

From the Rabbi's Desk
Rabbi Manes Kogan
Hillcrest Jewish Center
183-02 Union Turnpike, Flushing, NY 11366
rabbikogan@hillcrestjc.org

Stories with a Twist [226]

Chaldean Astrologers Told Rav Nahman bar Yitzhak's Mother: Your Son Will be a Thief Insights into Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 156b



Background to Our Story

Rav Nachman bar Yitzhak



https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rav_Nachman_bar_Yitzchak

Rav Nachman bar Yitzchak or *Rabh Naḥman bar Yiṣḥaq* in actual Talmudic and Classical Hebrew (died 356) was an amora (rabbi of the Talmud) who lived in Babylonia. He was a disciple of Abaye and Rava and the dean of the yeshiva at Pumbedita.

In his youth, Rav Nachman studied together with Rava, but he sat one row behind him. Later Rav Nachman studied under Rav Chisda. During the time when Rav Joseph bar Chiya was head of the Yeshivah of Pumbeditha and Rava conducted his own Yeshivah in Mechoza, Rav Nachman bar Yitzchak was the chief lecturer (Resh Kalah) under Rava, and he was already famous for his great learning and piety.

He praised the character trait of humility greatly. His modesty may be seen from the fact that when Rava stated that "a little pride is becoming a scholar," Rav Nachman hastened to remark, "None of it, nor part of it!"

He worked to facilitate a peaceful relationship between husband and wife.

The honour of the Sabbath was of prime importance to him. He would even personally do menial chores in its honour. He would say that "one who honours the Sabbath will be saved from the pains of the exile".

Astrology



Astrology is the study of the movements and relative positions of celestial objects as a means for divining information about human affairs and terrestrial events. Astrology has been dated to at least the 2nd millennium BCE, and has its roots in calendrical systems used to predict seasonal shifts and to interpret celestial cycles as signs of divine communications. Many cultures have attached importance to astronomical events, and some – such as the Indians, Chinese, and Maya – developed elaborate systems for predicting terrestrial events from celestial observations. Western astrology, one of the oldest astrological systems still in use, can trace its roots to 19th-17th century BCE Mesopotamia, from which it spread to Ancient Greece, Rome, the Arab world and eventually Central and Western Europe. Contemporary Western astrology is often associated with systems of horoscopes that purport to explain aspects of a person's personality and predict significant events in their lives based on the positions of celestial objects; the majority of professional astrologers rely on such systems.

Throughout most of its history astrology was considered a scholarly tradition and was common in academic circles, often in close relation with astronomy, alchemy, meteorology, and medicine. It was present in political circles, and is mentioned in various works of literature, from Dante Alighieri and Geoffrey Chaucer to William Shakespeare, Lope de Vega and Calderón de la Barca.

During the 20th century and following the wide-scale adoption of the scientific method, astrology has been challenged successfully on both theoretical and experimental grounds, and has been shown to have no scientific validity or explanatory power. Astrology thus lost its academic and theoretical standing, and common belief in it has largely declined. Astrology is now recognized as pseudoscience.

Daniel 2:2-5

And the king commanded to summon the necromancers, the astrologers, the sorcerers, and the Chaldeans to tell the king his dreams, and they came and stood before the king. And the king said to them, "I dreamed a dream, and my spirit is troubled to know the dream." Then the Chaldeans spoke to the king in Aramaic, "May the king live forever! Tell your servants the dream, and we shall tell the interpretation." The king replied and said to the Chaldeans, "The matter has escaped me. If you do not let me know the dream and its meaning, you shall be torn limb from limb, and your houses shall be made into a dunghap"

Jewish Views of Astrology





In early classical rabbinic works written in the land of Israel ([Jerusalem Talmud](#) and Palestinian [midrash](#) compilations) astrologers are known as *astrologos* and *astrologiyya*. In early classical rabbinic works written in Babylon, astrologers were called *kaldiyyim*, *kalda'ei*, and *iztagninin*.

The Babylonian [Talmud](#) (BT), in Sanhedrin 65, suggests that this means that Jews may not consult an astrologer. Another tractate, BT Pesachim 113b, clearly says that Jews may not consult astrologers.

Samuel of Babylonia (circa 250 CE) is the only sage in the Talmud who seriously studied astrology, yet he held that it was not compatible with Judaism. Quoting Deuteronomy 30:12, "The Law is not in the Heavens", he is reputed to have taught that "Torah can not go together with the art that studies the heavens" (Midrash Deuteronomy Rabbah 8:6).

R. Johanan, the Palestinian amora, says "there is no *mazal* (literally "star") for Israel, but only for the nations [which recognize the validity of astrology.]" This opinion is shared by Rav (BT Shabbat 156a).

[Rabbinic literature](#) records that [Rabbi Akiva](#) contends against astrological beliefs, e.g., Sifre, Deut. 171; Sifra, Kedoshim, vi.; Sanhedrin 65.

However, other statements in the Talmud and in the [midrash](#) literature show that many Jews had some level of admiration for astrology.

Some hold that the stars generally do control the fate of people and nations, but Abraham and his descendants were elevated by their covenant with God, and thus achieve [free will](#). (Midrash Genesis Rabbah 44:12, Yal., Jer. 285). A statement in the [Tosefta](#) (Kiddushin 5:17) holds that the blessing bestowed on Abraham is the gift of astrology. Midrash Ecclesiastes Rabbah states that the rulers of some non-Jewish nations were experts in astrology, and that King Solomon too had expertise in this realm. (7:23 no. 1)

There is a story in the Talmud according to which [God](#) showed to [Adam](#) all the future generations, including their scribes, scholars, and leaders (BT Avodah Zarah 5a). According to this source, the biblical Patriarch [Abraham](#) bore upon his breast an astrological tablet on which the fate of every man might be read. Thus, kings are said to have congregated before his door in order to seek advice.

An announcement is found to the effect that it is dangerous to drink water on Wednesday and Friday evenings (Pesachim 112a). Samuel, a physician and astrologer, taught that it was dangerous to bleed a patient on Monday, Tuesday, or Thursday, because on the last-mentioned day Mars reigns at the even-numbered hours of the day, when demons have their play. The new moon was likewise regarded as an unfavorable season for bleeding, as were also the third of the month and the day preceding a festival (BT Shabbat 129b).

Covering the Head



Koren Talmud Bavli Noe Edition, Vol. 3: Tractate Shabbat Part 2. Page 422

From several Talmudic sources it is apparent that not all men covered their heads. Prominent Torah scholars covered their heads with a scarf. Since children never covered their heads, Rav Nahman bar Yitzhak, was exceptional in this regard. In subsequent generations covering one's head became standard practice.

According to Jewish law, a man may not walk four cubits with his head uncovered even under a roof (*Mishna Berura*), as covering one's head is a custom of piety and leads to fear of God. The story of Rav Nahman bar Yitzhak is one of many sources that mention this custom. Although there are halakhic authorities who explicitly characterized covering one's head as merely a custom of piety (Maharshal; Vilna Gaon), the majority of Jewish men are especially vigilant when it comes to covering their heads (*Shulchan Arukh. Orakh Hayyim 2:6*).

The Text: Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 156b

וּמְדַרְבַּ נְחֻמָּן בַּר יִצְחָק נָמִי, אֵין מְזַל
לְיִשְׂרָאֵל. דְּאִימִיָּה דְרַב נְחֻמָּן בַּר יִצְחָק אָמְרִי
לָהּ פְּלֻדָּאִי: בְּרִיךְ גַּנְבָּא הוּא. לָא שְׂבִקְתִּיהָ
גְּלוּיֵי רִישִׁיָּה. אָמְרָה לִיהָ: כְּפִי רִישִׁיךָ, כִּי הֵיכִי
דְתִיָּהוּ עֲלֶיךָ אִימָתָא דְשִׁמְיָא, וּבְעֵי רַחֲמֵי.
לָא הוּא יָדַע אֲמַאי קָאמְרָה לִיהָ. יוֹמָא חַד
יָתִיב קָא גְרִיס תּוֹתִי דִיקְלָא, נָפַל גְּלִימָא
מֵעִילּוּיָהּ רִישִׁיָּה דְלִי עֵינִיָּה חָזָא לְדִיקְלָא,
אֲלִמִּיָּה יִצְרִיָּה, סְלִיק פְּסָקִיָּה לְקִיבוּרָא
בְּשִׁינִיָּה.

Chaldean astrologers told Rav Nahman bar Yitzhak's mother: Your son will be a thief. She did not allow him to uncover his head.

She said to her son: Cover your head so that the fear of Heaven will be upon you, and pray for Divine mercy.

He [Rav Nahman bar Yitzhak] did not know why she said this to him.

One day he was sitting and studying beneath a palm tree that did not belong to him, and the cloak fell off of his head. He lifted his eyes and saw the palm tree. He was overcome by impulse and he climbed up and detached a bunch of dates with his teeth.



Explaining the Story

What is the sequence of events that take place in the story?

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

? Why did the Chaldean astrologers tell Rav Nahman's mother "Your son will be a thief"?

Bonus ? Why didn't the Chaldean astrologers tell Rav Nahman's mother what to do about their prophecy?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

? How do we know Rav Nahman's mother believed in what the Chaldean astrologers told her?

? Why did Rav Nahman's mother tell her son "Cover your head so that the fear of Heaven will be upon you"?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Bonus ? Why did Rav Nahman's mother add "and pray for Divine mercy"?

Bonus ? Why didn't Rav Nahman's mother tell her son why she said what she said?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Bonus ? Why did Rav Nahman detach a bunch of dates from a palm tree that wasn't his?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Bonus ? What do you think is the moral of our story? Did Rav Nahman become a thief?

"The Twist" – Or the Lessons We Can Learn from the Text



It is written in the stars, and yet...

EPILOGUE

At a first reading our story seems to suggest that our life is written in the stars and there is nothing we can do to change the script. At the beginning of the story, Chaldean astrologers tell Rav Nahman bar Yitzhak's mother "Your son will be a thief," and at the end of the story he does indeed steal a bunch of dates from a palm tree that wasn't his.

However, our story is not only about the inexorability of our future being written in the stars but precisely about a noble attempt of a loving mother to challenge that inexorability. While Rav Nachman steals once –after all the stars have a very powerful influence- he doesn't become a thief. His mother's stratagem worked well for many years and we can expect will continue to work in the future.

Indeed, our future is written in the stars, in our genes, in our family history, in our environment, in the education we were lucky or unlucky to receive, and in many other countless variables that escape our control. Yet, I believe the underlying message of our story is an optimistic one: with smarts, hard work, good guidance, and help from those who love you, you can overcome the stars (or at least keep them in check), shape your own future and become who you wish and ought to be.