

# Unveiling the Hidden— Anticipating the Future

*Divinatory Practices among Jews  
between Qumran and the Modern Period*

*Edited by*

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## Abraham bar Ḥiyya's *Letter* to Judah bar Barzillai—Translation

*Josefina Rodríguez-Arribas and Amos Geula*

The translation of Abraham bar Ḥiyya's *Letter* to Judah bar Barzillai presented in this chapter follows Zechariah Schwarz' edition.<sup>1</sup> In his edition, Schwarz corrected some mistakes of the copyist and introduced some new terms not appearing in the manuscript he followed—MS Warsaw, *Zydowski Instytut Historyczny* 282—in order to clarify the meaning. When we follow or disagree with Schwarz' readings or modifications of the manuscript we have indicated this in the footnotes, but we have not indicated in footnotes our corrections of visible typos in Schwarz' edition. For the translation, we have compared Schwarz' edition with the two manuscripts of the *Letter*: MS Warsaw, *Zydowski Instytut Historyczny* (Jewish Historical Institute) 282, fols. 5<sup>r</sup>–13<sup>v</sup>, previously in the collections of the library of the Jewish Community in Vienna (= MS Austria VI and MS Austria 285); and MS London, Montefiore Library 484, fols. 37<sup>r</sup>–38<sup>v</sup>. MS Warsaw 282 is complete while MS Montefiore 484 contains only the beginning of the *Letter* and the colophon, so it is not useful for the most important contents of the *Letter*; MS Montefiore 484 ends when the discussion about the meaning of “consulting Chaldeans” (the motive of the objection in the *Letter*) and their differences with other divinatory practices begins in MS Warsaw 282.<sup>2</sup>

In our translation we keep the pages and the lines of Schwarz' edition in Arabic numbers indicated between ( ). We use [ ] to introduce brief clarifications in the body of the translation and < > to indicate that we have introduced a word that is neither in the manuscripts nor in Schwarz' edition.<sup>3</sup>

1 See Zechariah Schwarz, “*Iggeret R. Abraham bar Ḥiyya ha-Nasi še-katav le-Rabbi Yehudah bar Barzilai ‘al še’ilah ba-kaldaim*,” in *Festschrift Adolf Schwarz zum siebzigsten Geburtstage*, ed. Samuel Kraus (Berlin and Vienna: R. Löwit, 1917), 23–36.

2 MS Warsaw 282 (microfilm F 11609 at the Institute of Microfilmed Hebrew Manuscripts at the National Library of Israel) is written in a sixteenth-century mixture (difficult to decipher) of Sephardic cursive and Italian semi-cursive scripts, very likely by a Sephardic scribe in Italy, probably one who arrived there after the expulsion from Spain. MS Montefiore 484 (= microfilm F 6113 at the Institute of Microfilmed Hebrew Manuscripts at the National Library of Israel) is written in a fifteenth-century semi-cursive form of Sephardic script from Provence. We thank Ilona Steimann for her advice on the paleography of both manuscripts.

3 We are grateful to Charles Burnett for his readings and comments on an earlier version of

## Translation

(p. 24) **THIS IS THE LETTER ABOUT WHAT HAPPENED, WHICH THE GREAT SAGE, THE NASI RABBI ABRAHAM BEN HA-NASI, THE GREAT RABBI ḤIYYA' THE SEFARADI, OF BLESSED MEMORY, CALLED ŞAḤIB AL-ŞURṬA, SENT TO RABBI JUDAH BAR BARZILLAI OF BARCELONA, OF BLESSED MEMORY.**

### I.

#### 1 <Introduction on Psalm 34:15>

It is written: *Depart from evil and do good* (Ps 34:15) in your affairs and in any work of your hand, *seek well-being and pursue it* (Ps 34:15) with the word (5) of your mouth and the thoughts of your heart. <Another interpretation>: *Depart from evil and do good* in any affair between you and yourself, *seek well-being and pursue it* in any affair between you and your neighbor. <Another interpretation>: *Depart from evil and do good*: If your desire inclines toward something that does not deserve praise from <the point of view of> either wisdom or knowledge, *depart from* the evil desire and receive the advice of good wisdom. *Seek well-being and pursue it*: If you see your fellow asking for <unreasonable> advice, *seek perfection, pursue it*, then counsel him in the same way as you would *pursue* your own *well-being* and *seek* it.

#### 2 <What Psalm 34:15 has to do with *electiones*>

(10) The explanation of this issue is <as follows>: If you are ready to travel and a wise person who loves you tells you: “Do not travel at this hour because it is dangerous or is an even-numbered hour or Saturn’s or Mars’ hour”; or he tells you: “Do not travel on this day because its ruling planet is not suitable for the journey,”<sup>4</sup> then you should pay attention to his advice and do not travel. Likewise, if there is before you some food you really like eating and your physician tells

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this translation and to Maud Kozodoy for her assistance with several expressions. Needless to say, the authors are solely responsible for the contents and for any possible error or mistake.

4 We follow the reading in MS Montefiore 484 (מזל), rather than the reading in MS Warsaw 282 and Schwarz’ text (מזלך). *Mazzal* has different possible translations, given Bar Ḥiyya’s use of the term in the *Letter*; the apparent meaning of *mazzal* here is “ruling planet” meaning the specific planet that rules a specific nation, country, or here, a day. For the meaning of *mazzal* in rabbinic contexts, see Reimund Leicht, “The Planets, the Jews and the Beginnings of *Jewish Astrology*,” in *Continuity and Innovation in the Magical Tradition*, ed. Gideon Bohak, Yuval Harari, and Shaul Shaked (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2011), 282.

you: “Do not eat it because it is harmful to men your age,” you should follow his advice and do not eat. This is <the meaning of the words> *depart from evil and do good*: depart from the decree of the evil and perform the advice of the good. (15) And <the meaning of the words> *seek well-being and pursue it* is: If you see your friend departing or beginning some business at an even-numbered hour, which is a dangerous hour, or on a day whose ruling planet is not appropriate to that business, dissuade him from travelling or doing that business. For, because of this action you will be the one who *seeks* his friend's *well-being* and *pursues* his good.

## II.

### 1 <Electiones and bloodletting>

It is proper for all men of knowledge to be warned of any danger and to be careful not to begin any business at an hour unsuitable for it or on a day whose ruling planet is unsuitable for that business. And in the same way as they should be cautious and take care of themselves, they should also take care of their close friends and warn them, thus learning a rule of behavior from our rabbis of blessed memory, (20) who warned us about it <specifically> in one place only, but in other places taught us <in general> to do their deeds and to emulate them.

They <taught> that Samuel said:<sup>5</sup> *The suitable times for bloodletting are Sunday, Wednesday, and Friday, but not Monday and Thursday. As a master said: One who has the merit of the patriarchs lets blood on Monday or Thursday, for the tribunal above and the tribunal below are as one. For what reason <do they> not <do this> on Tuesday? Because the planet Mars rules an even-numbered hour <that day>. Does not Saturn rule Friday and also an even-numbered hour <that day>?\**<sup>6</sup> *As there are many who do this, <let blood on Friday>, “the Lord preserves the simple”* (Ps 116:6).<sup>7</sup>

### 2 <Malefic planets and even-numbered hours>

The explanation is that Mars, which is in an even-numbered hour, is the ruler (25) among the planets that day.<sup>8</sup> According to rough calculation, the astrologers know that even-numbered hours are inauspicious for beginning anything

5 We do not keep Schwarz' reading (אמר), which requires his addition of אמר. MS Montefiore 484 has אמר: אמר שמואל

6 We keep Schwarz' addition to the manuscript (נמי), which is also in MS Montefiore 484.

7 Quoted from *TB Šabbat* 129b.

8 We keep Schwarz' addition (בוכב). The day implied is Friday, when Mars rules the fourth hour of the night and the sixth of the day; see Chapter Six (Appendix 1), 208.

and all the more if one of the malefic planets rules them [the even-numbered hours]. There are those who are afraid of bloodletting at the hour of Mars because Mars rules over blood. So they warned that a person should not let blood on a day on which Mars rules an even-numbered hour of that day, such as Monday, when <Mars> rules an even-numbered hour, or Thursday, when <Mars also> rules an even-numbered hour. These two days are dangerous because of the rule of the planets (30) <in even-numbered hours> and also because the tribunal above and the tribunal below are as one.<sup>9</sup> Tuesday is dangerous because Mars controls its eighth hour.<sup>10</sup> We know that these days—or the even-numbered hours of these days—when Mars rules are dangerous for bloodletting, according to the words of our sages of blessed memory.<sup>11</sup>

We learn from this fact that anyone wishing to build a house, plant a vineyard, or dig a well—and whatever <other> activity Saturn rules—must begin <it> on Sunday or Wednesday.<sup>12</sup> One is warned against starting on Monday, Tuesday, (35) or <Friday>, because Saturn <rules> an even-numbered <hour> these three days.<sup>13</sup> In this way we deduce rules for each activity controlled by a planet. And <for that> we take as our basis the words of our sages of blessed memory, and nobody protests against us; this is clear.

9 Since the tribunal of Israel sat on Mondays and Thursdays (see *TB Bava kamma* 82a), then on these days a person may be sentenced in the tribunal above, and so bloodletting is dangerous on these days.

10 Schwarz modified the reading of the manuscript, *first* rather than *eighth* hour. We keep the reading of MSS Warsaw 282 and Montefiore 484 (*eighth*), which is correct in this context. Schwarz proposed the reading “first” possibly because Mars also rules the first hour of the day, which is why Tuesday is ruled by Mars, the planet that rules the first hour of this day, but the passage is dealing with the planets ruling the hours, not with the planets ruling the days.

11 We keep Schwarz’ addition of אנו at the beginning of this sentence as the implicit subject of רואים.

12 “Hours” in this context means the seasonal hours of a day that starts at sunrise and is divided into day (from sunrise to sunset) and night (from sunset to sunrise), each having 12 unequal or seasonal hours whose duration changes according to the season (longer during the day in summer time but shorter in winter and vice-versa). So on Sunday Saturn rules the third hour of the night and the fifth hour of the day, i.e., two complete hours after sunset and one complete hour before noon. On Wednesday, Saturn rules the third hour of the day and the first hour of the night, namely, a couple of hours after sunrise and the first hour after sunset. See Chapter Six (Appendix 1), 208.

13 We keep Schwarz’ correction (בשלישית and וששית) of the manuscript (ושלשית and וחמשי). So, according to the corrected text, Saturn rules the second hour of the day of Monday; the fourth of the night and the sixth of the day of Tuesday; and the second of the night and the first and the eighth of the day of Friday; see the Table in Appendix 1.

## III.

**1 <Electiones for a wedding: An odd-numbered hour>**

(p. 25) However, something happened to me relating to this issue, which I need to explain here and review all complaints, doubts, and problems until its truth becomes clear. A good disciple, one who loves me and is dear to me, was to be married on a Friday and I agreed [with him] that he should be married on the third hour of that day, at the moment when the congregation leaves the synagogue. In my opinion, his suggestion was quite correct, for this hour is odd numbered,<sup>14</sup> the moon rules it, and it is (5) auspicious to begin in it anything good, according to everyone's view. The hour was also auspicious for this because of the positions of the planets.

**2 <A funeral delays the wedding: An even-numbered hour>**

However, it became necessary to delay the ceremony because of the funeral of a person without family to bury him that was taking place in the city. The people <involved> in the wedding—the heads and the principals of the congregation—opted to bury the dead first. Therefore, the bride's entry <under the wedding canopy> was delayed until they had completed everything that needed to be done for the dead. So the congregation came back from the burial at the end of the fifth hour of the day and the beginning of the sixth hour,<sup>15</sup> which is even numbered and is ruled by Mars.

**3 <The new hour is not good according to astrology>**

In my opinion, <that hour> was not suitable, because of the positions of the planets and the ascendant <of the hour>.<sup>16</sup> When I realized this, I told him: "Since the ceremony was delayed until the sixth hour, wait (10) until this hour is over and the seventh hour arrives,<sup>17</sup> which is odd numbered and is ruled by

14 Lit. "separate number," cf. Robert Ramsay Wright (Arabic text and English tr.), *The Book of Instruction in the Elements of the Art of Astrology (Al-Taḥḥīm)* (London: Luzac & Co., 1934), 27 [87]: "numbers like seven and ten, which have no common factor other than one, and do not share in other particulars. They are therefore spoken of as separate numbers." The hour shares the quality of the number that corresponds with it in the order of the hours of the day and the night.

15 I.e., 11 a.m. and noon, respectively

16 This information about the specific positions of the planets at that day and that time makes this calculation a clear occurrence of electional astrology in its most technical form, while the simple choice of even/odd-numbered hours related to the planets is a basic form of electional astrology, whose knowledge was within the reach of anybody, just as the elections based on the number of the hours unrelated to the rule of the planets.

17 I.e., 1p.m.



the sun, and is suitable for beginning anything. In addition it has a different quality [lit. “status”] in connection to the positions of the planets.”<sup>18</sup>

The man listened to my advice, my words persuaded him, and he and his fellows decided to wait.

**4 <Someone found that the election of the day and the hour is consultation of Chaldeans>**

However, there was someone there who took issue with the decision and said that this delay was a case of consultation of Chaldeans; that our sages of blessed memory said not to consult Chaldeans;<sup>19</sup> that the person who does this [choosing the hour of the wedding according to astrological rules] is transgressing the words of the sages; that what Samuel said, that *the moment appropriate* (15) *to bloodletting is Sunday, <Wednesday, and Friday, but neither Monday nor Thursday>*<sup>20</sup> refers only to bloodletting because of the weakness that it causes to the body; and that we should not draw any other conclusion from it.<sup>21</sup>

**5 <The objector prevails: The wedding takes place in an even-numbered hour against the will of the bridegroom>**

He [the objector] further insisted twice and thrice, until the bridegroom entered the wedding canopy, against his will, at the sixth hour.

**IV.**

**1 <Bar Ḥiyya feels he is in a situation in which he has to defend his position and, consequently, astrology>**

Now, as I was the one who brought all this up, it seemed to me that all who heard this would consider me to be a transgressor of the law and a sinner. And so I need to justify my words and defend myself before God and before (20) my people, as it is written: *You will be blameless before God and before Israel* (Num 32:22).

18 The hour could have a different relationship to the planets than the previous degree rising at the earlier hour, and thus affect the aspects of the chart. The planets' degrees would not move in a couple of hours, although the Moon would move faster and could affect the chart aspects. Bar Ḥiyya would have been well aware of all this, but the main change would have been the positions of the planets and the signs in the houses (because of the change in the ascendant's position). On this specific question, see Chapter Six, 204–206.

19 *TB Pesahim* 113b.

20 *TB Šabbat* 129b.

21 Namely, the days of week are taken into account for bloodletting because of the weakness that it causes to the body, but they are not taken into consideration for weddings.

## 2 <Psalm 34:15 re-emerges: Choosing a suitable hour is like choosing a suitable medicine>

I stand by what I have said and I say that this one [the objector] held a stringent halakhic opinion in a case that does not require it,<sup>22</sup> and that he adopts a stringent approach<sup>23</sup> to an issue to which stringency does not apply. For anyone who states that a certain hour of a certain day is auspicious for a certain activity, or who says that it is good to begin a certain activity at the hour of Jupiter or at the hour whose zodiac sign is Aries, or at the hour <when> Taurus rises or sets, is like one who states: “The water of this herb is good for eyes,”<sup>24</sup> “this food is good for teeth or for intestines,” or “this drug brings about diarrhea and this <other one> hardens and constipates.”

And just as this <specific> drug, food and herb do not (25) work in the same way <for different illnesses>, likewise <different> hours do not act in the same way for all men, for the former and the latter are analogous cases, and nobody says that it [the former] is either banned or permitted.<sup>25</sup>

## 3 <Astrology is not consultation of Chaldeans: God rules the stars>

In the same way, the person who says that when Jupiter rules the nativity of a child, he shall be honest or humble, or that any girl whose nativity is dominated by Venus shall be beautiful and charming, neither consults the Chaldeans nor does he practice the deeds of the Chaldeans. With his words he does not depart from the way of the Torah, not even by the thickness of a hair, for all Israel unanimously believes that the influence conferred on the stars has been given to them conditionally, and they do not have power to cause benefit (30) or to harm of their own free will and knowingly, but everything is by <God's> judgment and command.<sup>26</sup>

22 We follow Schwarz' correction (החמיר) of the manuscript (המאמר), which agrees with MS Montefiore 484 (המחמיר החמיר).

23 The technical term *ḥumra'* (stringency) has two meanings: first, an obligation in Jewish practice that exceeds the bare requirements of halakhah; second, a stricter interpretation of a Jewish law (halakhah), when two or more interpretations exist. The two meanings are very close. The *maḥmir* of the *Letter* is imposing a larger requirement of the law in the understanding that to do any less would be a violation of the halakhah. Cf. the use of this term below (XX.4, XXI.1, and XXI.2).

24 We correct Schwarz' reading (יפית) of MSS Warsaw 282 and Montefiore 484 (יפה).

25 I.e., this is not a case for halakhah according to Bar Ḥiyya.

26 This statement has its equivalents in the *Baraita di-Shmuel* (end of the ninth chapter), the *Baraita de-Mazzalot* (ch. 15), and the *Sefer megillat ha-megalleh* (beginning of the fifth

#### 4 <Astrology is legitimate and does not infringe the law>

Such is the belief of everybody who fears Heaven [God] and studies the science of the stars [astrology]. Anyone who suspects one of the children of Israel on that issue is suspecting righteous people, and his way of thinking is not that of righteous people.

We consider—by rational estimation—that the person who avoids engaging in an activity at an even-numbered hour or at any hour that is not auspicious because of the positions of the planets does not violate any ban and is relying on Samuel's words. He infringes neither the words of the sages nor the words of the Torah;<sup>27</sup> his act is not a consultation of Chaldeans, as the one who held the stringent legal opinion considers.

#### V.

##### 1 <Why did the Sages warn against the consultation of Chaldeans?>

(35) However, we have to clarify and inquire into what our sages of blessed memory said: *Do not consult Chaldeans*. Does <this mean that> one should not consult them because one should not be concerned with their answers and should not listen to their advice? Or <does this mean that> we are warned only against consulting <them>?

##### 2 <Is the ban about consulting Chaldeans or about consulting and fearing their answers?>

(p. 26) We organize the inquiry in this way. Let us say that the one who consults Chaldeans, listens to their advice, and fears their answers infringes upon the words of the sages and deserves death, for they said “*Do not consult <Chaldeans>*,” but he does consult. <If> in addition <to consulting them>, he is <also> afraid of their answers, because of his deeds, is he guilty of both [consulting them and fearing their answers] or just one of them [consulting them]?

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chapter); see Schwarz, 25 n. 9. For the texts of the *Baraita di-Shmuel* and the *Baraita de-mazzalot*, see Judah D. Eisenstein, *Oṣar Midrašim*, 2 vols. (New York: Reznick Menschel & Co., 1928), 2:542–547 (*Baraita di-Shmuel*), and Shlomo Aharon Wertheimer, *Battei midrašot*, 2 vols. (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1955), 2:7–37 (*Baraita de-mazzalot*).

<sup>27</sup> Schwarz added *לא* before *על דברי חכמים* and before *על דברי תורה*, which does not seem necessary, since it does not affect the meaning of the sentence.

### 3 <The ban is only about consulting Chaldeans: Listening to their answers and being afraid of them is legitimate><sup>28</sup>

If Simeon consults Chaldeans, but is not afraid of their answers, and <Levi> listens to their advice,<sup>29</sup> but did not ask them, should we say that (5) they are both <equally> guilty? Or <should we> say that Simeon's guilt is greater than Levi's? Or is only Simeon guilty while Levi is innocent? We cannot clear Simeon from his culpability and, considering the question, we find that Levi—who was afraid of the <Chaldeans'> words and listened to their advice but did not ask them—is exempt from any charge, because of the words of our sages of blessed memory, who said: *Rabbi Akiva had a daughter. Chaldeans said to him "on the day when she gets married a snake will bite her, and she will die."* He was very worried about it.<sup>30</sup> We cannot say that Rabbi Akiva consulted Chaldeans, for (10) our sages of blessed memory did not say it. God forbid that Rabbi Akiva transgressed the words of the sages; rather, the Chaldeans spoke to him although he did not ask. As *he was very worried*, we see that one <is allowed to> be afraid of the words of Chaldeans [and so one is allowed to listen to them].

Likewise, we say that one <is allowed to> listen to their advice because of <the example of> Naḥman ben Isaac's mother, to whom the Chaldeans said "*your son will be a thief.*" She did not allow his head to be uncovered and said <to her son> "*cover your head.*"<sup>31</sup> As she listened to their advice, she asked <her son> to cover his head and the sages did not admonish her. You will understand from this that

28 The ban only concerns taking the initiative to consult Chaldeans.

29 We follow Schwarz' addition (יָלַד) of the manuscript.

30 The text alluded to in this discussion about Simeon and Levi is one from the *TB Šabbat* (156a and 156b), from which Bar Ḥiyya took the quotation included in his *Letter*. Several rabbis are discussing how the fact of being born on a particular day of the week or at a particular hour influences character and fate. In any of these cases, the native's character is determined by one of the seven planets ruling that particular day of the week or that particular hour in which the birth took place. In this context, the well-known discussion about Israel being or not being under the influence of the stars is introduced; the rabbis refer to several examples regarding this question. For the popular folkloristic motif of the bride or groom fated to die in the bridal chamber and the symbolism of the snake in wedding contexts, see Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, "Talmudic Astrology: Bavli Šabbat 156a–b," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 78 (2007): 109–148, at 133 and the bibliography quoted there.

31 See *TB Šabbat* 156b. The fragment is based on the belief that if the son covers his head, the influence of the star does not reach him, and it is therefore ineffective. See Rubenstein, "Talmudic Astrology," 135–136: "we must explain that the Sage was indeed free from planetary influence as long as he covered his head, and only his failure to continue to perform that *mišvah* made him susceptible to his *destiny*. Or we might explain that his constant vigilance in covering his head restricted his stealing to this one anomalous act, and he did not become a habitual thief as predicted. Both explanations demonstrate again that, as

one <is allowed to> listen to the Chaldeans' advice. It is clear to us that our sages of blessed memory warned only against consulting (15) Chaldeans. However, the one who is afraid of their answers and listens to their advice [Chaldeans'] has no part in this [i.e., the guilt of the consultation].

#### 4 <There is transgression of the law in consulting Chaldeans>

Let us now inquire whether their warning against consulting Chaldeans is because there is some idolatry or some offense to Heaven in the knowledge with which they busy themselves. <Perhaps> they warned against consulting <Chaldeans> because the knowledge entailed by it infringes the law. Or perhaps they warned not against the consultation, but against the specific manner of the consultation <of Chaldeans>, for, in their search for knowledge, they [the Chaldeans] ask questions that in some way transgress the law and it is as if they [those who consult Chaldeans] actually share with <the Chaldeans> in this <transgression>.

### VI.

#### 1 <Why is there transgression in consulting Chaldeans? The words of the Chaldeans versus the words of the rabbis>

In order to overcome (20) this problem, we will investigate the words of the Chaldeans and their science until it becomes clear whether it involves transgression of the law or not. In the words of our sages of blessed memory we find <evidence> regarding the words of the Chaldeans, who informed Rabbi Naḥman's mother that her son would be a thief.<sup>32</sup> They are similar to the words of those who study the positions of the stars [astrologers], when they state that one born under a certain zodiac sign or one whose ruling planet is a certain planet will be a thief, or rich, or wise.

#### 2 <The words of the rabbis are according to astrology not according to the Chaldeans>

Thus, we find that the words of our sages of blessed memory are not according to the language of the Chaldeans, but according to the broadest sense written in Rabbi Joshua (25) ben Levi's notebook. For instance: *One born under the sun will be this way. One born under Venus will be this other way. <...> One born under Mars will be a man who makes blood flow. Rabbi Ashe said "a thief, a surgeon/bloodletter, a butcher, or a circumciser."* Rava said: "I <was born> under

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with Abraham, so with his descendants: the fate of Jews is not determined exclusively by the stars."

32 *TB Šabbat* 156b.

*Mars <and I do not practice any of these crafts>.* Abaye answered him: “Sir, you also punish and kill.”<sup>33</sup> Their words are similar to the words of Chaldeans and the words of astrologers.<sup>34</sup>

### 3 <The rabbis practiced astrology>

An issue that Rabbi Joshua ben Levi, Rava, and Abaye dealt with—and each of them provided a strong reason—is how we can say that there is a transgression of the law in this question. However, we see from this [the words of the rabbis] that our sages of blessed memory engaged in (30) astrology, taught it, and did not abstain from it.

As the words of the Chaldeans are similar to the words <of the sages> in this respect, we can say that there is no transgression in the occupation of the Chaldeans, unless it is because they [the Chaldeans] inquired in these questions in a way that transgresses the law. For this reason, our sages of blessed memory warned against consulting them [the Chaldeans].

## VII.

### 1 <Abraham practiced astrology>

We will clarify this question in a different way. Let us say that the words of those who busy themselves with astrology and the procedures of their art look like <the words of> Abraham, our father.<sup>35</sup> For our sages of blessed memory said: *Abraham said before God: “Lord (35) of our universe, I consulted my horoscope and <I saw that> I cannot conceive a son.” <God> answered him: “Get away from your horoscope,<sup>36</sup> for Israel does not have a star. Why do you think this? Because*

33 Abbreviated quotation from *TB Šabbat* 156b.

34 We follow Schwarz' correction (גמרי) of the manuscript (גמי). Cf. the description of the individuals born under the rule of each of the seven planets, each of the twelve zodiac signs, and in the different days of the week in Richard J.H. Gottheil, “A Further Fragment on Astrology from the Genizah,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 49 (1929): 291–302, especially 295–302.

35 According to certain Talmudic passages, Abraham was originally an astrologer; see *TB Yoma* 28b and *TB Bava batra* 16b.

36 This word is written in two slightly different forms in the text, *ʾištagninut* and *ʾištagninut*. The word, also related to *ʾištagninin/ištagninin* (“astrologers”), might come from the Greek στέγω (“to cover, defend, avert, keep closed”) and its derivative στερνός (“covered”); see Robert S.P. Beekes and Lucien van Beek, *Etymological Dictionary of Greek*, 2 vols. (London: Brill, 2010), 2:1393; and Avraham Even-Shoshan, *Milon Even-Shoshan (The Even-Shoshan Dictionary)* 6 vols. (Jerusalem: Ha-milon he-ḥadaš, 2010 [2003]) 1: 112. Cf. Samuel Krauss, *Griechische und Lateinische Lehnwörter in Talmud, Midrasch und Targum*, 2 vols. (Berlin: Olms, 1899), 2:118–119. Marcus Jastrow relates the root to the Latin loanword תגגס (mean-

*Jupiter rises in the west? I will move it and put it in the east.” So it is written: “Who makes Jupiter rise in the east?” (Isa 41:2).<sup>37</sup>*

**2 <First conclusion: Astrology is a licit science, for Abraham practiced it>**

From this fact [Abraham’s relationship to astrology], we conclude that there is nothing illicit in the astrology that concerns the horoscope of any man and investigates the events that are going to happen to him because of the position of the planets and the zodiac signs (p. 27) at his birth, for it is like the science with which Abraham, our father, busied himself.

Alternatively, one could also say that it is a science different <from the Chaldean science>, because what Abraham, our father, said—*I consulted <my horoscope> and I saw that I cannot bear a son*—<sup>38</sup> is like the astrologers’ words when they analyze peoples’ horoscopes. Abraham, our father, *knew the Glory of his Creator when he was three years old*,<sup>39</sup> and God, blessed be He, said about him: *After listening to My voice, Abraham (5) kept My service, My commandments, My laws, and My teachings* (Gen 26:5). So nobody can say that he concerned himself with something shameful or something that transgresses the law. Rather, one must say that anything similar to what Abraham, our father, concerned himself with is licit.<sup>40</sup>

Thus, we say that astrology is licit. Regarding the discipline of the Chaldeans, we say that while it looks like astrology, there is no guilt in it [astrology] because of that similarity. This is the first conclusion that emerges from this story [Abraham’s].

**3 <Second conclusion: Astrology is a true and reliable science>**

According to <this story>, it seems that astrology (10) is a true science and it is proper to rely on it and to study it; for God, blessed be He, told Abraham, our father: *Get away from your horoscope, for Israel does not have a star*. He did not say: *Abandon astrology, for it is not a science, its proofs are not true, and it is not*

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ing here “astrologer”); see *Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Bavli, Talmud Yerushalmi and Midrashic Literature*, 3 vols. (London-New York: Luzac-Putnam’s Sons, 1903), 1:89–90. According to Ernest Klein, the actual etymology remains uncertain; see *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the Hebrew Language for Readers of English* (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 50.

37 Quoted from *TB Šabbat* 156a and 156b.

38 *TB Šabbat* 156a.

39 *TB Nedarim* 32a.

40 We keep Schwarz’ correction (שהיה) of the manuscript (שהוה).

*proper to learn <it>*. He could have said all this to him, if it were not proper to rely on and to study this science.

Because of all this, astrology is called a science, its proofs are <considered to be> true, and it is proper to teach and to study it [this is the second conclusion].

**4 <Third conclusion: Israel, as opposed to the other nations of the world, can nullify their stellar decrees>**

A third conclusion that can emerge <from this story> is <related to> the star, for *Israel does not have a star*. This means that the righteous (15) ones of Israel can nullify the stellar decrees that act upon them, by their righteousness (*ṣedaqah*) and their prayers. The other nations of the world cannot do this, as they said: *Rabbi Johanan said: "How do we know that Israel does not have a star?" From what is written here: "The Lord said: you will not learn the behavior of the gentile nations and you will not fear the signs of heaven as they fear them. Gentiles fear but Israel does not" (Jer 10:2).*<sup>41</sup>

**VIII.**

**1 <The meaning of *Israel has no star* is that Israel's power is greater than the power of the stars>**

They said that *Israel does not have a star*, for the whole world was created for Israel.<sup>42</sup> If Israel had not been given the Torah, the whole universe, which consists of the heavens [i.e., the heavenly spheres], the planets, and the constellations,<sup>43</sup> would have returned to chaos. (20) So if the spheres, the planets, and the constellations exist for the sake of Israel, how can they rule over Israel? Israel's strength and merits, which support the universe, are greater than the power of the stars.<sup>44</sup>

For this reason [because Israel's strength is greater than the power of the stars], they said that Israel does not have a star, for the horoscope does not have power to maintain its signs and testimonies on Israel. But the righteous of Israel, by the power of their merits, can nullify the influence of the stars that act upon them. So it is written: *Righteousness releases from death* (Prov 10:2 and 11:4).

<sup>41</sup> *TB Šabbat* 156a.

<sup>42</sup> See *TB Šabbat* 156a. Cf. *Midraš Šir ha-širim rabbah* 7.8; *Pesiqta' rabbati* 28 and *Midraš Tehillim* 137.3.

<sup>43</sup> We follow Schwarz' addition (וּכּוּכְבִּים וּמִזְלוֹת) to complete the text.

<sup>44</sup> Also quoted at the beginning of the fifth chapter of Bar Ḥiyya's *Sefer megillat ha-megalleh*.



2 <If Israel can nullify the stellar influence, it certainly means that the stellar influence also works for Israel>

Although they said that Israel does not have a star, they <also> said that stars testify about Israel, as it is written. Rabbi Ḥanina said: *A star makes one rich, a star makes one wise, and Israel has a star.*<sup>45</sup> (25) There is no disagreement between Rabbi Ḥanina's words and Rabbi Joḥanan's, Rav's, Rabbi Judah's, Samuel's, and Rabbi Akiva's words, who all said that Israel does not have a star. The meaning of Rabbi Ḥanina's words is that Israel has a star that makes them rich and wise, or poor and stupid. But Israel's merit nullifies the testimony of the stars acting upon them.

Israel, therefore, has and does not have a star, for the stars do not testify about Israel, and <their> testimony does not remain depending on Israel's behavior and merit.

IX.

1 <Stellar influence *versus* stellar decree: Israel *vis-à-vis* the other nations>

If God, blessed be He, wishes to nullify the stellar decrees acting upon Israel, He does not nullify the stellar influence indicating (30) the decree, but the decree is nullified <by the power of the merits of the righteous of Israel>,<sup>46</sup> because neither stars nor zodiac signs rule Israel.

If God wishes to remove the stellar decrees from the nations of the world, He first removes the influence of the star controlling that decree and nullifies its rule.<sup>47</sup> Afterwards, He establishes His plan for that nation.

2 <King Hezekiah's case>

Thus we find that God decided to extend King Hezekiah's life beyond what the testimony of the stars had established at his birth. According to Isaiah's prophecy to him: *You shall die, you shall not live* (2 Kings 20:1 and Isa 38:1). But we see that He neither removed the influence of the star, (35) nor nullified the rule of the horoscope. He <only> said: *I will add to your years fifteen more* (Isa 38:5).

45 *TB Šabbat* 156a.

46 See the previous chapter of the *Letter* (VIII).

47 We keep Schwarz' correction (ומבטל) of the manuscript (לבטל).

### 3 <Rabbi Akiva's case>

Likewise, regarding Rabbi Akiva's daughter, whom God, blessed be He, released from death, Rabbi Akiva did not say that God, blessed be He, removed the rule of the horoscope, but he taught *righteousness releases from death*, and *Israel does not have a star*.<sup>48</sup>

### 4 <The relation of the Biblical constellation *Kimah* with the flood>

There is not a case like this [Akiva's, i.e., Israel's] among the nations of the world, but when the decree came (p. 28) upon the peoples of the flood, they said: *He removed a star from Kimah and brought the flood upon the world*,<sup>49</sup> for the flood would not have come upon the world if He had not nullified the influence of the stars. He removed a star from *Kimah*, which is in the sign of Taurus. He did not remove a star from another zodiac sign, for the flood took place in the month of 'Iyyar, when *Kimah* rises in the east, or in Marḥešwan, when *Kimah* sets in the west.<sup>50</sup>

The opinion of our sages about the time of the flood is divided between these two months. (5) *Kimah* controls rain and thunders in its rising or setting in these two months and indicates the abundance or shortage in every year, according to the opinion of all those who study astrology. The flood took place on the days when *Kimah* rules. For this reason, they said: *He removed a star from Kimah and brought the flood*. If the flood took place in 'Iyyar, He removed a star from *Kimah*, which rose then. If it took place in Marḥešwan, He removed <a star from *Kimah*, which> set <then>.<sup>51</sup>

### 5 <Israel and the other nations *vis-à-vis* the stellar influence>

<All this> is to indicate that God, blessed be He, nullifies only the influence of the star that rules a future event at a certain moment in order to bring it about or to remove it from among the nations of the world. However, (10) He does not remove the influence of the star from Israel, for stars do not rule Israel.

### 6 <Abraham's case shows the special status of Israel *vis-à-vis* the stellar influence>

God, blessed be He, made known these two questions through Abraham's example: the power of Israel, which does not have a star, and the influence

48 See *TB Šabbat* 156b.

49 See *TB Roš ha-šanaḥ* 11b and *TB Beraḳot* 59a.

50 See *Seder 'olam rabbah* ch. 4.

51 Cf. *TB Roš ha-šanaḥ* 11b.

of the stars on the nations of the world. For He says to him: *Jupiter is in the west? I will remove it and put it in the east.*<sup>52</sup> He mentioned these two questions because many nations who are under the rule of the stars emerged from Abraham our father. God said to him about them: *Jupiter is in the west? I will remove it and put it in the east.*<sup>53</sup> He nullified the influence of the stars <from the other nations, but does not remove it from Israel>, *for Israel does not have a star.*<sup>54</sup>

Therefore <Abraham> said to Him: *That Ishmael might live (15) before You* (Gen 17:18), for You nullified the influence of the stars affecting him. He said: *So it will be*, and added: *I will establish My covenant with Isaac* (Gen 17:21), whose strength is greater than the influence of the stars,<sup>55</sup> and *through Isaac your seed shall be named* (Gen 21:12), and his seed [Isaac's] shall be lasting and the stars shall have no influence on his seed.<sup>56</sup>

X.

#### <Conclusions from Abraham's Story>

##### 1 <First conclusion: Astrology is licit>

From the case of Abraham,<sup>57</sup> our father, we have seen that astrology is licit [first conclusion], for Abraham, our father, busied himself with it or with something similar to it.

##### 2 <Second conclusion: Astrology is a true science>

We have <also> seen that it is a true science [second conclusion], for God, blessed be He, did not nullify the testimony (20) of the stars affecting Abraham, but He exchanged <their> position and placed Jupiter in the east.

##### 3 <Third conclusion: The stars rule the nations of the world>

We saw that the stars rule all the nations of the world and the testimony of the stars rules them and remains with them [third conclusion]. If God, blessed be

52 *TB Šabbat* 156b.

53 *TB Šabbat* 156b.

54 *TB Šabbat* 156a.

55 We keep Schwarz' deletion of אִקִּים אֶת יְצַחֵק, which is in MS Warsaw 282 and is clearly a mistake.

56 We keep Schwarz' correction (יהיה) of the manuscript (יקרה).

57 We keep Schwarz' correction (ממעשה) of the manuscript (מעשה).

He, wishes to nullify it,<sup>58</sup> He removes the influence of the stars and nullifies their judgment, as Rav said:<sup>59</sup> *Jupiter is in the west? I will remove it and put it in the east.*<sup>60</sup>

#### 4 <Fourth conclusion: The stars do not rule Israel>

We realized that the heavenly host does not have power to rule Israel [fourth conclusion].

#### 5 <Fifth conclusion: One can deduce actual facts from astrology>

We also drew a fifth conclusion, namely, that one can deduce <actual facts> from astrology. <Abraham> said: *One member of my house [Eliezer] will be my heir* (Gen 15:3). But he did not see this, he only saw (25) that he did not have a son. As he saw this, he concluded: *one member of my house* <who is not my son> *will succeed me* (Gen 15:3).

This is like the sage who told a man: *Your son shall be the son of adultery.* The man answered: *How have you known this and through which science?* The sage replied: *I saw that all the women you will marry shall be barren, but I <also> saw that you shall have children. Thus I understood that your children shall be children of adultery.* This is something that one deduces with this science [astrology].

#### 6 <Sixth conclusion: The practice of astrology is proper, also for Israel>

From all that goes before, it is clear that it is proper to study and rely on astrology [sixth conclusion].

### XI.

#### 1 <Astrology versus the Chaldean science>

However, (30) as someone may think that the astrology about which we have spoken so far is the science of the Chaldeans,<sup>61</sup> against consulting whom our sages warned, we will investigate the distinction between the two.

58 We keep Schwarz' correction (לבטלה) of the manuscript (לבטל).

59 We keep Schwarz' correction (רב) of the manuscript (רבא).

60 *TB Šabbat* 156b.

61 We keep Schwarz' correction (דע) of the manuscript (דצ).

## 2 <Astrologers only prognosticate general features>

We say that astrology can<sup>62</sup> report any future event in a general way (*klalo*), and cannot effectively report its particularity (*praṭo*) [i.e., its specific details], its hidden characteristics (*tevi'ut 'eino*), or its real essence (*gufo*). If astrology indicates that this man shall own lands and vineyards, nevertheless it cannot anticipate that you shall buy a particular person's land, that you shall own a vineyard situated in a particular place, with specific conditions, or that you shall purchase their (35) business.

## 3 <Astrologers cannot change the future>

Astrology does not have power to add to this or to make it <happen> in a different way, for it only sees the influence of the star and the testimony that <the star> indicates in the sky. It does not see the hidden characteristics in the earth, but <only> its type (*mino*) and its generality (*klalo*). This is something clear and considered true <and> within the reach of everyone who knows this science [astrology].

## 4 <Chaldeans can foretell very specific details: Joseph-who-honors-Shabbats>

However, the Chaldean method is not like this. Instead they testify about what is specific (*ešem*) to the thing and its real essence (*gufo*), as they said: *Joseph-who-honors-Shabbats had among his neighbors a very rich gentile.* (p. 29) *The Chaldeans told him [the gentile]: 'Joseph-who-honors-Shabbats will consume all of your wealth.'*<sup>63</sup> They informed him of the name of the man who would consume his wealth; this is different from what astrologers do.<sup>64</sup> Astrologers knew that the gentile would lose his property, but they did not know that so-and-so would consume it, as the Chaldeans said: *<Joseph>-who-honors-Shabbats will consume them.*<sup>65</sup>

## 5 <Chaldeans know how to change the future: Rabbi Naḥman's case>

Likewise, what they said: *The Chaldeans told Rabbi Naḥman's mother,*<sup>66</sup> *"your son shall be a thief," thus she did not allow him to have his head uncovered.*<sup>67</sup> <This> is not according to the procedure of astrologers, for they (5) could see he

62 We keep Schwarz' correction (נותנת) of the manuscript (בוהות).

63 *TB Šabbat* 119a.

64 We keep Schwarz' addition (בן) to complete the text in the manuscript.

65 *TB Šabbat* 119a.

66 We keep Schwarz' addition (אמר) to complete the text in the manuscript.

67 *TB Šabbat* 156b.

would be a thief, but they could not know if covering his head would help him <by protecting him from the negative influence of the stars>. This procedure [i.e., covering his head] is not something one can deduce <from astrology>, as we explained above, for covering the head has nothing to do with theft in any aspect at all.<sup>68</sup>

### 6 <Astrologers cannot prognosticate specific details: Rabbi Akiva's case>

When the Chaldeans informed Rabbi Akiva of the snake that would bite his daughter,<sup>69</sup> this was not according to the procedure of astrology either, for astrologers are not able to indicate the place of death. If they see <that death will happen in> a field, they <cannot> say in so-and-so's field or in so-and-so's garden. For this reason, we say that the power of the Chaldeans and the power of astrology are not alike.<sup>70</sup>

### 7 <Astrologers cannot change the future: Ablat's case>

They also said: *Samuel and Ablat were sitting while some persons went (10) to a lake. Ablat said <to Samuel>: "That man goes but shall not return."*<sup>71</sup> About this question, astrology can indicate that a certain event will happen to him in the way and at what time. So they referred to Ablat by his own name,<sup>72</sup> because he was an astrologer, but they did not say about him "*the Chaldeans said,*" as they did about Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Naḥman's mother.

### 8 <Astrology is not the Chaldean science>

It seems to us that astrology is not the practice of Chaldeans, rather the Chaldeans went further into the details than astrology does. For this reason, we will say about the Chaldean practice, by which they inquire into the future, that <in their discipline> they do not behave (15) as astrologers do when they inquire into it [the future].

68 It looks like covering his head is something that the mother did *motu proprio*. However, according to the Talmudic text, it seems that the Chaldeans knew that covering his head was going to work, despite this being neither a standard procedure nor something that they could deduce from astrology.

69 According to *TB Šabbat* 156b, she removed her hair-pin and stuck it in the wall, so that she inadvertently killed the poisonous snake that was in the wall's crevice and saved her life.

70 We keep Schwarz' correction (אמרנו) of the manuscript (אמר).

71 *TB Šabbat* 156b. See also Giuseppe Veltri, *Magie und Halakha: Ansätze zu einem empirischen Wissenschaftsbegriff im spätantiken und frühmittelalterlichen Judentum* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997), 173–174.

72 Bar Ḥiyya calls him "Ablat the astrologer" in xv.5.

**9 <Bar Ḥiyya begins the analysis of the stellar sciences to separate licit from illicit>**

If we explain the sciences and the practices that depend on the zodiac signs and the stars, what they are, and in how many ways men are interested in astrology and busy themselves with it concerning the influence of the stars, you shall deduce whether what concerns the Chaldeans depends on these sciences [astronomy and astrology] or not.

**XII.**

**1 <Definition of astronomy: the description of the heavens>**

We will say that the first science of the stars [astronomy] investigates the form of the Earth and the heavens, and their geometrical representation, in order to provide evidence and proofs that they are circles, like the geometrical image of the sphere, that the Earth rests still in the center (20) of the heavens and the sky revolves around it and circles it from east to west; to investigate the shapes of the planets and their dwellings in their spheres, and that each sphere is within another;<sup>73</sup> to know the way of their motions from east to west, their positions to the north or to the south of the celestial equator and the ecliptic; <to know> if they are close to or far from the Earth; to calculate all their motions; to know the position of any planet in the zodiac, if it is visible to the north or to the south of the ecliptic, if it is close to or far from the Earth,<sup>74</sup> if it is direct or retrograde in its path, and everything concerning this, which I (25) need not explain further.

**2 <Israel and the other nations agree almost in everything as regards astronomy>**

This science [astronomy] is the highest of the sciences of the stars. The holy sages of Israel and all the sages of the gentile nations investigated and taught it and took pride in disclosing its secret. There is no disagreement between the sages of Israel and the sages of the gentile nations about this science, except in a few questions.

**XIII.**

**1 <Definition of astrology: how the stars influence the world and its beings>**

The second science [astrology], which depends on the <previous> science [astronomy], is the knowledge about the rule [of the stars], and the influence

73 We correct (והארופין) Schwarz' text, who follows the reading in MS Warsaw 282 (והדוכין), which is clearly a mistake of the copyist.

74 This phrase looks like an unnecessary repetition of the same phrase written two lines above.

conferred on the planets and the zodiac signs in their circumvolutions around the Earth, what influence <God> gave to each planet in each zodiac sign, how (30) this influence changes according to the change of the path of the star in its sphere—when it is in the north or in the south <with respect to the ecliptic>, when it comes closer to the Earth or goes away from it, when it is direct in its path or retrograde, and influences the Earth,<sup>75</sup> everything that is on it, any man at <the moment of> his birth, and the events that happen to him.

**2 <Astrological knowledge relies on tradition, divine inspiration, and experience>**

All this according to what the sages of this art [astrology] conveyed and tested, either what the most ancients of them transmitted by tradition or the spirit of God, or what the most recent <of them> accumulated by experience during their lives.<sup>76</sup> The sages of Israel studied this science, for we have found an allusion to it among their words. *The one born under Saturn shall be so-and-so. The one born under Jupiter shall be so-and-so,*<sup>77</sup> as (35) it is explained with their words much more than here in the *Baraitot* written in their [his] name [i.e., Samuel].<sup>78</sup>

75 Schwarz completed the word that is not completely legible in the manuscript and read **לְוַמְשַׁחֵל**. As only the first three characters are legible, it can be completed in different ways, for instance, **לְוַמְשַׁפֵּי**. The two words are from the semantic field of astrology; however, *mašpī'a* seems to fit the context better.

76 We follow Schwarz' correction (**הַאֲרוֹנוֹיִם**) of the manuscript (**הַאֲרוֹנוֹיִם**). The use of this word makes sense in a sentence where Bar Ḥiyya is putting side by side the contribution of the ancient astrologers (**קַדְמוֹנֵיהֶם**), tradition and divine inspiration, and of the most recent of them (**הַאֲרוֹנוֹיִם**), experience. Three channels are mentioned here for the transmission of astrology: tradition, divine inspiration, and experience. Experience (Heb. *nissayon* and Ar. *tajriba*), which is essential in astrological practice, must include the observations of past astrologers, given that a single lifetime does not allow observing the recurrence of the longest planetary cycles and taking note of their influences; cf. Keiji Yamamoto and Charles Burnett (ed. and transl.), *The Great Introduction to Astrology by Abū Ma'šar*, 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 1:128–133 (Arabic text and English translation of book 1, chapter 5, sections 25b–31). For the role of experience in the fields of applied sciences including astrology, see Yitzhaq Tzvi Langermann, "From My Notebooks. On Tajriba/Nissayon ("Experience"): Texts in Hebrew, Judeo-Arabic, and Arabic," *Aleph Historical Studies in Science and Judaism* 14, 2 (2014): 147–176.

77 Abbreviated quotation of *TB Šabbat* 156a.

78 *Baraita di-Shmuel* ch. 9 and *Baraita de-mazzalot* ch. 15.



### 3 <The nations of the world believe that the stellar influence is non-conditional>

There is no important disagreement between them [the sages of Israel] and the sages of the gentile nations regarding the rule of the stars, except for whether their influence is non-conditional in practice.<sup>79</sup> The wicked sages of the gentile nations of the world have no (p. 30) fear of Heaven and they say that the influence of the stars is absolute and complete, and that they [the stars] are <therefore> able to cause benefit and harm of their own free will and knowingly, and that their decree is permanent and without condition.

### 4 <Israel believes that the stellar influence is conditional: It depends on God>

By contrast, the faithful sages of Israel, whom God strengthened with the fear of Heaven in His creation and sanctified with His Torah, received the science <of the stars> from the holy spirit and from the teaching of the prophets. <These sages> say that the influence of the stars and the zodiac signs is not complete and that they are not allowed either to cause benefit or harm knowingly and of their own free will. Rather, everything depends on <God's> word and commandment, and every (5) time God, blessed be He, wishes, He removes the rule <of the stars> and modifies their decree.

This is the difference between the sages of Israel and the sages of the <gentile> nations concerning this art.

## XIV.

### 1 <According to the rabbis, Israel is obliged to calculate *tequfot* and *mazzalot*, i.e., to practice astronomy and astrology>

Our sages of blessed memory praised these two sciences [astronomy and astrology], investigated them, and busied themselves with them, for they were required to <engage in> both of them. *Anyone who knows how to calculate tequfot and mazzalot*<sup>80</sup> should calculate them in order to confirm what was said: *This is your wisdom and your knowledge before the nations* (Deut 4:6).<sup>81</sup>

79 We follow Schwarz' correction (בהכרעת)—meaning here “<forced/necessary/unavoidable> rule”—of the manuscript (בהרבאת).

80 *TB Šabbat* 75a. This dictum is attributed to Bar Qappara (Palestine, second-third centuries), and Rabbi Joḥanan refers it in this *sugya* of the Babylonian Talmud.

81 See Bar Qappara (*TB Šabbat* 75a): “Everyone who knows how to calculate the *tequfot* and *mazzalot* and does not calculate (them)—Scripture says about him (Isa 5:12): *And they*

**2 <To calculate *teqfot* and *mazzalot* does not mean to calculate the four seasons>**

You cannot assert that their saying *to calculate teqfot and mazzalot*<sup>82</sup> (10) refers to the calculation of the four seasons of the year that the Jewish calendar conveys by tradition, for this is an easy task and does not entail any great calculation, nor any additional knowledge; all the nations of the world are able to calculate them [the seasons].

**3 <To calculate *teqfot* and *mazzalot* does not mean calendrical calculation>**

If you say that the calculation of *teqfot* and *mazzalot* is to calculate the positions in the zodiac signs of any of the seven planets, *teqfot* referring to the calculation of the sun <and> *mazzalot* referring to the calculation of the <remaining> planets, we say: If the calculation of *teqfot* by the sages of Israel, by which the festivals and the years are determined,<sup>83</sup> is calculation of the stars, what wisdom is there in this calculation if one does not care for the advantage <that this calculation of the stars brings> to the Earth?

**4 <To calculate *teqfot* and *mazzalot* means astronomy (*teqfot*) and astrology (*mazzalot*)>**

However, he [Bar Qappara] says: As the sun revolves in its sphere, (15) so does each star revolve in its own sphere. As the sun has four periods in its cycle, which are the four annual seasons, when it changes its motion and its position with respect to the Earth, likewise, every planet has four points in its cycle where it changes the path of its position and motion. These four points <together> are for the planet like the <total number of the> days of the revolution of its orb.

<According to this explanation>, it was enough for them [the sages of Israel] to say only *to calculate teqfot*, but as they said *teqfot and mazzalot*, we know

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*do not look at the work of the Lord and the doing of his hands they did not see*"; a similar *dictum* circulated for Rav: "Who knows how to calculate the *teqfot* and *mazzalot* and does not calculate <them>—one does not talk to him"; and the one quoted by Bar Ḥiyya attributed to R. Johanan. Leicht explains that the different forms of this *dictum* are evidence of "the attempts made at that time to fix the length of the tropical solar year and, concomitantly, to make a precise calculation of the length of the four seasons defined by the equinoxes"; see Leicht, "The Planets, the Jews and the Beginnings of *Jewish Astrology*," 275–276.

82 *TB Šabbat* 75a.

83 We do not follow Schwarz' correction (ברהם) of the manuscript (שברהם).

that *tequfot* refers to the calculation of the positions of the stars<sup>84</sup> and *mazzalot* refers to the calculation of their decrees, which are visible on the Earth.

Thus we call *mazzalot* (fortunes) the testimonies (20) and decrees of the stars. We name *mazzal tov* (good luck/good fortune) the good <testimony or decree> among them, while we name the <testimony or decree> which is not good *mazzal ra'* (bad luck/bad fortune). There is proof of this in what is written: *For this is your wisdom and your knowledge before the gentile nations* (Deut 4:6).<sup>85</sup>

The calculation of the positions of the stars is not a science <specific> to Israel with respect to the gentile nations,<sup>86</sup> but most nations are better at this calculation than Israel. The wisdom and knowledge of Israel in the eyes of the <gentile> nations is precisely that their righteousness [Israel's people's] nullifies the stellar decree acting upon them [Israel's people]. However, the stellar decree acting upon the gentiles remains and is not nullified, unless God, blessed be He, diverts the influence of the star and weakens it. Nevertheless, the influence (25) of the star is not weakened for Israel, for the star does not rule Israel.

#### XV.

##### 1 <The righteousness of Israel nullifies any unfavorable stellar decree: This is the distinctive knowledge of Israel as regards astrology>

If two similar horoscopes, one with <the positions of> the stars for a gentile and the other for <a child of> Israel, falls into the hands of one of the sages of the gentile nations, eventually he will find that <the child of> Israel will be saved from the unfavorable decrees <indicated> in his horoscope, while the evil gentile will fall under all of them. Because of this, the sages of the <gentile> nations are very amazed and terrified, and they realize the great dignity of Israel.

##### 2 <Stellar influence versus stellar decree: Israel versus the gentile nations>

There is another great difference between Israel and the gentile nations: If a favorable decree is coming for both Israel and the gentile nations, and God, blessed be He, wishes to nullify it in the case of the gentiles, He removes the influence of the star (30) and nullifies it [the influence]. When He removes the

84 The expression *mahalaḳot ha-koḳavim* in *ḥešbon mahalaḳot ha-koḳavim* is the same expression that Bar Ḥiyya has used before exclusively to denote astrology.

85 Cf. *TB Šabbat* 75a.

86 We keep Schwarz' deletion (הכוכבים) in the text of the manuscript, which fits the meaning intended in the text.

influence of the star, the decree acting upon both Israel and upon the <gentile> nations is nullified at once, for the star has no power left to cause harm or benefit.

But if God, blessed be He, wishes to nullify <an unfavorable stellar decree> acting upon Israel, He does not weaken the influence of the star, for its decree does not rule Israel.<sup>87</sup> As its influence is not weakened, its decree acting upon the gentiles remains. About this, Scripture says: *For what great nation has a god as close to them as Adonai, our Lord, whenever we call upon Him?* (Deut 4:7). He says *your wisdom shall be before the nations* (Deut 4:6), who shall see the <unfavorable> stellar decrees acting upon you nullified only by calling upon God,<sup>88</sup> while <the unfavorable stellar decree> acting upon them [the gentile nations] shall not be nullified.

### 3 <The righteousness of Israel nullifies any unfavorable stellar decree: Hezekiah's case>

(35) You shall be given evidence of the wisdom of Israel in this. Everybody studying the stars saw Hezekiah king of Judea and <knew> that his reign would not last more than fourteen years. However, his righteousness and prayer doubled the days of his rule <beyond what had been established> by the stellar decrees;<sup>89</sup> those who study horoscopes know <what kind of> honor this <is>.

### 4 <The righteousness of Israel nullifies any unfavorable stellar decree: Ahaziah's case>

Likewise, it was foretold to Ahaziah, son of Ahab, king of Judea, that he would recover from his illnesses. The priests of Baalzebub, the god of Ekron, also predicted this, for he asked to consult other gods, and he was given a judgment <through the prophet>: *He shall not leave the bed on which he will lie because he is going to die* (2 Kings 1:2, 1:4, 1:6).

You (p. 31) cannot say that this decree was established for him before consulting Baalzebub. If so, what power did the prophet have to let us know that he was going to die? Rather his consultation caused his <own> death. He was told: *As you sent messengers to ask Baalzebub, the god of Ekron <...> for this reason <on>*

87 As Bar Ḥiyya has said previously that Jews called the good influence *mazzal tov* and the bad one *mazzal ra'*, we keep his translation; *mazzal* denotes here "stellar decree" or "stellar influence."

88 We keep Schwarz' correction (אִירָא) of the manuscript (אִירָא).

89 See 2 Kings 20:6 and Isa 38:5.

*the very bed you are lying, you shall die* (2 Kings 1:16). If he had not sent <to ask>, the decree would not have been given to him.

**5 <The righteousness of Israel nullifies any unfavorable stellar decree: Rabbi Akiva's and Ablat's cases>**

Thus, Rabbi Akiva, whom the Chaldeans frightened [because his daughter was going to die], when the decree was nullified,<sup>90</sup> did not say that the words of the Chaldeans (5) were false, but that *righteousness releases from death* (Prov 10:2).<sup>91</sup> Likewise, Samuel, when the words of Ablat, the astrologer, did not come true, did not say that he was a liar, but he said *righteousness releases from death* (Prov 10:2).<sup>92</sup>

**XVI.**

**1 <Everybody with the knowledge of it, Israel included, is required to practice astrology>**

For this reason, everybody who knows how to calculate *tequfot* and *mazzalot* is required to calculate them. If he sees a good testimony, he will not trust it, but he will be mindful and will take care lest sin causes <the good testimony to be nullified>. If he sees an unfavorable testimony, he will do repentance and pray to God; perhaps he may be found righteous before Him and He will nullify the decree acting upon him.

**2 <Why the obligation to practice astrology?>**

You see that one knowing this occupation is required to rely on it in order to strengthen (10) his faith<sup>93</sup> and fear of Heaven, to constantly increase his prayer and righteousness.

**3 <Any astrological forecast needs astronomy, so they both are compulsory sciences for Israel>**

Thus, what our sages of blessed memory said—*one who knows how to calculate tequfot* [the cycles of the stars] *and mazzalot*<sup>94</sup> [their decrees]—refers to the calculation of the positions of the stars [astronomy] and the explanation of their unfavorable decrees [astrology]. It was necessary to mention the

90 We follow Schwarz' addition (הגזרה) to the text in the manuscript.

91 *TB Šabbat* 156b.

92 *TB Šabbat* 156b.

93 Schwarz modifies the reading of the manuscript and suggests אמונתו instead of אומונתו; we follow his correction.

94 *TB Šabbat* 75a.

*tequfot* and the *mazzalot* [the cycles and the decrees], because the value of the stars and their testimonies is known only through their positions. Among the sciences of the stars, these [astronomy and astrology] are the two sciences devoted to fear of Heaven that Israel is required to learn and to busy herself with.

XVII.

1 <The remaining sciences related to the stars are banned for Israel: They involved idolatry (the belief that stars act knowingly and of their own free will)>

There are other sciences depending on the stars with which most gentile nations busy themselves. However, (15) no child of Israel is allowed to engage in them, for they have to do with idolatry and scorn the fear of Heaven. For all the nations that thought the stars act and cause harm knowingly and of their own free will increased <their> evil and haughtiness to the point that it seemed to them that their worship and offering<s> were effective with them [the stars].

2 <The first non-licit stellar science: The founders of observances>

Many <people> thought that an impure spirit descended upon them from the stars, to listen to them, to advise them, and to show them how to worship them. Then these evils misled the people of their generation; they made images and idols to worship them [the stars], they taught them [the people] the way of their worship [the stars'] and established the rules of the wicked religion (20) that they practiced with their rites, which established for them the way of their worship.

These false prophets or Baal prophets are called in Arabic *wadī'ī al-waṣāyā* (واضعي الوصايا, "the makers of the commandments/regulations")<sup>95</sup> in Hebrew "the founders of observances" (*meyassedei ha-nimusim*). Their disciples, who follow their depraved precepts, are called *al-atbā'* (الأتباع, "the followers"), in Hebrew "those who go after the evil" (*ha-nimšakim aharei ha-reša'*). Each gentile nation that worships idols <has> a different <founder> who conveys<sup>96</sup> to them this impious custom, and a large number of people who follow him [the founder] are called a religious sect.

95 Or *wadī'ī al-nawāmīs* ("the founders of religions") according to Sela's correction of the original text; see Shlomo Sela, "Abraham Bar Hiyya's Astrological Work and Thought," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 12 (2006): 128–158, at 150. We do follow Schwartz's modification (אוצאי) in the reading of the manuscript (אומאי).

96 It is necessary to read מוסר rather than מסור, which is the reading in MS Warsaw 282 and in Schwarz' text.

### 3 <The second non-licit stellar science: Those who make the powers of the stars flow>

In addition to these, there is another sect that is called in Arabic *mustanzil bi 'l-quwah* (مُسْتَنْزِل بِالْقُوَّةِ), “he who makes the power descend”),<sup>97</sup> in Hebrew (25) “those who make the powers <of the stars> flow” (*mazzilei ha-koḥot*). These sinners waited until they decided, in their souls, when they wanted the power <of a certain planet> to flow in its dwelling [the planet’s] by means of one of the beautiful objects (*ha-manot ha-yafot*) that they devised as destined for the planet that was <visible> in the sky. They burned incense for that planet, or offered it those things proper to offer at that moment according to their thought. By <doing> this, they made the power of the planet descend to Earth, so that it carried out their will and answered their questions.

These two evil sects really practice idolatry and kneel before another god. They (30) and all those acting like them shall be cursed.

### 4 <The third non-licit stellar science: The makers of talismans>

We find a third sect, *ābā' al-ṭilasmāt* (آبَاءِ الطَّلَسْمَاتِ, “the masters of talismans”),<sup>98</sup> in Hebrew “the makers of talismans” (*ba'ālei ha-temunot*, lit. “the masters of images”). They studied the positions of the planets, and investigated the order of their motion<s>, in which of the constellation<s> in the visible sky they revolved, the one that seemed to those who studied the form of this world. As soon as they saw which constellation, which part of the zodiac, which side of the sphere, northern or southern, this <specific> planet revolved in, they made a form like it [the constellation] from the metal appropriate to it [the constellation]. If the planet is one of the benefics, it (35) strengthens the power of this constellation. But if it is one of the malefic planets, it nullifies it [that power]. These people knew when the power of the species existing in this world grows weak or strong. Many talismans have remained until now that are the work of these wicked persons.

97 We follow Schwarz’ modification (מוסתנזל) in the reading of the manuscript (MS Warsaw 282 gives מוסתנגל).

98 This expression might intend the most common expression أَصْحَابِ الطَّلَسْمَاتِ (*aṣḥāb al-ṭilasmāt*); see Sela, “Abraham Bar Hiyya’s Astrological Work and Thought,” 151. We follow Schwarz’ modification (אבא) of the manuscript (האבא).

## 5 <The fourth non-licit stellar science: The masters of sympathetic relationships>

Next, there is a fourth sect that, through its practices, knew, from the positions of the planets, which moment<s> and which day<s> were auspicious for reaping all sort of herbs, harvesting any seed, collecting honey, picking (p. 32) olive trees, harvesting vineyards and <all> sorts of fruits, and chopping and gathering wood. They knew what is harvested every day, what its nature is, and for what purpose it is efficacious. Everything was kept secret. When it was needed, they gathered all the secret species, what was proper to gather at that moment to carry out their work, to increase the strength of a thing, and to weaken the power of another. These activities,<sup>99</sup> both when they harvested in the field and when they gathered <the species> to do <their work>, (5) <were done> with a spell, for they cast spells using sacrilegious and demonic names. This sect is called in Arabic *aṣḥāb al-ḥiyāl* (أصحاب الحيل, “the masters of subterfuges”), in the holy language “the masters of <sympathetic> relationships” (*ba‘alei ha-ṣedadin*); they are also called in Arabic *aṣḥāb al-aṣḥār* (أصحاب الأصهار, “the masters of spells”).

### XVIII.

#### 1 <These four Arabic sciences are mentioned in Hebrew and Aramaic in Daniel 2:2 and 4:4>

The science and art of all these sects depended on the positions of the stars but do not accord with the fear of Heaven.<sup>100</sup> It seems to me that these four sects are all mentioned in the *Book of Daniel*, in the dream of Nebuchadnezzar the impious, as it is written: *The king commanded to bring the ḥartummim, the ‘aššafim, the mekašfim, and the kasdim to explain to him (10) his dreams* (Dan 2:2). These <sects mentioned in Daniel are identical to> the four whose practices we have explained. Let the *ḥartummim* be those who are called *the <masters> of <sympathetic> relationships*; the *‘aššafim* those *who make powers flow*; the *mekašfim*, *the makers of talismans*; and the *kasdim*, *those who go after <evil>*.

#### 2 <The meaning of gazrayya’>

We find that these four are mentioned in Aramaic in the *Book of Daniel*, as it is written: *Then came in the ḥartumayya’, ‘ašfayya’, kasdaia’, and gazrayya’* (Dan 4:4). It is also written: *Your father, the king, made <him> master of ḥartummin, ‘ašfin, kasda’in, and gazrin* (Dan 5:11). As is known, the *ḥartummin*, *‘ašfin*, and

99 We follow Schwarz’ correction (ולמעשיהם) of the manuscript (ולמעשיהם).

100 We follow Schwarz’ correction (ואומנתם) of the manuscript (ואומנתם).



*kasdim* that are mentioned the first time in the holy language [in Dan 2:2] are the *ḥartumayya*, *ʾašfayya*, and *kasdaia* mentioned the second time (15) in Aramaic [in Dan 4:4 and 5:11], but the *meḳašfim* of the holy language can <hardly> be the *gazrayya* <mentioned> in Aramaic, for their occupation [*meḳašfim*'s] does not entail speaking about future events, <while> the occupation of the four mentioned in Aramaic does. Alternatively, the *gazrayya* are those who study the stars [lit. zodiac signs]; they are called *gazrayya*, because, in their opinion as regards any testimony of the stars, their decree remains and is without condition. They [the *gazrayya*] are allowed to make astrological judgments that remain; for this reason they are called *gazrayya*.<sup>101</sup>

### 3 <The meaning of *meḳašfim*>

I like this view [that *meḳašfim* and *gazrayya* are not the same group], for <the *Book of Daniel*> says in the first dream of Nebuchadnezzar: *For as much as no king, lord, or ruler (20) has ever asked such things of a ḥartum, ʾašaf, or kasdaia* (Dan 2:10). He mentioned three of the four whom Nebuchadnezzar calls, and omitted the *meḳašfim*, for their way of informing is not so [they do not speak about the future, while the other three do].

Their art [*meḳašfim*'s] consists in indicating when the strength of everything on the Earth grows strong or weak. For this reason, Daniel did not mention them [*meḳašfim*] when he spoke to Nebuchadnezzar:<sup>102</sup> *The mystery that the king has asked no ḥakimin, ʾašfin, ḥartummin, or gazrin can explain it to him* (Dan 2:27).<sup>103</sup> <Daniel> did not mention the *meḳašfim*, for their practice lies neither in disclosing secrets, nor in speaking about the future. But he mentioned the *gazrin*, who study (25) the positions of the planets in the zodiac signs, for their occupation lies in speaking about the future, which is obscure to the rest of men.

The *kasdim* did not mention them [the *meḳašfim*] before Nebuchadnezzar, they mentioned the *ḥartum*, *ʾašaf*, and the *kasdai* [in Dan 2:10], for they were not among those gathered before the king at that moment.<sup>104</sup> Thus Daniel omitted the *meḳašfim* [in Dan 2:27]<sup>105</sup> and did not mention them among the

101 The Hebrew root *g-z-r* means “to cut, to decree.”

102 We are following Schwarz' correction (לנבוכדנצר) of the manuscript (נבוכדנצר).

103 We follow Schwarz' correction (חרטמין and חכימין) of the manuscript (חרטומים and כשדאין, respectively).

104 We keep Schwarz' addition (היין) to the text of the manuscript.

105 We have corrected Schwarz' edition and the text of Ms Warsaw 282; they both have הכשדים here, but the word intended is המכשפים, according to the explanation.

*ḥaḳamim*, *ʿašfin*, *ḥartummim*, and *gazrin*, for they [*meḳašfim*] were disciples of the *ʿaššafim* and followed them.<sup>106</sup> They soiled themselves with idolatry more than the *ʿaššafim*; for this reason he [Daniel] took care not to mention them.

In another passage, the *ḥartummim* are omitted according to what is written:<sup>107</sup> *The king asked aloud (30) to bring the ʿašfin, kasdaia, and gazrayya* (Dan 5:7). <Daniel> did not mention among them the *ḥartummim*, for it is not appropriate to ask them about a matter that is as deep in wisdom and knowledge as *written on the lime of the wall of the palace* (Dan 5:5).<sup>108</sup>

#### 4 <*Ḥaḳamim* and *meḳašfim* are the same>

We have seen that Scripture omits the three [*ʿašfin*, *ḥartummim*, and *gazrin*] in the passage in which they were not necessary, and mention only the *meḳašfim*, as it is written: *Pharaoh called the ḥaḳamim and the meḳašfim* (Exod 7:11). He called the *ḥaḳamim*, who were <like> the *meḳašfim*. As soon as he [Pharaoh] saw the rod become a snake, he immediately called the *meḳašfim*, who knew the moments at which the strengths of everything existing on the Earth are increased, (35) in order to see at that moment through the positions of the planets what power the form of the snake, the trees, or the rods had, to do the same thing [i.e., to transform something into something else]. The *meḳašfim* were stupid and said that the snake only had the power to bite and that it was powerless at that moment.<sup>109</sup>

#### 5 <*Ḥartummim* and *meḳašfim* acted together>

The science of the *kišuf* that depends on the positions of the planets does not have power in relation to this. However, the *ḥartummim*, whose occupation is something kept hidden with them since past times, rushed to act. As the *meḳašfim* did not admonish them [the *ḥartummim*], (p. 33) they [the *meḳašfim*] were considered as being part of the former [the *ḥartummim*], as it is written: *The ḥartummim from Egypt also acted with their spells* (Exod 7:11).<sup>110</sup> He could say *the ḥartummim from Egypt acted*, but as he said *they also*, we learn that Scripture

106 Dan 2:27 does not mention either *meḳašfim* or *kasdim*, but does mention *gazrin*, and Dan 2:2 mentions all of them except for the *gazrin*.

107 We keep Schwarz' correction (נחסרו) of the manuscript (נחסר).

108 Cf. M. Gaster, *Chronicles of Jerahmeel* (London: Oriental Translation Fund, 1899), 208 (§67).

109 We keep Schwarz' addition (אין לו) to the text of the manuscript.

110 We have corrected Schwarz' reading; instead of בלטיהם we read בלטיהם.

includes among them the *meḳašfim*, for they [the *meḳašfim*] did not admonish them [the *ḥartummim*].

#### XIX.

##### 1 <God establishes His divine decrees when the stars do not indicate them>

From here, we see that of all the plagues that God, blessed be He, sent upon the Egyptians in Egypt, none of them could be according to the positions of the planets. (5) This was to make the <gentile> nations of the world know the deficiency of their science with respect to God's power.

##### 2 <Prophets prophesy what the stars do not indicate>

Likewise, you <should> say that any decree that God, blessed be He, determines concerning the impious <gentile> nations of the world, He establishes it only if the testimony<sup>111</sup> of the stars does not indicate this decree. If prophecy considered the testimony of the stars, what would it be that the prophet was announcing to us?

##### 3 <Astrologers can forecast God's decree but stellar decrees vary with respect to God's decrees>

The truth is that prophecy is not like the testimony of the zodiac signs and the planets, so that all the sages of the <gentile> nations look wrong, foolish, and frightened before God's decrees, as soon as they see that the decrees <of the stars> and their interpretations are not fulfilled. So it (10) says: *Where are your sages? Let them tell you now and let them know what the Lord of the heavenly hosts has planned concerning Egypt* (Isa 19:12), to teach you that the experts could see through astrology the decree that <God> has determined to bring upon Egypt.<sup>112</sup> However, their science draws decrees that vary with respect to God's decree, as it is written: *The wisest counselors of Pharaoh are a senseless counsel* (Isa 19:11).

##### 4 <Only astrologers can understand the special status of Israel vis-à-vis the stellar influence>

Scripture does not intend to show the mendacity of the Egyptian sages, but to report His power, which nullifies the stellar influences and removes their rule

111 We keep Schwarz' addition (עדת) to the text of the manuscript.

112 Contrary to what he said before, that God establishes His decree only if the testimony of the stars does not indicate it, Bar Ḥiyya says now that the divine decree is visible in the stars so that the nations of the world can read it and see that this decree can change. Astrological judgments vary with respect to God's decree; they forecast what God has established before.

[the stars'], so that the sages become idiots in their own sight, as it is written: *He turns wise men backward and makes their knowledge foolish* (Isa 44:25). No (15) one can understand this amazing power, unless he is an expert in astrology. The moment he sees the stellar decree nullified because of the righteousness of the righteous and the sin of the sinners, <his> fear of Heaven and <his> faith increase.

**5 <Astrology increases the fear of Heaven and knowledge of God and makes visible God's miracles and powers>**

You see from this that this science [astrology] increases the fear of Heaven and the knowledge of God, and makes visible God's miracles and His power.

**6 <The remaining four sciences of the stars are forbidden to Jews>**

However, the remaining four sciences of the stars that we have mentioned <the founders of observances, those who make powers flow, the makers of talismans, and the masters of sympathetic relationships> do not act in this way. Thus it is forbidden to busy oneself with them, for they aim at idolatry and scorn fear of Heaven.

**XX.**

**1 <Forbidden practices mentioned in Scripture>**

(20) There are other, similar, practices and, as it is not appropriate to call them science, they are called art and artifice. Scripture calls them, or most of them, divination (*qesamim*), as it is written: *“For the king of Babylon stood at the parting of the way, at the head of the two ways, to use divination; he qilqal ba-ḥiṣṣim, consulted the terafim, and looked at the liver”* (Ezek 21:26). These three arts practiced by means of *ḥiṣṣim*, *terafim*, and a liver are called divination (*qesem*), which is a single category that encompasses them all.

**2 <Qesem by means of ḥiṣṣim>**

The *ḥiṣṣim* mentioned there can be <arrows> like a sharp arrow (Prov 25:18), go find the arrows (1Sam 20:21), which are arrows for the bow, and the king of Babylon performed divination (*meqassem*) (25) through them. *Ḥiṣṣim* could also mean small stones as in *he has broken my teeth with gravel* (Lam 3:15), and *afterwards his mouth shall be filled with gravel* (Prov 20:17); the divination would be <therefore> through stones. Likewise, we have found that the Arabs who were in the lands of Kedar,<sup>113</sup> a people whose practice was to cast stones on the

113 We follow Schwarz' correction (הערביים) of the manuscript (התרפים).

earth,<sup>114</sup> knew through this means what way to take and what to do. *Qilqal ba-ḥiṣṣim* (“he cast stones”) may refer to this practice.

### 3 <Qesem by means of *terafim*>

The *terafim* were forms and images, such as glass mirrors of different shapes, into which they looked when they consulted to do something, in order to know <through the images seen in them> whether it would be favorable or unfavorable; (30) they relied on what they saw in the surface. In these lands [in the Iberian Peninsula], you find something similar to the *terafim*. For instance, those who look at a glass full of water placed against something red. They look at it and do not remove their eyes from it until they see within the water in the glass the form of the thing about which they inquire.

It is the same with the one who consults nails, a shoulder-blade, and an egg painted with a certain translucent and shiny substance, like resin or olive oil. All of them are consultation of the *terafim*, for the *terafim* means the essence (*toref*) of the thing, which is its contents and its image. In this way its <Aramaic> translation [of the Hebrew *terafim*] is (35) *šalmanaia*’ [in *Onkelos Gen 31:19*], and our Rabbi Saadia <ben Josef Gaon> explained it as “forms” and “images.”

### 4 <Any form of *qesem* mentioned in Scripture is forbidden for Jews>

(p. 34) It is good that man refrains from any of the practices that the king of Babylon consulted, for they are called divination (*qesem*) and the Torah forbids <some forms of> divination (*qesamim*), as it is written: *There shall not be found among you anyone who makes his son or his daughter pass through fire, one who uses divination (qosem qesamim), <like> a me’onen, a menaḥeš, a mekašef, or a ḥover ḥever, a šo’el ’ov or yidde’oni, or a doreš ’el ha-metim* (Deut 18:10–11). You say that all these practices are called divination (*qesamim*), and what is said, *one who uses divination (qosem qesamim)*, is a general category and its particular types are *me’onen*, (5) *menaḥeš*, *mekašef*, and the rest. You must say that *when you have the particular type (prat), the general category (klal), and the particular type, you only judge the particular type.*<sup>115</sup>

Then you <should> understand that the Torah only forbids the forms of divination (*qesamim*) mentioned in this <specific> passage of Scripture, and this

114 We follow Schwarz’ correction (אומנתם) of the manuscript (אומנתם).

115 Sixth exegetical rule (*kelal u-perat u-kelal*, i.e. “particular, general, and particular”) of the *Baraita de-Rabbi Išma’el*. See, for instance, *TB Nazir 35b*.

is the lenient approach while the other is the stringent.<sup>116</sup> The proof for you that *qesamim* is a general category and not a specific practice is that it says *šō'el 'ov* or *yidde'oni* (Deut 18:11), and it calls consultation (*še'ilah*) the act of *šō'el 'ov*. However in another place it says *now divine (qasemi) for me through a 'ov (be-'ov)* (1Sam 28:8) and does not say *consult (ša'ali)*, to teach that any of the forbidden practices in this passage are considered divination (*qesem*) <whatever the term that is used>.

(10) Another proof is that you find explained in the words of our sages of blessed memory *me'onen*, *menaheš*, and all those mentioned in these texts, the work of every one of them, and what is specific about their practice, but they [the sages] did not explain among them *one who divines (qosem qesamim)*, for it comprises all of them. Our sages of blessed memory said: *There shall not be found among you anyone who makes his son or his daughter pass through fire. There is mention of his son or his daughter; why should his grandson or his granddaughter be included?*<sup>117</sup> <Because> it is said: *he gave of his seed to Molech* (Lev 20:4).

##### 5 <The meaning of *me'onen* (a form of *qesem*)>

They said as regards *me'onen*: *Rabbi Akiva says that he [a me'onen] is one who calculates moments and hours and says: "Today is a favorable day to travel," "tomorrow shall be favorable to purchase," "the eve of the seventh year is favorable for wheat," or "pull up beans (15) before they shall be useless."*<sup>118</sup>

These who calculate moments and hours rely on their own experiences, which they carry out on the <week>days <that are appropriate for these experiences> according to their assumption. They forecast neither through astrology nor through the positions of the planets, for astrology does not give any stringent

116 According to *TB Megillah 22a*. Only specific forms mentioned in Scripture are forbidden (lenient halakhic opinion or *maqil*), but not the whole category that contains them (stringent halakhic opinion or *maḥmir*). These two halakhic technical terms (*maqil* and *maḥmir*) are used several times throughout the *Letter*; see, for instance, XXII.1.

117 *TB Sanhedrin 64b*.

118 *TB Sanhedrin 65b*. Cf. *Tosefta, Šabbat 7, 12*: "Who is an enchanter (*me'onen*)? One who says: *My staff has fallen from my hand. My bread has fallen from my mouth. Mr. So-and-So has called me from behind me. A raven has called to me. A dog has barked at me. A snake has passed at my right and a fox at my left. A deer has crossed the road before me. Do not begin with me, for it is dawn, it is new moon, it is the end of Sabbath,*" quoted in Giuseppe Veltri, "The 'Other' Physicians: The Amorites of the Rabbis and the Magi of Pliny," *Korot: The Israel Journal of the History of Medicine and Science* 13 (1998–1999): 37–54, at 48.

interpretation to any specific day of the week.<sup>119</sup> If a particular day of a particular week is appropriate to some business, it can also be<sup>120</sup> appropriate to the <same> business in another week,<sup>121</sup> but it can <also> be risky. In this way, *the eve of the seventh year* <may> not be *favorable for wheat*, because <moments or hours> do not follow a single rule for all business.

The *me'onen*, according to Rabbi Akiva's words, establishes<sup>122</sup> a single rule for days and years. (20) We say<sup>123</sup> that the *me'onen* does not follow in his art the way of astrology and the way of the science in the world, neither according to Rabbi Akiva's words, who says <that *me'onen* is> *one who calculates moments and hours*, nor according to the sages' words who say <that *me'onen* is> *one who holds sight* (*o'hazei einayim*, "one who tricks the eye"), nor according to Rabbi Ishmael's words,<sup>124</sup> who said <that *me'onen* is> *one who applies seven kinds of male* <semen> *on the eye* [to perform witchcraft].<sup>125</sup>

## 6 <The meaning of *menaḥeš* (a form of *gesem*)>

They said: *Menaḥeš* is *one who says* "a piece of bread has fallen from his mouth," "his rod has fallen from his hand,"<sup>126</sup> "a gazelle has crossed his way," "a snake <has come> from his right," or "a fox from his left."<sup>127</sup> And also: *Our sages taught* "you shall not take auguries (*tenaḥašū*) as those who take them (*hamenaḥašim*) through a rat or through birds."<sup>128</sup> These are those who speak about (25) the <future> events in the world through the signs to be found in stars, animals, and birds.<sup>129</sup>

119 It is highly significant that Bar Ḥiyya uses the halakhic technical term *ḥumra* in the semantic field of astrology and astrological decrees. *Ḥumra* (stringency) and *qulla* (leniency) are two opposite sensibilities in halakhah and custom as regards the degree of latitude with which halakhic indications must be dealt. As we have already seen in the *Letter* (IV.10), *ḥumra* implies a stringent interpretation of the halakhah, whereas *qulla* inclines toward understanding halakhah in a more permissive way.

120 We are following Schwarz' correction (יכול יהיה) of the reading in the manuscript (או אינו).

121 We follow Schwarz' correction (לדבר) of the manuscript (לדברים).

122 According to Schwarz' correction (מנהיג) of the manuscript (נהיג).

123 We are following Schwarz' correction (גאמר) of the manuscript (אמר).

124 In *TB Sanhedrin* 65b, it is Rabbi Simeon who refers to this. Bar Ḥiyya is quoting other versions extant in manuscript, in which Rabbi Ishmael is the one speaking.

125 All these quotations come from the *TB Sanhedrin* 65b, already mentioned in the text.

126 We keep Schwarz' addition (גפלה מפיו מקלי) to the text of the manuscript.

127 *TB Sanhedrin* 65b.

128 *TB Sanhedrin* 66a.

129 In this case, Bar Ḥiyya is again following a different reading of the Talmudic text (*TB Sanhedrin* 66a), one that reads *stars* instead of *fishes* (cf. *Sifra*, *Kedošim* 6), a textual variant. All this is divination in "the ways of the Amorites." See Yuval Harari, *Jewish Magic before*

This art [divination through the signs from stars, animals, and birds] is common among mariners and farmers. For instance, those who say if the moon of the first or the second night <of the month> is surrounded by a blackish halo, it is a sign that rains will come that month, and they will be in proportion to<sup>130</sup> the blackness of the halo. If the sun rises and the air around it is red, the winds will get rough on the side where the red color is visible. Likewise, they say the same about each of the seven planets and (30) the most brilliant among the fixed stars. For instance, those who say that the voice of a raven by night or the voice of a cock at the beginning of the night indicates rain, and the rat whose voice is heard and moves at the same time indicates cold weather.<sup>131</sup> These signs are like <the signs> of one who takes auguries (*menaḥeš*) from birds or stars.

7 <A *mekašef*, *kešafim*, and *ḥartummim* perform magic acts>

They said a *mekašef* is one who performs a <magic> act (*ma'aseh*),<sup>132</sup> but one who holds the sight (*ha-ḥeš 'et ha-'einayim*) does not <perform an act>.<sup>133</sup>

The occupation of the *kešafim* above mentioned is knowing when the moments that have power are happening in the world <so that they can use them for their purposes>.

The occupation of the *ḥartummim*, who gather herbs and trees at certain specific moments, is also a <magic> act, but <the practice of> those who hold the sight is not <any kind of act>.

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*the Rise of Kabbalah* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2017), 424 n. 201. “The ways of the Amorites” are interpreted as “pagan laws” in the early halakhic *Midrash*, the *Sifra* and in the *Babylonian Talmud*; see Giuseppe Veltri, “The Rabbis and Pliny the Elder: Jewish and Greco-Roman Attitudes toward Magic and Empirical Knowledge,” *Poetics Today* 19 (1998): 63–89 (at 67–68).

130 We keep Schwarz' reading (ומענין) rather than the spelling (ומענן) in MS Warsaw 282. Although we are dealing with rains, the amount of the rain is here not related to any “cloud” (ומענן) but is rather “related to” (ומענין) the blackness of the halo of the moon, which is the omen that Bar Ḥiyya is explaining.

131 For this kind of *prognostica* in the Hebrew tradition, see MS Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana ebr. 290, fols. 3b and 4b (Spain, fourteenth century), which contains prognostications related to the raven; see Reimund Leicht, *Astrologumena Judaica. Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der astrologischen Literatur der Juden* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 154–155.

132 *TB Sanhedrin* 67a.

133 *TB Sanhedrin* 65b. According to the Mishnah, the sorcerer is liable to be punished by death but someone who just performs tricks is not, see *TB Sanhedrin* 65a.



**8 <Hover *ḥever*, *šō'el 'ov*, *šō'el yidde'oni*, and *doreš 'el ha-metim* are forms of *qesem*>**

(35) They said *ḥover ḥever*: *this applies as much to one who charms great beings as to one who charms small beings, even snakes and scorpions.*<sup>134</sup> In addition they said: *one who consults a 'ov is one who speaks through vertebrae and through the joints of his hands; one who consults a yidde'oni is one who places a certain bone within his mouth and speaks through it.*<sup>135</sup> (p. 35) They said *doreš 'el ha-metim* is *one who deprives himself from food in order to be possessed by an impure spirit (ruaḥ tume'ah).*<sup>136</sup>

**XXI.**

**1 <It is licit to learn any kind of *qesamim* but not to practice those mentioned in Scripture>**

Our sages of blessed memory reported on all the diviners (*qosemim*).<sup>137</sup> They explained the proceedings of their art and noted that it is forbidden to perform any of them [mentioned in Scripture], as was said: *You shall not learn to perform <as the gentile nations perform> (Deut 18:9), but you shall learn in order to understand and become learned.*<sup>138</sup> From this, they deduce that it is forbidden to consult them, for it is written: *For who performs these things is an abomination <before> God (Deut 18:12), (5) you will be whole-hearted with the Lord, your God (Deut 18:13).*

Thus they concluded that one should not consult them, as it is said: *Where does it come from that you shall not consult Chaldeans?* From the words: *You shall be whole-hearted with the Lord, your God (Deut 18:13).*

**2 <Any of these practices, which are forbidden in Scripture (*qesem* and *magic*), is considered Chaldean>**

You will find that our sages of blessed memory explained all these practices that one is forbidden to devote oneself to and practice in the same passage where they warn against inquiring through them and consulting them [Chaldeans]. Anyone who busies himself with the arts whose practice is forbidden, namely, *ḥartummim*, *'aššafim*, *kasdim*, *meḳašfim*, and all (10) the diviners (*qosemim*)

<sup>134</sup> See *TB Kritot* 3b and *TB Sanhedrin* 65a.

<sup>135</sup> See *TB Sanhedrin* 65b. For the meaning of necromancer, see Veltri, *Magie und Halakha*, 72–80. Cf. *Mishnah Sanhedrin* 7:7, *TY Sanhedrin* 7:7, and *Tosefta Sanhedrin* 10:6.

<sup>136</sup> See *TB Sanhedrin* 65b.

<sup>137</sup> We follow Schwarz' correction (מהקוסמים) of the manuscript (במקומה).

<sup>138</sup> See *TB Šabbat* 75a.

[mentioned in Scripture], is called a Chaldean. They are called Chaldeans (*kaldim*) because the people of Babylon and in the land of Sumer concerned themselves with all these sciences. It is known that the inhabitants of these lands were Arameans, as it is written: *The Chaldeans spoke Aramaic to the king* (Dan 2:4), for they spoke the language [Aramaic] of the people [Arameans] to which they belonged: *The children of 'Aram, 'Uš, Ḥul, Geter, and Maš* (Gen 10:23), and neither Chaldeans nor *kasdim* are mentioned among them. The inhabitants of the land of Sumer are called Chaldeans, and they are called *kasdim*, *suranim*, and also by other names. The general name for all of them is false prophets, and afterwards, Chaldeans. From this name, (15) the language of the rabbis is called the Chaldean language.

*Kasdim* were from the royal family in the time of Nebuchadnezzar, the impious. They appointed the worship of their idol and became priests in its temple. For this reason, those who make the powers of the stars flow (*mazzilei koḥot ha-koḥavim*) are called *kasdim*, for they were priests in the temple of <their> idols.<sup>139</sup> Chaldeans are the other people of <that> land who concerned themselves with the remaining sciences. *Kasdim* was one of their families [Chaldeans'] and any *kasdi* was called Chaldean, but not every Chaldean was called *kasdi*.

As our sages of blessed memory said *not to consult Chaldeans*,<sup>140</sup> they included within them (20) the *kasdim*,<sup>141</sup> who made powers flow, and anyone who concerned himself with the remaining sciences that inquire about the future. Their words were as if they had said: One must not consult *meḳašfim*, Chaldeans, *me'onnim*, or any practitioner of similar sciences <mentioned in the Torah>, for Chaldeans concerned themselves with all of them.<sup>142</sup>

139 Bar Ḥiyya previously identified (xviii.1) “those who make the powers flow” with the *ʾaššafim* of the *Book of Daniel*.

140 *TB Pesahim* 113b.

141 We are following Schwarz' correction (כנסו) of the reading in the manuscript (וקנסו).

142 This paragraph of the *Letter* is now bringing together all the forms of divination that are forbidden for Jews, those that are sciences (the four sects with Arabic names) and those that are not (the divinatory practices mentioned in Scripture). As regards the latter, he refers explicitly only to *me'onim*, one of the forms of *qesem*, but all of the forms of *qesem* mentioned in Scripture are intended and belong in the class “consultation of Chaldeans,” which is forbidden.

## XXII.

## 1 &lt;The objector is stringent as regards astrology but permissive as regards the forbidden practices&gt;

<Now> it is very clear for us <their words>: *You shall not consult Chaldeans*, and it has been revealed what science is proper to learn and to practice, and what is allowed to be learned but not to practice. According to this, it seems that one who puts into practice the appropriate sciences, (25) if his intention keeps the fear of Heaven, can be called pious (*hasid*). Most people call him foolishly pious (*hasid šoteh*).<sup>143</sup>

However, if he behaves permissively as regards the bans but stringently as regards the proper thing,<sup>144</sup> as we see today, people who behave permissively either with those consulting *terafim* or with those *meqalqelei hiššim* (shaking arrows/casting stones), while they behave stringently with those interested in astrology, we do not call this man foolishly pious, for he turns aside from the <right> way and deviates; he should be called <therefore> guilty and a transgressor.<sup>145</sup>

## 2 &lt;The election of the hour of the wedding according to astrology is not banned&gt;

With all the reasons that we have written above, we have enough to prove that he who holds a stringent halakhic opinion against the bridegroom, because of whom [the objector] we have ended up (30) here [writing this *Letter*], behaves too stringently, and bans something about which there is no ban, despite it being known and clear that all his acts [the bridegroom's] are with fear of Heaven and for honoring God.<sup>146</sup>

143 See *TB Sotah* 21b, where Rabbi Joshua says that a *hasid šoteh* is one of those “who bring destruction upon the world” because, on account of his rigid observance of the Law, refrains from saving his fellow from death.

144 We are following Schwarz' correction (בראיות ובאסורות) of the manuscript (באיטורו and בראיות, respectively).

145 This is a highly interesting statement of Bar Ḥiyya, which clearly shows that contemporary Jews were practicing different forms of divination (in addition to astrology, the motive of the *Letter*).

146 Here starts the rhymed epilogue that closes the *Letter*.

## XXIII.

## 1 &lt;Rhymed Epilogue addressed to Bar Barzillai&gt;

We learned all the words we wrote above from his mouth [Bar Barzillai's], and from his waters we have drawn.<sup>147</sup> //

Any science known by man on the Earth, he [Bar Barzillai] is as familiar with it as he is with *the streets of Nehardea*.<sup>148</sup> //

## 2 &lt;Bar Ḥiyya asks Bar Barzillai to stand in his defense&gt;

If my letter is good for him, if he [Bar Barzillai] is righteous in God's sight, he will do well before Him. //

He will see that these my words are good and appropriate //  
to uncover his thought [Bar Barzillai's] to us. We will be honored when he lets us know his kind words.<sup>149</sup> //

May he not let us remain in doubt, walking in darkness, //  
for the teaching of truth and the teaching (35) of the right path is the measure of the sages and the way of clever and perfect men. //

All of us who listen to his words should be grateful and praise his //<sup>150</sup>  
many graces and excellences, his humility and modesty.

If he [Bar Barzillai] considers that these my words are an error and derangement, words of vanity and delirium, //

and that neither repeating nor arguing about them is appropriate, may he increase his kindness for me, fulfill (p. 36) his righteousness, and open his hand //

to show how <these> words deviate and why we do not have to rely on them.<sup>151</sup> //

As soon as I hear his reasons, I will acknowledge my guilt, and say: *I repent, I repent*,<sup>152</sup> and read about myself: *Is not my help in me?* (Job 6:13).

147 According to Schwarz (35 n. 7), Bar Ḥiyya is referring to the *Commentary on the Sefer yeširah* written by Judah bar Barzillai.

148 This is a reference to *TB Beraḳot* 58b, where the *amora* Samuel (Babylon, third century) states that he is as familiar with the heavenly paths as with the streets of Nehardea, his town. This *amora* is also credited with the rule that connects the luck of the *tequfah* with the planetary hour in which its beginning falls and with the rules concerning the days of the week and bloodletting.

149 We are following Schwarz' correction (יכבדנו) of the manuscript (ויכבדנו).

150 We are not following Schwarz' correction (וכל) of the manuscript (כל).

151 We keep Schwarz' addition (דברִי) to the manuscript.

152 This sentence is found in *TB Eruvim* 52a and 64a, *TB Pesahim* 39a, etc.

However, if he neither is cordial nor listens to my speech, asking himself one of the two questions I have asked him,<sup>153</sup> and tells me: *I do not accept your words and I do not care about refuting what they claim.*<sup>154</sup> I reply to him: (5) *God forbids that I justify you; until I die I will not put my integrity away from me* (Job 27:5).

### 3 <Bar Ḥiyya addresses the rabbis and finishes the Letter>

If I made a mistake in these things and with my statements, I apologize before my elders; //  
 may no one blame me for anything that I have said. God knows, and He is a witness //  
 before Whom anything hidden is revealed,<sup>155</sup> that I did not come to teach, instruct, or stand out—God forbids—, or to challenge; //  
 rather my intention has been to purify my soul. Perhaps I shall be judged blameless, //  
 for I have been studying the science of the stars from my youth until today. I have busied myself with it, inquired into it, and taught //  
 it; I have seen myself acquiring wisdom (10) and knowledge without sin or blame. //

But now, when I have seen that righteous and humble sages who are expert and distinguished do not agree with my view, I reject my occupation. //  
 I say to myself: In the days of my childhood and youth I was judged benevolently according to the dignity that I reached before //  
 princes and the king, but, now, in the days of <my> old age, I am discredited by it [my occupation, i.e., astrology]. //  
 It is good for me to seek its decrees [astrology's] and report its profit until I anger those who hate <it> and have spoken to harm it, //  
 speaking of its blame and ignominy. Maybe their words have the strength to persuade me to follow (15) them. //

153 The two questions alluded to here are those expressed in the *Letter* in xxiii.2: “to show the ways from which <these> words deviate and for what reason we do not have to rely on them,” i.e., Bar Ḥiyya is asking of Bar Barzillai whether his statement is wrong or right, and, if it is wrong, why it is so.

154 We are following Schwarz' correction (אני) of the manuscript (אני).

155 According to Deut 29:28: הַסְתֵּרֶת לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְהַגִּלְתָּ לָנוּ וּלְבָנֵינוּ, “The hidden things belong to God our Lord and the things that have been revealed belong to us and our children.”

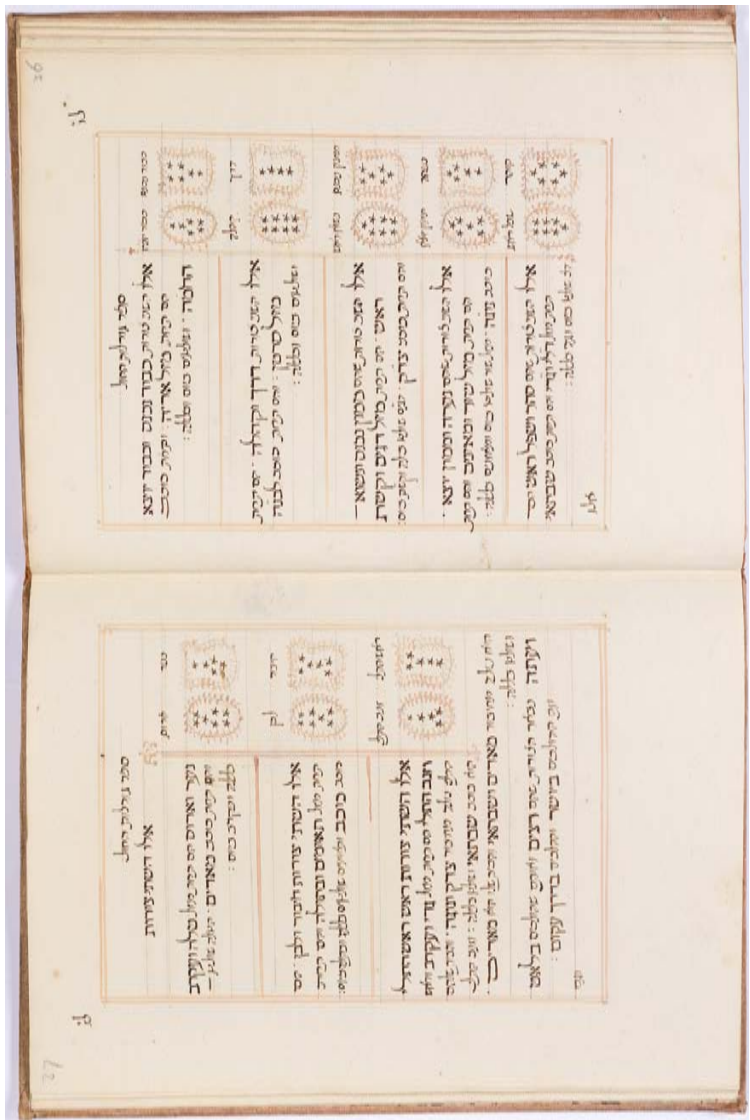
Now you, my teachers, masters of wisdom (*tusiyyah*) and the Torah,<sup>156</sup> sages  
 who support the law and justice, who have power to master //  
 science and rule <people>, do not put *a stumbling block* before *a blind man*,<sup>157</sup>  
 and show me the way that is the royal road, <in which> I will walk, //  
*for all Israel is a guarantor of each other*.<sup>158</sup> Its fat [Israel's] should splash with  
 its oil those who are lean, //  
 he who sees well <should> guide the blind, and he who is quenched <should>  
 satisfy with water those who are thirsty, //  
 until the days come when every one of us will be glad (20) with his part and  
 will attain his wish and longing. //  
 May the God of the heavens give us the right to attain that moment, and may  
 He fulfill in us what is written: *No man will any longer teach //*  
*his neighbor or his brother saying "know the Lord," for everybody will know Me,*  
*from the least to the greatest of them, the Lord says, for I will forgive //*  
*their blame and will remember their sin no more* (Jer 31:33). //

The letter is finished. Praise and glory to God. //

156 According to Schwarz the expression רבוּתִי is not clear in the manuscript. We have checked it (MS Warsaw 282, fol. 12a) and we confirm Schwarz' reading.

157 According to Lev 19:14.

158 *TB Šavuot* 39a.



ms Amsterdam Ets Haim 47 A 27, fols. 36-37 (*Sefer goratot ha-hol* copied by David Franco Mendes in Amsterdam in 1735, paper; square and Sephardic cursive scripts). Note the sixteen geomantic figures on the right side of both pages.

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