

# WILL THAT BE A MEDIUM, OR WELL DONE?

*by Rabbi Pinchas Winston*

## FRIDAY NIGHT:

*Do not eat blood . . . (Vayikra 19:26)*

We already know about this because we were told about this prohibition earlier:

Do not eat any blood, whether from a mammal or a bird, no matter where you may live. (Vayikra 7:26)

Thus, there are a variety of opinions as to what this posuk refers, such as to occult practices (Ramban), or to a meal that accompanied a human sacrifice (Rashbam). According to the Radak, some of the blood of an animal sacrifice would be placed in a bowl for occult purposes, and a meal would be eaten with it. (I Shmuel 14:32-33)

However, the Talmud learns this verse to include a prohibition against eating from the flesh of an animal before it is completely dead (Sanhedrin 63a), and not to eat of a sacrifice offered until its blood has been sprinkled upon the altar as per the Torah commandments. And, according to the Sefer HaMitzvos (Negative Mitzvah 195), this is a commandment not to eat like the rebellious son does.

Man is, by definition, a spiritual being. He has no choice in the matter, because his essence is spiritual, a soul. Not just a soul like an animal possess -(Nefesh), but a higher level of soul, such as Ruach and Neshamah. You can put the body of a Volkswagon on the engine of a BMW, but the car will still drive like a BMW (though it will look like a Volkswagon). You can dress your body up non-spiritually, but it is still the soul that drives you.

To acknowledge this and accommodate this given reality is to seek and even gain inner peace and a sense of completion; it is to seek out and find G-d. However, to disregard this very essence of what it means to be human is to turn away from G-d and to turn in the direction of the occult, something that, as we shall see, has many surprising and all too common forms.

It is not as hard to die for G-d as it is to live for Him. For the most part, you can only die once in a lifetime. But to live for G-d means getting up EACH morning and fulfilling His will and mandate for Creation, minute after minute, hour after hour, day after day, and year after year. It means devotion to the will of the Master of the Universe before devotion to one's own will.

At least that is what it looks like to someone unfamiliar with G-d and His ways, particularly His way of doing what's best for us at all times. I didn't say what is most COMFORTABLE for us, but rather, what

is BEST for us, because though they are not mutually exclusive of one another, they are, at least in this world, not always the same thing. And, though we try and teach this to our children regarding our decisions on their behalf, we have difficulty with this concept regarding G-d's decisions on our behalf.

Agreeably, part of the problem is that G-d rarely tells us what He is doing for us and why. Not that He owes us an explanation, it would make our crises a little easier to handle if we could trace them back to G-d and His view of what is good for us and what is not. Instead, it often seems as if events occur to us without much rhyme and reason, and that G-d doesn't step in to protect us from the randomness of life.

Thus, we are trained by the Talmud to say, "All that G-d does He does for the good" (Brochos 60b), so that we never forget that there really is no randomness to life, and all that happens to us, no matter how chaotic life may seem to be, is still a function of direct Hashgochah Pratis -(Divine Providence). (Chullin 7b)

For many, it is still so difficult.

### **SHABBOS DAY:**

*Do not act on the basis of omens. Do not act on the basis of auspicious times. (Vayikra 19:26)*

Therefore, it is forbidden for a Jew to be concerned about or to act on the basis of superstitious bad omens, or to look for auspicious times using astrology (Rambam, Avodas Kochavim 11:4). So common is this that people turn to the Horoscope section in the newspaper religiously on a daily basis, and even Torah-abiding Jews have to remind themselves to avoid such frivolous pursuits.

Being spiritual beings, it is so easy to become superstitious. Being meaning,seekers. It is so difficult not to believe that nothing is by chance, and to believe that everything that happens to us can affect us for good or for bad. The alternative is to believe that chance rules the world, making life quite trivial and painful.

To believe that G-d rules history, also means to believe that He gave the Torah, which defines Him and His relationship to man. That, in turn, obligates a person to learn the Torah and to take it to heart, or to suffer the consequences for going against the will of G-d. It means to make oneself subservient to His will, which, as we all know, is not always physically pleasant.

The compromise? The occult, a religion designed by man for the sake of maintaining a spiritual condition without having to be told how to upkeep it. Sure, cults are extremely ritualistic, but they are rituals designed by the followers themselves, not by some outside reality. It is a humanly decided balance of the physical and the spiritual, which is what makes cults so incredibly destructive to the person and the world.

The trouble is that they seem to have power. People swear by this and not all of them seem

mentally unfit. Miracles, or some semblance of miracles have been performed by cult leaders, and not all of them have been optical illusions. To the naïve, such small miracles act as large evidence in favor of the divinity of the cult leader, though from a Torah perspective it can mean nothing at all.

In fact, says the Nefesh HaChaim, even so-called Black Magic -(the real heavy-duty occult), is just G-d working behind the scenes. As the Shema proclaims, all forces merge in G-d, so-to-speak, and any force that seems to act independently of G-d is really just a function of hester panim - (the hiding of G-d's face). And nothing hides the hand of G-d better than someone who seems to be working against G-d and getting away with murder, or having it his way.

Let's not forget how the Egyptians also turned their staffs into snakes, or how they turned water into blood, just as Moshe did. True, when it came to something as small as lice their magic tricks fell short. But, anyone who could make a stick turn into a snake, water into blood, or produce lots of frogs from nothing in someplace like downtown New York, could sign up new initiates by the hundreds on the spot!

And, it's all for the sake of free-will, the main purpose of Creation. Quite perplexing is the entire concept of evil that we live in fear of it on a daily basis, rather than of G-d Himself. Even the great Rebi Chanina ben Dosa, when confronted by a witch, reminded himself, "there is no other but G-d," which Rashi explains to mean that he said: even if your spell works on me, I know that it is really G-d carrying it out and you are merely the device to bring it about, to test my belief in G-d. (Sanhedrin 66b)

The whole concept of evil becomes even more perplexing on a Kabbalistic level, where it is referred to as the K'lipos or Chitzonios, both terms of which refer to some kind of external, fringe reality, obviously quite distant from the light of G-d. It's modus operandi may be the yetzer hara, the Satan, the Sitra Achra, but it all comes down to the same basic source of negative light within Creation.

So concrete is this concept that we even do things like throw it its spiritual due like one does a hungry, angry dog. This can mean giving one of the two goats on Yom Kippur to Azazel, bribing a nazi to save one's life, or letting the water used to rinse the hands after a meal roll off in the direction of the floor (Arizal). Spirituality it is not as black- and-white as we might have hoped it to be, which is why there has been so much confusion in today's world.

### **SEUDOS SHLISHIS:**

*You must burn their idolatrous statues in fire. Do not desire the gold and silver on [these statues].*  
(Devarim 7:25)

And then there are the Agnostics and Atheists who proudly proclaim that they doubt that G-d exists, or even go so far as to proclaim that He doesn't exist at all. We're not talking about those who are really too hurt by what has happened to them and others, and too hurt to believe that G-d could exist and allowed such things to happen. Rather, we are referring to those who solve their financial

or mathematical puzzles by subtracting G-d from their personal equations for life.

They are not giving up on the idea of religion altogether, because that would be spiritually, if not physically suicidal. We human beings need to devote ourselves to something that we can worship, and we thrive on laws that channel our energies. But true religion, they say, asks too much of them, and cults they know are clearly nonsense. However, science or the practice of making money is both practical and satisfying, and offers tangible rewards and a certain sense of control over life. What better form of religion for self-serving individuals can there be than that?

Every society that goes in that direction builds on its own obsolescence, because to believe in G-d or not, eventually such societies either implode or explode. And, whether it is the result of angels dressed as wayfarers as in Lot's time and the destruction of S'dom, or some other form of hidden Divine wrath, the net result is still the same.

But in the meantime, prosperity is as credible as a successful faith healer. People watch, worship, and support the stock markets like they are a form of deity, and truly believe that they are the best measure of society's health and longevity. Like technology, the money markets are seen only in terms of the prowess, not their awesome vulnerabilities, until, that is, they fail and fall apart.

Indeed, the Akeidas Yitzchak held that the accumulation of money for its own sake is what the Torah prohibits when it commands the Jew not to take the gold and silver used for idol worship (Devarim 7:25). On a Pshat- level, the posuk means gold and silver that was used as a covering for the idol itself (Ramban). But, on a Drush-level, it can mean going after all the glitter of false beliefs.

The litmus test? A simple question to ask: Am I pursuing what I am pursuing in order to make myself more powerful, either over my own life or the lives of others? If the answer is yes, then it is a form of idol worship. If the answer is, "No, I only wish to provide means through which G-d can empower me to do more good in His world," then it is completely permissible, if the person is truly sincere about his intentions.

Thus, the Torah warns:

[When you later prosper, be careful that you not] say to yourself, "It was my own strength and personal power that brought me all this prosperity." You must remember that it is G-d your L-rd who gives you the power to become prosperous. (Devarim 8:17-18)

Even the cheaters? Yes, even the cheaters . . .

### **MELAVE MALKAH:**

*Remember the way G-d, your G-d, led you for these forty years in the desert in order to test you, to see what you really thought, and whether you would keep His commandments or not. He afflicted you, and caused you to go hungry, and gave you manna to eat which you did not recognize, nor did your ancestors experience it - so that He could teach you that man does not live by bread alone, but by*

*whatever G-d says should exist does man live. (Devarim 8:2-3)*

The key word here is "test" - for forty years G-d tested the Jews in the desert, to see what they would think during difficult times and during times of prosperity. To see whether they would turn to G-d for direction and support, or to others and themselves.

If a prophet appears, or a person has a vision and performs a sign or something wondrous, and after the sign or wonder he told you about, he says "Let us pursue other gods which you have never known and serve them!" do not listen to the words of the prophet, or the one who dreamed the vision, because G-d, your G-d tests you, to see if you really love G-d, your G-d with all your heart and with all your soul. (Devarim 13:2-4)

Just like evil has to exist to make the choice of good real, fake prophets have to exist to test our willingness to reject falsehood. And, what kind of test is a false prophet if every time he goes to perform a miracle and he flops? In fact, one of the greatest differences between a true prophet of G-d and a false prophet is not his ability to use nature to his advantage; G-d empowers both of them. Rather, the true prophet ascribes all of his greatness back to G-d and uses it to return the Jews to Torah and mitzvos, whereas a false prophet takes credit away from G-d, in order to steer Jews away from Torah and mitzvos.

It is the same with Kabbalah and Black Magic: both take advantage of spiritual energies to bend nature to its will. However, whereas Kabbalah emphasizes G-d as the Source of everything, Black Magic creates the image that G-d is not involved and that therefore, there are other independent powers in Creation.

Even when it comes to medicine, which seems to help so consistently, the Talmud writes:

A Jew named Zunin asked Rebi Akiva: "Both of us know that idols have no power. So how do we explain the fact that sometimes their worshippers come to them crippled from illness and walk away with their limbs healed?"

He replied with a parable:

"There was once a very honest person in a town whom people trusted to the point that they would leave their precious belongings in his safekeeping even without witnesses. One man, however, refused to rely on his honesty and would insist on witnesses being on hand when he left something in his safekeeping, but on one occasion he left something and forgot to bring witnesses. The guardian's wife (insulted by the depositor's past insistence on witnesses), suggested to him that they deny that they ever received the item he had just left in their safekeeping.

'Because this fool acted improperly,' said her husband, 'we should abandon our faithfulness?'

"Likewise," concluded Rabbi Akiva, "when pains are sent from Heaven to afflict a person they are sworn to a strict schedule exactly when they must come and when they must leave, at precisely

which hour they must depart and which healer and medicine should be the agents of the cure. When the appointed time comes for them to leave and the sufferer visits the idol's temple these pains first say 'It is only right that we should not leave.' But then they say 'Because this fool acted improperly we should abandon our faithfulness about which we swore?' " (Avodah Zarah 55a)

But you have to admit, it is interesting the way that so many people just happen to visit the faith-healer, or even the doctor just as the contract for illness comes up for renewal. Indeed, there are some "good" doctors in the world with great success rates, and there are some excellent faith-healers and gurus who have a whole list of grateful and cured followers.

What's Pshat? This is Pshat:

G-d, your G-d tests you, to see if you really love G-d, your G-d with all your heart and with all your soul. (Devarim 13:2-4)

And, if you approach any medium (permissible by Torah) for success in this fashion, then Heaven will make sure that you find the best shaliach to bring you success. Success, that is, from Heaven's point of view, which may not always be the most comfortable form of success, but definitely the best one for you.

Have a great Shabbos,  
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