

Parshas Kedoshim 5771

THE RISE AND FALL OF WITCHCRAFT: AN OVERVIEW

Covering a wide range of topics, this week's *parshah* delineates numerous laws. Amongst them we find prohibitions against sorcery, with a certain emphasis on necromancy in particular, referred to by the Torah as *ov v'yidoni*. Exactly what this entails is the subject of the Mishnah in Sanhedrin (7:7), which states:

בַּעַל אוֹב זֶה פִּיתוּם הַמְדַבֵּר מִשְׁחֵי, וְיִדְעוּנִי זֶה הַמְדַבֵּר בְּפִי.

“A practitioner of *ov* (performs his craft in the following manner): He elicits post-mortem communication, emanating from his armpit. *Yidoni* refers to communication that emerges from the mouth (specifically, from the bone of a beast known as *yadua*, which projected from the practitioner's mouth)” (translation follows *Rashi, Sanhedrin 65a*).

One curious aspect of the *ov v'yidoni* prohibitions is the fact that they are mentioned repeatedly in this *parshah* (*Vayikra 19:31, 20:6, 27*). Furthermore, each time the subject is mentioned, it appears to be accorded more severity. In its first appearance, the verse simply states the fact that these practices are forbidden; the second time, the Torah warns the practitioner of excommunication; and the final verse of the *parshah* spells out the punishment to be meted out by *beis din* (the tribunal) for these offenses: death by stoning, the most severe form of capital punishment. What could account for this seemingly unusual arrangement?

FACT OR FICTION?

There are some other basic issues surrounding this intriguing topic that require some clarification. Whatever the precise details associated with these practices, it is clear from the Mishnah that they involve some type of communication with the dead. Notwithstanding the Torah's ban on these

institutions, the question arises: do they really “work”? Is contact with inhabitants of another world actually established, or is the whole thing just some big sham? And if, somehow, it is “real” – why don't we hear too much about this today?

These issues touch on the much broader dispute among the Rishonim (medieval commentators) concerning the general field of sorcery and (black) magic. The Rambam accords it no validity. In his well-known and strongly worded opinion on the matter (*Yad Hachazakah, Hilchos Avodah Zarah, 11:16*), he maintains that these practices are mere chicanery, intended to lead the gullible masses to accept idolatry.

The Ramban, on the other hand, does attribute some credence to the occultists. He explains (*Devarim 18:9*) that while the Torah forbids the practice of sorcery, this does not mean that it denies the efficacy of the institution. On the contrary; Hashem, Who created the universe, also introduced these “supernatural” abilities into the world (for reasons beyond the scope of this particular article), but proscribed His people from engaging them. The Ramban seems to anticipate the Rambam's vehement objections, but concludes: “We simply can't contradict things that are in everyone's plain view” (apparently there were many witnesses to the sorcerers' demonstrations). The Ramban states that this seems to be the view of the Talmud, as well. Moreover, it appears that the overwhelming majority of Sages follow the view of the Ramban (*R' Ya'akov Hillel, Tamim Tihyeh, ch. 2*).

The bottom line (of the latter approach) seems to be that while there *is* something to these practices, it's really no “big deal.” The magicians, fortunetellers, and astrologers are merely harnessing certain spiritually impure forces that Hashem purposefully introduced into the world. As far as the Jewish people are concerned, we have no reason to fear or be concerned with these matters. Hashem, Who created these forces (along with the universe and everything in it) is the One in charge; He can nullify these forces when He chooses.

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In any event, even according to the view that accords legitimacy to the sorcerers, it does appear that at some point a substantial change took place in the magical landscape. The heyday of the occultists passed some time ago; by today, this particular craft has all but disappeared. The classic Kabbalist R' Ya'akov Chagiz (*Eitz Hachaim*) explains that these impure forces lose their potency as we approach ever closer to the Messianic Era.

INSPIRED BY THE NATIVES

Yet some wonder why, in fact, the powers of sorcery and necromancy have waned. Wouldn't there have been some benefit in keeping them around? Interestingly, the Steipler Gaon (*Chayei Olam*, p. 19) quotes an account of a *ba'al teshuvah* (returnee to Judaism), who related what led to his transformation. He explained that in the course of his "search," he ended up amongst a foreign group in the wilds of

America (presumably, he had fallen in with some Indian tribe of the West). There, he witnessed a remarkable event. Using incantations, the tribe members raised and conversed with the dead. Having witnessed "living" proof of the eternal nature of the soul, the latent Jewish spark within him reignited. This individual then emerged from the forest and returned to a Torah-true lifestyle. (Imagine what would happen if the modern-day *kiruv* [outreach] fieldworkers could invite a genuine necromancer to their seminars; their success rate would increase dramatically!)

R' Zalman Sorotzkin provides much insight on this issue. He actually perceives the diminished role of such encounters as a manifestation of Hashem's love for His people, as shall be explained.

FETISH WITH THE FUTURE

We opened by focusing on the curious manner in which this subject is presented in the *parshah*: with repetition and increasing severity. R' Sorotzkin reveals the purpose behind this arrangement: In general, people possess a burning curiosity about the future. Especially in ancient times, when there were various methods to acquire "inside information" (such as by conversing with the deceased), activities aimed at uncovering the future were extremely popular. It was no simple matter for a nation to simply forego this addiction. Sensitive to the difficulty involved, the Torah sought to "soften the blow" of outlawing these practices by presenting the prohibition in a gradual manner, divulging its severity in incremental steps.

Additionally, an alternative for learning about the future was supplied to the Jewish people, through the institution of prophecy. When the era of prophecy came to an end, Hashem once again reacted with sympathy. In the wake of prophecy's disappearance, it would be very difficult for the Jewish people to observe the other nations continuing to receive their futuristic news from the sorcerers and necromancers. As a result, Hashem greatly reduced their power and proliferation, which is why we hear so little about their activities today (*Oznaim LaTorah*, *Vayikra* 20:6, *Devarim* 18:14).

There is another manifestation of the necromancy theme in the coming *parshah* (*Emor*), which, *im yirtzeh* Hashem, we will discuss next week.