

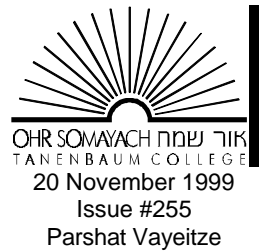


Ask The Rabbi

Researched at Ohr Somayach, Jerusalem

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OHR SOMAYACH תנוח טאנענבאום קאלעדזש
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Parshat Vayeitze

NO NO NOSTRADAMUS

Perplexed along the Potomac wrote via the Internet:

Dear Rabbi,

A nearby Jewish group is planning to hold a book discussion on Nostradamus. It was my impression that Judaism seriously frowned upon the belief that the stars can be used to predict the future. Nostradamus, to me, seems way off the Jewish path...despite the fact that I'm now told he had a Jewish background. I usually attend this series of book discussions; however, Nostradamus strikes a discordant note. Have I misread Jewish law and not heard enough about Nostradamus?

(Thank you for a wonderful Ask-the-Rabbi feature).

Dear Perplexed along the Potomac,

Actually, it is generally accepted by the Talmud and Midrashim that the stars do indeed influence events, and that one who understands this influence can, to some extent, predict future events. It's not really so different from the way a meteorologist or a stock analyst look at trends and influences and foresee tomorrow's outcome.

For example, the Egyptian astrologers correctly foresaw that a baby would be born who would redeem the Jews from Egypt — which, by the way, is why Pharaoh decreed that the babies be cast into the Nile.

But you don't put your full faith in the weather forecast, and certainly not in stock predictions, do you? All the more so should we be highly skeptical of the accuracy of whoever presumes to read the stars, especially today. Even the ancient Egyptians, who were proven experts, were only able to see generalities, and couldn't predict anything with perfect accuracy. The farther along we get from their ancient wisdom, the hazier this area of knowledge seems to become.

Furthermore, G-d is All-Powerful and can change what the future seems to hold. For example, through our prayer and good deeds, G-d may change a "bad" event into a good one.

Astrologers told Rabbi Akiva that a snake would bite and kill his daughter on the day of her wedding. On her wedding night, she took the jeweled pin from her hair and stuck it into the wall; in the morning light she saw that her pin was stuck through the head of a snake which had been poised to bite her! Rabbi Akiva asked her, "My daughter! Some good deed must have saved you from this snake. Can you think what it might have been?" "Well," she answered, "last night a poor man came to the wedding, but everyone was too busy with the feast to notice, so I gave him my portion of food."

The Torah tells us to live in the present and have perfect faith in G-d. If we do so, we won't feel the need to know or worry about future events that are beyond our control. All said, therefore, I don't think a Jew should give much weight to the predictions of any would-be star-gazer.

Source:

- Shabbat 156b

TALKING TURKEY

Bob Mogel from Omaha, Nebraska <Rmogel@aol.com> wrote:

Dear Rabbi:

One of my friends is Jewish. Is it ok to invite him to Thanksgiving at my house? If so, is there anything I should not serve, given the Jewish dietary laws? Is there any special way the turkey should be served or cooked? I was wondering also...do Jews themselves celebrate Thanksgiving? Thank you for taking my question.

Dear Bob Mogel,

First of all let me commend you on your sensitivity and on your inquiry.

Keeping kosher is easy for those who keep a kosher home. However, the kosher laws are very comprehensive and complex, and include the way the turkey is slaughtered, prepared, cooked, and even how it is

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served and eaten. It would be beyond the scope of this forum to explain how to prepare a kosher meal in your home for a one time basis.

Regarding your second question: I think most American Jews observe Thanksgiving the same way most Americans do, as a break from work and a time to gather with family — perhaps even to offer a word of thanks to G-d — but not really as a religious holiday. Many religious Jews do not observe it at all, since it is a non-Jewish custom and since we are anyway obligated to give thanks to G-d every day of the year.

Interestingly, Thanksgiving has “Jewish” roots. The Pilgrims based Thanksgiving on the Torah (Bible), in which G-d commands us Jews to celebrate the Harvest Festival. This festival is called Succot, the Festival of Booths, which Jews have been celebrating for several thousand years.

TESTING TESTING

Ben Waldbaum from Washington University, St. Louis <bwaldbau@artsci.wustl.edu> wrote:

Dear Rabbi,

I heard someone advise a student at my university that they can say, “I will study five pesukim (Torah verses) this week if You, G-d, give me an “A” on an exam.” Is someone allowed to say this? If it is allowed, why is it not considered testing Hashem? Thanks a lot!

Dear Ben Waldbaum,

Did he mean that he will study the Torah verses first, and as a result he expects G-d to reward him with an “A” on the exam? If so, this is considered testing G-d and is forbidden. (One may test G-d only in regard to giving tithes and charity.)

Or did he mean that if he gets an “A” he will *then* study five Torah verses? If so, this is not testing G-d. Rather, it’s like a conditional vow. It’s like saying: “If I get an A, then I vow to study five verses. But if not, then not.”

In this week’s Torah portion, Jacob made a conditional vow: “Jacob took a vow saying: If G-d will be with me...give me bread to eat and clothes to wear, and I return in peace to my father’s house... then this stone which I have set up as a pillar shall become a house of G-d...” (*Bereishet 28:21-2*).

However, a person should not make vows, because the punishment for breaking a vow is very severe. Furthermore, making a vow smacks of arrogance, like saying, “I’m so perfect that, not only do I fulfill 100% of my obligations to G-d, but I’m even taking on extra obligations!”

Source:

- Shulchan Aruch Yoreh De’ah 247:4

Yiddle Riddle

Last week we asked:

In which weekly *Parsha* (Torah portion) is the number of verses equal to the numerical value of the last word of the *Parsha*?

Answer:

Parshat Vayetzei. The number of verses in *Parshat Vayetzei* is 148, which equals the numerical value of its last word, “*machanaim*.”

Mike Marmor, Toronto <mike.marmor@reuters.com>

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