

Weird Customs

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Anyone familiar with the Haredi/Orthodox world today knows that there has been a phenomenal increase in the number of charms (segulot) that are being peddled, adopted, and regarded as essential to Jewish religious life. The Orthodox press is full of announcements of pious visiting rabbis who will guarantee solutions for every human problem. Organizations here and in Israel will arrange visits of holy men to holy tombs, prayers at the Western Wall, cures for every ailment and human problem. In the Talmud there is a debate, left unresolved, as many are. Whether Simanim, Segulot, amulets, signs, charms, auspices, etc., are of any value or not—despite the Torah saying quite explicitly that magic, charms, and divinations have no place in Israel.

But they persist. The Talmud even distinguishes between amulets that work and those that don't. And we play the game still. At the Rosh Hashana table every year some eat a sheep's head (or a fish's) so that we will be the head and not the tail! Eat dates so that our enemies will be consumed. Apple in honey so that we have a sweet year. Pomegranates so that we will be as full of good deeds as they are of seeds. And so on. Some based on the ambiguity or connection with a Hebrew word. Others are simply giving expression to hopes and fears. But thinking that charms will solve the problems is just illogical and counterintuitive.

Once upon a time, when medicine was rarely available people relied on herbs, grandmother's traditions and charms. Some of which seemed to have worked though we wouldn't know whether it was the charm or other factors. Did they really? Or was just that anything that gave a person hope, the will to fight and live, might have had some beneficial effects. And if they didn't work out, that was the will of God. At least we had tried our best. Bake a challah. Who knows what the benefits might be! Peace at home? Pinch your nose too, for good measure.

Throughout the ancient world, folk medicine coexisted with what more empirical doctors— from Hippocrates, who lived some 2,400 years ago, to Galen—based on what they believed to be scientific evidence. The Talmud approved of empirical medicine, even gives examples of medical experiments. But most poor people has no access to such doctors. They relied on witches, quacks, and anyone who promised cures and hope. Almost everyone believed in spirits, devils, and magic. The scientific Maimonides declared that spirits, evil eyes and curses were efficacious only because people were simple enough to believe in them. And if they helped, so be it. Baalei Shem, men who knew how to use God's name to cure you, were employed as community healers for those who couldn't afford real doctors. Medicine was a lucrative, if dangerous, career. If the doctor cured, he was guilty of witchcraft; if he failed, he was guilty too. Many prominent medieval rabbi doctors met awful ends.

Kabbalah came to dominate both the Sephardi and the Hasidic worlds. Then as

now people were desperate for magic. On an intellectual level, it stood then as now as an antidote or alternative to an arid, rational expression of mainstream Jewish life, a profound and demanding spiritual experience. But it also became a tool for helping the needy and for controlling them. Adopting the whole panoply of miracles, wonders, magic, and spells borrowed wholesale from the pagan world, medieval Christianity, and Islam. Worshipping saints, relics, and tombs, generating vast sums of money out of miraculous cures and blessings offered to the credulous and desperate. As a result, the very term "Kabbala" came to be synonymous with weird, suspect practices.

The Enlightenment attacked such nonsense. It influenced Central and Western Europe as well as the USA with a heavy dose of skepticism, as well as scientism (much of which turned out to be dangerous and misguided). Established religious authorities (scared by the mystical excesses of the seventeenth century messianic pseudo-messiah, Shabbtai Zevi, and then Jacob Frank) turned their backs on anything nonrational. The Enlightenment threw the baby out with the dirty water.

All the more amazing that now the tables have completely turned, and it is the rationalists who are often looked on as weirdos, out of sync with the zeitgeist. Perhaps it is the failure of science to solve our personal problems, and the pressures of life that science and technology have only increased, that explains why in all religions the pseudo-mystical extremes seem to be so successful. Folk medicine, particularly, is making a comeback. Rhinoceros horns cure everything, even if they are the same as our fingernails.

David Biale has recently published a magisterial study called *Hasidism: A New History*. In it he and other contributors detail how the emerging Hasidic dynasties rivaled each other in magic and wonder cures, in pandering to the needs of the simple, as much as by defining themselves intellectually—but also, let's not forget, as a lucrative source of income. Now this approach has completely taken over the Lithuanian, more rational wing of Judaism, and its leaders play a similar game.

This nouveau excess can now be experienced firsthand in Israel where, for demographic and historical reasons, Kabbalah (Hassidic, Sephardi and New Age) has enjoyed an amazing rebirth amongst secular and religious. Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, who lived through and suffered Roman occupation, was the figurehead and leader of the mystical approach.

The tomb of R. Shimon Bar Yochai, in Meron in the Gallil, on his assumed anniversary on Lag BaOmer (the 33rd Day of the Omer—which falls next Wednesday night, this year), has become a focal point for almost every community, sect, variation, and denomination. They come together at this most popular pilgrimage destination that is the nearest alternative Judaism has to the annual Burning Man Festival in the Black Rock Desert in Nevada, USA.

I remember Meron from the 1950s as a small, remote oriental mausoleum. It has now expanded into a village of its own with special private walkways and tunnels for (self-) important rabbis to be able to move through the crowds, from cars to grave and back.

It is here that one can see a whole range of new miracle customs. One very strange one, which no one heard about in Judaism 100 years ago, but is now regarded as a holy as Moses, is the "Chai Rotel". It is a measurement of 18 measures (the number 18, is the same as Chai, the Hebrew for Life, in numerology), some 54 liters, of drink, preferably alcoholic, that one should provide for visitors to Meron on Lag BaOmer. The measurement Rotel seems to be of Egyptian origin.

The custom originated with the Hasidic Rebbe Ben Zion Halberstam of Bobov. He claimed he heard it from the sages of Eretz Yisrael that barren women who donated Chai Rotels on the anniversary of Shimon bar Yochai's death would be blessed with children—an alternative to visiting Rachel's tomb for the same reason, except that he added a lot of extras. If you do this, he said, you will be blessed with all kinds of miracles and cures. This and sticking bits of paper into the Western Wall (or the rebbe's grave) for God to read. Which now seems to be the obligation of anyone, Jewish or non-Jewish, gangster or billionaire, even presidents visiting either site.

Another completely new custom (as opposed just baking challah and separating some off for a sort of tithe) is baking a challah with a key inside or in the shape of a key, called in Yiddish "Schlissel Challahs". Never heard of them? Neither had I until recently. During the week after Passover it is a charm to ensure parnassa (making a living). I wonder if the Zuckerbergs baked one this year. (For a thorough analysis of this and the whole phenomenon of superstition, charms, and miracle cures that have infected us, see [Schlissel Challah, Bread Baking, and the Relief of Anxiety – An Update.](#))

If we were to be objective, we would say that this present phase of Judaism is overwhelmingly superstitious and inclined to magic. How do we, who are not superstitious, who like our religion to be spiritual, even mystical but still rational, deal with all this? With amusement? Derision? With admiration for the creativity of wonder rabbis and snake oil salesmen? With respect for any kind of tradition? Or sympathy for the simple and needy? I don't know. We all choose what works for us. I know I shouldn't make fun of the credulous. But I just cannot help laughing, crying, and sympathizing all at the same time! Still, I hope you enjoy Lag BaOmer, wherever you are and however you celebrate it. Another of its strange customs is to shoot bows and arrows!