YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**On Being Chosen:**

**A Philosophical Investigation into the Election of the Jewish People**

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**Shiur #20: Mediation**

In this lesson, I shall explore two Rabbinic perspectives regarding the relationship between God and Israel. The first perspective focusses on the ways in which that relationship is mediated by the Torah. The second focusses on ways in which that relationship is direct.

**A Heavenly Father-in-Law (A Relationship Mediated by Torah)**

In lesson 18, we explored the debate between the cosmic-eternal and the historical-relative conceptions of the election. The following *midrash* draws from both. It draws from the cosmic-eternal school in its depiction of the Torah as a heavenly entity, intimately related to God Himself, potentially having existed from the earliest days of creation (or from *before* creation). It draws from the historical-relative school in its suggestion that the election was contingent, that it just happened to be Israel that merited to become God’s elect; perhaps, had things gone differently, it could have been some other nation. Here’s the *midrash*:

Is there such a thing as a sale in which the salesperson is sold alongside that which he sells? The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Israel, “I have sold you my Torah, and I have, so to speak, sold Myself [to you] alongside her.” As it is said, “And they shall bring Me gifts” [which could be translated as, “And they shall take *Me*, as a gift”] (Exodus 25:2).

This can be compared to a king who had an only daughter. A foreign king came and married her. He wanted to go, with his [new] wife, to his homeland. The king said to [his new son-in-law]: “My daughter, whom I gave to you, is my only daughter. To separate from her is impossible for me. Nor can I tell you not to go with her, since she is your wife. But do me this favor. Everywhere you go, make me a small room, so that I can reside with you, for I cannot leave my daughter.”

So said the Holy One, blessed be He, to Israel: “I gave you the Torah. To separate from her, I cannot do, nor can I tell you not to take her. Rather, everywhere you go, make Me one home in which I can reside, as it says, “Make for Me a Tabernacle” (Exodus 25:5).[[1]](#footnote-1)

I must note my discomfort with the apparent attitude towards women in this *midrash*, as if a father sells a daughter into wedlock, and as if a bride has no say in whom she marries. But this isn’t the time or place for a study of Rabbinic and Jewish attitudes towards the status of women, despite the importance of the issue. In the meantime, it would be a shame to miss the profound religious message of the parable.

The Bible describes God as the Father of the children of Israel,[[2]](#footnote-2) as well as their Mother.[[3]](#footnote-3) But the Rabbis here (and elsewhere[[4]](#footnote-4)) develop an entirely new metaphor, according to which God is our Father-in-law. The Torah – which turns out to be His daughter – is our bride. As I’ve said, this metaphor draws upon both sides of the cosmic-historical debate of lesson 18. On the one hand, it regards the Torah as something heavenly, the daughter of God. On the other hand, it sounds as if she could have married any one of a number of suitors, as if this were a contingent and historical matter.

Indeed, drawing from both sides of that debate, the metaphor itself is actually neutral between them. Whether or not the election was cosmically pre-ordained, the Rabbis are here inviting us to think of God as a Father-in-law, and the Torah as our bride. In what follows, I’ll suggest why I think they may have found this metaphor to be so apt.

A remarkable feature of Jewish history is how we have thrived in and despite almost every setting into which we’ve been thrust. Exile, expulsions, crusades, blood-libels, pogroms, and even a Holocaust, despite the unfathomable toll they took, failed to subdue us for long. Time and time again, Jewish communities arrived as refugees in a foreign land and thrived. You do not expect to see high rates of literacy or social mobility such as are found among the Jews, let alone a disproportionate number of Nobel prizes, among the disenfranchised, or among those who might be described as “fresh off the boat.”

What is the secret of this uncanny ability to thrive? One could look for an answer in terms of a genetic or a racial endowment. But in that direction, one finds xenophobic prejudice hiding behind the veneer of science. If Jewish history has taught us anything, it is surely to be wary of any ideology of racial supremacy. Rather, our new midrashic metaphor would suggest that the crucial difference between the Jewish people and others is that we have the Torah. That is the only salient difference.

Generations of observance of Torah law created, in the Jewish people, a completely portable culture that placed family and education at its heart. In the words of Rabbi Sacks, it created a culture whose “heroes are teachers, whose citadels are houses of study, and whose passion is education and the life of the mind.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Even after large swaths of Jews became secular, the values of the Torah, such as family and literacy, remained close to their heart. We were privileged to receive the Torah, and more than we kept the Torah, the Torah kept us.

As a people we are blessed. But, according to our new midrashic metaphor, we are only blessed because and to the extent that we have a relationship with the Torah. To the extent that we manifest any greatness, or enjoy a special relationship with God Himself, it is because we have a relationship with God’s daughter.

Typically, a relationship between a father-in-law and a child-in-law is only going to flourish to the extent that the underlying relationship between husband and wife is flourishing too. We think that God wants to dwell in our midst. After all, we were commanded to build a Tabernacle, and later a Temple, for just that purpose. But, according to our new metaphor, God only has a desire to dwell in our midst to the degree that we hold fast to His Torah.

To relate to God as our heavenly Father-in-law is to relate to the election of Israel as a relationship that, while privileged, is only ever as strong as the underlying relationship between Israel and the Torah. In other words, the Torah becomes an intermediary between Israel and God. Indeed*, Midrash Tanchuma* comments upon the fact that the Tabernacle is sometimes called the Tabernacle of the *Testament*,[[6]](#footnote-6) and sometimes the Tabernacle of the *Lord*:[[7]](#footnote-7)

Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai [explained, and] said: “‘Testament’ refers only to Torah. [In other words: it’s called the Tabernacle of the Testament because the Torah scroll is kept there.] As it is said: ‘These are the testimonies, statutes, and laws’ (Deuteronomy 4:45).

This can be compared to a king who had a daughter, and he builds for her a palace, and sits her within seven chambers, and declares, ‘Anyone who approaches my daughter, it’s as if they have approached me.’ Therefore, the Tabernacle had two names: the Tabernacle of the Testimony, which is the Torah; and elsewhere [it is called] the Tabernacle of the Lord.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

To approach the Testimony (i.e., the Torah) is functionally equivalent to approaching the Lord Himself. Perhaps, in fact, God *cannot* be approached by humans directly. He transcends space and time. Instead, when we approach the Torah, it is *as if* we have approached Him. The *midrash* continues:

The Holy one, blessed be He, said, “If a person disrespects My daughter, it’s as if he has disrespected Me. If a person enters the synagogue and disrespects My Torah, it’s as if he has ascended and disrespected My honor.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

The elect are those who are married to the Torah. One way to present this new metaphor is to think of it as an amended version of the Marriage Model that we found in the Bible. When that model is updated by this new Rabbinic metaphor, it turns out that we didn’t marry God Himself. The idea that God fell in love with *us* is put to one side. Instead, we married His *daughter*, the Torah. God loves us when and to the extent that *we* love His daughter.

**Israel Doesn’t Fall Under Any Star (A Relationship with No Mediation)**

The Talmud is home to a dictum that potentially casts another new light over the nature of the election. The dictum in question states that *ein mazal le-Yisrael*, which is to say that the powers of the constellations don’t apply to the people of Israel – though it is often understood that every other nation is subject to the constellations, or to one that is particular to it. Let’s examine the contexts in which this dictum emerges.

In Tractate *Nedarim*, the Talmud examines the Biblical scene in which God, responding to Abraham’s fears as to whether he will have an heir through Sarah, “brings him outside,” to view the night sky and receive Divine assurance that his descendants will be as numerous as the stars.[[10]](#footnote-10) The Talmud articulates Abraham’s fear in the following words, “Master of the Universe, I looked at my constellation [i.e., at my astrological chart, and according to it], I will have only one son [and, since I’ve already fathered Ishmael, through Hagar, it seems as if the prospect of a son through Sarah has been ruled out for me].”[[11]](#footnote-11)

Playing on the Biblical description of God *taking Abraham outside*, the Talmud presents God’s response in terms of God taking Abraham *outside* of the influence of astrology. In other words, God seems to concede that, all things being equal, the astrological facts *would* determine that Abraham will only have one son. But then, God assures him that *ein mazal le-Yisrael*, which is to say that astrological forces, existent though they may be, and sovereign though they may be over the fate of the gentiles, have no power to determine what happens to the Jews.[[12]](#footnote-12)

The claim that astrology has no power over the Jews was subject to debate among the Rabbis. After a long discussion of various astrological theories, which seem to have been proposed as equally relevant to Jews and gentiles, the Talmud presents the following debate:

It was stated: Rabbi Chanina says, “A constellation makes one wise; a constellation makes one wealthy; and *yesh mazal le-Yisrael* [i.e., there *is* a constellation for the Jewish people, which is to say, the Jews are no exception to the rule that each nation has a constellation that influences its fate].”

Rabbi Yochanan [disagreed and] said, “*Ein mazal le-Yisrael* [i.e., there is *no* constellation for the Jewish people].” And Rabbi Yochanan follows his own reasoning [i.e., is consistent in his views], [since it was] Rabbi Yochanan [who] said, “From where [is it derived] that there is no constellation for the Jewish people? As it is stated: ‘Thus said the Lord: Do not learn by the way of the nations, and be not dismayed at the signs of heaven, that the nations are dismayed at them’ (Jeremiah 10:2). The nations will be dismayed by them, but not the Jewish people.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

What Rabbi Yochanan apparently wants to learn from the verse in Jeremiah is that the gentiles are right to be dismayed by negative omens in the stars. The stars really do have power over them. We Jews, by contrast, should ignore such things, because astrology has no effect over us. The Talmudic discussion continues, eventually revealing that Rabbi Yochanan’s position is endorsed by both Rav and Shmuel, and in earlier times, by Rabbi Akiva too.[[14]](#footnote-14)

**Maimonidean Skepticism**

Belief in astrology strikes many modern ears as no different from belief in magic. But we should recognize that, on a geocentric model of the universe, it’s not absurd to suppose that the motions of the planets and stars, which all revolve around us, should have some effect down here. Indeed, Aristotelian physics regards the orbit of the heavenly spheres as responsible for creating the conditions necessary for life on earth. Their motion around us churns up the four earthly elements – preventing the air and fire inside all things from escaping upwards, and the water and earth from escaping downwards. Why not suppose that their motion can also influence our fate?

Once one recognizes that Talmudic discussions of astrology were nothing more than presentations of *scientific* hypotheses, rather than something rooted in their understanding of the Bible, or in some discipline more centrally connected to their Rabbinic authority, the whole topic becomes easier for Orthodox Jews to dismiss.[[15]](#footnote-15) Judaism attributes massive epistemic and legal authority to the Rabbis, but not over every topic. Indeed, the Rabbis never claimed to be *scientific* authorities and readily accepted that other intellectual traditions may have had a better grasp over scientific phenomena.[[16]](#footnote-16)

The Bible led the Rabbis to recognize that astrology couldn’t bind the *Jews*. But it was their understanding of science that led them to the believe that astrological factors *do* bind the destiny of gentiles. Accordingly, Orthodox Jews can feel free to reject that opinion, given our up-to-date understanding of the relevant physics.

Tzvi Langerman notes that Maimonides’ rejection of astrology, like Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra’s embrace of it, had nothing to do with their having differing attitudes towards magic and superstition. On the contrary, Maimonides and Ibn Ezra were united in their disdain for magic and superstition. They both thought these things were forbidden by the Torah, not because they can be misused, but because they are nonsense and they lead people astray. In the words of Ibn Ezra:

Empty-brained [people] have said that, were the auguries and other forms of sorcery not true, Scripture would not have banned them. I maintain the opposite viewpoint: Scripture has banned falsehood, not truth.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Instead, “the very different attitudes taken by Maimonides and Ibn Ezra toward astrology stem in large measure from their different assessments of the scientific worth of that art.”[[18]](#footnote-18)

Maimonides wrote a letter to the Jews of Marseilles repudiating astrology as bad science. He goes so far as to say that he has “clear [and] flawless proofs invalidating [the] essential theories [of astrology].”[[19]](#footnote-19) The exact nature of those clear and flawless proofs, Maimonides doesn’t divulge in his letter.

Professor Langerman documents how, early in his career, Maimonides based his scientific critique of astrology upon the claim that its foundational axioms contradict a fundamental assumption of Aristotelian astronomy, known as the homogeneity of the spheres.[[20]](#footnote-20) Langerman goes on to note, however, that in the *Guide for the Perplexed*, Maimonides no longer seems to believe in the homogeneity of the spheres himself.[[21]](#footnote-21) This would indicate that Maimonides’ clear and flawless proofs were subject to revision over the course of his career. But at no point was he willing to countenance the scientific respectability of astrology.

One particular bugbear that Maimonides held against astrology was that even its advocates could only claim that its efficacy was based upon observation. Certain astronomical phenomena had been established, by repeated observation, to correspond to certain sorts of terrestrial events. Maimonides was skeptical. The terrestrial events in question were too loosely defined, such that the regularities they claimed to have discovered were gerrymandered and, even then, never wholly accurate. As he writes in the introduction to his commentary to the Mishna, “one astrologer is superior to another only insofar as the former’s falsehoods are less than those of the latter; but it is impossible that even he may be correct with regard to all of the details.”[[22]](#footnote-22)

Even if all the astrologers’ observations were trustworthy, it still wouldn’t amount to a science, in the Rambam’s estimation. In opposition to the view that David Hume would one day endorse, Maimonides thought that a science owes us more than a mere report of regularities in the recorded data. A science has to propose a causal mechanism to explain the regularities it discovers. As far as Maimonides was concerned, the astrologers had no fully fleshed-out story to tell about what those causal mechanisms may be. They merely trusted the observations upon which they relied. This concern against astrology echoes the Rambam’s opposition to the alternative medicine of his days, namely, unscientific treatments based on trial and error, but with no story to tell about the underlying causal mechanisms.

To get a handle on the Rambam’s opposition to the method of trial and error, bear in mind that scientists in his time had very few sophisticated tools for controlling either experimental conditions or large pools of data. Without the failsafe of such controls, observations of regularities really were liable to be very misleading unless backed up by a plausible causal explanation. Moreover, if such controls *were* in place, I strongly suspect that we’d find no data to back up the claims of astrology! Accordingly, Maimonides wrote in his *Treatise on Asthma:*

Therefore, those who rely [only] on experience [i.e., without an underlying theory to make sense of that experience] lack logical reasoning and err. For sometimes things work out for them, and sometimes not. I therefore state: he who submits himself to a physician who has experience but does not understand the rules of logical reasoning is like someone setting out to sea who submits himself to the blowing of the winds. For they [the winds] do not proceed according to reasoning; sometimes they blow in accordance with the wish of the seafarer and in line with his purpose, and sometimes they [lead to] his drowning and the denial [of his purpose]. I have called this to your attention because many people perish as a result of [treatment which is based solely] on experience. It is by chance that one survives or perishes from [that type of treatment].[[23]](#footnote-23)

Maimonides also associates his attack on astrology with his defense of our possession of free will. For example, he insists:

If God had decreed that a person should be either righteous or wicked, or if there were some force inherent in his nature which irresistibly drew him to a particular course… as the foolish astrologers out of their own fancy pretend, how could the Almighty have charged us through the prophets, “Do this and do not do that, improve your ways, do not follow wicked impulses ... ?”[[24]](#footnote-24)

But whatever its relationship with free will, Langerman insists that the Rambam’s primary concern with astrology was scientific. Moreover, I would add, it is this fact that allows him to reject so summarily the views of Rabbi Akiva, Rabbi Yochanan, Rav, and Shmuel. Rabbi Leon Stiskin claims that Maimonides is actually siding with these thinkers, since he agrees with them that *ein mazal le-Yisrael*; astrology has no power over the Jews.[[25]](#footnote-25) But this seems to miss the point. The Rambam’s view is that astrology is false for *everyone*. He writes:

I am aware that it is possible to find some individual opinions of our sages in the Talmud, the Mishnah and Midrashim supporting astrological assumptions about the potency of the stars at a man’s nativity … [Notwithstanding the existence of such opinions] it is not feasible to surrender demonstrative rational knowledge [i.e., the clear findings of science] and embrace the opinion of one individual sage who might have missed a crucial point at that time or [who] may have proffered an allegorical remark not to be taken literally… For is it not apparent that many statements of the Torah cannot be taken literally but, as is clear from scientific evidence, require interpretation that will make them acceptable to rational thought?[[26]](#footnote-26)

We must either reject (when necessary) the opinions of individual sages when it comes to scientific matters, or we must relate to their words as metaphor rather than taking them literally.

As a matter of fact, I think there is a plausible non-literal way to relate to the dictum of *ein mazal le-Yisrael*, which is perhaps what Maimonides had in mind. Instead of taking the whole edifice of astrology to task, perhaps these Rabbis thought it would be easier to wean people off the enticing falsehood of astrology with the claim that, whether or not it’s true, it simply doesn’t apply to the Jews. Indeed, one could relate to Rabbi Yochanan’s reading of Jeremiah as saying just that:

As it is stated: “Thus said the Lord: Do not learn by the way of the nations, and be not dismayed at the signs of heaven, that the nations are dismayed at them” (Jeremiah 10:2). The nations will be dismayed by them, but not the Jewish people.”[[27]](#footnote-27)

The nations will be dismayed, but that’s not to say that astrology is *true*. It’s just to say that the nations believe in it. Rabbi Akiva, Rabbi Yochanan, Rav, and Shmuel, on this subversive reading of their position, are only paying lip service to the legitimacy of astrology, as it applies to the gentiles.

If we wish to follow in the footsteps of Maimonides, we have plenty of reason to reject the view that astrology rules the gentiles but not the Jews. To the extent that this view seems to have been endorsed by prominent Talmudic figures, we can either (1) recognize that we have permission to reject outdated Rabbinic science, and therefore reject what they say, or (2) reinterpret their words, so as to save them from any heartfelt commitment to the legitimacy of astrology.

However, even if we’re convinced by Maimonides to jettison all commitment to astrology, the claim of *ein mazal le-Yisrael* points to a more significant Rabbinic doctrine that seems to underlie it.

**Ministering Angels and the Reach of Providence**

We saw a *midrash* in lesson 18 according to which God somehow delegated the governance of each nation, by lottery, to His ministering angels. As a result of this lottery, the role of governing the nation of Israel fell to God. Consequently, it turns out that, according to this midrashic tradition, God governs the Jews more directly than the gentiles.[[28]](#footnote-28) The notion of *ein mazal le-Yisrael* might therefore be nothing more than an astrological formulation of this underlying *theological* doctrine.

After all, the idea that each nation, and each region of the world, has its own angel, is commonplace in Rabbinic literature, and so too is the idea that Israel is the exception – the special allotment of God.[[29]](#footnote-29) According to midrashic tradition:

* The angels that Jacob saw ascending and descending a ladder to heaven, in his dream, were the governing angels of the great empires of the world;[[30]](#footnote-30)
* When Jacob wrestled with a mysterious man, it was the angel of Esau (i.e., the angel of the nation of Edom);[[31]](#footnote-31)
* The angels of other nations protest God’s favoritism towards Israel;[[32]](#footnote-32) and
* When God enacts judgement against the nations of the world, He also judges their ministering angels.[[33]](#footnote-33)

Reflecting these sources, Nachmanides tells the following story:

The Glorious Name created everything and placed the power of the lower creatures in the [hands of] higher beings, placing some known star or constellation over each and every nation in their lands, according to their nations, as is known by means of astrological speculation. It is with reference to this that it is said, “which the Eternal, your God, has allotted unto all the people” (Deuteronomy 4:19), for He allotted to all nations constellations in the heavens, and higher above them are the angels of the Supreme One, whom He placed as lords over them, as it is written, “But the prince of the kingdom of Persia withstood me”(Daniel 10:13), and it is written, “Lo, the prince of Greece shall come” (Daniel 10:20).[[34]](#footnote-34)

Even if we have reason to reject astrology, shouldn’t we be committed to the existence of the angels that remain in this picture, even once the astrological elements have been removed? When astrology is removed, leaving only angelology behind, we’re no longer dealing with Rabbinic science but with Rabbinic theology.

What’s more, the idea that God directly governs the land of Israel, while delegating the governance of other regions to angels, explains various Biblical and Rabbinic dicta about the holiness of the land of Israel. Nachmanides continues:

And so the Rabbis taught in the *Sifra*, [regarding the verse,] “And the Land shall not vomit you out also…” (Leviticus 18:28): “The Land of Israel is unlike other lands; it is unable to contain sinners.”[[35]](#footnote-35) And in the Sifrei, we find that the Rabbis taught: “And there was no strange god with Him [when He took Israel out of Egypt, and protected them during their wandering through the wilderness],[[36]](#footnote-36) so that none of the princes of the nations [i.e., none of their angels] should have power to come and exercise authority over you.”[[37]](#footnote-37)…

This is the meaning of the saying of the Rabbis: “Whoever lives outside the Land, is as if he had no God, for it is said, “I am the Eternal your God, who brought you forth out of the land of Egypt, to give you the land of Canaan, to be your God” [i.e., only in the land of Canaan could He fully be our God] (Leviticus 25:38)…” And in the Tosefta of Tractate *Avoda Zara*,[[38]](#footnote-38) the Rabbis have said: “Now it is said, “And I [Jacob] will come back to my father’s house in peace; then shall the Eternal be my God” (Genesis 28:21), and it is further said, “to give you the land of Canaan, to be your God” (Leviticus 25:38). When you are in the land of Canaan, I am your God. When you are not in the land of Canaan, I am not your God [to the extent that that] were at all possible to say.”[[39]](#footnote-39)

Of course, there is only one God. But to live under His direct sovereignty, without being subject to intermediary heavenly powers, one has to be Jewish, or live in the land of Israel, or both. I’m not saying that this distinctive angelology was a universally agreed-upon doctrine of the Rabbis. But it seems to have been a broader commitment than mere scientific commitment to astrology. One doesn’t need to believe in the power of the stars to affect our destiny in order to believe in the power of angels to direct the flow of God’s providence.

Moreover, this angelology provides a very specific conception of the election. A consequence of that election is to fall directly (or more directly) under His providential care. Other communities are governed, of course, by God, but *indirectly* (or more indirectly), through the angels that He has appointed over them.

Why might this be a consequence of being chosen? Well, the suggestion would seem to fit with certain elements of the Biblical picture of the election.[[40]](#footnote-40) We are supposed to function as God’s witnesses, bearing God’s name, being a light unto the nations, and an example to them. Given that background, one might think that our history would have to bear the fingerprint of Divine involvement in a distinctive way. This might cause the rest of the world to take note of our distinctive national story; to see in it a sort of evidence for the existence of God; or to ask, with Mark Twain, “what is the secret of the Jew?”[[41]](#footnote-41) No wonder, you might think, that God took hold of the providential reins more tightly over Israel (as both a people and a land) than He did over the other nations and places of the world. To be a holy nation, after all, is to stand at the center of God’s gaze.[[42]](#footnote-42)

**Maimonides Again**

At this point, it seems to me that Maimonides would urge caution. The idea that God has delegated heavenly powers to govern whole segments of His creation, even if He remains in ultimate control of all that happens, brings us very close to the pagan religion of the ancient Near East, according to which each region and nation had its own god.

The Rambam’s opposition to astrology was always associated with what Langerman describes as the “organic and insoluble link… joining astrology to star worship.”[[43]](#footnote-43) Indeed, Maimonides outlines the history according to which monotheistic descendants of Adam moved from relatively accurate, though primitive, scientific descriptions of the world, to erroneous astrological beliefs about the powers of the heavenly bodies, and from there, to *worship* of the stars.

If an idea necessitates false logical consequences, then it must be false. But if an idea merely has the *potential* to lead people, erroneously, to draw false conclusions, one cannot thereby conclude that the idea is false. Danger and falsehood are not the same thing. But there are various considerations that would likely lead a Maimonidean to reject, as *false*, any literal construal of our Rabbinic angelology.

The Torah’s declaration that God is the only heavenly power – “there is nobody besides Him”[[44]](#footnote-44) – might lead one to take Rabbinic angelology in general as saturated with figures of speech. With Maimonides, you might be inclined to regard Biblical and Rabbinic angel-talk as a poetical way of describing any causal power that flows from God to the creation.[[45]](#footnote-45) Consequently, one shouldn’t take too literally Rabbinic literature that presents angels as if they are incorporeal persons, with minds of their own, to whom real responsibility could be delegated. Maimonides accepts, with Aristotle, that some of the heavenly bodies were *intellects*, but that remains a far cry from thinking of them as independent *persons*.[[46]](#footnote-46)

And yet, even if we take this literature to be highly poetic, full of metaphors, we must surely endorse one of the following claims if we are to respect anything of the spirit of these poetic texts:

1. To be God’s elect is, somehow or other, to fall more directly under the personal providential care of God; or
2. Something about the election entails that we should, at least, view ourselves *as if* we fall more directly than do others, under the personal providential care of God.

**Conclusions**

In this lesson, we’ve looked at two Rabbinic notions. According to one, God is our Father-in-law. This implies that the relationship between God and Israel is mediated via the Torah. The second notion, in its astrological manifestation, tells us that *ein mazal le-Yisrael*. In its angelological manifestation, it tells us that God’s governance of the Jews, unlike His governance of other nations, operates without angelic mediation.

The first notion focuses on the *mediated* nature of the relationship. The second focusses on the *unmediated* nature of the relationship. And yet, the two notions are not in conflict. According to the Father-in-law metaphor, *our* access to God is mediated through the Torah, and God’s attitude to us depends upon the state of our relationship with her. According to Rabbinic astrology and angelology, by contrast, God’s access to *us*, and the flow of His providential care towards *us*, is unmediated. The first notion concerns our access to God; the second, God’s access to us. The gap between God and Israel, and how that gap is mediated, will continue to be our topic in next week’s lesson, as we turn to one more Rabbinic model of the election.

1. *Shemot Rabba* 33:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For example, Deuteronomy 14:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Isaiah 49:15-16. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See, for example, *Bamidbar* *Rabba* 2:25 and *Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer*, ch. 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *The Koren Siddur with Introduction, Translation and Commentary by Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks* (Jerusalem: Koren Publishers, 2009), p. 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For example, Exodus 38:21. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For example, Leviticus 17:4. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Midrash Tanchuma*, *Pekudei* 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Genesis 15:5. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. BT *Nedarim* 32a. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid. A more detailed variation of this *midrash* appears in the name of Rav, in BT *Shabbat* 156a. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. BT *Shabbat* 156a. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid., 156a-b. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See Rav Sherira Gaon’s responsum, *Teshuvot Ha-Geonim*, no. 394, according to which the *scientific* opinions of the Rabbis have no binding status in Jewish thought or law. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See, for example, BT *Pesachim* 94b. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibn Ezra on Leviticus 19:31. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Y. Tzvi Langerman, “Maimonides’ Repudiation of Astrology,” in *Maimonides and the Sciences*, edited by Robert S. Cohen and Hillel Levine, *Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science,* volume 211 (Berlin: Springer Science+Business Media, 2000), 131-157, p. 133. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Maimonides, *Epistle in Repudiation of Astrology*, as translated by Leon Stitskin, “Maimonides’ Letter to the Jews of Marseilles in 1194,” *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought* (1972) 13/1: 131-142, p. 135. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Langerman, “Maimonides’ Repudiation of Astrology,” p. 136. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. As translated in Langerman, ibid., p. 140. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. As translated by Langerman, ibid., p. 139. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Teshuva*, 5:4. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Leon Stiskin, “Maimonides’ Letter,” p. 133. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. As translated by Stiskin, ibid., pp. 140-141. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. BT *Shabbat* 156a. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. *Pirkei De-Rebbi Eliezer* 24:9. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. E.g., *Midrash Tanchuma, Re’eh* 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. E.g*., Vayikra Rabba* 29:2; *Midrash Tanchuma*, *Vayeitze* 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. E.g., *Bereishit Rabba* 77:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. E.g., *Vayikra Rabba* 21:4; *Rut Rabba, Petichta* 1; *Shir Ha-shirim Rabba* 2:1, 8:8. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. E.g., *Shemot Rabba* 23:15. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Nachmanides on Leviticus 18:25. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Sifra *Kedoshim* 11:14. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. This is a reference to Deuteronomy 32:12. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Sifrei *Haazinu* 315. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Tosefta *Avoda Zara* 5:5. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Nachmanides on Leviticus 18:25. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. As summarized in lesson 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. See Mark Twain’s Essay, “Concerning the Jews.” [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. See Lesson 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Langerman, “Maimonides’ Repudiation of Astrology,” p. 134. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Deuteronomy 4:35. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. For a discussion of Maimonides on angels, and the relevant primary sources, see Menachem Kellner, *Maimonides’ Confrontation with Mysticism* (Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2006), chapter 8, “Angels.” [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. *Guide for the Perplexed* 2:6. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)