

Fortune Telling and Palm Reading are Not Part of Judaism

By Shelomo Alfassa

“He frustrates the omens of impostors and drives diviners mad!”
-- Isaiah 44:25

Introduction

In New York City, we have both Ashkenazi and Sephardi ‘rabbis’ which come from Israel to provide ‘blessings’ to those who visit them. These rabbis also read palms; claim to be able to tell people when they will be married; advise people if they are infected with ‘*ayin harah*’ (the evil eye); promise businessmen they will reap great rewards; advise people about their past lives; and, advise people on their future. The events that take place in the privacy of these sessions between the rabbi and his unsuspecting victim often fall under the rubric of *Practical Kabbalah*. The people who come to have their fate told and who provide a donation to the rabbi (or his yeshiva, camp or kollel), have no idea that: 1) many times these people are not great Torah scholars or even rabbis; and, 2) they are going against Jewish law by visiting with these men. This paper strives to advise people, male and female, that these charlatans are nothing more than fakes. It is the hope of the author that Jews will read and share this paper, written with a Torah-grounded intellectual (not emotional) approach, to learn for themselves, that they are being taken advantage of by visiting with these pseudo-rabbis.¹ The author would like the reader to know that by participating with these people, that they are being taken advantage of, and are unintentionally conducting themselves in a way that is not in line with the Torah and goes against the desires of the Almighty.

New York City may be the center of the universe for Jews returning to Judaism, especially for young Jews from around the United States who visit there to take advantage of the many religious seminaries and classes. However, many newly religious people are encountering ‘rabbis’ (often self-proclaimed and sometimes not rabbis at all), who are willing to read their palms, their hair, their faces, and conduct other practices for a donation. While the rabbi does not directly solicit the donation, the rabbi’s assistant or the host of the home he is staying at often does, and it often involves a certain degree of gentle and/or persistent

¹ It appears that women consult these rabbi-fortune-tellers more than men, this can be openly observed when visiting a location where the rabbi has come to meet with people for the purposes of fortune telling. Scientifically, it has been said that it is quite common for young women to seek out fortunetellers as they embark on adulthood, and many women maintain decades-long relationships with their fortune-tellers. In New York City, the visiting rabbis will generally always telephone their previous contacts to arrange a visit before his next arrival. A study on this topic can be found in the *Journal of Personality Assessment*, which says although we live in an age dominated by science and technology, there exists an increasingly popular anti-science sentiment. In this study, they describe the development of a scale to assess the degree of personal acceptance of supernatural causality versus acceptance of scientific explanation. In addition to the psychometric data concerning validity and reliability of the scale, data are presented which showed the personality factor of supernaturalism to be independent of orthodox religious attitudes. See: Randall T.M., Desrosiers M. “Measurement of supernatural belief: sex differences and locus of control.” *Journal of Pers. Assess.* 1980 Oct;44(5):493-8.

pressure.² These palm reading rabbis set up shop in someone's home as a visitor in residence, then using both their own list of contacts, as well as the friends and contacts of their host, invite people to visit, "*The Holy Rabbi!*" or "*Meet the Famous Mekubal (Kabbalist) from Israel!*" Once alone in the room with the rabbi, tactics used against the visitors by these palm readers and fortunetellers include throwing out a bunch of high probability guesses, for example, if a person is overweight, they will tell him/her that they are probably concerned about his/her health and diet, to which most people will nod.³ A common ruse they use is to flatter their subjects with praise about their own psychic powers. One particular woman in New York (who this author interviewed) was told by a certain visiting rabbi, that she was "the reincarnated soul" of a student of Hakham Yishak ben Shelomo Luria, the kabbalistic rabbi commonly known as the *Ari*.⁴

The Situation

Newly observant Jews are bombarded with many different names and personalities they are not familiar with. Trying to determine who one rabbi was over another often results in a confusing tangle that can be difficult to navigate. Often, we turn to the Internet for information on who these various rabbis were, but we should be careful of the type of Website we retrieve our information from. We must assure that only factual based essays and articles are trusted, and we don't fall for those essays and articles, which are based on emotion and 'tradition.' Acknowledging tradition is fine when it comes to ancient legends and historic stories, but when we are talking about the lives of famous rabbis, those who lived just a few hundred years ago, we must remember that these Jewish personalities were real live men, human beings, not so-called angels, or other spiritual beings. An essay on the *Ohr Somayach Yeshiva*⁵ Website says that the Ari, "could read on a person's forehead, a man's transgressions, how many reincarnations his soul had been through, and what he had come to this world to rectify." This is not unlike the modern visiting rabbis that come to New York to attempt to do the same. While the Ohr Somayach article has the flavor of fact, it certainly is not—it is based only on a legend, yet it does not admit it is a legend. This type of writing can be misleading to the newly observant and still learning Jew. Rabbi Yitzhak Blau of *Yeshivat Hamivtar* in Efrat, Israel says encouraging an appetite for miraculous stories, "Helps phonies waiting to take advantage of the religiously naive. The result is the *hillul Hashem* of [a] rabbi taking money to [dispense] magical blessings.

² There are also laws that forbid the practice in New York, as it is a class B misdemeanor State law, S 165.35: "A person is guilty of fortune telling when, for a fee or compensation which he directly or indirectly solicits or receives, he claims or pretends to tell fortunes, or holds himself out as being able, by claimed or pretended use of occult powers, to answer questions or give advice on personal matters..." (Note: A study conducted ten years ago said that 20% of Israelis consult fortune tellers using palmistry, tarot cards or tea leaves; another 11% prefer astrologers. The survey by *Maariv*, reported, "One out of five Israelis visit seers." Sep. 18, 1997.)

³ Upon the end of the visit, the rabbi usually provides his guest with a magical trinket or memento of some type to go home with; this may include a small gold key-shaped charm or a photo of an old rabbi, or other trinket.

⁴ A 16th century Jewish mystic. His mother was Sephardi, his father Ashkenazi, and he was raised in the Jewish *milieu* of Ottoman, Cairo, Jerusalem and Safed.

⁵ Ohr Somayach is a non-Hasidic Ashkenazi 'black hat' yeshiva in Jerusalem founded in 1970.

The Rizhiner⁶ argued that “the more miracle stories are attributed to tzaddikim, the more the ground is prepared for deception by clairvoyants, fortune-tellers and charlatan doctors.”⁷

Today, we know that the Ari’s practice has been explained. Jews have (like other religions have), absorbed many secular customs and practices into their religion. Sometimes, these practices have been adapted, changed and completely assimilated into the religions; other times, they remain on the margins. Writings about the Ari tell that he had “the capacity to discern and interpret the meaning of Hebrew letters visible upon an individual’s forehead.”⁸ This is called *hokhmat ha-parzuf* in Hebrew, and was popular as a 16th century pseudo-science known as *metoposcopy*.⁹ Professor Lawrence Fine,¹⁰ a prominent scholar of medieval Judaism, and an expert on the Ari and Jewish mysticism says, “Metoposcopy was one of the wide array of divinatory or mantic arts practiced especially in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.”¹¹ Prof. Fine writes that:

There are a substantial number of anecdotal reports by [Hayyim] Vital and other Safed scholars about Isaac Luria’s practice of the art of metoposcopy. Such evidence clearly suggests that Luria actually engaged in this activity, and that it was not merely a matter for theoretical discussion.¹²

The *Jewish Encyclopedia* tells that Luria introduced his mystic system into religious observances. He had, “a tendency to substitute a mystic Judaism for the rabbinical Judaism, against which Luria was warned” by his own teacher, the kabbalist, Hakham David ibn Abi Zimra of Egypt. This type of Judaism, “became still stronger after Luria’s death,” and that, “His disciples, who applied to him the epithets ‘Holy’ and ‘Divine,’ sank further in mysticism and paved the way for the pseudo-Messiah Sabbatai Sevi.”¹³

⁶ Rabbi Israel Friedman of Rizhin (1798-1850), the Rizhiner Rebbe. His Hassidic dynasty is now gone, but his six sons all established hasidic dynasties, which include Sadigura, Boyan, Chortkov, Husyatyn and Bohush. Yekuthiel Kamelhar, Arye. *Dor Deah*; New York, 1952. 139

⁷ “Miracles and Morals: Choices in Educational Storytelling.” *Ten Da’at, A Journal of Jewish Education*, Vol. XI. Sivan 5758 - Spring 1998

⁸ Fine, Lawrence. “The Art of Metoposcopy: A Study in Isaac Luria’s ‘Charismatic Knowledge.’” *AJS Review*, Vol. 11, No. 1. (Spring, 1986), 79-101.

⁹ Metoposcopy is the interpretation of skin wrinkles to determine the character of a person. It is also used as a type of divination and has been used in conjunction with astrology. This pseudoscience was invented by the 16th century mathematician, physician, and astrologer Girolamo Cardano (1501-1576). Legend has it that Cardano starved himself to death at the age of seventy-five rather than live and run the risk of falsifying his horoscope and thereby discredit his beloved astrology.

¹⁰ Prof. Fine has written four books, most recently *Physician of the Soul, Healer of the Cosmos: Isaac Luria and His Kabbalistic Fellowship* (Stanford University Press, 2003); *Judaism in Practice: From the Middle Ages through the Early Modern Period* (Princeton, 2001); *Essential Papers on Kabbalah* (NYU, 1995); and *Safed Spirituality* (Paulist Press, 1984). Before teaching at Mount Holyoke, he taught at Indiana University for 12 years. His particular interests include medieval Jewry in Islamic lands and contemporary Jewish spirituality. His field of scholarly research is the Jewish mystical tradition, with a special focus on religious community and mystical experience.

¹¹ Fine, Lawrence. “The Art of Metoposcopy: A Study in Isaac Luria’s ‘Charismatic Knowledge.’” *AJS Review*: Vol. 11, No. 1. Spring, 1986, 18-82.

¹² Fine, Lawrence. “The Art of Metoposcopy.” 88

¹³ Sabbatai Sevi, 1626-1676 was a man that claimed to be the long-awaited Jewish messiah. He set in motion a catastrophic destruction of Judaism in the 17th century. Ultimately he converted to Islam and left Jews across the world disillusioned. Even though he left Judaism, some of his believers also converted to Islam and “followed” him. His life

Contrary to what is often taught by the mainstream *kiruv* (outreach) organizations, Judaism is truly a religion that allows you to question concepts, and most importantly, is a religion based upon existing as a person of the world and a person of the Torah. This type of Judaism was the basis for Jews such as the *Rambam* (Maimonides). The Rambam, talks about the practices of fortunetellers and others like them, he considers these acts to be idolatry.¹⁴ The Rambam says,

It is forbidden to practice divination or to consult a diviner. One who consults a diviner is flogged because of a Rabbinical decree, but the diviner himself is liable to flogging [according to the Torah], for it is written, ‘There must not be found amongst you...anyone who uses divination.’”¹⁵

He indicates that divination consists of performing particular actions, “In order to elevate oneself and clear one’s mind of all [thoughts and] matters until one starts predicting the future by saying, ‘Such-and-such will, or will not, happen, or, ‘It is fitting to do such-and-such, but because of such-and-such a reason’”¹⁶ The Rambam points out however, that there is no problem making a statement such as, “This house that I built is a good sign for me,” or, “This woman that I married is blessed, for once I obtained her I became rich.” These statements are permitted because by making them no one has decided upon a course of action or refrained from doing something, one has just accepted whatever it is as a good sign for what has all ready happened.

It is clear. The Torah says, “You should be wholehearted with Hashem your God. For these nations which you inherit, they listen to fortunetellers and diviners; but as for you, [the Jews] not so has Hashem your God given.”¹⁷ Rabbi David Bassous¹⁸ quotes Rabbi Nahman of Barcelona, the *Ramban*, when he says that, “You should be wholehearted with Hashem,” means that we are to direct our hearts to Him only, and believe that He alone does everything. Rabbi Bassous continues:

We are not to inquire of the astrologers or from anyone else, or by any means to trust that their words will be fulfilled. Instead, if we hear any prediction [of the diviners] we should say, ‘Everything is in the hands of Heaven, for He is the God of gods Who is supreme above all, the Omnipotent One over everything, Who changes the set order of the stars and constellations at His Will, Who frustrates the tokens of the impostors, and makes diviners mad.’

story should be required reading for all Jews, especially for those who hear stories that certain modern-day rabbis that have died may be or is the *mashiah* (messiah).

¹⁴ *Yad Hahazakah, Hilhot Avoda Zarah*, Chapter 11

¹⁵ *Hilhot Avoda Zarah*, Chapter 11, 7

¹⁶ *Hilhot Avoda Zarah*, Chapter 11, 6

¹⁷ Deuteronomy, 18:13, 14

¹⁸ Rabbi Bassous attended college in England and after receiving an Engineering degree, attended various yeshivot in England and Israel. He received his *semita* (ordination) from the Shehebar Sephardic Center (*Midrash Sephardi*) in Jerusalem as well as that of the Israel Chief Rabbinate. He is rabbi of the Sephardic Congregation Etz Ahaim of Highland Park, NJ.

Rabbi Elazar Menachem Man Shach, the former *Rosh Yeshiva* of the (Litvish) Ponevezh Yeshiva in B'nei Brak, Israel, once said, "It is absolutely forbidden to read palms or to believe what is seen in them. The Torah states, 'You shall be perfectly faithful to Hashem your God.' We must rely only on God. All else is nonsense."¹⁹ Well known author Rabbi Hillel Goldberg Ph.D., also points out that we must only rely on God. He says palm reading is the opposite of being "wholehearted with God." He indicates:

There is a thin but very real line between idolatry and wholeheartedness. To be wholehearted with God does not mean that God dishonors a person's pain or perplexity. Quite the contrary. God honors those who cry out to Him -- this point pervades the entire book of Psalms. The Talmud stresses the point graphically, if anthropomorphically: "God lusts for the prayers of the righteous...To be wholehearted before God is to be at peace with whatever God brings."²⁰

In regard to fortunetellers, those that predict what will be in the future, Rabbi Yosef Benarroch, director of the *Sephardic Educational Center* in Jerusalem comments that the Torah gives us explicit instructions that it is forbidden to visit these individuals in order to find out the future. He says, "According to Maimonides, following fortunetellers is foolish, according to Nahmanides it is outright dangerous." He explains,

It is true that knowing the future could avert many problems, but it would also create the most crippling and pessimistic philosophy around. Once one knows the future then all possibilities are closed. There is nothing one can do because what is going to happen has to happen. When we do not know the future then the possibilities we can choose from are infinite. When we know the future then there are no possibilities. We would be paralyzed by complete pessimism knowing that there is nothing we can do to change our lives. A fundamental principle in Judaism is that we can change, that we are dynamic beings able to choose and create a better world for ourselves and for those around us....By not knowing what the future has in store life becomes exciting and filled with so many decisions and opportunities. Knowing the future may make life easier but it would be less fulfilling. Not knowing the future makes life more challenging. But isn't it challenge that we crave?²¹

¹⁹ Rabbi Shach (1898-2001). Qtd. from "Palm Reading" by Rabbi Yirmiyahu Ullman, May 24, 2003. The Ponevezh Yeshiva is considered the Harvard of haredi yeshivot.

²⁰ Goldberg, Hillel. "Making deals with the Creator." *Jewish World Review*. Sept. 14, 2001. (Rabbi Goldberg earned his doctorate in Jewish intellectual history at Brandeis, and taught at The Hebrew University (Jerusalem) and Emory (Atlanta). He has written several books published by Artscroll and today is the Executive Editor of the *Intermountain Jewish News*.)

²¹ From the SEC Weekly Parasha email. This week's version is hosted as, "The Future is Now." desireto share.com/fortunetellers.htm

Rabbi Avi Geller²² of AISH HaTorah tells that the Torah prohibits patronizing fortunetellers, soothsayers, star gazers and palm readers. He says, “We are admonished to be ‘In complete faith with the Lord’ (Deut. 18:13). This means trusting in God, for better or for worse. We don’t always understand His plan, but knowing that enables us to deal with all situations. This awareness raises the Jewish people above all forms of ‘black magic.’”²³

The late Rabbi Ben Zion Abba Shaul, dean of the respected *Porat Yosef Yeshiva* and one of Israel’s leading rabbis said, “It is a great scandal that ordinary men pretend to be rabbis and miracle makers of all sorts, give out amulets, blessings or nostrums to innocent people who have troubles and are beguiled into believing in them.”²⁴

Rabbi Yehekel Lebovic, rabbi of the Chabad-Lubavitch of Maplewood, NJ, sums up both the Torah position and that of the late Rabbi Menachem Schneerson:

Since time immemorial people have sought relief from worry by not waiting patiently for the passage of time till the future point at the end of the tunnel, but by striving to develop an earlier knowledge of what the future may hold. The nations of the ancient world have sought advice and instruction of fortunetellers, the crystal-ball-soothsayers and palm-readers, attempting to probe the unknowns of the future. Jews are forbidden to seek enlightenment from such sources.²⁵

Mesora.org is a Website dedicated to the scriptural and rabbinical verification of authentic Orthodox Jewish beliefs and practices. People visiting this site tend to be religiously observant or at least interested, literate, and immersed in classic Jewish culture. A question was asked in a forum on this site:

There are many stories of ‘Kabbalists’ today who can foretell events, like predicting when a couple will have a baby, or tell people about themselves things that only they could have known, such as previous experiences, or give blessings that only after the blessing, come to fruition. What is the true perspective on these Kabbalists? Do they really contain the true Kabbalah?

The rabbi answered with the following:

I have heard of people going to kabbalists, and are told that they will get married in the coming year. One such person who went to a kabbalist was told this, and did not get married as he was “foretold”. It is amusing that only the favorable stories get circulated.

²² Rabbi Geller has been a senior lecturer at Aish Hatorah since 1980. He is an alumnus of Lakewood, Be'er Yaakov and Mir Yeshiva; he lives in Jerusalem.

²³ “Shoftim (*Deuteronomy* 16:18-21:9) - Lively Parsha Shoftim”
aish.com/torahportion/livelyparsha/Lively_Parsha_Shoftim.asp

²⁴ *Darhei Emet*. Publication of the Bukharian Community. Vol. 4., September 2007

²⁵ Lebovic, Yehekel. “To be a Complete Tamim.” *Chabad Info Magazine*. Issue 523 (Based on *Likkutei Sichos* vol. 14: 64-69.)

There are twice as many unfavorable ones. Know one thing clearly, Kabbalists are human. They have no more power than anyone else. People go to them against Jewish law (*b'issur*) to satisfy their insecurities. They want to know what gender their child is, or what business to go into, or who to marry. This is against halacha, and against the chumash. It only serves to satisfy the insecurity emotion. Nothing more... God never validated enchanters or fortunetellers. Therefore, we must abhor them as God does.

In a popular article entitled, "Frauds, Con Artists, Quacks, and Charlatans," Rabbi Eli Teitelbaum²⁶ says an individual making kabbalistic claims and proposing so-called miraculous cures can bring him instant fame and get people flocking to him by the masses. Rabbi Teitelbaum adds: "These frauds attract the destitute, sick and broken-hearted who desperately seek a miracle worker to end their suffering...While charlatans exist in every profession and come in every shade and color, the most dangerous are the ones making kabbalistic claims."

One of the very few popular rabbis to aggressively come out against palm readers and other charlatans, which include those that assertively market themselves, has been the respected Rabbi Yaakov Hillel²⁷ of Jerusalem. In his "*Tamim Tiheyeh*" (republished in English as: *Faith and Folly: The Occult in Torah Perspective*) he advises that, "No one should use Practical Kabbalah" unless he has been informed by Elijah the Prophet himself! Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein in his on-line journal, told how Rabbi Yaakov Hillel addressed the collected rabbinate of Los Angeles; he described Rabbi Hillel as being, "Blunt and unsparing regarding the plethora of Kabbalah wannabes, the people who come to communities reading mezuzahs, or palms, or kesuvos [ketubot]." Rabbi Adlerstein recounted Rabbi Hillel's discussion:

Lamentably, too many people who should know better, including Torah figures, flock to these charlatans for advice. Besides amounting to nothing more than *hokum*, he views them as fully flouting halacha, which forbids predicting the future. They accomplish what they do in some cases through accomplices who gather information, and in other cases through a combination of intuition and the careful study of chicanery.²⁸

Closing

The tenth century rabbi, Gaon Shemuel ben Hophni, the last head rabbi of the yeshiva at Sura (Babylonia), banned soothsayers, sorcerers and mediums for non-Jewish non-idol worshipers, commonly known as Noahides.²⁹ If Gaon Shemuel would ban such practices for non-Jews, how

²⁶ Rabbi Eli Teitelbaum is a rabbi at the New York based Yeshiva and Mesivta *Torah Temimah*, and Director of Camp *S'dei Chemed* International, Israel.

²⁷ Rabbi Yaakov Hillel is a leading scholar of Kabbalah and is the author of many books on the subject of Jewish law. He is the Dean of *Ahavat Shalom*, Jerusalem, one of the largest advanced Talmudic institutions, including an exclusive branch for the training of rabbinical judges and a select group of scholars engaged in the study of Kabbalah.

²⁸ Adlerstein, Yitzchok. "Rav Yaakov Hillel Outs the Charlatans." *Cross Currents* (Blog) November 1, 2006.

²⁹ According to Jewish law, non-Jews are not obligated to convert to Judaism, however they are required to observe the *Seven Laws of Noah*. These people are often called *Noahides*.

much more do we realize that Jews should stay away from such practices?³⁰ The *Talmud Yerushalmi*³¹ recalls that Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel, the *Nasi* (Prince) of the Jewish people, thought that if there exist sorcerers, fortune-tellers, palm-readers, and so-called ‘Kabbalists’ who assume positions for which they are unworthy, and the masses are drawn to them, then this is, in effect, the “gateway to *gehinnom* [hell].” He felt this trend must be eradicated. Today, we have Torah scholars to guide us along the path of the Torah; we therefore have no business following the direction of hollow, self-proclaimed kabbalists, who do nothing but cloud the minds of their followers with worthless ideas. Clearly, Kabbalah and Hassidut may be studied, and nothing in this paper should be believed to make one think otherwise. However, God admonishes us from following palm readers, fortunetellers and other soothsayers. A person calling himself a rabbi, whether he is an actual rabbi or not—does not entitle him to act in any fashion he desires against the Torah. It is the hope of this author that persons who seek a quick fix or instant security will find it directly through the Almighty and not through a con-artist that is extrinsically interested in you, and is solely interested in your wallet. The Rambam does not attribute any power whatsoever to these people and he explains that the Torah has forbade these practices because they are foolishness and of no avail.³² If we expect fortune telling palm readers to provide us advice on marriage and the future, we are fools. We must turn to authentic and respected rabbis with our questions. Our desire should be to look for guidance from within the Torah, and from this, we will be in line with the wishes of the Almighty.

³⁰ See Rabbi Ulla's statement in Hullin 92A. Also: Clorfene, C. and Rogalsky, Y. *The Path of the Righteous Gentile: An Introduction to the Seven Laws of the Children of Noah*. New York: Phillip Feldheim, 1987.

³¹ Sanhedrin 6:6

³² *Guide for the Perplexed*, Vol. 3, Chapter 29