

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Stories with a Twist [326]

Poverty Follows the Poor Insights into Babylonian Talmud, Bava Kamma 92a



Background to Our Story

Bikkurim

Bikkurim or first fruits, are a type of sacrificial offering which was offered by ancient Israelites. In each agricultural season, the first-grown fruits were brought to the Temple and laid by the altar, and a special declaration recited. The laws of this offering appear in the Bikkurim tractate of the Talmud.

Tzaraat—A Biblical Affliction



According to the King James translation of the Bible, both Moses and Miriam suffered from leprosy at some point in their lives. But the Hebrew word often translated as leprosy, *tzaraat*, is not the same as the disease we call leprosy (also known as Hansen's disease) today.

In the Bible, *tzaraat* is a skin disease that can take many different forms, and in particularly bad cases can manifest itself on one's clothing, belongings, and house, in addition to the skin. According to the rabbis, *tzaraat* is caused by sin. This makes it a disease like no others; part medical condition, part spiritual pathology.

Two chapters of the Book of Leviticus are devoted to the laws of dealing with someone who is afflicted with *tzaraat*. Symptoms described include swelling, and whitish-red spots on the torso. According to the Torah, when a person saw that he may be coming down with *tzaraat* he consulted with a priest, or *kohen*, who examined him. Diagnosis was somewhat counterintuitive. A person who had spots covering his whole body was not considered infected, and someone who was infected could be granted a grace period if they were about to get married.

These rules, which were detailed and expanded by the rabbis of the Mishnah and Talmud, imply that *tzaraat* did not operate in the same way as the infectious diseases

we're familiar with today. On the other hand, part of the treatment for tzaraat was isolation from the community, so there was concern about the disease spreading from person to person.

If tzaraat was confirmed, three separate ceremonies were required on three different days. The ceremonies were focused on sacrifices, and cultic rituals. The infected person had to offer a guilt offering and a sin offering, and the rabbis added requirements for repentance as well.

Cases of Tzaraat in the Bible

Aside from the chapters dealing with the laws of tzaraat (Leviticus Chapters 13-14), the disease comes up in narrative parts of the Torah twice. After encountering the burning bush, Moses worries that the elders of Israel won't believe him. God gives Moses two signs: turning his staff into a snake and then back into a staff, and turning his hand white with tzaraat, and then back to normal again (Exodus 4:1-8).

Miriam, Moses' sister, is afflicted with tzaraat after she and Aaron criticize Moses' choice of a Cushite wife (Numbers Chapter 12). Though Moses and Aaron plead for her to be healed immediately, she has to be isolated from the camp for seven days.

Other later biblical characters who suffered from tzaraat are Naaman, a commander of the Aramean army (II Kings 5:1), and after interacting with him, Gehazi, a servant of the prophet Elisha, comes down with tzaraat as well. Four men with tzaraat pillage the Aramean camp after it has been abandoned (II Kings 7:3-10). King Azariah suffered from tzaraat (II Kings 15:5), as did King Uzziah (II Chronicles 16:20-23).

Rabbinic Interpretations

Traditional Jewish thinkers have understood tzaraat in a variety of ways. The Talmud lists seven reasons one might be afflicted with the disease: Gossip, murder, perjury, forbidden sexual relationships, arrogance, theft, and envy (Arakhin 16a). The midrash focuses on gossip, as have many more modern and contemporary commentators, connecting the word *metzora*, a person afflicted with the condition, to *motzi shem ra*, a person guilty of slander or libel.

Nahmanides viewed tzaraat as a withdrawal of godliness from the world. This explained why it could manifest itself in the walls of one's home. If someone sinned, and then began noticing green or red streaks on the wall of his house, this was an indication that as a result of his sin, God's presence was removing itself from his home.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsh pointed out that because tzaraat was treated by priests, rather than doctors, it shouldn't be interpreted as a medical problem at all, but rather as an exclusively spiritual ailment.

Medical Interpretations

Though tzaraat in the Torah is a combination of the physical and the spiritual, many scientists and doctors have made attempts to connect tzaraat to medical conditions. Maimonides, who was a physician himself, recognized that tzaraat was probably comprised of a few different skin diseases that were all malignant and destructive. Seforno understood some forms of tzaraat to be skin cancer, and others to be punishment for sin.

Modern medical scholars have identified the white spots described as symptoms of tzaraat as vitiligo, a disfiguring but otherwise harmless disease, or as psoriasis, a disease that results in thick silvery scales and itchy, dry, red patches on the skin.

Though tzaraat is most often translated as leprosy, it has almost nothing in common with the disease we know by that name today. The translation came about because in the Septuagint tzaraat was translated as *lepra*, which in Greek meant rough or scaly.

Later English translations made the connection from lepra to leprosy. But in ancient Greece, what we now call leprosy was known as elephantiasis.

Understanding Tzaraat Today

The Talmud, the Mishnah, and the Tosefta all expend a great deal of effort detailing the laws of tzaraat, but by the time the laws were written, they may have been moot. There are hardly any references to actual cases of tzaraat in the tannaitic period. The Tosefta includes the house infected by tzaraat in its list of laws that were never carried out, and whose purpose was to teach an idea, rather than command an action.

Today, even if we could positively identify someone as having tzaraat, the sacrifices and rituals needed to purify the person are no longer possible, since there are no Jewish priests and no Temple.

As a result, most contemporary communities use tzaraat as a way to think about our behavior and its consequences. How would we act differently if we knew that our sins could come back to us in the form of a rash on our skin, or mold growing in our homes? The Torah prescribes that a person with tzaraat needs to go outside the camp of Israel before he or she can be healed. What can this teach us about isolating ourselves or others when we see destructive behavior?

Leviticus 13:45

And the leper in whom the plague is, his clothes shall be rent, and the hair of his head shall go loose, and he shall cover his upper lip, and he shall cry: Unclean, unclean!

The Text: Babylonian Talmud Bava Kamma 92a

אמר ליה רבא לרבא בר מרי, מנא הא מילתא דאמרי אינשי: בתר עניא אזלא עניותא?
אמר ליה, דתנו: עשירים מביאין בכורים בקלתות של זהב ושל כסף, ועניים בסלי נצרים של
ערבה קלופה. הסלים והבכורים נתונים לפהגים.
אמר ליה: את אמרת מהתם, ואנא אמינא מהכא: "וְטָמֵא טָמֵא יִקְרָא".

Rava said to Rabba bar Mari: From where is this matter derived whereby people say: Poverty follows the poor?

Rabba bar Mari said to him: As we learned in a mishna (*Bikkurim* 3:8): Rich people would bring first fruits in baskets of gold and of silver, and poor people would bring first fruits in wicker baskets made of peeled willow, and they would give the baskets and the first fruits to the priests. The rich would have their baskets returned to them, while the poor would not.

Rava said to him: You said the proof from there, from a mishna, and I say the proof from here, from a verse in the Torah: The verse states with regard to one diagnosed with leprosy: "*And the leper in whom the plague is, his clothes shall be rent, and the hair of his head shall go loose, and he shall cover his upper lip, and he shall cry: Unclean, unclean*" (*Leviticus* 13:45). Not only must the leper suffer from the leprosy itself; he must undergo further embarrassment by publicizing his condition. This is akin to the aphorism that poverty follows the poor.



Explaining the Story - What is going on in our story? (Explain the sequence of events)

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

? Rava and Rabba bar Mari disagree on which is the best source to prove that poverty follows the poor. On what do they agree?

Bonus ? Why do you think the priests in the Temple returned the baskets of gold and of silver to the owners?

Answer 1

Answer 2

Answer 3

Bonus ? Why do you think the priests in the Temple didn't return the wicker baskets made of peeled willow to the owners?

Answer 1

Answer 2

Answer 3

? Rava might have thought that his source was more convincing than Rabba bar Mari's one? Why?

Bonus ? What is the reason why a person suffering from tzaraat must call: unclean, unclean!

Answer 1

Answer 2

Answer 3

? How does Rava interpret the biblical instruction for the metzora to call: unclean, unclean?



Mazal Tov

The phrase mazel tov literally means “a good constellation,” implying that the recipient is experiencing good fortune because the stars have aligned for him/her.

Everything is dependent upon mazal (astral influences), even the Torah scroll in the ark. (הכל תלוי במזל, ואפילו ספר תורה ביהיכל) Book of the Zohar, vol. 3, section 134a.

“Unos nacen con buena estrella y otros estrellados”



“Unos nacen con buena estrella y otros estrellados” es una frase popular que intenta explicar la arbitraria (random) buena y mala fortuna de algunas personas.

Se dice normalmente que las personas que tienen mucha suerte en la vida y consiguen todo fácilmente, “nacieron con estrella” o “con buena estrella”, mientras que las personas con mala suerte y muchos problemas “nacieron con mala estrella”. Es decir, las personas que emplean estas frases atribuyen las bendiciones o los problemas a una fuerza mayor, a la voluntad de un dios, del destino o del universo, y no a las acciones de cada persona.

Este refrán utiliza un juego de palabras entre el término ‘estrella’ (star) y los dos significados de ‘estrellado’ (‘starry’, ‘star-shaped’ o ‘crushed’, ‘broken’, ‘shattered’) para expresar esta misma idea de forma humorística.

Aunque en inglés no hay un equivalente perfecto, si existen expresiones con una idea similar como ‘born under a lucky star’.

Moed Katan 28a

אמר רבא: חיי, בני ומזוני, לא בזכותא תליא מילתא. אלא במזל תליא מילתא. דהא רבה ורב חסדא תרווייהו רבנו צדיקי הוו, מר מצלי ואתי מיטרא ומר מצלי ואתי מיטרא, רב חסדא חיה תשעין ותרתין שנין, רבה חיה ארבעין. בי רב חסדא שיתין הלולי, בי רבה שיתין תיכלי. בי רב חסדא סמיך ללבי וְלא מתבעי, בי רבה נהמא דשערי לאינשי וְלא משתכח.

Rava said: Length of life, children, and sustenance do not depend on one’s merit, but rather they depend upon fate.

As, Rabba and Rav Ḥisda were both pious Sages; one Sage would pray during a drought and rain would fall, and the other Sage would pray and rain would fall.

And nevertheless, their lives were very different. **Rav Ḥisda lived for ninety-two years**, whereas **Rabba lived for only forty years**. **The house of Rav Ḥisda celebrated sixty wedding feasts**, whereas the **house of Rabba experienced sixty calamities**. In other words, many fortuitous events took place in the house of Rav Ḥisda and the opposite occurred in the house of Rabba.

In the house of Rav Ḥisda there was bread from the finest flour [semida] even for the dogs, and it was not asked after, as there was so much food. **In the house**

of Rabba, on the other hand, there was coarse **barley bread** even **for people, and it was not found** in sufficient quantities.

? Both Rabba bar Mari and Rava believe that “poverty follows the poor;” in other words, that fate (bad luck or good luck) is a real thing. Do you agree with them? What do you think about the role of luck in life?

A Change of Place, a Change of Luck (Babylonian Talmud Rosh Hashanah 16b)

In Hebrew there’s a saying: “*meshane makom, meshane mazal.*” It means “change your place, change your luck.” In other words, changing your place in the world can lead to a positive shift in your luck.

? Do you think that a change of place can affect a shift in your luck? If yes, how so?

“The Twist” – Or the Lessons We Can Learn from This Text.

! Fate might be a “real thing,” and yet...

Bachya ben Asher

Bachya ben Asher ibn Halawa (Rabbeinu Bachya) was a Spanish rabbi, scholar and biblical commentator. He was a pupil of Rashba, and modeled his exegetical style on that of Ramban.

He was the first to build his Torah commentary on the four principles denoted by the letters PaRDeS, "Peshat, Remez, Drush, Sod," or 1) the plain text; 2) a deeper, more philosophical approach to the text; 3) a homiletical approach to the text; and 4) a mystical kabbalistic interpretation of the text. He also authored a work on ethics called "Kad HaKemach".

Rabbeinu Bahya

Fourteenth-century commentary incorporating literal explanations along with allegorical, philosophical, and mystical interpretations.

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה הֲנִי קָרָב וְקָרְבוֹ נְמִידָה לְמוֹת קְרָא אֶת־יְהוֹשֻׁעַ וְהִתְיַצְּבוּ בְּאֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וְאֶצְוֶנּוּ וְיִלֶּךְ מִשָּׁה וַיְהוֹשֻׁעַ וַיִּתְיַצְּבוּ בְּאֹהֶל מוֹעֵד:

Hashem said to Moses: The time is drawing near for you to die. Call Joshua and present yourselves in the Tent of Meeting, that I may instruct him. Moses and Joshua went and presented themselves in the Tent of Meeting. (Deuteronomy 31:14)

הן קרבו ימיך למות, "here your days to die are drawing near."

According to the plain meaning of the text this verse teaches that the period man has to live has been predetermined, every single human being having a time allocated to him at birth. G'd sees to it that every person lives out the time thus allocated to him at birth. This would correspond to Exodus 23,26: "I will ensure that you complete the number of your days (years)." The expression קריבה, "approach," mentioned here is one which is specifically reserved for the approach of death of righteous people as we know already from Genesis 47,29 when the Torah speaks about the approaching death of Israel our patriarch. Similarly, Kings I 2,1: "the time for David to die approached." These verses prove that such times had been determined by G'd already at birth, and that G'd's השגחה, "benevolent supervision of history," ensures that the individuals in question get to live out their allotted time, that their lives are not cut short by acts of violence or natural disasters. Alternatively, G'd lengthens the allotted life span of these people as a reward for merits which they have accumulated during their lives. At the same time, their allotted life span may be reduced due to demerits they have become guilty of. The important thing is that no one dies unless G'd has so determined.

According to our information that G'd has empowered planetary forces, stars and their constellations, to exercise their influence on the lives of people on terrestrial earth, and the orbits of these forces are of constructive or destructive influence on these lives so that their lives appear to depend on mazal," i.e. such influences (Targum Kohelet 9,2), we find that our sages did not deny the impact of such mazal; we therefore seem to be faced with a dilemma here. Our sages said specifically that phenomena such as economic success, (duration of) life on earth itself, as well as the ability to have children, do not

depend on one's merit but on one's mazal (Moed Katan 28). If that is so, where is there room for G'd's הגגה in the matter? Further details of our sages' view is found in their statement that though both Rabbah and Rav Chisdah were righteous individuals (seeing that when they prayed for rain it materialised), one lived only to the age of 40 whereas the other lived to the age of 92. Rabbah's 40 years on earth were filled with painful experiences. Rav Chisdah was blessed to marry off 60 children, whereas Rabbah buried 60 family members. The latter could not always afford to eat even bread made from barley, whereas the former fed his dogs with white bread. These statements are proof positive that the sages acknowledged the influence of mazal in our lives, i.e. that there is substance to the discipline we call astrology.

It is true that these planetary phenomena have been equipped with initial power to influence our fates. However, they are not supreme. Their influence need not be final. They are subservient to the Lord Almighty, to the attribute Hashem. If people born under adverse mazal turn to the supreme G'd, to Hashem, and appeal to Him to neutralize their apparently negative mazal, G'd will respond to such prayer if it is warranted. In fact, we may go further and posit that G'd instituted mazal partly in order to encourage us to pray to Him to change adverse mazal in His benevolent way. We know that G'd can lengthen our lives from the very verse in Exodus 23,26: "I will make full the number of your days," i.e. "I will add to them if the situation warrants."

King Chizkiyah had 15 years added to his life expectancy although the prophet Isaiah had been sent to him to prepare his last will and testament as he was not going to recover from his sickness. G'd responded to his prayer and revoked the decree he had been subject to (Isaiah 38,5). We also know that when the occasion warrants it G'd reduces the number of years allocated to a person at birth, from Achazyah King of Israel son of Achav. The reason he had his life span shortened was that when he fell ill, instead of turning to G'd or to an accredited prophet, he turned to idols to inquire about his chances of a recovery (compare Kings II 1,16). He was told clearly that he would die now because he had turned to Baal Zevuv, the god of Akron, ignoring the presence of accredited prophets in Israel. The verse we just quoted makes it plain that Achazya's death at that time was due to his having turned to idols at that time. Had death already have been decreed upon him previously, what point was there in the prophet telling him about it now? The above examples teach us that G'd reserves the right to lengthen or shorten the life span decreed for man at birth. G'd remains a free agent; this is why He is known as ידש. The word, derived from דדש, means that He is in charge of the laws of nature, changing them at will if He so desires. (Compare author's comments on Genesis 17,1) These adjustments in life span, etc., occur with a view to reward and punishment. It follows that the statement that "life (expectancy), children (ability to have them), and economic success, do not depend on merit but on mazal," which we quoted from Moed Katan, means that the power of prayer is so great that it can override predetermined fates set according to mazal. The astrologers themselves admit that the general rules are set by G'd, whereas the planetary systems only supplement details pertaining to the lives of the subjects under their influence. Clearly, He who sets the general rules is able to set aside mere details, i.e. the subordinate powers assigned to the horoscopes. It follows that it is within man's power to create the conditions for setting aside such details if his actions merit it and he appeals to the Lord to use His powers on his behalf. On occasion, G'd fulfills man's desire without waiting for man to appeal to Him. What the statement in Moed Katan, regarding the three

cardinal parts of man's fate does mean is that in these matters G'd does not interfere with the predetermined fates of these individuals unless asked, unless appealed to. This is the meaning of Psalms 145,19 וַיִּשְׁמַע וַיִּשְׁמַע יְיָ וַיִּשְׁמַע יְיָ וַיִּשְׁמַע יְיָ, "and their cry He hears and He delivers them." On the other hand, the same psalmist says in the first half of this verse: "He does the will of those who fear Him;" this refers to the unspoken requests by these people. We have proof positive from the Torah and the Books of Prophets that the three critical values of man, 1) children, 2) life, and 3) economic success, פרנסה, are all subject to prayer. Rachel, who had been unable to conceive and had prayed was granted children (Genesis 30,22): "G'd listened to her and opened her womb." King Chizkiyah provided proof for the fact that G'd changes even decrees of death announced by one of His prophets at His command. Elijah and Elisha both experienced that the supply of food was dramatically increased through their prayerful intervention in the fates of starving individuals (Kings I 17,13-15 and Kings II 5,42-44). These individuals were saved from famine, although clearly that had been their assigned fate.

This is the reason why our sages singled out these three aspects of life which are normally dependent on mazal to inform us that even these matters are subject to change by means of prayer by the intended victims.

Luck: Mazal (מַזַּל)

Written in Heaven, Translated on Earth

By Mendel Kalmenson and Zalman Abraham

Mazal tov is the colloquial Jewish expression of congratulations, the traditional felicitation given at a wedding, bat mitzvah, or brit. It is also the standard response to hearing good news from or about another person. But what does this familiar Jewish expression really mean?

The word mazal is sometimes translated as "luck,"¹ something that happens perchance. According to this interpretation, mazal tov would mean good fortune or good luck.

In fact, the real meaning of mazal tov is the very opposite of luck. The literal translation of the word mazal means a constellation of stars. Instead of luck, therefore, mazal implies a kind of fate or some form of predetermination, alluding to the idea that what happens on earth is initiated and orchestrated by higher, cosmic forces.

Indeed, according to the Jewish view, everything that happens on earth is first articulated in the heavens. As the Midrash² teaches: "R. Simon said: 'There isn't a single herb or spice that doesn't have a constellation in the heavens that strikes it and tells it to grow.'"

There are a number of examples of Jewish astrological tradition throughout the Talmud. One fascinating passage³ describes various temperaments likely to be found among people born during various hours of the day. These personality traits and dispositions are specific to the qualities associated with the dominant planets at the time of their birth.

“One who was born under the sun will be a radiant person; he will eat from his own and drink from his own, and his secrets will be exposed. If he steals, he will not succeed.

“One who was born under Venus will be a rich and promiscuous person. Why? Because fire was born [during the hour of Venus].

“One who was born under Mercury will be an enlightened and expert person, because Mercury is the sun’s scribe [it is closest to the sun].

“One who was born under the moon will be a person who suffers pains, who builds and destroys, and destroys and builds. Who eats not from his own and drinks not from his own, and whose secrets are hidden. If he steals, he will succeed [like the moon, which constantly changes form, whose light is not its own, and which is at times exposed and at times hidden].

“One who was born under Saturn will be a person whose thoughts are for naught. And some say that everything that others scheme about him will be for naught.

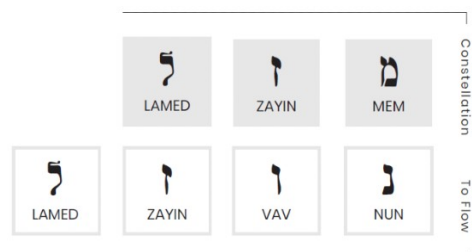
“One who was born under Jupiter [tzdek] will be a righteous person [tzadkan]....

“One who was born under Mars will be one who spills blood. R. Ashi said: He will be either a bloodletter or a thief, a slaughterer of animals or a circumciser.”

Furthermore, the Talmud tells of numerous Sages whose destinies were informed by Chaldean astrologers. For instance, R. Akiva was told by an astrologer that his daughter would pass away on her wedding day.⁴ R. Yosef declined the position of head of the Rabbinic academy because astrologers informed him that he was destined to pass away two years after taking the position.⁵

The Talmud clearly associates the concept of mazal not with random luck but with a kind of astrologically-based predetermination, as in “The blessings of health, children, and livelihood do not depend on merit; rather, they depend on fate (mazal).”⁶

Indeed, the Jerusalem Talmud⁷ recounts a fascinating custom practiced by the Amalekites that highlights the power of mazal. “They would place soldiers at the frontline on their birthday in the belief that a soldier would not fall easily on his birthday.” From this the Talmud derives that a person’s mazal is dominant on their birthday.



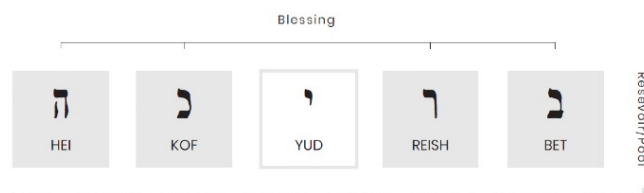
Interestingly, mazal is an etymological cognate of the word nozal, which means a downward flow.

This follows the Jewish belief that every person has a reservoir of spiritual energy in the higher realms⁸ that can either remain “above” in the ethereal realms as dormant potential, or descend “below” and translate into actual physical blessings in the form of children, health, wealth, or other blessings, depending on our actions and input.

For instance, Rosh Hashanah is the day of judgment when our annual allotment of good fortune for the coming year is determined. However, the Talmud⁹ explains that although our future was already decided on Rosh Hashanah, we continue to pray each day of the year to assure that our allotted fortune will reach us and manifest in a concrete and positive manner. If it was decreed, for example, that a certain amount of rain would fall throughout the year, the same volume of rain could fall all at once as a destructive deluge, or it could be spread over time in a manner of blessing—meaning, in the right increments to ensure that the crops will flourish.

Herein lies the Jewish twist on ancient astrology: Our “fate” may be decreed “above,” but our “destiny” is determined by our actions “below.” The concept of mazal is the active mediation between these two dimensions, the manner in which what is decreed in the heavens is brought down and materialized on earth in the form of blessing or its opposite.

The idea that blessing is not a function of luck but of actualizing one’s heavenly destiny is alluded to in many Jewish sources.



For instance, Chasidut¹⁰ states that the Hebrew word for blessing, brachah, is etymologically associated with the word hamavrich, to lower down, as in,¹¹ “if one has lowered a vine down into the ground.” Other Jewish sources¹² understand the word brachah to be a derivative of the word breichah, a reservoir or pool, referring to the above mentioned spiritual reservoir of potential blessing that exists in the upper realms and can be channeled into this world through our positive actions.

The expression mazal tov, therefore, is not an acknowledgment of one’s good luck; rather, it expresses our wish that what is stored up in heaven should manifest on earth in a manner of revealed goodness.¹³

It is important to note that some Jewish sages reject the notion that Judaism subscribes to any form of astrology whatsoever. In the aforementioned Talmudic passage that discusses the temperaments determined by the planets under which one was born, R. Yochanan¹⁴ concludes that, ultimately, “the Jewish people are not governed by mazal.” Maimonides¹⁵ seems to understand R. Yochanan’s words to mean not only that “Jews are not governed (and their fate is not predetermined) by astrology” but that “there is no place at all for astrology in the Jewish faith.”

Unlike Maimonides, however, the predominant stance among Talmudic commentators (see Rashi and Tosafot¹⁶) is that Judaism does accept the

governance of astrology to a certain degree, with the caveat that while mazal does have an influence, we are not powerlessly bound by that influence and can, in fact, change the outcome or expression of that influence through prayer and by overcoming our inclinations. If one transforms themselves in some substantial way, they can transform their predetermined fate and manifest their higher destiny.

Based on this perspective, the accepted view is that, while there are natural and cosmic forces at play in our lives, we always retain the freedom and ability to choose our own paths and influence our own outcomes. Reflecting this idea, the Talmud¹⁷ relates a conversation between Abraham and G-d, in which Abraham tells G-d, "I looked into my astrological destiny, and I am not fit to have a son." To which G-d replies, "Emerge from your astrology, for Israel is not governed by mazal." Appropriately, G-d then tests and refines Abraham's faith and character until he is given a new name by G-d, indicating that he has sufficiently transformed himself enough to change his destiny, at which point he does indeed have children.

Similarly, the Talmud tells us¹⁸ that R. Akiva's daughter, mentioned above, did not end up dying on her wedding day, because, while everyone else was preoccupied with the wedding feast, she took notice of a poor person in need and gave up her own portion of food to feed him.

Based on the above, one's mazal is not something to be passively received but proactively achieved.

When we wish each other mazal tov, therefore, it is not an expression of surrendering to random luck or faceless forces beyond our control. Instead, it is a wish that our story, as written in the stars, translates on earth in ways that are positive, just, and life-enhancing.

According to the Jewish take on astrology, one's mazal is not simply a matter of chance but a matter of choice.

It happened once; R. Akiva's daughter once went to the market to buy things for the home. As she passed a group of stargazers and fortune tellers, one of them said to the other: "See that lovely girl? What a dreadful calamity is awaiting her! She is going to die on the very day of her wedding!"¹⁹

On the night of her wedding, before retiring to bed, she removed her golden hairpin and stuck it in a crevice in the wall.

The following morning, she pulled her pin from the wall, and in doing so dragged a small but poisonous snake with it. Horrified, she realized that she had killed the snake that was lurking in the wall's crevice when she stuck the pin into the wall the night before. What a miracle!

She heard a knock on the door. "Are you alright, daughter? I heard you scream," her father said. Then he saw the dead snake still dangling from the pin. She told her father what happened.

"This is indeed a miracle," R. Akiva said. "Tell me, daughter, what did you do yesterday? There must have been some special mitzvah that you performed to have been saved from this."

“Well, the only thing that I can remember is this. Last night during the wedding feast, a poor man came in, but nobody seemed to notice him. I saw that the poor man was starving, so I took my portion of the wedding feast and gave it to him.”

Moved by his daughter’s kindness and overjoyed by her miraculous deliverance, R. Akiva stated the verse, Tzedakah delivers from death.

FOOTNOTES

1. Interestingly, the word *massel* also means luck in German and Dutch, indicating that it possibly crept into these languages from the popular Jewish usage.
2. *Breishit Rabbah* 10:6.
3. *Shabbat* 156a.
4. *Shabbat* 156b.
5. *Brachot* 64a.
6. *Moed Katan* 28a.
7. *Rosh Hashanah* 3:8.
8. Indeed, the Talmud (*Megillah* 3a) utilizes the word *mazal* to describe “a person’s guardian angel above (see Rashi ad loc.)” More than simply there to protect us, this guardian force and energy, or “higher self,” communicates with our spiritual subconscious at times, whispering words of premonition and intuition into our soul. As Ravina teaches in the Talmud: “If one becomes frightened for no apparent reason, although he does not see anything to be frightened about, his *mazal* sees it,” and as a remedy “he should recite the *Shema*.” The same is true in the positive sense: There are times when we feel suddenly and unexpectedly inspired, guided towards spiritual growth for no obvious reason and without a conscious cause. This, too, according to the mystics, is the work of our “higher self” in an effort to motivate us for the better. Mystical sources (see *Sefer Hama’amarim* 5672 Vol. 1, p. 114; *ibid.* Vol. 2, p. 1182) teach that this *mazal* is the source of a person’s innate faith in G-d. For although we don’t see G-d with our own eyes, our “*mazal*,” our transcendent soul, witnesses Divinity in a sublime and suprarational sense, which in turn influences our faith in G-d.
9. *Rosh Hashanah* 17b.
10. *Torah Or, Miketz* 37c.
11. *Kilayim* 7:1.
12. *Sefer Taamei Hamitzvot, Peirush Barchu; Kad Hakemach, Brachah; Chinuch, Mitzvah* 430; responsa of Rashba 1:423.
13. Originally, the expression *mazal tov* was likely only used before or during an auspicious event, as it suggested an attempt to positively influence an event in process. The earliest mention of this expression in Jewish literature is in *Sefer Hachasidim*, a thirteenth-century book of *Ashkenazi* customs, suggesting to those who are present in a home where a woman is in labor that they should “beseech mercy on her behalf and for the child to be born with *mazal tov*.” It was also common for medieval *ketubot* (marriage documents) that were written in advance of a wedding to contain a decorative header that reads: “*B’simana tava uv’mazala maalya*,” which means “with a good sign and auspicious *mazal*.”
14. *Shabbat* 156a.
15. Laws of Idolatry 11:8-9.
16. Ad loc.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. This story is recounted in the Talmud (*Shabbat* 156b), a version of which can be accessed here: [The Daughter of Rabbi Akiva](#)

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