

“So says God, ‘To the ways of the nations, do not learn. And from heavenly phenomena do not fear; for the nations fear from them. For the statutes of the nations are futile’...” (Jeremiah 10:2-4)

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Weekly Parsha

Bemidbar

RABBI BERNIE FOX

“And Hashem spoke to Moshe and Aharon saying: Bnai Yisrael shall encamp each man by his banner according to the insignias of their father’s households, at a from the Ohel Moed they shall

(continued on next page)

Superstition

Mazel

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

What does mazel mean? And is it a truth?

Literally, “mazel” means star, planet, or constellation. But our culture and Talmud use the word to refer to “planetary influence” and “nature”. It is these definitions that we will discuss. That is, whether mazel refers exclusively to planetary influence; is it a reality or a superstition; and if the latter, then it is a falsehood.

As we commence, you must realize that Torah is the only source for our direction in life. And Torah commands us to follow the Rabbis only in matters of the mitzvahs, not philosophy or science: “In accord with the ‘Torah’ that they teach you...” (Deut. 17:11) “Torah” is the dominion of the Rabbis, nothing else. (It would actually be foolish to follow a Rabbi’s

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(Bemidbar cont. from pg. 1)

Weekly Parsha

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Weekly Journal on Jewish Thought



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encamp. Those camping in front, to the east, shall be the banner of the camp of Yehudah according to their legions – and the leader of the children of Yehudah is Nachshon, the son of Amminadav.” (BeMidbar 2:1-3)

Moshe is commanded to instruct the shevatim – the tribes – of Bnai Yisrael to encamp around the Mishcan – the Tabernacle. The members of each shevet – tribe – are directed to encamp around the banner of the shevet. The shevatim are divided into four groups, each with a lead shevet. Each group is directed to encamp on a specific side of the Mishcan.

The Torah explains that Yehudah is the lead shevet for the group to encamp on the east side of the Mishcan. This group includes the shevatim of Yisachar and Zevulun. The group led by Reuven is to encamp to the south of the Mishcan. Shimon and Gad are included in this group. The group led by Ephraim, including Menasheh and Binyamin, is to encamp on the west side. The shevet of Dan is to lead the group encamped to the north. This group includes Asher and Naphtali.

(See Fig. 1 next page)

The Torah does not describe the banners of the shevatim. However, the commentaries provide a number of suggestions regarding their design. Rashi suggests that each banner was distinguished by its color. These colors were selected based upon the stone representing the shevet on the choshen – the breast-plate of the Kohen Gadol.[1] In other words, each shevet was represented by a stone on the choshen. The banner of the shevet was of the same color as this stone.

Rabbaynu Avraham ibn Ezra and Nachmanides suggest that the banners of the lead shevatim had more intricate designs that featured specific figures. Each figure had a specific relevance to the shevet. Yehudah's banner featured a lion. Yaakov had compared Yehudah to a lion. Reuven's banner featured the figure of a man and mandrakes. This designed referred to Reuven's collection of mandrakes for his mother Leyah. Ephraim's banner featured an ox. Moshe would compare Ephraim's father – Yosef – to an ox. Dan's banner included the figure of an eagle. Moshe would compare Dan to an eagle. These four figures are similar to those that the prophet

Yechezkiel would see in his vision of the Divine Chariot.[2]

Rashi's suggestion that each banner had a unique color based on the color of the stone assigned to the shevet on the choshen is reasonable. It seems that the banners were designed to assist the member of the nation in locating their proper position within the camp. A unique banner with a distinctive color serves this purpose. However, Ibn Ezra and Nachmanides contend that in addition to its distinctive color, the banner of the lead shevatim included a figure. Why was the addition of this figure necessary?

There is another comment by Rashi that can help us understand this dispute. Rashi explains that the various shevatim were assigned their

respective positions surrounding the Mishcan based upon the positions that they were assigned surrounding Yaakov's body during his funeral procession.[3]

Rashi's comments are based on the midrash. According to the midrash, Moshe was commanded by Hashem to assign positions to the shevatim surrounding the Mishcan. Moshe was concerned that this task would be divisive. The various shevatim might object to the positions assigned to them. Hashem responded that this would not be an issue. The positions that the shevatim were to be assigned would correspond to those that Yaakov himself had



assigned for his funeral procession. When the shevatim would learn that Moshe was merely reassigning the positions already assigned by Yaakov, each shevet would willingly accept its assigned position.[4]

In short, according to Rashi, the position assigned to each shevet was determined by its position surrounding Yaakov's body. This raises an interesting question. What is the relevance of the position of the shevet in Yaakov's funeral procession to its position surrounding the Mishcan? Actually, from the midrash, it seems that there is no connection or relevance. Yaakov's funeral procession was selected for a model in order to avoid dissension and debate. Hashem assured Moshe that it was a model the shevatim would accept and not challenge.

It seems that according to Rashi, each shevet was required to assume a position surrounding

(continued on next page)

the Mishcan. This system was designed to maintain an orderly encampment. The specific position of each shevet was not of primary importance. The main objective of the system was to ensure order. We can now appreciate Rashi's position regarding the banners. Each banner consisted of a unique color. The function of the banners was to assign a position to each shevet and each group of shevatim. This required that each banner be distinguishable from the others and identifiable as the banner of its specific shevet. This requirement was met through banners in the color of the stone of the shevet. According to Rashi, there was not reason to include a figure on any of the banners.

Before we can understand the position of Ibn Ezra and Nachmanides, we must consider a fundamental question. Each shevet was assigned a position surrounding the Mishcan. Presumably this created or reflected a relationship between the shevet and the Mishcan. What was this relationship? There are two general possibilities. One possibility is obvious. The encampment of the shevatim surrounding the Mishcan demonstrated the centrality of the Mishcan and Hashem's presence to the encampment. Through encamping around the Mishcan, the shevatim

Fig. 1

Position of the shevet relative to Mishcan			
East	South	West	North
Yehuda (lead)	Reuven (lead)	Ephraim (lead)	Dan (lead)
Yisachar	Shimon	Menasheh	Asher
Zevulun	Gad	Binyamin	Naphtali

demonstrated that the Mishcan and Hashem's presence gave the encampment its unique character and meaning. The second possibility is that the encampment was designed to enhance the presence of the Mishcan and to add to its glory and honor. The shevatim were assumed the role of legions surrounding their sovereign. These accompanying legions add to the glory and honor of their king.

To rephrase the question, what does the design of the encampment tell us about its nature? Was this an orderly encampment of the nation designed to reflect the centrality of the Mishcan and Hashem's presence? Alternately,

was this encampment really an encampment of the Mishcan designed to demonstrate its glory through its surrounding legions?

According to Rashi, the banners of the shevatim reflect the first, obvious purpose. They assist the members of the nation in finding their proper places surrounding the Mishcan. The banners merely mark the location of each shevet. The simple design of these banners suggests no other purpose than the obvious one. Each shevet must assume its proper position relative to the Mishcan in order to demonstrate and affirm that the Mishcan is the center of the community.

However, according to Ibn Ezra and Nachmanides, the four flags of the lead shevatim were adorned with the figures that Yechezkiel observed in his vision of the Divine Chariot. This suggests that the encampment of the shevatim surrounding the Mishcan was similar to the Divine Chariot of Yechezkiel's vision. Like the Divine Chariot, the shevatim glorify and honor the Mishcan, which represents the presence of Hashem. ■

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[1] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer BeMidbar 2:2.

[2] Rabbaynu Avraham ibn Ezra, Commentary on Sefer BeMidbar 2:2. Rabbaynu Moshe ben Nachman (Ramban / Nachmanides), Commentary on Sefer BeMidbar 2:2.

[3] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer BeMidbar 2:2.

[4] Midrash Rabba, Sefer BeMidbar 2:8.

(continued from page 1)

advice on surgery, instead of a trained surgeon.) Therefore, as we discuss philosophy and science, no obligation exists here to follow any Rabbi's view. However, by nature, we are compelled to either accept or reject a view. But in philosophical matters, or in science, our decisions are not subject to Rabbinic authority, which does not exist, but only on our intelligence. As the Talmudic section at hand unfolds, you will be confronted with opposing views. Both views cannot be correct. You can either accept that you don't know the truth, or you will choose a view based on your own reasoning. But be careful that if you do accept a view, that you have arrived at it with intelligence and proofs. A simple head nod, or siding with a comfortable or popular view does not make your view true. Only reason can defend a view as truth.

Talmud Sabbath 156a discusses our matter. The Talmud first says that in Rabbi Joshua ben Levi's notes were found the following comments: "If one was born on a Sunday, he will be all-good or all-evil. Why? Because on Sunday, light and darkness were created. If a man was born on a Monday, he will be angry, since the division of the upper and lower waters took place on Monday [division referring to an upset personality]. If a man was born on Tuesday, he will be lustful, for on Tuesday were the herbs of the field created [which multiply rapidly]. If born on Wednesday, he will be wise, since on that day the luminaries [enlightenment] were suspended in heaven." The Talmud goes on, but we have cited enough cases to convey the Talmud's point: man's personality parallels some element of Creation of that corresponding day. "Parallels"...not necessarily "caused by".

However, this parallel does appear arbitrary. For why don't we suggest that if man is born on a rainy day, that he will be an expert swimmer or plumber? Or if born with a smile that he will always be happy or have a fine sense of humor? Or if at age 2 a child builds a sandcastle, he will be an architect? What significance exists, that the parallel is between the day of birth, and the corresponding weekday of Creation? Why only these two elements? And what is this idea in general: is there some undetected force at work whereby clods of clay and gas (stars) millions of light-years from Earth have some relationship with human personalities? And why only personalities? Furthermore, are Rabbi Joshua's notes his own opinions, or just notes on worldviews? Is it significant that Joshua ben Levi didn't teach these views, but merely that these comments were located in his notes? Be mindful as well, that Rabbi Joshua's notes did not attribute powers to the planets and stars. His writings correlated days

of Creation with human personality types.

But the glaring problem is that his notes claimed that a birthday falling on Sunday related to one's perfection, as his notes read that this person will be all-good or all-evil. This appears to violate free will. So this surface understanding cannot be true. Rashi too says that this view "implies" that on Sunday, righteous and evil people are born. (This we can answer quickly: an "extreme personality" type is related to a Sunday birth. But not that free will is affected.)

Rabbi Chaninah then rejects Rabbi Joshua's notes, claiming, "it is not the day that is causative, but it is the hour of one's birth". (We will soon explain the word "causative".) He clarifies that the sun, moon, or some heavenly sphere influences each hour of the day, and those born during those hours. Rabbi Chaninah appears to support the theory of "planetary influence" saying, "The spheres affect one's wisdom and wealth". (Meharsha seems to comply with both the planetary influence theory, while clearly defending that free will is never lost. I am not sure of his meaning.)

Rabbi Chaninah then says "mazel makes wise and makes one wealthy, there is mazel for Israel". Rabbi Yochanan rejects Rabbi Chaninah saying, "There is no mazel for Israel." But didn't Rabbi Chaninah already state his view above? Isn't this redundant?

Rabbi Yochanan then proves his position from Jeremiah 10:2-4:

"So says God, 'To the ways of the nations, do not learn. And from heavenly phenomena do not fear; for the nations fear from them. For the statutes of the nations are futile'..."

Radak explains there (ibid 10:2), "The spheres have no ability to do harm or good". The nations feared them based on superstitious beliefs, which Radak says grew into full-blown idol worship (ibid 10:3). Maimonides too teaches this in his Mishneh Torah (Laws of Star Worship 1:1). Tosfos "Kaldai" (156b) cites many other Torah verses prohibiting stargazing and superstitions. There, he says deducing from the stars is akin to lotteries, "Lotteries and stargazing are one matter". This makes sense. Just as one would not rely on a lottery draw for his life's decisions, one should not rely on stargazing. Neither practice follows reason, for they are equally unrelated to a question one might have. Think a moment: how does an arbitrary lottery offer intelligent information? By definition, "arbitrary" is not "intelligent"! Tosfos says viewing the stars for answers is equally arbitrary. He outright discounts astrology, as does Maimonides in his Letter to Marseilles.

Rabbi Yochanan quotes this verse in Jeremiah since he discounts natural laws as determining Israel's fate, described therein as "heavenly phenomena". The Jewish nation is under God's providence. He also rejects the idolatrous nations' fearful projections onto heaven. Two messages are derived from this verse: 1) heavenly "signs" are not signs at all, but merely nature, and 2) our nation is not subject to those natural laws.

What must have been the views of the ancient astrologers? Certainly, we have the same skies they had. And we see absolutely no relationship between planets and stars and varying human personalities. (Personality has actually been shown as genetic.) And with no evidence of a relationship, God's plan that we follow intelligence demands we reject unproven views. What ancient astrologers must have done, was correlated the zodiacs' positions with Earthly phenomena. If enough cases corroborated their view, they "assumed" a relationship to exist between stars and Earthly phenomena. But ask yourself this: if each time someone sneezed, a shooting star crossed the sky, would it be sensible to suggest a causal relationship between man and stars? We must reject the coincidences that astrologers assumed as causal. We must look for a rational explanation. The Talmudic Rabbis as well meant something rational, not astrological. For we see Tosfos, Maimonides, Radak and God's very Torah in Jeremiah rejecting astrology. So how can we understand our Talmudic portion?

If we are careful with our reading, there is a difference between the first and second Talmudic arguments above. The first dispute refers to "man", while the second refers to "Israel". This removes the redundancy I cited earlier. Rabbi Chaninah is addressing a new case when he says, "there is mazel for Israel."

Perhaps Rabbi Joshua's notes were his views...perhaps not. It is odd that the Talmud says, "they were found in his notebook" and not "taught by Rabbi Joshua". Regardless, we can explain that view without resorting to "planetary influence". It may very well be that just as a person aspires to embody his namesake, human identification works in other manners as well. A person has ego. He naturally views his birthday with significance. Learning about Genesis, a person born on Wednesday might identify with Day 4, when lights (sun & stars) were suspended in the heavens. He might then associate "light" and "wisdom" as part of his very identity, and become studious, and eventually, a scholar. When one strongly identifies him or herself in some way, it can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Thereby, it is not the birth on a day that has a "causal" relationship. Rather, it is a psychological

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*There is no evidence for
“planetary influence”.
And God desires we
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Radak, Maimonides
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ogy, basing themselves on
sound arguments.
Astrology on the other
hand has no rational
explanation.
Furthermore, God rejects
viewing the heavens as
informative.*



phenomenon of identification that propels the person towards certain feelings and activities that have real results.

In the first debate, Rabbi Joshua and Rabbi Chaninah argue over whether days or hours “influence” man’s nature. This can be understood as a debate over how man identifies: does man identify more with his day of birth, or the hour of his birth. Nothing more. In support of the definition of mazel as “nature”, Rava said (Tal. Moade Katan 28a) “life, children and wealth depend on mazel”. What this means is that nature determines one’s health, wealth and children. Mazel is nature. But free will is in man’s hand, and not subject to mazel. The “nature” discussed here in our Talmudic portion is ‘human’ nature – identification.

The second argument addresses the nation of Israel, not individual men. Rabbi Chaninah says there is mazel (natural law) governing Israel, while Rabbi Yochanan says Israel’s fate is due to God alone. Not mazel. Israel is more of a reality before God, so nothing is left to natural law...unlike individuals whose merit is less than the nation’s.

The Talmud continues to prove no mazel exists for Israel, with a medrashic conversation between God and Abraham: Abraham said, “God, I see in astrology that I am not going to beget a child.” God responds, “Leave your astrology, for there is no mazel in Israel”. God assures Abraham he will in fact have his own child, unlike what Abraham deduced based on natural study. That’s what Abraham meant: Abraham studied nature, viewing the stars and the Earth under a single scientific approach...unlike today’s foolish astrologers who use tarot cards. Abraham had some system that was scientific. Abraham lived a

life where reason led him to proofs of God. Are we to suggest that in one area, Abraham looked at stars and arbitrarily connected the dots? Mustn’t we be consistent and also give Abraham the credit that his decisions in all areas were rational? Of course. God then tells Abraham that he based his conclusion that he was to be barren on the alignment of Jupiter. God doesn’t say Abraham was wrong: He says he will move Jupiter from the West to the East. This metaphor means that God endorsed Abraham’s accurate recognition of nature, but that God will invert nature so as to allow this barren man to beget a child.

We thereby interpret the Talmud as not describing astrology, but psychology and natural law. We are taught that man will identify with the day or hour he was born. Man emulates what he identifies with. So he shares a quality with the day of Creation, or hour of his birth, due to his own emulation. Planets and stars are too far away to have any affects on distant objects, certainly on intangible things like personalities. And when it comes to the nation – not people – the Rabbis dispute whether nature plays a role at all, or is Israel’s fate solely due to God’s constant providence.

Again, there is no evidence for the “planetary influence” theory. And God desires we follow our minds so we must reject that view. Radak, Maimonides and Tosfos as well reject astrology. They all base themselves on sound arguments. Astrology on the other hand has no rational explanation. Furthermore, God rejects viewing the heavens as informative (Jeremiah 10). These are God’s words. This is the authoritative source. All else must follow suit. We must reject it. ■

America

*Presented by***RABBI REUVEN MANN***Memorial Day Service, May 26, 2008**Veterans Memorial Park, Hicksville, New York**Ladies and Gentlemen*

It is a pleasure to join with you today to pay tribute to the heroic soldiers of all of this country's wars who gave their lives so that America could endure - so that we could be free. All of us owe our freedom and this great way of life we enjoy to the sacrifice of countless millions. I wake up each day and give thanks to the Creator for all the blessings He has bestowed on me – chief among them the privilege of living in the greatest country on earth the United States of America. However, I am aware that not everybody feels the way I do.

It is sad but true that we live at a time when there is unprecedented hatred of America, here at home and around the world. It is our duty to foster an appreciation of the inner essence of America and transmit it to our children. The founders of this country took their inspiration from the Bible. They believed that the dignity of man stems from the Creator of the Universe who fashioned man in His Image and endowed him

with inalienable rights. No nation has been a greater crusader for the freedom and well-being of mankind than the United States. In the 20th century the evil empires of Fascism, Nazism and Communism were defeated because of America's leadership of the free world.

Let those who disparage America, especially in Europe – ask where the world would be today if not for the generosity and freedom loving spirit of the American people and steely fortitude of the American soldier. Today it has become fashionable to ridicule our country and its leaders and even some members of the clergy say terrible things about America from the pulpit. Sometimes it is important to view America from the standpoint of others who came here after experiencing oppression in their native lands. One of the greatest rabbis of the past generation, Rabbi Moses Feinstein ruled that it is a religious obligation to display loyalty to America and absolutely forbidden to engage in any speech or behavior which would offend the honor of this nation. The rabbi grew up in communist Russia where he was subjected to all manners of religious oppression. When he managed to reach America he breathed its holy air of freedom and devoted his life to religious service. He established a world renowned seminary in Manhattan, trained thousands of leaders, wrote volumes of classical works; he became a towering religious leader to millions of Jews around the world. Like all genuine spiritual giants he was exceedingly humble and taught that we must express gratitude for every good that G-d bestows on us, that we must be grateful to America and be loyal and patriotic citizens because America is a unique land of justice and compassion.

In that spirit of thankfulness, as a Jew and an American, I want to thank President Bush and the First Lady, Laura for honoring Israel on the 60th Anniversary of its miraculous rebirth. America has been a special friend and supporter of Israel since its inception. The President made a profound and moving speech from the rostrum of Israel's Knesset. Speaking about the shared democratic and spiritual values that draw the

two nations together, he said, "The alliance between our governments is unbreakable, yet the source of our friendship runs deeper than any treaty. It is grounded in the shared spirit of our people, the bonds of the Book, and the ties of the soul. When William Bradford stepped off the Mayflower in 1620, he quoted the words of Jeremiah: 'Come let us declare in Zion the word of God.' The founders of my country saw a new promised land and bestowed upon their towns names like Bethlehem and New Canaan. And in time, many Americans became passionate advocates for a Jewish state."

Making reference to the mutual dedication to the war against terrorism, the President said, "Some people suggest that if the United States would just break ties with Israel, all our problems in the Middle East would go away. This is a tired argument that buys into the propaganda of our enemies, and America rejects it utterly. Israel's population may be just over 7 million. But when you confront terror and evil, you are 307 million strong, because America stands with you." And he concluded with beautiful wishes saying, "Over the past six decades, the Jewish people have established a modern society in the Promised Land, a light unto the nations that preserves the legacy of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And you have built a mighty democracy that will endure forever and can always count on America to stand at its side. May God bless Israel." I say, may G-d bless President Bush.

Ladies and gentlemen, as we honor America's past heroes let us remember that right now our brave soldiers are in harm's way in far flung battlefields around the world. May G-d be with them to give them the strength and fortitude to successfully complete the mission in which they have performed so magnificently. Let us honor their sacrifice by being thankful and appreciative of what they do. Let us return to the values on which this great country was founded. May America always affirm its allegiance to the Creator of the Universe. May she always be blessed with Divine protection and endure forever. And let us say, Amen. ■

EXCERPTS

Letter *to the* Community of Marseille

MAIMONIDES

“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.”

“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).