

No Luck
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One day God made a strange remark to Abraham, according to the Talmud. God said to Abraham, Ein mazzal l'Yisra'el (BT Shabbat 156a): Israel has no mazl, no luck. What a depressing thing for God to have told the patriarch! But what does it mean? Doesn't Israel have any luck? Well, Israel is the only country in the Middle East without oil. Gosh, that could've worked out better.

Are the Jews an unlucky people? That's complicated, I guess, but we've certainly had our share of historical vicissitudes. Other ethnic groups might brag about the luck of the Irish, or what have you: but no one would say the luck of the Jews without a note of bitter irony. As the Yiddish joke suggests: God, you chose us from among all nations; what did you have against us? Actually, though, I've taken God's no-luck remark out of context. This is the Torah portion where God drafts Abraham and Sarah to spawn the chosen people. When they find out they're the ancestors of the Jews, the first thing Abraham and Sarah do is kvetch. But God, how can we be the ancestors of anyone? We have no children! So God tells them, Look up at the sky and notice the stars (Gen. 15:5). I guess it's nighttime. Notice the stars, says God, and of course the implication is that Abraham and Sarah's descendants will be as numerous as the stars.

That part is in the Torah. But the Talmud adds a wrinkle. According to the Talmud, when Abraham looks up at the stars he says to himself, What am I looking at? Am I supposed to be looking for an astrological sign? Because I don't see anything in the zodiac indicating that we're going to have kids. I don't see my mazzal, my planet or constellation. Technically, mazzal means planet or constellation. So that's when God says, No no Abraham, ein mazzal l'Yisra'el. Jews don't have a constellation. Jews don't need astrology. Jews don't believe in astrology.

Well, some Jews believe in astrology. Nostradamus was half Jewish, and so is Sister Boom Boom, the San Francisco drag queen astrologer. I have some New Agey cousins who are heavily into the occult. The occult would probably go out of business if not for the Jews. But it's not, strictly speaking, what Jews are supposed to believe in.

The point is that Jews don't trust to luck. Trusting to luck keeps us from trying harder. If you ever play bridge or Scrabble, you know that the folks who complain of bad luck are the worst players. In the old movie All the President's Men, aspiring muckraker Robert Redford says, I haven't had any luck yet. And his boss Jason Robards says, Get some. Luck isn't a thing you passively wait for.

Luck is a factor in life, sure. Someone who does their best may lose their job, or their friends, or their health, through no fault of their own. Someone else may be in the right place at the right time and get all the breaks. The Jewish people, after centuries of hardship culminating in the Holocaust, today enjoys unprecedented freedom and prosperity, both in America and in Israel. Maybe our luck has changed; maybe it's part of God's inscrutable plan; maybe it won't

last. But I refuse to believe that we are just flotsam on the sea of destiny. We do have some control.

One of our more challenging prayers is the Aleinu, which says Israel is not like other nations. Or maybe it means you are not like other individuals: you don't have to share your neighbor's lifestyle or your neighbor's luck; you don't have to wait for luck as others may do. God made each of us unique and gave each of us permission to do our own thing. Whatever may happen to us, we are not victims of bad stars, or bad karma. That insight is the legacy of Abraham and Sarah, far more than their DNA. In spite of a vagrant life and decades of infertility, they knew they weren't helpless in the grip of fate. They had the courage to get out there and make a fresh start.

Rabbi Akiva said, Everything is foreseen, yet freedom of choice is given (Pirkei Avot 3:19). Fascinating paradox there: the future is already in the mail, already in the pipeline, but somehow we retain the power to choose. There's an astrology story about Akiva too. Astrologers told Akiva that his daughter would die of a snakebite on her wedding day. Well, he was a little upset about that, but the big day came and went without incident, and then the next morning the daughter brought him a dead snake. What happened? During the wedding party she noticed a beggar at the door, so she took off her brooch, stuck it in the wall, and carried some bread outside to the beggar. When she later removed the pin from the wall, she found that it had pierced the head of a snake.

This weird narrative, from the Talmud (BT Shabbat 156b), shows that the rabbis didn't deny astrology. They just thought Torah and good deeds could trump astrology. Abraham beat his bad luck: Akiva's daughter beat hers; and we can all at least make an effort to do the same. Ein mazzal l'Yisra'el, Jews have no luck. Yesh mikveh l'Yisrael (Ezra 10:2), Jews have hope. Yesh Elohim l'Yisra'el (I Sam. 17:46), Jews have God.