

FURTHER IYUN

Three General Approaches to Magic and Superstition in Jewish Philosophy

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The Three Approaches

There are three basic approaches within Jewish thought and philosophy concerning how to relate to magic and superstition, as will be enumerated below.

The extreme rationalist school, headed foremost by the **Rambam**, is of the view that man has no hand in the supernatural. Involvement with magic and superstition is a futile endeavor of nonsense, disassociating man from higher truths. It is for this reason that the Torah prohibited such behavior, as it distances man further from his ultimate goal – that of proper character and correct knowledge. The Rambam¹ therefore refers to such preoccupation as “repulsive,” even if not strictly prohibited.² The **Sefer HaChinuch**³ elaborates further that involvement in such activities of nonsense and fallacy distances man from proper faith in Hashem and Torah values and may even bring him to complete heresy,



as he may come to think that there is no divine providence. Similarly, **Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch** explains in his commentary on the Torah⁴ that not only do such activities bring one to heresy, but also directly impacts one's

world view. It entices one to look towards alternative sources other than the Torah to guide his life choices.

The mystical school of thought, headed by the **Ramban**, is of the approach that magic and superstition are indeed real and very powerful. The Ramban in his commentary on the Torah⁵ explains that the Torah prefers that one be “simple and perfect” in his service to G-d, and not seek out these aggressive methods of intervention, despite their effectiveness. This approach is further elaborated in his responsa⁶ where he explains that the prohibition is limited to going out and actively seeking fortune telling and the like. But if one happened to passively come

1. Responsa of the Rambam, *siman* 218.

2. See also Rambam, *Hilchot Avoda Zara* 11:4.

3. *Sefer HaChinuch*, mitzva 249.

4. Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, commentary to *Vayikra* 19:26.

5. Ramban on the Torah, *Devarim* 18:13.

6. Responsa of the Rashba, *siman* 283, attributed to the Ramban (although this specific response was actually written by the Ramban).

across the information, then it is permitted to believe it and even act in accordance with it, so long as one does not give it too much credence, for the Jewish belief is that Hashem can overturn any decree. The **Ran**⁷ similarly attributes real power to magic and superstition, and explains that the Torah nevertheless prohibited such activities as they are the tools of Hashem and not meant to be used by man.

The third school is what will be referred to as the pragmatic rationalist school. The Gemara⁸ questions how the Rabbis could have established the four cups of Seder night in apparent total disregard for the danger accompanied with pairs (*zugot*). The Gemara provides two technical answers as to why there is no concern of *zugot* in this specific instance, and then goes on bringing numerous laws regarding *zugot* for another page. The *sugya* concludes with a general rule that to the extent that one concerns himself with *zugot*, the *zugot* will have a corresponding effect over him (“*kol d'kapid*”), but in any event one should always retain at least a minimum level of concern. The **Rashbam**⁹ explains that it is obvious that one can never totally negate the concern by not showing worry over the matter, for if so then the Gemara would have simply suggested initially not to be worried and the concern would dissipate. However, the **Meiri**¹⁰ explains that during the times of the Gemara there was a significant percentage of

the nation that was attracted to superstitious practices and beliefs. Since these particular practices and beliefs did not entail any prohibition of idolatry or *darchei emori*, the Rabbis did not protest. This was all the more so regarding those which gave them encouragement and strength. The Meiri explains that this is the meaning of *kol d'kapid*: Really there is no truth to these concerns and therefore one does not have to be concerned at all.¹¹ In truth, the Gemara did not need to entertain the issue of *zugot* while dealing with the four cups, but due to the overwhelming indulgence of the masses regarding these superstitions, they felt the need to justify themselves concerning the establishment of the four cups with reasons which, in truth, are not at all necessary.¹² The position of the Meiri, although different than that of Rashbam, is thus also considered to be in the pragmatic rationalist school as he acknowledges and makes allowances for the large segment of the population that were (at that time) concerned for the effect of the *zugot*.

Why is Eating Certain Foods for a “Mazal Tov” Permitted?

The **Mordechai**¹³ raised the issue as to why our practice of eating *Simanim* on Rosh Hashana is not in violation of the Torah prohibition of using omens. His answer – that these are positive omens and therefore permissible – is enigmatic and in need of elaboration.

7. *Derashot HaRan* 4.

8. *Masechet Pesachim* 109b.

9. Rashbam, *Masechet Pesachim* 110b, s.v. *kol d'kapid*.

10. *Beit HaBechira, Pesachim* 109b s.v. *kol d'kapid*.

11. The Meiri seems to have had a slightly different text of the Gemara, as he acknowledges both in his quotation of the Gemara as well as in his explanation of the statement that one need to always retain at least a minimal level of concern.

12. Ironically, all the laws of *zugot* subsequently brought by the Gemara are presented by pairs of Rabbis, perhaps in a subtle hint to the reader that one need not be concerned with such matters.

13. Mordechai, *Yoma* 723.

The **Maharsha**¹⁴ explains that the criteria for prohibiting the use of omens is the reliance on them for both positive and negative implications. When one gives credence to them for the good and the bad they are essentially saying that the foretold outcome is set in stone. This is philosophically problematic, for Jewish tradition says that misfortune is result of sin and being disconnected from G-d. If one returns to the ways of the Torah, then these negative decrees may be overturned, and are therefore not inevitable. So to rely on an omen for the bad as well as the good is to negate divine providence. However, to use an omen solely for good is in essence not fully relying on it, and thus permissible.

The **Nimukei Yosef**¹⁵ similarly explains that any omen which is not fully relied upon is not prohibited. Nonetheless, the *Nimukei Yosef* adds that the proper attitude is not to occupy oneself with such activities, but rather to put all one's trust into the Creator of the world.

Employing a more rational approach, the **Meiri**¹⁶ explains that the *Simanim* of Rosh Hashana are not used as omens, Heaven forbid, rather they are simply "props" used to inspire repentance and arouse the desire for good deeds. The additional prayer said with each of the *Simanim*, a practice not found in the Gemara but brought down by the *Geonim*, is a support to this idea. But of course it is not the *Simanim* or even the prayer by themselves which are accomplishing anything. Rather, repentance and good deeds are the central tenet of the practice.

The **Maharal**¹⁷ and the **Chayei Adam**,¹⁸ based on the Ramban, take a more mystical approach. The **Ramban**¹⁹ explains that everything the patriarchs went through was an omen for their future descendants. Avraham's descent to Egypt, the digging of the wells, and all their journeys happened and were recounted in the Torah for the sake of the future generations. The Ramban explains further that when a higher macro-decree is pre-manifested in parallel micro-form in this world, then the micro-decree will certainly manifest itself in its fullness as well.

Accordingly, the Maharal and *Chayei Adam* explain, that we eat the *Simanim* on Rosh Hashana – the micro-manifestation of a good decree – in order that the higher macro-decree should follow. Hence, the *Simanim* are not merely symbolic or a prop, but rather have metaphysical attributes (see also *Hagahot Chochmat Shlomo* 583:1, whose explanation is perhaps based on the same tenets).

14. *Chidushei Agadot, Horayot* 12a.

15. *Nimukei Yosef, Sanhedrin* 16b.

16. *Beit HaBechira, Horayot* 12a.

17. Maharal, *Be'er Hagola* 2:7.

18. *Chayei Adam* 139:6.

19. Ramban on the Torah, *Bereishit* 12:6.