



The “Spirits” Born to Adam By Rabbi David Silverberg

Toward the end of Parashat Bereishit (5:3), the Torah relates, “Adam lived one hundred and thirty years and he begat a son in his own likeness, in his form, and he named him Shet.” The Torah here emphasizes that Shet was born in the “likeness” and “form” of Adam, a description which does not appear in the accounts of the births of Adam’s older children, Kayin and Hevel.

This anomaly is noted by the Talmud in Masekhet Eruvin (18b), which reaches a rather startling conclusion on this basis: “All those years when Adam was under rebuke, he begat spirits, demons and night demons.” According to the Gemara, the Torah specifies that Shet was born in Adam’s form to indicate that during the previous one hundred and thirty years, ever since the sin of the forbidden tree, Adam had begotten offspring of different forms. Namely, he produced various kinds of harmful spirits (identified by the Gemara as “*ruchin*,” “*shedin*” and “*lilin*”) that were not in the same human form and image as Adam.

The rationalist Medieval scholars suggested different approaches in explaining the Talmud’s reference to spirits and demons begotten by Adam. The Radak (Rabbi David Kimchi of Provence), citing Rav Sherira Gaon, explains that as a result of God’s curse upon Adam, the children born to him during these years were deformed. The “spirits” spoken of the Gemara were human beings, but people with certain physical deformities on account of which they were called “spirits” and “demons.” It was only after one hundred and thirty years, when God finally eased the curse cast upon Adam, that Adam begot a child “in his own likeness” and “in his form,” who appeared as an ordinary, healthy human being.

Maimonides, toward the beginning of his *Guide for the Perplexed* (1:7), advances a different understanding of the Gemara’s comment. He addresses this verse as part of his discussion of the various meanings of the verb *y.l.d.*, which generally is used to mean “beget” or “create,” but can also assume figurative connotations. Thus, for example, in Maimonides’ words, “A man who has instructed another in any subject, and has improved his knowledge, may in like manner be regarded as the parent of the person taught, because he is the author of that knowledge.” The verb *y.l.d.*, therefore, can at times be used in reference to teaching or training, as opposed to childbirth. Surprisingly, Maimonides asserts that this is the meaning of the word “*vayoled*” (“he begat”) in the verse under discussion. The Torah does not mean that Adam fathered a child in his likeness and form, but rather that Adam succeeded in raising this child – Shet – in accordance with his “likeness” and “form.” Adam had fathered many other children during the previous one hundred and thirty years, but only Shet grew to resemble his father, and assumed the “likeness” and “form” of Adam.

This “likeness” and “form,” as Maimonides explains, refers to intellectual achievement: “With reference to Seth, who had been instructed, enlightened and brought

to human perfection, it could rightly be said, 'he [Adam] begat a son in his likeness, in his form'." Earlier, in the first chapter of the *Guide*, Maimonides elaborated on the concept of man's creation in "the image of God," which he understood as a reference to the human being's intellectual faculties. Adam was endowed with these abilities, but after the sin of the forbidden tree, he did not succeed in "begetting" children in this "form," in raising children toward what Maimonides called "human perfection." Maimonides proceeds to explain why the verb *y.l.d.*, which generally refers to childbirth, is an appropriate description of Adam's success in cultivating Shet's intellectual capabilities:

It is acknowledged that a man who does not possess this "form" (the nature of which has just been explained) is not human, but a mere animal in human shape and form. Yet such a creature has the power of causing harm and injury: a power which does not belong to other creatures. For those gifts of intelligence and judgment with which he has been endowed for the purpose of acquiring perfection, but which he has failed to apply to their proper aim, are used by him for wicked and mischievous ends; he begets evil things, as though he merely resembled man, or simulated his outward appearance. Such was the condition of those sons of Adam who preceded Seth. In reference to this subject the Midrash says: "During the 130 years when Adam was under rebuke he begat spirits, i.e., demons; when, however, he was again restored to divine favor, he begat in his likeness, in his form."

According to Maimonides, then, the Gemara does not refer at all to any sort of "spirits" or even to physically inferior creatures, as the Radak had explained. Rather, it refers to people who failed to utilize their God-given intellectual faculties for the purpose of self-perfection. These people are described as harmful spirits because human beings who misuse their unique powers of reason and creativity pose a particularly grave threat to the world.

It should be noted that in the ensuing discussion, the Talmud modifies its theory concerning Adam's begetting "spirits" during the interim one hundred and thirty years. The Talmud initially challenges this notion on the basis of a Tannaitic passage claiming that Adam abstained from marital relations during these one hundred and thirty years, and thus could not possibly have begotten any kind of offspring during this period. To resolve this difficulty, the Gemara answers, "When this [the statement of the birth of spirits] was said, it referred to the semen which he emitted against his will." Rashi explains this to mean that the spirits were produced not from Adam's cohabitation with Chava, but rather from nocturnal emissions which Adam experienced during these one hundred and thirty years. These were not physical creatures formed by a sexual union, but rather spiritual beings that somehow surfaced as a result of unintentional emissions that occurred outside the context of intimate relations.

It seems difficult, at least at first glance, to explain how Maimonides understood the Talmud's conclusion. Maimonides, as we saw, interpreted the Gemara's comment to mean that Adam begot during these years ordinary children, but did not succeed to educate them to a life of intellectual achievement. According to the Gemara's

conclusion, however, these children were not actual human beings at all, but rather some manner of spiritual entities that were not even produced through intercourse.

Presumably, Maimonides understood that the Gemara's proposed reconciliation between the two conflicting passages was not definitive. The Gemara suggested a theory whereby we may reconcile the concept of Adam begetting "spirits" with the tradition that he refrained from relations during those years. Nevertheless, Maimonides preferred viewing these two sources as reflecting two different, conflicting rabbinic traditions. He chose to embrace the tradition that Adam indeed cohabited with Chava during these years, and these unions produced "spirits," children who did not follow their father's example of intellectual engagement and living a life of reason and wisdom.