

JewishTimes

VOL. XIX NO. 23 — JUNE 25, 2021

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OF ABRAHAM,
NOT OF BILAM**

Rabbi Israel Chait





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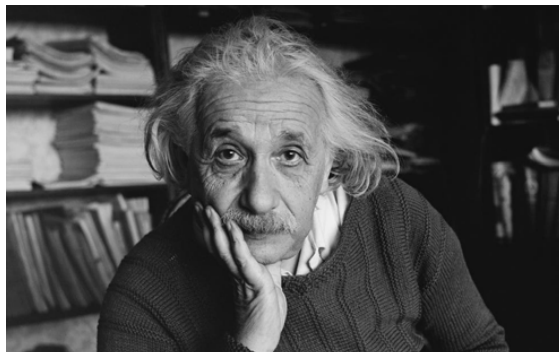
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ALBERT EINSTEIN

LETTERS

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Omens

ARIEH: I have had a bit of a disagreement with a local rabbi about various 'customs' surrounding the Havdala wine at the Sabbath conclusion, which seem to me to be omens or amulets and therefore, according to you, forbidden. For instance, wine overflowing and dipping fingers in the wine afterwards and putting it on ones eyes and in ones pockets to "ensure success" for the upcoming week. I would like your comments please.

RABBI: Yes, these are Nichush—omen—violations. (See Mishne Torah, Avoda Zarah chap. 11) Any act that has no demonstrated effects, and people act expecting effects, is Nichush: a form of idolatry.

ARIEH: I suppose the same applies to the following, taken from a shiur emailed last week:

As my own simple example, there were times in the past when I would leave morning synagogue services more promptly in order to make it to work sooner. I began to notice that whenever I would do that, I would somehow get on the entirely wrong traffic-light cycle, and find myself waiting 5+ minutes at red lights -- something which never seemed to occur to me when I stayed in the synagogue longer. I got the message. And there is nothing unique about my case. Any one of us will notice -- if we only pay attention -- that the little things which go wrong in life are often G-d's veiled way of nudging us in the proper direction. We need only notice it and hear G-d's message.

I wonder if he did a statistical analysis of his supposed phenomena. Where does G-d indicating something to him appear on the graph: 50%, 80%?

RABBI: This would not be Nichush. Certainly, saying God did something is baseless, as we don't have that knowledge. But it's not Nichush, since he doesn't gauge his activities based on his assumed "signs", like your first case where people put Havdala wine on themselves as a charm. Here, he doesn't say his speed in leaving shul caused the lights, but it was God who caused this as a punishment. ■ (CONT. ON NEXT PAGE)

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Witchcraft: A Fallacy

ELLIOT: Hello rabbi. I appreciate your site, and your perspective, but I'm curious: in your article about how you guys think the Baal Ha Ov or witch that Saul spoke to put on a ruse to make him THINK he was hearing Saul, you never mentioned how she also seemed to automatically become aware, without prior knowledge, of Saul's true identity. This happened only AFTER she supposedly saw Saul's specter. It seems the book is implying that she received knowledge from some kind of spiritual-means through the craft she was practicing, perhaps her familiar spirit appeared with his spirit and told her?

I don't believe in ghosts and witchcraft, but this part section seems to kill your argument. What do you think happened?

RABBI: Why is it difficult to accept that the most popular figure—the king—is not known by face to all? Or, perhaps, his promise that the witch would not be harmed can only be ensured by the king himself. She knew it was King Saul.

There is nothing in this account forcing our acceptance of powers never evidenced. The path of the Torah and reason is just the opposite: we only state something is fact when based on evidence or reason. Both are lacking here. Additionally, God's prohibition against witchcraft is precisely because it is false. Ibn Ezra (Lev. 19:31) says the following: *"Those with empty brains say 'Were it not that fortune tellers and magicians were true, the Torah would not prohibit them.' But I (Ibn Ezra) say just the opposite of their words, because the Torah doesn't prohibit that which is true, but it prohibits that which is false. And the proof is the prohibition on idols and statues."* ■

Easier to Bear

DOV: *"When we know this we shall find everything that may befall us easy to bear; mishap will create no doubts in our hearts concerning God, whether He knows our affairs or not, whether He provides for us or abandons us. On the contrary, our fate will increase our love of God."* This is a quote from Maimonides.

Since your last email about repentance, wherein you quoted Maimonides' analysis of Job in the Guide for the Perplexed...I have been going over that section...I highlighted the portion above, whose conclusion still eludes me.

How does knowledge that God's providence, intention, rule and management being different from any concept we can know, make anything that may befall us "easy to bear?" I can see how knowing that God's management and knowledge (being so different in nature to our own) would help relieve doubts of whether God is aware of our affairs, and that He does not abandon us. But I'm not sure how that knowledge makes mishaps easy to bear.

RABBI: God knows our suffering and can respond. We are not left without an avenue for relief. God is there, He knows. He can help. This is in contrast to one who does not

know about God, or HOW God operates, so when he is in pain he despairs: "Mishap will create no doubts (whether He knows...whether He provides)" meaning we know He CAN do these, so we have no doubts. This conviction does not lead to despair, but in trusting God, who can perform, since He knows our plight. ■

Age of the World

Yael: You wrote, "There is no contradiction to say that the world is both 5781 years old, and 16 billion years old. Time is different when measured from different portions of the universe, as proven by Einstein's law of relativity".

Given that the Torah was accepted 1300 BCE, why did G-d wait so long to give the Torah? Why has the vast majority of human kind been forced to live without it or observed other beliefs? It makes no sense that such a small minority would be given the truth? This makes me think that Orthodox Judaism can't be the only way. Where do I start to rectify this?

RABBI: Please see my article "God's Plan for Man" where I answer this: www.mesora.org/planforman.html ■

“Numerous as the Stars”

EUGENE: Where did God fulfill His promise to make the Jews as "numerous as the stars of heaven", for God said, we are "smallest among all nations" (Deut. 7:7)?

RABBI: That latter quote is to remind the Jews not to feel arrogant, as the following verse says, He made us numerous "to keep His oath to our forefathers" (Deut. 7:8) and not due to our own greatness.

But despite this, that we are smallest, nonetheless, Moses says, "God has made you today as numerous as the stars of heaven" (Deut. 1:10), and "And now Hashem your God has placed you numerous as the stars of heaven" (Deut. 10:21). So, although we are smallest, God did fulfill his word to make us many.

What was God's intent in making us numerous? Why is this of such importance, that He promised this to Abraham? We can suggest that as Abraham desired to teach the masses how foolish their religions were, and to help them, to guide them towards truth using reasoning and proofs...- God encouraged Abraham and endorsed his mission by promising to assist in spreading Abraham's message of monotheism by multiplying his seed.

God desires the good for all mankind. This is precisely why God created the human species. It is therefore reasonable that God desires to help religions who err, to see the light, and abandon idolatry, deification of man and other fundamental errors. Once Abraham found God, God desired to assist Abraham, so as to assist all mankind in our most vital purpose on Earth: to recognize the One Creator and appreciate His amazing wisdom, "For this is all of man" (Koheles, 2nd to last verse). ■

The 3 Traits of Perfected People

BE A STUDENT OF ABRAHAM, NOT OF BILAM

Rabbi Israel Chait
Transcribed by a student



ETHICS 5:19

WHOMEVER POSSESSES THESE 3 THINGS, HE IS OF THE DISCIPLES OF ABRAHAM, OUR FATHER; AND [WHOMEVER POSSESSES] 3 OTHER THINGS, HE IS OF THE DISCIPLES OF BILAM, THE WICKED. A GOOD EYE, A HUMBLE SPIRIT AND A MODERATE APPETITE, HE IS OF THE DISCIPLES OF ABRAHAM, OUR FATHER. AN EVIL EYE, A HAUGHTY SPIRIT AND A LIMITLESS APPETITE, HE IS OF THE DISCIPLES OF BILAM, THE WICKED. WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE DISCIPLES OF ABRAHAM, OUR FATHER, AND THE DISCIPLES OF BILAM, THE WICKED? THE DISCIPLES OF ABRAHAM, OUR FATHER, ENJOY THIS WORLD, AND INHERIT THE WORLD TO COME, AS IT IS SAID: "I WILL ENDOW THOSE WHO LOVE ME WITH SUBSTANCE, I WILL FILL THEIR TREASURIES" (PROVERBS 8:21). BUT THE DISCIPLES OF BILAM, THE WICKED, INHERIT GEHENOM, AND DESCEND INTO THE NETHERMOST PIT, AS IT IS SAID: "FOR YOU, O GOD, WILL BRING THEM DOWN TO THE NETHERMOST PIT, THOSE MURDEROUS AND TREACHEROUS MEN; THEY SHALL NOT LIVE OUT HALF THEIR DAYS; BUT I TRUST IN YOU" (PSALMS 55:24).

Did Bilam the wicked [really] have students? Why did the mishnah frame it in this way [comparing one group of students to others, as opposed to simply identifying good and bad values]? Maimonides comments:

Regarding Abraham, a good eye refers to satisfaction [Abraham was satisfied with his possessions]. A moderate appetite refers to caution in avoiding lusts. And a humble spirit refers to [excessive] humility. The opposite character traits are an energetic pursuit of wealth referred to as an evil eye, a limitless appetite [insatiable desires] and a haughty spirit. Students of Abraham attain this designation as they follow Abraham's attributes. And whomever possesses the negative traits belongs to the students of Bilam. And I will cite the verses describing Abraham's attributes and Bilam's flawed character.

Abraham's satisfaction is seen when the king of Sodom wished to reward Abraham for returning the captives and their positions. But Abraham said he would not take anything from the king, even a shoestring. And this is the height of satisfaction and that is that man abandons much wealth and refuses to benefit even in a minute amount.

Abraham had reason not to accept a reward from the king of Sodom:

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But Abram said to the king of Sodom, "I swear to the Lord, God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth, I will not take so much as a thread or a sandal strap of what is yours so you shall not say, 'It is I who made Abram rich.'" (Gen. 14:22,23)

God told Abraham that he would make him great. And if Abraham's greatness could be attributed to the king of Sodom, it would reduce the sanctification of God's name [through Abraham's success achieved exclusively through God and no other]. Abraham realized what happens to him [now] is no longer a phenomenon in the capacity of Abraham as an individual, which was his capacity until now in Ur Casdim. There, Abraham had no responsibility other than to himself. That is where Abraham developed his ideas about Judaism. He saw through the fallacy of idolatry to the nth degree and it is where he began teaching and developed a following. But when God appeared to Abraham at the age of 75 and told him "Leave your land, your birth place and the house of your father" (Gen. 12:1), that meant that God removed Abraham from living as a private individual to become an entity who will build a structure [the Jewish nation] that will benefit the world. If anyone would taint this role, it would be destructive. Taking money from the king of Sodom would reduce his role. The world must view Abraham as one whom God—and no other—made successful. Thus, it was a political reason that Abraham refused gifts from the king.

Maimonides says that for a person [Abraham] to refuse such wealth, he must possess the trait of satisfaction. Meaning, a normal person could not refuse those gifts. This is because a person by nature has an insatiable desire for wealth. Even for political motivation, a person could not walk away from a fortune unless he possesses this trait of satisfaction. Such a person is not excited over wealth; he is satisfied financially and needs no more. Most people feel that if they have a certain amount of wealth, that they would be satisfied and not seek anything more. But in truth, one's desire for wealth is the energy of the psyche directed towards an ultimate fantasy which one seeks to attain from wealth. One who is under the sway of that fantasy cannot refuse gifts. An imperfect person will cave in to his desires even if there are reasons not to cave in [such as political reasons as in Abraham's case]. A small person can never perform a great deed. It is impossible. If there were no reason to refuse the gift, Abraham would have accepted. Wealth has a purpose to help one function according to his needs, and anything additional should be used to sanctify God's name. But in Abraham's

case, refusing the reward was the greatest use [it maintained sanctification of God's name]. There was no difference in Abraham's emotions whether he accepted the gift or not. He decided the proper response in each case, and when it was improper, he walked away. Maimonides continues:

Abraham's removal from lusts is seen when he said this to Sarah the day they came to Egypt: "Behold I know that you are a beautiful woman" (Gen. 12:11). Chazal say that until that day, Abraham never looked at Sarah in a way of total evaluation of her beauty [but he did so on that day because he was concerned for her danger]. And this is the height of removal from the instinctual.

You see from Chazal that the relationships between the Patriarchs and the Matriarchs was qualitatively differentiated [from our own]. Abraham's and Sarah's relationship operated on a different basis, totally removed from the instinctual and physical aspects of love as we understand them. Also, when Abraham our father took Hagar, Rashi comments:

And Sarah the wife of Abraham took her maid Hagar the Egyptian at the end of 10 years: She took her with words, "Happy are you that you merit to cleave to a holy body as this" (Gen. 16:3).

This means that the relationship with Abraham was different than with any other human being. It was a different kind of conjugal relationship. Maimonides continues:

Abram said to Sarai, "Your maid is in your hands. Deal with her as you think right" (Gen. 16:6). This teaches that Abraham had no desire to enjoy Hagar physically. And also, when Sarah demanded that Abraham chase out Hagar and Ishmael, and he would not be able to live with Hagar anymore, Torah says that Abraham was upset only about Ishmael: "The matter distressed Abraham greatly, concerning his son" (Gen. 21:11). These are demonstrations of a person who is removed from the physical, the instinctual.

Abraham was undisturbed in losing Hagar as a physical mate for he was completely removed from the area of physical desires. Maimonides continues:

And Abraham's humility is seen when he said, "I am dust and ashes" (Gen. 18:27).

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Rabbeinu Yona comments:

Why did the author of this mishnah need to be so verbose here? It is because he wished to demonstrate what perfection consists of, namely the 3 matters: satisfaction, removal from the instinctual and humility.

Maimonides continues:

Due to his love of money, Bilam traveled from Aram Naharayim to curse the Jews [in spite of the difficulties]. And based on his great desire for sex, Bilam gave advice to Balak that the women act promiscuously with Israel.

Bilam gave a brilliant counsel. The Jews succeed because they sublimate their energies into wisdom. Other nations remain in the world of lusts. After Bilam failed at cursing Jews he told Balak that he could destroy Jews by engaging them in the instinctual. That will be their end, and he was correct. Bilam was brilliant and understood very advanced psychological warfare. This is more advanced than biological warfare. Maimonides says that you learn that Bilam was very lustful:

For were it not for his abundant lust, Bilam never would have advised Balak to entice the Jews through the women. Because man's advice is always in accord with his own thinking, for good people do not advise others on evil.



Why is this so? Perhaps Bilam was not a baal taiveh (lustful person) but he knew how to destroy the Jews. And he advised Balak due to his desire for the money [which Balak promised him for cursing the Jews]. It is a difficult question. Maimonides also says that Bilam cohabited with his donkey. This means that he was engaged in much sexual activity. This was his way of life.

Bilam was a highly organized and sophisticated individual. He did not simply follow every passing desire like an average person. Such people get nowhere and cannot become much of a rasha. A true rasha requires organization. Bilam had a philosophy: the good in life is wealth, honor, physical enjoyments and sexual pleasure. And a person must use his mind to attain these matters. Bilam was very successful in doing so. These sound familiar in American society.

“Students” of Bilam the rasha mean that Bilam represented a “way of life” [a path that

could be studied, but not indicating such a path is correct]. However, the components don’t equal the whole. For example, one person can chase wealth, but this does not necessitate a philosophy of his life; perhaps he chases wealth as he is insecure, and he has emotional problems. In one sense he is better than Bilam because he does not espouse a philosophy of lust. But in another sense, he is worse because it is a weakness in his soul; he has no control over his emotions. You hear proverbial stories of people dying with a fortune under their mattresses, yet they lived like paupers. These people had a desire for money, but they were not Bilam. They had a neurosis, but they don’t reflect a philosophy of life. The same applies to following desires. But when one spans the gamut and one is involved in wealth, physical pleasures and honor, these are not just weak emotions, which [by design] do not set themselves up in all areas. Rather, this type of personality

lives with a philosophy of life. That was Bilam.

Now, if Bilam only had a weakness for money, then in general he would have been a good person and would not have had a drive for the instinctual. But Maimonides says that if that were the case, Bilam could never have advised Balak to cause others [the Jews] to engage in sexual promiscuity since “good people do not advise others on evil.” It is psychologically impossible for a good person to destroy another person by offering destructive advice, as Bilam had advised Balak. Maimonides means that a good person never destroys another on a spiritual plane. For example, a person will not say, “I will destroy that person by preventing him from praying.” This is because once a person values the good, he cannot cause others to lose it. Again, a person cannot destroy his enemy by preventing the enemy’s acts of kindness so he might inherit gehenom. A person can

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only try to destroy another in an area dealing with earthly existence: he'll take his money and hurt him physically. But he cannot destroy others spiritually by removing from them a spiritual good. This is humanly impossible; no one would want to do such a thing. There is no satisfaction in such an act. If one is convinced that promiscuity is evil, and there is a higher benefit in life, he will not destroy another person with destructive advice. On the contrary, it will bother him to do so. When others try to stop us from Torah study [or living a Jewish life] it is not because they know what Torah is. Rather, they wish to strip us of an earthly superiority.

People's identification with others prevents them from destroying them spiritually. But the fact that Bilam had advised Balak in sexual promiscuity displayed that Bilam viewed promiscuity as a good, but only when it is under control. But Bilam felt the Jews will lose control and he will harm them. Bilam wished to destroy the Jews. But had Bilam felt that there was a higher good and that promiscuity was evil, he could not cause the Jews to indulge; it would disturb him.

Bilam hated the Jews because they represented the truth and because the Jews' existence conflicted with his whole way of life. That is Sinai. [Proof of God through revelation at Sinai and His selection of the Jews generates a jealous hatred in others].

A person can destroy another materialistically. For by removing materialism from another, one makes more materialism available to himself.

Why did Bilam receive prophecy? It was for the sake of the Jews. Like Lavan, Bilam never received prophecy because he intrinsically deserved it. He was a rasha. He did not have the proper prerequisite character to deserve prophecy. But he did possess intellect. He was the only case of a prophet who possessed intellect without perfection of character. He received prophecy because of a certain situation that befell the Jewish nation. The term "vayikar" is used in

connection with Bilam indicating that he did not deserve prophecy. [Vayikar indicates an accidental relationship. God accidentally or not essentially spoke with Bilam, indicating that intrinsically he did not deserve prophecy.] Bilam had a brilliant mind and when he was under prophetic influence, he saw true ideas. But the moment the influence of prophecy left him, he reverted back to his original state. This is because a person cannot be perfected by anything other than himself. Even if God gave him prophecy and he gained momentary perfection due to prophetic influence, when prophecy ceases, he reverts back to his evil self. That is the case of Bilam.

Chronicles calls Bilam a kosame, a soothsayer. This means that through his intelligence he caused people to believe that he could curse others. His curses affected others psychologically in a way that destroyed them; they believed that they were cursed. [But to believe that curses are effective in the mystical sense is false and idolatrous]. That is why God prevented Bilam from cursing the Jews; at that time, he could have destroyed them in this psychological manner (Ibn Ezra).

This is why our mishnah phrases this matter as "students" of Bilam and "students" of Abraham; both used intellect. Bilam and Abraham were powerful people with powerful minds. They were influential individuals. Bilam stood before kings. The mishnah tells us that with wisdom alone without proper character, one can be as far from perfection as east is from west. Perfection is attained only through a difficult struggle with the self where a person—inch by inch—makes advances and moves his nature to come in line with his perception of perfection. But if perfection is suddenly given to a person, even though he has the greatest intellect, he will lose it. For as long as knowledge [and proper character] is not part of one's nature, it is an alien entity and cannot possibly perfect him. [The perfected state Bilam experienced under prophecy could not endure once the prophecy ended because of his corrupt nature.] ■



SHARE



PARSHA

Do Blessings Matter?

RABBI REUVEN MANN

This week’s Parsha, Balak, takes us into very strange terrain. Jews are not unaccustomed to having enemies who intend them great harm. However, this is generally of the conventional type which one can prepare for.

For most of the exile Jews were easy prey for all the vicious predators that were out there. They had no way to fight back and this is what attracted the bullies to attack them. But that situation has changed dramatically.

Today there is an Israeli army that ranks among the best in the world. And the IAF is world class. So when Hamas shot missiles into Israeli cities recently Gaza was visited by the Air Force with targeted, stunning kills. Thank G-d that the era of silent suffering is part of our past.

Balak son of Tzippor King of Moab was fearful of the Jews. He knew that he was no match for them on the battlefield so he sought to weaken them in a different manner. He retained the services of Billam son of Beor to “curse” them for he knew that “who you curse is cursed and who you bless is blessed”.

What exactly was Billam able to achieve with his imprecations? The Torah does not endorse any kind of Voodoo which, in fact, falls under the heading of Idolatry. It does not believe that any human has the power to effectuate actual events in the natural world by uttering incantations.

Whatever man can achieve in this world is possible only by his utilization of the forces that Hashem established in His Universe. All of the great technological progress that we now

enjoy is due to the understanding of the laws of nature which has accrued to mankind through the study of science. Black magic has nothing to offer so beware of religious charlatans who seek to convince you otherwise.

So what exactly was the talent of Billam that attracted the notice of Balak? Rabbi Israel Chait explained that Billam was a shrewd manipulator who had very deep insights into the weaknesses of societies. He was able to detect when a nation was in a state of severe turmoil and on the brink of dissolution. At that point he would dramatically utter curses and incantations against the failing entity. And when the calamity inevitably occurred people would attribute it to the power of Billam’s curses.

This explains, said Rabbi Chait, why Hashem had to intervene to prevent Billam from cursing the Jews. For left to his own devices Billam would have peered deeply into the core makeup of the Jewish People and he might have discovered some fatal flaws in their inner character which, if revealed, would have been a source of great harm throughout our history.

This makes sense of Billam’s ability to bring down nations with his curses. But what is the explanation of, “and who you bless is blessed”? Of great significance are the words of the Sforno. He says that the power of Billam did not reside in conferring blessings. (And Balak only mentioned this to show respect not because it was true.)

Sforno deduces this from the fact that Balak did not request that Billam bless him so that he

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might have the strength to overcome the Jews, whom he detested. Rather, he believed that the only viable course was to have Billam weaken them by cursing them which was his true vocation.

This insight opens a window to understanding the nature of a genuine blessing. A wicked person cannot give blessings. Since he does not recognize the nature of the true good, what positive benefit can he confer on anyone? On the verse, "And G-d said to Billam, 'Do not go with them, do not curse the Nation for they are blessed'", Rashi comments that Billam responded to Hashem, "if so let me curse them in my place".

Hashem then said, "Do not curse the Nation", to which Billam retorted, "if so then I will bless them" to which Hashem answered, "They do not need your blessing for they are blessed". In conclusion Rashi says, this is akin to what one says to the hornet, "neither your honey nor your sting".

This teaches that the blessing of the Rasha (wicked one) is equal to his curse. Both are destructive because the wicked have no concept of

the true good and whatever they would give you will only bring harm.

A true bracha can only come from a Tzadik. That is because only he knows what the actual tov is and genuinely wants you to achieve it. He must have the wisdom and motivation to study your nature and situation and then offer a considered judgement as to how you might go forward. He can offer you clarity and the psychological confidence in yourself which is vital to succeeding in your mission.

One must, first and foremost, work on himself, develop his skills and increase his self-confidence. But one's subjective vision, especially in matters pertaining to his personal pursuits, is, of necessity, limited. If possible one should seek access to those who are truly wise and submit his plans and aspirations for their perusal.

The blessings of the wise and righteous are very potent and can have positive ramifications. In fact, authentic blessings matter greatly. May we merit to be worthy of them

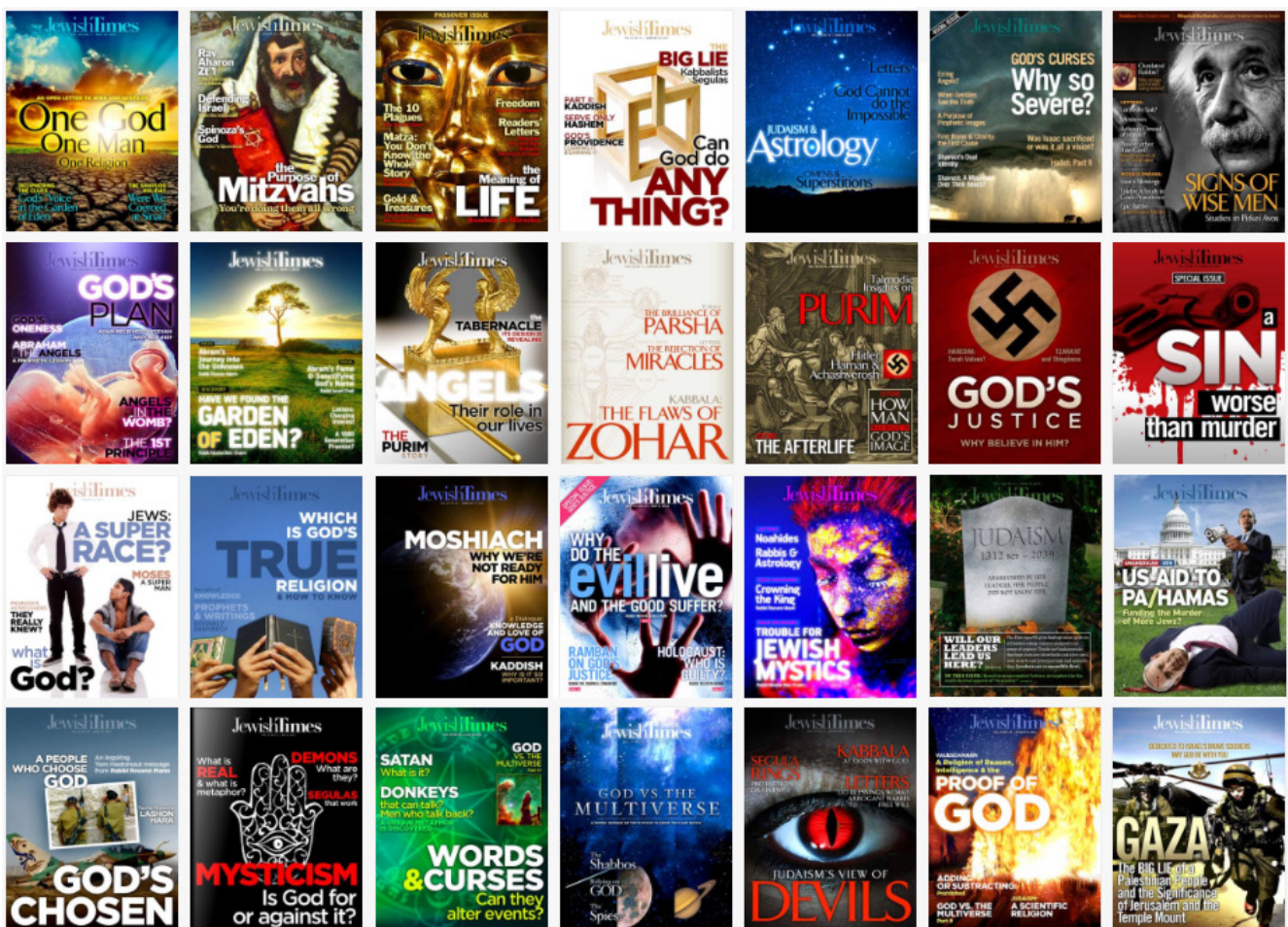
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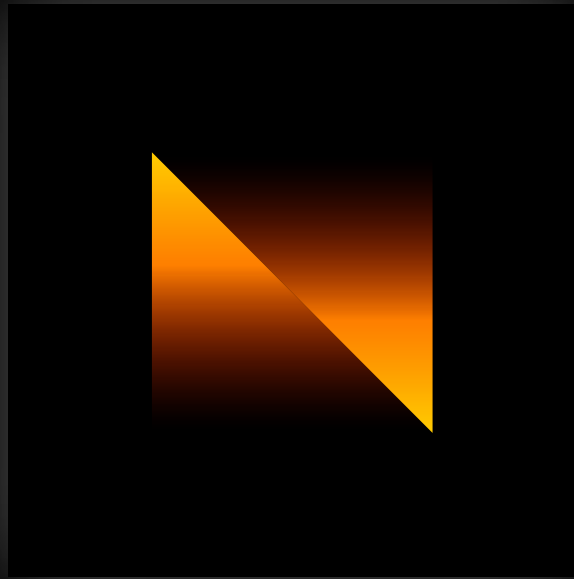
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CONDÉ NAST





METHOD IN TORAH STUDY

Freedom of Speech

Rabbi Bernie Fox

I. Methods of Torah study

One of the challenges of a Torah educator is making the Torah relevant to the students. One approach to establishing relevancy is to identify questions and issues that are interesting to the students. Then, the educator provides a survey of material from the Torah that addresses or is relevant to the issues.

This approach can result in a study process that is very different from the traditional method. In the traditional method, a section of the Torah is studied without preconception of its messages or meaning. The text speaks to us and shares its messages. When we create a survey of material relevant to an issue, we are no longer studying the text to uncover its messages. We have selected this text because it seems relevant to an issue we wish to explore. The issue may not be one of the messages of the text. This method puts aside the open-ended analysis of the text. Instead, it looks to the text for answers or comments relevant to a selected issue.

Consider an analogy. A scientist who is an expert in immunology is invited to a televised interview. She comes to the interview fashionably attired. The newscaster assigned to conduct the interview is intrigued by fashion and not as interested in science. The interviewer sees this as an opportunity to explore fashion trends and his questions focus on the scientist's outfit rather than immunology. The scientist came to discuss and share messages concerning immunology. But because the interviewer pursued an area of personal interest, the interview was not about the scientist's area of expertise and did not cover the messages she wished to communicate. It was about fashion – an issue relevant to the interviewer. Let us be aware of these two approaches to Torah study as we discuss Parshat Balak.

Now, please go and curse for me this nation because it is too mighty for me. Perhaps, I will be able to do battle with it, and I will expel it from the land. For I know that whom you bless is blessed and whom you curse is cursed. (Sefer BeMidbar 22:6)

II. The mystery of Bilam

Each time I teach Parshat Balak students are intrigued by Bilam. Balak, the king of Mo'av, recruits and hires Bilam to curse Bnai Yisrael. Hashem interferes. Repeatedly, Balak sets the stage for Bilam to place his curse on the Jewish people. Each time, Hashem forces Bilam to bless Bnai Yisrael. Eventually, Bilam stops resisting Hashem and willingly confers Hashem's blessing. He also shares with Balak a prophecy describing the destinies of Bnai Yisrael and other nations. The students want to understand Bilam's power. Did he have the capacity to confer blessings and curses or was he a clever deceiver? If he did have a power, what was it? These are compelling questions. There is an even better question. Why is the Torah so vague about Bilam? Why does it not tell us more about Bilam, whether he had some special power, and the nature of this power?

There is another question. Balak and Bilam wanted to curse Bnai Yisrael. Hashem interfered and transformed the intended curses into blessings. Why did Hashem care? Even if Bilam had some special power and could influence the destiny of individuals and nations, he could not countermand the wish of Hashem. His curse could not have an impact if it contradicted Hashem's will.

Let us summarize our questions:

- Did Bilam have a special power and if he did, what was it?
- Why does the Torah not reveal more about Bilam and address the above question?
- Why did Hashem interfere with Balak and Bilam? Bilam's curse could not overpower the will of Hashem!

III. The Torah focuses on its messages

Our starting point is the middle question. Why does the Torah not reveal more about Bilam and his power? This question is invalid. The question assumes that the Torah should address the issues in which we are interested. We believe that the aspects of the narrative that intrigue us should be fully developed. This assumption is wrong. The Torah has messages. It communicates them and provides the information relevant to them. It does not include completely irrelevant material. One seeking material on the Torah's attitudes toward sorcery, the occult, and other supernatural powers, will be frustrated by this parasha. It does not provide insight. These issues are not relevant to the messages of the parasha. Therefore, it does not deal with them. What are the messages the Torah is imparting? To answer this question, one must study the text without preconception. We must allow the Torah to speak and be attentive listeners.

(CONT. ON NEXT PAGE)

IV. An overview of the parasha

The parasha is composed of three parts. The first two deal directly with Balak and Bilam. The first section describes Balak's efforts to recruit Bilam. Bilam is eager to assist Balak in cursing the Jewish people but not willing to disobey Hashem. Balak sends an initial delegation to Bilam. When Bilam refuses to come to Balak, he sends a second more prestigious delegation. Eventually, Hashem allows Bilam to travel to Balak but warns him to say only that which He commands.

The second part of the parasha describes Balak's and Bilam's attempts to curse the Jewish people. Twice, Balak attempts to evoke a curse from Bilam. Bilam is willing and eager to comply. But each time, Hashem forces Bilam to replace his intended curse with a blessing.

Balak assumes that Bilam's initial resistance to responding to his summons and his refusal to curse the Jewish people is willful. He believes Bilam has some personal motive for resisting him. He wonders whether he is holding out for a greater reward or honor. At the conclusion of the second section of the parasha, Balak tries one last time to elicit a curse from Bilam. Again, Bilam blesses Bnai Yisrael. At this point, Balak recognizes that Bilam is not resisting him. Hashem is closely controlling Bilam. Balak tells Bilam, "Hashem has deprived you of the honor I was willing to give you."

Let us summarize these sections of the parasha. The Torah describes a King Balak who is eager to curse the Jewish people. He believes that this curse will be effective. With it, he will be able to battle Bnai Yisrael. His instrument for the curse is Bilam.

He is a willing and eager partner. Balak and Bilam share in the determination to curse the Jewish people. But Hashem repeatedly transforms Bilam's curses into blessings. At first, Balak assumes Bilam is maneuvering to secure something from him. Eventually, he recognizes that Bilam wants to comply. Hashem is controlling Bilam. In short, the parasha describes two partners who wish to curse Bnai Yisrael, at least one believes that this curse will harm the Jewish people. Eventually, they recognize that Hashem is confounding them and replacing their intended curses with blessings.

Now, flee to your place. I said that I would greatly honor you. Now, Hashem has restrained you from [receiving] honor. (Sefer BeMidbar 24:11)

V. Balak's recognition of Hashem

This is the story. What is its message? There is more than one message. One of the most moving messages is that these two enemies of the Jewish people produced a profound Kiddush Hashem – sanctification of Hashem. Ultimately, Balak pronounced his conclusion that Hashem is in control, and He will not allow them to curse His nation.

To better understand this Kiddush Hashem, let us consider a modern analogy. The State of Israel has many enemies. They have tried to destroy it. Many are still committed to its destruction. But their repeated efforts to achieve their objective failed. Israel contin-

ues to exist and flourish. What is the response of these enemies to Israel's survival? Some have accepted Israel's existence and made some peace with this reality. Others persist in their efforts to find and implement the means of destroying Israel. Did any one of these enemies have Balak's epiphany? Did Egypt, Jordan, or any of Israel's newfound friends declare, "Hashem – the G-d of the Jewish people – rules the universe. We cannot overcome His will. He will not allow us to succeed." That would be a completely amazing declaration. That is exactly the pronouncement made by Balak!

VI. Hashem's objective

Now, we better understand the story. Let us return to our original questions. Why is the Torah silent on the issue of Bilam's powers? The Torah does not address this issue because it is irrelevant to its message. The important element is that Balak believed that Bilam had the power to influence the destiny of individuals and nations. Whether he was correct or deluded is not relevant to the narrative.

So, what powers – if any – were possessed by Bilam? The Torah does not say. Our interest in this issue cannot be satisfied through this text [1]. The text is not dealing with the question.

Finally, why did Hashem care about Balak and Bilam's plans to curse the Jewish people? No curse can overcome Hashem's will. The answer is that Hashem did not interfere to protect Bnai Yisrael. He interfered so that even two intense enemies of the Jewish people, who were completely committed to our destruction, would recognize, and declare to all humanity that the will of Hashem is supreme and that He protects His nation.

VII. Giving the Torah its voice

This study illustrates studying a text for its messages. When we allow the Torah to speak to us, it shares its messages. To accomplish this, we must set aside preconceptions, let the Torah speak, and be attentive listeners. ■

[1] The commentators discuss this issue. Included among their explanations are the following: Rashi says Bilam understood how to anticipate the proper moment at which Hashem is inclined to respond to and implement a blessing or curse. His power was not magical. He understood providence enough to anticipate when a nation or person was in disfavor or favor with Hashem. He took advantage of these opportunities to pronounce his blessings or curses. Orech Chayim contends that Bilam was a complete fake. He used astrology to figure out likely events and then preceded them with curses and blessings. He created the impression that his pronouncements influenced the outcome of events. Sforno suggests that he could curse by appealing to Hashem's anger. His curses were appeals to Hashem to punish iniquity. He uncovered a nation's failings and prayed to Hashem to punish the nation.



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OUR PURPOSE: WISDOM & MORALITY



God created man to live by truths concerning Him, creation, others and ourselves.

We must study God's instruction about what He is, what is idolatrous or fallacy, we must study nature, psychology, philosophy and morality. This draws us closer to God and He to us, and creates societal harmony which fosters greater Torah for all.

[MORE BELOW](#)

Kindness: As equals, all humans must treat others as we wish to be treated. Charity, kindness and justice demand we rise above personal and selfish emotions and recognize that God made others as He made ourselves. Doing so creates harmony, and earns His kindness.

Racism: A Lie: Man descends from Adam. [Black/white twins](#) unveil the lie of racism. Bible denounces it: Moses' wife was black, our kings married Egyptians and Messiah descends from Moabites. "Better is the day of death than the day of birth" (Ecc. 7:1). Birth doesn't define us; how we live does.

Insecurity: Man's insecurities can be false, but reality is greater, as it is truth. Man seeks security about his future, accepting fallacies like astrology, amulets, omens, horoscopes and others. God prohibited such practices precisely because they are false. God is more powerful than false notions. Rely on Him alone.

Happiness: Many think wealth and success secure happiness. But Torah teaches happiness stems from study. When pursuing wisdom, one is most happy as Torah offers childlike amazement at every turn. Study offers the daily novelty necessary to retain interest and the depth that offers amazement.

Pleasing Others: Don't seek approval over truth. Torah says, "What can man do to me?" (Psalms 56:5). "Don't fear man" (Deut. 1:7). "Desist from man whose soul is in his nostrils, for what is he considered?" (Isaiah 2:22). Mortal attention is irrelevant. Following God earns all goodness.

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METAPHOR

Bilam & the Donkey



Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim

The story of Bilam and his donkey contains unbelievable events and is described in great detail. As the account in Numbers 22:21 goes, Balak was the king of Moav at that time and was faced with the fear of millions of Jews damaging his land by gaining safe passage. To avert this problem, Balak called upon Bilam, a Prophet, and requested that Bilam curse the Jews so that Balak would have ease in attacking them and in driving them out. When Balak sent the first group of messengers to Bilam, Bilam's reply was that he must consult with God. God's answer was that Bilam should not curse the Jews for they are blessed. Bilam informed the messengers that he was restrained from going by God's word. Balak persisted and sent more messengers; now higher in rank. Bilam responded by saying that even if his house was filled with silver and gold he couldn't go. Nonetheless Bilam requested an answer from God. This time God gave him permission, however, he still must refrain from cursing the Jews.

What happens next is quite remarkable. Bilam arose early and God was angry that he went. (This was after God gave him permission) God placed an angel in the path to deter him as he was riding on his donkey. It states that the donkey saw the angel standing in the path with an outstretched sword in his hand, and that the donkey turned aside and went into the field. Bilam hit the donkey to return it to the path. The angel stood a second time in the vineyard. There was a fence on both sides of the donkey and Bilam. The donkey saw the angel and pressed up against the wall in avoidance, crushing Bilam's leg. Bilam continued to smite the donkey. The angel passed to a place that was narrow with no room to pass left or right. The donkey saw the angel and crouched down under Bilam and Bilam's anger burned, smiting the donkey – this time, with a stick. God opened the mouth of the donkey and it said to Bilam, "What have I done that you have smitten me these three times?" Bilam responded, "Because you have mocked me. If there were a sword in my hand I would kill you." The donkey said, "Am I not the donkey that you have ridden upon from long before until today? Is it my nature to act this way?" Bilam replied, "No."

God then opened Bilam's eyes and he saw the angel of God standing in the path with a sword outstretched in his hand. Bilam then prostrated himself before the angel. The angel said to Bilam, "For what have you smitten your donkey these three times? Behold I have come out to turn you away because your way is contrary to me. Your donkey has seen me and turned aside these three times. Would it be that you would turn aside. Because now I would kill you and cause her (the donkey) to live." Bilam says, "I have sinned. I didn't know that you stood in the path to turn me aside. And now if this is bad in your eyes, I will return." The angel informs Bilam that he may continue, but only that which he tells him may he say. Rashi states that the significance of "three" times represents two things: the three forefathers, and the three Jewish festivals. Ibn Ezra states that once the donkey spoke it died, and that with each successive hitting, Bilam used a stronger object.

Following are questions on this section, including the meaning behind both Rashi's and Ibn Ezra's statements:

- 1) Why didn't Bilam see the angel of God at first?
- 2) What's the significance of the sword?
- 3) Why, according to Ibn Ezra, did Bilam hit the donkey with a stronger object each time?
- 4) Why did the donkey die after it spoke?
- 5) What was the argument of the donkey?
- 6) Why wasn't Bilam astounded at the ability of an animal to talk?!
- 7) What does the fence allude to, and why did the path become more and more impossible to traverse with each appearance of the angel?
- 8) Of what significance is it that Bilam's leg was crushed?

Maimonides states (Guide for the Perplexed, Book II, chap. XLII) that every case in Scripture where we find an angel appearing or talking, the entire account is describing a vision, and not an actual physical event. The event didn't take place in physical reality, but in a person's mind. This being the case, this entire story must be interpreted in this light, according to Maimonides. This is a parable for a conflict with which Bilam was struggling.

If we refer to the events leading up to Bilam riding on the donkey, we see that Bilam comes off appearing as a true follower of God. But with a closer look, his true nature is seen. He was asked to curse the Jews. God told him he could not. The fact that Bilam (during the account of the second messengers) requests from God again to know whether he can curse the Jews shows that he wanted to curse them. That's why he said, "God has restrained me from cursing." Meaning that he really desired to curse, but God prevented him.

This desire to curse the Jews awoke in Bilam a strong conflict. On the one hand, he desired the destruction of the Jewish people. On the other hand, he knew that God blessed them. Bilam was well aware that God's establishment of His Providence over the Jews was due to our forefather's perfection. Abraham's self-realization of the absurdity of idolatry, his conclusion of the reality of monotheism and the Oneness of God secured this treaty of God's Providence. With this knowledge, Bilam was greatly troubled as to which path to follow, namely 1) his desire for the destruction of the Jews, or 2) the word of God. This entire account is a parable of his conflict.

Interpreting the elements of this story as representing psychological phenomena, the story's real meaning can be explained.

Bilam, in great conflict, decides to travel to Balak with the goal of cursing of the Jews. In order to do so, he must suppress his knowledge of God's command to refrain from cursing them. Riding on his donkey represents the suppression of what his conscience (the donkey) "sees." "Riding" conveys a sense of dominion over another object. Bilam himself (in this vision) represents his evil instincts and thus, isn't aware of reality (the angel of God). One's instincts aren't designed with the ability to judge what is morally good or evil. Instincts are not perceivers: they simply emote. This explains why Bilam couldn't "see" the angel. Bilam, in this story, represents his instincts – a faculty of man unable to 'perceive.' Instincts have only one function: they guide a person towards

instinctual satisfaction.

The donkey represents Bilam's conscience: the part of man that detects good and evil.

The angel represents reality, or his intellect: the ability to perceive what is real and true. Bilam's inability to curse the Jews was so threatening, it was represented by an angel of God wielding a sword, a very terrifying sight. The conscience, represented by the donkey, is designed to perceive and make value judgments. This is its main function.

Now that we understand the main components of the parable, (Bilam, his donkey, and the angel represent respectively the instinctual drive, the conscience, and reality), we must interpret this account accordingly.

Bilam riding on his donkey can be interpreted as his evil instincts are riding (suppressing) his conscience. His conscience alone is aware of the reality – "the donkey sees the angel," but Bilam doesn't. Whenever the conscience goes "off of the path," it starts to become more conscious, making Bilam sense his error. Therefore, Bilam suppresses his conscience – "hitting the donkey." His conscience slows him down – "crushes his leg" – as he tries to go on his "path." Bilam's weapon for suppressing his conscience becomes stronger – "he hits the donkey with a stick." Then the conscience finally prevails – "the donkey talks."

The argument of the donkey is that "it's not me who's at fault" – meaning that Bilam gains insight (from his "talking conscience") into his actions and realizes that there's something behind his suppression of his conscience. At this point, Bilam becomes aware of his denial only through God's kindness. That's why God had to open his eyes. The donkey dying after it spoke means that once his conscience made him aware of this information, the conscience ceases to function – termed here as death. It did its job. It "dies."

Rashi's statement that the three things shown to Bilam's donkey alludes to the three forefathers and the three festivals fits in beautifully: the donkey – Bilam's conscience – was contemplating the primary reason for God's direct Providence over the Jews, namely the perfection of our forefathers – which entitled the Jewish nation to God's Providence. Bilam's conflict was directly caused by these three individuals (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob). Had it not been for them, he might have been able to curse the Jews. That's why the donkey turned aside (Bilam's conscience experienced greater conflict) when it thought about the forefathers. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob brought about the relationship with God, and now, Bilam desired to curse them! But all curses are from God. We also see why Bilam acted calmly towards a talking animal, as Maimonides states, this was all a vision.

In summary, the entire account of Bilam and his donkey – according to Maimonides – was a vision or conflict, happening only in his mind. In order for the Torah to inform us of this, the Torah writes it as a metaphor so that many ideas and psychological principles can be capsulated into one account. A parable also conceals ideas from those who would shrug at them, if they were written openly. The fact that Bilam did travel to Balak in physical reality is not discounted by this explanation. ■

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