

THE JEWISH PERSPECTIVE OF ASTROLOGY

by Rabbi Dr. Nachum Amsel | February 19, 2019

This essay is reprinted from the book, "The Encyclopedia of Jewish Values" published by Urim, or the upcoming books, "The Encyclopedia of Jewish Values: Man to Man" or "The Encyclopedia of Jewish Values: Man to G-d" to be published in the future. This essay is not intended as a source of practical halachic (legal) rulings. For matters of halachah, please consult a qualified posek (rabbi).

Throughout the ages, there have always been individuals who have used the movements of the stars as a guide for their behavior. Even in this age of scientific discovery, more and more prominent people admit to believing in astrology and confess to using astrological predictions when making personal decisions. Is there any legitimacy to astrology? Does Judaism reject or support belief in the validity of astrology? Can one be a believing Jew and also believe in astrology?

As is often the case, the Talmud offers much conflicting evidence regarding these questions. Many sources seem to support the validity of astrology, while other sources seem to reject its validity. These Talmudic sources will be presented and analyzed, and, with the aid of later authorities, a unified Judaic approach will hopefully evolve.

THE VALIDITY OF ASTROLOGY IN THE SOURCES

The primary source supporting the concept of astrology comes from a passage in the Tractate Shabbat¹ where it says that there is a star which causes some people to be wise, another star which causes some people to become wealthy, etc. It further states that the timing of one's birth (which day of the week, not month or date) determines one's personality. Rabbi Chanina adds that the hour of the day in which the birth occurred predicts the future of this infant.

Then there is a debate (on the same Talmudic page) whether there exists a *Mazal* (a planetary influence) for the Jewish people as a whole. While most opinions say that there is no influence, they cite as a proof the story of Abraham who came to G-d and said, "My astrological indicators say that I will not have a child" (after G-d had promised Abraham a child). G-d then changed the astrology (the placement of the planets) so that Isaac would be born to Abraham. Thus, it seems that there is no planetary influence upon the Jewish people. However, from this story, the phrase "there is no planetary influence for the Jewish people" indicates that there was an influence, but that G-d changed it. From this answer, it is not clear at all from this passage whether the planetary influence exists or not.

Later, on that same Talmudic page, Rabbi Akiva, who had stated his opinion that there is no planetary influence upon the Jewish people, was told by non-Jewish astrologers (Chaldeans) that his daughter was in danger of being bitten by a snake. Rabbi Akiva was very worried and then did something that would kill the snake. Later, it turns out that Rabbi Akiva's daughter had performed an act of charity and Rabbi Akiva proclaims that it was the act of charity had saved her from death. This source is, once again, very enigmatic. Rabbi Akiva, who says that there is no planetary influence for Jews, heeded the advice of the astrologers as truth, and then it turns out that the astrologers' predictions did not come true after all. What is the true intention of this passage?

Based on the Talmud's use of the word *Mazal* in this source, the commonly used term "Mazal Tov" does not mean "congratulations" but, rather, "you have been blessed with a good planetary sign, indicating that normative Judaism does believe that the stars have some influence."

¹ Shabbat 156a

Other sources also indicate the power of astrological influence. Another Talmudic passage² says that the life span, the children and food of a person are all determined by planetary forces, and not by man himself. Still another Talmudic quotation³ says that G-d changed the astrological charts (moved around the planets) so that the flood at the time of Noah could come on a day which usually does not allow a lot of rain. The Midrash⁴ discusses the various planetary alignments before and after Adam's sin. The Talmud⁵ records that there is a certain specific day of the week (Tuesday) when a Jew should move in and move out of his or her house. And yet, various other Talmudic sources seem to negate the validity of this entire approach.

NON-VALIDITY OF ASTROLOGY IN THE SOURCES

The Torah itself forbids consulting with mediums and wizards.⁶ A few verses earlier⁷ it says in the Torah "*Lo Te-onenu*." In the Talmud,⁸ there is a three-way disagreement what this phrase actually forbids. Rabbi Akiva says this forbids predicting the future, i.e. consulting an astrologer who says that on this day you should do this particular action. But can this be the same Rabbi Akiva who acted on the advice of the astrologers (Chaldeans) who predicted about his daughter? In another passage,⁹ it clearly says that a Jew may not consult an astrologer.

How can these apparent multiple contradictions be resolved to emerge with a unified Jewish approach?

RESOLVING THE APPARENT CONFLICTS

The beginning of a resolution of the question can be found in the Geonic period. They say¹⁰ that one may not view astrology as fatalistic. While it is true that astrology does give a person an inclination, each person has the ability to overcome that basic inclination. Thus, the guiding phrase for Jews is, "All is in the hands of Heaven except the fear of Heaven".¹¹ There is determination in that all things are controlled by G-d, except for man's moral choice. Thus, although man is born with a certain proclivity, he has the ability to choose to overcome these tendencies. One of the ways in which to overcome these tendencies is through prayer.¹²

Nachmanides,¹³ who lived several hundred years after the period of the Geonim, tries to resolve the contradictions in the Talmud by saying that while one may not ask an astrologer for a forecast of the future, a pattern for prediction does indeed exist. Based on the verse commanding man to be "complete

² Moed Katan 28a

³ Rosh Hashanah 11a

⁴ Midrash Beraishit Rabbah 10:4

⁵ Pesachim 2a

⁶ Leviticus 19:31

⁷ Leviticus 19:26

⁸ Sanhedrin 65b

⁹ Pesachim 113b

¹⁰ Otzar HaGe'onim 133

¹¹ Nidah 16b

¹² Otzar Hamidrashim, p. 496

¹³ On Deuteronomy 18:13 and in his Responsa, no. 282

with G-d,"¹⁴ and used in the Talmud quoted previously to prove one should not consult astrologers, Nachmanides stresses that the Jew must believe that everything in life comes exclusively from G-d and from Him alone can we ask about future events.¹⁵ He stresses, however, that this pattern laid out by G-d for each individual can be altered through individual merit and deeds. Thus, Rabbi Akiva's contradiction is resolved. He stated that one may not ask an astrologer for information and predictions. However, when he was told information (without asking) he was indeed worried, as there is some validity in astrology. The act of charity by his daughter, which changed the fate predicted for her, did indeed save her life.

Maimonides¹⁶ disagrees completely with the approaches of Nachmanides and, before him, the Geonim. Rejecting the validity of astrology altogether, Maimonides says that the planets are mere agents of G-d for reward and punishment for actions chosen by the free will of man, but they do not contain any unique power of their own. Anyone who believes this, says Maimonides, is an ignoramus and a fool. Therefore, anyone who asks the advice of an astrologer is punished.

The Tur,¹⁷ who compiled many of the great commentaries of the Middle Ages while organizing Jewish law in four major areas (a system later used to codify Jewish law by the Shulchan Aruch), quotes both Nachmanides and Maimonides. Then he concludes that if you hear an evil prediction, you should pray that it be annulled. However, he also mentions that a Jew may not seek out such a prediction. This seems to basically follow the path of Nachmanides, giving some validity to astrology.

The Shulchan Aruch,¹⁸ the Code of Jewish Law, codifies the final ruling regarding astrology. He simply says that one may not consult astrologers, which is a point of agreement between both the approach of Nachmanides and Maimonides. However, in the very next halacha,¹⁹ the Shulchan Aruch says that it is customary not to begin work on a Monday or Wednesday and that one should marry only when there is a full moon. The Ramah adds that the period of Torah study should begin on Rosh Chodesh (the beginning of the Jewish month). These statements indicate that the Shulchan Aruch rejected the notion of Maimonides that there is no validity at all to astrology, and supports the position of Nachmanides who says that while one may not consult astrologers, there is some validity in astrology and, therefore, one may adopt certain practices based on planetary influence.

Consequently, it seems that most of the authorities believe that astrology has some sort of power, but there is a fine line between believing this and believing in another power other than G-d, which is not the Jewish view. Thus, one cannot give credence to any power except G-d nor use astrology on a regular basis to guide one's life.

Rabbi Dr. Nachum Amsel currently works with Rabbi Berel Wein and the Destiny Foundation as the Director of Education, whose mission is "to bring Jewish history to life in an exciting, entertaining and

¹⁴ Deuteronomy 18:13

¹⁵ Pesachim 113b

¹⁶ In his letter to the wise of Ashkenaz and in Hilchot Avodat Kochavim 11:8-9

¹⁷ Tur, Yoreh Deah 179

¹⁸ Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 179:1

¹⁹ Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 179:2

ASTROLOGY

4

interactive way.” Rabbi Amsel has also served as a teacher, a school principal, and an adjunct professor. He has also taught over 2000 educators how to teach more effectively. Rabbi Amsel has worked in all areas of formal and informal Jewish education and has developed numerous curricula including a methodology how to teach Jewish Values using mass media. Recently, he founded the STARS Program (Student Torah Alliance for Russian Speakers), where more than 3000 students in 12 Russian speaking countries learn about their Jewish heritage for five hours weekly. Rabbi Amsel previously served as the Educational Director of Hillel in the Former Soviet Union. He lives Jerusalem with his wife and has four children and three grandchildren.