



Pharaoh's Magicians: *The Ten Commandments and The Prince of Egypt*

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1. Exodus 7:3-13

(3) But I will harden Pharaoh's heart, that I may multiply My signs and marvels in the land of Egypt. (4) When Pharaoh does not heed you, I will lay My hand upon Egypt and deliver My ranks, My people the Israelites, from the land of Egypt with extraordinary chastisements. (5) And the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I stretch out My hand over Egypt and bring out the Israelites from their midst." ... (8) The LORD said to Moses and Aaron, (9) "When Pharaoh speaks to you and says, 'Produce your marvel,' you shall say to Aaron, 'Take your rod and cast it down before Pharaoh.' It shall turn into a serpent." (10) So Moses and Aaron came before Pharaoh and did just as the LORD had commanded: Aaron cast down his rod in the presence of Pharaoh and his courtiers, and it turned into a serpent. (11) Then Pharaoh, for his part, summoned the wise men and the sorcerers; and the Egyptian magicians, in turn, did the same with their spells; (12) each cast down his rod, and they turned into serpents. But Aaron's rod swallowed their rods. (13) Yet Pharaoh's heart stiffened and he did not heed them, as the LORD had said.

2. Deuteronomy 18:10-13

(10) 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, (11) one who casts spells, or one who consults ghosts or familiar spirits, or one who inquires of the dead. (12) For anyone who does such things is abhorrent to the LORD, and it is because of these abhorrent things that the LORD your G-d is dispossessing them before you. (13) You must be wholehearted with the LORD your G-d.

3. Mishneh Torah, Foreign Worship and Customs of the Nations 11:16

(16) All of these things are false and spurious, and it was with such that the ancient idolaters misled the peoples of many lands so that they be following them. And it is unbecoming to Israel who are exceedingly wise to be attracted by these absurdities, nor to even imagine that they are of any consequence, even as it is said: "For there is no enchantment with Jacob, neither is there any divination with Israel" (Num. 23.23); and it is again said: "For these nations that thou art to dispossess, hearken unto soothsayers and unto diviners, but as for thee the Lord thy G-d hath not suffered thee so to do" (Deut. 18.14). Whosoever believes in these matters, and their like, and suppose that there is wisdom and truth in in them, save that the Torah disallowed them, such are none other save from among the foolish and ignorant...

4. The Gaon of Vilna's commentary on Yoreh Deah 179:13

All those who came after him disagreed with [Maimonides], for there are many incantations mentioned in the Talmud. But he was drawn to philosophy, and that is why he wrote that sorcery and holy names and incantations and demons and amulets are all false. But he had already been hit over the head about this, for we have seen many incidents in the Gemara using holy names and sorcery. Philosophy has influenced him [Maimonides], by the magnitude of its teachings, to interpret the Gemara as analogy and take it out of its plain meaning, G-d forbid. I do not believe in them [philosophers] or their great numbers. Everything is as its plain meaning, but it contains an inner element -- not the inner element of philosophy, which is truly external, but that of the masters of truth.

5. Ralbag Beur HaMilot on Torah, Exodus 7:11:1

This wisdom was... either to perform slight of hand and bring people to think that they were doing what they were not, or create natural scheme to perform strange things which seems like magic, or do these through magic if they can perform them through magic, like the true acts that were performed. We don't know the nature of this magic...

6. Midrash, Psikta Zutrita Shemot 7:22

With their incantations, appearing to act but not acting... The deeds of the charatumim of Egypt were all deceptions of the eyes.

7. Sanhedrin 67b:10

Rabbi Aivu bar Nagri says that Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba says that in the verse: "And the magicians of

Egypt did in that manner **with their secret arts [belateihem]** (Exodus 7:22), **these** words **are** describing **acts of employing demons**, which are invisible, and their actions are therefore hidden [*balat*]. With regard to the similar term **“belahateihem”** (Exodus 7:11), **these are acts of sorcery**, which sorcerers perform themselves, without using demons. **And likewise it says: “And the flaming [lahat] sword that turned every way”** (Genesis 3:24), referring to a sword that revolves by itself.

8. Shemot Rabbah 9:6

And Pharaoh also called his wise men and magicians. At that moment, Pharaoh began to laugh and cackle at them like a chicken. He said, "these are the signs of you G-d!" Normally, people bring merchandise to a place that needs them. Do you bring fish brine to Apamea, or fish to Acco? Don't you know that all the magic is in my control. He immediately sent for children from their schools and they did the same. Even more so, he called his wife and she did the same, as it says "and Pharaoh also called." What does "also" mean? That he even called his wife and she did the same. "The magicians also did this." What does "also" mean? Even four and five-year-old children were called and they did this.

9. Sanhedrin 67b

Rabbi Yohanan says: Why is sorcery called keshafim? Because it is an acronym for: **Contradicts the heavenly entourage [shemakhshishin pamalia shel mala]**. Sorcery appears to contradict the laws of nature established by G-d. The verse states: "To you it was shown, so that you should know that the Lord is G-d; **there is none else besides Him**" (Deuteronomy 4:35). **Rabbi Hanina says:** This is true **even** with regard **to a matter of sorcery**; sorcery is ineffective against a righteous person.... **Rabbi Aivu bar Nagri says** that **Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba says** that in the verse: "And the magicians of Egypt did in that manner **with their secret arts [belateihem]**"...

10. Exodus 7:14-23

14) And the LORD said to Moses, "Pharaoh is stubborn; he refuses to let the people go. (15) Go to Pharaoh in the morning, as he is coming out to the water, and station yourself before him at the edge of the Nile, taking with you the rod that turned into a snake. (16) And say to him, "The LORD, the G-d of the Hebrews, sent me to you to say, "Let My people go that they may worship Me in the wilderness." But you have paid no heed until now. (17) Thus says the LORD, "By this you shall know that I am the LORD." See, I shall strike the water in the Nile with the rod that is in my hand, and it will be turned into blood;... (22) But when the Egyptian magicians did the same with their spells, Pharaoh's heart stiffened and he did not heed them—as the LORD had spoken. (23) Pharaoh turned and went into his palace, paying no regard even to this.

11. Exodus 8:14-15

(14) The magicians did the like with their spells to produce lice, but they could not. The vermin remained upon man and beast; (15) and the magicians said to Pharaoh, "This is the finger of G-d!" But Pharaoh's heart stiffened and he would not heed them, as the LORD had spoken.

12. Two reasons G-d would allow this:

- To make it harder for Pharaoh to give in (see, for example, R. Yaakov Medan).
- To slowly educate him that there is a creator G-d whose wonders cannot be explained away (see, for example, R. David Fohrman)

13. The Doubts Linger...Midrash Tanchuma, Ki Tisa 19:1

(1) **And when the people saw that Moses delayed to come down (Exod. 32:1)...** Forty thousand people had assembled to leave Egypt with the Israelites, and among them were two Egyptians named Jannes and Jambres, who had performed magical feats for Pharaoh..

14. Mishneh Torah, Foundations of the Torah 8:1

(1) Moses our Master was not believed in by Israel because he delivered tokens, for whosoever bases his belief contingent upon tokens retains suspicion in his heart, for it is possible that the token was delivered by means of enchantment and witchcraft. But all the tokens delivered by Moses in the wilderness were responsive to necessities, and not as testimony for prophecy.... Wherein, then, did they believe in him? In being present at Mount Sinai; for our own eyes saw and not through a stranger's.