

JewishTimes

VOL. XI NO.17 — MAY 4, 2012

What is
REAL
& what is
metaphor?

DEMONS

What are
they?

SEGULAS
that work



MYSTICISM

Is God for
or against it?

10 YEARS

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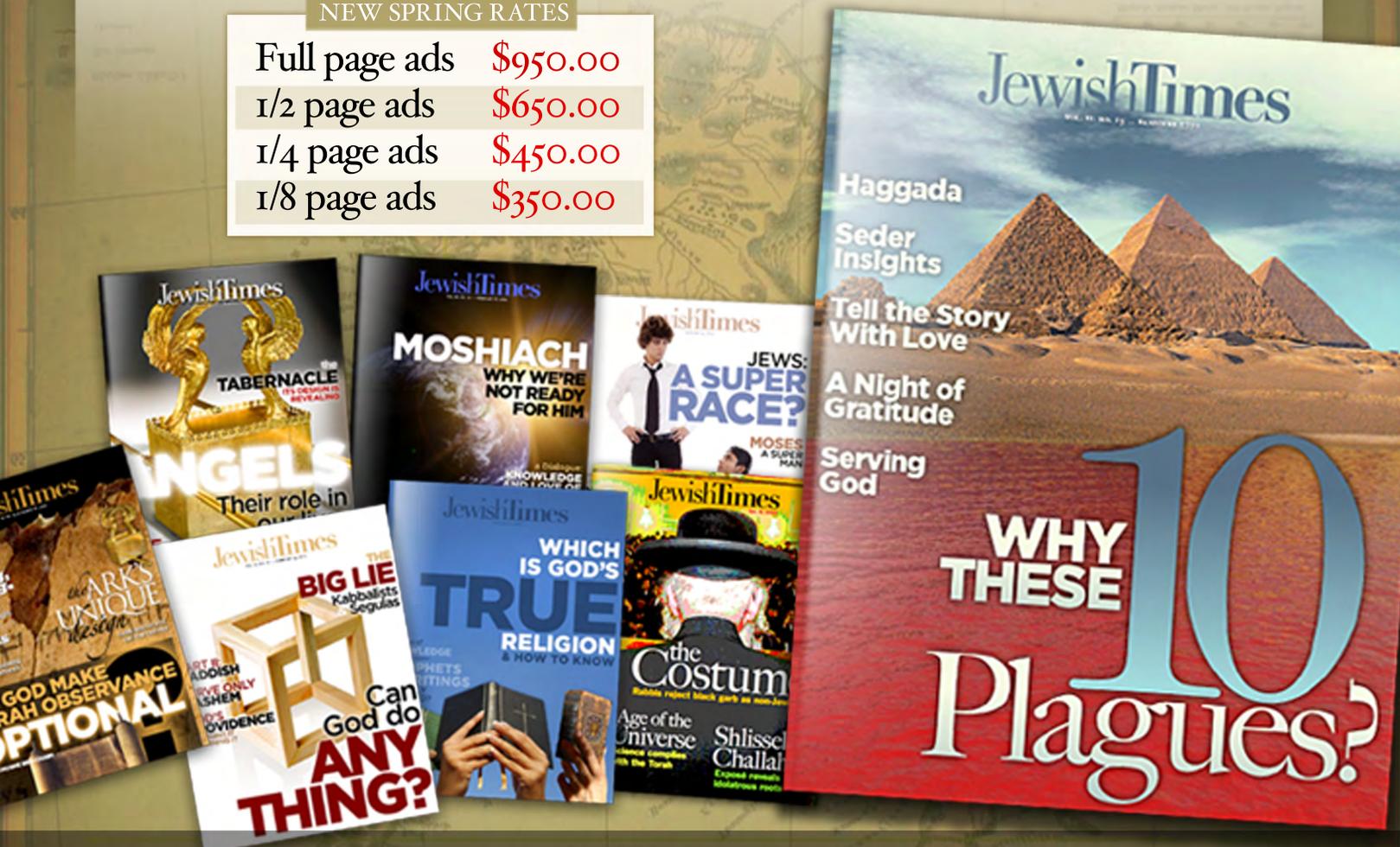
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LETTERS

YAAKOV: I would like to write an article on the following topic, please let me know your thoughts. There are several places in the Torah where the Jewish nation is encouraged to keep the commandments so that they will inherit the land. There are also places where it says what will happen if the Jewish nation doesn't keep the commandments.

"And you will do that which is straight and good in the Eyes of Hashem, so that it will be good for you and so that you will come and inherit the good land which Hashem promised your forefathers (Deut. 6:18)."

"Be careful, or you will be enticed to turn away and worship other gods and bow down to them. Then the Lord's anger will burn against you, and he

will shut up the heavens so that it will not rain and the ground will yield no produce, and you will soon perish from the good land the Lord is giving you (Deut. 11:16-17)."

"And you shall keep all of my statutes and laws and do them, so that the land does not spit you out (Lev. 20:22)."

There is an obvious question: We know that less than 50% of the world's Jews consider themselves to be religious, both in Israel and around the world. Israel seems to be flourishing economically. If less than 50% of Jews are actually keeping the Torah, how can it be that the Jews in Israel aren't being kicked out of the land? (cont. page 10)

RELIGION of REASON

by Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim, Founder Mesora.org

Are your beliefs true,
or simply popular
among other Jews?

33 pg Preview

www.Mesora.org/ReligionofReason

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Jews have succumbed to mystical religion and pop-kabbala. Ten years in the making, the author cites authentic Torah sources unveiling the fallacy of widespread beliefs. He focuses on Torah's brilliance and method of decryption; unraveling metaphors and interpreting texts to reveal hidden gems. Readers will enjoy a long overdue, rational exposé of cultural beliefs, and a unique look at Torah's deep insights. Free 33 page preview at right...

REVIEWS



RABBI REUVEN MANN

Rabbi, Y. Israel of Phoenix; Founder, Masoret Institute; Menabel YBT

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim has written extensively about the philosophy and Hashkafa of Judaism for many years. As the title of his book, "Judaism; Religion of Reason" indicates, his ideas are rooted in an uncompromisingly rational approach to Judaism. He follows the guidelines of the great rationalist philosophers such as Rambam and Saadia Gaon in his exploration into the values and ideals of Torah Judaism. He is convinced that all of the teachings of Judaism and the statements of the Sages make perfect sense and are amenable to the rational, inquiring mind.

He is absolutely opposed to all forms of "mysticism" and seeks to debunk all practices and beliefs which are rooted in superstition or are contrary to reason. This collection of writings covers a wide variety of topics that are of interest to contemporary Jews. It also contains insightful analyses of Biblical narratives as well as the underlying significance and relevance of many mitzvot.

Rabbi Ben-Chaim demonstrates that Judaism can be harmonized with human reason. Indeed he asserts that one can only understand and appreciate Judaism by analyzing it in a logical manner in order to elucidate its deeper ideas. He is not afraid to ask the most penetrating and challenging questions because he is absolutely convinced that Torah is the Word of God and thus based on the highest form of wisdom.

Jews who have a profound desire to make sense out of their religion will benefit greatly from reading this book. One need not agree with all of Rabbi Ben-Chaim's ideas, but his questions, analyses and original thoughts will open your mind to a new appreciation of the wisdom and logical consistency of Torah Judaism.

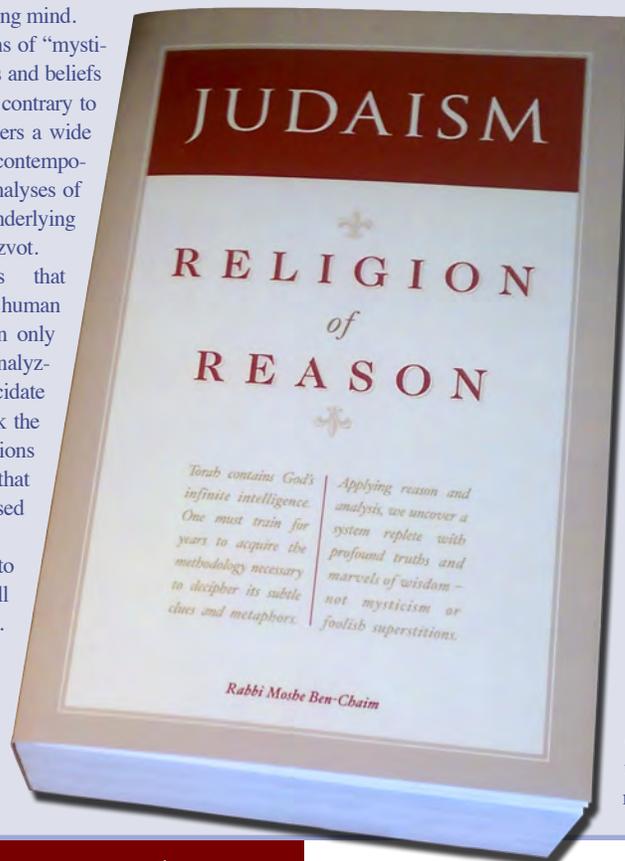


RABBI STEVEN WEIL

Executive Vice President, The Orthodox Union

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim has followed in the footsteps of the great Medieval Rishonim (Rambam, R. Avraham ben HaRambam, etc.) in trying to explain, define and lay out the world outlook of Torah and the philosophy of Judaism in rational, logical terms. Rabbi Ben-Chaim asks critical, crucial and defining questions that any thinking Jew needs to ask. He is extremely critical of approaches to Judaism that superimpose external methodologies (such as mysticism, other religions) and project primitive emotions onto the

Almighty. Although one can disagree with some of the conclusions; his approach, his questions and method enable the reader to explore and engage our theology in a meaningful and serious way. When Chazal employ certain terms and convey certain images, the student is forced to conceptualize, extract and deduce profound psychological and philosophical principles. Unfortunately, many take Chazal at face value or project onto Chazal, motives and rationalizations they never meant. Rabbi Ben-Chaim following the method of the Rishonim, forces us to define, weigh and analyze each word and phrase of Chazal. Rabbi Ben-Chaim shows there is no contradiction between a serious investigation of Science and a serious investigation of Judaism. Rabbi Ben-Chaim has written a work that addresses the thinking, seeking person of all faiths. This work speaks to the scholar and lay person alike. Once again, one may not agree with specifics within the book but at the same time will appreciate it and gain insight into how the great Rishonim define how we view the world. Rabbi Ben-Chaim's website, Mesora.org is a very serious tool and resource for thinking human beings who want to engage and explore the Almighty, the Almighty's universe and do so within the realm of wisdom, rationality and intellectual honesty.



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JESSIE FISCHBEIN

When I was a child, I read many aggadetas and midrashim. Although a part of me knew that these things were not physically possible (I distinctly remember wondering in first grade how the sun and moon could possibly be arguing, as I knew for a fact that they were not sentient beings), some of the stories tantalized me with possibility. Did King Shlomo really speak to the king of the Demons? Did the ants really stop and speak to him? One of the stories I found especially enticing was the story of the rabbis who created a man. Was it true? Can a human reach such a high level of closeness to Hashem that he will be endowed with mystical powers to the extent that he will become a creator?

It was with great excitement, almost thirty years later, that I read the article below. When I finally understand something our Rabbis taught us that I used to think was mysterious and magical, and I see an explanation that is intellectually satisfying and spiritually meaningful, I am filled with joy. When I thought the Torah was mystical, I was filled with a sense of wonder and hope that perhaps the laws of nature can be suspended for those who are worthy. When I learn rational explanations, I am filled with a profound gratitude that the Torah is for me, with deep and fascinating ideas to learn from and to help my spiritual growth.

From the book, *“Religion of Reason”*

by, Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim
Edited by, Jessie Fischbein

Rava Created a Human

*Decrypting
Rabbinic lessons
in Talmud*

The Rabbis’ clues reveal their lessons

Rava said, "If one is righteous, he could create worlds [like God]." As it says, "For your sins separate you from your God" [Isaiah 59]. Rava thereby created a man, and sent him to Rav Zeira. He spoke to him but he did not answer. Rav Zeira said, "You are from the chavrei [sorcerers], return to your dust." On each Friday evening Rav Chanina and Rav Oshiah would indulge in Sefer Yetzira [book of Creation] and would create a third-grown calf and eat it. [Sanhedrin 65b]

the second one is animal, not a man, and that it had a positive outcome.

The Talmud cites a quote from Isaiah that might be misunderstood, "For your sins separate you from your God." It appears at first that only our sins separate us from God, otherwise we would not be separated. But this cannot be as we recite numerous times daily that God is "Kadosh"—greatly elevated and distinguished from all creation. The Talmud is actually showing how man cannot understand human creation, let alone perform creation. But it does so in a metaphoric style:

Sabbath is the day of Creation. As such, the Rabbis were accustomed to study areas of Creation, as they always studied "matters of the day." (On Succos they would study that holiday as well, etc.) On one such Sabbath eve, Rava studied man's creation, and felt he had a new understanding about how God created man, as if Rava "could create a man" himself. Rava did not send a "man" to Rav Zeira, but rather, he sent his findings from his studies, asserting he obtained a new insight. His sending must have been out of some doubt, so he desired his teacher's analysis. Rav Zeira asked a question to Rava, to which Rava had no answer. Rav Zeira said "return to the dust" meaning, return to studies about dust, and not man, an intelligent being. Rav Zeira was saying that we cannot know so much about how God created intelligent beings like man: metaphysics is difficult. "Return to the dust"

is Rav Zeira's ridicule that Rava should return to studying lower areas within his grasp, i.e., "dust." However, Rav Chanina and Rav Oshiah studied matters of biology alone, well within their abilities. "Creating a calf" and "eating" it mean "understanding biology" and "enjoying" it, respectively. But even in the more approachable area of biology, we read that Rav Chanina and Rav Oshiah were only able to create a "third-grown" calf. This means that human knowledge, although grasping some amount, is still incomplete: only "a third" of the knowledge out there.

Perhaps also explained is that Rava's independent studies resulted in errors, while Rav Chanina and Rav Oshiah who studied together were successful. This illustrates how essential it is to test one's ideas on another, removing the possibility of errors generated by overestimation of the self and personal infallibility. Gaining a critique almost always minimizes mistakes, "in a multitude of counselors there is safety (Proverbs 11:14)." And as a Rabbi once taught, the very first verse of Proverbs also teaches this idea: "The proverbs of Solomon son of David, King over Israel" was stated by King Solomon to teach that he had a great teacher and an environment that fostered wisdom. The King wished to express that his work Proverbs was substantiated by great minds who influenced his thinking, and on whom he also tested his thoughts to determine their veracity. ■

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& Yedoni

A Present Day Problem

Ancient-day idolatrous forms have expired, but their germ is not gone. Jews have become as diseased as the old, idolatrous civilizations

Rabbi. Dr. Darrel Ginsberg

Parshas Kedoshim spells out in detail, a myriad of new commandments, traversing a wide spectrum of concepts and halachas that are mixed in with references to the kedusha of God and Bnai Yisrael. There is also considerable mention of the area of nichush (superstitions, the belief in signs and omens, etc.), both the prohibition itself and its different manifestations. One of these involves the use of ov and yidoni, which is mentioned three different times in the parsha. It is the last mention of this prohibition that stands out.

As the parsha comes to a close, God explains how Bnai Yisrael must separate between the different types of animals (tahor or tameh), and the necessity to avoid those that are tameh.

The Torah (Vayikra 20:26) then tells us:

“You shall be holy to Me, for I, Hashem, am holy and I have distinguished you from the [other] peoples to be Mine [and to serve Me].”

This would seem to be a fitting end to the parsha, an accentuation of the concept of our being a sanctified nation. Yet, the following pasuk brings the parsha to a close:

“If among the men or women there will be a medium (ov) or an oracle (yidoni) they shall surely be put to death. You shall stone them to death, their blood is on them.”

With this, Parshas Kedoshim comes to an end. Why end with this warning? Rashi (ibid 27) points out that this is the third mention of this sin, with the Torah now clarifying that

(cont. next page)

Ov

the punishment (with witnesses and a warning) is stoning (sekila). While certainly it is crucial to know the punishment for this act, how does it tie in to the previous verse? On a thematic level, it seems completely out of place.

What exactly is the Torah referring to with ov and yidoni? There is considerable debate as to the particulars, but a general consensus exists in the Torah Shebal Peh (Oral Law) as to the overall concept. The ov, according to many, involved a person claiming communication with the dead, but channeling the voice of the dead through his armpit. The yidoni would use a bone to project a voice, whether from the dead or not. In either case, the person would address the purveyor of this information, asking questions about his future, and the answers would be communicated through these mediums.

Today's sophisticated, refined, culturally advanced society would laugh at such nonsense. The average Jew could easily see through a trick like this. Who would believe that a voice projecting from an armpit can tell the future?

Why the insistence by the Torah of this prohibition? Are we to worry about this today?

The Sefer HaChinuch (255) offers an enlightening explanation as to the problem of ov/yidoni. He writes as follows:

“At the root of this commandment lies the reason we wrote about the prohibition on practicing nichush. For all these forms of vapid nonsense cause a man to leave the essential, true religion and belief in the Eternal Lord, and he will thus turn to follow the nonsense; and he will believe that all that happens to him comes upon him by way of chance, and it lies in his power to better his fortune and remove every harm from himself by those questions [to the medium] and those tricks that he will do. Yet all this will avail him nothing, since everything is decreed by the Lord and Master of the world, and according to the worthy or sinful activity that a man will do, new events, good or bad, will occur for him - as it is written, ‘For according to the work of a man will He requite him’ (Iyov 34:11). It is fitting for a man to center all his thoughts and attune all his affairs about this. This is the way of thinking of every man among good, worthy Israelites...”

In writing about the general prohibition of nichush (249), he explains again that a person who apprises himself of this type of thinking will “reckon that all his good and bad fortune, all that happens to him, is a matter of chance occurrence, not by the watchful care on the part of his Creator...”

The Chinuch is elucidating an important foundation of Judaism – the existence of a system of schar v’onesh – Reward and Punishment – and our conviction in this system. The belief in this is one of the fundamental concepts in Judaism. The Rambam bases his eleventh foundation, as noted in his thirteen foundations of faith (Introduction to Perek HaChalek), on the acceptance of this concept. We understand there is a system of reward and punishment based on God’s justice, and that this is tied into man’s actions, good or bad. In other words, that which happens to mankind is always tied into his actions. The specifics – how the infinite causes and effects play out, why one person is deserving of this or that – are beyond man’s comprehension. The Torah, given to us by God, outlines for us that which is the “good” and that which is the “bad.” The guide, the derech Hashem, directing us in how to live our lives properly, is contained within the Torah. One who follows the Torah and internalizes the concept of this being the derech Hashem, is demonstrating an adherence to schar v’onesh.

It is important to note that a person should not believe that the performance of a mitzvah will necessarily produce an immediate, tangible reward (and vice versa regarding sin). Our dedication to the Torah is based on the concept that it brings us to a greater knowledge of God and helps perfect ourselves. To perform a mitzvah on the expectation of a reward removes the value of the mitzvah and intimates that man has detailed knowledge of God’s providence, which he does not. The main idea here is that a person should recognize that there is an overall system of schar v’onesh, and it is tied into man’s overall performance of mitzvos and aveiros.

However, when a person turns to nichush, he is abandoning the belief in the system of Reward and Punishment. A person who relies on this false method is conceding that God’s justice has no link to man’s

actions. Accordingly, living life correctly or incorrectly, has no bearing on that which occurs to him. He asks the baal ov about what will happen to him – he seeks information about the good or bad that will occur. He believes that the good or bad has nothing to do with his actions – the “chance” the Chinuch speaks of – which indicates a disbelief in God’s justice. To be punished or rewarded must be tied into one’s correct or incorrect actions – otherwise, there is no justice regarding that which occurs to mankind. Once a person disengages from the belief in man’s actions affecting his “standing” with God, he is denying the fundamental foundation of schar v’onesh.

We may scoff at the more primitive-sounding methods; after all, who today would make use of a person who claimed to determine one’s fate through a voice emanating from a bone? Yet the same silly, nonsensical thinking, as characterized by the Chinuch, is still prevalent in many religions, and even within Judaism. There are many Jews who attach their fates to actions involving inanimate objects or unworthy human sources. They want to ascribe causal relationships that distinctly deny any semblance of a system of Reward and Punishment. Superstitions abound, the segula business is thriving, red strings are everywhere and people are continually shying away from the firm concept that it is through the understanding and observance of the derech Hashem that will ultimately determine our fates. The ideology of the ov/yidoni is as manifest today as it was thousands of years ago.

One could therefore see why this warning ends the parsha. The basis for kedushas Bnai Yisrael stems from our acceptance of the system of mitzvos. It is a system predicated on our using our minds in the pursuit of serving God. It serves as the moral compass, guiding us towards the good and far from evil. Our acceptance of the Torah – by definition – is an admission of schar v’onesh that reflects God’s justice. It is an integral part of our belief in God – God is the one and only source of power in the universe. To pursue one’s fate through these other means is completely contradictory to the entire acceptance of mitzvos, usurping the element of kedusha – sanctity – that is tied to our identity as God’s chosen nation. ■

& Yedoni



Rabbi Steven Pruzansky
Congregation Bnai Yeshurun
Teaneck, New Jersey



Volumes have been written on segulot, charms.
Many written words are false; many books are lies.

the Real Segulot

The most important contribution that Jewish mysticism has made, especially in recent times, has been the proliferation of segulot — magical amulets, incantations, entities, tchotchkes, vials of water, red strings, etc. — among the people of Israel. We have thus been able to ascertain with great clarity the varying levels of reverence for G-d, knowledge of Torah, commitment to Mitzvot, and common sense that exist among our people. We have seen how, at one end of the spectrum, Judaism has become almost unrecognizable in its metamorphosis from a religion of reason and rationality, into a series of scams and gimmicks that rob people of a true connection to Hashem.

Almost as importantly, it has sparked a real interest in the genuine segulot — those tried and tested remedies that have come to us through the Torah and the words of Chazal — all of which are guaranteed to connect us to the Creator and bring us closer to His service. I was recently given this list below of segulot by one of my congregants, found in its original form at www.cross-currents.com, and offered here with some of my amendments and additions, which I urge all Jews who yearn for authentic spiritual growth, and a need to ameliorate pressing issues in their lives, to immediately implement.

How fortunate are we that the Creator of the Universe has granted us the secrets to a happy, fulfilling, meaningful and productive life.

- Segulah for longevity (I) — lead a healthy lifestyle (Rambam, Hilchot De'ot 4:20)
- Segulah for longevity (II) — charity and kindness (Mishlei 21:21)
- Segulah for longevity (III) — do not speak lashon hara (Tehillim 34:13; Avoda Zara 19b)
- Segulah for recovery from illness — go to a doctor (Berachot 60a, Bava Kamma 46b)
- Segulah for marriage — go out and find a suitable wife (Kiddushin 2b)
- Segulah for shalom bayit — love and patience (Sanhedrin 7a, Bava Metzia 59a)
- Segulah for a happy wife — be a good husband (Rosh Hashana 6b)
- Segulah for a happy husband — be a good wife (Shabbat 152a)
- Segulah for children — prayer to Hashem (Breisheet 25:21; I Shmuel, Chapter I)
- Segulah for Yir'at Shamayim — learning Torah (Avot 2:5)
- Segulah for spirituality — learning Torah and observing mitzvot (Megila 6b)
- Segulah for answered prayers — pray for someone else who has that same request (Bava Kamma 92a)
- Segulah for kavanah in prayer — take it seriously (Berachot 5:1)
- Segulah for averting evil decrees — repentance, prayer and charity (Musaf, Yamim Nora'im)
- Segulah for avoiding sin — avoid temptation (Sanhedrin 107a)
- Segulah for pure faith — don't believe in segulot (Devarim 18:13)
- Segulah for honest parnassah — learn a profession (Kiddushin 30a)
- Segulah to prevent drowning — learn how to swim (ibid)
- Segulah for happiness — seek out Hashem (Tehillim 105:3)
- Segulah for children who will love to learn Torah — be a parent who loves to learn Torah (common sense)
- Segulah for the coming of Moshiach today — listen to Hashem's voice (Sanhedrin 98a)
- Segulah for anything and everything — daven directly to Hashem! (Source: G-d; I Melachim 8:28; Yeshayahu 65:24) ■

I have several answers to this question, I would be very interested to hear your thoughts.

RABBI: If you review the sources (Kings II 20:10), it is the specific sin of idolatry that caused the Jerusalem's destruction, exile, and why we will be ousted from Israel, as the Shema Yisrael states. But at present, Jews are monotheists. Your quote from Leviticus warns against sexual violations, which too are not violated nationally. Jews are not marrying sisters, mothers and other prohibited marriage partners.

This is just based on what we know from the verses, which appears to satisfy your question. But we do not know God's other considerations that might explain his allowance of the Jews to remain in Israel. ■

STEVE: I someone write, "If God does not give something to you, it is a sign that it is not good for you." What's your take on this?

RABBI: The Talmud says all is in God's hands except for fear of God. Meaning, our height, our wealth, our intellectual capacity and the like are not in our control. But to say "If He does not give something to you, it is a sign that it is not good for you" assumes that what you don't have, is God's doing.

Maybe it's self inflicted? Maimonides teaches that most man's troubles are in fact self-inflicted.

Maimonides and Sforno [1] both explain — based on Torah — verses that God's providence does not extend to every person. It depends on our perfection. Fools and evildoers do not benefit from God's intervention. This makes sense. Sforno actually says most Jews are also not under God's individual providence. It is the rare person, says Sforno, that benefits from tzaraas for example, for his speaking Lashon Hara. One must be deserving that God will step in and/or alter nature to assist such a righteous soul. King Solomon agrees: "Those whom God loves does He rebuke (Prov. 3:12)." ■

[1] Guide for the Perplexed book 3, chap. 18; last Sforno on Tazria, see Rav Pelcovitz's edition.

SUBMIT YOUR LETTERS TO:
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Rabbi Reuven Mann

Strategic Silence

This week we read two parshas, Acharei Mot and Kedoshim. The latter exhorts us to live a life of holiness. This principle should regulate one's behavior in dealing with basic instincts. The Torah has many regulations governing the food we may and may not eat and the categories of people with whom we may and may not cohabit. Eating and sexual indulgence are expressions of man's animal nature and moderation in these areas is vital to living a holy existence. Control of one's speech is also central to this endeavor. The urge to express one's feelings and desires is even more difficult to control than the primal drives. Through speech man can vicariously gratify his aggressive tendencies, sexual fantasies and culinary proclivities. Thus the Torah is very strict in delineating the areas of permissible and forbidden speech. It also promotes the much overlooked virtue of silence. The Rabbis teach that there is nothing better for the well being of one's body and soul than that of silence. This teaching is contrary to our natural way of looking at things. We are taught from childhood not to be silent when others attack us but to stand up for our rights and fight back. Thus we feel like a fool if someone insults us and we just bear it in silence. We admire the person who always has a great comeback and can put to shame anyone who mocks him.

However, the matter is not so simple. Most of the suffering people experience in life is brought on by their own behavior and speech. How often do we find ourselves in difficult situations because we couldn't control our lips and said things which we have come to regret. The challenge is to be able to differentiate the significant from the trivial. We need not have an opinion on every subject and must learn that it is all right to say "I don't know." Of course we should not allow everyone to walk all over us. When our legitimate rights are being violated we should defend ourselves in a firm and intelligent manner. We must learn to abstain from retorting when it serves no positive purpose. One of the most unrecognized virtues is the ability to overlook silly offenses. This is true in every area of life. How many friendships, partnerships, marriages and families would benefit if all of us had the wisdom and discipline to know how to overlook and ignore things that need not be responded to. Of course we must all work to improve our sensitivity to others and refrain from doing or saying provocative things. However, we should also recognize that it's not a mitzvah to become offended at every insult.

Fortunate is the one who recognizes the benefit of strategic silence. Shabbat Shalom





MYSTICISM

Is God for or against it?

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim

Introduction

The pursuit of truth demands that we abandon any belief when it is exposed to be false, i.e., rejected by reality. However, many people are emotionally driven and continue to believe notions devoid of reason, or notions without evidence. Such people also gauge their activities based on horoscopes or superstitions.

Why do people ignore their senses and their minds?
There are many causes...

For one, people wish to defend cherished views, to find security, or they harbor emotional bias. Other times people support notions because some great person echoed that view, they saw it in a popular or ancient book, or because the masses support that notion.

Subsequent to Ramban's successful rejection of Dominican friar Pablo Christiani (Disputation at Barcelona), Christiani maintained his rejected views, even telling others he was the victor of the Disputation. He continued his attacks against Ramban and successfully obtained Ramban's exile and the burning of the records of the Disputation. This display of such arrogant intolerance, when even reality is insufficient to force one to concede, is part of each of us. Be not misled that Pablo Christiani was a unique psyche. All people have the potential

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to deny reality to such extremes. Be keenly aware of this emotion of intolerance as you read onward. We will touch upon sensitive issues, possibly arousing an emotion within you to argue. But do not follow your emotions. If you follow reason, you will succeed in hearing, and hopefully following the truth.

This article cannot speak to the likes of those just mentioned; it can be of value only to one who can say "I am wrong," or "A great person has erred," or "All books aside from Torah, Prophets and Writings are fallible." However, if you enter this topic prejudiced in any manner, my words will have no purpose for you. You will view me as attempting to personally attack you, or to undermine what you value. But as I don't know you, this cannot be so. Instead, determine if in my words there are truths. If you desire truth rather than the comfort in what is familiar, then you will find rational arguments will displace your former emotional and flimsy beliefs, with firm love for what you will come to see as "real"; what can never be uprooted. It is this sentiment King David speaks of when he calls God "my Rock." The king likened God's absolute truths to a rock; a permanent, immovable object, firm in its everlasting truths, providing ultimate security.

Our question is whether mysticism is a reality, including its many forms adopted within Jewish culture. Although many people, even great names, have referred to "mysticism," this does not instantly validate mysticism. To validate anything as truth, it must conform to reality. It must be proven.

What is "Real?"

As Maimonides teaches, experience, reason or Torah ideals are the sole criteria that can validate anything as true. For example, I might believe in unicorns, but until one is experienced, we do not say my imagination validates this fantasy. And as we have experienced cats, this experience tells us cats are real. Second, in addition to experience (trusting our senses), reason too can validate truth. Thus, I need not meet the architect of the Empire State Building to know through reason alone, that he existed. And third, Torah is known as Divine – meaning its is 100% truth – since its miraculous receipt through Moses was witnessed by millions. All subsequent prophets too wrote their books through Divine inspiration. All matters other than what experience, reason or Torah/Prophets/Writings teach, Maimonides rightfully says we must not accept. Meaning, we must reject it. For all other matters carry no validation. Nothing can validate a truth without 1) experiencing it, 2) reasoning or 3) a scriptural Torah source. This is quite sensible, since our human design is limited to senses (the ability to experience), reason, and we know

history witnessed by masses must have occurred. It is impossible to persuade millions of people to believe that they attended events, if in fact, they did not.

For this reason, we do not suggest all statements by Talmudic or Torah commentators are true, since men err, while God inspired only Torah, Prophets and Writings. In fact, Talmud and Chumash are replete with men refuting each other, thereby testifying to the fallibility of human knowledge. The Rabbis themselves admitted they were wrong and the Greeks were correct. The Zohar, Kabbalah, Tanya and other human works are equally subject to error and severe errors have been found. Moses erred, and God referred to him as a prophet of such high perfection, that no man before or after him will approach his level. Therefore, as Moses erred, all men err, since all men are below Moses in perfection, including Talmudic Rabbis, the Vilna Gaon, the authors of Tanya and Zohar, etc., works not written prophetically or with Divine Influence.

It must be clear: God designed us with senses and reasoning precisely to enable our distinction between truth and falsehood. If we have no evidence to validate some notion, we must claim it is false. But one might suggest that although we have no evidence, this does not mean we won't find evidence, or that its false..."maybe unicorns or aliens exist," they purport. Our response is this: "You need no longer to work, since you "might" find one of these creatures and become famous and rich." However, the fact this person retains his job is his express denial of such creatures, and this mode of thinking.

Based on this, we will test mysticism to determine if it is validated by either of these three modes.

What does "mystical" mean?

Definition of "mystic" (from Old French "mystique"): "one who believes as truth, that which is beyond the intellect's grasp."

Mystical beliefs concern matters that are unproven. It is quite telling that people who endorse mysticism such as horoscopes will not bet all their wealth on their predictions; they will not accept a job with the promise of pay after 365 days, even if a friend says, "I saw in your horoscope that you will get paid then." When it comes to matters that really matter, people are suddenly quite realistic. This demonstrates that the very people who support mysticism verbally, do not fully believe in it in practice. And actions do speak louder than words.

Of course, the question is why people believe matters they have not sensed, or reasoned to be true. We offered a few motives above: people desire to maintain comforting views, to defend a beloved leader, or due to some other bias.

Other motives to accept mysticism largely include a desire to connect to something "spiritual." This belief satisfies a person's need to be favored by God, or to create a pious and religious self-image. Naturally, men and women desire a sense of self that is positive. People blindly adopt theories that offer this self image. Thus, if by believing in "X" one views himself as more "spiritual," people are inclined to accept such mystical

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views. Unfortunately, such individuals cannot explain what it is they believe in. They simply parrot words, since what is unreal, cannot be explained at all.

An example is when someone says there is a "force" that controls our destiny. If we ask where this force is, no one knows. If we ask how it relates to the future, when the future does not yet exist, again they don't know. If we ask why this force selects one person over another, and why it renders John's future different than Mike's...you get the picture. People accept what please their emotions, regardless of the complete lack of reason or evidence.

Lately, Kabbalah has become a growing trend among those seeking a stronger Jewish identity. But Kabbalah errs by claiming knowledge of our unknowable God. Kabbalah refers to terms like "ein sof", "imma", "abba", and other humanistic terms referring to various "aspects" of God. No kabbalist or mystic has ever been able to explain these and other terms, since they employ physical terms to describe our non-physical God. It's an impossibility. Now, as God told Moses "Man cannot know me," Kabbala violates God's words, attempting to explain what God said cannot be explained. Adherence to God's Torah is not the concern of mystics. Mystics are also not well versed in the basics of Torah. They cannot detect when Kabbalah violates God's words. Furthermore, such divisions of God into imma, abba, etc., violate a Torah fundamental that God is unlike His creations. Creation is subject to division, as all matter is. But as God is not physical, division cannot apply to Him. Kabbalists say otherwise.

Kabbala's popularity is due to the imagination of attendees, as they assume they are now "in touch" with some higher universe, although when asked, they cannot explain a thing.

How does God say we are to approach Him? Does He endorse mysticism? Did the Patriarchs, Matriarchs or Prophets ever endorse mysticism? Does the Torah in fact prohibit mysticism? And what about the Talmudic Rabbis?

What Approach Does Torah Demand?

God gave us a system called Torah. He said this is a complete system, as God commands us not add to, or subtract from the Torah's words.

Torah prescribes reason, not belief, "Don't forget what your eyes saw" was Moses' warning to the Jews regarding Revelation at Sinai. He did not ask for belief, which applies to imagination. Moses asked the Jews to rely on their senses, Maimonides' first criteria for accepting truths. Mysticism on the other hand does not offer a basis in what we sense, and for this reason alone, we must reject it's claims.

Nowhere in Torah, Prophets or Writings do the Patriarchs, Matriarchs or Prophets speak of or endorse mysticism. In fact, parshyos Achrei Mos and Kedoshim which we read this Shabbos contain many prohibitions against mysticism.

We are not bound to follow Torah commands alone, and dismiss the perfections of Torah personalities. God includes their actions to direct us in their path. Our great leaders adhered to natural law, using their abilities in all areas of life, and they prayed to God. They did not employ any other means to achieve their goals. Again, God said not to add to

the Torah, so altering the lessons set by these great individuals violates Torah's message.

When we find the Talmudic Rabbis speaking of cryptic matters, we must not suddenly reject the Torah's lessons and suggests mysticism is a truth. We should follow King Solomon's lesson, that the Rabbis speak in riddles. And as that wise King taught, they also speak in metaphors, as Mishlei shows in abundance. Don't be concerned with the numerous "Rabbis" found today selling mystical beliefs. Many men throughout time distort truth for personal gain. And titles of "Rabbi" today should not block your thinking. Be impressed by this alone: the person who is vigilant to support God's words.

The first lesson here is that Torah, Prophets and Writings are bereft of mysticism. And if you will suggest the witch (Baales Ove) actually raised Samuel from the dead, or that Elijah and Elisha resurrected people, you have not grasped the matter. For God alone is the creator of life, and man has no power to give life. The prophets prayed to God, and this is why the boys revived. It was God's response to prayer. And the witch did nothing, as Radak makes so clear (Sam. I, 28:25). The verses suggest Samuel was "actually" resurrected (Sam. I, 28:15) to convey the "reality" Saul gave to this event out of his desperation. It is a lesson in Saul's deviant personality, that he treated his imagination as real.

The Torah rarely does so, but at times God conveys how real something is, by describing it in "real" terms, although it never transpired. Similarly, the Jews were in Egypt only 210 years. Yet the Torah says that we dwelled there 430 years: "And the settlement of the Jews which they lived in Egypt was 430 years (Exod. 12:40)." Although the Jews did not live in Egypt 430 years, the idolatrous influence — identical to Egypt's influence — was already at work from Abraham's time, which was 430 years before the Exodus. Here too, God wishes to convey the reality of the influence of idolatry. Man need not live "in" Egypt to be affected by the pull of idolatry. To teach this, God says the Jews dwelled in Egypt "430 years", to teach how real were the affects of idolatry long before we were steeped in it in Egypt. God equates the 220 years before Egypt, with the 210 actually in Egypt, as both eras had equal idolatrous impact...as if we were in Egypt the entire 430 years.

The Rabbis also dismiss mysticism:

"R. Shimon ben Gamliel said: Because the early ones used prophecy, they would name [their children] based on an event. However, we who do not use the divine spirit [prophecy ceased—Tal. San. 11a] name [our children] after our fathers (Bereshis Rabbah 37:7)." Here, Rav Shimon ben Gamliel confirms that today there is nothing mystical in names.

Another quote: "R. Yossi bar Hanina said: There are four types of names. There are those whose names are pleasant and whose actions are pleasant. There are those whose names are ugly and whose actions are ugly. There are those whose names are ugly and whose actions are pleasant. And there are those whose names are pleasant and whose actions are ugly (Bereshis Rabbah 71:3)." R. Yossi bar Hanina confirms that one's name is irrelevant and has no affect on one's choices or personality.

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Mystics: Devoid of reason

It should alarm you that mystics propose no basis or reason whatsoever for their views. They tell you "things" or "powers" exist that affect us, offering no explanation. Let's take this example of our names.

A mystical view is that one's name has some affect on his or her personality. For example, last month I learned of an orthodox Rabbi selling his service of reading your name, and offering personal insights. He wished to defend his service suggesting there is some "spirituality" in a name. I asked what he meant by spirituality, and he was unable to explain it. I asked how one's name could, in any way, affect a person. Again he had no answer. His opinion was that if one is named Judah, he will possess some character of leadership, like the Biblical Judah. This, I responded, might be so, but is explained psychologically like the other source in Talmud that says people born on Sunday will excel at what they do; they can be expert thieves, or expert Talmudists. When one identifies with his birthdate, his ego naturally feels this day of birth is significant. It creates a self-fulfilling prophecy, where just as Sunday was the beginning or "head" of the week, this person to will strive to be a leader or "head" in some measure. The mystic reads the Rabbis words like fairytales, forfeiting real knowledge. But a reasonable person will understand that one need not look any further than natural laws (psychology) to explain the words and wisdom of our great Talmudic Rabbis. A person named Judah might identify with that Biblical personality, and emulate him. All this is so simple to an intelligent person.

The mystical Rabbi I spoke with assumed a person's name carries specific relevance or insight in the person bearing that name, and one might draw closer to God with this understanding. However, as the Torah includes the only means of becoming closer to God, following the Torah is all that is required. If one does not follow the Torah, he is distanced from God, and nothing can bridge that gap. If one follows Torah and is close to God, then there is no gap to bridge. In either case, the mystical belief that names make us close to God, is not in God's Torah. The few cases in Torah where people were named, was based on their accomplishments. Abram was changed to Abraham, meaning a father of nations. This name change was due to Abraham's "prior" perfection as Abram, as he toiled teaching others. His perfection predated his name change, so his new name was not causative. Similarly, God added Israel to Jacob as an additional name, based on his success dealing with men and with his inner perfection. The matriarchs named their children at times based on their emotional desires. The names Reuben, Shimone and Levi expressed Leah's desire that Jacob love her. Joseph, meaning to "add" another son, was given by Rachel to her son. But the mystical Rabbi wished to ignore the Torah, and make money. I wonder why he did not teach these sources too.

It is a wonder this Rabbi believed this position...he had no reasoning. But also, since many people have identical names, how can reading a name suggest two different people possess identical personalities?!

Another argument is that anyone, at anytime, has the right to change his or her name. Do we then say this change of name also changes the person? That is foolish.

And most of all, God gave every person free will. Despite what his parents name him, he can choose to be a leader or follower; a righteous person or a sinner. One's name does not affect one's free will. As mystical matters are unproven, following mysticism equates to following nothingness.

No Value in Siding with Great Minds

The mystical Rabbi continued, defending his position by saying the Vilna Gaon supported the influence/meaning of names. But I ask, is anything gained when he says, "I agree with the Vilna Gaon" while he offered no explanation? Others who enjoyed this Rabbi's name-reading service oddly said, "The Rabbi is not relying on reason for his art of name analysis." Let's understand this...

Great minds applied reason to all matters. The Ramban displayed excellent rationality when debating Dominican Friar Pablo Christiani as read in the Disputation at Bercelona. To suggest that such a rational thinker accepted any matter without intelligence, is a disgrace to the Ramban. Therefore, when we read of his acceptance of Kabbalah, we must not project onto him the nonsensical beliefs of today parading under the guise of Ramban's Kabbalah. Today's Kabbalah and Ramban's Kabbalah are similar only in name. Ramban applied reason to all areas of life, but as we see in the inexplicable position voiced today, no one offers any reasonable approach, yet they accept notions of "powers" and heretical positions that divide our indivisible God into many parts. We hear terms without any meaning.

Similarly, when this mystical Rabbi said he was following the Vilna Gaon's (Gra) position of the significance of names, but offered no understanding for the Gra, this Rabbi was at fault. Merely parroting what one reads, without explaining it, is useless. Repeating a view to others should be done only when one can offer reasoning. But without any reasoning, why is this Rabbi supporting one view, instead of the opposite view? The Rabbi should have said, "I don't know what the Gra meant", since he cannot explain the Gra. But to follow a practice without explaining it, and further, to recommend it to others, is a lie, since he is saying "this position is true" but he cannot show how it is so.

Summary

In conclusion, we note that Torah contains no mysticism and actually prohibits it. In fact, Torah demands we rely on what our senses tell us, as seen in Moses' words regarding Revelation. Maimonides and the Rabbis too used reason, and did not accept anything unproven. We find no evidence that names somehow possess powers. It is human insecurity that propels belief in non-proven and imaginary things. Just as King Saul accepted fantasy over reality, people today follow this course, despite the Torah's loud and clear admonitions to follow only reason and evidence...to side with what is real. ■



Mysticism & the Placebo Effect

Rabbi E. Feder and Rabbi A. Zimmer

In today's world, there is a prevalence of mystical practices designed to protect or give knowledge about the future (i.e., horoscopes, Ouija boards, red bendels, etc.). Devarim 18:14 states that the art of mysticism is something the other nations turn to. On the other hand, the Jewish nation is enjoined to be "tamim," complete with Hashem, our God. There is a divide between two camps of the Rishonim regarding how to understand the Torah's prohibitions against mystical practices.

One group, headed by the Ramban, believed that these things do in fact work. The Torah nonetheless prohibited them, instructing us to turn to Hashem alone. One difficulty with the Ramban's approach is why, if these things do work, did the Torah prohibit them? Why can't we use mysticism like we use aspirin, especially in light of the Ramban's commentary on Vayikra 26:11 (based upon Bava Kamma 85a), that the Torah gave us express permission to use conventional medicine. Because of this difficulty, the Ramban (Devarim 18:9) mentions that "many were kind [in their defense of the Torah] and said that these things do not really work...but we can not deny facts which are well known to observers..." In other words, the Ramban's belief was based upon numerous observations of the efficacy of these methods. An entire quasi-physical system of forces was posited to account for these effects.

The second group, headed by the Rambam, maintained that these things were all lies and deceptions. The Rambam states in Laws of Idol Worship 11:16 that there are clear proofs that mysticism is not a scientific system of thought, but is based on nonsensical speculations and is utterly false. The Torah prohibits them because they lead a person into a life of destructive fantasy.

One difficulty with the Rambam is how he explains the empirical evidence of the other camp. Similarly, how do we reconcile the observations of the Ramban against the clear proofs of the Rambam that all these things are false?

We believe that the approach to some of these problem (especially those concerning healing) can be resolved through an understanding of the placebo effect. The belief that something may work, can have a surprisingly powerful, positive effect. There is tremendous variation in how the placebo effect works, but there is convincing empirical evidence it is real.

The first recorded mention of the placebo effect was in 1784, where Lavoisier used a new method of blind experimentation to expose the mesmerists. The recognition of the placebo force was a major breakthrough in modern medicine. Because of its near ubiquity, the placebo effect was previously drowning out or distorting most experiments which tested medical drugs or procedures. The recognition of this effect allowed experimenters to filter out the "noise" created by the power of the placebo in order to identify other forces that "truly" heal.

The description of the placebo force closely matches the description of the mysterious forces of mysticism. There are similar, specific methods for inducing both. One example is that red pills have greater efficacy in inducing the placebo effect of a stimulant than blue pills. The reverse is true of a depressant. Similarly, mystics have perfected their art by choosing specific colors, sizes, and shapes in their rituals and practices.

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The very art of practical mysticism can be truly identified as the art of inducing the placebo effect. The mystic is a master of this art. It was not easy for mankind to learn this art. It required a tremendous amount of research to understand all the various factors that influence it. This knowledge is amassed and passed down to future generations.

We suggest that this unification of the placebo effect with mysticism can help us resolve the contradicting facts between the two camps of Rishonim, thereby uncovering a deeper understanding of the Torah's prohibition against all forms of mysticism.

It is true that the world model of mysticism can be observed to correspond to statistically significant improvement in the welfare of an individual who believes in them, especially when administered by an expert in the art. Yet it is likewise true that the speculated forces of mysticism, as separate from the placebo effect, are totally false. No intelligent person believes in their existence. (See the wiki article on the "The One Million Dollar Paranormal Challenge" by James Randi for an excellent modern day proof.) The practice of mysticism persists to this day only because it is rooted in some truth. Mysticism works because the placebo effect is real.

An ethical dilemma surrounds the phenomenon of the placebo effect. There are situations where we have no other method of curing other than the power of placebo. Should the person seek out a mystic, someone trained in the art of inducing the placebo effect? It would require society to foster a belief in mysticism. (It might even bring down the cost of healthcare.) Is there something wrong with this? The Torah is against this approach. But if it can work, why didn't the Torah promote a society of mysticism? What is wrong with a society availing itself of the placebo effect?

We believe that the reasons of the aforementioned Rambam and Ramban apply to this old question in a more modern form. The path of mysticism might start out from the placebo effect, but the path quickly branches out to include a life spent pursuing fantasy and imagination. This is necessarily so, as belief is most powerful when it grabs hold of deep, primitive fantasies in the unconscious mind. This path ultimately leads to the total destruction of both the individual and the society as a whole.

Bamidbar 23:23 states that the Jewish nation is different from other nations in that we do not have mysticism. Despite this, we do not lack the benefits of the placebo effect (in contrast to secular society at large). We have available to us a different method. We turn towards Hashem in prayer. We know from the words of the Torah and our Prophets, and from our national history (i.e., stories of Purim and Chanukah that have been transmitted to us through annual performances) that prayer works.

A person can never be sure that Hashem will answer their prayers. There is no guaranteed method for bringing about every cure. Nevertheless, you can have perfect confidence that the best method for success is to follow God's ways in all of your deeds, and to turn to God in your time of need. The true belief of a Jew is much deeper and greater than the other nations' beliefs in mysticism.

As such, the Jew does not lack the benefits of the placebo effect. On the contrary, we benefit from the true efficacy of Divine Providence, as well as from a greater, enhanced placebo effect through pursuing a path that we know to be grounded in truth.

How full of wisdom is our Torah's solution for troubles in our lives. It steers us away from the paths of desolation, and guides us towards the Name of Hashem. The prescription of the Torah is encapsulated in one verse in Devarim 18:13: "You shall be complete (tamim) with Hashem your God." ■



From the book, *“Religion of Reason”*
by Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim

Demons

When describing those who believed in demons (“shadim”) Ibn Ezra says, “Fools see demons (Lev. 17:7).” Meaning they are not real, but phantasms. Ibn Ezra says further:

Anyone who seeks them and believes in them estranges himself from his God. Can one think that there is anyone that can do good or do bad except for God, the Honored and Awesome?

Ibn Ezra clearly states that there are no powers, only God. Besides God, man is the only other intelligence on Earth.

When approaching an area where the Rabbis discuss unusual and almost impossible phenomena, it is especially important to maintain a rational and objective approach. If we look into the instances discussing shadim, we find that the Rabbis tell us not to give greetings to “others” if we are in a field or at night, lest he be a “shade.” Other cases where one is warned not to give greetings to another includes pits (caverns), and mountain tops.

Additionally, a Talmudic portion (Gittin 66a) states that if one hears a voice calling from a pit, (telling anyone who hears) to divorce his wife, we listen to him. The gemara asks:

“Perhaps it is a shade (demon)?” [And we should ignore it] The gemara continues, “No. It is when you see a shadow.” [Therefore it’s a real person] The gemara asks, “But the shadim also can have shadows!” The gemara concludes, “No. You also saw a shadow of a shadow.”

The gemara ends, saying that since you saw a “shadow of a shadow,” this cannot be a shade, and we can divorce this man’s wife. On the surface, this is a very strange gemara indeed. But there

must be an idea here. (We can also ask why a shade might be assumed in such a case, where one thinks he hears a man wishing to divorce his wife.)

There are a number of questions:

1) What exactly is a demon? Can it be taken literally that there are demons roaming the earth? Have any of us ever seen one?

2) Why are we not warned against greeting our friends in the city? Why is it only in the fields, pits, night time, and mountain tops? Are shadim unable to leave these four situations? This is truly odd.

3) What is the warning about? Will they harm us? If so, what’s the difference if we greet them or not? Can they not harm us equally whether or not we greet them?

4) How does a “shadow of a shadow” prove that it is not a shade?

I believe the answer to all these questions can be approached by first looking at one peculiar bit of information: the location where we are warned not to greet “others.” All the cases, pits, fields, mountain tops, and night time, are cases where one is in a situation of isolation to some degree. Either geographical isolation (mountain tops, pits/caves, or fields/deserts) or psychological isolation: at night.

What does isolation do to a person?

Man, a social creature by definition, fears isolation more than anything. This is why solitary confinement is the worst type of punishment. Isolation is even recognized by the Prophets as one of the worst situations, and requires one to ‘bench gomel (praising God for being saved),’ as we read in Psalms,

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107:4: “They wandered in the wilderness, in the desolation of the path; they found no inhabited city.” Not finding inhabitants is utterly distressing, to the point that King David made mention of it in Psalms.

When a person is isolated, his desire to be around civilization causes him to project onto reality – he will think he sees someone. But it is all an illusion to satisfy his fear and loneliness. Thus, what the Rabbis are telling us not to offer greetings to is in fact our ‘psychological fantasies.’ Greeting a mirage is crossing the line from fantasy to reality, one of man’s worst crimes. The Rabbis, knowing that these shadim are truly daydreams or illusions, warned us not to “talk to them.” Talking to a mirage elevates fantasy to reality. There are so many areas of the Torah which deter man from living an illusory life. The Rabbis saw fit here, too, to remove us from this behavior. Talking to a phantom of the mind gives credence to it. The Torah desires that man abandon all that is false, “midvar skeker tirschak: from falsehoods, keep distant.”

This now explains why the gemara in Gittin said that if there is a shadow, then it is a real person, and you can divorce the wife of this person in the pit, although you do not see him clearly. When a person creates these illusion to comfort himself, he creates the minimal information needed to convince himself. His mind projects either a form of the person’s face, his height, his hair color, or something else distinctive of the person he desires to be near. But what is not needed is not created, such as a shadow. This offers the person’s psyche no comfort, and is therefore not created by the fantasy. Therefore, if one sees a shadow, it most probably is a real

person. The gemara goes on to suggest that even shadim have shadows. This means that in some cases, one will create a more defined illusion. This is possible so the gemara adds that when there’s a “shadow of a shadow,” then it is definitely not a shade. “Shadow of a shadow” means that completely detailed illusions do not exist, and hence, it must be a real person one is seeing. Greetings are then permitted, and divorce is warranted since the speaker is a real person. We may then follow halacha and act as a messenger on his behalf to divorce his wife, or carry out any other halachic act.

It now makes sense that shadim don’t enter cities. Deciphered, this mashal (metaphor) means that images of friends are not created when they are in reality near to us, as is found when we are in cities. Here, no need exists in our psyches to create illusions. We have company around us. At night however, when we are psychologically alone, or in the mentioned isolated locations, we will create images to comfort us.

In summary, the Rabbis teach that shadim are illusions created to satisfy real concerns. They are fantasies created in our minds. The Rabbis warned us that we should not cross the path, treating fantasy as reality, even when we “see” it. How much more so when we don’t.

Addendum

Rashi writes in Parashas Noach, that Noach took two of every species, “even shadim” in to the ark. I believe this fits in well with our theory. Noach was now embarking on a state of isolation aboard the ark. Perhaps Rashi is intimating this aspect of isolation by suggesting that Noach “brought shadim into the ark.” ■