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Practical Kabbala: Is it Allowed?

Based on a Shiur by Rav Avraham Y. Cohen, Rosh Kollel Ohel Yitzhak, Lakewood

While *Kabbala* generally refers to the study and understanding of the various traits of *Hashem*, it is possible that certain elements of *Kabbala* can be used to defy the laws of nature. Although this is rarely seen today, the notion of using the Names of *Hashem* in this manner may have been more common in earlier times, and is mentioned throughout Torah literature. Would the use of “practical *Kabbala*” be permitted according to *Halacha*, or might this be included in the prohibition of *Kishuf* – sorcery? In this article, we will examine the various sources in the *Gemara* and *Halacha* that discuss this issue.

The Categories of *Kishuf*

The *Gemara* (*Sanhedrin* 67b) states that there are three categories of *Kishuf* – sorcery. One form carries the capital punishment, based on the *Passuk*: “You may not keep a sorcerer alive” (*Shemot* 22:17). Another is not punishable but forbidden nonetheless (*Patur Aval Assur*), and yet another form is permitted. The *Gemara* elaborates on the definition of these three categories:

1. Doing a physical act of sorcery is forbidden and punishable by death.
2. Creating an illusion of witchcraft (*Ahizat Enayim* – lit. “grabbing the eyes”, which

today might be called sleight of hand [1]) is forbidden but not punishable.

3. A permissible act: The *Gemara* gives the example of R. Hanina and R. Oshaya, who, every *Erev Shabbat* would delve into the wisdom of creation (*Yetzira*), and thereby created an *Egla Tilta* – a calf that was big enough to be one third of its adult size[2], which they would then eat for their *Shabbat* meal! Apparently, this type of “sorcery” is permitted.

How did *Amoraim* Create a Calf?

In this article, we will focus on the parameters of the third category: using the names of *Hashem* to create objects, which can otherwise be termed as “practical *Kabbala*.” What exactly did R. Oshaya do in order to create the calf, and does this mean it is permitted to use the wisdom of *Kabbala* to create objects or other supernatural events?

Rashi's Understanding

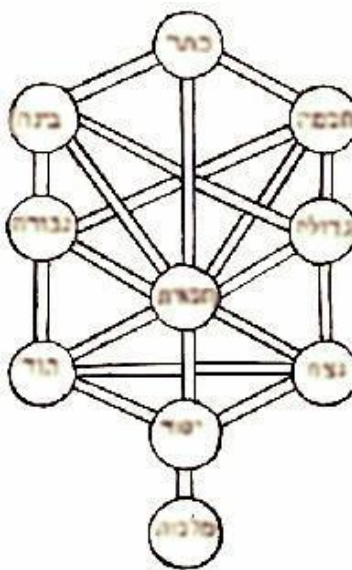
According to *Rashi*, R. Oshaya and R. Hanina did not create the calf directly. Rather, they were combining together the letters of *Hashem's* name with which He created the world, and the calf

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happened by itself. *Rashi* explains that the reason this is not considered *Kishuf* is because it is considered the work of *Hashem*, and is performed through a process of using His Holy Name. The *Levush* (Y.D. 179:15), commenting on this phenomenon[3], explains (seemingly based on *Rashi*, though he doesn't cite him directly) that *Hashem* created a force, inherent within His Names, by which great individuals, such as prophets or pious people, can perform these types of actions. He then says that one who uses the names of *Hashem* for such purposes is demonstrating the greatness of *Hashem*. Therefore, as long as it is done in a manner of holiness, and for the purpose of sanctification of *Hashem's* name, it is not considered sorcery. However, the *Levush* notes that nowadays, no one is on a sufficiently high level to engage in this type of activity.

The Meiri's Opinion

The *Meiri* appears to interpret the *Gemara* differently. He states that a natural act is permitted, and adds the following: "Even if people learn how to create beautiful creatures not through mating, as is known from the books of science that such an act is not impossible, they are permitted to do so, as anything that is natural, is not included in *Kishuf*." Thus, the *Meiri* understands that using natural forces of the world to create living beings is permitted[4]. According to the *Meiri*, it seems that the critical factor is whether the act is a natural one or not. Presumably, he understands the actions of R. Hanina and R. Oshaya as using the *Sefer Yetzira* and laws of creation to naturally create living beings. This is different than *Rashi* (and the *Levush*), who understand the distinction as whether it was done in a manner of holiness.



The Opinion of Maran

This statement of the *Gemara* is cited in the *Shulhan Aruch* (Y.D. 179:15), who says that it is permitted to use the *Sefer Yetzira* to create an illusion and even to perform miraculous actions.

The *Shach* (Y.D. 179:18) cites the explanation of the *Levush* quoted above, as well as his conclusion that nowadays we are not on the level to be capable of doing such things, and the *Shach* agrees as well that this may not be done today, despite the fact that it does not constitute *Kishuf*. He notes that other authors agree with this, and references the *Mishna* in *Pirke Avot* (1:13) that

says that "one who uses the crown will vanish". He then references the *Rema* (Y.D. 246:21) who suggests (among other interpretations) that this saying may refer to one who uses the Names of *Hashem* for such purposes[5]. Thus, the *Shach* is also warning us not to use the Names of *Hashem* in this manner, even if we would know how to do so.

Another relevant source that limits the usage of the Names is the *Rashba* in his *Teshuvot* (1:220). The *Rashba* says that if one knows and understands the inner workings of *Hashem's* Names, then he who uses them is "*Ahuv l'ma'ala, v'nehmad l'matta*" – "beloved in the Heavens, and delightful on this earth[6]." However, this is only if one understands these Names thoroughly. One who simply knows how to pronounce the letters, but does not understand them, is in essence "playing around" with them, and, as the *Rashba* declares: "*Shomer nafsho yirhak mizeh*" – "one who guards his soul must distance himself from such behavior".

Precedent

Let's return to the explanation of *Rashi*. It seems from *Rashi*, as mentioned above, that these Sages did indeed use *Hashem's* Names to create the

calf. The *Hattam Sofer* (O.H. 198) elaborates that this was certainly something that was done, and he brings a few other examples of such actions. For instance, the *Gemara* (*Sanhedrin* 65b) states that *Amora'im* even created people. He refers to the *Hacham Tzvi* (93) who also discusses such phenomena[7], and also references a comment of the *Behag* (one of the *Ge'onim*) that one of the great Sages of the *Gemara*, Shemuel, was born through the use of *Hashem's* Name[8]. Clearly, the sources imply that great people used practical *Kabbala* and that, in earlier times, such actions were entirely permitted.

Direct Vs. Indirect

The *Likute He'arot* on the *Hattam Sofer* quotes the *Imre Yosef* (Vol.1 *Mo'adim, Shavu'ot*, pg. 34) who does not understand how this can be permitted, even for the early Sages. After all, as the *Shach* and the *Rema* stated, one should not engage in these types of activities, as "one who uses the crown will vanish". In order to explain *Rashi's* stance, the *Imre Yosef* notes that *Rashi's* expression is that it happened automatically. However, he claims, it certainly should not be done actively, by any one and in any era.

This explanation of *Rashi* is a bit difficult though, as the *Gemara* pointed out that this event happened every week. Furthermore, the *Gemara* indicates that they did it in order to eat, which means it was most likely intentional.

Resolving Rashi and the Hattam Sofer

The *Likutei He'arot* suggests that perhaps the *Hattam Sofer* understood *Rashi* as follows: since these Sages were delving into *Hilchot Yetzira*, they knew that the calf would be created, and it was intentional. However, they didn't create the calf directly, but did so by studying *Hilchot Yetzira*. That is why the *Gemara* states "and a calf was created", in the passive form.

As for the *Shach*, *Levush*, and the *Rema* mentioned above, the *Likute He'arot* notes that they

did not say it is forbidden; rather, the *Levush* stated that one doing so must be on a sufficiently high level, which even in his time was not attainable. However, those who were on such a level, were permitted to do so. As the *Levush* notes, even the prophet *Yesha'aya* erred in this regard, but it was not forbidden for him to try. Therefore, the *Amora'im* should also have been allowed. The *Likute He'arot* also cites the prime disciple of the *Arizal*, *Ribbi Hayim Vital* and other works of *Kabbala* that confirm the understanding that, in earlier generations, using practical *Kabbala* was allowed, whereas, in later times, it is no longer permitted.

Footnotes:

[1] This statement is the basis for an interesting *Halachic* discussion of whether it is permitted to be a magician or do magic tricks. Many *Poskim* actually forbid this, while others are somewhat more lenient. See *Hochmat Adam*, *Igrot Moshe* and others. [2] This is one explanation given by *Rashi* (*Sanhedrin* 65b). However, there are other interpretations of this phrase as well. [3] His comments are on the *Halacha* in the *Shulhan Aruch* about this, cited below. [4] This statement of the *Meiri* is actually a critical source in discussing the potential *Halachic* issues with cloning – a subject discussed by recent medical *Halachic* literature. It seems that according to the *Meiri*, cloning would be permitted if done in a scientific manner. [5] This interpretation is based on a statement in *Avot D'Ribbi Nattan*. [6] This is based on a statement in the *Gemara* (*Kiddushin* 71a). [7] The *Hacham Tzvi* discusses whether a person created through the *Sefer Yetzira* can count for a *Minyan*. From his discussion, it is clear that he felt that such an occurrence was conceivable and apparently permitted, at least for some people. [8] See *Tosafot* (*Kiddushin* 73a s.v. *mai*) and *Rosh* (*Kiddushin* 4:7) who briefly explain that Shmuel's father had traveled overseas, but then used the Name of *Hashem* to miraculously travel home to conceive Shmuel.

A Helping Hand

Giving *Tzedakka* to Shul Solicitors

By Rav Yehonatan Sasportas

Q: Am I required to contribute to a poor man soliciting funds in shul if I wasn't personally asked for a donation or if I am in the middle of my *Tefilla*?

A: The *Mitzvah* of *Tzedakka* comprises both a negative and a positive commandment. The *Torah* (*Devarim* 15, 7-8) says "*Lo Te'ametz*" – "you shall not harden your heart", "*V'Lo Tikpotz*" – "you shall not tighten your fist" towards your needy brother. Instead, "*Patoah Tiftah*" – "you shall surely open your hand to him".

We can ask two questions regarding the prohibition of *Lo Te'ametz*, not hardening one's heart to the plight of the poor. First, since, as most *Poskim* write[1], one only transgresses this commandment when he actually refrains from helping the poor, why did the *Torah* find it important to emphasize the "hardening of one's heart" that lay at the root of his refusal?

Secondly, many *Poskim*[2] write that there is no obligation to seek out the poor and come to their aid. As the *Rambam* writes[3], one only transgresses *Lo Te'ametz* upon seeing a poor man requesting *Tzedakka* and turning away. Why is the mere knowledge that needy individuals exist not sufficient to obligate us to find them?

It would therefore seem that *Lo Te'ametz* is not merely a secondary facet of the *Mitzvah*, but rather a description of its very nature. It indicates that we are not expected to take responsibility for the needs of all Jewry. Instead, as the *Yere'im* (202) explains[4], we are commanded not to suppress the natural feelings of pity that are experienced upon witnessing the plight of a

fellow Jew. The obligation therefore only exists when their situation is brought to our attention, and we are not obligated to search for an unknown indigent whose situation does not naturally arouse pity.

Following this explanation, it would be logical to say that one need not wait until he is approached in order to give *Tzedakka*. As the *Rishon L'Tziyon* (written by the *Ohr HaHayim*) and others write[5], the mere knowledge that a specific individual is in need of charity should be enough to evoke our pity. Refraining from helping the poor once their situation is apparent, either by witnessing them soliciting in shul[6] or by means of a mailing[7], would therefore be a violation of *Lo Te'ametz* – hardening one's heart. This view is supported by the *Rambam*[8] and the *Hinuch* (479), who write that one violates this commandment even after merely seeing or knowing of a friend's plight and ignoring it.

Although there are dissenting views that *Lo Te'ametz* is only violated when one refuses to donate after being personally approached[9], all opinions agree that the positive commandment of "*Patoah Tiftah*" – opening one's hand – is applicable in all instances[10]. Additionally, as the *Pele Yo'etz* writes, one who sits at a public place, advertising his cause, is considered to have solicited every individual specifically.

It would seem from the *Torah* that if one can afford to do so, he should donate to all the needy who are soliciting funds in shul. In addition, although, as mentioned earlier, there exists no obligation to search for needy individuals, many write that doing so is a virtuous act[11], or that it is included in the *Mitzva* of *Ma'aser Kesafim*[12]. It is unclear, however, if one must give the same solicitor a donation every time he encounters him. The *Hazon Ish* is reported[13] to have given *Tzedakka* every time, while Rav S. Z. Auerbach is quoted to say that one only needs to give the same person once a day[14]. Others are of the opinion that if no new need has arisen, one is only obligated to donate once per cause[15], but



should remind the solicitor that he has already given him so that the latter not be disappointed.

If one is solicited during *Tefilla*, however, it would seem at first that he would be exempt from the *Mitzva* of *Tzedakka*, following the rule of "*Ha'Osek B'Mitzvah Patur Min HaMitzvah*" – one who is already engaged in a *Mitzvah* performance is exempt from performing a second one[16]. This applies even when the first one is a rabbinic obligation (*MideRabannan*), such as *Tefilla*, and the second is a Torah obligation (*Mide'Oraita*), such as *Tzedakka*[17]. However, the *Rama* and *Bi'ur Halachah* (O.H. 38) write, based on the *Ran*, that this exemption doesn't apply when little or no effort is required to perform the second *Mitzvah* at the same time as the first. Consequently, many *Poskim*[18] write that if one's concentration will not slacken by giving *Tzedakka* (or that one is in any case not concentrating), he should not refrain from distributing *Tzedakka* during *Tefilla*. While this ruling applies to most of *Tefilla*, such as *Pesuke D'Zimra* or *Birkot Keri'at Shema*[19], *Tzedakka* should not be distributed during *Keri'at Shema*, because it demands more concentration[20].

Footnotes:

[1] כך משמע ברמב"ם, מתנות עניים ז' ב', והל' שמיטה ויובל ט' ל' (בלאו דולא ירע לבבך), וכ"כ החינוך במצוה תע"ח. אבל להסמ"ק (מצוה כ') עובר בלא תאמץ אף כשנותן, אם זה ברוע לב, וכ"כ שם בענין לאו דולא ירע לבבך. וכ"כ הסמ"ג (עשה קס"ב) שאפי' נתן הרבה ברוע לב עובר. [2] כ"כ המהר"י וקרקס בהל' מתנות עניים, ז' ב', שאינו מחוייב לבקש אחריו. וכ"כ

הרשב"א בשבועות כ"ה, דאינו חייב ללכת לפרנס עניים במדי. וכ"כ בספרי (ראה) – כשהוא אומר באחת שערך, ה' יושב במקום אחד אי אתה מצווה לפרנסו. [3] הל' מתנות עניים ז' ב'. [4] וכ"כ הנצי"ב מה שאמרו בספרי (שם) על לא תאמץ, שיש בן אדם שמצער אם יתן אם לא יתן, דהנה השכל מבין שיש ליתן, אבל לבבו חושב מחשבות און ומצטער, כי קשה עליו לגבר א' מבי אלה, ועל זה בא הפסוק לא תאמץ את לבבך אלא את שכלך. ובעיר מקלט פי', לא תאמץ, לא תתן ללבך חוזק ואומץ. לפי שעל כרחך כשתראה עני, ובפרט אם הוא מבשרך ודמדך, ודאי שירך ויחלה לבך עליו, ואתה נותן לו אומץ וחוזק כדי שתתאכזר עליו. [5] ע' בשו"ת שבט הלוי ט' קצ"ט, ובס' שערי צדק עמ' מ"ח. [6] ל' הרמב"ם הוא שראה עני מבקש, ולא שצריך לבקש דוקא ממנו, ע' ס' שערי צדק עמ' מ"ז. [7] כ"כ בשו"ת באר משה ד' צ"ב, והגר"ח שיינברג, כמו שהביא הגר"ש פעלדער בשיעוריו, ולדעתו כו"ע מודו בזה דחשיב כביקש ממנו. [8] ספר המצוות, ל"ח רל"ב. וכ"כ בשו"ת הרשב"א, ג' ש"פ, שיש חיוב על הציבור לפרנס העניים אף כשלא שאלו מהם. ומש"כ בשבועות שם שצריך העני לבקש, צ"ל דמיירי בגוונא שאם לא יבקש לא נדע שהוא עני, וכן צ"ל בדעת הרמב"ם בהל' מתנו"ע שהרואה עני מבקש עובר, דבלי שיבקש לא ידע שהוא עני. אבל אם יודע שהוא עני עובר מיד כדמשמע בסה"מ. וכ"כ מכתובות ס"ז: שמי שאין לו ואין רוצה להתפרנס שנותנים לו לשום הלואה וחוזרים ונותנים לו לשום מתנה, שיש לפרנסו אף שלא שאל. וכ"כ ברמב"ם, בהל' מתנו"ע י' י"א, במנין המעלות, שא' מהן הוא שיתן לעני בידו קודם שישאל. [9] כן היא ש"י הצפנת פענח, הברכת יצחק בפ' ראה, שו"ת ערוגות הבושם יו"ד רי"ט, דרך אמונה ז' ז', והגר"ש אלישיב, מובא בעלון והחזקת בו ז'. וע' בתשו' והנה' ג' רפ"ז. ומה שהביאו מהמחנ"א (הל' צדקה א'), נראה דאיירי לגבי קדימה, ע"ש. [10] כ"כ בצ"פ, ברכת יצחק, ושו"ת ערוגות הבושם שם. [11] ע' בצדקה ומשפט א' א' בשם ס' מלוא העומר. [12] כ"כ בראשון לציון בסי' רמ"ז. [13] ס' מעשה איש (ח"ד, עמ' קל"ח). ובספרי (ראה) ובי"מ (ל"א). דרשו עה"פ פתוח, אפי' מאה פעמים. [14] הביאו הגר"ש פעלדער בשיעוריו. [15] ס' שערי צדק עמ' מ"ז, הגר"נ קרליץ מובא באורח צדקה עמ' צ"ז, וכ"כ מהגר"ח קניבסקי המובא שם בעמ' ת"ב. [16] כך צידד בס' דרך אמונה (מתנו"ע י', צה"ל צ"ו), וכן דעתו בויכוחו עם הגר"ב זילבער בס' מקור היראה, מפני שזה יפריע לכונתו. [17] ע' ביאור"ל בסי' ע"ב, בכור"י ס' תר"מ כ"ב, וס' אפיקי מגינים בסי' ע"ב. [18] עלון והחזקת בו מס' 8, בשם הגר"ש אלישיב והגר"ח שיינברג, וס' מקור היראה להגר"ב זילבער באריכות, ושו"ת משנה הלכות י' י"ד. [19] כן נהג הגרשז"א ליתן צדקה בברכות ק"ש (הליכות שלמה, עמ' פ"ד) וכ"כ בתשו' והנה' (ג' רפ"ז) שנהגו להקל. [20] תשו' והנהגות שם, וכ"כ בס' מקור היראה לגבי פרשה ראשונה של ק"ש.

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