

MAGIC: SPELL-BINDING

by Rabbi Osher Chaim Levene

The Mitzvah:

The Torah forbids all form of witchcraft, practical magic and engaging in the occult. Forbidden practices include divination through trances (koseim); divining auspicious times through astrology (me'onein); divining by omens (menacheish); sorcery using magic (mechashsheif); using incantation (chover); consulting mediums and oracles (shoel ov veyid'oni); and communicating with the dead (doreish hameisim). (See Exodus 22:17, Leviticus 20:27, Deuteronomy 18:9-13).

Egypt was the hotbed of witchcraft: "Ten measures of witchcraft descended to the world; nine were taken by Egypt" (Talmud Kiddushin 49b). Pharaoh's wizards sought to duplicate the divine miracles performed by Moshe in the Ten Plagues that afflicted the idolatrous Egyptians. For some plagues, the sorcerers were successful. But they ultimately confessed that the supernatural phenomena were the "finger of G-d".

Witches and wizards, magic spells and potions, demons and spirits. The occult and forces of magic are a source of fascination for many people. Folktales and legends regaling magical characters have enjoyed a strong resurgence in popularity of recent. Most authorities maintain witchcraft constitutes a serious force - one that must be reckoned with. So what is the allure of magical forces? And why is the occult so forcefully rejected by the Torah?

G-d fashioned two systems in creation: the natural system and the supernatural system. Obeying the laws of cause and effect, the natural world is clearly chartered. One can accurately predict that the sun will rise in the morning and set in the evening. A cause has a resulting effect and an effect can be traced back to a cause. But man has to penetrate the appearance of this system by seeing G-d as the Creator and Power behind the natural world that veils His Divine Presence.

The supernatural system is a quasi-spiritual realm where nature's rules can be bent or temporarily suspended. Subject to its own system of laws, this realm still remains very much under the aegis of G-d. And it is within this latter system that miracles and magic operate.

What magic does is to rightly tap into the supernatural domain. But it falls short insofar as the person does not, ultimately, come closer to G-d. The magician recognizes the invisible spiritual forces at work and is aware one cannot view the world exclusively within the realm of nature. Searching out the spiritual forces to circumvent the natural channels, however, the sorcerer sets his heart on forcing the spiritual forces to do his own bidding. Indeed, the word magic kisuf (plural keshafim)

denotes the "coercion (Mekacheish) of the heavenly spiritual agents [of G-d]" (Talmud, Sanhedrin 67b).

Where magic tragically errs is by mistakenly thinking that the occult and the supernatural forces may be independent of G-d. The belief in many forces and powers contradicts the Creator's Oneness and constitutes a form of idolatry. This explains why the prohibitions against magic fall under the grouping of idol-worship (See Rambam, Moreh Nevochim III, 37).

The Talmud (Sanhedrin 66b) relates how a witch once wanted to cast an evil spell upon Rabbi Chanina. He mocked her by proclaiming the verse "there is none besides Him [G-d]". With this he disarmed the evil forces of the occult by reaffirming G-d's Absolute control of the cosmos. "If G-d desires that I live," said Rabbi Chanina, "then all your efforts are for naught. And if you are successful in harming me, you should know that this is due to His royal decree. Then you will merely be the medium for His will to be fulfilled." The existence of evil forces is only to the extent that man gives them existence. But they do not have a free hand; they do not have any autonomy! This sage dismissed the forces of magic as non-existent by lending them no credence.

Instead, a Jew lives according to the dictate "you shall be perfect with Hashem your G-d" (Deuteronomy 18:13). He demonstrates a complete trust in G-d precluding the need to consult any medium or oracle regarding his future. Magic does not impress him. Nor does the Jew imagine he has anything to fear other than the Creator. (See Nefesh HaChaim 3:12). Supernatural feats and miracles may be most impressive but they cannot be a foundation for faith or belief (See Rambam, Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah 8:1). Bilaam confirmed as much by declaring "There are no divination in Yaakov and no sorcery in Yisrael" (Numbers 23:23).

To be sure, the popular appeal of magic is that it offers the quick-fix way to solve one's life's problems with its complex difficulties by the introduction of powers that do, indeed, counter the natural order.

And yet, a wave of a wand is not the solution.

Life's challenges do not magically vanish in a puff of smoke with a muttered incantation. Fantasy may provide temporary relief and respite but this avoids working out a long-term solution. All escapism does is to avoid dealing with the issues.

Still, man must address his individual set of circumstances. He should apply his intellect over and above his imagination to come out with a sound, thought-out conclusion. This requires tackling the harsh reality of living and using it as a springboard for spiritual growth within our designated environment.

It is here in the natural world that we must work our 'magic' by relating directly to G-d, placing our trust in Him and by performing the Torah's laws upon leaving Egypt. Text Copyright © 2006 by Rabbi Osher Chaim Levene and [Torah.org](https://torah.org).

