

## Jewish Attitudes Toward Magic

*Do Jews believe in magic?*

BY MY JEWISH LEARNING

Judaism has had a long and tenuous relationship with magical beliefs and practices. Lists of prohibited magic appear at various junctures throughout the Bible, for example ([Deuteronomy 18:10-11](#)): “There shall not be found among you anyone who burns his son or his daughter as an offering, anyone who practices divination, a soothsayer, or an augur, or a sorcerer, or a charmer, or a medium, or a wizard, or a necromancer.”

Yet in other biblical contexts, practices that would seem to be similarly questionable — interpreting dreams, using magic staffs, reciting blessings or curses, and referring to oracles — figure prominently as suitable behaviors for Israelite heroes. Moses and Aaron, for example, are celebrated for performing tricks that the Egyptian magicians could not match. The supernatural actions of Israelites—whose source of power is God—are welcomed; the actions of outsiders—whose power comes from sorcery—are derided.

The rabbis in the Talmud make a similar distinction. They oppose some magic as the “ways of the Amorites” (Mishnah Shabbat [6:10](#)) while describing other magical acts with wonder and pride. In one talmudic story, the prestige of a sage is significantly enhanced when it becomes apparent that his Torah knowledge gave him supernatural powers that stopped a house from collapsing (Yerushalmi Ta’anit 3:11).

An anti-magic current in Jewish thought continued in the Middle Ages, and was expressed most strongly by the great rationalist Maimonides. Though he accepted that astrology has the ability to influence human behavior he declared that it, as well as other forms of magic, was an out-of-bounds and dangerous superstition, explicitly forbidden by ([Leviticus 19:26](#)), “You shall not practice augury or witchcraft.”

Yet Jews continued to be associated with magical practices. In the Middle Ages, Christian beliefs about Jewish magic led to persecution and violence. Jews were occasionally charged with performing black magic, in allegiance with Satan, and this charge made them targets of the Inquisition. Certain Jewish customs, such as washing hands upon returning from a cemetery, aroused suspicion and provoked some bloody scenes. This even led Jews to abandon some religious practices and customs. In Provence, for example, the ritual cleansing of the public oven in preparation for Passover was neglected because it provoked suspicion of sorcery.

But when medieval Christians were in need of healing, Jews were regularly called upon to perform magic and miracles. Jews were generally more effective medical practitioners because of their wide knowledge of languages, the availability of Arabic-Greek medical works in Hebrew translation, and their propensity for travel and study abroad.

Paradoxically, Jews' scientific training made them superior magicians in the popular view, and every triumph of Jewish medicine enhanced Jews' reputation for sorcery.

Ritual murder accusations, for example, appear to originate in the belief that Jews killed Christian children in order to use their bodies in medicinal and magical recipes. The belief that Jews used Christian blood for matzah baking was a later development.

Though historians have dispelled most of the allegations of nefarious Jewish sorcery, there is ample evidence that medieval Jews considered certain magical practices to be legitimate and embraced these wholeheartedly. Around the 13th century, Kabbalah (Jewish mystical literature) split into two branches: *iyyunit* (theoretical) and *ma'asit* (practical).

The Kabbalah *ma'asit* explained the mystical values of Hebrew letters and offered formulas for achieving closeness to God through meditation and name-recitation—all of which might be considered examples of Jewish incantations and spells. The rich demonological literature and elaborate angelology in the Kabbalah *ma'asit* further blurred the distinction between Jewish mysticism and Jewish magic.

In all parts of the modern Western world, popular belief in magic has declined, and Jewish arguments against magic have been strengthened by enlightenment and post-enlightenment thinking. But interest in the supernatural and the unknown never completely wanes. Some Jews continue to embrace notions of the evil eye, for example, and seek ways to avert or trick it. It's unclear whether these practices—such as wearing a hamsa or a red string—should be categorized as magic. The line between superstition and authentic religious expression is certainly open to debate.

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