



FROM THE DESK OF RABBI MOSHE HAUER

OU EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT



Mitzvot and Magic

Do you believe in magic?

Religion is at times conflated with superstition, the mystical and magical. This makes sense, as a way of life built around one invisible force – G-d – would be prone to preoccupation with other presumed invisible forces. The true distinction between mitzvah and magic is something that we ourselves may lose sight of as we come to view mitzvah opportunities in terms of the deliverables they offer, their *segulah* value. The *mezuza* that we place on our doorpost may be valued as an amulet that magically provides G-d's protection to the home rather than as a faith-inducing and self-fulfilling reminder of G-d's place and presence in our homes and lives. Even charitable acts can be recast from expressions of caring for and sensitivity

to others into a pathway to *yeshuot*, a tool to spare ourselves personal crises. This mindset deploys religious activities as magic methods to manipulate G-d and produce the outcomes that serve our own needs. A more correct religious worldview is built on *avodat Hashem*, genuine deference to G-d while using every opportunity to serve Him.

My teacher, *mori v'rabi* Rav Moshe Shapira zt"l, would illustrate this point by highlighting a Midrashic comment (Bereishit Rabba 69:3) that contrasts how Pharaoh dreamed of himself standing over the Nile River that he worshipped, whereas Yaakov in his dream of the ladder saw G-d standing over him. This implies that proper religious activities are not us managing G-d, using magic tricks invoking Divine mystical powers to achieve our own ends and meet our needs, but rather G-d standing over us as we put our own needs aside and humbly serve G-d.

Bilaam was a powerful sorcerer who had a track record of success casting his spell on others but who came up completely short when trying the same against the Jewish people. As he himself grudgingly recognized (Bamidbar 23:23), "*lo nachash b'Yaakov v'lo kesem b'Yisrael*, sorcery is ineffective against Yaakov and magical spells do not impact Yisrael." While there may have been something to Bilaam's magical powers, he became utterly impotent when in conflict with G-d and His people. As Klal Yisrael, we are forbidden to engage in sorcery and told to instead place our trust in G-d, *tamim tiheyeh*

In loving memory and לעלוי נשמת

KURT ROTHSCHILD ז"ל
גרשון בן החבר מרדכי ז"ל
on the occasion of his 3rd yahrzeit

He devoted his 102 years in this
world to תורת ישראל, עם ישראל
and ארץ ישראל

May he be a מליץ יושר for his family
and for all of כלל ישראל

im Hashem Elokecha, recognizing that instead of mimicking the pathetic efforts of Bilaam to work around G-d's will for our own goals, we would do better to entrust ourselves to the one true Power to be reckoned with. For that is Torah at its essence: not a set of clever rituals but an encompassing deference to the infinitely greater wisdom and power of G-d. As Shmuel told Shaul (Shmuel 1 15:22), "*hinei shemo'ah mizevach tov*, it is better to heed G-d's word than to present Him an offering."

Bilaam ultimately brought the Jewish people down when instead of trying to overpower he undermined. His successful scheme combined luring the Jewish men to behave immorally with the daughters of Moav and having those women use the power of their seduction to draw the men to worship the god Pe'or. The worship of Pe'or was shockingly strange as it involved defecating on the idol. While many have offered interpretations of this strange ritual, one thing is clear: it was not an act of deference to god. Conventional worship involves bowing humbly and giving to G-d something that is precious to us, while with Pe'or they stood over the god and gave it that which they had no use for, their waste.

Bilaam successfully undermined us when he got us to practice religion as magic. He drew us into his lifestyle of immoral selfish indulgence by shifting our religious mindset from deferential service to manipulative utility. As children of Yaakov, we need to find our way back to his path of humility and deferential trust in G-d. ■

Jonathan Rosenblum, DPM

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