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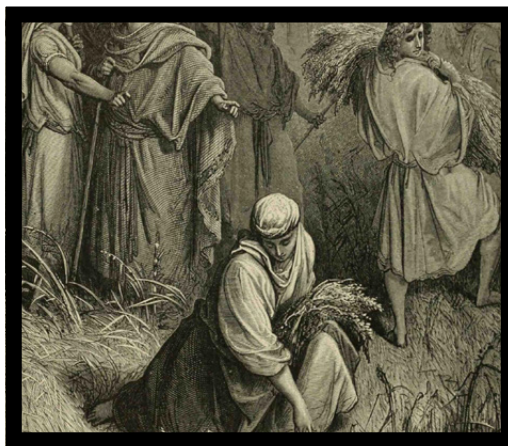
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TORAH & HUMILITY

"Do not seek greatness for yourself, and do not covet honor."

(Avos 6:4)

Torah's brilliance fixes one's focus on the beauty of the ideas, and drives one to seek God. The self is of no concern.

PARSHA

RABBI REUVEN MANN

The Power of Ashes

It comes as a surprise that something as seemingly inconsequential as ashes should play a major role in Jewish religious life. This week's Parsha, Chukat, deals with the subject of death and the purification therefrom via the entity of the Para Aduma (Red Heifer). Judaism teaches that contact with a human

corpse engenders a state of ritual impurity with significant consequences. These specifically distance one from entry into the Holy Temple and partaking of consecrated foods. However, the state of Tumah is not permanent. One can go through a process of purification and return to a normal condition. (CONT. ON NEXT PAGE)

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This entails a waiting period of seven days, after which the person submerges in a body of water known as a Mikvah. However, the process is only valid if he has been sprinkled with a mixture of special ashes that have been produced by the burning of the Red Heifer. This sprinkling is done on the third and seventh days, after which he is eligible for ritual immersion and then obtains a state of purity.

While this procedure doesn't seem that complicated, it is rendered so by the difficulty of acquiring the cow which corresponds to the features of the Red Heifer. We have not had one and hence its ashes for many years. Thus, today virtually all Jews, Kohanim and others are regarded as ritually impure and are unable to alleviate that state.

The question arises, why does the Torah impose a state of impurity just because of contact with a corpse? This is especially problematic given that respectful treatment of the deceased, especially the provision of a decent burial, is considered a great Mitzvah. In spite of this, one who engages in this commandment by coming in contact with a dead body contracts a state of Tumah. What is the reason for this?

Numerous explanations have been proffered for this phenomenon. I should like to add some thoughts of my own. It seems to me that contact with the deceased can be an unnerving experience. Death is a troubling phenomenon, as it violates man's sense of immortality. In order to function at his optimum, man needs to deny death and to behave as though he is going to live forever.

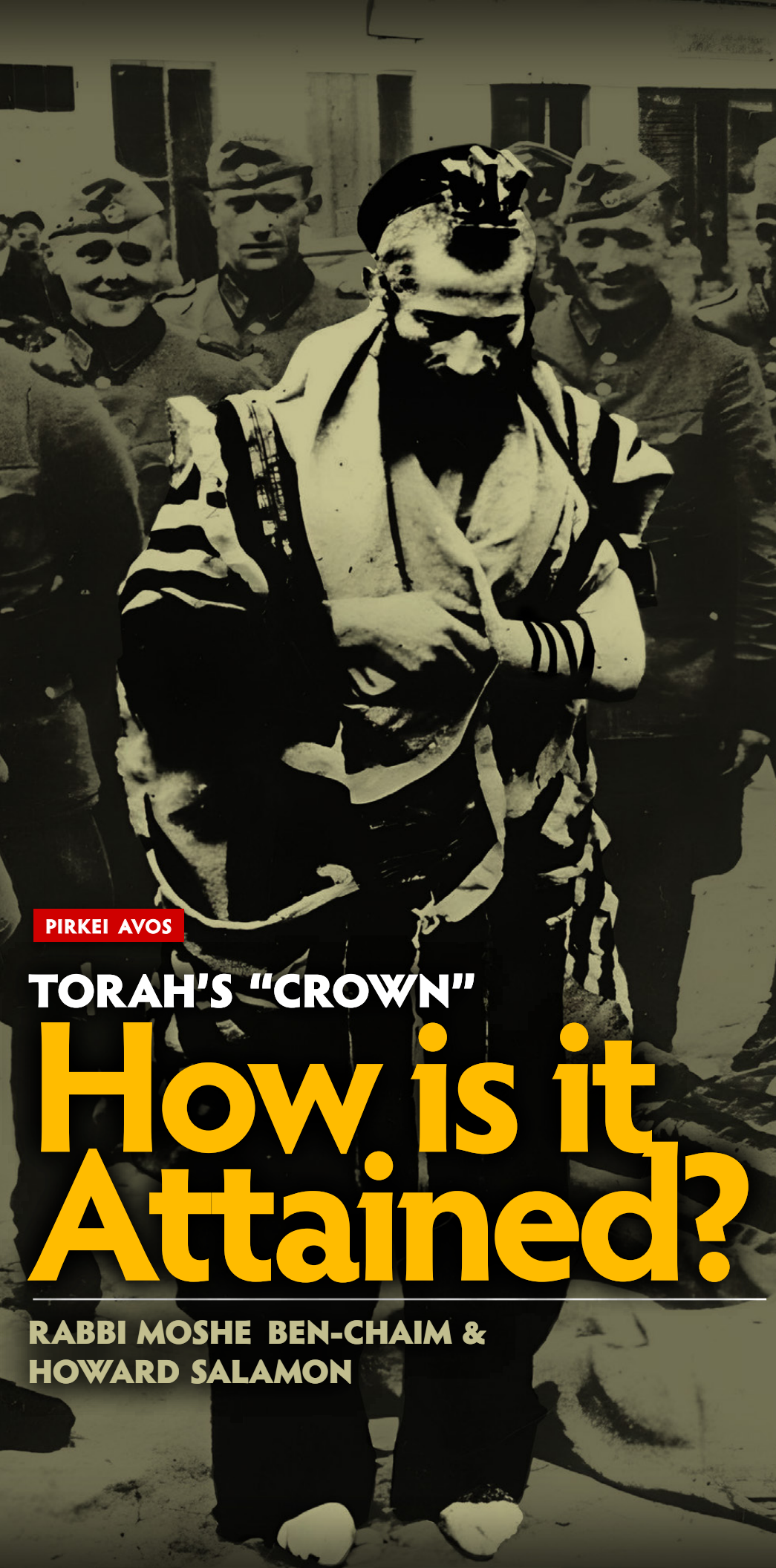
The sight of a corpse impels man to acknowledge the reality that this life is temporal and that sooner or later we are all going to expire. At first this is a painful awareness which can cause a certain depression. For the cognizance of mortality can dispel the spirit of enthusiasm

which is integral to man's creative endeavors. The sense that one is going to die anyway can leave one feeling hopeless and uninspired. However, on the other hand, the experience of death can cause one to lose unrealistic fantasies and to reorient himself to a more appropriate outlook. He may come to the realization that there is such a thing as immortality but that it pertains to the soul not the body. Judaism teaches that the Tzadik (righteous person) who has lived in accordance with the Mitzvot and has perfected himself through study of Torah and performance of good deeds, effectuates a transformation of the soul which enables it to live on after its separation from the body. Perhaps then a state of Tumah is imposed in order to get the person to think about the significance of his encounter with death. It does not mean that man is only a temporal being who lives for a time and then departs the scene never to be heard from again. That may be true with regard to the physical aspect of existence that he partakes of in this world. That may very well be a one time thing.

But the essence of man resides in his Neshama (Soul) which is not subject to the laws of death and decomposition. The soul is a non-physical entity which has the potential to live on after the death of the body. This depends on how the person has lived his life.

If he sought to cultivate the soul through pursuit of wisdom and performance of deeds which enabled him to overcome the forces of the instincts, then his Neshama becomes stronger and eventually reaches the level where, upon death, it outlives the body in what is known as Olam Habah (World to Come). The Rabbis teach that all Jews have a share in the World to Come. May we merit to attain it.

Shabbat Shalom. ■



PIRKEI AVOS

TORAH'S "CROWN"

How is it Attained?

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM &
HOWARD SALAMON

Such is the way [of a life] of Torah: you shall eat bread with salt, and rationed water shall you drink; you shall sleep on the ground, your life will be one of privation, and in Torah shall you labor. If you do this, "Happy shall you be and it shall be good for you" (Psalms 128:2): "Happy shall you be" in this world, "and it shall be good for you" in the world to come. (Avos 6:4)

Rashi comments:

It is not saying it about the wealthy one that he should place himself in a life of pain in order to study Torah. But rather, this is what it is saying: Even if a person only has bread with salt, etc. and he does not have a pillow and blanket to sleep [on], but rather [must sleep] on the ground, he should not refrain from involvement in [Torah study]; as in the end, he will study it in wealth.

This mishnah describes the degree of value one has for Torah study. Torah study is indispensable to his life because it is the core of his life. This is due to the amazing enjoyment derived from thought, and uncovering Torah's endless wisdom. Torah is God's wisdom, so this must be the case. There is no other consideration that would remove his yearning and fiery interest in continuously uncovering God's brilliance. Even if impoverished, and with no home, he could not take his mind off Torah study. This is the degree of attachment that is required. If one were given a full week to take as much gold as he could from a treasury, he would not let his eyes sleep, and he would not waste time eating. But he would carry as much gold he could with

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relentless effort until he collapsed from exhaustion. The true Torah student—the person who learns for the sake of Torah and no ulterior motive (lishma)—values Torah in an even greater degree: “The judgments of the Lord are true, righteous altogether, more desirable than gold” (Psalms 19:10,11). No other interest surpasses it, as nothing else in life offers such intense pleasure. It is an endless journey that always presents unexpected marvels.

The Torah life can be achieved equally by a wealthy person, as we see Rabbi Judah the prince and Rabbi Tarfon were very wealthy and were great Torah minds. Rather, as Rashi states above, this mishnah describes the required attitude of a person living the proper Torah lifestyle. Torah is only discovered with an unrelenting pursuit; both poor and rich people can demonstrate this level.

Discovering Torah’s brilliance is not a simple task and requires great energies. It requires a sustained search, and not something studied casually once a month, once a week or once a day.

Torah study occupies the major focus of his day, every day. Torah’s depth, breadth, precision and subtleties are what demand such sustained dedication, patience and deep thought. If one does not study daily, his mind wanders

to other areas and he loses the momentum, which is also required to excel. Torah study today, is built on Torah studied yesterday. But if there are gaps in a person’s learning, and he forgets, he has to rebuild: “Abandon me (Torah) one day, I will abandon you two days” (Sifrei Devarim 48:8; Jerusalem Talmud end of Berakhot). He lost the content, and he also lost the steps that he took in his mind, so he must rehash and rebuild. Rabbi Israel Chait once said, “No one ever became successful unless he was head and shoulders immersed in his pursuit.” The same applies to Torah study.

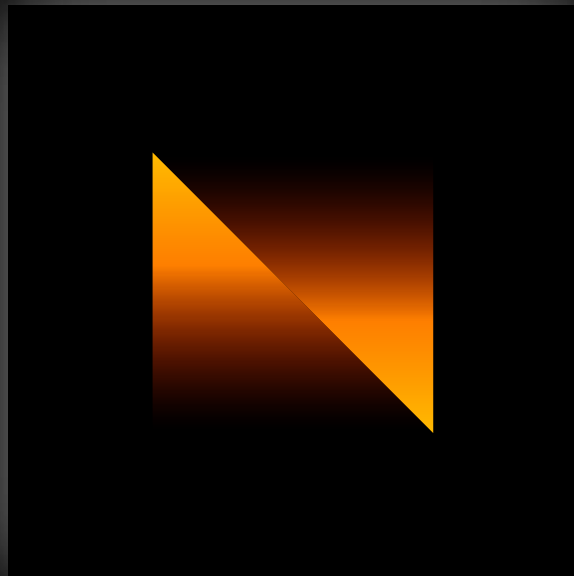
The mishna continues:

Do not seek greatness for yourself, and do not covet honor. Practice more than you learn. Do not yearn for the table of kings, for your table is greater than their table, and your crown is greater than their crown, and faithful is your Employer to pay you the reward of your labor.

One who studies Torah for its own sake also develops finer ethics. Here’s amazement with God and his wisdom overshadows any other interest, including the self. He does not view himself with importance, so he has no

need for greatness or to gain honor through his abundant knowledge. Moses had the greatest knowledge and also was the most humble man: “Moses himself was exceedingly humble, more so than any other human being on Earth” (Num. 122:3). With his tremendous knowledge, Moses had the greatest appreciation for the disparity between God and man, thereby engendering in him the greatest degree of humility. One does not engage in self-aggrandizement when awestruck by God and His Torah wisdom. This humility is the true barometer of the person who studies for the sake of study alone, and not honor or leadership. He also does not envy the wealth of kings as it does not register on him as greater than wisdom.

Why must the Torah student “eat bread with salt, drink rationed water and sleep on the ground?” He doesn’t have to, if he has wealth. But if he lost it or never had wealth, this would not impede his yearning for life’s greatest treasure and pleasure. Torah is God’s wisdom. To unlock its brilliance requires a sharp mind which is earned only through sustained study. The dissatisfaction with mediocrity propels a Torah lover to persist in his questions until he uncovers stupendous ideas. ■



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PSYCHOLOGY & METAPHOR

Bilam & the Talking 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

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and cause her (the donkey) to live.” Bilam says, “I have sinned. I didn’t know that you stood in the path to turn me aside. And now if this is bad in your eyes, I will return.” The angel informs Bilam that he may continue, but only that which he tells him may he say. Rashi states that the significance of “three” times represents two things: the three forefathers, and the three Jewish festivals. Ibn Ezra states that once the donkey spoke it died, and that with each successive hitting, Bilam used a stronger object.

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

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

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

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

This desire to curse the Jews awoke in Bilam

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

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

Bilam, in great conflict, decides to travel to Balak with the goal of cursing of the Jews. In order to do so, he must suppress his knowledge of God’s command to refrain from cursing them. Riding on his donkey represents the suppression of what his conscience (the donkey) “sees.” “Riding” conveys a sense of dominion over another object. Bilam himself (in this vision) represents his evil instincts and thus, isn’t aware of reality (the angel of God). One’s instincts aren’t designed with the ability to judge what is morally good or evil. Instincts are not perceivers: they simply emote. This explains why Bilam couldn’t “see” the angel. Bilam, in this story, represents his instincts – a faculty of man unable to ‘perceive.’ Instincts have only one function: they guide a person towards instinctual satisfaction. The donkey represents Bilam’s conscience: the part of man that detects good and evil. The angel represents reality, or his intellect: the ability to perceive what is real and true. Bilam’s inability to curse the Jews was so threatening, it was represented by an angel of God wielding a sword, a very terrifying sight. The conscience, represented by the donkey, is designed to perceive and make value judgments. This is its main function. Now that we understand the main components of the parable, (Bilam, his donkey, and the angel represent respectively the instinctual drive, the conscience, and reality), we must interpret this account accordingly.

Bilam riding on his donkey can be interpreted as his evil instincts are riding (suppressing) his conscience. His conscience alone is

aware of the reality – “the donkey sees the angel,” but Bilam doesn’t. Whenever the conscience goes “off of the path,” it starts to become more conscious, making Bilam sense his error. Therefore, Bilam suppresses his conscience – “hitting the donkey.” His conscience slows him down – “crushes his leg” – as he tries to go on his “path.” Bilam’s weapon for suppressing his conscience becomes stronger – “he hits the donkey with a stick.” Then the conscience finally prevails – “the donkey talks.”

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

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

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

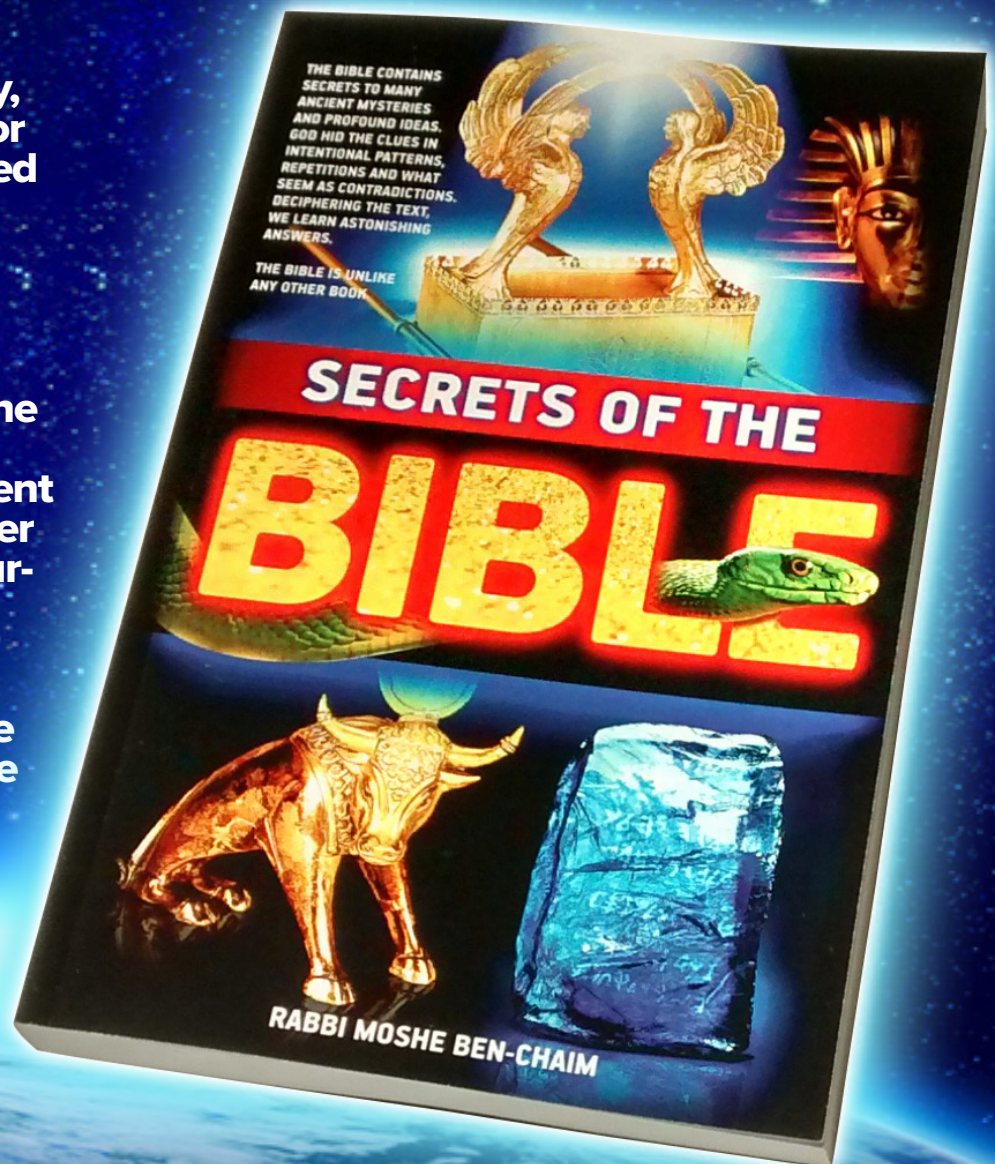
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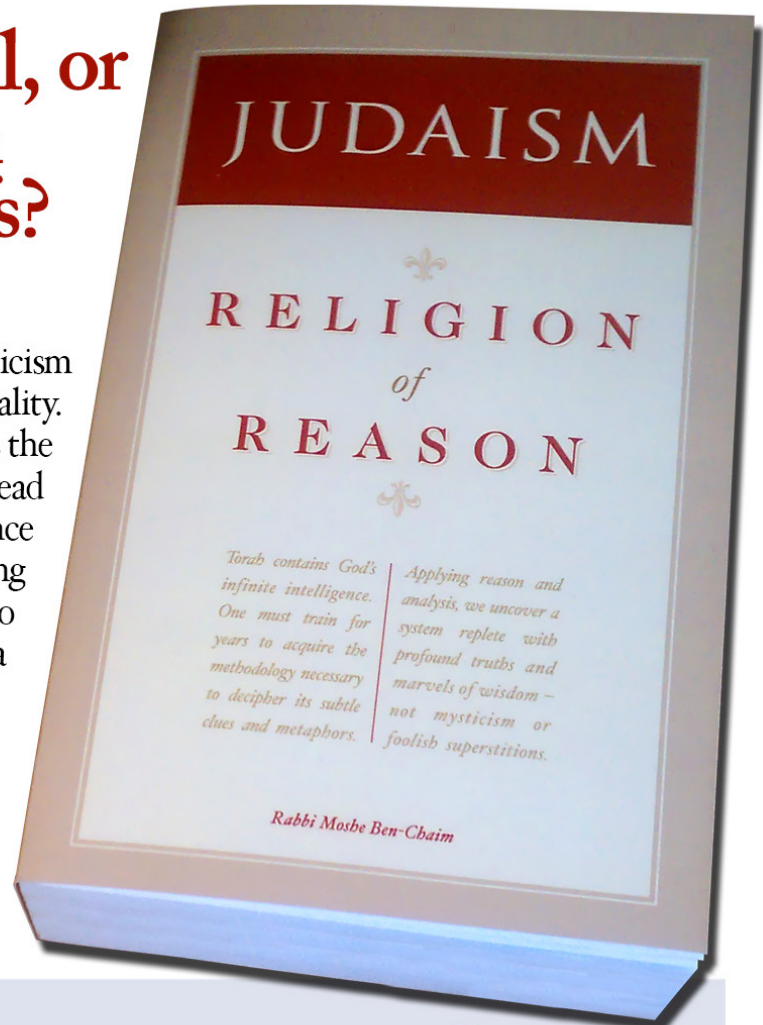
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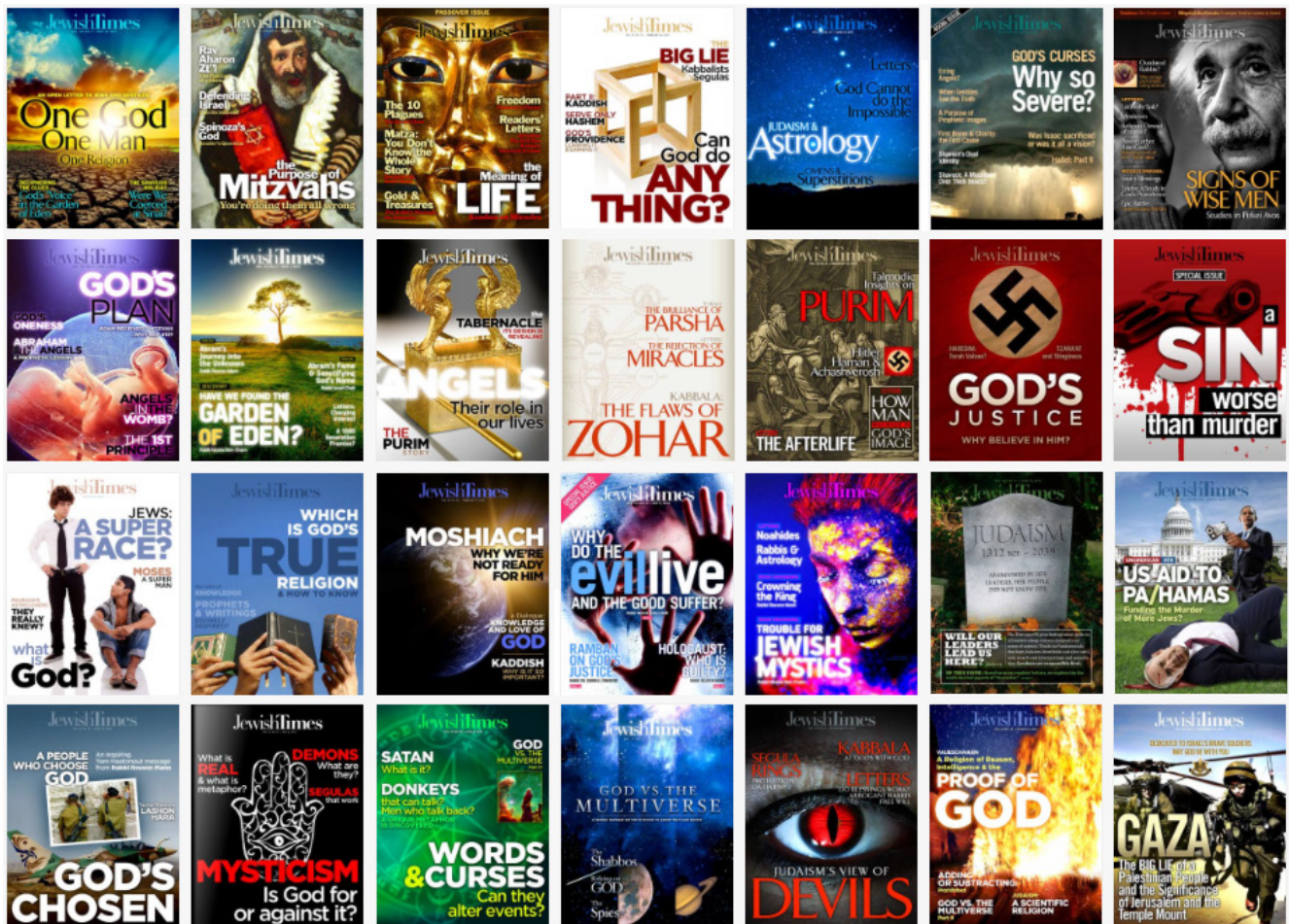
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