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Weekly Parsha

Balak

RABBI BERNARD FOX

“And Bilaam arose in the morning. And he said to Balak’s ministers, ‘Go to your land for Hashem has refused to allow me to go with you.’” (BeMidbar 22:13)

Hashem appears to Bilam in a
(continued on page 5)

Bilam

RABBI ISRAEL CHAIT

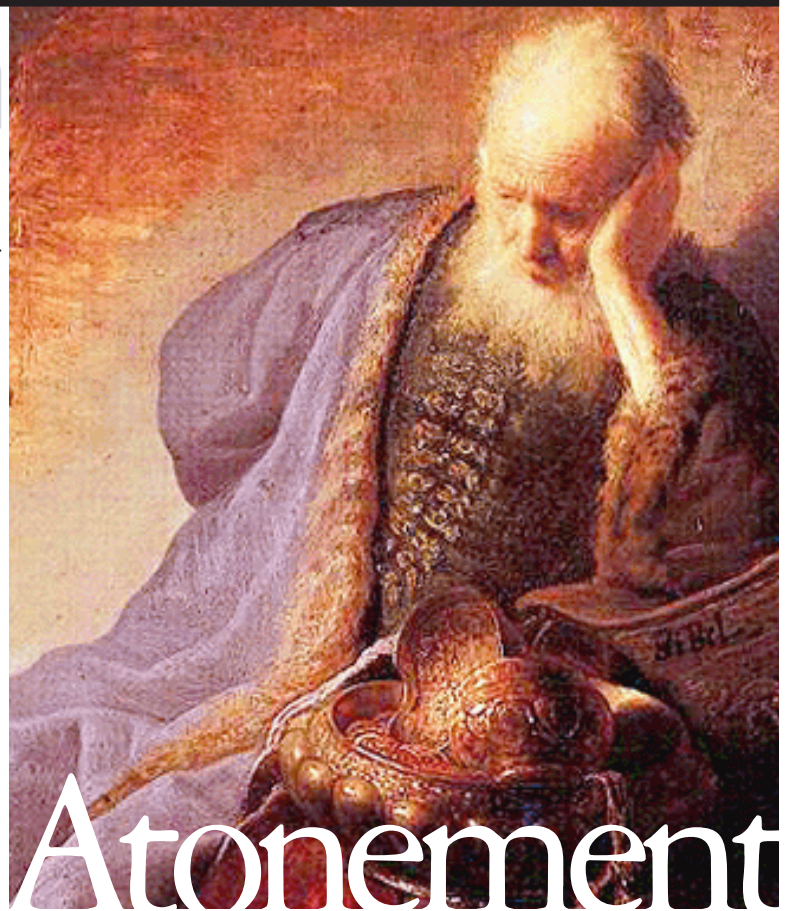
Transcribed by students

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

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

In order to resolve this difficulty we must analyze the personality of Bilam to appreciate the threat that he posed. Chazal tell us that Bilam possessed great genius and excellent political acumen. He was the advisor that counseled Pharaoh that all Israelite male children should be thrown into the river. He had the political foresight to appreciate that every political movement requires a leader at its forefront.

The Gemara states that Bilam possessed great powers of perception. However, he was also
(continued on next page)



Atonement

Jesus Dying for Sins vs the Death of the Righteous

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Reader: Just wondering, have I not read or heard that the death of the righteous can be atonement for all Israel? It seems your article of June 18 denies this is possible.

Mesora: Yes, the Talmud (Moade Kattan 28a) states the following:

“Rabbi Ami said, ‘Why was the death of Miriam adjoined to the section of the Red Heifer? To tell you that just as the Red Heifer atones, so does the death of the righteous atone. Rabbi Elazar said, ‘Why was the death of Aaron adjoined to the section of the priestly garments?’ [To
(continued on page 10)

(Bilam continued from previous page)

very devious. When he saw a person was in a precarious situation, albeit political or economical, he would curse that person. The individuals ultimate downfall was attributed to Bilam's ostensible supernatural powers. Bilam was a machivellian type of personality, a great political genius and adviser to kings. He counseled his clients by exposing their enemies political weakness. We can therefore appreciate the Gemara in Brachos 7a, which tells us that Bilam knew the time when G-d was angry at Klal Yisroel. He was capable of determining what Bnai Yisroel's weakness was and when was the proper time to exploit that weakness. A student of history can appreciate that certain critical events trigger many different phenomena which in turn have very severe ramifications. History is replete with specific turning points which shape the course of mankind. There are two factors which play a role and permit the exploitation of a political vulnerability. One is the ability to know the nature of your antagonist. Secondly, you must be cognizant of an event that can occur which would allow this weakness in his nature to present itself. This event would afford one the opportunity to take advantage of that vulnerability. Bilam as a political genius had this ability. He perceived a weakness in Klal Yisroel which would cause their divisiveness and self destruction. Therefore, Chazal inform us that G-d was not angry at Bnai Yisroel, throughout this entire event. This has added significance since G-d did not allow an event to occur that would have afforded Israel's enemies the opportunity to take advantage of them.

Bilam's plan was to expose the weakness of the Israelites. He recognized that G-d relates to the Children of Israel as evidenced by their exodus from 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 G-d like figure. He professed that he was communicating with G-d at night and therefore requested them to stay. Bilam was the ultimate rationalist. He was a calculating character that used his genius to exploit people's insecurities and quest for the supernatural. However, contrary to his plan, G-d appeared to him in a prophetic vision and warned him about his attempted mission. G-d instructed him not to go curse these people because they are blessed. This vision was startling for Bilam, the ultimate rationalist. He manipulated peoples fears and merely professed supernatural powers. Thus G-d's appearance to him was shocking. He therefore, as a rationalist, was incredulous as to the revelation. Hence, he did not advise Balak's messengers to leave, but rather wanted them to wait another night

to determine if this was merely an illusion.

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

G-d relates to man in the absolute. The best and most rational course of action is the conduct most desired. In this instance this was set out in his first vision. Do not go and curse the nation.

G-d also relates to man in terms of the individuals own emotional framework.

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

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

Bilam's only philosophy was that the intellect was merely a means for satisfying his desires. He rejected the concept of an objective good. This notion ran counter to his basic philosophy. That is why the Torah tells us that he initiated the mission by harnessing his own donkey. He was

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(Bilam continued from previous page)

demonstrating that his visions were merely aberrations. There is no objective reality. Therefore, G-d expressed his anger at Bilam for he failed to comprehend true reality. He was guided by his emotions and had to demonstrate that he Bilam, the rationalist, was the ultimate master of his own destiny.

Despite Bilam's recalcitrance in pursuing this mission, G-d utilized his donkey as the means for thwarting his desires. Irrespective of whether the donkey actually talked or if the entire incident was a prophetic vision, it demands our analysis. The donkey prevented Bilam's progress on three separate occasions. The first detour the donkey went into the field when it saw an angel of G-d standing in its way with a sword drawn in his hand. Despite Bilam's smiting the donkey and prodding it to proceed, it was again blocked by the angel of G-d. This time the donkey did not move and engaged Bilam in a dialogue. It was only after this dialogue that G-d opened Bilam's eyes and permitted him to see the angel of G-d blocking the road. Rashi comments that at the outset only the donkey was capable of seeing the angel because G-d gave it permission. Had Bilam seen the angel, since he was a man of intelligence, his mind would have been damaged upon beholding this sight. Bilam was blinded to the philosophy of Judaism and incapable of perceiving an objective reality. The previous night's prophetic visions were startling to him and threatened his convictions as the master logician. However, due to the strength of his belief he discounted them and proceeded upon his mission. Therefore, Rashi tells us, had G-d permitted him to see the angel immediately, he would have been devastated. To suddenly be confronted with the phenomenon of a greater metaphysical reality, would have destroyed him. Therefore, the perception of this metaphysical reality was only comprehended by his donkey. The donkey represented his stubborn desire to proceed which was thwarted. At this point, he was only capable of perceiving the truth in a distorted manner. Emotionally Bilam desired to proceed, to continue through life with his distorted vision of reality. However, the donkey that he rode on since his youth, did not budge. He hit the donkey three times, but to no avail. He did not investigate the situation to determine if anything was bothering his normally faithful donkey. He hit the donkey repeatedly which reflected his irrational desire to accomplish his goal. However, the donkey spoke to him and questioned his determination and asked Bilam whether it ever prevented his movement in the past. At this point the Torah tells us that G-d opened Bilam's eyes and he saw the angel of G-d standing in the roadway. This vision was possible only after Bilam contemplated the situation and examined his irrational behavior. He realized that his donkey would not proceed despite being hit

three times. He slowly started to realize that there was some metaphysical force behind these abnormal events. The previous prophetic visions and the current events, led him to realize there was a force at work that did not want him to proceed. He was beginning to appreciate that these were not just physical obstacles but rather a manifestation of a metaphysical reality. Three times the donkey was hit but did not proceed. Bilam started to realize that this symbolized that he was dealing with a unique nation that had three forefathers guided by G-d. The Israelites were a special nation that celebrate three festivals whereby they acknowledge their unique relationship with G-d. He slowly started to appreciate that he was dealing with not just another political entity, but rather a unique nation under G-d's special providence. G-d allowed Bilam to perceive these concepts by placing him into circumstances, whereby his genius and power of perception enabled him to perceive this metaphysical reality.

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

Bilam and the Donkey

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

The story of Bilam and his donkey contains many unbelievable events and is described in great detail. As the account in Numbers 22:21 goes, Balak was the king of Moav at that time and was faced with the fear of having the Jews—a nation of millions of people—damage his land by gaining safe passage. To avert this problem, Balak called upon Bilam, a prophet, and requested that Bilam curse the Jews so that Balak would have ease in attacking them and in driving them out. When Balak sent the first group of messengers to Bilam, Bilam's reply was that he had to consult with G-d.

G-d's answer was that Bilam should not curse the Jews for they are blessed. Bilam informed the messengers that he was refrained from going by G-d's word. Balak persisted and sent more messengers—higher in rank and number. Bilam responded by saying that even if his house was filled with silver and gold he couldn't go. Nonetheless Bilam requested an answer from G-d. This time G-d gave him permission if there was a monetary gain, however he still must refrain from cursing the Jews.

What happens next is very remarkable. It is stated that Bilam arose early and that G-d was angry that he went. This was after G-d gave him permission! G-d stood an angel in the path to deter him as he was riding on his donkey. It states that the donkey saw the angel standing in the path with an outstretched sword in his hand, and that the donkey turned aside and went into the field. Bilam hit the donkey to get it back on the path. The angel stood a second time in the vineyard, a fence on both sides of the donkey and Bilam. The donkey saw the angel and crushed up against the wall, crushing Bilam's leg. Bilam continued to smite the donkey. The angel passed to a place that was narrow with no room to pass left or right. The donkey saw the angel and crouched down under Bilam and Bilam's anger burned, smiting the donkey with a stick. G-d opened the mouth of the donkey and it said to Bilam, "what have I done that you have smitten me these three times?" Bilam responded, "Because you have mocked me. If there were a sword in my hand I would kill you." The donkey said, "Am I not the donkey that you have ridden upon from long before until today? Is it my nature to act this way?" Bilam replied, "No". G-d then opened Bilam's eyes and he saw the angel of G-d standing in the path with a sword outstretched in his hand. Bilam then prostrated himself before the angel. The angel said to Bilam, "For what have you smitten your donkey these three times? Behold I have come out to turn you away because your way is contrary to me. Your donkey has seen me and turned aside these three times. Would it be that you would turn aside. Because now I would kill you and cause her (the donkey) to live." Bilam says, "I have sinned. I didn't know that you stood in the path to turn me aside. And now if this is bad in your eyes, I will return." The angel informs Bilam that he may continue, but only that which he tells him may he say. Rashi states that the significance of "three" times represents two things: the three forefathers, and the three festivals. Ibn Ezra states that once the donkey spoke it died, and that with each successive hitting, Bilam used a stronger object.

Following are some of the many obvious questions on this section, including the meaning behind both Rashi's and Ibn Ezra's statements: 1) Why didn't Bilam see the angel of G-d at first? 2)

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

There is a very important statement of Maimonides regarding this and similar events. He states in the Guide for the Perplexed that in every case in Scripture where we find the term "angel", the entire account is describing a vision, and not an actual physical event. The event didn't take place in physical reality, but in a person's mind. This being the case, this entire story must be interpreted in this light according to Maimonides. The story is here is a parable for a conflict with which Bilam was struggling.

If we refer back to the immediate events leading up to the riding on the donkey, we see that Bilam comes off appearing as a true follower of G-d. But with a closer look, his real nature is seen. He was asked to curse the Jews. G-d told him he can't. The fact that Bilam (during the account of the second messengers) requests from G-d again to know whether he can curse the Jews, shows that he wanted to curse them. That's why he said that "G-d has refrained me from cursing." Meaning that he really desired to curse, but he was prevented by G-d. This desire to curse the Jews awoke in Bilam a strong conflict. On the one hand he desired the destruction of the Jewish people. On the other hand, he knew that they were blessed by G-d. Bilam was well aware that G-d's establishment of His providence over the Jews was due to our forefather's perfection. Abraham's self realization of the absurdity of idolatry, his conclusion of the reality of monotheism and the Oneness of G-d secured this treaty of G-d's providence. With this knowledge, Bilam was greatly troubled as to which path to follow, namely 1) his desire for the destruction of the Jews, or 2) the word of G-d. This entire account is a parable of his conflict.

By interpreting the elements of this story as representing psychological phenomena, the story's real meaning can be explained as follows: Bilam, being in great conflict, decides to go to Balak with the cursing of the Jews as his goal. In order to do so, he must suppress his knowledge of G-d's command to refrain from cursing them. His riding on his donkey represents the suppression of what



his conscience (the donkey) "sees". Riding always carries with it the sense of dominion over another object. Bilam himself represents his evil instincts and thus, isn't aware of reality (the angel of G-d). One's instincts aren't designed with the ability to judge what is morally good or bad. (The same is true about any apparatus in the human body. The heart isn't designed to breathe, and the lungs aren't designed to pump blood.) This explains why Bilam couldn't "see" the angel. Bilam, in this story, represents his instincts - a faculty of the mind unable to perceive. Instincts have only one function-they guide a person to instinctual satisfaction. They cannot do an act of perceiving. The angel represents reality. Bilam's inability to curse the Jews was so threatening, it was represented by an angel of G-d wielding a sword. A very terrifying sight. The conscience, represented by the donkey, is designed to perceive reality. This is its main function. (This is why Adam and Eve were granted the conscience after they showed that they sinned too easily. They needed an additional way for restraining their instincts.)

Now that we understand the main components of the parable, (what Bilam, his donkey, and the angel represent, namely the instinctual drive, the conscience, and G-d's reality- respectively- we must go through the story interpreting it with this information:

Bilam is riding on his donkey-"his evil instincts are riding(suppressing) his conscience." His conscience only is aware of the reality-"the donkey sees the angel", but Bilam doesn't. Whenever the conscience goes "off of the path", it starts to become a bit conscious, making Bilam a bit aware of his wrong, Bilam "hits" his conscience to suppress it-"hitting the donkey". 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 G-d's kindness. That's why G-d 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 forefathers and the three festivals fits in beautifully: The donkey-Bilam's conscience-was contemplating the whole reason for G-d's direct providence over the Jews, namely the perfection of our forefathers who caused G-d to originally bring about His providence. Bilam's conflict was directly caused by these three individuals (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob). Had it not been for them, he might have been able to curse the Jews. That's why the donkey turned aside when it thought about the forefathers. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob brought about the relationship with G-d. Bilam now desired to curse them-but all curses are from G-d. We also see why Bilam acted calmly towards a talking animal, as Maimonides states, this was all a vision.

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

(Balak continued from page 1)

vision. He tells Bilaam that he should not respond to Balak's summons. Bilaam cannot curse Bnai Yisrael. The nation is blessed.

Hashem's meaning was very clear. Bilaam could not affect destiny. He could merely foretell the future. This ability was the foundation of Bilaam's illusions. Hashem told Bilaam he could not succeed in this case. Bnai Yisrael was blessed. Bilaam would have no opportunity to curse the nation.

Bilaam told the messengers that he could not return with them to Balak. He did not explain the reason. He did not indicate that he could not help Balak or that Bnai Yisrael could not be cursed. Why did Bilaam conceal this information?

Rashi explains Bilaam's motivations. He comments that Bilaam told the ministers that he could not proceed with them. This implied that Balak should send a more worthy delegation. This delegation would earn Bilaam's cooperation. Clearly, Bilaam was attempting to conceal his limitations.[1]

The effect of Bilaam's response is predictable. Balak understood Bilaam's message. He sent a new delegation. This group was composed of ministers of higher rank. These ministers arrived at Bilaam's home. They assured Bilaam he would be amply rewarded for his services. They assured him of Balak's complete cooperation.

Of course, Bilaam's situation remained unchanged. He knew that only the Almighty shaped destiny. Bilaam could not truly curse or bless anyone. He was forced to reveal this limitation.[2] He told the messengers they must wait with him. He must receive guidance from Hashem.

Bilaam's behavior seems bizarre. He knew that ultimately he must follow Hashem's command. Hashem had told him that Bnai Yisrael was blessed. Bilaam would not be able to satisfy Balak's request. Why did he mislead Balak?

Don Isaac Abarvanel explains that Bilaam was involved in an immense

internal conflict. He enjoyed the attention he was receiving from Balak – the king of Moav. Balak's entreaties appealed to Bilaam's vanity. He did not want this attention to end. He needed to provide Balak with encouragement. This required Bilaam to create the impression that he had volition. However, Bilaam had no freedom. He could not act without Hashem. This eventually was revealed.

Bilaam's situation was further complicated by his very claim. He presented himself as the true prophet of the Almighty. This implied that he was subject to the Almighty's authority. This created an absolute contradiction. Bilaam implied freedom and subjugation simultaneously.

Bilaam could not resolve this conflict. This is reflected in his actions. He attempted to continue his charade. But in the end was forced, by his own claims, to admit his limitations.

The most revealing aspect of this entire incident is Bilaam's immediate reaction to the second delegation. Essentially, the delegation asked Bilaam to name his price. This angered Bilaam. He responded that all of Balak's wealth could not force a prophet to violate Hashem's command. Why did Bilaam react so sharply? Bilaam had implied that the proper delegation could enlist his support. Balak rightfully understood this to imply that Bilaam had the ability to make a decision. He challenged Bilaam to exercise his freewill. This angered Bilaam. Balak had implied that Bilaam was not a true prophet. Bilaam immediately responded that he must obey Hashem. He was forced to confess his limitations.[3]■

[1] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer BeMidbar 22:13.

[2] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer BeMidbar 22:18.

[3] Don Yitzchak Abarvanel, Commentary on Sefer BeMidbar 22:7.



the Zealot

RABBI BERNARD FOX

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

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

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

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

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

The end of the parasha discusses a related incident. Bnai Yisrael are camped in Shittim. This placed them in close proximity of Moav. Familiarity developed between the men of Bnai Yisrael and the women of Moav. These relations

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became intimate and sexual. Soon, these men and women began to share cultures. This led to these men associating with the idol of Moav – Ba'al Peor.

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

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

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

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

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

Already, a number of questions emerge. According to Maimonides, the two people executed by Pinchas had not violated an explicit Torah prohibition. Yet, Pinchas was permitted to execute them, and was praised for doing so. How is it possible to endorse the execution of two people that have not violated any explicit law on the Torah level?

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

If we proceed further in Maimonides' discussion of this area, additional



Bal Peor

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

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

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

In order to resolve these questions, we must better understand the Torah's position regarding normative punishments. The courts are charged with the duty of enforcing observance of these commandments. The courts have the authority and responsibility to punish specific violations. Their role is to determine whether a crime or sin has been committed. If their judgment is that this is the case, then the guilty party has a liability to receive the punishment. The court merely responds to this liability. In carrying out a punishment, the courts are completely reactive. A liability to receive punishment has been determined to exist. The court reacts and responds to this liability.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

FROM MINISTER TO TORAH OBSERVANT NOACHIDE

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim,

Having just finished reading the recent articles published in Volume III, No 32.....June 18, 2004 of the 'Jewish Times' I would like to make some comments especially about two of the articles, "Christianity Vs Judaism" and "G-d Becoming Man."

After reading these two articles that caught my eye instantly, I said to my wife, "This is probably the first time since the 'Debate at Barcelona' that someone has had the courage to speak out so forth right about the differences in Christianity and Judaism." I would like to applaud your efforts not only to educate the Jewish Children concerning false religions but also to challenge those in Christianity to be seekers of Truth rather than just conforming to a certain form of theology prescribed by the various denominations found within Christianity.

Having, myself, once been a Baptist Minister I know how difficult it is for someone to look at one's current religious status and evaluate it objectively. Most, rather than being challenged to seek the Truth, would rather spend their time and effort defending their current religious position without paying any attention to the possibility that their position could be wrong. I remember in the 'Debate at Barcelona' that the whole purpose of the Catholic Priests were to try and convert the Rabbi to their theological system by insisting that he keep his mind open to the possibility that he was wrong and convert. But when the Rabbi challenged the Priests involved to extend the same courtesy, i.e., keep their minds open to the possibility that they were wrong and of their possibility of converting, it seemed to strike a nerve. While they insisted that the Rabbi keep his mind open to the fact he might be wrong, it failed to enter their minds that they were wrong. But, I also know that if Truth becomes the sole object of one's search it can be done.

Over the years since I left Christianity and having become an Observant Noachide, I have continually challenged people to develop a correct concept of the Creator. For without first having a correct concept of our Creator, everything else will become flawed. The true concept of our Creator can be only found in what He declares of Himself and these declarations are only to be found in the Torah, Tanach, and the Teachings of the Sages of Israel. It is only when one departs from these sources that an unhealthy concept of the Creator will emerge, and one will find himself involved in idolatry.

If indeed one desires to truly see idolatry, then having a correct concept of the Creator will expose any and all forms of it.

May Hashem, may His Name be blessed, bless you in your efforts to expose people to the Truth and challenge them whether they are Jews or non-Jews to be seekers of Truth and to direct their hearts toward the only True direction, the Creator - to The Creator of the Universe, Who has chosen to reveal Himself to all of humanity as the L-ORD G-D of Israel.

Shalom,
Jack E. Saunders

After reading Mr. Saunder's thoughts, I invited him to elaborate on his idea that G-d may only be discovered through His own words. Mr. Saunders' accepted my invitation, and his elaboration follows on the next page. I feel his ideas deserve wider circulation. I thank him. -Moshe Ben-Chaim

DEVELOPING a CORRECT CONCEPT of the CREATOR

JACK E. SAUNDERS

THE PROBLEM

The most difficult task that has ever faced humanity since its inception has been to acquire a correct concept of their Creator and maintain that concept down through the ages. This responsibility floundered very early in the history of humanity when Enosh the son of Seth the son of Adam began to “profane the Name”[1] or the true concept of G-d. It is difficult to believe, but it only took two generations from the first human being, Adam, created by our Creator to distort the correct concept of G-d.

Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon commonly referred to as Rambam in one of his great works states[2]:

“During the times of Enosh, mankind made a great mistake, and the wise men of that generation gave thoughtless counsel. Enosh himself was one of those who erred. Their mistake was as follows: They said G-d created stars and spheres with which to control the world. He placed them on high and treated them with honor, making them servants who minister before Him. Accordingly, it is fitting to praise and glorify them and to treat them with honor. [They perceived] this to be the will of G-d, blessed be He, that they magnify and honor those whom He magnified and honored, just as a king desires that the servants who stand before him be honored. Indeed, doing so is an expression of honor to the king.

After conceiving of this notion, they began to construct temples to the stars and offer sacrifices to them. They would praise and glorify them with words, and prostrate themselves before them, because by doing so, they would - according to their evil conception - be fulfilling the will of G-d.

This was the essence of the worship of false gods, and this was the rationale of those who worshipped them. They would not say that there is no other G-d, except for this star. This message was conveyed by Jeremiah, who declared (10:7-8): 'Who will not fear You, King of the nations, for to You it is fitting. Among all the wise men of the nations and in all their kingdoms, there is none like You. They have one foolish and senseless notion; that which they are punished, is

[mere] wood.' i.e., all know that You alone are G-d. Their error and their stupidity consists of conceiving of this emptiness as Your will.”

I would now like to point out a couple of statements found in Rambam's assessment of the downfall of humanity that eventually led them to the practice of idolatry:

1. He states in the very first paragraph that: “the wise men of that generation gave thoughtless counsel.”

Thus, Rambam makes it very clear that this was not a mistake of the ignorant but of the wise men of the generation of Enosh, and even of Enosh himself. And that through their thoughtless or careless council led men away from the worship of the Creator - to the worship of the created.

Also in the second paragraph: “[They perceived] this to be the will of G-d.”

“Their”(the wise men's) next mistake was their instance that by paying homage and honor to the various created things, one was actually doing the will of the Creator.

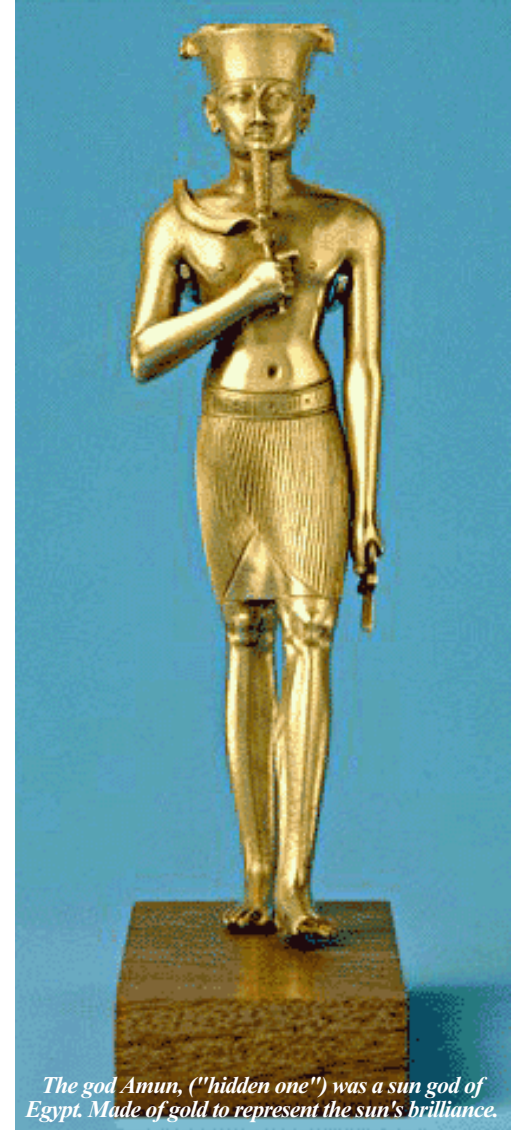
No we can begin to see the development of idolatry and the means through which it came about. It was through carelessness and self-perceived ideas of the wise. But their self-perceived ideas concerning the will of G-d and their lack of concern for imparting the correct notion of the Creator only led mankind down the dark path of idolatry.

The age in which we live has not changed so much from the time in which Enosh and the wise of his generation lived. Many of the so-called wise men of our generation have fallen into the same trap as those of the days of Enosh. They continue to proclaim their self-perceived ideas concerning the correct notion and will of G-d and thereby continue to contribute to many treading the darken path of idolatry.

THE PERFECTION

The way out of this darken path, of course, is to begin to toss aside our self-perceived ideas of G-d. Next, rather than being careless when it comes to developing a correct concept of our Creator, we should fully concentrate our efforts on the limit of our G-d given ability to discover the correct idea of our Creator.

Now how do we approach the seemingly



The god Amun, ("hidden one") was a sun god of Egypt. Made of gold to represent the sun's brilliance.

impossible task of beginning to acquiring a correct concept of the Creator? It becomes quite clear that since we cannot depend upon our own rationale to discover the true concept of G-d, or as Rambam states[3], “and this was the rationale of those who worshipped them.” If the rationale of the wise of the generation failed to discover and maintain the true concept of G-d, what makes us think today that we may discover with our own rationale what they failed to through their own rationale without succumbing to error? What makes us better than they? Are we wiser?

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As far as we know, at least in the recorder history of the generations of Adam, there has been only one man that has ever arrived at the true concept of the Creator through his own intellect and rational - Abraham. It is no wonder that three different world religions lay claim to this man as its founder.

But we all cannot be Abraham. How can we begin to arrive at a correct concept of the Creator? Where are we to start?

I would suggest that while Creation itself is enough to declare to all peoples in all languages that there is indeed a Creator.[4] But where do we turn in order to learn to do His will and discover a true concept of Him? According to King David[5], "The Torah of HaShem is perfect and able to restore the soul." Although creation may silently declare that a Creator exists, the Torah, Tenach, and the Sages of Israel provide us with much more insight than the creation.

According to the Prophet Isaiah it is impossible to physically equate Him or to intellectually compare Him to anyone or anything. "To whom then will you liken Me, or shall I be equal? saith the Holy One." [6]

When you have a One of a kind Being how does anyone attempt to make a comparison?

Psychologically speaking, the human mind works from the basics of comparisons and when we fail to have anyone or anything to compare someone or something with then we are at a loss to describe the thing whether it is inanimate or animate. The prophets were at a loss of words on many occasions to describe the visions they received from G-d and in many instances relied upon the use of similes to convey what they had seen. Similes are often used to point out similarities in two objects that seem to have very little in common. Such as: "And their feet were straight feet; and the sole of their feet was like the sole of a calf's foot; and they sparkled like the colour of burnished brass." [7] Ezekiel upon having his vision of the Hayyoth attempts to explain to those who have never seen such spiritual beings before in the only way he can. He does so by comparing these spiritual beings to physical ones that most people have come into contact with and would have some basic idea of what they looked like and by the use of comparisons of two completely different types of objects. He thereby informs us of what they look like but the likeness is never exact, only a similarity in likeness.

The same applies in our every day lives. We are constantly using comparisons to convey ideas to those whom we speak with. For example: If I say, table, a certain type of table appears in your mind but in truth it may not be

the same type of table that I am about to describe to you. But, because we all have the basic idea of a table i.e., an object that has either a small or large flat surface supported by legs or a center post. Thus, we all may speak of a table even though it may be different in actually composition or design.

Based on the proclamation by Isaiah and our own inadequacy all that we can ever know of the Creator is that which He chooses to reveal to us in His Torah.

Our Creator through the words of Balaam and stamped with the approval of Moshe Rebbanu who records his words uses the same type of language[8] to inform us of certain incorrect ideas that men may attribute to Him. Such as when Balaam says, "G-d is not a man that He should lie; neither the son of man that He should repent: hath He said, and shall He not do it? Or hath He spoken, and shall it not make it good?" [9]

The words of the Torah declare that G-d is not a man "Ish" neither is He a "ben Adam." The Prophets also make the same declaration. "And also the Strength of Israel will not lie nor repent: for He is not a man that He should repent." [10]

Some will look at these texts and dismiss the fact that these texts do not actually dismiss the possibility of the Creator not being mortal or a corporal being. But that they only describe the fact that as the Creator He is not lacking in power and has no need to lie or repent. And indeed they may ascribe that also. However, the words clearly state, "G-d is not a man" which negates the possibility of Him being such.

1. One may look at this text and discount altogether that it describes the incorporeality of G-d.

2. Another may read this same passage and because of a lack of knowledge not be able to decide if it denies the incorporeality of G-d.

3. Lastly, another individual perceives that one of the truths that is found in these words is indeed a clear denial of any possibility of the Creator having a body and sets out to clearly prove this to be so.

The question now is which one of these individuals is closer to a true concept of the Creator? [11]

From these texts and from others that are like it we may discover a great secret and that great secret is that what we can truly know of the Creator is always found in the negation of a quality that is attributed to the Creator. The Tenach in several places declares what the Creator is not and it is through these negations that we may begin to arrive at a correct concept of the Creator. Generally speaking we can never know what He is, but it is certain that we can

eliminate all that he is not and arrive at a complete understanding of what He is not.

Rambam in one of his works states: "...I shall show you that we cannot describe the Creator by any means except by negative attributes." [12]

"Once we comprehend that 'we cannot comprehend the Incompressible One', then for the very first time we have truly comprehended, and have formulated a correct concept of the Creator." [13] And this can only be arrived at through the negation of qualities that are attributed to Him.

THE PURPOSE

Why should we put so much effort into this discovery?

Rambam also states[14], "The true worship of G-d is only possible when correct notions have previously been conceived. When you have arrived by way of intellectual research at a knowledge of G-d and His works, then commence to devote yourselves to Him, try to approach Him and strengthen the intellect, which is the link that joins you to Him."

Since our worship and approach to G-d is limited by our incorrect notions of Him according to one of the great Sages of Israel, it behooves us to constantly seek to Formulate A Correct Concept of our Creator to the best of our G-d given ability. ■

[1] See Rashi's comments on Genesis 4:26, "It was then that they called profanely upon the Name of G-d."

[2] Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Avodat Kochavim V' Chukkoteihem, Moznaim Publishing Corporation 1990, Chapter One pp. 14-16.

[3] Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Avodat Kochavim V' Chukkoteihem, Moznaim Publishing Corporation 1990, Chapter One p. 16

[4] Psalms 19:1-6

[5] Psalms 19:7f.

[6] Isaiah 40:25

[7] Ezekiel 1:7

[8] For G-d to have to state that He is not a man must have been done in order to correct an incorrect idea that some men held of Him.

[9] Numbers 23:19

[10] I Samuel 15:29

[11] See, The Guide for the Perplexed, Dover Publishing, p. 84

[12] The Guide for the Perplexed, Dover Publishing, p. 81

[13] My Comment after reading The Guide for the Perplexed for the first time.

[14] The Guide for the Perplexed, Dover Publishing, p. 385

(Atonement continued from page 1)

teach] just as the priestly garments atone, so too does the death of the righteous atone.”

The first distinction, which must be made, is between Jesus and the righteous in their deaths. Christianity claims the “goal” of Jesus’ death was precisely to atone for mankind’s sins. This is “why” he died. But this is not the position of this Talmudic section. Here, we do not find the Talmud suggesting at all, that these two righteous leaders died for others’ sins. Yes, it says that their deaths “atone”. However, do not confuse the issues: in their deaths - which happened for G-d’s own reasons - there is the “added benefit” that it may atone for others. We will explain shortly how this works. But you must comprehend the distinction between a death having a singular goal of atoning (Jesus), and a death having some other goal, but carrying with it an additional benefit of atonement (Aaron and Miriam). Aaron and Miriam did not die ‘to atone for others’. They died based on G-d’s considerations.

Conversely, Jesus is said to have died ‘for the one goal’ of atoning for other people’s sins. Be mindful of the Torah’s verse we continually cite, (Deuteronomy, 24:16) "There will not be killed fathers for sons (sins, nor) are sons killed for father's (sins). Each man in his own sin will be killed." This distinction must be clear. If it is not, read this paragraph again.

A definition of “atonement” is required. What does it mean that someone is “atoned”? This means that the error, which existed previously, no longer exists. There is no need for punishment (i.e., corrective measures by G-d) as there is nothing to correct.

G-d promised never to bring a Flood again. The question is, why shouldn’t He, if man corrupts himself again? The answer is because G-d made changes in man’s psyche post-Flood. The Medrash says man used to be quite tall, beasts were as insects to him, and he traversed the earth in a few steps, while uprooting trees in the process. Of course this is an extreme metaphor, but the Rabbis taught through such a metaphor that man was quite invincible, pre-Flood. This was the cause of his rebellion against his fellow man, and why G-d destroyed that entire generation. G-d also prevented reoccurrence of such corruption by diminishing man’s stature. As a Rabbi once taught, this explains why G-d permitted meat only after the Flood: as man was reduced physically, his diminished health required stronger nourishment. This also explains why G-d said upon Noah’s exit, that the fear of man should be in the beasts, when G-d already said this in Genesis. The reason for G-d renewing this characteristic in the animals was due to mankind’s reduced stature: now, easy prey for the animals.

It may be said of man post-Flood that “he has been atoned for his prior sin.” However, man did nothing! How is he atoned? The answer is that here, we have one example of atonement: “external” atonement. In this case, G-d is the cause for man never sinking to the depths of sin displayed by the Flood’s generation. Although man did not repent, the cause of the error was removed. G-d’s oath to never bring another Flood points at man’s new nature. He has been stripped of all the causes that may lead to such sin. He can never commit such crimes again as a people.

Another type of atonement is repentance: “internal” atonement. In this case, man is the cause of his atonement. He examines his ways, sees the harm he does to himself, that he removes himself from G-d, and he regrets such a life. He resigns himself to never again commit this sin, or follow this character trait.

In both cases, “atonement” means that man’s cause of sin is removed. It may be removed externally, or internally.



Mount Hor, where Aaron is buried

Now, which one of these types of atonement applies to the death of the righteous? Well, first we must explain how their deaths “atone”. What do you think? What happens to us when we witness a great individual dying? Although it may have varying degrees of severity on many people, I feel there is one common affect on all of us: we view the righteous as those who do not sin, by definition. I don’t mean they never sin - that is impossible. But I mean that they are removed from sin more than others. They are also committed to a life dedicated in G-d’s service. “Then suddenly, they die?” This is what many of us feel in our heart. We feel their perfection should make them immune to all evil - even death. This is not a conscious sentiment, but we view death as evil, and these people as righteous - as water and oil - death and righteousness doesn’t mix readily. We eventually accept their deaths as no reflection on sin. We all die. But during this time of their demise, we feel, “if they died, and they are righteous, then I, as one far lower than them due to my sins will also die.” Herein lies the cause for atonement when the righteous die. This momentary reflection and regret on our sins is in fact an act of repentance. I believe this is what this section of Talmud teaches. There is nothing magical going on. The reflection on one’s own sins, identifying his actions as sinful, is the commencement of repentance. Thus, if one repents, his sins are atoned for, and this was all caused by the death of the righteous. This is the meaning behind “the death of the righteous atones”.

Conversely, Jesus dying for other people’s sins makes no sense as a goal unto itself. This is unjust if he didn’t sin, and is also against G-d’s words.

Looking at Jacob’s twin Esav, who commenced a life of sin upon Abraham’s death, we see clearly that a righteous person dying is no guarantee that one will repent. It is not the death per se that atones, but what one does with this knowledge. Does he reflect? Does he investigate his sin and realize the destruction he brings to himself? Does he resign to never commit this sin again? If so, and only if so, is he atoned. But merely hearing of a righteous person dying, this alone does not atone for one’s sins. The person did nothing! This latter case is what infantile thinking leads to. Although it is quite appealing to be sinless, and this attracted many to Christianity, it is baseless.

We conclude that one does not die for others, “each man I his own sin will be killed”. These are G-d’s words. However, there is a phenomenon that upon the death of righteous people, we reflect on ourselves and regret our lowly state as compared to theirs. This can evoke repentance. But it is in our hands to repent. Someone else cannot repent for us. That makes no sense. ■

Taken from "Getting It Straight", Practical Ideas for a Life of Clarity

Good & Evil

DOUG TAYLOR AND RABBI MORTON MOSKOWITZ

"Ever wondered why monsters are always under the bed?" I shifted my gaze from the outgoing ferry to my friend, the King of Rational Thought, seated across the table. We were sipping toddies (coffee without the acid or oil) on the patio at the Mukilteo Coffee Company, enjoying an early spring afternoon. His question brought me back to our discussion about emotions. "What do you mean?" I asked. "Weren't you afraid of monsters when you were growing up?" he asked. "Yes," I said, not wanting to tell him that I'm still sometimes afraid of them. "Did you ever wonder why they were always under the bed, and never in the bed?" I took a sip of my toddy and thought about his question. "Because if they were in the bed, I could see that they weren't really there?" I tried. "Exactly!" he exclaimed. "The monsters are only where you can't see. That's why fears come out at night." "Now," he went on, "what happens when you turn on the light?" "The monsters go away," I said. "Close," he said. "More precisely, when you turn on the light you see reality - that there are no monsters - and your fear goes away." "Makes sense to me," I said. "But fear is an emotion. And this same principle operates with other emotions too.

"Now," he went on, "tell me what evil is." "Huh-- what?" I said involuntarily. Would I ever get used to this man's sudden shifts? "Tell me what evil is," he repeated. "Well, uh, it's-- it's evil," I stammered. "It's bad stuff, it's murder, it's hurting someone else, it's the dark side, it's-- it's all the villains in Stephen King novels." I was at a loss. The King of Rational Thought looked amused. "No offense," he said, "but that's a pretty imprecise definition. Ever heard of the 10th

century Jewish philosopher Saadya Gaon?" "A bit before my time," I replied, trying to recover. "He said that evil is ignorance."

"Ignorance? Oh, come on," I countered. "What about murder and mayhem?" This idea sounded ridiculous. "Remember how we've discussed that emotions cloud your view of reality?" he asked. "A fear of monsters under the bed is an emotion. Turning on the light allows you to see reality, and your fear disappears. It's the same with other emotions, like vengeance and jealousy. They can only operate where there is ignorance of reality. But once the light of reality is turned on - in other words, once you see reality clearly - those emotions can be undone. Evil, then, is simply failing to see reality. Why do people commit horrible crimes and then later regret it? Why didn't they see that they'd regret it before they committed the crime? Which of us hasn't gotten blazing angry at someone, wanted to hurt them, and then later calmed down and wondered how we could have acted that way? Emotions cloud the criminal's view of reality, and ours as well." I reached for my toddy, then realized the cup was empty. "It strikes me that this idea has pretty awesome implications," I said. "You're right," he replied. "Among other things, it suggests the challenge for us is to learn as much as we can about what reality is. The antidote to evil - or ignorance - is knowledge." I hesitated, thinking about a few monsters in my life that a little light might help. "Uh, does this idea apply to religion?" "It applies to every area of life," he replied. "Business, science, health, personal growth, fixing cars, you name it." He smiled. "And especially religion." I didn't say anything. I just ordered another toddy. □

