YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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***MIKDASH***

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**Lecture #253: The History of the Divine Service at Altars (LXIII) – The Prohibition of Bamot (XL)**

In this *shiur*, in order to understand the significance of Shaul's appeal to the sorceress in Ein Dor, we will continue to examine the essence of the Biblical prohibition to appeal to sorcerers.

We will deal with the question whether there is any truth in this service or whether the words of a sorcerer are nothing but nonsense and falsehood. We will try to clarify why the Torah prohibits the practice with such a severe prohibition, in light of its spiritual meaning.

### Are the Words of a Sorcerer True or False?

Is there any truth in the various magical practices performed by gentile sorcerers and wizards? The Torah describes applying to a sorcerer as an impurity and defilement; but does the sorcerer's activity work or not?

The Rambam, in his *Hilkhot Avoda Zara*, understands that these are all idolatrous practices, lies and falsehood, nonsense and vanity. And therefore the Torah commands: "You shall be perfect with the Lord your God" (*Devarim* 18:13). He writes as follows:

It is forbidden to inquire of a person who practices [divination with an] *ov* or a *yid'oni*…

All the above matters 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 it is stated (*Bemidbar* 23:23) "No black magic can be found among Yaakov, or occult arts within Israel." Similarly, it is stated (*Devarim* 18:14): "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. For these reasons, when the Torah warned against all these empty matters, it advised (*Devarim* 18:13)]: "You shall be perfect with the Lord, your God."

And similarly, the Ibn Ezra, in his commentary on *Vayikra*:

The empty-minded say that were it not for the fact that the words of sorcerers are true… Scripture would not have forbidden them. But I say just the opposite, for Scripture does not forbid the truth, but only falsehood. And the proof is the pagan gods and idols. Were it not for the fact that I do not wish to expand on the matter, I would explain the matter of the sorceress with compelling proofs. (19:31)

In contrast, the Ramban in his commentary to *Devarim* writes as follows:

Many piously argue that there is no truth at all to the occult arts, for who would tell a crow or a crane what will be. But we cannot deny things that have been made known before the eyes of witnesses. And our Rabbis have also admitted to them… But there is a mystery to this matter… (18:9-12)

The Ramban is apparently alluding to the words of the Rambam,[[1]](#footnote-1) and disagreeing with them. The Ramban understands that there is truth to the occult arts, and yet the Torah commands us to remove ourselves from them. This is also the position of the Malbim:

Surely *Chazal* in their *Aggadot* tell stories regarding acts of sorcery that still took place in the days of the Sages of the Mishna and the Talmud, and they testify that these sorcerers were able to actually raise souls from their graves. And they said that he who raises the dead can see him, and the person who made inquiry can hear his voice. And they said that if the person making the inquiry was a common person, he [the dead] would rise upside down, and if he were the king, he would rise right side up. They said all this because these arts were known and practiced in their day, and they were familiar with all their qualities. (I *Shemuel* 28:12)

Rabbeinu Bachya (*Shemot* 22:17) suggests another approach in the name of Rabbeinu Chananel who comments on the following passage in tractate *Sanhedrin*:

Rabbi Yochanan said: Why are they [sorcerers] called *kashafim*? Because they lessen the power of the Divine agencies (*ma****k****khi****sh****im* ***p****amalya shel* ***m****a'ala* ("lessen the family on high) [interfering with the course of events decreed by God.

"There is none else beside Him" (*Devarim* 4:35). Rabbi Chanina said: Even by sorcery. A woman[[2]](#footnote-2) once attempted to take earth from under Rabbi Chanina's feet. He said to her: If you succeed in your attempts, go and practice it [sorcery]: But it is written: "There is none else beside him." But that is not so, for did not Rabbi Yochanan say: Why are they called *mekashefim*? Because they lessen the power of the Divine agencies? Rabbi Chanina was in a different category, owing to his abundant merit. (67b)

Rabbi Chananel comments as follows:

"They lessen" – it appears as if they lessen. And he said that sorcerers do only that which God decrees, as Rabbi Chanina told that woman: "It is written: 'There is none else beside him.'" And even though they answer there: "Rabbi Chanina was in a different category, owing to his abundant merit," that is just an answer, but we do not rely on it…

And should you ask: Seeing that sorcerers do only that which God decrees, why did the Torah forbid [these practices], and why does it condemn a sorcerer to death? The reason is that he violated God's decree, doing that which was forbidden to him. If one who violates a decree of a king of flesh and blood is liable for death, all the more so one who violates the decree of the King, King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He.

According to Rabbi Chananel, it is not the sorcerer who performs his acts of magic, but rather God chooses to allow those amazing things to happen. The sorcerer himself transgresses God's decree and is therefore liable to the death penalty, but it is God who reveals Himself, initiates the action and causes it to happen. Therefore the approach of Rabbi Chanina is correct, and it should be used to understand the position of Rabbi Yochanan.

### What is the Spiritual Meaning of the Prohibition

### Everything is by Chance and there is no Providence

The *Sefer Chinukh* relates to the rationale underlying the prohibition of sorcery:

The root of this *mitzva* is what we wrote regarding the prohibition of divination. All these nonsensical matters cause a person to abandon true religion and belief in God, and turn to nonsense and think that everything that happens to him happens by chance, and that he is capable of bettering his situation and removing from himself all harm through those inquiries and those strategies that he follows. All this is worthless, as everything is decreed by the Master of the universe. And in accordance with his fitting actions or sins good or evil things happen to him, as it is stated: "For the work of a man will He requited unto him" (*Iyyov* 34:11).

And to this it is fitting that a person set his thoughts and direct his ways. This is the thought of every member of the good people of Israel. And furthermore, *ov* and *yid'oni* have an aspect of idol worship. (Commandment 255)

The main problem is that a person who turns to sorcery thinks what whatever happens to him happens by chance, and he fails to understand that everything is decreed by the Master of the universe, and that man with his actions, for better or for worse, directly impacts upon his own fate.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The *Chinukh*, therefore, maintains that all these prohibitions come to reinforce a person's belief in Divine providence. In addition, *ov* and *yid'oni* have elements of idolatry.

### Loss of Freedom

Rabbi S. R. Hirsch in his commentary on *Vayikra* considers the defilement and impurity that follows from appealing to sorcerers and wizards:

"You shall not seek to be defiled by them." Unless we are mistaken, the word "defiled" here is in the sense of its real original meaning, which, as we have so often indicated, is nothing else but the conception of "subjection"…

The erroneous conception of these oracles "seek," try – by vigorous bodily movements, dancing, gyrating, by narcotic fumes, or other means – to lose all their own powers of thought or feeling, so that, deprived of all their own senses, they fall under the power of the oracle-giving spirit, and serve as the completely passive medium for it. This would be the "mental" defilement, which the sorcerer "seeks." But the person who makes the inquiry "seeks" "moral" defilement…

He does not wish to place the decision for what he is to do and for what he is not to do under the dictate of the word of God, whose laws for human behavior are addressed to the clear wakeful mind, nor under the dictates of his own thinking brain which has grasped and understood God's will from His word. But, with all his mental moral free will, with his God-like freedom of action, he places the decision for himself and his acts under the dictates of some supposed dark mysterious power, which itself belongs to the unfree "bound" realm of nature, so that he "seeks," he asks, to become defiled. (19:31)

Rabbi Hirsch identifies defilement with lack of freedom. The oracles who turn to the spirits seek to be deprived of their own senses and thoughts. Thus, they become completely passive mediums who are controlled by the power of the oracle-giving spirit.[[4]](#footnote-4)

But both the mental and moral defilement which is sought by the *ov* and the *yid'oni* and in consulting them, are the absolute opposite of that sanctity which forms the contents of this chapter, and which is nothing other than the freest placing, - with complete consciousness of what one is doing, and completely of one's own freewill, - the whole of oneself and one's actions ready for the dictates of God's will as revealed in His Torah…

But this is the opposite of the *ov* and the *yid'oni*. Paying attention to the oracle of some imagined unfree power of the night, placing the exalted morally free human being under the ban of blind sophistry is defilement and leads to defilement.

The clear bright human mind and the wisdom of God, which He has laid down in the Torah for its instruction, they, which God has appointed to be exclusively our guides; they are only to be found on the way of sanctity and lead to sanctity.

Hence: "You shall not apply to sorcerers or wizards, nor seek to be defiled by them: I am the Lord your God." Rather: "You shall rise up before the hoary head, and honor the face of the old man, and fear your God: I am the Lord" (19:32). (Ibid.)

Continuing this line of reasoning, it may be suggested that from a pagan perspective, man is abandoned to the will of blind forces that determine his fate, over which he has no influence, and to whose absolute will he is subjected. In the case of *ov*, these are powers that come from the dead and show a person the future, and this absolutely negates his choice and freedom.

Having examined the prohibition of appealing to sorcerers and wizard, we will consider in the next *shiur* the ways in which the Torah deals with these phenomena.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. The Vilna Gaon as well relates to the Rambam: "This is what he also wrote in his Commentary to the Mishna, *Avodah Zara*, chapter 4. But all who came after him disagreed with him, for many incantations are mentioned in the Gemara. He was drawn after evil philosophy, and therefore he wrote that magic, and names, and incantations, and demons, and charms are all lies. But he was already struck on the head, as we find many anecdotes in the Gemara… Philosophy inclined him to interpret the Gemara in a metaphoric manner, and to uproot its plain sense. And God forbid that I should believe them, but rather they should all be understood in accordance with their plain sense, only that they have an inner meaning, not the inner meaning of the philosophers who cast them in the dung heap, but rather that of those who know the truth. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. According to Rashi (ad loc.), we are dealing with a woman who would take earth from under Rabbi Chanina's feet without his knowledge in order kill him with magic. When Rabbi Chanina noticed what she was doing, he said to her: If you succeed in your attempts, go and practice it. I am not afraid, for "there is none else beside him." [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The *Sefer Chinukh* gives very similar explanations to commandments 249 (against *nachash*) and 250 (against *onen*). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In the continuation, R. Hirsch demonstrates from the verses how this defilement is the absolute opposite of sanctity, which according to his definition, refers to readiness to do God's will as it manifests itself in the Torah, out of freedom and conscious choice. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)