

Sedra Highlight

- Dr Jacob Solomon

Sho-f'tim

There shall not be among you one who practices divinations... who consults the dead. For anyone who does these things performs an abomination of G-d. It is because of these abominations that G-d drives out those nations from before you. You shall follow G-d with perfect faith (18:10-14).

Rambam heads those who believe that human capacities to perform magic are mere delusions and have no real substance whatsoever. The Chinuch, whilst acknowledging this approach, does include other positions that consider that there exist individuals with spiritual sensitivities that have capacities to sense the beyond and even sometimes 'get it right'. Yet right or wrong, the Torah forbids those avenues of inquiry as means of communicating with those who have passed on or for foretelling the future. Instead, the Torah reassures, people should have perfect faith that G-d will communicate what the people need to know through His chosen prophets. And if the nevi'im draw a blank and don't get the desired vision at crucial moments as happened with Shaul HaMelech (Shmuel Alef 28:6), so be it. Accept that G-d does not wish to advise, take the hint, make the best-informed

decision possible, and move on. Do not ask a medium to bring up a soul from the dead to give advice, as he did.

What is striking is that the Torah terms all these practices as abominations, using the same word - TO'EIVA - as it does for the forbidden sexual practices of incest and bestiality listed in Parashiot Achrei and K'doshim. And with the same consequences: with their carnal offences "For the nations [of Canaan] did all those things and I spew them out" (Vayikra 20:23), and, here in their working with supernatural forces, "It is because of these abominations that G-d drives out those nations from before you." G-d declares that He will ensure that the Israelites drive out the Canaanites from the Land. However, incest is forbidden to all humanity under the Sheva Mitzvot B'nei No'ach, the Seven Noahide Laws. But these mitzvot do not seem to include tuning into the supernatural for guidance and advice.

In recognizing this difficulty, Ramban does say that the words "because of these abominations G-d drives out those nations" do not include "all these abominations", as he recognizes that not all the practices of nations using this path of inquiry are fatal as passing children in fire (18:10); some of the methods listed appear to be fairly harmless.

However, it may be suggested that "these abominations" refer to what we today understand as common superstition being taken very seriously, and so include all the practices listed, for the following reason. The tapping into forces beyond normal human reach tends to declare what is going to happen, and thus put people at risk of life-destroying despair. Once people give up hope, they feel that things are outside their control, and they easily get to a stage where they are beyond help. It is the putting people at risk of descending into helplessness that is an abomination in the eyes of G-d. To paraphrase a mantra of Rabi Nachman of Beslov: "All life is a narrow bridge, but the most important thing is not be afraid; tackle the challenges face on."

Contrast with the words of the nevi'im as expounded in the Tanach, which generally have one thing in common. They warn of the likelihood of something horrible happening, but only if the people do not change their behavior. So however thunderous the words of Yirmiyahu, Amos, and Yechezkel, they always contained words of hope for those who would choose to behave in the right way. The words of the prophets including those enshrined in the Tanach for posterity emphasize the same message: there is always hope and help for those who actively seek to do the right thing. It is up to the individ-

ual to choose whether to seek the truth and do the right thing or not. There is the possibility of hope; rarely is there finality. It is that hope that gives people the courage and stamina to persist when things are not working out. In short, the individual has a hand in his or her own destiny. And it is an abomination to take that sense of self-determination away.

