



# The Collective Conversation

*Weekly Torah Essays from the  
Young Israel of Scarsdale Community*



Sefer Devarim

Parshat Shoftim

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## Bad Omens and Real Miracles

*By Alvin Pasternak*

During the height of the baseball pennant race in 1969, a black cat walked near the Chicago Cubs' dugout while they were playing the New York Mets at Shea Stadium. The New York media had a field day with the "Bad Omen." Perhaps the black cat got into the Cubs players' heads. Perhaps. But it was wise managing, superb pitching, and great teamwork that propelled the "Miracle Mets" to their first championship.

*Parshat Shoftim* includes many *mitzvot*. One of *Hashem's* commands is to stay away from soothsayers, astrologers, and the like. *Moshe Rabbenu* explained to the Jewish people:

לֹא יִמָּצָא בְּךָ מֵעַבִּיר בְּנֹר־וּבְתוֹ בְּאֵשׁ קִסָּם קְסָמִים מְעוֹנָן וּמְנַחֵשׁ וּמַכְשֵׁף:  
וְחֹבֵר חֶבֶר וְשֹׁאֵל אוֹב וַיִּדְעֹנֵי וְדָרֵשׁ אֶל-הַמֵּתִים:  
כִּי-תוֹעֵבֶת יְהוָה כָּל-עֲשֵׂה אֵלָה וּבִגְלַל הַתּוֹעֵבֶת הָאֵלֶּה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ מוֹרִישׁ אוֹתָם  
מִפְּנֵיהֶ:

*Let no one be found among you who consigns his son or daughter to the fire, or who is an augur, a soothsayer, a diviner, a sorcerer, one who casts spells, or one who consults ghosts or familiar spirits, or one who inquires of the dead. For anyone who does such things is abhorrent to the LORD, and it is because of these abhorrent things that the LORD your God is dispossessing them before you.*

*For whoever does these things is an abomination unto Hashem, and as a result of these abominations Hashem, your G-d is driving them out before you. (Devarim 18:10-12)*

Sounds straightforward — but is it?

It is not unusual to reach a crossroad, literally or figuratively, and not know which way to turn. One's decision might involve a relationship, a career, or something of greater or lesser importance. Should I act, or should I not act? Should I do X, or should I do Y? I have gathered the facts and analyzed the risks, and I still do not know what to do.

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What's so wrong, then, about adding a palm reading to the mix? In situations when it is difficult to make a decision, aren't we — at least some of the time — just "rolling the dice" and hoping for the best?

*Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch* clarifies *Moshe's* explanation. The *Parsha* has gone to great lengths to show *Hashem's* vision for a just and moral society, in which the Jewish people use their free will for good. *Hashem* commands: Appoint fair-minded judges. Honor your kings who fulfill their *Torah* obligations. Support your priests as representatives and ministers of the Sanctuary of the *Torah*. Listen to your prophets who demonstrate that they are *Hashem's* true messengers.

Palm reading and related activities have no place in a just and moral society. When a person places a decision in the realm of dark, unfree, and mysterious powers, which have nothing to do with justice or morality, it is like saying that they don't have free will. That person is not following the *Torah*. That person is not reviewing the facts and analyzing the risks. That person is not making a just and moral decision. That person is doing only one thing: giving up. *Hashem, Moshe* teaches, wants us to use our free will for good. Giving up is the opposite of what *Hashem* wants us to do.

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Palm reading and related activities, therefore, are not harmless. They can never be a part of the mix. They attack our free will, and they deny it. They destroy our ability to fulfill *Hashem's* command to use our free will for good. We must stay away. The *Parsha's* words are a warning to the Jewish people.

The "Real Miracle" is that *Hashem* has given us the tools to make good decisions: The *Torah*, a brain, and a heart. When we use these tools properly, even when we don't know what will result from our decisions, we fulfill *Hashem's* command to do our best.

**Alvin** and Marilyn Pasternak have been part of the YIS community for 25 years. Alvin graduated from Yeshiva University and Washington University in St. Louis Law School. Marilyn grew up in Southern California, graduated from Stern College, and is a former elementary school teacher. They have twin daughters, Samantha and Amanda. Samantha graduated from Cornell University and is continuing her studies there for a Master's in Mechanical Engineering. Amanda graduated from Brandeis University and is starting Cardozo Law School. The family enjoys their short commute to *Tashlich* at Carpenter's Pond on *Rosh Hashanah*.

*Want to write or dedicate a Parsha essay?*

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