



## BIBLIOMANCY AND JUDAISM: THE CASE OF THE LUBAVITCHER REBBE

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### Abstract:

This paper examines bibliomancy in Judaism. Following a historical overview of this topic, it focuses upon the late Lubavitcher Rebbe's *Igros Kodesh* as a form of bibliomancy. To receive the Rebbe's counsel and blessings, Lubavitchers insert questions and requests into this text. They find a response by opening the same page at which it is inserted. Advocates of this practice see it as an opportunity for miraculous guidance, maintaining that the Rebbe's soul transcends physical boundaries and that it is Divine Providence which guides the seeker to the exact page containing the necessary advice. Using a trawl of the internet, it presents four narratives pertaining to the practice of bibliomancy in this group.

**Keywords:** epistemic hegemony, knowledge systems, epistemological pluralism, methodological anarchism, symbiotic dialogue

### 1. Introduction

*"There must not be among you.... any diviner..."* ([Deut. 18:10-15](#))

The anthropology of divination has played a significant role in cross-cultural understandings of misfortune, attempting to answer the question of how and why individuals suffer, who is responsible and what the outcome will be. Divination can provide meaning in uncertain times and is a framework for future praxis. Anthropologist David Zeitlyn argues for divination as a 'technology of decision making' (Zeitlyn, 2021, p. 145). Cearns (2024:54) provides a useful definition of divination: *"a way of exploring the unknown so as to elicit answers to questions beyond our own realm of understanding, calling upon further layers of intelligence or knowledge to access or clarify some truth that would otherwise remain opaque."* This paper focuses upon bibliomancy in Judaism, specifically

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using the *Igrot Kodesh* -the Holy Letters or Holy Epistles of the late Lubavitcher Rebbe, who died in 1994.

The term bibliomancy - deriving from the Greek words *biblio* (book) and *"manteia"* (divination) - refers to the practice of divination through interpreting passages in books, often sacred texts. It is likely that bibliomancy evolved from the ancient, widespread practice of cleromancy or casting lots (McCook, 2025). Bibliomancy goes back at least to Roman and Greek times, when the works of Homer and Vergil were deployed (*Sortes Homericae* and *Sortes Vergiliana*). Vergil's *Aeneid* was commonly used in medieval Europe. Bibliomancy's roots are related to the Roman practice of sortes-drawing lots or selecting passages from texts at random to receive advice or predict outcomes. The practice has been widely used in Jewish (Torah, Psalms, Tanakh and Zohar), Christian (the Bible, Gospels), Islamic (a practice known as "[istikhara](#)" through tools like the Qu'ran or the [Falnama](#) Book of Omens) and Chinese contexts (e.g. I Ching) but has often been viewed with suspicion. Sometimes novels or poems are used to provide some insight. Future outcomes are divined by opening a book at random, where the verse can predict an outcome.

Shraga Bar-On (2020, 2021) provides an excellent overview of the history of bibliomancy in Judaism. While sorcery and divination are prohibited, bibliomancy has been sanctioned throughout history, and the methods even include asking a child to recite a random verse to receive a divine message. The Jewish tradition includes a rich history of legitimate divine communication; prophecy through direct communication with God is permitted. In Greco-Roman times, dream interpretation was seen as a legitimate practice (Tervanokto, 2024). Maimonides, a medieval Sephardic rabbi, physician and philosopher, strictly opposed most forms of divination but did allow "rejoicing" if a good verse appeared when opening a book, but disapproved of making practical decisions based on it. While bibliomancy was often practised, it is not seen as an official part of Halachic decision -making, but as a form of 'folk piety'. The traditional Jewish method of bibliomancy popularized by the Vilna Gaon (Rabbi Eliyahu ben Shlomo Zalman, 1720–1797) is referred to as the *Goral ha-Gra* (Lot of the Gra).

There has always been a tension in Judaism between strict rabbinic rejections of magic and the widespread cultural practices of forecasting- between the official, highly rationalistic teachings of rabbinic law and the persistent, everyday need of ordinary people to understand and control their destinies. The Hebrew Bible strictly prohibits forecasting the future through occult, magical, or pagan methodologies, all deemed as severe spiritual offenses. This prohibition derives from the need to safeguard absolute monotheism and personal trust in God, since divination grants independent power to the occult. For example, Deuteronomy 18:10-12 states: "*There shall not be found among you anyone who... uses divination, a soothsayer, an enchanter, a witch, a charmer, a medium, a wizard, or a necromancer. For all that do these things are an abomination to the Lord.*"

While the rabbis attempted to eradicate sorcery, they frequently needed to accommodate the folk religions of the masses and many superstitious or forecasting practices were essentially rebranded or re-contextualized to fit the tenets of monotheism. As an example, there are Talmudic passages (e.g. Tractate Shabbat 156a of the Babylonian

Talmud) where rabbis acknowledge that planetary alignments (like being born under a certain zodiac sign) can exert a real influence. However, they assert that Jews are ultimately immune to this determinism through prayer, free will, and keeping the commandments. Celestial forces are not inescapable destiny.

Bar-On (2020) notes how attempts at prognostication have been a longstanding aspect of Jewish culture from its primordial beginnings until the present day. He asserts that it was particularly in the Medieval period that Jewish mantic practices proliferated because of a confluence of practical, ideological and cultural circumstances. He speaks of bibliomancy as "mantic pietism"—a divinatory practice that became legitimate through deploying the Torah, rather than using other "foreign" or forbidden magical arts, thus reinforcing the central role of the Bible in Jewish life (2021: 161). He underscores the fact that while Deuteronomy strictly forbids foreign mantic arts, biblical texts display profound internal ambivalence. Judaism developed its own legitimate forms of prognostication and divine consultation—such as prophecy or using the High Priest's *Urim and Thummim*.<sup>12</sup> From a Jewish mystical perspective, the late Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan sees meditation and the contemplation of divine names not as fortune-telling, but rather as a spiritual technology deployed to attain higher consciousness, connect directly with God and to experience prophetic states (Kaplan, 1995).

The practice of bibliomancy began in the post-exilic period and developed in the Hellenistic period (Berger, 2000) and has been deployed at times of uncertainty to obtain divine insights.<sup>2</sup> Texts, like the Torah, Psalms, or the Zohar, have been employed in this practice. The commentators of the Code of Jewish Law- the *Shulchan Aruch* (Yoreh Deah 179:4) - mention that opening a holy book to find an answer is acceptable, and this is a "minor prophecy". The *Shulchan Aruch* discusses the biblical prohibition of divination (*nichush*), and notes that while general superstitions are prohibited, certain types of signs are permitted.

According to one celebrated story, bibliomancy was deployed during the Israeli War of Independence (1947-49) by the Tzadik of Jerusalem – Reb Aryeh Levin, who deployed the "Goral Ha-Gra."<sup>3</sup> Thirty-five soldiers were dispatched to provide additional defence for the Settlements in Gush Etzion - the Lamed-Heh Convoy. Tragically, they all died fighting. Following their discovery after the war, the Chief Rabbinate of Israel was unable to identify twelve of the bodies. Reb Aryeh Levin used the Goral Ha-Gra involving a particular format of the Chumash.<sup>5</sup> The pages were flipped backwards and forwards until finally a particular verse was chosen. In all cases, the chosen verse accurately identified a particular body with a dead soldier. This story illustrates how bibliomancy had become a widespread practice within the Jewish establishment (Bar -On, 2021).

Traditional and Orthodox Judaism today forbids the practice of traditional or occult divination (e.g., Tarot, reading tea leaves, or seances). However, among liberal and progressive Jewish communities, there has been interest in exploring these tools as instruments deployed for psychological and spiritual self-reflection rather than for literal fortune-telling (Hurwitz, 2019).

## 2. Chabad and their Rebbe

Lubavitch is a Hasidic group named after a town in Russia. The group are also called Chabad –an acronym for the three elements of human and divine intelligence: *Chochma, binah and death*. The headquarters of the group is in Brooklyn, NY, with smaller linked communities in Stamford Hill (UK), Kfar Chabad (Israel), Paris, Melbourne and Sydney. Unique to Lubavitch is a network of *schluchim* (emissaries) worldwide who attempt to bring non-Orthodox Jews back to Judaism.

Until his death in 1994, the group was led by the seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe, Menachem Schneerson -- who was their spiritual leader. While he was alive, his followers would visit him at his residence, 770 Eastern Parkway, to attend a ceremony called Dollars, where his petitioners received a dollar symbolising charity, and he gave them a blessing for health, wealth, education or family. Alternatively, they would write to or e-mail him about events in their lives, requesting his help. Many narratives were circulated in the Lubavitch community pertaining to his miraculous powers. Following his death, they would visit his graveside-the Ohel- depositing handwritten requests on his grave. It is possible to submit a letter directly to the Rebbe's resting place via the Ohel Chabad-Lubavitch Portal. This is then printed out and placed at the *Ohel* on the person's behalf. These activities have been reported on by Dein (2002, 2010).

Lubavitch is well known for its messianic assertions and its identification of its leader, Menachem Schneerson, with Moshiach, who would usher in the imminent Redemption. Dein (2012) has traced the history of Lubavitcher Messianism from the early 1980's when there was an upsurge of messianic belief, until after the Rebbe's death in 1994. In 1991, the Rebbe called for the redeemer to reveal himself, thus creating a sense of messianic urgency. Toward the end of his life, his followers asserted that the Rebbe himself was Moshiach. Following his death, the group split into those who maintained that he was Moshiach and those who disagreed with this assertion-the non- messianists. For many outside this movement, these assertions were seen as heretical (Berger, 2008).

## 3. Consulting the Rebbe through his Igros Kodesh

Consulting the written works of Rebbes is rooted in *hiskashrus*- the belief that there exists a deep spiritual connection between a Rebbe and his followers. The Previous Lubavitcher Rebbe (Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn) emphasized how a true spiritual bond is cultivated, not just by seeing the Rebbe's face, but also through the study of his written discourses, or *maamarim*. Because a Rebbe's soul is considered deeply unified with the Torah he teaches, engagement with these texts allows a follower to unite directly with the Rebbe. Studying a Rebbe's words strengthens the spiritual bond and provides a channel through which to draw down blessings. Writing to the Rebbe is viewed by his followers as akin to a *yechidus*- a private meeting with him, which was possible before he died.

Here we focus on the seventh Rebbe's *Igros Kodesh* (Holy Epistles) - a collection of his correspondence, Halachic rulings and responses. It consists of tens of thousands of letters that he wrote over several decades to people from all backgrounds. Modelled on the *Igros Kodesh Maharayatz* of the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn, his immediate predecessor, the seventh Rebbe's collected volumes comprise diverse discussions pertaining to philosophy (Halachic, Talmudic, mystical, Hasidic, or other), global events, social/communal proceedings, scientific matters, counsel in personal issues, and education. Twenty-five volumes of his letters written in Yiddish, English and Hebrew now exist. While the exact statistics concerning Lubavitchers' use of the *Igros Kodesh* for divination are not available, several members of the London community stated that it was widely employed by his followers-both the messianic and non-messianic factions.

Consulting religious texts is a longstanding tradition in Lubavitch. When Hasidim living in Russia were not in direct contact with their Rebbe, they would typically insert their letters in a *Tanya*- the foundational text of Chabad documenting the mystical and practical philosophies of the movement- to seek responses to their questions and receive blessings. A *Sicha* (talk) by the seventh Rebbe in 5749 (1988/89) mentions a *minhag* (custom) of many Jews: that prior to making certain decisions, they would open a *sefer kadosh* (holy book), look at the place where the sefer randomly opened, and subsequently make a decision based on what was written on that page. For many years, the seventh Rebbe's *Igros Kodesh* has been employed by Lubavitchers to communicate with the Rebbe, to seek answers to their questions, requests and to receive his blessings. Advocates of this practice see it as an opportunity for miraculous guidance, maintaining that the Rebbe's soul transcends physical boundaries and that it is Divine Providence which guides the seeker to the exact page containing the necessary advice. This bibliomantic practice became more prominent following the Rebbe's passing in 1994 as a way of seeking his direction.

A recent digital alternative is to communicate with the Rebbe online and request a blessing related to health, business, education or marriage. A messianic Lubavitcher site, <http://www.kingmessiah.com/>, provides visitors with a portal to write to the Rebbe and "behold miracles" (Dein, 2012). Furthermore, it is possible to type a request or dilemma directly into [Igrot.com](http://Igrot.com), which acts as a digital portal to randomly open a volume of the letters for an individual's personal guidance. After the request is sent to the system, there is an immediate response providing an answer that should be studied upon receipt. As the site mentions:

*"It's an easy way of turning to the Rebbe King Moshiach for problem resolution. Over the years the Rebbe wrote thousands of notes and letters to people who turned to him for advice, guidance and blessing. The appeals and answers dealt with an array of topics that relate to all facets of life that include society, education, family, politics, livelihood, business, military service, art, Torah study, and more."*

Before consulting the seventh Rebbe's *Igros Kodesh*, petitioners prepare spiritually by washing their hands and giving charity. In their letter to the Rebbe, the person writes down their name, their mother's name, and their request or dilemma. They conclude by stating their commitment to grow in good deeds or Torah study. Following insertion of the letter randomly into a volume of the Rebbe's *Igros Kodesh*, a response is provided by opening the same page at which it is inserted. Lubavitchers maintain that the letter on the opened page contains advice or a message which is directly applicable to the situation at hand. Practitioners search for a connection or directive within that text as a response to their specific query. Sometimes, if the text is complex or in rabbinic Hebrew, a local Chabad Rabbi is consulted to help interpret the answer accurately.

As an example, when composing a letter concerning health, the page where the letter has been inserted, which they open, pertains to health. Typically, in relation to health-related matters, the Rebbe instructed individuals to seek the advice of two separate medical professionals and to obey their orders. Or when seeking a blessing for marriage, the person often receives advice or a blessing about this exact same subject. The Rebbe often advised consulting widely with friends and seeking multiple opinions in relation to business dilemmas.

Many letters state the importance of strengthening religious observance, like checking *mezuzot* or *tefillin* as spiritual vessels to receive blessings<sup>4</sup> The Rebbe would often suggest that the petitioner finds a spiritual mentor—a *mashpia*—to provide objective guidance. Those who have deployed this practice frequently document “success” stories on Lubavitcher websites.

While the movement's central institutions officially promote learning the *Igros Kodesh* for the purpose of spiritual elevation and Torah knowledge, they do not universally recommend the “opening” of the books for prophetic advice. Within the movement, there is some internal skepticism, and there are varying perspectives on this practice. Chabad guidelines recommend that ‘earthly’ methods should be deployed first to resolve dilemmas before consulting books. Primary methods come first, such as consulting doctors for health issues. The Rebbe himself frequently directed individuals with personal, medical, or financial questions to find qualified experts in those specific fields, rather than solely relying on opening books for guidance. Interestingly, the Rebbe himself never officially instituted or authorized random book-opening as a formal method of divination. Although not formally studied, some moderate observers in the movement have reframed the practice as a psychological tool for reflection rather than as a form of divination. From this perspective, opening a random letter of the Rebbe allows the seeker to reframe their dilemma through the Rebbe's established teachings on faith and encourages them to find relevant personal parallels and take subsequent positive action.

#### 4. Internet Narratives

Following a trawl of the internet, focusing on the keywords *Igros Kodesh*, divination and bibliomancy,<sup>6</sup> I document three narratives from the website *"Igros Kodesh: Have a Story to Share?"*

One such story relates to two Israeli girls who had asked to speak to a rabbi urgently opposite the Rebbe's headquarters. They were tearful and barely able to speak. They told the rabbi how their father, living in Manhattan, had claimed that witches and evil spirits were chasing after him. He was unable to leave the house and was not eating. They feared he might kill himself.

In response to the girls, the rabbi suggested that they should write to the Rebbe about their father's state and insert their letter in a volume of *Igros Kodesh*. After writing it, they inserted it randomly into the text and opened it to page 164, which stated:

*"In response to your letter of 15 Kislev in which you write the main points of what you have experienced, and what you attribute and mention witches and magic, etc. You should put this completely out of your mind and strengthen your trust in Hashem (God), who supervises every single person with divine providence, but you need to check your tefillin and the mezuzos of your home, and on every weekday before davening (praying) in the morning, you should give some coins to tzedakah (charity). And after the morning davening, also on Shabbos and Yom Tov, you should say the monthly portion of Tehillim (Psalms) as it is divided over the days of the month."*

While it is not possible to confirm the contents of this story, in this instance the Rebbe's response appeared to focus upon the aforementioned evil spirits. The Rebbe emphasised the importance of trust in God and divine providence and to dismiss ideas of magic and witches. Additionally, he stresses the need to check the ritual artefacts.

A second instance relates to a dilemma involving a decision about moving house to a new neighbourhood. A woman wrote a letter about this issue to the Rebbe and inserted it into a volume of the *Igros Kodesh*. When she opened the book, the page contained a blessing for moving to a new home and discussed *chanukas ha'bayis*—the ceremony for dedicating a new home through affixing a *mezuzah* to the doorway and hosting a festive gathering to invite blessings, peace, and Torah study into the space. But her husband was uncertain about this decision, so he too wrote to the Rebbe about it and placed the letter in the *Igros Kodesh*. He was stunned to find that he opened it on the same page as his wife! (<https://moshiach.ru/english/igrot-kodesh/25488.html>)

In a third instance, a Lubavitcher rabbi was approached by a thirteen-year-old Polish Hasidic student in the Rebbe's synagogue. This student asked for a blessing from the Rebbe to become a *chassan* (cantor). The rabbi asked him to insert a letter randomly in the Rebbe's *Igros Kodesh*. The student then opened the volume at random, but not to the specific place where he had placed his letter. He was astonished when he read the letter on the page he had opened to, where the Rebbe had written that not touching his beard is a *segula* (charm) for a *shidduch* (a system of matchmaking in which Jewish singles



are introduced to one another), The passage was not related to his wish to become a cantor, relating to an entirely different matter. The student then opened the Igros Kodesh to the place where he had put his letter, and he read a letter from the Rebbe to someone who wished to learn more about Chabad Hasidic practice. Everybody present was shocked.

In a fourth instance taken from <https://www.igrot.com/english/>, the Rebbe provided advice on marital problems:

*"Mrs. X. (who wishes to remain anonymous) was going through a very trying time; Her husband was not earning enough to support their family. He was very unhappy with his job and wanted to quit. Though Mrs. X. always wanted a large family and therefore was happy to be expecting another child, she had misgivings due to problems in her marriage."*

*"When she first realized that she was pregnant, she immediately wrote to the Rebbe to inform him of the good news, as well as to ask for his blessings for an easy pregnancy and birth. She put her letter into a volume of the Igros, hoping to see a positive answer. To her dismay, she did not receive any answer. She was rather upset, as under her present circumstances it would have meant a lot to her to have the comfort of a blessing from the Rebbe."*

*"It was during Chol Hamoed Pesach 1997 (the intermediate days of Pesach), when Mrs. X. had a big argument with her husband over a difference in their approach to a certain religious custom. Mr. X. had a more liberal view of things than his wife. In the heat of the argument, he grabbed an Igros which happened to be nearby (not realizing what he had grabbed) and randomly tore a page from it. His wife immediately removed the Igros from his hands when she realized what he was tearing, but a page had already been torn out."*

*"A while later, after they had settled their differences and things calmed down, they decided to see what the Rebbe was saying on this page that was torn out. They were both totally overwhelmed at what they read! On page 373 (in Volume 18) of the Igros Kodesh, the Rebbe addressed the problem of how to deal with certain issues in a marriage, explaining that sometimes it is better to get a third objective person involved, as that can be more acceptable to the spouse. The Rebbe went on to suggest how to work out problems related to his job, so that he can go on working there without all the hardships he was experiencing until now."*

*"In the last paragraph of the letter, the Rebbe answered Mrs. X.'s request of weeks before, by giving her a blessing for an easy pregnancy with the birth of a healthy child, in the right time."*

*"Mr. and Mrs. X. were both so overcome at seeing how the Rebbe is there for them through "thick and thin", that it has made a lasting impression on their entire attitude."*



*"When Mrs. X.'s doctor showed concern about her pregnancy, Mrs. X. - while following the doctor's advice - is totally confident that all is well and will turn out well, as the Rebbe promised in his (unasked) blessing."*

## 6. Conclusion

As Ehrlich (2005, p 264) notes: *"That the method works, at least for believers, is evident from the many stories of fortuitous answers and miraculous occurrences passed by word of mouth in the movement and published in messianist Chabad journals."* However, some Chabad rabbis such as Rabbi Ginsburgh in Israel have strongly cautioned against its use, compiling guidelines to limit its excessive use. Rabbi Ginsburgh asserts that the *Igros Kodesh* is not to be used when answers are available from other sources. For example, medical issues necessitate consulting a doctor and likewise, for religious issues, a rabbi. The only issues for which the process of *Igros Kodesh* may be endorsed are those for which no "normal" solutions exist. However, Rabbi Ginsberg's views remain contentious and not widely accepted among members of Chabad in Israel.

## Notes

- 1) The *Urim and Thummim*- most likely two sacred sticks, tablets or stones- employed by the High Priest of ancient Israel to divine the Divine will on matters which were of critical national importance. They were worn in a pouch woven directly into the High Priest's sacred breastpiece, and rested over his heart whenever he entered into the divine presence. They are mentioned primarily in the Old Testament and could only be consulted by the High Priest on behalf of nobility.
- 2) The Bible was deployed as a form of magic by medieval people. For instance, a pregnant woman could ensure a safe delivery by hearing readings from the Bible. A child unable to sleep could be pacified by laying a Bible on its head.
- 3) See Raz, Rax and Wengrov 1978 "A Tzaddik in Our Time: The Life of Rabbi Aryeh Levin," pp. 111-117).
- 4) The mezuzah (plural *mezuzot*) is a metal case containing a parchment on which a Hebrew prayer is inscribed, which is affixed to the right-hand doorpost of every room. *Tefillin* refers to phylacteries.
- 5) A *Chumash* is the printed, bound version of the Five Books of Moses (the Torah) often containing commentaries, translations, and readings from the Prophets (Haftarah).
- 6) Some of these narratives have been previously published in Dein (2016).

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### Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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