

# Superstitions and Cause and Effect

## *Behukotai 5873*



I am all in on the Celtics in the playoffs. While you never know which team -- the good one or the not so good one -- is going to show up, they are fun to watch. And what a game seven with Jason Tatum's 51 points for the win.

Now, everyone watches a game differently.

I am pretty superstitious.

I sit at the edge of my seat, mumbling ancient Jewish incantations. I don't knock on *wood* - since that refers to the wood of the cross, but I try to remove bad outcomes by wishing that no *kenahara* occurs.

*A kenahara* is Yiddish for the evil eye: *k'ayin hara*.

My grandmother, z"l, witnessed horrors when trapped in what is now Ukraine, in World War I. When she came to America, she was so passionate about this country that had saved her from further evil, that she wanted to assimilate deeply and even lose her Yiddish accent, adopting a bit of a British accent - how much more American can you be than British!

But even she could not escape her Jewish superstitious language. So she Americanized the phrase "*kenahara*" to "canary."

If someone said something she thought could bring about a bad outcome, she would say, "don't give me a canary."

But the impulse to see the world through the lens of superstition is real.

I cannot tell you how many times I've watched a baseball game where the announcer cites a statistic like "the batter has not struck out in 10 games," and boom, he strikes out.

This week, the announcer of the Celtics game said: "The Celtics have gone perfect from the line - 11



for 11.” I just shook my head, because I knew what would happen next...

The Celts missed the next free throw—simple cause and effect. 😊

As a kid, I definitely believed that my prayers and superstitious incantations could impact the game, and if I were not praying hard enough, then my team would lose.

But now that I am older, I know that it is not true... well, maybe - I still kind of believe it....

The Torah certainly believed in reward and punishment.

The second portion of this week’s Torah reading, *Parashat Behukotai*, opens with:

אִם-בְּחֻקֹּתַי תֵּלְכוּ וְאֶת-מִצְוֹתַי תִּשְׁמְרוּ וְעִשִּׂיתֶם אֹתָם”

If you walk in my statutes, and keep my commandments, and do them; then I will give you rain in due season, and the land shall yield its increase, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit.”

And I will give peace in the land, and you shall lie down, and none shall make you afraid: and I will remove evil beasts out of the land, neither shall the sword go through your land.” (Lev 26:3-4, 6)

Nice and simple - you keep your end of the bargain and God will reward us.

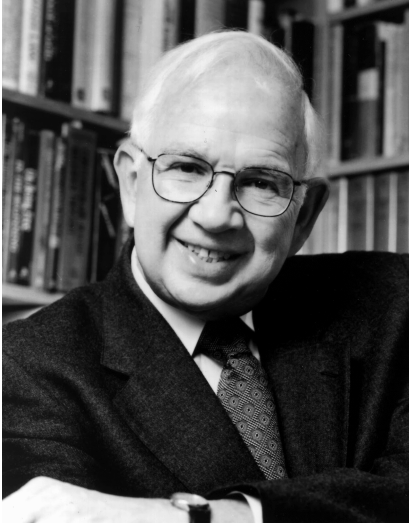
If I pray, the Celtics win. (Of course, if the rabbi from Philly cheers on the 76ers, they should win..... but whatever.)

And if you don’t listen to my commandments, the Torah states: “I will even appoint over you terror, consumption, and fever, that shall consume the eyes, and cause sorrow of heart: and you shall sow your seed in vain, for your enemies shall eat it. And I will set my face against you, and you shall be slain before your enemies: they that hate you shall reign over you; and you shall flee when none pursues you.” (Lev 26:16-17)

Woah...! Pretty scary stuff.

The Torah is trying to make sense of a world filled with dangers and blessings and tie them to our actions.

Rabbi Harold Kushner, z”l, the great rabbi who wrote our *Etz Hayim* commentary, and who passed away just a few weeks ago, wrote about this.



In his incredibly popular book, “*When Bad Things Happen to Good People*,” he rejected the traditional notion of reward and punishment. While we have free will, which can have a big impact on the world (see climate change, gun violence, and wars, for example), we cannot control everything evil.

He had no traditional way to explain why his own son was born with a deadly genetic disease.

What could his son have done to deserve this?

So instead, Kushner imagined a God who is like a cheerleader - urging us to do good, supporting us when

we don't or when bad things happen, but not a God who gets on the field and plays. God will not jump into the game and change the outcome for us or make the 3-pointer go in.

This is how many moderns, including myself, look at blessings and evil. And it's even how some thinkers in our more ancient texts did as well.

Famously, the Talmud teaches: “The world follows its natural course - *olam k'minhago noheig*.” (Avodah Zarah 54b)

The world follows its natural course - meaning that God does not intervene; God does not prevent bad things from happening to good people.

Another way to reinterpret our biblical text which is also in our liturgy - like the second paragraph of the Shema - is to read it plainly - if we do not follow the mitzvot, the commandments and rules about protecting the environment, for example, then the land will not sustain us.

We can see this clearly today.

I also appreciate the view that the mitzvot are rewards in themselves - if we fulfill them, we live lives of meaning and purpose.

We will live moral and ethical lives.

But if we do not, we will lose out on those traditions that help us live with wonder and appreciation, and those that help us stay on track.

Today, I want to offer another take on reward and punishment, on cause and effect.

I want to think about where the original theology comes from.

Why did people create it or believe in it?

I see it as coming from fear - the most powerful of human emotions.

People have experienced and experience the world as challenging -- there is suffering.

And for our ancestors, they wanted an explanation - why am I sick? Why am I suffering? Why are others suffering?

They turned to their belief in God. They believed that there must be some higher power in control, and this gave them a measure of comfort -- especially since they could clearly see that they were not in control.

Today, we understand much more about the world. We know that certain diseases come from our genes. There are just accidents. They cause real and terrible suffering, but I don't see this as God punishing us.

I strive to believe in a God whose Presence saturates the world, but is not always easily accessed. While this spiritual energy is everywhere, including within us, we don't often slow down and become aware of it. We don't often remove our own shells, our own blockers, and impediments to feeling that spirituality.

When we do manage to do that, I believe we become God's hands in this world, and we can live a fulfilling life based on what we can control - our reactions, our behaviors.

Our fear is about not being able to control the world, to make sense of it.

Sometimes, as we age, we realize that we are not able to manage it to our will, and we learn to live with that difficult reality.

We do not cause all the good and bad in the world, nor does God. Our free will, accidents of nature, and the fact that this material world is fragile, all guarantee that the world is not fair.

But the yearning for it to be comprehensible and controllable is still there. This *parashah* reminds us to try - to try hard to make the right choices.

And I think it's OK to hold both truths.

I can understand the world through a logical, scientific, and philosophically consistent lens and, at the same time, appreciate my need to pray, to access something that is more emotional, more spiritual - even to be superstitious.

God may not reward us with a Celtics win on Sunday, but I will be praying really hard, hoping the announcers do not give them a *kenaharah* or even a canary.