



*"If you search for it like silver, and seek it like buried treasures, then will you comprehend knowledge of God, and the fear of God will you find."*

*King Solomon, Proverbs 2:4-5*

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## Bilam and 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—a nation of 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

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## Bilam

RABBI ISRAEL CHAIT

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 G-d did not want Bilam to curse the Children of Israel as he placed many impediments in this attempted mission. G-d 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 G-d 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 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 individuals 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 enemies political weakness. We can therefore appreciate the Gemara in Brachos 7a, which tells us that Bilam knew the time

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Read the article on Bilam's donkey, and then explain the concept of metaphor to your child.  
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## God is Our Keeper

RIVKA OLENICK

"The Lord will keep you from all evil; He will keep your soul." Psalm 121:7

How can the Lord keep anyone from all evil if a person can choose evil? What is meant by: "He will keep your soul?" What is intended by the word: will? "He will keep" means he doesn't keep now. "Will keep" is dependent on how we should live in order to merit God as our "keeper."

All the evil that God will keep you from is evil that people bring on themselves and each other, since God does not cause evil. "No evil comes down from above." (Bereshis Rabba Chapter I). Most evil is caused by peoples intentions, desires and opinions regarding religious beliefs and stem from ignorance, not wisdom. The greater a person's ignorance the greater the evil one causes to oneself and others. A person who lives a life dedicated to truth removes him/herself from hatred of the self and the hatred of others. Knowledge of God, which is truth, also removes a person from the hatred that instigates war. In order for The Lord to keep you from all evil, one's life has to be directed to and immersed in truth by being involved in the will of God. Each person has to be cognizant of God at all times, and in all activities. Every person has the ability to use their free will and choose truth or the good, rather than ignorance, which produces evil. We all have the ability to live a life that adapts itself to the highest moral standard. As Jews we were chosen to be the nation that exemplifies this moral standard that the rest of the world must observe. Being kept from all evil is that through our actions and speech

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# Bilam and the Donkey

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

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to Bilam, Bilam's reply was that he had to consult with G-d. G-d'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 G-d's word. Balak persisted and sent more messengers-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 G-d. This time G-d gave him permission if there was a monetary gain, however he still must refrain from cursing the Jews.

What happens next is very remarkable. It is stated that Bilam arose early and that G-d was angry that he went. This was after G-d gave him permission! G-d 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 crushed up against the wall, 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 with a stick. G-d 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". G-d then opened Bilam's eyes and he saw the angel of G-d 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 G-d 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 entire story must then be interpreted accordingly. I would suggest the story is here is a parable for a conflict which Bilam was struggling with.

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 G-d. But with a closer look, his real nature is seen. He was asked to curse the Jews. G-d told him he can't. The fact that Bilam (during the account of the second messengers) requests from G-d again to know whether he can curse the Jews, shows that he wanted to curse them. That's why he said that "G-d has refrained me from cursing." Meaning that he really desired to curse, but he was prevented by G-d. 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 they were blessed by G-d - the very Being who grants curses or blessings. Bilam was well aware that G-d'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 G-d secured this treaty of G-d'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 G-d. 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 G-d's command to refrain from cursing them. The act of 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 represents his evil instincts and thus, isn't aware of reality (the angel of G-d). 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 man unable to perceive. Instincts have only one function-they guide a person to 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 G-d 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 way for restraining their instincts.)

Now that we understand the main components of the parable, (what Bilam, his donkey, and the angel represent, namely the instinctual drive, the conscience, and G-d's reality-respectively- 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 refers to Bilam's act of suppressing his conscience. 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 into his actions (from his "talking conscience") and realizes that there's something behind his suppression of his conscience. At this point, Bilam becomes aware of his denial only through G-d's kindness. That's why G-d had to open his eyes, not he himself. 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 forefathers and the three festivals fits in beautifully: The donkey (Bilam's conscience) was contemplating the core reason for G-d's providence over the Jews, namely, the perfection of our forefathers who caused G-d 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 G-d and Bilam now desired to curse them - but all curses are from G-d. 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. □

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# Bilam

RABBI ISRAEL CHAIT

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when G-d was angry at 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 G-d was not angry at Bnai Yisroel, throughout this entire event. This has added significance since G-d 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 G-d relates to the Children of Israel as evidenced by their exodus from Egypt. 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 G-d like figure. He professed that he was communicating

with G-d 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, G-d appeared to him in a prophetic vision and warned him about his attempted mission. G-d instructed him not to go curse these people because they are blessed. This vision was startling for Bilam, the ultimate rationalist. He manipulated people's fears and merely professed supernatural powers. Thus G-d'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 G-d 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 G-d 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 G-d changed his mind. Furthermore, after Bilam goes, G-d expressed anger that he went, even though G-d consented to his journey, provided Bilam did not violate his command. Upon closer analysis we can appreciate that G-d relates to man on two different levels.

G-d 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.

G-d 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, G-d 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, G-d 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, G-d 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, G-d 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 G-d 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 G-d. This time the donkey did not move and engaged Bilam in a dialogue. It was only after this dialogue that G-d opened Bilam's eyes and permitted him to see the angel of G-d blocking the road. Rashi comments that at the outset only the donkey was capable of seeing the angel because G-d 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 G-d 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 G-d opened Bilam's eyes and he saw the angel of G-d 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 G-d. The Israelites were a special nation that celebrate three festivals whereby they acknowledge their unique relationship with G-d. He slowly started to appreciate that he was dealing with not just another political entity, but rather a unique nation under G-d's special providence. G-d 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. ■

## God is Our Keeper

RIVKA OLENICK

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we are to cling to and internalize all possible knowledge of God. As His chosen nation we are to teach the world that truth, which in essence, is God can remove a person entirely from evil. God will keep us from evil when our lives are committed to Torah knowledge and the mitzvot that He gave us and commanded us in. We will not stray from what is good, which is His will. We will not choose evil, which is the absence of good, the absence of His will. We have the ability to always turn to God for assistance and help. We should not allow ourselves to be dependent on or be afraid of man's powers in the world. It is God that created the entire world, which is subject to His continuous, ongoing rule. Even when we feel estranged from God, we should always remember that He created us to obey His laws. He provides everything that is needed for all His created beings and His creatures, continuously. "The earth is the Lord's" (Exodus 9:29). Our existence and desires are completely subject to and dependent on His rule, not man's rule. As we live our lives we should remember that our soul is His. Meaning, that the knowledge we acquire is His knowledge and He will keep our soul as long as we keep His knowledge. The Rambam says: "The wise and virtuous see and understand the wisdom of God in the world." "All the paths of the Lord are mercy and truth unto such as keep His covenant and His testimonies." Psalms 25:10.

The definition of "soul" is often misunderstood and thought to be something mystical, it is not. The wisdom or chachma that we acquire for our soul through Torah study is what brings us closer to the understanding of what God wants from us and for us. Ideally, our soul, which is also our intellect manifests itself in obtaining wisdom, and to the best of each person's ability, allows each of us to be involved in our own perfection. When we keep our commitment to the commandment of acquiring knowledge, we will want to do the actions of kindness, justice and charity. This is a natural result of understanding God's laws. This is being involved in one's own perfection and being worthy of God's protection. This is what: "He will keep your soul," means, that each person; through the use of their intellect can

search for and obtain the knowledge that is essential for perfection. In Bereshis Rabba: "In one place Scripture says: And all things that are desirable are not to be compared to her (Proverbs 8:2); and in another place, And all things that thou desirest are not to be compared unto her By "things that are desirable" the performance of the Divine precepts and good deeds is to be understood, whilst "things that thou desirest" refer to precious stones and pearls. Both things that are desirable, and things that thou desirest - cannot be compared to wisdom, but "in this let him that glorieth glory, that he understandeth and knoweth me." The Rambam adds: "God is near to all who call Him, if they call Him in truth, and turn to Him. He is found by everyone who seeks Him, if he always goes towards Him, and never goes astray."

## Providence vs Miracles

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

**Reader:** I read with some surprise your article in this week's Jewish Times, some statements to the effect that Hashem only influences certain things in our daily lives; the rest is left to natural forces. You state that "unless one is a prophet, he cannot know with certainty whether G-d actually did something or not."

This is very confusing to me, since according to Rav Dessler - as well as many other commentators - "nature" is just as miraculous as the splitting of the sea, except that we're used to it because it's more common. Why do you make a distinction between "natural occurrence" and "G-d's will"? Surely they are one and the same thing - the only difference being the degree to which we are conscious of the fact that Hashem is controlling everything in the world (other than our free will)?

**Mesora:** I believe you are confusing divine providence with miracles.

The ideas I quoted are from Maimonides' "Guide for the Perplexed". Other Rishonim as Sforno, share Maimonides' view. Therein, Maimonides quotes Scriptural verses from which he derived his theory. He makes a clear distinction between divine

intervention, and nature. He explains that one's perfection and divine protection are directly proportional.

I am sure you would agree, for example, that of two people cast into a furnace, the one who is untouched by flames was the recipient of divine intervention. The other was not. Maimonides says this preferential treatment of the saved soul is due to the higher level of his perfection.

Yes, both men were affected by God's laws; i.e. laws of ignition, vs laws of divine providence. Both laws are creations of God which contain stupendous wisdom. You were arguing that all man's experiences - natural and divine - are really miracles. This is Rav Dessler's teaching. However, that is not the point of my statement. My point is that of Maimonides: That divine protection is great in some people, absent in others, and varying degrees in between....all due to each person's perfection. It would be correct to state that God intervened on behalf of the saved man, and He did not intervene on behalf of he who perished.

I believe the confusion is how we distinguish between miracles, and divine intervention. Meaning, if all that happens on Earth - as Rav Dessler said - are truly miracles, then how do we distinguish between the two men in my example above? The answer is that all that happens are ultimately God's forces at work. But that does not mean it is God's will at work. People can cause themselves great harm, with God's forces: As an example, someone igniting a barbecue grill. A perfected person earns God's suspension of damaging forces in such a case. Those men who are not perfected will suffer from God's inactivity, and the explosion might be deadly. In both cases both men experienced God's forces. But only in the first case did God suspend damage due to the person's perfection.

So one topic, yours, is whether we say all which occurs are miracles. My topic was concerning God's intervention.

Miracles deal with the ongoing design of earthly occurrence and matter. Intervention refers to something different - God's will.

Regarding your other point, if one is not a prophet, he cannot know when occurrences are divine, or natural. We do not know God's "mind". It would be completely arrogant to suggest, "I know that God just did something." We should say instead, "It is possible that God did something." The only way we can know for certain, is through God's informing us, or if the event was clearly a miracle. □

## Kissing Objects

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

**Reader:** Why is it okay for Jews to kiss or bow to objects of Mitzvot? For example, bowing to the Torah, kissing the Torah or Tallis, kissing a Kipah if it falls off your head, etc. Why is this not Avodah Zara mentality? Thank you in advance for your response.

**Mesora:** Avoda "Zara" (normally translated as "idol worship") really means "strange worship", as in "strange worship from that which God commands". Any worship originated by God is of course Torah. So bowing to the Torah is not a digression from God's commands. Bowing to that which the Torah did not command would be a form of Avoda Zara.

You need not kiss a kipa or sefer if it falls, or even the Torah as it passes you (you are supposed to follow it at least three steps to respect it via escorting it). If you do kiss these objects, it is not Avoda Zara as you are not doing so to deify them. You do so out of respect to God's commands. I personally feel that one must be on a level to kiss with sincere love, an object of Torah. A simple act of kissing should not be performed if one has no grasp of the reasons why he performs such an act, such as Tefillin or Lulav. Judaism demands honesty in all areas. If you truly don't appreciate the great benefit and concept behind a given command, or you don't have an appreciation for the Creator of this command, why are you kissing the object? Such a kiss would be action with no true motivation of love. It would be a lie. God tells us that he does not wish our sacrifices, but our perfection. Meaning, an empty act is worthless before God.

The simple act of bowing or kissing is not the sole consideration for determining an act as idolatrous. By definition, if the Torah commands an action, it is obviously not strange (to the Torah). Practices not found in the Torah, although practiced by many Jews, could possibly be idolatry, such as the act of wearing red bendels, or checking mezuzot if bad tidings occur. Here, one projects powers onto physical objects. Objects which cannot even protect themselves, foolish people believe can protect them.