

“In Need of Mazel?”

By Rabbi David Wolpe

Napoleon is reputed to have asked only one question in hiring an officer: “Is he lucky?” While hard work and piety can do much good in this world, *mazel* is indispensable.

Mazel, which actually refers to constellations, has popularly come to mean “luck.” The connection back to ancient astrology is clear. Sometimes the stars seem aligned for or against us. Listen to the wry, resigned words of the great medieval poet, Abraham Ibn Ezra: “If I sold candles/ The sun would never set./ If I sold funeral shrouds/ People would stop dying./ If I sold weapons/ there would be an outbreak of universal peace.”

Ezra’s lament reminds us that our misfortune may be another’s good fortune; luck is complicated and unpredictable. Even though the Talmud teaches that Israel does not rely on mazel, we wish each other “mazel tov” just in case.

There is a piquant story about the great physicist Niels Bohr. Apparently this giant of reason hung a horseshoe above his office. When one of his students said, “Professor, you don’t really believe that brings good luck, do you?” Bohr replied, “Of course not. But I understand it works even for those who don’t believe it.” So work hard, and good luck.