

Providence and Theodicy in Hazal  
Sources concerning Mazzal  
Gesher at JCC, January 12, 2012

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Moed Katan, page 28a

Rava said: [Length of] life, children and sustenance depend not on merit but [rather on] mazzal.<sup>24</sup> For [take] Rabbah and R. Hisda. Both were saintly Rabbis; one master prayed for rain and it came, the other master prayed for rain and it came. R. Hisda lived to the age of ninety-two,<sup>25</sup> Rabbah<sup>26</sup> [only] lived to the age of forty. In R. Hisda's house there were held sixty marriage feasts, at Rabbah's house there were sixty<sup>27</sup> bereavements. At R. Hisda's house there was the purest wheaten bread for dogs, and it went to waste;<sup>28</sup> at Rabbah's house there was barley bread for human beings and that not to be had.

(24) 'Destiny'. Cf. however, Shab. 156a.

(25) Died 309 C.E.

(26) 13. Nahmani, died 330 C.E.

(27) A proverbial number. The number sixty is a Babylonian unit, e.g., the hour and minute are divided into sixty.

(28) Lit., 'was not wanted'.

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Shabat, page 156a – 157a

It was stated. R. Hanina said: The mazzal gives wisdom, the mazzal gives wealth, and Israel is ruled by mazzal. R. Johanan maintained: Israel is not ruled by mazzal.<sup>34</sup> Now, R. Johanan is consistent with his view, for R. Johanan said: How do we know that Israel is not ruled by mazzal? Because it is said, Thus saith the Lord, Learn not the way of the nations, and be not dismayed at the signs of heaven, for the nations are dismayed at them:<sup>35</sup> they are dismayed but not Israel.<sup>36</sup> Rav too holds that Israel is not ruled by mazzal. For Rav Judah said in Rav's name: How do we know that Israel is not ruled by mazzal? Because it is said, and he brought him him outside.<sup>37</sup> Abraham pleaded before the Holy One, blessed be He, 'Sovereign of the Universe! My steward will be my heir.'<sup>38</sup> 'Not so,' He replied, 'none but your very own issue.'<sup>39</sup> 'Sovereign of the Universe!' cried he, 'I have looked at my astrological signs and have found that I am not fated to beget a child.' 'Go forth from [i.e., cease] thy astrological studies, for Israel is not ruled by mazzal. What is thy calculation?

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(34) Lit., there is no mazzal (planetary influence) to Israel.

(35) Jer. X, 2.

(36) Israel being uninfluenced by 'the signs of heaven'.

(37) Gen. XV, 5, q.v.

(38) Ibid. 3.

(39) Ibid. 4.

Because Zedek [Jupiter] 1 stands in the West?<sup>2</sup> I will turn it back and place it in the East.' And thus it is written, Who hath raised up Zedek from the east?<sup>3</sup> He hath summoned it for his sake.<sup>4</sup>

From Samuel too [we learn that] Israel is not ruled by mazzal. For Samuel and Ablat were sitting, while certain people were going to a lake.<sup>5</sup> Said Ablat<sup>6</sup> to Samuel: 'That man is going but will not return, [for] a snake will bite him and he will die.' 'If he is an Israelite,' replied Samuel. 'he will go and return.'<sup>7</sup> While they were sitting he went and returned. [Thereupon] Ablat arose and threw off his [the man's] knapsack, [and] found a snake therein cut up and lying in two pieces — Said Samuel to him, 'What did you do?'<sup>8</sup> 'Every day we pooled our bread and ate it; but to-day one of us had no bread, and he was ashamed. Said I to them, "I will go and collect [the bread]".<sup>9</sup> When I came to him, I pretended to take [bread] from him, so that he should not be ashamed.' 'You have done a good deed,' said he to him. Then Samuel went out and taught: Charity<sup>10</sup> delivereth from death;<sup>11</sup> and [this does not mean] from an unnatural death, but from death itself.

From R. Akiva too [we learn that] Israel is not ruled by mazzal. For R. Akiva had a daughter. Now, astrologers<sup>12</sup> told him, On the day she enters the bridal chamber a snake will bite her and she will die. He was very worried about this. On that day [of her marriage] she took a brooch [and] stuck it into the wall and it happened to penetrate the eye of a serpent. The following morning, when she took it out, the snake came trailing after it. 'What did you do?' her father asked her. 'A poor man came to our door in the evening.' she replied, 'and everybody was busy at the banquet, and there was none to attend to him. So I took the portion which was given to me and gave it to him. 'You have done a good deed,' said he to her. Thereupon R. Akiva went out and lectured: 'Charity delivereth from death': and not [merely] from an unnatural death, but from death itself.

From R. Nahman b. Isaac too [we learn that] Israel is not ruled by mazzal. For R. Nahman b. Isaac's mother was told by astrologers, Your son will be a thief. [So] she did not let him [be] bareheaded, saying to him, 'Cover your head so that the fear of heaven may be upon you, and pray [for mercy]'. Now, he did not know why she spoke that to him. One day he was sitting and studying under a palm tree; the hood fell off of his head, he lifted up his eyes and saw the palm tree, temptation<sup>13</sup> overcame him, he climbed up and bit off a cluster [of dates] with his teeth.<sup>14</sup>

- (1) Which is thy constellation.
- (2) Which is an unpropitious combination for begetting children.
- (3) E.V. 'righteousness'.
- (4) Sc. for the sake of Abraham: Isa. XLI. 2.
- (5) Or, meadow.
- (6) V. supra p. 644, n. 11.
- (7) prayer can counteract his fate as controlled by mazzal (Rashi).
- (8) To escape your fate.
- (9) Lit., 'throw into the basket'.
- (10) E.v. righteousness. From the Jewish point of view the two are identical: One merely performs his duty (i.e., righteousness) in giving charity.
- (11) Prov. X, 2.
- (12) Lit., 'Chaldeans'.
- (13) Lit., 'the evil inclination'.
- (14) The tree did not belong to him. — This story shows that head-covering was not de rigueur, though regarded as conducive to piety. — From these stories we see that belief in planetary influence was not entirely rejected, but that these Rabbis held that it might be counteracted by good deeds.

*The following says that God has no power over poverty. It all depends on the stars and to change ones mazal God would have to go back and recreate the world. See Mory Schwartz page 54. On this story see also the Perushei haHagadot of the Rashba*

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Taanit, page 25a

R. Eleazar b. Pedath found himself in very great want. Once after having his blood let he had nothing to eat. He took the skin of garlic and put it into his mouth; he became faint and he fell asleep. The Rabbis coming to see him noticed that he was crying and laughing, and that a ray of light was radiating from his forehead. When he awoke they asked him: Why did you cry and laugh? He replied: Because the Holy One, Blessed be He, was sitting by my side and I asked Him, How long will I suffer in this world? And He replied: Eleazar, my son, would you rather that I should turn back the world to its very beginnings? Perhaps you might then be born at a happier hour?<sup>6</sup> I replied: All this, and then only perhaps?<sup>7</sup> I then asked Him, Which is the greater life, the one that I had already lived, or the one I am still to live. He replied: The one that I have already lived. I then said to Him: If so, I do not want it. He replied: As a reward for refusing it I will grant you in the next world thirteen rivers of balsam oil as clear as the Euphrates and the Tigris, which you will be able to enjoy. I asked, And nothing more? He replied: And what shall I then give to your fellow men? I said: Do I then ask the share of one who has nothing? He thereupon snapped at my forehead and exclaimed: Eleazar, my son, I have shot you with my arrows.<sup>8</sup>

(6) Lit., 'In an hour of sustenance'.

(7) He would not give God all this trouble for a mere probability.

(8) The text is in disorder and its meaning is doubtful. According to Rashi it is a gesture of God's love for Eleazar.

(20) Ps. XVII, 14. E.V. 'From men by thy hand, O Lord'.

(21) Ibid.