

# THE TORAH'S ATTITUDE TO MAGICAL THOUGHT & PRACTICE\*

BY SINA KAHEN

A central aspect of a Torah-led life revolves around the delicate equilibrium between the observed natural order and what may lie beyond. This balance dictates the prohibition of certain practices, including black magic, divination, astrology, and related occult arts<sup>1</sup>. Irrespective of the reasons or objectives behind engaging in these activities – even if they are noble or beneficial – the Torah's decree is clear and unequivocal: these practices are strictly forbidden.<sup>2</sup>

This directive is explicitly articulated in the Torah:

*“There shall not be found among you anyone who... uses divination, or a soothsayer, or an enchanter, or a witch, or a charmer, or a medium, or a wizard, or a necromancer. For those who do these things are an abomination to the Lord, and because of these abominations the Lord your God drives them out from*

*before you... For these nations...listened to soothsayers, and to diviners; but as for you, the Lord your God has not allowed you to do so.”<sup>3</sup>*

This passage forbids engagement with a range of activities considered to be occult or magical. The passage strongly advises against meddling with the divine order and enjoins followers to trust in God's natural sequence of events, without attempts at manipulation or interference.<sup>4</sup>

Yet, Halakha provides a fascinating exception: those serving on ancient rabbinical courts were allowed to study black magic, albeit for a specific purpose. The reason behind this was to enable them to recognise when someone was practising magic, thereby providing them with the necessary knowledge to rightfully condemn such practitioners.<sup>5</sup> Further reinforcing the prohibition on occult arts, Halakha explicitly forbids



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1 Occult refers to mystical, supernatural, or magical practices.

2 As Hakhm Dr José Faur points out in his essay, “Monotheism & Magic” in *Harvard Theological Review: Jewish opposition to magic is old. Magic is intrinsic to Aboda Zara* (imperfectly translated “idolatry,” but actually meaning “strange” i.e. unprescribed, “worship,” encompassing any ritual not included in the Jewish way of worshipping, even when directed to God). In a deep sense, magic and religion compete for the same things and apply similar methods: both aim at affecting the effects of this world by influencing the realm of the beyond. The Talmudic legend that Abraham taught the art of necromancy to children of the concubines (*Sanhedrin*, 91a, cf. Rashi ad. loc.), reflects the intimate relation between magic and religion. Although one is superior to the other, both were taught by the patriarch Abraham, hence the fierce rivalry between them. Traces of this fight are found in Rabbinic literature (*Mishna Sanhedrin*, VI 4 and P.T. ad. Lock; *Bekhorot*, 8a-9a, etc.). This brings us to a fundamental problem: how to distinguish between them. At the practical level there was no problem. Certain rituals and acts were classified as “magical”, others as “religious”. Conceptually, however, it was another matter. The distinction between “white” and “black” magic (or “good” and “evil” spirits etc.) usually made in this connection, cannot be accepted by a monotheistic religion believing in one omnipotent God, Creator of everything, “pure” and “impure”....The same concern is evident in Elijah’s prayer that his miracles not be perceived as necromancy (*Berakhot*, 6b)...There is no doubt that Maimonides’ statement that magic is sheer nonsense and useless (*Aboda Zara* XI, 17) offended the religious sensitivities of many. To them, denial of the magical was tantamount to denial of the miraculous.

3 Deuteronomy 18:10-14:

לא ימצא בך ... קסם קסמים מעונן ומנחש ומכשף: וחבר חבר ושאל אוב וידעני ודרש אל המתים: כי תועבת יי' כל עשה אלה ובגלל התועבת האלה יי' אלהיך מוריש אותם מפניך: ...כי הגוים האלה אשר אתה יורש אותם אל מענבים ואל קסמים ישמעו ואתה לא כן נתן לך יי' אלהיך.  
See also Leviticus 19:26.

4 Rashi on Deuteronomy 18:13:

“התהלך עמו בשלימות ותצפה לו, ולא תסמוך על המנחשים ועל המעוננים”

5 *Menahot* 65a:

“דאמר רבי יוחנן אין מושיבים בסנהדרין אלא ... בעלי כשפים”



experimenting with any form of occultist practices. It extends its stricture to consulting astrologers for advice<sup>6</sup>, relying on omens and amulets<sup>7</sup>, and attempts to communicate with the dead<sup>8</sup> or demons.<sup>9</sup> It emphasises the need to dismiss any claims of supernatural powers by astrologers, sorcerers, or other self-proclaimed wise men. This is underlined by HaRaMBa”M’s assertion that anyone who believes in such practices lacks intelligence:

*“All the above matters [magic and superstitious arts] are falsehood and lies with which the original idolaters deceived the gentile nations in order to lead them after them. It is not fitting for the Jews who are wise sages to be drawn into such emptiness, nor to consider that they have any value as [implied by Numbers 23:23]: “No black magic can be found among Jacob, or occult arts within Israel.” Similarly, Deuteronomy 18:14 states: “These nations which you are driving out listen to astrologers and diviners. This is not [what God... has granted] you. Whoever believes in [occult arts] of this nature and, in his heart, thinks that they are true and words of wisdom, but are forbidden by the Torah, is foolish and feebleminded.*

*He is considered like women and children who have underdeveloped intellects.*

*The masters of wisdom and those of perfect knowledge know with clear proof that all these crafts which the Torah forbade are not reflections of wisdom, but rather, emptiness and vanity which attracted the feebleminded and caused them to abandon all the paths of truth.”<sup>10</sup>*

Additionally, HaRaMBa”M’s prohibition is not limited to practices traditionally seen as occult. It also warns against engaging in sleight-of-hand magic, subtly hinting that even seemingly innocuous practices can be seen as straying into forbidden territory.<sup>11</sup> His disbelief in magic and his claim that magic spells are mere placebos, possessing no real effect is further codified by Maran in the Shulḥan Arukh.<sup>12</sup> HaRaMBa”M also considered preoccupation with such activities as “repulsive,” even if some activities are not explicitly prohibited by the Torah<sup>13</sup>.

This perspective is contrasted by the more Kabbalistically-inclined Vilna Gaon, who, while maintaining the need to avoid such practices, asserts that diviners and

6 Rambam, Hilkhoh Aboda Zara 11:8:

אי זה הוא מעונן, אלו נותני העיתים, שאומרים באסטגנינות, יום פלוני טוב, יום פלוני רע, יום פלוני ראוי לעשות בו מלאכה פלונית, שנה פלונית או חודש פלוני רע לדבר פלוני

Y.D. 179:1:

אין שואלים בחושים בכוכבים ולא בגוֹרלות

7 Y.D. 179:3:

האומר: פתי נפלה מפך, או מקלי מיד, או בני קורא לי מאחרי, או שצבי הפסיקו בדרך, או שעבר נחש מימינו או שועל משמאלו, ולמי שארע לו אחד מאלו עושה ממנו נחוש שלא לצאת לדרך או שלא להתחיל במלאכה, וכן המנחשים בחלדה ובעופות ובכוכבים, וכן האומר: אל תתחיל לגבות ממני, שחרית הוא, מוצאי שבת הוא, מוצאי ראש חדש הוא, וכן האומר: שחט תרנגול שקרא כעורב, ותרגלת זו שקראה כתרנגול, אסור

8 Y.D. 179:13: "דורש אל המתים זה שמרעיב עצמו ולן בבית הקברות כדי שתשרה עליו רוח הטומאה"

9 Y.D. 179:16: "מעשה שדים, אסור. ויש מי שמתיר לשאל בהם על הגנבה"; ibid 19: "מעשה שדים, אסור. ויש מי שמתיר לשאל בהם על הגנבה"

10 Rambam Hilkhoh Aboda Zara 11:16:

ודברים האלו כולם דברי שקר וכזב הן, והם שהטעו בהן עובדי עבודה זרה הקדמונים לגויי הארצות כדי שיינהו אחריהן, ואין ראוי לישראל שהן חכמים מחוכמים להימשך בהבלים אלו, ולא להעלות על"ה (דברים י"ח:ד) "כי לא נחש ביעקב ולא קסם בישראל" (במדבר כ"ג:ג), ונאמר "כי הגוים האלה אשר אתה יורש אותם אל מעוננים ואל קוסמים ישמעו ואתה לא כן נתן לך יי אלהיך"

כל המאמין בדברים אלו וכיוצא בהן, ומחשב בליבו שהן אמת ודברי חכמה אבל התורה אסרה אותם, אינו אלא מן הסכלים ומחסירי הדעת, ובכלל הנשים והקטנים שאין דעתן שלימה. אבל בעלי החכמה ותמימי הדעת ידעו בראיות ברורות שכל אלו הדברים שאסרה תורה אינן דברי חכמה, אלא תוהו והבל, שנמשכו בהן חסידי הדעת ונטשו כל דרכי האמת בגללן

11 Rambam Hilkhoh Aboda Zara:

"וכן, האוחז את העינים ומדמה בפני הרואים שעושה מעשה תימהון והוא לא עשה, הרי זה בכלל מעונן, ולוקה"

12 Rambam Hilkhoh Aboda Zara 11:11

quoting "מי שנשכו עקרב או נחש, מותר ללחוש על מקום הנשיכה, ואפילו בשבת, כדי ליישב דעתו ולחזק לבו. אף על פי שאין הדבר מועיל כלום, הואיל ומסוכן הוא, התיירו לו, כדי שלא תיטרף דעתו עליו"

in Shulḥan Arukh, YD 179:6 Responsa of the Rambam, siman 218

13 Responsa of the Rambam, siman 218

their ilk possess actual supernatural powers, and that HaRaMBa”M’s contrary position was due to him being “led astray by the accursed Greek philosophy”<sup>14</sup>. *Side point: The Vilna Gaon’s comments alone are proof that HaRaMBa”M did not believe in magic, contrary to some recent revisionists who turn Maimonides into My-Monides to fit their own personal (and often magical) agendas.*

Of course, HaRaMBa”M was not alone in this repulsion. Rabbenu Abraham ibn Ezra, his fellow Andalusian, strongly chastises those who claim that the Torah’s prohibition of these actions is proof that they are real:

*“Those with empty brains say, ‘Were it not that fortune tellers and magicians were true, the Torah would not prohibit them.’ But I (Ibn Ezra) say just the opposite of their words, because the Torah doesn’t prohibit that which is true, but it prohibits that which is false. And the proof is the prohibition on idols and statues.”*<sup>15</sup>

Rabbenu David Qimḥi (Radaq) uses more colourful language. In his commentary to the book of Samuel, he discredits necromancy by referring to it as “nonsense, lies, and ridiculous”<sup>16</sup>.

Rabbenu Se’adya Gaon was also against the idea that magic had any real credibility. He writes<sup>17</sup> that the acts performed by Pharaoh’s “magicians” were simply sleight of hand, and nothing more. He states that these “magicians” imitated the Plague of Blood using red dye, and they imitated the Plague of Frogs by placing chemicals in the Nile River that caused the frogs to leap from those poisons. Further, Rabbenu Hananel ben Hushiel not only states that these Egyptian “magicians” were illusionists, but also applies this to stories in the Talmud of *Amoraim* “creating” people and animals.<sup>18</sup>

This is not exclusively a Geonic or Sepharadi position. The great Ashkenazi leader, Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, in his commentary on the Torah<sup>19</sup>, referred to such magical

things as “more than a laughable, absurd delusion”, and argues that involvement in such activities not only leads one to heresy but also profoundly influences one’s world view. He contends that such practices entice individuals to seek guidance from sources other than God, thereby leading them astray.

### Other Approaches

As is evident, the approach we have explored thus far holds the view that magic and superstition are futile endeavours, constituting mere nonsense and disassociating humans from higher truths. If we zoom out on Jewish tradition, however, there seems to be two<sup>20</sup> other approaches to magic.

A second approach is dedicated to those who are more Kabbalistically inclined, represented by the likes of the RaMBa”N (Nahmanides), who posit that magic is indeed real and potent. However, RaMBa”N maintains that the Torah prefers that one be “simple and perfect” in his service to God, discouraging the pursuit of aggressive methods of divine intervention, despite their alleged effectiveness.<sup>21</sup> This approach is further elaborated by him as he explains<sup>22</sup> that the prohibition is limited to actively seeking fortune-telling and the like. The Ran<sup>23</sup> also acknowledges the potential potency of magic but elucidates that the Torah explicitly forbids its use because it is regarded as a divine instrument, not intended for human manipulation.

A third approach supports the first group, but understands the second! We see this, for example, in none other than the Meiri. He provides commentary to a Talmudic passage<sup>24</sup> that engages with the concept of pairs (*zugot*), questioning how the Rabbis could have established the four cups of Seder night despite the apparent danger associated with pairs.<sup>25</sup>

The Meiri explains<sup>26</sup> that during the times of the Talmud, a significant percentage of the nation was attracted to superstitious practices and beliefs. Since these practices

14 Vilna Gaon, Be’ur Ha’Gra on YD 171:6 note 13: “הפלוסופיא ולכן כתב שכשפים ושמות ולחשים ושדים” והפלוסופיא הטנו ברוך לקחה לפרש הגמרא הכל בדרך הלציי וקמיעות הכל הוא שקר אבל כבוד הכו אותן על קדקדו שהרי מצינו הרבה מעשיות בגמרא ... וכן קמיעין בהרבה מקומות ולחשים רבו מלספר. והפלוסופיא הטנו ברוך לקחה לפרש הגמרא הכל בדרך הלציי ולעקור אותם מפשטן וח”ו איני מאמין בהם ולא מהם ולא מהמונים אלא כל הדברים הם כפשטן אלא שיש בהם פנימיות לא פנימיות של בעלי הפלוסופיא שהם חזונית אלא של בעלי האמת וריקי מוח אמרו: לולי שהאוב אמת, גם כן דרך הכשוף, לא אסרם הכתוב. ואני אומר הפך דבריהם, כי לא יאסור הכתוב האמת, רק השקר. והעד: האילנים”<sup>15</sup>

15 Commentary on Leviticus 19:31: “הפסילים”  
16 Commentary on 1 Samuel 28:24: “וראינו מחלוקת בין הגאונים בדבר הזה, וכלם נשתו כי מעשה האוב הבל ותוהו ודברי כזב והתול” In the very same passage, he cites the position of Shemu’el ben Hofni, a renowned Babylonian Gaon: “לא יקובלו הדברים במקום שיש מכחישים להם”  
17 Sefer Emunot V’Deot 3:5 “לבריה מהם הצפרדעים”  
18 Commentary on Sanhedrin 65b:

19 Commentary on Leviticus 19:26 (original German): “Ein solches Verhöhnung wäre nun nichts als ein zu belächelnder denkwidriger Wahn, wenn es nicht gleichzeitig die Leugnung einer sittlich freien göttlichen Weltordnung und Wahrung involvierte und auf die sittlich freie Tätigkeit des Menschen einen schädlich hemmenden Einfluss übte, die Gott hinsichtlich ihrer Ziele, ihrer Zulässigkeit oder sittlichen Notwendigkeit lediglich auf sein Gesetz, sowie hinsichtlich der Ausführbarkeit auf die von Ihm verliehene vernünftige Einsicht hingewiesen hat.”

20 ...or one and a half!

21 RaMBa”N, commentary on Deuteronomy 18:9-13: “וטעם”  
22 See Responsa of the RaSHB”A attributed to the RaMBa”N, no. 283.

23 See the end of Derashot HaRa”N 4.

24 Pesahim 109b: “היכי מתקני רבנן מידי דאתי בה לידי סכנה? והתניא: לא יאכל אדם תרי, ולא ישתה תרי, ולא יקנה תרי, ולא יעשה צרכיו תרי”  
25 The Talmud adds that the fear of drinking an even number of cups is typically a Babylonian fear, but “in the West [i.e. in Palestine] they do not fear even numbers.” For the possible Zoroastrian and Babylonian contexts of some of these beliefs, see Isaiah Gafni’s works.

26 Bet Ha’Behira, Pesahim 109b: “לא חששו בהם חכמים לעקרב וכל שכן במה שהיה הרגילות אצלם בו כל כך שהיה טבעם מקבל בענין חזק או חולשה וכמו שהעידו בסוגיא זו



for a man to abandon the prevailing law and raise once again the counterarguments and replies (that preceded its enactment). Similarly, it is not proper to abandon matters of reason that have already been verified by proofs, shake loose of them, and depend on the words of a single one of the sages from whom possibly the matter was hidden. Or there may be an allusion in those words... A man should never cast his reason behind him, for the eyes are set in front, not in back."<sup>28</sup>

Rabbenu Hai Gaon of Babel zooms out with a broader principle. According to him, one can disregard Talmudic passages that do not make sense, as aggadot and midrashim, even if present in the Talmud, are not based on tradition, but rather individual interpretation.<sup>29</sup> Another Babylonian Gaon, Rabbenu Sherira Gaon, further clarifies that these midrashic interpretations, or aggada, are considered as estimates and are not always reliable:

*"These words that are derived from verses and are called midrashim or aggada are estimations (umdena)...Some are indeed correct, but many are not correct...Therefore we do not rely on aggada...Accept as reliable only those that follow from reason/intellect or from the verses."*<sup>30</sup>

Indeed, the belief in such magical concepts was merely a product of the time. Throughout Jewish history, the scientific ideas of yesterday have often become the pseudoscience or superstition of today – and nobody was immune to them. As HaRaMBa"m notes:

*"Even the good and pious among the followers of our Torah believe these things to be true, but forbidden simply on account of the Torah. They do not realise that these are baseless and false things that the Torah warns about in the same way it warns against lying."*<sup>31</sup>

Ḥakham Yaaqob Anatoli (13th century) repeats this sentiment in no uncertain terms:

*"Most of our people, including the well-known scholars among us, have their faith corrupted due to this... and until now they stumble with the stupidity of demons [shedim] and the like..."*<sup>32</sup>

did not entail any prohibitions of idolatry or *Darkhe Ha-Emori* (superstition, literally "the way of the Emorites"), the Rabbis did not protest. However, he reiterates that there is no truth to these concerns, and therefore one does not have to be concerned at all.

### What about the Talmud?

Turning our attention to the Talmud, one inevitably encounters references to occult practices and other seemingly magical phenomena. Do these passages provide stumbling blocks to what we have explored thus far?<sup>27</sup>

In his renowned Letter on Astrology, HaRaMBa"m responds to this very challenge by strongly denouncing the supposed magic of astrology and dismisses certain Talmudic references that seemed to support its legitimacy. He wrote:

*"I know that you may search and find sayings of some individual sages in the Talmud and Midrashim whose words appear to maintain that at the moment of a man's birth, the stars will cause such and such to happen to him. Do not regard this as a difficulty, for it is not fitting*

27 King Solomon, revered for his wisdom, is believed to have captured the essence of the challenge in his phrase in Proverbs 1:6:

לְהִבִּין מִשָּׁל וּמִלִּצְיָה דְבָרֵי הַחֲכָמִים וְהַדִּיּוֹתִים

28 RaMBa"m, Iggeret LeHakhme Kehal Ir Marseilles:

ואני יודע שאפשר שתתפשו ותמצאו דברי יחידים מחכמי האמת רבותינו ע"ה בתלמוד ובמשנה ובמדרשות, שדבריהם מראים שבעת תולדות של אדם גרמו הכוכבים כך וכך. אל יקשה זה בעיניכם, שאין דרך שנגניח הלכה למעשה ונהדר אפירכי ואשינויי. וכן אין ראוי לאדם להניח דברים של דעת שכבר נתאמתו הראיות בהן, וינער כפיו מהן ויתלה בדברי יחיד מן החכמים ע"ה, שאפשר שנתעלם ממנו דבר באותה שעה, או שיש באותם הדברים רמז ... ולעולם אל ישליך אדם דעתו אחריו כי העיניים הם לפנים לא לאחור.

29 Ošar Hageonim, Ḥagiga 14b: אלא 'אפשר' והמדרשות הללו לא 'דבר שמועה' הם, ולא דבר הלכה, אלא 'אפשר'

30 Ošar Hageonim Ḥagiga 14a:

הני מיילי דנפקי מפסוקי, ומקרי מדרש ואגדה, אומדנא ניהו ויש מהן שהוא כך ... והרבה יש שאינו כך ... ולכן אין או סומכין על דברי אגדה. והנכון מהם מדבריהם, מה שמתחזק מן השכל ומן המקרא

31 Mishna Aboda Zara 4:7, Perush of HaRambam:

ואפילו טובים וחסידים מאנשי תורתנו חושבים שהם דברים נכונים אלא שהם אסורים מטעם התורה בלבד, ואינם יודעים שהם דברים בטלים ושקריים הזהירה התורה עליהם כדרך שהזהירה על השקר. והם דברים שנגעשה להם פרסום רב אצל העמים, והיסוד לכך הם "אלצאבה", והם האנשים אשר רחק אברהם איבנו מהם וחלק על דעותיהם הנפסדות במה שנתן ה' בלבן מן החכמה. והיו מכבדים את הכוכבים ומיחסים להן פעולות לא להן, והם אשר יסדו את גזירת הכוכבים והכישוף והלחשים והורדת הרוחניות ושיחות הכוכבים והשדים והקסם והניחוש לכל ריבוי מיניהם, ודרישת המתים, והרבה מן הענינים האלה אשר שלפה תורת האמת חרבה עליהם וכתרה אותם, והם שורש עבודה זרה וענפיה

32 Malmad HaTalmidim, p.148:

החטא הגדול הנמשך אז לה המין הוא נמצא בנו היום במה שדברה בו תורה בלשון בני אדם עד שרוב בני עמינו אף החכמים הנודעים בעמנו אמונתם נפסדת לסבת זה ועד עתה הם נכשלים בהבלי השדים וכיצא בהם. וכאשר למד השם את עמו חוקים ישרים ותורות אמת הזהיר אזהרות רבות מלכת בחוקות הכופרים כדי למחות הדעת הרע שהתפרסם ביניהם וכדי להחזיק באמונה האמיתית שהממשלה לשם לבדו ואין שם שטן וזלת הטבע הנמשך לחומר והוא שאמר לו השם הנו בידך והוא הצריך לדברים ההרים והנפסדים ולולי זה לא היה להם מצאות

More recently, Ḥakham José Faur reiterated this oft-forgotten reality:

*“Although the Scripture and the Rabbis opposed magic and demonology, many Jews, even among the learned and pious, were influenced by the general trend of their times.”*<sup>33</sup>

Therefore, when it comes to the presence of seemingly magical *midrashim and aggadot* in the Talmud, Rabbenu Abraham ben HaRaMBa<sup>34</sup> provides us with the clearest response. He explains that the non-legal opinions of our Talmudic Sages such as those on medicine, science, astronomy need not be “answered for” or “maintained”:

*“It is your duty to know that anyone who wishes to uphold a known theory and admire its author by [blindly] accepting it without proper analysis or verification of its truth, is [considered to possess] a deficient character trait. This is forbidden according to the way of the Torah, and is not an intelligent approach... We are not bound to the Talmudic Sages because of their greatness and wisdom, or because of their expertise in explaining the Torah with its fine details, or because of the truth of their statements when elucidating the general and specific components [of the Torah], [that we must] answer for them and maintain their views regarding all they say concerning medicine, science, or astronomy. We are not required to say the truth is with them in these matters in the same way in which we believe them regarding their explanations of the Torah, since [only] this form of wisdom [that is to say: exposition of the Torah] is their mastery, and to them was given the jurisdiction to instruct people in it.”*<sup>35</sup>

Another Sepharadi Rishon, Ḥakham Eliyahu Del Medigo highlights this clear distinction:

*“The Talmud is divided into two parts: one for the exposition of all the laws, and the other for homiletical interpretations and stories [midrashim and aggadot]. The first part, without a doubt, any faithful person from our people agrees that it should not be disputed at all, as already stated. However, the second part may sometimes be disagreed upon, and no mistake occurs in this. This is because the Torah obligates us to listen to the Sages only in matters of law that involve action, or in matters concerning the fundamental principles of faith that are agreed upon.”*<sup>36</sup>

**It is the laws – not the contemporaneous ideas – of the Talmud that are binding upon Am Yisrael.**

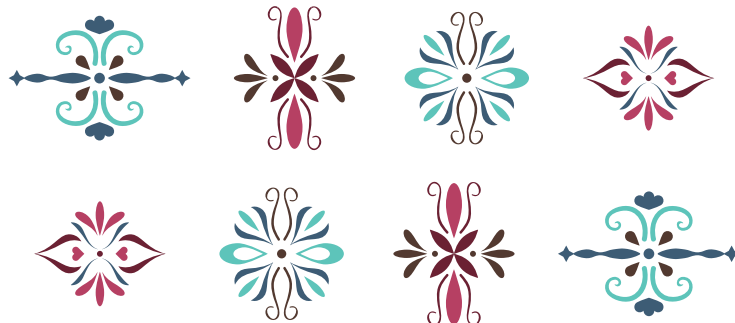
## Conclusion

It is worth highlighting the guidance our *Ḥakhamim* provide in their steadfast rejection of magic, the occult, and associated superstitious acts and beliefs. They counsel us to place our trust not in fanciful illusions that take us away from reality, but in the natural order of reality itself - as established and maintained by God. This approach does not diminish or sideline the complexities of life, but rather invites us to embrace the genuine wisdom of the Torah, free from childish distractions. It is a perspective that encourages discernment. After all, it is entirely possible for such practices to be graced with the cloak of Judaism to appear well-intentioned, perhaps even promising divine insight, but upon closer examination, they might be not too dissimilar to the magic that so many of our *Ḥakhamim* warned against.

So, we should all take a moment to reflect. Could any of our own beliefs or practices, even unknowingly or well-intentionally, be resonating with elements of magic or superstition? Do they promise a control over the natural order or a privileged access to hidden knowledge? Are they anchored in the Torah's primary concern about idolatry, or are they perhaps pandering to a desire for control and certainty?

Insight is the key here. It is not about inducing guilt or anxiety, but about developing an understanding. If these practices serve as a detour from the reality of God and His Torah, then a reassessment might be worth considering.

The legacies left by our *Ḥakhamim* are enriched with wisdom and guidance. We do them and the Torah honour by introspecting on our thoughts and actions. As we navigate life's course, let us aim to lean into the reality of our existence alongside God, rather than seek to control it through magical and superstitious means. As appealing as it might be, the realm of magic and superstition is one that many in our cherished tradition encourage us to sidestep in favour of a more genuine, mature path to *Berit*.



33 Ḥakham José Faur, *A Crisis of Categories: Kabbalah and the Rise of Apostasy*

34 Letter on the Derashot and Aggadot of Ḥazal (See Chapter 2, Understanding Ḥazal, translation by Rabbi Yitzhak Berdugo). Available on [www.daat.press](http://www.daat.press)

35 דע בי אתה חייב לדעת, כל מי שירצה להעמיד דעת ידועה, ולישא פני אומרה, ולקבל דעתו בלי עיון והבנה לעניין אותו דעת אם אמת אתה אם לא, שזה מן הדעות הרעות, והוא נאסר מדרך התורה וגם מדרך השכל... לא נתחייב מפני גודל מעלת חכמי התלמוד ותכונתם לשלמות תכונתם בפירוש התורה ובדקדוקיה וישר אמריהם בביאור כלליה ופרטיה, שנטען להם ונעמיד דעתם בכל אמריהם ברפואות ובחכמת הטבע והתכונה, [ולאמין] אותן כאשר נאמין אותן בפירוש התורה, שתכלית חכמתה בידם, ולהם נמסרה להורות לבני אדם

36 Behinat HaDat ed. Isaac Reggio, Vienna 1833, p.55-56:

“התלמוד נחלק לב' חלקים. חלק בהודעת הדינים כלם, וחלק במדרשות ואגדות. והחלק הראשון אין ספק אצל כל בעל דת מאנשי אומתנו שאין ראוי לחלוק עליו כלל כאשר כבר נאמר, אולם החלק השני”  
“הוא אשר יתכן לפעמים שלא נסכים כי לא יקרה בזה חטא. וזה כי התורה לא חייבתנו לשמוע לחכמים אלא בעניני הדינים אשר בם מעשה או בעניני פרשי האמונה המוסכמים מהם