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What makes you Jewish?  
What did the Rabbis say?

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**Weekly Parsha**

# the Zealot

RABBI BERNARD FOX

“And Pinchas, the son of Elazar, (who was) the son of Aharon, saw. And he arose from among the assembly and he took a spear in his hand.” (BeMidbar 25:7)

It is interesting that there are certain practices that are generally taboo among Jews, regardless of the level of their commitment to

(continued on page 4)

## Bilam

RABBI ISRAEL CHAIT

Transcribed by students



Upon studying the events of Balak's hiring Bilam we reach the inescapable conclusion that Balak was truly awed by Bilam's powers. He relentlessly attempts to hire Bilam to curse the Children of Israel. It also seems apparent that God did not want Bilam to curse the Children of Israel as he placed many impediments in this attempted mission. God ultimately converts Bilam's curse into a blessing.

This entire incident raises many disturbing questions. Why is this story highlighted, throughout the generations many people have cursed us? Furthermore, why is God concerned with Bilam's curse? It seems that if Bilam uttered his curse it would have been dangerous, as though it could influence the rova olam?

In order to resolve this difficulty we must analyze the personality of Bilam to appreciate the threat that he posed. Chazal tell us that Bilam possessed

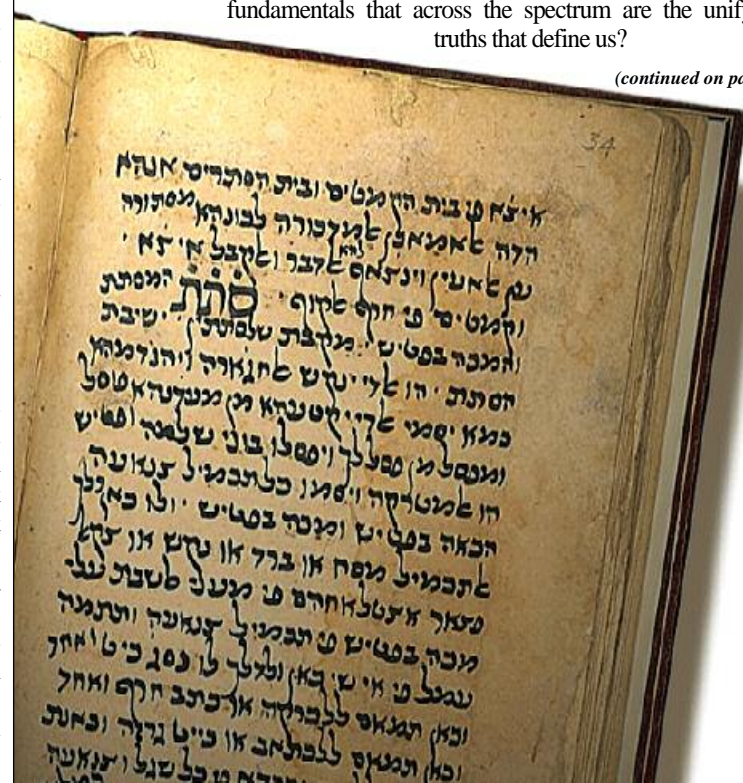
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## What Defines Jew and Noachide?

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

In an age where the differences between Jewish sects and communities are enough to render each a different religion, one wonders what identifies us all as “Jewish”? What are the ties that bind, the fundamentals that across the spectrum are the unifying truths that define us?

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(Bilam cont. from page 1)

## Weekly Parsha

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great genius and excellent political acumen. He was the advisor that counseled Pharaoh that all Israelite male children should be thrown into the river. He had the political foresight to appreciate that every political movement requires a leader at its forefront.

The Gemara states that Bilam possessed great powers of perception. However, he was also very devious. When he saw a person was in a precarious situation, albeit political or economical, he would curse that person. The individual's ultimate downfall was attributed to Bilam's ostensible supernatural powers. Bilam was a machiavellian type of personality, a great political genius and adviser to kings. He counseled his clients by exposing their enemy's political weakness. We can therefore appreciate the Gemara in Brachos 7a, which tells us that Bilam knew the time when God

was angry with Klal Yisroel. He was capable of determining what Bnai Yisroel's weakness was and when was the proper time to exploit that weakness. A student of history can appreciate that certain critical events trigger many different phenomena, which in turn have very severe ramifications. History is replete with specific turning points, which shape the course of mankind. There are two factors, which play a role and permit the exploitation of a political vulnerability. One is the ability to know the nature of your antagonist. Secondly, you must be cognizant of an event that can occur which would allow this weakness in his nature to present itself. This event would afford one the opportunity to take advantage of that vulnerability. Bilam as a political genius had this ability. He perceived a weakness in Klal Yisroel, which would cause their divisiveness and self destruction. Therefore, Chazal inform us that God was not angry with Bnai Yisroel, throughout this entire event. This has added significance since God did not allow an event to occur that would have afforded Israel's enemies the opportunity to take advantage of them.

Bilam's plan was to expose the weakness of the Israelites. He recognized that God relates to the Children of Israel as evidenced by their exodus from Israel. He could not just wage war with these chosen people but rather he had to curse them. The curse essentially was to expose the weakness of Israel for all generations. This weakness, if exposed would have allowed Israel's enemies to exploit it

and ultimately cause the self-destruction of the Jews.

We can now appreciate why Balak pursued Bilam to curse the Children of Israel. However, Bilam utilized his talents as a means of enriching himself. Although he had great intellectual gifts, he used them merely to cater to his materialistic desires. Balak thereby offered Bilam exorbitant amounts of money to undertake this task of cursing the Israelites. Bilam due to his materialistic nature really desired to accept Balak's task. However, as part of his mystique and to profess some supernatural talents, Bilam, told Balak's emissaries to stay the night. He had no qualms about going on a mission to destroy the Israelites. He previously had advised Pharaoh concerning their destruction. However, his hesitancy was merely a clever guise to bolster his persona as a God like figure. He



professed that he was communicating with God at night and therefore requested them to stay. Bilam was the ultimate rationalist. He was a calculating character that used his genius to exploit people's insecurities and quest for the supernatural. However, contrary to his plan, God appeared to him in a prophetic vision and warned him about his attempted mission. God instructed him not to go curse these people because they are blessed. This vision was startling for Bilam, the

ultimate rationalist. He manipulated peoples' fears and merely professed supernatural powers. Thus God's appearance to him was shocking. He therefore, as a rationalist, was incredulous as to the revelation. Hence, he did not advise Balak's messengers to leave, but rather wanted them to wait another night to determine if this was merely an illusion.

The second night when God appeared, he advised Bilam you can get up and go with these people, but you can only do what I tell you. This second vision raises difficulties. Originally God advised Bilam not to go, but seemingly changes his mind and tells him to go, but obey what I command you. This would seem to support the inane proposition that God changed his mind. Furthermore, after Bilam goes, God expressed anger that he went, even though God consented to his journey, provided Bilam did not violate his command. Upon closer analysis we can appreciate that God relates to man on two different levels.

(continued on next page)

(Bilam cont. from page 2)

God relates to man in the absolute. The best and most rational course of action is the conduct most desired. In this instance this was set out in his first vision. Do not go and curse the nation. God also relates to man in terms of the individuals own emotional framework.

The ideal is not to even go on the mission. However, emotionally Bilam wanted to go. His ego and materialism propelled him on the mission. Perhaps this vision was really just an illusion and he could still salvage his self image and enrich himself. Therefore, God also relates to man in terms of the subjective. If you feel compelled to go, then go, but do not disobey my command. The objective remains constant. However, God expressed his anger because Bilam fell prey to his emotions and was incapable of acting in terms of the objective.

Bilam's emotional makeup was unique. He was a brilliant thinker capable of great powers of perception. He was not subject to the irrational insecurities of his contemporary man. On the contrary, he rose above his peers and his genius was unique. However, Bilam the consummate rationalist was incapable of perceiving the ultimate reality. He utilized his abilities merely to satisfy his ego and his materialistic tendencies. He was totally blind to the philosophy of Judaism. Judaism maintains that the world of chachma is the essence. It is a reflection of the creator, the ultimate reality. However success and the accumulation of material goods all extraneous concerns for the talmid chacham, were the motivating factors for Bilam.

Bilam's only philosophy was that the intellect was merely a means for satisfying his desires. He rejected the concept of an objective good. This notion ran counter to his basic philosophy. That is why the Torah tells us that he initiated the mission by harnessing his own donkey. He was demonstrating that his visions were merely aberrations. There is no objective reality. Therefore, God expressed his anger at Bilam for he failed to comprehend true reality. He was guided by his emotions and had to demonstrate that he Bilam, the rationalist, was the ultimate master of his own destiny.

Despite Bilam's recalcitrance in pursuing this mission, God utilized his donkey as the means for thwarting his desires. Irrespective of whether the donkey actually talked or if the entire incident was a prophetic vision, it demands our analysis. The donkey prevented Bilam's progress on three separate occasions. The first detour the donkey went into the field when it saw an angel of God standing in its way with a sword drawn in his hand. Despite Bilam's smiting the donkey and prodding it to proceed, it was again blocked by the angel of God. This time the donkey did not move and engaged Bilam in a dialogue. It was only after this dialogue that God opened Bilam's eyes and permitted him to see the angel of God blocking the

road. Rashi comments that at the outset only the donkey was capable of seeing the angel because God gave it permission. Had Bilam seen the angel, since he was a man of intelligence, his mind would have been damaged upon beholding this sight. Bilam was blinded to the philosophy of Judaism and incapable of perceiving an objective reality. The previous night's prophetic visions were startling to him and threatened his convictions as the master logician. However, due to the strength of his belief he discounted them and proceeded upon his mission. Therefore, Rashi tells us, had God permitted him to see the angel immediately, he would have been devastated. To suddenly be confronted with the phenomenon of a greater metaphysical reality, would have destroyed him. Therefore, the perception of this metaphysical reality was only comprehended by his donkey. The donkey represented his stubborn desire to proceed, which was thwarted. At this point, he was only capable of perceiving the truth in a distorted manner. Emotionally Bilam desired to proceed, to continue through life with his distorted vision of reality. However, the donkey that he rode on since his youth, did not budge. He hit the donkey three times, but to no avail. He did not investigate the situation to determine if anything was bothering his normally faithful donkey. He hit the donkey repeatedly, which reflected his irrational desire to accomplish his goal. However, the donkey spoke to him and questioned his determination and asked Bilam whether it ever prevented his movement in the past. At this point the Torah tells us that God opened Bilam's eyes and he saw the angel of God standing in the roadway. This vision was possible only after Bilam contemplated the situation and examined his irrational behavior. He realized that his donkey would not proceed despite being hit three times. He slowly started to realize that there was some metaphysical force behind these abnormal events. The previous prophetic visions and the current events, led him to realize there was a force at work that did not want him to proceed. He was beginning to appreciate that these were not just physical obstacles but rather a manifestation of a metaphysical reality. Three times the donkey was hit but did not proceed. Bilam started to realize that this symbolized that he was dealing with a unique nation that had three forefathers guided by God. The Israelites were a special nation that celebrate three festivals whereby they acknowledge their unique relationship with God. He slowly started to appreciate that he was dealing with not just another political entity, but rather a unique nation under God's special providence. God allowed Bilam to perceive these concepts by placing him into circumstances, whereby his genius and power of perception enabled him to perceive this metaphysical reality.

Bilam's ultimate blessing of the Children of Israel

was a testimony to his powers of perception. However, Bilam's prophecy was different that other prophets. Bilam was only capable of this higher level of perception when aided by external circumstances. The true prophet obtains his prophecy by constantly changing and improving himself guided by his intellect. The true prophet's prophecy is inherent to the person and emerges as a result of the state of his intellectual perfection. Bilam only obtained his prophecy when aided by external circumstances. Therefore, Chazal tell us that Bilam eventually became a diviner. In the absence of external phenomena, he fell prey to his materialistic tendencies. His prophecy was not inherent and thus when the external circumstances were not present he was doomed to failure. □



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traditional Torah values. One of these pervasive taboos is intermarriage between Jews and non-Jews. On occasion, non-Jews have remarked to me that this attitude strikes them as xenophobic. But – in truth – this is not an expression of xenophobia. One of the factors that seem to underlie this inhibition is the association between intermarriage and assimilation. This association is so strong that the statistic most often used to measure the rate of assimilation among Jews is the intermarriage rate. The implied message is that intermarriage and assimilation are somewhat synonymous. In other words, this association is based on the premise that intermarriage, almost inevitably, will lead to the assimilation of the Jewish partner in the marriage. Is there a Torah basis for this association?

Maimonides explains that it is prohibited for a Jew to have sexual relations with a non-Jew. The punishment for violating this negative commandment is lashes.[1] Maimonides adds that the Torah is determined to preserve the commitment of Bnai Yisrael to Torah observance. In order to create a barrier against assimilation, the Torah allows only for intimate relations between Jews. Intimacy between individuals creates strong emotional bonds. These emotional bonds will lead to assimilation of each other's values. If the two individuals share the same religious outlook, then this bond will allow each to reinforce the other's values. But, if their religious values conflict, then the religious identity of one or both of the partners will be jeopardized.[2]

Maimonides' assessment of the effects of intermarriage is not merely based on psychological and sociological insight. His position is founded upon an incident described in our parasha.

Our parasha begins by recounting the efforts of Balak, the king of Moav, to defeat Bnai Yisrael. Balak hired Bilaam to curse Bnai Yisrael. Bilaam was believed to have supernatural powers. Balak believed that if Bilaam could be induced to curse Bnai Yisrael, then Moav could successfully defeat Bnai Yisrael in battle. However, rather than cursing Bnai Yisrael, Bilaam blessed them. Balak realized that Bnai Yisrael could not be cursed. Balak and Bilaam separated. Each returned to his home.

The end of the parasha discusses a related incident. Bnai Yisrael are camped in Shittim. This placed them in close proximity of Moav. Familiarity developed between the men of Bnai Yisrael and the women of Moav. These relations became intimate and sexual. Soon, these men and women began to share cultures. This led to these men associating with the idol of Moav – Ba'al Peor.

Our Sages concluded that this incident in our

parasha in which sexual intimacy progressed into assimilation was not an isolated, behavioral aberration. Instead, the incident represents an example of normative human behavior. It can generally be assumed that sexual intimacy will result in emotional bonds, and these bonds promote assimilation.

The account of this incident ends with a violent, and somewhat disturbing turn of events. A member of Bnai Yisrael brought a woman from Midyan into the midst of the people and openly engaged in intimate sexual behavior with her. Pinchas, the son of Elazar and the grandson of Aharon, observed this travesty and reacted. He seized a spear and drove it through the two of them.

This incident is codified into halacha. But, before we can consider halacha's treatment of this incident, some basic background is needed. As we have noted, Maimonides explains that sexual intimacy between Jews and non-Jews is prohibited. He further explains that the Torah only prohibits intimate relations between the Jew and non-Jew in the context of marriage – if the two participants live together. Although casual sexual liaisons are also prohibited, the Torah does not empower the courts to punish this behavior. However, the Sages did institute a punishment of lashes for this activity.[3]

On the surface, these laws seem to contradict the implications of the incident in our parasha. The two individuals executed by Pinchas were engaged in sexual relations. But, the context of marriage was missing. No explicit Torah law was violated – the Torah only explicitly prohibits sexual relations in the context of marriage. What basis and authority did Pinchas have for executing these two people? Furthermore, even if these two individuals had violated the law prohibiting relations between Jew and non-Jew, the punishment for violating the commandment is lashes. But, Pinchas executed these two people!

This issue is discussed in the Talmud, and Maimonides codifies the discussion. He explains that if the Jew and non-Jew publicly engage in sexual relations, a zealot – like Pinchas – is permitted to execute the participants. Furthermore, the zealous behavior is praiseworthy![4] In other words, Pinchas is vindicated. The two people that he responded to had made a point of conducting their liaison in public. He observed this overt, public sexual behavior between a Jew and non-Jew, and he assumed the role of the zealot. Not only was he permitted to do so, his behavior was worthy of praise!

Already, a number of questions emerge. According to Maimonides, the two people executed by Pinchas had not violated an explicit

Torah prohibition. Yet, Pinchas was permitted to execute them, and was praised for doing so. How is it possible to endorse the execution of two people that have not violated any explicit law on the Torah level?

Ra'avad raises a second issue. Generally, before a person can be executed, he must be warned that he is violating a commandment. Maimonides makes no reference to this requirement in the case of the zealot. Apparently, the zealot can carry out an execution without providing a prior warning.[5] Of course, these two questions are related. Since – according to Maimonides – no explicit Torah commandment is being violated, it would be impossible to provide a warning. What commandment would serve as the basis for the zealot's warning? However, Ra'avad's question does indicate that Maimonides' position results in a fundamental deviation from normative halacha – an execution can take place without prior warning.

If we proceed further in Maimonides' discussion of this area, additional questions emerge. Maimonides explains that the zealot can only act at the moment of the incident. But, once the two partners are no longer engaged in sexual activity, the zealot is not permitted to act.[6] Now, if the zealot is allowed to execute these individuals because of the inappropriateness of their behavior, what difference does it make whether the execution takes place while the two people are still sexually engaged, or whether it takes place soon afterwards? If their behavior is so seriously sinful as to deserve execution, the zealot should be permitted to carry out this punishment even after the sexual activity has ended.

Maimonides follows this ruling with another that is, perhaps, the most astounding of his comments. If the zealot asks the court to advise him, the court cannot tell the zealot to carry out the execution. Maimonides adds that, furthermore, if the person the zealot is attempting to execute defends himself and kills his assailant, he is not liable.[7]

Let us consider these two rulings. The court cannot direct the zealot to act, or even confirm that it is proper to do so. How is it possible for Maimonides to maintain that the zealot is acting properly and that his behavior is praiseworthy, and, at the same time, contend that the court cannot direct or even confirm the propriety of this behavior? In addition, if the zealot is acting properly, then what right does the sinner have to kill the zealot?

In order to resolve these questions, we must better understand the Torah's position regarding normative punishments. The courts are charged with the duty of enforcing observance of these commandments. The courts have the authority

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and responsibility to punish specific violations. Their role is to determine whether a crime or sin has been committed. If their judgment is that this is the case, then the guilty party has a liability to receive the punishment. The court merely responds to this liability. In carrying out a punishment, the courts are completely reactive. A liability to receive punishment has been determined to exist. The court reacts and responds to this liability.

Let us contrast this to the execution carried out by the zealot. A zealot is a person who is deeply committed to his convictions. If these convictions have a firm basis – as in the case of a person who is zealous in regard to the Torah, then a zealous attitude is appropriate. However, the zealot is not reactive. No court has judged the case, and no liability to receive punishment has been created. The zealot is not responding to a liability. Instead, he acts upon a personal commitment to protect the Torah. In the specific case of a Jew engaged in overt, public sexual behavior with a non-Jew, this zealot is permitted to, and commended for, acting on his convictions.

In short, a normative punishment stems from a liability within the convicted sinner or criminal to be punished. The courts merely respond to this liability. In contrast, the zealot acts out of personal conviction and is not responding to a liability created through a court judgment.

Based on this distinction, the questions we have outlined can be resolved. First, how can the zealot execute a person for sexual activity with a non-Jew if the Torah is only explicit in prohibiting this behavior in the context of marriage – and even then, only condemns the sinner to lashes? This question is easily resolved. The zealot is not responding to a liability created by the violation of an explicit Torah mitzvah. In fact, the court has not convened and judged the person. The zealot is permitted to take action – in this specific case – as an expression of the intensity of his own convictions. Therefore, the absence of any violation of an explicit mitzvah, punishable by death, is not a factor.

Ra'avad's question on Maimonides is also answered. It is true that, in this case, the zealot is not required to warn the violator that he is violating the Torah. But, this

requirement of providing a warning is designed to determine the culpability of the sinner or criminal. In other words, his guilt can only be established if he has first been warned. But, the zealot is not acting in response to the guilt of the sinner. He is given the authority to express his zealousness. Therefore, no prior warning is needed.

Why can the zealot only act at the moment at which the sexual behavior is taking place? This seems to be the question that is most easily answered. The sinner that the zealot seeks to punish has not been found guilty in a court. The zealot can only act because the Torah allows him to give expression to the depth of his convictions. But, the zealot is not permitted to be an avenger. He is permitted to bring this public desecration to an abrupt and emphatic end. Therefore, his authority is limited to the time at which the sin is occurring. But, once the sexual act has ended, the zealot no longer has a role. Now, only the courts can act.

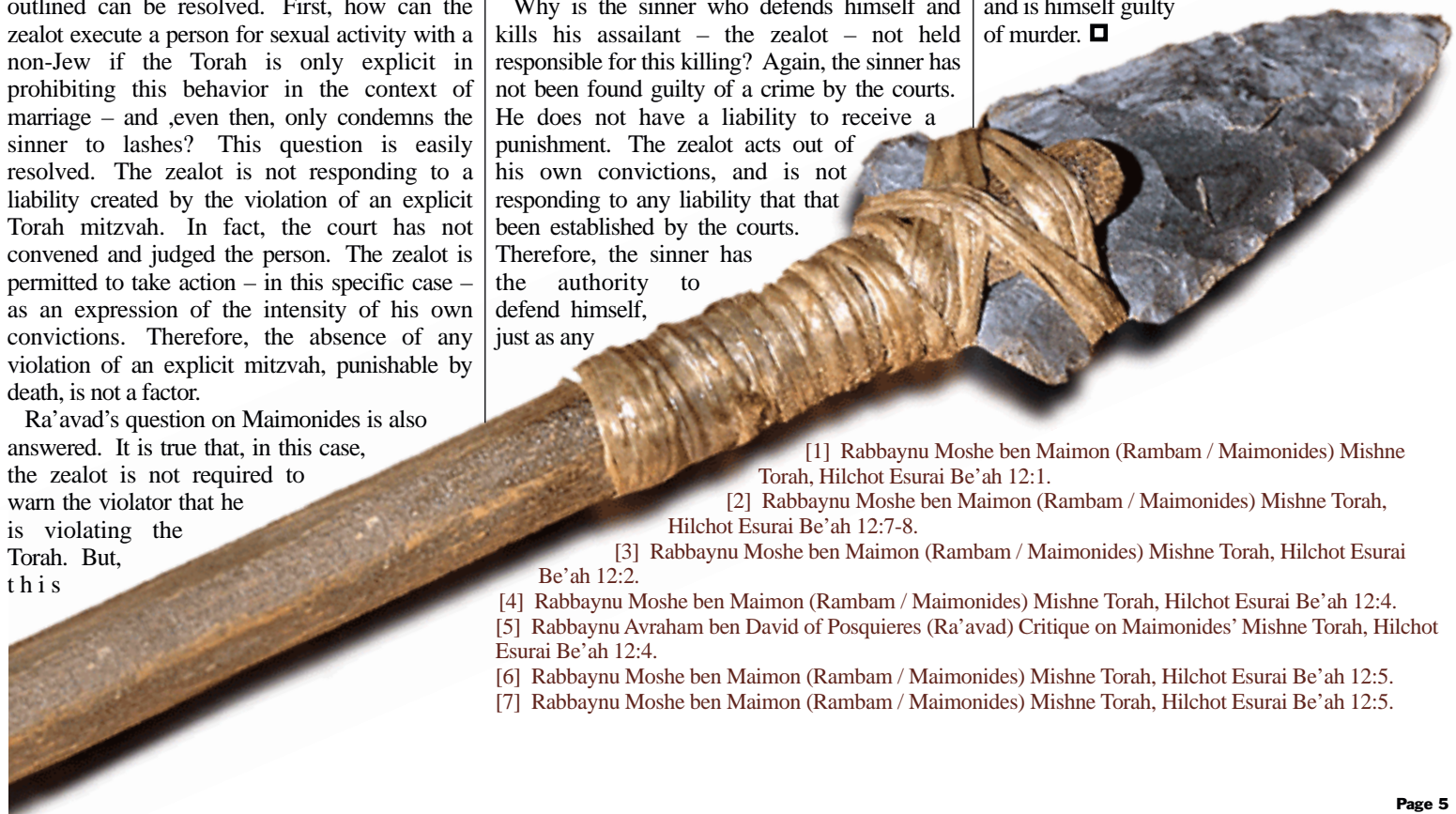
Why can the courts not direct the zealot? First, the courts decide innocence or guilt on the basis of specific principles of jurisprudence. The sinner has not been judged. So, the court is in no position to issue a statement regarding the guilt of the sinner. But more importantly, a zealot acts out of the strength and depth of his own personal convictions. If this person must first go to the court for approval of his actions, then his claim of zealousness is questionable.

Why is the sinner who defends himself and kills his assailant – the zealot – not held responsible for this killing? Again, the sinner has not been found guilty of a crime by the courts. He does not have a liability to receive a punishment. The zealot acts out of his own convictions, and is not responding to any liability that has been established by the courts. Therefore, the sinner has the authority to defend himself, just as any

other person has the right to kill another individual in his own self-defense.

This discussion is rather technical, but, from it, an important point emerges. The Torah does not encourage the unrestrained expression of zealous attitudes. The Torah consists of 613 commandments. It is important for a Jew to have strong conviction in the truth of the Torah. However, regardless of the strength of one's convictions and the intensity of one's zealousness, in most cases, one does not have the right to take the law into one's own hand or violate any percept of the Torah. If the zealot had such authority, society would quickly become lawless and halacha would become meaningless. It is impossible in an ordered, just society, governed by a system of halacha, to allow one member to harm another or disregard halacha and then attribute his behavior to zealousness.

In response to a public display of intimacy between a Jew and non-Jew, the Torah does make an exception and allows the zealot to give expression to his convictions. But, as the discussion above indicates, this does not mean that the zealot is permitted to ignore any and all halachic considerations in order to address the wrong he observes. On the contrary, the rights and authority of the zealot are strictly prescribed and defined. If he deviates from these rules – for example, if he kills the sinner after the act has been completed – he is no longer defined by halacha as a zealot. Instead, he is an avenger and is himself guilty of murder. ■



[1] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Esurai Be'ah 12:1.

[2] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Esurai Be'ah 12:7-8.

[3] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Esurai Be'ah 12:2.

[4] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Esurai Be'ah 12:4.

[5] Rabbaynu Avraham ben David of Posquieres (Ra'avad) Critique on Maimonides' Mishne Torah, Hilchot Esurai Be'ah 12:4.

[6] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Esurai Be'ah 12:5.

[7] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Esurai Be'ah 12:5.

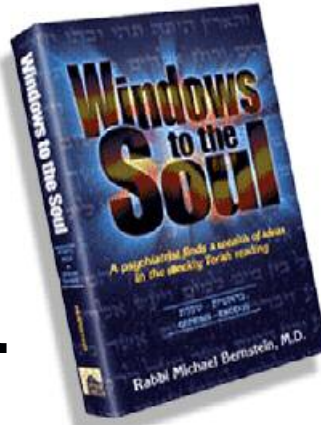


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*Taken from "Windows to the Soul"*

# Balak

RABBI MICHAEL BERNSTEIN



## COPPER, SNAKES AND SORCERY

Do copper, snakes and sorcery have anything in common? It would appear that they do. They all share the same Hebrew root word (nachash), and they all appear in close proximity to each other in the Book of Numbers, further suggesting an underlying commonality.

In his coerced prophecy about the Jewish people, Balaam declared (23:23), "The Lord brought them forth from Egypt . . . and there is no sorcery (nichush) in Jacob." Earlier, the people had complained about the lack of water and the "flimsy bread," but they had a change of heart after serpents attacked them (21:7-9), "And the people approached Moses and said, 'We sinned by speaking against God and you! Pray to God that He remove the serpent (nachash) from us.' . . . And Moses made a serpent (nachash) of copper (nechoshes) and placed it on a pole, and whenever a serpent bit a man, he would look upon the copper serpent and survive."

What is the connection between these three things? Furthermore, why did Moses choose a copper serpent to affect the nation's repentance?

Let us take a closer look at the word nachash, which means serpent. It can be deconstructed into two syllables, nach ((1)to rest, and chash ), to move swiftly, an accurate description of the serpent's characteristic of lying still then striking quickly. First, it is nach, then it is chash.

The word nachash first appears in the story of the original sin, when the serpent tempted Eve. Our Sages state that the serpent (nachash) of original sin represents man's yetzer hara, the Satan and the Angel of Death. The Torah describes the serpent as the craftiest of all creatures (arum). Just as a serpent lies deceptively still before its quick strike, so does a man's yetzer hara overcome his resolve with instant rationalizations that lead him

toward corruption and perdition; for example, a recovering alcoholic may delude himself that he will have only one drink. Such is man's nature that in his weakness he can quickly be overcome by his basic drives and desires, which frequently lie deceptively dormant.

Copper (nechoshes) is a brilliant metal with a gold-like luster. It is, however, only an ersatz precious metal, "fool's gold." [1] Like the serpent, copper is furtively deceptive. Copper is, therefore, an excellent metallic metaphor for the serpent, which personifies the ultimate hidden deceiver. Serpent and copper were, therefore, the combination of image and material Moses considered most effective for therapeutic purposes. By looking at the copper serpent, the people would realize that their desires for pleasures such as fancy foods, like copper, offer only a chimera of the real good, and that they only lead to unexpected and deleterious consequences, like a crafty snake in the grass.

Sorcery (nichush), which fools the unsuspecting victim by sudden trickery, also has this negative quality of deceptiveness. [2] When Balaam cast his malevolent gaze on the Jewish people, however, his prophetic experience did not detect any sorcery (nichush) in Jacob. At that moment, following the repentance inspired by the copper serpent (nachash hanéchoshes), God had refined the nation like metal in the hands of its smelter. They were pure and had no room for the trickery of sorcery (nichush) spawned by the yetzer hara.



Such is the nature of the yetzer hara. It beguiles man and draws him away from God. Such is the nature of the infinite wisdom of God's language that it reveals the connection between snake, copper and sorcery, and the subterranean passages of the mind and heart through which the yetzer hara travels. ■

[1] In the prophecy of Isaiah (60:17), God promises to replace copper with gold in the Messianic era.

[2] There are varying opinions as to what exactly constitutes nichush. Nonetheless, regardless of whether it is some form of magic or a metaphysical communication, nichush is a deceptive practice forbidden to Jews, who must place their trust in God.



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# Punishment

DOUG TAYLOR & RABBI MORTON MOSKOWITZ

"If you don't stop that, I'll paddle you so hard you won't be able to sit down for a week!"

The kids didn't obey, but their mother's angry voice certainly got the attention of everyone on our ferry's forward upper deck. Seated several rows over, I turned back to my friend, the King of Rational Thought, while an afternoon deluge pounded out a reminder of western Washington's rainy reputation.

"Hmm," I said, half to myself. "Reminds me of dealing with my own kids."

"Really?" he replied with a disarming smiling. "Do you handle your children that way?"

I glanced at the mother, still struggling to corral her herd of wild ponies, and replied, "Well, I try not to get angry. But sometimes it seems like threats are the only way to get compliance."

Now it was his turn to say, "Hmm." I suddenly felt uncomfortable.

"Why is it so important for you to get compliance?" he asked.

"Well, to make them behave, of course. To teach them the right way to do things."

"Do you think that threatening them teaches them the right way to do things?" he asked gently.

That didn't seem fair. Or maybe I just didn't like looking in a mirror. I didn't answer.

He took a different tack.

"What's the purpose of punishment?" he asked.

I hesitated, then finally said, "Well, it's to punish people when they do bad things. When someone does something bad, you can't just let them get away with it." I found myself exasperated. Why was he questioning such an obvious concept? "Besides," I said defiantly, "sometimes people, and children, deserve it."



"I see," he said. "Tell me, do you think seeking revenge is a positive character quality?"

"No."

"What's the emotional difference between seeking revenge and saying that someone deserves to be punished?"

Checkmate.

"You see," he said, graciously not pushing the point, "there are really only two rational reasons to punish someone. The first reason is correction. This is as true for teaching a child not to run out in the street as it is for teaching an adult not to steal. We need to teach the child or adult to modify his or her behavior. But to achieve true, long-lasting correction, the punishment must be designed to bring about a

real behavior change, not just compliance out of fear. If compliance comes only from fear, then compliance ceases as soon as the threat is removed. How many times have you told your children to do something under threat of punishment, only to have them do it when you're not around?

"In crafting punishments," he continued, "emotions cloud the picture. The common parental approach of 'if you don't stop that, I'll spank you' is often more an expression of the parent's anger than a well-thought-out punishment designed to achieve real behavior change. That's why many of our societal responses to discipline problems and crime are ineffective. They're based more on vengeance motivation than on a carefully considered correction process."

I pondered that idea for a minute, then asked, "What's the second reason for punishment?"

"To protect society," he said. "Even if correction is impossible, society must protect itself from certain types of people, such as serial killers. However, even in these cases, the punishment should be designed solely with the objective of protecting society, not exacting vengeance."

I was quiet for a long time, thinking about how I sometimes discipline my children. The thoughts did not cheer me. What would happen, I wondered, if I disciplined my children only for their benefit and not mine? What if I disciplined my children based on my intellect rather than my emotions? What if I carefully designed punishments solely to achieve real understanding and behavior change on their part, instead of the short-term quick-fix compliance that so easily masquerades as the real thing?

I decided to find out. ▣



(Jew? continued from page 1)

## Torah Fundamentals

Having recently addressed many distinctions among our varying practices, I wish to express this qualification: all our studies must – over all else – be targeted at the strengthening of Judaism's fundamentals, insuring that we and future generations are not confused by our differences, but conversely, that we all understand and uphold the primary ideals that separate Judaism from every other religion. We must shift the focus from our dividing distinctions, to our unifying fundamentals. We focus on such ideational goals, not to isolate ourselves from all of God's other peoples, but the opposite: to understand and transmit His one religion to both Jew and Gentile.

Judaism was never 'matched'. All other religions lack proof of divine origin: God's Revelation at Sinai was the only event of God giving a religion, witnessed by two million Jews whose miraculous Egyptian redemption by God, His unparalleled Exodus, and our travels via pillars of cloud and fire, and fed by manna, are historically undisputed, and even confirmed by other religions. The question is, with the plethora of Jews and Jewish denominations, how to we ensure that Judaism maintains its originally given identity? What is this identity? Compound this with the variety of causes supported by Jews such as anti-Semitism, Israel, anti-terrorism, Zionism, settlement, education, conversion, poverty, and the list is endless. However, each one of these issues must finally be viewed as a "means" not an end. Meaning, you cannot fight against anti-Semitism as your ultimate goal in Jewish life, because once that is resolved, is this truly the objective? Is there nothing else obligatory on us all? Of course not. The objective of eliminating hatred is the backdrop of the harmony, essential for us all to live as Jews, to follow the brilliant system of Torah granted by God to each one of us. You see, we come back to the ultimate question: what defines Judaism and how do we live as a true Jew once we have

addressed all other issues? The removal of a negative of any kind is only a 'means'. What goal are we trying so desperately to arrive at after we have vanquished all negative forces?

From the most irreligious Jew living in Israel, to the most pious anywhere else, all agree that the Land of Israel is distinguished as the "Land of the Jews". And all agree that Israel attained and maintains this status due exclusively to God's Biblical oath to Abraham. The Torah is our source for our claim to Israel. Therefore, one is puzzled at those who seize this Biblically-based right to Israel, while dismissing the rest of God's words. This position is with no rhyme or reason. Furthermore, the land was given to us conditionally: we must adhere to the Torah. Again, all denominations cherish the fundamental Shema blessing; we start our toddlers on these words as we gently tuck them in each night once they can talk. No Jew is ignorant of the Shema. But as remarkable as it is, many are ignorant of the Shema's message: Israel is "conditional" on our adherence to God's laws, His mitzvos. If we observe God's Torah, the land is ours. If we deviate, God abandons us. The Talmud states that the Shema is so essential to our daily prayers, as it contains the fundamentals of Judaism.

This week, we start a series of articles addressing what are Judaism's tenets, regardless of our denomination. Uniting under our fundamentals, studying the words of our greatest teachers, we will insure that we truly adhere to one Judaism: retaining its identity and tenets for our children.

**Proof is Mandatory**

The most primary concept in Jewish life, which forms the basis of everything else we learn in life, is a true and accurate idea of God, as far as man's feeble mind can understand. For if our idea of God is corrupted and false, then all that we attribute as "God's" creation, is in fact, attributed not to the

true God, but to an imaginary and false god. So we must take great care to dismiss all false notions of God, and learn what are the truths concerning Him.

We must also be mindful that all of our studies must be governed by intelligence, where we strive to prove our ideas using analysis and rational proof. Without such rigid criteria, we may come away believing in something imaginary and not real, since we failed to prove its validity. Certainly, in this most fundamental area, we must use reason to arrive at our convictions.

This approach and these truths may be seen in our great Rabbis' analysis of a Torah verse: "And you shall know them today, and you shall place them on your heart; for God is the Governor in heaven above, and on Earth below, there is no other." (Deut. 4:39) This was Moses' command to the Jews after he recounted the event of Revelation at Sinai, which transpired 40 years earlier. He reminded the Jews that Jewish history is unparalleled; 1) no other people heard God's voice emanating from fire; 2) God never selected a nation with miracles as displayed in the Exodus, the splitting of the Red Sea, and the journeys in the desert; 3) and that the Jews were proven that God exists, and nothing compares to God. Moses then told them that verse above.

Rabbi Bachya author of Duties of the Heart says that one lesson from this verse, is to prove things to our minds, and not live based on simple acceptance of authority. Thus, the verse first says, "And you shall know today" which Rabbi Bachya explains as "know through the teachings of the Rabbis". But Rabbi Bachya continues, "and you shall place it on your heart" means that you shall then, after hearing ideas from the Rabbis, think into them until you can prove them to your heart through proofs. What is Rabbi Bachya's lesson?

He is teaching us this fundamental: as beings gifted with intelligence (the faculty for proof) we are mandated to engage this intelligence, and not remain relying on authority. We must fulfill our role as human beings created with reason and use our minds to the utmost, which is when we arrive at proof for our views, surpassing and abandoning faith. Proof is available, and we are to use this ability in the greatest of areas: knowing what God is. For when we realize any matter by way of proof, we are then living with an indisputable conviction, and such conviction is our mission in life. Conviction also affords us the greatest satisfaction in life, for belief without proof leaves us dissatisfied, and wondering. But when something is clearly proven, our minds and emotions find the greatest happiness, all conflict is gone, and we actually enjoy such knowledge made this absolutely clear.

So the first lesson in this verse is to engage our intelligence, for through it, all else depends.

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## Torah Fundamentals

# KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

## God exists: He Is the Creator

What are the next few fundamentals taught by our verse? "God is the Governor in heaven above, and on Earth below." What may we derive from here? What do the Rabbis teach? Sforno, (1470-1550, Italy) writes the following: "God is the eternal Creator [arranger] witnessed in the heavens above and on Earth below. For God's mastery is demonstrated by their order and relation, which cannot be known without them [the planets and stars]." This means that God created the universe to display His role as Creator. For without creation, how will man come to know there is a Creator? It is a subtle, yet primary idea, that creation exists not for itself, but to point to a Creator. God wishes that man use his mind to uncover great things, and to do so, God gave us this universe to study. Maimonides too says this very idea, that we come to a love of God through studying the physical universe. (Mishneh Torah: Laws of the Torah Fundamentals, 2:2) Sforno continues, "It becomes known that there exists a Existence who directs [the cosmos] Who created all this for a specific purpose, which comes from Him."

## God Has a Plan for Mankind

We now learn from the fact that God created everything with such wisdom, that this is His desire for man, that we study this wisdom. We don't simply marvel at creation, but comprehend that there is a "will" behind the creation of all we see. God has a plan for mankind. We must take this realization seriously; we must look at ourselves as "created beings", created "for" a purpose. We must know this purpose, as Sforno underscores here: to study creation and come to know what we can about God. Unfortunately today, and even in Sforno's times as he writes, man is more absorbed in the amassing of wealth which does not travel with him to the next world, than he is with what is our real purpose and what is truly eternal: Torah and virtues.

## God: The Only Cause for Everything

Moses words also teach us that God is the "exclusive" Source of all creation: "in the heaven above and on earth below" includes everything. Our concept of God must include this idea, as the verse ends, "there is no other". God is not in need of any other being; He created the entire universe from nothing, by Himself. This is truly the greatest Being: One Who independently created the universe.

## God is One: No other gods

The Rabbis and philosophers agree: God must be One. For if there were two gods necessary for the creation of the universe, it implies limitation on both: neither one could create ALL of creation, without help from the other. And if this were the case, then who imposed the limitation on each of the gods, so that they could not create the universe independent of the other god? Again, we would arrive at another more powerful, singular god responsible for the limitation on these first two.

## God is Not Comparable to Anything

God is also One from another perspective: "number" exists in the physical world, as one body is distinguished from a second body its properties and by location. But these physical features do not exist with that which is not physical, so number cannot apply to God. But someone may ask: "Do we not count the "laws" of the world, and these laws are many? So if number applies to non physical laws, why can't I suggest that number also applies to God, and therefore, there are many Gods?" The answer is as follows: the reason we may accurately count various laws, is precisely because they are various, and different in the function. We say the law of gravity is #1, the law of moisture #2, the law of weight #3, etc. They may be counted as their differences may be counted, even though these laws, which govern the universe, are truly non-physical. But to suggest there is "A God Who created the universe" and "There is also another God Who created the universe"...one is not describing two Gods, but the same God. If there is no difference in two non-physical things, then there is no way in which to distinguish them. This is unlike two identical water droplets, or two identical metal cubes. Here, although identical, their place distinguishes them: one cube is on the left and the other, on the right. So in the physical world, "number" truly exists for identical things. But number cannot exist in the non-physical world, unless what we count varies one from the other somehow. Hence, there cannot be two, identical "Gods".

## God is Unknowable

One final idea for now: as all physical matter did not always exist, and requires creation, and cannot create itself, that which created everything is Himself, not physical, or governed by the very physical law he created. God, the Creator of all matter, therefore is not subject to following the laws of matter that He created. All worldly features such as aging, division, separation, ignorance, place, weight, visibility, weariness, etc. do not apply and cannot apply to God. For this reason, we say that God is not "in" the universe; He is not "on" Earth or "in" heaven. God told Moses that he could not know Him...certainly lesser minds as we are, cannot fathom God. ■



**WE WILL CONTINUE NEXT WEEK STUDYING THE FUNDAMENTALS ESSENTIAL TO JUDAISM AND JEWISH LIFE. ALL OUR PROPHETS, SAGES, TALMUDIC RABBIS, & LEADERS, FROM MOSES THRU MAIMONIDES ECHO THESE FUNDAMENTALS. THEY DEFINE JUDAISM. IT IS OF UTMOST IMPORTANCE THAT WE KNOW WHAT MAKES JUDAISM, "JUDAISM", SO AS TO INSURE WE ARE LIVING A TRUE JEWISH LIFE, IN LINE WITH REALITY, NOT FANTASY. AND ONCE WE APPREHEND THESE TENETS, IT IS OUR OBLIGATION TO TEACH THEM TO OTHERS.**



# Inherent vs. Conditional Prohibitions

**Reader:** On one of the audiotapes about the 7 Noachide laws, a Rabbi mentioned that the prohibition of men wearing clothes worn exclusively by women would not include women wearing slacks today, since both men and women in today's society wear slacks. Am I correct? Am I also correct to say that a thousand years ago this wasn't so, for many societies? If that is so, does it mean that if enough people violate this prohibition, then sooner or later the prohibition becomes no more? Am I missing something here? Compared to some Torah prohibitions mainly dealing with copying ways of the idolaters (such as Molech, shaving side burns, etc.) such practices may no longer be practiced today, yet the prohibition still stands. I think I heard another Rabbi once say that the Torah is trying to teach us just how far we should stay away from idolatry.

Thanks in advance,  
*Omphile Tshipa*

**Mesora:** Yes, you are correct. The prohibition to wear the dress of the opposite gender requires a standard, and that standard of style is based on the "current" dress code. I once asked a great Rabbi, "Do we consider only Jewish women's dress when determining "woman's clothing styles", or all women, gentiles included?" He responded the latter; we also consider what gentile women wear. Therefore, if years ago, women's dress did not include slacks, but today it does, then women do not violate "dressing as a man" when they wear slacks. Of course modesty is another issue, so tight-fitting slacks would violate modesty, but it would not violate cross-dressing. Since slacks became accepted as "women's clothing", they are no longer exclusive to men. Hence, a woman does not violate cross-dressing by wearing slacks.

So you asked the next, natural question: "Do we apply this reasoning to ANY prohibition? Do we say that although idolatry was prohibited back then, just as were slacks for women, and just as the majority of women now wearing slacks removes the violation, so too idolatry: it is also more popular today, and it too should be permissible?!"

However, this equation is based on a false premise: that once something is popular, this equates to permissiveness. This is not so, as Christianity's rise has not abrogated the prohibition of deifying man or idolatry: both

remain forbidden.

Let us identify and clarify the core issue: women wearing slacks is not inherently wrong, unlike idolatry which is. The prohibition for women from the Torah is not wearing "slacks" but rather, wearing "men's clothing." And this is defined precisely by a culture, and an era. So when times change, so do styles. And that which was formerly exclusive to men, is now applicable to women too. Now you ask why a violation of women evolving and wearing slacks, removes the prohibition on slacks in the future. However, gentile women do not have the violation of cross-dressing. This being so, their initial change from exclusively dresses to include slacks as well, was no violation with regard to the "gender" of woman. Now, since women's dress evolved, now including slacks, the very definition of what is "exclusively men's clothing" no longer included slacks, even Jewish women could now wear slacks. The reasoning is that "women's dress" is not determined by Jewish women, but by "all" women. Cross-dressing is a gender issue, not a Judaic issue. And this Rabbi ruled that in New York, the majority of women wear slacks, so it is not prohibited for a Jewish woman to wear modest slacks, as it is not cross-dressing.

In contrast, idolatry is not a conditional law as is cross-dressing, but an inherent violation for all mankind. Hence, popularity does not remove its violation.



## A Response:

Dear Rabbi Ben-Chaim,

Thank you, and Mesora, for such inspiring and informative articles in the JewishTimes.

Having come out of the idolatry of Christianity, I read with interest your article on "Idols" in the Jewish Times. The question by Zach in last

week's July 8th, 2005 issue, regarding the Hindu concept of idols, reminded me of another reason why these "symbols" are forbidden, and are considered idolatry: Hashem forbade the making of images. The idea that one can make a "symbol" of a deity is a violation of the prohibition against images. People claim they do not worship these symbols and images, they only worship the (false) deity represented by them. Yet the idea that the Creator, Who is invisible and not corporeal, and can be represented in a created form...is idolatry.

Idolatrous images become entrenched in the mind and imagination, contaminating the heart. What we view with our eyes, and absorb into our soul, becomes part of our thinking process. Therefore, idolatrous images and symbols are far more dangerous than many people realize. Making excuses for idolatry, among Jews or gentiles, is a grave mistake.

Good Shabbos,  
*Sharon Neely*

## Noachide Law: Violation of "Not to Add"?

**Reader:** Is the Noachide movement a Rabbinic invention, a violation of "Do not add to the Torah"? The Torah says, "One law for the native and the stranger" implying that the Noachide system is a "new" law for the Noachide, violating this principle of "one" law for both Jew and Noachide. Can you help me on this? I am studying some Karaite things and they have good points. Your view will be interesting on this as I have been reading your JewishTimes for a while and it seems that you agree with not adding to Torah. Thank you, Greg.

**Mesora:** "One Law" refers to the Jew and convert, not the Jew and Noachide. So the Jew and the Noachide can, and do have two different systems, which does not violate the "one law". This is proven from Exodus 12:49 where we are commanded to observe the Passover laws, be we Jew or convert: "One law shall you have for the Jewish-born and the convert who dwells among you." Rashi says on this verse that the convert is equated to the Jewish-born in all other Torah commands as well. This shows us that the "one law" excludes the Noachide, who is not comparable to one born Jewish.

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The Rabbis did not “invent” the Noachide system. Noachide Laws were the first 7 commands which God commanded (before Torah) those people defined as “children of Noah”, or Noachides. This proves that the Rabbis did not create Noachide Law, God did.

## Peace vs. Deception

**Richard:** To make a statement that can be viewed by anyone that “The never changing Torah remains firm in its position that all religions except Judaism are false, and all elements of other religions require extermination” is quite inappropriate at best.

It's these types of statements that have increased much hatred to our people. Rambam explains that any human being who faithfully observes the seven Noachide laws (Sanhedrin 56a-59b) earns a proper place in heaven.

“The duty is enjoined upon them to set up judges in each district to deal with these six commandments and to caution (educate) the people.” (Rambam, Laws of Kings 9:14)

Clearly they must teach the people to know and to live by the Laws of Noah. The foundation and basis of the Seven Noachide Laws is love and brotherhood. Even the word Noah indicates “pleasantness and friendliness”. And when Gentiles observe the Seven Noachide Laws they are called “pious (righteous) Gentiles” which indicates kindness and love.

As well, when Shlomo Hamelech built the Beis Hamikdash in Yerushalayim, he specifically asked God to heed the prayer of non-Jews who come to the Temple (1-Kings 8:41-43). The Temple was the universal center of spirituality, which the prophet Yishayahu referred to as a “House for ALL nations.”

So you see, the Torah is for all humanity, no conversion necessary. In light of this, the above statement at the beginning, which you have printed in your most recent issue of the JewishTimes, is patently obnoxious and foolish. I am truly embarrassed by your lack of sensitivity. This is unfortunately only one example of the type of offensive material your publication has printed. I think you do a great disservice, as well as committing a chillul HaShem by printing this type of material.

To end on a positive note, we Jews, of all people, must show kindness and emphasize the goodness and pleasantness which the observance of the Noachide Laws will bring to

the world and society. We certainly don't accomplish this by knocking down others. This has been clearly articulated by one of the gedolei ha-dor in 1986 on Shabbos Hagadol by the Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson, zt”l. -Richard

**Moshe Ben-Chaim:** Richard, We are in agreement: Gentiles are to observe the Noachide system. However, central to their system, and ours, is the abolition of idolatry, which the other religions today unfortunately cling to. Surely you do not mean to accept Christianity, which holds heretical views, which says God is not one, and which deifies man. Surely, you do not propose to accept Hinduism's polytheism. God Himself teaches in Deuteronomy (12:2,3) “wipe out idolatry” it's objects of worship, and its reputation. Rashi explains (12:3) how we are to remove their reputations: by forming derogatory terms for those idols and gods. The idea behind this last point of God commanding man to deride idolatry, is that man must view idolatry as most negative, and through the denigration of idolatrous practices, we keep our emotions for ever forming an attachment to this antithesis of Torah. So when we say “and all elements of other religions require extermination”, we are in fact echoing God's very words. What is it that you disagree with?

**Richard:** Moshe, Thanks for your prompt and courteous response. You are missing the point. There is such a thing as “darchei shalom”, “ways of peace”. What I am saying is that when you print the kind of stuff to which I strongly responded, you are only inciting the wrath of others who don't know or understand what you are saying and hence from a “maaris ayin” (surface) point of view, it is counterproductive. You know what it reminds me of? The time in Israel, a school bus was blown up, and one of the leading rabbis made the statement that perhaps the parents of the children killed should check their mezuzas. You probably would see nothing wrong with this. But I can tell you that many, many respectable traditional Jews were outraged. There is such a thing as common sense. And that's what I think is lacking sometimes. You are a very sincere and dedicated man, but that doesn't mean that you can't become more sensitive to these things and act more tactfully. When you ask me “So when we echo God's very words, what is it that you disagree with?” you're either dodging the issue or you're missing the whole point.

I laud you for your efforts and I hope you can understand what I'm trying to convey.

Kol tuv, Richard



**Moshe Ben-Chaim:** I would also condemn that man who announced that this righteous child or man was killed because he didn't check a mezuzah. That position is foolish, baseless, and not found in Torah, just as any foolishness will not be found there. To say that one's lack of knowledge that his mezuzah is nullified for some reason demands his tortuous death is utterly insane.

I understand your point, but think you don't understand the Torah's position; we don't seek to placate other nations, in place of rebuking their falsehoods and idolatry. I don't suggest we coerce the 7 Noachide Laws on these idolaters, but we must make the truth available to them, as that is God's will. Then they are free to follow or ignore these truths.

“Darchei shalom”, “ways of peace” (with other peoples) does not include lying about their idolatry. Idolatry is their most primary prohibition! Darchei shalom is to get along, but not at the risk of subtly conveying to them that Judaism tolerates idolatrous rites and heresy...that is lying. Nowhere in Torah do you find that we are to be quiet, and not inform others of their errors. Do you not recite Alenu each day, “and all men of flesh will call Your name.” This is God's will, that all peoples will recognize Him and His system for them, meaning the 7 Noachide Laws, including idolatry. And the Noachides' knowledge of God's will as stated here does not enter his mind magically, but through someone else educating him on God's Torah, namely, the Jew.

Most Jews run from condemning other religions. This is based on the Jews' faulty philosophy to preserve social niceties and relationships, over all else. However, anyone who truly cares about another, will risk his relationship by rebuking his fellow, if he knows that by doing

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so, he will enable his misguided Gentile friend to discover even one truth about reality. The greatest evil is the hiding of any truth from anyone. I would certainly welcome anyone who could expose my error. So I will risk a relationship with a gentile friend, if by doing so, he might hear an idea, and abandon his error. Isn't it far better that we are no longer friends, but he is now no longer idolatrous?

The truth is, it is no secret that Christianity feels that all men who denounce Jesus will burn in hell. It's just some game that people play, to keep such sentiments out of interfaith dialogues. When the truth is, to put it mildly, we do not agree. This doesn't mean that as a Jew, I hate a Christian. A few of my close friends are Christian. But it means that we should not sidestep this most avoided issue. By a Jew and a Christian openly discussing their respective tenets, we avail the Christian God's words as to why He cannot be a "trinity", we can explain to them how they have misconstrued the understanding of the Written Law, since they do not have the essential other half, the Oral Law. By honest communication, we can teach them what God's true will is for them, and how belief in Jesus violates reason, and intelligence. If in our discussions, as I experienced last week talking with my Christian friend, we fail, and the other person becomes angry that we are disagreeing with his religion, then there is nothing more we can do, and further discussion is not foolish. But remaining silent displays no concern for another person, if we think the other person might hear Judaism's rationale for the Noachide Laws.

When we have the opportunity to do as did Abraham and educate another person, and we feel they might receive our words, then we should help them by educating them. Abraham went to far as to teach against idolatry until he was imprisoned, and even in prison he continued teaching. His ways were acceptable before God, so much so, that God created a nation from him. This is all recorded in the Torah, and upheld by Christians. Perhaps if we discuss these Torah sections with them, sections they do not deny, they might start to question their false premises, and come to understand God's plan for all mankind.

Every religion and religionists, by definition, believes every other religion is false, and that he possesses the right lifestyle. Then with such conviction, these religionists should not feel a discussion would expose any fallacy in their religion. "If either of us is right, we have nothing to lose by talking", you should say. "And if either of us are wrong, have everything to gain". Putting it this way, we demonstrate objectivity, and create the right atmosphere, which may foster objective discussions. ■

*Abraham embodied generosity and equality - he was never prior to others in his eyes*



## Selfish Contradictions

This week, Mesora was once again contacted by an organization seeking our assistance. Once prior, a large, Jewish organization asked that we publicize them on Mesora.org. At first, recognizing this organization by name, I happily agreed, asking them to reciprocate the exact favor. They responded, "We have a policy not to advertise other organizations on our website." I replied, "If you ask us to do – that which you yourself will not perform – then I cannot deem you worthy of our support. I cannot support an organization that desires favors, and is unwilling to reciprocate in kind, this is not Torah-abiding behavior." Torah demands the "reciprocation of good", "Hakaras Hatove". I am very much disappointed that "Torah abiding" organizations act so selfishly, contradictory, and when faced with their contradiction, continue their twisted and unappreciative greed.

This week was no different: a business phoned us, asking if they could inquire about "eight questions". These questions were not Torah questions, to which I always take time and respond without ulterior motive or any condition. If we can educate another Jew or Gentile on Torah ideas, we must do so, and be happy to do so...we are helping them in the greatest area! But today, the questions were secular in nature, as he explained, "These questions would help my organization develop art classes throughout the United States". My response was, "Do you charge attendees for your classes?" He said, "Yes." I said, "Then it would be consistent with your very practice that we should be equally deserving, and charge YOU, since the very information you receive from us, is something for which you charge others." He laughed, paused, hesitated...then tried to sidestep my critique by commencing with his first of eight

questions. I stopped him and said again, "Do you feel we should charge you for our information, as this is your very method, that you charge others for information?"

He finally saw the point, still laughing or mocking my critique, but this time, I think his laugh did not suppress his realization. He felt he was in a contradiction. I then told him, "Regarding anyone else you call for this purpose, you should not try to 'get', without 'giving'." The phone called was over.

How many times do WE do the same thing: seeking self-gain, and showing no equal concern for another person? Maimonides teaches that when we do business, we must insure that the deal we wish to strike, is no more beneficial for us, than for our partner in that deal. I feel many more deals and greater success will be realized if we follow Maimonides' teaching. We won't allow our greed and Torah violation of selfishness to destroy possible transactions. We will engender a greater harmony between all mankind, when they see we honestly wish their equal success. How many businessmen do you know of who are on this level? Does not each businessman seek the better part of the deal, trying to obtain the price best for himself, and not what is best for "both" parties? Do terms like, "shrewd" and "cut-throat" come to mind when thinking of some businessmen? And isn't it the greatest "Chillul Hashem" (disgrace of God) when Jews are found guilty of crooked practices?

The two cases, I hope, will awaken a sense of "right" in all of us who require such admonition.

Genesis, 18:19: "For I know Abraham, that he will command his children and his household after him and they will keep the way of God to do charity and justice." ■



## Understanding Metaphors

# Bilam & the Donkey

**RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM**

The story of Bilam and his donkey contains many 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 having the Jews – millions of people – damage 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 had to 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 refrained from going by God's word. Balak persisted and sent more messengers, now, higher in rank and number. 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 very remarkable. It is stated that Bilam arose early and that God



was angry that he went. This was after God gave him permission! God stood 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 get it back on the path. The angel stood a second time in the vineyard, 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

(continued on next page)

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 festivals. Ibn Ezra states that once the donkey spoke it died, and that with each successive hitting, Bilam used a stronger object.

Following are some of the many obvious 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 the 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) Why is it important that Bilam’s leg was crushed?

There is a very important statement of Maimonides regarding this and similar events. He states in the Guide for the Perplexed that in every case in Scripture where we find the term “angel”, 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. The story is here is a parable for a conflict with which Bilam was struggling.

If we refer back to the immediate events leading up to the riding on the donkey, we see that Bilam comes off appearing as a true follower of God. But with a closer look, his real 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 refrained 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 if 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.

By interpreting the elements of this story as representing psychological phenomena, the story’s real meaning can be explained as follows: Bilam, being in great conflict, decides to go to Balak with the cursing of the Jews as his goal. In order to do so, he must suppress his knowledge of God’s command to refrain from cursing them. His riding on his donkey represents the suppression of what his conscience (the donkey) “sees”. Riding always carries with it the 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 bad. (The same is true about any apparatus in the human body. The heart isn’t designed to breathe, and the lungs aren’t designed to pump blood.) This explains why Bilam couldn’t “see” the angel. Bilam, in this story, represents his instincts - a faculty of the mind unable to ‘perceive’. Instincts have only one function: they guide a person towards instinctual satisfaction. They cannot do an act of perceiving. The angel represents reality. 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 reality. This is its main function. (This is why Adam and Eve were granted the conscience after they showed that they sinned too easily. They needed an additional means for restraining their instincts.)

Now that we understand the main components of the parable, (what Bilam, his donkey, and the angel represent: respectively; the instinctual drive, the conscience, and

God’s reality) we must go through the story interpreting it with this information.

Bilam is riding on his donkey – “his evil instincts are riding (suppressing) his conscience.” His conscience only 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 a bit conscious, making Bilam a bit aware of his wrong, Bilam “hits” his conscience to suppress it – “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 and ‘speaks’ – “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 whole reason for God’s direct providence over the Jews, namely the perfection of our forefathers who caused God to originally bring about His 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 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 in a parable format 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 written openly. The fact that Bilam did travel to Balak in physical reality is not discounted by this explanation. ■





Groups



Email

### Yahoo! Groups is an efficient means of communicating your business, religious and social interests with 1000s of others.

To list your group here & on [www.Mesora.org/Groups](http://www.Mesora.org/Groups) **FREE**, email us here: **Groups-On@Mesora.org**  
 Subscribing to our collective groups enables us all to reach 1000s more people with important information.  
 To locate a group online, follow this format:  
<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/GroupName>  
 To subscribe to a list, send a blank email to:  
**GroupName-subscribe@yahoogroups.com**  
 Once subscribed, you are enabled to email 100s-1000s others with a single email. Expect to receive many as well!

## Regional Lists

### Connecticut

• **Fairfield\_County\_Shuls (75)** An announcement list serving the Jewish community and all shuls in the greater Fairfield County Connecticut location.

### New York

• **Jewish\_Community (1576)** The Jewish Community is intended to combine the efforts of the local "shul" groups (NYC, Teaneck, Fair Lawn, Monsey, Essex County etc) and create a single resources for the New York and New Jersey metropolitan orthodox community for announcements of interest and common events. Certain announcements are very local in nature and belong in the local "shul" groups. Other announcements are regional in nature and should utilize this group to get the word out on a larger scale.

• **brooklynshuls(60)** A list for those affiliated with Brooklyn shuls.

• **bronxshuls(53)**

• **events\_for\_jewish\_women (182)**

• **FiveTownsJewishCommunity (1595)** The purpose of this email list is to enable local shuls, yeshivot and organizations to communicate with members of the Five Towns Jewish Community. The list should be used primarily for the dissemination of information regarding local shul, yeshiva and organizational or charity events and functions in accordance with the list policy posted on this site. It is the hope of the moderators of this group that this service will bring the community closer together by enabling the publicizing and enhancement of the

• **FiveTownsShuls (1345)**

• **HillcrestOnline (220)**

• **flatbushJewishAction (81)**

• **JFlatbushOnline (633)** Welcome! This is a group to allow members of the Brooklyn, New York Jewish community in Flatbush and other neighborhoods, to communicate. It is a place to let others know about events or programs at your shul or school, religious and cultural events, and singles events. We can also cover neighborhoods such as Boro Park or Crown Heights. It is also a place for various neighborhood topics, such as goods needed or available, different community efforts, concerns, etc.

• **lessshuls (112)** Discussion group for issues, topics and events of interest to the Jewish community of the Lower East Side of Manhattan.

• **MonseyShulsChat (72)**

• **manhattanshuls (95)**

• **NYCShuls (533) (NEW)**

NYCShuls@YahooGroups.com is an announcement list for the Jewish community in New York City. The primary goal of the group is to be an effective tool in the building and maintenance of our community.

• **PlainviewShuls (NEW)** Established to enable area residents a quick and effective means of information distribution. Please use this new forum to post shul/Torah class times, announcements, business, share ideas, and converse on matters relevant to the Plainview Jewish communities. As Torah

Jews we must follow what God demands of us. Let us all strive to learn more Torah, and practice the unmatched codes prepared by our Creator. Rising above our personal preferences, let us achieve something great...together.

• **queensshuls (102)** A general list for those affiliated with Queens shuls.

• **QueensCentralShuls (44)** An announcement list for the Jewish community and Shuls of Central Queens.

• **RiverdaleShuls (541)**

• **SiShulList (123)**

• **statenslandshuls (27)**

• **UWSyoungprofessionals (715)** The list is intended for announcements of interest Young Professionals living on the upper west side. HOW TO SUBSCRIBE: To subscribe go to <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/uwsyoungprofessionals/join> or send a blank email to [uwsyoungprofessionals-subscribe@yahoogroups.com](mailto:uwsyoungprofessionals-subscribe@yahoogroups.com). INFORMING OF EVENTS: To get an event added to our weekly e-mail send [grubey1@yahoo.com](mailto:grubey1@yahoo.com) information about the event and it will most likely be distributed to our list.

• **WestHempsteadShuls (270)**

• **WesleyHillsShuls (383)**

• **WhitePlainsShuls (26)**

### New Jersey

• **BergenfieldShuls (40)** Information for and about shuls in the Bergenfield / New Milford / Teaneck area.

• **EdisonHighlandParkBulletinBoard (563)**

• **EnglewoodShuls (635)**

• **LakewoodShuls (160)**

• **PassaicJews (651)**

• **TeaneckShuls (5958)** TeaneckShuls is an announcement list for the Jewish community and shuls in the Teaneck / Bergenfield / New Milford vicinity.

• **TeaneckShulsUnrestricted (60)**

• **TenaflyShuls (204)**

• **WestOrangeJewishCommunity (79) (NEW)** The Vibrant, Diverse, and Growing Jewish Community of West Orange, NJ USA This mailing list is intended for the sharing of information between, and communication among, all members of the West Orange Jewish Community and its many Jewish Institutions - regardless of religious affiliation.

• **WestOrangeShuls (638) (NEW)** The list is intended for announcements of interest to shul-goers in the West Orange vicinity

## Topical Lists

### Business

• **buscardexchange (22)**

• **jcbusinessforum (322)**

• **JewishBusiness (173)** Business ethics and practices according to Jewish law.

• **JewishBusinessnetworking (380)** A place for Jewish business people to network, develop leads and contacts, exchange ideas, find jobs, provide employment, and shmooze!

• **JewishBusinessAssoc\_Colorado (255)** We have monthly luncheons to discuss various business topics as well as Happy Hour get togethers to socialize with others in the Jewish Community.

• **JewishBusinessNetwork (490)** Hear Exciting Speakers, Exchange Business Leads, and Job Opportunities, Promote Your Business, and/or Come Socialize at Our 3rd Tuesday, Monthly Meetings, 6:00-8:15pm at the Jewish Community Association of Austin, 7300 Hart Lane

• **jewishwork (334)** The Jewish (and Bnai Noach) job market. For employers and for people seeking employment, anywhere in the world. On this email list you can announce positions available, and positions being sought. This list is not for ads to promote your business, product, or services.

• **UCLAAnderson-JBSA (99)**

### Dating

• **Bay\_Area\_Jewish\_Singles (29)**

• **Frum-Jewish-Singles (101)** The purpose of this group is for Orthodox Jewish singles to be able to get together, exchange information about each other, post information about gatherings / singles weekends, to ask questions and possibly be able to set up a shidduch. You MUST be an Orthodox Jew to join this group and you will NOT be accepted until you answer the questionnaire that is emailed to you.

• **JDate\_Jewish\_Online\_Dating (50)** Are you Jewish? Are you Single? We have the solution for you! At JDate.com, you can meet like-minded Jews that are also single! This isn't an ONLINE dating site full of fake profiles! These are REAL PEOPLE just like you.

• **Jewish\_Matchmaker (108)**

• **jewish-singles (350)**

• **jewish-single-doctors (28)**

• **mercerc\_jewish\_singles (294)**

### Home Life

• **1davening (60)**

• **1-JewishComputing (64)**

• **1Jewish\_Homes (83)**

• **chiddush (232)** Chiddush is an advanced group that offers Yeshiva-level Jewish scholars (talmidei chachamim) the opportunity to share original insights into Jewish ritual and lore. Submissions may be up to one screen long, and must include traditional sources for reference. Include a statement that the submission was your own and that it has not been published elsewhere.

• **davening (337)**

• **Frum-Jewish-Parents (90)**

• **Gabbai (143)**

• **Jewish\_Cuisine (623)**

• **jewish-food (1749)** Jewish-Food is a moderated list for all interested in the discussion of GENERAL aspects of Jewish food which includes the exchanging of recipes, and cooking techniques of Jewish food using Kashruth (laws of keeping kosher).

• **JewishGeography (334)**

• **jewishhomes (719)**

• **JEWISH-RECIPE (492)**

• **jewish\_stitchery (112)**

• **Jewish\_Weight\_Watchers (169)**

• **Vegetarian\_Jewish\_Cuisine (392)**

### Religious

• **Jewish\_Converts (260)**

• **Teshuvah (123)** This is a group for those returning to Halachik Judaism, or already-frum Jews interested in assisting others.

• **Torah\_study (79)**

### Social

• **1-JewishPhilanthropy (113)** Jewish Philanthropy offers information about philanthropic activities and surveys of foundations that fund Jewish institutions. It networks Jewish fundraisers and donors.

• **Jewish\_Action\_Alerts (178)** This is an action alert listserv for Jews and friends of Jews from around the world to participate in local, national and international action alerts to governments, businesses, agencies as they effect the safety, security and welfare of Jewish people at home, abroad and in Israel. Groups from which action Alerts will be posted include, but are not limited to: AIPAC, UJC, JCPA, ADL, HonestReporting.com, CAMERA, and others.

• **Jewish\_Self-Defense (841)**

• **Jewish-Humor (318)**

• **jewish-jokes (455)**

• **jewish-american-veterans (83)**

• **Jewish-Outdoors-Club (1521)**

• **Jewish\_World (428)**