Dissertation #5

Title: **Die Schicksalsidee im Judentum** (The Idea of Fate in Judaism)

Author: **Joseph (Josef) Wochenmark**

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German Rabbis – Project
Carlebach Institute / Bar-Ilan University

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Summary

Executive Summary: The dissertation belongs to the field of Religious Studies; the author (whose religious orientation is reported as moderately Orthodox) sets out to analyze the role played by fate/destiny in the doctrine and the practice of Judaism over the course of its history, especially focusing on the question of the relationship between fate and the principle of "Ethical Monotheism". Using a conceptual framework influenced by German Idealism and Nietzscheanism / existentialism, this dissertation is based mostly on primary sources such as the Hebrew Bible, prayer books and, above all, classical rabbinic literature and medieval Jewish philosophy. The main claim of this PhD thesis is that the belief in the force of fate (including the reliance on astrology) has been a very significant part of mainstream Judaism for most of its history, but that, at the same time, fate was not seen as totally inevitable but rather as subordinate to other fundamentals of the Jewish religion, such as the idea of divine mercy and the belief in the power of prayer.

Preface (pp. vii - viii)

The author explains the genesis of the dissertation as a fruit of a seminar conducted by the religious studies scholar and the author's thesis advisor Jakob Wilhelm Hauer in 1929: initially the author assumed that the concept of fate was alien to the principle of Ethical Monotheism at the core of Judaism. Only after consulting biblical (Kohelet) and rabbinical literature, did the author change his mind, and started to conceive of Judaism as containing both nomistic and antinomian elements - which are, however, subordinated to the nomistic ones. The dissertation is an attempt to explore this antinomian streak in Judaism.

I. Introduction (pp. 1 - 8)

1. Psychological and Mythological Differences Between Belief in G'd and Belief in Fate (pp. 1 - 4)

The author contrasts, relying upon German Idealist philosophers (Schleiermacher and Hegel) and upon the Hebrew Bible (Hiob, Psalms), the psychology of relying on G'd with the psychology of relying on fate. G'd and his interventions are perceived, so the author, as an ultimately just force faced by human beings with an attitude of humility and total submission, while fate is perceived as an ethically indifferent force confronted by humans with an attitude of pride and on an equal level.

2. Delineating the Topic of the Dissertation and Its Methodology (pp. 4 - 6)

The section starts with the assumption that, despite their theoretically mutually exclusive nature, in practice both the belief in G'd and the belief in fate could exist simultaneously in Judaism. Thus, the author aims at analyzing the place of fate, more precisely of the idea of fate, in Judaism and its relation

to Ethical Monotheism which the author sees as the core principle of the Jewish religion. In terms of sources, the thesis is based on classical rabbinic literature (the author does not presuppose knowledge of the terminology on the part of his readers and explains the terms Midrash and Talmud in footnotes), writings of medieval Jewish philosophers and prayer books; apocryphal literature and works by Hellenistic Jewish writers are not included among the sources, though, due to not having had any influence on rabbinic Judaism.

3. The Idea of Fate and Its Relation to the Idea of G'd (pp. 6 -8)

At the end of the introduction, the author sets out to define the concept of fate. Distinguishing between a conceptual-logical approach, i.e. comparing various definitions of the term "fate" and trying to extract their common features, and a phenomenological approach, i.e. inductively looking at the use of the term "fate" and determining what is meant by it, the author rejects the first conceptual-logical approach due to the divergence in the various definitions by the philosophers whom he cites (Spinoza, Leibniz, Schopenhauer, Oswald Spengler, Jakob Wilhelm Hauer) and instead, applying phenomenology, defines the belief in fate as the belief in a higher force that exerts itself independent of all human action and reasoning, influencing the destiny of both individuals and peoples. It is also characterized by a belief in irrational inevitability - a trait which it has in common, so the author, with the belief in G'd.

II. Fate as a Component of Jewish Belief in G'd (pp. 9 - 49)

In this part, the author analyzed how different aspects of the idea of fate, as described above, are present in Judaism.

1. a) The acting force of G'd is incomprehensible according to the categories of reason and according to the norms of morality (pp. 9 - 17)

This section focuses on the theme of the incomprehensibility of G'd's will which is illustrated by many examples of perceived divine injustice from the Hebrew Bible (Hiob, Kohelet) or from rabbinic literature (for example Rabbi Akiva's suffering as narrated by the Talmud) where the good are punished and where the wicked thrive. Then, the question is asked how Judaism reconciles such outcomes with the doctrine of just reward and punishment. According to the author, the oldest solution, employed in the Hebrew Bible (called the Old Testament in the dissertation), is to paint worldly injustice as temporary. A later approach, with some precursors in Biblical books (Psalms, Daniel) but especially dominant in Midrashic literature and in the Talmud, is the belief in divine judgement in the afterlife. A third option, exemplified by Isaiah 53 and various rabbinic sources, is to interpret apparently unjustified suffering as occurring on behalf of the sins of others. The last presented possibility of dealing with the problem is to accept the performance of "good deeds" as rewarding in itself (this is how the author translates the term *mitzvah* in Pirkei Avot 4, 2).

b) The acting force of G'd is a necessary condition for the success or the failure of all human undertakings (pp. 17 - 20)

Another theme associated with the idea of fate, so the author, is the vision of G'd as omnipotent and of the success of all human action as dependent exclusively on divine will, illustrated by many quotes from various books of the Hebrew Bible. However, such a view is integrated into the Ethical Monotheism of the Jewish Religion through the doctrine that there is a duty to submit to G'd's will even if it is perceived as incomprehensible, examples from Jewish religious literature and history are given for the persistence of such a trust in G'd. The Bible even contains examples of sinful action by humans that are ordered by G'd - a phenomenon, so the author, whose interpretation is controversial in Jewish thought. However, only one possible explanation is cited by the author: the one given by Maimonides who saw such enticement to sin as punishment for prior transgressions.

2. The Jewish teachings on the evil inclination (pp. 21 - 25)

One important instance of G'd's will leading to wicked conduct by humans is the doctrine of the evil inclination in Judaism. The author first explicates this doctrine based on Talmudic sources and then shows how it is made compatible with the principle of Ethical Monotheism: by the belief in the ability to master this inclination, especially with divine support which is invoked by prayer against the evil inclination (several different prayers against the evil inclination are quoted by the author at the end of the section).

3. The Belief in Providence in Judaism

A further theme associated with the idea of fate - as defined by the author - is the concept of providence or of a clearly delineated predestination in advance.

a) The belief in providence in Bible, Talmud and Midrash (pp. 26 - 34)

According to the author, unlike Jewish medieval philosophy with terms like *hashgaha* or *hanhaga*, Bible, Midrash and the Talmuds lack a word for providence. Nevertheless, the concept itself is demonstrated by the author to be present in the Bible and even more so in rabbinic literature; many examples are given to that effect: such as the belief that for every human being, his or her time of death is already predetermined from the beginning. However, in the practice of Jewish religious life, this theme of providence has been more "ethicized", by seeing it as the outcome of divine judgement - subsequently, an overview of doctrines and rituals regarding divine judgement, especially concerning the Day of Atonement, is provided.

b) The belief in providence among medieval Jewish philosophers of religion in connection with the problem of free will (pp. 35 - 42)

This chapter deals with the question of how Jewish philosophers of religion tried to reconcile the doctrine of predestination with the existence of free will. As a point of departure serve the three main currents / philosophies of ancient Judaism, as described by Josephus, which in the view of the author embody the three possible approaches to solving the problem: denial of free will (Essenes), denial of divine providence (Saduccees), an attempt to reconcile both free will and predestination (Pharisees). While, according to the author, the view of the Pharisees was characteristic of the worldview of the Talmud and the Midrash, Jewish philosophy in the Middle Ages offered differing solutions, What follows is a detailed description of the views of several core Jewish philosophers in chronological order: Saadia Gaon (affirming free will by reinterpreting divine providence as divine foreknowledge), Bachya ibn Paquda (seeing both free will and providence as compatible, by denying the rational solvability of the problem), Judah Halevi (similar to Bachya ibn Paquda), Abraham Ibn Daud (favoring free will by interpreting Biblical passages that presuppose divine predetermination allegorically), Maimonides (also in favor of free will by seeing divine punishment as a retribution for prior sins and divine providence as an emanation of divine rationality upon humans, i.e. humans are seen as taking part in G'd's rationality and are, thereby, able to exercise their free will), Gersonides (even more radically in favor of free will than Maimonides, claiming that the divine providential plan applies only to the human race as a whole on a macro-level and not to the destiny of individual human beings), Hadai Crescas (totally negating free will) and Joseph Albo (viewing both providence and free will as compatible, also by declaring this compatibility to not be completely understandable to the human mind). This chronological order where an intuitionist approach prevails at the end over a rationalist one signifies for the author the triumph of religion over philosophy; the author reports this neutrally and not necessarily as a negative outcome, noting that even philosophers such as Spinoza did not succeed at resolving the dilemma.

III. Personifications of Fate in Judaism (pp. 43 - 77)

1. a) Astrological forces in Bible, Talmud and Midrash (pp. 48 - 61)

Belief in astrological forces, so the author, became a part of Judaism due to Babylonian-Assyrian influences. Still absent in the earlier books of the Hebrew Bible (the author uses the term Old Testament), it appears in the post-exilic books like Daniel and becomes fully integrated into the Jewish religion in classical rabbinic literature, from which many examples for the view that stars have an impact on human destiny are provided by the author. A distinction is made between two approaches, one to assign a particular, personal star to every human being as a "star of destiny" that appears at his or her birth and vanishes at the moment of death (like a meteor). The second, more common approach according to the author, is the belief in the impact of the heavenly bodies of the sideral constellation at the birth of the person in question. This belief in the force of stars was, so the author, characteristic for all Talmudic sages, and even the many recorded controversies about this topic with the aim of accommodating this doctrine with the principle of Ethical Monotheism and the famous saying that "Israel has no zodiac sign" ("אין מזל בישראל") are not to be understood as though astrology had no place in Judaism (the author expressly contradicts Leo Baeck here), but rather that, according to the sages, it was possible to evade the power of the stars through a moral life and through the fulfillment of the commandments. Apart from the personal stars, the Sun and the Moon are seen as the celestial bodies that determine the course of history of nations and of humanity as a whole. Again, many examples are given from Biblical and Talmudic literature, including interpretive rules, such as the view that a solar eclipse is a bad omen for the gentiles while a lunar eclipse is a bad omen for the Jews. This section ends with a detailed account of the dogma that the Moon is the "star of destiny" of the Jewish people and with an overview of religious practices tied to this dogma, such as the *kiddush levana* ritual.

b) Astrological forces among medieval Jewish philosophers of religion (pp. 62 - 70)

Even more so than rabbinical literature, did medieval philosophy try to resolve the contradiction between the belief in astrological forces (shared by most philosophers whom the author mentions) and the tenet of Ethical Monotheism, with the majority of philosophers choosing a solution in which the stars and their forces are seen as ultimately ruled by G'd and where it is possible to evade their dictate through piety. The author elaborates on the views of Salomon Ibn Gabirol (quoting extensively from his hymn Keter Malkhut that shows his devotion to astrology), Abraham Ibn Ezra (who is portrayed, on the basis of an American PhD dissertation of 1927 idealing with his astrological works, as a firm believer in the force of celestial bodies, moderated by the principle of Ethical Monotheism), Abraham Ibn Daud (with similar views), Maimonides (who, as an exception in medieval Jewish philosophy, was totally opposed to astrology), Joseph Albo (who was somewhat torn between whether to believe in the inexorability of astral forces), Gersonides (who refused to believe in divine providence but considered the impact of the heavenly bodies real) and Judah ha-Levi (thinking it acceptable to believe that Jewry's fate was no longer determined by G'd but rather by the stars).

2. The figure of Satan as a force of fate (pp. 71 - 76)

As told by the author, initially the *satan* (to be translated as obstuctor) of the Hebrew Bible was a generic noun for an obstructing power, either a human being, for example an enemy, or an angel sent by G'd that was meant to put obstacles in the way of someone. Later, in the post-exilic books of the Bible (e.g. in the Chronicles) did Satan become the proper name of a supernatural hostile creature, but only in rabbinic literature became the contours of Satan's personality fully outlined both as an enemy of the angels and as an enemy of man. Many examples are given from Midrashic literature and from the Babylonian Talmud for the two main roles of Satan: as a seducer to transgressions (especially sexual ones) and as the bringer of death. But - so the author - in Judaism Satan, too, is subordinated to the principle of Ethical Monotheism and through righteousness, prayer and piety it is possible to escape his grasp. The section ends with several examples from Jewish religious practice meant to repel the devil (e.g. the *shacharit* morning prayer or blowing the Shofar on the morning of the Jewish New Year).

3. Dream divination (pp. 77 - 80)

In Judaism, fate often manifests itself in dreams, a phenomenon present already in the Hebrew Bible and, according to the author, much more so in rabbinic literature. Dreams may either announce fate or, especially in the case of the “evil dream”, be the realization of a fate, in other words a sort of punishment. The interpretation of dreams is a common occurrence in Talmudic lore (the author provides several examples) and seen as a necessary precondition for the fulfillment of a dream’s announcement. Prophetic dreams are, however, also integrated into the system of Ethical Monotheism and various practices, such as the *hatavat chalom* (dream amelioration) procedure or the supplication in the bedtime prayer to fend off bad dreams, to mitigate the impact of those dreams are mentioned by the author.

IV. Jewish Teachings on Divine Mercy and on the Fulfillment of Prayer Prevailing Over the Doctrine of Fate (pp. 81 -86)

In this chapter, it is argued that in Judaism the idea of fate is as a whole outbalanced by the belief in divine mercy and in the power of prayer. Citing Biblical and rabbinic sources the author sets out to demonstrate how the expectation to receive mercy on the part of G’d prevails over both the idea of implacable judgment on the part of G’d and over the idea of an ethically indifferent fate. Thereupon, the, in the view of the author, central place that the Judaism assigns to the power of prayer to override the influence of fate is shown on the basis of various sources from the Jewish religious tradition, including several longer quotations from prayer books (the section ends with an excerpt from a collection of *selichot*).

V. Final Observations (87 - 88)

The dissertation ends with a short observation on the polar nature of Judaism, consisting of both belief in G’d and belief in fate, and with praise for this state of things. Judaism, so the author, is thereby conforming to a general law from the history of religion that every living faith is characterized by a unity of opposites, being made up of various often contradicting ideas. This is especially true for Judaism due to its absence of dogmatic bonds, which underscores the vitality of the Jewish religion. Therefore, Judaism, according to the author, was able to avoid extreme positions choosing usually the middle way like in the case of its relation to fate where it eschewed both the views of the Essenes and the Saducsees, continuing on the path of the Pharisees instead.