

Superstition

Where does superstition end and religion begin? Or are they same? My late father had no patience for spells, curses, or any kind of superstition. He always quoted to us the famous line from Numbers 23:23, "There are no charms in Jacob, no magic in Israel." The most he conceded to us as kids was that if we were frightened we should say the Shema.

Why are Jews so superstitious? In fact, the world is. One might think that astrology, card reading, divination of all sorts, were demolished eons ago. But they are gaining in popularity, rather than waning.

However much we are led to believe we are closer to controlling our world, and we are in many areas, in our personal lives there is far more pressure and insecurity. The world we inhabit is often as frightening as it must have been to Neanderthal man in his cave. And we still use similar tools for protection. What is wrong with superstition?

Superstition is the belief that, regardless of my own actions or any other external factors, like walking into a war zone or driving a car the wrong way on a motorway, if one does certain prescribed actions, or carries a certain text or symbol, it will protect. Regardless of whether I do my homework, check the figures, and balance all the factors, if I get a blessing then this business deal will succeed. Look at all those footballers crossing themselves before they take their kick!

Any rational mathematician familiar with the laws of probability will be able to explain why some bets on currencies may well succeed, cancer will be cured, but others not. The successes will be hailed as miracles. The failures will be accepted and forgotten. Human brains have that amazing gift of ignoring things they want to.

Many people confuse religious symbolism with superstition, but it is not the symbolism of religion that protects. The mezuzah on your doorpost is not a magic charm. It is there to remind you of your religious obligations in the hope that by doing them you will be elevating yourself and your household.

Time and time again, the rabbis say that luck has no bearing on Jewish life (Talmud Shabbat 156a&b). And yet, for all that, you can find references in the Talmud to people relying on luck. Luck, like God, seems a natural human response to the unknowable. Whoever avoids using spells for luck enters the highest levels of spirituality (Nedarim 32a). However, human frailty, I am afraid, trumps logic most of the time.

Religion itself proclaims that the good are rewarded, yet in life the righteous often suffer and the wicked prosper. Clearly, good actions and good consequences are not inevitably connected. If God can ordain 400 years of suffering in Egypt before the Exodus, then during those four hundred years the enslaved sons of Jacob could have done nothing to change their situation. Rational attempts at explaining the world in terms of individual good and bad

totally flounder. No wonder it became so much easier to refer it all to another life.

Religion, in theory at least, is predicated on the idea that, one's actions can determine a lot. The word is "hishtadlut", the other side of the coin to "bashert", the Yiddish for "ordained". They coexist. We can and have no option but to accept what happens. There are so many competing and conflicting factors at work in the universe that it is impossible to know or control them all. But at the same time there are plenty of other areas where one can do one's best, where it is possible to change and achieve things by whatever means are at one's disposal. Only desperate or lazy people clutch at straws.

What I find offensive is that too many of these miracle rabbis expect people to pay for their insecurity! Credulity then becomes a matter of extortion and manipulation. Give me money and I will give you a charm to cure your cancer. Now that's what I expect from a witch doctor, not a rabbi.

I do feel the presence of a Divine power that can be reassuring and comforting, not because it necessarily produces the results we hope for, but because it reinforces a sense of our own humanity. It encourages us to use our human resources to cope. It is supportive, if not curative. It is like love. It does not take away life's problems, but it certainly makes life easier to handle. It is the difference between regarding God as a Slot Machine and regarding God as an experience to feel and savor and enjoy. The more positive experiences one has in life, the easier it is to cope.

I was always impressed by the story in Kings II, Chapter 5. The prophet Elisha cured the Aramean general, Naaman, by getting him to recognize a higher power, not a superstitious one. Most importantly, he refused any reward. Nowadays there's a charge. We have, indeed, deteriorated spiritually! Superstition and religion are in bed together more than ever.