



HILLEL'S JOSEPH MEYERHOFF
CENTER FOR JEWISH LEARNING

THE NIGHT, THE STARS
&

FATE:

A Look at

MAZEL

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A Conversation of the Night

Take in the night for a moment. For a moment look at the heavens and just peruse the stars with eyes wide open and then with eyes shut. Someone read the following prayer from the daily evening service out loud.

You are acknowledged O Lord our God Sovereign of the Universe with whose word the evenings were designed. with wisdom He opens the gates, and with intuition alters periods of weather, and changes the seasons, and arranges the stars in their heavenly constellations as is His will. He creates day and night, rolling the day before the night and night before the day. He causes day to pass and brings night, and He distinguishes between day and night, the Lord of Heavenly Hosts is His name. O living and enduring God, may your dominion over us be constant and eternal. You O God are acknowledged, the designer of evenings.

Talking points

Ask the question: What are the stars to you? Then note that for the ancients, the stars were considered to be heavenly bodies that had impact on human behavior. Fate was tied to the stars. Before we learn how Judaism grappled with these notions, let everyone share a story of fate. Was there ever a time one has felt that something was *meant to be*. Let those who have a story, share it. What do we mean when we say that? Do we believe it? What is it that we actually believe when we say that? Is what we believe somehow tied into the night?

What is the difference between the two statements:

It's just a coincidence.

It's fate.

THE TORAH & THE NIGHT

Genesis 1:14-18

And God said: let there be lights in the dome of the heavens, to separate the day from the night, that they may be for signs--for set-times, for days and years, and let them be for lights in the dome of the heavens, to provide light upon the earth! It was so. God made the two great lights, the greater light for ruling the day and the smaller light for ruling the night, and the stars. God placed them in the dome of the heavens to provide light upon the earth, to rule the day and the smaller light for ruling the night, and the stars. God placed them in the dome of the heavens to provide light upon the earth, to rule the day and the night, to separate the light from the darkness. God saw that it was good. There was setting, there was dawning: fourth day.

YOUR TORAH NAVIGATOR

1. List what the function of the sun and moon are.
2. Do the stars have a function?
3. What does it mean to “rule the day and night” in this context?

Genesis 15:5

1. After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, saying, Fear not, Abram; I am your shield, and your reward will be great.
2. And Abram said, Lord God, what will you give me, seeing I go childless, and the steward of my house is this (my servant) Eliezer of Damascus?
3. And Abram said, Behold, to me you have given no seed; and, lo, the servant in my house is my heir.
4. And, behold, the word of the Lord came to him, saying, This shall not be your heir; but he who shall come forth from your own bowels shall be your heir.
5. **And he brought him outside**, and said, Look now toward heaven, and count the stars, if you are able to count them; and he said to him, So shall your seed be.

Rashi’s Commentary on Genesis 15:5

And he took him outside. From the context the verse means that He took Abraham out of his tent in order to see the stars. The midrash, however, reads the verse “and he took him outside” as he took him outside of the way he was thinking. God said to him, “Get outside the astrology that determined from the planets you will not bear a son in the future. Abram will not have a son, however, your new name Abraham will have a son. Similarly, Sarai (your wife’s original name) will not have a son, but Sarah will. I will call you different names and the *mazel* will change.

YOUR RASHI NAVIGATOR

Rashi is an acronym for Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki (1040-1105) who was the most popular and authoritative of medieval commentators. He generally gleans his comments from the

early Talmudic sages (3rd to 6th Century) so that his point of view is reflective of certain Talmudic opinions. Here, Rashi says that you can read the verse literally. i.e. "God took Abraham outside his tent" or he offers another interpretation which echoes that of the sages of the midrash, the early interpretation of the Talmudic period. The midrash anticipates Abram's name change to Abraham which will happen two chapters later in Genesis 17:5. One rationale for the name change is that God in effect changes Abram's destiny (his mazel) by giving him a new name.

Does the opinion of the midrash that Rashi quotes hold that our destiny is in the hands of the planets?

What do you think this means?

How would you define fate, or destiny?

Babylonian Talmud *Moed Katan* 28a

Rava said: Length of days, children, and income are not contingent upon merit, but they are contingent on mazel. For look at Raba and Rav Hisda both of whom were righteous men. When either of them prayed, the rains came.

Rav Hisda lived to be ninety-two. Raba lived to be forty...

YOUR TALMUD NAVIGATOR

1. What is proved by the fact that Rav Hisda lived much longer than Raba?
2. In this context, how would you define mazel?

YOUR TOSAPHIST NAVIGATOR

The next comment will be made by the Tosaphists. The Tosaphist were commentators on the Talmud who lived after Rashi. (12th to 14th Century) After the Talmud was printed, Rashi always appears on the inside margin of the Talmudic page, and the Tosaphists, some of whom are Rashi's grandchildren, are on the outside margins. The Tosaphists often contend with Talmudic statements that appear to be contradictory. They will always try to reconcile the contradiction as they do here.

Tosaphists Comment on *Moed Katan* 28a

The Tosaphists queried: It is written in the Talmudic tractate Shabbat that "Israel is not governed by the planets." Yet, the passage here states life, children and food do not depend on merit, but depend on mazel?

This contradiction can be reconciled by saying that sometimes the planets make the change you wish and sometimes they don't as Rabbi Elazar ben Padat who was very poor, said in the tractate of Ta'anit: Do you want me to turn the world upside down with my prayers and my petitions, maybe a season of plenty awaits me and this will not be necessary?"

Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 156a

Rav Yehuda said in the name of Rav: What verse teaches that Israel is not governed by the planets? As it is written: "And He (God) went with him (Abraham) outside." (Genesis 15:5)

Abraham said before the Holy One: O Sovereign of the Universe, my servant will be my heir?

The Holy One said: No. "It will be one who comes forth from your loins." (Ibid:4)

Abraham answered: I looked at my astrology chart and I saw that I am not able to sire a child.

The Holy One answered: **Leave the astrology, for Israel is not governed by the planets.**

YOUR TOSAPHIST NAVIGATOR

The Tosaphists offer a different solution for reconciling the two Talmudic passages this time. After you have read what they have to say on the Talmudic passage on Shabbat 156a, go back and see how that works with their comment on Moed Katan 28a.

The Tosaphists on Shabbat156a

Israel is not subject to mazel: Didn't Rava say in tractate *Moed Katan* 28a that "Length of days, children, and income are not contingent upon merit, but they are contingent on mazel?" Nevertheless if someone has great merit, the mazel **can change**, as it says in the Talmudic tractate of *Yevamot* 3a "If one is worthy of merit days will be added and if one does not have merit days will be removed, for Israel is not subject to mazel."

YOUR TOSAPHIST NAVIGATOR

1. What is the one way mazel can change?
2. According to this understanding, what does *Israel is not subject to mazel* mean?
3. If we say that merit is synonymous with effort, what does it mean that "effort" can change "mazel"?
4. Do you believe that prayer and good works can change reality?
5. Do you believe that you have a hand in your destiny? Do you create the patterns for your luck?
6. Are leaders led, or do they set the patterns?
7. How do you see your role as a student leader? Are you in control?

**AND NOW...
FOR EXTRA CREDIT
(AND THOSE WHO HAVE TIME ON THEIR HANDS)
THE COMPLETE AND UNEXPURGATED TALMUDIC
DISCUSSION
ON MAZEL**

Babylonian Talmud, *Shabbat* 156a/b

It was recorded in Rabbi Joshua ben Levi's notebook: He who [is born] on the first day of the week [Sunday] shall be a man without one [thing] in him What does □without one [thing] in him mean? Shall we say, without one virtue? Surely Rav Ashi said: I was born on the first day of the week! Hence it must surely mean, one vice. But Surely Rav Ashi said: I and Dimi b. Kakuzta were born on the first day of the week: I am a king and he is the captain of thieves! Rather it means either completely virtuous or completely wicked. [What is the reason? Because light and darkness were created on that day.] He who is born on the second day of the week will be bad-tempered What is the reason? Because the waters were divided then. He who is born on the third day of the week will be wealthy and unchaste. What is the reason? Because herbs were created then. He who is born on the fourth day of the week will be wise and of a retentive memory. What is the reason? Because the luminaries (sun, moon and stars) were suspended [then] He who is born on the fifth day of the week will practice benevolence. What is the reason? Because the fishes and birds were created then. He who is born on the eve of the Sabbath will be a seeker. Rav Nahman bar Isaac commented: A seeker after good deeds. He who is born on the Sabbath will die on the Sabbath, because the great day of the Sabbath was desecrated on his account. Raba son of Rav Shila observed: And he shall be called a great and holy man.

Rav Hanina said to them, [his disciples]: Go out and tell the son of Levi, Not the constellation of the day but the constellation of the hour is the determining influence. He who is born under the constellation of the sun will be a distinguished person: he will eat and drink of his own and his secrets will lie uncovered; if he is a thief, he will have no success. He who is born under Venus will be wealthy and unchaste [immoral]. What is the reason? Because fire was created therein. He who is born under Mercury will be of a retentive memory and wise. What is the reason? Because it [Mercury] is the sun's scribe. He who is born under the Moon will be a man to suffer evil, building and demolishing, demolishing and building. He will eat and drink that which is not his and his secrets will remain hidden: if he is a thief, he will be successful. He who is born under Saturn will be a man whose plans will be frustrated. Others say: All [evil] designs against him will be frustrated. He who is born under Zedek [Jupiter] will be a right-doing man [zadkan] Rav Nahman bar Isaac observed: Right-doing in good deeds. He who is born under Mars will be a shedder of blood. Rav Ashi observed: Either a surgeon, a thief, a slaughterer, or a circumciser. Rabbah said: I was born under Mars. Abaye retorted: You too inflict punishment and kill.

It was stated. Rav Hanina said: Mazel gives wisdom, the mazel gives wealth, and Israel is subject mazel. R. Johanan maintained: Israel is not subject to mazel. Now, Rabbi Johanan is consistent with his view, for Rabbi Johanan said: How do we know that Israel is not subject to mazel? Because it is said, Thus saith the Lord, Learn not the way of the nations, and be not dismayed at the signs of heaven, for the nations are dismayed at them: they are dismayed but not Israel. Rab too holds that Israel is not subject to mazel. For Rab Judah said in Rab's name: How do we know that Israel is not subject to mazel? Because it is said, and he brought him forth from abroad. Abraham pleaded before the Holy One, blessed be He, Sovereign of the Universe! My heir will be one who lives with me. Not so He replied, but your heir shall come forth out of your own loins. Sovereign of the Universe! cried he, I have looked at my constellation and find that I am not fated to give birth to a child. Get outside of your astrology, for Israel is free from the influence of mazel...

From Samuel too [we learn that] Israel is not subject to mazel. For Samuel and Ablat were sitting, while certain people were going to a lake. Said Ablat to Samuel: That man is going but will not return, [for] a snake will bite him and he will die If he is an Israelite, replied Samuel. he will go and return. While they were sitting he went and returned. Then Ablat arose and threw off his [the man's] knapsack, [and] found a snake inside cut up and lying in two pieces Said Samuel to him, What did you do? Every day we pooled our bread and ate it; but today one of us had no bread, and he was ashamed. Said I to them, "I will go and collect [the bread]". When I came to him, I pretended to take [bread] from him, so that he should not be ashamed. You have done a good deed, said he to him. Then Samuel went out and lectured: But charity delivereth from death; and [this does not mean] from an unnatural death, but from death itself.

From Rabbi Akiba too [we learn that] Israel is free from mazel. For Rabbi Akiba had a daughter. Now, astrologers told him, On the day she enters the bridal chamber a snake will bite her and she will die. He was very worried about this. On that day [of her marriage] she took a brooch [and] stuck it into the wall and by chance it penetrated [sank] into the eye of a serpent. The following morning, when she took it out, the snake came trailing after it. What did you do? her father asked her. A poor man came to our door in the evening. she replied, and everybody was busy at the banquet, and there was none to attend to him. So I took the portion which was given to me and gave it to him. You have done a good deed, said he to her. Thereupon R. Akiba went out and lectured: But charity delivers from death (Proverbs 10:2) and not [merely] from an unnatural death, but from death itself.

From R. Nahman b. Isaac too [we learn that] Israel is free from mazel. For R. Nahman b. Isaac's mother was told by astrologers, Your son will be a thief. [So] she did not let him [be] bareheaded, saying to him, □Cover your head so that the fear of heaven may be upon you, and pray [for mercy] ~ Now, he did not know why she spoke that to him. One day he was sitting and studying under a palm tree; temptation overcame him, he climbed up and bit off a cluster [of dates] with his teeth.