



## *Chapter Ten*

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# Out of This World

## **It's about Time . . . and Space!**

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### **The Jewish Calendar**

**Q) Why do Jews refer to dates as B.C.E. and C.E. in place of B.C. and A.D.?**

A) B.C. means “before Christ” and A.D. means “Anno Domini” (Latin for “in the year of our Lord”). They are abbreviations used to define dates based upon the birth of Christ. Their use implies the acceptance of Jesus as divine, which is rejected by the Jews. So in Jewish scholarship, B.C.E., meaning “before the Common Era,” replaces the term B.C.; and C.E., meaning “Common Era,” replaces A.D.

**Q) Why does the Jewish day begin at sundown?**

A) Isn't it great, as soon as the day begins we go to bed! The Jewish day begins at sunset based upon the description of creation in the book of Genesis. After the creation was completed each day, the Torah says, “And there was evening and there

was morning . . .” Also when describing the Shabbat, the Torah says, “From evening to evening, you shall keep the Shabbat.” This, of course, is why Shabbat begins at sundown on Friday night and finishes after sundown on Saturday night.

One of the lessons we learn from this sequence is that darkness leads to light. We start every day not knowing what the future holds—in “darkness”—but as the day progresses, we fulfill our mission in life and move to “light,” which is clear and good.

**Q) Why does the English date of my birthday fall on a different Hebrew date every year?**

A) Look on the bright side, with an English birthday and a Hebrew birthday you get two sets of birthday presents! The English date is based on the solar calendar. But the Jewish calendar is lunar. On a Jewish calendar, we have twenty-nine or thirty days in a month; on a solar calendar months are usually thirty or thirty-one days. So there are going to be discrepancies between the calendars from year to year—a regular lunar year is about eleven days shorter than a solar year.

Since the Torah states that Passover must fall in the springtime, an extra month of Adar is added every two to three years to harmonize the Jewish calendar with the seasons. So in a Jewish leap year we have two months called Adar (conveniently called Adar I and Adar II).

With this difference in calendar dates, between the lunar and solar, the Hebrew dates will not correspond to the regular calendar. You thereby end up with “two birthday dates,” the Hebrew date you were born, e.g. Shevat 18th, and the date in the solar calendar when you were born e.g. February 3rd. Those two dates coincided on the year of your birth, but rarely afterwards. Either way, you end up with two chances to celebrate your birthday if you so wish!

**Q) Why are some Jewish holidays celebrated for more days outside of Israel than in Israel?**

A) The Torah tells us how long each holiday is supposed to last: Passover, seven days; Sukkot, seven days; Shavuot one day; Shemini Atzeret, one day. In the Diaspora (outside of Israel) an extra day is added to these holidays.

The reason for the additional day is based upon a historical reality. In ancient times, two witnesses were needed to testify before the Sanhedrin (the supreme judicial body) at the start of each month, that they had personally seen the crescent of the new moon. After cross-examination, if the Sanhedrin determined their testimony to be true, the first day of the new month was declared and this information was transmitted by riders from community to community throughout Israel, and through torch signals on mountaintops to the Jewish communities outside of Israel. (In cases where it was cloudy and no one saw the new moon, the beginning of the month was delayed one day, based on astronomical calculation.) The announcement of the beginning of each new month regulated the precise time for Jewish holidays to begin.

Eventually a Jewish sect called the Sadducees wanted to place the holidays on dates of their own choosing, in defiance of the rabbis of the mainstream Jewish community. They started to light false fires, waving torches on the mountaintops on different dates to confuse the system. So to avoid the Sadducees' sabotage, the Sanhedrin decided to inform the Jews in distant places (such as Babylonia and Egypt) of the new moon also by sending messengers. This system continued until the middle of the fourth century C.E. when the Sanhedrin set up the fixed calendar, which we still follow today.

Since travel to distant communities was challenging and sometimes involved delay, the messengers did not always

arrive before the start of the holiday. This could lead to the holidays being celebrated on the wrong date—a grave danger for it would mean that Jews could inadvertently eat on Yom Kippur and consume bread on Passover. In order to avoid this possibility, the communities in the Diaspora added an extra day to the observance of each of the major holidays. These communities could then be sure that even in the case of transmission problems, one of the two days on which a holiday was celebrated would be the actual holiday.

The Kabbalists add another element, relating to the quality of a mitzvah carried out in the Land of Israel, as opposed to a mitzvah performed outside of Israel. Since the Land of Israel has an extra element of spiritual power, it takes two days outside of Israel to achieve spiritually what takes only one day in Israel.

## **Going Way Way Back in Time and Space . . .**

### **Q) Doesn't the Big Bang theory disprove God?**

A) The Big Bang theory actually supports those who believe in God. Until the mid-1960s, the overwhelming opinion of the scientific community was that the universe was eternal, and that the universe had no beginning, middle or end. This was in direct contradiction to the opening sentence of the Torah that specifically says, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.”

Then two scientists at Bell Labs in New Jersey, Arno Penzias and Robert Wilson, while scanning the heavens with a special antenna, detected a weak radiation filling all of space. This radiation was identified as the residual energy of the big bang from creation. It is now known as the cosmic microwave radiation background. Penzias and Wilson were awarded the Nobel Prize for their discovery that changed our understanding of the universe.

On June 25, 1978, Dr. Robert Jastrow, director of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's Goddard Institute for Space Studies, released NASA's announcement that the open model was probably correct. Jastrow wrote about his findings in the New York Times Magazine:

“This is an exceedingly strange development, unexpected by all but the theologians. They have always accepted the word of the Bible: ‘In the beginning God created heaven and earth’ . . . [But] for the scientist who has lived by his faith in the power of reason, the story ends like a bad dream. He has scaled the mountains of ignorance; he is about to conquer the highest peak; [and] as he pulls himself over the final rock, he is greeted by a band of theologians who have been sitting there for centuries.”

It proved that there was a creation, a beginning to our universe. The Torah got it right and 3,000 years later science confirmed the fact. The Big Bang theory does not specify what caused the creation. The Torah, of course, gives the answer: God.

**Q) How can Judaism claim the universe is roughly 6,000 years old, when science claims that the world is at least 14 billion years old?**

The Talmud tells us that understanding creation, known as Maaseh Bereshit, is one of the most esoteric and challenging areas of Torah thought and Kabbalah! So while theologians and physicists try desperately to unravel the secrets of the universe, we are all really grabbing at straws in attempting to fathom God's methodology in creating the universe.

The scientific community is constantly producing new theories as to the exact age of the universe, so that it would be unwise to accept the current scientific claim as fact. As we just pointed out, the discovery that the universe is expanding

caused a revolution in scientific thinking regarding the beginning of our universe. But even if we were to accept science's claim, it would not contradict Judaism's chronology.

The Talmud in tractate Chagigah 13b informs us that there were 974 generations before Adam. This seems startling. Who were these "generations" and where are they hinted to in the Torah?

A close look at the Torah's description of the creation of the world reveals something quite fascinating. Before Adam was created, there were six days of creation. The time during those six days is indicated abstractly: "There was evening and there was morning, day one . . ." In fact, the usual measures of time, the sun and moon, did not even exist until the fourth day of creation. So for that segment of creation, time isn't being measured in any way that we can relate to. However, once we get to Adam's life, time is listed in "human" years. "Adam lived 130 years, and was the father of Seth." "Seth lived 105 years and was the father of Enosh." The Torah seems to have two calendars of time, cosmic years, which existed before mankind was created, and human years, which start with the formation of mankind.

A formidable Torah scholar, Rabbi Yisrael Lifschitz, known as the Tiferet Yisrael, published a work in 1834 (before Darwin published "On the Origin of Species" in 1859), where he speaks of the idea that there were universes and people before Adam. Then he says, "See how the teachings of our Torah have been vindicated. In various places in the world, creatures have been found which no longer exist today. In Baltimore, they found a gigantic creature called a mammoth, which no longer exists today. In other places, they found dinosaurs over 90 feet long, and obviously no such creatures exist in the world anymore. Just look and see the truth of our Torah tradition! Even science shows that there were worlds before ours!"

He continues by saying, “If we know how to look, we shall see how the holy Torah itself hints at these facts in the opening verses. The first verse refers to the original act of creation, while the next verse, ‘the earth was void and waste,’ refers to the epochs of upheaval and destruction, which preceded our present age.

“In my opinion, the pre-historic men, whose remains have been found in our time, and who lived long before Adam, are identical with the 974 pre-Adamite generations referred to in the Talmud, and lived in the epoch immediately before our own. This is the meaning of the expression, “From world to world you are God” (Psalm 90)—the divine spark enters into world after world, in ever ascending orders of creation.”

From all this we can see that what the Talmud told us so many years ago about the repeated destruction and renewal of the earth has found confirmation in the scientific discoveries of our time.

In his book *Immortality, Resurrection and the Age of the Universe*, the scholar and physicist Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan quotes Rabbi Yitzchak of Acco, who was a close student of the Ramban and lived in the 1300s. He writes about yomo shel HaKadosh Baruch Hu—“God’s days.” Before Adam was created, we did not use human years, but Divine years. Rabbi Yitzchak then made a calculation as to how long the creation of the universe took in God years compared to human years. He concluded that from the perspective of the Torah, creation took six 24-hour days, but from our human perspective that comes to 15 billion years. Does that figure sound familiar? Remember, the rabbi wrote this calculation 700 years ago!

How does this all fit into the text of the Torah? One approach is that the Torah begins: “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.” It does not tell you what happened in all the ensuing years, merely saying, “The earth

was void and waste,” in great chaos. It’s speaking of the earth, which already existed, since there was an order of time before this. So between “In the beginning God created,” and “God’s spirit hovered over the face of the water,” there are an undetermined number of years. Perhaps even 15 billion.

The key is that the Torah leaves the details of the age of the universe open because it’s not something God wants us to focus on. The Torah is a guide to living a moral, ethical and fulfilling Godly life. Whether the universe is 6000 years, or 5, 10 or 15 billion does not play such a major role in how we live our lives. What is more important, from God’s perspective, is how we live on this earth, no matter how long it’s been in existence.

### **Q) How does Judaism approach the theory of evolution?**

The theory of evolution, based on the known fossil record, attempts to describe how living species evolved over time. At a superficial glance, its principles seem to contradict the account of creation given in our Torah. However, under further examination, we see that this is not necessarily so.

Charles Darwin himself wrote at the end of his book *Origins of the Species*, “There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed by the Creator into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.”

Rabbi Meir Leibusch, known as the Malbim, writing in the 1800s, explained in his commentary to Genesis 1:20: “Creation progressed from level to level, inanimate matter, plants, animals and man. Everything that came earlier is a preparation for that which came later. It is also known, that rising up in the ladder of stages, creation did not proceed in discontinuous leaps, but rather through intermediate stages. Thus coral

is the intermediate between inanimate matter and plants, polyps are intermediate between plants and animals, and monkeys are intermediate between animals and man.”

The Seforno (1470-1550), writes in his commentary to Bereishit 2:7: “And He blew into his nostrils the breath of life’—a living soul, waiting to accept the image of God. Nevertheless, ‘man was a living being,’ he was still only a living creature, unable to speak, until he was created in God’s image and likeness.”

A recent scholar of note, Rav Gedalia Nadel, comments on this by saying, “Seforno’s basic point [is] that the creation of man in the image of God was a lengthy process, which began in a non-rational being in the category of animals, then proceeded to develop until it developed human intellect, and also the physiological appearance of man with which we are familiar. It is reasonable that this is the correct description. The evidence of Darwin and paleontologists regarding the existence of earlier stages appears convincing.

“As long as there is recognition of the Divine will that functions in nature via spiritual forces, there is no need whatsoever to negate the descriptions of events that scientific investigation presents today. There are discoveries of skeletons of bipeds with a small skull, whose brain could not have been like the brain of the humans that we know. The man of which it says ‘Let us make man in His image,’ was the final stage of a gradual process.”

Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan notes the unusual wording of the Torah when describing the creation of fish and animals: it does not say ‘Let there be creatures’ or ‘Let there be animals,’ but instead says, “Let the water/earth bring forth living creatures.” He then writes, “This suggests that God did not actually create life at this time, but merely imparted to matter those unique properties that would make evolution take place, first

to lower and then to higher forms of life, and eventually to man himself.”

Here are the profound and moving words of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, the nineteenth-century German Torah leader, on accepting the theory of evolution: “Even if this notion were ever to gain complete acceptance by the scientific world, Jewish thought . . . would nonetheless never summon us to revere a still extant representative of this primal form as the supposed ancestor of us all. Rather, Judaism in that case would call upon its adherents to give even greater reverence than ever before to the one, sole God Who, in His boundless creative wisdom and eternal omnipotence, needed to bring into existence no more than one single, amorphous nucleus and one single law of ‘adaptation and heredity’ in order to bring forth, from what seemed chaos but was in fact a very definite order, the infinite variety of species we know today, each with its unique characteristics that sets it apart from all other creatures.”

We see from this that even if evolutionary theory were somehow one day proven to be correct, it would not pose a challenge to our Jewish tradition. That being said, however, we must recognize as well that the theory of evolution is not a proven fact, but a theory which has undergone many modifications over time and is itself an evolving work in progress. It is also a theory that many scientists and philosophers believe fails to completely explain our world. Many inconsistencies, such as “missing links”—glaring gaps in the fossil record—in addition to new challenges brought about by discoveries in modern science, are hard to explain with evolutionary theory. For example, it is incredibly difficult to conceptualize how the process of evolution could lead to the surprisingly complex and ordered structure of the numerous intricate systems found within cell biology. These, and the many other highly

ordered systems being found throughout nature, increasingly point to an underlying element of purposeful design.

An even greater problem that modern scientists and philosophers grapple with is the idea of consciousness and subjective reality. Even if one would accept the theory of physical evolution as fact, still, the theory gives virtually no explanation of the origin of human consciousness and subjective experience that define who we really are. Scientific theories of physical development do not even begin to explain this all important non-physical aspect of the reality of our existence. Rather, the undeniable presence of our consciousness and self awareness, a “world of the spirit,” demands a more meaningful explanation that physical science by its nature cannot give us. It proves the existence of a reality above simple physical science, a Divine reality.

That is the spiritual world that our great Torah has come to teach us about. The Torah is not a book that was written to teach us science. It does not detail the evolution of life, if in fact that was the method God chose to create the world, for the simple reason I mentioned in the previous answer: it’s not important how we got here, but how we live and relate to others now that we are here. The Torah is the book that teaches how to live the life of the spiritual world, the world that really matters.

**Q) Why doesn't the Torah talk about dinosaurs? Does Judaism say they never existed?**

A) Just because the Torah does not mention a certain creature does not mean it doesn't exist. The Torah does not mention kangaroos or llamas either, but we have all seen them. As it happens, according to some commentators, dinosaurs are actually mentioned explicitly in the Torah. On the fifth day of creation the Torah tells us that the *tanim* *hagedolim* were created. Some commentators define these creatures as

extremely large sea creatures. However, if you look at the word tanin, you will find it mentioned elsewhere in the Torah. When God told Moses to throw down his staff in front of Pharaoh, and informed him that it would turn into a tanin, it is widely understood to refer to a snake. Therefore in the context of the creation of the world, we can see that God created on the fifth day, very large cold-blooded creatures such as amphibians and snakes. These could very possibly be referring to dinosaurs.

What happened to these creatures? The Talmud reports that God caused the extinction of the giant tanin soon after its creation (in prehistoric timeframes) because had the tanin multiplied the world would not have been able to sustain them. Others say that they were all destroyed at the time of the flood, in the days of Noah. Either way, don't be too concerned about them; they are not around anymore to hurt anyone!

**Q) Does Judaism believe that aliens or life on other planets can exist?**

A) Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, with his expansive knowledge of Kabbalistic sources, explores the possibility of life on other planets in his essay, "On Extraterrestrial Life." He notes veiled references in Jewish writings about "inhabitants" of other planets, but these may or may not be metaphorical. For example, in the book of Judges a certain planet or star is called Meroz, and we are told it is cursed, and so are its inhabitants. This however may only be a metaphor, or the "inhabitants" are the planets and stars surrounding Meroz.

The main Kabbalistic work, the Zohar, seems to support the existence of extraterrestrial life. Jewish writings mention seven earths, and although some say this is a reference to seven continents, the Zohar states that the seven are separated by a firmament, and are inhabited! Although they are not inhabited by man, they are the domains of intelligent creatures.

We know that, according to Jewish tradition, humans are the only beings in the universe to whom God granted the power of free will. If this is so, then other planets may actually have forms of life, which may be quite intelligent, but don't have free will; like animals, they live by instinct. Therefore, unlike humans, they lack moral responsibility.

## Kabbalah and Jewish Mysticism

### More than Just a Red String!

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**Q) My friend says she studies Kabbalah every week. What is she studying exactly?**

A) I can't tell you what your friend is studying, but I can tell you about Kabbalah. The Torah that was given to the Jewish People on Mount Sinai consisted of two corresponding parts: the Written Torah and the Oral Torah. The Oral Torah can be studied on four different levels:

Peshat—the straightforward meaning of the verses.

Remez—deeper meanings hinted at in the text.

Derash—deeper understandings of the text, through hermeneutical reasoning.

Sod—Kabbalistic interpretations. What this entails will be explained below.

Collectively these four approaches to Torah are known by the Hebrew acronym *pardes*, which means an orchard. The Talmud tells the story of four great sages who dared to enter an “orchard.” One went crazy, one became a non-believer, one died, and the last of the four was able to enter and exit without being harmed. By reading this piece of Talmud, we would

think this is discussing a hike and picnic that went terribly wrong for three people. To those who know, the word *pardes* is a code word for a deep Kabbalistic state of consciousness.

The word *kabbalah* comes from the word *lekabel*, to receive. The Oral Torah was never meant to be written down. Due to circumstances out of our Sages' control, eventually it needed to be written so it would not be forgotten. *Kabbalah* was the exception: it was not written down, and it was not allowed to be taught to groups of students. It was to be transmitted only from one teacher to his prized student, and only when that student knew the rest of the Torah extremely well. It took a lifetime of preparation. This is why most people who think they are studying *Kabbalah* are only reading the surface meaning, and cannot plumb its depths. They do not understand the vast Torah context in which true *Kabbalah* is rooted.

When someone studies *Kabbalah*, four things are the major focus:

1. Divine inspiration.
2. Ways of approaching God and cleaving to Him.
3. God's uniqueness. How God reacts to our deeds in this world through His attributes of *chesed* (loving kindness), *din* (precise judgment) and *rachamim* (mercy).
4. How one perfects the spiritual worlds by performing *mitzvot*.

As the Ramban, one of the great Kabbalists said, "Every field of knowledge—whether it is science, agriculture, medicine or palmistry—can be learned from the Torah."

**Q) Someone told me that studying *Kabbalah* is dangerous. Is this true?**

**A)** Not everyone is able to study *Kabbalah*. First, you need to be fluent in the other areas of Torah. According to the great

scholar Rabbi Yaakov Hillel, who is one of the premier authorities on Kabbalah today, Kabbalah can be dangerous when its wisdom is used for “practical Kabbalah.”

Here is why. God created four spiritual “worlds,” which conceal His light until it enters this material world. In descending order, they are:

Atzilut—nearness

Beriah—creation

Yetzirah—formation

Asiyah—action (our physical world)

The world of Atzilut is wholly good, Beriah is mostly good, Yetzirah is half good. The world of Asiyah is mostly evil, and the little bit of good it does contain is mixed with evil.

Rabbi Hillel writes that if a person uses practical Kabbalah, which operates in Asiyah, the evil that adheres to the good will cling to him. His soul, which he hoped to purify, will be sullied with that evil. An example of practical Kabbalah would be using incantations to control angels or negative spiritual forces to have them do your bidding. According to the Kabbalists, this action could have detrimental effects on the person performing it, as it could lead to the practitioner becoming impoverished, or dying of a dreaded disease. Not suggested!

It is forbidden to study practical Kabbalah today. The great Kabbalist, the Arizal (Rabbi Isaac Luria), who lived in Safed, in Israel in the 1500s, forbade the use of practical Kabbalah, and even refused to teach it to his closest disciple, Rabbi Chaim Vital.

Kabbalistic ideas however, can be very inspirational and rewarding. You should be very careful to only learn from an individual who is well versed in what he is teaching you, and

not taking advantage of you in any way. The rule of thumb I like to recommend to my students is: If someone tells you he is a Kabbalist, don't believe him. If, however, he denies he's a Kabbalist, while other respected rabbis confirm that he is, then you can believe he is one!

**Q) How can we study spiritual worlds that we can't see?**

A) Kabbalah has two main branches of study, which describe higher worlds that we are unable to see but may be able to experience. By studying these realms, the student of Kabbalah is able to understand spiritual realms, without actually seeing them. This may be similar to a physicist studying atoms, or an astronomer exploring distant galaxies, which are not visible to the human eye, by using equations or mathematical formula. This study comes in two main forms:

Ma'aseh Bereishit describes all the "upper" (spiritual) and "lower" (physical) worlds: how they were created, how they are directed, and how they may be corrected and brought to perfection. It also reveals the mystery of God's unity, and the secret meaning of the Torah and its laws.

Ma'aseh Merkavah—teaches the various methods by which you can sanctify and elevate yourself until you reach prophetic vision. These methods include praying, performing mitzvot with the correct special intentions (kavanot), purifying your body, and rectifying the roots of your soul.

**Q) On my Birthright trip I saw a lady handing out red string. When I asked her what it was for, she gestured that I should wrap it around my wrist. I took it, and then she demanded payment. What is this red string all about?**

A) Wearing a red string has become quite a fashion statement today, especially since celebrities such as Madonna have been seen sporting them. Some people claim that the red string is

meant to protect you from the “evil eye,” the materialization of human envy, which could cause pain or loss, and other harmful spirits. (See question on the “evil eye” below.) Jewish tradition prohibits superstitious activities such as not walking under a ladder (unless there is someone on top with a can of paint), not opening an umbrella indoors or avoiding black cats.

The reason these superstitious practices are forbidden is because we should have faith in God only, and not believe in a talisman or omen. By tying a red string on your wrist, which God did not command you to do in the Torah, it is possible that you are assuming that a power other than God can help you. Such superstitions were also the way some non-Jewish nations used to worship their gods or placate devils, and following their customs is forbidden according to Jewish tradition.

The question is whether wearing a red string is an effective and valid form of supernatural protection, which would permit it, or a superstition adopted from other religions or pagan ritual, which would forbid it.

Some scholars write of an old custom of wrapping a long piece of red string around the tomb of our matriarch Rachel, who is buried in Bethlehem, while reciting certain prayers. The custom was to then cut up the string into smaller pieces. It was believed that giving a piece of that string to a pregnant woman would enable her to have an easy pregnancy and a safe delivery. Later, some would take that string and tie it onto the wrist of the baby, or onto the baby’s crib, which would prevent the baby falling prey to the evil eye.

While we are not sure wearing the actual red string does bring God’s protection to the wearer, the reminder of Rachel’s character and emulating her ways of consideration, compassion, and selflessness for the benefit of others, while simultaneously giving charity to the poor, might protect one from evil and harm more than the string itself.

**Q) I was in a taxi in Israel, and I saw that the driver had hung a bracelet of what looked like fish eyes from the mirror. I asked why, and he responded in broken English, “no evil eye.” What was he talking about?**

A) The idea of an ayin hara or “evil eye” appears in connection to a number of stories in the Torah and Talmud. Here are a few examples:

When Moses was told by God to take a census of the Jewish People, he was warned not to count them directly. Instead, he was told to take a half-shekel coin from every person, and then count the number of coins to determine how many people there were. The reason this unusual method was employed was because counting the people directly could cause harm to them through the “evil eye.”

Before going to war, King David made the mistake of counting the nation directly. Subsequently, a plague killed seventy-thousand people.

The Talmud says that when you “cover” your money and your possessions so that they are not appraised, what you have will be blessed and increase. However, when you show off what you have, letting it all be seen and counted, there is no blessing.

One of the great sages, Rabbi Yehoshua said, “Three things remove a person from this world: the evil eye, the evil inclination and hatred of people.”

So what does all this mean? What do all of these stories have in common?

The connecting factor is jealousy. When you expose too much of what you have, and other people see those things, they can become jealous. For example, when someone sees your nice car, beautiful house or lovely children, they may feel jealousy in their heart. He (or she) may say, or even think,

“Why did he get that car?” or “Why does she deserve that husband?”

Those words are considered prayers, not very kind ones, but prayers nonetheless. And even a negative prayer can set off a spiritual mechanism. God makes an accounting of whether the owner of those items really deserves them. Did he use the gifts for the good, or merely show them off? Did he use these blessings to help others, or were they used for selfish purposes? Based upon that decision, the owner will either be permitted to keep the blessings, or could lose the right to that blessing. It will be taken away.

As the great Jewish thinker Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler puts it, “Jealousy has the power to make people suffer. One person who has what others lacks is careless, and lets other people see what he has. This causes pain to others, and their cry goes heavenward.”

So what’s with the fish eyes?

Joseph was blessed by having a “good eye,” (always wanting good for others) to such a degree, that he was not affected by the evil eye. When his father, Jacob, was about to die, he blessed Joseph’s children that they should multiply greatly, like fish. Why fish? Because fish have a few special traits: they are very silent, they live under the water and are not readily seen, and they multiply rapidly. In order to keep our blessings, we should emulate these traits.

Here are four ways to protect yourself from the evil eye:

1. Be silent and don’t discuss everything you have with everyone.
2. Keep under the radar, and don’t let everyone see everything you possess.

3. Be grateful for what you have, thanking God for the blessings.
4. Use the blessings God has given you to help others.

And through that modesty of behavior and action, the blessings that have been granted to you will stay with you and will increase.

**Q) When my grandmother hears bad news, she says “pooh pooh pooh” and then spits on the ground. Is this a Jewish superstition?**

A) Perhaps this practice comes from something that is mentioned in Jewish writings. The Chafetz Chaim, a great Jewish leader who lived in Europe before the Second World War, discusses this custom. He writes that when a bad thought enters your mind during prayer, you should say “pi pi pi” (which are comprised of the initials of two biblical names, Palti and Joseph) and then spit on the floor three times. This may have morphed into “pooh pooh pooh.”

Palti was a very great man who lived at the time of the early Jewish kings. He overcame an incredibly difficult challenge during his lifetime for which he became very famous, involving the daughter of King Saul. He was instructed to marry King Saul’s daughter Michal, knowing full well that she was already married to David, who at that point was not yet king of Israel. He resisted consummating the marriage by placing a sword between them while in bed to separate them. He passed this test with flying colors, and he is remembered in Jewish history as an extremely holy individual.

Joseph was the son of the patriarch Jacob. He was sold by his brothers as a slave and wound up in Egypt, living and working for a prominent courtier of Pharaoh named Potipher. Joseph was a very handsome young man, and Potipher’s

wife tried her best to seduce him, on one occasion coming very close to success. He overcame his personal desires and resisted her.

The Chafetz Chaim concludes that when you recall these two people and their intense power to overcome incredible temptation, your mind will be cleared of any bad thoughts.

Spitting is a sign that the person is disgusted by the thought he has had. Even though real spit doesn't need to leave your mouth, the gesture is a strong one.

### **Q) Does Judaism view the number 13 as an unlucky number?**

**A)** The number 13 in Judaism is an excellent number. It is the age a boy becomes bar mitzvah! What's better than that?

Numerology (in Hebrew, gematria) is used to enhance a point or an idea. This is done in the following way. Each one of the Hebrew letters is assigned a number. The first Hebrew letter, aleph, is the number one; the second letter, bet, is the number two; gimmel is the number three, and so on. So in every Hebrew word, the numerical values of each letter can be added together, producing a total. That number represents the word, and will reveal an aspect of its true meaning.

But wait—there's more! The Hebrew word for one, echad, is made up of three letters: aleph, chet and daled. The gematria of those three letters are  $1+8+4=13$ . The word echad is used many times in reference to God, because God is the true "Oneness" in the universe. Love in Hebrew is ahavah, with five letters equivalent to  $1+5+2+5=13$ . When we combine these two ideas, we end up with God's unity being the ultimate expression of love, which corresponds to the number 13.

So the next time you go to a hotel without a 13th floor, make sure you share this info with the manager! Chances are, he may: (1) humor you and renumber the hotel floors, (2) tell

you to go fly a kite, or (3) be so enraptured by this news that he will sign up for a course in Jewish numerology!

**Q) I went to a family birthday party, and a religious uncle got upset when the birthday boy wanted to blow out the candles. Is there a problem in Judaism with blowing out the candles on a birthday cake?**

A) The Torah forbids supernatural customs adopted from other nations. Making a wish and blowing out the candles on a birthday cake may not seem like such a custom, but it probably is. In Greek times, people on their birthday would try to find favor in the eyes of the moon goddess, Artemis. They would make round cakes—more like pita because “cake” hadn’t been invented yet—to symbolize the full moon, and then ask the goddess to grant them a wish. They would put candles on it to make it glow like the moon. The theory was that in blowing out the candles, the person’s wishes or prayers would be carried aloft by the smoke to the gods.

Today, round cakes are often baked, and not just for birthdays. So the pagan birthday “moon cake” has lost significance. Putting candles on a cake no longer carries religious significance either. It just makes the cake more exciting, so it’s fine.

So why did the religious uncle object? Some people say that the soul of a person is compared to flame (ner, in Hebrew), as it says in Proverbs: “Ner Hashem, nishmat adam—Man’s soul is the candle of God.” This is the reason a candle is lit in remembrance of the deceased on their *yahrzeit*, the anniversary of their death. According to Jewish law you may blow out candles. Some people are careful not to blow out a flame which is symbolic of a soul, and therefore, life itself.

## Astrology and the Zodiac—So Aquarians Aren't the Most Charming of Them All?

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### **Q) Do Jews believe in astrology and horoscopes?**

A) Yes, we believe in astrology, but not in common pop astrology. We don't believe in newspaper or magazine horoscopes that predict all Aquarians will today "meet a tall dark stranger" or warns Sagittarians that today they should "beware of a tall dark stranger" or that Pisceans "will become a tall dark stranger!"

The Talmud speaks about the idea of astrology. One discussion revolves around how the hour of the day a person is born influences his personality traits, and even his fate. At hourly intervals, different planetary configurations are considered to occupy planetary "houses" and these exert influences on the individuals born at that time.

For example, if you were born at the time of the sun's influence, you will have a lustrous appearance, but your secrets will be revealed to all; so if you attempt to steal, you will not be successful. If you were born at the time of the influence of Mercury, you will be very wise. Being born under the influence of the moon means you will suffer afflictions, but if you attempt to steal, you will be successful. If you are born under the sign of Mars, you will spill blood!

Looking at these astrological predictions, you would think that a person has no free will! But free will is available to everyone at all times. So we have two important caveats to add to our discussion, both of which will synergize the understanding of astrology, and will keep our free will intact. It all has to do with looking beyond the surface interpretations of those predictions.

For example, when the Talmud states that if you are born under Mars, you will be "a spiller of blood," it could mean

that you will be a murderer, but it could also be interpreted that you will be a butcher, a surgeon, or even a mohel (Jewish circumciser.) The proclivity toward blood may be there; you just have to channel it the right way.

The Talmud also makes the comment: “ein mazel l’Yisrael—the Jewish People are above astrology [and are not affected by it].” The proof for this comes from the story of Abraham. We are told that Abraham and Sarah wanted a child very much, yet Abraham complained to God that according to his astrological predictions, he would not be able to have children. God then told him the following: “Don’t worry about the astrological predictions. Jupiter is in the west, I will put it in the east.” And Abraham and Sarah did have a son, who was called Isaac.

Interestingly, God did not say that Abraham was wrong in his predictions. God loved Abraham so much for all the good he was doing for the world that He changed the astrological positions so they would work better for him.

Another story involves the daughter of an illustrious sage, Rabbi Akiva. An astrologer told Rabbi Akiva that on his daughter’s wedding day, she would die (not a pleasant thing to tell someone). Obviously Rabbi Akiva was greatly distressed by this prediction. The wedding day arrived. As the bride was preparing her hair, she took a hairpin and stuck it into the wall for safekeeping. The wedding day passed perfectly, and she was still alive! Rabbi Akiva went into her room, and saw that when she had stuck the pin into the wall, she had pierced a poisonous snake that had made its way into the cracks in the wall.

Rabbi Akiva did not understand how this could have occurred. So he asked his daughter what had happened that day that could have led to this outcome, considering the prediction of the astrologer. She replied that the only unusual thing that had happened was that while she was getting ready

for the wedding party, a poor man came knocking at the door for food. In the midst of all her wedding preparations, she went and prepared a full plate of food and gave it to the poor man. From then on, Rabbi Akiva would always teach, “Acts of kindness can save a person from death.”

So from these examples we can understand the Talmud’s meaning regarding astrology. We can say that astrology may be able to predict events in your life—but you can overcome anything by choosing how to use the cards that God deals to you. Through acts of kindness and other mitzvot, even astrological predictions can be annulled.

**Q) What are the Jewish months and what is their connection to the zodiac?**

A) Each Hebrew month has its own energy, beginning with Rosh Chodesh, the “new moon,” with its own star sign that reflects what the essence of that month is all about. This is also reflected in the Jewish holiday that occurs in each particular month. According to the astrological chart, the month in which you are born indicates a hidden strength you can develop, or a weakness you can overcome; however, you are not locked into the “personality” of your month.

Jacob’s twelve sons, whose families evolved into the twelve tribes of Israel, are also each reflected in the twelve months of the zodiac. Each soul of the twelve sons was rooted in one of the twelve months, and their attributes can be found in their month. As you will see, each of the tribes played a unique role in Jewish society; each had its own function that ensured a harmonious, healthy, spiritual and prosperous nation.

Here is a list of months, the energy, the astrological sign, and the tribe rooted in each Hebrew month, as explained by the Kabbalistic book, *Sefer Yetzirah*, Book of Formation. After the listing, we’ll take them one at a time.



Month	Energy	Astrological Sign	Jewish Tribe
Nissan	Redemption	Aries—Lamb	Judah
Iyar	Hard Work	Taurus—Ox	Issachar
Sivan	Unity	Gemini—Twins	Zebulun
Tammuz	Clarity of Vision	Cancer—Crab	Reuben
Av	Listening	Leo—Lion	Simeon
Elul	Prepare to Return	Virgo—Maiden	Gad
Tishrei	Returning	Libra—Scales	Ephraim
Cheshvan	Bitterness and Cold	Scorpio—Scorpion	Manasseh
Kislev	Trust	Sagittarius—The Bow	Benjamin
Tevet	Good Eye	Capricorn—Goat	Dan
Shevat	Healthy Eating	Aquarius—Water Carrier	Asher
Adar	Laughter	Pisces—Fish	Naphtali

## Nissan - We are redeemed

Nissan is the first month of the Jewish year. Its sign is Taleh—the lamb. When the Jewish People were about to leave Egypt, God commanded them to take a lamb, which the Egyptians worshiped as a god, and lead it through the streets to their home. This lamb served as the Passover offering. Its blood

was used to mark the door and lintels of each Jewish home so that God would “pass over” them and not strike the first-born in that home dead, as He did to the Egyptians. The lamb was eaten at the first Seder on the very night preceding the departure of the Jewish People from Egypt. As sheep follow their shepherd, so too, the Jewish People were led out of Egypt by their shepherd, Moses.

Our Jewish kings come from the tribe of Judah, so it is a royal month. A king rules with the power of his decrees, which he speaks with his mouth. So speech is the attribute to work on this month. We especially use speech at the Passover Seder when we read the Haggadah: the word itself means to “speak” or “tell” the story of the Exodus. According to Jewish tradition, Nissan is the month that the Jewish People will be redeemed again when the Messiah comes, who will come from the tribe of Judah.

The Jewish People were redeemed on the fifteenth day of Nissan, and this redemption was performed through great miracles. So if you wish to tap into the miraculous, this is the month that has potential miraculous power, especially to set you free from whatever is enslaving you.

### **Iyar—A time for introspection**

In the Bible, the month of Iyar is called the month of Ziv, which means radiance. The name Iyar is also connected to the Hebrew word for light, which is *ohr*. This light is related to the power of healing, as the acrostic of the Hebrew words meaning “God is your healer” utilizes the Hebrew letters of Iyar.

Iyar is symbolized by the *Shor*—the bull, which likes to dwell in isolation. Iyar is therefore a time of introspection and self-development, a time of preparation for receiving the Torah during the next month, Sivan. The word for ox in Hebrew also means to look, or to observe. So we “look” into ourselves during this month, and reflect on our true potential.

However, during the month of Iyar there were times when the Jewish People also exhibited the rebellious qualities of the bull and bucked the leadership of Moses and Aaron.

Issachar is the most scholarly tribe of Israel. The Sages of the Great Court, the Sanhedrin, was mostly composed of sages from the tribe of Issachar. In particular, the tribe of Issachar were masters of the secret of the Jewish calendar.

The ox is a beast of burden that works hard to slowly and steadily reach its goal. So the energy of this month allows you to emulate the ox; it enables you isolate yourself introspectively so you can work on reaching your goals.

### **Sivan—We receive the Torah**

The first two astrological signs are both represented by animals: Aries the Lamb, and Taurus the Bull. It is only with this month's sign Teomim—the Twins that we find a sign which is represented by Man.

The Torah was given during the month of Sivan under the first human sign, Twins, to indicate that only after the giving of the Torah can Man achieve his full potential and be raised above the level of animals.

The Jewish People received the Torah on the sixth day of Sivan. In order to do this, they needed to be united in heart and mind as though they were a single person. It was only in this state of unity, of being one, that they could receive the Torah, which is also a singular entity. This is because the Torah is the expression of God, Who is One. The symbol of the twins is an expression of “oneness,” of people who are physically separate but joined in a spiritual kinship, resembling each other to the point that they are identical.

Zebulun was a tribe of seafaring business people whose wealth supported the Torah study of the tribe of Issachar.

These two brothers (later, tribes) had different careers but worked together, symbolized by the twins. The concept of twins can be seen in the image of the Two Tablets of the Law, which God gave to the Jewish People at Mount Sinai.

The relationship between God and the Jewish nation is often compared to the love between a bride and groom. Standing at Mount Sinai, the Jewish People and God committed to each other, in a sense became “married.” The twin characters of this month evoke the idea of God facing His bride, the Jewish People, and giving His “ring” of commitment, the Torah.

Zebulun is the only tribe with the Hebrew letter zayin in its name. This letter appears in the Torah topped by a crown, symbolic of the crown of Torah. So the energy you can tap into this month is acquiring Torah for yourself. By learning all you can, you can achieve the spiritual perfection which only the Torah can give you.

### **Tammuz—Seeing clearly**

Tammuz can be a challenging month, as the forces of desire seem to be strong during this month. The Aramaic translation of Tammuz is “heating” which suggests the heat of physical desire. However heat can and should be turned into light!

The sign of this month is Cancer, or the Crab . The home of the crab is water, which flows freely and unrestrained, unless it is blocked. The crab is a passive creature that tends to run and hide. Tammuz begins the summer months. During the summer, you are free to go out and enjoy the world, like water flowing in a stream. But like a crab, at some points you must stop and retreat “into your shell” to evaluate how you are spending your summer and what you are achieving.

This month is connected to Jacob’s first-born son Reuben. In the Biblical story in which Reuben tampers with the

sanctity of his father's marriage, he acted on his impulses, and made a mistake. Yet he acknowledged his error and repented. So he turned his "heat" into spiritual "light."

In Hebrew the name is Reuben and it means "to see." The goal is to improve your view of situations and see the good in what can otherwise be challenging realities.

Viewing people with a critical eye leads to discord, and the Seventeenth of Tammuz begins a period of mourning known as "The Three Weeks," commemorating the destruction of the First and Second Holy Temples in Jerusalem. Our sages tell us that the destruction of the Second Temple came about because of discord and a lack of respect between the Jews.

The sin of the Golden Calf at Mount Sinai also took place in Tammuz. The Jewish People mistakenly viewed their situation in a negative light when Moses delayed coming down from the mountain. This led to their clamoring for another leader, which led to the creation and worship of the Golden Calf.

You can use your power of spiritual sight this month, to see through falsehood, and reveal God's truth in the world. The word Tammuz has the word, tam or "simple" inside it. This month requires you to remain pure and simple, and to stay on target as the summer months begin.

### **Av—A time to mourn**

The month of Av is regarded as a sad month, as the Ninth of Av was the date both the First and Second Holy Temples in Jerusalem were destroyed, hundreds of years apart. That date has become the day of national mourning for the Jewish People. The word av means father, as our Father in Heaven consoles us during this month.

The month of Av is associated with the tribe of Simeon, in Hebrew Shimon. The root of the name Shimon is Shema which means "to listen." So Av is a time that is predisposed to

correct mistakes in regard to hearing and listening to lashon hara (gossip) and rechilut (slander). When Moses sent spies to reconnoiter the land of Israel, they returned with a slanderous report. Their description of the land that “eats its inhabitants” and its indomitable armies discouraged the Jewish People to the point that they wept and wanted to go back to Egypt! The date they returned and gave that report was the Ninth of Av, and it has been a day of tragedy for our nation ever since.

Even though Av is the saddest time of the year for us, fraught as it is with tragedy, in the future it will be a month of great happiness. That day of disaster will also be the day that the Messiah will be born. He will come from the tribe of Judah whose symbol is the lion.

You can use the power of this month to work on correcting aspects of your speech.

### **Elul—Preparing to Return**

Elul is about preparing yourself for the judgment of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, which arrive next month in Tishrei. The word Elul is made up of four letters that make up the acrostic for the Hebrew expression “I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine,” which is a reference to the loving relationship between God and the Jewish People.

The name of the month itself means “searching” in Aramaic, inferring the sincere soul-searching we do for thirty days before Rosh Hashanah arrives. Jacob’s son, Gad, is associated with this month. The word gad means “group,” so we know we need to strive toward unity as a group this month.

The astrological sign of Elul is the maiden, symbolizing modesty and purity. It is the perfect sign for introspection and self-improvement. You are reflecting on your character defects and repenting for the mistakes you made over the past year. Elul requires you to be modest in your behavior and humble

in your relationship to others. According to Kabbalah, feminine attributes rule this month, and Elul is rooted in a deeper understanding of the self.

### **Tishrei—Returning to God**

The sign of the month of Tishrei, Libra, is called Moznaim in Hebrew, which literally means “scales/balances.” The symbol of the balances represents the month of Tishrei because the first day of the month is Rosh Hashanah and the tenth day is Yom Kippur. These are days when the future of the world and all its inhabitants “hangs in the balance” and your actions are weighed and judged. This month is bountiful with opportunities for spiritual perfection. With Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and Sukkot falling in this month, you can tip the scales to your favor by utilizing the many mitzvot this month affords you.

By repenting and “returning” during the ten days from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur, and then entering the sukkah on Sukkot four days after Yom Kippur, you are starting the year off right.

The name of this month’s tribe, Ephraim, means fruitful, expressing our wish that our union with God will have positive repercussions throughout the coming year.

### **Cheshvan—Feeling cold and alone**

The month of Cheshvan is also called Mar Cheshvan or “bitter Cheshvan.” One reason for the bitterness is that of all the months of the year, Cheshvan alone has no Yom Tov, no festival of its own.

The poison of the scorpion is cold, symbolizing the danger of approaching life without passion. The Hebrew name of this month’s tribe is Menasheh; the same letters are used to spell “breathing” (neshimah). Inhaling is connected to the sense we refine this month, smell. Our sense of smell is considered the

most spiritual of our senses. In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve sinned with all their senses, except the sense of smell. They ate the fruit, after seeing it, touching it, and hearing God's voice telling them not to eat it. Smell was the only sense not implicated in this sin and was the only faculty not affected by this event; it has remained spiritually purer ever since. Interestingly, the word for a smell, *reyach*, is related to the word for spirituality, *ruchani*. So this month's potential for a heightened sense of spirituality is connected to the sense of smell.

### **Kislev—Having faith in God**

The name Kislev derives from the Hebrew word *kessel* which can mean confidence or trust. The miracle of Chanukah happened on the twenty-fifth day of Kislev. It reflects the active trust of the Hasmoneans (the Maccabees) in God that spurred them to stand up and fight against the Hellenistic Greek kingdom. It is a time to strengthen our faith in God's support for all actions dedicated to holiness.

The symbol of the archer's bow evokes the Maccabees' weapons used to defeat the Greek army. The bow also represents the first rainbow that was seen after Noah's Flood. The rainbow symbolizes the pact that God made with mankind to never again destroy the world with water.

Chanukah was one of the last open miracles that happened on behalf of the Jewish People in history. The miracle of the lights began in Kislev. You can use the power of this month to put your trust in God that He will bring you salvation, as he did to the Jewish People thousands of years ago at this exact time.

Accordingly, this month's tribe, Benjamin, possessed valiant warriors who helped protect the small nation of Israel. Their territory contained the site of the Holy Temple, where our prayers and aspirations are directed.

## **Tevet—It’s all good!**

The word Tevet comes from the word tov which means good. When a person has a “good eye” for others he is generous and forbearing; he demonstrates a developed level of maturity. Tevet, the month of the tribe of Dan, relates to the growing-up process, from a state of immaturity to a state of maturity. In the Bible, a goat represents several things, but primarily it is used as an analogy to man in reference to the Holy Temple offerings. The goat is a domesticated animal, shepherded and cared for, just as we are supported and sustained by a loving God. It is also a stubborn animal; and with maturity in our understanding of Torah we are able to resist any temptation to abandon it. A mature goat, a ram, represents leadership as well. We are reminded that it is our mission to lead the way in moral and ethical behavior, to represent goodness and kindness, as God has instructed us to do in the Torah.

The attribute to work on this month is to judge other people favorably, and to improve all our relationships with others.

The tribe associated with this month is Dan. In Hebrew, the word dan means judgment. With honesty and maturity, we must judge our own behavior; but when judging the actions of others, our generous “good eye” must be activated, giving everyone the benefit of the doubt.

## **Shevat—Filling ourselves with Torah**

The sign of the Jewish People as a whole is the water carrier. The only purpose of a bucket is to be a vessel to carry water; so too the only purpose of the Jewish People is to carry the living waters of the Torah. Just as a person cannot live without water, the Jewish People cannot survive without the Torah. When we look at our history, it is clear that what has kept us a nation during 2,000 years of Diaspora has been our devotion to the

Torah and our precise observance of it. This month, smack in the middle of the winter, is a good time to fill up on Torah knowledge. You have to stay indoors anyway. So grab a Jewish book and learn something!

The holiday occurring in this month, Tu B'Shevat, is celebrated by eating fruits, reflecting this month's attribute, healthy eating. The Hebrew name *asher* is related to the word *osher* meaning happiness or bliss, also to *ashrei*, fortunate! So this month is a good time to think about God's gifts to us of physical and spiritual sustenance. And on the topic of gifts, don't forget mine; this is also my birth month and I know how important this is to you!

### **Adar—A time to rejoice!**

In the Purim story, when Haman plotted the genocide of the entire Jewish nation he consulted the stars to see which month would be the most propitious to execute his murderous plan. He found that the month of Adar, whose sign is fish, contained no special merit for the Jews which would make them vulnerable. He was confident that he could swallow his prey, the Jewish People, as a fish devours smaller fish.

Since Moses had died in Adar, Haman felt that this was a sign that the Jews would be spiritually weaker in this month. Fatal mistakes occur when you only know half a story: he did not realize that Moses was also born in Adar. And while it's true that fish can swallow up their prey, they can be swallowed by bigger fish! Which is exactly what happened to Haman and his cohorts: all their plans were turned upside down.

The celebration of Purim bids us to shed the inhibitions that conceal our inner essence. Normally, transforming evil into holiness is a methodical process. However, our sages teach us that "joy breaks all boundaries." Through laughter, this month's attribute, we transform obstacle into opportunity, a

decree for destruction into a day of celebration. We effect this transformation with the speed of this month's tribe, Naphtali, the swiftest of the sons of Jacob.

The attribute we can improve this month is the power of laughter! By realizing God runs all the events of this world, and has full control of our enemies, like he did Haman, we are able to "laugh" off the worries that sometimes prevent us from becoming who we are capable of being.

The two fish of Pisces, swimming in opposite directions, symbolize this total turnaround of events.