

# Thank you, Mr. Voight.

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| Chicago      | 8:11 | New York      | 8:13 |
| Cleveland    | 8:46 | Paris         | 9:40 |
| Detroit      | 8:55 | Philadelphia  | 8:15 |
| Houston      | 8:07 | Phoenix       | 7:24 |
| Jerusalem    | 7:30 | Pittsburgh    | 8:36 |
| Johannesburg | 5:07 | Seattle       | 8:53 |
| Los Angeles  | 7:49 | Sydney        | 4:39 |
| London       | 9:03 | Tokyo         | 6:42 |
| Miami        | 7:57 | Toronto       | 8:45 |
| Montreal     | 8:28 | Washington DC | 8:19 |

## Weekly Parsha

# 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

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## Weekly Parsha

# More than Just a Label

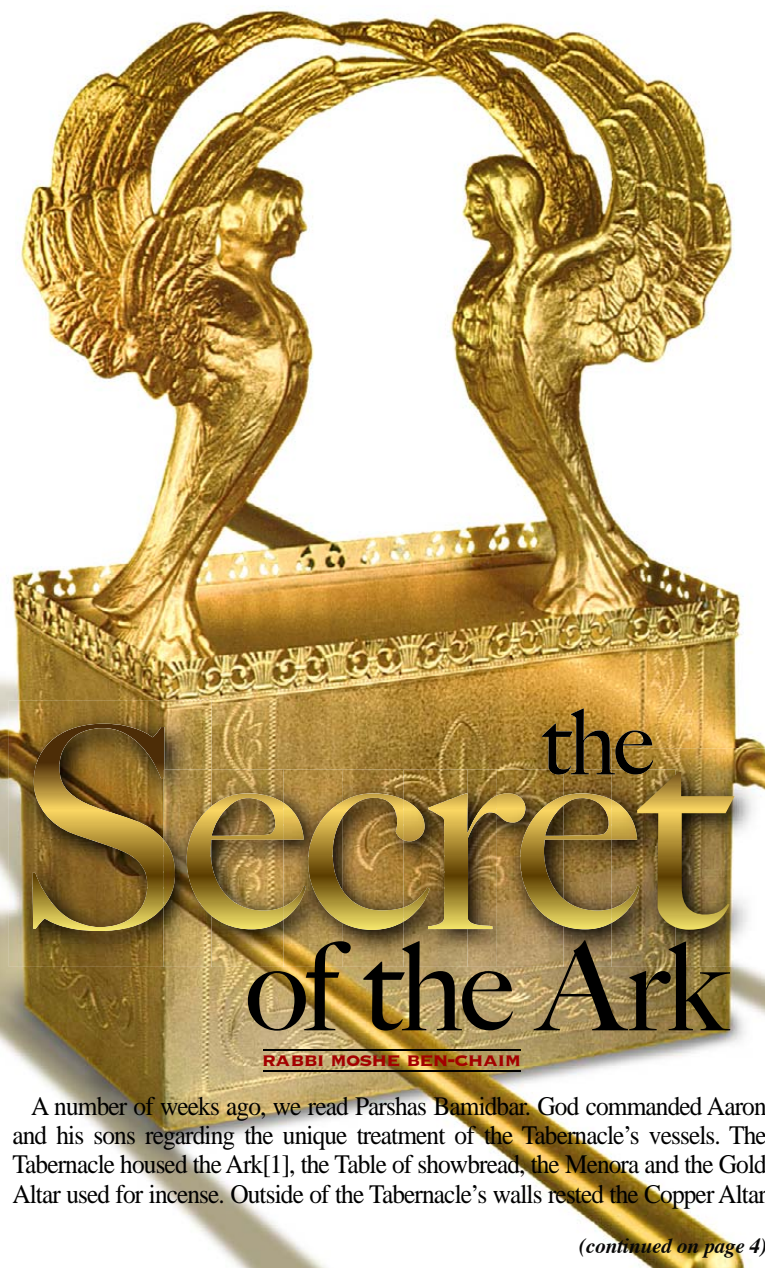
RABBI DR. DARREL GINSBERG

The rabbi spends the first part of his sermon, building up his case, even casting a shadow over the great tzadik. And when the conclusion comes, the moment to tie it all together, the rabbi reveals the truth about this unique individual: "he was caring." We have all heard these types of finales before - the labeling of our forefathers and leaders as "humble," "peace loving" or "baalei chesed." These labels become caricatures, identifying these complex personalities by one trait. Is this how we are to comprehend such personalities like Moshe and Aharon, or Mordechai and Esther? The truth is, many of these conclusions are based on superficial readings of the words of Chazal. It's true that on numerous occasions Chazal seem to characterize our forefathers in the exact same manner—as "one note wonders". Are the words of Chazal meant to be taken at face value, or is there a deeper idea to be found?

Looking at Pirkei Avos, one can see an example of Chazal's "label-

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## Fundamentals



A number of weeks ago, we read Parshas Bamidbar. God commanded Aaron and his sons regarding the unique treatment of the Tabernacle's vessels. The Tabernacle housed the Ark[1], the Table of showbread, the Menora and the Gold Altar used for incense. Outside of the Tabernacle's walls rested the Copper Altar

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(Bilam cont. from pg. 1)

## Weekly Parsha

# JewishTimes

Weekly Journal on Jewish Thought



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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 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

(continued on next page)



(Bilam continued from previous page)

## Weekly Parsha

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.

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 than 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. ■

(Secret continued from page 1)

## Fundamentals

used in animal sacrifice. God commanded Aaron and his sons – when preparing for journey – to cover these vessels. They should not be transported on the wagons in an uncovered state.

All but the Table had two coverings: a garment of dyed cloth, and an animal skin. (The Table had two dyed garments and an animal skin.) We wondered why the Torah alters the terms “garments” of cloth, and “coverings” of skin. Are they not both “coverings”? The Rabbis teach the purpose of the skins was to protect the vessels from the elements. This is sensible. But we are curious as to the purpose of these colored garments, and why they are called “garments”.

All vessels excluding the Copper Altar were covered with a blue garment, while the Copper Altar was covered with a purple garment. Why this change? Additionally, all vessels had a single colored garment, while the Table alone was covered in both blue and red garments. Of unique distinction was the Ark, for it was covered with the skin first, and then covered by its blue garment[2]. In contrast, all other vessels were first covered with their respective colored garments, and then covered externally with skins...the reverse order. We also wished to learn of these specific colors...had they unique meaning? Ramban cites the blue garments reflected the heavens, as he quotes from Exodus 24:10, “k’etzem hashamyim latohar”, “as the essence of the heavens in purity”. So what did the purple – not blue – garment on the Copper Altar represent, and what did the extra red garment on the Table indicate? We will come back to this.

The laws and specifics I cite may be somewhat technical, but I ask your indulgence. My objective is that you come to appreciate how many laws and formulations that seem arbitrary and unrelated, actually create a beautiful harmony.

These questions led us to investigate more details pertaining to the Tabernacle. We were specifically interested in the Ark, as its blue garment was to be external to its skin covering, while all other vessels were to have the skins external to the garment.

What was the purpose of the Ark? It is most unique, in that its covering comprised two gold winged cherub figurines. The Ark contained the Tablets and the Torah. We learn that when God spoke to Moses, He created a voice that emanated from between these two cherubs and then penetrated Moses’ ears. What consideration demanded this unique means of prophecy? (Exod. 25:22)

As such, the Ark may rightfully be viewed as the centerpiece of the Tabernacle. But here’s the strange part: Maimonides omits the Ark in his list of the Tabernacle’s vessels! (Hilchos Beis Habechira, 1:6) Every other item is listed, except the Ark. And when he does finally mention the Ark in chapter 4 (ibid) he does not offer any details of its measurements or design, as he does when describing the other vessels. He discusses what seems as extraneous

material...the stone upon which the Ark rested (the Evven Shessiyah[3]), the wall that separated the Ark from the other room, and other matters. But not a word of the Cherubim, or the Ark’s design! Astonishing. It is also curious that Maimonides, when formulating these laws of Temple, includes this history of Solomon creating caverns to hide the Ark. These caverns have nothing to do with Temple law! We are also puzzled as to why King Solomon did not care to hide the other vessels. Does this teach that the Ark – and no other item – required complete secrecy? If so, what’s the secret?

We do find Maimonides discussing the Ark later. (Laws 2:12 and 2:13 if Hilchos Klay Hamikdash.) There, Maimonides teaches three laws: that the Ark must be carried directly on man’s shoulders and no other means; the carriers must face each other’s faces; not facing a uniform direction (face to back); and the Ark’s poles must never be removed. Now, alone these laws deserve explanation, but what is so intriguing is where Maimonides places these three laws: together in his formulation of the incense! He could have equally placed these laws in the previous chapter addressing the oil. We are at a loss as to Maimonides’ juxtaposing of the Ark to the incense. There must be a connection, but what is Maimonides’ lesson? And we must ask what is the purpose of the incense.

### The Vessels Coverings

Although inactive while in transport, the vessels required man’s honor. These objects possess the God-given status of “objects of mitzvah”. We must treat objects used in mitzvah with greater care than mundane objects. Certainly, we must have a higher regard for items used in Temple service, for they are Kodesh (sanctified). Additionally, anything dedicated to Temple has an even greater status.

Now, although each vessel had a skin covering to protect it from the elements, God also commanded that each vessel have a “garment”. What is a garment? A garment is not always intended to ‘cover’, but at times, to highlight a distinction or delineate honor. Thus, a king wears unique garments and a crown. The High Priest also is made unique through his garments. The same concept applies to the Tabernacle’s vessels.

The vessels must be treated with honor. To do so, all vessels except the Copper Altar were dressed with a blue garment. Blue represents the created heavens and thereby we recall the Creator. This was to teach that each vessel contributed to some aspect of our knowledge of God. The Menora’s seven branches related the idea of seven days in Creation. For our definition of God is the Creator. The Table contained twelve loaves of showbread, teaching God’s omnipotence, and the incense Altar teaches that God is omniscient, for He is aware of man’s acts (offerings). So the blue garment is to highlight a vessel’s contri-

bution to our knowledge of God.

The Table had an additional red garment. Red is the color of blood, or human life. God feeds us by sustaining nature and thereby, all plant and animal life. The Table housed the 12 loaves of bread, which represents this sustenance. So it is reasonable that a red and blue garment be associated with the Table. For the Table teaches us about God (blue – pointing to knowledge of God, He is omnipotent to supply our needs) while also teaching that this sustenance preserves our very lives (red garment).

However, the Copper Altar was clothed with a purple garment alone. It had no blue garment. And there is an interesting idea here. Purple, is the combination of blue and red. It is also significant that the Copper Altar was not inside the Tabernacle. I believe this was because the Altar does not contribute to knowledge of God, as do the other three vessels found inside the Tabernacle clothed in blue. The Copper Altar is used to sacrifice animals. Why do we kill animals? The definition of sacrifice traces back to the very first sacrifice. Adam, as soon as he was created, offered a sacrifice. He did so, as Ibn Ezra teaches, he was a great intellectual. Thus, he immediately realized that he was ‘created’, and that his existence is not mandatory. Only God’s existence is necessary. Realizing this truth, Adam wished to express this truth by proxy: he killed an animal to be in his place, demonstrating to God and to himself that this lifeless beast represents man’s real state. Man does not have to exist. It is only through God’s kindness that each of us lives.

In essence, sacrifice is the combination of two ideas: human life is unnecessary, and man’s realization of the Creator and his reach towards a relationship with God. We must use sacrifice to constantly remind ourselves of our mortality, and that we are created beings. Human life (blood), God/Creator of heavens (blue), red and blue create purple. The Copper Altar was clothed in a purple garment, representing this combination. And again, the Altar’s placement outside the Tabernacle alludes to its different role: it is man’s approach to God, which is of a lesser level than pure knowledge of God conveyed through the inner vessels. This lesser status is also conveyed through a lesser metal: copper is not as precious a metal as is gold.

Now, above the dyed garments, the skins were placed to protect the vessels from the elements. However, the Ark was first covered with the skin, and then the blue garment was placed over that skin. Why in the reverse order of all other vessels?

### Torah: No Objective Outside Itself

The Ark required no service – “avodah”: its mere existence is the objective. Torah is not given with intent that it serves any ‘purpose’. Torah exists to display God’s wisdom. Thus, the Ark was not a

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(Secret continued from previous page)

## Fundamentals

vessel or utilitarian. To convey this idea, the blue garment was placed on the outside of the Ark. This was done to teach that the Ark was never compromised in its purpose, even while in transport...unlike the other vessels. The Ark, i.e., Torah, is always 'active'. We are to be in a state of contemplating God and His laws all day, as we read in the Shema. We must always see the blue covering on the Ark to remind ourselves that Torah is to always be engaged.

In contrast, the other vessels were 'utilized' objects: their varied purposes were only realized when functioning in the Tabernacle and serviced by the priests. But when not in service, they were to be stored. They were to be covered with skins on the exterior to signify these vessels were inactive.

This also explains why Maimonides excluded the Ark from his list of "kaylim", vessels. (Hilchos Bais Habechira 1:6) A vessel is something utilized. The Ark is not utilitarian in nature; it contained God's Torah. For this reason, the Ark's poles were never removed. For the Ark did not find a greater purpose while inside the Tabernacle or the Temple. The Ark is synonymous with Torah: God's wisdom. It needs nothing. It functions for itself.

This could very well explain why Maimonides groups the laws of the Ark together with the incense, and not the oil. For the incense was made for itself too...it was to be fragrant, as Maimonides teaches. That is, existing simply for itself. But the oil was "used" to anoint. It was utilitarian, unlike the incense and the Ark. And Maimonides' very formulation bears out this idea:

"It is a mitzvah to make the anointing oil that is should be prepared for matters requiring anointing with it"[4]. Whereas Maimonides' formulation of the incense reads:

"The incense was made yearly, and its making is a positive command"[5].

No mention of a "usage" in connection with incense, but the oil was "prepared for matters requiring anointing".

### The Secret

Why did King Solomon create deep subterranean, winding caverns to hide the Ark? Why did he not seek to hide any other vessel? Why did Maimonides include this history in his laws? Why did God command His Torah to be placed inside an Ark? This was actually a command even prior to the Temple, when Moses received the second Tablets. (Deut. 10:1)

Let's recount the facts. The Holy of Holies was off limits by punishment of death to all who approached, as witnessed in the death of Nadav and Avihu. Man must accept ignorance of God's nature, as a fundamental in our approach to God. No one was permitted to ascend Mount Sinai for this very reason, lest man feel he can draw "near" to God. Of course, God was not "on" the mountain...God cannot be

### The Copper Altar



localized, as He exists outside time and space. It is heretical to suggest otherwise. And we learn that 57,000 people were killed for looking into the ark upon its return from the Philistines. Why did they open the Ark? It is because they felt they could "see" something concerning God. A heretical notion.

We must know: God is unknowable. "For man cannot know Me while alive". (Exod. 33:20) This fundamental is beyond the scope of Temple. It is for this reason that King Solomon treated the Ark with such secrecy even though he knew the Temple would be destroyed. This fundamental of man's ignorance of God surpasses the walls – and times – of the Temple. And since God's knowledge (the Torah) is the very identity of the Ark, Maimonides includes this history in his chapter addressing the laws of the Ark. This is not a historical record for history's sake, but to illustrate the nature of the Ark's uniqueness. Thus, this history belongs in the discussion of the Ark's very distinction and its laws.

Additionally, an Ark – by definition – is something that conceals. So it is not a mere container, but the Ark embodies this idea that God is concealed from man's intellect.

Why did Maimonides not discuss the Ark's measurements? I am not sure, but this is an interesting quote: "Rabbi Levi said, 'We received a transmission from our forefathers that the Ark was not capable of being measured.'" (Talmud Megilla 10b) Rashi explains that the room where the Ark was housed (the Holy of Holies) measured 20 cubits square. The Ark was 2 cubits wide, so if it was centered in that room, there should be 9 cubits distance from the Ark to the walls, on both sides. The Ark measuring 2 cubits, plus the remaining 18 cubits of space would give the proper total of 20 cubits. However, when measuring the distance, there was found to be 10 cubits of space between any side of the Ark, and the wall. Meaning, the Ark occupied no space! I am less concerned with how this occurred, than "why" such a miracle was necessary.

But we may answer that in line with the purpose of a room that is off limits, teaching that God is off limits to our minds, a miracle was created to embellish this very concept. Man's mind cannot explain the existence of a 3-dimensional Ark that does not detract

from the space of that Holy of Holies room. This inexplicable miracle enables man to then admit he cannot explain all, and thereby apply this acceptance of ignorance in his appreciation of God. Just as one matter is inexplicable, man can then accept God as inexplicable.

This then, is the "Secret of the Ark"...a secret that is never revealed. It is the unknowable nature of God. As man is sensual, requiring his ideas be connected to the physical world, it is impossible that we might know anything about God. Just as we cannot "see" sound, also true is we cannot perceive God's nature. Even Moses' knowledge must first emanate between two physical cherub forms before it penetrated his ears. Human knowledge must be tied to something physical. This is the purpose of Creation: that man have a physical universe through which we may all witness God's wisdom, but never God Himself.

And as this is a truth independent of the Tabernacle and Temple, and predates both...Maimonides recorded the history of the caverns that Solomon built to hide the Ark. I believe Maimonides recorded this history in his law book, as he wished to highlight the true essence of the Ark. The unapproachable Holy of Holies and Ark is to teach our inability to approach knowledge of God. This is independent of God commanding man in building a Temple. It startles us at first, that a law book contains historical data. But now we understand, that this very history of hiding the Ark highlights the very nature of the Ark. Hiding the Ark was meant to teach that God is unknowable, even when the Temple is in ruins. Thus, Solomon did not seek to hide away any other vessel. For it is the Ark alone that teaches man of certain knowledge that is "out of reach" and hidden.

We now understand why in that chapter[6] Maimonides also discusses the separating wall, for this too contributes to the "separation" between man and knowledge of God.

An interesting last point is that this chapter starts with another historical fact cited in a few sources[7]. The Ark rested on a stone in the Holy of Holies. This stone is called the "Even Hashessiyah", the stone from which the Earth was established. The idea of a relationship between the Ark and the Earth's foundation stone implies that the Earth's creation is realized in the objective of the Ark. ■

[1] Not a "vessel" according to Maimonides' classification: Laws of the Chosen House 1:6

[2] The Ark was first covered by the Parochess: the curtain that divided between the Holies and the Holy of Holies. Above the Parochess was placed the animal skin, and then the blue garment last, on the exterior.

[3] Yoma 27b (Jerusalem Talmud) and Tosefta Yoma 2:12 cite the Even Hashessiyah, the stone from which the Earth was established.

[4] Klay Hamikdash 1:1

[5] Klay Hamikdash 2:1

[6] Hil. Beis Habechira 4

[7] Yoma 27b, Jerusalem Talmud and Tosefta Yoma 2:12

ing". The Mishna, in analyzing Bilaam, offers a well-known comparison in describing his traits (Avos 5:19):

*"Whoever possesses the following three traits is of the disciples of our father Abraham; and whoever possesses the opposite three traits is of the disciples of the wicked Bilaam. The disciples of our father Abraham have a good eye (ayin tov), a meek spirit (ruach nemucha) and a humble soul (nefesh shefala). The disciples of the wicked Bilaam have an evil eye (ayin hara), a proud spirit (ruach gavoah) and a haughty soul (nefesh rechava)..."*

As like many of the teachings of Chazal, to merely take this writing at face value would seem to offer no great insights - in fact, it would seem to substantiate the claim that our forefathers are merely caricatures whose purpose is to offer us a few personality traits by which to guide our actions. Of course, and much like a classic Western movie, Avraham is the great man and chacham, while Bilaam is the bad and evil rasha. Furthermore, it would seem natural to assume that a great man such as Avraham would possess the above traits, while someone like Bilaam would be the opposite. What new concepts are being introduced by Chazal in the above statement?

The first step it to get a better idea of the listed traits. The Rambam (Perush Mishnayos, ibid) elaborates on these qualities in great detail. He explains that the ayin tova refers to a person's ability to be satisfied with what he has, avoiding envy of what others possess. Whereas Avraham exhibited this trait, Bilaam was the opposite (ayin hara), constantly pursuing money, as seen in his willingness to be hired to curse Bnai Yisrael. Having a nefesh shefala, according to the Rambam, refers to one's avoidance of the instinctual world. This is expressed in Avraham's "sudden" recognition of Sarah's beauty prior to going to Egypt (Bereishis 12:11: "...Behold, I now realize that you are a woman of beautiful appearance") - he had never referred to her beauty previously, demonstrating a distance from the instinctual. Bilaam, in devising his "plan B" to unleash the women of Midyan on Bnai Yisrael, was someone who embraced this world. Finally, there is the ruach nemucha, which the Rambam learns to mean the trait of anivus, humility. Whereas Avraham expressed the greatest demonstration of humility, Bilaam reflected the height of haughtiness.

The Rambam seems to be offering an explanation as to the terms used by Chazal, but is that all there is to it? Are we simply being informed of how the different traits are to be understood? Why is it important to simply know that one tzadik had "good" characteristics, while one rasha possessed "bad" traits?

One clue that may offer a starting point is the choice of citing "the disciples of our father Avraham," rather than just Avraham himself. To be a student of Avraham means to accept a certain school of thought, a fundamental philosophical approach. The Mishna is extending its idea beyond the individual - it is presenting a core outlook. Yet one would therefore assume that the philosophies of Avraham and Bilaam have nothing in common. Not so. It is possible the Mishna is guiding us to first understand a basic starting point shared in common by Avraham and Bilaam. It requires understanding Bilaam in a more realistic light, as presented in different Gemaras and Midrashim. Bilaam was a very intelligent person, shrewdly manipulating Balak, identifying the weaknesses in Bnai Yisrael (as seen in his plan to have them seduced by the women of Midyan), and earning a reputation as a reliable mercenary. He understood the power of the mind, the part of man that separates us from animals. Rather than be labeled a "bad man," he was a rational thinker. Bilaam is described in these contexts, where, for example, he was an advisor to Pharaoh - he was valued for his political acumen and sharp insights. In so far as he appreciated the power of the mind, the importance of rational thinking, he can be compared to Avraham. Where they diverge has to do with the purpose of the mind. Avraham, through his discovery of God, recognized that the mind existed to serve God, to aid man in uncovering the infinite chachma of God. Bilaam, on the other hand, saw the mind as a vehicle for man, existing merely to serve man and his needs.

The trends listed in the Mishna directly emerge based on these two different philosophical outlooks. For lack of space, let's focus on the description of Bilaam as a baal taava, someone steeped in the physical world. Interestingly enough, the Rambam explains that Bilaam's "plan B" for Bnai Yisrael, unleashing the women of Midyan, demonstrates his attachment to the instinctual world, since Bilaam believed that sexual impropriety was "good." Yet the Torah never describes Bilaam as a glutton or someone with many spouses. The explanation follows the above thesis. When one thinks the mind exists to serve the self, a new world

outlook naturally emerges - if it makes me feel good, it is good. In other words, the physical world exists to serve mankind, and he determines that which is good and that which is not. This moral viewpoint is very common in a secular society, a subjectivist attitude leading to extremes in the pursuit of pleasure. In Bilaam's eyes, there could be no such thing as sexual impropriety, since the involvement in this arena leads to physical enjoyment. Bilaam was not only using his mind to devise a plan to weaken Bnai Yisrael, he was attempting to prove his view as the correct one. Bnai Yisrael's seduction by these women, demonstrating their willingness to give in to their instincts, was a direct validation (in Bilaam's eyes) of this concept. It is up to man to determine that which is the good and which is the bad. This is a natural product of the mind existing to serve the self. Obviously, the philosophy of Avraham was diametrically opposed to that of Bilaam. The Rambam directs us to Avraham's "sudden" realization of Sarah's beauty. Of course Avraham knew Sarah was beautiful. But he saw her beauty in the correct light. He realized how her beauty would help benefit the mission of bringing monotheism to the world as she was ideal to greet and teach those interested. Prior to going to Egypt, he describes how Sarah was beautiful. What did he mean? It was when he was going to a land whose people were ruled by their desire for physical beauty and materialism that he realized how they would view Sarah. She would be an object of pleasure, rather than a tzelem elokim. This incident was a microcosm of Avraham's overall view of the physical world. When the mind serves to understand God, the physical world's role is to benefit this pursuit, rather than be there to gratify man.

What we see from this example what would seem to be the objective of Chazal's description of personalities and traits. The concept that Chazal are teaching us is not that Avraham was "good" and Bilaam "bad." Chazal use these general labels as a means of guiding us to uncover deeper ideas. It is important that we move beyond the simplistic messages of "nice" and "caring." We must study how these different middos emerge, what leads one to develop the above traits, and ultimately, understand that merely focusing on what type of person Avraham or any of the forefathers were is a limited study. Many people are, at their core, are "humble" or "caring." It is how those traits manifest themselves, how they are directed and utilized in relation to the pursuit of yedias Hashem, which we need to analyze and internalize. ■



## Weekly Parsha

# Where are the Miracle Workers when You Need Them?

RABBI REUVEN MANN

This week's parsha, Balak, tells the story of Balaam who was called upon to defeat the Jews by cursing them. At first glance this episode seems difficult to understand. Judaism is opposed to all forms of magic, witchcraft and the occult. The Rambam makes it absolutely clear that we do not ascribe any reality to the realm of the "paranormal." It is a fundamental tenet of Judaism that everything that exists has been created by Hashem and cannot exceed the natural qualities with which it has been endowed. Man is no exception to this rule. He can use his intellect, which was bestowed upon him by Hashem to unravel some of the "mysteries" of the universe. Through an understanding of nature he can harness its forces and produce significant technological advances. However, there is no such thing as a human who possesses supernatural power. To ascribe divinity to any human is idolatrous. It therefore follows that there is no such thing as a curse i.e. no one has the power to influence natural forces through the utterance of certain "incantations." It is said that prior to his assassination certain "kabblistic" sects in Israel pronounced a severe curse against Yitzchak Rabin. Anyone who believes that there is a connection between that curse and Rabin's death denies then fundamentals of Torah. Let us ask: if there are people who claim supernatural powers, where were they during the Holocaust? Why couldn't they find the time to launch one of their choicest curses against Adolph Hitler? And what about Nasrallah and Ahmadiyya just for starters? Where are all the miracle workers when you need them?

However, the parsha of Balak does pose a problem. It seems that the curse of Balaam was something to be reckoned with. For Hashem saw fit to warn Balaam not to curse the Jews. G-d said to Balaam when Balak's messengers came to summon him, "Do not go with them. Do not curse the people, for it is blessed." However, we must ask: if the people are blessed, what harm can the curse of a mortal do?

The great Bible commentator, Sforno, explains that Balaam did not have the power to bless but only to curse. He means that Balaam was an extremely brilliant individual who had an uncanny ability to comprehend the weaknesses and vulnerabilities of people and nations. Rabbi Israel Chait explained that Balaam was able to figure out when a nation was on the verge of a calamity. He would then issue a curse against it. When the disaster struck people would



attribute it to the power of his "curse." Balaam was, thus, an "evil genius" with a devastating capability to discern the "fatal flaws" of various societies.

The Jewish people are "blessed," but not perfect.

The following is correspondence between a student and Rabbi Mann

**Brittany:** To whomever this may concern,

Hi my name is Brittany Davenport and I am an RN here in the Phoenix area. I am currently going back to school to further my education and am taking a course in spirituality. I am looking into different beliefs to see how I can offer better care for my patients with diverse religious/spiritual beliefs. As I am doing my research I am asking questions so I can formulate a research paper about the differences in spiritual practices and how that pertains to health care. If there is anyone that can answer four questions regarding your faith and email them back to me, that would be very beneficial to my research.

Thank you so much for your answers and assistance in my research and for opening up my perspective of your spiritual beliefs. Your responses will allow me to provide better quality of care for patients that follow the same beliefs.

Sincerely, Brittany Davenport, RN

**Rabbi Mann:** Hi Brittany,

I am Rabbi Reuven Mann of the Young Israel of Phoenix and will try to answer the questions you have posed.

**Brittany:** What is your spiritual perspective on healing?

**Rabbi Mann:** The Jewish perspective on healing is based on the religious obligation to maintain one's health. Both physical and mental health are of the utmost importance as it is impossible to serve G-d properly when one is ill or in pain. When a person becomes ill he is obligated to do everything possible to become cured. He must operate on the "natural" and "spiritual" fronts. Thus, he cannot simply sit back and pray to G-d for a recovery without doing all that is in his power as this would violate the Jewish injunction against "relying on miracles". Rather, he must operate within the framework of the natural order and seek out the best doctors and adhere to the prescribed therapeutic treatment.

Having done all of this, the spiritual element does come into play. Illness is regarded as an opportunity for introspection, to examine one's own life. In this regard prayer for a healing is considered to be very important. Judaism recognizes both individual and community prayer. The patient prays for his own healing "together with other ailing people of Israel." We do not isolate ourselves from others in our time of need. To the contrary, we should become more sympathetic to the plight of others and pray for their well being as we would pray for our own.

It is important to note that Jews have a religious obligation to be concerned about the needs of the sick person. It is a significant virtuous deed (called a "mitzvah") to visit the sick. The purpose of this visit is to a) see to his/her needs, make sure that he/she has what he/she needs and that he/she is receiving proper care at home or at the hospital, b) to lift his/her spirits by offering comfort and friendship and demonstrating concern, and c) to pray for him. It is interesting to note that the text of the prayer for the sick person always mentions "a

We have our flaws and blemishes as our long history of exile and persecution attests. However, we have survived and outlived all of our tormentors. Many have tried but no one has been able to discover the formula that could destroy us, Heaven forbid. According to Rabbi Chait Balaam had the capacity to uncover things about the Jews which if made public would cause them irreparable harm. Hashem intervened to prevent this from happening. Indeed, He went further and transformed all of Balaam's curses into blessings "for Hashem your G-d loves you." Shabbat Shalom ■

healing of the body and a healing of the soul". Judaism recognizes the supreme importance of one's spiritual health as well as physical health.

**Brittany:** What are the critical aspects of healing?

**Rabbi Mann:** The basic components are proper medical care i.e. going to the best doctors and following their directions. It is also important to seek Divine assistance. This is achieved through introspection and repentance and through prayer. In Judaism the prayers of the sick person are the most significant. However, it is also very important for the community to pray for the sick person. Those who visit the sick are supposed to include prayer for the patient as part of their visit. The psychological state of the patient is regarded as extremely important to his/her recovery. Hence he/she should engage in activities that reduce anxiety and afford peace of mind. The Rabbi is expected to visit the patient and help him/her spiritually and do his best to reduce his/her stress and provide a strong sense of hope and optimism. The Rabbi should strengthen the patient's faith in G-d and belief that G-d hears prayer and heals the sick. Faith and hope are extremely important as a person in despair is less likely to recover than a confident, optimistic patient.

**Brittany:** What is important to you and your faith, when cared for by health care providers whose spiritual beliefs differ from your own?

**Rabbi Mann:** In general the faith of the health care providers is not an issue. Doctors and nurses are professionals and we seek out the best medical care irrespective of the religious beliefs of the providers as that is irrelevant to their task. It is important that the health providers of other faiths stick to their professional chores and not get involved in the spiritual needs of the patient which can only be dealt with by the religious authorities of the patient's faith.

**Brittany:** How would you, as a patient, view health care providers who are able to let go of their own beliefs in the interest of the beliefs and practices of the patient (you)?

**Rabbi Mann:** There should be no conflict of interest between the beliefs of the patient and that of the medical providers because it is not their job to cater to the spiritual needs of the patient. Therefore, there would be no reason for them to "let go of their own beliefs in the interest of the beliefs and practices of the patient." However, the providers should be cognizant of the beliefs and practices of the patient and not interfere with them and allow the patient to follow his religious practices fully even if the providers do not subscribe to them. What is important is that each party respect the religious rights of the other even if they don't subscribe to their doctrines. Thus I would not want my health providers to "let go of their own beliefs" for my sake but only to respect my right to act according to my religious beliefs and practices.

I hope these answers are helpful. If you have any questions or want to discuss any of the points I have made, feel free to call me, 602 418 7689. Good Luck.

— Rabbi Reuven Mann

# The Washington Times

The Washington Times — June 22, 2010

## An open letter to President Obama from Jon Voight



*The JewishTimes thanks Mr. Voight for his continued support of Israel.*

*May others learn from your courage to speak truth; identifying injustice and defending its victims.*

*Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim*

You will be the first American president that lied to the Jewish people, and the American people as well, when you said that you would defend Israel, the only Democratic state in the Middle East, against all their enemies. You have done just the opposite. You have propagandized Israel, until they look like they are everyone's enemy — and it has resonated throughout the world. You are putting Israel in harm's way, and you have promoted anti-Semitism throughout the world.

You have brought this to a people who have given the world the Ten Commandments and most laws we live by today. The Jewish people have given the world our greatest scientists and philosophers, and the cures for many diseases, and now you play a very dangerous game so

you can look like a true martyr to what you see and say are the underdogs. But the underdogs you defend are murderers and criminals who want Israel eradicated.

You have brought to Arizona a civil war, once again defending the criminals and illegals, creating a melt-down for good, loyal, law-abiding citizens. Your destruction of this country may never be remedied, and we may never recover. I pray to God you stop, and I hope the people in this great country realize your agenda is not for the betterment of mankind, but for the betterment of your politics.

With heartfelt and deep concern for America and Israel,

*Jon Voight*



## Thought

# To Appreciate Torah's Precision & Depth

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

It is unfortunate when one delivering a sermon or Dvar Torah implies he will offer insights into the Parsha, but instead, offers his personal views. Maybe his view is valid, but he does the Torah a grave injustice. For his ideas do not represent the verses he quotes, nor is he conveying God's brilliance as formulated in the Torah's precise structure. He simply uses the verse as a launch pad for his own thoughts; thoughts that at times the speaker doesn't even claim are provable, but are merely possible. And that's contrary to a "Torah verse", which by definition is true. In this manner, the verse is rendered utilitarian; an associative tool or intro for his own remarks. His ideas do not fit the quoted words, but he presents his thoughts as the sum total of the verse.

I view this as a lost opportunity, where he might have shared God's great marvels. This is how we can make Torah appealing, when we unveil such amazing design in the verses...such precision and depth impossible for man to write. A simpler lesson as is typical of sermons, merely shows man's ingenuity. But a Torah sermon is supposed to imbue us with an appreciation for God, not man. A sermon should not evoke a shoulder shrug, but dropped jaws.

I say all this not to disparage anyone, but to increase your expectations of what Torah can offer, and to urge those who teach, to toil, dig deep, and present nothing less than magnificent sermons, for Torah is magnificent.

I wish to share some ideas, which we discovered in our Sunday learning group last week. I feel those who were present found King Solomon's teachings insightful, and hopefully you will feel the same.

## Koheles (Ecclesiastes) 7:5-8

*"5. Better is it to listen to the ridicule of a wise man, than to be a man listening to the songs of fools. 6. For as the sound of the thorns [crackling in flames] under the pot, so is the laughter of the fool; this too is futile. 7. For oppression profanes the wise, and destroys the heart given as a gift. 8. Better is the end of a thing than its beginning; better is patience than pride.*

As always, we must appreciate that a Torah lesson intends to oppose alternative views and our natural inclinations. For example, as people never worshipped air, the Torah did not isolate such a specific case, although it would be a violation to worship anything but God. But the verses above imply that we must possess the inclination to listen to songs, rather than hearing ridicule. Otherwise we need not be taught this lesson. This is why King Solomon advises us to abandon such a path.

**Verse 5.** But why do we prefer song? There are a number of reasons. One is that man's ego naturally prefers to retain a proud self-image. Man will avoid any ridicule to achieve this end. Man also enjoys instant gratification, quickly afforded by music. Notable is that the King says, "than to be a man listening to the songs of fools". He could have omitted the word "man", but he didn't. This indicates that the preference to hear song is tied to the person's preoccupation with the self. As long as the self – the man – is of primary concern, he will avoid rebuke.

However, this first verse is merely a discussion of man's actions, and directing us to what is preferable. But without measuring the value of song against wise rebuke, what is wrong with song? The next verse explains, as we witness the King ordering his verses as a progressive lesson.

**Verse 6.** Thorns, used as fuel to cook one's pot of food, will make crackling sounds. As these thorns are burnt and destroyed, they crackle. King Solomon equates this crackling to the laughter of fools. Fools destroy themselves as they engage in foolishness and frivolity, which could be valuable time used to engage in study, or perfection. Such loose talk also increases their attraction to speech, which is primarily emotional, not intellectual. So they waste time, and become more emotionally based. This is their destruction, akin to the thorns destroyed in the fire. This verse commences with the word "For", as it comes to explain verse 5. We now understand why it is better to listen to the ridicule of the wise, for if we prefer song, we engage in destructive behavior. Through another example of crackling thorns, we learn there exists harm in such actions.

**Verse 7.** This teaches that not only is frivolity destructive, but it also restricts or oppresses us from time spent in wisdom...something given as a gift. So frivolity has two negative aspects: 1) it engenders attachment to emotions over intellect, and 2) it forfeits the time we might have used to gain wisdom.

**Verse 8.** This is the primary verse in this series. For in this verse, King Solomon lays down a 'rule', "Better is the end of a thing than its beginning". If we tell our friend not to eat too much poultry so as to avoid cholesterol, he or she might listen, but might eat steak and cheese instead. If however we warn against animal products, the "rule" offers greater potential good, than does warning against one item. Similarly, King Solomon now sets down a rule: the latter end of a thing is better than its beginning. But in what respect does this rule relate to our verses?

As we said, one reason a person enjoys music over ridicule is that it offers immediate gratification. Many people opt to satisfy an emotion, rather than calculating if it might be better to refrain that emotional satisfaction in deference to a greater good. It is this immediate need for gratification that, in its many forms, harms us. We make knee-jerk decisions that ultimately prove wrong; we quickly assess the value of a home and thereby suffer monetary loss; we may ingest sweets over bitter foods, although the latter is healthier. With this rule, King Solomon enables us to be patient and evaluate all matters slowly, as the latter end will bring us more information, and a better decision. King Solomon wants the best for us, so he does not simply provide a single example about music over ridicule, but he provides a rule with far-reaching applications. The example is given first, so when the rule is stated, we may easily understand its ramification in practice.

This rule is precisely the underlying cause for the man who prefers music to constructive ridicule. He seeks to satisfy an impulse, as opposed to perfecting his soul. But had he evaluated what is preferable, i.e., the latter end, in light of his objective in life, he would have opted to hear the wise person's remarks.

## "Better is the end of a thing than its beginning"

This concept is quite important. When we say something is "better", we mean that it is truer than an alternative. Thus, "the day of death is better than the day of birth" (ibid 7:1) since man's value at birth is merely 'possible' and not yet real. However, at death, man has performed real actions; the good he has obtained is real. Only now is he a man of value. So his death is better than his

(continued on next page)

birth, as his soul is not 'potentially' good, but truly good.

This applies to everything. For only at the end of the life of a man or an object, or at the conclusion of an event, do we have the entire subject matter before our mind's eye. Only then is an evaluation absolutely true as it assesses the "entire" subject. Thus, when an evaluation is given, it is not assessing 'part' of the subject based on its beginning alone, but it takes into consideration its entirety. Only then is the evaluation true, what we call "better".

When Jacob heard his son Joseph telling his dreams, he rebuked his son in order to mitigate the brothers' jealousy, but not because he felt Joseph was proven wrong. That very verse also says "And his father guarded the matter". (Gen. 37:11) Meaning that Jacob did not assess the dreams as negative, simply basing himself on one consideration, that they initially evoked the brothers' jealousy. Rather, Jacob "guarded the matter" in his heart and waited to see how matters panned out. Perhaps from his own dream of the ladder, Jacob understood his wisest son Joseph might also benefit from prophetic dreams. Jacob's patience bore out his assumption as true. Joseph did in fact become the leader, as his dreams foretold. The dreams were prophetic.

Similarly, King Solomon ends his work Koheles with these words: "The conclusion of the matter, *all* having been heard...". King Solomon only offers an assessment of the best life after "*all* has been heard". He adds, "For *all* matters, God will bring to judgment, on *all* that is concealed, whether good or bad". (Koheles 12:13,14) This teaches that God too will assess man, but only after "*all*" matters are completed. And an example of the Torah's ridicule for one who is impatient and does not wait to grasp the full picture, we read of Jacob's rebuke of Reuben for being impetuous. (Gen. 49:4)

Returning to our verses, so vital is patience to accurate decisions, that King Solomon included "patience" in verse 8 as opposed to discussing patience in a new verse. For with this juxtaposition of patience and "the end of a thing" in a single verse, he follows the Mesora (tradition or transmission) that all ideas in a single verse are intimately related, more so than if found in subsequent verses. And patience by far, is that which enables us to assess the latter end of something. To impress upon us to wait until the end of a matter to judge anything, King Solomon also includes the lesson of patience in this very same verse.

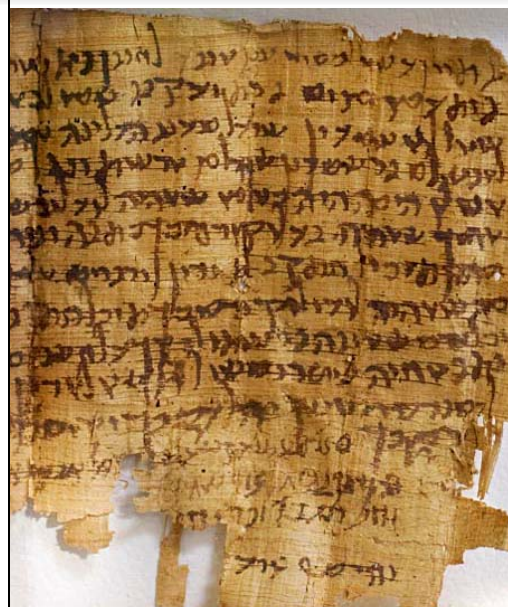
These lessons that are so vital to your appreciation of God's wisdom. God wrote His Torah and inspired His prophets' writings in a manner where the Torah's precise words are the starting and ending points of the lessons. The Rabbis teach "Ain mikra yotzai miday peshuto", "No verse may be interpreted where the interpretation conflicts with the literal reading". (Tal. Sabbath 63a) This means that we must strive to focus on the Torah's wording, for no

verse or word is superfluous; every verse contains gems, as does the sequence of verse. But these gems will only be uncovered through patience and deep analysis, where we "let the words speak to us", as a wise Rabbi taught. The Torah's words contain the lessons: we need not invent baseless interpretations. Developing a greater sensitivity to the nuances of each verse, we will ensure our understandings of these verses are truer.

Reviewing the King's words above, not only does he formulate his verses in a progressive manner, with each succeeding verse explaining the cause for the preceding verse, but also he uses the principles of joining a few ideas in a single verse to force us to ask why he has done so. And only when we ask, will we find an answer and appreciate the intent of that verse. But the common approach to simply make "suggestions" and call them "Torah", numbs the ears of many, and fails to impress everyone with God's words. One who teaches Torah has an obligation to present Torah as unparalleled in its brilliance. It must engender the sense in every listener that these words must emanate from a Supreme Intellect, from God. To get away with "filling" the sermon's 5-minute time slot with something half-baked, is a real loss. The speaker is more concerned that he spoke, than he is concerned to present God's wisdom. It would be more impressive if a speaker would, on one Shabbos, confess that the Torah portion is far above what he can unravel. In this manner he would sustain the correct awe of God's Torah. But to force some notion into a Torah portion has a lasting affect on others where their taste of Torah is made bitter. They may not wish to attend future lectures. I actually heard someone say this last Shabbos.

In this same vein, some speakers say a certain "Torah" secret is so deep, that "we cannot understand or explain it". He attempts to wow his audience by implying that he knows the "deep" subject, but his audience is far below his level. Ego: plain and simple ego. To this, I say the speaker is foolish. For he attempts to make his audience accept as real, that which he cannot articulate...an impossibility. For if a person knows an idea, he can articulate it. But if he doesn't know an idea, or if he desires to spread lies or foolishness that appeal to him and he's afraid to admit ignorance, he hides behind such claims that they're "deep" or "mystical". But the Rabbis already warned not to make the Torah a spade with which to dig or gain honor through. (Rambam, Hilchos Talmud Torah, 3:10)

Torah education is defined as impressing others with a greater appreciation for God's wisdom, not when we force an answer, for the sake of an answer. A wise Rabbi said we should offer answers that are "demanded" by the texts. "What we must say". Let us strive to uncover Torah gems, withholding our tongues if our theories are not demanded by the texts.



**"If you seek it out like silver, and chase after it (Torah) like buried treasures, then you will understand the fear of God, and the knowledge of God will you find."**  
(Proverbs, 2:4)

This teaches that a real striving is required, if one is to obtain the ideas of Torah. It is not a simple procedure. Now let's apply this verse, to itself!

Why does King Solomon refer to both "silver" and "buried treasures", and to "fear" and "knowledge" of God? What lesson would be lost had he cited only one in each pair?

I suggest that silver – as opposed to treasures – is a known thing. But a buried treasure – by definition – is beneath the Earth's surface, is covered, and is unknown. This means that when we study, we encounter two types of searches for truth: 1) we have intuition concerning the answer (silver), or 2) we do not have intuition, but we nonetheless anticipate something great, like a treasure. The King is teaching that only with "anticipation of something great" will we have the drive essential to endure the time essential to arrive at true answers. We also require a sense that the answer is great. This helps us dismiss simplistic explanations, so strive in our studies until we find real wisdom, which must be amazing. So too, one digging for treasure will not stop even when finding a few shiny trinkets, but he digs further until uncovering the treasure chest.

And what will these answers produce, once found? They produce both 1) fear of God, as we are awed by His wisdom, and 2) the knowledge King Solomon cites at the end of the verse. This means we are transformed emotionally (fear) and intellectually (knowledge) – both parts of man are affected by discovering new ideas. ■



## Metaphor

# 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 millions of Jews damaging his land by gaining safe passage. To avert this problem, Balak called upon Bilam, a prophet, and requested that Bilam curse the Jews so that Balak would have ease in attacking them and in driving them out. When Balak sent the first group of messengers to Bilam, Bilam's reply was that he 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. Bilam responded by saying that even if his house was filled with silver and gold he couldn't go. Nonetheless Bilam requested an answer from God. This time God gave him permission, however, he still must refrain from cursing the Jews.

What happens next is quite remarkable. Bilam arose early and God was angry that he went. This was after God gave him permission! God placed an angel in the path to deter him as he was riding on his donkey. It states that the donkey saw the angel standing in the path with an outstretched sword in his hand, and that the donkey turned aside and went into the field. Bilam hit the donkey to 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 replied, "No".

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

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

Following are 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 an angel appearing or talking, the entire account is describing a vision, and not an actual physical event. The event didn't take place in physical reality, but in a person's mind. This being the case, this entire story must be interpreted in this light, according to Maimonides. The is a parable for a conflict with which Bilam was struggling.

If we refer back to the immediate events leading up to Bilam's 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 of monotheism and the Oneness of God secured this treaty of God's providence. With this knowledge, Bilam was greatly troubled as to which path to follow, namely 1) his desire for the destruction of the Jews, or 2) the word of God. This entire account is a parable of his conflict.

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

Bilam, in great conflict, decides to travel to Balak with the 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. Riding on his donkey represents the suppression of what his conscience (the donkey) "sees". "Riding" conveys a sense of dominion over another object. Bilam himself (in this vision) represents his evil instincts and thus, isn't aware of reality (the angel of God). One's instincts aren't designed with the ability to judge what is morally good or bad. Instincts are not perceivers, but rather, they simply emote us. (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. 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 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 interpret this account accordingly.

Bilam is riding on his donkey – "his evil instincts are riding (suppressing) his conscience." His conscience alone is aware of the reality – "the donkey sees the angel", but Bilam doesn't. Whenever the conscience goes "off of the path", it starts to become more conscious, making Bilam sense his error, so 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 – that which entitled the Jewish nation to God's providence. Bilam's conflict was directly caused by these three individuals (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob). Had it not been for them, he might have been able to curse the Jews. That's why the donkey turned aside 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. ■

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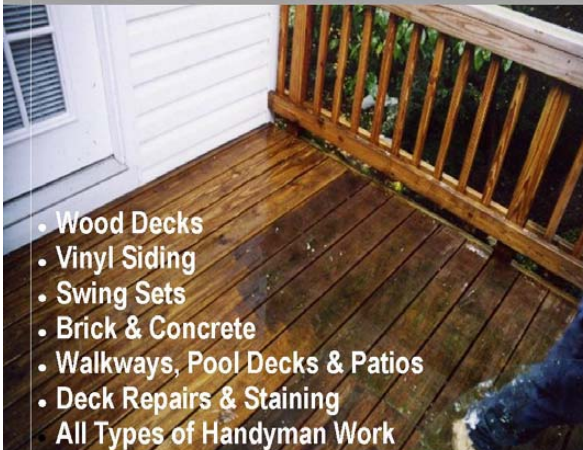
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