

MIRACULOUS HEALING IN JUDAISM

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SUMMARY

This paper explores and discusses the miraculous powers attributed to certain figures in Judaism, a power to revive or kill, heal, or harm. This idea already appears in the Bible, but also in many places all over the Talmud and rabbinic literature. Sometimes, the action performed is passive, the sages do not ask for it directly, while sometimes it is active and deliberate.

Since Judaism is known for its attitude to witchcraft, which is explicitly prohibited in the Torah, it is clear that such powers are not based on magic. If so, what forces are involved and what is their origin?

In this paper, we attempt to answer these questions and discuss other issues, such as the relationship between medicine and Jewish law, the attitude of Judaism toward medical healing and intervention in God's affairs, healing and the power of prayer and healing as a fulfillment of the obligation to save lives. The main part of this paper examines miraculous healings in the Bible, in the Talmud and during the rabbinic period. The last part investigates the source of the righteous metaphysical power and the attitude of Judaism regarding sorcery.

Finally, in the end of this paper we attempt to define the appropriate attitude toward those who seek blessings for medical healing from rabbis.

Key words: magic – sorcery - miraculous healing – medicine – Torah – Talmud - rabbis

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INTRODUCTION

We as human beings very much care for our health. Pain and sickness remind us of our weaknesses and mortality. Good health should not be taken for granted, as even a short visit to some hospital wings or simply participating in a funeral will remind us.

To get proper healing, one will do all one can. First, he will approach his doctor, hoping he will be healed. However, when the doctor gives up, some will turn to alternative medicine. Others will reach for supernatural remedies after being disappointed by all other kinds of conventional healings or simply because human beings possess a yearning for the spiritual, they search for miraculous remedies, and amulets.

The field of supernaturalism is very controversial and might even be dangerous. Sometimes it can help but sometimes it is all a hoax and deception. People who are in real distress seek advice and solutions from any avenues that seem to be open to them and do not reject any spiritual means in order to realize their goal. Because of their situation, it is difficult for them to distinguish between what is permitted and what is forbidden, and what is good or bad. They appeal to anyone who presents himself as a "great Kabbalist" or a "praised mystic", anyone who declares that he can bring a cure to their pains and that he has miraculous secrets that can change destinies and fortunes. In this paper, we will try to shed some light on this issue and to investigate the attitude of Judaism toward Miraculous Healings.

PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

Relationship between Science (medicine) and Jewish law

From time to time, a question arises if it is possible to bridge the gap between modern medicine and *Halacha*.¹ The question presupposes that there is a contradiction between medicine and *Halacha*, which is based on an incorrect understanding of the basic characteristics of medical theory and the very essence of *Halacha*. *Halacha* is a system that encompasses laws, ethics, and a way of living. Jewish law, the operational factor of *Halacha*, demands the fulfillment of positive and passive orders. On the other hand, science is neither a moral nor a legal system. Scientific research (which includes medical research) is only a powerful *tool* to explore the laws of nature and medical technology. It represents an extraordinary means for saving human lives and improving their quality. However, as tools, both medicine and technology can also be used in an inappropriate way. Science and technology *are not* opposed to human morality, despite the possibility of abuse. *Halacha* encompasses a whole spectrum of human activities. Medicine, on the other hand is traditionally limited in its outlook on particular forms of life.

¹ *Halacha* – 1. the legal part of Jewish religious literature. The name comes from the verb *halach* (to go), because we are *going* or *following* the Jewish law; 2. a particular provision from the system of *halacha*.

Is healing considered to be a human intervention in the affairs of God?

The basic question posed by medicine is whether healing is allowed. The Torah states that health is a divine reward for appropriate behavior, whereas suffering and pain are punishments for sin and transgressions². Even today, members of certain religions refuse any medical treatment in order not to clash with the "Divine will". *Halacha*, however, allows medical treatments and sometimes even considers them mandatory.³ The *Midrash*⁴ discusses this matter as follows:

"Rabbi Ishmael and Rabbi Akiva were walking in Jerusalem together with another man. A sick person met them and said: "Gentlemen, tell me how I may be healed." They responded: "Take such and such and you will be healed."

After the sick person departed, the man who was accompanying the Rabbis asked: "Who caused his disease?" They answered: "The Holy One, blessed by He." He asked: "Why do you interfere in a matter which is not yours? The Lord did smite him; why then do you heal him?"

The Rabbis asked him: "What is your occupation?"

"I work the land. Here you can see my scythe," he answered. Then the Rabbis asked: "Who created the land upon which you work?"

"The Holy One, blessed by He."

"Then you are interfering in a matter which is not yours. The Lord did create the vineyard; why then do you eat His fruits?"

The farmer responded: "Do you not see the scythe in my hand? If I did not plow and weed and put down fertilizer, nothing would grow in the land."

"Fool," the Rabbis said, "a tree cannot grow if the land is not prepared. And if the tree grows, it will die unless fertilized and watered. Similarly, the body of man must be tended by the physician with proper medication."⁵

The idea expressed by this *Midrash* is clear. The world was created with a system of natural law. Humans are permitted to use the laws of nature to earn their livelihood and to maintain health. We may engage in farming for our livelihood, and it is appropriate to engage in medical therapy for our health. Human deeds do not detract from Divine providence.⁶

² See: Ex. 15,26; Lev. 26, 14-16; Deut. 28,61.

³ See: Babylonian Talmud (BT), Baba Kamma 85a, Vilne ed. Machon Tevel, Bnei Brak, 1961 (Vilne); See also BT Bera- chot 60a, Steinsaltz ed. Jerusalem, 1999 (Steinsaltz); Shul- chan Aruch (ShA), Jore Dea 336, 1, *Ketuvim*; Jerusalem, 1992.

⁴ *Midrash* – exposition or investigation, Torah commen- taries; there are two kinds of m.: Agadic (narrative) and Halachic (law); gathered in collections. See more about *Midrash* in K.D., *Židovstvo*, pp. 503-505.

⁵ *Midrash Shmuel* 4. (Buber edition, Jerusalem, 1965, repr. Cracow, 1893).

⁶ See: Maimonides, Commentary on the *Mishnah*, (Kapach edition, Mossad HaRav Kook, Jerusalem 1963-1967) *Pesachim*, at the end of chapter 4.

Healing as a fulfillment of the obligation to save lives

In Judaism, healing represents a part of the Com- mandment regarding the obligation to save a life.⁷ The Talmud teaches us what we are obliged to do in case when other people's lives are in danger:

"If one person sees another drowning in a river, or being dragged as prey by an animal, or being attacked by robbers, he is obligated to save the person in danger. This is because it says in the Torah, "Don't just stand by when your neighbor's life is in danger. Lev. 19:16)."⁸

"Just as one must rather be slain than commit mur- der...and how do we know this? It is common sense. Even as one who came before Raba and said to him, 'The governor of my town has ordered me, "Go and kill so and so; if not, I will slay thee"'. He answered him, 'Let him rather slay you than that you should commit mur- der; "Who can say your blood is redder [than another's blood]? Perhaps his blood is redder than yours."⁹

Therefore, the Torah teaches that a man is not allowed to stand on the sidelines and simply watch while the blood of his fellow man, his health, is compromised. This obligation to save a life obliges everyone – not only doctors, nurses, police, or the firefighters. Every person who can help must do so in accordance with their ability. This obligation regarding the preservation of life even at great cost is also stressed by Maimonides¹⁰ and Rabbi Josef Karo (Spain, Israel, 16 century) in his halachic code *Shulchan Aruch*.¹¹

HEALING IN THE JEWISH BIBLE

God is presented in the Bible as both a Healer and the one who causes illness. The prophets are the actual healers, they have the power to revive and kill. Many miracles of healing are done by the prophet Elijah and Elisha. We will explore only some of the miracles they performed.¹² Although this is not explicitly stated in some of the stories, in light of Judaism's approach to witchcraft, it does not refer to an independent power of the prophets who engage in sorcery and through it, reviving the death. Instead, God attributes great impor- tance to the prayers and thoughts of the righteous. However, he is the only one capable of taking life and

⁷ For detailed analysis of this issue see: Kotel Dadon, »Stav prema spašavanju života u židovskom zakonu, Milosrdni Samaritanac – ideal ili dužnost, moralna ili pravna obveza?« *Nova prisutnost* 15 (2017) 3, str. 393-423.

⁸ BT *Sanhedrin*, 73a (Vilne)

⁹ BT *Sanhedrin*, 74a (Vilne)

¹⁰ Maimonides in *Mishne Torah*, Jerusalem, 1974, (reprint Warsaw 1881.), *Jad Ha-Hachazaka* = *Mishne Torah*, (MT), *hilhot Rotzeach veShmirat Nefesh* 1:14,16.

¹¹ ShA, *Choshen Mishpat* 426:1.

¹² For other examples of miraculous healings in the Bible see: Ex. 15,23-26; Num. 21,5-9; 2Kgs 2, 19-23; 2Kgs 4, 38-41; 2Kgs 6, 1-7; 2Kgs 20, 5-8.

reviving from death. The way a revival of the dead is done is similar: the sage seeks mercy for the dead, and his prayer is answered and the dead return to life. The power to revive is the power of God, to which the prayers of the sages are directed, and when a sage prays to bring the dead back to life, his prayer is answered. While the request to revive the dead is an explicit request that the sage refers to God, the killing of someone takes place either by the explicit request of the sage or as God's response, to punish those who offended the sages' honor or distressed them. We will present three types of healing mentioned in the Bible: infertility, leprosy and resurrection after death.

Healing of infertility

The longing for a child is a powerful motif in the Bible, and it is already mentioned in stories about all our great-grandmothers (Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel) and later, for example, about Hanna, Samuel's mother and many other biblical figures.¹³ The most detailed story of infertility is the story of the barrenness of Rachel. Lea gave birth to six sons and one daughter of Jacob before Rachel was granted the birth of her first son Joseph. It does not take much imagination to understand how Rachel felt during all this time. Having this background, one can understand her jealousy of Lea. How can this phenomenon be understood? After all, the suffering of barrenness is unbearable, so why did the righteous mothers of Israel have to go through it? The Sages explain that the greater the man, the harder his trials are. The Almighty wanted to strengthen and train the future leaders of the Jewish people, and because of that, they underwent a difficult and strenuous path.¹⁴ In the Rabbinic literature we find special references to this question in the Midrash:

*"Rabbi Isaac stated: Why were our ancestors barren? - Because the Holy One, blessed be He, longs to hear the prayer of the righteous."*¹⁵

Of course, God does not really need our prayers. However, God wants us to pray as prayer affects man; prayer turns the worshiper into another person, raising and elevating him. And as great as is the sorrow due to the lack of children, so great will be the joy of a pregnancy experienced after barrenness. The Talmud explains the following wedding blessing: "May the barren greatly rejoice and exult when her children will be gathered in her midst in joy".¹⁶ Precisely from the depth of difficulty and absence, the sense of fullness will be great and vast. Much was said by the sages on

the power of prayer. The following Mishnah explains the power of prayer:

*"[It is written] and it came to pass, when; Moses held up his hand that Israel prevailed, etc. (Ex. 17, 11.) Now did the hands of Moses wage war or crush the enemy? Not so; only the text signifies that so long as Israel turned their thoughts above and subjected their hearts to their father in heaven they prevailed, but otherwise they fell. The same lesson may be taught thus. [it is written], make thee a fiery serpent and set it up on a pole, and it shall come to pass that everyone that is bitten, when he seeth it, shall live. (Num. 21, 8.) now did the serpent kill or did the serpent keep a live? No; [what it indicates is that] when Israel turned their thoughts above and subjected their hearts to their father in heaven, they were healed, but otherwise they pined away."*¹⁷

Healing of leprosy

The Biblical leprosy is a physiological reaction to a spiritual behavior and not the medical skin disease known to us.¹⁸ What is the source of healing from such a disease? Although the Bible does not give us a specific answer, we will analyze several Biblical episodes of people being healed from this disease.

The healing of Miriam

The first episode of leprosy healing was Miriam's. The Torah says that Aaron and Miriam had spoken against Moses (Num. 12:1-16). So, God punished Miriam and she was struck with leprosy. Aaron confessed his sin and begged Moses to do something about Miriam's leprosy. Moses prayed to God to heal her, God listened to Moses' prayer and Miriam was healed.

The healing of Naaman

Another well-known case in the Bible involving healing from leprosy is the story of Naaman (2 Kings 5). Naaman was the head of the army of the king of Aram. He had a Jewish servant girl in his house. The servant told them about the great prophet who is in Samaria, who can cure Naaman of his leprosy. This prophet was Elisha. The king of Aram sent Naaman to Israel with a letter to the king of Israel, asking him to heal him. When the king of Israel received the letter from Naaman, he tore his clothes, as he thought that the king of Aram is searching for a reason to attack him, since he did not have the power to heal Naaman. However, when Elisha heard about it, he asked the king to send Naaman to him *"and he shall know that there is a prophet in Israel"* (2 Kings 5:8).

To prove the point that healing comes from God only, Elisha instructed Naaman, without even seeing

¹³ See: 1 Sam 1; 2 Kgs 4, 8-37; Judg 13.

¹⁴ See: Zohar (HaZohar Pirush HaSulam 3 Jerusalem, 1961) Vajishlah, str. 14. in Hasulem commentary paragraph 45; see also BT Jebamot 64a.

¹⁵ BT Jebamot 64a (Vilne), see also Midrash Bereshit Rabbah, Jerusalem (reprint Vilnius 1878) 45,4.

¹⁶ BT Ketubot 8a (Vilne).

¹⁷ Mishnah Rosh HaShana III,8 in BT Rosh HaShana 29a. see also: BT Berahot 32b. (Steinsaltz) BT Suka 14a (Steinsaltz); BT Jebamot 64a. (Vilne); BT Berahot 32b. (Steinsaltz).

¹⁸ BT Arahin 15b (Vilne); MT hilhot Tumeat Tzaraat 16, 10.

him but through a messenger, to go *and wash in the Jordan river seven times*. Naaman felt he was not treated respectfully by Elisha and therefore he refused to fulfill the commandment of the prophet and was about to leave empty-handed. However, his servants convinced him to do what the prophet had asked. Naaman followed the words of Elisha and dipped himself seven times in the Jordan river and was cured. This made Naaman state: "*Behold now, I know that there is no God in all the earth, but in Israel;*" (2 Kings 5:15). To be healed, Naaman had to show his humbleness by obeying the word of the prophet of God. In essence, Naaman was asked to humble himself.¹⁹

Reviving of the dead

The two most famous examples of the resurrection of the dead are the stories of the prophet Elijah and his disciple, the prophet Elisha. The two stories have similar motifs, they talk about the revival of boys who died.²⁰ In both stories, the description of resuscitation contains three components: the prayer of the prophet to God, a practical act of contact with the dead child and the resurrection of the child.

HEALING IN THE TALMUD AND IN RABBINIC LITERATURE

In many places in Rabbinic literature, in the Talmud and the Midrash, different metaphysical powers in addition to the power to heal, to revive from the dead and even to kill are attributed to certain sages. Sometimes the action is passive, and the sage does not mean it directly, and sometimes it is active and intentional. The following classical halachic dispute noted in the Talmud, that between the majority of Rabbis and Rabbi Eliezer son of Horkenus who advocated his opinion, can teach us about the miraculous power of some sages. Furthermore, we can see how God loved them so much that he protected their honor. The Halachic question asked was with regard to earthen hearth located in a home and shaped as a snake (circles positioned one on top of the other): does this hearth have the status of a pot (as the Rabbis thought, in which case it becomes ritually impure when someone dies in the house) or does it have a status of an object conjoint with the floor (as Rabbi Eliezer thought, which doesn't make it ritually impure, just like walls of the house, and is allowed to be used even after the death of the resident):

"and this was the oven of 'Aknai. Why [the oven was called off] 'Aknai? - Said Rab Judah in Samuel's name: [It means] that they encompassed it with arguments as a snake and proved it unclean. It has been taught: On that

day R. Eliezer brought forward every imaginable argument, but they did not accept them. Said he to them: 'If the halacha agrees with me, let this carob-tree prove it!' Thereupon the carob-tree was torn a hundred cubits out of its place - others affirm, four hundred cubits. 'No proof can be brought from a carob-tree,' they retorted. Again, he said to them: 'If the halacha agrees with me, let the stream of water prove it!' Whereupon the stream of water flowed backwards - 'No proof can be brought from a stream of water,' they rejoined. Again, he urged: 'If the halacha agrees with me, let the walls of the schoolhouse prove it,' whereupon the walls inclined to fall. But R. Joshua rebuked them, saying: 'When scholars are engaged in a halachic dispute, what have ye to interfere?' Hence, they did not fall, in honor of R. Joshua, nor did they resume the upright, in honor of R. Eliezer; and they are still standing thus inclined. Again, he said to them: 'If the halacha agrees with me, let it be proved from Heaven!' Whereupon a Heavenly Voice cried out: 'Why do ye dispute with R. Eliezer, seeing that in all matters the halacha agrees with him!' But R. Joshua arose and exclaimed: 'It is not in heaven.' (Deut. 30, 12.) What did he mean by this? - Said R. Jeremiah: That the Torah had already been given at Mount Sinai; we pay no attention to a Heavenly Voice, because Thou hast long since written in the Torah at Mount Sinai, After the majority must one incline. (Ex. 23, 2)

R. Nathan met Elijah and asked him: What did the Holy One, Blessed be He, do in that hour? — He laughed [with joy], he replied, saying, 'My sons have defeated Me, My sons have defeated Me.' It was said: On that day all objects which R. Eliezer had declared clean were brought and burnt in fire. Then they took a vote and excommunicated him. Said they, 'Who shall go and inform him?' 'I will go,' answered R. Akiba, 'lest an unsuitable person go and inform him, and thus destroy the whole world.' What did R. Akiba do? He donned black garments and wrapped himself in black and sat at a distance of four cubits from him. 'Akiba,' said R. Eliezer to him, 'what has particularly happened to-day?' 'Master,' he replied, 'it appears to me that thy companions hold aloof from thee.' Thereupon he too rent his garments, put off his shoes, removed [his seat] and sat on the earth, whilst tears streamed from his eyes. The world was then smitten: a third of the olive crop, a third of the wheat, and a third of the barley crop. Some say, the dough in women's hands swelled up.

A Tanna taught: Great was the calamity that befell that day, for everything at which R. Eliezer cast his eyes was burned up. R. Gamaliel too was travelling in a ship when a huge wave arose to drown him. 'It appears to me,' he reflected, 'that this is on account of none other but R. Eliezer b. Hyrcanus.' Thereupon he arose and exclaimed, 'Sovereign of the Universe! Thou knowest full well that I have not acted for my honor, nor for the honor of my paternal house, but for Thine, so that strife may not multiply in Israel!' At that the raging sea subsided.

¹⁹ see more about leprocy in the Bible: Ex. 4,6; 2Kings 5,27; 2Chr 26,31.

²⁰ see: 1Kings 17, 17-24; 2Kings 4, 32-37.

*Ima Shalom was R. Eliezer's wife, and sister to R. Gamaliel. From the time of this incident onwards she did not permit him to fall upon his face. Now a certain day happened to be New Moon, but she mistook a full month for a defective one. Others say, a poor man came and stood at the door, and she took out some bread to him. [On her return] she found him fallen on his face. 'Arise,' she cried out to him, 'thou hast slain my brother.' In the meanwhile, an announcement was made from the house of Rabban Gamaliel that he had died. 'Whence dost thou know it?' he questioned her. 'I have this tradition from my father's house: All gates are locked, excepting the gates of wounded feelings.'*²¹

Reviving the death

The Talmud relates that when Antoninus visited the Rebi (Rabbi Judah the Prince), Rabbi Haninah bar Hama brought Antoninus's dead servant back to life:

*"Antoninus had a cave which led from his house to the house of Rebi. Every time [he visited Rebi] he brought two slaves, one of whom he slew at the door of Rebi's house and the other [who had been left behind] was killed at the door of his own house Said Antoninus to Rebi: When I call let none be found with thee. One day he found R. Haninah son of Hama sitting there, so he said: 'Did I not tell thee no man should be found with thee at the time when I call?' And Rebi replied. 'This is not an [ordinary] human being.' 'Then', said Antoninus, 'let him tell that servant who is sleeping outside the door to rise and come in.' R. Haninah son of Hama thereupon went out but found that the man had been slain. Thought he, 'How shall I act now? Shall I call and say that the man is dead? - but one should not bring a sad report; shall I leave him and walk away? - that would be slighting the king.' So, he prayed for mercy for the man and he was restored to life. He then sent him in. Said Antoninus: 'I am well aware that the least one among you can bring the dead to life...' "*²²

In another place it is told about Rabbi Haninah son of Hakhinai who revived his wife after she died because she was very excited to see him after a dozen years during which he was absent from his home for Torah study²³:

"Rabbi Hanania son of Hakinai was about to go away to the academy towards the conclusion of Rabbi Simeon son of Yohai's wedding. 'Wait for me', the latter said to him, 'until I am able to join you'. He, however, did not wait for him but went away alone and spent twelve years at the academy. By the time he returned the

*streets of the town were altered and he was unable to find the way to his home. Going down to the riverbank and sitting down there he heard a girl being addressed thus: 'Daughter of Hakinai, O, daughter of Hakinai, fill up your pitcher and let us go!' 'It is obvious', he thought, 'that the girl is ours', and he followed her. [When they reached the house] his wife was sitting and sifting flour. She lifted up her eyes and seeing him, was so overcome with joy that she fainted. 'O, Lord of the universe', [the husband] prayed to Him, 'this poor soul; is this her reward?' And so he prayed for mercy to be vouchsafed to her and she revived.'*²⁴

Another story relates to the holiday of Purim²⁵ One of Purim commandments is to eat a Purim feast. In a discussion²⁶ regarding the amount of wine one needs to drink during the Purim feast, the Talmud relates the following story about the two rabbis who fulfilled this mitzvah:

*"Raba said: It is the duty of a man to mellow himself [with wine] on Purim until he cannot tell the difference between cursed be Haman' and 'blessed be Mordecai'.²⁷ Rabbah and Rabbi Zera joined together in a Purim feast. They became mellow, and Rabbah arose and cut Rabbi Zera's throat. On the next day he prayed on his behalf and revived him. Next year he said, Will your honour come and we will have the Purim feast together. He replied: A miracle does not take place on every occasion."*²⁸

Another Talmudic story talks about a student who upset his teacher, Rabbi Johanan. The rabbi was hurt and as a result the student died. The next day, it turned out that there was a misunderstanding because the student was from Babylon, where they had behaved differently from the Holy Land while studying. When Rabbi Johanan heard this, he regretted that and immediately went to the student's burial cave, begging God for mercy and resurrected him.²⁹

Causing death

In the Talmud, the examples of causing death are mainly cited as a punishment for inappropriate and humiliating behavior that caused the Sages to feel sorrow, and not as a voluntary act of death. Occasionally, the person hurt was not a stranger but a rabbi. One of the classic examples appears in the following Talmudic story:

²⁴ BT Ketubot 62b. (Vilne).

²⁵ Purim – a holiday commemorating the salvation of the Jews from the hands of their enemies led by Haman who wanted to kill all the Jews at the time of the diaspora in the Persian Empire. For more, see K.D. ŽIDOVSTVO pp. 154-161.

²⁶ Purim feast - seudat Purim – an afternoon meal during the holiday of Purim, one of the commandments (mitzvot) of the said holiday, written in the Esther Scroll. For more, see K.D. ŽIDOVSTVO pp. 154-161.

²⁷ The two phrases ברוך מרדכי and ארור המן have the same numerical value, 502.

²⁸ BT megila 7b. (Steinsaltz).

²⁹ BT Baba Kama (Vilne) 117a.

²¹ BT Baba Metzia 59b. (Vilne).

²² BT Aboda Zara 10b. (Vilne).

²³ In Talmudic times, one would marry in the Holy Land and after a while go to Babylon to study in great centers of learning that were located there. Babylon was the spiritual center of Judaism after the destruction of the Temple. See: BT Ketubot (Vilne) 62b.

“Incident which happened with a slave of King Janai.³⁰ who killed a man. Shimon son of Shetach (1. century BC) said to the Sages: 'Set your eyes boldly upon him and let us judge him.' So they sent the King word, saying: 'Your slave has killed a man.' Thereupon he sent him to them [to be tried]. But they again sent him a message 'Thou too must come here, for the Torah says, "If warning has been given to its owners" (Ex 21,29) [teaching], that the owner of the ox must come and stand by his ox.' The king accordingly came and sat down. Then Shimon son of Shetach said: 'Stand on thy feet, King Janai, and let the witnesses testify against thee; yet it is not before us that thou standest, but before Him who spoke and the world came into being... 'I shall not act in accordance with what thou sayest, but in accordance with what thy colleagues say,' he answered. [Shimon] then turned first to the right and then to the left, but they all, [for fear of the King], looked down at the ground. Then said Shimon son of Shetach unto them: 'Are ye wrapped in thoughts? Let the Master of thoughts [God] come and call you to account!' Instantly, [angel] Gabriel came and smote them to the ground, and they died.”³¹

Another case relates to Rabbi Shimon son of Yohai who condemned the behavior of the Roman authorities. A Jew informed the authorities and as a result Rabbi Shimon was sentenced to death. He had to flee with his son and hide in a cave for thirteen years. When he was out of danger he came out of the cave and went back home. One day he went out into the street and saw the informer, the one who informed the Romans, “That man is still in the world!” he exclaimed. He cast his eyes upon him and he became a heap of bones.”³² We will conclude this section with the following Talmudic paragraph that emphasizes the supernatural power of the Sages:

“Rabban Shimon son of Gamliel said: Wherever the Sages looked upon someone [in a negative manner], it resulted in either death or poverty.”³³

³⁰ Alexander Jannaeus (Jonathan) lived 103-76 B.C.E. third son of John Hyrcanus, King of Judea.

³¹ BT Sanhedrin 19a, 19b. (Steinsaltz).

³² BT shabat 34a. (Steinsaltz) There is a controversy about the meaning of the expression “he became a heap of bones,” which appears in many places in the Talmudic literature (see: BT Baba Batra 75a(Vilne) ; BT Berahot 58a, 58b (Steinsaltz); BT Nazir 57b(Vilne) ; BT Baba Kama 80a (Vilne); Midrash Bereshit Rabbah Jerusalem (reprint Vilnius 1878.) Mikec 8; Echa Rabbah. (Buber, Vilnius, 1899.) 1,18.), does it mean an actual death, or fainting or other bodily injury.

³³ BT Moed Katan 17b. (Steinsaltz) For other examples of the power of the Sages in the Talmud see: BT Moed Katan 17a (Steinsaltz); BT Taanit 9a, 24a (Steinsaltz); BT Megila 5b (Steinsaltz); BT Aboda Zara 18a, 18b. (Vilne) ; translated from Aramaic by the author.

THE SOURCE OF THE RIGHTEOUS METAPHYSICAL POWER

According to Judaism, the purpose of the creation of the world was for man's sake, and therefore in the story of the creation of the world, man was created at the end of the process as the crown of creation, when the world was ready for him. The more one rises in his righteousness and piety, the closer he is to God. Nachmanides (Spain, 13th century) explains that the righteous are truly connected to God in their thoughts, and therefore everything they wish to happen actually takes place, whether for good or for bad.³⁴ A person's spiritual level is measured first and foremost by adapting his actions to the religious demands, and as the person continues to refine himself, he approaches the level of the Holy Spirit that can lead to the fulfillment of his wishes by God to the point of reviving the dead. The Talmud states:

“Rabbi Pinchas son of Jair said: Study leads to precision, precision leads to zeal, zeal leads to cleanliness, cleanliness leads to restraint, restraint leads to purity, purity leads to holiness, holiness leads to meekness, meekness leads to fear of sin, fear of sin leads to saintliness, saintliness leads to the [possession of] the holy spirit, the holy spirit leads to resurrection of the dead”³⁵

When a person reaches the level of the Sage, the Talmud emphasizes that he can even cancel the decrees of God by means of his prayers.³⁶ According to Jewish tradition, the existence of the righteous in the world is essential to the existence of the world.³⁷ The Talmud mentions the vital existence of 36 righteous people for the existence of the world:

“Abaye said: The world must contain not less than thirty-six righteous men in each generation who are vouchsafed [the sight of] the Shechinah's countenance, for it is written, Blessed are all they that wait for him [lo – heb. לו]; the numerical value of 'lo' is thirty-six.”³⁸

And the Divine providence takes care of the continuity of the existence of the righteous in every generation:

“R. Hiyya b. Abba said in the name of R. Johanan: No righteous man dies out of this world, before another, like himself, is created, as it is said: “The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down (Eccl. 1, 5.), - before the sun of Eli set, the sun of Samuel of Ramathaim rose. R. Hiyya b. Abba also said in the name of R. Johanan: The Holy

³⁴ Nachmanides, Igeret HaKodesh, fifth chapter, p. 16 (DAAT 2018- Based on silja-1580 and Salonika 1575.) <http://www.daat.ac.il/daat/mishpach/mini/ramban-igeret.pdf> revied 24.6.2019.

³⁵ BT Aboda Zara 20b. (Vilne), The phrase means that the possessor of the Holy Spirit is endowed with the power of restoring life to the dead.

³⁶ BT Moed Katan 16b. (Steinsaltz) see also BT Taanit 16b. (Steinsaltz).

³⁷ Mishnah Avot 10,25.

³⁸ BT Sanhedrin 97b. (Steinsaltz).

One, blessed be He, saw that the righteous are but few, therefore He planted them throughout all generations, as it is said: For the pillars of the earth are the Lord's, and He hath set the world upon them. (Prov. 10, 25.)³⁹

One of the most prominent Sages thanks to whom the world exists, according to the Talmud was Rabbi Haninah son of Dosa:

*"Rab Juda said in the name of Rab: Every day a Heavenly Voice is heard declaring, The whole world draws its sustenance because [of the merit] of Haninah my son, and Haninah my son suffices himself with a kab of carobs from one Sabbath eve to another."*⁴⁰

Because of his righteousness, he was able to abolish the powers of the demons⁴¹ and even to nullify the decrees of the Holy One.⁴² The following paragraph describes his metaphysic powers:

*"Rabbi Haninah son of Dosa was journeying on the road when it began to rain. He exclaimed: Master of the Universe, the whole world is at ease, but Haninah is in distress; the rain then ceased. When he reached home, he exclaimed: Master of the Universe, the whole world is in distress and Haninah is at ease; whereupon rain fell..."*⁴³ ... *Once on a Friday eve he noticed that his daughter was sad and he said to her, My daughter, why are you sad? She replied: My oil can got mixed up with my vinegar can and I kindled of it the Sabbath light. He said to her: My daughter, why should this trouble you? He who had commanded the oil to burn will also command the vinegar to burn. A Tanna taught: The light continued to burn the whole day until they took of it light for the Havdalah*⁴⁴."⁴⁵

One of the metaphysical tools used by the Sages when needed were the names of God. The secrets of divine names were given by Sages only to their closest students. The Talmud mentions that God's names consist of four letters, and 12 letters, and that they were revealed by the Sages to the chosen ones among their students once a week⁴⁶. The name that consisted of 42 letters was handed only to those who met special criteria and thus says the Talmud:

"Rab Judah said in Rab's name: The forty-two lettered Name is entrusted only to him who is pious, meek, in the middle of his days, free from bad temper, sober, and not insistent on his rights. And he who knows it, is heedful

*thereof [Not to use it lightly] and observes it in purity, is beloved above and popular below, feared by man, and inherits two worlds, this world and the future world."*⁴⁷

THE ATTITUDE OF JUDAISM REGARDING SORCERY.

The Torah explicitly forbids sorcery in all its forms and requires the death penalty⁴⁸ for those engaged in witchcraft.⁴⁹ In the story of the exodus from Egypt, the Torah speaks of great miracles performed by Moses and Aaron, and among them the Ten Plagues. In the case of the first two plagues, blood and frogs, after the water of the Nile became blood and the frogs emerged in great quantities, the Torah says: "But the magicians did the same things by their secret arts;..." (Ex. 8,7). But, in the case of the third plague, the plague of lice, Pharaoh's sorcerers failed, and so the Torah states:

"Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Tell Aaron, 'Stretch out your staff and strike the dust of the ground,' and throughout the land of Egypt the dust will become gnats.' They did this, and when Aaron stretched out his hand with the staff and struck the dust of the ground, gnats came on people and animals. All the dust throughout the land of Egypt became gnats. But when the magicians tried to produce gnats by their secret arts, they could not. Since the gnats were on people and animals everywhere, the magicians said to Pharaoh, 'This is the finger of God.'" (Ex. 8, 16-19).

The Talmud explains the meaning of "This is the finger of God!", why the Egyptian magicians failed:

*"Rabbi Eleazar, said: This proves that a magician cannot produce a creature less than a barley corn in size."*⁵⁰

This refers to the plague of lice, which they could not imitate. The Torah (Deut. 13) warns that a false prophet might produce a sign that comes true but must not be followed. Supernatural occurrences were not authoritative in matters of normative practice. So, what is the source of such supernaturalism? The Talmud discusses the subject of permissible witchcraft and forbidden witchcraft.⁵¹ The Talmud even permits the study of sorcery laws and experimenting with them in order to know how to recognize the sorcerers who are condemned to death.⁵² The existence of magical powers

³⁹ BT Joma 38b. (Steinsaltz).

⁴⁰ BT Taanit 24b. (Steinsaltz).

⁴¹ BT Pesachim 112b. (Steinsaltz).

⁴² BT Shabat 63a (Steinsaltz).

⁴³ BT Taanit 24b. (Steinsaltz).

⁴⁴ *Havdalah* – prayer at the end of Shabbat or holidays that separates the holy time from the profane; at the end of Shabbat wine, a candle and spices are blessed and at the end of a holiday only the wine is blessed. See more in K.D ŽIDOVSTVO pp. 264.

⁴⁵ BT Taanit 25a. (Steinsaltz) see more in: BT Berahot 5b, 34b. (Steinsaltz); BT Shabat 53b.

⁴⁶ BT Kidushin 71a.

⁴⁷ BT Kidushin 71a. (Vilne). Rashi explains in his commentary on the Talmud (On this page BT Kidushin 71a) that the Sages were very careful to avoid improper use of the Divine names. In other places Rashi is writing that "Rabbi Haninah son of Teradion used to pronounce the Divine name in his letters, interprets the forty-two letters and managed to do whatever he desired (Rashi, BT Aboda Zara 17b. (Vilne)).

⁴⁸ See Ex. 22,17.

⁴⁹ Deut. 18,10-14.

⁵⁰ BT Sanhedrin 67b. (Steinsaltz).

⁵¹ See examples of witchcraft of various types in the Talmud: BT Gitin 45a, BT Sanhedrin 67b, BT Aboda Zara 55b.

⁵² BT Sanhedrin 68a (Steinsaltz).

and their use both in the Bible and in the Talmud seems to be obvious and the following example will only tell us how much:

"Raba said: If the righteous desired it, they could [by living a life of absolute purity] be creators... Rabbah created a man and sent him to Rabbi Zera. Rabbi Zera spoke to him but received no answer. Thereupon he said unto him: 'Thou art a creature of the magicians. Return to thy dust.' Rabbi Haninah and Rabbi Oshaia spent every Sabbath eve in studying Sefer Jetzira,⁵³ by means of which they created a calf that has reached one third of its full growth and ate it."⁵⁴

In the period of the Geonim⁵⁵ and the Middle Ages, the issue of the essence of witchcraft was disputed by major thinkers of Judaism. The rationalist school of Judaism, among whose leaders were Rabbi Saadia Gaon,⁵⁶ Rabbi Shmuel HaCohen son of Hofni of the time of the Geonim and Maimonides, who came after them, claims that there is no reality in magic. The rationalist school, as we know, attaches great importance to logic, whereas sorcery is contrary to logic. Therefore, they negate most of the magical phenomena because it is all a mirage and an illusion, and in their opinion, the

⁵³ Sefer Jetzira – known as a fundamental book within the scope of Talmudic kabbalistic practice: Sefer Jetzira (The Book of Creation), is attributed to the forefather Abraham, which fact indicates an old tradition, and the possible antiquity of the book itself. The book is the title of two esoteric books. The older, referred to here, was a thaumaturgical work popular in the Talmudic period. Its basic idea is that the Creation was accomplished by means of the power inherent in the Hebrew letters and that this same power could be utilized in further creation.

⁵⁴ BT Sanhedrin 65b. (Steinsaltz).

⁵⁵ *Gaon* – (Hebr. excellence, pl. Geonim), a title of the president of Babylonian yeshivot in Sura and Pumbedita at the time of the Geonim (589-1038).

⁵⁶ Saadia Gaon, rabbi, abbreviated: Rasag (Fayum, Egypt, 882. – Sura, Babylon, 942.) – The most important individual of the time of the Geonim. Famous since childhood for his knowledge of Halacha, the Bible, grammar, and astronomy, regarding which he published numerous books. Moved from Egypt to Israel and then to Bagdad. Although he was an immigrant, he was quickly named the Gaon of the Sura, Babylon yeshiva (928.), that soon after turned into a spiritual center and the halachic focal point of all Jews. Due to disagreements with the head of the Babylonian diaspora, he lost his position as a Gaon between 931 and 937. In this period, he also wrote his works. He was the first among medieval Babylonian Jewish scholars to study Jewish subjects in a scientific way. He is the author of numerous books in various fields of study, ranging from philosophy to Bible commentary. He was the first to write books on various halachic topics such as a book on inheritance and a book on security deposit. Simultaneously he focused on battling the Caraites and managed to stop the spread of their ideas in Babylonia and elsewhere. His most famous book is *Emunot vedeot (Beliefs and opinions)*, which was published in Constantinople in 1562 and written in Jewish Arabic language. This was the first philosophical methodical written in a circle of Jewish scholars and it was translated into Hebrew by Rabbi Yehuda Ibn Tibon.

sorcerer is a manipulator that makes people think he is making a miracle while the truth is that he does nothing beyond the realm of natural. The severity of the command against sorcerers and the severe punishment stem from the falsehood of the impossibility of witchcraft and the cynical exploitation of people and their deception. Saadia Gaon explains that while Moses performed miracles in Egypt openly, Pharaoh's sorcerers did everything in a hidden manner, and by a simple investigation their manipulations could be proven to be falsehood and lies.⁵⁷ Maimonides writes:

"All the above matters [divination, sorcerer...] 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 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...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: "You must be blameless before the Lord your God. (Deut 18, 13)."⁵⁸

Maimonides is faithful to his rationalist view that everything must be centered around reason, and the readings must be interpreted according to this principle.⁵⁹ On the other hand, the more Kabbalistic stream of other sages, including Nachmanides, the Gaon of Vilne⁶⁰,

⁵⁷ Saadia Gaon, Rabbi, Sefer haemunot vehade'ot. Slutsky, Leipzig, 1864. III,5.

⁵⁸ Maimonides MT Abodat Kohavim 11.16; see more in Maimonides Moreh Nevukhim. (transl. Rabbi Josef Kapah). Mossad Harav Kook, Jerusalem 1977. III, 37. str. 357-362.

⁵⁹ MT Hillhot Teshuva 3,7, see also Moreh Nevukhim II,25. str. 219-221.

⁶⁰ The Vilna Gaon – HaGra (Gera) (1720-1798). Full name: HaGaon Rabbi Eliyahu mi-Vilna (from Vilna). The title *Gaon* (the title of presidents of Babylonian yeshivot) was awarded him due to his extraordinary learnedness, even in secular sciences. he used mathematics and astronomy to further the understanding of Torah. He was among the first to oppose Hassidism (*mitnaged*). Thanks to his efforts, Vilnius became the center of non-Hassidic Judaism (*hitnagdut*) in Europe. At the age of around 60, he wanted to immigrate to Israel but only got as far as Königsberg and returned to Vilnius. In 1810 a large group of his students emigrated to Israel and founded Adath Perushim (The Community of Pharisees) in Safed and Jerusalem. He wrote more than sixty works covering different topics: commentaries on Tanach and Zohar, notes on Mishna and Tosefta, Talmud and Shulchan Aruch, texts regarding grammar, the geography of Israel, mathematics, and astronomy. Most of his books were gathered and printed by his students.

Rashba⁶¹ and others, believe that there is substance in the magical acts and that there are witchery acts that can affect nature. The magical acts are a deviation from nature; however, it is a deviation that is contrary to the Divine will. Such magic is intended to change the natural order of the world, as God created it, therefore the Torah forbid it and punishes the sorcerers by death. The Rashba accepts these things as the Torah and the Talmudic sages teach in their plain sense, and claims that just as natural drugs heal, "even amulets and sorcerers have the power to heal and they act as another law in nature, although logic cannot figure how"⁶² The Vilna Gaon held the opinion of the Rashba and even came out firmly against Maimonides' opinion: "All those who came after him disagreed with him [Maimonides], since many spells were said in the Talmud, however he was drawn to the philosophy, therefore he wrote that witchcraft and names and spells and demons and amulets are all lies...After all, we find many tales in the Talmud dealing with names and sorcery, however the rationalist philosophic influenced him ... All things are simply true, but there is deepness, not the deepness of the philosophers, but rather of those who possess the truth"⁶³. In his commentary on the prohibition of witchery, Nachmanides writes that in the witchery there is essence and he explicitly rejects Maimonides' view that the witchery was forbidden because it is not real. Nachmanides explains that the sorcerers were forbidden because they "change the nature of the world"⁶⁴. In other words, theirs is a forbidden intervention in creation. In his commentary on the book of Samuel, regarding King Saul's journey to the Medium at Endor, who raised the spirit of Samuel from his grave, the RaDak refers to the above dispute and tends to agree with the stream that claims that there is an essence and substance in witchcraft.⁶⁵

⁶¹ Shelomo ben Avraham Aderet, Rabbi, abbreviated: Rashba (Barcelona 1235-1310). Famous Sephardic rabbi. In his youth he started dealing in commerce but gave it up and became the head of a yeshiva and the rabbi of Barcelona. He held this post for more than 40 years. He received questions from all over the world: Spain, Portugal, France, north Africa, Germany, Turkey, Italy and Israel. He wrote more than ten thousand answers that later served as a foundation for various halachic books, such as Shulchan Aruch. Thousands more are yet to be published. He was the student of Rabenu Yonah Gerondi and Rambana. He also wrote the commentary on the Talmud and several halachic books. His vast knowledge of roman law, local law and economy helped him greatly in leading the Spanish Jewish community.

⁶² Rashba, Responsa (Bnei Brak, 1958) I, responsa 413. pp. 149. see the whole responsa pp. 144-150.

⁶³ Beur HaGra on Shulchan Aruch (Shulchan Melahim, Jerusalem 2004) Jore Dea 179, 13.

⁶⁴ Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman – Nahmanides, Commentary, (Netiv Haberaha, 1998, Jerusalem), Deut. 18,9 pp. 227.

⁶⁵ see: Rabbi David Kimhi ili Qimhi (1160.– 1235.), famous also according for his Hebrew acronym RaDaK, a medieval rabbi, Bible commentator, philosopher, student of grammar. RaDak's commentary of Bible (Jerusalem, 1959, repr. Vienna, 1859), 1 Sam 28,25 pp. 132-133.

CONCLUSION

Life and healing are fundamental values of Jewish tradition. Conventional medical healing is an obligation both of the patient to seek medical treatment and of the doctor to give it to the best of his ability.⁶⁶ However, how does Judaism see the practice of some people who visit rabbis with requests for healing, miraculous remedies, and amulets?

The tendency among Jews to go to Rabbis and to ask for a blessing and miraculous remedies is very popular, especially among Sephardic Jews⁶⁷ from north-Africa and among followers of the Chasidic movement, who consult their rabbinical leader on every issue, from health and business to the choice of a marriage partner. We saw that there are two attitudes in Judaism to this issue; however human beings possess a yearning for the spiritual, for things that reside beyond our own physical realm. This is why the Torah warns us not to go to people who deal with the supernatural. It is not advisable to seek out such supernatural devices, even though they sometimes provide solutions to problems. Sometimes such things are a hoax and a deception, sometimes the effects of such practices are only psychological, sometimes one reaches a truly righteous person and will be saved miraculously. However, generally we can say that the more a person is familiar with Torah's greatness and the more his faith is complete, the less need one feels to resort to supernatural; however, where Torah knowledge is lacking, one feels a greater need for the supernatural in the form of blessings, miracles, and amulets. Furthermore, the Sages teach us that when difficulties befall a person, they come as a sign. As Job's friends told him, a person then needs to examine his ways, to check his behavior, to repair and refine himself. By searching for solutions in the supernatural, he might be avoiding dealing with the foundation of the problem. Judaism generally asks people to do what is right and what is in their ability to help themselves in solving their problem, regardless of the perceived likelihood of success. So, if conventional treatment does not help, one should not give up! Miracles happens everywhere and all the time.⁶⁸ One should use the power of

⁶⁶ Vidi: Ex 21,19, Lev. 19,16; BT Baba kama 81b (Vilne) ; vidi i BT Sanhedrin 73a (Steinsaltz); See Maimonides, *Komentar Mishne*, Jerusalem, Kapach ed., Mossad HaRav Kook, 1963-1967; Nedarim 4,4.; see also K.D. ŽIDOVSTVO pp. 468.

⁶⁷ Sephards – a branch of Jews, descendants of Jews exiled from Spain and Portugal near the end of the 15th century, north African Jews, Jews from the Arabian peninsula and from the Mediterranean to Georgia and Bukhara; they have a different prayerbook, customs and melodies from another great branch of Jews, the Ashkenazim.

⁶⁸ There are many sources in rabbinic literature that arguing that God performs daily countless miracles of which people are not even aware. see: Midrash Shemot Rabbah Jerusalem (reprint Vilnius 1878.) 24:1, Midrash Tehilim Rabbah (Buber, Vilnius), 1891.106.; Midrash Bereshit Rabbah Jerusalem (reprint Vilnius 1878.)13:4–6, 20:9.; BT Nedarim 41a. (Vilne).

prayer, since as we saw before, prayer has the power to cancel the harshest doom. Also, we should get a blessing from a genuine spiritual leader. We will conclude this article with a classical expression of this approach from the Talmud:

“He [God] brought sufferings upon Hezekiah and then said to Isaiah, Go visit the sick. For so it says, In those days was Hezekiah sick unto death. And Isaiah the prophet, son of Amoz, came to him and said unto him, “Thus saith the Lord, Set thy house in order, for thou shalt die and not live” (Isa. 38, 1.). What is the meaning of ‘thou shalt die and not live’? Thou shalt die in this world and not live in the world to come. He said to him: Why so bad? He replied: Because you did not try to have children. He said: The reason was because I saw by the holy spirit that the children issuing from me would not be virtuous. He said to him: What have you to do with the secrets of the All-Merciful? You should have done what you were commanded, and let the Holy One, blessed be He, do that which pleases Him. He said to him: Then give me now your daughter; perhaps through your merit and mine combined virtuous children will issue from me. He replied: The doom has already been decreed. Said the other: Son of Amoz, finish your prophecy and go. This tradition I have from the house of my ancestor [King David]: Even if a sharp sword rests upon a man's neck he should not desist from prayer.”⁶⁹

⁶⁹ BT Berachot 10a. (Steinsaltz).

Acknowledgements: None.

Conflict of interest: None to declare.

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