# Magic and Superstition: Then and Now

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Jeremy Rosen is a graduate of Cambridge University in philosophy and studied at and received semikha from Mir Yeshiva in Jerusalem. He has worked in the Orthodox rabbinate, Jewish education, and academia, and currently is the rabbi of the Persian Jewish community of Manhattan. This article appears in issue 35 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

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The Torah is quite clear in its condemnation of magic and superstition. So, too, is the Talmud and most certainly and explicitly, Maimonides. Magic, spells, and superstitions are universal and have been since the earliest record of human cultural activity. They are to be found throughout Jewish history and sources. In many respects, our present Jewish world seems to have regressed to the Middle Ages in its embrace of the paranormal. Sometimes I wonder if there is any room in the world of Torah for rationalism anymore.

**Biblical Terminology**

The Torah uses a lot of different words for what we subsume under the general term “magic.” Laban uses the word *leNahesh*, which in modern Hebrew means something like “I took a risk in employing you.” But the Chaldeans of whom he was one, were well known for their interest in the supernatural and that was probably Laban's world. He will have consulted some kind of magic or oracle. There is even a Midrash that says that the rabbis agreed with Chaldean methods.[1] The same word, *leNahesh* is used of Joseph telling them that he is able to guess, or to divine the real truth about the brothers. Its

root suggests *lahash*, to whisper or talk or even *nahash*, meaning a snake, with its hissing and slyness. This is the word favored by Balaam when he was invited to curse the Children of Israel. When he realized that he could not countermand God he no longer returned to consult his *nahashim*. Balaam declared that "There is no witchcraft [*nahash*] in Jacob and no magic [*kessem*] in Israel." *Kessem* seems to be more a description of objects used in magic rather than a system. When the elders of Moab come to Balaam, they bring *kessamim,* carrying charms. Someone who uses charms is called a *kossem*. The word *kessem* also means a stick—possibly the art of casting down sticks or wooden dice and reading their signs.

In Egypt, Pharaoh had disturbing dreams and called upon his *hartumim*, commonly translated as magicians, to interpret them. Most scholars take the origin of the word to come from *heret* a stylus or engraver and so the *hartumim* could be those who interpreted texts, perhaps the scientists of those days. It is used in Egypt together with wise men and so must have been one of their sciences: "And Pharaoh called to his wise men and his magicians, *mekhashefim*," in which case it could be a synonym for *hartumim*.

When Moses met God at the burning bush, God used a variety of methods to persuade Moses to take on the assignment of going down to Egypt to get the Children of Israel out. There was a burning bush that did not burn up, a staff that turned into a snake, and an arm that turned leprous. We might have put all these down as miracles performed by God were it not for the fact that the Egyptian *hartumim* could, initially at any rate, imitate many of Moses's miracles, including the snake trick.

Another word that is used in connection with *nahash* is *onen* which might mean telling the future by reading the clouds (since the word for cloud is identical), or it could come from another similar word *ana* for answering, replying with words to requests for information. *Onen* is used later in respect of the dead as well. Then there is the word now commonly used for magic, *kishuf*, which indicates the ability to reveal secrets.

There is another category that involves making something, either an effigy or raising up an image of someone. The words are *ov* and *yidoni*, and the Torah talks about not turning toward them (for answers). "Do not turn to the *ovs* and the *yidonis*. Do not ask things of them." There the text adds the prohibition against "asking of the dead." So it would appear that these elements were part of a procedure of calling up the spirits of the departed. An *ov* might be an image, figurine, or effigy, and a *yidoni* might be a spirit or a less material form having some special knowledge (given that *yidoni* has the same root (*y-d-a*) as the word for knowledge).

Deuteronomy adds another category, that of the "*hover haver*." Literally this means befriending a friend. One can only assume it is a confidant or a private consultant on the affairs of the occult. It could also mean someone who has a special relationship with spirits or is on a higher level, like the honorific term later given to scholars *haver*.

These are a series of very different categories in the Torah that are forbidden under the general rubric of turning to forces, oracles, symbols, or objects to guide one in one's actions and decisions. This looks like a very clear objection to magic, witchcraft, astrology, and the various pseudo-sciences that are just as prevalent today as they were 3,000 years ago.

In those days they were associated with idolatry. When it comes to the specific laws of the Torah, there are laws that deal with the penalties for magic and its allied areas. In Exodus there is a specific command to get rid of witches: "A witch (*mekhashefa)* should not be allowed to live." Why only a witch and not the others mentioned above? The death penalty as prescribed in the Bible was reserved only for the most serious and existential of threats and even so, rarely exercised. And although the word is most commonly used of a female, it is also used of a male wizard.

There are specific commands against individuals to try doing these things. “Do not try to make charms or tell the future” and “Do not turn (for answers) to an image or a spirit, and do not contaminate yourselves with them, for I am God.” Here we go a step further in specifying that this approach is a form of contamination that goes against God directly. The implication is that one should accept God's instructions and no one else's. The same text goes on “Do not eat over blood, do not make charms or tell the future.” Eating blood was strictly forbidden in the Torah. It was a very important part of idolatrous rites in Canaan and has continued to play a role in magic rites supposedly passing on the qualities of the previous “owner” of the blood. We have a clear indication that these practices were rooted in idolatry and the opposition is to the context as well as the act itself.

The clearest evidence of the idolatrous context of these practices comes toward the end of the Torah:

> When you come into the land which the Lord your God gives you, do not learn to do the abominations of those nations. There should not be amongst you anyone who passes his son or daughter through fire, a charmer of charms, a reader of clouds, a fortune teller or a magician. A friendly fortune teller or someone who asks of an image or a spirit or asks of the dead. Because God despises anyone who does these things and it is because of these abominations that the Lord your God is driving them out before you. You should be straight with the Lord your God. For these nations that you will displace, they listen to fortune tellers and charmers, but you should not do so.

Then the Torah goes on to talk about the prophet as the prototype of spiritual leadership and spiritual direction. He is the one the Israelites were instructed to turn to for advice and for help in dealing with the unknown, the frightening and the uncertainty of the future. And that was because he or she functioned within the constraints of Torah.

**Oracles**

Oracles were very much part of the ancient world, in Greece and Rome, using humans, animals, and inanimate objects. The Bible approved of the oracle of the *Urim* and *Tumim* that were part of the breastplate of the High Priest. They were occasionally consulted before and during the First Temple period. Interestingly they were also called the *ephod,* which was as well the name for the basic priestly garment that was also used to describe idolatry objects. However, the Torah ordained that *Urim* and *Tumim* were a way of consulting God through the medium of the priest, rather than other forces.

And this was what differentiated them from other pagan forms of oracles. If the message comes from the One God, the vehicle of revelation may vary. This after all is the message of Balaam, a renowned and successful magician, but unable to do anything without God’s approval.

A striking story involves King Saul. Desperate for guidance after the prophet Samuel died, he asked his servants to find him a *ba’alat ov,* a woman who could produce and communicate with images of the dead. The spirit of Samuel does indeed appear to rise. This seems to indicate that magic in one form or another can achieve results. Yet it was clearly regarded as forbidden.

The very name of Purim is based on what one assumes was a Persian word for the magic lots that Haman cast to determine the appropriate time to destroy the Jews. Haman is portrayed as trying to use this “magic” for his own ends. In contrast, divine influence, even though hidden, is not obvious.

Esther's name means “hidden,” and perhaps that is also why God's name is not mentioned directly in the story of Esther. Forces at work behind the scenes are referred to by Haman's wife and his wise men (a parallel with the wise men and magicians of Pharaoh) when they tell him, “If you have begun to fall before him (Mordecai) you will not be able to overcome him.” This is an obvious contrast to the Jewish historical experience, which often has included a decline before rising. This was an assertion of the superiority of the Jewish way of responding to challenges over the pagan way of feeling determined how to act and therefore more passive in the face of adversity.

The Torah, interestingly, does not say that magic is baseless, empty, or primitive. Its instructions are simply not to get involved in it in any way that might have some influence or power over a person. But clearly these practices were so ingrained and popular that they were all but impossible to wipe out as the history of both Israelite Kingdoms illustrate. King Hezekiah had to destroy the serpent from the time of Moses because it was being abused[2] as well as censoring a “Book of Cures.”

**The Talmudic Era**

By the time of the Talmud, the serious debate centered more on astrology and *mazal*. There is a difference of opinion as to whether these skills count as part of idolatrous practices and therefore are banned under the general prohibition of anything to do with idolatrous practices, *Darkei HaEmori*, Emorite, or pagan practices,[3] or whether they count as wisdom: “The men of the east know about *mazalot* and astrology.” Non-Jewish wisdom that had no heretical connotations was not prohibited, and, on the contrary, was something to be appreciated (there is even a blessing to be said over wise men of all races).[4]

There is also a major difference of opinion as to the extent to which the constellations or various forms of *mazalot* did or did not influence human behavior. It was at the time a universally accepted idea that there were 12 signs of the Zodiac that were an integral part of the way God's universe was made up and influenced the natural and supernatural world. It was not until modernity that such an idea transitioned from science to superstition.

The term *mazal*, initially meant no more than the constellations. At some stage, the role changed into one of determining the future in ways bound up with magic and other non-rational esoteric practices. “What did they do wrong? They consulted the stars (signs of the Zodiac), magicians who look at birds and those expert in reading signs. “*Tayar*,” say some commentators, are the auspices of Roman tradition, the innards of birds, others suggest symbols, the origin of Tarot).”[5]

In the creation process described in Genesis, there is no mention of *mazalot*. The Torah talks about the sun, the moon, and the stars. But by the Second Book of Kings there is one passage where *mazalot* replace the stars.[6] The fact that the *mazalot* are not mentioned in the Torah leads one to argue that the idea of *mazalot* came later into Israelite life because they were significant in Egyptian and Mesopotamian culture and then in Roman and Christian societies. This may be why Balaam thought they had no impact on the Israelites. But the Talmud is happy associating Abraham with astrology. “Abraham said to God I can see the future in my *mazal*, that I will only have one son. God took him outside and showed him the heavens and said to him 'Ignore your astrology; *mazal* has no power over Israel.’”[7]

The main discussion on *mazal* in the Talmud above, has R. Yohanan, Rav, R. Yehuda, R. Nahman Bar Yitzhak, R. Akiva, and Shemuel all agree with different sources that *mazal* has no power over Jews. On the other hand, R. Hanina says there that both wisdom and wealth are influenced by

*mazal* and that every hour of the day has its *mazal* exercising control over it.[8] The most famous passage from the Talmud that supports the influence of *mazal* is that "Life (how long a person lives), children (how many or how they turn out), and income do not depend on a person's deserts but on *mazal*."[9] And "There is not a blade of grass that does not have a *mazal* in the heavens."[10] "*Mazal* affects people" seem to assert that something extraterrestrial has an influence, whether it is the constellations or the power of God working through various processes before it reaches humankind. If a person suddenly feels frightened, it may be because although he hasn't seen anything dangerous, his *mazal* has. But the Talmud responds by saying that the answer is to say the *Shema*. In other words, having a direct connection to God is a protection against any sub-divine powers or influences. The compromise position is that *mazalot* exist and have influence. But God controls everything. "There are 12 *mazalot* God created in the heavens,"[11] or "God controls the *mazal*."[12]

The *ayin hara*, the evil eye, as well as the fear of curses, played and still plays an enormous part in many people's lives. Initially a bad eye meant only an attitude, a way of looking at the world negatively. "A bad eye (outlook) and a bad inclination can destroy a person's world."[13] The rabbis give different meanings to this: feelings envy, hatred, or negativity. The Hebrew *Beli Ayin Hara* and the Yiddish expression *kenayinhora*, may there be no evil eye, are widespread among some Jews…as if just looking at another person really can do harm.

Despite the illogicality of it, the Talmud refers a great deal to its negative effects. For example, there is reference to Joseph protecting one from the evil eye based on a verse in the Bible[14] that Joseph is pleasing to the eye which can be mistranslated as overcoming the (evil) eye. The very concept that a random look or putting a hex on someone can affect a person defies logic. But then logic and superstition are opposite poles. People who feel they are cursed can find it turning into is a self-fulfilling source of anxiety. The pure halakhic response is that if one behaves according to the Torah one should have nothing to fear.

**Spirts and Demons**[15]

The Talmud continued the biblical polemic against witchcraft. R. Shimon Ben Shetah is reported to have executed 80 women when he waged a campaign against witches. The Talmud records that their families paid him back by framing his son. Yet the Talmud is full of stories of magicians, spells, demons, spirits, and the whole paraphernalia of the ancient and medieval world.

The spirit *Ketev Meriri* is covered with scales and anyone who sees him cannot survive.[16] If one wants to see the spirits around, he should "get the placenta of a black cat the offspring of another black cat, the firstborn of a firstborn, roast it and grind the ashes, and put them on his eyes and he will see them. Then put the left over into an iron sealed container so that they do not steal it and keep his mouth closed throughout.[17]

**Cures**

Lists of fanciful cures abound. Here is one example amongst many. "If one has a fever, one should take seven thorns from seven palms, seven chips from seven logs, seven pegs from seven bridges, seven

ashes from seven ovens, seven amounts of earth from seven sockets, seven samples of pitch from seven ships, seven pinches of cumin, seven hairs from an old dog, and tie them together to the garment of the sick person with a white thread."[18] One wonders if in the time it takes to gather all this, the fever might have passed. Perhaps the effort in itself was therapeutic.

So is the prevalence of the ancient idea of charms or in talmudic language, a *kameya.* The Talmud discusses being able to carry a *kameya* around one's neck on Shabbat. It distinguishes between a *kameya* that "works" and one that has not proven its effectiveness.

Medieval mysticism drew heavily on the non-Jewish world of magic, astrology, and alchemy. Once one leaves rationality or philosophy behind, the gates of superstition are thrown wide open. For them, this was still a world of evil spirits, devils as well as angels; and given the absence of universal health systems it is not surprising that any tool would be used when faced with a crisis of health or wealth.

There are many such charms used in the past and today, written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and local languages, often combining Hebrew letters, quotations from Psalms, kabbalist combinations of letters, not to mention blood, plants, and bones. Of course, in days before modern scientific health provision, people turned to magic for cures, and still do in many parts of the world.

The rabbis completely reject the idea of using sources from religions outside Judaism to bring about cures.[19] Yet if the same methods are used by rabbis acting in the name of God, they become legitimate. Nevertheless, it seems they understood and condoned the placebo effect.

**Why Is It Not Acceptable?**

Idolatry requires obedience to corrupt practices and symbols that damaged the fabric of a moral, caring society. It delivered people into the random and unpredictable power of priests and magicians who had control over life and death. This conflicts with the Jewish concept of a clear commitment to a known constitution that preserves rights and protects the weak.

The important principle lying behind opposition to magic was the issue of responsibility of a person to decide how to act. The opposition to these practices is because a person is handing over the decision-making process either to another or is subjecting the decisions to random or unknown criteria. This is not the same as asking for advice or seeking out expertise because there, one still has responsibility for the final decision. In Judaism, the expert advice of a great rabbi is still based on clear set of assumptions and criteria. It is handing oneself over to unknown powers that conflicts with the Jewish principle of obedience to God and Torah.

Despite these very definite prohibitions, it is hardly surprising that many Jews around the world still do pay a great deal of attention to good luck charms, things that protect from harm, evil spirits, and demons. And they can point to talmudic and medieval sources to justify their beliefs. Superstition is deeply imbedded in all societies. Sometimes it is associated with and part of the local religion. And even where officially the religion may deny the role of superstition, people often treat the religion in a superstitious way.

**Why Does It Continue?**

To this day, many people pay attention to astrological charts and go to see miracle workers to discover the appropriate times for business deals and betrothals. It seems that almost everything Maimonides specifies as being wrong and prohibited is popular in many Jewish circles. And what of those who regard the mezuzah as a charm to protect homes? What is more, many people have had experiences with mind readers, palm readers, or psychics that are remarkably correct both about the past and the future. Besides, the Torah does not say these things are all nonsense, just that we should avoid them. And if the Bible can record Samuel's body returning doesn't this prove that there is something to it?

Just because people do things, this does not make them right. The mezuzah is not a charm. It simply reminds us of the principles and the commandments that each home should be dedicated to. The word on the exterior is the name of God. It is God who protects us, not the mezuzah. Yes, we have all heard of “wonders” that happen when we check a mezuzah and find a letter missing, but like all “miracles” there are other ways of seeing what actually happened. We hear about the coincidences and the wonders but not of the cases where nothing happens at all. People are very gullible. That is precisely why so much of the Torah is devoted to attacking these sorts of practices.

The current nostalgic return to the past has led to a roaring trade in our times in wonder rabbis and others offering cures (for money usually). Checking texts for errors, a mezuzah or a ketubah, to explain why things went wrong for a household or a couple. Combining names, all the tricks of astrologers, mind readers, and card sharps are all part of the game. The lines between religion and magic and superstition can be very blurred.

Science and technology have made life so much easier in so many ways. And yet, societies have become so materialist, so stressful, so soulless, and so devoid of human interaction that more and more people look for comfort, solutions, and answers. The human need for a placebo is so strong that this is an area where religion, tacitly if not officially, has capitulated.

The Torah is clear that one can intercede directly with God and that the best protection one can have is to behave according to the commandments. An ability to cope with pressures, to be positive and strong are the only honest answers. But if superstitious beliefs and actions give people hope, it is difficult to wean people from them.

There is room to study these phenomena, to try to understand what is going on and to better understand the universe we are part of. However, the guiding principle is “Be straight with the Lord Your God.” [20]

We have the possibility of a direct and personal relationship with God, and this is the route we should aspire to follow. It is, to give an analogy, the difference between having direct access to the President, instead having to make appointments with his secretaries and assistants. We have no need of intermediaries.

[1] *Midrash Tanhuma Hukat* 11 and *Zohar* 1.223.
[2] 2 Kings 18:4.

[3] Mishna *Shabbat* 6:10.
[4] TB *Berakhot* 58a.
[5] *Midrash Rabba Kohelet* 7.
[6] 2 Kings 23:5.
[7] TB *Nedarim* 32a.
[8] TB *Shabbat* 156a.
[9] TB *Moed Katan* 28a.
[10] *Midrash Bereishit Rabba* 120.
[11] TB *Berakhot* 32b.
[12] *Pesikta Rabtai* 20.
[13] *Avot* 2 :11.
[14] Genesis 49:22.
[15] For a comprehensive account of Jewish demonology and magic, I recommend Yuval Harari *Jewish Magic: Before the Rise of Kabbalah.*
[16] *Midrash Rabba* Numbers 12:3.
[17] TB *Berakhot* 6a.
[18] TB *Shabbat* 61b and 67a.
[19] TB *Sanhedrin* 17a and Rashi loc cit.
[20] Deuteronomy 18:13.