

VAEIRA (EXODUS 6:2-9:35)

Abracadabra = MC²

2010 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

"Show me a sign!" challenged the Pharaoh. *"I've never heard of this G-d of yours! And I have no intention of releasing the Israelites!"* (Exodus, 7:9, 5:2)

Moses was prepared. He took his staff and threw it to the floor. The staff miraculously turned into a snake. Surely, this man was for real.

The Pharaoh laughed in his face. "Do you think you can impress me with simple magic? Anything you can do, my magicians can do better!"

Sure enough, the Egyptian sorcerers made their own sticks into snakes. "Are you trying to sell straw in *Ofarayim*?" (The Egyptian equivalent of bringing coal to Newcastle or rabbis to Monsey. :-)) This was Egypt, the magic capital of the world! (From Midrash Rabbah, 9)

Unimpressed by Moses' "miracles," the Pharaoh refused to allow the Israelites to leave. It was time to begin the Ten Plagues. The Nile turned to blood. The Egyptian sorcerers took water and turned it to blood. The Pharaoh refused to listen to Moses.

Egypt was overrun with frogs. The sorcerers produced more frogs, but couldn't get rid of Moses' frogs. The Pharaoh temporarily relented and agreed to release the slaves, but later changed his mind.

For the third plague, Aaron turned the dust into lice that attacked all the Egyptians. The sorcerers tried to duplicate that plague, but couldn't. They threw in the towel. They now saw that Moses was not using magic. Magic, it seems, has no influence on microscopic matter. They had no choice but to admit that "... *it is the finger of G-d*" (8:15), not sorcery, that gave Moses his power.

The sorcerers never again challenged Moses. They had met their match. (Midrash Rabbah, 10:7)

Do we believe in magic?!

Isn't G-d the only source of supernatural power? Do we believe in Merlin and witches and goblins and sorcerers?

There are actually two schools of thought among the classical commentaries. Rashi and others take the position that the Egyptians had the power to manipulate nature. There is a "*Koach Hatum'ah*," a type of Black Magic, which G-d allows to exist in the world. The Torah mentions, for example, that it is possible for a false prophet to perform miracles. We are warned to ignore a miracle worker who tells us to violate the Commandments. (Deuteronomy, 13:2-4)

The other school of thought is that of Maimonides. He states (Hil. Avodah Zarah, 11:16) that the magic of the ancients was phony. It was all a show! Egyptians were simply masters of illusion.

***DISCLAIMER: There is no shortage of websites devoted to the occult and its supposed relationship with Judaism. There are many so-called experts in Kabbalah -- "Jewish Mysticism," who use a lot of Hebrew phrases and sound very scholarly in spouting gibberish. In one respect, I have something in common with these "experts." I don't know what they're talking about, and neither do they!**There is definitely a concept of the supernatural in Judaism. However, one who has not mastered all of Jewish Law and the Talmud should not dabble in that which he cannot hope to understand. A responsible and ACCURATE study of this topic is beyond the scope of this humble writer. In consideration of the above, I will limit my comments to the view of the second school of thought.*

I have on my computer desktop a picture that I took of my son at the *Kotel* (Western Wall) in Jerusalem.



(And now you have it too! -- He's on the lower left hand side, next to the flag pole, holding an umbrella.) Now, there is nothing extraordinary about a father taking a picture of his son. The unusual part is that I took that picture while sitting in my office in Monsey, New York. (See <http://www.aish.com/wallcam>)

Magic! Can you imagine, from thousands of miles away, he was able to hear me tell him where to stand! Without "seeing" him, I was able to reproduce his image on a "magic" computer connected to a "magic" camera via the "magic" of the Internet! And now, I have "magically" sent it to you!

What we don't understand, we call magic. Imagine if someone had told Magellan that John Glenn would circumnavigate the globe in a couple of hours. He would have dismissed it as sorcery. What if someone had told William Shakespeare that people could watch his plays on a little glass screen called a television? He would have called it the work of the Devil!! (And he just might have been right!!!!)

Only recently has modern science come to appreciate the knowledge of medicine and herbs possessed by "primitive" cultures. We know today that the ancient Egyptians were master mathematicians and architects. They accomplished feats that could be considered superhuman.

Is it so far-fetched to assume that Pharaoh had a team of showmen who were geniuses at illusion? Or, perhaps they were scientists who were experts in a type of "spontaneous generation" that today's "experts" haven't "discovered" yet. ("Today's science fiction is tomorrow's science fact.")

Whatever it was that they were doing, they recognized that what Moses brought to the table was neither science nor sleight of hand. It was "*the finger of G-d*," and they were powerless to compete.

We are still left with one question. O.K., the Egyptians didn't defy nature. They were experts, either in a science that is beyond us, or in fraud. But what made them so sure that they were seeing "*the finger of G-d*?" Couldn't it be that Moses was just a better scientist or fraud than they were?!!

I look at it this way. The ancient Egyptians, for all their math and scientific wizardry, are gone. The ancient Canaanites and Philistines are gone. The great Babylonians are gone. The lands of the four above-mentioned nations are inhabited by children of Abraham!

Greeks? Romans? Phoenicians? Gone. Kaput. Forgotten. The Thousand-Year Reich? History.

Oh, there is one nation from back then who is still around. Remember Israel, poor, persecuted Israel? Enslaved, exiled, Inquisitioned, Pogromed, and Holocausted Israel? Yeah, they're still here!

Some may call it chance, some may call it magic. As for myself, if that's not the finger of G-d, I don't know what is!

Have a great Shabbos.

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