

Defying Destiny

The stars might try to predict our future, but our real power comes from within.

The Prediction

Amy Tripp, known as the “internet’s viral astrologer,” predicted the date of the U.S. President’s withdrawal from the presidential race. On July 11, she posted that if he would be forced to drop out, it would be on July 21. Indeed, on that exact day, he announced his decision to withdraw. Actually, back in 2020, she predicted that the Vice President would run for the presidency in 2024, and now, she predicts that the Republican candidate will win the election.

What does the Torah say about astrology? Do we really believe in it?

On one hand, the Talmud sometimes seems to take astrology seriously.

Here’s an example which is relevant to these times: We are currently in the period of the “Three Weeks,” between 17 Tammuz and Tisha B’Av, when we mourn the destruction of the Holy Temple. Well, the Talmud says that a Jew who has a court case against a non-Jew should avoid it in the month of Av, because of its bad Mazel, and should try to have it resolved in the month of Adar, when it’s a lucky month for the Jews according to the stars. (Taanit 29b). Clearly, the Torah attributes importance to the constellations.

Here's another story, but with a twist:

When Abraham, the first Jew, was worried that he would never have children, the Torah tells us that G-d took him outside and said, "Look at the stars. Your descendants will be just like them."

Rashi explains that G-d told Abraham to forget about the astrology that said he wouldn't have a son. Yes, there are constellations, and they suggest that Abraham and Sarah will not have children. But there is a way to circumvent them: G-d changes their names—from Abram to Abraham and Sarai to Sarah—and their fortune changes (Lech Lecha 15:5).

There is a similar custom in our day: when a person is very ill, some have the custom of changing or adding a name to alter their fortune for the better; in the words of the Rema, "changing the name tears up the decree" (Yoreh De'ah 335:10).

The next time we come across astrology is in the Book of Exodus:

We all remember Pharaoh's awful order to get rid of the Israelites by throwing their babies into the Nile. But why the Nile specifically? Why not just order that all Hebrew baby boys be killed? When the slavery began, Pharaoh told the Hebrew midwives to kill the babies at birth, but he didn't tell them how. So, why was he so focused on the Nile?

Rashi explains this as well. He says that on the day Moses was born, Pharaoh's astrologers told him that the Israelites' savior had been born and would eventually be harmed by water.

That's why they recommended that all boys be thrown into the water. They didn't realize that Moses would be harmed by water not then, but much later, when he hit the rock in the desert (Exodus 17:22).

This story reveals another flaw in astrology. The astrologers indeed knew certain things—but not precisely. They knew that Moses would be affected by water, which was true, but this event occurred 120 years later, when Moses struck the rock instead of speaking to it. Astrologers might have information—but it is not exact science.

The Star of Evil

Here's a similar story related to the Exodus from Egypt.

In the beginning of Parshat Bo, when Moses warned Pharaoh about the eighth plague, Pharaoh tried to negotiate by asking who would be leaving. When Moses replied that everyone, "our young and our old, our sons and our daughters" would go, he responded by saying, *"I see evil (ra'ah) ahead of you."*

Rashi explains that Pharaoh saw a star named Ra'ah through his astrology, which he believed was a sign of bloodshed awaiting the Israelites in the desert. Pharaoh told Moses that he foresaw blood in their future.

What truth was there to this vision?

When the Israelites sinned with the Golden Calf, G-d wanted to destroy them. However, Moses argued that Egypt would say that G-d took us out of Egypt only to do evil ("Ra'ah") against us. He uses the word *ra'ah*, evil, several times; in other words,

he was telling G-d that Pharaoh would claim his prediction had come true.

Ultimately, G-d accepted his argument and didn't destroy the Jewish people.

There was a postscript to the story as well. Rashi explains that G-d turned the blood, which Pharaoh had seen as a bad omen in the stars, into something positive: the mitzvah of circumcision. He transformed what was meant to be negative into a sign of life and covenant.

Now, this only took place forty years later. During their forty years in the desert, only the tribe of Levi circumcised their sons. The rest of the Israelites—as stated explicitly in the Book of Joshua (5:6)—did not circumcise their sons born in the desert.

Why not? The Talmud explains that it was dangerous to circumcise in the desert, because the northern wind, which has the power to heal the infant, did not blow there. Also, no one knew how long they would camp at any given place; whenever the Cloud of Glory moved, they would pack their tents and belongings and continue their journey. There was always a concern that they would need to move, and traveling with a baby five minutes after the circumcision was a risk to the infant.

In any case, most of the generation born in the desert was not circumcised, and after the passing of Moses, G-d told Joshua that the people needed to be circumcised before entering the land. When they were finally circumcised, G-d told Joshua, "Today I have removed the disgrace of Egypt from you."

With this statement, the story came full-circle. This “disgrace” referred to the Egyptians’ vision of blood as a bad omen for the Israelites in the desert. By circumcising them, Joshua fulfilled G-d’s promise to erase this shame (Exodus 10:10).

Rabbi Akiva’s Daughter

What we see in this story is that the astrologers did see something true—they saw blood for the Israelites in the desert. But through Moses’ prayer after the sin of the Golden Calf, he persuaded G-d to transform the bad blood into the blood of circumcision.

Now, whether it was with Abraham or the Israelites in the desert, it was G-d who changed the astrological forecast. So what should a simple Jew do today if he accidentally consults an astrologer who “predicts” bad news? How should he handle it?

The answer can be found in the famous story of Rabbi Akiva’s daughter.

The Talmud says that an astrologer predicted that Rabbi Akiva’s daughter would be bitten by a snake and die on her wedding day. However, Rabbi Akiva chose not to share this ominous prediction with her.

The wedding day arrived, and everything went smoothly. After the celebration, before going to sleep, his daughter took a pin from her hair and casually stuck it into the wall. Unknowingly, she pierced the eye of a snake that was hiding there, killing it instantly.

The next morning, when she pulled the pin out of the wall, she

was surprised to find a dead snake hanging from it. She recounted the incident to her father, who immediately realized that she had been saved from certain death.

“What did you do last night?” he wanted to know. He wasn’t asking how she had killed the snake, but rather what good deed she might have done to change her fate.

She told him that during the wedding feast, while everyone else was busy celebrating, she heard a knock at the door. A poor man stood outside, asking for food. She decided to give him her portion of the wedding meal. Rabbi Akiva told her, “Charity saves from death.” It was this act of kindness that saved her life (Shabbat 156b).

This story shows that while horoscopes might hold some truth, a Jew can change their fate by doing a mitzvah. The Talmud quotes Rabbi Yochanan, saying, “There is no constellation for Israel,” meaning that Jews aren’t bound by astrology. We don’t need to follow the gentile custom to be afraid of signs in the heavens. “They are frightened, but not Israel,” the Talmud concludes (Shabbat 156a).

In fact, Jewish law rules that it is forbidden to make decisions based on a horoscope altogether (Yoreh Deah 179:1). **Not to do magic, necromancy, or divination.** We do not make inquiries to astrological seers, nor to the fates. [Comment of Rema: Because it is said, “You must be wholehearted with the LORD your God.” (Deuteronomy 18:13)]

The Rebbe explains that while other nations are governed by nature and might need to worry about astrological signs, Jews

who serve G-d beyond their natural limits rise above these concerns. When we align ourselves with G-d's will, and transcend our nature then G-d will override nature on our behalf. We don't need to be afraid of the stars or any natural omens—our lives are guided by miracles that go beyond nature (Likkutei Sichot, Vol. 15, p. 12).

Today we completed the Book of Bamidbar. Life in the desert symbolizes more than anything that a Jew is above nature. From the manna, the water, to the Clouds of Glory, everything was miraculous. Those 40 years were meant to teach the Jew that he has nothing to fear from horoscopes. We are connected to G-d, and we live above the natural order. When we overcome our own nature to perform G-d's will, G-d subdues nature to perform ours.