

Judaism and the Supernatural

In this week's portion, *Vaera*, miracles and magic abound:

-Moses and Aaron came to Pharaoh, and did... as the Lord had commanded: Aaron cast his staff before Pharaoh... and it became a serpent. [Then,] Pharaoh, too, summoned the wise men and the magicians, and the necromancers of Egypt, [and they] also did likewise with their magic. Each one of them cast down his staff, and they became serpents. But Aaron's staff swallowed their staffs... [Ex. 7:10-12]

-Moses and Aaron did... as the Lord had commanded, and he raised the staff and struck the water that was in the Nile before the eyes of Pharaoh... and all the water that was in the Nile turned to blood. And the necromancers of Egypt did likewise with their secret rites... [Ex. 7:20-22]

-And Aaron stretched forth his hand over the waters of Egypt [as the Lord had commanded], and the frogs came up and covered the land of Egypt. And the necromancers did likewise with their secret rites, and they brought up the frogs on the land of Egypt. [Ex. 8:2-3]

-Aaron stretched forth his hand with his staff and struck the dust of the earth [as the Lord had commanded], and the lice were upon man and beast; all the dust of the earth became lice throughout the entire land of Egypt. And the necromancers did likewise with their secret rites to bring out the lice, but they could not... So the necromancers said to Pharaoh, "It is the finger of God." [Ex. 8:13-15]

Supernatural events or beliefs are those that do not conform to our current understanding of the laws of nature.

Our Sources are full of apparently supernatural events caused by God and man. Many people strongly believe in the supernatural. What does the Torah say about it?

The Torah seems to resolutely forbid engaging in supernatural activities:

-There shall not be found among you any one who... uses divination, or a soothsayer, or an enchanter, or a witch, or a charmer, or a medium, or a wizard, or a necromancer. For those who do these things are an abomination to the Lord, and because of these abominations the Lord your God drives them out from before you... For these nations... listened to soothsayers, and to diviners; but as for you, the Lord your God has not allowed you so to do. [Deut. 18:10-12; also Lev. 19:26]

-You shall not suffer a witch to live. [Ex. 22:17]

Yet some of these practices are tolerated, sometimes even viewed positively. Talmud accepts those that clearly have no tie to idolatry.

Let's review them:

Necromancy

Communicating with the dead, especially to predict the future. (Seances, psychic phenomena.)

The Witch of Endor

And [the prophet] Samuel was dead. [King] Saul had expelled the mediums and the wizards out of the land. [Yet]... when Saul saw the camp of the Philistines, he was afraid ... and inquired of the Lord, [but] the Lord did not answer him... So Saul [went to the witch of] Endor... and said, "Bring me up Samuel..." Samuel [came up and] said to Saul, "Why have you disturbed me...?" And Saul answered, "I am greatly distressed; for the Philistines make war against me, and God has departed from me..." Then Samuel said... "Tomorrow you and your sons shall be with me; and the Lord shall deliver the camp of Israel into the hand of the Philistines."
[1Sam 28:3-19]

So, in distress, Saul forgets his own principles and seeks a necromancer!

Jewish law:

It is permitted to make a dying person swear to return after his death in order to convey some information he will be asked. And some permit an attempt to do this even after the person has died provided that he does not conjure the actual corpse but the ghost of the dead man. [Shulchan Aruch YD 179:14]

-Foretelling the future not possible given current science understanding (uncertainty principle in quantum mechanics).

-Commandments are meaningless if people don't have free will.

The Evil Eye (*Ayin hara*)

-Some rabbis in Talmud believed envy caused by your good fortune will cause harm to fall on you, so don't advertise your good fortune. [Bava Metzia 107b, Pesachim 50b]

-However, some said it does not apply to Jews. [Berachot 55b, 20a] When a woman tried to cast a spell on Rabbi Hanina, he said:

Try as you will, you will not succeed, for it is written [in the Torah]: "There is none else beside Him." [Deut. 4:35] [Hullin 76b]

-Kenahora = "Let there be no evil eye". Blue pearl, hand of Fatma.

Extra-Sensory Perception

- Telepathy, clairvoyance, senses beyond the senses were attributed to prophets (neviim), but age of prophecy ended with Malachi 2500 years ago.
- Some modern experiments have claimed scientific basis, but no solid evidence.
- It is possible that unknown powers of the mind exist.

Faith healing

- Healing ills by religious faith is practiced in the Talmud [Berachot 5b].
- The Baal Shem Tov, founder of Hasidism, used it (laying of hands while pronouncing the Name of God).
- Rabbi Alfred G. Moses influential 1916 book: "Jewish Science: Divine Healing in Judaism", followed by Rabbi Morris Lichtenstein's founding of the Society of Jewish Science in 1922.
- Fiction: Malamud's The Silver Crown.
- Judaism approves healing power of spiritual faith, but disapproves cults that deny reality.
- Power of mind over body is real (placebo effect).

Demons

Demons (*shedim*) are supernatural malevolent beings. Talmud accepts their existence. Rationalists (Maimonides, Saadia Gaon, Ibn Ezra) deny their existence. They are now considered only "customs of the pious" (*middot hasidut*), and belief in them is optional [Rav David Bar-Hayim].

Abraham's dubious gifts

Torah:

Abraham gave all that he had to Isaac. But to the sons of his concubines, Abraham gave gifts while he was still living. [Gen. 25:5-6]

Talmud:

What gifts? Rabbi Jeremiah bar Abba said: He gave them [the secrets of] "*tumah*" [impure powers, e.g., the knowledge of sorcery, demons, etc.] [Sanhedrin 91a]

Astrology

-Prophets scoffed at astrologers:

[Isaiah:] Let now the astrologers, the star gazers... stand up and save you from these things that shall come upon you. Behold, they shall be as stubble; the fire shall burn them; they shall not save themselves from the power of the flame... none shall save you. [Isa. 47:13-14]

[Jeremiah:] Thus says the Lord... Do not be dismayed at the signs of heaven, for the nations are dismayed at them. [Jer. 10:2]

-The Talmud understood astrology to be included in the Torah list [Deut. 18:10-12] of prohibited supernatural activities. [Sanh. 65b-66a; Yad, Avodah Zarah 11:8-9]

-Yet many Talmudic rabbis believed stars influence the destiny of people. But they were divided as to whether the power of the stars extends to Israel:

-Rabbi Akiva, Rabbi Yochanan, Mar Shmuel, Rav Nahman ben Yitzhaq believed it did not:

Rabbi Yochanan said: There is no constellation (*maza*) for Israel. [Shabbat 156a; Rabbi Shmuel in Shabbat 156b; Sukkah 29a].

-Rabbi Hanina ben Hama believed it did:

The stars make one wise, the stars make one rich, and there are stars for Israel. [Shabbat 156a]

-The rabbis were also divided as to whether virtue could change what the stars decree:

-Rava said it could not:

Life, children and sustenance do not depend on merit, but on the stars. [Moed Katan 28a]

-Rabbi Akiva believed it could:

Rabbi Akiva had a daughter. Astrologers told him: On the day she enters the bridal chamber a snake will bite her and she will die. He was very worried about this. On [her wedding] day she took a brooch and stuck it into the wall. By chance it penetrated the eye of a snake. The following morning, when she took it out, the snake came trailing after it. 'What did you do?', her father asked her. She replied, "A poor man came to our door in the evening, and everybody was busy at the banquet, and there was none to attend to him. So I took the portion that was given to me and gave it to him." He said: "You have done a good deed." He went out and

lectured [based on the Book of Proverbs]: "Righteousness delivers from death." [Prov. 10:2, 11:4] [Shabbat 156b]

-Shmuel said it could. He gave rules of health and agriculture based on astrology. [Shabbat 129b; Eruvin 56a].

-Talmud:

-Every man has a celestial body (mazel) as his patron since his conception.

[Shabbat 53b; Bava Kamma 2b].

-It perceives things unknown to him [Meg. 3a; Sanh. 94a].

-Two people born under the same star have a bodily and spiritual kinship [Ned. 39b; Bava Metzia 30b].

-Midrash: Not only human beings, but

There is not a blade of grass that does not have its constellation in the heavens to strike it and say to it: "Grow!" R. Hanina b. Papa and R. Simon said: [The constellation of] Pleiades binds the fruit [giving it shape and substance] and [the constellation of] Orion draws it out between knot and knot [giving it fullness]. [Gen. R. 10:6].

-Midrash:

In the days of Jeremiah the Israelites wished to entertain this belief [in astrology], but the Holy One, blessed be He, would not permit them... Your ancestor Abraham [also] wished to entertain this belief long ago, but [God] would not permit him. [Genesis Rabbah 44:12]

-Zohar:

All the stars and constellations in the heavens were appointed to be rulers and commandants over the world... there is not a single blade of grass in the entire world over which a star or a planet does not preside, and over that star one [angel] is appointed who serves in the presence of the Holy One Blessed Be He, each according to his merit [2:171d].

The Zohar also gives astrological reasons for the commandments. [3:251a-b, Raya Meheimna].

-Josephus:

Astrology was common among Jews. Jewish interpretation of celestial signs was partly responsible for the revolt against Rome. [Josephus, Wars 6:288ff]

-Maimonides: Very strongly opposed belief in astrology, against the tide of his time and later:

-Astrology is a disease, not a science... It is a tree under the shadow of which all sorts of superstitions thrive. ... Only fools and charlatans lend value to it. [Responso 2:25b]

-Fools have composed thousands of books of nothingness and emptiness... Men, great in years but not in wisdom, wasted all their days in studying these books and imagined that these follies are science. They came to think of themselves as wise because they knew that science... All the things that man

finds written in books, he presumes to think of as true—and all the more so if the books are old.

-And since many individuals have busied themselves with those books and have engaged in discussions concerning them, the rash fellow's mind at once leaps to the conclusion that these are words of wisdom... This is why our kingdom was lost and our Temple was destroyed and why we were brought to this; for our fathers sinned and are no more because they found many books dealing with these themes of the stargazers, these things being the root of idolatry... They erred and were drawn after them, imagining them to be glorious science and to be of great utility.

-The science of the stars that is genuine science is knowledge of the form of the spheres, their number, their measure, the course they follow, each one's period of revolution, their declination to the north or to the south, their revolving to the east or to the west, and the orbit of every star and what its course is... This is an exceedingly glorious science... [The Talmud says:]

He who is able to [learn from Gentiles to] calculate the cycles and planetary courses but does not, one may hold no conversation with him... It is written, "You shall not learn to do [after the abomination of those nations]", [Deut. 18:9] [implying], but you may learn [what is not an abomination] in order to understand and instruct! [Shabbat 75a]

But as for these assertions of the stupid astrologers, they are nothing...

-I know that you may... find sayings of... sages in the Talmud and Midrashim whose words appear to maintain that at the moment of a man's birth, the stars will cause such and such to happen to him. Do not regard this as a difficulty... Possibly the matter was hidden from them. Or there may be an allusion in those words. Or they may have been said with a view to the times and the business before him. (You surely know how many of the verses of the Torah are not to be taken literally...)

-A man should never cast his reason behind him, for the eyes are set in front, not in back...

[Rambam, Letter on Astrology]

An astrologer added:

There is a special irony in Maimonides' position, considering how clearly astrological cycles map some of the most important happenings of his life!

Jewish law:

One should not consult astrologers, nor should one cast lots to determine the future. [Shulchan Aruch, YD 179:1].

Science:

It made astrology improbable.

Effect:

- Despite Maimonides' great prestige, his criticism of astrology had practically no influence on subsequent Jewish writers.
- On joyful occasions in individual and family life, Jews everywhere congratulate each other by saying *mazal tov* ("Good luck", but literally: "A good constellation".)
- Even the rationalistic Levi ben Gershom said that all life is predestined by the positions and movements of the stars. The astrologers fail because of insufficient knowledge about the position and movement of the stars and because "the intellect and [free] will carry us beyond the limitations of the stars." [Milḥamot Adonai 2:2]

Superstition

Rambam hated all superstition with a passion, but made allowances to set people's minds at ease:

A person bitten by a scorpion or serpent may whisper a charm over the wound even on the Sabbath, in order to settle his mind and to strengthen his heart. The thing is of no avail whatsoever, but, since he is in danger, he is permitted to do it, so he won't feel troubled. Those who whisper upon a wound a charm, consisting of verses from the Torah, or who read such verses over a child to save it from fear, or who place beside an infant a Torah scroll or tefillin to make him sleep, are not only guilty of superstition, but are amongst those who deny the Torah. They treat the words of the Torah as mere bodily medicine, whereas they are spiritual medicine. [Rambam, On Idolatry, 2:11-12].

Talmud: If a woman's first two husbands die, she must not marry again because it would bring bad luck to the third husband [Yevamot 64b]. However, Maimonides adds that if the woman has married again anyway, [the marriage is valid and] her third husband need not divorce her. [Rambam, On Prohibited Marriage, 21:30]

A mezuzah must contain only the Shema, which the Torah says must be inscribed "on the doorposts of your house" [Deuteronomy 6:9]:

Those who write upon the mezuzah the names of angels have no share in the World to Come. Not only do these fools fail to carry out a divine precept, but they treat the religious duty of proclaiming the Unity of God and acknowledging the love and service due to him, as though it provided them with an amulet for their own profit. [Rambam, On Tefillin, 5:4]

Ironically, his own synagogue in Egypt, the 10th-century Maimonides synagogue and yeshiva:

كنيس ابن ميمون , *Bet Knesset ha-Rambam* , בית כנסת הרמב"ם

has traditionally been considered to have miraculous healing powers! Ailing local Jews slept in an underground room, hoping to dream of Maimonides and get better.

-Not in my family, but parallel story of sugar lumps between the sifrei Torah to cure my brother Ben.

What will the future reveal?

Supernatural events or beliefs are those that do not conform to our current understanding of the laws of nature. Key word: Currently. Are they irrational and superstitious? Or just not yet understood and controlled?

Conclusion

A joint University of Texas/Northwestern study concluded: People who feel a lack of control try to impose order through superstition. Lack of control leads to a visceral need for order, even if imaginary.