

Customs and Laws from the Parsha: Vaeira

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Aaron cast his staff before Pharaoh and before his servants and it became a serpent. Pharaoh too summoned the wise men and the magicians; and the necromancers of Egypt also did likewise with their (lahat) magic. (Exodus 7:10-11)

The Torah explicitly prohibits the use of different types of black magic. Categories of such practices include koseim (soothsaying), me'onein (use of omens), menacheish (superstitions) and kishuf (sorcery) (Deuteronomy 18:10, Leviticus 19:26 and Rashi ibid.). Lahat implies the use of incantations (Rashi on Exodus 7:11).

Rashi (d. 1105) also brings the opinion of the Gemara that a me'onein is someone who performs achizas einaim (lit. seizing the eyes) which implies sleight of hand (Rashi on Deuteronomy 18:10). Rashi does not clarify any further and so there is some discussion regarding the nature of achizas einaim.

Rabbi Yoel Sirkis (d. 1640) explains it as witchcraft (Bach on Yoreh Deah 179) whereas Rabbi David ben Solomon ibn Zimra (d. 1573) explains it as the use of demons (Metzudos Dovid 61).

The other explanation of achizat einaim is that it does not employ supernatural phenomena or beings but rather creates an illusion which defies logic, such as magic tricks which simply employ sleight of hand. Maimonides (d. 1204) explains achizat einaim as an illusion produced by well-rehearsed, agile, and subtle movements (Sefer Hamitzvot Lo Ta'aseh 32).

Rabbi Avraham Danzig (d. 1748) prohibited magic shows even though the tricks used did not attempt to employ supernatural forces (Chochmat Adam 89:6). When asked whether modern day magic shows fall under the category of achizat einaim and would therefore be prohibited according to the Torah, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein (d. 1986) concludes that there would be grounds to prohibit magic shows if the audience genuinely believed that supernatural forces were being used. Since it is well known that the performer is only using sleight of hand, he permits the performance of magic shows (Iggrot Moshe Yoreh Deah 4:13).

Similarly, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef rules that magic shows are permitted provided that the performer announces that he is just tricking the audience (Yabia Omer Yoreh Deah 5:13).

Sorry Mr. Daniels, that's *not* magic.



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