

DA'AT TEVUNOT - SECTION 6: CHAPTER 8

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

1. Like the stars, each and every moment alternately shines and dims, shines and dims. Each moment matters, has its needs, makes its demands, gets its due, offers its help, and then steps aside for the next one. And again like the stars, each moment is fed by forces higher, wider, and deeper than it, and subsequently feeds phenomena lower, thinner, and shallower than it.

Not only is that so, but we find in fact that each moment is affected by a star (or a swatch of them) which is itself affected by the moment itself, after which the moment passes on its influence to another one, and so one down the line. This is the thrust of the theory of Astrology in the context of the passage of time, which will be stressed later on here. Astrology, the study of the influence of the celestial upon the terrestrial, is an ancient art which, while having passed from favor in the modern world, was nonetheless once perceived as the system par excellence of gaining insight into reality.

2. Many of our greatest sages discussed the reality upon which Astrology might be based and its efficacy, and we'll offer some insights now into their thinking before we explore Ramchal's own. We do this because Astrology is about to be cited in Da'at Tevunot and we wanted to lay out the various Torah perspectives on it since it's usually and often automatically pooh-poohed and written off by most of us -- either justifiably or not, as we'll see.

First off, let it be noted that Astrology is never cited in the five books of the Torah, a fact that simply cannot be denied and that undoes its truth in the eyes of many. But gravity doesn't figure in the Torah either, nor do other things of that order which while fundamental to reality have no bearing on the Torah's concerns. But it is cited several times in the other books of Tanach where its practitioners are scoffed at (see Isaiah 47:13 and Jeremiah 10:2) or where its simply cited as a fact of life (see Daniel 2:2, 4, 5, 10; 4:14; 5:7, 11).

The Talmud and later works often cited it and sometimes sided with it, while other times rejected it. On the one hand, Avraham and we, his descendants, are said to be above the subjection to the stars (see Breishit Rabbah 44:12), while on the other hand we're told that the blessing bestowed on Avraham in Genesis 24:1 is to be interpreted as the gift of Astrology (see Tosefta to Kiddushin 5:17). And there are positive views of it cited in other places (see Shabbat 119a, Kohelet Rabbah 173, etc.).

The great Sa'adia Gaon wrote a commentary to Sefer Yetzirah based on Astrological principles, and

Ibn Ezra wrote about it extensively, as did Yehudah HaLevi. But the mighty Rambam was famously against it on all levels, which clinched it for many. The Zohar and the Kabbalists accepted Astrology as a truism, and so did Ramchal, as we'll now see.

3. The first thing to note is that when he discussed it at length in Derech Hashem, Ramchal spoke of it in terms of one of the systems that G-d uses to govern the world, thus indicating from the very first that G-d alone is behind everything even when He uses various phenomena to help carry out His wishes. And he spoke of the stars and constellations as "having influence over" the world, as acting as "pipelines" of G-d's light rather than as controlling things., and as being limited in scope and not capable of revealing very many elements of reality (2:7:1-4).

In any event he'll soon cite Astrology as a means of understanding many things about G-d's interaction with the world, which is our concern here.

Rabbi Yaakov Feldman has translated and commented upon "The Gates of Repentance", "The Path of the Just", and "The Duties of the Heart" (Jason Aronson Publishers). His works are available in bookstores and in various locations on the Web.