

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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IS IT OK TO USE BIBLE TEXTS TO "MAGICALLY" CONTROL YOUR LIFE?

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By now, you're aware of how valuable studying Torah can be. But what about using Torah, especially certain verses from Torah and Tanach, to help you change or control something in your life? Using a Scriptural text in this way is called Bibliomancy. This practice is at least as old as the Talmud because there we find the following practice described there:

And when he recited his verses [concerning the burning bush] he pulls down the bush and says: "O thorn, O thorn, not because you are higher than all other trees did the Holy One, blessed be He, caused His Shekhinah to rest upon you, but because you are lower than all other trees did He cause His Schekhinah to rest upon you. And even as you saw the fire [kindled] for Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah and did flee from before them, so look upon the fire [i.e., fever] of So-and-so and flee from him" (B. Shabbat 67a)

The procedure outlined in this passage is far from clear. We can conjecture that a person with a severe fever wanted it to be a "fire that did not consume." They would go to a bush like the one in which Moses saw the fire that did not consume and recite the verses about it from Exodus 3. The verses to be recited come from this passage from the Torah:

Now Moses was keeping the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian; and he led the flock to the farthest end of the wilderness, and came to the mountain of God, unto Horeb. And the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush; and he looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed. And Moses said, "I will turn aside now, and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt." And when the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called unto him out of the midst of the bush and said, "Moses, Moses". And he said, "Here am I". And He said, "Draw not nigh hither; put off your shoes from off your feet, for the place whereon you stand is holy ground." (Exodus 3:1-5)

Then the sick person would adjure the fever to leave without consuming him/her as it left the bush in our passage and as it left, untouched, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah who were thrown into a furnace and yet were not burned (Daniel 3:19-25).

Are we, as Jews, permitted to use verses from the Tanach to heal ourselves? On the one hand, reciting verses because of their healing power is a widespread Jewish practice. (See <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=1039&letter=B&search=bibliomancy> for a long list of the uses to which various verses are put). On the other hand, using Biblical verses as magic formulas is forbidden (M. Sanhedrin 11:1). In other words, one may recite Biblical verses to comfort oneself and inspire confidence and hope when one is ill, but not as incantations.

Does the practice outlined above follow this rule? The answer is not clear and it certainly appears to be on the borderline. We should not be at all surprised that rules laid down by the sages were ignored by the general populous and that the sages were well aware of this. Today, we tend to read rabbinic literature and impute great authority to the sages since their words did come to have great power over the Jewish community. We should clearly remember, though, that they didn't have so much power in their own day. One need only look at today's rabbis, and how much

authority they actually wield (or don't wield), to understand this clearly. Mostly, today's rabbis can only persuade, not command, and the sages of the rabbinic era were in a similar situation.

Discussion Questions:

1. Take a look at the list in the link, above, to see how many Biblical verses are used and for the incredible variety of causes to which they are applied. How do you think such practices developed?
2. Do you feel it would be permissible to use Biblical verses in this way today? Do you feel it would be efficacious?
3. Have you ever tried reciting a verse as a kind of mantra, to help you achieve peace or serenity? Was it effective?