



WITCHCRAFT: ILLUSION OR REALITY?

Can the forces of darkness actually create something?

Is witchcraft a real phenomenon in our times?

TEACHER'S MANUAL



JEWISH INSIGHTS

A TASTE OF THE REBBE'S TEACHINGS



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Shluchim of the Rebbe to Mumbai India

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Aharon took the gold the Jews had gathered, threw it into the fire and low and behold, out came a calf. Rashi explains that the Egyptian sorcerers did this with their magic (Source 1). Grappling with witchcraft has accompanied the Jewish people since their very beginning.

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Some radical groups attacked Chabad for using the “impure” radio to broadcast Tanya classes.

At a farbrengen, the Rebbe explained that the impure forces have no power to create even the smallest of things, certainly not something like radio, with its immense potential. This is evident from the Talmud’s discussion about the capabilities of sorcerers. (Sources 2-3).

Everything G-d creates is for a positive objective, and it’s up to man to choose how to use it. For example, donkeys were created for positive use. Abraham and Moses used them for mitzvahs, while Balaam used them for negative pursuits.

The same applies to the radio: It was certainly created by G-d for positive uses. The fact that some people use it for the opposite doesn’t contradict our job of using it for good.

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The power of witchcraft is debated. Maimonides says that sorcery and witchcraft is “nothingness” (Source 4) while Nachmanides believes that it is a real power (Source 5).

A broad rule in Talmudic logic is not to engage in undue debate. This means that it is preferable to interpret differing opinions in a way that their differences aren’t as pronounced. Therefore, since Maimonides and Nachmanides lived during the same period, it’s hard to believe that they argued over a contemporaneous phenomenon. It’s more reasonable to suggest that they both agreed there was no real witchcraft in their time, and their debate was whether in Biblical times it was a real force or not.

In response to a question on this, the Rebbe responded firmly that magic does not exist today, and it is mere illusion and imaginary.

Introduction

Moses goes up on the mountain to receive the tablets. On his way down, he can't believe his eyes. The nation is dancing before a golden calf. How was this calf created? Do sorcerers have the power of creation?

השיעור לפרשת כי תשא

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A. The History of Witchcraft

In our Torah reading, we learn of the sin with the golden calf. The Torah recounts how Aharon took the gold which the Jews had collected and threw it into the fire. Low and behold, out came a golden calf.

Source 1 Exodus, 32:1-4

Student's
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When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aharon and said, "Come, make us gods who will go before us, for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him."

Aharon answered them, "Take off the gold earrings that your wives, sons and daughters are wearing, and bring them to me." So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aharon. He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, "These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt."

Rashi

An idol cast in the shape of a calf: As soon as they had cast it into the fire of the crucible, the sorcerers of the mixed multitude who had gone up with them from Egypt came and made it with sorcery.

וַיִּרְא הָעָם כִּי בִשֵׁשׁ מִשֶּׁה לָרְדֶת
מִן הַהָר, וַיִּקְהַל הָעָם עַל אֶהֱרֹן
וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו: קוּם עֲשֵׂה לָנוּ
אֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר יֵלְכוּ לְפָנֵינוּ, כִּי זֶה
מִשֶּׁה הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר הָעֵלְנוּ מֵאֶרֶץ
מִצְרַיִם, לֹא יָדַעְנוּ מָה הָיָה לוֹ.

וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם אֶהֱרֹן: פָּרְקוּ נִזְמֵי
הַזֹּהָב אֲשֶׁר בְּאָזְנֵי נְשֵׁיכֶם בְּנֵיכֶם
וּבְנֹתֵיכֶם וְהֵבִיאוּ אֵלַי. וַיִּתְּפְּרוּ כָל
הָעָם אֶת נִזְמֵי הַזֹּהָב אֲשֶׁר בְּאָזְנֵיהֶם
וַיָּבִיאוּ אֶל אֶהֱרֹן. וַיִּקַּח מִיָּדָם וַיִּצַּר
אֹתוֹ בַּחֶרֶט, וַיַּעֲשֶׂהוּ עֵגֶל מִסִּכָּה,
וַיֹּאמְרוּ: אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר
הָעֵלֹן מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם.

רש"י

עֵגֶל מִסִּכָּה. כִּיּוֹן שֶׁהִשְׁלִיכוּ
לְאוֹר בְּכוֹר, בָּאוּ מְכַשְׁפֵי עֶרְב
רַב שָׁעֲלוּ עִמָּהֶם מִמִּצְרַיִם
וַעֲשִׂאוּהוּ בְכַשְׁפִּים

Much has been said and written about the sin of the golden calf. In this class we will focus on an extraordinary angle of the story: the powers of witchcraft. Rashi says the sorcerers from Egypt created the calf with magic.

Looking back, it seems that witchcraft accompanied and challenged the Jews since they became a people.

During the exile in Egypt

Pharaoh had a team of sorcerers who tried to challenge Moses' power and show that it was mere witchcraft, just as they were able to do.

Enroute to Israel

Balaam was a great sorcerer, and the foes of the Jewish people hired him to curse the Jews and annihilate them. The Amalekites also used sorcery during their war. Moses had to choose soldiers who knew how to combat magic in order to deal with them (Deuteronomy, 17:2).

In Israel

The Jewish people were at a critical junction. King Saul wanted to know what G-d wanted him to do. But unfortunately, Samuel the Prophet had died, and Saul had killed the High Priest, so he couldn't ask the Urim Vetumim. Saul went to a practitioner of Ov sorcery from Ein Dor to magically resurrect Samuel. He successfully communicated with Samuel and received his advice.

The Big Question:

Does Judaism ascribe supernatural powers to witchcraft? If yes, what is it capable of?

B. Can The Forces of Darkness Create Something?

Tanya Classes On The Radio

In 1960, something momentous happened in the Chabad Chassidic community and the Jewish world as a whole. Rabbi Yosef Wineberg, an outstanding Chabad scholar with a gifted tongue, began broadcasting a class on Tanya over the radio every Saturday night.

Today, this is a given; there are many radio stations and podcasts broadcasting Torah classes, but in those days this was unheard of.

The project began after Shabbat Parshat Mishpatim, 1960 and continues weekly until today. Over the years, tens of thousands of people from all over the U.S., from all backgrounds, tuned in to these classes and found the light of Tanya and Chassidic teachings. With time, Rabbi Wineberg transcribed his classes and published them in a series titled Lessons in Tanya. The original commentary was written in Yiddish, and was quickly translated to Hebrew, English and several other languages. It was, and remains, a bestseller.

The Rebbe deeply valued these radio classes and constantly encouraged Rabbi Wineberg to continue with this blessed venture.

Eventually it became an established routine: Every year on Parshat Mishpatim, when Rabbi Wineberg finished the book of Tanya again, the Rebbe would mention it in his talk that week and give him further encouragement.

At a farbrengen on Parshat Mishpatim, 1984, the Rebbe noted the completion of another cycle of Tanya on the radio. During his remarks, the Rebbe stressed the value of these classes on the radio. Thanks to this technology, the Rebbe said, his words were being heard across the country at that moment—the fulfillment of the Baal Shem Tov's enjoinment to spread the wellsprings of Chassidut through the whole world.

At that time, among certain radical groups there were those who objected to the Chabad movement's efforts to spread Chassidic teachings and did everything they could to impede it.

After this talk of the Rebbe, they sharply attacked Chabad in the newspapers for teaching Torah on the "impure" radio. According to them, the creation of the radio came from the forces of impurity and evil!

The next week, the Rebbe responded to what they had written.

Can Impurity Create

>> The Rebbe

The Rebbe responds to the fact that certain individuals designated the radio as coming from the “Other Side,” the side of impurity, and raises the question: Does Judaism believe that impurity can create something?

Student's Unfortunately, whenever attempting something good or holy, we come up against people—from our own—who dedicate their efforts to fight against anything holy. In this instance too, some have challenged us: How can one use the radio for anything holy, it is impure, and coming from the “other side,” the side of kelipah?

pg. 4

G-d forbid, to say that the “other side” has the capability to create anything! G-d should protect us from such a belief, it is absolutely contrary to the Torah’s belief system.

It is impossible for there to be any being which can create something new, however big or small, whether as large as a camel or as small as a mosquito. This applies even to sorcerers (that existed in the Talmudic era, before disappearing by the time of Maimonides). Sorcerers are called in the Torah “mechashfim,” because they “contradict the heavenly hosts,” but even they cannot create even the tiniest thing. Creation is something only the Creator can do.

The verse implies this: “In the beginning G-d created the heavens and the earth,” “the heavens - to include the heavenly

לדאבוננו, הנה בנוגע לכל הוספת דבר טוב וקדושה, ישנם “מהרסיך ומחריביך ממך יצאו”, שכל ענינים לנגד ולהפריע לכל דבר שבקדושה, וכן בענין זה - שטענו וכתבו: הייתכן לנצל “רדיו” עבור עניני קדושה - הרי “רדיו” הוא מ”סטרא-אחרא”!...

חס ושלום לומר ש”סטרא-אחרא” בכוחה לברוא דבר מסוים - ה’ ישמרנו מדעה כזו, דבר כזה הוא היפך התורה והיפך האמונה לגמרי:

לא יתכן שתהיה מציאות שבכוחה לברוא אפילו דבר הכי קטן, כגמלא וכיתוש¹, וזאת אפילו בנוגע ל”מכשפים” (שהיו בזמן הגמרא, מה שאין כן בזמנו של הרמב”ם כו’, כידוע), ש”תורת אמת” קוראת להם בשם זה משום ש”מכחישין פמליא של מעלה”², גם הם אין בכוחם לברוא דבר הכי קטן, כי ענין הבריאה אינה אלא בכוחו של הבורא.

ומקרא מלא דיבר הכתוב: “בראשית ברא אלוקים את השמים ואת הארץ”, “את השמים

יש מאין - אלא שלר”י בן זמרא גם שינוי יש מיש כזה - אין ביכולת כל באי העולם, אבל בבריאת יש מאין - הרי בלשון רבינו הזקן (אגה”ק ס”ב קל, סע”א)) - אפילו “מלאכים דאצילות” וכי אין יכולים לברוא יש מאין ורק “הוא לבדו (המאציל ב”ה כו’) בכחו ויכלתו” לעשות זה, ומבאר גם הטעם, ש”מציאותו הוא מעצמותו ואינו עלול כו” ואכ”מ.
(2) (סנהדרין שם).

1) סנהדרין סו, א, ובירושלמי סנהדרין ספ”ו.
והנה יש מקשים בהירושלמי שם דאפילו יתוש אינו יכולים לבראות מהמשנה דסוגיה זו עצמה - העושה “מעשה” חייב ומהמשך הסוגיה שם “אין אכלת מיני” מעשה הוא”, דמשמע שאפשר שיברא עגל.
והביאור פשוט על אתר: בכל העשיות שהובאו בהירושלמי שם מודגש: נסיב קריין כו’ צרור כו’ גולגלא - ונעשה איילין ושבין כו’ עגל - אבל לא

Student's creations; the earth - to include the
pg. 5 earthly creations.” Creation is something that only G-d’s essence can accomplish, as the Alter Rebbe explains, “ ... Only He has the power of creation.”

This is true about creating even the tiniest object. It is all the more true regarding the radio. Radio is a powerful force that G-d inserted into nature, that with the right implements someone can project his voice across the world, almost instantaneously.

לרבות תולדותיהם ואת הארץ לרבות תולדותיה³. ענין הבריאה אינו אלא בכוח העצמות, כפי שמבאר אדמו"ר הזקן, ש"מהותו ועצמותו של המאציל ברוך ה', שמציאותו הוא מעצמותו . . הוא לבדו בכוחו ויכולתו לברוא כו"⁴.

ואם הדברים אמורים בנוגע לבריאת דבר הכי קטן (שאינה אלא בכוחו של הבורא יתברך) - הרי על אחת כמה וכמה שכן הוא בנוגע ל"רדיו", כוח אדיר שהכניס הקב"ה בטבע, שעל ידי כלי המתאים נשמע קולו של המדבר מסוף העולם ועד סופו, וברגע כמימרא [=רגע כאמירתו. זמן קצר ביותר]!

Source 2 Talmud, Sanhedrin, 67b

Student's “The sorcerers told Pharaoh, “This is the finger
pg. 5 of G-d.” (Exodus 8:15). Rabbi Eliezer said: From here we see that a demon cannot create something smaller than a grain of barley. As a result, the sorcerers were unable to replicate the plague of lice, and even they understood it was not magic but an act of Heaven.

וַיֹּאמְרוּ הַחֹרְטָמִים אֶל פְּרֹעֹה אֶצְבַּע אֱלֹקִים הוּא” (שמות ח, טו), אָמַר ר' אֱלִיעֶזֶר: מִכָּאן רָאִינָה שְׂאִין הַשָּׂד יָכוֹל לְבָרֵא בְרִיָּה פְּחוּת מִכְּשַׁעוֹרָה, וְלִכֵּן לֹא יָכְלוּ לַעֲשׂוֹת דְּבַר הַדּוֹמָה לְמַכַּת כְּנִים, וְאַף הִבִּינוּ שְׂאִין זֶה מַעֲשֵׂה כְּשָׁפִים אֲלָא מִיְדֵי שָׁמַיִם.

Rabbi Eliezer notes the weight of the plague of lice over the previous plagues, for only now did the Egyptian sorcerers acknowledge G-d's power. They were able to replicate all the previous plagues but when Moses and Aharon struck them with lice they were unable to replicate it because lice are smaller than barley and witchcraft cannot create something of that size.

Student's Rabbi Pappa said in the language of a vow: “By
pg. 5 G-d! Even a creation the size of a camel they cannot create; they do not create anything: larger creatures they bring from other places and smaller creatures are too difficult to collect.

רב פפא אמר בלשון שבועה:
האלוקים! אפלו כגדל של גמל
גם בן אינם יכולים לברא, ואין
הם בוראים מאומה, אלא שאת
בעלי החיים הגדולים - יכולים
הם לאסוף אותם ולהביאם ממקום
למקום, ואת בעלי החיים קטנים -
אינם יכולים לאסוף.

His contemporary, Rabbi Pappa responded: I swear that sorcerers cannot create anything, even an animal the size of a camel! The difference is that larger animals can be brought from place to place while the tiniest creatures cannot.

Source 3 Jerusalem Talmud, Sanhedrin, end of chapter 7:

Student's Rabbi Yannai said: I was walking in the town
pg. 6 of Tzipori when I witnessed a heretic take a snakeskin, throw it in the air and it landed and turned into a calf.

אמר רבי ינאי: הייתי מהלך בדרך
בצפורי, כשראיתי מין אחד שלקח
חלוק נחל, זרק אותו לאויר, והוא
נחת והפך את עצמו לעגל.

Rabbi Eliezer said otherwise in the name of Rabbi Yosi ben Zimra: If all of humankind came together, they would not be able to create even a mosquito and endow it with a soul.

אך לא כן אמר רבי לעזר בשם רבי
יוסי בן זמרא: אם כל בני העולם
יתכנסו, אינם יכולים לברא יתוש
אחד ולזרק בו נשמה.

This heretic didn't take a snakeskin, throw it in the air and create a calf. Rather, he summoned a demon to steal a calf from a barn and bring it to him.

אלא נאמר, שהמין הזה לא לקח
חלוק נחל, זרק אותו לאויר,
ואחר כך רד ונהפך לעגל, אלא
הוא קרא לשד שלו שגנב לו עגל
מרפת בקר, והביא אותו אליו.

Rabbi Yannai recounted witnessing sorcery in Tzipori, someone had created a calf! But Rabbi Yosi ben Zimra said that even all of humanity together couldn't create one mosquito! How then did they create a calf in Tzipori? The Talmud answers that it was an illusion: a sorcerer can't create anything.

Both the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds agree that a sorcerer's only ability is to change one creation into another. They cannot create a new creation; only G-d can.

>> The Rebbe

Everything G-d Creates Is for a Good Purpose

Student's
pg. 6

Everything in this world was created “for the Torah and for the Jewish people.” It is therefore clear that this great power of the radio was also created for the Torah and the Jewish people, so that they could use it for holy purposes, e.g, sharing Torah - both the revealed and esoteric dimensions.

However, this too was put under the control of free will, as the verse states, “I have placed before you . . . life and good,” and then continues, “you should choose life.” Free will means that one can use this power for worldly matters as well, and even things which are against holiness.

Student's
pg. 7

Therefore, the fact that some use this power for unholy pursuits should not hold us back from using it for the purpose it was created for, “for the Torah and the Jewish people.”

Humans Have Choice

Student's
pg. 7

An example of this concept can be found in a demonstrative story in the written Torah, regarding riding a donkey:

G-d created the ability to ride a donkey “for the Jewish people,” so that they could use it for holiness. One can definitely use it for unholy pursuits as

ומכיון שכל עניני העולם נבראו “בשביל התורה ובשביל ישראל”⁵ - הרי פשיטא שגם כוח אדיר זה (“רדיו”) לא נברא “אלא בשביל התורה ובשביל ישראל”, כדי לנצלו לעניני קדושה, הפצת התורה - נגלה שבתורה ופנימיות התורה, וכיוצא בזה.

אלא שגם ענין זה - ככל עניני העולם - ניתן לבחירתו של האדם, כמו שכתוב “נתתי לפניך כו' את החיים ואת הטוב וגו'”⁶, ביחד עם הבקשה ונתינת הכוח - “ובחרת בחיים”⁷, ומצד ענין הבחירה קיימת אפשרות לנצל כוח זה עבור עניני העולם, ואפילו - ענינים שהם היפך הקדושה.

ומכיון שכך, הרי עובדה זו שישנם כאלו שמנצלים כוח זה עבור ענינים שהם היפך הקדושה - בוודאי אינה צריכה למנוע להשתמש בכוח זה לתכלית ומטרת בריאתו, “בשביל התורה ובשביל ישראל”.

דוגמה לדבר - מעשה רב בתורה שבכתב - מענין רכיבה על חמור:

הכוח שברא הקב"ה בחמור שאפשר לרכב עליו - תכליתו ומטרתו (ככל עניני הבריאה) “בשביל ישראל”, כדי לנצלו לעניני קדושה. ועל דרך לשון הכתוב “יששכר חמור גרם”⁸. ולכן,

(7) (שם, יט).
(8) בראשית פרק מט פסוק יד.

(5) (פירוש רש"י ריש פרשת בראשית).
(6) (נצבים ל, טו)

Student's well—as in the story of Balaam, where
pg. 7 the verse notes “he saddled his donkey”—
but this does not negate our using it for
holy pursuits, which is its real purpose.
The Torah also tells of Abraham riding
his donkey to the Binding of Isaac and
of Moses riding with his family on a
donkey on the way to lead the Jews out
of Egypt. And Moshiach will also use a
donkey, as the Talmud refers to him, “a
poor man riding a donkey.”

אף שיכולים לנצלו עבור ענין שהוא
היפך רצון ה', וכפי שמצינו אצל בלעם
- "ויחבוש את אתונו גו", מכל מקום,
אין זה מונע מלהשתמש בו לתכלית
ומטרת בריאתו, עבור עניני קדושה:

אברהם אבינו - רכב על חמור בלכתו
לעקידת יצחק, כמו שכתוב "ויחבוש
את חמורו"; משה רבינו - רכב על
חמור בלכתו להוציא את בני ישראל
ממצרים, כמו שכתוב "ויקה משה את
אשתו ואת בניו וירכיבם על החמור";
וכן משיח צדקנו ירכב על חמור כדי
לגאול את בני ישראל - "עני ורוכב על
החמור" ¹⁰.

The donkey is a creation of G-d's, so it was obviously created for a good purpose. As usual, a human has the choice whether to use it for good or for evil. We can use it like Balaam or like Moses and Abraham, to ride on the way to curse a nation, or to ride to offer a sacrifice and redeem the Jewish people.

Story Is nuclear energy positive?

Student's Rabbi Groner, the Rebbe's secretary repeated the following story:
pg. 8

A couple once visited the Rebbe along with their young daughter. When they exited his office, I saw the girl was very happy.

“Why are you so happy?” I asked her.

They told me that initially the Rebbe spoke with the parents, while their daughter watched quietly from the side. When the conversation ended, the Rebbe turned to the girl and asked: “Do you also have a question?” She answered affirmatively. Her parents tried to silence her, but the Rebbe told them, “Until now I spoke to you, now I wish to speak with her.”

“What is your question?” the Rebbe asked the girl with a smile. “I want to know if the nuclear bomb is a good or bad thing?”

“Tell me,” the Rebbe asked the girl, “do you have a knife at home?”

“A knife? Of course, which house doesn't have a knife?” she responded.

“Is a knife good or bad?” the Rebbe asked.

Student's "If I use it for eating, that's good. If I use it to hurt someone, that's bad," she answered.
pg. 8

The Rebbe continued, "Did you hear what you said? A knife placed on the table is neutral. It depends on what it is used for. The same applies to the nuclear bomb. If it is used for good, like to blow up a mountain to build a road, that is good. If it is used to kill thousands of people that is certainly not good. But it itself is neutral."

>> The Rebbe

Student's The same holds true in our discussion.
pg. 8
The fact that some are using a certain thing for a bad purpose is not a reason for us to avoid using it for its real purpose. As the Mishna relates, "The Romans asked the sages: 'If G-d does not want people to worship idols, why does not he not remove them?'" If G-d would just destroy all idols, no one would worship them. "The sages answered, 'Had they been serving something the world does not need, He would remove it. But they worship the sun, moon, and stars. Must the world be destroyed because of these fools?'"

Student's The same is true in our case. Just
pg. 9
because some "fools" use this power for improper objectives, "must the world be destroyed?" I.e, must we not use it for good?!

And as mentioned, this idea is stated explicitly in the Mishna, and should be known to anyone who studies Torah honestly, without an agenda of criticizing others.

ועל דרך זה מובן בענייננו - שהעובדה שמשתמשים בדבר מסוים עבור ענין בלתי-רצוי, אין בה כדי למנוע להשתמש בדבר לתכלית ומטרת בריאתו.

ובלשון המשנה¹¹: "שאלו את הזקנים ברומי, אם אין רצונו בעבודת כוכבים למה אינו מבטלה" - יבטל הקב"ה את מציאותה של העבודה זרה, וחסל כל העסק... "אמרו להן, אילו לדבר שאין צורך לעולם בו היו עובדין, היה מבטלו, הרי הן עובדין לחמה וללבנה ולכוכבים ולמזלות, יאבד עולמו מפני השוטים?"

ועל דרך זה בענייננו: וכי מפני שישנם "שוטים" שמנצלים כוח זה עבור ענינים בלתי-רצויים "יאבד עולמו" - זוהי סיבה למנוע את השימוש בכוח זה לתכלית ומטרת בריאתו!?

וכאמור - ענין זה הוא "דבר משנה", שיודע כל אחד שהגיע ללימוד המשניות, "בן עשר שנים למשנה", וזאת - אם רק לומד תורה כדבעי, ולא "על מנת לקנטר"...!

11. (עבודה זרה, פרק ד' משנה ז):

It is clear that the radio, a powerful force in nature, was created for a good purpose. The fact that others use it for unholy and even evil objectives is their choice, which has no relevance to our responsibility to use it and all forces in nature for good. It is therefore a mitzvah to use the radio, and to use it correctly, such as for furthering Torah study.

משיחת שבת פרשת תרומה
ב' דראש חודש אדר ראשון, ה'תשד"מ
הנחה בלתי מוגה
תורת מנחם ה'תשד"מ כרך ב', עמ' 1040

Summary:

In contrast to other groups, the Rebbe didn't shun the use of technology. On the contrary, the Rebbe encouraged its use for holy purposes. The Rebbe likened technology to gold, which can be used for good or bad. In the desert, the Jews used it to create a golden calf, an idol. Afterwards, gold was elevated for holy use when it was used in the construction of the Tabernacle.

Chanukah Live:

Beginning in 1990, a moving event took place on Chanukah. The Chanukah candles were lit in several locations around the world simultaneously, and broadcast live on huge screens. In those days, satellite broadcasts were in their infancy, and this was a massive and novel technological production.

The project, the brainchild of several devoted Chassidim, was enthusiastically encouraged by the Rebbe, who participated in the event from his synagogue in New York.

At the 1992 event, the Rebbe declared that technology was created to increase G-d's glory: "Since G-d created everything for His own glory, this also applies to all recent scientific developments. The purpose of them all is to increase G-d's glory by using them for holy pursuits, Torah and mitzvot."

C. Does Witchcraft Exist Today?

In the Rebbe's address that we learned in the first part of this class, the Rebbe tangentially mentioned that sorcery existed only in Talmudic times but not during Maimonides's times.

Following that, some of the listeners questioned in various scholarly Torah journals as to the source for the idea that witchcraft no longer exists.

At the next farbrengen, the Rebbe responded to the question.

>> The Rebbe

Student's
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Regarding sorcery we find different opinions among the authorities:

בנוגע לענין הכישוף - מצינו מחלוקת הפוסקים:

Source 4 Maimonides' Mishneh Torah, Avodah Zarah, 11:12

Student's
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These ideas are all utter falsehood and they swayed idol worshippers in the past to follow them. It is not befitting for Jews who are wise to be drawn to such nonsense and to even consider that there might be value in them. As the verse states, "There is no divination against Jacob, no evil omens against Israel" (Numbers 23:23). And it also states, "The nations you will dispossess listen to those who practice sorcery or divination. But as for you, G-d has not permitted you to do so" (Deuteronomy 18:14).

Anyone who believes in these things and thinks they are true wisdom, but that the Torah forbids them, is simply a foolish boor. Wise and reasonable people know with clear proof that all these things prohibited by the Torah are not

ודברים האלו כִּלְוֵן דְּבָרֵי שְׂקָר וְכִזָּב הֵן, וְהֵם שֶׁהִטְעוּ בְּהֵן עוֹבְדֵי כּוֹכָבִים הַקְּדֻמוֹנִים לְגוֹיֵי הָאֲרָצוֹת כְּדֵי שִׁינְהִיגוּ אַחֲרֵיהֶן. וְאִין רְאוּי לְיִשְׂרָאֵל שֶׁהֵם חֲכָמִים מְחַכְמִים לְהַמְשִׁיךְ בְּהַבְלִים אֵלָיו, וְלֹא לְהַעֲלוֹת עַל לֵב שׂוֹשֵׁי תוֹעֵלֹת בְּהֵן. שְׁנֵאמַר (במדבר כג, כג) "כִּי לֹא נִחַשׁ בְּיַעֲקֹב וְלֹא קָסָם בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל". וְנֵאמַר (דברים יח, יד) "כִּי הַגּוֹיִם הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה יוֹרֵשׁ אוֹתָם אֵל מְעַנְנִים וְאֵל קֹסְמִים יִשְׁמְעוּ וְאַתָּה לֹא כֵן" וְגו'.

כֹּל הַמְאֲמִין בְּדְבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וְכִיּוֹצֵא בְּהֵן, וּמַחֲשֵׁב בְּלִבּוֹ שֶׁהֵן אֱמֶת וְדָבָר חֲכָמָה אֲבָל הַתּוֹרָה אֶסְרְתּוּ, אֵינֶן אֵלָּא מִן הַסְּכָלִים וּמַחֲסְרֵי הַדַּעַת.

Student's
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wisdom. They are nonsense followed by boors who abandoned the ways of truth because of them. Therefore the Torah warned us about this foolishness "You shall be straight and pure before G-d" (Deuteronomy 18:13).

אָבֵל בְּעֲלֵי הַחֲכָמָה וְתַמִּימֵי הַדַּעַת
יִדְעוּ בְרָאיוֹת בְּרוּרוֹת, שֶׁכָּל אֱלוֹ
הַדְּבָרִים שֶׁאֶסְרָה תוֹרָה אֵינָם דְּבָרֵי
חֲכָמָה אֲלָא תְהוּ וְהֵבֵל שֶׁנִּמְשָׁכוּ
בְּהוֹ חֲסָרֵי הַדַּעַת וְנִטְשׂוּ כָּל דְּרָכֵי
הָאֱמֶת בְּגִלְלוֹ. וּמִפְּנֵי זֶה אָמְרָה
תוֹרָה כְּשֶׁהִזְהִירָה עַל כָּל אֱלוֹ
הַהֲבָלִים, (דְּבָרִים יח, יג) "תַּמִּים
תִּהְיֶה עִם ה' אֱלֹקֶיךָ".

According to Maimonides, witchcraft is "foolishness and nonsense!"

Source 5 Nachmanides, Deuteronomy, 18:9

Student's
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Now, understand how magic works: When G-d created the world from nothing, He made the upper beings rule over the lower beings. He gave the natural power of control over the earth and all upon it to the stars and constellations according to their patterns, as can be observed by those well-versed in astrology. In addition to the stars and constellations, G-d created angels and spiritual forces to be their soul. . . .

וְעַתָּה דַּע וְהִבֵּן בְּעֵינָי הַכְּשָׁפִים,
כִּי הַבוֹרָא יִתְבָּרַךְ כְּאֲשֶׁר בָּרָא
הַכֹּל מֵאֵין, עָשָׂה הָעֲלִיוֹנִים מְנַהֲגֵי
הַתַּחְתּוֹנִים אֲשֶׁר לְמַטָּה מֵהוּ,
וְנָתַן כַּח הָאֲרֶץ וְכָל אֲשֶׁר עָלֶיהָ,
בְּכוֹכְבִים וּבְמִזְלוֹת לְפִי הַנְּהַגְתָּם
וּמִבְטָם בָּהֶם, כְּאֲשֶׁר הוּא מְנַסֶּה
בְּחֻכְמַת הָאֲצִטְגָּנוֹת. וְעָשָׂה עוֹד
עַל הַכוֹכְבִים וְהַמִּזְלוֹת מְנַהֲגִים
מְלָאכִים וְשָׂרִים שֶׁהֵם נִפְשׁ לָהֶם...

This is the secret of witchcraft and its power. The Talmud says that these forces contravene the Heavenly legions. This means that they are contrary to the natural forces and can circumvent them. The Torah forbade their use because G-d wishes for the world to operate according to nature.

וְזֶה סוֹד הַכְּשָׁפִים וְכַחֵם שֶׁאֶמְרוּ
בָּהֶם (חולין ז) שֶׁהֵם מְכַחֵשִׁים
כְּמַלְאֵי שָׁל מַעְלָה, לוֹמַר שֶׁהֵם הַפְּנֵי
הַכַּחוֹת הַפְּשׁוּטִים, וְהֵם הַכְּחֻשָּׁה
לְכַחֵשׁ לְפַמְלֵא בְּצַד מֵהַצְּדִין. וְעַל כֵּן
רָאוּ שֶׁתִּאָסֵר אוֹתָם הַתוֹרָה שִׁיוֹנַח
הָעוֹלָם לְמַנְהִגוֹ וּלְטַבְּעוֹ הַפְּשׁוּט
שֶׁהוּא חַפֵּץ בּוֹרָאוֹ.

According to Nachmanides, witchcraft has real power.

The natural order of the world is run according to stars and celestial beings, thus affecting the stars and constellations can effect change in the world. This is the secret of witchcraft, it is a mysterious wisdom which has the power to change the celestial bodies, which in turn affects the world.

>> The Rebbe

All Agree That Sorcery Cannot Create Ex-Nihilo

Student's
pg. 11

Maimonides is of the opinion that all paranormal forces are false and void, they do not exist. However other authorities maintain that they are real, and they are able to accomplish certain things. This is also the implication in The Code of Jewish Law.

It's clear that everyone agrees that there is no power that can create something new. Creation ex-nihilo is not within human capabilities, as the Alter Rebbe (the first Chabad Rebbe) writes in Igeret Hakodesh, "only He, the Emanator, has the power and ability to create something from absolute nothingness." He explains the logic too: "G-d's existence is from Himself, with no prior cause or source, so He can create a real thing from absolute nothing, without any other prior source for it." Therefore, even those who maintain that sorcery is real, only mean that those powers can change something, but not create. This idea also appears in the Jerusalem Talmud, where it says, "Rabbi Yehoshua the son of Chananyah said: I can take gourds and melons and turn them into deer and antelope, and breed them." He could do that because none of those actions are creation, they are all transformations of existing physical items. Maimonides however maintained that even transformation cannot be accomplished using any form of magic, and all paranormal forces are "false and fabricated, empty and void."

דעת הרמב"ם¹² היא שדברים האלו כולן דברי שקר ופזב. אבל ישנם פוסקים¹³ הסוברים שזהו דבר שיש בו ממש, היינו, שבכוחם לפעול ענין מסוים כו', וכפי שמשמע גם בשולחן ערוך¹⁴ בנוגע להלכות כישוף.

כלומר: פשיטא שלכולי עלמא אין בכוחם לברוא יש מאין, שהרי דבר זה (בריאת יש מאין) אין ביכולת שום נברא, וכמו שכתב אדמו"ר הזקן באגרת הקודש¹⁵, שרק "הוא לבדו (המאציל ברוך הוא כו') בכחו ויכלתו לברוא יש מאין ואפס המוחלט ממש". ומבאר גם הטעם - "שמציאותו הוא מעצמותו ואינו עלול כו'", שלכן ביכולתו "לברוא יש מאין ואפס המוחלט ממש בלי שום עילה וסיבה אחרת קודמת ליש הזה". ולכן, גם אלו שסוברים שכישוף הוא דבר שיש בו ממש - כוונתם אינה אלא לשינוי יש מיש. וכמודגש בירושלמי¹⁶: "אמר רבי יהושע בן חנניה יכול אני ליטול קישואים ואבטיחים ועושה אותם איילים וצבאים, והללו מולידים איילים וצבאים וכו'", שכל עשיות אלו אינם יש מאין, כי אם שינוי יש מיש. אמנם, לדעת הרמב"ם - אין בכוחם של מכשפים לעשות אפילו יש מיש, ואין זה אלא "שקר וכזב כו' תוהו והבל כו'".

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(14) יר"ד סקע"ט.
(15) ס"כ (קל, סע"א ואילך).
(16) סנהדרין ספ"ז.

(12) הל' ע"ז ספ"א. וראה פיהמ"ש ע"ז פ"ד מ"ז. מו"נ ח"ג פל"ז. ועוד.
(13) רמב"ן עה"ת שופטים יח, ט. אברבנאל שם. דרשות הר"ן דרוש ד' קרוב לסופו. דרוש יב. ועוד.

First, the Rebbe notes what we learned in the previous section, that all schools of Jewish thought agree that sorcery, witchcraft, and magic cannot create anything new. The argument is only if sorcery has some sort of power and influence on physical items, or if it's all only illusory.

Minimizing disputes is preferred

Student's
pg. 12

When there are two options for how to understand a dispute, whether it is a broad dispute relevant to the entirety of Jewish philosophy or only a minor dispute over one element, we stick to the principle that we try to minimize disputes. So it would make sense to try to understand the above dispute as relating only to a small area, and not a major disagreement with polar opposite stances.

אמנם, כאשר ישנם שתי אפשרויות בביאור המחלוקת, האם זוהי מחלוקת גדולה "עד לב השמים", בכל תרי"ג פרטים וכו', או שהמחלוקת אינה אלא בפרט אחד - הרי בהתאם לכלל שלא מרבים במחלוקת¹⁷, מסתבר שיש להקטין את היקף המחלוקת שלא תהיה מן הקצה אל הקצה ממש, כי אם בפרט מסוים כו'. ובפרט כאשר מדובר אודות מחלוקת במציאות¹⁸ - שאז בוודאי מסתבר לומר שהמחלוקת במציאות היא רק עד כמה שמוכרח וכו'.

There is a general principle in Talmudic study that we try to avoid disputes, or at least minimize them. Meaning, when there are two opinions which seem to differ, we try to explain them in a way which results in them not directly arguing, or at least only arguing over minor details.

With this premise, the Rebbe will explain the conflicting opinions of Maimonides and Nachmanides.

All Agree That Today There Is No Sorcery

Student's
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As this discussion is a dispute revolving around facts—a factual occurrence of magical acts, with the dispute surrounding only how real it was—it is logical to try to narrow the scope of the disagreement, and say that when this dispute took place, during the times of Maimonides and Nachmanides, they

מכיון שהמחלוקת בעניין הכישוף היא מחלוקת בדבר שבמציאות - מציאות מסוימת שנעשתה על ידי מכשף, אם מציאות זו יש בה ממש, עד שיכולים לאכול ממנה, כלשון הירושלמי (לעיל) "באם אכלת ממנו - מעשה הוא". או שזהו דבר שאין בו ממש, ואין זה אלא שקר וכזב כו' תוהו והבל כו'" - מסתבר להקטין את

קד"ת) כללי הש"ס אות ל' סרנ"ז.
(18) ראה שד"ח כללים מע' המ"ם כלל קסד.

(17) ראה תוד"ה והאמר - יומא פז, ב. יד מלאכי כללי שני התלמודים ס"י.
שד"ח (כרך ט') כללי הפוסקים ס"ב אות א. דרכי שלום (בשד"ח הוצאת

Student's all agreed that sorcery was no more.
pg. 13 The question is only whether in the era recorded in the Torah, sorcery was real, or illusory.

היקף המחלוקת, ולומר, שבנוגע לימינו אלו (שבהם היתה המחלוקת, כלומר, בזמן הרמב"ם ושאר הפוסקים) כולם מודים שלא קיימת המציאות של כישוף כלל וכלל, היינו, שנתבטל כל ענין הכישוף, וכל המחלוקת אינה אלא בנוגע לזמן מתן תורה, שבו היתה קיימת המציאות של כישוף - אם אז היה זה דבר שיש בו ממש או שגם אז לא היה זה אלא "אלא שקר וכזב כו' תוהו והבל כו'".

The Rebbe explains that considering that Maimonides and Nachmanides lived in the same era, it's hard to believe they would argue about the existence of a certain phenomenon in their time, with one saying sorcery exists and the other rejecting that notion entirely. Rather, it would be more logical to say they were arguing about the validity of sorcery in the time of the Talmud or Torah.

Nachmanides argues that in those eras the force of sorcery was real, and sorcerers had the ability to actually change reality. Maimonides' argues that all sorcery was always just an illusion, and sorcerers were never able to influence reality.

Other Things Also Changed

Student's It is not surprising that there used to
pg. 13 be a certain force of sorcery, and then at some point it disappeared. There are many similar occurrences documented. For example: The 26 generations from creation until Abraham, and particularly mankind before The Flood, are noted in the Talmud as having been sustained "by the kindness of G-d," and their lifespans are recorded as being many hundreds of years. But later the average human lifespan got shorter and shorter,

ומובן, שאין כל פלא בכך שבעבר היה ענין של כישוף ובזמן מסוים נתבטל - שהרי מצינו כמה וכמה ענינים דוגמתו: אודות העשרים וששה דורות שלפני מתן תורה אמרו חכמינו זכרונם לברכה¹⁹ שהיו ניזונין בחסדו של הקב"ה ובמיוחד - הדורות שלפני המבול²⁰, ולכן, עד המבול מצינו אריכות ימים מופלגה, מה שאין כן לאחרי המבול כו'²¹, שנתקצרו ימיהם עד "והיו מאה ועשרים שנה"²²... ועל

(21) רמב"ן בראשית ה, ד. וראה פרש"י לך יז, יז. תקו"ז תיקון ע' בסופו.
(22) בראשית ו, ג.

(19) פסחים ק"ה, א.
(20) ראה אוה"ת בראשית (כרך ב) רפה, א. לקו"ש חט"ו ע' 67.

until it reached a maximum of 120 years. There are numerous other mentions of the concept that "nature has changed," so this idea can be applied to sorcery as well.

דרך זה מצינו בכמה וכמה ענינים ש"נשתנו הטבעיים"²³. וכמו כן מובן גם בנוגע לענין הכישוף, כנזכר לעיל.

משיחת ש"פ תשא, שושן-פורים קטן, ה'תשד"מ
הנחה בלתי מוגה
תורת מנחם ה'תשד"מ כרך ב', עמ' 1100 והלאה

In summary, it's important to note that the Rebbe received many requests from people who felt they were possessed by witchcraft or under some sort of a spell. In all these cases the Rebbe answered very firmly that today there is no magic and it is all imaginary. The Rebbe recommended they strengthen their observance in a given mitzvah and in Torah study, and simply forget about it entirely.

We append two such answers from the Rebbe:

A. In response to a woman who was worried about magic, the Rebbe wrote:

"Explain to her the words of Maimonides that there is no reality at all to magic. Check the mezuzot and tefillin. I will mention this at the resting place of my father-in-law."

B. In response to a woman who feared that she was harmed by sorcery:

"Forget entirely about the notion that someone - from India or elsewhere - can harm you G-d forbid, for G-d watches over you.

You should stop thinking about idols and the like because there is nothing to them whatsoever. This is only your imagination and nothing more.

Check the mezuzot.

