

TELLING TIME IN RABBINIC JUDAISM: CORRELATING THE
LUNAR-SOLAR CALENDAR WITH THE LECTIONARY CYCLE
Narrar el tiempo en el judaísmo rabínico: el calendario lunar-solar y el
ciclo leccionario

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BIBLID [0544-408X (2004) 53; 231-248]

Resumen: Episodios críticos de la historia de Israel, conmemorados como días festivos, son medidos de manera que coincidan con el cambio anual de la naturaleza. En el judaísmo, el tiempo es marcado por los meses lunares y las estaciones solares; además adquieren sacralidad cuando un cambio en los cielos coincide con un episodio en la historia de Israel. Así la armonía caracteriza la vida de Israel sobre la tierra y la morada de Dios en el cielo. En las palabras del *Qaddish*: “Aquel que procura la paz en las alturas puede procurar nuestra paz”. El calendario sagrado, señalado por el sol (para las estaciones) y por la luna (para los meses), regula la vida en Israel en la tierra con el movimiento de los cuerpos celestes. El movimiento del sol y la luna en torno a la tierra da testimonio de episodios críticos en la narrativa de la Torah.

Abstract: Critical chapters of the story of Israel, commemorated as festivals, are timed to coincide with turnings in the year of nature. In Judaism, time is marked by the lunar months and the solar seasons and is endowed with sanctity when a turning in the heavens coincides with an episode in Israel's story. Harmony thus characterizes Israel's life on earth and God's abode in heaven. In the words of the Qaddish, “He who makes peace in the heights may make peace for us.” The sacred calendar signalled by the sun (for seasons) and the moon (for months), coordinates Israel's life here on earth with the movement of the heavenly bodies. The movement of the sun and moon around the earth attests to critical episodes in the Torah's narrative.

Palabras clave: Calendario, lunar y solar. Ciclo leccionario. Naturaleza e historia. Historia y naturaleza. Pascua. Pentecostés. Tabernáculos. Sábado. Sinagoga. Luna. Sol. Astrología. Elul. Tisré. Nisán.

Key words: Calendar, lunar and solar. Lectionary cycle, nature and history, history and nature, Passover, Pentecost, Tabernacles, Sabbath, synagogue, moon, sun, astrology, Elul, Tishre, Nisan

Professor Pérez Fernández has made fundamental contributions to the study of ancient Judaism and Christianity, and I am happy to join in this

tribute to an important and influential scholar. I am proud to publish his *articles du fond* in the *Review of Rabbinic Judaism* (Brill), where I serve as chairman of the editorial board.

Critical chapters of the story of Israel, commemorated as festivals, are timed to coincide with turnings in the year of nature. In Judaism, time is marked by the lunar months and the solar seasons and is endowed with sanctity when a turning in the heavens coincides with an episode in Israel's story. Harmony thus characterizes Israel's life on earth and God's abode in heaven. In the words of the Qaddish, the prayer repeated in synagogue worship that sanctifies God's name, "He who makes peace in the heights may make peace for us."

The point is, the sacred calendar signaled by the sun (for seasons) and the moon (for months), coordinates Israel's life here on earth with the movement of the heavenly bodies. The movement of the sun and moon around the earth¹ attests to critical episodes in the Torah's narrative. Thus, every year on the first full moon after the vernal equinox of March 21, the communities of Judaism commemorate the liberation of the Israelite slaves from Egyptian bondage and their escape into the wilderness of Sinai. So too on the first full moon after the autumnal equinox of September 21, Israel returns to dwell in the shackles that afforded shelter in the wilderness for forty years.

Telling Time: Tabernacles and the First Full Moon after the autumnal Equinox

Approaching the Promised Land, the freed slaves did not have confidence in God's promises. They turned away from the Land. Consequently, God condemned the generation of freed slaves to wander for forty years in the wilderness. There they would die out. Only their children would be worthy of entering the Promised Land. Lev. 23:33-43 explicitly links the Festival of Tabernacles to Israel's dwelling in the wilderness for forty years.

1. Following the usage of the Ptolemaic, pre-Copernican calendar of Judaism.

“You shall dwell in booths [Sukkot] for seven days; all that are native in Israel shall dwell in booths, that your generations may know that I made the people of Israel dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt; I am the Lord your God.”

In reverting to the wilderness, Israel is to take shelter in any random, ramshackle hut, covered with what in form and in purpose man otherwise does not value. Israel's dwelling in the wilderness is fragile, random, and transient — like Israel in the wilderness. The Torah thus has the Festival of Tabernacles commemorate Israel's condition in the wilderness. On the Festival for a week's time, Israel moves from its permanent houses to impermanent huts, re-enacting the fragility of its life in the wilderness.

The context of the Festival of Tabernacles is the lunar month of Tishré. The first day of that Tishré is the New Year, when God sits in judgment on all the world and decides the fate of nations and individuals for the coming year. The tenth day following the New Year is the Day of Atonement, which atones for sin and brings forgiveness for sin. In Hebrew, the New Year is called Rosh Hashanah and the Day of Atonement is called Yom Kippur. Then the Festival of Tabernacles follows in sequence. It is the third part of the season of judgment and atonement marked by the New Year and Day of Atonement. We realize that these fall on the first and the tenth days of the lunar month of Tishré. Sukkot comes on the fifteenth through the twenty-second days of that same month. The Festival of Tabernacles therefore is integral to the penitential season of judgment, atonement, and forgiveness of sin. It marks the happy outcome. It celebrates the advent of the rainy season with prayers and activities meant to encourage the now-conciliated God to give ample rain to sustain the life of the Land and its people. Israel has rebelled and sinned, but Israel has also atoned and repented.

Restoring Paradise

Passover-Pentecost and Tabernacles focus on one of the two paramount narratives that nearly all communities of Judaism adopt as their own: Israel liberated from Egyptian bondage, brought to Sinai, given the Torah, condemned by its own rejection of the Land to wander in the wilderness until all the contumacious generation has died out.

There is another narrative that shapes the way of life and world view and definition of “Israel” of nearly all communities of Judaism, and that concerns the creation of the world. On the seventh day of the week, the Sabbath, Israel rests, as God rested after making the world. The Sabbath recreates the condition of the world when God completed creation: “God blessed the seventh day and declared it holy, because on it God creased from all the work of creation that he had done”(Gen. 2:3). With God Adam and Eve rested on the first Sabbath, and on the Sabbath day, by its repose, Israel restores the conditions that prevailed when God and Adam were last together — that perfect Sabbath when God, having perfected creation, blessed and sanctified the Sabbath day in celebration of the perfection of creation — and entered upon repose.

How is the story of the restoration of Eden told? Here, in so many words, we are told that Israel’s perfect sanctification of a single Sabbath day represents that repair and perfection of the world that marks the recovery of the Land that is Israel’s Eden:

YERUSHALMI-TRACTATE TAANIT 1:1 II:5:

The Israelites said to Isaiah, “O Isaiah, our Rabbi, What will come for us out of this night?”

He said to them, “Wait for me, until I can present the question.”

Once he had asked the question, he came back to them.

They said to him, “Watchman, what of the night? What did the Guardian of the ages say [a play on ‘of the night’ and ‘say’]?”

He said to them, “The watchman says: ‘Morning comes; and also the night. [If you will inquire, inquire; come back again]’” (Is. 21:12).

They said to him, “Also the night?”

He said to them, “It is not what you are thinking. But there will be morning for the righteous, and night for the wicked, morning for Israel, and night for idolaters.”

Now comes the main point in the exchange: when will this happen? It will happen when Israel wants. And what is standing in the way is Israel's arrogance, to be atoned for by Israel's remorseful repentance:

They said to him, "When?"

He said to them, "Whenever you want, He too wants [it to be] — if you want it, he wants it."

They said to him, "What is standing in the way?"

He said to them, "Repentance: 'come back again'" (Is. 21:12).

This is stated in the clearest possible way: one day will do it.

R. Aha in the name of R. Tanhum b. R. Hiyya, "If Israel repents for one day, forthwith the son of David will come.

"What is the scriptural basis? 'O that today you would hearken to his voice!'" (Ps. 95:7).

Now comes the introduction of the Sabbath as a test case:

Said R. Levi, "If Israel should keep a single Sabbath in the proper way, forthwith the son of David will come.

"What is the scriptural basis for this view? 'Moses said, Eat it today, for today is a Sabbath to the Lord; [today you will not find it in the field]' (Ex. 16:25).

"And it says, '[For thus said the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel], 'In returning and rest you shall be saved; [in quietness and in trust shall be your strength.]' And you would not]" (Is. 30:15).

By means of returning and [Sabbath] rest you will be redeemed.

The main point, then, is the linkage of repentance to the coming restoration of Israel to the Land, the dead to life, by the Messiah. But the advent of the Messiah depends wholly upon Israel's will. If Israel will subordinate its will to God's, all else will follow. And the Sabbath stands at the very center of the Judaic master-narrative.

No wonder then, that in the liturgy of home and synagogue, to the Sabbath-observing Israelite, the Sabbath is the chief sign of God's grace:

For thou hast chosen us and sanctified us above all nations, in love and favor has given us thy holy Sabbath as an inheritance.

So states the Sanctification of the Sabbath wine. Likewise in the Sabbath morning liturgy:

You did not give it [Sabbath] to the nations of the earth, nor did you make it the heritage of idolaters, nor in its rest will unrighteous men find a place.

But to Israel your people you have given it in love, to the seed of Jacob whom you have chosen, to that people who sanctify the Sabbath day. All of them find fulfillment and joy from your bounty.

For the seventh day did you choose and sanctify as the most pleasant of days and you called it a memorial to the works of creation.

Here again we find a profusion of themes, this time centered upon the Sabbath. The Sabbath is a sign of the covenant. It is a gift of grace, which neither idolaters nor evil people may enjoy. It is the testimony of the chorines of Israel. And it is the most pleasant of days. Keeping the Sabbath is living in God's kingdom:

Those who keep the Sabbath and call it a delight will rejoice in your kingdom.

Keeping the Sabbath brings the Israelite into the kingdom of God. So states the additional Sabbath prayer. Keeping the Sabbath now is a foretaste of the redemption: "This day is for Israel light and rejoicing."

To act like God on the Sabbath, the Israelite rests; he does not working, meaning, do what God did in the six days of creation. Creation yields those large principles that we have identified: the traits of an act of labor for God in creation define the prohibited conditions of an act of labor on the Sabbath. What then takes place inside the walls of the Israelite household when time takes over space and revises the conduct of ordinary affairs? Israel goes home to Eden. That is how best to make the

statement that the Land is Israel's Eden, that Israel imitates God by keeping the Sabbath, meaning, not doing the things that God did in creating the world but ceased to do on the Sabbath, and that to restore its Eden, Israel must sustain its life — nourish itself — where it belongs. That is the story Judaism tells about the Israelite through the tale of the Sabbath day.

Observing as holy time specific days and appointed seasons, most communities of Judaism act out the same episodes in the Torah's narrative of Israel. The story Judaism tells brings the past into the present and imposes upon the present the pattern of the past. It is a story about eternity in time, made up of narratives conveying timeless verities. People living anywhere in creation, any time in history, in any realm of language and culture, tell that story about themselves and find a natural fit. The Judaic way of life acts out, chapter by chapter, the world view of the sacred community — episodes that form a continuous, single narrative of timeless relationships and transactions with God.

Marking Time and the Lectionary Cycle

So we see that Judaism tells time by correlating nature's solar seasons and lunar months with Israel's paradigmatic events. But there is another way of marking time, another narrative woven into the narrative of the solar seasons and lunar months. It is time as marked by the Torah as declaimed in the synagogue: the Sabbaths made to recapitulate another narrative.

To understand that way, we have to recall that through the lunar year, each Sabbath is marked by reading a passage in the Pentateuch, which is completed on a one (or a three) year cycle. That begins with the Sabbath on which the creation story is retold, continues with the next Sabbath, Noah's day, followed by the third in the year, the call to Abraham, and so throughout. That is called "the lectionary cycle."²

2. So too each lection is joined by a prophetic passage, the *Haftarah*, itself forming a commentary to the narrative of the week. Michael Fishbane has systematically linked the prophetic to the Pentateuchal lections in *The JPS Bible Commentary* (Philadelphia, 2002: Jewish Publication Society of America), pp. xix-xxxiv. He explains why each prophetic lection was chosen and how it makes an impact upon the interpretation of the Pentateuchal lection.

But the lectionary cycle is augmented by special readings for a sequence of Sabbaths beginning in December and ending in October. These special readings mark many, though not all, of the Sabbaths of the year. Sometimes they involve an additional lection of the Pentateuch chosen for that particular Sabbath, but they always involve a prophetic lection that imposes its significance on the celebration of that day. In either case, these special Sabbaths impart a meaning in addition to the regular rhythm of the Pentateuchal cycle.

Seen as groups, what do the special Sabbaths signify, and how do they link nature's time with the narrative of Scripture? They are in three groups.

First, the special Sabbaths from Hanukkah through Pentecost, coinciding with the rainy season from December into early May, situate Israel in nature's time. The theme of the lections for special Sabbaths celebrates its meeting with God in the Temple.

Second, then in nature the rains end. There follow the days of desiccation and death. The special Sabbaths encompass three weeks of mourning, when Israel's rebellion against God brings about God's abandonment of the Temple. With Israel's rebellion fully requited in the disaster, there succeed the seven Sabbaths of consolation for the penitent, corporate Israel.

The third season of special Sabbaths, marked by the hope that the rainy season will start once more, in the lunar months of Elul, forms a time of penitence, generally in August, and Tishré, corresponding to September. The first ten days are the Days of Awe, the individual Israelite's time to recapitulate in his own being the main lines of corporate Israel's story of sin, punishment, suffering and atonement and the rest. The Days of Awe, the New Year and the Day of Atonement, marked by repentance for sin, atonement, and prayer for forgiveness, then correspond to the days from the seventeenth of Tammuz to the ninth of Ab and the weeks following. At the end follows the climactic moment, the Festival par excellence, Tabernacles, with the promise of renewal.

That program, laid out in the lectionary cycle superimposed on the Pentateuchal one, presents the main points of Rabbinic theology in its doctrine that builds on the correspondence of Adam and Israel, Eden and the Land. And this rabbinization of the liturgical experience does not

match the way in which the Pentateuchal lections, whether annual or triennial, organize the sacred calendar of synagogue worship. A curious disjuncture imposes itself on the two distinct sequences, [1] the narrative-historical sequence of the Pentateuch, [2] the paradigmatic of the lunar cycle.

The Pentateuchal lectionary cycle recapitulates the narrative sequence from Adam to the border of the promised land. By extension through Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings, the narrative (if not the lectionary) cycle ends where it began: loss of Eden, loss of Jerusalem. By contrast, the lectionary program of *Pesiqta deRab Kahana* hardly works through the same narrative in the same sequence at all. There is no beginning, middle, and end, constructed in a teleological sequence out of the narrative history of Israel. Now, the events of the natural year, signified in the movement of the lunar months correlated with the solar seasons, built around the first full moon after the vernal and autumnal equinoxes in particular, do match certain moments in Israel's life. But these are not in the temporal order so paramount in the lectionary narrative from Genesis through Numbers plus Deuteronomy. They follow their own order and sequence. The occasions of nature matched by moments in Israel's pattern of conduct and its consequence thus are removed from the narrative framework, e.g., of Genesis through Kings. Events are no longer unique, linear, sequential — teleological. They now are formed into moments of an exemplary character, out of time altogether, out of phase with the Pentateuchal-narrative setting. Thought is no longer teleological but rather paradigmatic.

No wonder, then, that *Pesiqta deRab Kahana* starts where it does, with the rededication of the Temple signified by Hanukkah. In the repertoire of events gathered in the document, that is the only logical starting point; the alternative, the end point, is impossible. That is then followed by the leap to the four Sabbaths preparatory to Passover, with the rest in sequence! With the preparations for the celebration of Israel's beginning in the Exodus and at Sinai marking the starting point, the rest of the natural year lays itself out against the main lines of the liturgical year. There is then this cycle:

- (1) the preparation of the Temple, its dedication, then its purification;
- (2) the beginnings at Passover-Pentecost,

(3) the catastrophe of Tammuz-Ab, the season of death, then the consolation quick to follow, and at the end,

(4) the recapitulation of the same cycle in Elul and Tishré — sin, punishment, atonement, consolation and renewal, as the life-cycle of nature and the rhythm of Israelite existence correspond and signify, each, the reliability and renewal of the other.

So the story of the Temple on earth recapitulates in Israel's setting the story of the passage of the seasons. The rainy season celebrates the dedication and repair of the Temple, leading to the end of the rainy season and the pilgrim festival of Passover, celebrating spring, freedom, and the liberation of the Israelite slaves from Egypt, followed fifty days later by the celebration of the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai. The next chapter of Israel's story is told during the next segment of the natural year, the dry season of death, marking the destruction of the Temple. And then comes the third chapter, the one of repentance and judgment, leading to the renewal of the rainy season and the beginning of the recapitulation of the matching cycle of nature and Israel's history: life, death, resurrection.

The absolute, fixed order of the Special Sabbaths

Why start the cycle of special Sabbaths as defined by Pesiqta deRab Kahana with Hanukkah in December and end with Sukkot in the following October? A moment of reflection on the articulated plan of the whole shows that for a construction with its focus on the Temple, nexus of heaven and earth, the sole possible starting point was Hanukkah: today the Temple commences. Then what can have followed? The only logical continuation is with the four Sabbaths prior to the advent of Nisan, with Passover following two weeks later. These Sabbaths then prepare the way for the pilgrim festival, Passover-Pentecost. From the climactic season, Passover-Pentecost, with the end of the rains, follows the long dry season, marked by the Temple's destruction.

Then comes Israel's repentance. That is in two correlated phases, corporate and individual. First is the corporate with the ninth of Ab, then the individual with the penitential season of Elul followed by the New Year, the day of remembrance, and the Day of Atonement. So is realized the time of renewal marked by judgment of the year gone by and renewal of life in the year to come. Once the natural year, celebrated in Temple

rite, defines the heart of the matter, then the matter was set. That is why, within the logic of the natural year embodied in the Temple rites, there is no other sequence that can have served, no other starting point that can have realized the governing program of the document viewed whole.

Here is how Israel encounters that other reading of the Torah. That is besides the one beginning with Creation and ending at the border of the Land of Israel in the lectionary cycle encompassing Genesis through Deuteronomy, week by week. The document's authorship has undertaken to expound the Torah in the sequence of the natural year in such a way as annually to tell the tale of Israel's conduct embodied in the passage of the seasons, celebrated in the realization of the Temple, where God and Israel meet. The plan is therefore to show how what happens to the Temple, then, now, and in time to come, signifies the relationship of God and corporate Israel and recapitulates the relationship of God and the individual Israelite. Then the liturgical lections of the synagogue's special occasions. It is the story encompassing the Festival cycle and related, special Sabbaths. Autonomous of the sequence of Sabbath lections that begins with Genesis and concludes with Deuteronomy, it makes its own selections of appropriate occasions and their inexorable themes. In its context, its statement is unique.

Astral Israel

What we see in the sacred calendar is how Israel on earth embodies the course of the moon and the solar seasons in heaven, and when Israel mends its way, all of astral nature will respond. To that complex but lucid construction of time all else forms a commentary and is made up of details.

The week of seven days: Creation. The synagogue through the paramount Torah-cycle calls Israel to rehearse, week by week, the chapters of Israel's formative life: Genesis for the foundation of Israel, Exodus through Numbers, then Deuteronomy, for the definition of Israel. Then, on a given week, Israel once more recapitulates through its paradigmatic and definitive narrative the earthly story of itself. This week the world was made, that week recalls the Flood, the next, the call to Abraham, and so throughout. So through the lectionary cycle, annually or triennially, the past is made present, the present resituated in the past,

historical time, marked by unique, one-time events, is recapitulated, the past both recognized and renewed.

The solar seasons. The calendar imposes upon the story of Israel's formation and definition another dimension, another layer of being: the heavenly. It is now Israel in the context — indeed, in control — of natural time, marked by the seasons. The Sabbaths of Joseph's story, for example, that in the annual lectionary cycle come in Kislev in accord with the annual cycle of lections, embody also the occasion of the rededication of the Temple. But these do not intersect. While an exegetical initiative may link the one with the other (reading Scripture to underscore the Temple in the patrimony of Benjamin, for instance, joining the two distinct themes), that is a mere serendipity.

The solar component of the calendar thus concerns Israel's celebration in the Temple, its loss of the Temple, and its hope for forgiveness and restoration of the Temple. It is no wonder that ten of the twenty-eight special Sabbaths with their significant lections concern themselves with the destruction and consequent consolation. Nor is it surprising that the following sequence of heavenly events — those of Elul and Tishré — recapitulates the pattern of Tammuz-Ab! The one concerns corporate Israel, the other Israel as Israelite, one by one, all before God but judged as individuals.

We should not miss this reading of the cycle of nature that defines the rhythm of the Israelite year. While the lunar-solar calendar conventionally interpreted knows two climactic moments, the first full moon after the vernal equinox, then the same after the autumnal equinox, for Passover and Pentecost, respectively, the lectionary cycle has constructed a single, continuous cyclical sequence, as I have explained. Events of nature, the unfolding of the lunar year, and events of history, the unfolding of Israel's life in historical time, are formed into a single, unitary construction. That is, furthermore, transformed into a paradigm of the life of not only corporate Israel but also the individual Israelite. Nature, Israel, the Israelite — all now are given their moment in the lectionary life of the synagogue.

Israel is not subject to astral influence because Israel forms a Celestial Body

Implicit in the calendar of Judaism is the intent to highlight Israel as the counterpart, on earth, to the heavenly bodies. And, as I stress, the unfolding of Israelite existence on earth, the patterns of its relationship with God — these correspond down here to the movement of the moon and sun in the heavens above. But though taken with that correlation, we should not miss the point: the stars in their courses respond to Israel's conduct. The cycle of time treats Israel not as a principal player in world history on earth alone, as does the Pentateuchal cycle as framed by the Rabbinic masters. Rather, Israel now represents a cosmic presence, a heavenly actor on the natural stage of the Temple, along with the moon in relationship to the sun and the passage of the natural seasons.

What of Israel in the heavens: is Israel then subject to the stars? The media of keeping time answer that question. Israel is *sui generis*, because God alone, and not determinism in any form, dictates what happens to Israel and to Israelites. What happens to Israel realizes God's will, that alone. Gentiles, by contrast, live within the ordinary rules of nature that pertain to all but Israel and so are subject to astrology, having rejected a position in God's dominion and chosen not to live under his rules, beyond nature's. That is why God does not choose to overrule the stars, because gentiles do not accept his dominion in the Torah, and that is why they are ruled by impersonal forces of physics. At stake in the logic of an orderly world subject in every detail to the rationality of justice, then, is the working of God's just will. Where God chooses to govern and is so chosen, there the stars affect nothing. So we see once more the working of the doctrine of Israel and the Torah, the gentiles and idolatry. While recognizing the scientific standing of astrology, therefore, most sages represented in the Oral Torah therefore concurred that when it comes to Israel, God rules, not the stars.

Since the Bavli sets forth systematic topical expositions, not merely random opinion, and organizes those composites in such a way as to indicate the thrust and direction of opinion, I choose for the authoritative statement on astrology the Bavli's one sustained statement on the subject. That systematic statement is so organized as to yield only a single conclusion. Specifically, I focus upon the single most systematic composite

on the subject, which is so framed as to demonstrate that astrology does not apply to Israel.’

BAVLI TRACTATE SHABBAT 24:4 III.9/156A-B

2. It has been stated:

B. R. Hanina says, “One’s star is what makes one smart, one’s star is what gives wealth, and Israel is subject to the stars.”

C. R. Yohanan said, “Israel is not subject to the stars.”

Clearly, two opinions competed. Two characteristics mark the normative one in a dispute: [1] whose opinion is explored, whose neglected; and [2] whose opinion is complemented with sustaining authorities’ views, whose not. In the following, Yohanan’s position is analyzed, Hanina’s ignored:

D. And R. Yohanan is consistent with views expressed elsewhere, for said R. Yohanan, “How on the basis of Scripture do we know that Israel is not subject to the stars? As it is said, ‘Thus says the Lord, Do not learn the way of the gentiles, nor be dismayed at the signs of the heavens, for the nations are dismayed at them’ (Jer. 10:2). They are dismayed, but the Israelites are not dismayed.”

Now begins a long sequence of systematic demonstrations that Israel is not subject to astrology. We begin with exegetical-scriptural proof:

III.10 A. And so Rab takes the view that Israel is not subject to the stars, for said R. Judah said Rab, “How on the basis of Scripture do we know that Israel is not subject to the stars? As it is said, ‘And he brought him forth outside’ (Gen. 15:5). Said Abraham before the Holy One, blessed be He, ‘Lord of the world, “Someone born in my household is my heir” (Gen. 15:3).’ He said to him, ‘Not at all. “But he who will come forth out of your own loins” (Gen. 1:4).’ He said before him, ‘Lord of the world, I have closely examined my star, and I have seen that I am destined to have no

children.’ He said to him, ‘Abandon this astrology of yours — Israel is not subject to astrology. Now what’s your calculation? [156B] Is it that Jupiter stands in the west [and that is your constellation]? I’ll turn it back and set it up in the East.’ And so it is written, ‘Who has raised up Jupiter from the east? He has summoned it for his sake’ (Isa. 41:2).”

Scripture, as always, supplies the initial demonstration. Wherever possible, the patriarchs will be asked to show that, even at the very beginning of Israel, the besought principle applied. At the next stage, we are given exemplary cases that show us how and why sages maintain that Israel is not subject to astrology. The first case pits astrological judgment against divine intervention; the latter sets aside the testimony of the stars.

Not only so, but a specific reason is adduced to account for the special favor shown the man, which is the man’s own supererogatory act of generosity, to which Heaven responds with a supererogatory miracle:

B. It is also the position of Samuel that Israel is not subject to the stars.

C. For Samuel and Ablat were in session, and some people going along to a lake. Said Ablat to Samuel, “That man is going but won’t come back, a snake will bite him and he’ll die.”

D. Said to him Samuel, “Yeah, well, if he’s an Israelite, he will go and come back.”

E. While they were in session, he went and came back. Ablat got up and took of the man’s knapsack and found in it a snake cut up and lying in two pieces.

So there must be a reason, and the reason has to do with an act of generosity or some other source of *zekhut*. The man acted in a way that the law could not require, but that God could, and did, much appreciate:

F. Said Samuel to the man, “What did you do [today in particular]?”

G. He said to him, “Every day we tossed our bread into one pot and ate, but today one of us had no bread, and he was shamed. I said to

him, 'I will go and collect the bread.' When I came to him, I made as if to go and collect the bread, so he shouldn't be ashamed."

H. He said to him, "You have carried out a religious duty."

2. Samuel went forth and expounded, "'But charity delivers from death' (Prov. 10:2) — not [merely] from a grotesque death, but from death itself."

In the next case astrology is set aside by a sheer accident, which, we shall see in a moment, sages identify as a medium of God's will. Here the astrologers ("Chaldeans") make a flat prediction, and an accident overturns their prognostication; once more, the supererogatory act of generosity accounts for God's personal intervention:

III.11 A. It is also the position of R. Aqiba that Israel is not subject to the stars.

B. For R. Aqiba had a daughter. Chaldeans [astrologers] told him, "On the day that she goes into the bridal canopy, a snake will bite her and she'll die."

C. This worried him a lot. On that day she took a brooch and stuck it into the wall, and by chance it sank into the eye of a snake. The next day when she took it out, the snake came trailing along after it.

D. Her father said to her, "What did you do [today in particular]?"

E. She said to him, "In the evening a poor man came to the door, and everyone was busy with the banquet so no one could take care of him, so I took some of what was given to me and gave it to him."

F. He said to her, "You have carried out a religious duty."

G. R. Aqiba went forth and expounded, "'But charity delivers from death' (Prov. 10:2) — not from a grotesque death, but from death itself."

If piety on the part of an Israelite overcomes astrology, a lapse in piety for even a moment subjects the man to the influence of the stars. Here keeping one's head covered serves as a sign of fear of Heaven, and the rest follows:

III.12 A. It is also the position of R. Nahman bar Isaac that Israel is not subject to the stars.

B. For to the mother of R. Nahman bar Isaac the Chaldean said, “Your son will be a thief.” She didn’t let him go bareheaded, saying, “Keep your head covered, so fear of Heaven may be upon you, and pray for mercy.”

C. He didn’t know why she said that to him. One day he was in session, studying under a palm tree. His head covering fell off. He lifted his eyes and saw the palm tree, and was overcome by temptation; he climbed up and bit off a cluster of dates with his teeth.

The proof therefore is positive and negative, and the composite leaves no doubt as to the position taken by the Oral Torah, even while dissenting opinion registers.

If determinism in the form of astrology conflicts with the logic inherent in the theology of a just and merciful God, freely acting in a rational way, then what appears to come about by sheer accident — in other words, what others may deem sheer chaos — coheres with that logic. Chance or accident reveal God’s intent and plan; there is no such thing as sheer chance and pure accident. Sages regard what happens by chance as an act of Heavenly intervention, an event in the dominion of the kingdom of Heaven. In the Oral Torah, casting of lots and other forms of chance yield God’s decision.. How the lot falls then reflects how God wants things, since to begin with God commands and fate conforms. Nothing in fact takes place by chance, so by allowing the dice to fall where they will, man discovers God’s wishes. That position, explaining events in private life rather than in public affairs — we do not have a single instance in which sheer chance serves to explain an event in the life of Israel or the gentiles in relationship to Israel — is formulated more in Halakhic than in aggadic terms. The fact that the identification of chance with God’s determinate will forms the premise of entire bodies of the law proves the normative standing of that conviction.

Israel makes choices and bears responsibility for those choices. So it relates to the movement of the moon and the sun through the seven levels

of heaven signified by the fixed stars. But this is not in the way in which others are subject to the same heavenly movements. *Israel drives its own chariot through the skies, the nations are merely passengers on a chariot they do not drive.*