Does Superstition Enslave Our Minds?
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Today is Friday the thirteenth, a uniquely unlucky day, according to superstition. Actually, though, the number thirteen has only positive connotations in Judaism. We celebrate Bar or Bat Mitzvah at the age of thirteen. We are taught that God has given us 613 commandments.

Even if the number thirteen doesn't bother us, we Jews do have our superstitions. Some are harmful and should be eliminated, while others are more innocent. Some traditional practices, though, often dismissed as mere superstitions, may actually provide deeply meaningful religious moments.

What is a superstition?

Dictionary = an irrational belief in the ominous significance of a particular thing, circumstance, or occurrence.

So what are some common superstitions – not necessarily Jewish?

What are some Jewish ones?

You might think that kind of thinking would have little place in Judaism a rigorous and rational belief system governed by laws and the written word. But superstition in Judaism has been around nearly as long as Judaism itself and certainly as long as the Talmud. When the rabbi (all men) began to dictate what to do and not do in Judaism, women passed down a folk tradition, much like recipes were passed form generation to generation. Where there is room for the unexplained which Judaism makes room for there is room superstition.

Middle world of demons, angels and evil spirits. The idea was that these were souls that God created just before shabbat began on the 6th afternoon of creation, and his work was left undone. Scary stuff

These evil spirits could disguise themselves, could be invisible and interacted with human being in our natural world.

Who was susceptible?

Travelers, the isolated, people at joyious occasions, the sick and the weak. One tradition had it that if you were leaving on a journey on your won you would take some dirt from

your village with you so that you would still be connected to your people, thus not alone and protected.

Not only people but words could tempt the evil sprits

- A course read from torah would be read silently, or by the most beloved person in the congregation who had no enemies
- We don't name after the living for fear of the angel of death getting confused
- The evil eye Ayin Hara. was thought to come from boasting, so we would ward it off we would tie a red string to the crib of a new born, or spit 3 times who we said something positive.
- Break a glass at a wedding to scare way the evil spirits that are drawn to opulence and celebrations

Some become Jewish law

- Kosher knife in the dirt
- Fast of 1st born on pesach
- breaking a glass

Some though are actually harmful

Our early Reform rabbis when they wrote the prayer, "May the time not be distant . . .," so beloved in the old Union Prayer Book, and now found in our Gates of Prayer. With those words, we pray for a better world in the years ahead. One of the prayer's hopes is that "superstition no longer enslave the mind." Our Reform founders sought to create a Judaism free of superstition, a rational faith worthy of the modern, sophisticated Jew.

Mezzuzah for example - Some years ago, in Israel, an entire bus full of school children from one town were killed in a terrible accident. In the days following that horrible tragedy, the chief rabbi of the town announced that the accident had occurred because too many of the *mezuzzot* in town were not kosher. His pronouncement was based on the superstitious notion that the *mezuzzah* is a mere amulet, a magic spell meant to ward off evil.

This kind of superstition is harmful, and should be eliminated, because it suggests that victims have brought on their own misfortunes. Imagine the parents of those Israeli school children, who were told that their children would have lived if they had simply remembered to have their *mezuzzot* inspected on a regular basis. Moreover, this kind of superstition can drive Jews away from Judaism. A sophisticated person, hearing that the *mezuzzah* wards off evil, may well assume that all of Judaism's teachings are equally silly, and therefore unworthy of our attention.

Some among us may be familiar with the tradition that people with two living parents should not recite the Mourners' *Kaddish*, or even remain in the room while it is being said, lest something terrible befall one of those parents as a result. We might have heard that breaking the glass at a wedding is meant to ward off evil spirits. These superstitions, no less than regarding the *mezuzzah* as an amulet, have the potential consequence of

blaming victims who might make a slight ritual error, and could easily lead some to scoff at Judaism altogether.

Today, we have begun to recognize the role of faith in Reform Judaism. While still trying to steer clear of the harmfully irrational, we embrace many rituals that were once dismissed as mere superstition, and we worry less about whether our faith stands up to the test of reason.

On this Friday the thirteenth, we acknowledge that some superstitions may harm us and can be used to harm others. Taken to an extreme, superstition can enslave our minds. Blaming our failures and tragedies on ritual errors isn't just silly, it's immoral.

At the same time, though, we affirm that not all superstition is harmful and not all faith is superstitious. Let us embrace Jewish rituals which bring us good teachings, even if they are connected to superstitions. May we be unafraid to take great leaps faith. If we are inspired and if we are healed, physically, emotionally, or spiritually, let none dare to call our faith mere superstition.