

# Maimonides & Metaphor: Bilam and His Talking Donkey



# Special Instructional Article: Methodology in Torah Study

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## Parashas Chukas/Balak

RABBI BERNARD FOX

“This is the law of the Torah that Hashem commanded saying: Speak to Bnai Yisrael. And they should take for you a perfectly red cow that has no blemish and has never had a yoke placed upon it.” (BeMidbar 19:2)

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# Bilam

RABBI ISRAEL CHAIT

Transcribed by Student

Upon studying the events of Balak's hiring Bilam we reach the inescapable conclusion that Balak was truly awed by Bilam's powers. He relentlessly attempts to hire Bilam to curse the Children of Israel. It also seems apparent that 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 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 Machiavellian 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.

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# Bilam

RABBI ISRAEL CHAIT

(continued from page 1)

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 Egypt. 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 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

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# Bilam

RABBI ISRAEL CHAIT

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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 - described in great detail. (Numbers 22:21)

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 his 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, fenced 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

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# Bilam and the Donkey

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

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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 the "three" appearances of the angel represent 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) 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 entire story must then be interpreted accordingly. In accordance with Maimonides' view, I would suggest these fantastic statements comprise a parable for a conflict within Bilam's mind. However, such a parable does not discount Bilam's ride on a donkey to Balak. But it does discount any earthly discussion between Bilam and his donkey, and the angel. These, Maimonides says, are visions of some sort.

If we refer back to events leading up to Bilam's ride on his donkey, Bilam appears as a true follower of G-d. But with a closer look, his real nature is detected. He was asked to curse the Jews by Balak. G-d told him he can't. The fact that Bilam (during the account of the second messengers) again requests from G-d to curse the Jews, teaches that Bilam actually desired evil for the Jews. 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 - the very Being who grants curses or blessings. 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. The act of 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 man 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 realization of the truth (finally seeing the angel) 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 have deciphered the subjects of the parable, ( Bilam=his instinctual drive; the donkey=his conscience; the angel=G-d's reality) we must go through the story interpreting it with this information:

"Bilam is riding on his donkey"; means 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 refers to Bilam's act of suppressing his conscience. 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". As reality tries to 'poke through', the need to suppress this distasteful reality becomes greater, "the object used to hit the donkey was larger." 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 into his actions (from his "talking conscience") 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, not he himself. 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 allude to the forefathers and the three festivals fits in beautifully: The donkey (Bilam's conscience) was contemplating the core reason for G-d's providence over the Jews, namely, the perfection of our three 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, and Bilam now desired to curse their descendants - 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. The three festivals also represent the idea of a nation favored by G-d.

In summary, the entire account of Bilam and his donkey - according to Maimonides - was a vision or a conflict, occurring only in Bilam's mind. The Torah informs us of this by writing in a parable format so that many ideas and psychological principles may be conveyed, and 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. ▣



# Parashas Chukas/Balak

RABBI BERNARD FOX

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Parshat Chukat discusses the laws of the Parah Adumah – the Red Cow. This cow is burned. Its ashes are used in the process of purifying a person that has become defiled through contact with a dead body.

The cow that is burned and used in this purification process must meet specific requirements. Our pasuk describes these three basic requirements. The cow must be completely red. It must be unblemished. The cow must never have had a yoke placed upon it.

The need for the cow to be unblemished is not surprising. This is a requirement of animals used for sacrifice. It is reasonable for this requirement to be applied to the Parah Adumah. However, the restriction against using a cow that has born a yoke is unusual. This restriction does not generally apply to sacrifices. What is the reason for this restriction?

There is one instance of a similar restriction. This is in regard to the Eglah Arufah. This calf is slaughtered in the process of atonement for an unsolved murder. The Torah requires the calf has not been used for labor and has not drawn a load with a yoke.[1]

These restrictions are similar. Both the Parah Adumah and the Eglah Arufah are disqualified through association with labor. However, the restrictions are not identical. A cow is disqualified from serving as Parah Adumah through placing a yoke upon it. It is not necessary for the cow to do any actual labor.[2] In contrast, the mere placement of the yoke on a calf does not disqualify it from serving as an Eglah Arufah. The calf is only disqualified if it has actually drawn a load.[3] This raises an additional question. Why is this unique restriction formulated differently in these two instances? Why does the mere placement of the yoke upon

the Parah Adumah disqualify the animal? Why is the Eglah Arufah only disqualified through drawing a burden with the yoke?

Gershonides deals with our first question. Why is an animal associated with labor disqualified from use as a Parah Adumah and an Eglah Arufah? He explains the basic concept underlying this restriction. There is a fundamental distinction between animals used for sacrifice and the animals chosen for Parah Adumah and Eglah Arufah. An animal chosen for a sacrifice can have a previous identity or function. An animal that has been designated for work or used for labor can become a sacrifice. Only after the animal is chosen for sacrifice, does it receive a designation. After the animal is designated to be a sacrifice, it can no longer be used for labor. Using the animal for labor contradicts its designation as a sacrifice. In short, in the case of a sacrificial animal a previous identity does not disqualify the animal from receiving a new designation. It can still be designated as a sacrifice.

The cow chosen for the Parah Adumah cannot have been previously associated with labor. The use of the cow as a Parah Adumah must be the first and only identity of the cow. The placement of a yoke upon the cow confers an identity. With the placement of the yoke upon the cow, it is associated with labor. This is an identity in the animal. This disqualifies the animal. The identity of Parah Adumah or Eglah Arufah must be the first and only identity in the animal. Gershonides expresses the concept in an interesting manner. It must be as if the animal was created to serve as a Parah Adumah or Eglah Arufah. [4]

We will now turn to our second question. Why is the restriction of the Eglah Arufah formulated differently than the restriction upon the Parah Adumah? Why does the mere placement of the yoke upon a cow disqualify it from use as a Parah Adumah? Why is a calf disqualified from serving as an Eglah Arufah only after it has pulled a load?

Gershonides contends that the restrictions upon the Parah Adumah

and the Eglah Arufah share the same underlying concept.[5] The animal chosen for either of these functions must be free of a previous identity. He explains that the difference in the restrictions lies in the stringency with which this requirement is applied. In the case of the Eglah Arufah, the animal becomes associated with labor through the performance of labor. Therefore, only through the actual performance of labor is the calf disqualified. In contrast, the Parah Adumah is associated with labor through designation. Placement of the yoke upon the cow designates it for use in labor. This designation alone creates an association. The cow can no longer be used as a Parah Adumah.

In short, the two formulations differ in the degree of association to labor that disqualifies the animal. The restriction in regard to Eglah Arufah requires a higher degree of association. Only the actual performance of labor produces this degree of association. The restriction in regard to the Parah Adumah requires a lower degree of association. Even designation of the cow for labor creates this lower degree of association and disqualifies the cow.

**“And Hashem came to Bilaam in the night. And He said to him, “If these men have come to call for you, arise and go with them. However, that which I will tell you, you should say”.** (BeMidbar 22:20)

Balak sends messengers to Bilaam. He asks Bilaam to curse Bnai Yisrael. Bilaam responds that he must follow Hashem's instructions. The Almighty appears to Bilaam. He tells Bilaam that he should not accompany the messengers. He cannot curse Bnai Yisrael. They are a blessed people.

Balak sends a second delegation. Again, Bilaam tells the messengers that he must wait for guidance from Hashem. Our pasuk contains the Almighty's response. He tells Bilaam that he may accompany the messengers.

Bilaam leaves on his journey to join Balak. Immediately, the Torah reports that Hashem is angry with

Bilaam for deciding to accompany the messengers. An angel of G-d appears to Bilaam. The angel threatens to kill him. Bilaam recognizes his mistake. He offers to abandon his mission and return home. The angel tells Bilaam to continue on his journey. However, he cautions Bilaam not to deviate from the message he will receive from Hashem.

This series of incidents presents a number of problems. First, the Almighty initially told Bilaam not to accompany the messengers. Then, Hashem apparently relented. He told Bilaam he can travel with the delegation back to Balak. How could the Almighty alter His decision?

Second, Bilaam embarked on his journey. The Torah tells us that Hashem was angry. Why was Hashem angry? He told Bilaam he could accompany the delegation! Bilaam had not disobeyed Hashem!

Third, an angel is sent to Bilaam. The angel persuades him that he had not acted properly. Bilaam understood the message. He confessed his sin. He offered to abandon his mission. We would expect the angel to accept this offer and to tell Bilaam to return home. Instead, the angel told Bilaam to continue on his journey! What was the objective in sending the angel? In the end the angel encouraged Bilaam to continue on his journey!

Nachmanides offers a brilliant but simple answer to these questions. He explains that the Almighty never intended to forbid Bilaam from joining Balak. Hashem actually wanted Bilaam to respond to Balak's summons. Why? The Almighty wanted Bnai Yisrael to be blessed by this non-Jewish prophet. He wanted Balak to witness this event. This insight can be applied to answer all of our questions.

First, the Almighty initially forbade Bilaam from accompanying the messengers. The reason is found in Bilaam's explanation of his mission. He told Hashem that he had been called upon to curse Bnai Yisrael. Hashem responded that this is a mission that Bilaam cannot fulfill. He should not accompany the delegation.

Second, Hashem never altered His

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# Parashas Chukas/Balak

RABBI BERNARD FOX

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position. The second time He spoke to Bilaam He told him that if the delegation has called upon him for assistance and counsel, he may accompany the messengers. He did not tell Bilaam he can curse Bnai Yisrael. Hashem specifically told him he can only repeat His words. This is consistent with Hashem's objective. The Almighty wanted Bilaam to bless Bnai Yisrael in the presence of Balak. This required Bilaam to return with the delegation. However, it was made clear that he could curse Bnai Yisrael.

Third, Bilaam left on his journey. Hashem became angry. This was because Bilaam did not indicate to the delegation the conditions of his agreement to follow them. The delegates assumed that the Almighty had actually agreed to their request. This created a problem. Ultimately, Bilaam will not be permitted to curse Bnai Yisrael. The G-d of the Jews will appear quite capricious.[6]

Third, the angel did not want Bilaam to return home. He demanded that Bilaam clearly state his limitations. Once the angel was convinced that Bilaam would tell Balak that he can not curse Bnai Yisrael, the angel allowed him to proceed.

We can now understand Bilaam's first words when meeting Balak. He told Balak that although he had responded to his summons, he could not utter any pronouncement that is not authorized by the Almighty. Bilaam was fulfilling the commitment made to the angel.[7] □

[1] Sefer Devarim 21:3. [2] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Parah Adumah 1:7. [3] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Rotzeach U'Shmirat Nefesh 10:3.

[4] Rabbaynu Levi ben Gershon (Ralbag / Gershonides), Commentary on Sefer BeMidbar, (Mosad HaRav Kook, 1998), pp. 94-95. [5] Rabbaynu Levi ben Gershon (Ralbag / Gershonides), Commentary on Sefer BeMidbar, (Mosad HaRav Kook, 1998), pp. 94-95. [6] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Nachman (Ramban / Nachmanides), Commentary on Sefer BeMidbar 22:20. [7] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Nachman (Ramban / Nachmanides), Commentary on Sefer BeMidbar 22:35.



## Proper Questioning: A Method in Learning

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

This paper was written to be an aid in developing questions when studying Torah, and to help direct one to the main issues and understand a given area.

When one goes through an account of Jewish history found in either the Pentateuch, Prophets or Writings, or Jewish Law in the Mishna or the Talmud, it is essential to your understanding that the following be kept in mind: the Pentateuch was designed word for word, letter for letter by God, as was the Oral Law. The Talmud was written by the extremely wise. One commits a grave injustice both to the ideas and to oneself by offering a simple explanation of any topic found in these areas, as they all stem from God - Who has infinite wisdom. "For God gives wisdom, from His mouth come knowledge and understanding." (Proverbs,2:6). Everything must be appreciated and understood on this level. Every sentence in the Pentateuch, for example, must contribute to the explanation of the area. In any story in the Pentateuch, the Prophets or the Writings, the precise amount of information is disclosed to us by God so that we can detect the issues. Certain unusual words will be used to catch our attention. Certain passages will seem - at

first - out of place, and seemingly impossible events are described which force us to delve onto the area. These are all generous clues for the investigation.

Besides having the correct appreciation for the design of the Torah, you must also approach your studies with the correct questions. As a Rabbi once said, "asking the right question is 90 percent of the answer."

You will notice that many times when asking a question, you already have more information than you may think, and by incorporating that information in your question, you will more likely arrive at the correct answer. For example: When you see a flat tire on you friends car you can ask "what happened?" But you already know what happened. He probably drove his car over some sharp object. The question should really be formulated as, "What did you drive your car over?" By asking the question in this way, you will start pondering what could have done this. You have directed your thoughts to the precise area that will contain your answer - namely, the type of sharp object. If you would have persisted with your first type of question, "what happened?", you would have placed your mind set in an astonished state, as

opposed to an inquisitively directed state. Being astonished sets up the emotional state in a person to await a response from another. What we really want, is to position the mind to answer the question. This can only come from direct, inclusive questions on the facts. This type of approach to questioning commences an intellectual search, better suited to result in answers.

The following area in the Pentateuch will illustrate this point. I will first give a brief summary of the area. Then I will show an indirect and direct way of asking questions:

The area is in Numbers, chapter 21, sentences 4 through 9. It states that the people traveled towards the land of Edom, and their patience grew short on the way. They complained regarding God and Moses that there was no bread and water and that they were tired of the "light bread" (the manna). God then sent fiery serpents to attack and kill the people, and many died. The people saw their wrong and went to Moses and confessed that they spoke wrongly about God and about Moses, and asked that Moses pray that the serpents be removed. After Moses prayed, God told him to create a serpent and to place it upon a pole and that any who looked at it would be healed. Moses did so, and made a brass serpent and placed it on a pole, and any man that was bitten gazed at it and was healed. This is the basic story. You must keep to the main issues if you are going to successfully answer an area. Distinguish between main questions and side questions.

The main questions on this section are: What was the fault of the people? Why did God choose to give "fiery serpents" as a punishment here, as opposed to something else? What does the added affliction of "fiery" serpents accomplish? Why did Moses need to make a serpent if the people already confessed to their sin? Why put it on a pole? Why did Moses make it out of "brass"? How did looking at this serpent heal?

Rashi said, "let the serpent who was punished due to his evil talk (the section dealing with Adam and Eve) come and exact punishment from those who spoke evil. Let the serpent come, to who everything tastes as one, and exact punishment from those who denied the good; that one thing (manna) was changed for them to many things." According to Rashi, the Jews received a corrective measure through snakes

(continued on next page)



# Proper Questioning A Method in Learning

**RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM**

because of evil talk. However, this isn't the first time someone spoke evil. Why didn't Miriam receive snakes when she spoke against Moses? Why didn't the Jews receive snakes long before this? They spoke evil before.

These are the basic questions. It is very possible to work with them as they are. But if we make slight changes to their structure, we will direct ourselves closer to the answers. Remember, all of the information we need to answer these questions is in the passages.

The main question should be addressed first. Why snakes? We know why. They spoke evil. So we must ask more directly: "What was the difference in the evil talk of the Jews here, that they received the snakes?" After asking the question this manner, you direct yourself at the Jews' actions for the answer. You know that in other cases the Jews complained to God and Moses, and they didn't receive snakes, let alone "fiery" snakes. So speaking evil per se cannot be the cause of their extraordinary punishment. What is different here?

The difference is that the Torah never mentions anywhere else that the people "grew tired on the way". This first passage seems extraneous at first. But now, rephrase the question using this information from the first passage: "What is it in the fact that they were tired, that the ensuing evil talk should be punished with serpents?" You can almost immediately make the connection that their evil talk was the direct result of being tired. Meaning, their evil talk was unjustified in relation to the object of their complaint. It was talk used to vent their emotions regarding something else. Their was no inherent flaw with the manna. But it was their wearied state which contributed to their sin somehow.

Talking can be used for one of two things: 1) communication of an idea or of a complaint, 2) an outlet for the emotions, as one does when hot tempered and breaks something. Instead of breaking something, people often whine and complain.

This first passage is here to hint towards the underlying cause for their complaining. They were tired of the

journey and didn't control their feelings, and began to displace their frustration to outlet their emotions. We also understand now why they received such a different punishment here than in other areas. Here, their complaining wasn't based on any real problem. They covered it up with a rationalization of the lack of bread and water. But in reality they shouldn't have complained. This explains why they received serpents.

Serpents afflicted them because they represent what the original serpent was punished for - evil talk - and to point out to them that they were victims of an emotion of outletting their feelings through speech. Had there been another incident in Scripture where an individual, or people, had outletted their emotions in this manner, and were on a level for God to administer a corrective measure, we would witness another case of "fiery serpents". However, this is the only account where this specific flaw occurred, and therefore, the only account where fiery serpents comes to correct the situation.

With this information, we can also answer another question: Why the additional aspect of "fiery"? The reason is because they denied the good of the manna. This is what Rashi was pointing to. If there were two aspects to their punishment (serpents and fiery), the Jews must have harbored two corruptions which needed to be corrected. "Serpents" corrected evil speech, and their "fiery" nature came to correct their denial of the good manna. Tangentially, Miriam was not punished with serpents because her degrading talk was not to outlet an emotion. Contained in her words was an incorrect notion regarding how God relates to man. She however expressed this with a boastful overtone. Thus, she fell prey to two faults; 1) She misunderstood how God relates to Moses, (as compared to herself) 2) She gave in to the feeling of haughtiness. Since Miriam faulted in these two, God corrected her in both. He taught her how His relationship with Moses differed from His relationship with her, and He afflicted her with leprosy which lowers ones self esteem. One is isolated from the camp when


leprosy. This is another example of how God's punishment differs from man's. When God punishes someone, or a people, it is to correct a fault. It is not a mere deterrent. This is the basic concept behind "Mida k'neged mida", (measure for measure).

What about the question as to why God told Moses to make a replica of the serpent? Didn't the people repent already? This is one way of asking this question. But we can deduce from the facts that there must have been something lacking if God told Moses to do something further. The question should be rephrased as the following: "What was it in the Jews' request for the removal of the serpents which demonstrates incomplete repentance?" You can see the answer clearly. Their confession to God and Moses is immediately followed by their request to have the serpents removed. (An important point about this is that they both take place in the same passage. When one passage contains a few thoughts, they are related.) Their repentance was only for the sake of removing their immediate pain from the serpents - not a true realization of their error. Because of this, God instructed Moses to create a replica of the serpent so that they could stare at it in order to

contemplate their problem properly, thereby removing from themselves their incorrect notions. Placing it upon the pole facilitated the direction of their thoughts towards God, Who is figuratively "upon high".

In summary, the following steps should be taken when approaching an area of Torah Sheb'csav:

- 1) Determine where the area begins and ends.
- 2) Understand the area thoroughly.
- 3) Distinguish between main points and side points.
- 4) Ask yourself how this area differs from all other areas. This will help to point you towards the main topics.
- 5) Formulate questions clearly using as much information as you have to work with.
- 6) If the area deals with God's relationship with man, detect either man's fault and see how the punishment fits the crime, or look into God's actions towards man to understand what He was improving upon.
- 7) In areas dealing with mitzvot (commandments); if they are positive commands, look into man's nature to see what they affect; and if they are negative commands, then they are coming to control a natural disposition of man which must be tempered. □



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# The Red Heifer

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

**Reader:** "What was the meaning of the sacrifice of the Red Heifer?"

**Mesora:** I will offer my own opinion, based on the words of the medrashim. The red heifer was to atone for the Golden Calf. The medrash states, "...let the mother (Red Heifer) come and atone for the child (Golden Calf). Let the one who is Red come and atone for the one who is Gold."

It is clear that some form of atonement is effectuated for the sin of the Golden Calf via this Red Heifer. But atonement must first be defined. Atonement is normally when one commits himself to never approaching a specific evil act or character trait again. How can an external act of offering the Red Heifer atone for the sin of the Calf?

I believe the answer lies in a further definition of atonement. Atonement is also referred to on the New Month, Rosh Chodesh. We say in the Musaf (additional) service "zman kapara l'chol toldosam", "a time of forgiveness for (man)". My friend Rabbi Shmuel Moskowitz had a very good explanation for this: As one approaches the New Month, one has the ability to look upon his previous month's actions as "behind" him. Over and done with. That which he puts behind him, is an act of repentance. When one says to himself that he desires to remove from himself a specific act or character trait, he has commenced atonement. The very image one has of himself as a "new person" starting off the new month, is atonement. Meaning, atonement is when one no longer identifies himself as a sinner. He is not the one who sinned last month. A Rabbi explained the atonement of the Scapegoat on Yom Kippur the same way. When one sees the High priest placing the sins of all Jews upon the head of the scapegoat, and then sending it off the cliffs of Azazel via the appointed messenger, one is atoned for his sins. This is because one figuratively sees

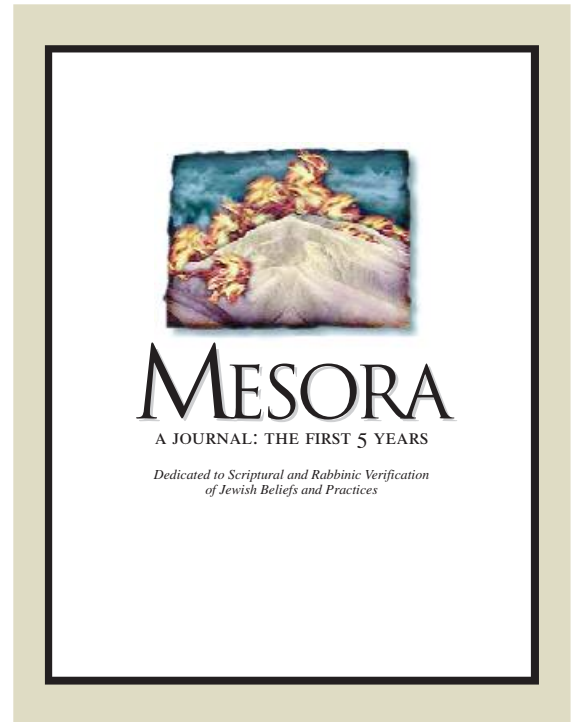
his sins being placed on the scapegoat, and no longer views himself as a sinner. His sins are 'removed', sort of speaking. The Talmud also states that certain individuals are atoned for their sins; a bridegroom, and a person elevated in status. Here, one is embarking upon a new stage in his life, and replaces his self image as a single person, with one as a married person; a lower person, with a self image as one with a new elevated status (viz, Sergeant promoted to a General).

G-d then forgives the person for his past crimes, as the person does not identify himself with that "old me", and G-d does not consider prior sins as having been committed by this "new" person. He is completely forgiven. A true act of kindness by G-d.

I believe the Red heifer works in the same way. The reason why the Jews sinned with the Golden Calf is because they were accustomed to this species. It was present in Egypt. Their familiarity with this animal allowed them to express their idolatrous wishes. To remove the possibility of the Jew committing such a sin again, G-d created the Red Heifer as a means of removing one's familiarity with this species.

How does this work? The answer is that by creating self contradictory laws in the Red Heifer (it purifies one who is ritually impure, and contaminates one who is pure) one is distanced from a simple understanding of this aspect of the Red Heifer. Meaning, in this one and only instance, G-d desired that the Red Heifer be perplexing in terms of the laws of ritual impurity, so as to distance one from this species. The perplexity of these laws actually causes one to have less identification with this species, and feel alien to it.

This alien feeling now combats the previous familiar feeling towards the calf, and prevents one from attaching himself to this animal, for use in idolatrous purposes. ■



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