

**Predicting the Future Isn't so Hard:  
It Is Just a Matter of Making the Right Decisions  
Rabbi Jay M. Stein  
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Have you ever heard of the superstition of throwing salt over your shoulder after you sneeze? It is actually a superstition that dates back to biblical times when salt was a highly prized commodity. It was expensive, crucial in preserving food, and was often used in lieu of currency. So, spilling salt was considered an almost sacrilegious offence, and left one perilously exposed to the devil's machinations.

Throwing salt over your shoulder is akin to blessing someone after they've sneezed -- it's a way of keeping the devil at bay while you're in an especially vulnerable moment. Depending on your interpretation, the salt is either intended to blind the devil so he can't witness your error, or keep him from sneaking up on you while you're cleaning up your mess. It's important to note that the superstition calls for the offender to throw salt over the left shoulder. As one web site notes, many ancient traditions place the devil to the left of the straight and narrow path. The classic image of a devil on one shoulder and an angel on the other often shows the sinister imp sitting on the left side.

If you want to really follow the letter of the law, you're encouraged to throw the salt with your "good," or right hand. Of course, we know that throughout history, the association of right with good and left with bad caused a number of perfectly respectable left-handed people to be burned at the stake.

In general, superstitions appeal to the religious person. What I mean by this is, for those people who believe in God and have faith there is a power greater than they, there is a sense there are forces at play in the world we simply will never understand and can rarely identify in any concrete way. Therefore, it's not all that big a jump to say that if there are forces at play in the world we cannot see or touch, then those forces probably are giving us signs about how they can be manipulated. Superstitions such as "Don't walk under a ladder or you will have bad luck," or "You should never break a mirror but if you do, you should take the pieces outside and bury them at moonlight." Or the most common superstition is that we should break a plate and then later at the wedding ceremony break a glass to ward off the evil spirits - and the list goes on and on. The religious person becomes a laughing stock when all of these superstitions begin to control their life. When the mezuzah on our doors loses its significance, as a reminder of the values we hold to be sacred, and becomes a protector against wild animals or worse, illness, then we have crossed the line. We can't deny its power. We all want to be able to manipulate our world, we all want to be able to find some protection in a world that seems less in our control than we feel comfortable with. We build buildings and number the floors skipping the 13<sup>th</sup>. We watch pitchers leaving the mound skipping over the first base line. We think twice when we see a black cat and we hold our breath as we pass a cemetery, all in the name of gaining a little control.

However, that cannot be the entirety of our lives. At some point we must rise above that primitive mindset and become sophisticated travelers on the highway of life. We have to turn our desires into reality and we must have a plan for achieving our goals. It is that plan, that strategy, which will insure our success. I had no idea that this is how my life would turn out. I had a dream, but without a plan the dream was nothing more than a wish. I wanted to become a rabbi so there were things I had to do. I wanted to get married and have a family so there were things I had to do. I realized that the plan I had might be altered along the way, but there had to be a plan. All along, even if the plan had to be refined and changed, I always kept my eye on the ball. All the while, I knew if I wanted to achieve something then I had to plant the seeds for it.

We have been engaged for the last few weeks in reading a section of the Torah that deals with the construction of the Tabernacle and the many items that would be used in executing those rituals. Week after week, we have focused on what each of those items symbolized and how they engaged us in this national project. All the while, we have been reminded of the real purpose. In life we tend to lose focus, we tend to lose sight of the big picture and we tend to forget what we are working towards. So, last week amidst the agonizing details of how to build the outside structure, the text reminded us *V'asu li mikdash v'shachanti betocham* – build Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among you. (Exodus 25:8) The details are important, the plan is critical but don't forget what this is all about.

Then again, in this week's description of the clothing to be fashioned for the priests, the unbearable particulars are once again given as the text says, *L'chavod u'l'tifaret* “For honor and glory.” This is not said once, but twice. (Exodus 28:2 and 40) We do all of this for a reason and a purpose. We must remember that, so the Torah says it twice. If we didn't get the point from the Torah directly then the Etz HaChayim makes it abundantly clear, the garments did not serve to glorify and dignify the High Priest. The reason the Torah says it twice is to solidify the point that there is a greater purpose. *Hayu mitushtashin oh mikor'in v'avad avodato pesula*, the priest's clothing represents the glory of God. That is what this is all about. It is not about making the kohen look good. We must be careful that the goal remains in our mind. Continuing to look at our objectives will reinforce our actions. If we don't, then we are wasting our time and effort. We have dreams and we have plans for achieving those dreams, and when brought together, something really magical can happen.

Much has been made about the Urim Thumim that we have described in this week's reading. These amulets were supposed to assist the Kohen Gadol in performing his tasks. “These two items constituted a device for determining the will of God in specific matters that were beyond human ability to decide.” (Etz Hayim page 508) They were supposed to help him make good decisions. I reject the idea that we need a talisman, a lucky charm, to generate a purposeful meaningful life.

If we want love we have to plant seeds of love, if we want respect we have to plant seeds of respect. It is true personally and individually, it is true nationally and internationally.

If we want people to be empowered, we need to plant seeds of empowerment. If we want peace then we need to plant seeds of peace and then we must nurture those seeds. If we don't nurture the seeds, the people who want to plant seeds of violence and totalitarianism will be far more successful in nurturing those destructive forces than we will be in bringing kindness and mercy. We must always keep our perspective while we work the plan because the plan can work. For every Islamo fascist, Ahmanidajad or Bin Laden that exists, we need to highlight the work of kind and generous hearted Muslims like EBOO PATEL who insightfully remarked, "Action is what separates a belief from an opinion. Beliefs are imprinted through actions." In the words of the great American poet Gwendolyn Brooks: "We are each other's business; we are each other's harvest; we are each other's magnitude and bond."

Recently I had the pleasure of speaking on a panel at the Agnes Irwin school with a Presbyterian Minister. When asked how we ended up in the various denominations of our respective religions, Pastor McClellan pointed out that he was attracted to his denomination because it never asked him to give up his intellect in order to believe. To which I added the same is true for me and that my stream, my movement, actually demanded it of me. We must be ever engaged in our world. We must use all of our faculties to apprehend God and to create and sustain a meaningful life. We are moved and motivated by sound bites and we attach ourselves to big ideas and moral conviction. However, we must demand a plan as well. Though I often like to conclude with a prayer, today I would ask that we not only pray but we plan as well.

Success is intentional, whether it is in our physical lives or our spiritual lives, whether it is in our personal or professional arenas or whether it is individually or nationally. If we want substantive relationships we must work toward that goal with intentionality. If we want to care for every one around us, making sure everyone is covered by health insurance, then we must have a plan. If we want to make sure everyone in American receives a good education, then we need a plan. If we want to reduce the number of armed conflicts in the world, then we need a plan. If we want to save our planet, then we need a plan. If we want to protect the rights of women, then we need a plan. If we want to secure a plan of an American/Israeli alliance, then we need a plan. All of these ideas are important but without a plan not a single sound bite will give direction to our country.

If our country is going to continue as world leader and plot a course for bringing pluralism, freedom and democracy to a world in desperate need of it, then we must have a course and that path must be filled with the right people. It must have the appropriate markers of achievement and it must appropriate metrics for progress. These indicators serve as places for refueling, for reenergizing, for regaining focus because these are the places that give us information. It is not enough to have a goal, we have to have the route to get there as well.

May your journey be filled with wonderful destinations and may you never feel lost along the way. I pray the rest stops along way bear great meaning as well.

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