Segulot – Part 4 – *Mazel* – JewishClarity.com

While the *gemara* discusses whether or not there is *mazel* (astrological influence) for the Jewish people, it seems clear to all of the classical sources (besides the **Rambam** who viewed it as nonsense) that *mazel* is a spiritual reality which definitely does affect the Jewish people, along with the entire creation. The discussion in the *gemara* involves how great the impact of *mazel* is specifically on the Jewish people, both individually and communally, and how much they can overcome this influence.

Bereshit Rabba (10:6) says this clearly –

There is not a single plant or blade of grass that does not have a *mazel* that strikes it and says – "grow."

The *Zohar said similarly* –

Everything is influenced by the *mazel* (i.e., constellations).

The ***Zohar*** (*Shemot* 171b) explained –

There is a ruler appointed over all of the stars and constellations. Every single blade of grass has its own star and constellation that rules over it. And each star has its own ruler who also serves before Hashem. Ultimately, every star serves the world by supervising one object in the world.

The *Zohar* explained further –

When the Torah was given, the people of Israel were chosen to be the portion of Hashem, with their souls bound to Him. They went out of the sphere of influence of the *mazel* and into the sphere of influence of the upper levels of sanctity – on condition that they would learn Torah and keep the *mitzvot*.

In terms of the impact that *mazel* has upon us, Rava said (*Gemara Mo'ed Katan* 28a) –

[Length of] life, [number of] children, and wealth do not depend [only] on merit, but rather, on *mazel*. He supported this with the story of Rabbah and Rav Chisda who were both completely righteous sages, as we see from the fact that both of their prayers for rain were answered. Yet they seem to have had very different *mazel*. Rav Chisda lived 92 years, while Rabbah lived only until 40. Rav Chisda's household had 60 weddings, while Rabba's household suffered 60 deaths. Rav Chisda's household had enough fine flour bread even for the dogs, while Rabba's household struggled to find enough lowly barley bread for people.

The *Gemara* (***Shabbat* 156a**) addressed the roots of *mazel* –

It was written in R. Yehoshua ben Levi's notebook that the **day** of the week we are born will affect us: *Yom Rishon* – Extremely good or extremely bad; *Yom Sheini* – angry or irritable; *Yom Shlishi* – wealthy and promiscuous, *Yom Revi'i* – wise and shining; *Yom Chamishi* – kind and giving; *Yom Shishi* – hard-working; Shabbat – great and holy person.

1. Chanina, however, taught – One's mazel does not depend on which day he was born, but rather, the **hour** he was born (i.e., which of the seven planets was dominant then)… [As an example,] one that is born during the hour of Mars will be a spiller of blood… [with the choice to be] a blood letter or a thief, a *shochet* (ritual slaughterer) or a *mohel* (performing circumcisions).

2. Chanina held – "*yeish mazel l'Yisrael* – there **is** *mazel* in Israel," while others held – "*ein mazel l'Yisrael* – there is **no** *mazel* in Israel."

However, all three stories the *gemara* (***Shabbat* 156b**) uses to show – "*ein mazel l'Yisrael*" simply show that certain actions, like a great level of *tzedaka* or instilling a great *yirat Shamayim* [fear of Heaven] from a young age, can overcome a negative *mazel*.

Rabeinu Bachye wrote –

According to what is known, G-d fixed in the Heavens the paths of the stars and gave them the power to influence that which is beneath them. Therefore, these stars have either constructive or destructive influence in this world, and everything seems to be dependent on the specific influence of *mazel*. Our Sages did not deny or reject this notion and, in fact, some of them were expert astrologers… Even though Hashem gave *mazel* this power over the lower realms, it is not absolute power, since Hashem retains control over the stars. Hashem has the power to bring low the mighty and to elevate the lowly. He can sustain that which was decreed by the stars, or increase or decrease their influence.

Rabeinu Bachye –

When the Rabbis teach – *Ein mazel l'Yisrael* (Israel is not governed by *mazel*), the explanation is that the Jewish people are not governed by *mazel*, but every individual Jew is. The Rabbis would never have contradicted the great and esteemed science of astrology.

The **Ran** (**Derashot HaRan** #8) qualified how *mazel* impacts us –

When it comes to *mitzvot* and transgressions, *mazel* only gives an orientation, it doesn't force one's behavior… While Rebbe Chanina and Rebbe Yochanan argue over whether *mazel* affects *Yisrael*, both of them agree that *mazel* does affect intelligence and wealth, but not *mitzvot* and transgressions. [In other words,] *mazel* affects the physical, not the spiritual… The Rabbis argue whether *mitzvot* can protect one from the harm of *mazel*, but agree that this world is run through *mazel*.

The **Ran** (Sanhedrin 65b) explained further –

Authentic astrology is real, and *mazel* will impact our nature unless we work to overcome it. As the *Gemara Shabbat* (156a) says – the time when we are born will affect our traits. We can use this information to try to overcome anything negative from the *mazel*… The Ramban said that the only prohibition is to make an inquiry, but one is permitted to guard oneself against harm [i.e., from the *mazel* if one happens to find out what it says], and this seems correct. The Rambam, however, forbids all of this as divination, which is difficult to understand.

The **Nimukei Yosef** (*Sanhedrin* 16b DH Tanu) wrote –

The understanding that people have about the arrangements of the stars and their influences is not *nichush* (sorcery) but rather a great wisdom. Hashem arranged to run the world this way [through the constellations] from the very beginning of creation. Therefore, every *chassid* (pious individual) should daven to nullify the decree of the *mazel* from himself. Everything comes from Hashem and He has the ability to change it as He desires.

The **Meiri** (Shabbat 156) wrote –

We follow the *gemara* which tells us that Jews are generally not controlled by *mazel*, and disregard the opinion that says Jews are controlled by *mazel*… This means that we are confident that reward and punishment, based on the actions that we ourselves choose, [ultimately] determine everything, and not *mazel*… If, for example, one is born under the constellation of Mars, and is a blood spiller by nature, he will still have full freedom of choice, with nothing pushing him to transgress. Through the guidelines of the religion, one can control his nature, as opposed to simply following after one's inborn inclinations. Through effort and struggle one can fulfill the purpose of the Torah by overcoming his nature.

The great majority of the Sages followed the **Ramban'**s opinion (*Devarim* 18:9) concerning the spiritual reality of *mazel* –

In terms of sorcery…Hashem placed power over the earth and everything on it in the stars and constellations…as has been proven empirically in the science of astrology. And over these stars and constellations, Hashem further placed angels and celestial ministers in control, who are the life force of those stars… However, it was among G-d's mighty wonders that He incorporated within the power of these supernal controllers certain possibilities of change and capabilities to alter the control exerted by that which is beneath them… And this is the secret behind the sorcery and their power, which the Sages said – "they contravene the celestial legion" (*Chulin* 7b). This means that they are contrary to the ordinary powers [of the universe], and they are contrary to the legion [of stars and constellations] in one particular aspect. It is, therefore, logical that the Torah should prohibit them so that the world may be left to carry on its ordinary conduct and natural state, which is the desire of the Creator… All this is not an abomination among the nations; on the contrary, it is considered a mark of wisdom for them. In fact, the *medrash* tells us that Shlomo *HaMelech* learned this among his many fields of wisdom. It was the acts of **sorcery** [not astrology] which are an abomination before Him… The Jews are beyond the influence of the constellations… Their situation improves as they improve their deeds or increase their bonding to Hashem through prayer and learning Torah.

Ibn Ezra (*Shemot* 20:1) wrote –

G-d rules over the nations of the world through the structure of the *mazel*, whether for good or bad. While, according to the system of the *mazel*, the Jews should have continued to be slaves, through G-d's love of the forefathers, His power created a different reality from the *mazel*. G-d thereby removed the Jews from the control of *mazel* to make them His inheritance. Our Sages, therefore, said that Israel has no *mazel*.

Ibn Ezra (*Shemot* 33:21) then pointed out –

The statement of our Sages (*Shabbat* 156a) that there is no *mazel* for Israel, is only true if they observe the Torah. If they don't follow the Torah, however, then *mazel* will control them as we see… This has occurred for both the nation and the individual.

The **Maharal** (*Shabbat* 156a) addressed the concept of "*Ein mazel l'Yisrael*" –

This means that it is possible to affect the impact of *mazel* through the merit of *mitzvot*. This change of the *mazel* can occur even without prayer; a mitzvah itself can affect the impact of the *mazel*. But prayer can [also] certainly change the *mazel*, since G-d can do whatever He wants in heaven and earth.

While "*Ein mazel l'Yisrael*" is referring to the overall Jewish community, even individual Jews can affect the impact of their *mazel* through *mitzvot*. The Jewish people are not affected by *mazel*

because of their elevated reality, and individual Jews can attain that [elevation] through their *mitzvot*. This doesn't mean that *mazel* has no affect on Jews. Everything [in existence actually] depends on the influence of the *mazel*…

However, "*Ein mazel l'Yisrael*" means that *mazel* never controls everything like with the other nations. The principle is that Jews can transcend the influence of *mazel* when they are on their true spiritual level, and not limited by their transgressions… Similarly, individual Jews can rise above the influence of *mazel* through doing *mitzvot*.

The **Maharal** (*Shabbat* 156a) clarified –

There is no prohibition of seeking out an astrologer or relying on various *simanim* (signs) for a mitzvah. Otherwise, this would be a violation of *tamim ti'yeh* (being complete with G-d).

The ***Meshech Chochma*** (*Devarim* 4:19) wrote –

It is well known that the the nations are governed through the intermediary of *mazel*… This is not true for the Jewish nation. They are directed exclusively through *hashgacha pratit* (personal [Divine] supervision), and not *mazel*.

And, finally, the **Chafetz Chaim** (*Sheim Olam* 1:3) clarified –

Hashem appointed a *mazel* above everything, as we say – There is no blade of grass below which does not have a *mazel* above it. This *mazel* is the source of its sustenance and what allows it to grow. However, we should never think that Hashem removed His *hashgacha* (supervision) and allowed the *mazel* to control it as an independent power. That is [certainly] not true. G-d Himself is the only power in the Heaven above and on the earth below… The *mazel* is merely the agent to do G-d's will, and Hashem will alter the *mazel* whenever He wants, as we know with the leaving [of the Jewish people] from Egypt.

In some cases, however, it seems that it is simply not possible to overcome the *mazel*.

The *Gemara Ta'anit* 25a tells the story of Rebbe Elazar ben Pedat who was exceedingly poor. One time he let some blood (a practice done for health) but had nothing to eat afterwards. He became weak and passed out, and later recounted what had happened in his dream or vision.

Rebbe Elazar asked Hashem – How long will my difficulties continue in this world?

Hashem answered him – Would you like me to recreate the world from the beginning? [If so,] then **perhaps** you would be born [with positive *mazel*] for income.

Since this would only have **possibly** helped his situation, and he had already lived the majority of his life, Rebbe Elazar declined the offer [to recreate the world]. Hashem then showed him the enormous *s'char* (benefit) that awaited him in *Olam Haba*.

Rav Dessler, in the name of the Radak, pointed out that the word *mazel* comes from the *shoresh* (root) of *nazel* (flow), and is expressing a flow from above to below. It refers to the tools and environment that one is given to fulfill their role in this world. From the words of *Tosfot* it appears that there is really no *machlokut* (argument) – in some cases the *mazel* can not be changed, and in some it can be changed through a great *zechut* (merit). We need to understand what it is which determines whether the *mazel* can be changed or not.

Sometimes one's poverty or wealth is merely a tool to fulfilling one's role in the world, and then it would be possible for it to change.

But sometimes, how one deals with poverty or wealth is the actual task [of one's life], and then it can not be changed at all.

In a case where some aspect of one's life is not central to their role in the world and it would, therefore, be possible for it to change, that is where a change in one's place or one's name could contribute to a change in one's *mazel*. That is [what is expressed by] the popular expression – "*Meshaneh makom, meshaneh mazel* – Change [your] place, change [your] *mazel*." And this is also the basis of the custom brought by the Rema in *Yoreh Deyah* 335:10 to change the name of one that is very ill – "since a *shinui sheim* (change in name) can tear up the *gazar din* (decree) of a person."

Rav Dessler explained further –

Whatever is required for one to obtain his portion in *Olam Haba* has been given to him – both the means and whatever assistance is required is precisely provided… This is also the subject of *mazel*… In other words, the *mazel* is selected before birth to provide the person with the necessary means for his service of G-d.

A person has the ability to change his *mazel*, as we say – *shinui makom shinui mazel* (change [your] place, change [your] *mazel*)… When he changes his *mazel*, his means of serving G-d also changes. Thus a person can expand or build upon what he has through *mazel* so that he will [be able to obtain] a greater portion in *Olam Haba*.

The *sefer* ***Hishtadliyot Ruchniyot*** (*Perek Vav – Shinui HaMazel*) sums up the topic of *mazel* by explaining –

The foundation of our *emunah* is that whatever happens to a person is dependent on his actions. However, we also find that everyone has a certain *mazel*.

While the whole topic of *mazel* is quite complicated, ***Tosfot*** (*Mo'ed Katan* 28a dh – ela) concludes that *mazel* does, in fact, impact us. And there are some situations where we are [actually] unable to change our *mazel*. Other times, however, we are able to change our *mazel* through a great *zechut*. And it may be that this is specifically what the different arguments are all about – [not whether there is *mazel* which affects us, but rather] to what degree we are able to change our *mazel*.

This should be *l'zechut ul'illuy nishmat* Ruchama Rivka, *a"h*, bat Asher Zevulun