

# Kabbalah and Astrology

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Throughout history, Jewish Kabbalists have taken into consideration the path of astrology as a way of accessing symbolic knowledge due to its similarities to Kabbalah. This does not mean that there are no notable differences between the two, such as the personal references contained in astrology, compared with the efforts of Kabbalah to be transpersonal and inter-textual, always seeking interpretative freedom. Nevertheless, it should particularly be noted, as a fundamental meeting point, that these disciplines teach us that all human beings' fate is in their own hands, and that they make it good or bad according to how they use the circumstances of life.

Throughout history there have been numerous biblical references to astrology, notably Daniel 1:20. Interpreters of dreams or prophets appear in this passage, such as the character of the eponymous book, whose text includes almost all the mentions that the Scriptures make of astrologers. These figures bear the strange name of *jartom*, *jartumim*, a word which, in its turn, comes from the root *bow*, joint, sharp point (hence, emphasising the connotation as chroniclers and scribes of the professionals of the heavens). Although the Bible is usually pejorative or exaggeratedly critical of these astrologers, the fact is that from the 3rd or 4th centuries and in Gnostic Alexandria Hebrew Kabbalists who compiled or published the *Sefer Yetzirah* or *Book of Creation*, as we will see, continued to regard it as a way of accessing symbolic knowledge or, at least, one of the great spheres of correspondence between the macro- and the micro-cosmos. Not to do so, in that era, would have been to emphasise a provincialism that Jews, forming part of the city-axis of Hellenistic culture, under no circumstances wished to assume. And yet, despite this, Daniel's posture would be maintained throughout the centuries, regardless of an Ibn Ezra or a

Nahmanides, beyond the suggestive mentions by the reputed Maimonides on health and the Zodiac Wheel.

Certainly, astrology has this dual impact on our intellect, and much more in recent centuries, from the Renaissance onwards, when empirical knowledge and rationalism cleared the path to exact numbers and deposited the emblematic map and its network of relations and analogies – in the midst of which medieval man had lived – in the archaeological closet of the merely imaginary. If it had not been for a genius of the greatness of Jung in the 1930s, and the reliable tutelage of the physicist Pauli, in showing his interest in astrology thus supporting his theory of archetypes, probably no serious psychologist would give it the attention it deserves as a cosmo-biological imprint of our cultural guidelines. Having said this, it seems clear that astrology is more interesting as a model of knowledge than as a template, because if it founders in some way it is in its mathematical-predictive credibility. During the last Great War, Hitler and Churchill had their astrologers, and none of them predicted anything beyond the configuration of a clumsy image of what could or would happen, despite

which it is still possible to understand the mentality of both of them in the light of astrological typologies. And little else.

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The first similarity we can find between Kabbalah and astrology comes from understanding that the thirty-two paths that flow and come together through the length and breadth of the Tree of Life, the four worlds (in fact the four classical elements) and the three vertical axes, constitute an equivalent, in terms of the mystical game board, of the twelve signs, of their igneous or aerial correspondences, houses, oppositions and conjunctions. There are even those who see correspondences between the *Sephiroths*, virtual spheres of power, and the planets, but as the schools and Kabbalists do not agree on the exact place of Mars or Jupiter in the Sephirotic scheme, it is best not to ply those seas of uncertain turbulence. We will offer, however, the diagram that *Yetzirah* mentions in the version by Rabbi Kaplan. The most notable difference lies, in my view, in the fact that while Kabbalah is and endeavours to be transpersonal, astrology fascinates exactly because of its references to the personal. This means, of course, that astrologists and Kabbalists also differ and that, in the cited traditional line from Daniel, they prefer to see themselves as interpreters rather than chart makers, or as readers of dreams and wonders rather than calculators of eclipses and movements. Kabbalah tends towards anonymity and, in short, towards freedom, even when explaining an event after recourse to a text. This is prefigured by its aniconic, in fact Semitic, tendency, as well as a certain visceral rejection of determinism. Astrology, in contrast, cannot avoid being minimally deterministic and trying, through its knowledge, to coordinate or attempt to adjust

the subject's destiny to the cosmic and stellar diorama of a determined moment of his life.

In what is "recorded" (*jarut*) in the Tablets of the Law and according to Exodus 32:16, the teachers will want to read *jerut* ("freedom") as, according to the Mishnah, "No man is free but he who labours in the Torah." We could argue that students of astrology also seek freedom through knowledge, but the truth is that, *grosso modo*, the characters we encounter here and there, in the street market of prediction, are far less free and unprejudiced people than we might suppose: they live by their wits and by a certain crypto-symbolism tidied up for unoccupied housewives and unscrupulous individuals with little will of their own. In a few words, astrology seems more easily inclined to deceit and falsification precisely because of its tendency to look for intimate and private solutions, in opposition to Kabbalah, which submerges the students in an ocean or a sea (the Torah) with no more requisites than attention and devotion, and offers them nothing of value until their ego is pliant enough to be illuminated throughout. Even in the voice of a great teacher like Jesus the same non-conformism of Daniel resounds when he says to us that "*Shabbat* has been created for man and not man for *Shabbat*." As Saturday is the day dedicated to Saturn, Saturn-Chronos, the god of time, and as the Nazarene emphasises independence of non-ritual criteria, and therefore the undetermined substance of reality, he alludes indirectly to the fact that nothing is prefigured forever, that everything is, in fact, a projection of the soul of the believer on the draughtboard of his acts. Kabbalah, and there is no reason to doubt that Jesus was initiated in its mysteries, always moves in pursuit of an interpretative and inter-textual freedom, even at the risk of not coinciding with cosmic truth, even transgressing the classical. I very much doubt that astrology aspires to transgress anything. Rather, it does seek to adapt itself to the laws of outer space, to its symmetries and resonances,

in which there is much that is praiseworthy and noble, but also dangerously abstract. Astrology or *itztaginut* has the same root as *utztav*, that which is made of drawers, platforms, shelves; that is, what is hierarchical by its own nature and adapts to a framework. In contrast, it seems to me that what Kabbalah yearns for is to leave the frame, to see the yet undetermined margins of reality. Of course, it will not be so in the composition of the Yetzirah, but it will be in the Bahir and the Zohar, later texts.

*Every one of us has our destiny in our hands, and we make it good or bad depending on how we use the conditions of our life*

When, step by step, we consider the concept of astrological sign or *mazal* and calculate its numerical value, which totals 77, in other words 14, whose verbal equivalent is the word hand, we discover – given that *mazal* also means fortune, simply fortune – that every one of us has our destiny in our hands, and that we make it good or bad depending on how we use the conditions of our life. In its turn, the number 77 can be read directly as *oz*, a word that has this value and means power, shield, protection. Therefore, knowing everyone's sign, perceiving its characteristics and its limits, can give us the faculty of protecting us from its weaknesses while enhancing its secret virtues. Given that I can also convert this 77 into the expression *halel bi*, the psalm in me, praise, the praise in me, it seems obvious that my destiny contains, at each moment of my life, the occasion of a music, the secret configuration of a melody, regardless of whether it is sad or happy, as there will always be a *hel* or aura of revelations over my heart, *libi*. Such is my power and fortune beyond any astral determinism given that, as Saint John of the Cross wrote in his Toledo prison, I find myself “Without a *guide* or *light* than that which burned so deeply in *my heart*.”

Also the Koran (Sura 41:37) tells us: “Adore not the sun or the moon, but adore Allah, Who created them,” pointing out that the conscious invisible is more powerful than the unconscious visible, understanding the latter as nature discernible through our external senses. This did not preclude, within Islam, the existence of astrologers and teachers of prediction up to the present day. This is obviously, in the cited quotation, a call to individual and mystical freedom beyond the astral configuration of each historical moment. An exhortation to the responsibility of the subject before the objective world of the stars that, although they influence, shape and determine him, do not fully coerce or limit him in action. Mohammed cleansed the Ka'aba of Mecca of what he suspected were idols to the stars and goblins, but the same meteoric stone imbedded in this monument, with the passing of the centuries, finally became the cube of the human wheel whose celestial equivalent has as its cube the pole star. For this reason we can never stray far from the structural laws of the heavens. Moreover, while more than half of the nomenclature of our stars bears an Arabic name, the Sufis or mystics of Islam sing the praises of absolute freedom of the human universe at the core of its own heart. Our health depends on the play between what is free and what is determined, and this is how it has always been seen by Taoist philosophers. When Kabbalists devote themselves to studying, according to the Yetzirah, the wheel of the zodiac or *galgal ha-mazalot*, they cannot separate it from the twelve tribes, the complementary or opposed forces of the universe, or the idea that everything, each perceptible particle of the real, is a solar spark of divine fire.

The *Book of Creation* astrologically determines a spiritual scheme of work that can be useful to us. At the centre we find the Tetragramaton or Sacred Name of God assimilated to the Sun or *shemesh*. Starting from this centre which is, moreover, that of our

planetary system, we see in the most intimate circle the signs of the zodiac of Aries to Pisces; immediately followed by the months of the year, which in the Hebrew calendar are lunar, despite which they are amount to twelve. Next we have the tribes and their names; then, the virtues or polarities – love/hate, friendship/enmity, etc – and, lastly, in the outermost circle, all the possible permutations of the Ineffable Name, which tells us that the Creator is both outside us and inside us; at the centre and on the periphery. In this way, following the Cosmogogenesis, the Sun first begets the zodiac, then the months corresponding to its signs, later the tribe that each sign protects, then a tendency or characterological emergent and, lastly, it deposits, burning cinder of marvels, a small trace of itself in our path; that is, in the part of the wheel which touches, like our feet, the ground we walk on. So that, before it, before the discovery and marvel of knowing ourselves to form part of a prodigious universe, we begin to seek the correspondence of the part with the whole. Then what must I know first if I aspire to reach the centre of myself, which is no other than the Creator creating me, the Giver of Life giving me his living splendour in every cell and atom, in every particle and beat? The emotional world, of course. The relations I have with others and myself; such is the psychological space par excellence or what we could call the first level of karmic determination: parents, friends and enemies, partner, children, ancestors and vocations. Afterwards, on the second level of karmic determination or the third circle from the outermost point, just as Jung would say, I must know my cultural collective unconsciousness; in other words my tribal matrix of origin: the Christians of the Gospels, the Jews of the Torah, the Buddhists of the Tripitaka, the Muslims of the Koran. In spiritual terms, “our tribe” is no other than the symbolic family we descend from, its verbal and mental treasure, through whose

window I will see the world of cosmic values better than if I struggle to see from a distant perspective. After that assimilation will come the month I consider favourable and then, at last, very close to God but also to the Sun, the signs of the zodiac.

*The words of the Torah can be likened to fire. As fire, they come from heaven, and as fire they are everlasting*

In such a suggestive way, the Yetzirah considers that for us to come closer to the divine it is first necessary to find a vestige of it in our path. As the alchemists said in their time: “To make gold you need a gram of gold.” The drawing and text of Kabbalah put the bar of astrology very high, although they do so in a transpersonal way, as in the circle closest to the central solar light, the proper names seem to evaporate before what is indicated by Taurus, Virgo, Aquarius or Gemini. Astrology is, in truth, an astonishing mirror for those who know how to look at themselves in it, but it can also be the worst quality fodder for those who refuse to investigate and reflect for themselves beyond the ephemeris table, the fantastic Chinese zology of the Year of the Monkey or the Horse, the scales of Libra or the arrow of Sagittarius. Undoubtedly, Kabbalah does not allow us this superficiality, not because it is better or more profound, but simply because it does not lend itself, in its deepest well, to the same commerce and popularisation. The Hebrew wise men say: “What can the words of the Torah be likened to? The words of the Torah can be likened to fire. As fire, they come from heaven, and as fire they are everlasting. If a man gets too close to them he is burnt, and if he moves away, he freezes. If they are an instrument for his work, they save man. If he uses them to ruin others, they destroy and ruin him. The fire leaves its mark on all who use it. This is exactly what the Torah does. Every human being dedicated to

the study of Teaching carries the mark of the seal of the fire in his actions and words.” It is almost unnecessary to add that all those who dedicate themselves to astrology to serve others and help themselves are in an identical context,

while those who, disparaging themselves, disparage and disfigure it, end up, as we know, enclosed in the ice of their astral remoteness, isolated in their vanity of vanities and caught in their own net.