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Letters

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do the
Impossible

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OMENS &
Superstitions

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3 Letters

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Omens: Clarification of a misunderstood Jewish law; Medrash on changing Joshua's name with Sarah's Yud; A student's question on the chilazon.

6 The Impossible

MAIMONIDES

Maimonides explains how God cannot do the impossible.

9 Astrology

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

A thorough analysis of the belief in astrology.

15 Ov & Yedoni

RABBI DR. DARRELL GINSBERG

Rabbi Ginsberg explores these two idolatrous trends and explains how their corruptions are alive and well today in Jewish communities.

18 Vicarious Atonement?

RABBI REUVEN MANN

Rabbi Mann explains this oxymoron.

19 Astrology: False

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Rejections from science and Torah.

20 Flawless

GEORGE H. GISSER

An anecdote on responding to our successes.

21 Astrology

MAIMONIDES

His famous letter unveiling astrology as contrary to reason and Judaism's fundamental.

LETTERS

Omens II

Reader: I have had a bit of a disagreement with a local rabbi about various 'customs' surrounding the Havdalla wine at the Sabbath conclusion, which seem to me to be omens or amulets and therefore, according to you, forbidden. For instance, wine overflowing and dipping fingers in the wine afterwards and putting it on ones eyes and in ones pockets to ensure success

for the upcoming week. I would like your comments please.

Rabbi: Yes, these are Nichush (omen) violations. See Mishne Torah, Avoda Zarah chapter 11. Any act that has no demonstrated effects, yet people claim it causes certain results...is Nichush and a form of idolatry.

(continued on next page)

The above is a direct reprint of the last Jewishtimes Letters. Subsequently, a few readers wrote in quoting the Shulchan Aruch (Orech Chaim 296) claiming this source condones placing wine on one's eyes as a means of **"attaining success."** Unfortunately, the readers did not read carefully. The Shulchan Aruch says one may spill some of the wine as his "sign of blessing," and the placing of wine on the eyes is said to be an expression of "love of mitzvah" – not as the readers suggested, that it causes success. Nowhere in this or any part of Shulchan Aruch will you find superstition. Now that we've clarified the readers errors, let's understand the Shulchan Aruch.

The Shulchan Aruch says one may spill some of the wine as a sign of blessing, **"for any house that does not spill wine as water, there is not in it [in the havdalla act, or in the house] a sign of blessing."** This means that if one is not generous with his money for the sake of mitzvahs, he will not have a sign of blessing creating in his home. The emphasis is on "sign" of blessing. It does not say, "he will not have a blessing." As this would be nichush, if one spilled wine thinking it would change his fortune. So his spilling of wine means he is generous with mitzvahs. Doing so, just like purchasing a fish head for Rosh Hashana, we create a physical sign of value. As we wish to be the head, not the tail, and seeing a fish head drives this point home. It concretizes it for us. That's all. No superstitions here. Spilling wine, we see a generous overflow in the act of a mitzvah, which thereby bolsters our emotional attachment to mitzvah, and that's a good thing. But it's not causative, for that would be superstitious, nichush. The Shulchan Aruch is merely telling us that creating physical attachments to mitzvah via concrete expressions is a good thing.

We are sensual beings; we have emotions. Calev traveled to Hebron to view the caves of the patriarchs. Although intellectually he accepted the reality of God's oath to the Patriarchs, seeing them with his own eyes would help him bolster his emotions so he might not succumb to the Spies' counsel. Isaac

desired to eat a delicious meal before blessing his son; he wished to be in a positive state of mind. We are to use sensual aids, just like the spices we smell at havdalla for the sake of placing our hearts in a positive state to fulfill God's commands. Let us be careful when we learn and share ideas. Careful reading and abstaining from emotional projections is mandatory. Let's be guided by reason and question anything we come across, for this too will help prevent misreading our Torah. Perhaps it is the writer's error, perhaps it is our own. ■

Renaming Joshua with Sarah's Yud?

Jessie: I just read a midrash about Moshe renaming Hoshea "Yehoshua." (Jerusalem Talmud, Sanhedrin 2:6 cited by the Torah Temima):

"The letter yud was taken from our Matriarch Sarai. It went and prostrated before God and said, 'Master of the world, because I am the smallest letter, You uprooted me from this tzadekes Sarai?' God answered him: 'In the past you were placed on a female name at the end of the name; by My life that I will place you in a male name at the beginning of the name. And that is that it is written, 'And Moshe called Hosea bin Nun 'Yehoshua'.' (Moshe added Sarai's yud to the beginning of Hosea, renaming him Yehoshua)

My questions:

1. What do we learn from the association of the yud from Hosea, being originally from the name of Sarai?
2. What is the comfort of being used at the head of a male vs. the end of a female name? What do we learn from the anthropomorphism of the yud?
3. Why did Hashem make an oath to move the yud to a better location after it complained? What do we learn from this?

Rabbi: Hebrew letters (the yud) cannot talk! What then can this mean? We must say the "cause" for which the yud pleaded with God, is a worthy cause; for we see God complied with the yud. Now we must

discover the valid claim the yud presented before God.

I asked my friend Rabbi Pearl about this medrash. He said "Sarai" (before God named her Sarah) meant "my Master," as in "God is my Master." Sarah, now means God is not only my master, but Master in general not only my personal Master. This makes sense, as Sarah was renamed in proximity to Avraham being renamed from Avram. And we are told why, he was to be a father to nations. Sarah too was now to share this role. Thus, the renaming from Sarai to Sarah. Midrash Rabba states this openly (Gen. 47:1): "Rav Manna said, 'In the past Sarai was to herself, now Sarah will be to all those who enter the world'."

Base on what Rabbi Perl said, I surmised that Sarai's relationship to God was one of tznius, explaining the independent or secluded reference, Sarai, "my Master." This private relationship is what is meant by the letter yud. And it is this precise trait that Moshe saw Hosea required, if he was to isolate himself from the counsel of the Spies and maintain loyalty to God. Moshe prayed that "Yehoshua" would find the strength to stand independent from the Spies, so as to defend himself from succumbing to their evil plan. The Yud represents one's private relationship with God. And this private trait, is more feminine, than the more brazen male personality. Thus, the yud is Sarai is at the end of her name, a modest position, whereas the yud in Yehoshua is at the beginning, a prominent position.

We are taught that this trait in fact not reserved for women, but it is a boon to both genders. I recall the Chazal that says tazddikim are akin to women. A wise Rabbi once said it means they are less driven to build empires and accomplish "grand" things. This trait, to be subdued and be a tznuah, a modest person, is a highly-praised trait.

Why did Hashem make an oath to move the yud to a "better" location after it complained? It was not a "better" location. Perhaps the beginning means more prominent, as in, more needed by Yehoshua. ■

(continued on next page)

the CHILAZON

Teacher: A student is asking about Rashi's comment that the techeiles (blue dye) is from the blood of the chilazon, which arises from the sea to the mountain every 70 years. She pointed out that the Jews are in the desert at this time, so where did they get the dye? Her teacher explained that perhaps, like Yaakov prepared the atzei shitim by planting them, maybe they carried dye with them. Any other ideas or sources?

Rabbi: Let's distinguish between matters that are; 1) possible, 2) probable, 3) improbable, 4) impossible and 5) what must be true.

It appears the student's question is generated from genuine curiosity. Other times, such questions are based on the assumption that certain matters are improbable, or impossible. I will address both.

People often wrongly assume, "That which is difficult, must be improbable, or even impossible." People cannot fathom how God ensures that innocent and righteous people escape a natural disaster, as King David teaches (1), while many others perish. People feel, "I wouldn't be able to work out all the details that certain traffic lights got delayed, certain trains too, that certain people missed their planes, etc." This projection of our weaknesses onto God causes the error. In fact, with ease, God is aware of the 7 billion people alive today; all their thoughts and plans, and at all moments. Difficulty, is not something God faces. He can step in at any moment to alter events. This, then, is the 5th category: things that "must" be. Meaning, as God is in full control of all He created, and He created all, nothing prevents Him from expressing His will.

Therefore we must appreciate that as sure as God knew the Jews would be in a certain location when they would require the chilazon to dye the Temple's fabrics, God planned that this chilazon was around, and that this animal was designed in a manner that it reproduces abundantly, as the Jews required (Talmud Sanhedrin 91a):

"Go up to the mountains, where you will see only one chilazon, but by tomorrow the rain has descended and it is covered with chilazons."

Here, the Talmud states that this species called the chilazon can reproduce quickly when there is ample moisture. There's no impossibility here, for the presence of the chilazon in the desert nearby the Jews is merely a matter of timing natural events. Although improbable by natural law, the presences of many chilazons in proximity to the Jews is possible, and clearly occurred in the dessert.

This is unlike impossible matters, such as God creating a square that is also a circle at the same moment. If it's a square, it cannot be a circle. Maimonides discusses certain matters are impossible(2):

"That which is impossible has a permanent and constant property, which is not the result of some agent, and cannot in any way change, and consequently we do not ascribe to God the power of doing what is impossible"... "It is impossible that one object have at the same moment, two opposite properties" [like our square circle

case] ... "Likewise it is impossible that God should produce a being like Himself, or annihilate, corporify, or change Himself".

The difficulty most people have with this, is they view God like "Superman," where if something is impossible for Him, this is a weakness in God. But in truth, being limited in this fashion, is certainly not a weakness. For if we find a judge who literally cannot make an error and always frees the innocents and jails the wicked, this is clearly a perfection, not a flaw. Similarly, God cannot perform that which is impossible, and this too is a perfection, for the impossible, by definition, literally "cannot" exist. That's what "impossible" means. And our God is involved only in what is real and exists. What we call "truth."

Once we distinguish between these 5 possibilities, and know when and where to apply each one, we will find it easier to accept God's complete control over all variables, and at all times. We will also grow in our intelligence, as we will distinguish between what God can, and cannot do. We thereby abandon the false infantile view of a "Superman" God, and arrive at a conviction in what is truly impossible, and that God's inability to perform the impossible, is a truth, and is not an imperfection in God. ■

(1) Psalms 34:20

(2) "Guide for the Perplexed" book III, chap xv

LETTERS:

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MAIMONIDES

God Cannot do the IMPOSSIBLE

(Guide, book III, chap xv)

That which is impossible has a permanent and constant property, which is not the result of some agent, and cannot in any way change, and consequently we do not ascribe to God the power of doing what is impossible. No thinking man denies the truth of this maxim; none ignore it, but such as have no idea of Logic. There is, however, a difference of opinion among philosophers with reference to the existence of any particular thing. Some of them consider its existence to be impossible, and hold that God cannot produce the thing in question, whilst others think that it is possible, and that God can create it if He pleases to do so. E.g., all philosophers consider that it is impossible for one substratum to have at the same moment two opposite properties, or for the elementary components of a thing, substance and accident, to interchange, so that the substance becomes accident, and the accident becomes substance, or for a material substance to be without accident. Likewise it is impossible that God should produce a being like Himself, or annihilate, corporify, or change Himself. The power of God is not assumed to extend to any of these impossibilities. But the existence of accidents independent of substance is possible according to one class of philosophers, the Mutazilah, whilst according to others it is impossible; it must, however, be added that those who admit the existence of an accident independent of substance, have not arrived at this conclusion by philosophical research alone: but it was mainly by the desire to defend certain religious principles, which speculation had greatly shaken, that they had recourse to this theory. In a similar

manner the creation of corporeal things, otherwise than from a substance, is possible according to our view, whilst the philosophers say that it is impossible. Again, whilst philosophers say that it is impossible to produce a square with a diagonal equal to one of the sides, or a solid angle that includes four right angles, or similar things, it is thought possible by some persons who are ignorant of mathematics, and who only know the words of these propositions, but have no idea of that which is expressed by them.

I wonder whether this gate of research is open, so that all may freely enter, and whilst one imagines a thing and considers it possible, another is at liberty to assert that such a thing is impossible by its very nature: or whether the gate is closed and guarded by certain rules, so that we are able to decide with certainty whether a thing is physically impossible. I should also like to know, in the latter case, whether imagination or reason has to examine and test objects as to their being possible or not; likewise how things imagined, and things conceived intellectually, are to be distinguished from each other. For it occurs that we consider a thing as physically possible, and then some one objects, or we ourselves fear that our opinion is only the result of imagination, and not that of reason. In such a case it would be desirable to ascertain whether there exists some faculty to distinguish between imagination and intellect, [and if so,] whether this faculty is different from both, or whether it is part of the intellect itself to distinguish between intellectual and imaginary objects. All this requires investigation, but it does not belong to the theme of this chapter. ■

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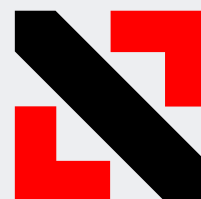
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JUDAISM & Astrology

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Some time ago my brother Nissim wrote me regarding the Torah's view of astrology. We discussed the matter, and after reviewing many sources, I wish to share our findings, and my thoughts.

"I know that you may search and find sayings of some individual sages in the Talmud and Midrashim whose words appear to maintain that at the moment of a man's birth, the stars will cause such and such to happen to him. Do not regard this as a difficulty, for it is not fitting for a man to abandon the prevailing law and raise once again the counterarguments and replies (that preceded its enactment). Similarly it is not proper to abandon matters of reason that have already been verified by proofs, shake loose of them, and depend on the words of a single one of the sages from whom possibly the matter was hidden."

—Maimonides, "Letter to the Community of Marseille"

Maimonides teaches that reason must be the ultimate guide of our thoughts and actions. Once we know something to be

true based on reason and proof, any opposition, even from the Sages, must be of no consequence. Maimonides was guided by his understanding of the universe; there are fixed laws of nature and Divine providence. Our acceptance of theories have but a single arbiter: "proof". Once we see a proof for something, all other views are of no regard, for "proof" means that man has uncovered conclusive reasoning for how the universe operates. And any view opposing that which has been demonstrated, must be false.

Certainly, the method displayed by many individuals defending a view simply because a Sage or Rabbi stated it, is self-contradictory, as seen in this example: Ruben accepts Rabbi A on a certain, philosophical issue. Then, Ruben reads that Rabbi B opposes Rabbi A. What shall Ruben do? He already claimed support for Rabbi A, based on his reputation. Now when he learns that Rabbi B opposed it, how does Ruben decide which is truth? For two opposing views cannot both be correct: either one is wrong, or both are wrong. But both cannot be correct if they oppose each

other. Relying on reputation alone, Ruben is at a stalemate.

Many times, it is confidence alone that people lack – not proofs – and therefore they cannot say, "I think Rabbi B is more sensible. Sometimes this stems from false humility, and sometimes, from the lack of independent thought and their inability to cleave to truth, over reputations. Maimonides teaches that this path cannot be followed, for the clear reason proved in Ruben's stalemate. Man must use reason to determine truth: this is precisely why God granted "each" of us intelligence. We are not to simply follow the leader.

When approaching the area of astrology, we are faced with this dilemma: great reputations oppose each other. Do we follow Maimonides, or Ramban and the Ramchal? Actually, this is not how a thinker frames his question. For a true thinker seeking truth, cares nothing about reputations: he is concerned only for what is reasonable. The thinker is not deciding between Ramban and Maimonides. He divorces the theories from the personalities, judging theories on their own merit. We are certain that our Baalei HaMesora – Masters of the Oral law – always followed Maimonides' principle of following truth over any other consideration:

"It is not proper for a man to accept as trustworthy anything other than one of these three things: 1) clear proof deriving from man's reasoning; 2) what is perceived through one of the five senses; 3) what is received from the prophets or from the righteous. Every reasonable man ought to distinguish in his mind and thought all the things that he accepts as trustworthy, and say: 'This I accept as trustworthy because of tradition, and this because of sense-perception, and this on grounds of reason.' Anyone who accepts as trustworthy anything that is not of these three species, of him it is said: 'The simple believes everything' (Prov. 14:15). —Maimonides, 'Letter to the Community of Marseille'"

Maimonides teaches that our acceptance of truths must be limited to one of these three methods; reason, sense perception, or Torah tradition. Based on the third, let us review some Torah verses addressing astrology. We will then answer other quotes, which on the surface, seem to contradict our findings.

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Man has feared the heavens for centuries. Volumes have been written on astrology. Neither validates astrology as fact.

TORAH REFUTATIONS

In Miketz (Gen.41:8) Pharaoh has two dreams: in one dream, seven lean cows swallow seven healthy cows. In the second, seven lean ears of corn swallow seven healthy ears. In both dreams, no display of ingestion could be discerned. Pharaoh was deeply bothered by his dreams, but “he could find no interpreter.” (ibid)

Typically, Pharaoh would accept his astrologers’ theories. However, in this case, as Pharaoh was distraught; his regular acceptance of astrological theories did not suffice to settle his mind. Here, when he was personally involved, he dismissed the baseless quality of his astrologers’ explanations. This teaches that there were no incontrovertible proofs in the words of his astrologers.

On verse 41:8, Rashi states that his Egyptian astrologers suggested the dreams to mean that Pharaoh will bear seven daughters, and that he will bury seven daughters. However, this never occurred. We learn that these astrologers were lying, and had no knowledge based on their astrology. Why did they speak up when they knew they were lying about foreknowledge? The answer is because they desired to retain their posts as

Pharaoh’s ministers: honor and fame is a great lure. Surely, his astrologers were consulted in the past, and as back then, they would suggest meanings, otherwise, they had no use to Pharaoh. Why would Pharaoh retain them? Because they could not be proven wrong; they might claim, “You will yet have those daughters and you will yet bury them.” The astrologers were wise enough not to paint themselves into a corner. Pharaoh may have retained their posts for the additional reason that he needed to consult with mystics, and perhaps, sometimes, these astrologers guessed correctly. They clearly received their position based on some performance...be their prior successes based on mere intuition, or coincidence. But foreknowledge is clearly dismissed, as seen in this example of the seven daughters theory.

Why did Pharaoh accept Joseph’s dream interpretations? It appears from Joseph’s method of explanation, that at a certain point even before completing his interpretation, Joseph was convinced he conveyed to Pharaoh a convincing explanation. At that point midstream in his interpretation, Joseph exclaims, “This is the thing that I told Pharaoh: what God

plans to do, He has shown to Pharaoh.” (Exod. 41:28) Joseph could have said this, only if he was certain that he already proved the true meaning, and that this was Divine. Thus, he tells Pharaoh, in other words, “Are you now convinced? This proves your dreams are divine!”

With the words, “The dreams of Pharaoh are one” – which Joseph repeats – Joseph was convinced in his interpretation, and that he also proved to Pharaoh his interpretation was correct. Telling Pharaoh twice, “The dreams of Pharaoh are one”, Joseph deviated from the arbitrary methods of the astrologers: Joseph emphasized the dream’s “design,” – duplication – not merely offering an alternative explanation of the “content”. With his explanation of the repeating “design” feature, Joseph distinguished his interpretation from that of the astrologers. Thereby, Pharaoh was convinced that Joseph was correct. Ibn Ezra (41:32) states that the dreams’ duplication – in a single night – meant that God’s plan was imminent as well. So the dreams’ duplication in general proved that the dreams were divine; and the fact that the two dreams occurred in a single night proved that God’s plan was imminent.

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In exodus 2:3, Moses' mother could "no longer hide him". After a premature birth to Moses, just six months pregnant, Moses' mother Yocheved was only able to hide him from the Egyptian, genocidal decree for three months. Why? Because according to Rashi, the Egyptians calculated when nine months would arrive after Yocheved and her husband reunited, expecting them to bear a child only after that time. This proves that the Egyptians' astrology was false: they continued killing infants fearing the birth of the Jews' savior...even after Moses was born! But since Moses – the savior – was already born, why did they continue their murders? They must have felt the messiah was "yet" to be born. But they were mistaken, for Moses was already alive for three full months. Again, they failed at discerning a matter through astrology.

In Exodus 1:16 Rashi explained why Pharaoh decreed the death of the males, "for the astrologers saw that a savior was to be born to the Jews". But this is common sense: any oppressed people possess the probability of an uprising. Here, claims of astrological knowledge are unnecessary: psychology explains this quite easily. In Exodus 1:22 Rashi states, "On the day Moses was born, Pharaoh's astrologers told him, 'today the savior has been born, but we know no whether he is Egyptian or Jew'." The words "On the day Moses was born..." are misleading, for one

might think that Rashi was convinced that the astrologers knew the exact day that Moses was born. However, as a Rabbi once taught, this was not necessarily the first time the astrologers told Pharaoh a savior was born...they may have said this on numerous occasions, exposing their ignorance. Their claim again here, was merely chance.

Saadia Gaon remarks that Egypt's magic was sleight of hand, and nothing more. ("The Book of Beliefs & Opinions", pg. 153) This also explains why the Egyptian astrologers could duplicate Moses' first two signs of blood and frogs: these objects can be manipulated with adequate, tactile dexterity. Saadia Gaon states the astrologers deceived others, using dyes to merely mimic blood, and tossing chemicals into the Nile causing the frogs to flee to the unpolluted, dry ground. Through their deception, the astrologers simulated Moses' two plagues. However, the astrologers could not manipulate the third plague of lice. Lice are too small for the hand to adequately manipulate. Thus, the Egyptians attested, "this is the finger of God." They admitted their lack of control, but did so in a way – again – where they were not to blame, for "God is superior".

Supposed astrological powers or knowledge are repeatedly refuted. No proof for astrological theories presents itself in any of these cases. And astrological claims have yet to be validated today.

REFUTATIONS IN PROPHETS

But the most glaring refutation of astrology, is God's very words:

"So says God, 'To the ways of the nations do not learn, and from the signs of heaven, do not fear, for the nations fear them. For the statutes of the nations are futile, for a tree from the forest they cut, the work of an artisan with an adze. With silver and gold they adorn it; with nails and pegs they strengthen it so it does not disconnect. They are like a sculpted palm tree and they cannot speak, they are carried about for they cannot walk: do not fear them, for they cannot harm and they also cannot do good.'" (Jeremiah 10:1-5)

God clearly teaches man that the nations live in foolishness, that stars or heavenly signs (occurrences) are nothing to fear, and idols are manmade. Man has no reason to attribute powers to his sculpted creations. They cannot speak or walk as man, yet man attributes more powers to these idols, than to himself. Herein is man's distortion: man is greater and can walk and talk; yet he assumes these inanimate blocks of wood – that required man to make them – possess greater powers than he. God exposes the corruption of thought harbored by these nations, and groups therein, the practice of fearing heavenly phenomena. It is no coincidence that God groups heavenly signs together with idolatry in His

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ridicule. God says both; heavenly phenomena and idolatry are equally futile. Would it then be sensible to claim that the stars and astrology are not for Jews to follow, but for gentiles it is permissible, or that it even works? But God plainly states, “For the statutes of the nations are futile”. This applies to the object or practice, and it matters none if the followers are gentile or Jews. God states openly “for they cannot harm and they also cannot do good.” These are God’s own words. This satisfies the third of Maimonides’ three categories for determining truth “Torah traditions”: traditions must be true.

Maimonides’ second category of truths is sense perception, that is, all that we perceive is accurate and truth. And we have no perception or proof of the stars affecting our free will or granting us unique character traits. Just the opposite is the case: our free will is “free” and uncontrolled by anything, but our will alone.

Maimonides first rule is that when something is proven, we care nothing about what we might find, even in the words of the Sages, as he says, “Similarly it is not proper to abandon matters of reason that have already been verified by proofs, shake loose of them, and depend on the words of a single one of the sages from whom possibly the matter was hidden.”

Maimonides teaches that the very fact God gave us commands must be predicated on our ability to comply. We are free to follow God or oppose Him, and therefore, stars and zodiacs contribute nothing to our own choices, for which we are justly rewarded or punished. “For all His ways are judgment.” (Deut. 32:4). “Whose eyes are open upon all the ways of the sons of men, to give every one according to his ways, and according to the fruit of his doings.” (Jer. 32:19)

TALMUD: ASTROLOGY OR PSYCHOLOGY?

The Talmud (Sabbath 156a) suggests that depending on the day or hour of one’s birth, he will possess a certain personality. Sounds like astrology. But can we answer this in light of what we have stated to this point? But before we answer that, why is the entire discussion in the Talmud concerning one’s “birth?” Why is this moment given such status, when in fact, King Solomon said “Better is the day of



Do not be fooled by numerous cultures across the globe who, for generations, adopted the same beliefs. Their books with ancient art mislead us, we think “ancient” equals truth. The clear rejection: Egyptian books on idolatry.

one’s death than the day of his birth?” (Eccl. 7:1) Why does the Talmud elevate birth, when King Solomon elevated death? Ibn Ezra answers this question: “at birth, we know not yet what will be come of this child; he might turn out good or evil. But at death, he has already earned his good name.” Thus, even Ibn Ezra of whom it is said endorsed “astrology”, did not ascribe to fates, and here commits to his view that at birth, nothing is known. Death is better; for it is only then that we can determine through historical proof, whether an individual is good or evil.

So how then does the Talmud state that if one is born on Sunday, he will be either totally good, or totally evil? Rashi states that since Sunday is the “lead” day of the week, one who is born on Sunday will also be a leader, in either the good life, or the evil life. This explanation removes any need for astrological theories, and uses proven, psychological principles to explain why such a person will lead: he identifies with that “lead” day of the week, which itself would be insignificant, had it not harkened back to God’s six days of creation. So man is not directed by some unknown, astrological “power”, but functions many times based on his emotions: specifically, his emotion of identification.

Since man’s ego tends to endorse “his” existence with great value, he invests his very first day on Earth with unparalleled significance: “my birthday has meaning” he feels. Thus, he looks at what “other” significant events occurred on that day, to bolster his self worth. He realizes God’s

creation is great, and parallels himself to God’s creation by viewing the day of his birth on par with that day of the week in Creation. He then latches on to that day’s significance (the “lead” day in our case) and then creates a self-fulfilling prophecy. The Talmud continues with additional examples: “He who is born on the second day of the week will be bad-tempered. What is the reason? Because the waters were divided thereon. (Division or disunity is caused by bad temper, Rashi) so will he be estranged from other people through his temper). He who is born on the third day of the week will be wealthy and unchaste. What is the reason? Because herbs were created thereon. (Herbs multiply very rapidly and also continually intermingle with other herbs.) 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 were suspended [thereon].”

In all these cases, man identifies with the day of his birth, and this identification is what propels him to mimic the nature of that day. The heavenly phenomena play absolutely no role in determining his fate. We also learn, “All is in the hand of heaven, except for the fear of heaven”. Man is solely responsible for his actions. This Talmudic portion can be explained reasonably, and with no need to resort to astrological views. It educates man on his insecurities, and his means to inflate his worth. In truth, King Solomon is correct: one’s birthday is insignificant. But it is also true that man is partial to himself, and ignores truths when they counter his ego.

This Talmudic portion concludes with five additional cases where individuals were not subject to planetary influence, but received their good lot based on merit. It is worth noting that two of those cases deal with serpents, which might allude to those cases being metaphorical, discussing man’s instincts (serpent), not real events. But even taken literally, we find two opposing Talmudic views debating if astrology offers any true knowledge. On this, Maimonides wrote as we quoted, that we do not abandon what is proven, even if opposed by a sage.

ASTROLOGY EQUATED TO IDOLATRY: HUMAN INSECURITY

We see from God’s words in Jeremiah 10 that He warns us against attributing any

(continued on next page)

significance to heavenly signs, or idolatry, and He groups the two crimes together, since they are related. In fact, Maimonides teaches that it is precisely man's flawed attribution of greatness to the stars, from which idolatry was born. Idolatry is actually referred to as "Avodas Kochavim", "star worship". Maimonides elaborates on this in his first laws of his Mishne Torah, Laws of Star Worship (idolatry).

To those who cleave to a belief in astrology, you must realize that you cannot claim a belief in something, if you cannot explain it. A Rabbi once defined idolatry as "claiming a causal relationship for things unrelated." He meant to say that idolatry has no basis in reason or what we perceive, so that we should accept it. Astrology is no different: if you cannot explain it, it must not be accepted, as our lives are to be guided by reason. Even if one were to say astrology is a force of nature, but he does not know what it is, it is worthless to say "I agree with it". That is an outright lie. To suggest astrology refers to "heavenly powers which guide human affairs" is a nonsensical statement, if one cannot prove those powers exist, or how they might govern.

Regardless of which Rabbi held astrology to be truth or falsehood, I ask: "Why, without an argument reasonable to your mind, do you accept a premise...just because others do?" Astrology is not an area of Jewish "law", so there is no ruling or "psak". Therefore, feel not obligated to agree with one view over another. And be honest: if there are two opposing views, one must be wrong. And if you cannot reasonably prove your view, your view may be the incorrect one. Certainly, if the opposing view is explained rationally, as Maimonides has done, and as we read in the Torah and know from experience, that man has freewill, why should you not abandon your view in place of what makes sense?

You must also know that if any of the Rabbis were shown that his view was false, he would abandon it. We witness this devotion to truth throughout the Talmud. Honesty and truth are at the helm of every Torah scholar. Not a single one remained in his view once disproved, realizing it violated reason, science, or Torah.

You must also be sensitive to your feelings of insecurity, to which astrology

caters. Assuming there are "powers out there guiding me" is quite comforting, and relieves one of his responsibilities. He can easily blame all his shortcomings on his horoscope. But remember that the Torah prohibits horoscopes. Horoscopes satisfy the very same insecurities which idols were created to address. This is why God groups idolatry with heavenly signs in Jeremiah: they share the same origin, human insecurity.

Living in line with truth, means we examine all facets of our lives, which are primarily psychological in nature. If you ignore self-assessment and reflection, you will never see your flaws, and never repent, which God desires for our own good.

We are not born with all of the answers...far from it. But with honesty, we can arrive at an ever-growing attachment to truth, where we spend less time defending our predisposed, unexamined notions, and more time defenselessly seeking what is real and true.

Ibn Ezra on Leviticus 19:31 says the following, "Those with empty brains say 'were it not that fortune tellers and magicians were true, the Torah would not prohibit them.' But I (Ibn Ezra) say just the opposite of their words, because the Torah doesn't prohibit that which is true, but it prohibits that which is false. And the proof is the prohibition on idols and statues." Based on this Ibn Ezra, as the Torah prohibits fortunetellers and horoscopes, they must be equally false practices, affording man lies, and not truth.

Again, as Maimonides wrote, simply because one Rabbi accepted astrology, this is no basis for you to accept it, especially when you do not fathom what he did, or understand his words, and possess reason to refute it. First and foremost, you must know what God said to be true, starting with Jeremiah, and throughout the Tanach...this must be your measuring rod. But do not seek to defend a cherished view, if your mind tells you it violates God's Torah.

The Rabbis state, "All is in the hand of heaven, except the fear of heaven". This means that one's wealth, health, personalities, children and all matters aside from free will are decided by God. Whatever God's means are for determining our personalities or world events, God does so with wisdom, whether we know how He

does this or not: "All His ways are just". The One who gave such a perfect system of wisdom, i.e., the Torah, surely works with wisdom. The One who created and governs the universe with intelligent laws, is consistent. Therefore, it is a denial of God's methods of wisdom to follow reputations or popular notions, instead of theories, certainly, when you are bereft of any understanding about what you verbally support and merely follow the masses. God does not wish that man lies, and accept a view, unless man understands that view. Whether on a specific issue a Rabbi was right or wrong, this is not our concern to prove, for all men err. What our Rabbis teach is that we engage our minds alone for determining truth. If some view is contrary to reason, we are wise to ignore it. Judaism's teachers unanimously agree: our "methods" of decision-making are crucial, not who we follow in the end. This may sound odd, but provided we use our intellects granted by God, we are not to blame for concluding something God knows is false. The principle "Lo Bashamayim Hi", "It is not in heaven", teaches that our objective is not to make sure we know what God knows, but that we arrive at decisions to the best of our abilities. "Aylu v'Aylu, Divray Elohim Chaim", "These and these, the words of God are life", means that regardless of "these views or those views" (opposing rulings) both are nonetheless attempts to arrive at truth, and that is what is praiseworthy, "Divray Elohim Chaim". Of course, when two views oppose each other, one must be wrong, but that is not in man's hands at all times, and not to his discredit. This last quote means to praise all those who honestly engage their minds in the pursuit of truth, regardless of their outcome.

We know quite little about how God governs the world. And just as we admit that point, we must be consistent and admit when we do not understand any other matter. And it makes no difference if a Rabbi claims to understand it. For if "we" do not, we have no grounds to agree with that view, whether he is right or wrong. "Agree" means we apprehend a matter, and understand it as consistent with how the world operates. Our allegiance to a theory must be, as Maimonides taught, based on proof, perception, or Torah Traditions. ■

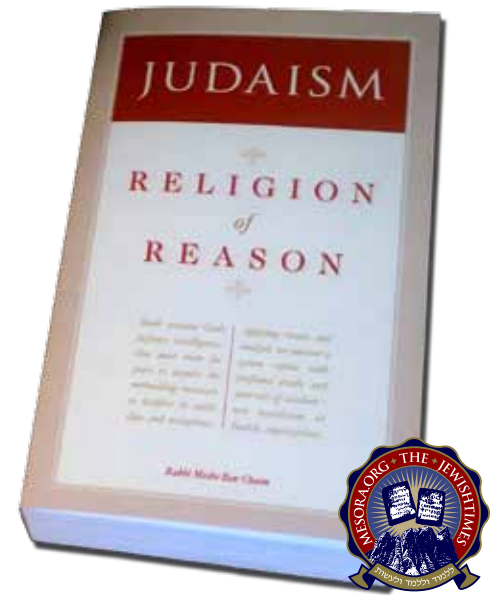
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Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim

REVIEWS



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Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim has written extensively on Jewish philosophy for many years. His ideas are rooted in a rational approach. He follows the great philosophers like Rambam and Saadia Gaon. He is opposed to all forms of "mysticism" and seeks to debunk all practices and beliefs which are rooted in superstition and contrary to reason. This work covers a wide variety of topics, of interest to contemporary; insightful analyses of Biblical narratives as well as the significance of many mitzvot. Rabbi Ben-Chaim demonstrates that Judaism can be harmonized with human reason. He is not afraid to ask the most penetrating and challenging questions as he is convinced that Torah is the Word of God and based on the highest form of wisdom. Jews who have a profound desire to make sense out of their religion will benefit greatly from reading this book.



RABBI STEVEN WEIL — Executive Vice President, The Orthodox Union

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim asks critical, crucial and defining questions that any thinking Jew needs to ask. His method enables the reader to explore and engage our theology in a meaningful and serious way. Following the Rishonim, he forces us to define, weigh and analyze each phrase of chazal, showing there is no contradiction between an investigation of Science and an investigation of Judaism. Rabbi Ben-Chaim has written a work that addresses the thinking person of all faiths. This work speaks to the scholar and lay person alike and will help you gain insight into how the great Rishonim define how we view the world. Rabbi Ben-Chaim's website, Mesora.org is a very serious tool and resource for thinking human beings who want to engage and explore the Almighty, the Almighty's universe and do so within the realm of wisdom, rationality and intellectual honesty.



PARTIAL CHAPTER LIST

Astrology	Red Bendels
Reincarnation	Kabbala
Praying to the Dead	Mysticism
Superstition	Miracles
Demons	What is God?
Bashert	"Jewish" Souls
Evil Eye	Talmudic Stories
Rebbe Worship	Metaphors
Segulas	Belief vs. Proof
Satan	Do Rabbis Err?
Angels	Gentile Equality
Western Wall Prayers	Man's Purpose

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OV & YEDONI

A PRESENT DAY PROBLEM

RABBI DR. DARRELL GINSBERG

Parshas Kedoshim spells out in detail a myriad of new commandments, traversing a wide spectrum of concepts and halachas that are mixed in with references to the kedusha of God and Bnai Yisrael. There is also considerable mention of the area of nichush (superstitions, the belief in signs and omens, etc.), both the prohibition itself and its different manifestations. One of these involves the use of ov and yidoni, which is mentioned three different times in the parsha. It is the last mention of this prohibition that stands out.

As the parsha comes to a close, God explains how Bnai Yisrael must separate between the different types of animals (tahor or tameh), and the necessity to avoid those that are tameh.

The Torah (Vayikra 20:26) then tells us:

"You shall be holy to Me, for I, Hashem, am holy and I have distinguished you from the [other] peoples to be Mine [and to serve Me]."

This would seem to be a fitting end to the parsha, an accentuation of the concept of our being a sanctified nation. Yet, the following pasuk brings the parsha to a close:

"If among the men or women there will be a medium (ov) or an oracle (yidoni) they shall surely be put to death. You shall stone them to death, their blood is on them."

With this, Kedoshim comes to an end.

Why end with this warning? Rashi (ibid 27) points out that this is the third mention of this sin, with the Torah now clarifying that the punishment (with witnesses and a warning) is stoning (sekila). While certainly it is crucial to know what the punishment for this act is, how does it tie in to the previous pasuk? On a thematic level, it seems completely out of place.

What exactly is the Torah referring to with ov and yidoni? There is considerable debate as to the particulars, but a general consensus exists in the Torah Shebal Peh as to the overall concept. The ov, according to many, involved a person claiming to communicate with the dead, but channeling the voice of the dead through his armpit. The yidoni would use a bone to project a voice, whether from the dead or not. In either case, the person would address the purveyor of this information, asking questions about his future, and the answers would be communicated through these mediums.

Today's sophisticated, refined, culturally advanced society would laugh at such nonsense. The average Jew could easily see through a trick like this. Who would believe that a voice projecting from an armpit can tell the future?

Why the insistence by the Torah of this prohibition? Are we to worry about this today?

The Sefer HaChinuch (255) offers an enlightening explanation as to the problem of ov/yedoni. He writes as follows:

(continued on next page)

"At the root of this commandment lies the reason we wrote about the prohibition on practicing nichush. For all these forms of vapid nonsense cause a man to leave the essential, true religion and belief in the Eternal Lord, and he will thus turn to follow the nonsense; and he will believe that all that happens to him comes upon him by way of chance, and it lies in his power to better his fortune and remove every harm from himself by those questions [to the medium] and those tricks that he will do. Yet all this will avail him nothing, since everything is decreed by the Lord and Master of the world, and according to the worthy or sinful activity that a man will do, new events, good or bad, will occur for him - as it is written, 'For according to the work of a man will He requite him' (Iyov 34:11). It is fitting for a man to center all his thoughts and attune all his affairs about this. This is the way of thinking of every man among good, worthy Israelites..."

In writing about the general prohibition of nichush (249), he explains again that a person who appraises himself of this type of thinking will "reckon that all his good and bad fortune, all that happens to him, is a matter of chance occurrence, not by the watchful care on the part of his Creator..."

The Chinuch is elucidating an important foundation of Judaism--the existence of a system of *schar v'onesh* - reward and punishment - and our conviction in this system. The belief in this is one the fundamental concepts in Judaism. The Rambam bases his eleventh foundation, as noted in his thirteen foundations of faith (Introduction to Perek HaChelek), on the acceptance of this concept. We under-



stand there is a system of reward and punishment based on God's justice, and that this is tied into man's actions, good or bad. In other words, that which happens to mankind is always tied into his actions. The specifics--how the infinite causes and effects play out, why one person is deserving of this or that--are beyond man's knowledge to comprehend. The Torah, given to us by God, outlines for us that which is the "good" and that which is the "bad." The guide, the *derech Hashem*, directing us in how to live our lives properly, is contained within the Torah. One who follows the Torah and internalizes the concept of this being the *derech Hashem* is demonstrating an adherence to *schar v'onesh*.

It is important to note that a person should not believe that the performance of a mitzvah will necessarily produce an immediate, tangible reward (and vice versa with a sin). Our dedication to the Torah is based on the concept that it brings us to a greater knowledge of God and helps perfect ourselves. To perform a mitzvah on the expectation of a reward

removes the value of the mitzvah and intimates that man has detailed knowledge of God's *hasgacha*. The main idea here is that a person should recognize that there is an overall system of *schar v'onesh*, and it is tied into man's overall performance of mitzvos and *aveiros*.

However, when a person turns to nichush, he is abandoning the belief in a system of reward and punishment. A person who relies on this method is conceding that God's justice has no link to man's actions. A person living his life correctly or incorrectly, according to this false ideology, has no bearing on that which occurs to him. He asks the *baal ov* about what will happen to him--he seeks information about the good or bad that will occur. He believes that the good or bad has nothing to do with his actions--the "chance" the Chinuch speaks of--which indicates a disbelief in God's justice. To be punished or rewarded must be tied into one's correct or incorrect actions - otherwise, there is no justice to that which occurs to mankind. Once a person disen-

gages from the belief in man's actions affecting his "standing" with God, he is denying the fundamental *yesod* of *schar v'onesh*.

We may scoff at the more primitive-sounding methods; after all, who today would make use of a person who claimed to determine one's fate through a voice emanating from a bone? Yet the same silly, nonsensical thinking, as characterized by the Chinuch, is still prevalent in many religions, and even within Judaism. There are many Jews who attach their fates to actions involving inanimate objects or unworthy human sources. They want to ascribe causal relationships that distinctly deny any semblance of a system of reward and punishment. Superstitions abound, the *segula* business is thriving, red strings are everywhere and people are continually shying away from the firm concept that it is through the understanding and observance of the *derech Hashem* that will ultimately determine our fates. The ideology of the *ov/yidoni* is as manifest today as it was thousands of years ago.

One could therefore see why this warning ends the parsha. The basis for *kedushas Bnai Yisrael* stems from our acceptance of the system of mitzvos. It is a system predicated on our using our minds in the pursuit of serving God. It serves as the moral compass, guiding us in the good and bad. Our acceptance of the Torah by definition is an admission of *schar v'onesh* that reflects God's justice. It is an integral part of our belief in God--God is the one and only source of power in the universe. To pursue one's fate through these other means is completely contradictory to the entire acceptance of mitzvos, usurping the element of *kedusha* that is tied to our identity as God's chosen nation. ■



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VICARIOUS ATONEMENT?

This week's parsha, Chukat, begins with the commandment of the Red Heifer, which is followed by the death of Miriam. It should be noted that there is a gap in the narrative of the sojourn of the Jews in the Wilderness. There is no account of what took place during the 40-year stay in the Midbar (desert) that had been decreed because of the sin of the spies. All the events recorded in our parsha took place after the culmination of the enforced exile.

The severe punishment for the sin of the spies illustrates an important Torah lesson, i.e., that the forward momentum of the Jewish people can be stalled, but not halted. G-d's chosen people are eternal. We are not perfect, but can become corrupt and engage in sinful behavior. Other nations and empires that are subject to the ordinary laws of nature will come and go. Not so the Jews. We are under a special Divine Providence that guarantees our survival. This does not mean that we have a free pass. Indeed, Hashem demands more of us and metes out serious punishment when warranted. However, the nation cannot be eliminated. This lesson is clearly illustrated in our own time. No people has experienced a greater calamity than the Holocaust. Yet, this catastrophe was followed by the establishment of Israel and its development into one of the most advanced societies on earth.

The section on the Red Heifer is followed by the death of Miriam. Rashi explains that the juxtaposition of these two subjects is to teach us that, just as the Red Heifer provides atonement, so too does the death of the righteous. At first glance, this idea seems very strange. Judaism rejects the notion of "vicarious atonement." This doctrine is

contrary to the idea of Divine Justice. Judaism affirms that the "L-rd is righteous in all His ways." Accordingly, G-d rewards and punishes a person in accordance with his deeds. Just as fathers are not punished for the sins of their sons, the sons are not rewarded for the good deeds of their parents. If one has sinned, he must do sincere Teshuva (repentance) and will thus obtain forgiveness. In what sense can it be said that the death of the righteous provides atonement?

A unique feature of Jewish history is the preponderance of Tzadikim (righteous people) who have appeared in every time and place of Jewish existence. Our heroes are a unique brand of individuals. They are profound thinkers who devote themselves to Torah study as well as to other branches of knowledge. However, the goal of their study is not mere intellectual satisfaction. They seek to obtain a deeper understanding of Hashem's ways so they can perfect themselves by emulating them. No other nation can even approach the Jewish record in this regard. The genuine Talmid Chacham (Torah scholar) who devotes himself to study and good deeds is the national treasure of the Jewish people. The Rambam says that the "crown" of Torah is greater than that of the Kingship and Priesthood. Moreover, whoever dedicates himself to total immersion in Torah becomes sanctified as the "Holy of Holies." At the brit of a child, we offer the prayer that he will grow to "Torah, chuppah, and good deeds."

The genuine Talmid Chacham is the pride and joy of the Jewish people. He is a teacher, guide, and role model whom all aspire to emulate. The greatness of the nation resides in the profound respect that it accords to these true heroes. Because of our great awe for their wisdom and the behavior it produces, we seek to emulate them and raise our children to be like them. When they die, extreme honor is shown to them.

Every Jew then becomes a mourner. Whom we mourn for reflects our values. When Miriam, Aharon, and Moshe died, the entire nation mourned. This mourning is a form of divine service. It expresses our deep regard for righteousness based on wisdom and chesed (kindness). It elevates us to a higher level and strengthens our conviction that the path of the true Tzadik is the highest form of life, which we must strive for.

Sincere appreciation for what is truly important in life, which is triggered by the death of the Tzadik, is what provides atonement.

Shabbat shalom. ■



TORAH & SCIENCE

How Astrology is False

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim

How can we prove this claim? Let's grasp the difference between astrology and unexplained but true causes and effects:

Astrology has not demonstrated 100% or even a majority of times, any cause and effect relationship between astronomical phenomena and our personality traits; it's primary claim. Think a second; a correlation is "not" a demonstrated cause and effect. Meaning, if we find some percentage between people born in the spring and their wisdom or leadership personalities, this does not mean the "cause" of leadership is a spring birthdate. It is mere correlation. And many leaders like Newton were born in the winter and summer.

However, we do witness a demonstrated cause and effect relationship when large bodies attract smaller ones 100% of the time. Even without understanding gravity, we witness the effects of some force we call gravity. For we define a truth as that which is constant, and astrology is not constant, nor are its claims consistent a majority of the time. Thus, astrology offers no truths. The stars' locations and your personality traits are as unrelated, as is a splinter in your finger to a solar eclipse. As the splinter did not cause the eclipse, the stars have not given you personality traits.

When God told Abraham to abandon astrology, this does not mean it was a true science for the gentiles, but not for us. Many Jews suggest this, but the statement itself contradicts natural law. For if some law is true for gentiles, it is true for everyone. A truth is independent of followers.

In fact, God rejects astrology (Jeremiah 10, 1-5):

"1. Hear ye the word which the LORD speaketh unto you, O house of Israel; 2. 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. 3. For the customs of the peoples are vanity; for it is but a tree which one cuts out of the forest, the work of the hands of the workman with the axe. 4. They deck it with silver and with gold, they fasten it with nails and with hammers, that it move not. 5. They are like a pillar in a garden of cucumbers, and speak not; they must certainly be carried for they cannot walk. Be not afraid of them, for they cannot do evil, neither is it in them to do good."

God calls the nations' attribution of power to the stars, a vain thing. God continues to discredit decorated trees, for the idolaters used to believe trees would receive the imagined powers of the stars and constellations. Of such "received heavenly powers," God says, "Be not afraid of them, for they cannot do evil, neither is it in them to do good." God created the stars, and He tells us they are powerless. Astrology is a sham.

Proponents of idolatry offer no rhyme or reason. They cannot explain why the heavenly phenomena effect man and not other creations, and why based on his birth date as opposed to another date; why it affects personality traits as opposed to hair color or height; why the stars target Earth-bound life and not the moon's soil or Saturn's rings...all pointing to an arbitrary "system." Therefore it is readily understood why astrology has been rejected by the scientific community[1]. Scientific testing of astrology has been conducted, and no evidence has been found to support any of the premises or purported effects outlined in astrological traditions. As Philippe Zarka stated, and this is a crucial point: "One problem is that none of the presently known physical forces (or interactions) or of any reasonable extrapolation of them can explain the presumed astrological influence" ... "It can be easily checked that astrological predictions are often wrong, or -worse- neither wrong nor right because [they are] too ambiguous."

Zarka further explains astrology's popularity is due in part to "a psychological support to its believers, especially to "fragile" populations (unemployed, students, isolated people, etc) (Kunth & Zarka 2005; Zarka & Kunth 2006)."

Based on these reasons, the intelligent person must dismiss astrology's claims. ■

[1]Zarka, Philippe (2011). "Astronomy and astrology". Proceedings of the International Astronomical Union 5 (S260): 420-425. <http://bit.ly/119y8b3>



Flawless

Responding to Success

GEORGE H. GISSER

Thirty days before our Yom Tov of Shavuot my fondest friend, Joshua, a prominent diamond importer, invited me to come to his Fifth Avenue office. "Chaim, I want to show you a beautiful stone. Maybe you have a customer, and I am sure you could use the broker's commission." (Usually not more than two percent.)

Before I continue, I am taking a step backward to fill you in on my little-peg status, in the gigantic wholesale jewelry business. I wasn't a diamond dealer or broker. My specialty was selling precious colored stones, specifically rubies, sapphires and emeralds. As I entered Joshua's second security door I looked up at his strategically mounted camera, and gave him a "hello-wave", for him to buzz me into his private, well lit office.

"Sholom, Joshua!" My curiosity was heightened as he guided me over to his gigantic window, overlooking Fifth Avenue. Before he handed me his little white stone envelope, he confessed to me that this stone has become a challenge to his previous successful buying skills, and couldn't turn it over in his customary one to two months. Instead, this diamond has gotten under his skin, and has been irritating him for over one year!

He carefully opened the envelope, handed it to me, and exclaimed, "Chaim, I know you are not knowledgeable of diamonds, so as you can see, it is not a white diamond."

As my eyes focused down on this extremely large diamond and as it changed hands into my domain, he continued, "The color falls into a rare color classification, Green/Yellow. Since you are a color-stone maven, I'm sure you recognize it's beautiful color." (Unconsciously, his inborn gift of salesmanship leaking out.)

"Yes!" (I agreed, even though I didn't recognize it's beauty.) To me, it looked like someone left deli

mustard out too long) I continued to scrutinize it, walked closer to the window, and focused my jewelers' loop on it's interior. There, smack in the heart of the stone, was a gigantic flaw!

"Josh", hesitating, not to hurt his feelings, "It has a slight flaw, right in the center of the stone. Do I see right?" (Disheartened.) "Yes, Chaim, you see right. Maybe that's why I haven't sold it yet, and that's the reason why I invited you here. You mentioned this morning, coming in on the Monsey bus, that you have reserved a booth at the annual Colorstone Trade Show in Las Vegas."

"That's right! I will be flying out, immediately after Shavuot, which will occur in about one month from now" I said.

"Chaim, I want you to take junior here, with you to Vegas, to try to sell it. Perhaps you will be my shliach." The price seemed reasonable, so I agreed to his terms.

"Here, take it now!" He passed me the "Memo", (legal jewelry trade document, which acts as a receipt) signed it, took the stone and thanked him for giving me the opportunity to earn parnusah. "See you later on the bus, Chaim, and thank you."

The four weeks flew by, and just before Shavuot, Joshua invited me to learn Torah all night with him at his shul. This was my first experience to stay up all night, and have a talmud chocham by my side. My Hebrew skills were very inadequate, however Joshua took his time to explain every concept. When the sun smiled, I couldn't believe the night had passed so quickly. I was on a metaphysical Torah high, together with Joshua, my teacher.

My booth in the Convention Hall was in an ideal position, right next to the food court. I artistically placed my colored stones under the glass top for

maximum eye appeal. In the center of my display I placed Josh's stone on a bed of white cotton. I must admit, his ten carat diamond really stood out amongst all the supporting red, blue and greens.

The second day brought a stone dealer from Chicago to my booth who asked a lot of questions about the diamond. His last question, "Would you send it to me on memo if I set up an appointment with my customer?" came as a surprise. I answered, "No problem, if your references check out." He gave me his card and a short list of NY stone dealers with whom he has established a track record. One of the names was a friend of mine who I have done some business. Shlome, was a tough Israeli stone dealer who wouldn't trust a weak, marginal, credit risk. If he was doing business with this gentleman, his approval would be sufficient for me to Fed Ex it.

So, after I returned to NYC, I visited Shlome. "Oh,...so you met my customer from Chicago?" I detected his emotional jealousy...since his secret was revealed. "He is so good, that you can sell the stone to me, and I will ship it, and pay you immediately, if he sells it." I didn't show my surprised internal reaction, since the total price would be over \$45,000.00. Why would he put himself at risk, without any profit motive? I quickly figured it out: he didn't want any another dealer to get close to his special customer!

Sure enough, Chicago called me, and requested to have the stone for a few days. I packed it up, insured it, and hand carried it to the closest Fed Ex office. They said, "It should be there in two days!"

One week later, he called me, and gave me the good news: "It is sold!" (And no typical chiseling, commonly practiced by most NYC merchants.) "I will send you my check after my customer check clears, usually within five days. Thank you for all your help!"

I was so excited! I immediately called Joshua and told him, "I just made Mazel and Brucha on Junior, your tsorus stone, and I would have the payment in about one week!"

Joshua wasn't too surprised...he later told me he had Emunah in Hashem, and the merit we gained on that Shavuot night. How else can we reconcile an event as unlikely to happen, even after a year of trying to sell an ugly green yellow diamond with a flaw?

Somehow, the color became beautiful, and the imperfection became "flawless!"

Of course, as Prophecy no longer exists. Therefore we have absolutely no knowledge when God is acting, unless we witness a miracle, which is not the case here. But we also cannot say with absolute knowledge that God was not involved in this case. If He was, this was yet another kindness and great deed from Hashem. ■

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MAIMONIDES

Letter to the Community of Marseilles

Letter on Astrology

I perceive in this inquiry that although its boughs are many, they are all branches of a single tree, which is their common root: namely, all the statements of “the astrologers, the stargazers” (Is. 47:13). It is evident that the compilation we have made of the statutes of the Torah, which we entitled *Mishneh Torah*, has not reached you. If it had, you would have known directly my opinion regarding all those things of which you have inquired; for we have made this entire matter clear in (the section of that work called) *Laws Concerning Idolatry* and the *Ordinances of the Nations*. It seems to me that it will come to you before this reply, since it is already widespread on the island of Sicily, as well as in the West and in the East and in the South. In any case, I myself need to make this clear to you.

Know, my masters, that it is not proper for a man to accept as trustworthy anything other than one of these three things. The first is a thing for which there is a clear proof deriving from man’s reasoning—such as arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy. The second is a thing that a man perceives through one of the five senses—such as when he knows with certainty that this is red and this is black and the like through the sight of his eye; or as when he tastes that this is bitter and this is sweet; or as when he feels that this is hot and this is cold; or as when he hears that this sound is clear and this sound is indistinct; or as when he smells that this is a pleasing smell and this is a displeasing smell and the like. The third is a thing that a man receives from the prophets or from the righteous. Every reasonable man ought to distinguish in his mind and thought all the things that he accepts as trustworthy, and say: “This I accept as trustworthy because of tradition, and this because of sense-perception, and this on grounds of reason.” Anyone who accepts as trustworthy anything that is not of these three species, of him it is said: “The simple believes everything” (Prov. 14:15).

Thus you ought to know that fools have composed thousands of books of nothingness and emptiness. Any number of men, great in years but

not in wisdom, wasted all their days in studying these books and imagined that these follies are science. They came to think of themselves as wise men because they knew that science. The thing about which most of the world errs, or all of it—save for a few individuals, “the remnant of whom the Lord shall call” (Joel 3:5)—is that thing of which I am apprising you. The great sickness and the “grievous evil” (Eccles. 5:12, 15) consist in this: that all the things that man finds written in books, he presumes to think of as true—and all the more so if the books are old. And since many individuals have busied themselves with those books and have engaged in discussions concerning them, the rash fellow’s mind at once leaps to the conclusion that these are words of wisdom, and he says to himself: “Has the pen of the scribes written in vain” (Jer. 8:8), and have they vainly engaged in these things? This is why our kingdom was lost and our Temple was destroyed and why we were brought to this; for our fathers sinned and are no more because they found many books dealing with these themes of the star gazers, these things being the root of idolatry, as we have made clear in *Laws Concerning Idolatry*. They erred and were drawn after them, imagining them to be glorious science and to be of great utility. They did not busy themselves with the art of war or with the conquest of lands, but imagined that those studies would help them. Therefore the prophets called them “fools and dolts” (Jer. 4:22). And truly fools they were, “for they walked after confused things that do not profit” (I Sam. 12:21 and Jer. 2:8).

Know, my masters, that I myself have investigated much into these matters. The first thing I studied is that science which is called judicial astrology—that is, (the science) by which man may know what will come to pass in the world or in this or that city or kingdom and what will happen to a particular individual all the days of his life. I also have read in all matters concerning all of idolatry, so that it seems to me there does not remain in the world a composition on this subject, having been translated into Arabic from other languages, but that I have read it

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and have understood its subject matter and have plumbed the depth of its thought. From those books it became clear to me what the reason is for all those commandments that everyone comes to think of as having no reason at all other than the decree of Scripture. I already have a great composition on this subject in the Arabic language (namely, the Guide of the Perplexed) with lucid proofs for every single commandment but this is not required of us now. I now return to the subject of your inquiry.

Know, my masters, that every one of those things concerning judicial astrology that (its adherents) maintain—namely, that something will happen one way and not another, and that the constellation under which one is born will draw him on so that he will be of such and such a kind and so that something will happen to him one way and not another—all those assertions are far from being scientific; they are stupidity. There are lucid, faultless proofs refuting all the roots of those assertions. Never did one of those genuinely wise men of the nations busy himself with this matter or write on it, no (nation) wrote such compositions or committed the error of calling it a science, other than the Chaldeans, Chaldeans, Canaanites, and Egyptians, for that was their religion in those days. But the wise men of Greece—and they are the philosophers who wrote on science and busied themselves with all the species of science—mock and scorn and ridicule these four nations that I have mentioned to you, and they rally proofs to refute their entire position “root and branch” (Mal. 3:19). The wise men of Persia also recognized and understood that all that science which the Chaldeans, Chaldeans, Egyptians, and Canaanites produced is a falsehood and a lie. Do not imagine that those refutations are mere assertions and that we therefore should not put our trust in them; rather there are lucid and correct, faultless proofs to refute that entire position, and the only one who would cling to it would be “a simple one who believes everything” (Prov. 14:15), or one who wishes to deceive others.

And know, my masters, that the science of the stars that is genuine science is knowledge of the form of the spheres, their number, their measure, the course they follow, each one’s period of revolution, their declination to the north or to the south, their revolving to the east or to the west, and the orbit of every star and what its course is. On all this and the like, the wise men of Greece, Persia, and India wrote compositions. This is an exceedingly glorious science. By means of it the onset of the eclipses of luminaries may be known and when they will be eclipsed at any given place; by means of it there may be known the cause for the moon’s (yareah) appearing just like a bow, then waxing great until it is full, and then gradually waning; by means of it there may be known when the moon (levanah) will or will not be seen; and the reason why one day will be long and another day short; and the reason why two stars will rise as one, but not set together; and the reason why a given day at a given place

is thirteen hours long and in another place fifteen or sixteen or twenty hours long, yet being a single day. (In one place the day and the night will be of equal duration; in another place the day will be like a month or two months or three—so that a place may be found where the entire year is a single day, six months daytime and six months nighttime.) How many amazing conditions are made intelligible by this science, all of which is undoubtedly true. It is this calculation of astronomical cycles of which the (Talmudic) sages said that it is wisdom and understanding in the sight of the (Gentile) peoples (Shabbat 75a). But as for these assertions of the stupid astrologers, they are nothing. I am now making clear to you the main points of those matters that are the mystery of the world.

Know, that all the wise men of the Gentile nations—and they are the great philosophers, men of intellect and science—were all in accord that the world has a Governor; He makes a sphere revolve, the sphere not revolving of itself. They have many books advancing a lucid proof for this; on this point there is no controversy among men of science. There is, however, a great controversy among them regarding this entire world, namely, the sphere and what is beneath it.

(1) Most of them say that it is not subject to generation and corruption, but that as it is now, it was and it will be forever and ever. Just as the Holy One, blessed be He, who was always the same as He is now, is making it revolve, so was He always making it revolve, and it was always being revolved; the two of them were always together, never was one without the other.

(2) Among them there are those who maintain that this sphere has come into being and that the Deity has created it, but that there is a single thing that exists together with the Creator, “like the clay in the potter’s hand” (Jer. 18:6). From that thing which exists together with Him, He makes whatever He pleases. Sometimes He will use some of that clay, as it were, to make heaven and some of it to make earth; and sometimes, if He pleases, He takes some of that out of which He has made heaven and makes something else out of it. But to bring forth something out of nothing is impossible.

(3) Among the philosophers there are those who maintain—just as the prophets maintained—that the Holy One, blessed be He, created all created things out of nothing and that there is no other thing with the Creator aside from the creation that He has brought forth.

Now the great controversy is over this point, and this is the very point that Abraham our Father discerned. A thousand books have already been written on this, with proofs that each and every one of them rallies to support its position. It is the root of the Torah that the Deity alone is primordial and that He has created the whole out of nothing; whoever does not acknowledge this is guilty of radical unbelief and is guilty of heresy. I myself have already written a great composition in Arabic

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(Guide of the Perplexed) on these matters. I have explained the lucid proofs of the existence of the Creator and that He is one and that He is not a body or corporeal in any respect. I have shattered all those proofs that the philosophers advance as proving that the world was not created. In addition, I have resolved all the great difficulties that they have raised against us on account of our maintaining that the Deity has created everything that exists out of nothing.... All these, then, are the three sects into which the wise men of the world fall, from the earliest antiquity down to now.

(1) Those who maintain that the sphere is not a created thing, but that it eternally has been and will be just as it is.

(2) Those who maintain that the Deity has created it out of that matter which always exists by Him.

(3) Those who maintain—just as all the prophets did—that there is no other thing that is with the Deity, just He Himself, and that when He wished, He brought forth this world out of nothing, in conformity with His will.

All of these three sects are in accord on the following point. Everything that comes into being in this lower world—namely, every “living soul” (Gen. 1:30) and every tree and every species of grass and every one of the species of minerals—the whole has the Deity as its maker, through a power coming from the spheres and the stars. And they are in accord that the power of the Creator flows first upon the spheres and the stars; from the spheres and the stars it flows and spreads through this (lower) world—everything that is, thereby coming into being. Just as we maintain that the Holy One, blessed be He, performs signs and wonders through the angels, so do these philosophers maintain that all these occurrences in the nature of the world come through the spheres and the stars. They maintain that the spheres and the stars possess souls and knowledge. All these things are true. I myself have already made it clear, with proofs, that all these things involve no damage to religion. And not only this, but what is more I have understood from the sayings of the sages in all of the Midrashim that they maintain as the philosophers maintained. There is no controversy whatever between the sages of Israel and the philosophers on these matters, as I have made clear in those chapters [in the Guide of the Perplexed, a philosophical treatise].

All three of these sects of the philosophers, which maintain that everything is made by means of the spheres and the stars, also maintain that whatever happens to each and every human being is due to chance; it is not due to any cause coming from above, and neither the constellation under which one is born nor nature will avail against it. There is no difference for them between this individual who was torn to pieces by a lion that happened upon him, or this mouse that was torn to pieces by a cat, or this fly that was torn to pieces by a spider. Neither is there a difference between a roof’s falling upon and killing someone, or a rock’s breaking

loose from a mountain and falling upon a tree or upon another rock and breaking it. All this, they maintain, is simply fortuitous. It is said as well of those human beings who are warring with one another over a great kingdom, that they are like a pack of dogs warring over a carcass. This is not due to any cause coming from the stars. Furthermore, this one being poor and that one rich, this one having children and that one being childless—all the philosophers maintain that this is due to chance. The summary of the matter is that they maintain that what happens to each and every thing—be it man or beast or trees and minerals—is all due to chance. But the being of all the species and the things comprehended in the entire world—in which there is not the activity of a living soul—all of this stems from the power of the spheres whose root, in turn, comes from the Holy One, blessed be He. The controversy lies in this, that the true religionists, and that is the religion of Moses our Teacher, maintain that what happens to individuals is not due to chance, but rather to judgment—as the Torah says: “For all His ways are judgment” (Deut. 32:4). The prophet explained: “Whose eyes are open upon all the ways of the sons of men, to give every one according to his ways, and according to the fruit of his doings” (Jer. 32:19). It is regarding this that the Torah warned and bore witness and told Israel: “But if you will not hearken to Me” (Lev. 26:14), I shall bring hardship upon you. If you maintain that that hardship is not an affliction brought on by your sins, but rather due to chance and one of those things that happen by chance, why then I Myself shall heap more of that chance upon you—as it is written: “And if you walk with Me in (the way of) chance, I too shall walk with you in the wrath of chance” (Lev. 26:27–28). This is a root of the religion of Moses our Teacher, that everything happening to human beings is a (just) decree and judgment. Hence, the sages maintained: “There is no death without sin and no affliction without transgression” (Shabbat 55a).

And know, my masters, that it is one of the roots of the religion of Moses our Teacher—and one that all the philosophers also acknowledge—that every action of human beings is left to them and that there is nothing to constrain or draw them. Rather, if he so pleases, a man will worship God and become wise and sit in the house of study. And if he so pleases, he will follow the counsel of the wicked and run with thieves and hide with adulterers. There is no influence or constellation under which one is born that will draw him in any manner toward any one of these ways. Hence it was commanded and told to him: “Do this and do not do that.” We have made clear many of the things involved in these matters in most of our Arabic compositions, in the Commentary on the Mishna and in the rest of the compositions. Thus we ought to know that what happens to human beings is not—as the philosophers maintain—like what happens to the beast.

Three disagreements are to be found in these matters.

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Imagine this situation. Here is Reuben, a tanner, poor, and his children have died in his own lifetime. And here is Simon, a perfumer, rich, and his children stand before him.

(1) The philosopher will maintain that this is due to chance. It is possible that Reuben could become a perfumer, grow rich, and have children; and it is possible that Simon could become impoverished, turn into a tanner, and witness his children's death. All this is simply fortuitous. There is no nature in the world and no power emanating from a star that caused this individual to be or not to be thus. This is the position of the philosophers.

(2) The second position is that of those who believe in judicial astrology and whose sayings you have heard and whose follies are widespread among you. They maintain that it is impossible that a given thing should ever change. Never will Reuben be anything other than a tanner and poor and childless, for it was thus fixed by the power of the sphere at the time of his birth. Similarly, it is impossible for Simon to be anything other than a perfumer and rich and with surviving children, just as it was fixed by the power of the sphere at the time of his birth.

These two ways, or these two positions, are regarded as falsehoods by us. The position of the astrologers is given the lie by reason, for correct reasoning has already refuted, by means of lucid proofs, all those follies that they have maintained. It also is regarded as a falsehood by us because of the religious tradition, for if the matter stood thus, of what utility would the Torah and the commandment and the Talmud be to a particular individual? For in that event, every single individual would lack the power to do anything he set his mind to, since something else draws him on—against his will—to be this and not to be that; of what use then is the command or the Talmud? The roots of the religion of Moses our Teacher, we find, refute the position of these stupid ones—in addition to reason's doing so with all those proofs that the philosophers maintain to refute the position of the Chaldeans and the Chaldeans and their associates. The position of the philosophers who maintain that these things are due to chance is also regarded as a falsehood by us because of the religious tradition.

(3) The true way upon which we rely and in which we walk is this: We say regarding this Reuben and Simon, that there is nothing that draws on the one to become a perfumer and rich, and the other to become a tanner and poor. It is possible that the situation will change and be reversed, as the philosopher maintains. But the philosopher maintains that this is due to chance. We maintain that it is not due to chance, but rather that this situation depends on the will of "Him who spoke, and (the world) came into being" (Ps. 33:9); all of this is a (just) decree and judgment. We do not know the end of the Holy One's wisdom so as to know by what decree and judgment He required that this should be this way and that that should

be the other way; "for His ways are not like our ways, neither are His thoughts like our thoughts" (Is. 55:8). We rather are obliged to fix in our minds that if Simon sins, he will be punished with stripes and impoverished and his children will die and the like. And if Reuben repents and mends his ways and searches his deeds and walks in a straight path, he will grow rich and will succeed in all his undertakings and "see (his) seed and prolong (his) days" (ibid. 55:10). This is a root of the religion. If a man says, "But look, many have acted in this way and yet have not succeeded," why, this is no proof. [For] either some iniquity of theirs caused this, or they are now afflicted in order to inherit something even better than this. [But not afflicted in the senses that they are sinners, and a subsequent good will be a "reward". Maimonides means they are dealt a trail through which they will emerge with a greater good. An example is when God commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. This was not commanded as a means of suffering so that Abraham might thereby be 'owed' a subsequent good. Rather, it was to actualize Abraham's potential, for his own good.]

The summary of the matter is that our mind cannot grasp how the decrees of the Holy One, blessed be He, work upon human beings in this world and in the world to come. What we have said about this from the beginning is that the entire position of the stargazers is regarded as a falsehood by all men of science. I know that you may search and find sayings of some individual sages in the Talmud and Midrashim whose words appear to maintain that at the moment of a man's birth, the stars will cause such and such to happen to him. Do not regard this as a difficulty, for it is not fitting for a man to abandon the prevailing law and raise once again the counterarguments and replies (that preceded its enactment). Similarly it is not proper to abandon matters of reason that have already been verified by proofs, shake loose of them, and depend on the words of a single one of the sages from whom possibly the matter was hidden. Or there may be an allusion in those words; or they may have been said with a view to the times and the business before him. (You surely know how many of the verses of the holy Law are not to be taken literally. Since it is known through proofs of reason that it is impossible for the thing to be literally so, the translator [of the Aramaic Targum] rendered it in a form that reason will abide.) A man should never cast his reason behind him, for the eyes are set in front, not in back.

Do not censure me, my masters, for the brevity of these remarks, for the writing makes it clear that I wrote it to fill a present need. For I was very busy with many Gentile affairs. The Deity knows that if Rabbi Pinhas had not sent a messenger who "urged me till I was ashamed" (II Kings 2:17) and did not leave my presence until I had written it, I would not be replying now since I have no leisure. On this account, judge in my favor. Farewell, my brothers, friends, and masters; may you increase and be exalted forever. *Amen.* ■