

## Bnei Akiva Svivot 5780: Choveret Chinuchit

*It is unsurprising that magic forms the basis of so many stories in popular culture. People are left spellbound by accounts of the magical and mysterious. So, what does Judaism have to say about this?*

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### WEEK 10: You're a wizard Harry

#### Spelling trouble

The story of Yetziat Mitzrayim is filled with accounts of the supernatural. God proves that He is above nature through the ten plagues, the splitting of the sea and the events at Har Sinai. Before any of this happens though, there's a strange account of something that barely seems miraculous by comparison:

כִּי יִדְבַר אֲלֵכֶם פֶּרְעֹה לֵאמֹר תִּנּוּ לָכֶם מוֹפֵת וְאָמַרְתָּ אֶל־אַהֲרֹן קח אֶת־מִטְדֶּךָ וְהִשְׁלַךְ לִפְנֵי־פֶרְעֹה יְהִי לְתַנִּין: וַיָּבֵא מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן אֶל־פֶּרְעֹה וַיַּעֲשׂוּ כֹן כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' וַיִּשְׁלַךְ אַהֲרֹן אֶת־מִטְדֵּהוּ לִפְנֵי פֶרְעֹה וְלִפְנֵי עַבְדָּיו וַיְהִי לְתַנִּין: וַיִּקְרָא גַם־פֶּרְעֹה לַחֲכָמִים וְלַמְכַשְׁפִּים וַיַּעֲשׂוּ גַם־הֵם חֲרָטְמֵי מִצְרַיִם בְּלִהְטִיהֶם כֹּן: וַיִּשְׁלִיכוּ אִישׁ מִטְדֵּהוּ וַיְהִיו לְתַנִּינִם וַיִּבְלַע מִטְדֵּה־אַהֲרֹן אֶת־מִטְדֵּתָם:



*“When Pharaoh speaks to you and says, ‘Produce your marvel,’ you shall say to Aharon, ‘Take your rod and cast it down before Pharaoh.’ It shall turn into a serpent.” So Moshe and Aharon came before Pharaoh and did just as Hashem had commanded: Aharon cast down his rod in the presence of Pharaoh and his courtiers, and it turned into a serpent. Then Pharaoh, for his part, summoned the wise men and the sorcerers; and the Egyptian magicians, in turn, did the same*

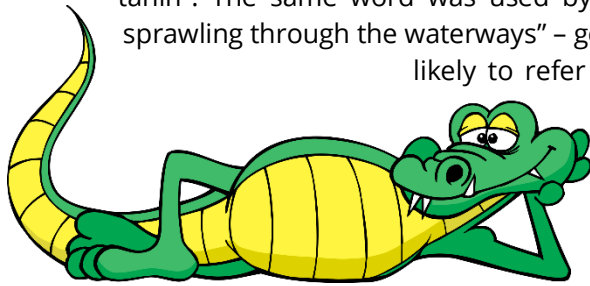
*with their spells; each cast down his rod, and they turned into serpents. But Aharon’s rod swallowed their rods.” (Shemot 7:9-12)*

Many questions are raised by this passage. Why was this performance needed? And why did Aharon’s staff swallow the other staffs?

Signs and wonders are used as ‘proofs’ for prophets throughout the Tanach, as an indication that their messages come from Hashem. In this case, however, Moshe had something else to prove. Pharaoh wasn’t denying Moshe’s validity as the spokesperson of Am Yisrael. He was denying the very existence of God. It is significant that Moshe and Aharon were instructed to wait for Pharaoh’s request for a sign to produce the serpent. Had they walked straight in and performed the sign without being asked to, they would have been accused of trickery, of pre-preparing an illusion. Instead, they are able to respond to Pharaoh’s request, and prove to him the existence of a supernatural being who is backing Bnei Yisrael.

## A ruthless reptile

The 'serpent' that the staff transformed into was not any old snake. The word used in the Hebrew is "tanin". The same word was used by Yechezkel to describe Pharaoh as a "mighty tanin sprawling through the waterways" – generally translated as a "mighty monster". The tanin is likely to refer to a crocodile, a mighty reptile familiar to those in Egypt. The crocodile represents power and strength, and is a metaphor for Pharaoh himself.



By turning his staff into a snake, Aharon made a direct challenge to Pharaoh's authority. The response on Pharaoh's part is direct, proving that his sorcerers were equal to the challenge of producing a crocodile from a piece of wood. In response, Aharon's staff swallowed the other two, demonstrating that Pharaoh would be swallowed up by God's might.

The commentators debate what the "spells" used by the magicians to replicate Moshe's sign were. The Ramban describes how the sorcerers had a knowledge of the element of fire and knew how to manipulate the forces and demons associated with it to produce magic. However, according to Rashi, they merely created the illusion of a spell, essentially performing a magic trick to make it appear that they had turned their staffs into snakes.



According to the pasuk, it was Aharon's staff that swallowed the magicians' staffs, rather than Aharon's serpent that swallowed their serpents. Though they appeared like serpents, the staffs remained staffs. In the same way that this wonder was no more than an illusion, Pharaoh's power was only an illusion which could be shattered at any time.

## Banned bewitchments

The Torah is adamant in its proscription of witchcraft and sorcery. Sefer Shemot commands that "you shall not allow a sorcerer to live" (Shemot 22:17), which Rashi explains to mean that the Bet Din is obligated to execute witches. Unlike other transgressions which merit the death penalty, this is framed as a negative commandment, meaning that the Bet Din would be violating a mitzvah lo ta'aseh if they found a witch and did not execute them! So why is witchcraft so abhorrent as to demand such a punishment?

According to the Tur HaAroch, people who practice witchcraft not only sin but cause all those whom they mislead into believing in their powers to abandon their faith in Hashem; in other words they present themselves as God's competition. Practicing witchcraft or even believing in superstitions is essentially a form of idolatry, denying God as the only source of power in the universe. Many idolatrous religions are based on concepts of magic and feature spells and incantations as part of worship. This was the case with the Canaanite nations that occupied Eretz Yisrael before it was inherited by Bnei Yisrael. One reason they were commanded to eradicate the Canaanite tribes is because they practiced pagan rituals that could provide a negative influence to those living around them.

The Rambam extends the prohibition of practicing witchcraft to performing magic tricks that may convince others that the performer has magical ability. Despite the performer themselves not believing that they have any special powers, they may cause those observing to believe in powers besides God. As explained in Masechet Sanhedrin, sorcery appears to contradict the laws of nature established by God. To avoid this, some Jewish magicians are careful to reveal their tricks at the end of a performance, to ensure that nobody has been truly fooled.

### True or false?

It would make sense that the prohibition on sorcery is at its heart a prohibition on belief in supernatural powers or on deceiving others into believing in such powers. However, some commentators are of the opinion that magical forces and demons are real and can be used to perform spells, and that this is where the prohibition lies. As we saw earlier, the Ramban believes that certain spirits exist which are not meant to be understood by humanity. The sorcerers of Egypt were able to harness these powers to achieve supernatural results.



There are definitely occasions where the Torah appears to imply the existence of magic. After the death of Shmuel HaNavi, King Shaul consults with a necromancer to communicate with the prophet beyond the grave. She summons up the ghost of Shmuel, who chastises the king for engaging in forbidden practices. This sin is responsible for Shaul's ultimate downfall. So can it really be possible to summon the dead? Why would the Torah prohibit such a practice if it's not possible?

The Ibn Ezra suggests that it is precisely because such witchery is false that the Torah prohibits it. In the same way, we are forbidden to worship alternative gods or to create idols. It is not relevant that these other gods do not exist or that the idols have no power. The Sefer Hachinuch describes witchcraft and sorcery as "crazy things and total foolishness" and says that "it is not fitting for the holy true people that God chose that they pay attention to false words." As representatives of God's Torah, we have a duty to behave in a certain manner. If we were to engage in foolishness, we would be causing a Chilul Hashem.

### Questions to ponder

- Why did Hashem choose a sign that the Egyptian magicians were able to replicate so easily?
- If God did create magical forces in this world, why are we forbidden to utilise them?

## Peula Ideas

### Games about Egypt

- Hungry Hippos
- Sleeping mummies

### Games about magic

- Magic show – teach yourself some card tricks
- Quidditch
- Pin the hat on the Wizard (use Velcro to make it Shabbat friendly – no stickers or blu tac!)
- Card tower building
- Magician's hat toss - take turns to throw small rubber bouncing balls into the hat
- Bunny bunny

For more game ideas head to:

<https://www.bneiakiva.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/ShabbatGames.pdf>

## Discussions

- Should Jews be permitted to read books such as Harry Potter that promote a magical world?
- Why does the idea of magic cause such a sense of wonder? How can we harness that sense of wonder to appreciate God's creations?

