

Under the Spell of Harry Potter



Illustrations by Ann D. Koffsky

If ever you harbored the thought that reading is a lost cause among the television-video-computer crowd, be comforted. A wizard named Harry Potter has resurrected the art of reading for pleasure.

In a frenzied, meteoric leap to the

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by **Yaffa Ganz**

top of the best-seller lists, the Harry Potter books (four have been published to date; seven books are envisioned in all) have become the world's all time best-sellers. More than 30 million books have been sold (breaking every book-selling record in history) and the series, which has been translated into 37 languages, is the recipient of major literary awards.

Parents are claiming that children

who previously wouldn't touch a book are now tearing through the series at top speed, reading, rereading and waiting impatiently for more. In addition, there are (as of this writing) 103 Harry Potter sites on the Internet and over 600,000 references to Harry on other sites. A major movie was recently released and a billion dollar empire of merchandising, licensing and subsidiary income is growing by leaps and bounds.

The story of Harry Potter is, by now, well-known. An orphaned infant is found on the doorstep of a cruel

aunt and uncle. For ten miserable, loveless years he suffers unimagined misery until, on his eleventh birthday, he begins to receive mysterious invitations to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. (Hogwarts, it turns out, is the “Harvard” of sorcery and magic.) To Harry’s delight, he discovers that he was born a wizard, a fact which explains all sorts of strange occurrences in his young life.

Colorado for teaching “devil worship.” In an international conference on Fairies and Magic, which took place in Tel Aviv this past summer, Professor Julia Briggs, a professor of English Literature at the University of Leicester, said, “People have taken Harry Potter, which I think is a kind of charming joke, very very seriously....” She went on to say how some Americans are worried about the “anti-Christian”

or fools because ‘*Ein od milvado*’ (there is only one God).” Therefore, all forms of magic are forbidden because even if they are a sham, they introduce the idea of independent powers competing with God.

In light of the Torah’s prohibitions, can we regard magic as “fun?” Is it permissible to indulge in magical fantasies for entertainment?

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Harry’s parents were killed by the powerful and evil wizard, Lord Voldemort. Although Voldemort was unable to kill little Harry (attesting to some undiscovered great power Harry possesses), the child is left with a lightning-shaped scar emblazoned on his forehead. As Harry prepares to leave his “Muggle” (non-wizard) family for Hogwarts, the fun begins.

In four volumes of bewitching characters, inventions and stories, we read about owl-powered mail service; Quidditch (a form of basketball played on flying broomsticks); mobile portraits which wave to you; clocks which tell not time, but the whereabouts of family members; magic wands, ghosts, dragons, potions, spells; Hagrid the gentle giant; Professors Flitwick, Snape and McGonagall; Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts and Supreme Mugwump in the International Confederation of Wizards.

These are but a few of the fantastical creatures and surprises awaiting you in the wizard world, a vibrant and amazing world which exists, unseen and undetected, side by side with the ordinary “Muggle” world. The world of Harry Potter is captivating, funny, freewheeling and sometimes frightening.

Yet, despite Harry’s widespread popularity, there has been strong opposition to the series. Indeed, the books have been challenged in 17 states and banned in some schools in Kansas and

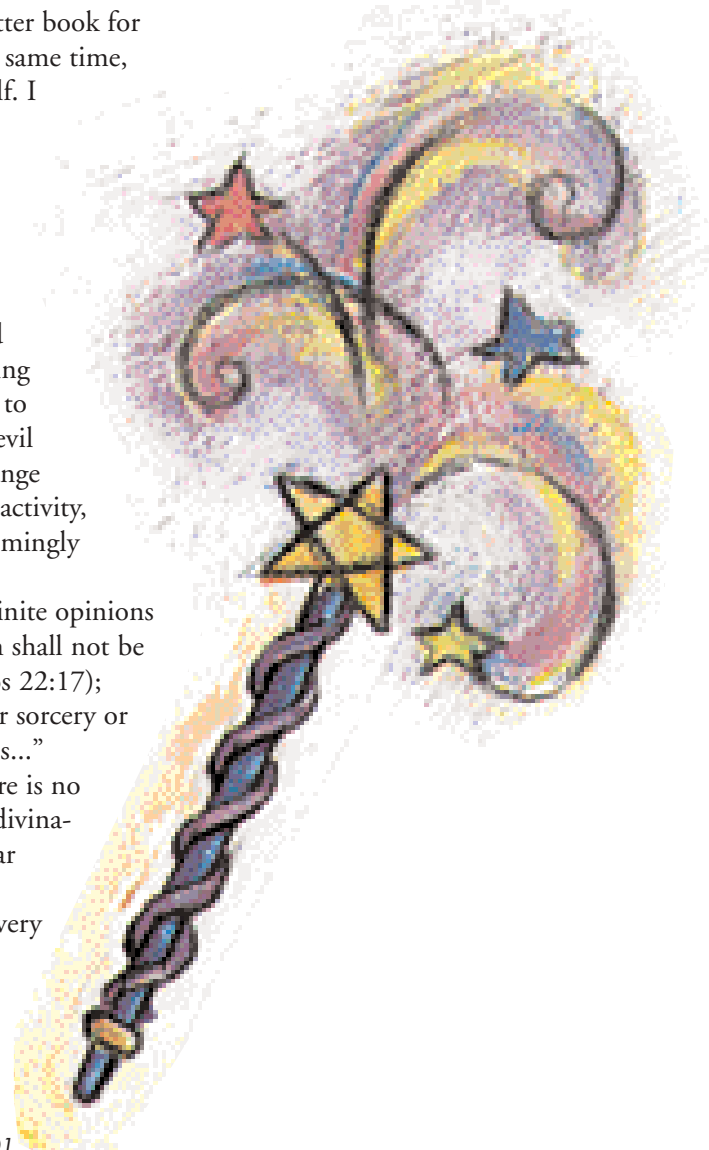
messages in the books.

While the Potter books can be found in countless Orthodox Jewish homes, personally, they leave me feeling ambivalent and uncomfortable. Last year, I bought a Hebrew translation of the first Harry Potter book for my grandchild and at the same time, an English copy for myself. I wanted to see what made the book so remarkable. After reading my copy, I decided to return the Hebrew book and find something else for my grandson; somehow, I did not envision myself as being the one to introduce him to the World of Magic—to evil powers and spirits, to strange creatures and necromantic activity, to a world where God seemingly does not even exist.

The Torah has very definite opinions regarding magic. “A witch shall not be allowed to live...” (Shemos 22:17); “Do not consult omens or sorcery or believe in auspicious times...” (Vayikra 19:26); “For there is no sorcery in Jacob, and no divination in Israel...” (Bamidbar 23:23).

The Rambam also has very clearly stated opinions in *Hilchot Avodat Kochavim* (11:9) where he states, “All who claim to do magic are either cheaters

The recent rise in popularity of *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *Northern Lights* plus a plethora of other magical stories says something about the modern frame of mind.



Similarly, the great contemporary interest in kabbalah and mysticism says something too. People today are searching for something beyond technology; the question is: where are they looking—toward God or toward a world of magical forces?

What is it about magic that so captures the human imagination? What is it that so enralls us in the occult? Since the destruction of the Second Temple, God operates through *hester panim* (lit. concealing His face); His Presence is no longer as manifest as it once was. There are no longer obvious, breathtaking miracles or direct prophecies. Perhaps that is why magic is so compelling. It supposedly empowers those who learn its secrets and gives us the illusion of being in control in an increasingly complex world.

Indeed, the Harry Potter books are classic tales of empowerment. Harry is a decent, likeable, but somewhat meek kid who suffers endlessly at the hands of his dreadful relatives. Once he discovers his magical abilities, however, he undergoes a transformation. No longer a passive pawn in a volatile world, he can now control his own destiny. How nice it would be if we, too, could only say the correct words, press the right buttons, concoct the proper potions and spells and abracadabra—everything would fall into place!

Unfortunately, life doesn't work that way. In the Jewish view, it is not we who control life; it is God. We do the best we can; we pray for Divine assistance, and then we trust in God to bring about His desired results.

In the end, it all boils down to one

question: Can a world of magic be treated as “entertainment,” or is it somehow a form of “idolatry,” i.e. acknowledging the presence of powers other than God? Are Harry Potter and his magic really bad for our kids? Or is the entire question a non-issue?



There are contemporary rabbinical opinions cited to the effect that children are permitted to read fantasy books involving magic *so long as it is clear that there is no such thing as magic*. But how do we know what is “clear” to a child? Do we really have a sense of what a child internalizes? On the other hand, let us assume that our children indeed know that there are no magical “powers.” What happens when they close Harry Potter and sit down

to learn certain *midrashei Chazal*? How will they differentiate between one and the other? Might they perhaps dismiss *Chazal* along with the wizards and witches (which is why Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch objected to seemingly innocent fairy tales and talking animals)?¹

In sum, what are we supposed to do when our kids come home with Harry Potter from the public or even their own school library? Perhaps we should ask ourselves why our children are so enthralled with the series? What does it give them? Does it further the goals we are trying to imbue them with? Obviously, we must first define what those goals are; then we can try and see what's available out there and determine whether to censor, condone or ignore.

As religious Jews, we must try to imbue our children with the realization that *Ein od milvado*—there is no one, no power, nothing else other than God whose glory fills the world, and *Shiviti Hashem lenegdi tamid*, we stand in His presence at all times. Personally, I doubt that Harry Potter can help us strengthen our *emunah*, but at the very least let us make sure that he does not weaken it. If you feel sure that Harry is harmless entertainment, let your child read and enjoy. But if you have any doubts, it's worth giving the matter more thought. **JA**

Notes:

1. *Collected Writings of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch: Volume VII* (New York/Jerusalem: Philipp Feldheim Inc., 1990) 113-114.