



MISHNAS CHAYIM

משנת היום

MISHNAH ON THE PARSHAH

פרשת ויצא תשי"ע • Parshas Vayetzai 5770

THE “MAGICAL” FORMULA

Sojourning in the house of his conniving uncle Lavan, Ya’akov Avinu was faced with an almost insurmountable challenge.

The Torah refers to Lavan as “Lavan Ha’arami,” referring, at face value, to his place of origin: **Aram Naharayim**. The Medrash, however, attributes this title to a penchant for *rama’us*: trickery and cheating.

But Lavan had many more “tricks” up his sleeve than mere chicanery. Apparently, he was a master magician – not of the rabbit-out-of-a-hat sort, but the “real deal.” There exists in the world an institution known as *kishuf* (black magic), which stems from a sort of reservoir of *kochos hatumah* (forces of spiritual impurity). Although not so widely known or practiced today, it was a force to be reckoned with in the heyday of sorcerers and necromancers.

Someone with the know-how can harness these *kochos* to override the standard order of natural laws. In numerous places, the Torah proscribes Jews from engaging in this practice. But that is not because of lack of effectiveness; it is simply forbidden (see *Ramban, Devarim 18:9*).

Lavan was more than a mere magician who utilized the *kochos hatumah* to do his evil bidding. The Avnei Nezer (quoted in *Shem Mishmuel, parshas Vayetzai*) explains that he was the absolute master in the field. So proficient was he that, according to the Zohar (*166b*), no person could resist or overcome his power. He could inflict harm on anyone of his choosing through his command of the spheres of darkness. And his sights were set upon Ya’akov: “Lavan sought to uproot the entirety (of Klal Yisrael),” (*Pesach Haggadah*).

How was it possible for Ya’akov Avinu to stand up to such a formidable foe? Wasn’t resistance – as the Zohar stated – virtually impossible?

However, like all forces and systems in the world, the power of *kishuf* was implanted there by Hashem, and so – as will be expounded on below – remains subservient to His Will.

EIN OD MILVADO

The Gemara (*Chulin 7b*) addresses this issue head-on. A certain wicked sorceress tried to kill R’ Chanina through the implementation of magical practices. But R’ Chanina remained unconcerned. “Try what you like,” R’ Chanina remarked. “It will not work on me.” He explained this reality by quoting the verse (*Devarim 4:35*), “*Ein od milvado* – there is nothing aside from Him (Hashem).”

R’ Chaim Volozhiner explains (*Nefesh Hachaim, 3:12*) that R’ Chanina was well aware of the power – and danger – of *kishuf*. The Gemara, however, is revealing a remarkable principle, one which, in effect, can shield a person from the effects of *kishuf*, or any dangerous force, for that matter. The “trick” is to bear in mind the fact that Hashem is the One who created, established, and controls the forces of *kishuf*, nature, and everything else. In other words, the dangerous forces derive their strength only from Hashem Himself, and they are only as powerful as He allows them to be. Should He decide in an instant to withhold their energy, their effectiveness – and their very existence – comes to a screeching halt. R’ Chanina, whose faith in Hashem was pristine, had nothing to fear, for he was well aware that it was Hashem Who was pulling all of the strings. Surely Ya’akov Avinu adopted this method to similarly ward off Lavan’s grasp.

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In his glosses on his father's *sefer Nefesh Hachaim*, R' Yitzhak Volozhiner sees this idea expressed in a well-known Mishnah, which comments on the intriguing episode of the Copper Snake (*Bamidbar 21:4-9*). As punishment for their complaints, a plague of harmful snakes invaded the Jews in the *midbar* (desert), causing many fatalities. After praying for their salvation, Moshe Rabbeinu was instructed by Hashem to fashion the likeness of a snake to be hoisted in full view of the people. Anyone bitten by the (real) snakes had only to look at this model serpent to be cured. The Mishnah in Rosh Hashanah (3:8) raises the obvious issue:

וכי נחש ממית, או נחש מחיה. אלא, בזמן שישראֵל מסתכלין כלפי מעלה ומשעבדין את לבם לאביהן שבשמים, היו מתרפאים, ואם לאו, היו נמוקים.

“Can a (model) snake really cause either death or life? Rather, when Yisrael would look Heavenward and subjugate their hearts to their Father in Heaven,

they would be healed; and if not, they would pine away.”

THE POWER OF CONCENTRATION

R' Yitzhak explains the intent of the Mishnah along the lines of R' Chaim's great principle. The real purpose in looking toward the snake was to come to a realization – after contemplating its power – that, in fact, it was entirely powerless. People would recognize instead that the Sole Power is Hashem. By dedicating their hearts to the recognition of Hashem's absolute power, they would be healed.

R' Chaim concludes that this idea is actually a wondrous “*segulah*” (especially effective option): to dwell on the Singular Power of the Almighty, in keeping with R' Chanina's application of the sacred words “*ein od milvado*”. Just as R' Chanina was able to ward off and nullify any pernicious effects of the forces of *kishuf* by inculcating this verse into his psyche, so, too, any individual who concentrates fully on this idea will be saved from danger. By recognizing that Hashem is truly the only Power, all other harmful forces will be neutralized.

This “*segulah*” was employed by the Brisker Rav when fleeing from the Nazis, *ym"sh*. The Brisker Rav sought to heed the *Nefesh Hachaim's* exhortation to focus intently on the *ein od milvado* credo: the servant of Hashem has nothing to fear, as no person or force can cause harm if not so deigned by the Almighty. So long as this idea never left the Rav's thoughts, he experienced no travail.

“Only once,” the Brisker Rav reported, “did I break my concentration. At that precise moment, a German soldier materialized, seized me, and demanded to see my passport.

“In light of this great danger,” the Rav continued, “I quickly summoned my powers of concentration and forced my thoughts back to the all-important *ein od milvado* principle. All at once, the soldier disappeared, as if into thin air...” (*She'al Avicha V'yagedcha*, vol. 3, p. 55).

Mishnas Chayim

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