



Saul and the witch

Do Jews believe in afterlife? Is witchcraft real?

Good Shabbos!

People often ask if Jews believe in Afterlife. They claim that it's not a Jewish belief and are surprised to hear that Afterlife is a basic precept in Judaism. The next question is always, "Where is it written in the Bible?"

There is a story in the Prophets about King Saul (Shaul) and how at the end of his life, he fought his last battle with the Philistines (Plishtim). Those were tough days for the Jewish Nation. The Philistines had amassed a huge army and had come to fight with the Jews, and Shaul had also called up his military and camped in a place called Gilboa.

When he stood atop Mt. Gilboa and looked down at the mighty Pelishti army, his spirits fell. He was at a loss for how to proceed and wanted to hear G-d's word direct him and show him the way.

But where do you ask for G-d's Word? Shmuel HaNavi (Samuel the Prophet) was no longer alive at the time and Shaul himself, who once had the spirit of prophecy resting upon him, was no longer meriting prophetic revelation, not even by dream. What do you do?

In those days, as was the established custom, it was incumbent upon Shaul to go ask the Kohein

Gadol (High Priest) what to do by means of the Urim V'Tumim.

However, Shaul had killed Achimelech, the Kohein Gadol, and had destroyed Nov, the city of Kohanim, because they had both helped his rival Dovid.

So the one and only “option” left to Shaul now was to go seek the advice of a professional witch.

This would be a master of the black art of Ov, which was a form of genuine sorcery outlawed by the Torah. (How Shaul could even think of doing this, never mind actually doing it, is an entirely different discussion.) Indeed, Shaul himself had purged the country of Ov and Yidoni practitioners, as the Torah mandates—so now, where was Shaul, the great King of Israel, going to find an Ov master and how would he get to her?

Shaul’s servants searched high and low until they found their desired subject and notified the king. In Ein-Dor, there was an Ov-master witch—and Shaul decided to meet with her and ask how to proceed with the war.

King Shaul changed out of his royal apparel and dressed like a common man. In that outfit, no one would recognize him. With a heavy heart and with the unfolding events casting a heavy shadow on his steps, Shaul set out for Ein-Dor accompanied by two of his top officers, Avner and Amsha.

The Ov master trembled to no end when this man arrived and demanded that she raise the spirit of Shmuel HaNavi. She refused. She said, “Look! You know what King Shaul did—how he cut the Ovos and Yidonim from the land! Why do you lay a snare for my life to cause me to die?”

Shaul swore to her that she would come to no harm.

“Who shall I raise up for you?” the witch then asked Shaul. “Raise

Shmuel HaNavi for me!” came the reply.

The witch took a certain bone, placed it under her armpit and performed the traditional rituals of the Ov masters—and raised the spirit of the Prophet Samuel.

A great fright fell on the Ov master when she saw Shmuel rise before her in the form of a living human being. She immediately understood that her customer was no ordinary man at all but a king—and King Shaul in all of his glory himself!

“Why did you deceive me when you are Shaul?!” screamed the woman to the king in deathly fright.

“Don’t scream and don’t fear!” Shaul said. “Tell me—who do you see?”

“I see an old man rising, and he’s wrapped in a cloak,” said the witch. Shaul realized that it was Shmuel, who would wear the cloak his mother Chana had made him.

“Why have you disturbed me to raise me?” Now Shaul could hear Shmuel speaking.

“It’s very hard for me!” replied Shaul in a trembling voice and with a broken heart. “The Pelishtim are upon me, and G-d has left me, and I have not been answered further, not through prophets and not in dreams!”

“And why do you ask me when G-d has departed from you?” Shaul heard Shmuel’s words once again.

Here the Midrash tells us that Shmuel was saying to Shaul, “Now that I am in the World of Truth, I can tell you the entire truth that I could not tell you before. I told you then that G-d had ripped away the kingdom from you and given it to your comrade who is better than you. Now, I

can reveal to you that G-d meant Dovid by that—the very man you pursue and intend to kill. Know you that G-d does this to you not for naught, but rather ‘because you did not listen to Gd’s Voice and you did not execute His fury upon Amalek; thus this matter.’ ”

Shmuel essentially said to him that because of that incident, both you and your son will die, and Israel will fall into Pelishti hands.

Shaul then asked him, “If I flee, will I be saved?”

Shmuel told him that he would—but that if he died in battle tomorrow, he’d be with him in Gan Eden.

And indeed, the next day, Shaul went out to fight, and died in battle (Shmuel I:28). (Sichos LaNoar Vol. I, Iyar 5709.)

The Rebbe asks: Apparently the entire story doesn’t make sense!

We learn that Shmuel gets angry at King Shaul for disturbing him from his rest. But, as we touched on before, the real big question here comes right from our very Torah portion!

In the Parshah of Kedoshim, in the very last verse, we read: “And a man or woman who has in them Ov or Yidoni shall surely die” (Vayikra 20:27). And so how is it possible that Shaul raises the spirits of the dead using Ov—and no less than Shmuel HaNavi?! It’s something that is strictly forbidden in the Torah itself!

What’s more, Avner and Amsha were great tzadikim—holy people who did not do sins. And on top of that, how is it that Shmuel did not rebuke Shaul for doing something against the Torah?

So the Rebbe answers these questions with something very interesting.

Since Shaul was the king and he saw that the Pelishtim were coming

to attack the Nation of Israel, and it was he who was supposed to lead the battle but he didn't know how, he therefore felt that it was a life-threatening situation for the entire Jewish nation—and a matter of life and death negates all the rules of the Torah itself (except for the rules against idol worship, murder and illicit relations). (And, as it turned out, using the Ov master didn't help in any case.)

And so Shmuel only asked him why he didn't use conventional methods like prophets and dreams, etc. To that, Shaul answered that he had tried but that it hadn't helped—the only choice left to him was to raise Shmuel by Ov because he thought that was the only way left to him by which he might be able to save the Jewish Nation. (See Sichas Parshas Shmini, Sichos Kodesh 5730, Vol. I, pg. 688.)

What's important for us to know is that the Rebbe says that witchcraft and black magic and necromancy only existed during the era of the Prophets. That's because as long as there was real prophecy on the side of holiness—meaning, in plain English, on the light side of the Force, for you Star Wars fans—then there was real witchcraft and black magic and necromancy on the side of unholiness. But the moment real prophecy ended, so did real black magic.

So today, there is no such thing as real witchcraft—it's all fake.

The entire idea of knowing the future by reading tarot cards or crystal balls or coffee grinds is all illusion and has no truth to it. And so people who run nowadays to all kinds of future predictors and pay them lots of money are not only violating the Torah but are also engaging in something simply false—there's nothing real about it. (Hisvaduyos 5744, Vol. II, pg. 1101.)

As the Rambam writes (Laws of Idol Worship, end of Chap. 11), “These things are all matters of lies and falsehood... and it is not fitting for Jews to carry on with these frivolities... all who believe in such matters and their like, and thinks in his heart that they are true and things of

wisdom but the Torah merely banned them, is nothing but among the fools and ignoramuses.”

The one and only way to deal with such a situation is for the Jew to strengthen his trust in G-d as it is printed on no less than the U.S. dollar itself: “In G-d We Trust.”

Belief in G-d is something a lot of people have. But trust in G-d is something that needs to be worked on—to open up to Him and to turn to Him all the time.

And so instead of wearing amulets or lucky charms or red strings (about which the Rebbe said it’s an Emorite practice—see Hiskashrus #857), what we need to be doing is fulfilling the words of the Rebbe, who always said, “*Tracht gut—vet zein gut!*” Think positively and it will be positive.

Good Shabbos!