



## Star-Gazing, Jewish Style, in Heaven and on Earth

Cantor Marsha Dubrow, Ph. D.  
Spiritual Leader,  
Congregation B'nai Jacob,  
Jersey City, NJ

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During the summer months, we often head outdoors in the evening and enjoy looking up at the night sky and marveling at the miracle of 'the heavens above.' For thousands of years, humankind has been in awe and pursued understanding – both knowledge and meaning – of this mass expanse of the universe beyond our planet earth that we in modern times refer to as 'space.' Even throughout art history, depictions of the Eternal anthropomorphized God as the king seated on a throne surrounded by clouds somewhere up in the heavens. So it comes as no surprise then that when we look up at the night sky and see stars, it always feels particularly mysterious to us. This month's column explores the idea of 'stars' from both a literal and metaphorical perspective.

Our Jewish ancestors were participants in early space exploration, not by way of travel, but by way of study from afar right here on terra firma. The phases of the moon dictated the Jewish calendar from the earliest times and there are myriads of allusions in biblical texts regarding timing of Jewish festivals according to the lunar calendar. There are even references to both lunar and solar eclipses. Additionally, there are allusions to the stars from the perspective of what we know as 'astrology.' While there are numerous biblical prohibitions against seeking guidance from the stars in important life decisions, Jews throughout the ages have always embraced elements of superstition in everyday life, even right up to the Ashkenazic Golem legend, the Dybbuk, and the familiar 'Poo, poo, poo' expression to ward off evil spirits of just a century or two ago. In fact, the word '*Mazal*' means 'constellation' or 'destiny' in Mishnaic Hebrew, so the expression '*Mazal Tov*' actually alludes to a favorable alignment of the stars for good luck (actually that's already happened). And we all know that the way to determine if Shabbat has ended is by seeing three stars in the night sky.

Those of you who have visited the Jewish Museum in New York City no doubt have seen the mosaic floor reproduction taken from the Dura-Europas Synagogue in Syria that shows a depiction of the twelve astrological signs. The preponderance of these symbols throughout the ancient world in early synagogue sites is evidence that surely there was some significance to our ancestors to the signs of the Zodiac, derived as we know from the stars and their configurations. There are remnants of Zodiac signs at at least eight other ancient

synagogues from the post-rabbinic period including at Beth Alpha, Hammath Tiberias (on the shore of the Sea of Galilee), Naaran (near Jericho), Sepphoris (north of Nazareth), En-Gedi (on the Dead Sea), Hureika (at Mt. Carmel) and Susiya (20 miles north of the Dead Sea). No doubt there are even more examples that simply have not been unearthed yet. The Beth Alpha example has clear names for the twelve zodiac signs in Hebrew, not Latin words. There is even a relatively recent doctoral dissertation by Leonard Ness entitled, *Astrology and Judaism in Late Antiquity*. Chapter 4, on Jewish Astrology and Chapter 5, on Synagogue Art and Astrology, provide an up to-to-the minute presentation of just about all that is known on the subject. Certainly something for us to ponder as we look at the summer night sky.

Fast-forwarding to more modern times and coming back down to earth, especially as we enter the month of July and experience our revered American national holiday, the Fourth of July, Independence Day, our thoughts turn to the matter of stars in another context, namely 'the stars and stripes.' This reference to the American flag has significant overtones of national pride this time of the year. Recently, David and I visited Gettysburg, Pennsylvania and spent many hours walking over the battlefields where more than 50,000 Americans were either killed, maimed and captured over the course of three days. It is believed that over 7,000 Jewish-Americans fought on both sides in the Civil War. Simon Wolf, a Jewish activist of the 19th Century, collected the names of over 7000 Jewish-Americans who fought on both sides and published the list in directory form in 1895, as *The American Jew as Patriot, Soldier, and Citizen*.

The impetus for his research was the virulent, ongoing denial in the press that Jews had participated as soldiers in the Civil War. Setting the record straight in a detailed article published in the *Washington Post*, Simon Wolf proclaimed, "What I had anticipated and supposed would be an easy task, requiring probably no more than six months at the utmost, has taken more than four years of continuous work, notwithstanding the assistance I received from many quarters, and I am even now compelled to give this work to the public in an inadequate form, with the feeling that it is incomplete and that much more should have been made of it. The difficulties in the way of completing fully and accurately such a compilation as

I have here attempted will scarcely be realized by those who have not undertaken a similar task. The work was begun nearly thirty years after the close of the war, when many of those whose names were to be gathered were dead, and many others dispersed throughout our vast domain and beyond our borders. In response to three successive calls made through the leading newspapers of the country, I received, indeed, a large number of replies, but after all, the great majority even of the survivors failed to respond, and of the data that reached me much could not be classified. Nearly a thousand names are accordingly placed in the unclassified list.”

Simon Wolf’s noble effort to rectify for posterity a crucial and significant legacy of Jewish-American national identity, pride and history makes him the true star of our summer skies – what we call ‘the north star’, a guide for all of us to follow. By his standing up to the promulgation of inaccuracies, distortions and misconceptions reflecting covert and not-so-covert anti-semitism within America’s borders, he demonstrated an unwavering commitment to the universal American principle of liberty and justice for all, to say nothing of *Emet* (Truth) and *Chesed* (Righteousness) the two Jewish principles expressed so beautifully in mosaic on B’nai Jacob’s ark housing our torahs..

Have a nice, relaxing summer and enjoy the fireworks and fireflies. And be sure to do some stargazing!

**Cantor Marsha Dubrow, Ph. D.**

[cantor@bnaijacobjc.org](mailto:cantor@bnaijacobjc.org)

(201) 910-4334

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