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Abstract

This is a film review of *The Vigil* (2021), directed by Keith Thomas.

Keywords

Dybbuk, Demons, Talmud, Shomer

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Author Notes

Daniel Ross Goodman is a writer, rabbi, and scholar from western Massachusetts. He holds a Ph.D. from the Jewish Theological Seminary of America and studied English & Comparative Literature at Columbia University. He is the author of *Somewhere Over the Rainbow: Wonder and Religion in American Cinema* and the novel *A Single Life*. In 2021-22 he is serving as a postdoctoral research scholar in the Department of Systematic Theology at the University of Salzburg. His next book—*Soloveitchik's Children: Irving Greenberg, David Hartman, Jonathan Sacks, and the Future of Jewish Theology in America*—will be published in 2023 by the University of Alabama Press.

The Vigil, written and directed by Keith Thomas and available now on Hulu, begins with a few prefatory white lines on the still-black screen that give us most of the background information we need for this story: “For thousands of years, religious Jews have practiced the ritual of ‘the vigil’ — When a member of the community dies, the body is watched round-the-clock in shifts by a Shomer, or watchman, who recites the Psalms to comfort the deceased’s soul and protect it from unseen evil. This watchman is typically a family member or friend, but there are paid Shomers...Hired to sit the vigil when no one else can.”

After an ambiguous flashback to a traumatic event in a mist-filled forest, we’re brought into the middle of a conversation taking place between a group of young Jews sitting around a table in an apartment in Brooklyn, speaking with a mixture of fascination and bewilderment about various events that they’ve recently witnessed in the non-Jewish world. When the conversation comes to a close and the young men and women begin to make their way out of the apartment, one of the girls, Sarah (Malky Goldman), asks the tall, fairly good-looking guy in the group if he’d like to have a coffee sometime. When he awkwardly replies that he doesn’t like coffee, she asks him if he’d like to go out for tea. When he hesitantly responds “okay,” she tells him to take her number. He fumbles for his phone, but he doesn’t know how to put her number in his phone—he has only recently just acquired a smartphone and is still learning how to use it. After she puts her number into his phone for him, she tries to hug him; he wavers even more awkwardly. “Sorry,” he apologizes sheepishly. “I’m still learning the rules.” “It’s okay,” she replies acceptingly. “We all are.”

The young man is Yakov (Dave Davis), a formerly Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) Jew who has recently left the Haredi community and is trying to find his footing in what, for him, is still an often disorienting secular world. Though now shorn of his side-locks and beard and having exchanged his long black coat and flat black hat for more colorful modern attire, he still retains some sympathies for the community and way of life he has left behind. And so, when a former acquaintance of his—a Haredi rabbi—bumps into him on the streets of Brooklyn shortly after he’s gotten Sarah’s number and asks him if he’d be willing to be a Shomer for the night, he does not immediately reject the proposition.

The traditional Jewish rituals for caring for the dead are not written in the Torah and are not among the 613 biblical commandments, but over the course of Jewish history they have come to be considered some of the most important practices in all of Jewish life, so much so that those who regularly volunteer to carry out these functions are called the “*chevra kadisha*”—literally, the “holy society.” Although he is no longer a diligent observer of the 613 commandments, Yakov is still sensitive to the importance that these rituals have for the community, and so he agrees to serve as a Shomer—for a small fee—for the recently deceased husband of a childless, ghostly-looking elderly woman named Mrs. Litvak (Lynn Cohen).

The setup here is thus that of a typical haunted house story—a character is challenged to stay overnight in an eerie location (in this case with a dead body); if he or she can make it through the night, a reward awaits him or her the following day. Add some scary music, uncomfortable close-ups, jarring cuts, and a dash of creepy old women, and ninety minutes later you have your standard-issue horror movie. What

makes *The Vigil* much more than your typical midnight movie, however, is its basis in ancient religious mythology and its grounding in centuries-old cultural and literary traditions.

For, as we soon learn, Mr. Litvak—though possessing a generic Jewish name that is the equivalent of a character in a mafia movie bearing the name “Mr. Sicilian”—was no ordinary Haredi Jew. He was a speculator in the Jewish folkloric traditions related to *mazikin* (demonology). There are numerous discussions of *sheidim* (demons) and *mazikin* (lit., “damagers”; another name for demons) in the Talmud and Midrash, including guidance on the level of halakhah (Jewish law) for how one should conduct oneself in order to guard against damage from *sheidim* and *mazikin* as well as stories about various rabbinic sages’ encounters with such beings. The authoritative medieval scholar and rationalist philosopher Moses Maimonides, however, in his comprehensive code of Jewish law *Mishneh Torah*—which includes rulings on a whole host of legal matters which have not been applicable since the Bronze Age and which will not be relevant again until the messianic era—did not include any rulings regarding the practices the Talmud advises to guard against *mazikin*, indicating that he considered these matters to be outside the bounds of normative Jewish tradition. Because of Maimonides’ momentous influence on subsequent Jewish law and philosophy, discussions of demons mostly disappeared from canonical Jewish texts, replaced by meticulous analyses of Talmud and Jewish law. However, discussions of demons in Jewish tradition did not disappear altogether; they merely went underground, passed down orally in the manner of all legend and folklore, until they began to resurface in written form in early modern Yiddish

literature. When great 19th and 20th century Yiddish writers such as I. L. Peretz and the Noble Prize-winning writer Isaac Bashevis Singer began to dabble in stories of *dybbuks* (demonic possessions), the comeback of demons in Jewish culture was complete, just around the time that it would begin to infiltrate secular American culture as well, through novels and films such as *The Exorcist* and *The Omen*.

The Vigil partakes vigorously, almost lustily, in this revived mythology of demons and *dybbuks*, as Yakov confronts demons of his own—real or imagined—in the course of his terror-filled night at the creepy home of Mrs. Litvak. The suspense and scares are largely predictable; Hitchcock this is not. Its attempt to graft a traumatic backstory onto Yakov's past might feel forced to some viewers. And its subpar sound editing makes the film difficult at times to listen to, compelling you to watch it with the remote in your hand while constantly either raising or lowering the volume depending on the need of the particular scene. But in its imaginative use of the millennia-old Jewish demonological tradition and in its setting of an archaic tale in a contemporary setting—as well as its suggestion that the uncanny lurks not only in haunted houses but in the recrudescence of religion in secular settings in a manner that evokes Philip Roth's short story "Eli, the Fanatic"—*The Vigil* works as a horror film that puts old wine in new bottles, reminding us that though the times have changed, the deep structure of our common human experience has remained the same. Demons are still very much here with us today: if not in the dark corners of our houses, then most assuredly in the dark regions of our unexplored minds. In that very real sense—as *The Vigil* reminds us as well—there is nothing more normative in the Jewish or any other human tradition than demonology.