

# PARSHAS HAAZINU - DEMONS AND GHOSTS

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

## Demons and Ghosts<sup>1</sup>

*They would slaughter to demons without power, gods whom they knew not - newcomers, recently arrived, whom your ancestors did not dread.*

How are we to understand these demons? Are they real, but assigned exaggerated power by some people? Or are they as imaginary as the other "gods" of the pasuk - complete inventions, without any basis at all in fact? If there is nothing to them at all, why mention them alongside the false gods? Why would the pasuk need to tell us about two non-entities - demons and gods - that differ only in their names?

While most of us cannot contribute much to the discussion based on our direct experience with demons, we can make progress by studying the words related to דִּם, the word for demon. We then find שֹׁד and שָׁדֵד. The latter means plundering through typical, physical means and force; the former connotes causing damage through something invisible. From these verb forms we can narrow in on what shedim (the noun form related to the verbs) are all about. They are injurious to progress and prosperity. Invisibly and inexplicably, they sow damage and destruction. We need not know how they allegedly work, or go about their mischief. We have an idea of their consequences - and their mystery.

These demons are not divine, even in the minds of those who serve them. Moreover, those who serve demons also have gods - and these gods have much in common with demons. Both are served because people come to fear their power. They may be recent arrivals, newly fabricated by Man's imagination, rather than old deities. These objects of veneration and service are not part of a culture that dutifully carries on an old tradition. To the contrary, people's "ancestors did not dread" these demons and gods. Still, they move to the focus of people's attention, and keep populations spellbound

This is the point, perhaps, of the pasuk. When people drift away from belief in Hashem, they may think that they have found freedom from His demands, but they have really enslaved themselves to all forces that can be imagined, both real and fictitious. When they served Hashem, they could count on His protection, and face the future intrepidly. Now, they have become prisoners to whatever their minds can conjure up. There is no limit to what they come to fear. They commit their energies attempting to neutralize a host of invisible demons. Their "freedom" from serving Hashem imprisons

them in uncounted dungeons created by their own dreaded concerns - some real, and some born of irrational superstition.

When connected to Hashem, Man can behold all around him with confidence. He sees the power of Truth and Good to conquer and subjugate all else. He does not fear darkness, certain that in time it will be replaced by Light. Buoyed by his knowledge of immortality and eternity, even death is not the horrible specter that it is for others. He ventures into new places feeling the Hand of G-d holding his own, and walks forward resolutely. When Man abandons the true G-d, however, the future, the unknown, the misunderstood - all of them become demon-like forces of destruction in his mind, sapping his strength and energy.

Trading in G-d for newly-invented systems of belief and devotion, the Light no longer is available. Instead, Man sentences himself to a darkness populated by all sorts of ghosts and demons.

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1. Based on the Hirsch Chumash Devarim 32:17

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