Superstition is not Religion: Thoughts for Shabbat May 8, 2010

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"And you shall not wrong one another; but you shall fear your God, for I am the Lord your God."

I recently read a heart-breaking news story.

The Brooklyn District Attorney's office is investigating accusations that a popular kabbalistic rabbi in Israel has defrauded American Jews in the amount of many thousands of dollars. This rabbi is also accused of having bilked many Israelis. The charges relate to his promising to use kabbala, blessings and amulets to cure the terminally ill or to make barren women fertile.

One of the rabbi's victims claims to have given $100,000 in exchange for a guarantee that his barren daughter would be able to conceive a child. She never did. Now this man is seeking legal redress for having been cheated by the kabbalistic rabbi. Other victims are coming forward to complain about this rabbi's deceitfulness and outright thievery.

This story reflects a serious defect in the way religion is being taught and observed in some segments of the Jewish community. People are led to believe that they can manipulate God if only they can find a wonder- working rabbi who knows the right magic formula, who can write an amulet, who can bless some red string etc. Religion is degraded to the level of superstition and shamanism.

The accused "kabbalistic rabbi" and others like him prey on people's gullibility and fear. They make a business of exploiting desperate individuals. In the process, they enrich themselves and impoverish Judaism. Instead of teaching Jews to pray directly to God, they foster their own image as wonder-workers who alone have magic powers to engender God's miracles.

When the Torah commands us not to wrong one another, it adds the phrase "but you shall fear your God, for I am the Lord your God." It is easy enough for us to justify our wronging of others--we are masters at making excuses for ourselves. So the Torah reminds us: We may be able to fool others, we may even be able to deceive ourselves and misunderstand our own motives: but we cannot deceive

God.

When "kabbalistic rabbis" or others foster a Judaism that is akin to superstition, this is a great wrong perpetrated against those who follow them. It is a great wrong against the high values and teachings of Torah. Corruption and deception in the guise of religion are all the more heinous for their desecration of God's name. Superstition is not religion.

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Angel for Shabbat