

JewishTimes

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ODD TORAH STORIES

METAPHOR: THEIR NEED & PURPOSE

How does God intend man to understand beasts that talk, curses, angels, or Satan?

LETTERS

Satan & Angels
Power of Speech?
Dealing with Aging
Judaism vs. Christianity

THE
JEWISH
OUTSIDER

CURSES

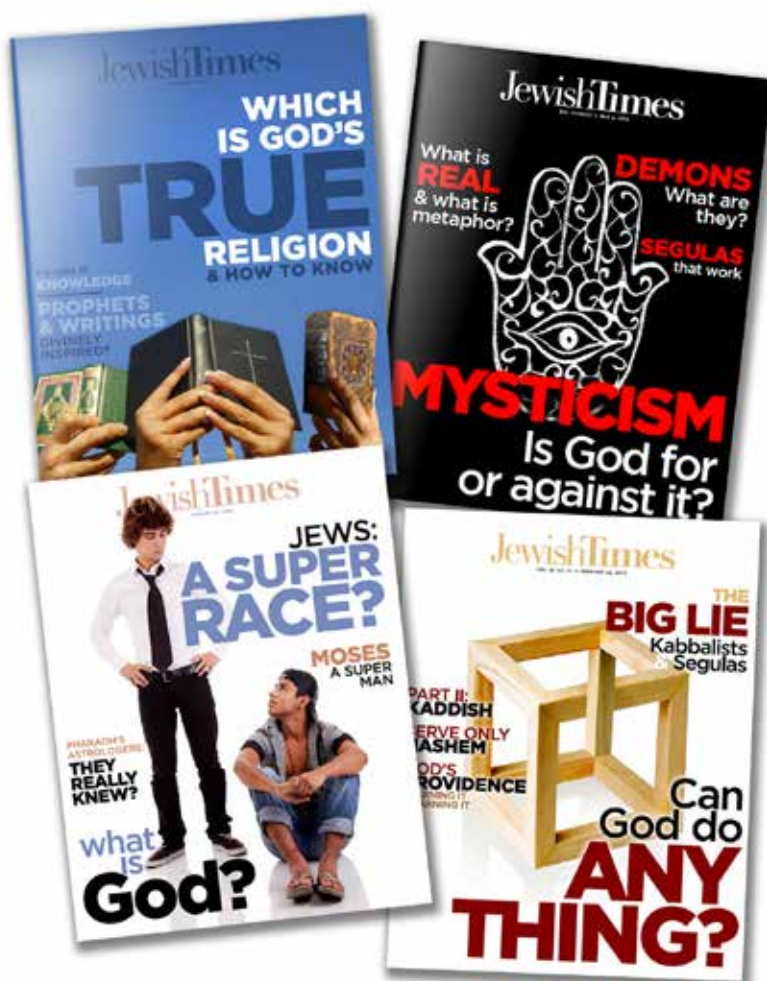


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3 Letters

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

We respond to a number of recent letters, all with valuable lessons.

7 Bilam

RABBI ISRAEL CHAIT

As man is powerless to curse, what was Bilam's ability?

12 Metaphor

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Using Bilam and his donkey as the example, we illustrate the benefit and depth of Torah's metaphors.

6 Jewish Outsider

RABBI MOSHE ABARBANEL

Rabbi Abarbanel shares a vital lesson from Tanach regarding communal inclusion.

11 Harm from Curses?

RABBI REUVEN MANN

Rabbi Mann offers his insights from the weekly Parsha with lessons applicable to today.

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LETTERS

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Why God Omitted Rabbinic Laws from Torah

Reader: Why didn't God include in His Torah, the laws that the Rabbis instituted?

Rabbi: Very good question. God possesses foreknowledge; He could have done as you suggested. Why didn't He?

Deuteronomy 17:11 teaches, "According to the Torah which they [the Rabbis] teach you, and in accordance with the judgements which they tell you, you should perform. Do not veer from the matter which they tell you, to the right or the left." From here, the Rabbis are commissioned to institute new laws in order that God's 613 commands are protected. The Rabbis may not institute any law for any other purpose. Thus, they cannot create a 614th law such as feasting on Sundays. But they can prohibit, for example, riding a horse on the Sabbath in order that one of the 613 (uprooting of vegetation) is protected. If permitted to ride a horse, one might violate uprooting by breaking-off a branch to whip that horse to gallop faster. So the Rabbinic prohibition of riding a horse on the Sabbath is within Rabbinic jurisdiction, which God ordained.

But God knew this. Why did He not include in Torah the prohibition of riding a horse on sabbath?

One answer is that Had God done so, we would assume there is an inherent problem in riding a horse; God's inclusion of such a law would raise this prohibition to the level of a "core Torah prohibition." But this is not the case. God desires man to distinguish primary concepts and values, from protective devices. The Torah's messages must be clear: Sabbath is a core principle, riding a horse is not.

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More essentially, the focus of Torah is study. The laws are not the ends. The practice of the law may be viewed as a barometer of one's conviction in the Torah's truths. Ibn Ezra comments on Exod. 31:18, saying:

"Brainless people think that the performance [of mitzvah] is the essence. But this is not true; rather [the essence of mitzvah] is the 'heart' [human intent]. [So be aware] that the actions, thoughts and speech [commanded by mitzvah] are merely to make one fluent [in following the laws]. And accordingly, it is written, 'It is in your mouth and in your heart to perform it', and so have our early [Sages] said, 'God desires one's heart. And the root of all mitzvahs culminates in loving God with all one's soul and clinging to Him.'"

Ibn Ezra teaches that the goal of Torah is not mitzvah, but one's attachment to, and love of God. This makes sense, since simple human movement does not affect our true selves, our souls. What is of the highest importance must relate to our highest element.

Maimonides teaches[1], "One's love of God is in direct proportion to his knowledge." Now, as Torah study is the study of God, and He is infinite in His wisdom, by what means can man tap infinite wisdom using a limited set of Torah's words? The answer: "thought." God designed wisdom in a manner that proper thought reveals endless stratum of brilliant new truths. Man must induce, deduce and extrapolate to penetrate such infinite wisdom. He must follow the principles through which Torah is expounded and deciphered. As love of God is the goal (not mitzvah), and, as knowledge leads to that love, God deemed the process of thought and learning as our highest pursuit.

Learning has a process: we acquire new facts, detect relationships, make inferences, and build on that initial knowledge through thinking. We then arrive at problems and solutions that are astonishing...and never ending. The demand for analysis is expressed in the Torah's cryptic

accounts of human interaction, as well as highly-formulated and beautifully structured laws. The latter is not a static set of obligations, which God could have written in total. And as Ibn Ezra said, the goal is not action, but love of God...through knowledge.

God desires that man apply thought in all areas. Therefore, He commissioned the Rabbis to engage this thinking process to embellish on His Torah, for the mitzvahs have thought as their objective. Had Torah been a complete list with nothing to explore or add, it would miss the goal that man engage thought and analysis in all aspects of Torah.

[1] Hilchos Teshuva 10:6

Curses, Satan & Angels

Reader: Is it possible that today, curses affect others? I have experienced a sensation of what I can only describe as a binding on my spirit for years. I do not feel happy at all and my spirit usually feels broken.

Rabbi: No powers exist other than God, His natural laws, and man's muscular abilities. It is idolatrous to think otherwise. Meaning, it is idolatrous to imagine powers to exist that are unproven, and then gauge our activities based on these imagined powers. The feelings of a binding on your spirit are your own creations; not real forces; similar to depression. With guidance and thought, you can remove these feelings and live happily.

I suggest you seek out counsel from a person who understands psychology, discuss your past and your feelings, and he or she can help you overcome these ill feelings.

Reader: However if these powers as you state do not exist, does that mean Satan

and angels do not exist? Or is it merely the popular ideas of Satan, demons and the like that are not supported? I ask because some people attribute these ill feelings as a effect from such metaphysical creatures invading one's life.

Rabbi: Satan and angels are referred to by Torah, but we must understand to what they refer. Satan refers to our instincts; the only thing that can cause us to sin. And angels are natural laws, or those existences that control natural law or communicate to man in prophecy. Regardless, we each have free will. We are not compelled towards any belief or action by anything but our own abilities. Nothing forces man to act, otherwise God's system of justice, i.e., reward and punishment can not exist. ■

Christianity vs. Judaism

Reader: What are your thoughts when comparing Christianity to Judaism?

Rabbi: Briefly, Christianity asks for blind faith, as there is no proof for any of the miracles they say Jesus performed. The only proof for any historical claim, is mass witnesses. Without witnesses, any historical claim is baseless. You can believe it, and millions can believe it, but belief does not equate to validation and proof.

Judaism however has proof. Even Christianity and Islam accept as true, the event of God giving a Torah to the Jewish nation at Mount Sinai. Why do others accept our religious claim? Because it was witnessed by 2.5 million Jews. Such a story could not have gotten off the ground, let alone survived over 3000 years, had the event never occurred. Moses' words of "Don't forget what your eyes saw (Deut. 4:10)" said to the entire Jewish population, would not have been accepted in place of what those Jews knew. No one throws out their history, and deludes himself that he stood at a miraculous event with 2.5 million

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others, if there was never such an event. But, as we possess this communication, mouth-to-mouth for thousands of years...we know this event of Revelation at Sinai must have occurred.

And be clear: do not equate mass "witnesses" to mass "believers." Christianity's wider audience does not validate its claims. It merely indicates its appeal. The only validation of a historical claim is mass witnesses, which is absent in literally every other religion.

Judaism is the only religion that possesses proof of Divine origin. All other religions are based on blind faith, since they have no proof. And as all religions argue on each other, only one religion can be true.

A rational person must not accept all religious claims. Reason must exist in religious belief, just as in science, math, etc.

"Reason" is our gift to distinguish truth from fallacy.

Finally, notice that Christianity contains conflicting accounts of its Gospel. Whereas true historical events witnessed by masses have but one version. ■

Power of Speech?

Reader: I have always felt that bossy people were always the most manipulative. This is fine if you are actually the boss. I probably won't explain this well, but I get frustrated when people use me...so what I am seeing in a nutshell is psychological warfare. Mostly women employ this tactic and they are extremely cunning in my experience.

At work, on a job or whatnot, how does God expect someone desiring to seek wisdom to handle people who attack the mind and heart? They wound in the spirit or motivation. They abuse by misinformation and misdirection. Now this, I would appreciate an answer for.

Rabbi: Another person's words affect us, only in as much as we allow them to.

Meaning, it's in your hands to allow your emotions to value the words of the oppressor. Or, you can be confident in your values and actions and feel self-assured. At times, we actually value the oppressor's lies, explaining why it bothers us to hear their ridicule. Of course, if they are accurate, we must change ourselves. But if we know they are lies, then all we hear is noise, and no truth. We are not agitated. This might take some practice, to become solid in your self-confidence and your control of your feelings. But truth is stronger than lies. And what I suggest is achievable. God created us with many emotions: we can either succumb to them, or we can control them. Maimonides teaches that through practice of going to the opposite extreme, we can change our emotions. If we are cowardly, we must do brave acts for a while until we settle in the middle ground. If we are harsh, we must express extreme sensitivity until we become even-keeled. This applies to all emotions.

If someone oppressed me, and they are incorrect about their accusations, I remain confident and unaffected by mere words. I avoid those who wish to demean me, if possible. If I must face such people, I need not converse with them. If I must converse with them, I would repeat these words to them, "I will converse with you once you address me without hostility, deceit, sarcasm, etc."

If they do not concede, I would patiently wait and not respond. If this oppressor is a fellow worker or superior, there are those of higher status I can complain to. If this is the business owner, I would try my method. If this does not work, and you find it unbearable, then seek legal advice or another job. If this is a child, then sustained discussion and education is due. If a spouse, you must talk calmly, use this method, or seek marriage counseling. At times, divorce is appropriate.

I understand this is difficult. I hope this advice helps. Please be in touch regarding progress. ■

Nothingness

Reader: We pray daily to Hashem, "Please do not make our life's efforts be in vain." We also experience daily negative input from life's experiences. For example, "Man plans, and G-d laughs!" When we study King Solomon's Koheles, "All is futile!" We are constantly made aware, no one has ever come back from the dead! This awareness has instilled into man's psyche the finality of death.

How do we overcome all these negative inputs which we observe through our lives? As we get older, the "Promise of the Future" wanes.

How can a person who has just lost a close friend or relative, and surmises he might be next, and has become spiritually distraught, overcome their "down" state of mind and keep from focusing on nothingness? Man's natural instincts, especially "the delusion of personal invulnerability" removes his focus on his own death to focus on something else. So the important idea here is this: What should man train himself to focus on?

Answer by Rabbi S. R. Hirsch: "People who have lost their *raison d'être* of their lives can find it again in the bond of the Community." Can you explain the above?

Rabbi S. R. Hirsch's additional answer (Horeb", Chapter 43, Edoth. page 214):

"and if God takes away, recognize in the taking, as in the giving, the same loving Fatherly hand, and with what is left to you, in whatever condition you may be, rise to live fulfilling the will of God, pursuing it and blessing Him, until He calls you away to another existence, and to a new life."

What counter-thoughts, understanding, Torah Concepts, should we lean on, when we experience these negative, depressing, hopeless thoughts of "nothingness"? Is there a reality to finality?

Rabbi: First, we must correct our view of the "negative." Part of King Solomon's

objective in writing Koheles was to do just that. Many of his words are misunderstood as his own beliefs. In fact, as Ibn Ezra teaches, the king is merely quoting the masses (Koheles 9:4). King Solomon's reason for allowing for such confusion was because he understood that rebuke is hard to accept. Therefore, he wrote as if he was siding with the masses. One example, "For he who is attached to life has hope; a living dog is better than a dead lion (ibid)." The novice reader of Koheles will assume the king believes this. This in turn allows the reader to feel safe harboring the same belief. His belief can now be elevated from a denial, to an admission. Admitting an error is the first step to correcting it. The king continues his work where he corrects false views. It is a brilliant method. Calev expressed the identical behavior upon the return of the Spies. The Spies feared the inhabitants and said Israel was not conquerable. To silence to the terrified mob, Calev said, "Is that all Moses did?" referring to taking the Jews to their deaths. Rashi said the people assumed Calev was going to add his own complaints against Moses, so they quieted down to hear them so as to further vilify Moses. Then, as they silenced, the stage was perfectly set...Calev informed them of all the good Moses did, and that God would vanquish the inhabitants! Clever indeed.

Getting back to your point, we must constantly learn God's Torah if we are to attain correct views of good and evil. Death is not an evil. That is what the masses think. But King Solomon and all of our prophets and Rabbis teach otherwise. And this is sensible, for death is not the removal of a person, but his soul enters a paradise, if he has

come to appreciate God's Torah while alive and arrive at a love of God. The good God who granted all earthly goodness, certainly maintains His good traits by preparing the afterlife which is wholly good with no pain. I do not minimize the fear of the unknown, but our convictions must stem from God's promises and His history of offering mankind the greatest benefits. So we must grow in our learning, and start to release our attachment to this earthbound life.

"People who have lost their *raison d'être* of their lives can find it again in the bond of the Community."

This means that focus on the greater good, and on others, will help minimize one's focus on the self. He will find purpose once again and his self-esteem will be uplifted. The view that old age is a measure of lesser worth, is incorrect. The broken Tablets and the whole Tablets were both placed in the Ark. This was to teach that the aged (broken Tablets, broken people) are of no less value before God than the young. King Solomon says the day of death is better than the day of birth. For at birth, we know not if this infant will become good or evil. But at death, one has their righteous deeds. And older people are wiser than younger people. So one must hold strong to Torah values that the older we become, the more valuable we are, and we must reject Hollywood's favoritism of youth and success. Even the young grow old. But God has a great gift in store for each one of us who follow Him. In fact, if we dedicate our time properly, and maximize our Torah study, we will not find age a negative. But with each new year, we will revel in studying God's wisdom that much more. ■

The Jewish Outsider

A TIME FOR INCLUSION

Rabbi Moshe Abarbanel



We Jews understand discrimination. Sometimes we discriminate against our own. This came to mind when preparing for a speech for my son's Bar Mitzvah. The first person I thought of was Yephtach. We know that his own family, the half brothers from his father threw him out. Why did they discriminate against him? We see that "Yephtach was a mighty man of valor (gibor) and he was the son of a woman- a "zona" (Judges 11:1). This gives us a springboard to understand the hatred. Our great sages comment on the word zona. Zona maybe interpreted in many different ways.

The first option by Targom Yonatan translates this as an innkeeper. Yephtach was different because his mother worked. She was independent, creating an economic distinction.

The Ralbag explains that she hailed from a different tribe. In those days, he explains, this was not the custom. Therefore the Torah called her "zona" for acting in a socially inappropriate manner. The Radak comments that she was a concubine. So they called her a zona. According to any definition, there is a social distinction between Yephtach and the others. Shoftim gives us another reason: greed. Yephtach's brothers told him, "You shall not inherit our fathers house (1:2)." Finally, the Torah tells us that Yephtach "was a mighty man of valor (gibor)." He was physically different.

Any reason for discrimination is wrong. We see greatness in Yephtach: he did not fight with his family, but he left voluntarily: "Yephtach fled from his brothers and he dwelt in the land of Tob (Judges 11:3)." He lived as Torah Jew with fellow Israelites like himself amongst the non-Jews.

My son Pesach lives this life. Due to his special needs he attends a non Jewish school where he wears a kippa and tzizit. At home he becomes one of the only children in our community who does not attend a Jewish Day school. Like Yephtach, he is an outsider in both circumstances. Thank God, today, the Jewish Community created special schools but that does not mean it will meet the needs of all children. God blessed us with a synagogue that welcomes him with such love that he looks forward to going to pray and seeing the congregants. We also found the perfect religious camp for him this summer. We hope this will bridge the gap for him in our community.

May the Almighty give us strength to combat hatred and include all members of the family at the Shabbos table. ■

PARSHA

Bilam

CLEVER, NOT CAUSATIVE

Rabbi Israel Chait: Written 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 God did not want Bilam to curse the Children of Israel as he placed many impediments in this attempted mission. God ultimately converts Bilam's curse into a blessing.

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

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

The Gemara states that Bilam possessed great powers of perception. However, he was also very devious. When he saw a person was in a precarious situation, albeit political or economical, he would curse that person. The individual's ultimate downfall was attributed to Bilam's ostensible supernatural powers. Bilam was a machiavellian type of personality, a great political genius and adviser to kings. He counseled his clients by exposing their enemy's political weakness. We can therefore appreciate the Gemara in Brachos 7a, which tells us that Bilam knew the time when God was angry with Klal Yisroel. He was capable of determining what Bnai Yisroel's weakness was and when was the proper time to exploit that weakness. A



student of history can appreciate that certain critical events trigger many different phenomena, which in turn have very severe ramifications. History is replete with specific turning points, which shape the course of mankind. There are two factors, which play a role and permit the exploitation of a political vulnerability. One is the ability to know the nature of your antagonist. Secondly, you must be cognizant of an event that can occur which would allow this weakness in his nature to present itself. This event would afford one the

opportunity to take advantage of that vulnerability. Bilam as a political genius had this ability. He perceived a weakness in Klal Yisroel, which would cause their divisiveness and self destruction. Therefore, Chazal inform us that God was not angry with Bnai Yisroel, throughout this entire event. This has added significance since God did not allow an event to occur that would have afforded Israel's enemies the opportunity to take advantage of them.

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

We can now appreciate why Balak pursued Bilam to curse the Children of Israel. However, Bilam utilized his talents as a means of enriching himself. Although he had great intellectual gifts, he used them merely to cater to his materialistic desires. Balak thereby offered Bilam exorbitant amounts of money to undertake this task of cursing the Israelites. Bilam due to his materialistic nature really desired to accept Balak's task. However, as part of his mystique and to profess some supernatural talents, Bilam, told Balak's emissaries to stay the night. He had no qualms about going on a mission to destroy the Israelites. He previously had advised Pharaoh concerning their destruction. However, his hesitancy was merely a clever guise to bolster his persona as a God like figure. He professed that he was communicating with God at night and therefore requested them to stay. Bilam was the ultimate rationalist. He was a calculating character that used his genius to exploit people's insecurities and quest for the supernatural. However, contrary to his plan, God appeared to him in a prophetic vision and warned him about his attempted mission. God instructed him not to go curse these people because they are blessed. This vision was startling for Bilam, the ultimate rationalist. He manipulated peoples' fears and merely professed supernatural powers. Thus God's appearance to him was shocking. He therefore, as a rationalist, was incredulous as to the revelation. Hence, he did not advise

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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 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. ■



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Can Curses Do Harm?

BILAM & BALAK

Rabbi Reuven Mann

This week's parsha, Balak, describes the fascinating tale of the gentile prophet, Bilaam, whose words were incorporated into the text of the Torah. He was hired by Balak, the king of Moab, to curse the Jews, but it is not clear why he wanted to harm them.

Balak was aware that the Jews had won a great victory over Sichon, the Amorite king, and had confiscated his land. However, this was not a war of aggression. They had simply requested to pass through his land on the way to Eretz Yisrael.

Sichon did not merely refuse this innocuous request: He used it as a casus belli to come out and initiate a war with the Jews. With Hashem's help, the Jews were victorious and, as the adage says, to the victor goes the spoils.

The reality was that Balak had nothing to fear from the Jews. They did not covet his land, nor anything else he possessed. He could have made contact with them and established friendly relations. Unfortunately, antisemitism is a very powerful, and irrational, emotion. Balak projected evil characteristics and intentions onto the Jews. He couldn't tolerate their proximity to his kingdom; he wanted to drive them away.

But Balak was conflicted. He hated and simultaneously feared the Jews, and therefore needed to weaken them by resorting to "supernatural" schemes. He engaged the services of Bilaam, who had earned a reputation for his devastating "curses." The idea was that the combination of Bilaam's maledictions and Balak's military action would be sufficient to solve the dilemma.

This story presents a basic problem: Does a curse, mere words uttered by a human being, have the power to alter any aspect of reality? The intuitive answer would be a resounding NO! Man is a product of the laws of nature; his divine soul enables him to gain understanding of the forces that govern the natural order. This knowledge,

which gives him tremendous ability to manipulate those forces, is the basis for mankind's amazing technological progress.

Of course, all humans are limited in that we can only operate within the context of the natural order; we can't exercise supernatural power to perform acts that contradict it. No

man can perform a miracle or pronounce a mantra that could produce objective consequences.

Why, then, did Hashem act to stop Bilaam from uttering his curses? Why not let him say whatever he wants? Wouldn't this demonstrate the futility of ascribing supernatural powers to a human?

The Torah is based on the deepest understanding of the human psyche, and it prohibits us from cursing a fellow Jew. While a noxious utterance has no real power, it can still cause great harm. Man's mental makeup is fragile; he is very sensitive to the opinions of others, especially when they are pronounced by charismatic, imposing personalities. If someone like that tells an impressionable person that he is a worthless failure who will never succeed, the "prophecy" can be self-fulfilling.

One of the great tasks of life is to overcome the need for social approval. It is not easy, as man, by nature, is emotionally insecure and derives strength from the "endorsement" of others.

I believe that the Jewish people have a particular weakness in this area. There are many practical reasons for this. As Bilaam



said, "Behold, it is a people that dwells alone and is not reckoned among the nations." Our lengthy exile and dispersion, and the extreme antisemitism we have experienced, have taken their toll.

The antisemitic impulse is intrinsic to the human psyche. Theodore Herzl thought that the condition of the Jews as strangers in other peoples' lands was the prime cause of Jew hatred. He reasoned that, if the Jews had an independent country, the problem would be solved. Herzl was greatly mistaken. No nation is more defamed and hated than Israel. Witness the U.N. report that condemns Israel's conduct in last summer's Gaza war.

The sad part is that the Jews are affected by this ill-spirited criticism, which sometimes leads them to make faulty decisions in order to gain approval. All this is in vain. Hashem forced Bilaam to transform the curses into blessings.

It is only through faith in Hashem that we can be strong. As long as we remember that it is His approval, alone, that we desperately need, we can withstand the disapproval of all others.

Shabbat shalom. ■

ODD TORAH STORIES

METAPHOR: THEIR NEED & PURPOSE



Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim

Torah's amazing stories: how do we understand talking donkeys, talking snakes, curses, angels and Satan? The story of Bilam and his donkey[1] contains unbelievable events and is described in great detail.

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. 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

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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 collapsed 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?

9) Why tell us of the two lads that accompanied Bilam, and then never mention them again?

Maimonides states^[2] that every case in Scripture where we find an angel appearing or talking, the entire account is describing a vision, and not a literal event. This being the case, this entire story must be interpreted, according to Maimonides. I suggest this is a metaphor 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 appears as a 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

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conveys a sense of dominion over another object. Bilam himself (in this vision) represents his evil instincts and thus, isn't aware of reality (he doesn't see 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. Thus, the donkey "saw" the angel. The angel represents reality, or intellect; 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. Bilam, his donkey, and the angel represent respectively the instinctual drive, the conscience, and reality. Now that we understand the main components of the metaphor, 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." As he senses his error more and more, as the passageway becomes more and more narrow, Bilam's weapon for suppressing his conscience must become 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 caused directly by these three individuals (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob). Had it not been for them, Bilam would not be in conflict. That's why the donkey turned aside: Bilam's conscience experienced great conflict when it thought about the forefathers, or the three festivals. (Both sets of three embody God's favor of the Jews) Turning from the path means Bilam was growing frustrated and more hesitant about traveling to curse the Jews. "Abraham, Isaac and Jacob brought about the relationship with God, and now, I, Bilam desire to curse them?" Bilam thought. But all curses are from God. We appreciate his great conflict.

We also see why Bilam acted calmly towards a talking animal, as Maimonides states, this was all a vision. Bilam responds to his talking beast without any amazement, indicating this is not a literal account.

Of what significance are the two lads that accompanied Bilam? Why do we not hear anything more about them throughout this entire account? We find a similar instance where King Saul visited the Baales Ove[3] to learn of the future, a violation of course. There too, two men were with Saul, and although the story depicts the king talking with the dead prophet Samuel, Radak explains[4] this was a phantasm produced from paranoia, not a literal event. Radak explains regarding the "dialogue" between Saul and Samuel, that these two other men saw and heard nothing. In both cases, I believe the Torah is defining where the literal story ends, and where the phantasm begins. The literal story includes others, the two men. But they are not involved at all in the subsequent account of Saul "talking to Samuel", and Bilam "talking to his donkey." By omitting the men, God indicates where the non-literal message begins.

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

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Why does God at times, include riddles, metaphors and non-literal accounts in His Torah? Perhaps, God describes the internal world and other deeper messages through metaphor, since a literal treatment will be rejected by the young and the ignorant, thereby closing the door to any future consideration of a deeper meaning. Similarly, Jacob wrestling with the angel is treated literally, while the matter is not so...the verse commences that Jacob was alone. No one was there with whom he could wrestle. But as that account too addresses man's internal world, it too was disguised, as if Jacob "wrestled a man."

Not all metaphors address man's psyche or internal world. There are many needs for metaphor, and cannot be fully addressed in a single essay, even of many pages. ■

[1] Numbers 22:21-35

[2] Guide for the Perplexed, Book II, chap. XLII

[3] Samuel I, 28

[4] Samuel I, 28:25 towards the end

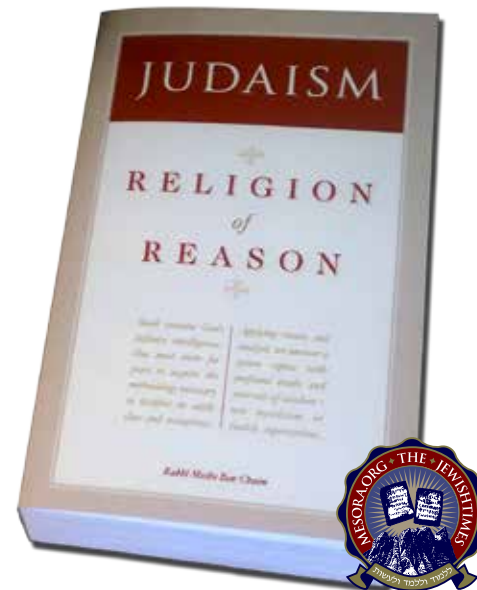
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PARTIAL CHAPTER LIST

Astrology	Red Bendels
Reincarnation	Kabbala
Praying to the Dead	Mysticism
Superstition	Miracles
Demons	What is God?
Bashert	"Jewish" Souls
Evil Eye	Talmudic Stories
Rebbe Worship	Metaphors
Segulas	Belief vs. Proof
Satan	Do Rabbis Err?
Angels	Gentile Equality
Western Wall Prayers	Man's Purpose

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