

JewishTimes

VOL. XI NO.20 — JULY 6, 2012

SATAN

What is it?

DONKEYS

that can talk?

Men who talk back?

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GOD VS. THE MULTIVERSE

Part IV



WORDS & CURSES

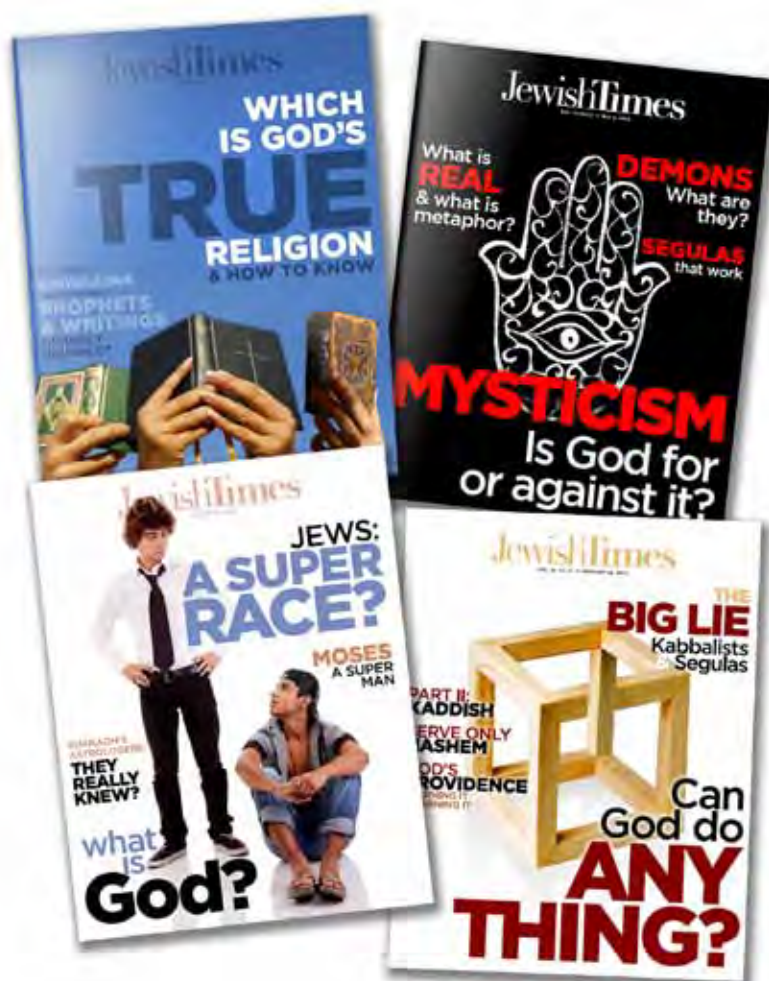
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LETTERS

Can God do Anything

Rabbi: God cannot make a square, that is also a circle at the same moment in time.

Friend: Maybe He can...maybe our minds are limited based on our views? Maybe we're biased due to the natural laws we witness on Earth? Perhaps in another universe God can make a square, that is also a circle?

Rabbi: Can God make your day of birth tomorrow, although you already exist? No he cannot. "Impossibilities" refer to imagined phenomena that cannot exist. Similarly, God

cannot make another God. By the fact that God caused everything, and this is what makes him "God," His creation of another superpower means that this 2nd being was 'created', and not all-powerful! So, God cannot do anything.

I would add this comment to your first suggestion. You said "in another universe God can make a square that is also a circle." As you referred to another "universe", your statement is predicated on the acceptance that whatever God makes, must exist. Meaning, He cannot make something exist, that simultaneously does NOT exist. Yet, if

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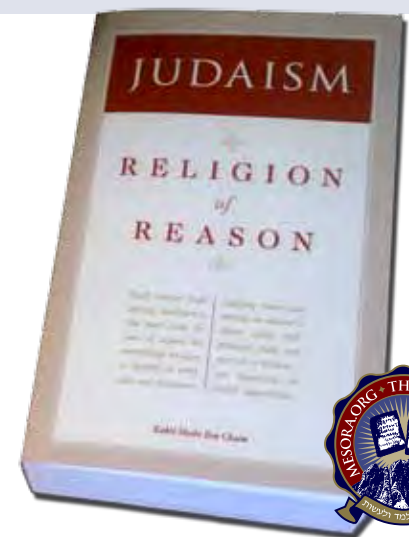
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Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim



REVIEWS



RABBI REUVEN MANN — Rabbi, Y. Israel of Phoenix

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim has written extensively on Jewish philosophy for many years. His ideas are rooted in a rational approach. He follows the great philosophers like Rambam and Saadia Gaon. He is opposed to all forms of "mysticism" and seeks to debunk all practices and beliefs which are rooted in superstition and contrary to reason. This work covers a wide variety of topics, of interest to contemporary; insightful analyses of Biblical narratives as well as the significance of many mitzvot. Rabbi Ben-Chaim demonstrates that Judaism can be harmonized with human reason. He is not afraid to ask the most penetrating and challenging questions as he is convinced that Torah is the Word of God and based on the highest form of wisdom. Jews who have a profound desire to make sense out of their religion will benefit greatly from reading this book.



RABBI STEVEN WEIL — Executive Vice President, The Orthodox Union

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim asks critical, crucial and defining questions that any thinking Jew needs to ask. His method enables the reader to explore and engage our theology in a meaningful and serious way. Following the Rishonim, he forces us to define, weigh and analyze each phrase of chazal, showing there is no contradiction between an investigation of Science and an investigation of Judaism. Rabbi Ben-Chaim has written a work that addresses the thinking person of all faiths. This work speaks to the scholar and lay person alike and will help you gain insight into how the great Rishonim define how we view the world. Rabbi Ben-Chaim's website, Mesora.org is a very serious tool and resource for thinking human beings who want to engage and explore the Almighty, the Almighty's universe and do so within the realm of wisdom, rationality and intellectual honesty.

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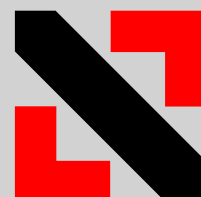
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Words, Curses & Blessings: Do They Really Change Reality?

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Reader: Here's a topic, whether words/speech have "powers", other than the obvious psychological and emotional hurt it causes. I came across a Rabbi's blog where he says that words are causative, that is, we can actually "create negative events" by mere speech. I know this is not so. I would love for you to tackle this with the real sources. Here are the Rabbi's words:

"The Rama (Yoreh De'a 376) mentions that one should not "open his mouth to the Satan."

This means [according to this Rabbi] that one should not speak about events that he does not wish to transpire, such as disasters and catastrophes, as words have the power to cause these misfortunes to happen. The Sages teach, "Berit Keruta La'sfatayim" – "a covenant is made with the lips" whereby they have power to cause that which they speak about. The word "Dibbur" (speech) is derived from word "Dabar" (thing), which generally refers to tangible objects. Speech has substance and force, and therefore it must be used with great caution.

Thus, a person should not say, "I haven't heard from him; he must have died." The mere utterance of these words could cause death. A person should not curse himself, or curse somebody else, as the curse could come back to hurt him. Masechet Shabbat (62b) lists several things that could potentially cause poverty, one of which is a woman's cursing her husband because he does not buy her

jewelry. This demonstrates that even if a person has a legitimate grievance against somebody he must not express his wish that he should suffer misfortune. One should not speak about misfortunes that he does not wish to experience, or utter a curse, as the mere utterance of the words could cause those unfortunate events to transpire."

Rabbi: Are we to suggest God is evil, that regardless of your merit, I can curse you and you will suffer? This is of course a violation of God's Reward and Punishment system, where each person determines his and her own success or punishment. If we use intelligence, and remove our ignorance of Torah's fundamentals, we will not make errors like these when reading cryptic Talmudic statements. Instead, we will seek the underlying truths that the Rabbis intended.

The quote from the Rama must be clarified. He states, one should not say, "I was not punished in accurate measure to my sins". This is taken from Talmud Brachos 19a where the Rabbis say one watching the dead (until burial) should say:

"I have not been punished 1/1000th of what is due me. Creator of the world, guard our breaches (sins) and the breaches of all Israel. Abbaye disagreed, saying one is not obligated to make this confession, like R. Shimon ben Levi said, "Do not open the mouth of Satan"."

Evidently, watching the dead awakens one to his own repentance. As he

reviews his sins, he realizes he has not suffered much at all considering the abundant sins he performed. But Abbaye says one should not say "I have not been punished 1/1000th of what is due me" as this somehow "opens Satan's mouth". The question is, who is Satan here? The Rabbis taught that Satan refers to one's instinctual drive (yetzer hara), which turns him aside (satan), and can eventually cause the death of his soul (malach hamavess). With this knowledge we can explain quite simply...

One who says he has not been punished enough, identifies with his sins. As he views himself as a "sinner," this can cause him to more easily sin. The Rabbis teach, "man is led in the path he chooses". This means that man's emotions get stronger as progresses in any trait. This equally applies to one who views himself as a sinner; his self image is not strong in the direction of Torah, and he finds it easier to justify the next sin. One who has abstained from illicit sexual encounters for years, will not readily violate, while one who sins in this area each day, will find it easy to sin again tonight.

This is how to understand the statement, "Do not open the mouth of Satan." It means not to entice your own instincts. But this does not mean that mere words are animate or possess independent powers to cause evil in the world, as the Rabbi suggested above. That is childish, and violates Torah principles as we stated.

This Talmudic source bases itself on Isaiah 1:9-10, where the Jews confessed they were similar to Sodom in their sins, deserving annihilation. And God then calls the Jews "Sodomites." The Jews said something, which God then endorsed when addressing them. It is derived therefrom, "Do not open the mouth of Satan." Interpreted here, it means that the Jews' confession of their sins and their identification with Sodom, in some manner rendered them "Sodomites", therefore God called

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them Sodomites. Had the Jews not identified with Sodomites, they might have been better able to repent. Thus, the Jews' identification, as expressed through their speech, increased their attachment to sin, and thereby they deserved God's rebuke that they were in fact "Sodomites." This is all easily explained based on psychological and philosophical principles, with no need to suggest that words alone alter reality, or "The mere utterance of these words could cause death" as the Rabbi suggested above. Such notions are dangerous and idolatrous at their root, for they personify inanimate words, giving them powers, like ancient people blindly believed.

Sanhedrin 102a has a similar case when Jehu spoke of sin, and then committed the sin. His speech awakened his instinctual drives. To suggest, as the Rabbi did, that "Words have the power to cause these misfortunes to happen", is a literal read of our great sages deep sayings. We do much harm to the reputation of our Sages, to others, and to ourselves, when simply 'reading' a Talmudic statement, but not studying it. Talmud is not a novel. It is a great work with even greater depth.

Talmud Sabbath 62a cites Rav Avahu saying, "Three matters cause poverty: one who urinates near his bed, one who doesn't properly wash his hands, and a wife's curse of her husband because he does not buy her jewelry."

A simple read, again, leaves one thinking that a woman can cause poverty, with speech alone! But what about the first two cases? Speech is not the issue, yet those also cause poverty. Perhaps the Talmud cites these three cases, as they share a common theme? That would be the proper approach, so let's apply it...

What is common to all three cases? Rashi helps us. He says the first case is where one is too lazy to get dressed and go outside to the outhouse, as was the case in Talmudic times. So he would awake naked from his bed, and use the dirt floor of his home to receive his urine. This man's laziness outweighed his concern to address a personal need in proper, dignified fashion. (If he had

a urinal, the Talmud says this man will not become impoverished) One who is too lazy to behave properly harbors a trait that will hurt him in other areas, and certainly at work.

This also applies to areas of Torah law. If one doesn't concern himself to properly perform the most simple of laws, i.e., washing the hands, he too expresses a poor character trait: he is trying to get by with the least amount of exertion. He too will eventually become poor, as he won't exert himself in business like the first case. The first cases teach this lesson: laziness causes poverty. Simple.

And if one has the means (Rashi) but doesn't purchase what his wife adores (jewelry), such a man is unwise. For his wife's happiness is his own happiness. If he fails to labor for his happiness, and then his wife withdraws her satisfaction with him, his motivation to work can be lessened, to the point of poverty. It's not that her curse has any power, but rather, that her curse removes his motivation to labor for her any more. This is why it is specifically his wife's curse, and no other. Another person's curse will not remove my motivation to labor for my household.

Moade Kattan 18a cites Genesis 22:5 where Abraham tells his servants "Isaac and I will return". Abraham knew that in a few moments he would slaughter Isaac at God's command. So how can he tell his servants he will return "with Isaac?" The Talmud says, "Since Abraham said he and Isaac would return, they both did!" It sounds like the Talmud endorses the view that words are causative.

Rashi says that Abraham told his servants he'd return with Isaac, as a means of not exciting them to the truth of Isaac's impending sacrifice. This might alarm the servants and they might try to stop Abraham. So he lied in order to have the ability to perform God's command uninterrupted. In truth, Abraham did not think Isaac was returning with him.

My friend Jessie suggested that Avraham truly wanted to return with Isaac. (The Talmud says he was in

conflict for the 3-day journey to Mt. Moriah.) Perhaps then, "Bris karusa l'sifosayim", ("a covenant is made with the lips") applied here, means that Avraham's perfection – in wanting Isaac's safe return with him and saying Isaac would return with him – was the reason Isaac need not be sacrificed. Abraham's words were not causative, but the reverse: they reflected his existing perfection. This perfection, i.e., his value of Isaac as a future transmitter of monotheism, was the very perfection that gave him the strength to sacrifice Isaac, an act of complete devotion to God. So when Abraham said "Isaac will return with him" – an expression of his desire to transmit monotheism – it was this love of God that ensured Isaac would return. The phrase "a covenant is made with the lips" means man's words are indicative of how he operates, and can even strengthen man in his selected path of life, for good or bad.

In summary, there is no evidence that words are causative; natural law teaches otherwise. More importantly, if words could cause harm, then God would be evil, allowing an innocent person to be harmed by others. The system of Reward and Punishment God speaks of throughout Torah, would be a lie. Based on our observation of the universe and on Torah's principle, we cannot take literally the notion "A covenant is made with the lips", and "Don't open the mouth of Satan." There is no animate being called "Satan" causing evil based on our mere verbal wishes. Satan is our own instinctual nature, and when we arouse our instincts through our speech, we might more readily act on our wishes for good or bad. This is the intelligent understanding of "A covenant is made with the lips."

We must also investigate and thoroughly analyze Talmudic statements, and not simply quote them on face value! "Three matters cause poverty" intends to draw us towards questioning, "Why these three?" If we follow such hints of our Sages, we will uncover their intended lessons. ■

Political Acumen

vs. Mystical Curses

RABBI ISRAEL CHAIT

Written by a student



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

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

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

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weakness. We can therefore appreciate the Gemara in Brachos 7a, which tells us that Bilam knew the time when God was angry with Klal Yisroel. He was capable of determining what Bnai Yisroel's weakness was and when was the proper time to exploit that weakness. A student of history can appreciate that certain critical events trigger many different phenomena, which in turn have very severe ramifications. History is replete with specific turning points, which shape the course of mankind. There are two factors, which play a role and permit the exploitation of a political vulnerability. One is the ability to know the nature of your antagonist. Secondly, you must be cognizant of an event that can occur which would allow this weakness in his nature to present itself. This event would afford one the opportunity to take advantage of that vulnerability. Bilam as a political genius had this ability. He perceived a weakness in Klal Yisroel, which would cause their divisiveness and self destruction. Therefore, Chazal inform us that God was not angry with Bnai Yisroel, throughout this entire event. This has added significance since God did not allow an event to occur that would have afforded Israel's enemies the opportunity to take advantage of them.

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

We can now appreciate why Balak pursued Bilam to curse the Children of Israel. However, Bilam utilized his talents as a means of enriching himself. Although he had great intellectual gifts, he used them merely to cater to his materialistic desires. Balak thereby offered Bilam exorbitant amounts of money to undertake

this task of cursing the Israelites. Bilam due to his materialistic nature really desired to accept Balak's task. However, as part of his mystique and to profess some supernatural talents, Bilam, told Balak's emissaries to stay the night. He had no qualms about going on a mission to destroy the Israelites. He previously had advised Pharaoh concerning their destruction. However, his hesitancy was merely a clever guise to bolster his persona as a God like figure. He professed that he was communicating with God at night and therefore requested them to stay. Bilam was the ultimate rationalist. He was a calculating character that used his genius to exploit people's insecurities and quest for the supernatural. However, contrary to his plan, God appeared to him in a prophetic vision and warned him about his attempted mission. God instructed him not to go curse these people because they are blessed. This vision was startling for Bilam, the ultimate rationalist. He manipulated peoples' fears and merely professed supernatural powers. Thus God's appearance to him was shocking. He therefore, as a rationalist, was incredulous as to the revelation. Hence, he did not advise Balak's messengers to leave, but rather wanted them to wait another night to determine if this was merely an illusion.

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

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

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

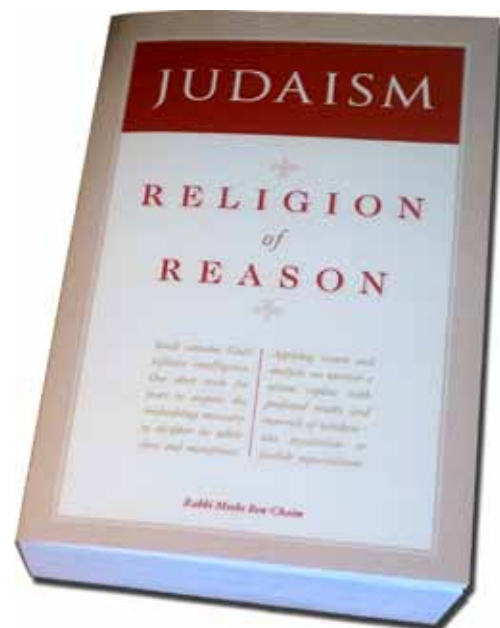
Bilam's only philosophy was that the intellect was merely a means for satisfying his desires. He rejected the concept of an objective good. This notion ran counter to his basic philosophy. That is why the Torah tells us that he initiated the mission by harnessing his own donkey. He was demonstrating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

Despite Bilam's recalcitrance in pursuing this mission, God utilized his donkey as the means for thwarting his desires. Irrespective of whether the donkey actually talked or if the entire incident was a prophetic vision, it demands our analysis. The donkey prevented Bilam's progress on three separate occasions. The first detour the donkey went into the field when it saw an angel of God standing in its way with a sword drawn in his hand. Despite Bilam's smiting the donkey and prodding it to proceed, it was again blocked by the angel of God. This time the donkey did not move and engaged Bilam in a dialogue. It was only after this dialogue that God opened Bilam's eyes and permitted him to see the angel of God blocking the road. Rashi comments that at the outset only the donkey was capable of seeing the angel because God gave it permission. Had Bilam seen the angel, since he was a man of intelligence, his mind would have been damaged upon beholding this sight. Bilam

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

appreciate that he was dealing with not just another political entity, but rather a unique nation under God's special providence. God allowed Bilam to perceive these concepts by placing him into circumstances, whereby his genius and power of perception enabled him to perceive this metaphysical reality.

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



**DEMONS:
What are
they? (pg 191)**

God can in fact do anything, He should be able to make something exist which does not exist. I think we now see clearly that God cannot do anything. Meaning, that which is impossible, is not subject to existence, and therefore cannot be created.

OK to Sing Torah Verses?

Friend: Do the many religious Jews who sing Torah verses indicate it is a permissible act?

Rabbi: Talmud Sanhedrin 101a:

"One who reads a verse of "Song of Songs" and makes it into a (personal) melody, or one who reads (without singing) a Torah verse at a party not in its time, he brings evil to the world. Because the Torah garbed itself in sackcloth and stood before God and said, 'Your children have made me like a harp that is sung to by scorners.' God responded, 'My daughter (the Torah) what should the Jews involve themselves in when they eat and drink?' The Torah responded, 'If they are masters of written texts, let them engage in the Five Books, the Prophets and the Writings... If they are masters of Oral law, let them engage in Oral Law, edicts and stories... if they are masters of Talmud, let them engage in the laws of Passover at its time, Shavuot at its time and Succos at its time.' Rabbi Shimon son of Elazar said in the name of Rabbi Shimon son of Chananya, 'One who reads a verse in its proper time brings good to the world, as (King Solomon) said, 'A word (davar) in its time, how good (it is)."

The Talmud teaches two violations:

- 1) Singing a verse is prohibited, even a verse that is part of a Shira (song);
- 2) Reading a verse not as a song, and doing so for a reason other than studying it's teachings.

We are thereby taught that a Scriptural verse has one purpose: to educate us about God. It must not be abused as done today, where Jews sing a verse, thereby rendering the verse a tool for emotional pleasure, and not for study. This is why the Torah is "garbed in sackcloth;" it is mourning due to the Jews' abuse. But abuse can be in another manner too. Even if a verse is not sung, but if it is cited merely to make another person get a laugh, again it is not being used to learn about God.

Torah verses have a single designation, and

when not quoted for this purpose of studying God, it is clearly prohibited to verbalize the verse; whether in song or not. It truly matters nothing at all that the religious world at large violates this. It is unfortunate, but most people look at the masses and say, "How can X be prohibited, everyone does it!" This shows us how far from intelligence the Jewish people have strayed. For an intelligent person will read the Talmud, and accept the prohibition. Those who are more impressed by their peers than by the Talmudic Rabbis, will say "Everyone does it!" to justify their error.

Rabbi Moshe Feinstein zt"l prohibited the singing of verses." (Yoreh Daya 2:142) This great mind understood this Talmudic portion clearly. It is prohibited to sing a verse. Rav Moshe expressed that although the practice of singing scriptural verses is widespread, and even respected men engage in this practice, he states that it is certainly prohibited and he does not see a just reason for those who violate. Rav Moshe added that some might read Rashi as singling out Shir HaShirim alone as the only prohibited text. But Rav Moshe makes it clear that Rashi means to say that if Shir HaShirim is prohibited, a song...certainly all other scriptural passages are prohibited.

Was Torah Ever Lost?

Reader: Two question please:

1) The Ramban, Kuzari and many Talmudic sources indicate the Jews lost the Torah. Yet, God promised it would never be lost! How can we explain this?

2) The next question requires Talmudic context:

"If the halachah agrees with me, let it be proved from Heaven!" Whereupon a Heavenly Voice cried out: 'Why do ye dispute with R. Eliezer, seeing that in all matters the halachah agrees with him!' But R. Joshua arose and exclaimed: 'It is not in heaven.' What did he mean by this? Said R. Jeremiah: That the Torah had already been given at Mount Sinai; we pay no attention to a Heavenly Voice, because Thou hast long since written in the Torah at Mount Sinai, After the majority must one incline. R. Nathan met Elijah and asked him: What did the Holy One, Blessed be He, do in that hour? He laughed [with joy], he replied, saying, 'My sons have defeated Me, My sons

have defeated Me.' It was said: On that day all objects which R. Eliezer had declared clean were brought and burnt in fire. Then they took a vote and excommunicated him."

Question: "My sons have defeated me" is a phrase which really bothers me because how can God be lesser than his creations? This phrase seems so heretical.

Rabbi: "Torah will never leave your mouths, your children's mouths or the mouths of your grandchildren (Isaiah 59:21)." God doesn't break His promises. Your words above show that there were leaders who finally arose, who possessed the Torah, so as to restore it! So, while many may become ignorant, the Torah is never completely lost. Maimonides too validates this, as he lists the unbroken chain of Torah transmission in the beginning of his Mishneh Torah.

Regarding your second question, "Torah not being in heaven", means it is something attainable. It also means that rulings were given to man. God desires that man use his mind to arrive at what "he" sees is Torah law. In Torah law, God does not want man simply seeking God's absolute knowledge, as this makes man absent-minded, a mindless robot. This is not God's plan in the realm of Jewish law. God created a system of Torah verses together with the Oral Law, so man might analyze, deduce, induce and apply his thinking. It is this act of analytic thought that enables man to then grow in his wisdom and reasoning skills. He is then enabled to grow his knowledge past the written words in Torah, as God desired. This is the very process of Talmudic thought. This is in contrast to an operational handbook where we follow steps to repair a appliance, without knowing the inner workings and relationships between all the parts, and merely treating the symptoms. Halacha is the opposite: we are to engage analysis and creativity to decipher and apply amazing principles. God wants us to experience the enjoyment of realizing new ideas, for this fills a person's soul with the greatest joy, to witness a system of wisdom that reflects the great Creator. But to simply go through the motions, even if they match God's ultimate knowledge, fails in the purpose of the human mind.

The Talmud you cite where Rabbi Eliezer is declared right by a heavenly voice, means he knew the law perfectly in this area. Yet, "R. Joshua arose and exclaimed: It is not in

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heaven" meaning that Torah law was given to man's jurisdiction. This is God's will. God does not desire that man attain His level, where man is flawless and his thoughts agree with God's 100% of the time. No. God desires more than correct conclusions, that man uses a process of intelligence, following Halachik principles, regardless of the outcome. This is the meaning of "it is not in heaven." Meaning, God desires that rulings are developed by human intelligence and creativity, not a rote, blind mimicking of what God is thinking.

The Rabbi's statement "My sons have defeated me" euphemistically attributed to God, means that the Rabbis successfully adhered to Halacha – using the Torah's laws – to arrive at truth and ignored the Heavenly Voice. The Rabbis "succeeded" by following the principle "It is not in heaven". They remained firm to the Torah's principles, and did not cave in to the attraction of Divine phenomenon, which would be against God's principles for determining law.

The Rabbi's statement "My sons have defeated me" is just one of thousands of Rabbinic saying purposefully crafted to catch our ears. Intuitively, we are alarmed at such a statement, that Rabbis could "beat" God. This phrase is intended to draw us in and analyze it. So you are properly perplexed by it, as the Rabbis intended! But you must go past the surface meaning, for this is not the lesson.

Business Ethics

Reader: When negotiating in business, is it permissible to make a low offer for something that you know is of high value, taking advantage of the other guy's ignorance or desperation?

Rabbi: Maimonides teaches that the correct ethic is to seek equal gain for you and your business partners. Do not look to get the better deal. This is sensible, for what makes you more important than your fellow man, that should entitle you to a more profitable deal than him? This also fulfills the obligatory morals of kindness and generosity. Additionally, if you know your business partner is ignorant of certain values, and you allow him to remain that way by concealing that knowledge, you effectively sustain his current ignorance, allowing others too to take advantage of him. I

would certainly seek to help this person, educate him about his ignorance, teach him the true value of his property or service, assisting him to achieve greater success in life.

The Torah speaks of this ethic regarding the Jubilee (50th) year where all fields return to the original owners (Lev. 25:15). We are taught to sell fields for progressively less as each year draws closer to the return date. Fields purchased year 1 after the Jubilee are possessed for 49 years; thereby having higher worth than a field bought 25 years after the Jubilee which is retained only 24 years. The latter must be sold at a lower price.



Praise of God

Reader: Is the Hebrew word Hallelujah the highest praise we can give God? If so, why? If not, what is the highest praise we can give God? Thank you for your assistance.

Rabbi: Man cannot praise God, since praise refers to one party benefiting the other with words. Man cannot benefit God, who is already most perfect.

Torah's "praises" of God are the words of the most perfected prophets, like those of Moses and King David. Since their words were Divinely inspired, or most perfect, they were included in our prayers to remind us of these perfected ideas. We cannot alter these words

in any way, since these great minds knew the proper expressions that best humanly describe God's honor. These great individuals had no intent to "benefit" God through their praises. Rather, their intent was to express their joy in knowing what they could of God, or to thank Him and to act naturally using verbal expression in their love of the Creator and His uncountable acts of kindness for man. Their praises of God were for themselves; a natural outpouring, and for others as instruction on what we can and cannot say in connection with God. Their great insight isolated proper formulations that recount accurate notions about God. By studying the depth of their praises, we are enabled to gain their insight.

The highest praise to God is commensurate with our highest understanding of God. Only then can we truly agree with the content of our praises, and mean what we say. But in no way do we actually benefit God in any way. Praising God is solely for our benefit.

The word Hallelujah means "praise God". It actually does not contain a reference to anything God did. That is why it is always followed by an elaboration of God's acts.

If we say God created the universe, that is a greater statement of truth than saying Hallelujah. As we continue to grow in our knowledge of God, we are further enabled to recite more praises. But we must, as the Talmud states, cite only the praises our great Sages formulated in our daily prayers — nothing more or less.

Lashon Hara, or Not?

Reader: If John comes to you and bad-mouths Bob, and you realize that Bob is not aware of John, is it permitted for you to warn Bob to be careful of the John, the "gossiper"?

Rabbi: It is certainly proper that you warn Bob about John, as you are not denigrating John with your warning but seeking to protect Bob. This would not constitute Lashon Hara. Using your first question above, the Torah mandates not to sell fields for more than their worth. Applied to this case, if I know John intends on selling his field to you for more than market value based on the upcoming Jubilee, I am supporting the Torah's mandate to ensure buyers are protected, by informing you of John's cheating tactics. ■



The **TRAGEDY** OF THE IDOL

RABBI DR. DARRELL GINSBERG

This coming weekend, we begin the period commonly known as the Three Weeks, the period of mourning that culminates with Tisha B'Av. This period of time begins with the fast of Shiva Asar B'Tammuz (this year it is pushed off a day due to Shabbos), a fast that holds a unique place amongst the other fast days of the year. On the one hand, this fast day is classified as a "minor" fast, meaning there are certain leniencies built into it that differentiate it from both Yom Kippur and Tisha B'Av. On the other hand, it is similar to Tisha B'Av in the extent of tragedies that occurred on the day, as well as it marking the true beginning of the end of the two Temples. One of the tragedies that occurred on this day accentuates the importance of this fast day, demonstrating to us how fragile the status of the Temple was prior to its eventual destruction.

The Talmud speaks of five tragedies that took place on this day, one of them being the placement of an idol in the Temple. When the Talmud expands on this heinous act, we see a number of difficult issues emerge (Taanis 28b):

"AND PLACED AN IDOL IN THE TEMPLE. Whence do we know this? — For it is written, And from the time that the continual burnt-offering shall be taken away and the detestable thing that causeth appalment set up. Was there then only one detestable thing? Is it not written, And upon the wing of detestable things shall be that which causeth appalment? — Raba replied: There were two [idols] and one fell upon the other and broke its hand and upon it was found inscribed: You desired to destroy the Temple, but I have handed over your hand to Him."

The eye naturally travels right to the obvious question – what exactly are we to make of one idol falling on another, breaking a hand, with inscriptions found on it??? However, in reality there are two other questions which, while more subtle, require an answer to even begin understanding the final part of this Midrashic piece.

The first question involves an implication at the start of this explanation. As we mentioned, there were five distinct tragedies that took place on the seventeenth of Tammuz. Among those directly related to the destruction of the Temple, there was the breach of the walls and the stoppage of the daily offering (korban tamid). The verse cited above in the Talmud indicates a direct causal relationship between the stoppage of the daily offering and the placement of the idol. If this indeed is the case, one would think the greater evil in these two events was the placement of the idol – after all, it is hard to conceive of the kohanim performing the daily work on the Temple while an idol was present. In other words, what is the significance of the halt of the daily offering, in light of the idol being placed in the Temple?

The second question is the type that is easily missed when first reading this piece. The Talmud emphasizes the fact that there were actually two idols, and not one, in the Temple. What exactly is the difference? One would think that the mere placement of an idol in the Temple is the problem. Why does adding one make any difference?

Let's begin with the tragedies and the significant difference between them. With the discontinuation of the daily offerings, the Temple ceased to function. In a sense the Temple became an empty building. However, it still had the potential to function as the makom hashechina, the central "place" of God's presence. It

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was in a state of limbo, lacking a positive direction but not yet shut down. The placement of an idol changed the entire character of the Temple. With an idol, it was no longer a matter of whether the Temple was functioning. The Temple cannot operate when an idol is present. It is a direct contradiction to the Temple to have an idol, a direct refutation to the very idea of God. The halt of the daily offerings meant the Temple ceased to function. But the placement of the idol meant the Temple could not function. This strengthens the question about the need for both, as causing the inability to function is certainly more severe than halting its operations. What then is the underlying significance of the end of the daily offering? This is where the fact that they are presented as discreet tragedies enters into the picture. The tragedy of the halt of the Temple service was something more important than simply "no more sacrifices". This was an opportunity for the Jewish people to repent, to engage in teshuva, an indicator that the Temple was on the verge of destruction. The knowledge that the Temple was a shell should have been a catalyst for teshuva. Rather than the Temple become immediately defiled by the idol, there was a moment where its status still hung in the balance, the possibility of re-starting its function still existed. The tragedy is that the Jewish people wasted this opportunity.

With this in mind, we can answer why in this case two idols are actually different than one. If someone, God forbid, places an Idol in a local synagogue, he would be sending a clear message--this is now a place of worship for a different god. The presence of an idol signifies a new direction of worship, as there is no idea of co-existence with God. In the situation of the Temple, there were two different objectives, and each "idol" reflected this. The first idol served to prevent any offerings from being brought to the Temple, as the Temple could not function with an idol present. The second signified a different goal--to introduce a new ideology into the Temple. The Temple would no longer be the domain of the Jewish people, dedicated to serving God. Instead, it would now be considered to be the Temple of whatever new ideology was being introduced. Whether or not there were physically two idols is irrelevant. What we see from here is a qualitative difference in the idolatrous objectives of the enemies of the Jews.

Therefore, the Talmud emphasizes the two idols.

In truth, it makes sense why the enemies of the Jews would insist on placing the "second" idol into the Temple. All of the enemies of the Jewish people recognize there is something different about them, how their history does not follow the usual path of other civilizations and religions. The times of the Temple signified to the world the unique relationship God has with the Jewish people. The enemies of the Jews want to destroy the Jewish people, yet they also are aware of how the God of the Jewish people relates to them in this unique manner (regardless of it being a distorted view of God). One could ask, why not destroy the Temple and build a new house of worship for their god? By taking over their Temple, they could capture some of the "magic" of the Jews and use it towards their idolatrous objective. This is where one idol falling on the other can be explained. The broken idol signifies an incomplete idol, demonstrating that while the idol was still present, its purpose was not expressed in its entirety. The enemies of the Jews desired to combine the "benefits" of the Temple with their religious outlook, a fusion of different ideologies. While on paper this sounds like a plausible option, as to many people the difference between religions is really superficial, in truth such an outcome is impossible to achieve. The very notion of the ideology of the Jewish people, which revolves around the idea of a non-physical God removed from man's comprehension, cannot somehow be fused with a man-centric belief system, the core of all idolatry. This is reflected in the "damaged" idol, the inability to truly accomplish this distorted objective (there is more to be said on this piece, but due to space constraints, we will leave it at this introduction).

To most Jews, the mere thought of an idol being placed in the Temple brings forth a sense of revulsion. However, this reaction is incomplete. As we see from the Talmud, there are some critical ideas we can take from the tragedy. As we begin this period of mourning, and we immerse ourselves in teshuva and fasting this coming weekend, we should reflect back on the significance of the tragedy of placing the idol in the Temple, bringing us to a greater understanding of the destruction of the Temple. May we merit to see it built in our days. ■

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This image from the NASA/ESA Hubble Space Telescope shows Sh 2-106, or S106 for short. This is a compact star forming region in the constellation Cygnus (The Swan). A newly-formed star called S106 IR is shrouded in dust at the centre of the image, and is responsible for the the surrounding gas cloud's hourglass-like shape and the turbulence visible within. Light from glowing hydrogen is coloured blue in this image. Credits: NASA/ESA

God vs. the Multiverse IV: The Solution

RABBI E. ZIMMER, RABBI E. FEDER

There is another example of fine tuning in the universe we want to highlight because it is of a very different conceptual nature than the constants, and provides an independent proof of an Intelligent Designer. (For an elaboration of this point, see the first comment below.) This is regard-

ing the initial conditions of the universe, which were set at the big bang.

We've never seen anyone (which doesn't mean they don't exist) propose either the Master Mathematical Equation theory or the Necessary Existences theory, to explain the fine tuning of the

initial conditions. It's not even clear how such

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initial conditions. It's not even clear how such an explanation would even be formulated, as it seems of a qualitatively different character than our current understanding of physical law. (It would seem at this point, that the only alternative explanation to an Intelligent Agent is the multiverse.)

The big bang is the widely accepted model for the emergence and evolution of the universe as we know it. The arrangement of the matter and other conditions at the big bang were perfectly tuned so that the universe we see today would naturally emerge. This arrangement was highly specialized, in the sense that variations in the initial conditions would have resulted in disorder (a universe filled with black holes) instead of the ordered universe we witness today. The probability of obtaining such a state by random chance is staggeringly low.

(For those afraid of the physics, you can skip to the paragraphs after the video below and you will still follow the main point of this post. This post will be our last post that contains this much physics and math. For those interested, the following will provide a good opportunity to review or learn some physics and mathematics, and thereby have a deeper appreciation for the uniqueness of this proof.)

Someone may ask that although it is highly unlikely that the arrangement of matter at the big bang would be exactly as it was, any one arrangement of matter would have an equally low probability. However, it had to have one arrangement. How do you know the initial conditions were so special?

The critical distinction we need to make in order to understand this question is between:

1) the specific arrangement of the individual parts of a system. (A collection of particles.)

2) the state of a system as a whole.

The relationship between the whole and its parts is the key concept. Some states of the whole object are contingent on a unique arrangement. For example, the meaning of this very sentence (we're treating this whole sentence as a system, with the letters as its parts) is contingent on all the letters and spaces being arranged in

approximately this order. If we jumble up all the letters, the sentence as a whole, loses this state (of making intelligible sense). Other states, like a meaningless jumble of letters, are independent of how the letters are arranged. Almost every random ordering of the letters will be in this state of meaninglessness.

If we randomly scramble an object's parts, entropy is the measure of how probable a particular state of the whole object is. A state that can come about through many different arrangements is called a state of high entropy. A state that can only come about through very few different arrangements is called a state of low entropy. Entropy is thus a number which measures the likelihood of any particular state of the whole object if we randomly shuffle its individual parts. (The fact that a state of lower entropy is less probable is a direct consequence of the fundamental postulate in statistical mechanics.) We'll illustrate with an example.

If we toss 2 individual coins, we consider all the possible ways they could land (H - heads, T - tails):

(1) HH (2) TT (3) HT (4) TH.

The probability of each of these 4 outcomes is $1/4$. Upon consideration we notice that outcomes (3) and (4) will appear exactly the same in terms of the whole system; 1 head and 1 tail. Thus a better way to describe the probabilities is as follows: $P(0 \text{ heads})=1/4$, $P(1 \text{ head})=2/4$, $P(2 \text{ heads})=1/4$. One head is more likely to occur than 0 or 2 heads because it can happen in 2 ways, while 0 or 2 heads can only occur in one way each.

We can generalize this idea to flipping 10 coins. In total, there are $2^{10}=1024$ possible outcomes. Thus, the probability of obtaining any particular outcome (say, HHHHHH-HHHH or HTHHTHTHTHT) is $1/1024$. However, there is only 1 way to get 10 heads, while there are 252 (for those mathematically inclined, 10 choose 5) ways of getting 5 heads (some examples are HHHHHHTTTT, TTTTTHHHHH, THTHTHTHTH, HTHHHHTTHT). Thus the probability of obtaining 10 heads is $1/1024$, while the probability of obtaining 5

heads is the much more likely value of $252/1024$, which is approximately $1/4$.

Because it can only occur in 1 way, we consider the outcome of 10 heads to be highly unlikely (which counter-intuitively is called a low entropy state). Conversely, since 5 heads can occur in many ways, we consider it to be fairly probable (or a high entropy state). The outcome of eight heads would be somewhere in between in terms of likelihood and entropy.

In general, one can think of a low entropy state as being highly ordered and a high entropy state as being disordered. This is because there are many ways to randomly bring about a state of disordered nonsense, but there are only a few ways to bring about a state of meaning and order.

The second law of thermodynamics states that all physical processes move an object from lower states of entropy to higher states of entropy. This means that over time, all objects end up in the state that has the highest number of arrangements that can bring that particular state about. Meaning if you start with 8 out of the 10 coins on heads, and you give them enough time and let them interact (i.e., you shake the container), you'll end up with a state of about 5 heads. While it is not theoretically impossible for the second law (which is essentially a statistical law based on probabilities) to be violated in a particular instance (i.e., the red sea splitting in half for a few hours), a violation of this law has never been observed (without the observers claiming they have witnessed a miracle).

When you apply this reasoning to the universe going forward in time (towards the future), you end up with a conclusion that the universe will, at a point far in the future, end up being in its most likely state (which is a very boring, meaningless state). This is known as the heat death of the universe which is the state of highest entropy and the least amount of order.

The universe is currently in a state of much lower entropy than heat death. We have things in this universe with a



lot of order, such as galaxies, stars, planets, life, etc.; things that are very unlikely to be attained by a random arrangement. If we extrapolate backwards in time to the big bang, we realize that based on the second law of thermodynamics, the universe must have been in an even lower state of entropy (an even more ordered, highly improbable, state than it is now).

Another way to see this point is based on the idea of meaningful states. The number of possible arrangements of all of the particles in the universe at the big bang was very, very high. Therefore, the probability of any particular arrangement occurring by chance is very, very low. However, we can divide all arrangements into two distinguishable classes: (a) those which eventually unfold to an ordered universe; (b) those which eventually unfold to a universe of total nonsense. There are very, very few arrangements in (a) and therefore these states have a low entropy and a very low probability of occurring by chance. There are many, many arrangements in (b) and therefore these states have a high entropy and a very high probability of occurring by chance.

The fact that at the big bang the universe had such a low state of entropy is like tossing up trillions of letters and having them randomly fall in the arrangement of all the Wikipedia articles. If the universe did not start off in this special, highly unlikely, low entropy state, then even if we had

the same qualitative laws of physics and the same fine tuned constants of nature, we would never get a beautiful, ordered, complex universe. This is what is meant by the fine tuning of the initial conditions of the big bang.

(As an aside, this is why the infinitely cyclic universe model of big bang/big crunch was rejected in 1934, as entropy would be infinitely increasing. There is an arrow of time and it had a beginning. There are a few modern day approaches that attempt to reincarnate the theory, but as of yet they are still entirely speculative with no experimental support. In any event, the key point of fine tuning is independent of the cyclic universe. Only a genuine multiverse theory can help. More on this in latter posts.)

Roger Penrose derives the probability for this initial state in his book *The Emperor's New Mind* (1989). We highly encourage the more advanced reader to try to read through his basic derivation which is only a few pages mostly in English.

The likelihood of the initial conditions of the universe (the arrangement of matter for the big bang) to occur by chance alone, is the biggest number (or smallest probability) we have ever seen with regards to fine tuning, less than 1 out of 10^{10123} . It is a double exponent. For those who are mathematically inclined, try to fathom how big this number really is. It makes the cosmological constant ("trillion, trillion, trillion....") seem minuscule. If you tried to write the

number using every single particle in the universe to represent a zero, you run out of particles! It's not even close.

There are a few amazing things about this result. Firstly, that physics, mathematics and computer science have come to the point where we can actually calculate such a probability. Second, that the probability here is so amazingly small. Lastly, that such a fine tuned arrangement was "built in" to the big bang in order to naturally unfold to our universe. It's astounding!

As we are going to be moving forward in these posts with the assumption that we have sufficiently established the fact of fine tuning, both in the constants of nature and the initial conditions of the big bang, we want to mention that there is a very small minority of scientists who deny the fact of fine tuning altogether. Their view is largely rejected by the scientific community as a whole, and the mistakes in their thinking are fairly easy to see. We encourage you look at this 76 page article by Luke Barnes that thoroughly examines and rejects the opinion of Victor Stenger. It also does an excellent job of explaining a lot of the details of fine tuning. (See pages 23-26 in particular for this post, where the author exposes the fallacies in Stenger's attack on Roger Penrose, and concludes "that Stenger has not only failed to solve the entropy problem; he has failed to comprehend it. He has presented the problem itself as its solution.") ■

a Nation that **DWELLS** **ALONE**

Rabbi Reuven Mann

This week's parsha, Balak, describes the attempts of that king to defeat the Jews, not through direct military confrontation, but through the curse of Bilam. At first glance this story seems strange and far fetched. What was the nature of the power that Bilam possessed? Also, why did Balak fear the Jews? What had they done to him to warrant his concern that they posed a threat to him? He had witnessed the decisive defeats that the Jews had handed to two mighty Amorite kings, Sichon and Og, and this would naturally be a cause of concern. However, these were defensive wars fought by the Jews in response to unprovoked attack. There is no indication that they were planning any actions against Balak. If that were the case Balak would have known about it. According to Torah law we are obligated to offer an enemy the terms of peace before engaging in hostilities. No mention is made of any such terms being proffered to Balak. We know that no military action against him was in the works. In fact, he was entirely safe insofar as the Jews were concerned. Indeed, if he was so afraid of them he could have spoken to Moshe and expressed his desire for positive relations. In addressing the rulers of Midian the representatives of Moav said, "Now the congregation will lick up all around us as the ox licks up the grass of the field". According to their own words they were concerned that the Jews would consume the vegetation and resources in the area surrounding them. However, no mention is made that the people of Midian were in any danger of being afflicted at the hands of the Jews. What was the underlying cause for the attempt to solicit the fearful curses of Bilam against the Jewish people?

In describing the feeling that Balak's nation had toward the Jews the verse states, "Moav was terrified of the nation because they were mighty and Moav was disgusted with their life because of the children of Israel." In my opinion we need to understand the emotions of

Moav on a deeper level. They were consumed with feelings of "fear and loathing." In their message to Bilam they said, "Behold a people has come out of Egypt and have covered the face of the earth, and are located across from me." They knew all about the enslavement of the Jews in Egypt and their miraculous escape. One would have thought that they would have had sympathy for them and a desire to support and champion their cause. Had the Jews remained a small and powerless people vulnerable to the persecutions of all they would not have been so bothered by them. However, this slave people had escaped and grown to become a powerful force who would not back down from the mightiest warriors such as Sichon and Og. They must be special and unique, a chosen people. The success of the Jews which reflected their special relationship with G-d was too much for Balak to bear. It made him disgusted with life itself, just as the Egyptians had become disgusted at the phenomenal growth of the Jews. Balak was too fearful to confront them openly. He hired Bilam to divine the inner weakness of the Jews and thus topple them from within. The hatred of Balak is alive and well today. The success of the Jews in building from nothing a modern, advanced and thriving democracy is too much for her Arab neighbors to bear. Their endless hatred and demonization of Israel is an expression of their frustration and disgust. Unable to defeat Israel on the battlefield they seek to undermine her self confidence by orchestrating a propaganda campaign in which the entire world condemns her as an aggressor. We should not be affected by the hatred of the Arabs and their fellow travelers in the West for it is rooted in their inner insecurities and inability to look within and confront their flaws. Let us remember the words of Bilam who said, "Behold it is a people that dwells alone and is not counted among the nations." This is indeed a blessing. We must realize that our strength resides in our unique mission to study and live by the eternal truths of Torah. This will earn us the approval of Hashem and fortify us against any denunciations of unstable and immoral people.

Shabbat Shalom. ■

Bilam and the DONKEY

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM



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

What happens next is quite remarkable. Bilam arose early and God was angry that he went. This was after God gave him permission! God placed an angel in the path to deter him as he was riding on his donkey. It states that the donkey saw the angel standing in the path with an outstretched sword in his hand, and that the donkey turned aside and went into the field. Bilam hit the donkey to return it to the path. The angel stood a

second time in the vineyard. There was a fence on both sides of the donkey and Bilam. The donkey saw the angel and pressed up against the wall in avoidance, crushing Bilam's leg. Bilam continued to smite the donkey. The angel passed to a place that was narrow with no room to pass left or right. The donkey saw the angel and crouched down under Bilam and Bilam's anger burned, smiting the donkey – this time, with a stick. God opened the mouth of the donkey and it said to Bilam, "What have I done that you have smitten me these three times?" Bilam responded, "Because you have mocked me. If there were a sword in my hand I would kill you." The donkey said, "Am I not the donkey that you have ridden upon from long before until today? Is it my nature to act this way?" Bilam replied, "No."

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

continue, but only that which he tells him may he say. Rashi states that the significance of "three" times represents two things: the three forefathers, and the three Jewish festivals. Ibn Ezra states that once the donkey spoke it died, and that with each successive hitting, Bilam used a stronger object.

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

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

Maimonides states (Guide for the Perplexed, Book II, chap. XLII) that every case in Scripture where we find an angel appearing or talking, the entire account is describing a vision, and not an actual physical event. The event didn't take place in physical reality, but in a person's mind. This

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being the case, this entire story must be interpreted in this light, according to Maimonides. This is a parable for a conflict with which Bilam was struggling.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Bilam riding on his donkey can be interpreted

as "his evil instincts are riding (suppressing) his conscience." His conscience alone is aware of the reality – "the donkey sees the angel," but Bilam doesn't. Whenever the conscience goes "off of the path," it starts to become more conscious, making Bilam sense his error. Therefore, Bilam "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 primary reason for God's direct Providence over the Jews, namely the perfection of our forefathers – which entitled the Jewish nation to God's Providence. Bilam's conflict was directly caused by these three individuals (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob). Had it not been for them, he might have been able to curse the Jews. That's why the donkey turned aside when it thought about the forefathers. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob brought about the relationship with God, and now, Bilam desired to curse them! But all curses are from God. We also see why Bilam acted calmly towards a talking animal, as Maimonides states, this was all a vision.

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



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