

א ביסל תורה!

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Why Can't a Jew Practice Magic?

By Eitan Orkaby '27

"מכשפה לא תחיה" "a sorceress shall not live" (שמות כ"ב:י"ז). The מצוה to kill a witch is a rather unusual kind of מצוה. There is no explanation given and seems to be alone in its category of מצוות: magic-related. What is so bad about magic and why would someone receive the death penalty for doing magic?

משנה תורה הלכות עבודה זרה וחוקות רמב"ם says, that magic is something that is not real. Magic originates from idolaters, who used magic to impress other nations to let them rule. However, the idolaters never did any magic, it was all fake. This then leads to the terrible nature of magic, the foolishness. Since magic does not exist (according to the רמב"ם), believing and trying to do magic is just believing in lies. While this explanation makes sense, why would someone receive the death penalty?

One possible answer to this question could be the nature of truth. The תורה is the complete truth. If one takes the first, middle, and last letter in the Hebrew alphabet it spells אמת, showing that the תורה is true. By practicing or believing in magic, one is

directly contradicting this idea, by saying that there is a truth that goes against the תורה. This would explain the death penalty given to a sorcerer.

While רמב"ם's explanation of the מצוה might make sense logically, textually it does not. After שמואל's death, שאול decides that he needs to ask advice from שמואל. שמואל goes to a sorceress to try speaking to the dead and is successful in being able to talk to שמואל. It is very clear from this story that magic is real and not made up. Additionally, בני בלק sends sorcerers to בלעם, to help curse ישראל. Furthermore, given that the תורה is true it would not make sense for it to prohibit something that does not exist?! The רמב"ם, on this מעשה רוקח, explains that there is magic in the world, it just stems from trickery and connivery. In this sense, the תורה is strictly warning us not to get involved with any trickery and to stay in the path of the תורה, which is always straight.

רבינו בחיי takes a different approach. He says that there is a connection between magic and כלאים - mixing two different species. Both of them are acts by humans to try to create something that is outside of nature. While two plants might grow separately, by

combining them one is trying to create a new plant, which goes against nature. רבינו בחיי understands that this reason for the תורה prohibiting magic does not work with its punishment, death. כלאים does not get the death penalty?! Therefore, רבינו בחיי gives an additional reason for the death penalty for practicing magic. He says that no explanation has to be given. 'ה' commanded us not to practice magic and if one dies they receive the death penalty, so we should listen. Just as one who goes against a king's decree will get the death penalty, so too, going against a decree of The King of kings, 'ה'.

What all of these explanations have in common is their drive to explain a rule in the תורה. While we have to follow the תורה whether or not we understand it, there is still benefit in striving to connect with it more. Furthermore, while this law of not practicing magic does not apply nowadays, as magic does not exist anymore, explanations are still given just as to practical laws. This teaches us the importance of learning תורה just to learn and not necessarily to understand the practical aspects of every word in the תורה.



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