MAIMONIDES ‘aboda zara 11:4. Let’s flip a coin!

Last week we began to describe a pagan practice called “divination” which Maimonides in Hilkhot ‘aboda zara 11:4 includes within the prohibition of idolatry. We explained that divination means “reading in nature or in trivial events messages from the gods” (see **this**).
In that same Halakha Maimonides refers to another type of divination. This time is not about a person reading the will of the gods in events that occurred to him or around him, but in signals that he sets for himself. Maimonides says: “*if a person sets omens for himself, e.g., if this and this happens I will do this… all is forbidden*“. For example. If a person has to make a personal decision (a business deal, a shiddukh, a medical procedure, etc.) and he says to himself: “Since I don’t know if God wants me to do this or not, I will flip a coin. If a get ‘tails’ it means that God wants me to do it, ‘heads’, God does not want me to do it.” This reasoning is apparently irreproachable. After all God definitely controls the outcome of the flipping coin.
For Maimonides, however, a person who acts upon this type of divination is transgressing a Biblical prohibition. Why? Because the person who flips the coin assumes that God is ‘coerced’ to reveal His will by making the coin land on “heads” or “tails”. And this is definitely a pagan reasoning. The quintessence of ‘aboda zara consisted of the idea that humans can force the gods to grant them information about the future, by setting imaginary preconceived omens. The ultimate goal of pagans was not to serve God (as it our goal as Jews) but to coerce the gods to serve them. Such an attempt to manipulate God, Has veShalom, is an idolatrous and forbidden practice.

NOTE: Flipping or tossing a coin to resolve a dispute, when both parties a priori agree to accept the results of the outcome—like what is done in a football game to decide which team will use the ball first—is an acceptable practice. This type of method (in Hebrew *goral*) used for conflict resolution is mentioned in the shulhan ‘arukh, hoshen mishpat, 173:2, 174: 4,5 as a valid way by which heirs or partners would resolve their differences in dividing a piece of land, etc.

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Fear & Illusion
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on a faulty perspective of reality?
by Hanan Harchol