Tanakh and Superstition: Debates within Traditional Commentary

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The Torah rooted out many ancient pagan superstitions. Professor Yehezkel Kaufmann (1889–1963) pinpointed several critical features that fundamentally distinguish Tanakh from ancient Near Eastern literature. There is one supreme God above who is the Creator of all nature, and there are no forces competing with God. God is absolutely free. God is timeless, ageless, nonphysical, and eternal. Nature is a stage on which God expresses His will in history. Rituals do not harness independent magical powers and do not work automatically. Endowed with free will, people can defy God and even drive God's Presence away. Evil does not inhere in universe but rather is a product of people sinning, and it undermines creation. Absolute standards of good and justice exist, and people may use their free will to build an ideal society.[1]

The overwhelming majority of Tanakh fits this description perfectly. God and the religious-moral behavior of humanity are explicitly responsible for nearly all events. This premise is so self-evident that one Mishnah dismisses any possibility of a "magical" reading of two Torah narratives that could have been read that way: Moses' raised arms assisting Israel in the battle against Amalek (Exodus 17:8–16); and Moses' using a divinely-commanded brass serpent to heal serpent-bitten Israelites in the wilderness (Numbers 21:4–9):

Is it Moses' hands that make or break success in war? Rather, this comes to tell you, that whenever Israel looked upward and subjugated their hearts to their Father in heaven, they would prevail. If not, they would fall. Similarly, you can say concerning the verse, "Make a [graven] snake and place it on a pole, and

everyone bitten who sees it will live." Is it the snake that kills or revives? Rather, whenever Israel looked upward and subjugated their hearts to their Father in heaven, they would be healed. If not, they would be harmed. (Mishnah *Rosh HaShanah* 3:8)

There are instances, however, where some commentators interpret biblical narratives and laws in ways that differ from the above principles. This essay focuses on biblical passages that could be interpreted as reflecting powers that do not directly emanate from God. Among traditional commentators, there is diversity of opinion regarding the existence of forces beyond the divine. In most cases, Tanakh does not exhibit evidence of forces beyond God's realm, but there are a few occasions where it might.[2] Religious educators must be particularly sensitive when teaching these passages with classical commentary, so that their students do not become superstitious.

Do Human Blessings and Curses Work Automatically?

Isaac's Blessing to Jacob

Isaac's bestowal of the birthright is the central theme of Genesis chapters 25 and 27. Jacob successfully obtains the blessing through deception. Isaac upholds his blessing even after learning that he had mistakenly blessed Jacob:

Isaac was seized with very violent trembling. "Who was it then," he demanded, "that hunted game and brought it to me? Moreover, I ate of it before you came, and I blessed him; now he must remain blessed!" When Esau heard his father's words, he burst into wild and bitter sobbing, and said to his father, "Bless me too, Father!" But he answered, "Your brother came with guile and took away your blessing." [Esau] said, "Was he, then, named Jacob that he might supplant me these two times? First he took away my birthright and now he has taken away my blessing!" (Genesis 27:33–36)

Given his knowledge of Jacob's deception, why does Isaac conclude that "now he must remain blessed" (verse 33)?

Following a Midrash (*Genesis Rabbah* 67:2), Rashi suggests that Isaac said "now he must remain blessed" (verse 33) only *after* hearing that Esau had sold the birthright years earlier (verse 36). Isaac thereby made a rational decision upon learning previously unknown (to Isaac) vital information. Of course, Rashi's interpretation requires reading the verses out of sequence. In the text, Isaac appears to uphold the blessing *immediately* after learning that he was speaking with Esau. Most commentators therefore reject Rashi's reading. According to Rabbi Joseph Bekhor Shor and Ramban, Isaac's blessing was prophetic and therefore could not be retracted. Ralbag and Abarbanel disagree and suggest that the blessing was not "automatic." Rather, Isaac concluded that since Jacob had deceived him successfully, it must have been God's will that Jacob should be blessed.

To summarize: Rashi, Ralbag, and Abarbanel interpret Isaac's upholding the blessing as Isaac's rational decision. Rabbi Joseph Bekhor Shor and Ramban maintain that Isaac's blessing was an unretractable prophecy. In this latter reading, Isaac was powerless to annul even a misdirected blessing.

Regardless of the aforementioned debate, there is one other critical detail. Although Isaac was unaware (as far as we know), Rebekah received a prophecy during her pregnancy suggesting that Jacob would prevail over Esau:

The Lord answered her, “Two nations are in your womb, two separate peoples shall issue from your body; one people shall be mightier than the other, and the older shall serve the younger.” (Genesis 25:23)

Moreover, several Midrashim and later commentators understand “the older shall serve the younger” (*ve-rav ya’avod tza’ir*) as ambiguous. It could mean “the older shall serve the younger,” but it also can mean “the older shall have the younger work for him” (*Genesis Rabbah* 63:7, Radak, Abarbanel). According to the Midrash, God stated the prophecy ambiguously since its favorable fulfillment for Jacob would occur only when Jacob and his descendants are faithful to God and the Torah. In the broader birthright narrative, then, Isaac’s human blessing also fulfills God’s prophetic plan. Even then, it does not work automatically but appears to be conditional on the future righteous behavior of Jacob and his descendants. According to all of the aforementioned readings, then, Isaac’s blessing reflected God’s will, and did not invoke some independent power that would bring blessing to Jacob and his descendants regardless.

In this spirit, Malbim (on Genesis 27:1) asserts that Isaac did not have the power to bestow divine blessings of chosenness. Rather, he had power over inheritance. The blessing to be God’s nation is solely in God’s hands, and that blessing depends on the religious worthiness of Jacob and Esau. Nehama Leibowitz agrees with this approach, and insists that Esau’s intermarriage to Canaanites (Genesis 26:34), rather than his sale of the birthright, forfeited his worthiness of the divine blessing. Isaac’s blessing of Esau could not have created the third Patriarch of the chosen nation.[3]

Noah’s Blessings and Curses

After Ham’s shameful behavior toward his drunk and naked father Noah, Shem and Japeth respectfully covered their father. When Noah realized what had happened, he cursed Ham’s son Canaan and blessed Shem and Japheth:

He said, “Cursed be Canaan; the lowest of slaves shall he be to his brothers.” And he said, “Blessed be the Lord, the God of Shem; let Canaan be a slave to them. May God enlarge Japheth, and let him dwell in the tents of Shem; and let Canaan be a slave to them.” (Genesis 9:25–27)

These blessings are fulfilled when the Canaanites—the descendants of Ham—are dispossessed by the Israelites—the descendants of Shem. Did Noah’s blessing and curse cause this critical event in Israel’s history?

The answer is negative. God dispossesses the Canaanites because they were wicked (for example, Genesis 15:16; Leviticus 18:24–30; Deuteronomy 9:1–5). The Israelites receive the Land because of God’s covenant with the Patriarchs (Deuteronomy 9:1–5). The Israelites also do not retain the Land of Israel automatically. If they are wicked, God will dispossess them from their land as well (see, for example, Leviticus 26:31–33; Deuteronomy 4:25–28; 11:16–17; 28:64–68). Righteous behavior allows a nation to merit the Land of Israel, and wicked behavior leads God to expel a nation from the Land of Israel.

Like Isaac's blessing to Jacob, then, Noah's blessings and curses reflect the divine will, and play no independent role in the dispossession of the Canaanites nor in God's awarding the Land of Israel to Abraham and his descendants.

Balaam's Blessings and Curses

A similar discussion arises over Balaam's power to curse Israel. The premise of the narrative in Numbers chapters 22–24 is that Balaam's powers were perceived as genuine, and God's intervention on Israel's behalf rescued Israel from the deleterious effects of the curse. Tanakh repeatedly invokes this story to demonstrate God's love of Israel (see Deuteronomy 23:5–6; Joshua 24:9–10; Micah 6:5; Nehemiah 13:1–2).

However, traditional commentators debate the "what if" of the narrative. Had Balaam actually cursed Israel, would that have harmed Israel? Several talmudic passages and later commentators take the premise of the narrative as factual, that is, Balaam indeed would have harmed Israel were it not for God's intervention. However, other commentators maintain that Balaam was a charlatan. Moabites and Israelites alike believed in his powers, but they were objectively mistaken. Balaam could not arouse metaphysical powers to harm Israel against God's will to bless Israel.[4]

Rachel's Death in Childbirth

Rachel's tragic death as she gave birth to Benjamin is heart-wrenching (Genesis 35:16–20). The Torah does not explain why she died. Following one Midrash (*Genesis Rabbah* 74:4, 9), Rashi (on Genesis 31:32) ascribes Rachel's death to a curse uttered by Jacob when he proclaimed his innocence in stealing Laban's *terafim* (household idols) several chapters earlier. Jacob did not know that Rachel had stolen the *terafim* and hidden them in her saddle bag (Genesis 31:19, 34–35):

"But anyone with whom you find your gods shall not remain alive! In the presence of our kinsmen, point out what I have of yours and take it." Jacob, of course, did not know that Rachel had stolen them. (Genesis 31:32)

In this reading, Rachel tragically dies as a result of Jacob's unwitting curse.

However, most commentators do not link Jacob's declaration of innocence to Rachel's death. First, some do not think Jacob's statement is a curse at all, but rather an exaggerated statement that Jacob would kill anyone who stole the idols (Ibn Ezra), or that Laban would have his permission to kill the thief (Radak).

There also is no reason to think that human curses work automatically. When Joseph's brothers emphatically denied stealing Joseph's silver goblet, they stated:

Whichever of your servants it is found with shall die; the rest of us, moreover, shall become slaves to my lord. (Genesis 44:9)

Benjamin did not die prematurely as a result of this declaration.

Rejecting Rashi's approach, Ibn Ezra (on Genesis 31:32) observes that childbirth is dangerous. The only other recorded biblical childbirth death is that of the High Priest Eli's son Pinehas' wife (I Samuel 4:19–22). Nobody cursed

her, and yet she died. There is no reason to believe from within the text that Jacob's unwitting curse (if it was a curse at all) should be considered a reason for Rachel's death.[5]

Do Head Counts Bring Plagues?

During the commandment to build the Tabernacle, God commands that every Israelite man contribute one half-shekel toward a census:

> When you take a census of the Israelite people according to their enrollment, each shall pay the Lord a ransom for himself on being enrolled, that no plague may come upon them through their being enrolled…the rich shall not pay more and the poor shall not pay less than half a shekel when giving the Lord's offering as expiation for your persons. You shall take the expiation money from the Israelites and assign it to the service of the Tent of Meeting; it shall serve the Israelites as a reminder before the Lord, as expiation for your persons. (Exodus 30:12–16)

Regardless of one's means, every man is required to give exactly the prescribed amount "to atone for your lives." The silver from the original census was used to make sockets for the Tabernacle and hooks to connect the boards (Exodus 38:25–28). Every Israelite, rich or poor, thereby contributes equally to this aspect of the Tabernacle.

Why, however, are people threatened with a plague if they do not give a half-shekel?

Rashi submits that counting Israelites by head triggers the "evil eye" and brings a plague. Therefore, they must conduct every census using objects such as half-shekels and then count the objects. Rashi adopts the reading of the talmudic Sage Rabbi Eleazar: "Whosoever counts Israel violates a negative precept" (*Yoma* 22b).[6]

To support his reading, Rashi invokes the narrative of King David's census of Israel in II Samuel 24. Despite Joab's protests, David insisted on counting. The census incurred God's wrath, eliciting a devastating plague that claimed the lives of 70,000 Israelites:

> The king said to Joab, his army commander, "Make the rounds of all the tribes of Israel, from Dan to Beer-sheba, and take a census of the people, so that I may know the size of the population." Joab answered the king, "May the Lord your God increase the number of the people a hundredfold, while your own eyes see it! But why should my lord king want this?" However, the king's command to Joab and to the officers of the army remained firm; and Joab and the officers of the army set out, at the instance of the king, to take a census of the people of Israel… The Lord sent a pestilence upon Israel from morning until the set time; and 70,000 of the people died, from Dan to Beer-sheba. (II Samuel 24:2–15)

Rashi asserts that David sinned by not counting with half-shekels or other objects, but instead counted heads.

Ramban (on Numbers 1:2) rejects Rashi's interpretation. Joab opposed the very census, and not its method (of not using half-shekels). There are other legitimate military censuses in Tanakh (see, for example, Numbers 31:4–5; Joshua 8:10; I Samuel 11:8, 13:15, 15:4; II Samuel

18:1). To explain the plague in David's time, Ramban observes that David's is the only military census in Tanakh taken during peace time, rather than at war time. It was unnecessary and displayed arrogance and a lack of trust in God. God plagued Israel as a consequence of a sin in faith, rather than because of the method of the census (see also Ralbag and Rabbi Isaiah of Trani on II Samuel 24).[7]

It appears that Ramban's objection to Rashi is compelling, and there is no connection between the commandment to take half-shekels in Exodus 30 and David's sin in II Samuel chapter 24. How, then, should we understand the threat of plague in Exodus 30:12?

Rabbi Saadyah Gaon (quoted in Ibn Ezra) submits that the annual half-shekel commanded in Exodus 30 is for support of the Tabernacle and the daily sacrifices. A plague results from laxity in contributing to the building fund and to the nation's sacrifices, and not from conducting a head count. In this approach, there is nothing wrong with counting people by head. There is a problem with people refusing to contribute a minimal amount to participate in the Tabernacle and its service of the nation.

Alternatively, Rabbi Samuel D. Luzzatto (Shadal) maintains that Rashi has the best reading of Exodus 30:12, that there is a threat of a plague for conducting any census without half-shekels. However, the Torah reflects a popular superstitious belief that counting people can lead to a plague, rather than an objective reality.[8] This approach traces back at least as far as Rabbi David Kimhi (1160–1235) and Rabbi Joseph ibn Caspi (1279–1340), who explain several passages in the Torah as reflective of popular superstitions that are not objectively true.[9]

In either reading, the Torah does not teach that head counts elicit divine plagues. Religious sins such as arrogance, lack of faith, and non-participation in the national religious service incur God's wrath.

Is There Black Magic?

The Torah prohibits witchcraft as a capital offense (Exodus 22:17; Leviticus 20:27; Deuteronomy 18:9–13). Our commentators debate whether witchcraft exists, or whether witchcraft does not exist but the Torah prohibits its practice since many pagans believed in its efficacy and used magic in their idolatrous systems. Two biblical narratives bring this question to the fore: The Egyptian magicians in the Torah, and the Witch of Endor in I Samuel chapter 28.

The Egyptian Magicians

Pharaoh's magicians turn their staffs into serpents (Exodus 7:8–13), produce blood (Exodus 7:22), and produce frogs (Exodus 8:3). They are defeated during the plague of lice, which they could not replicate (Exodus 8:14–15), and the plague of boils which kept them from being able to appear before Pharaoh (Exodus 9:11).

Some Sages in *Sanhedrin* 67b, followed by Ramban, maintain that black magic exists and that the magicians successfully used it. Other Sages in *Sanhedrin* 67b, followed by Abarbanel, assert that there is no magic and the magicians used illusion (*ahizat enayim*). Similarly, some Midrashim (*Exodus Rabbah* 9:10; 10:6) maintain that the magicians used black magic to produce blood and frogs, while others (*Mishnat Rabbi Eliezer* 19, *Midrash HaGadol*, quoted in *Torah Shelemah* Exodus 8:7) assert that the magicians cleverly found areas not yet afflicted, invoked their "magic", and then the blood and frogs

spread entirely from the divine plague.[10] In this instance, the Torah may be read either way.

The Witch of Endor

Nearing the end of his tragic demise, King Saul turned to a necromanceress out of desperation to ascertain God's will:

> Saul disguised himself; he put on different clothes and set out with two men. They came to the woman by night, and he said, "Please divine for me by a ghost"…At that, the woman asked, "Whom shall I bring up for you?" He answered, "Bring up Samuel for me." Then the woman recognized Samuel, and she shrieked loudly…"What does he look like?" he asked her. "It is an old man coming up," she said, "and he is wrapped in a robe." Then Saul knew that it was Samuel; and he bowed low in homage with his face to the ground. Samuel said to Saul, "Why have you disturbed me and brought me up?" And Saul answered, "I am in great trouble. The Philistines are attacking me and God has turned away from me; He no longer answers me, either by prophets or in dreams. So I have called you to tell me what I am to do." Samuel said, "Why do you ask me, seeing that the Lord has turned away from you and has become your adversary? The Lord has done for Himself as He foretold through me: The Lord has torn the kingship out of your hands and has given it to your fellow, to David, because you did not obey the Lord and did not execute His wrath upon the Amalekites. That is why the Lord has done this to you today. Further, the Lord will deliver the Israelites who are with you into the hands of the Philistines. Tomorrow your sons and you will be with me; and the Lord will also deliver the Israelite forces into the hands of the Philistines." (I Samuel 28:8–19)

It appears that the witch successfully conjures up the deceased prophet Samuel's spirit, and the characters saw and heard his spirit. This is the only biblical narrative that reflects a connection between the worlds of the living and the dead.

Radak surveys several rationalist positions which reinterpret the story in light of their belief that witchcraft does not exist. Rabbi Saadyah and Rabbi Hai Gaon maintain that on this singular occasion, *God* miraculously brought Samuel's spirit down. Alternatively, Rabbi Samuel ben Hofni Gaon maintains that the entire episode was fraudulent and Samuel's spirit never appeared. The witch recognized Saul immediately but hid that fact so that she could fool him into thinking that she learned it through her magic. She made an educated guess that Saul would die, since the Philistines were powerful.[11] Ibn Ezra (on Exodus 20:3; Leviticus 19:31) also denies the existence of black magic and maintains that the narrative reflects the mistaken perception of the characters rather than objective reality. Rambam (*Hilkhot Avodah Zarah* 11:16) states more generally that all forms of witchcraft are both forbidden by the Torah and absolute nonsense derived from the pagan world. Only a fool would believe something so patently irrational (see also his discussion in *Guide* 2:46). This debate relates to the much broader discussion of how literally traditional interpreters understand biblical texts when confronting conflicts with reason.[12]

Radak (on I Samuel 28:24) rejects the aforementioned readings. The narrative suggests that the witch really conjured up Samuel's spirit, and there is no mention of divine intervention. Ramban (on Exodus 7:11; Leviticus 18:21; Deuteronomy 18:9) also adopts the literal reading of the narrative and agrees

that the witch successfully conjured up Samuel's spirit using black magic. These commentators maintain that black magic is prohibited by the Torah, and most of its alleged practitioners are frauds. However, in principle black magic does exist and the Witch of Endor was a true practitioner.

Moshe Garsiel[13] adopts a position similar to Rabbi Saadyah Gaon cited above. The narrative clearly depicts the event as genuine, that is, Samuel's spirit really appeared and communicated a prophetic message to Saul. According to Garsiel (like Rabbi Saadyah Gaon), Tanakh generally portrays witchcraft as fraudulent. In this unique occurrence, however, God miraculously sent Samuel's spirit to communicate with Saul. The witch was shocked herself, and therefore screamed. She also immediately understood that only Saul would merit such a miracle, which is how she knew he was the king: "Then the woman recognized Samuel, and she shrieked loudly, and said to Saul, 'Why have you deceived me? You are Saul!'" (I Samuel 28:12). This revelation was part of God's punishment of Saul, and God specifically refused to answer Saul through legitimate means.[14]

To summarize, the plain sense of the text suggests that Samuel's spirit genuinely appeared to Saul. However, there is no reason to conclude that black magic exists. Rather, this may have been a one-time miraculous occurrence, shocking even the witch herself who was used to deceiving her customers.

Can One Divine the Future with Signs?

The Torah prohibits divination of the future with signs (Leviticus 19:26). Nevertheless, two biblical narratives present ostensibly righteous figures divining the future with signs and they are successful, suggesting God's providential approval.

Seeking a wife for Isaac, Abraham's servant (midrashically identified as Eliezer, Abraham's servant in Genesis 15:2) prays to God and creates a sign to ascertain God's approval:

And he said, "O Lord, God of my master Abraham, grant me good fortune this day, and deal graciously with my master Abraham: Here I stand by the spring as the daughters of the townsmen come out to draw water; let the maiden to whom I say, 'Please, lower your jar that I may drink,' and who replies, 'Drink, and I will also water your camels'—let her be the one whom You have decreed for Your servant Isaac. Thereby shall I know that You have dealt graciously with my master." (Genesis 24:12–14)

After the servant prayed, Rebekah appeared, drew water for the people and the camels, and clearly was the perfect fit for Isaac. It appears that the servant's divination of the future through this sign receives divine approval in the narrative.

Similarly, King Saul's son Jonathan boldly decides to attack a vast enemy Philistine camp accompanied only by his arms-bearer. He creates a sign that he interprets as signaling divine approval:

Jonathan said, "We'll cross over to those men and let them see us. If they say to us, 'Wait until we get to you,' then we'll stay where we are, and not go up to them. But if they say, 'Come up to us,' then we will go up, for the Lord is

delivering them into our hands. That shall be our sign." (I Samuel 14:8–10)

Jonathan goes on to win a spectacular victory and is the hero of the narrative.

Despite their resounding successes, did Abraham's servant and Jonathan violate the Torah's prohibition against divination? Commentators debate the meaning of a talmudic passage:

Rab himself has said: An omen that is not after the form pronounced by Eliezer, Abraham's servant, or by Jonathan the son of Saul, is not considered a divination. (*Hullin* 95b)

Rambam (*Hilkhot Avodah Zarah* 11:4) interprets this passage to mean that the divination of Abraham's servant and Jonathan is forbidden divination.

Rabad of Posquieres sharply rejects Rambam's reading and insists that Abraham's servant and Jonathan were righteous and acted appropriately, as is evident from the narratives. He concludes by saying that if Abraham's servant and Jonathan were alive, they would whip Rambam with fiery lashes. Radak and Ralbag agree with Rabad and maintain that the signs of Abraham's servant and Jonathan were permissible. Rabbi Elhanan Samet explains that Rabad, Radak, and Ralbag interpret the Talmud to mean that unlike the other signs discussed in that passage, which are considered unreliable forms of divination, the signs of Abraham's servant and Jonathan were reliable. The Talmud is giving advice on appropriate divination.[15]

Alternatively, Ran (Rabbenu Nissim on *Hullin* 95b) and Rabbi Joseph Karo (*Kesef Mishneh* on Rambam, *Hilkhot Avodah Zarah* 11:4) agree that the signs of Abraham's servant and Jonathan were appropriate because they are rational. Abraham's servant sought a hospitable wife for Isaac, and Jonathan interpreted the Philistines' summoning him as giving him a military advantage. The Torah prohibits making decisions based on signs that have no rational basis, such as seeing a black cat.

According to Rambam, the Torah outlaws all divination signs, rational or not. For the others, Abraham's servant and Jonathan sought signs of divine providence using rational means and prayer. The plain sense of the narratives supports the majority opinion against Rambam, that Abraham's servant and Jonathan acted appropriately and were blessed with divine assistance.[16]

Conclusion

The plain sense of the biblical texts we have considered does not support the notion that human blessings or curses work automatically without divine support. There also is no evidence that a head count automatically elicits a plague. The plain sense of the narrative in I Samuel 28 (and possibly also the Egyptian magicians) might suggest the existence of black magic, but a number of commentators exclude that possibility and provide a fair alternative reading of the text. Regardless, the Torah outlaws sorcery as a capital offense. It appears from the plain sense of the text that the signs of Abraham's servant and Jonathan are acceptable in the context of faith in God and rationality. Rambam rules otherwise, and prohibits all forms of divination.

While some Midrashim and later commentators ascribe some of these events to automatically triggered forces, it appears that Tanakh indeed attempts to eradicate superstitions at their roots. God rules the entire universe, and

people's righteous or wicked behavior, not magic, determines God's providential relationship with humanity.

A final note to educators: While Rashi often is the exclusive commentator taught to children throughout much of Elementary School, educators of young children should give serious pause before teaching Rashi's comments about the issues discussed in this essay. Since it is difficult to present complex and conflicting views on these subjects to young children, Elementary School students will necessarily adopt the view that Rachel died because of Jacob's unwitting curse and that head counts invoke the "evil eye." It is preferable to defer these discussions at least until High School, when children are old enough to learn the different sides of these debates.

Notes

[1] For further discussion, see, for example, Nahum M. Sarna, "Paganism and Biblical Judaism," in *Studies in Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2000), pp. 13–28; Christine Hayes, *Introduction to the Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), pp. 15–28.

[2] A different, and much broader, discussion pertains to rabbinic statements in the Talmud and mystical literature and later rabbinic interpretations, particularly that of Rambam. See, for example, Menachem Kellner, *Maimonides' Confrontation with Mysticism* (Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2006); Marc B. Shapiro, *Studies in Maimonides and His Interpreters* (Scranton: University of Scranton Press, 2008), pp. 95–150; H. Norman Strickman, *Without Red Strings or Holy Water: Maimonides' Mishneh Torah* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2011).

[3] Nehama Leibowitz, *Studies in Bereshit (Genesis)*, trans. Aryeh Newman (Jerusalem: Eliner Library), pp. 277–278.

[4] For a survey of traditional opinions, see Yehuda Nachshoni, *Studies in the Weekly Parashah: Bamidbar*, trans. Raphael Blumberg and Yaakov Petroff (Jerusalem: Mesorah Publications, 1989), pp. 1091–1098.

[5] See further sources and discussion in Elhanan Samet, *Iyyunim BeParashot HaShavua* (second series) vol. 1 (Hebrew) ed. Ayal Fishler (Ma'aleh Adumim: Ma'aliyot Press, 2004), pp. 156–160.

[6] Rashi also follows Rabbi Elazar (Yoma 22b) on I Samuel 15:4, when King Saul counted his troops prior to his battle against Amalek: "Saul mustered the troops and enrolled them at Telaim (*va-yifkedem ba-tela'im*): 200,000 men on foot, and 10,000 men of Judah." Rashi interprets "*va-yifkedem ba-tela'im*" to mean that he counted them using sheep, rather than counting them by head. Radak disagrees and interprets "Tela'im" as the name of a place (the NJPS translation cited in this note adopts this reading). In Radak's reading, Saul did not specifically use objects, but simply counted his troops.

[7] In I Chronicles, there is a brief note of a related problem, that of counting all of Israel. God promised that Israel would be as numerous as the stars, and therefore a census is limiting: "David did not take a census of those under twenty years of age, for the Lord had promised to make Israel as numerous as the stars of heaven. Joab son of Zeruiah did begin to count them, but he did not finish; wrath struck Israel on account of this, and the census was not entered into the account of the chronicles of King David" (I Chronicles 27:23–24). From this vantage point, counting all of Israel in any form, half-shekels or not, remains the

problem. However, military censuses are appropriate under normal circumstances.

[8] See further discussion in Moshe Shamah, *Recalling the Covenant: A Contemporary Commentary on the Five Books of the Torah* (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav, 2011), pp. 445–460.

[9] See Jerome Yehuda Gellman, *This Was from God: A Contemporary Theology of Torah and History* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2016), pp. 122–123.

[10] Nahum M. Sarna observes that there is an Egyptian species of cobra rendered rigid by applying pressure to a nerve at the nape of its neck. When thrown to the ground, the jolt causes it to recover and it wriggles away (*Exploring Exodus: The Origins of Biblical Israel* [New York: Schocken, 1986–1996], pp. 67–68).

[11] In this reading, how could the witch have known that Saul was rejected by God? Samuel's prophecy was not public knowledge.

[12] See Hayyim Angel, "Controversies over the Historicity of Biblical Passages in Traditional Commentary," in Angel, *Increasing Peace Through Balanced Torah Study*. *Conversations* 27 (New York: Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, 2017), pp. 10–21; reprinted in Angel, *The Keys to the Palace: Essays Exploring the Religious Value of Reading the Bible* (New York: Kodesh Press, 2017), pp. 115–131.

[13] Moshe Garsiel, *Reshit HaMelukhah BeYisrael*, vol. 2 (Hebrew), (Raananah: Open University Press, 2008), pp. 302–303.

[14] For a fuller discussion of rabbinic and Karaite views of the tenth-twelfth centuries and their influences, see Haggai ben Shammai, "From Rabbinic Homilies to Geonic Doctrinal Exegesis: The Story of the Witch of En Dor as a Test Case," in *Exegetical Crossroads: Understanding Scripture in Judaism, Christianity and Islam in the Pre-Modern Orient*, ed. Georges Tamer et al. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), pp. 163–197.

[15] See further discussion in Elhanan Samet, *Iyyunim BeParashot HaShavua* (second series) vol. 2 (Hebrew) ed. Ayal Fishler (Ma'aleh Adumim: Ma'aliyot Press, 2004), pp. 389–407. An English version can be found at http://etzion.org.il/en/prohibition-divination-rambam-vs-sages-provence, accessed June 26, 2018.

[16] Jacob Milgrom adopts a similar perspective. Sorcery is when one tries to alter the future with magic. This practice is absolutely incompatible with monotheism and is a capital crime in the Torah since a magician tries to overrule God's will. In contrast, divination is when one tries to predict future using signs. This practice *could* be compatible with monotheism if one claims to predict God's future. Milgrom appeals to Abraham's servant and Jonathan as examples that can be tolerated (*Anchor Bible: Leviticus 17–22* [New York: Doubleday, 2000], pp. 1687–1688). Milgrom disagrees with Yehezkel Kaufmann, who maintained (like Rambam) that divination is incompatible with biblical monotheism.