

ONLY A TRUE MAGICIAN SUCCEEDS

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

In honor of Eliezer Meir ben Pinchas Yitzchak HaLevi, n"y whose Bar Mitzvah is this Shabbos, b"H. May he merit to always grow in Torah and mitzvos and to be a credit to his family and nation.

Mazel Tov to Eliezer Meir, the entire family, and especially the honored grandparents, Jack and Betty Winston, and Avrom and Roslyn Neumark

Balak... sent messengers to Bilaam ... saying ... "I am aware that the one you bless is blessed, and the one you curse will be cursed." (Bamidbar 19:1-2)

Who doesn't love a good magic act? Magic is so entertaining, so mystifying, so supernatural, or so we are led to believe, and in truth, we want to believe. However, at the end of the day, we know that it is really just a matter of the magician's hand being faster than his audiences' eyes, and of the magician being a good psychologist, taking advantage of people's intellectual assumptions.

Even fake magic is powerful. Just watch how spellbound people become when someone suddenly starts to perform some kind of trick in public. Within seconds, he usually has an audience that sticks around and watches just about any magic trick he might do. But, ask him to actually create something from nothing, and all that will result is disappointment.

Real magic, of course, is real power. With real magic, perhaps, I can walk through walls. With real magic I can travel great distances without the use of a futuristic transporter. With real magic, I am far less limited by the physical world in which the average person is bound by the rules of nature, and that is real power.

But is that magic, or is that a miracle, or are these just two names for the same thing? And, if not, then what is the difference between the two? The difference between the two would seem to be that magic is a miracle on demand. Miracles happen all the time in daily life, but most of them happen unexpectedly. Real magic, however, is a supernatural bending of the natural rules at will, and that, obviously, makes all the difference in the world.

As a result, we don't want someone with ill will to be able to manipulate reality at his will anymore than we want evil powers to have weapons of mass destruction, or of any level of destruction for that matter. With such power, they can gain far more control over people and situations than is good for the world and therefore, God has limited access to the supernatural to historically safe people.

There is another reason why this is so. The point of history, especially for the Jewish people, is to reveal God in Creation. When a righteous person performs a miracle, or one happens for him, he is quick to attribute the miracle to the Source of all miracles, God Himself. When evil people perform miracles, they are quick, instead, to attribute the miracle to themselves in an effort to appear powerful before others, contrary to the purpose of Creation.

That is the fundamental difference between miracle and magic. Miracle, as the Hebrew word, which means banner, implies, advertises the reality of God and His involvement in history. Magic, on the other hand, is meant to convince others that God is not behind the trick, ascribing power to the magician instead, which is why, halachically, even the fake, entertaining kind is still controversial.

Nevertheless, as we see from this week's parshah, evil people can end up gaining illicit access to the supernatural realm. They have been able to, over history, perform real magic and seemingly get away with it. I don't know the statistics, but I would venture to say that some sorcerers, who did not cross the path of the Jewish people as Bilaam does in this week's parshah, died what appears to have been normal deaths. Why?

For the same reason why God allows mamzerim to be born from illicit relationships, such as adultery. As Rashi explains with respect to the Flood, one of things that angered God about Noach's generation was the way they kept producing illegitimate children into which God had to put souls. If God hadn't then it would have been a miracle, and miracles compel people to believe in God without the intellectual work necessary to come to such a conclusion on one's own.

And, just as it is God who puts the soul into a mamzer, it is God Who empowers the wizard to do his magic, the real magic. But, just as God makes sure that the soul He puts into a child born from an adulterous relationship is one that deserves to be there, perhaps because of its own past illicit relationships in previous incarnations, likewise does God make sure that any sorcerer performing magic only affects people who are meant to be affected, no matter how it looks to the contrary.

This is what Rebi Chanina ben Dosa told a witch he had encountered one day:

"There is no one else but Him" (Devarim 4:35); Rebi Chanina said, "Even sorcery." There was a woman who tried to remove earth from under neath the feet of Rebi Chanina (Rashi: to cause him to die). He said to her, "Take it; this will not help you a bit, for, there is no one else but Him." (Chullin 7b)

There is nothing besides Him, meaning, nothing can occur without His knowledge or against His will. Therefore, if there isn't a decree before Him, then nothing can harm a person. (Rashi)

We need not confine this conversation to magic only. Rather, we can also talk about conventional magic, such as Weapons of Mass Destruction, for example. I say magic because it is amazing how

much destruction a single bomb can cause today, and conventional, because we know how it works and employ such methods in one form or another on a daily basis.

However, though it looks as if just about anyone can acquire dangerous weapons, and use them against just about anyone, which has to be the case to maintain free-will even at this very complicated period of history, no one will be affected by such weapons unless it is decreed in Heaven first. That is why we find in life that some people escape impossible situations of danger, while others are killed against the odds. That's not good or bad luck. That's Hashgochah Pratis.

On the topic of magic, is it not extremely ironic that, at this late stage of history as Arab oil begins to wane, that the Israelis, who since giving up the Sinai to Egypt, has been oil-less, have declared an oil find, and the technology to bring it out of the ground? Fox Business' headline: Israel on its Way to Becoming a World Oil Power. How magical indeed.

But then again, life itself is magical. It really is. Do you want to know why?

The answer, of course, is Kabbalistic. It has to do with something called Ohr Penimi, and Ohr Makif, literally, Internal Light and Surrounding Light. They are both completely spiritual, the former existing inside of us, and the latter existing around us, on the outside.

For, some levels of Divine light are low enough on the scale of spirituality that they can be contained by keilim, or vessels, like our bodies, for example. However, other levels of light are far too spiritual to be contained by any kind of vessel, no matter how spiritual, and therefore they remain on the outside of the vessel, emanating light from the outside inward.

What we call the natural world is really a function of Ohr Penimi, light that can be contained within vessels. As such, even though the light itself can accomplish much more than the vessel containing it might be able to achieve, it is limited by the vessel in which it finds itself, just like a runner who may feel like running and has the energy to do so, but can't because of an injury he has sustained.

Not so the Ohr Makif, which by its very nature is unlimited and unhampered by the physical world. It is not just part of the supernatural reality, it is the supernatural reality. I don't think it is what others might call one's aura, and it is certainly not something one can see, not with physical eyes at least. Those who believe in the concept of aura seem to treat it like a spiritual reality with certain physical properties.

However, an Ohr Makif is completely spiritual without any physical properties. And, were one able to tap into it, then he would be able to go beyond the limitations of the physical and accomplish supernatural feats. Indeed, that is precisely what a true miracle worker would have to do to work his miracles, such as the great Rebi Chanina ben Dosa in the Talmud, who did such miracles at will.

The upshot of this is that we all have miraculous powers by virtue of the fact that we are encompassed by Ohr Makifim (the plural). It is there, hovering around us all of the time, having an impact on our lives, but not necessarily according to our plan and schedule. It has the capacity to

elevate us above the everyday mundane reality, but won't as long as we are unworthy of accessing it at will.

Miracles may happen for us because of it, and do, but not necessarily always when we want them to. So utterly grounded in the physical natural reality, we aren't even aware that Ohr Makifim exist. We might believe in hokus pokus, magic that makes mystical things that just seem to happen, or in supernatural natural forces that, with training and concentration, one can draw upon, but it is too great a stretch of one's belief and imagination to believe in a concept such as Ohr Makif.

But not for the Kabbalist. The Kabbalist not only believes in the reality of Ohr Penimi and Ohr Makif, he lives within it all the time. Using Kabbalistic tradition, he draws from the Ohr Makif to get around the so-called laws of nature, or limitations of the Ohr Penimi, to do what he thinks God would have him do at such a time.

And, while he does his thing, and certainly after he is successful at manipulating the seemingly concrete natural reality, he is sure to attribute all of his success back to God. He knows from the beginning that the most he can ever be is a shaliach, a messenger of God, and he endeavors to be the best one he can be.

That is, perhaps, what distinguishes the true magician—a Kabbalist—from the phony ones, even when they access the spiritual reality to perform their tricks. A Kabbalist must be, first and foremost, someone who fears God, and who lives to sanctify His Name. It is this that gains him access to the type of knowledge and experience that allows him to make use of the Ohr Makif.

Not so the Bilaams of history, who seek only to manipulate the natural world for their own power and glory. For the rest of us watching, for whom everything is a test of our belief and use of free-will, they may succeed. However, for the sorcerer, because he uses magic for his own good, becomes indebted to God for the gift of magic he may have received, and punishable for misleading the people who witness his miraculous feats.

However, not only does the Kabbalist not owe God anything for the miracles he performs, he instead gains merit for having used the supernatural reality to reveal God within Creation. Hence, though Bilaam may have challenged Moshe Rabbeinu's greatness in this week's parshah, at the end of the fight, when they return to their respective corners, Bilaam will end up in Gihennom, while Moshe Rabbeinu will be able to enter the ultimate heights in the World-to-Come. How magical, indeed.

Text

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