

SHOFTIM

Presented 14 August 2021 by Roslyn Bryan

This parsha, as the title states, is about judgments. There are a few judgments mentioned, but the one I want to focus on today is the judgment that cost the other nations their lands and homes:

We read in Deuteronomy 18:9 – 13 that:

When you enter the land that the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not learn to imitate the abhorrent practices of those nations.

Let no one be found among you who consigns his son or daughter to the fire, or who is an augur, a soothsayer, a diviner, a sorcerer, one who casts spells, or one who consults ghosts or familiar spirits, or one who inquires of the dead.

For anyone who does such things is abhorrent to the Lord, and it is because of these abhorrent things that the Lord your God is dispossessing them before you.

You must be wholehearted with the Lord your God.

Is this passage relevant to us today? Rabbi Robert Harris warns that:

“An act whereby a person seeks or occupies a tomb and seeks the presence of the departed in order that she or he might give some specific information that would be of supposed benefit to the questioner, or that the dead might intercede with God on behalf of the questioner.

This is the practice that the Torah prohibits, and it equates the “abhorrence” of such an act along with one who would “consign his son or daughter to the fire” and all of the other various proscribed practices on the list. Who among our people today “practices necromancy,” or “augury,” or any of the other terrible customs described by the Torah?

Perhaps it is true that none indulge in these specific behaviours, but nonetheless many people do turn to other practices that contravene the intent of this biblical passage. Such as astrology, or visiting the grave of a tzadik or holy sage, or a loved one, in order to seek intercession of the dead in beseeching that God might grant this or that request.

Despite our sympathy for those who would wish to know the future or would have a sincere prayer answered by any means, our Torah portion prohibits such practices and concludes, “You must be wholehearted with the LORD your God” (Deut. 18:13). God demands complete loyalty.

Communicating with the dead is forbidden. But, what's wrong with a little divination? According to the Online Merriam-Webster Dictionary, divination is the art or practice that seeks to foresee or foretell future events or discover hidden knowledge usually by the interpretation of omens or by the aid of supernatural powers.

However, Dr. Uri Gabbay in TheTorah.Com, argues that divination is not simply a magical act. And that to understand this biblical prohibition, we must look at it in the context of the ancient

Near Eastern cultures surrounding the biblical world, especially in ancient Mesopotamia. Various forms of divination were practised in the ancient world:

- Direct divine oral messages, such as those revealed in prophecy
- Oral messages achieved less directly, for example, in dreams
- Entirely indirect messages, not received orally, such as a lunar eclipse or anatomical formations in the liver of a sacrificial sheep.
- Spontaneous phenomena occurring in nature, such as an earthquake or an astral phenomenon
- Dream incubation, in which a specific message is sought in a dream
- Extispicy, or the reading of entrails, whereby an oracular question is asked before sacrificing the animal, usually a sheep and the divine answer is then found in its internal organs, usually the liver, after it is slaughtered. “

“The internal abdominal organs of the sacrificial sheep were believed to reveal the decisions and intention of the god sacrificed to. Extispicy, seen as the most sophisticated act of divination, was used by the ancients to help them understand their world. As part of their education, priests studied clay models of sheep livers and other internal organs, often inscribed with their predictions.” They were like scientists.

“The biblical prohibition , when seen in its ancient Near Eastern context, is not only against a popular superstition about foretelling the future. Divination was conceived as a means of communication with the divine realm, was closely related to sacrificial rituals, and was used to help the ancients make sense of their universe. “

In ancient times it was common for science to be mingled with magic, religion, mysticism, and philosophy. Today, religion and science are often seen as opposing forces, but there are some who view science as a new religion:

Imagine that Moses, an ancient Israelite and prophet, steps into his Tent of Meeting and is instantly teleported to our time. Imagine him observing as devoted worshippers piously enter temples dedicated to this new religion. He watches as we bow before the priests and priestesses adorned in their white robes and holding religious instruments. They speak a strange language that only other members of the priesthood understand. These divine sorcerers subject our internal organs to observations and testings and readings. They utter their oracles to us and write their prescriptions in a handwriting that only their medicine men and women can decipher, who then dispense their mysterious concoctions that miraculously bring us healing.

Like the ancients, we, too, are trying to make sense of our universe and are religiously seeking answers to the dilemmas we face today. We may not be reading livers and hearts of sacrificial animals, but we do devote a great deal of time to scientific endeavours and social media. We study every new modelling forecast for a vision of what our world would look like in a week, in a month, in a year. In a century.

We are in the midst of a pandemic and we are fearful. And when fear drives one's response to a situation, that cloud of fear can overshadow creative solutions and cloud judgments. In the last 18 months, we have witnessed wealthy nations, in their panic, stockpiling medical supplies, then medicines, then vaccines, while the poorer nations continue to suffer and die.

As a result of stockpiling, millions of vaccines in the US are about to expire. I read that Alabama threw out 65,000 expired Covid vaccines.

Vaccinations are not equitably distributed around the world. 30 percent of the world population has received at least one dose. 16.1 percent are fully vaccinated. While 4.62 billion doses have been administered globally, only 1.2 percent of people in low income countries have received at least one dose. (<https://ourworldindata.org/covid-vaccinations>)

As one reporter commented a couple weeks ago:

“ A deadly cocktail of vaccine nationalism, restrictive patents, and limited vaccine manufacturing infrastructure has left the entire continent of Africa with just over one percent of its population fully vaccinated.”

Most of the world are still waiting for their first dose of the vaccine. Yet, there are nations offering their people their third dose of a vaccine that requires two doses for full immunity.. Some view this as an abhorrent act. Is our inability to think Holistically affecting our judgment and possibly inadvertently prolonging this global pandemic? Are we indirectly consigning the sons and daughters of the poorest nations to the fire of death?

Rosh HaShanah is three weeks away. How will the nations of the world be judged?

The nations of Ammon and Moab were judged harshly and denied entry into the congregation of Israel because of their insensitivity to Israel's situation after they left Egypt. “No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted into the congregation of the Lord... because **they did not meet you with food and water** on your journey after you left Egypt and they hired Balaam against you.” (Deuteronomy 23:3-4)

As a Light To The Nations of The World, is Israel morally obligated to consider delaying its administration of the third dose of the Covid-19 vaccine, a booster shot, while the majority of the world is still waiting for its first dose?

Is there a connection between being just and being wholehearted with God?

Deuteronomy 18:14,15 tells us:

The nations you will dispossess listen to those who practice sorcery or divination. But as for you, the Lord your God has not permitted you to do so. The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your fellow Israelites. You must listen to him.

Commenting on this week's parsha, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks stated that “Prophets were mandated by God to be critical of the corruptions of power and to recall the people to their religious vocation whenever they drifted from it.”

If the Lord were to send a prophet in our midst today, what would he or she say to Israel?

What would he or she say to us?