Beyond the Forbidden:
Reimaging Divination as a Path to the Divine

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Table of Contents

Beyond the Forbidden: Reimaging Divination as a Path to the Divine

- **Abstract:** Beyond the Forbidden: Reimagining Divination as a Path to the Divine
- **Preface/Personal Introduction:** A Personal Journey into Divine Inquiry
- **Part One: Seeking Answers and Understanding**
    - Introduction
    - Divination as Divine Communication
- **Historical Perspectives**
    - The Role of Divination in the Near East
    - Manticism and Clairvoyance
    - Cultic and Natural
    - Omens and Oracles
    - Monotheism and the Problem of Access
- **Biblical Examples of Divination in Jewish Practice: The What**
    - Permissible forms of Divination
        - Prophecy
        - False Prophets and Failed Prophecies
        - Casting Lots
        - Dreams
        - Astrology
    - Forbidden Forms of Divination
        - List of Prohibitions in Tanakh
        - Necromancy and Divine Mediation

        - Divination as Subversion— or Revelation?
    - Rabbinic Definitions: Precision and Narrowing of Scope
        - The Prophecy of Fools and Children
        - Dreams as Divination
        - Bibliomancy: Divining Through Sacred Text
        - Demonology and the Gray Zones of Permissibility
        - Divine Timing, Open Gates, and Attuning to Response
- **Part Two: The Who**
    - The Who: The Power and Politics of Practice
        - Rabbinic Authority and Control of Divine Access
        - Permitted Practices and Interpretive Loopholes
        - Signs vs. Forbidden Omens
        - Rabbis as the New Prophets
        - The Marginalization of Women's Roles in Sacred Power
            - Divination Performed by Women
            - Sacred Work at the Threshold of Life and Death
            - Power, Punishment, and the Politics of Divine Access
        - Prophecy Departed— But Not Gone
- **Part Three: Reimagining Divination for Contemporary Practice**
    - Guiding Principles for a Contemporary Approach
        - Reframing the Practice: Divination as a Form of *Hitbodedut*
        - Understanding Divination as Present-Moment Insight
        - Reclaiming the Tools: Practices for Self-Guidance

        - The Role of Images
    - Contemporary Practices
        - Meditation
        - Hebrew Alphabet
        - Tarot
        - Oracle Cards
            - Shechinah Oracle
        - The Mystical Journey of Counting the Omer
        - Ecological Divination through Nature
        - Astrology
    - Potential Benefits of These Practices
- **Conclusion**
- **Bibliography**

Abstract

Beyond the Forbidden: Reimaging Divination as a Path to the Divine

Divination, commonly understood as the interpreting signs, dreams, and omens to uncover hidden truths or foresee the future, has long served as a bridge to the Divine. Contrary to common perception, Jewish tradition has engaged deeply with divinatory practices such as prophecy, cleromancy, oneiromancy, and bibliomancy. This project will provide a closer examination of divination throughout Jewish history, revealing that the legitimacy of these methods often depended on context and authority, distinguishing the sanctioned guidance of prophets and rabbis from the folk "magic" practiced by laypeople and women.

Without modern day priests or prophets, the access to divination through an appointed Jewish spiritual leader has greatly diminished. In fact, many forms of divination are still approached with caution by Jews or avoided altogether. However, the practice of seeking understanding and knowledge by means of divinatory practices can serve as an anchor for reverence and relationship with the Divine. In this manner, divination can help complete the communication loop between humans and God. For example, Jews offer prayer as a means of communicating with God, but don't have a specific way of receiving messages back from God. Practices of divination open a channel for conversation between the Jewish people and the Divine. Through this lens, these practices can facilitate *Hitbodedut*, a Jewish meditation practice of open, personal, direct communication with the Divine. In this reframing, spiritual divinatory practices can be embraced by Jews today as a way of tapping into the great mystery of the Divine and receiving Divine guidance regarding choices, actions, and outcomes for the future.

Throughout history, the human quest for guidance and meaning has often led to the mysterious practice of divination. This project will define and explore the complexities and contradictions of divination in the Tanakh and Talmud, focusing on how certain forms—sometimes renamed or performed by appointed figures—are treated differently. Centered on divination as a means of inquiry for guidance and right action, this study acknowledges texts that prohibit the practice, yet also highlights the persistent human desire for divine insight. Ultimately, I frame divination as a tool for personal dialogue with the Divine. By weaving in the concept of free will and our capacity to shape the future, divination is renewed as a creative and deeply spiritual practice within Judaism.

Preface/Personal Introduction: A Personal Journey into Divine Inquiry

My journey into the complexities of Jewish tradition, particularly concerning the topics of magic and divination, began not in an academic text, but in a space of personal spiritual seeking. For much of my life, I have felt drawn to the intangible and the unknowable, to the intuitive wisdom that exists beyond the confines of logical explanation. The compulsion to connect with the Divine in an unmediated, deeply felt way led me to explore methods of spiritual guidance that often lie outside the mainstream of modern Jewish practice. Through personal experience, I have found that practices such as symbolic interpretation of tarot and oracle cards, bibliomancy, cleromancy, dream interpretation, and astrology can serve as powerful tools for enhancing one's spiritual life and sense of connection to the Divine.

This personal interest, however, quickly led me to a central scholarly challenge. I had to reconcile my lived experience with the historical and textual narrative that often paints these

practices as explicitly "forbidden." Yuval Harari became a crucial guide in the understanding of this tension.. In *Jewish Magic before the Rise of Kabbalah*, Harari states "Because I do not believe in 'truth' but in its self-interested social-subjective representations, I hold that it is crucial to examine the genealogy of these representations within the institution (to which I belong) entrusted with the formation of knowledge in our culture—academia." Harari's perspective encourages and inspires a move beyond a simplistic understanding of truth as a fixed concept and to instead explore how the designation of "magic" versus "religion" was a product of power, authority, and social context. Examination of the who, what, when, and where, became focal points of my research as I sought to better understand how the dynamics of power and position played out to allow and laud divinatory practices when performed by rabbis or other Jewish male authority figures as contrasted with condemnation of the same practices as sorcery and witchcraft when enacted by people outside of inner Jewish circles of leadership and power, particularly in reference to women and Jews on the margins of society.

This project, therefore, is an exploration of the genealogy of divination within Jewish thought. It is an academic inquiry born from a personal conviction: that the impulse to seek divine guidance is a fundamental human need that Judaism has long sought to channel and, at times, to control. By examining the nuanced history of divination, I aim to create a space for a deeper, more inclusive understanding of Jewish spirituality, one that honors both the wisdom of our texts and the wisdom of our own intuitive connection to the Divine.

Glossary of Helpful Definitions and Terms

Astrology- Divination using celestial bodies such as the sun, moon, and planets to gain insight into the unfolding of future events.

Belomancy- An ancient form of divination that uses arrows to seek guidance or predict the future.

Bibliomancy- foretelling the future by interpreting a randomly chosen passage from a book, especially the Bible. The use of sacred books for "magical medicine", for removing negative entities, or for divination.

Cartomancy- divining through the use of cards.

Cleromancy- is a form of sortition (casting lots) where an outcome is determined by seemingly random means, often interpreted as revealing a deity's will. It involves using objects like dice, stones, sticks, or other marked items to make decisions or predict the future.

Cledonomancy- Divine utterance by chance (can be Bat Kol- also can be a divine revelatory utterance or sometimes both in the Talmud)

Divination (Merriam-Webster) 1. 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. 2. unusual insight: intuitive perception

2. (Jewishencyclopedia.com) The forecasting of the future by certain signs or movements of external things, or by visions in certain ecstatic states of the soul.

Divine Inquiry- the act of asking for information from God.

Extispicy- the reading of entrails, i.e., finding the divine message by asking an oracular question before the sacrifice of an animal, usually a sheep; the answer is found in its internal organs, usually the liver, after it is slaughtered.

Hermeneutics- the study of the methodological principles of interpretation (as of the Bible).

Hitbodedut- a Hebrew term that translates to "seclusion, solitariness, solitude." It is a form of meditation that is unstructured, spontaneous, and individualized. The ultimate aim is to establish a close, personal relationship with God and to recognize the Divinity inherent in all being.[1]

[1] ShalomSpace, "Hitbodedut."

Necromancy- The practice of communicating with the dead through divination, conjuring of spirits, and to gain insight, obtain knowledge, and/or influence events.

Oneiromancy- The interpretation of dreams in order to foretell the future.

Prophecy- 1. an inspired utterance of a prophet. 2. the inspired declaration of divine will and purpose. 3. a prediction of something to come.

Sortition- means "selection by lot" referring to the method of drawing names from a group to make a selection.

Urim and Thummim- a priestly device consisting of two lots that were cast by the levitical priest as a legitimate means of obtaining oracles in early Israel.

Part One: Seeking Answers and Understanding

Introduction

The art of divination carries with it a fraught reputation in Judaism, often dismissed outright as a forbidden act. Yet what if this assumption is incomplete? The Talmud praises the wise person "who foresees the results of his deeds,"[2] acknowledging a fundamental human desire to anticipate the future. This thesis argues that Judaism's relationship with divination is not one of absolute prohibition, but of contextual negotiation. Throughout Jewish history, the permissibility of divine inquiry has depended less on the act itself than on its context, purpose, and practitioner. By examining sources from the Tanakh, Talmud, and later mystical traditions, this study demonstrates how Jewish thought distinguished between the sanctioned divination of prophets and sages and the "magic" of common folk– a distinction that has shaped Jewish attitudes for centuries.

Our traditions and the words of wisdom we subscribe to struggle with tension between two sometimes conflicting aspects of divination. The wise Ecclesiastes cautions, "Indeed, he does not know what is to happen; even when it is on the point of happening, who can tell him?"[3] Yet, by raising the question at all, Ecclesiastes reveals a paradox central to the human condition: the yearning to understand what lies ahead, even when it may be unknowable. This work contends that the impulse to seek divine insight is both natural and worthy, and that its treatment in Jewish tradition is far more complex than an outright ban.

[2] TB *Tamid* 32a
[3] Ecclesiastes 8:6

From the earliest evidence of humanity, there has been an innate desire to understand our place in the world and to anticipate the future. The story of Adam and Eve in Gan Eden illustrates this natural impulse: even in paradise, they could not resist reaching for hidden knowledge. Their curiosity set in motion a defining human tension– between what is concealed and what is revealed in its proper time. As Ecclesiastes reminds us, "To everything there is a season and a time."[4] This suggests that it isn't the quest for understanding that is problematic, but perhaps other aspects of divination that became stumbling blocks for Jewish authorities.

Judaic practices have long navigated the impulse to seek divine guidance. This project will explore the dichotomy of prohibition and permissibility through our ancient texts and rabbinic interpretations . Passages in Leviticus appear to condemn divination outright while early rabbis sought to balance prohibition with necessity and desire with restraint. Upon close examination, Jewish tradition reveals a complex and often contradictory relationship with practices of divine inquiry. This project will investigate whether these acts were considered permissible or forbidden while taking a closer look at the roles they played in the evolution of Jewish spirituality, superstition, and mysticism throughout history and modern times.

Judaism, as this study will show, neither fully rejects nor wholly embraces divination. Like many topics encountered in the Torah and Talmud, it offers contradictory perspectives. There is clear textual evidence that acknowledges the presence of divination within and around Jewish communities, yet there are also clear lines that Jews were not to cross. By tracing these tensions through history– from biblical oracles to kabbalistic visions and contemporary spiritual experimentation– this project seeks to recover a deeper understanding of divination as a tool for listening to the Divine.

[4] Ecclesiastes 3

Divination as Divine Communication

Ulla Koch, defines divination as a "means of gaining knowledge that is not obtainable by normal modes of investigation." It seeks to manage uncertainty through communication with the supernatural.[5] In a Jewish context, this "supernatural" is often understood as God. Thus, divination can be seen as a mode of receiving and interpreting messages from the Divine.

A useful way to think about Divine conversation is to see prayer as the human act of sending a message to God, and divination as the human act that facilitates receiving and interpreting a message from God back to humans. While prayer is deeply embedded in Jewish practice, methods for listening to God's response have been less emphasized and more heavily scrutinized.

The Torah frequently asserts that God spoke to Moses: "*Vayidaber Adonai el Moshe lemor"* or "God spoke to Moses and said."[6] This recurring phrase points to a longstanding tradition of Divine-human communication, particularly through prophecy. If we accept that humans speak to God through prayer, then it is not unreasonable to explore the means through which they might also hear and receive God's reply.

This brings us to a central tension: If communication with God is foundational to Judaism, why have some methods of Divine reception been marginalized while others were revered? In this project, we will explore different forms of divination - as tools for Divine/human communication- and examine how they functioned in Jewish contexts throughout time.

[5] Koch, "Divination and Omens."
[6] Several occurrences including Exodus 32:7, Leviticus 19:1, Numbers 27:6, Numbers 28:1

The voice of God, according to biblical texts, is not monolithic. In Psalm 29, God's voice thunders over the waters, shaking the wilderness. In contrast, the prophet Elijah hears the Divine as a "kol d'mama daka"—a still, small voice.[7] These diverse descriptions suggest that Divine communication may come through many forms—some dramatic, others subtle. Recognizing this range invites a re-examination of divinatory tools, not as threats to Jewish faith, but as instruments of spiritual listening.

One of the methodologies that this project proposes for the reintegration of divinatory practices into contemporary Jewish spiritual worship is that of *Hitbodedut*, or the secluded act of entering a form of communion and dialogue with the Divine. Hitbodedut, meaning "seclusion" or "solitariness" in Hebrew, is a Jewish practice popularized by Rebbe Nachman (1772-1810) of Breslov and adopted within Hasidut.. Often practiced in nature, *Hitbodedut* invites stillness, quieting the mind and inner noise so that one may become more receptive to the divine presence above, below, outside, and within. In this receptive state, divine communication can unfold organically, suggesting that listening for God has always been part of Jewish practice, even if called by other names.

Divination has been persistently debated and refined through Jewish traditions, but not unilaterally forbidden. By examining biblical, rabbinic, and mystical texts, this thesis unveils the rich tapestry of Jewish thought and tradition that challenges and legitimizes divinatory practices. By tracing its treatment across these works we reveal how Jewish thought has both sanctioned and suppressed divinatory practice– and how those dynamics continue to inform Jewish spirituality today.

[7] 1 Kings 19:12

Historical Perspectives

Divination in the Ancient Near East

Evidence of divination in the ancient Near East dates back to the second and first millennia B.C.E., as seen in thousands of Akkadian cuneiform tablets from Babylonia and Assyria. These texts reveal a complex system in which divination was not primarily used to predict the future, but rather to discern manifestations of the divine in the world. As Dr. Uri Gabbay, professor of Assyriology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, explains: "Divination was first and foremost a way of seeking the divine manifestation in the universe."[8]

This conception parallels Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel's notion of "radical amazement"[9]—a posture of awe and spiritual attentiveness to the sacred in everyday life. Divination, in this light, becomes a means of perceiving divine presence, not merely of predicting outcomes.

Yuval Harari, in *Jewish Magic before the Rise of Kabbalah*, describes divination as premised on the idea that "everything that occurs in the world (past, present, and future)… is available to human consciousness as potential knowledge." He distinguishes between *inductive* divination, which interprets external signs (omens, astrology, bodily symptoms), and *intuitive* divination, which arises from direct insight—dreams, visions, or trance states.[10] Rabbi Geoffrey Dennis adds another distinction between *manticism* (seeking knowledge of the future) and *clairvoyance* (uncovering hidden knowledge of the present).[11]

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[8] Gabbay, "The Practice of Divination in the Ancient Near East - TheTorah.Com."
[9] Heschel, *God In Search of Man*, 46.
[10] Harari and Stein, *Jewish Magic before the Rise of Kabbalah*, 408.
[11] Dennis, "Divination | My Jewish Learning."

From these frameworks, Dennis classifies ancient Near Eastern divinatory practices into three main types:

1. **Serendipitous omens** – interpreting naturally occurring phenomena (weather patterns, abnormal births, celestial signs).
2. **Impetrated omens** – asking specific questions using methods such as casting lots or reading animal entrails.
3. **Mediumistic divination** – channeling divine messages through human intermediaries, such as prophets, mediums, or oracles.[12]

These distinctions—between mantic and clairvoyant, inductive and intuitive, spontaneous and ritualized—are critical for understanding the diverse expressions of divination that later appear in Jewish sources. They also highlight how deeply these practices were embedded into the broader ancient religious world, offering a crucial backdrop for Judaism's own selective embrace and rejection of them.

Omens and Oracles: Interpreting the Divine

Divination was nearly universal in the ancient world. As Hendrik Bosman explains, in his article *From "Divination" to "Relevation"?,* most traditions include two primary types:

- **Natural divination**: direct revelations through dreams, visions, or ecstatic states—commonly associated with prophecy.
- **Artificial divination**: interpretation of signs or coded messages requiring a hermeneutic system—often through omens or oracles.[13]

[12] Dennis, "Divination | My Jewish Learning."
[13] Bosman, *From "Divination" to "Revelation"? A Post Exilic Theological Perspective on the Relationship between Law and Prophets in the Old Testament,* 378.

Ulla Koch further clarifies: an *omen* is a spontaneous sign sent by the divine, while an *oracle* is a response to a specific human question.[14] Natural divination tends toward direct revelation, while artificial divination requires interpretation and skill.

Both natural and artificial forms appear in Jewish texts—from the prophetic visions of Isaiah and Ezekiel to the priestly use of the Urim and Thummim. This project will trace how these forms of knowledge were legitimated or condemned depending on context, content, and practitioner—factors that reveal much about rabbinic boundaries of sacred knowledge.

Monotheism and the Problem of Access

A central reason for the cautious treatment of divination within Judaism lies in its theological foundations. In contrast to polytheistic traditions, where multiple gods were seen as accessible and responsive to human inquiries, monotheism introduces a radical shift: a singular, transcendent, and often ineffable God. As Fredrich Graf notes, "Divination is largely unproblematic in polytheistic religions,"[15] where gods are often tied to natural forces or local cults and thus directly accessible. In monotheistic systems, however, the greater perceived distance between God and humanity can lead to a rejection of practices that claim to access divine will through non-sanctioned means.

This theological shift may explain why practices like extispicy (reading animal entrails) of sacrificial animals were widely accepted in neighboring cultures but largely absent or forbidden among the Israelites. In polytheism, many gods meant many opportunities and channels of

[14] Koch, "Divination and Omens."
[15] Graff, "Divination/Manticism."

communication. In Judaism, divine communication became increasingly centralized through prophets, priests, and eventually rabbinic authority.

Yet even within monotheism, human beings continued to yearn for signs, answers, and contact with the divine. Jewish tradition never eliminated this impulse—it redefined and regulated it. The ongoing tension between prohibition and possibility lies at the heart of this study, inviting a re-examination of divination as a dynamic, evolving mode of Jewish spiritual expression.

Biblical Examples of Divination in Jewish Practice: The What

Permissible Forms of Divination

While divination is often viewed with suspicion in Jewish tradition, several forms of it are not only permissible in biblical sources but are explicitly endorsed as valid channels for Divine communication. These include prophecy, casting of lots (especially the use of the Urim and Thummim), dream interpretation, and occasionally even astrology—although the latter is at times prohibited, depending on the context.

Prophecy

Prophets in the Hebrew Bible operated at the highest level of Divine communication. According to Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, "They were able to ascend into the spiritual dimension through the inner levels of the soul and climb the ladder that leads to intimate communion with the Divine."[16] Kaplan further explains that ancient sources are in agreement that every prophet would express

[16] Kaplan, *Inner Space*, 28-29. Also in Ma'amar HaIkkarim, "Moses and Prophecy," Ramchal defines the purpose of prophecy: "God desired to reveal His will to man, and therefore prepared a process of revelation through which He makes Himself known in the physical world. Through this process, God reveals whatever He desires, whether it be His secrets and mysteries, concepts of His providence, or decrees that He is issuing regarding the world. This process is called prophecy."

their prophecy in a way that also reflected their unique gifts of speech, writing, or other means of translating their personal spiritual experience.[17]

Prophetic speech often occurred in the third person, with the prophets referring to themselves as if narrating someone else's experience- for example, even Moses says, "And God spoke to Moses."[18] Kaplan explains this as a function of deep meditative practice explaining, "The cause of this phenomenon is their deep meditation, *Hitbodedut,* where the mind elevates itself above the body and the body remains as if it were devoid of soul."[19] The framing of prophetic experience as akin to *Hitbodedut*, or deep meditative transcendence, will be emphasized later in this project as a model for cultivating awareness and intimacy with the Divine in contemporary practice.

A key tension in discussing prophecy alongside divination lies in this question: In what ways is prophecy similar to other forms of divination? Prophets often entered trance-like states and received visions, messages, and Divine insight—sometimes to foretell future events, offer counsel in warfare, or admonish the people. In *Prophets and Prophecy in the Ancient Near East*, Martti Nissinen offers a succinct definition: "Prophecy. . . is human transmission of allegedly divine messages" which he classifies as a distinct yet legitimate branch of divination.[20] In this sense, prophecy is sanctioned divination: authorized by God and recognized within the covenantal relationship.

[17] Kaplan, *Inner Space*, 135.
[18] Exodus 4:4, 4:19, 4:21, 6:1, 7:1, 7:8, 7:14, etc.
[19] Kaplan, *Inner Space*, 138.
[20] Nissinen, *Prophets and Prophecy In The Ancient Near East*, 1.

God's bestowal of prophecy is selective but not exclusive. In *Parshat Beha'alotecha,* when Joshua expresses concern over Eldad and Medad prophesying in the camp, Moses replies, "Would that all יהוה's people were prophets, that יהוה put [the divine] spirit upon them!"[21] This moment indicates that prophecy, while rare, was not meant to be the domain of an elite few. The 70 elders who received their spirit that day through Moses prophesied once and then ceased. In contrast, Eldad and Medad received their prophetic spirit directly from God, and continued to prophesy.[22]

The acceptance of prophecy- Divine knowledge reaching the human mind- is arguably a core tenant of Jewish belief. According to Donniel Hartman's reference to Maimonides' Hilkhot Teshuvah in his work, *The Boundaries of Judaism*, the *apikorus,* is one who holds heretical beliefs as to God's relationship with the world. He goes on to identify three classes called *apikorsim:* one who denies the reality of prophecy and maintains that there is no knowledge which emanates from the Creator and directly reaches the human mind; one who denies the prophecy of Moses, our teacher; and one who asserts that the Creator has no cognizance of the deeds of the human beings. Each of these is an apikorus.[23] Perhaps surprisingly, the heretic is *not* the one who is seeking to engage with the knowledge emanating directly from the Creator and into the human mind, but rather the one who denies the reality of prophecy and this type of transmission of information.

Thus, if one acknowledges that there is information that emanates from the Creator and directly reaches the human mind, why wouldn't one seek to be open and interactive with such divine

[21] Numbers 11: 26-29
[22] Bamidbar Rabbah 15
[23] Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Teshuvah 3:7

inspiration? There are several ways in which humans can place themselves into a position to better receive divine knowledge and these include, meditation, spending time tuning into nature, interpreting signs and omens through the senses, and strengthening our own prophetic abilities through the interpretation of dreams, signs, and patterns in the worlds around us. The ancient Hebrew mystics were often referred to as *b'nai nevi'im,* or Children of the Vision Bringers.[24] This designation makes sense and encourages one to think about what the *b'nai nevi'im* might look like in the Jewish world today.

False Prophets and Failed Prophecies

To understand prophecy within the context of divination, it's important to distinguish between false prophecy (deliberate deception) and failed prophecy (Divine messages not actualized). The former refers to individuals claiming false revelation for personal gain or political power. The latter—seen in prophets like Ezekiel[25]—is often the result of God's mercy or the conditional nature of prophecy itself.

Many prophecies are intended to warn rather than predict; they are contingent upon human response. If the people repent or change course, the prophecy may not come to pass—making the act of prophecy more about shaping the future than predicting it.

In this light, prophecy is not deterministic but interactive: Divine insight shapes human response, and human actions influence Divine outcomes..

[24] Winkler, *Magic of the Ordinary: Recovering the Shamanic in Judaism*. 203.
[25] Ezekiel 29:8-12, 30:12 is one example when he prophesizes the complete destruction of Egypt but it does not come to pass.

Casting Lots

The interpretation of the oracle of lot, or *goral,* is present in several ancient Jewish texts, from the selection of King in Samuel[26] to the casting of Pur in Esther,[27] to the division of land by lots by tribe in Bamidbar.[28] It is particularly interesting to note that in Samuel 10, the casting of lots is used to publicly select Saul to be King. However, in 1 Samuel 10: 9-11 Saul had already been anointed king by Samuel in a secret ceremony, but only God, Samuel, and Saul were privy to this information. Thus, the casting of lots was an additional step to communicate God's decision to the people in a manner so that they could also witness the choice being made.[29] Additionally, within the Bible there is reference to the mysterious Urim and Thummim, which some scholars believe to have been similar in function to a lot oracle.

Within the Prophets, Israelite leaders such as Joshua, Saul, David, and Ahab all used divination to help them make decisions at various different junctures in the Tanakh, particularly regarding fortuitous times to enter into battle. The Pentateuch, however, sheds very little light on the divinatory character of the objects and practices associated with these tasks of inquiry and instead, emphasizes their ritual and religious character.[30] When exploring the methods of lot oracle in ancient Israel there were generally two main methods of inquiry:

> First, pebbles, stones, four-sided knucklebones or six-sided dice could be cast, and depending on the sides where they fell they would provide an answer. Apparently, these methods could be applied in ways that usually provided answers to binary questions, indicating either yes or no as e.g. in 1 Sam 14:42. Second, stones, clay balls, beans, or inscribed objects were drawn from jars, bowls or other containers. An individual randomly picked the response to the question posed by the

[26] 1 Samuel 10: 20-21, 1 Samuel 14: 41-42
[27] Esther 3:7
[28] Numbers 26:53-56
[29] "Casting of Lots in I Samuel - Olives and Coffee."
[30] "Ancient Israelite Divination."

> consultant out from the container. The chosen lot expressed the divine will in that moment."[31]

While other divinatory methods could be subjected to speculation or interpretation, divination by lot oracle provided a clear means for determining God's will at the present moment, while also providing a way in which the divine "voice" was able to be immediately heard and experienced through the answers provided by the lots for each particular inquiry.[32] Though in some contexts the outcome provided by the lots suggested a deterministic *fait accompli*, the ultimate final say rested with God. Diviners who recognized this utilized the lots more successfully as a tool for confirmation and reassurance from God, not necessarily to forecast non-influenceable decisions. Final attribution granted to God, along with reverence and fear that God could change course at any moment, was an important aspect of the utilization of these methods.

Even with the presence of lot oracles in biblical sources, the only form of divination through physical means expressly sanctioned by biblical authors was the Urim and Thummim.[33] Though this instrument is mentioned several times in the Hebrew Bible, its occurrences reveal very little about its nature. Victor Avigdor Hurowitz explores attempts to shed light on this obscure phenomenon in his review essay *True Light on the Urim and Thummim* for The Jewish Quarterly Review. In this essay he reviews the work of Cornelis Van Dam, *The Urim and the Thummim*: *A Means of Revelation in Ancient Israel*, which he wrote in 1997. Hurowitz reviews Van Dam's work and notes that it serves as a departure from previous biblical scholars who surmised that the Urim and Thumim were devices of the lot oracle category. He explains and summarizes Van Dam's position that, "the Urim and Thummim was associated intimately with prophecy, and that

[31] Tervanotko, "Dice, Stars and Names," 52.
[32] Tervanotko, "Dice, Stars and Names," 53.
[33] Hurowitz, "True Light on the Urim and Thummim," 263.

its operation probably involved some sort of emission or refraction of light."[34] The book concludes by discussion of the theological significance of the Urim and Thummim and the fact that it was eventually replaced by prophecy, which related to the decline in the role of the High Priest. His hypothesis also suggests that the eventual disappearance of Urim and Thummim was not because it was no longer available or because the people of Israel forgot how to use it, but because God decided not to answer through its agency.[35] Hurowitz, while praising Van Dam's work overall, challenges his positions that the Urim and Thummim were not of the lot-oracle category in regards to a binary yes or no answer and that they instead required some type of prophecy and light source. Hurowitz goes on to note that, "Assyriologists recognize that even in such a complex system all answers are essentially reducible to"yes " or"no ".[36] The Urim and Thummim was kept in the possession of the High Priest and was used for the general purposes of understanding the will of God and foreseeing the future. According to the text, not only did God approve of the Urim and Thummim, God also commanded the High Priest concerning how to use it. [37]

Directions for the High Priest instructed him to wear sacred holy vestments, "a breastplate, and an ephod, and a robe, and a broidered coat, a mitre, and a girdle (Exod 28:4). The ephod was made of gold, blue, purple and scarlet material made to drape over the shoulders with the sides joined together. The ephod contained two shoulder pieces by which two stones were attached to each side. The breastplate containing twelve pouches, each holding a precious stone bearing a name of one of the tribes of Israel, was placed over the ephod. God instructed the high priest to

[34] Hurowitz, "True Light on the Urim and Thummim," 265.
[35] Hurowitz, "True Light on the Urim and Thummim," 266.
[36] Hurowitz, "True Light on the Urim and Thummim," 267.
[37] Cornelius Van Dam, *The Urim and Thummim: A Means of Revelation in Ancient Israel (*Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997), 231. Also see Exodus 28, Numbers 27:21

fasten the Urim and Thummim to the breastplate and construct a pouch in which the Urim and Thummim could be placed.[38]

More interesting than how these vestments and stones were worn, was their function. How exactly did the high priests and prophets receive revelation and instruction from the Urim and Thummim? We don't have a clear answer in this regard. Some scholarship suggests that, "After the high priest inquired through the Urim and Thummim, the answer would appear in the twelve stones located in the breastplate. Each stone contained the engraved name of one of the twelve tribes of Israel. Several letters would become illuminated, thus creating a word.[39] Other scholars developed the theory that the answer from the Urim and Thummim would come audibly with the Urim and Thummim acting as a device to project sound, probably similar to a modern day microphone or speaker, making it possible for all the troops of Israel to hear the instruction from God and every person would know what the battle plans entailed to help avoid confusion.[40] More widely accepted is the notion that Urim and Thummim were used as a lot-oracle device that somehow produced guidance in the form of yes and no answers.

It is clear that the Urim and Thummim were used in connection with war and often involved public display. There are times in which the high priest would not withdraw to the tabernacle to receive an answer through the Urim and Thummim but would instead stand before a gathering, "most likely in the temple courtyard."[41] In this situation the high priest would stand, in the holy vestments, and inquire of God regarding war strategies and even inquire as to whether they

[38] Hatch, *Magic, Biblical Law, and the Israelite Urim and Thummim*, 90.
[39] Ginzberg, Legends 3:172 as cited in Hatch, *Magic, Biblical Law, and the Israelite Urim and Thummim*.
[40] Cohen, *Secret of God*, 30, 34-35.
[41] Hatch, *Magic, Biblical Law, and the Israelite Urim and Thummim*, 92.

would be victorious in battle. One tradition states that the answer would come to the army by the "flashing of the two engraved stones on the shoulder piece of the ephod."[42] Josephus Flavius, (ca. 38-100), stated that "By means of the twelve stones [and Urim and Thummim], which the high-priest wore upon his breast. . . God foreshadowed victory to those on the eve of battle. For so brilliant a light flashed out from them."[43] The *Zohar,* of the 13th century quoting Rabbi Hiyya, stated that not only did the stones flash brightly, but the face of the high priest shone bright as well.[44] From this divine light emanating from the stones, all of Israel could see that they were protected by God and the troops would understand the message by the manner in which the stones flashed their light.[45]

If God not only sanctioned the use of oracle by lot, but actually commanded its use by the High Priest, what are we to make of this? What happened to the Urim and Thummim when the Temple was destroyed? And what came along to take its place? Were these instruments of divine communication too sacred to replicate? Could they only be used accurately by the High Priest or Prophets? Or, could we consider these ancient lot oracles to be prototypes for contemporary devices of divination that may be able to aid in dialogue with the divine?

One clear conclusion arises from this examination, that when God condemned divination, God was referring to the practice of divining in a name of a god other than God's own name. It was the "foreign" work of magic of which God did not approve.[46] However, it would appear that

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[42] Van Dam, *The Urim and Thummim: A Means of Revelation in Ancient Israel*, 17.
[43] Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews* 3.163, 166, 185; as cited in Van Dam, *The Urim and Thummim: A Means of Revelation in Ancient Israel*, 19-20.
[44] Van Dam, *Urim,* 25; as cited in Hatch, *Magic, Biblical Law, and the Israelite Urim and Thummim*.
[45] Hatch, *Magic, Biblical Law, and the Israelite Urim and Thummim*, 92.
[46] Freedman, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*. 4:469.

attempts to divine in this specific manner with the lot oracle in the name of the one God were not only allowed, but even encouraged.

Dreams

Divination through dreams is frequently mentioned in biblical sources from Jacob's dream in which he wrestles with an angel to Joseph's lauded skills of dream interpretation in Egypt. The subject of dreams and their function in divination is a robust topic for expansion within this area of study. Within the world of dreams there are a variety of ways in which divine communication is encountered in biblical texts.

1. **Direct Encounters -** Dreams such as Jacob's in parshat Vayetizei[47] and Vayiggash[48] in which he directly encounters a vision of God within the dream and receives a prophetic message are the types of dreams that are directly understood by the dreamer.
2. **Dreams to be Interpreted-** Certain dreams may need further examination and explanation to be understood. These dreams include those of Pharoah's cupbearer and baker[49] along with Pharoah's own dreams, all of which needed to be decoded by a skilled interpreter such as Joseph.[50]
3. **Prophetic Dreams-** Dreams that lay out a future potential outcome. Prophetic dreams can occur as direct encounters or as dreams to be interpreted. Joseph had prophetic dreams in parshat Vayishlach, indicating that his father, mother, and brothers would come to revere and bow down to him.[51]

[47] Genesis 28: 12-15, 31: 11-13
[48] Genesis 46: 2-4
[49] Genesis 40: 5-22
[50] Genesis 41: 25-32
[51] Genesis 37: 5-9

4. **Dreams Communicating Divine Will in the Present-** There are dreams that are described as being able to communicate God's will in the present, such as Avimelekh's dream in which God condemns him to death for taking Sarah, a married woman.[52] and Solomon's dreams in which he makes a wish and has it granted by God within the dream.[53]
5. **Dream Oracles-** Dream oracles can be spontaneously occurring, with no indication that the dream is going to transpire. There is also indication, as with Balaam's night-time vision manifestations, that guidance and communication through dreams may be specifically summoned and requested.[54]

All dreams can fall into at least one of the above categories, and it is possible for a dream to fall under several of the classifications listed above at the same time.

Astrology

Another area in which this project is only going to touch the surface is that of astrology, or divination by the lunar calendar, solar calendar, and zodiac signs. The Orthodox union writes, "In Judaism, Astrology is not regarded as "idol worship," even though the generic name for "idol worship" is "*Avodat Kochavim U'Mazalot*," Worship of the Stars and the Signs of the Zodiac."[55] From the Jewish perspective, the stars are not unrelated to events on earth and they can be viewed as having been set in their exact places by the Divine. With God overseeing their positioning, it is not irrelevant whether a person was born on any particular day because each day

[52] Genesis 20:3, 20: 6
[53] 1 Kings 3: 5-14
[54] Numbers 22: 7-12, 23: 3-5, 23:15-16
[55] "Significance of Astrology in Judaism."

of the year is special and has a unique imprint.[56] The ancient text *Sefer ha-Razim,* The Book of Mysteries, is said to have been presented by the angel Raziel to Noah before the flood, used as a guide, and then subsequently passed down through the biblical generations to Solomon.[57] It offers an understanding of the organization of astrological elements in a Hebraic context. Yuval Harari writes:

> Sefer ha-Razim draws together cosmological, angelological, astrological, and magic elements and organizes them, in a fluent Hebrew register, into a text containing seven parts that correlate to the seven firmaments. The work opens with a preface that ties together a tradition of delivering magic knowledge with praise of its wonders. According to the preface, the entire work is celestial knowledge that was given to Noah by the angel Raziel.[58]

Ancient manuscripts of *Sefer haRazim* were widely available during the second millennium, as evidenced by their discovery in Hebrew and in translations in Arabic, "attesting to the vast popularity of this work and to the great interest it held for Jews in Egypt at the beginning of the second millennium."[59] With the evidence of Sefer ha-Razim, even astrological divination had a context and historic source of reference within ancient biblical Jewish texts.

Forbidden Forms of Divination

Perhaps more well known to most Jews today are the prohibited forms of divination that are referenced in biblical sources such as necromancy, soothsaying, and divining in an unspecified manner. However, we will discover that even these prohibitions are not as clear as they may first appear. The primary prohibitions regarding specific acts of divination occurring in a Jewish context can be centered around three primary fears/concerns:

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[56] "Significance of Astrology in Judaism."
[57] Morgan, *Sepher Ha-Razim = The Book of the Mysteries*.
[58] Harari and Stein, *Jewish Magic before the Rise of Kabbalah*, 277.
[59] Harari and Stein, *Jewish Magic before the Rise of Kabbalah*, 284, and referencing M. Margalioth (1966, 76-77)

1. Contact with the dead, which causes ritual defilement.
2. Idolatry, or adopting non-Jewish religious practices
3. Undermining human agency, by overly relying on divination to dictate behavior

As Joshua Trachtenberg explains in J*ewish Magic and Superstition,* Jewish law broke down the all-encompassing category of sorcery into specific types, establishing varying degrees of guilt.[60] He further explains:

> The Bible had pronounced and unqualified condemnation of sorcery. The Talmud, while maintaining this fundamental attitude, pursued its customary function of clarifying and classifying Jewish law, and so broke up the all-inclusive category of sorcery into several divisions, establishing varying degrees of guilt. Two main types of forbidden magic were distinguished: that which produces a discernible, material effect, by means of "the performance of an act," and that which only creates the illusion of such an act or its effect (ahizat 'ainayim, "capturing the eyesight"); or, as further observation defined them, the one operates without the aid of demons, the other requires their assistance. The practitioner of the first type merits the Biblical penalty of death; the second is forbidden but not so punishable. Still a third kind of magic, "permitted from the start," involved the use of "the Laws of Creation," a term which was later interpreted to signify the mystical names of God and the angels.[61]

In examining the two principal forms of forbidden magic—the actual performance of an act that produces a discernible, material effect and the creation of the illusion of such an act—this passage provides only limited clarification. It leaves the boundaries of divination within a Jewish context somewhat ambiguous. The distinction between reality and illusion is one that has often perplexed humanity and to choose to vary the penalty from something as severe as death, to punishment, to having no penalty because the act is permitted creates room for interpretation and several shades of gray.

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[60] Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition*, 19.
[61] Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition*, 19.

When it comes to understanding these boundaries or permissability, the source of spiritual authority is key. As Trevan G Hatch writes in *Magic, Biblical Law, and the Israelite Urim and Thummim*, "A way of proving whether a particular individual had performed a miracle or magic was by showing under what authority he acted. If an individual produced great miracles using another name beside the name of the God of Israel, he was considered a magician and would therefore be sentenced to death."[62] If the inquiry is made of another deity or supreme source without the intention to appeal to Adonai the One God, then it would automatically be heretical, and outside of the permissible boundaries. If the inquiry and performance of the act occurred alongside the invocation of the Divine name, it passed one of the major criteria for potential permissibility.

Biblical Prohibitions Against Divination

The Tanakh contains several explicit condemnations of divination and its associated practices and practitioners, which served as the foundation for later rabbinic prohibitions.

- Exodus 22:18 – "You shall not tolerate a sorceress" מְכַשֵּׁפָה.
- Leviticus 19:26 – "You shall not eat anything with its blood. You shall not practice divination or soothsaying." תְּנַחֲשׁוּ וְלֹא תְעוֹנ�ְנוּ
- Leviticus 19:31- "Do not turn to ghosts and do not inquire of familiar spirits, to be defiled by them: I the Lord am your God." ידעני
- Leviticus 20:27 – "A man or a woman who has a ghost or a familiar spirit [אֹוב אֹו יִדְּעֹנִי] shall be put to death; they shall be pelted with stones—and the bloodguilt is theirs."
- Deuteronomy 18:10-11 – "Let no one be found among you who consigns a son or daughter to the fire, or who is an augur, a soothsayer, a diviner, a sorcerer, one who casts

[62] Hatch, *Magic, Biblical Law, and the Israelite Urim and Thummim*, 90.

spells, or one who consults ghosts or familiar spirits, or one who inquires of the dead." דֹּרֵשׁ אֶל־הַמֵּתִים

A range of specific practices are named in these passages, including the following: *nahash* (*hissing), onan* (*clouds)*; possibly referring to nephomancy (divination by clouds), *kashaph* or *pharmakia* (*poison*), being a *ba'al ob* (*master of spirits)*, being a *yidde'oni* (*gainer of information from ghosts),* being a *doresh el ha-metim*; *(one who questions corpses), qasam qesem*; (*divination by distributions/lots)*, and *khabar kheber* (joining).[63] Though the list appears formidable and extensive, the primary reasons these words and phrases come into question is because of prohibitions against the use of dead bodies (which is in line with the beliefs of Judaism that make dead bodies ritually unclean) and against the adoption of acts from other religions.[64] Crucially, outside of these concerns, the texts do not universally condemn all forms of divination or all spiritual tools associated with it. The language often focuses on particular methods or sources rather than the general act of seeking knowledge beyond the physical.

Necromancy

In regards to contact with the dead, Harari writes in *Jewish Magic Before the Rise of Kabbalah*, "Various stories show that consulting the dead, in the broad sense of seeking their help to attain knowledge, was not perceived as intrinsically negative and forbidden."[65] Despite its biblical prohibition, necromancy was widely practiced throughout the ancient Near East, and its use in Israelite contexts was likely more widespread and complex than the prohibitions alone suggest. T. Witton Davies, in *Magic, Divination, and Demonology Among The Hebrews And Their Neighbors* clarifies:

[63] Jewitches, "Jewish Divination," April 17, 2023.
[64] Jewitches, "Jewish Divination."
[65] Harari and Stein, *Jewish Magic before the Rise of Kabbalah*, 426.

> Necromancy is a part of divination and not a thing distinct in itself. Its peculiar mark is that the information desired is sought from the ghosts of deceased persons. Divination embraces all attempts to obtain secret knowledge from the denizens of the spiritual world, so that necromancy comes under it, and is part of it. Indeed, the word itself denotes literally divination by consulting the dead.[66]

The most frequently cited example of necromantic practice in the Tanakh is the story of The Witch of Endor.[67] In this story we are introduced to a necromancer, (*ba'alat ov*) who is consulted by Saul to summon the prophet Samuel when other divinatory methods including consulting with the sacred lots of Urim and Thumim had failed Saul. In this story, Saul attempted first to inquire directly of God himself, "And Saul inquired of GOD, but GOD did not answer him, either by dreams or by Urim or by prophets."[68] When he was unsuccessful he requested that additional assistance be sought out. He said, "Find me a woman who consults ghosts, so that I can go to her and inquire through her."[69]

The woman successfully conjures the prophet Samuel, who informs Saul that God has turned away from him due to his failure to carry out divine vengeance against the Amalekites. This narrative is often read as a cautionary tale about Saul's desperation and failure. But another interpretation suggests it affirms the power and validity of the woman's mediumship in consulting with the dead. Samuel appears—not a trick, not a false spirit—and delivers a true and devastating prophecy.

This raises a critical point: the primary issue is not the act of divination, but what that act reveals about Saul's standing with God. The problem is not necromancy per se, but Saul's inability to recognize divine disfavor through God's silence alone. His turn to a woman medium shows his

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[66] Davies, B.A, PhD., *Magic, Divination, and Demonology Among The Hebrews and Their Neighbors*, 6.
[67] I Samuel 28
[68] I Samuel 28:6
[69] I Samuel 28:7

desperation for confirmation, not his rebellion. His failure lies in his earlier disobedience—not in consulting a gifted intermediary when God remained silent.

Rabbi Jill Hammer offers a compelling explanation for the biblical prohibitions and later aversion toward consulting a *ba'alat ov,* when she writes:

> The priestly rules against entry into the sanctum if one has been in contact with birth or death (i.e. if one menstruates, gives birth, touches a corpse, etc.), as well as the rules against consulting and/or feeding the dead, may have been specifically meant to disempower those practitioners whose primary work was with the ancestors and the portals of death and life. Women, who may have been particularly involved in death rites, might have been especially vulnerable to such delegitimation.[70]

Moreover, this episode elevates the woman's role as a spiritual conduit, suggesting the existence and recognition of women as skilled and sincere intermediaries, even within a patriarchal religious system. Thus, the inclusion of this story within the TaNaKh is possibly, "to create a contrast between the (sanctioned) male prophet Samuel and the (unsanctioned) female witch of En-dor."[71] Additionally, its inclusion, "may point out a truth about society: authorities condemn magic, witchcraft, etc. until they themselves need help."[72]

Hammer offers readers the following for contemplation, "When we examine the story deeply, we find that the witch of Endor– or to use the Hebrew term, the *ba'alat ov* or spirit-keeper– is not at all a villain. She is intelligent, competent at her work, and compassionate to Saul– indeed, she is the only person who is kind to King Saul in the last days of his life." Perhaps it is the woman, tending the threshold between realms, who is necessary to serve as a compassionate conduit and intermediary in this divinatory role.

[70] Hammer, "The WItch of Endor: Tending the Spring of Generations."
[71] Hammer, "The WItch of Endor: Tending the Spring of Generations."
[72] Hammer, "The WItch of Endor: Tending the Spring of Generations."

Expanding the Landscape: Additional Forms of Divination

While this project focuses primarily on key practices of divination that have shaped or challenged Jewish spiritual frameworks, it is important to acknowledge the wider landscape of divinatory methods found throughout Jewish history and its surrounding cultural contexts. In the process of researching this project, I was struck by the sheer number and diversity of divinatory forms—many of which appear briefly in texts or were practiced on the margins of official tradition.

Some of these include lead casting, candle divination, bellomancy (divination using arrows), hepatoscopy (the inspection of livers—explicitly forbidden in Jewish law), lecanomancy and hydromancy (interpreting the patterns of oil in water or water in oil), and dreidel spinning as a form of divination.

While not all of these practices are explored in depth here, their presence in Near Eastern rituals, biblical narratives, and Jewish folk practices across centuries reveals just how widespread and deeply human the desire has been to seek knowledge beyond the visible world. They also remind us that the boundaries between "magic," "religion," and "divination" were not always so clearly drawn. Understanding these varied methods helps us to appreciate the broad cultural and spiritual context in which Jewish divinatory practices emerged—and sets the stage for the next exploration: whether such practices should be viewed as acts of subversion or of revelation.

Divination as Subversion– or Revelation?

Beyond the more tangible concerns of impurity and worship of false gods, the primary cause for concern with acts of divination taking place within a Jewish context according to Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, " is attempting to know the will of G-d and subverting it through the use of divination."[73] Rabbi Sacks expands that in Judaism, "we believe that we cannot predict the future when it comes to human beings. We *make* the future by our choices. The script has not yet been written. The future is radically open."[74] While Rabbi Sacks' position affirms human agency and divine partnership in shaping the future, his outright rejection of divination presumes a deterministic intent– that the goal of divination is to predict an unchangeable outcome.

But divination, properly understood, need not function that way. Rather than prescribing the future, divination can help illuminate the present. It may offer a lens through which hidden truths, patterns, or spiritual dynamics are made visible. It is not about foretelling immutable fate, but about bringing consciousness to possibility.

In this light, divination aligns not with fatalism, but with spiritual discernment. It offers interpretive insight– like reading signs, dreams, or intuitions as tools for self-examination and divine inquiry. In Jewish thought, such interpretive practices have long existed under other names: *heshbon hanefesh* (accounting of the soul), *hitbodedut* (contemplative prayer), and even *midrash* (interpretive reading).

[73] Sacks, "On Not Predicting the Future."
[74] Sacks, "On Not Predicting the Future."

Rabbinic Definitions: Precision and Narrowing of Scope

While the biblical prohibitions are sweeping, the rabbis of the Talmud were often far more specific in their legal definitions. Their aim was to clarify which exact behaviors violated Torah law.

The Talmud, therefore, attempts to classify and define these acts in detail. For example, the sages asked: "What is the definition of the soothsayer mentioned in verse: “There shall not be found among you. . . a soothsayer?”[75] Rabbi Shimon responds: "This is one who applies seven types of semen [*zekhur*] to one’s eye in order to perform sorcery. And the rabbis say this is one who deceives the eyes, as though he is performing sorcery.”[76] This verse uses a rather explicit act as a tool for identifying this type of forbidden act, and while it may have been used for exaggeration and effect through metaphor, it still advertises a lack of genuine understanding or respect for how those gifted with vision might utilize their gifts both then and now.

The rabbis provided similarly precise, if strange, definitions for other forbidden practices. The prohibition in Leviticus 19:31 against inquiring by means of a *yidde'oni* is defined in the Talmud as, “one who puts a bone of an animal the name of which is ידוע into his mouth and the bone speaks.”.[77] These highly specific acts demonstrate that the blanket biblical prohibitions were narrowed by the rabbis, and did not necessarily apply to all forms of divine inquiry. This approach inadvertently leaves space for practices that fall outside these hyper-specific definitions including interpretive, intuitive, or symbolic spiritual methods that are not explicitly banned.

[75] Deuteronomy 18:10
[76] TB *Sanhedrin* 65b.19
[77] TB *Sanhedrin 65b*

The Prophecy of Fools and Children

The Talmud makes a striking observation about prophecy in the post-Temple period: "R. Yoḥanan said: 'From the day the Temple was destroyed, prophecy has been taken from the prophets and given to fools and children'." [78] Children, traditionally seen as vessels of innocence and purity, were understood to be unencumbered by the complexities and distractions of adult life, making them ideal conduits for divine inspiration. The inclusion of fools might initially seem puzzling, but it suggests that a fool– lacking intellectual pretense or ego– may serve as a kind of empty vessel, a blank slate upon which divine insight can be imprinted.

In earlier times, prophecy and divine communication were channeled through more formal means such as the ephod, Urim and Thummim, or prophets and Levitical priests with oracular roles. However, as these methods faded, ecstatic prophecy and spontaneous inspiration became more prominent. During this shift, warnings against "false prophets" grew louder—understandably so. Yet distinguishing between true and false prophets was never simple. One commonly cited test was whether the prophecy came true. But this was not always a reliable indicator: even a divinely inspired prophecy could remain unfulfilled due to repentance, divine mercy, or shifting circumstances. As a result, even authorized forms of divination were not immune from ambiguity or misinterpretation.

Dreams as Divination

One of the most culturally embedded—and rabbinically acknowledged—forms of divination in Jewish tradition is dream interpretation. Although this project only touches on dreams briefly, it's

[78] TB *Bava Bahra* 12b

worth noting that dream divination was both widely practiced and widely accepted in Jewish texts.

As the Talmud states in Berachot 55a, "A dream not interpreted is like a letter not read. As long as it is not interpreted it cannot be fulfilled; the interpretation of a dream creates its meaning." This affirms the centrality of interpretation– without it, even dreams filled with divine symbols remain meaningless. In Berachot 57b it is stated that, "a dream is one-sixtieth of prophecy," implying the foretelling aspect of the dream itself. For a religion supposedly against the use of divination, it spends quite a bit of time in this tractate discussing its practice through dreams.

In her Dissertation on Rabbinic Discourse on Divination in the Babylonian Talmud, Stephanie Bolz highlights that, "In both the Hebrew Bible and the Bavli, dream interpretation is permitted as an accepted form of divination." She further explains that, "By utilizing scriptural verses and midrashic exegetical techniques, the rabbis make dreams and dream interpretation analogous to the Written Torah and Oral Torah respectively, and promulgate a method of dream interpretation of which they are the sole arbiters in their cultural context."[79] Once again, the rabbis and *hachamim* held the authority as interpreters of dreams and divine messages received in this context. However, looking in the periphery, we can see that there were certainly others who were both talented and skilled in interpreting dreams. These may have been women or folks living on the margins of society who may have simultaneously been viewed as witches and outcasts.

[79] Bolz, *Rabbinic Discourse on Divination in the Babylonian Talmud*, 14.

Bibliomancy: Divining Through Sacred Text

Building on the idea that divine insight could come through unexpected vessels—children, fools, and dreams—it is not surprising that the rabbis also explored divination through sacred text itself. When prophecy became rarer and the Temple rituals ceased, the center of spiritual life shifted from the Temple to the text. Torah study became the primary means of encountering the Divine, and with this shift came new interpretive practices—among them, bibliomancy, or the divination of meaning and guidance through scripture.

As study and wisdom became central to the rabbinic enterprise after the destruction of the Second Temple, the environment became fertile ground for divination through texts, especially Torah. Bibliomancy rose to prominence around the same time the Talmud was being codified. At this point in history, children were not only regarded as vessels of innocence and prophecy but were also actively used as oracular tools in a form of oral bibliomancy.

Yuval Harari writes:

> Children were perceived in the ancient world as particularly effective agents of divination. The Talmud shows that they were used as living books, in a form of oral bibliomancy Rabbis (and other) would listen to a random verse recited by a child or even ask him, “Tell me your verse" (referring to a scriptural verse that would come to the child’s mind), and derive from it an answer to the question that concerned them.[80]

This practice echoes the earlier recognition of children as prophetic vessels,[81] now channeled through their intimate relationship with sacred text. The randomness of a child’s recited verse was seen not as chaotic but divinely directed—a serendipitous channel for insight.

[80] Harari and Stein, *Jewish Magic before the Rise of Kabbalah*, 414.
[81] TB *Bava Batra* 12b

For example, Shmuel is said to have practiced bibliomancy by opening a scroll of sacred writings and interpreting the first verse that he saw. Likewise, Rabbi Yochanan would inquire about his fate by asking a child what verse they were learning.[82] Rabbi Yochanan also noted, " If one rises early and a verse comes to his mouth, this is a small prophecy."[83] This reliance on chance encounters with scripture was not considered subversive; rather it affirmed the sacred omnipresence of Torah, capable of responding to the seeker in any moment.

Another compelling example comes from Midrash Esther Rabba 7:17, where Mordechai approaches three children and asks what verses they are studying. Each child recites a verse that speaks of divine protection and victory. Mordechai takes this as a message of divine assurance that Haman's plot to destroy the Jewish people will fail.[84] This form of divination through verse is not condemned—it is sanctified. It glorifies study, recitation, and the Torah itself as a living dialogue between heaven and earth.

Demonology and the Gray Zones of Permissibility

Just as bibliomancy blurred the lines between study and divination, rabbinic literature also reveals complex attitudes toward more controversial forms of inquiry, such as demonology. Though not frequently discussed, demons were acknowledged within Jewish cosmology, and their consultation appears as a debated issue in the Talmud:"Is one permitted to consult demons on the Sabbath?"[85] This question, while brief, is revealing. If demon consultation were completely forbidden in all cases, there would be little need for a conversation about timing. The

[82] TB *Hullin* 95b
[83] Harari and Stein, *Jewish Magic before the Rise of Kabbalah,* 424-425. and TB *Berakhot* 55b
[84] Esther Rabba 7:17
[85] TB *Sanhedrin* 101a

fact that the issue is not outright dismissed but rather restricted by context (Shabbat) implies that certain types of spirit consultation may have been tolerated—or at least ambiguously addressed—within specific boundaries.

These examples illustrate the flexibility and interpretive space that existed within rabbinic discourse. While some practices were clearly outlawed, others fell into halakhic and spiritual gray areas, often shaped by intent, method, and context.

Divine Timing, Open Gates, and Attuning to Response

If dreams, texts, and even marginalized voices could carry divine messages, it follows that not all channels of communication with the Divine are open at all times—or equally accessible to all people. In Devarim Rabbah 2:12 the issue of divine timing for prayer and answers through the gates of communication is addressed: "As it says (Psalms 69:14), "As for me, may my prayer come to You, O Eternal, at a favorable moment. . . Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachman said to Rabbi Hannina bar Papa, the gates of prayer are sometimes open and sometimes closed, but the gates of repentance are always open."[86] Here, we learn that timing and openness are central to divine access. There are auspicious moments when the gates of communication swing wide– and others when they remain shut, either by divine will or by human inaccessibility.

Divination, then, can be understood not as a way of controlling the future, but as a method of attuning oneself to the proper frequency—a spiritual calibration to receive insight when the gates of wisdom and revelation are open.. Whether through dreams, verses, or even the mouths of children, these practices reflect a continuous human effort to seek guidance—not in defiance of God's will, but in relationship with it.

[86] Devarim Rabbah 2:12

Part 2: The Practitioner (The Who)

The Who: The Power and Politics of Practice

The human act of seeking and receiving Divine guidance throughout Jewish history was subject to a complex set of rules and social dynamics establishing several distinctions between sacred ritual and forbidden magic. The key to understanding these distinctions lies primarily within the framework of a two-part inquiry: a close look at the practitioner (The Who) and the nature of the act itself (The What).

Rabbinic Authority and Control of Divine Access

The rabbis of the Talmudic period were by no means strangers to divinatory practices or desire to uncover hidden knowledge. Yet, this access to the unseen was closely guarded. Knowledge was power– and power, especially supernatural or spiritual power needed to be carefully managed within the emerging rabbinic framework. Thus, If rabbis performed acts of divination, they were often deemed legitimate; if non-rabbis or professional diviners engaged in similar practices, the same acts were condemned.

As Dr. Stephanie L. Bolz observes in her dissertation *Rabbinic Discourse on Divination in the Babylonian Talmud*, "The Bavli tends to positively depict rabbis performing divination when they are not acting as a professional diviner and tends to negatively depict non-rabbis and professional diviners who perform divination."[87] This framing underscores one of the clearest markers of what constituted "magic" versus "religion": who was performing the act. Acts

[87] Bolz, *Rabbinic Discourse on Divination in the Babylonian Talmud*, 14.

deemed heretical, dangerous, or punishable by death when done by women, outsiders, or professional diviners could be tolerated, or even celebrated, when performed by sages.

It might come as a surprise to consider rabbis as participants in acts of divination and attempts to know the future, but Yuval Harari notes that the rabbis saw their supernatural abilities as a result of their closeness to God and mastery of Torah, which distinguished their actions from those of 'sorcerers'. Even though they viewed themselves as "agents of ritual power", it was only they, in their own eyes, who were the worthy and legitimate agents of this power.[88] Thus, their views toward divination, witchcraft, and sorcery in any other context than their own rabbinic practice could be characterised as hostile.

Despite their harsh rhetoric against sorcery and superstition, rabbinic texts don't shy away from showcasing their own extraordinary powers. Harari catalogues a long list of miraculous abilities attributed to rabbinic figures:

> The rabbis' supernatural power is manifest in stories about their power to curse and send a snake whose bite is incurable, to cause rain or direct it as they wish, to fill a field with gourds and collect them by means of speech (TB Sanhedrin 68a), to fill a valley with golden dinars (Midrash on Psalms 92:8; Exodus Rabbah 52:3), to control the sea (PT Sanhedrin 7:11), to kill a snake through their mere contact with it (TB Berakhot 33a), to move a tree, to shift the flow of water by a cubit, to bring down walls and halt their fall (TB Bava Metsia 59b), to raise corpses from the earth (PT Shevi'it 9:1), to kill with words or with a stare, to revive the dead (TBE Megillah 7b), to divine and contend with demons, to overcome witches and sorcerers, and so forth.The apex of this trend is in the attribution to the rabbis of the capacity to create.[89]

[88] Harari and Stein, *Jewish Magic before the Rise of Kabbalah*, 371.
[89] Harari and Stein, *Jewish Magic before the Rise of Kabbalah*, 372-373.

The very way in which they might go about overcoming witches and sorcerers was to act the part of a witch or sorcerer themselves. The main difference was that for the rabbis, "the source of these powers was not magic but normative righteousness, implying extreme closeness to God."[90] In creating a community and society that sought to define norms and proper avenues for power, "the rabbis wrestled with other agents of ritual power- sorcerers, in their rhetoric- mainly women and heretics."[91] One of the ways in which they protected their power was by standing strongly against any outside of their immediate sphere who sought to perform similar acts and this included the common folk of whom the distinction of folk religion was applied, as well as women who were considered witches, sorcerers, and heretics.

A clear example of this permissive double standard appears in *Sanhedrin 67b,* where Abaye says:

> The laws of sorcerers are like those of the Sabbath: Certain actions are punished by stoning, some are exempt from punishment, yet forbidden, while others are entirely permitted. Thus, if one actually performs magic, one is stoned, if one creates an illusion, one is exempt, while what is entirely permitted? That which was done by Rabbi Chanina and Rabbi Oshaya, who spent every Sabbath eve in studying the laws of Creation, and through it they would create a third-year calf and eat it. . .[92]

Here, magical creation is not only permitted but sanctified, because the rabbis are its agents. Their actions are not classified as "sorcery" but as sacred acts born of Torah study and piety. One of the primary distinctions appears to be that the rabbis were operating with the intention of channeling a power that was God's power, whereas with the sorcerers and witches, the source of power was questionable at best. However, we don't really know whether or not those

[90] Harari and Stein, *Jewish Magic before the Rise of Kabbalah*, 374.
[91] Harari and Stein, *Jewish Magic before the Rise of Kabbalah*, 375.
[92] TB *Sanhedrin* 67b

considered to be witches and sorcerers were also God fearing channelers of divine insight or whether they attributed their abilities to different sources of power.

Permitted Practices and Interpretive Loopholes

While certain forms of divination were banned outright, others were permitted under specific rabbinic frameworks. Practices like bibliomancy, divination through children, and divination through spontaneous revelation (bat kol, angels, or dreams) were accepted when performed by, or under the auspices of, rabbinic authority.[93]

For instance:

- **Shmuel** would "examine the book" (bibliomancy).
- **Rabbi Yochanan** divined by interpreting verses recited by children.
- **Hanina ben Dosa** practiced divination through heartfelt prayer.
- **Some rabbis interpreted signs (simanim)**, distinguishing them from forbidden omens (nihush).

According to Harari, "Practices such as consulting a book, a child, or the dead were carried out by rabbis or explicitly permitted by them, so one may assume that no flaw was found in them."[94]

These practices reveal how the rabbis created halakhic categories to allow for selective engagement with the unseen—preserving their authority while condemning rival sources of spiritual power.

[93] Harari and Stein, *Jewish Magic before the Rise of Kabbalah*, 422.
[94] Harari and Stein, *Jewish Magic before the Rise of Kabbalah*, 422.

Signs vs. Forbidden Omens

Some rabbis interpreted "signs" (siman), which they distinguished both categorically and normatively from divination.[95] Divination based on omens was generally prohibited for Jews as in the ways of the Amorites,[96] "but the rabbis sought to distinguish categorically and normatively between the two kinds: divination (*nihush*), which was forbidden and sign (*siman*) which was permitted." According to Harari, "The key text in this regard is a story about Rav, who interpreted an approaching boat as a propitious sign and ruled: "Any divination that is unlike that of Eliezer, Abraham's servant, or Jonathan, the son of Saul, is not divination."[97] To clarify this difference Harari explains that, "Determining a priori that a given event will be interpreted as an omen is divination, whereas determining it as such after the fact is a sign."[98] Even astrology, often associated with foreign magical traditions, was tolerated within this framework– as long as it was observational rather than predictive. Interpreting signs in the stars could be permissible, while using stars to determine fate might cross the line and be considered idolatry or forbidden practice. Harari takes note of this nuance saying, "Even astral divination which was associated with foreign professional diviners, was perceived in many traditions as harmless in that it was irrelevant to the people of Israel".[99] Signs interpreted could be harmless whereas omens were something to potentially be feared and forbidden even to the rabbis.

Rabbis as the New Prophets

The rabbinic project following the destruction of the second temple in Jerusalem saw the rabbis constructing themselves, their positions, and their authority. During this time, prophecy and the

[95] Harari and Stein, *Jewish Magic before the Rise of Kabbalah*, 413.
[96] Harari and Stein, *Jewish Magic before the Rise of Kabbala*, 422.
[97] TB *Hullin* 95b and Rashi on Genesis 24:12-14 and I Samuel 14:8-11)
[98] Harari and Stein, *Jewish Magic before the Rise of Kabbalah*, 422.
[99] Harari and Stein, *Jewish Magic before the Rise of Kabbalah,* 422.

interpretation of signs and wonders became one of the roles of the rabbis. Christine Hayes in *Inventing Rabbis* guides the reader along this transition from biblical Israel to the invention of Rabbinic Judaism. She traces this evolution: "Prophets were less prominent in Second Temple Jewish society. . . persons skilled in the transmission and interpretation of sacred writings (scribes) began to emerge." [100] The rabbis bestowed upon themselves the interpretive powers of theological, ethical, and moral discernment. As such, they were able to to determine whether or not to intervene to commune and/or influence the divine to respond benevolently toward themselves or their constituents.

Continuing to highlight the evolution from prophecy to rabbinic authority the Talmud states the following:

> R. Avdimi from Haifa said: "Since the day the Temple was destroyed, prophecy has been taken from the prophets and given to the rabbis." But is not a rabbi [also] a prophet? rather, say thus: "Although it [prophecy] has been taken from the prophets, from the rabbis it has not been taken." Ameimar said: "A rabbi is even superior to a prophet, as is said: 'And a prophet has a heart of wisdom' (Psalms 90:12). Who is compared to whom? That is to say—the smaller [the prophet] is compared to the greater [the rabbi]." [101]

The exaltation of the rabbi and his position set the stage for the pursuit of wisdom based in Torah study as an alternative to the prophets' divine inspiration concerning God's message to humanity.[102] What couldn't be readily understood might become revealed through the process of repetition and study of verses of Torah and Talmud. As the Mishna states, "Turn it over, and turn it over again, for everything is in it." [103] In this light, study itself becomes a form of divination– a sacred practice of uncovering what is hidden, not through visions or spirits, but through

[100] Hayes, "Inventing Rabbis," 201.
[101] Harari and Stein, *Jewish Magic before the Rise of Kabbalah*, 409-410 and TB *Bava Bathra 12a*
[102] Harari and Stein, *Jewish Magic before the Rise of Kabbalah*, 410.
[103] TB Avot 5:25

disciplined engagement with Torah. This shift was not just theological; it was a strategic consolidation of power, defining who could speak for God– and who could not.

The Marginalization of Women's Roles in Sacred Power

As rabbinic authority solidified in the centuries following the destruction of the Second Temple, women's roles in accessing divine communication, healing, and ritual leadership were increasingly sidelined. The rabbinic class constructed itself as the exclusive mediator between the people and the Divine, often labeling those outside this framework—especially women—as superstitious, dangerous, or heretical, even when they engaged in practices similar to those sanctioned for male rabbis.

Yet, historical and textual evidence suggests that women long occupied roles of spiritual authority—as healers, seers, dream interpreters, necromancers, and priestesses. These roles persisted on the margins of Jewish life, filling gaps left by male-dominated religious traditions, particularly in liminal or transitional spaces like birth, death, illness, and mourning. Rabbi Jill Hammer, in *The Hebrew Priestess (2015),* explores the roles and functions of ancient priestess traditions that were often overlooked in male authored sources and patriarchal societies and institutions. Hammer writes: "Four thousand years ago, in the ancient Near East, women were poets, drummers, scholars, dancers, healers, prophets, and keepers of sacred space." She continues, "Because the Bible tends to avoid and even repress the existence of priestesses, one might believe that no such archetypes or examples exist in the religions of the west"[104].

[104] Hammer, *The Hebrew Priestess,* 17.

Despite this erasure, a closer examination reveals women functioning in powerful ritual roles. Titles such as neviah (prophetess), tzovot (ministering women, perhaps singers or diviners), and mechashefa or ba'alat ov (witch, medium, or necromancer) point to a complex, if often unofficial, spiritual infrastructure in which women were central.[105]

Hammer notes that women engaged in spirit work with the dead—roles from which male priests were barred due to purity laws—thus filling a spiritual and ritual void. These unofficial practices, while unsanctioned by rabbinic authority, met real communal needs.[106] In recent years, several scholars have shed light on the gendered aspects of witchcraft traditions in rabbinic literature including Tal Ilan's work offering a feminist reading of the "witch hunt" in Asheklon as a basis for understanding historical events.[107] Rebecca Lesses also offers an examination of the place of female gender in three layers of the Jewish culture of witchcraft: clients, witches, and she-demons. With an examination of the connection between talmudic traditions and magic traditions in Babylonian incantation bowls, she notes that the female character of witchcraft in rabbinic literature reflects a gender politics struggle.[108] Lesses claims that the way in which the rabbis relate to gender ideology in the Talmud is not uniform. While women are perceived as "engaged in sorcery," they are also seen at times as possessing knowledge vital for protection and healing. She notes that this kind of knowledge was valued and ultimately preserved by the rabbis in their literature, despite its female origin.[109]

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[105] Hammer, *The Hebrew Priestess*, 19.
[106] Hammer, *The Hebrew Priestess*, 19.
[107] Ilan, *Silencing the Queen: The Literary Histories of Shelamzion and Other Jewish Women*.
[108] Harari and Stein, *Jewish Magic before the Rise of Kabbalah*, 100.
[109] Lesses, "Exe(o)rcising Power: Women as Sorceresses, Exorcists, and Demonesses in Babylonian Jewish Society of Late Antiquity."

Women were not the central focus in cultic, religious Judaism and the void of focus around them and their roles allowed for them to weave in and out of liminal and transitory spaces while cultivating attunement to the natural cycles of life unfolding around them. As part of a mysterious and often poorly understood realm of birth and creation, the women and their folk practices were often relied upon, when all other methodologies including consulting with the rabbis, had been exhausted.

Sacred Work at the Threshold of Life and Death

Throughout Jewish history, particularly in Eastern Europe, female ritual specialists continued to mediate the realms of the living and the dead. In the shtetls, *feldmesterins* (grave measurers) and *kneytlekeh-leygerins* (women who laid out thread for measuring graves) performed necromantic and healing rituals when all else had failed.[110]

As Annabel Gottfried Cohen explains on her website *Pulling at Threads*, these women measured the graves of deceased relatives using thread while reciting *tkhines*—Yiddish supplications—calling on the dead to advocate for the living in heaven. This ritual could culminate in the creation of a soul candle, crafted from a wick measured on the grave, to call on the departed for guidance, strength, and protection.

These women, often working outside formal religious structures, guarded sacred thresholds—between illness and health, between life and death, between silence and revelation.

[110] Cohen, Pulling at Threads, "Pulling at Threads."

Power, Punishment, and the Politics of Divine Access

Ultimately, what emerges is a deeply gendered double standard. The same acts—divining through texts, dreams, the dead, or signs—were permitted or praised when performed by rabbis, but condemned as dangerous or idolatrous when performed by women. Yet, time and again, when male religious figures failed to access divine truth, women were turned to as a last resort.

These women may have been labeled witches, heretics, or practitioners of forbidden magic—but their actions often demonstrated effectiveness and spiritual depth. Their marginalization was not due to lack of ability, but to the threat they posed to centralized, male religious authority.

The threat was both acknowledged and memorialized in different passages of the Talmud Bavli when referencing rabbis dueling witches, while also acknowledging an aspect of witchcraft inherent in all women, including Jewish women. Berachot 53a states the following:

> The rabbis taught in a baraita: If one was walking outside a city and smelled a fragrant smell, if most of the inhabitants of the city are pagans, one may not recite a blessing. If most of the city's inhabitants are Jews, one may recite a blessing. Rabbi Yose says: even if a majority of the city's residents are Jews, one may not recite a blessing, because Jewish women burn incense for witchcraft.[111]

Rabbi Yose's position contradicts the notion taught in the baraita implying a clear boundary between what is taking place in the homes of pagan women as opposed to the homes of Jewish women. In fact, he clearly states in his opposition that "Jewish women burn incense for witchcraft." Thus, he implies that the line between designation of performative action as witchcraft or ritual was certainly not always easy to ascertain. The very inclusion of this line

[111] TB Berachot 53a

acknowledges the blurring of lines between who is considered a woman and who might be considered a witch and it is inclusive of Jewish women.

The harshest irony is that the women who were often sought out in moments of desperation by the rabbis were also those most vulnerable to condemnation, punishment, and even death—for performing the very acts often relied upon in times of crisis.

Prophecy Departed– But Not Gone

Today, the fear of false prophets still casts a long shadow over Jewish discourse around prophecy and divination. This fear provides a convenient refuge for skeptics and a theological rationale for avoiding the ambiguity these practices inevitably invite. After all, if prophecy cannot be verified, if divination cannot be objectively proven as divine communication, it is easier—and safer—to dismiss them altogether than to enter into the uncertain terrain of spiritual interpretation.

Yet with the end of canonical prophecy in the era of the Nevi'im, and the disappearance of tools like the Urim and Thummim, Judaism has, in some ways, suffered a rupture—a severing of once-acknowledged channels of divine response. The chords of connection, while not entirely cut, have been frayed. What does it mean, then, to be in dialogue with the Divine today?

Prayer gives us one half of the conversation—a human outcry to the heavens. But how, and when, do we receive a response? Where do we find the other half of the exchange? What does divine listening sound like in a world without prophets?

Practices of divination—especially when reframed as sacred tools for reflection, discernment, and inner attunement—offer a way to restore part of that lost dialogue. These methods do not claim to replace prophecy as it once existed, but they invite us into relationship with the unknown, with the sacred mystery that still pulses beneath the surface of everyday life. By engaging practices that honor signs, dreams, intuition, and even the wisdom of ancestral memory, we begin to create space for encounter—a place where guidance, insight, and meaning can emerge.

For women, in particular, reclaiming these practices also means reclaiming long-silenced modes of spiritual authority. It challenges the historical exclusion from official religious power and affirms that Divine dialogue was never meant to be monopolized by any one gender, role, or class. The silence of prophecy may mark an ending—but it also beckons toward new beginnings, inviting us to listen again with deeper courage and an orientation toward expansion.

Part Three: Renewing and Expanding Pathways of Divine Dialogue

Developing a Contemporary Approach

The historical and textual analysis in the preceding sections demonstrates that Jewish tradition has never held a simple, static view of divination. Instead, it was a fluid and often contradictory practice, shaped by issues of power, authority, and context. Given this complex legacy, how can a modern Jew, in the absence of prophets and sanctioned rabbinic diviners, authentically engage with this impulse for Divine guidance? This final section will explore how ancient principles of inquiry can be reimagined as powerful tools for contemporary Jewish spiritual practice. By examining ancient divination practices through the lens of what was permissible and more frequently noted in Jewish biblical texts, we can establish a few guiding principles for reframing and reclaiming them as contemporary Jewish approaches to divine dialogue.

Guiding Principles for Divine Dialogue Today

1. **Form of Hitbodedut:** Personal, direct, dialogue with the Divine.
2. **Compatibility with a Monotheistic Foundation**: These practices do not inherently contradict the belief in one, divine source.
3. **Insight into the Present Moment**: These practices are not utilized as tools to know a pre-determined future, but rather to inquire as to the significance of the present moment, thus empowering inquirers to act with increased awareness and attunement to their own agency in future outcomes.
4. **Tool for Self Guidance:** These practices can be undertaken by anyone and do not require an intermediary, prophet, priest, or member of clergy for their performance. They can be

enhanced, however, when facilitated by someone who has cultivated their skills in the interpretation of these signs, symbols, and modalities.

5. **The Role of Images:** While not a requisite, images may facilitate and inspire connection and meaning making.

Form of Hitbodedut

Hitbodedut, meaning "seclusion" or "solitariness" in Hebrew, is a Jewish practice of private, unstructured prayer and meditation, popularized by Rebbe Nachman (1772-1810) of Breslov. It serves as a means of cultivating a personal and intimate relationship with God through spontaneous, individualized communication. By entering into private dialogue with God through Hitbodedut, people can talk openly to God, expressing desires and concerns, praying directly, and seeking guidance in the form of signs and symbols to be encountered.

The Torah offers an early image of such solitary mediation in the verse: "And Yitzchak came from the way of the well 'Lechai Roi,' for he dwelt in the south country. And Yitzchak went out to meditate in the fields upon evening, and he raised his eyes, and saw, and behold, the camels were coming."[112] Here, Yitzchak's evening meditation in the field reflects the essence of *Hitbodedut*: prayerful solitude in nature.

In Breslover thought, *Hitbodedut* is a pathway to *bitul*– self-nulification or dissolution of the ego–to become unified with the Divine. Rebbe Nachman emphasized this in *Likutei Moharan:*

> The essence of *bitul*—that a person negates his corporeality and becomes *ayin* (nothingness), becoming encompassed in the oneness of God—is achieved only through *hitbodedut* . *Hitbodedut* requires a special place and time so that he is not

[112] Genesis 24:62

> disturbed by distractions. The time is at night—i.e., He who stays awake at night—for then everyone is asleep.[113] (Likutei Moharan 52:5)

For Rebbe Nachman, such seclusion– especially in natural settings– enabled communion with God and a deepened awareness of divine unity within creation.

This theme continues in *Likutei Tifilot*, a collection of 210 prayers by Rebbe Natan Sternhartz, Nachman's foremost disciple, who transformed his teacher's teachings into poetic supplications. In "Prayer for *Hitbodedut* Among the Trees and Grasses," he writes:

> When a person prays in the field, all of the grasses enter into his prayer and imbue it with power. . . Master of the world, help me always engage in a great deal of hitbodedut. May I accustom myself to go out every day to the fields among the trees, grasses, and all of the vegetation of the field. There, may I engage in hitbodedut and a great deal of conversation– that is prayer– between myself and You, my Maker, expressing everything that is in my heart. May all of the vegetation of the field, all the grasses, trees, and plants, be aroused to greet me, rise up and invest their strength and vitality in my words of conversation and prayer." (Likutei Tefilot II:11)

Hitbodedut, then, can be understood as a vehicle for divine communication– an embodied dialogue between the human and the sacred, mediated through nature. Within this project, it provides a spiritual framework for exploring practices of divination as another form of communion with the Divine.

Monotheistic Foundation: One God, Not Many Gods

The prohibitions we have covered in this project exact a firm position against idolatry and praying to false Gods. But, embracing the spirit of life in all things and utilizing methods for self-discovery and inquiry in the name of one God is not contradictory to Jewish values. If we want to be receptive to the voice of God in any form, we have to make ourselves open to the

[113] *Likutei Tefilot II:* 11

possibility that we ourselves can be in dialogue with the Divine. In our human form, we are similar to antennae for the Divine and if we want to pick up a signal, we need to attune our minds, bodies, and spirits.

With the *a priori* knowledge that God is the creator of everything and that God is one, seeking to understand our lives by using the tools of divination is a natural extension of our human nature and need not be seen as problematic. Gershon Winkler, in his work *Magic of the Ordinary,* contrasts this with what he calls "abusive magic," which involves a disruption of the natural order of forces emanating from the Godhead down, along with "illegitimate Magic," in which the supernal powers drawn upon are attributed to forces other than the Creator.[114] Placing God before the creation of the universe, the solar system, the stars and planets, and the great mystery of existence, allows for a direct line of inquiry along this framework. Spiritual growth can occur while incorporating the teachings and insights revealed by studying and interpreting these signs. If everything is somehow ordered in a large mysterious sequence by God and we as humans desire to interpret the events in our lives as signs and indicators of these patterns, seeking to make meaning out of randomness gives structure to our lives. One way in which this randomness may be captured is by shuffling and selecting tarot or oracle cards, helping us to see potential outcomes of the exact present moment. This insight can then guide our decisions, offering support to our human journey received directly from the source of all creation, our one God.

[114] Winkler, *Magic of the Ordinary: Recovering the Shamanic in Judaism*, 76.

Present Moment Insight

Divination is often misunderstood as a means of inquiring to see or understand the future. Instead, we are better and more accurately served by understanding divination as a means of interpreting the present and as a tool for providing insight into what the future *may* bring. Belinda Gore writes in her article *Divination in the 21st Century,* "While many people think of divination as predicting the future, the traditional aim of divination is to inquire about the significance of the present. In other words, if we understand what is going on now, we can foresee the unfolding of the current situation into the future."[115] With this understanding of divination as a tool for insight and guidance in the present moment, we can begin to dislodge claims by those who take a rigid approach to the prohibitions in Leviticus by interpreting from them that Jews are not meant to engage with presuming or predicting the future.

In framing the act of divination as a means of understanding the present moment it also helps us address Rabbi Jonathan Sacks' argument against divination. Rabbi Sacks takes issue with divination by saying that it is not for humans to know and encounter the full mystery of the divine.[116] Yet even when employing divination techniques to gain insight in the present moment, it doesn't mean that we are trying to understand the full mystery of God. It just means that we are trying to understand as much as possible and gain some insight and guidance in how we live our lives. To me, there is nothing wrong with desiring to know and encounter the full mystery of the divine. It doesn't mean that we will ever have the ability or capacity to do so, but the desire and impulse for both connection and understanding are inherent to our human nature and to the godliness within each of us. We are able to experience glimmers, sparks of divine majesty and

[115] "Divination in the 21st Century."
[116] Sacks, "On Not Predicting the Future."

awareness through nature, in moments of sheer splendor and transcendence, that even the staunchest of skeptics can't deny. So, why wouldn't we seek to enter as fully as possible into divine dialogue with this transcendent source? Divination can help us begin this quest.

Tool for Self-Guidance

Divination today doesn't require an intermediary. When engaging in personal, private conversation with the Divine, it can be helpful to have visual aids to tap into the subconscious levels and help disarm our logical, rational, self-critics. This is one area in which Tarot and Oracle cards can come into play. Sophie Hurwitz writes in the Jewish Women's Archive, "I personally enjoy using tarot cards as a way to facilitate self-understanding. For me, they work sort of like a Rorschach ink blot: my brain's interpretation of the cards is more likely to illuminate something about my life than the cards themselves will. Without interpretation, they're just pretty pictures, but the way we assign meaning to them can be something more than that."[117] Again, we find that much of the art of divination lies in the interpretation of signs and symbols.

Interpreting signs and seeking divine guidance by the use of visual tools and aids such as oracle cards and tarot cards won't tell you something mysterious, joyful, or foreboding on their own. They won't even tell you what is going to happen in the future. They are merely cards with pictures that can help the human mind tap into the great collective unified consciousness and show signs and symbols. They can be openings, offering insight, portals into the mysterious unknown, and they can provide clues and suggestions as to how the future may unfold. To be able to make anything of the images or the cards that are drawn requires interpretation either by

[117] Hurwitz, "Divination: It's More Jewish Than You Think."

one's self or by a person skilled in reading the signs and symbols of the deck who is able to create a narrative imbued with meaning. Once someone has chosen a divination tool and invested time in learning to interpret the signs, they can begin direct dialogue and inquiry of the Divine by utilizing these tools to enhance their understanding of the answers. Or, one can choose to consult with someone skilled in interpretation of Divine signs and symbols.

This can lead one to ask about false prophets and those claiming to be the real deal but only exploiting vulnerable people for money. While it isn't an excuse, this claim can apply to most skilled professions and most professionals. There are those who are sincere and authentic in their motives and abilities and there are those who are phonies in all walks of life. This shouldn't be a reason to avoid engaging in seeking and receiving Divine guidance, but it is a reason to be cautious.

Additionally, one may encounter practitioners who may be reluctant to envision that they are able to tap into the mind of God or receive a message directly from the Divine. Sometimes we forget that we all contain a spark of the divine within us already. In activating and cultivating the receptivity of the divine spark within humanity, it should seem a less distant stretch to be able to also connect with God on the same wavelength, thought, or breath.

The Role of Images

The function of images in worship help us to connect the emotional to the rational, the experiential to wisdom, and provide us with visual associations from the concrete world to the world of the abstract. According to Rabbi Elliot N. Dorf, in *Knowing God: Jewish Journeys to*

the Unknowable, he states, "Images come equipped with all of the emotions of the concrete situations from which they come and are immediately applicable to other, similar circumstances."[118] Images provide insight and illumination and convey values through pictures much more effectively than general statements can. The interpretation of images of God's manifestation in the world, as long as they are not taken to represent the entirety of God, are an excellent way in which to engage human connection and meaning making. The use of visual aids such as tarot cards or oracle decks, designed to help engage the human mind in the unfolding journey of life, can greatly enhance the process of divine communication. Whether encountering the cards of the Major Arcana in a traditional tarot deck, or engaging pathways specifically employed by decks designed to facilitate transformational experiences through their unique language of imagery, the process of working with images, emotions, and the subconscious can be a powerful tool for cultivating awareness and receptivity to the Divine mystery unfolding in the present moment.

Contemporary Jewish Divination Practices

There are several forms of contemporary tools for Jewish Divination Practices today. Many of them can greatly enhance both the very personal experience of Hitbodedut, be used in facilitated 1:1 sessions such as *Hashpa'ah* (Spiritual Direction), and also enhance communal prayer experiences, It is my hope that with increased support for these modalities, they can become powerful tools for the enhancement of spiritual dialogue with the Divine in a number of Jewish contexts.

[118] Dorff, *Knowing God: Jewish Journeys to the Unknowable*, 224.

Practices such as meditation, tarot card readings, astrological readings, crystal work, casting dice, and interpreting oracle cards can all assist in providing insight into the potentiality and causality of the Divine mystery. These spiritual practices when approached through the lens of receiving (*kabbalah)* can enlighten, expand, and open our hearts to encounter the wisdom of our own self-guidance. Elijah's prophetic experience of the voice of God is referred to in the Un'tane Tokef prayer of the Yamim Norim, *"kol d'mama daka yishama"* (the still small voice of silence can be heard) exists within each of us. This small voice of silence, deeply rooted to source, can be cultivated as a transmitter along the vast web of spiritual interconnectedness. By tuning into this voice through practices such as meditating on the Hebrew letters, working with tarot cards, oracle cards, astrological attunement, and opening channels of potential contact with the dead, our Jewish spiritual lives can be greatly enhanced and take on new dimensions.

Meditation

Meditation is a practice of stilling and clearing the mind—a preparatory act that can accompany and enhance divinatory work by creating an inner openness through which insight, clarity, and divine knowing can emerge. In this context, meditation becomes not merely a method of relaxation or self-awareness, but a sacred instrument for perceiving divine communication.

While many meditative traditions emphasize attaining states such as *śūnyatā* or "Buddha nature" for their own sake, the meditative state within a divinatory framework serves a different purpose. It is employed as a means of quieting the inner noise so that one may hear, sense, and receive messages from the Divine. This subtle shift in intention—from self-liberation to divine attunement—transforms meditation into a receptive practice of communion. It is a way of

"getting out of one's own way," allowing the self to become a clear vessel through which divine wisdom can flow.

In divinatory practice, meditation thus acts as both preparation and participation: it clears the inner canvas and simultaneously invites revelation. Just as a prophet must quiet the mind to perceive God's voice, so too the diviner must cultivate stillness to perceive symbolic, intuitive, or visionary knowledge. Meditation becomes the threshold between human consciousness and divine disclosure.

This form of practice is especially powerful when enacted in nature, where the boundaries between the self and the sacred are most permeable.. Gershon Winkler, in *Magic of the Ordinary,* teaches that both the structured revelations of Torah and the raw, unmediated revelations encountered through meditating on the Divine Presence in nature can be understood as Torah. He writes, "Both are manifestations of the Creator's Self-Revelation to the human: one through the *word* of God, the other through the *work* of God; one through the learning received by prophets and visionaries, the other through the marvel and mystery of Creation itself."[119] Meditation in nature thus becomes a form of divination– an embodied reading of the works of creation, where God's messages are discerned not through symbols or hermeneutic devices, but through wind, sound, light, and intuition.

Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, in *Innerspace,* explores this relationship between meditation, prophecy, and divine revelation in depth. He describes meditation as a pre-requisite for prophetic vision, an act of "hearing the inaudible" and "seeing the unseen."[120] In this sense, meditation opens the

[119] Winkler, *Magic of the Ordinary: Recovering the Shamanic in Judaism*, 127-128.
[120] Kaplan, *Inner Space*, 150.

same spiritual channels through which prophets once received revelation. Kaplan's interpretation aligns with the teaching of the Kotzker Rebbe (1789-1859) who asked his father when he was five years old, "Where is God?" and his father answered, "God is everywhere!" He replied, "No, I think God is only where you let him in."[121] The Kotzker Rebbe knew that God couldn't be encountered unless man made space to experience God and divine blessing. Meditation as divination becomes precisely this letting in– a conscious surrender that makes space for divine wisdom to be perceived.

Ultimately, meditation and divination share a common aim: to bridge the human and the divine through disciplined receptivity. Both require quieting the self to perceive a reality beyond one's own making. When the mind is stilled, the Divine can enter, and revelation—whether in symbol, vision, or insight—becomes possible.

Hebrew Alphabet

The Hebrew alphabet occupies a sacred position in Jewish mysticism as both the building blocks of creation and channels of divine communication. Each of the twenty-two *otiyot* (letters) is not merely a sign or sound, but a living symbol — a vessel through which divine energy flows into the world. As Harold Kushner explains in *The Book of Letters*, the Hebrew letters are "symbols whose shape and name, placement in the alphabet, and the words they begin put them each at the center of a unique spiritual constellation."[122] In other words, each letter holds an archetypal vibration, encoding layers of spiritual meaning that reach far beyond linguistic function.

[121] Kaplan, *Inner Space*,160. and Cf .Emet VeEmunah, 97.
[122] Kushner, *The Book of Letters: A Mystical Alef-Bait*, 17.

Meditating upon the Hebrew letters is therefore not an abstract or purely intellectual exercise. It is a form of contemplative divination — a practice of opening oneself to receive revelation through the symbolic, vibrational, and energetic essence of language itself. Just as meditation in nature allows one to perceive divine messages through the elements, meditating on the letters allows one to receive revelation through the very structures of creation. In Kabbalistic thought, the world was spoken into being through these letters; to meditate on them is to listen back into the divine act of speech, attuning one's consciousness to the frequencies through which God continues to communicate.

In this way, the Hebrew letters serve as an oracular system of their own. Each letter offers a unique lens for divine inquiry — a portal through which questions, prayers, and contemplations can be directed and answered. For instance, *Aleph*, the silent letter, may reveal the presence of the ineffable, the pause before creation, the stillness that precedes revelation. *Bet*, the first letter of *Bereshit*, opens a doorway into beginnings and formation. *Shin*, with its three branches, may symbolize the divine flame, transformation, and the presence of God in dynamic movement. When one meditates upon or draws a letter in response to an inquiry, that letter can be interpreted as a divine response — a message encoded in the very alphabet of existence.

This contemplative engagement with the letters thus parallels the logic of divinatory practice: both seek to interpret signs that emanate from a divine source. Where tarot or oracle cards use images and archetypes to channel insight, Hebrew letter meditation employs sacred linguistic archetypes — symbols through which divine wisdom is revealed. The difference lies not in the act of inquiry, but in the symbolic language used to receive the response.

In practical application, one might engage this form of divination by selecting or intuitively drawing a letter while holding a question or intention in mind, then meditating upon its form, sound, and meaning. The practitioner may contemplate its numerical value (*gematria*), its corresponding *sefirah* on the Tree of Life, and its associations in Torah and Kabbalistic texts. Through this meditative inquiry, awareness can shift from human thought to divine communication, allowing insight to emerge not as intellectual analysis but as felt revelation — a knowing received through the sacred language itself.

Each of the twenty-two letters is, in essence, a miniature *Urim v'Tummim* — a conduit for divine illumination. To study, meditate upon, or inquire through them is to enter into dialogue with the creative force that brought all existence into being. In this way, the Hebrew alphabet becomes a living oracle — an alphabet of revelation through which the Divine continues to speak.

Tarot

Tarot, like the Hebrew alphabet, is a symbolic language — a living system of images that can serve as a channel for divine communication. Each card is a vessel, holding layers of meaning that speak to the inner life, the cosmic order, and the presence of the sacred within everyday experience. To work with the Tarot contemplatively is to engage in a kind of visual prayer — an intuitive dialogue with the Divine through color, number, and symbol.

Much has been written about the stunning correspondences between the Tarot and the body of Jewish mysticism and occult knowledge, known as Kabbalah. The Kabbalah and the Hebrew alphabet are strongly intertwined. Rachel Pollack, one of my esteemed teachers of Tarot, has

written several books and created her own decks, including an now out of print Rayziel Deck, which featured Jewish imagery, symbols, and characters from the Torah. In her research she noted the connections between one of the original decks of cards, created by an artist named Bonifacio Bembo, painted for the Visconti family of Milan around the middle of the 15th century. This original deck was unnamed and unnumbered and was used for playing a game that had no initial spiritual origins, but this deck went on to form the basis of what we have come to view as Tarot decks. It featured 22 trump cards, and four suits with 14 cards each and formed the origin of an Italian game called "Tarochhi'.[123] The adaptation of the deck to occult and fortunetelling practices with the name of *tarot* first occurred in France in about 1780.[124] In 1909, British mystic Arthur Edward Waite published a deck with the Rider Company that was illustrated by Pamela Coleman Smith. This became the modernized deck that is the most produced and commonly referred to today.[125]

There are several different ways in which the *tarot* can be encountered today and there are certainly those who combine the cards with their psychic gifts and abilities to deliver readings drawing out more hidden and concealed knowledge than others who are at a more introductory relationship with the cards. Yet, even a beginner can interpret the meaning of a card drawn in a particular moment, especially when pertaining to themselves. Kate Van Horn, in her book *The Inner Tarot: A Modern Approach to Self-Compassion & Empowered Healing Using the Tarot*, offers a very accessible guide to working with the *tarot* as an inward journey to connect with self and the still small voice of God within each of us. She is clear about the use of the *Tarot* cards as a tool to read and forecast the energy of the present moment. After reading the energy in the

[123] Pollack, *Seventy-Eight Degrees of Wisdom: A Tarot Journey to Self-Awareness*, 3.
[124] "Tarot | History, Meaning & Uses | Britannica."
[125] Hundley, Tarot, 10-19.

cards of the present, she explains that we can make actionable changes, utilize our free will, and move forward with purpose to realign and seek the outcome we desire most.[126] I find Horn's explanations and instructions for reading the cards as a form of self-attunement and awareness of our inner higher voice to be beautifully in line with the idea of the Tarot as a tool for Hitbodedut.

The Hebrew alphabet with its basis in 22 letters, presents an obvious point for comparison and interaction with the Tarot. In addition to 22 Major Arcana cards, there are usually four suits in a tarot deck, four court cards within every suit, and ten number cards in what is considered the Minor Arcana. The Jewish mysticism of kabbalah deeply explores the significance of both the number four and the number ten. There are four letters of the name of *yod, hey, vav, hey*, four worlds of creation *assiyah, yetzirah, briyah, and atzilut*, and four basic elements of medieval science. Another number that appears in contemporary Tarot decks is ten, as we encounter ten numbered cards in each suit. In Kabbalah, there are 10 divine emanations comprising the sefirot, a type of map of the inner life and energetic aspects of God.

It is possible that it is entirely coincidental that the mystical frameworks of Kabbalah can map so clearly onto the Tarot deck, and there have been several scholars who have researched in great detail trying to solidify and substantiate these connections. One such scholar, Stav Appel, has developed a theory that the Noblet Tarot de Marseille is derived from Jewish roots.[127] In his book, *The Torah in the Tarot*, newly published by Ayin Press in fall 2025, he interprets the Noblet Tarot through a Judaic lens to reveal that it contains a secret guide to Judaism. Appel's claim theorizes that this deck was developed by Crypto-Jews to preserve and help teach Jewish

[126] Horn, *The Inner Tarot: A Modern Approach to Self-Compassion & Empowered Healing Using the Tarot*, 17.
[127] TorahTarot, "Home | Torah Tarot | Tarot Kabbalah | Tarot de Marseille | Tarot Judaism."

traditions during a time in which it wasn't safe to be outwardly Jewish. Within the imagery of the deck one can find connection to the 22 cards of the aleph bet, Judaism's core ten days of religious observance, every significant Judaic ritual object, as well as the foundational stories of the Jewish faith.[128] The argument he makes is compelling and revelatory.

Yet, even prior to establishing an inherently Jewish aspect to the original creation of the Tarot, it is undeniable that numerical and spiritual associations can be drawn between the journey of the 22 cards of the Major Arcana and the *aleph bei*t, and between the Jewish mystical interaction with the Four Worlds and the *Sefirot*. There are parallels that can be leaned into, if desired, and the use of a tarot deck as part of a practice of divine inquiry and Hitbodedut can certainly aid in unlocking spiritual realms, providing visual stimuli, and facilitating connection to the psycho-spiritual-creative energy force within each of us.

Oracle Cards

There are several different types of Oracle decks with different subjects for emphasis of imagery and content. Themes with images of nature, angels, cats, trees, dragons, starseeds, mushrooms, fairies, and several other subjects of interest have been adapted into Oracle cards for providing insight, opportunity for self-reflection, and connection with the Divine. A random card drawn with a specific intention can shed light on the present moment as can cards placed in a particular spread (order) to help the reader interpret their positions and meanings in relationship to one another and the querent.

[128] TorahTarot, "Home | Torah Tarot | Tarot Kabbalah | Tarot de Marseille | Tarot Judaism."

Shechinah Oracle Deck by Geela Razel Raphael

The Shechinah Oracle: A Portal to the Divine Feminine in Jewish Mysticism by Rabbi Geela Rayzel Raphael is an excellent tool for introducing divinatory practices, interpreting images, and connecting with the Divine. An exquisitely designed deck, it features artwork from handmade, paper-cut collages by Rabbi Geela Rayzel Raphael with the intention of teaching and inspiring connection with Shechinah, the Divine Feminine presence in Jewish mysticism and tradition. By facilitating and opening channels to spirit, this deck makes, "ancient Jewish esoteric traditions relevant to your life today."[129] Rabbi Geela Rayzel Raphael writes in her introduction to the deck, "like other Oracle and Tarot decks, the purpose of these cards is to activate inner knowing from the unconscious, or Higher Self, and, by using symbols and images, bring this awareness to the conscious mind."[130] The entire process can help us connect spiritually to our deepest questions and, "unearth guidance from within." She explains that Shechinah means, "She Who Dwells Within."

Rabbi Geela Rayzel Raphael's conception of this deck factors in several components of Jewish mystical and esoteric teachings. The deck contains 54 cards. The first 22 cards correspond to the mystical letters of the Hebrew alphabet, said to be the building blocks of the universe itself. These cards can be compared to the Major Arcana in the traditional Tarot deck, which is the sequence used to represent the spiritual journey of ascension and evolution. The next 10 cards represent the 10 emanations of divine consciousness known as the *sephirot* of the Kabbalistic Tree of Life. The third section contains 15 cards, representing stages of the mythic journey of

[129] Raphael, *The Shechinah Oracle Booklet: A Portal to the Divine Feminine in Jewish Mysticism*.
[130] Raphael, *The Shechinah Oracle Booklet: A Portal to the Divine Feminine in Jewish Mysticism*.

Spiritual Warriors. The last 7 cards are the Magic cards, based on a series of unique Jewish esoteric teachings. The numerology is significant, the images are significant, and the journey through each section of the cards is also significant. These pathways offer portals of divine connection and inspiration directly tied to Jewish imagery, symbolism, and characters from the Bible. By meditating with these cards and engaging in a process of Divine and self-inquiry, they can serve to help one reach deeper understanding, inspiration, sense of purpose, and right action. They can be incorporated into daily private prayer practices, consulted with specific questions, and worked with to bring awareness to "the still, small voice within."[131]

Mystical Kabbalistic Journey of Counting the Omer

Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi offers us a "spiritual technology" for Counting the Omer through the path of the sefirot as a 49 day period in which to "debug" one's spiritual system and perform a "software update."[132] This practice occurs from Pesach through Shavuot and helps prepare us for receiving Torah at Sinai. Reb Zalman also advocated for a reverse Omer count from Tisha b'Av through Rosh Hashanah. This reverse counting is meant to repair and rebuild one's spiritual realm (*binyan ha-malchut*) after the loss and brokenness associated with Tisha B'Av. Spiritual and mental attunement to the places in our lives in which we find an expression of the journey of 49 days through the *sefirot* calls upon the same type of opening, receiving, and interpretation of signs and symbols as divination. Why engage in this practice? To better understand ourselves in relationship with the Divine in the present moment, so as to help guide us along our paths, decision making process, and Jewish lives into the future.

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[131] I Kings 19:12

[132] Singer, *Paradigm Shift: From the Jewish Renewal Teachings of Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi*, 126.

Several other visionaries have developed methods, cards, and resources for the 49 day journey of counting the Omer. Mark Horn created *Tarot and The Gates of Light: A Kabbalistic Path to Liberation* in which he uses tarot cards along the paths of the sefirot, week by week, on a journey through his own nuanced understanding of the cards, their meanings, and the ways in which the cards correspond to the sefirot combinations for each day. Nomy Lamm and Taya Mâ Shere created an Omer Oracle deck offering a divinatory card for each of the 49 days of the Omer, connecting the practitioner with specific emanations of what Shere refers to as, "the sacred inherent" for each day. Working with this deck can deepen the inner liberatory journey from slavery to freedom that occurs in Jewish sacred time between Passover to the receiving of Torah at Shavuot on Mt. Sinai.

Ecological Divination through Nature -

Gershon Winkler's advocacy for Jewish Shamanism and explanation in his book, *Magic of the Ordinary* offers additional insight into understanding what he calls "Aboriginal Judaism," and the ability of the Divine to communicate with us through nature and the ordinary world around us, known also as animism. Divining in the name of the holy one can open unseen channels and allow for a means of directly receiving messages, a subtle form of prophecy, from the Divine that exists and animates all things. With this mindset, all of earth and creation is seen as alive and containing within it bits of the great puzzle we're all working to complete during our lives. Therefore, "everything is a sacred conduit for divine revelation."[133] Extending this line of thought, Winkler claims that the Divine, "The Creator Spirit," communicates with us through the

[133] Winkler, *Magic of the Ordinary: Recovering the Shamanic in Judaism*, 23.

medium of Creation itself, not just through "prophets."[134] Being open to the divine animism in all things is very compatible with Abraham Joshua Heschel's suggestion in *God in Search of Man*, of living life, in a state of "radical amazement".[135] When we are inspired and amazed we are also open and attuned to the Divine presence.

Is divination something only humans can do or is it interrelated with nature? For example, Nimue Brown in a blogpost on Nature and Divination on the Blog *Druid Life*, tells of a folklore that when a lot of berries appear in autumn, it can indicate a harsh winter to come. But, Nimue also suggests that this only works, "if we think trees are better at predicting the future than we are."[136] It may be jarring to think of trees predicting the future, but let it marinate a bit and you may also come to agree that this makes perfect sense.

Geese fly south in advance of the cold winter months. They just "know" when to go. Other marine animals and birds living near coastlines are capable of predicting and anticipating major weather events such as hurricanes, tsunamis, and tropical storms. Sensing the impending changes through the environment, they move to safety long before our human instruments are able to detect danger. Even the *Farmer's Almanac* preserves animal wisdom, noting that "if a cow lays down in a pasture, rain is on the way."[137] These are not superstitions so much as reminders that all living beings are in constant dialogue with the world around them– listening, attuning, divining. Through their senses, they receive the subtle transmissions of the earth, responding to the unfolding patterns of time and weather, life and change.

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[134] Winkler, *Magic of the Ordinary: Recovering the Shamanic in Judaism*, 24.
[135] Heschel, *God In Search of Man*, 46.
[136] Nimue, "Nature and Divination."
[137] Boeckmann, "Can Animals Predict the Weather? | Animal Proverbs | The Old Farmer's Almanac."

Perhaps, then, divination is not a power to be claimed, but a relationship to be remembered- a shared language of intuition and communion between the human and more-than-human worlds. Through sensory attunement and deep connection to their environments, animals and plants embody a living form of ecological divination. They receive and respond to the subtle transmission of the earth's ongoing conversation. Recognizing this, a growing number of Jewish ecological organizations – including Wilderness Torah, Adamah, Living Tree Alliance, and others– are rekindling this sacred conversation.. Their work centers mindfulness, ecological awareness, and a return to the living wisdom of Creation. With these areas of focus at heart we are reminded that the Divine speaks not only in words, but in the wild and natural whispering world itself– in the rustle of leaves, the call of migrating birds, and even the silence between breaths.

Astrology

Divination through the sun, moon, planets, and stars continues to provide insight and help people identify with the major energetic shifts occurring above, below, outside, and within them. When framed through a Jewish lens, and seen as supportive information rather than contradictory or forbidden insight, astrology can greatly enhance Jewish understandings of time, space, relationship, and place. Working with one's astral birth chart and learning about one's sun, moon, and rising sign, the types of energies that are dominant in one's chart (Cardinal, Fixed, Mutable) and their qualities (Earth, Air, Water, Fire) can all help provide insight and self-awareness, aiding in the decision making process. Additionally, by understanding how a person's natural composition relates to the universe and the position of the planets at any given

moment in time, one can work with the energetic frequencies present to move toward a more desirable outcome.

Potential Benefits of these Practices

Why engage in the practices of divination in a Jewish context?

Gershon Winkler sums it up beautifully when he speaks of the value of learning and engaging in practices that could be considered magical or mystical within a Jewish context when he states:

> I have met many Jews who swoon to legends and teachings of cultures other than their own in response to their intrigue around sorcery. When I introduce them to the world of sorcery in their own tradition they often dismiss it as confined to minor, Gnostic stuff, not realizing how integrated it really is within virtually every thread that constitutes Jewish tradition.[138]

The allure and intrigue around sorcery that Winkler mentions certainly exists in modern times, strengthened by books, television shows, and movies that feature wizards, spells, witches, and magic such as *The Harry Potter Series, Agatha All Along, Heroes,* and *Wednesday,* to name just a few. To discover that there are threads of mystical and magical tradition throughout Judaism that point to practices of divination within our own history and culture is both exciting and empowering to those who might be seeking additional ways to engage with tradition in perhaps less traditional ways.

Traditional modalities of prayer can present barriers to entry, including the Hebrew language and familiarity with the *tefilah*. Without coming from a place of comfort, knowledge, and relative privilege of a prayerful Jewish upbringing, a person can feel shut out from the traditional modes of prayer and connection to the Divine. By incorporating divinatory practices such as

[138] Winkler, *Magic of the Ordinary: Recovering the Shamanic in Judaism*, 86.

Hitbodedut, astrology, meditation in nature, interpretation with tarot and oracle cards, and spiritual exploration through the sefirot and Omer, we can offer more points of entry and connection for Divine dialogue.

Time after time, people confide in me as clergy, that they consider themselves to be "spiritual," but not "religious." They feel the need to explain that they believe in something, but don't adhere to the structures and prescribed formulas for entering into prayer or attending a house of worship. For so many of these people, if they had access to other spiritual dimensions of Judaism and ways in which to be in dialogue with the Divine that may be alternative but still adhering to and celebrating their heritage and connection to God as Jews, it would present new possibilities for claiming and defining themselves as Jews.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Judaism's relationship with divination is far more nuanced than a simple prohibition. Tracing the history of these practices—from the sanctioned use of the Urim and Thummim to the marginalized folk rituals of women—reveals that permissibility often depended both on the nature of the act and the identity of the practitioner. The latter factor, "who," exposed a persistent tension between the forms of divination legitimized by rabbis and prophets and those dismissed as "magic" when performed by others.

In the absence of a centralized temple, priests, and appointed prophets, modern Jews face a spiritual landscape where the traditional channels of divine communication have diminished. While the rabbis constructed their roles in the post-Temple period, they accepted or refused

partaking in practices of a divinatory nature on behalf of their constituents and served as the gatekeepers of this spiritual technology. This work has shown that a new path can exist by reframing divinatory practices as a form of *Hitbodedut,* a personal and direct dialogue with the Divine. By engaging with tools like the symbolic interpretation of oracles, meditation, numerology, kabbalah, astrology, and the interpretation of dreams, contemporary Jews can reclaim a deep-seated human desire for connection and Divine guidance. This reframing allows us to move beyond the notion of the forbidden, transforming these ancient practices into a meaningful, creative, and deeply spiritual addition to modern Jewish life, one that honors both our agency and our yearning to know the unknowable.

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