

## MOSES AND MAGIC

## Torah Portion V'aroh

In this portion of the Biblical narrative, we are first told of the miracles that were performed to encourage Pharoah to liberate the enslaved Hebrews.

We are all familiar with the miracles that took place. Aaron made his rod turn into a serpent but we are told that the Egyptian magicians did the same. Aaron turned the waters of Egypt into blood, but the Egyptian magicians apparently did the same. Aaron made frogs to over-run the land, but the Egyptian magicians, we are told, did the same.

Only when the magic became more involved were the Egyptians unable to imitate the deeds of Aaron. The Egyptian magicians couldn't produce little things like gnats and flies and boils, etc. Clearly the magic of Aaron was superior, even to the highly developed magic of a land which was world famous for its intricate sorcery.

Later, when the Hebrews left Egypt, they asked Moses to use some of his magical ability to make water come out of a rock. The Bible does not explain to us why Moses was exceedingly angry at this request, but we know that he rebuked the people for their petition.

I should like to submit to you the reason I think Moses was angry on this occasion. Since Pharoah and the Egyptians refused to release the Hebrews on ethical grounds, it was necessary for Moses and Aaron to beat them at their own game - magic. To the Egyptians, as to most ancient peoples, religion consisted entirely of magical rites and this was the only way the Egyptian mind could be dominated. They could understand only a God who worked magic.

You will notice that the Bible tells us that Aaron worked the magic and not Moses, for Aaron had been trained in the Egyptian art as a priest.



Moses considered himself, not as a master magician, but as a law-giver, a teacher of morals. The Bible does not describe Moses primarily as a wonder-worker, but as the giver of the Ten Commandments. Now, when the Hebrews were in the desert, hungry and thirsty, they turned to Moses and said, "Work us a miracle", and Moses responded in anger and disgust. Could it be that he did not want the Hebrews to think of him as a magician. That talent was reserved for the unsophisticated Egyptians. Moses wanted the Hebrews to think of God, not as the source of magic, but as the source of law - that wondrous, continuing miracle of law that caused the sun to rise everyday, and which bound men together in a sharing community.

The Biblical portion of this week is a reminder to us that we have come a long way from the ancient religions that interpreted religion as magic and not morality.