

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of
Ezra *ben* Eliyohu *a”h*

a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of his *neshamah*

Avraham’s Intriguing Gifts **PARSHAS CHAYEI SARAH 5776**

What appears to be a relatively innocuous gesture recorded in this week’s *parshah* is in fact a catalyst for a wide-ranging discussion.

The *passuk* relates how Avraham distributed apportionments to the members of his household. The lion’s share went to Yitzchak, his principal heir and successor; but the others were also recipients: אֶל־אֲרָץ קְדָם ... וְיִשְׁלַחֵם ... מִתְּנָת וְיִשְׁלַחֵם ... וְלִבְנֵי הַפִּילִגְשִׁים – “And to the children of the concubines... Avraham gave gifts, and he sent them... to the Land of the East” (*Bereishis* 25:6). While seemingly straightforward, Rashi – quoting Chazal (*Sanhedrin 91a*) – identifies the nature of this gift with a short but enigmatic comment: שֵׁם טוּמְאָה מְסֹר לָהֶם – which, simply translated, means: “He gave over to them a ‘name of impurity.’”

The questions here are basically self-evident. To what does this possibly refer? Even before we learn of any definitive definitions, the phrase seems to convey a sense of murkiness and darkness. (There are those who extrapolate from here some connection to the Orient, as if the occult-centered practices prevalent in that region somehow originate from Avraham’s bestowal. This is a problematic possibility on a number of counts; but in any event – although the verse mentions “the Land of the East” – it does not appear that the recipients travelled to that area. The Rivash identifies their eastern destination with Aram, roughly the equivalent of modern-day Iraq.) Why would the saintly patriarch deem this “*sheim tumah*” to be a suitable parting gift?

As part of an extensive and illuminating discussion, the commentators offer a range of possibilities. With the understanding that it represents only a small sliver of this vast and fascinating topic, we present here a digest of some of these views.

A Magical Problem

Rashi himself in *Sanhedrin (ibid.)* explains what this “*sheim tumah*” entails: it refers, he states, to *kishuf* (magic and sorcery). This comment prompts many (such as the Maharshal [*Chochmas Shlomo, Sanhedrin*]) to voice their puzzlement. *Kishuf* is not merely an unseemly matter but is strictly forbidden by the Torah. How could Avraham teach these concubines’ children a prohibited practice? One may contend that the prohibition is limited to Yisrael, while the recipients of this gift were classified *halachically* as gentiles. However, continues the Maharshal, their status as gentiles still does not sanction the practice. Although we are familiar with the Tannaic teaching (*cited in Sanhedrin 56a*) that lists only seven Noachide prohibitions, that same *beraisa* later brings the opinions of others that add to the list. One of these is R’ Shimon, who contends that even gentiles are subsumed in the prohibition against *kishuf*!

The *Be’er Sheva (Sanhedrin 91a)*, however, dispenses with this issue. Firstly, he explains, the *halachah* follows the first opinion that the Noachide prohibitions are limited to the seven listed in the beginning of the *beraisa*. Moreover, even according to the opinion that gentiles are forbidden to practice *kishuf*, there was no impropriety in Avraham’s action. This is based on the fact that there are numerous gradations within the overall field, as apparent from the distinction drawn by the Mishnah (*Sanhedrin 7:11*):

הַמְכַשֵּׁף הָעוֹשֶׂה מְעֻשָׂה, חַיֵּב, וְלֹא הַאֲוִחִז אֶת הָעֵינַיִם.

“Regarding the practice of magic: One who performs an actual act (of sorcery) is liable, but not one who merely stages an illusion.”

In any event, the Gemara in the ensuing discussion (*Sanhedrin 67b*) draws another distinction between two forms of magical implementation: “*ma’aseh keshafim*” (the employment of actual sorcery) and “*ma’aseh sheidim*” (employment of demons). While this writer can’t claim to be thoroughly familiar with the particulars, it seems that the former is more of a “hardcore” form, entailing the use of sorcery itself, whereas with “*ma’aseh sheidim*,” the practitioner prevails upon demonic creatures to do his bidding. This latter form is of a much lesser caliber; it was this type of magic that Avraham transmitted, as there was no problem involved with doing so.

Spiritual and Physical Protection

The question still remains, however, why it was that Avraham made such a curious selection in choosing a gift. The *Panei’ach Raza* (a treatise from the *Ba’alei Tosafos*) explains that Avraham’s aim was to prevent the recipients from succumbing to a much more severe prohibition: namely, *avodah zarah* (idolatry). Prevalent in that region was a form of fortune-telling that was practiced in conjunction with *avodah zarah*. And so Avraham relayed to them a much more benign method of discovering the future.

Alternatively, some contend that Avraham’s instruction was purely educational. That is, he was not teaching them about the “*sheim tumah*” in order to put it into practice, but rather, in order to know what practices they should avoid (*Ma’asei Hashem, Haksav V’hakabbalah*).

Others maintain that this was an important tool for maintaining their safety and well-being. The *Maskil L’David* points out, based on the Zohar, that Aram basically functioned as “the sorcery capital of the world”; the most expert (and dangerous) practitioners could be found there. Going into that region, then, Avraham wanted them to be well armed; in order that no one could use these forces to harm them, Avraham taught them how to counteract and subdue this power. In a similar vein, the Maharal (*Gur Aryeh*) explains that what Avraham gave over to them was the ability to perform an exorcism, in the event that they were overtaken by *kishuf* or *sheidim*.

And there are those who maintain that this “*sheim tumah*” bears no relation to *kishuf* or anything of the sort. Tosafos (cited in *Hadar Zekeinim*) understands the term quite literally: “Impure name.” In keeping with his life-long campaign against paganism and in favor of publicizing Hashem’s Oneness, Avraham here was seeking to address a severe and prevalent issue. It may be astonishing, but the originators of idolatry (in the time of Enosh, grandson of Adam) would use the name of Hashem when referring to their idols; as the *passuk* states: “Then they began to call (idols) by the Name of Hashem” (*Bereishis 4:26*). This is what Avraham aimed to correct. He engineered that the Holy Name of Hashem would no longer be utilized in connection with *avodah zarah*. Instead – as illustrated by the case of Ba’al Pe’or – he conferred upon them titles that were most unflattering. Emphasizing the debased and repulsive nature of the peculiar service of its worshippers (“*Pe’or*” refers to an orifice), Avraham literally employed a “*shem tumah*” to denigrate and dissuade the practice of idolatry.