

MAZEL TOV!



We say it so often, but what does it really mean? And does saying it actually make any difference – can we really change what’s been written in the stars?

BY ROBERT SUSSMAN

NO MATTER THE SIMCHA (JOYOUS OCCASION), be it a wedding, bris, or bar mitzvah, we customarily greet each other by saying, “*Mazel Tov!*” In fact, it seems that any time we hear good news – a new job, a new car, a new house – we wish the person sharing that good news, “*Mazel Tov!*”

We say these words all the time, almost automatically, but do we ever really stop and think about what we’re saying or even why we say them?

We often think of *mazel* as being synonymous with “luck” or “fortune”, as though we’re simply wishing someone “Good

Luck!” when we say “*Mazel Tov!*”, just another way of saying, “Best wishes to you and your family on this special occasion”, but the term “*mazel*” actually refers to the stars, planets, and constellations (eg. the zodiac signs). In fact, the *gemara*¹ has an entire discussion regarding the impact that the day of the week on which a person is born has upon his life, as well as the influence that the particular hour of the day and how the sun, moon, and other planets and constellations under which he was born have on his life – this is what we mean by *mazel*. *Mazel* is quite powerful, as the *gemara* teaches² that life, children, and sustenance are not dependant on merit, but on *mazel*.

IS IT POSSIBLE TO CHANGE ONE'S MAZEL?

The gemara tells³ of Rabbi Elazar ben Pedas who was wretchedly poor. Once, because of his tremendous poverty, he did not have anything that he could eat following a bloodletting (a standard medical procedure at the time) except for a garlic skin. He ate the garlic skin and, because of his weakened state, fainted straight away. The rabbis happened to come and visit him and witnessed him crying and laughing while he was sleeping.

When Rabbi Elazar awoke, they asked him why he had been crying and laughing. He said that he had been sitting with Hashem and he had asked Him: "Creator of the Universe, how long must I suffer in this world from such tremendous poverty?" Hashem answered, "Elazar, my son, would you like me to turn the world back to its beginnings? It's possible that you will be born at a time of greater sustenance." Rabbi Elazar said, "All of this and only a possibility?" After inquiring from Hashem whether he had lived most of his days already, seemingly to consider if it was even worth taking the chance of starting over and finding out that he was closer to the end of his days than the beginning, he declined Hashem's rather generous offer.

How frightening, then, is the power and influence of *mazel* that, in order to change it, one needs to turn the world back to its very beginnings – and all of this for a "maybe", for just a mere chance that things might possibly be different the next go around, that one might be born at a time when the stars and planets would be aligned differently and more to his liking!

As we can see, changing a person's *mazel*, something that was clearly fixed in time and quite literally set in the stars, is terribly difficult. Based on this, we have to wonder about why we frequently wish each other, "*Mazel Tov!*" Just what good does it do to say such a thing, what difference could it possibly make?

If a person has good *mazel*, then he was born with it and it can be traced all the way back to the beginning of the world. Such a person clearly has no need of our

blessing. But if, *chas v'shalom* (G-d forbid), a person's *mazel* isn't so good, then that's what he has to live with and it's not possible to change it without starting the world over from the beginning.

Or, is it?

MAZEL DOES NOT APPLY TO ISRAEL

Our Sages teach⁴ that the concept of *mazel* does not apply to the nation of Israel, meaning that there is the chance, however slim, however remote and difficult, for us to overcome what has been written in the stars. Rashi explains on the verse in the Chumash⁵, "And [Hashem] took [Avraham] outside," that "Hashem said to Avraham, 'Go outside your astrology, through which you see that according to the stars you will not have a son in the future. 'Avram' will not have a son, but 'Avraham' will have a son; and so 'Sarai' will not give birth, but 'Sarah' will give birth. I call you by another name and it will change [your] *mazel*.'"

From the words of Rashi, we understand that sometimes it is decreed on a person based upon the power and influence of his *mazel* that he will have suffering or poverty, or that he will be, *lo aleinu* (may we never know from such things), childless – and this thing is built into the very fabric of creation, like a law of nature, and it is impossible to change it. But Avraham, through Hashem's raising him up, above the bounds of the natural world, together with the changing of his name, was able to have a son despite the *mazel* with which he was born.

RELENTLESS PRAYER FROM THE HEART

Since the destruction of the *Beis HaMikdash* (Temple), the gates of *tefilla* (prayer)

have been locked.⁶ Even so, the power of *tefilla* from the heart – together with an understanding that Hashem is All Powerful, that the Creator of the Universe is not limited whatsoever in His ability – a *tefilla* like this can break through all the gates of Heaven and there is nothing that can stand in its way. Relentless, focused prayer, prayer without rest, praying in a way that clearly demonstrates that a person realizes that the only one who can help him, the only one who has a solution for him is Hashem – is incredibly powerful. Prayer from closeness and love of Hashem, there is nothing stronger than this; it breaks all barriers and can change what has been decreed.

THE POWER OF PRAYER WITH TEARS

But even though the gates of *tefilla* are locked, all hope isn't lost because there is another avenue to get our requests heard: the gates of tears are not locked.⁷ Although there are prayers that are powerless to get through the locked gates of Heaven, there is no power that can stand opposite a prayer with tears.

There is a Chassidic tale that is told on the tzaddik, Rabbi Simcha Bunim of Peshischa. At one time, he was involved in business and would frequently visit Rabbi Yaakov Yitzchak Horowitz, better known as the "Chozeh (Seer) of Lublin", because he was able to "see" great distances. Once, on motzei Rosh Hashanah, the Chozeh informed Rabbi Simcha Bunim that he would lose all of his money that year. When the end of the year came, Rabbi Simcha Bunim approached the Chozeh and said that he had neither lost his business nor his money that year, as the Chozeh had "seen". The Chozeh asked him, "What did you do

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during the year?” Rabbi Simcha Bunim answered, “I cried and I davened about what you had told me.” The Chozeh responded, “All of what I said was without crying, but when a person cries and daven, everything changes.”

But not all crying is equal. There is crying because of pain and suffering over our many troubles and then there is crying that is even greater and more influential, a crying from closeness and connection, a crying that is like an embrace. A person who pours out his feelings in prayer before His Father in Heaven, before the All Merciful G-d, to the One who is entirely *chesed* (kindness) and *rachamim* (mercy), this is a prayer of closeness to Hashem, and it can break all barriers before it. Such a prayer, coupled with the power of crying, has the power to change one's *mazel*, despite its being something incredibly difficult and almost absolutely impossible to do. When a man cries before Hashem with a broken heart, from closeness and love, he merits changing his situation.

THE SPECIAL POWER OF WOMEN

Both men and women are given the power of prayer, but the special power of women with prayer is the power of crying. The gemara cautions⁸ us that, “One should always be careful about causing pain to his wife because her tears are frequent and she is easily caused pain.” Because of their emotional attributes and tendency to cry, women were appointed the difficult role of opening the gates of Heaven through their tears. Although the fashion of the day is otherwise, the real power of women has always been to daven with all of their heart and to cry out with bitter tears to Hashem, not to bake.

Dovid HaMelech (King David) said in *Te-*

hillim (Psalms)⁹, “Place my tears in Your flask, into Your record.” Every tear is gathered into a vessel by Hashem and guarded one by one. There is not a prayer and a tear that does not influence things; it's not possible that a tear goes to waste. Sometimes the power of prayer helps at the time, and sometimes it only helps at a later time – but it always helps.¹⁰

THREE PILLARS OR THREE POWERS

In addition to the power of prayer, there are other ways of changing a person's situation and *mazel* for the good. Our Sages teach¹¹ that the world stands on three things: Torah, *avodah* (service, which in the absence of the *Beis Hamikdash* (Temple) is the service of the heart, *tefilla*), and *gemilus chasadim* (kind acts). For each one, there is another way and a different influence and, just as we saw above with *tefilla*, so too Torah and kind deeds also have the ability to change one's *mazel*.

We find, for example, that Hashem swore that the children of Eli HaKohen would not merit to have long lives and would die young because they had desecrated His name and, as such, did not have available to them the chance to atone in this world. Hashem said¹², “I swear concerning the house of Eli that the sin of the house of Eli will never be atoned for by a *zevach* (an animal offering) or a *mincha* (a meal offering)” – and our Sages explain¹³ that, from here, we learn that although they could not atone with an animal offering or a meal offering, they could, however, atone with words of Torah. In other words, increasing their merits and offering *korbanos* (offerings) would not help change the oath that Hashem had made, but Torah and kind deeds have the power to atone for even the most egregious of sins.¹⁴

So how is this possible? The Torah stands above the reality of the world, having existed prior to the world's creation. One who is involved with Torah study merits to be lifted up above this world, above *mazel* itself; he lives in another world entirely and, in that world, there exists the ability to atone and for a long life – and, even more, there is no limitation placed upon him from the *mazel* with which he was born. Just what does one have to do to merit such a thing? He needs to immerse himself in the study of Torah to the point that he will not be disturbed during the times that he sets aside solely for Torah study because those times are sacred and inviolable, without any exception – be it phone calls, business opportunities, emergencies, etc. When a person is on such a level, he rises above the concerns and the limitations of this world, living in a world in which *mazel* does not rule over him.

KIND DEEDS TEAR UP EVIL DECREES

Kind deeds also have the power to change the *mazel* of a person. Hashem conducts the world according to the principle of *midah keneged midah* (measure for measure) – by the measure that a man measures, so is he measured. In other words, what a person does, will be done to him – like throwing a ball against the wall. A person who gladdens the heart of his friend, he too will be gladdened by Heaven.

The gemara tells¹⁵ the story of Binyamin HaTzadik who was a *gabai tzedakah* (one who collects and distributes funds for the needy). A widow came before him during a time of trouble and said to him, “Rabbi, feed me.” He told her that all of the *tzedakah* funds had been exhausted. She said that she and her children would die of hunger. So, he assisted her using his own money. When it reached the time for Binyamin HaTzadik to pass from the world, the *malach hamaves* (the angel of death) was dispatched to take his soul. The heavenly angels came before Hashem and said, “Master of the Universe, you said that

anyone who sustains a single soul from Israel, it's as if he sustained the whole world, and Binyamin HaTzadik has given life to a woman and her seven sons – and he will die with so few years?”

The decree against Binyamin was immediately torn up and 22 years were added on to his life. Our Sages explain that even though the years of his life that had been fixed for him had been completed, and, according to the rules of this world he was near death, but through the kind deeds that he did, his *mazel* changed and life was added for him because his actions gave life to a widow and her children – so he too deserved to live.

MAZEL TOV IS A TEFILLA

So, why do we constantly wish each other “*Mazel Tov!*”? There is a *mazel* that is fixed for each person and, in the natural course of the conduct of the world, everything is conducted according to that *mazel*, but, as we've explained, it's actually possible to change that *mazel*. When we wish “*Mazel Tov!*” to people on the occasion of a simcha – a couple who had a child or who got married – we're not just saying, “Congratulations!” Every participant in a *Shabbos Bracha* (aka Kiddush), everyone who partakes in a wedding *seudah* (meal), from feelings of closeness and goodness blesses “*Mazel Tov*” – and these two words have an enormous

power to change the *mazel* of the person being blessed to be for the good. Wishing people “*Mazel Tov!*” is like saying a short *tefilla* for them that will accompany them and strengthen them throughout the length of their lives.

May we share many simchas together in good health and happiness! 

Based upon Tiferes Shimshon al HaTorah (Bereishis) – Parshas Lech Lecha

“WHEN A PERSON IS ON SUCH A LEVEL, HE RISES ABOVE THE CONCERNS AND THE LIMITATIONS OF THIS WORLD, LIVING IN A WORLD IN WHICH MAZEL DOES NOT RULE OVER HIM.”

¹Shabbos 156a

²Taanis 28a

³Taanis 25a

⁴Shabbos 156a

⁵Bereishis 15:5

⁶Bava Metzia 59a

⁷Bava Metzia 59a

⁸Bava Metzia 59a

⁹56:9

¹⁰See “From the editor”, Jewish Life, August 2017, Issue #109

¹¹Pirkei Avos 1:2

¹²1 Shmuel 3:14

¹³Rosh HaShanah 18a

¹⁴See Shaarei Teshuva Perek Daled

¹⁵Bava Basra 11a

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