



Rabbi David Silverberg
Parashat Balak

Among the praises that Bilam lavishes upon *Benei Yisrael* is the declaration, "*Ki lo nachash be-Yaakov ve-lo kesem be-Yisrael*" ("For there is no divination in Jacob, nor witchcraft in Israel" – 23:23). Several commentators, including Rashi, Rashbam and Ibn Ezra, explain this as an affirmation of *Benei Yisrael's* rejection of witchcraft and sorcery. They are deserving of God's protection and assistance because there is no *nachash* (divination) or *kesem* (witchcraft) to be found among the nation. (See Ramban, who explains differently.)

Maimonides follows this interpretation, as well, amidst his vehement remarks concerning the futility of all kinds of astrology and sorcery (Hilkhot Avodat Kokhavim 11:16):

All these things [means of witchcraft] are matters of falsehood and deception, and it is with them that the ancient idolaters misled the peoples of the lands in order that they would follow them. It is not worthy for Israel, who are sophisticated scholars, to be drawn by these vanities or to conjure in the mind that there is some benefit to it, as it says, "For there is no divination in Jacob, nor witchcraft in Israel"... And whoever believes in these and similar matters, and thinks in his mind that they are true and matters of wisdom but the Torah forbade them, is only from among the fools and mindless people...

In this passage, Maimonides seeks to dispel the possible misconception that magic, sorcery and astrology have some truth and substance to them, that these forces indeed exert some kind of power, but the Torah nevertheless forbade them for whatever reason. Maimonides insists that the Torah forbade us from resorting to these so-called "forces" for the simple reason that they are entirely meaningless, nothing more than products of the imagination. He elaborates on this notion in greater length in his commentary to the Mishna (Avoda Zara, chapter 4), where he decries the fact that many otherwise knowledgeable and committed Jews acknowledge the power of these media.

Maimonides also focuses here on the lure of witchcraft and astrology, and how this attraction enabled paganism to earn widespread acceptance in the ancient world. The disseminators of pagan belief managed to attract followers by persuading them of all kinds of alleged spiritual forces that they could tap into in order to fulfill their wishes or predict the future. Maimonides thus brands superstitious claims as sheer foolishness, that was employed as a means of persuasion to lure the ignorant, unsophisticated masses to embrace absurd religious beliefs.

Superstition and fortune-telling having a luring effect because they purport to offer easy, "quick-fix" solutions to life's problems. They convey the message that rather than struggling with the harsh realities of the world, and investing time and energy in

discovering creative and beneficial solutions, man can overcome challenges through some simple rituals. There is a certain false sense of comfort in the belief that the laws of nature are not necessarily binding, that there is a way to "beat the system" and avoid the constraining rules of the natural world. Practitioners of witchcraft allegedly herald the promise of freedom from the obstacles, hardships and uncertainties of life. They claim to turn an unpredictable world into a readily predictable one, by showing their consumers which buttons to press on the astrological dashboard to make all their problems suddenly disappear.

Maimonides' vehement rejection of superstition reflects his conviction that the world's problems and challenges must be confronted, not avoided. The hardships posed by the natural world must be resolved within the system of natural law, not through futile attempts to invoke imaginary, external powers. Maimonides firmly believed that one of the messages that *Am Yisrael*, as "sophisticated scholars" ("*chakhamim mechukamim*"), are to convey is the need to accept the challenges of life and confront them through the guidance of the Torah, rather than attempt to escape these challenges by resorting to alleged, otherworldly forces.