

Witches, dybbiks and demons – oh my!

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I grew up in a family that believed in science and education, loved Shakespeare and opera and were Classical Reform Jews. I also grew up in a family that was superstitious.

My grandma Rose and her siblings would refer to their mother, a well educated Romanian immigrant who had studied to become a pharmacist, as a witch. Yes a witch. Not because they thought she was mean, on the contrary they adored and idolized her. They called her that as simply a matter of fact.

When a new baby was born, friends and neighbors would call her to come to their house and bless the child and the crib. When someone was sick, they went to her as well. And no one was surprised when she tearfully announced the death of her aunt, before anyone from back east had even called her to tell them about it yet.

Her family was from the provinces of Transylvania and Bohemia – places where superstition was infused in both the Jewish and non-Jewish cultures.

My father's side, Iraqi and Iranian Jews, were also superstitious. In fact superstition was one of the rare areas of overlap between those two families. On Sunday nights our family would gather for dinners that would last for hours, almost always ending with all of us eating sweet treats, drinking Turkish coffee, and having our fortunes told.

Superstitions and a belief in other worldly and supernatural creatures runs deep in Judaism. From angels and witches in the Bible, to dybbuks and demons, gollums and maziks, our people were filled with fear and caution, and had many rituals and prayers to guard against them.

Tomorrow night is Halloween, a holiday filled with ambivalence for many American Jews. Ambivalent not because Judaism teaches that these other worldly creatures don't exist, but because our tradition does

believe in them, and cautions us not to invite them into our lives, or God forbid, our homes!

In fact many of the traditions that we take for granted in Judaism, have several meanings. There are the rational explanations given by the rabbis. And then there are the folk interpretations that everyone knows are the real reasons why we do or don't do something.

For instance, it's Jewish custom not to announce a baby's name until the bris or baby naming, lest the newborn be snatched up by Lilith, who also happened to be the first woman, created before Eve, and who was turned into a demon because she had the audacity to think that she was equal to Adam.

When a person is ill, it is not uncommon to change their name, to something like Chaim or Chaya – meaning life. The official reason is that the change in name can change their destiny. The folk reason is to fool the Angel of Death, who will be looking for the person by their original name.

And then there is the custom for Ashkenazi Jews to never name a baby after the living. The rabbinic reason is that this is how we honor our loved ones who have passed on and keep their memory alive. However, it is also because we don't want the angel of death to pick up the wrong person, by confusing the newborn Jacob Rosenbloom with the 90 year old Jacob Rosenbloom.

When a person dies we cover the mirrors and open the windows. Some say this is because we shouldn't be concerned with our appearance during a time of grief, and the fresh air will revive us. But if you had asked my grandmother she would have told you it's so that the soul doesn't get trapped in the mirror, and the open window allows the soul to move on.

And when we leave a cemetery or enter a home after a funeral, we are supposed to wash our hands to make sure that any ghosts we might have come in contact with stay at the cemetery, and don't follow us out.

And there are many rules about burial itself, like not burying your parents next to people they don't like, so that they're not stuck with them throughout eternity. We're also not supposed to eat in a cemetery so as not to taunt the dead with things they can't do anymore.

Some say that we break a glass at a wedding to remember the destruction of the 2nd Temple. But a story in the Talmud makes clear it that we break a glass to scare away demons, because they like to gather at joyous occasions and cause trouble.

And I haven't even gotten into the different types of amulets that ward off the evil eye. But my least favorite tradition to protect ourselves from the evil eye was something my grandfather did, that was fairly common with Ashkenazi Jews. Apparently the evil eye is attracted by people bragging or gossiping. So my grandfather would affectionately call me "ugly" and "stupid" as a kid. I didn't realize why he did this until I was in college, but I have to admit, it still stings.

It's not surprising that the Angel of Death, capricious demons, and vengeful witches lurked in the shadows for our ancestors. Life itself was often capricious and dangerous, and of course they were looking for ways to create meaning from the chaos, and to protect themselves and their loved ones from the real and imagined dangers that were everywhere.

And so many of us grew up in homes where we spit 3 times, throw salt over our shoulder, and say k'ayin a'houra, to ward off evil. And God forbid you ever say "Things couldn't get worse!" – because as soon as those words come out of your mouth, something will get worse.

But in fairness, even those of us who are quick to say "God forbid!" or "poo-poo-poo," also go to doctors, dress warm when it's cold out and eat chicken soup when we're sick, and have found ways to balance superstition with science, after all, why tempt fate?

But there are times when we welcome catching a glimpse between this world and the next. Whenever we say Kaddish, this room feels a little bit more full, as we invite in our loved ones who have passed on to sit with

us, if just for a little bit, so we can let them know that we love them and miss them still. And as we sing the closing song, I can feel them leaving, slowly, lingering as we all do at an oneg, not wanting to say goodbye, but knowing that it's time to.

Oh yeah, I can feel them in this room when we say Kaddish, it is almost as though when we say their names aloud, they come in and take a seat. And when Kol Nidre is chanted, I feel our deceased past Temple presidents and Cantor Naluai peaking out between the old ark doors in the back of the sanctuary, peering down at all of us.

Oh! Did I forget to tell you the difference between a witch and a rabbi?

Traditionally, a rabbi was a well educated man, powerful because of the knowledge he had learned, knowing how to say the right blessings to protect us.

And a witch? A witch was an educated woman, powerful because of the knowledge that she had acquired, and someone who likely would have been called a rabbi, had she been born at a later time, when such women were no longer feared.

So tomorrow night, maybe wear something blue or red, I hear those colors blind the evil eye, and stay inside, and be safe.