

Mythical Creatures in Rabbinic Literature: The Adnei Hasadeh and the Mud-Mice

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Centuries ago, new reports of a strange and ferocious creature reached rabbinic leaders and scholars. This creature, called the adnei hasadeh (literally: man of the field), was described as a man-like creature that was connected to the ground through its navel by an umbilical cord. Its movement was limited to the cord that tied it to the ground, and anything that entered the adnei hasadeh's domain was immediately killed. Upon hearing this description, the rabbis were faced with a predicament: Under Jewish law, was this creature considered to be a wild beast or a human being? This distinction would have practical ramifications, for if the adnei hasadeh was to be classified as a human being, it would have the ability to impart spiritual impurity.

A mishnah in Tractate Kilayim (8:5) relates that the adnei hasadeh was considered to be a wild animal. Rabbi Yose disagrees and maintains that, under Jewish law, it should be treated as a human being. In the Talmud Yerushalmi, Kilayim (8:4), Yose Arkei describes the adnei hasadeh as a mountain-man who was sustained through its navel. Years later, other scholars attempted to further explain the adnei hasadeh. According to Rabbi Ovadia MiBartenura, the famous 15th century commentator, the adnei hasadeh was an animal that grew from the ground and remained attached to the ground through an umbilical cord. When hunters would find such an animal, they would shoot arrows at its cord until it broke, causing it to die instantly.

Interestingly, the Vilna Gaon, a revered 18th century scholar, used the corded version of the adnei hasadeh to better explain the plague of wild animals that befell the Egyptians when the Jews were slaves in Egypt. The verse states that as punishment, the Egyptians would be attacked by wild animals and "the ground upon which they are." The Vilna Gaon comments that one of the wild animals brought to attack the Egyptians were the adnei hasadeh, who came with the ground to which they were attached [1].

A 19th century rabbi, Rabbi Yisrael Lipschutz, questions whether such a creature that lived through a cord connected to the ground was even viable. He defines the adnei hasadeh as entirely different creatures, maintaining that they were, in fact, orangutans. Rabbi Lipschutz states that the adnei hasadeh were similar to people in build and could be trained to dress and eat like humans. In regards to the adnei hasadeh, Maimonides also notes that "those who bring news from the world state that it speaks many things which cannot be understood, and its speech is similar to that of a human being." This depiction seems to accurately describe the great apes. The term adnei hasadeh may not only include orangutans, but all other apes, too [1].

Scholars who doubt the biological viability of the adnei hasadeh as described by Rabbi Ovadia MiBartenura have pondered the origin of this idea of a creature attached to the ground by an umbilical

cord. A possible answer may be found in the Talmud Yerushalmi in Tractate Kilayim (8:4), where Yose Arkei states that the adnei hasadeh was a "man of the Tor [literally 'mountain'] and lived from his umbilical cord. If the umbilical cord was severed, it could not continue to live." Dr. Daniel Sperber, a professor of Talmud at Bar-Ilan University, argues that Yose Arkei was prompted to provide a translation of the term adnei hasadeh due to the problematic nature of the title, which caused halachic discord over its status as part human being, part wild animal. Yose Arkei provided a literal translation for adnei hasadeh, using his local Galilean Aramaic to translate the term as "man of the field/mountain" [2].

The word Tor, meaning mountain, is usually spelled with the Hebrew letter "vav" in the middle. Later on, this expression was misread and erroneously interpreted as Tavor, meaning navel, which is spelled with the letters "vav" and "bet" in the middle.⁷ This led scholarly commentators from the medieval time period to mistakenly read Yose Arkei's translation as "navel-man" and then proceeded to associate various medieval traditions with the new translation. These glossators added what they thought was a more accurate description to Yose Arkei's translation and wrote in the Talmud Yerushalmi, Kilayim (8:4) that the adnei hasadeh was a creature that lived by its umbilical cord and would die if the connection between it and the earth was severed [2].

Professor Sperber additionally comments that in medieval times, beasts and primitive men were often confused with each other, leading these creatures to develop legendary characteristics [2]. Primitive societies continue to exist today, without contact by the developed world. In total, they number several thousand people and are separated into many different tribes. Each tribe has its own social code and normally views outsiders as a threat, leading tribesmen to often behave violently upon meeting strangers [3]. It is quite probable that the witnesses who came across these indigenous tribes thought that they were observing wild beasts, when in reality they had come across primitive men. These isolated peoples may in fact be the modern day version of adnei hasadeh.

The Jewish sages also received other reports of mysterious and strange beings. Witnesses reported seeing a creature that initially grew from the earth and then developed into a mouse. This mud-mouse eventually morphed into a full mouse. A mishnah in Tractate Chullin (9:10) states that, "A mouse which is half flesh and half earth, if someone touches the flesh part, he is spiritually impure, if someone touches the earth part, he is spiritually pure." The mud-mouse was also mentioned in Tractate Sanhedrin (91a) as a proof for the resurrection of the dead: "A certain sectarian said to Rabbi Ami: You say that the dead will live again-but they become dust,

1. It is possible that some editions of the Talmud Yerushalmi spelled "Tor" as having two vav's in the middle, and in the Yerushalmi, the letter "bet" is frequently interchangeable with two vavs.

and can dust come alive? He replied...Go out to the field and see the rodent that is one day half flesh and half earth, and on the next day it has transformed into a creeping creature and has become entirely flesh” [1].

Maimonides discusses the mud-mouse and writes, “This is a well-known matter; there is no end to the number of people who have told me that they have seen it. This is despite the fact that the existence of such a creature is astonishing, and I do not know of any explanation for it.” In his commentary to Maimonides’ writings, Rabbi Yosef Kappach maintains that Maimonides did not believe that such a creature existed, as his comments noted doubt as to whether the mud-mouse was biologically viable. Many witnesses, claiming to have observed these creatures, told Rabbi Kappach that these mice appeared in the fields after rainy periods. Rabbi Kappach relates that he personally searched the fields for these mud-mice, and, while he did find mice that looked like they were partly made of earth, after handling them he notes, “It became clear that their hindquarters are covered with mud and they are really just mice like all other mice.” Rabbi Kappach concludes that the mud-mice do not exist by stating that “they remain fictional like our master [Maimonides] implied” [1].

In contrast to his approach to the adnei hasadeh, Rabbi Yisrael Lipschutz argues in favor of the existence of the mud-mouse and writes that it is the “heretics” who “mock” the possibility that such a creature existed. It is peculiar that while Rabbi Lipschutz questions the biological viability of the adnei hasadeh and even suggests that it may actually be an orangutan, whereas he strongly defends the existence of the mud-mouse and states that those who do not believe in it are “heretics.” It is important to remember the context in which he wrote. In reference to the mud-mouse, Rabbi Lipschutz argues against the “heretics,” as possibly they were using the example of the mud-mice to ridicule the whole Torah. This led him to reject any other possible explanations of such a creature in order to repudiate the “heretics” [1].

Rabbi Yehoshua Heller of Telz maintains that if the Sages mentioned and described any creature, it must exist. Rabbi

Natan Slifkin, widely known as the “zoo rabbi,” contends that denying the existence of these mysterious creatures does not make someone a heretic. He writes that the suggestion that the Jewish Sages believed in the incorrect scientific data of their time does not necessarily belittle or degrade the Sages. This concept is far from a new and revolutionary idea, as Maimonides also did not believe that the Sages’ descriptions of animals were always meant to be taken literally. Maimonides spoke disparagingly of the people who believed that every scientific idea stated by the Sages must be absolutely true, and stated that “this is the group of the intellectually weak. One should bemoan their foolishness; for they think that they are honoring and elevating the Sages, but in fact they are degrading them with the ultimate degradation, yet they do not realize this” [1].

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch writes in his letter entitled *Trusting the Torah’s Sages* that the Sages’ rulings on these mythical creatures were not meant to give credence to their existence. Rabbi Hirsch maintains that if a renowned scholar nowadays traveled to a distant country and, upon his return, would report that:

In some distant land there is a humanoid creature growing from the ground or that he had found mice that had been generated from the soil and had in fact seen a mouse that was half earth and half flesh and his report was accepted by the world as true, wouldn’t we expect the Sages to discuss the Torah aspects that apply to these instances? What laws of defilement and decontamination apply to these creatures? Or would we expect them to go on long journeys to find out whether what the world has accepted is really true? And if, as we see things today, these instances are considered fiction, can the Sages be blamed for ideas that were accepted by the naturalists of their times?

Rabbi Hirsch argues that the Sages were simply presented with reports of these strange creatures and proceeds to make various rulings in reference to them. The actual existence of these cases does not reflect the credibility of the Sages [1]. While the Sages had good reason to believe that the creatures they received reports about existed, we can be certain today that neither of these mythical creatures is real.

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