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Photo by: Courtesy of the Bible Lands Museum

## The mystical side

By FELICITY KAY  
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The Bible Lands Museum's latest exhibition examines the origins and development of magical practices in Judaism.

What do hands have to do with warding off evil? What is the significance of red Kabbala strings? Why do people knock on wood or spit? A new exhibition that opened recently at Jerusalem's Bible Lands Museum explores the origins of the practice of magic in Judaism, bringing together for the first time a wide display of amulets, hamsas, jewelry, manuscripts and books of spells from the First Temple period to the present day.

Angels and Demons is the first exhibition of its kind, examining through archaeology, folklore and superstition the beliefs, customs and practical use of magical objects in daily Jewish life. To construct such a varied exhibition, the museum was loaned artifacts by the Golan Archaeological Museum, The Institute of Archaeology of The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, the Israel Antiquities Authority and private collectors, most notably William Gross, a private donor who provided a large number of magical artifacts relating to practical Judaism.

While biblical laws expressly forbid Jews to have any involvement with witchcraft (Exodus 22.17: "You shall not allow a sorceress to live" and Deuteronomy 18:10-11: "There must not be found among you anyone that ... uses divination, a soothsayer or an enchanter or a witch or a charmer or a medium or a wizard, or a necromancer"), there was a distinction between black magic – such as witchcraft, discussed above – and white magic, such as defending oneself from evil powers and the damage they seek to cause. The latter was not forbidden but embraced in Judaism as can be seen in some of the artifacts in the exhibition.

"There is a very grey line between magic and superstition," museum director Amanda Weiss told *Billboard*. "Magic has its practice rooted in Judaism, but these aren't religious practices. Rather, if you believe in something, then that's where its power comes from. This exhibition looks at the practice of magic within Jewish cultural traditions – Kabbala, for example."

The ancient belief that the world was filled with supernatural and magical forces (such as angels and demons) was highly prevalent. These were thought to be responsible for the good and mostly the bad occurrences of everyday life. Many people today still retain some form of superstitious conviction, whether it be in the form of a blessing for the house or not naming a baby before it is born.

Oree Meiri, the assistant curator of the museum, cites the some of the exhibition's more modern examples, such as amulets written against disruptive neighbors, bad luck and rat infestations: "Some things you want to protect your family against, so there is an amulet to help to do that, such as an amulet written by a rabbi from Hungary against rats. Also very common are the amulets for protections against diseases and fire, as well as the evil eye."

So then what is the significance of the evil-eye hamsa, sold at practically every

Israeli market stall? Weiss believes it is a charm that works as a deterrent. “If you think about what is evil in nature and how we protect ourselves, we think about the evil eye being there as a reflection, a natural deterrent. If another evil eye looks at you and sees another of its kind staring back at it – such as on the hamsa– it will recognize one of its own with identical powers and will pull back from harming you.”

Meiri, adds that protective amulets are not as modern as one would think. She says they date back to biblical times. “Even in ancient Egypt, there was the concept of the evil eye. Actually, verses from the Bible are commonly used in other protective amulets. That’s because Israel is the Promised Land – it’s the place the Jews have tried to reach throughout the ages.”

This is a first for the museum, which usually only displays biblical-era artifacts. For those who are into superstitious practices or are simply curious skeptics, this one-off exhibition is nothing short of magical.

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