THE SECOND COMMANDMENT: “Thou shalt not be superstitious”

המניח ספר תורה או תפילין על התינוק כדי שיישן

We are analyzing the second commandment, *“Thou shalt have NO other gods before Me.”* The Tora warns us not to believe in other gods or objects, or people or forces with supernatural powers.

While most of the modern world has overcome the traditional beliefs in idolatry, i.e., worshiping gods of stone or wood, certain habits, intimately connected with idolatrous practices, still survive. I’m referring more specifically to superstitions.

What do I mean by superstitions? A belief or faith in the supernatural power of something that is not HaShem, or under His control: a perfect illustration of the warning of the second commandment.

Examples: the belief in the power –to do good or evil– of certain objects. Say, a broken mirror, a ring or a book with superpowers, a red string, water blessed by a “holy” person, etc.

Humanity, especially the less educated sectors of the population, was always tempted to believe in superstitions and attribute certain powers to objects or natural phenomena. As already explained, it is much easier to serve an object, which does not require anything of us, than serving HaShem Who demands that we learn and study, and requires us to exert discipline and integrity, practice generosity, etc.

There is also the “control” factor. When I buy a “red string” I might have the feeling that I possess and control its power, as the ring in “Lord of the Rings.”

Out of a total of 613 commandments, the Tora devoted more than 50 to the denial of idolatry, to teach the Jewish people to reject all beliefs in magical or superstitious powers, or as the Tora calls it: Aboda Zara.

The second commandment teaches us that no-one and no-thing has a "power" or a supernatural influence on our lives, other than HaShem.

We must recognize that unfortunately, even some observant Jews might fall into the trap of superstition. It might seem to them that it is compatible to believe in God and be superstitious at the same time. Especially if the objects supposedly endowed with superpowers are ritual objects.

This phenomenon is not new. Here is an example. Tefillin, the phylacteries that Jewish men wear every day to pray. The Tefillin has obviously QEDUSHA, "holiness", which means that it should be treated with great care, i.e., can not be introduced in inappropriate places, etc.

But we should not confuse "qedusha" which as exemplified by the case of tefillin, it demands *us* to *take great care* of these articles, with the false belief that the Tefillin, as a ritual object, might possess some superpowers… Maimonides wrote about this subject: a small child cries without stopping. And we try everything to calm him. The question Maimonides explores is the following: can we place the Tefillin in the bed of this child, so that with the "power of the sanctity of the Tefillin" the baby would stop crying and would fall asleep? The same could be said about a Sefer Tora, a Tora scroll, the most sacred religious article, higher than the tefillin. The idea is: if the sanctity of a religious object implies that these articles should possess some supernatural power, then these two items should be at the top of the list of effectiveness.

Maimonides, who mentions explicitly these two religiousarticles, considers this practice as a form of idolatry and condemns this act with extremely harsh words:
MT, Aboda Zara 11:12: *"… also, if someone places a Tefillin or a Sefer Tora [in the bed of] a small child to fall asleep,*

this person is not only guilty of [two forms of idolatry:] enchantment and sorcery, but he is also guilty of heresy …. “.

As we can see, some people might be a little confused and be tempted to “use” ritual items for superstitious practices. This is not a new phenomenon.

The second commandment teaches us that there are no other “powers” independent of HaShem. No matter how sacred those objects might be.

Far from appealing to objects or amulets, what we should do in cases of illness □”□ or when we face any other problem, is first of all, do our best effort to solve the problem, and simultaneously PRAY, asking HaShem *directly* for His help. Knowing that ultimately everything is EXCLUSIVELY in His power.