Religion and Superstition:Thoughts for Shabbat Vayikra, March 12, 2011

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By
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During the past week, I received an email from an organization in Israel seeking donations for which donors would merit success, happy marriage and good health. The organization offered to have a Torah scholar pray at the Kotel from the Fast of Esther through the 7th day of Passover. They assured donors that this is a "very powerful time for hidden blessings to be revealed."

Not long after getting this spam, I received in the mail a glitzy brochure from another organization seeking donations so that the "gedolei hador" will pray on our behalf at the Kotel. The brochure features photos of sages with long white beards, who assure us that by supporting this charity we will gain wonderful rewards.

These are recent examples of the ongoing process of cheapening Jewish prayer, and of undermining the spiritual foundations of the Jewish people. The above charities, and many others as well, prey on the gullibility and fears of the public. They claim to have direct access to God--through their "Torah scholars" and "gedolei hador"-- that the rest of us lack. They claim that these prayers at the Kotel will be effective, whereas our own prayers anywhere else will not be as effective. Charlatans abound who promise miracles, if only we will give them ample donations. They will write us amulets, bless red strings, send us holy water or food, pray for us at the Kotel.

There is, of course, a long history of charlatanism and shamanism in religion--including Judaism. There have always been those who claimed to have the keys to God's inner chambers, and that--for a price--they would intercede on behalf of those who turned to them.

Superstitious practices and beliefs, even if dressed in holy garb, are inimical to the purity of religion. They blur the line between religion and superstition, degrading and disgracing true religion.

As we approach the Purim holiday, we recall that Esther requested that the Jews fast during their hour of distress. Rabbinic tradition has understood this as a call to prayer and repentance. Esther did not ask Jews to send donations to holy people at the Kotel; or to pay for prayers by supposed saints and scholars. No, she called on each Jew to reach out to God from the depths of his/her heart. And the Jews were redeemed.

Let us each turn to the Almighty in sincere and pure prayer. This is the special privilege and responsibility that Judaism offers us: to stand before the Master of the Universe directly. The Torah of God is pure; we must not allow it to be defiled by misguided superstitious beliefs and practices.

Angel for Shabbat