

Mazal

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

We have just celebrated Purim, a festival named after the lottery, the *pur*, that nearly decided the fate of the Jewish people. But the randomness of the lottery was defeated by God's laws. You might have thought that this would have knocked luck or astrology on its head once for all. But it hasn't. Quite the contrary.

We wish each other *mazal tov* all the time, and many of us are very concerned about whether other people can have a good or bad impact on our *mazal*—whether an evil eye might strike us down or a curse ruin us.

But isn't this total superstition? And isn't the Torah unmistakably clear that we must not be superstitious? "There is no divination in Jacob and no magic in Israel," says Balaam in Numbers 23, and the law in Deuteronomy (18) is specific: "You must not practice divination, astrology, reading omens, charms or sorcery, dealing with spirits or calling up the dead."

Until relatively recently, everyone related to the natural universe through astronomy and its daughter, astrology. Spells and incantations carried out by experts could change the course of the stars and our fates. Paganism saw us as the playthings of the gods, and our fates were decided by the planets. In contrast, monotheism, I always believed, posited that the world functioned according to its own rules, which might overrule our human requirements (Avodah Zara 54b), and only our relationship with God could affect us spiritually. Our task was to accept what happens to us and see the positive. "Whatever God does (allows to happen) is for the best."

The earliest astrological chart dates back to Mesopotamia nearly four thousand years ago. The great Alexandrian Claudius Ptolemy (90-168) produced a framework of linking the astronomical solar system to astrology that is still used in this day, although scientifically it no longer holds true. Francis Bacon (1561-1626) thought that the stars influenced human behavior, though they did not determine it. Only in the 19th century did medicine succeed in severing the connection between the moon and lunacy. Yet even such moderns as Carl Jung tried to modify astrology in such a way as to have it remain relevant.

Given the importance of astrology in medieval Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, it is hardly surprising that it persisted. In Judaism astrology's interconnection with mysticism gave it continued relevance and influence. Today there are many "rabbis" who use astrology and its allied systems to help the sick and the disturbed try to cope with the pressures of life. Usually for a healthy fee or "charitable donation."

The idea persists in some Orthodox circles that astrology in Judaism is still a tool to explain the way God intervenes in the world. But then so does the idea that that past rabbis could never have got their science wrong, and if

some claimed the earth was flat or that the sun revolved around the earth every day then we must be wrong not they.

The term *mazal* is used only once in the Bible, in Kings II: "The pagans worship the sun the moon and the planets [*mazalot*]." Clearly it does not approve. Yet it all depends on what you understand *mazal* to mean. Is *mazal* fortune, something beyond our control? In which case, how does it differ from God? No one of any significance in Judaism, to the best of my knowledge, has ever said *mazal* is the same as God or divine intervention.

The Talmud in Shabbath 156a discusses the issue:

"R. Hanina said: The planetary influence gives wisdom and wealth and affects Israel. R. Johanan, on the other hand, said that Israel is immune from planetary influence [mazal used here as planetary influence]. Rab too holds that Israel is immune from planetary influence, and so does R. Akiba."

There is a great deal more throughout the Talmud and other rabbinic sources. It is clear that rabbinic opinion is divided. Today it is difficult to find any major rabbinic figure who will publicly decry the popular preoccupation with *mazal*, *ayin harah* (the evil eye), and their offshoots and variations. Once upon a time (Brachot 10b), our leaders had the guts to act against superstition. "King Chizkiyahu hid the Book of Cures and smashed the bronze serpent (of Moses's) days, and the authorities of the day approved it." Nowadays, sadly, they would make money out of it.

When *mazal* means random luck and superstition, it is clearly against Judaism (even if I know that most Jews relate to the religion superstitiously). But the idea that there are forces beyond our control—wars, epidemics or financial collapses—that affect us badly is obvious. Even so, many people have stories of miraculous events, cures, salvations, and successes that they put down to some external force, when the reality can easily be explained by examining events and causes and unusual capacities.

Those aspects of our life over which we have no control do indeed render us impotent, in the lap of the gods. Nevertheless, one does pray or hope that what unfolds through natural and unnatural causes will not have a negative effect on us. Just as we pray that our children will have an easy life free from danger, disease, and hardship. Hope for something is not the same as thinking that individuals can change the will of God or the nature of the universe. Recovering from cancer may be because certain types of cancer are more able to be fought and being given a placebo or a blessing might encourage a sick person to battle the ailment.

Some humans understand aspects of the universe we inhabit and the motives of other humans better than the ordinary person can. Some people can train themselves to read faces and gestures that tell them more about humans than the average person can see. Some people call that mind-reading and some mind-readers use this knowledge to get rich. A doctor can usually read the

physical signs better than others because of his training, and a psychiatrist can read the psychological signs because of hers. But it is equally true that both may also miss something that a more holistic mind can appreciate. We must distinguish between skills learned and claims of supernatural powers.

I do believe we can “make our own luck.” By being positive, looking out for possibilities, and thinking several steps ahead one can take better advantage of what life has to offer. This is one of the ideas behind the statement of the Talmud to avoid bad company. One’s mood, attitude, company, and friends can all impact the quality of one’s life. Avoiding bad vibes and negativity is great advice.

Random luck, on the other hand, has no place in an intelligent or a genuinely spiritual mind. To wish someone luck is simply a popular way of expressing one’s hopes and aspirations. To think that *mazal* has a power of its own that can be harnessed to control the uncontrollable is pure superstition. To treat it as code for the things we have no control over is less destructive, morally deficient, and intellectually primitive. The notion that there are irrational spells, or mystical incantations that can guarantee protection is as delusionary as fool’s gold. And most of us are indeed fools.

Maimonides, the great rationalist, in his Laws of Idolatry said:

“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).

Maimonides said that all references in the Talmud to spirits and metaphysical control over human affairs was simply a reflection of popular delusion. The masses believed in it, so the rabbis spoke in a language they were familiar with.

I realize there are many people who need the “security” of magic, fortune, astrology, and luck. Often life is so awful to us that we cannot cope. We

need comfort. It is false comfort, lies, that I deplore. I accept human frailty, because I am frail. But I am offended when I hear people say that it is a requirement of religion or even an essential part of it.