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The Meaning of Mazel

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1.

ECLIPSE OF THE HEAVENLY LUMINARIES

Commenting on the verse,¹ “Let there be lights... and they shall be for signs...,” Rashi quotes the following teaching of our Sages:²

When the {heavenly} lights are eclipsed,³ it is a bad omen for the world, as the verse states,⁴ “do not be dismayed by the signs in the sky...” {meaning} when you perform the will of Hashem, you need not worry about the punishment {augured by the eclipses}.

Regarding the reasons as to why these eclipses occur, the *Talmud* explains:⁵

On account of four matters the sun is eclipsed: On account of an *Av Beis Din*⁶ who dies and is not eulogized appropriately...; and on account of four matters the {heavenly} lights are eclipsed: On account of forgers of a fraudulent document....

Meaning, eclipses occur as a result of human behavior.

The question {on this Talmudic statement} is well-known: “The eclipse of the luminaries” — solar and lunar eclipses — are natural phenomena that occur at **specific times**, to the extent that they can be **predicted precisely**. How, then, can the Talmud say that “on account of four matters the sun is eclipsed... the {heavenly} lights are eclipsed...,” since an eclipse is the inevitable result of the laws of nature, which cannot be circumvented?

¹ *Bereishis* 1:14.

² See *Tosefta Sukkah* 2:7; *Sukkah* 29a; *Mechilta*, “Bo,” 12:2.

³ {I.e., a solar or lunar eclipse.}

⁴ *Yirmiyahu* 10:2.

⁵ *Sukkah* 29a.

⁶ {Lit., “father of the court,” i.e., the *Av Beis Din* is the second highest position in the *Sanhedrin*, under the *Nasi*.}

2.

INSINCERE QUESTIONS

Certain individuals throughout history have raised this “difficulty” as “proof” that not all of the statements of our Sages are accurate, Heaven forbid. On this basis, they rationalized their lifestyle of not observing the Torah and its *mitzvos*.

The truth is, however, that a person who doesn’t observe Torah and *mitzvos* does **not** do so because of “intellectual questions” {that challenge his faith in the validity of Torah}. Rather, his lack of observance is due to his emotional desires. The difficulties raised are {only} an excuse, which he uses to justify his aberrant behavior. Consequently, even a “difficulty” that can easily be dismissed after **brief** reflection is good enough for him to perceive as a challenge {to his faith}.

To preface:

Everyone acknowledges that during the times of the *Tannaim*⁷ and *Amoraim*,⁸ the calculations predicting the occurrence of solar and lunar eclipses were well known among gentile astronomers. Anyone familiar with Jewish history [from the accounts recorded in the writings of our Sages, and more specifically, as recorded in the history books of those times] is aware that gentile thinkers had close associations with Jewish Sages, discussing various matters of wisdom and science — to the extent that all areas of wisdom⁹ were debated, including the field of astronomy.¹⁰

Even if a person wishes to be stubborn and refuse to accept that our Sages had a solid understanding of scientific matters and astronomical computations, and that *through them*, this knowledge reached the gentile astronomers, it is **clear** and undeniable that when {knowledge of} the calculations predicting solar

⁷ {The Rabbinic sages whose views are recorded in the Mishnah.}

⁸ {The Rabbinic sages whose views are recorded in the Talmud.}

⁹ See *Bechoros* 8b, **et al.**

¹⁰ See *Pesachim* 94b.

and lunar eclipses became widespread among gentile academics, they certainly would have become known to the Jewish Sages¹¹ through their dealings (with the gentile scholars). This is especially so regarding astronomy, which was a competency needed for the {proper fulfillment of the} *mitzvah* of sanctifying the new moon.¹²

It is therefore **obvious** that the {above mentioned} statement of our Sages — that solar and lunar eclipses are a bad omen, etc. (and that they occur “on account of four matters”) — cannot contradict the fact that eclipses are an inevitable {and predictable} result of the laws of nature.

3.

SEEING THE ECLIPSE

Seemingly, we can explain that the emphasis of the statement, “When the {heavenly} lights are eclipsed, it is a bad omen...” is (not on the eclipse itself, but rather) on the eclipse being **seen**. Hashem’s intention in showing a Jew a bad omen is in order to spur him to repent; therefore, a Jew must **see** the omen {in order for it to be efficacious}.

According to this approach, the above-mentioned difficulty is resolved: The laws of nature only determine that eclipses will certainly occur. It is not, however, inevitable that the eclipses will be visible, for there can be clouds, or the like, that **obstruct** the eclipse.

This aspect {an eclipse being seen} is contingent on human behavior. If {one of} the “four matters...”¹³ are prevalent, there will be a “bad omen” signified by the eclipse being seen. If people conduct themselves properly, however, then

¹¹ See *Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer*, end of ch. 7.

¹² {Before the introduction of a set Jewish calendar, the new month was determined based on witness sightings of the new moon. The Sages needed to calculate when and where the moon was likely to appear, in order to ascertain whether the testimony of the witnesses was reliable.}

¹³ {Cited in sec. 1}.

clouds {or the like} will intervene, hiding the eclipse. As such, the eclipse does not serve as a “bad **omen**.”

Yet this explanation is untenable for the following reason:

From the wording of our Sages, “When the lights are eclipsed,” it is obvious that the {phenomenon of an} eclipse signifies a bad omen, and **not** the sighting of an eclipse. (Consider the fact, too, that in certain regions, such as Egypt, clouds almost never appear (and therefore it never rains in Egypt)).¹⁴

On this basis, the *Talmud*¹⁵ (in a *Beraisai*) makes a distinction between Jews and gentiles:

When the sun is eclipsed, it is a bad omen for gentiles. When the moon is eclipsed, it is a bad omen for the Jewish people.¹⁶ {The Jewish people are associated with the moon} for the Jews calculate {the yearly calendar} according to the moon {i.e., they use a lunar calendar}. The gentiles {are associated with the sun, for they} calculate {their yearly calendar} according to the sun {i.e., they use a solar calendar}.

Meaning, since Jews are likened to the moon, and gentiles, to the sun,¹⁷ the “eclipses” {i.e., defects}¹⁸ in their behavior **causes** an eclipse of the sun or moon; an eclipse (and “defect”) of the sun or moon is a **result** of an “eclipse” (and deficiency) in the conduct of Jews and the gentiles.

It is therefore understood that when the Jewish people’s conduct is ideal, there is no reason for there to be an eclipse or a deficiency in the moon at all (not even an eclipse that is not seen).

¹⁴ Rashi’s commentary on *Bereishis* 41:1, 47:10, et al. {Therefore, in such regions, given the absence of cloud coverage, eclipses will rarely, if ever, be hidden.}

¹⁵ See *Tosefta Sukkah* 2:7; *Sukkah* 29a.

¹⁶ {Lit., “The enemies of the Jewish people,” a euphemism for the Jewish people.}

¹⁷ See *Or HaTorah* s.v. “*Vayomer Lo Yehonasan*” {*Bereishis*, vol. 1., p. 4b ff.}

¹⁸ {“*Likui*,” the word used in the Hebrew original for “eclipse,” literally means “a defect.”}

4.

A TIME OF PUNISHMENT

The explanation is simple:

The meaning of the teaching, “When the {heavenly} lights are eclipsed it is a bad omen...” (and that it occurs “on account of four matters...”) is as follows:

An eclipse signifies that at that time, a harmful *mazal*¹⁹ is dominant [as we find **many times** throughout the teachings of our Sages²⁰ that at certain times, a harmful *mazal* is dominant]. Meaning, it is a **conducive** time {for Heaven} to mete out punishment, and it causes us to be (more) susceptible to punishment for these “four matters.”

For this reason, “when you perform the will of Hashem, you need not worry about the punishment {portended by eclipses},”²¹ since {when you conduct yourself properly} there will be no reason for punishment.

Accordingly, no difficulty can be raised {regarding the statement of our Sages} from the occurrences of solar and lunar eclipses at specific times due to the laws of nature, since eclipses are not the result of human behavior. They only signify a time of punishment, when we are especially susceptible to being punished for the *four matters*. **These** times (of {dominance of} a harmful *mazal*) along with their “signs” {the occurrence of an eclipse} are indeed part of the original setup of nature and the physical world [similar to the times the *Talmud* lists in tractate *Shabbos*:²² “One who is (born) on a Sunday... will be {wholly good, or altogether wicked}...”].²³

¹⁹ {Lit., “constellation,” a flow of spiritual energy initiated from Above that can influence the physical world.}

²⁰ See for example: *Shabbos* 129b; 156a. *Taanit* 29a ff.; *Shulchan Aruch* “Yoreh Deah,” 179:2; *Zohar*, vol. 3, 58a ff; 234a.; *Raaya Mehemna*, 281b; et al.

²¹ *Rashi* on *Bereishis* 1:14, as cited at the beg. of the *sichah*.

²² *Shabbos* 156a.

²³{The *Talmud* there says that a person's nature is influenced by the weekday on which he is born.}

5.

JEWS AND GENTILES

However, we still need to clarify:

The *Talmud* makes the following distinction between Jews and idolaters:²⁴

When **Israel** performs the will of Hashem, they need not worry about all these omens {as the verse says}:²⁵ “...do not be dismayed by the signs of the heavens, though the nations fear them.” **The idolaters are frightened, but not Israel.**

Meaning, under the same conditions in which Jews are **not** “frightened” (when “they perform the will of Hashem”), gentiles “are frightened.”

We need to clarify:

If “a bad omen” signifies a time designated for punishment (for laxity in the *four matters*) and, “when they perform the will of Hashem” means that if we do not transgress, naturally, we will not deserve any punishment, why should “the nations fear them” if they haven’t violated Hashem’s will?

6.

A BAD INFLUENCE

The explanation is as follows:

The effect of a “*mazal*” at certain times is (not only in terms of the dispensing of reward and punishment, but also) regarding human behavior. The “*mazal*” causes a person to have an inclination toward certain behaviors (good or... {the opposite}).

²⁴ *Sukkah* 29a.

²⁵ *Yirmiyahu* 10:2.

For example:

It says, “Most of a person’s {Torah} wisdom is only acquired at night.”²⁶ This statement does not mean that a person cannot learn Torah successfully during the day. Rather, it means that “night” is an opportune time for success in Torah studies, **more so** than during the day when more effort is needed to make significant gains.

The same is true of our Sages’ statement in *Shabbos*,²⁷ “one who is {born}... will be...,” meaning, a person’s nature and character traits are determined by the (*mazal* associated with the) time of his birth:

This does not mean that a person’s *mazal* compels someone born at a particular time to act in a specific way, since “license is granted to all people”²⁸ to be righteous or the opposite. And it is not possible that a person’s “inborn nature will drive him to something that he cannot control.”²⁹ Rather, it means that the *mazal* dominant at that time influences a person to have a “slight inclination”³⁰ toward a specific behavior. With effort, however, he can overcome this nature, and even change and transform it.

This is similar to what *Rambam* explains (at length) in *Shemoneh Perakim*³¹ that “it is impossible {to conceive} that a person is born... with either {intractable} goodness or evil”; rather “{he may be born} naturally **inclined** to good or negative traits.” Therefore, his nature doesn’t compel how he chooses {to behave}. The difference:

A person who is “naturally inclined toward good...” needs less effort to become a virtuous person, since his inborn nature helps him. (Still, he still has free choice and can choose to become the opposite of a person with positive

²⁶ *Rambam, Hilchos Talmud Torah* 3:13; *Shulchan Aruch Harav, Hilchos Talmud Torah* 4:8.

²⁷ *Shabbos* 156a, {as cited above in sec. 4.}

²⁸ *Rambam Hilchos Teshuvah*, beginning of chapter 5.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 5:4.

³⁰ Commentary of *Lechem Mishnah* on the *Rambam* *ibid.*

³¹ *Rambam, “Shemoneh Perakim,”* beg. of ch. 8. See also *Akeidah*, Gates 22 and 26.

qualities). Someone naturally inclined to having harmful dispositions, however, must work harder to become virtuous. (On the other hand, having to work harder is a sign that he has been given greater abilities than someone who is “naturally inclined toward positive qualities,” because, “the weight of the camel’s load is determined by the strength of the camel.”)³²

The same holds true of a person’s specific character traits that come as a result of the (*mazal* dominant at the) **time** of his birth. Although the Talmud says, “one who is {born}... **will be...**,” it does not mean that a person is **compelled** to be so; rather, the person must apply more effort and strength to overcome this nature.

[Similar principles apply regarding all of the times about which it is said that this is an “ill-fated day”³³ or the like. This only means that something undesirable is more likely to occur then, and we must therefore be cautious about certain activities on this day. (For example, “We don’t commence {projects} on Monday or Wednesday,”³⁴ and so on.) It is not inevitable, however, for something unfortunate to happen.

For this reason, the rule that “we don’t start on Monday or Wednesday” only applies when it does not conflict with the rule that “we do not postpone {the performance of} *mitzvos*.”³⁵ Similarly, with appropriate effort, a person can be successful even on an inauspicious day, etc.³⁶]

³² *Sotah* 13b. {Meaning, a person is only given a challenge that he has the strength to overcome, so the greater the challenge, the greater the strength he must have.}

³³ *Taanis* 29a.

³⁴ *Shulchan Aruch* “*Yoreh Deah*” 179:2; *Zohar* vol. 3, *Ra’aya Mehemna*, 281b. See also there, 273a, 234a; *Shabbos* 129b.

³⁵ {*Pesachim* 64b.} See *Sefer Chasidim* sec. 59; *Zohar* vol. 3, *Ra’aya Mehemna*, 273a.

³⁶ See *Rashi Bo*, 10:10; *Maamer Shnei Hameoros* 11b ff. at length.

7.

NATURAL INCLINATIONS

On this basis, we can say:

The statement “when the {heavenly} lights are eclipsed, it is a bad omen for the world” refers [not only to a time of punishment when improper behavior is **punished**, but] to a time when people are naturally (especially) inclined toward improper behavior. They are not, however, **compelled** to act on these urges, for they have the strength to overcome their inclinations.

[The Talmud’s wording in its analogy for a solar eclipse is, therefore, precise:³⁷

{An eclipse is comparable to} a King of flesh and blood who prepared a feast for his servants and placed a lantern before them {to illuminate the room}. When he became angry at them, he instructed his **servant**: “Take away the lantern from them....”

Meaning, the act of taking “away the lantern” was carried out (**not** by the King personally, but) by “his servant,” since {in the analogue,} the eclipse and bad omen of this time is only a result of **nature** (the King’s **servant**.)]

The phrase, “on account of four matters the sun is eclipsed...” means [not that an **eclipse** takes place because of **actual** improper conduct in the *four matters*, but] that the luminaries are eclipsed, etc., since there is a tendency and inclination toward the *four matters* at that time.

³⁷ {*Sukkah* 29a.}

8.

ABOVE NATURE

On this basis, we can also understand why the novelty of the teaching, “Do not be frightened {by the signs of the heavens}” was specifically said regarding Jews and not gentiles:

Gentiles can behave properly, and exercise control over their natural inclinations, etc., even when their inclinations are intensified by certain {astrological events and} times. Although non-Jews don't have **true** free choice,³⁸ they are not punished unless they sin **of their own accord**.³⁹ Nevertheless, since they are subject to the laws of nature, they need to exert much effort and labor, etc., to **negate** the {negative} effects of nature. Therefore, “the nations **will fear** them,” i.e., gentiles **fear** the urges caused by nature.

In contrast, when Jews augment their divine service, **performing the will** of Hashem beyond their natural limitations and boundaries, they **supersede** nature (including “the signs of the heavens”). Therefore, “**they need not worry** about all of these {omens.}”

Not only can they **overcome** {the effects of} nature (through their effort and labor to neutralize the negative influences of nature); they don't take “the signs of the heavens” into account in the first place; they **commence** {projects} on Monday and Wednesday, and so on, to the extent that they have no need at all to take the laws of nature into account. This is Hashem's conduct with the righteous (“and your people are all righteous”)⁴⁰ — a clear miraculous approach that is loftier than nature.

-Based on a talk delivered on Shabbos *parshas Shelach*, 5735 (1975)

³⁸ Only the Jewish people {have **true** free choice} (by virtue of their lofty soul), as is understood from *Likutei Torah, Emor* 38b; et al.

³⁹ See *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Teshuvah*,” ch. 6, par. 3; *Shemoneh Perakim*, ch. 8.

⁴⁰ *Yeshayahu* 60:21.