

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

“**W**hy did the Holy One, blessed is He, cause His divine presence to rest on the wicked non-Jew (Bilam)? So that the nations shouldn't be able to claim that if they had prophets (the way we had prophets to guide us) they would have changed their ways for the better.” As some of the commentators point out, this comment of Rashi (Bamidbar 22:5) doesn't seem to answer the question posed. After all, the nations could still claim that had G-d provided a prophet who was not wicked (unlike Bilam, who was) they would have changed their ways.

This question is posed by Rabbi Peretz Steinberg, shlita (Pri Eitz Hachayim, 1991), who (in two separate pieces) suggests two answers. First, he says that in truth Bilam did try to dissuade Balak from trying to curse the Children of Israel, telling him that he can't curse them if G-d doesn't want them cursed. However, rather than Bilam being able to positively affect Balak, Balak was a bad influence on Bilam, who eventually gave Balak advice as to how to corrupt the holy nation (so that G-d would be angry with them and punish them Himself). This seems like a very valid answer, if not for the way Rashi finishes his thought. Rather than saying that Bilam had been a worthy prophet who was corrupted by the people he was trying to influence, Rashi tells us that Bilam advised them to act immorally - despite such immorality being taboo up until that time. This sounds like it was Bilam doing the corrupting, not the one being corrupted. (Even though both could be true, with first Bilam being corrupted and then corrupting others, Rashi mentioning it in his answer indicates that it was Bilam's corrupting others that answered the question rather than strengthening it.)

This idea of Bilam being righteous until Balak corrupted him is countered by a point Rabbi Steinberg himself makes (Bamidbar 24:16) in a later (2006) volume of his work: Bilam's curses were effective because he knew that G-d became angry every day when the kings of the world get up and worship the sun, with Bilam timing his curses to coincide with that exact moment of G-d's anger. If Bilam knew what angered G-d, he should have approached those kings to get them to change their ways, not taken advantage of knowing when G-d was angry by hiring himself out as a master curser.

The second approach Rabbi Steinberg suggests is that a leader necessarily reflects the people he is leading; otherwise he could not relate to them, communicate properly with them, or lead them. Therefore, if the prophet G-d appointed for them was wicked, it must be because they were wicked, and the same result would occur no matter who was appointed to be their prophet. I would like to expand upon this thought, incorporating some of the first idea as well.

The Torah is compared to a potion (Yoma 72b). If one is righteous, studying the Torah is a life-giving potion. If one is wicked, though, it is poison. Knowledge can be liberating, but it can also be dangerous. For someone trying to get closer to G-d, the more one knows about Him, the better idea the person has of how to grow and become closer to Him. On the other hand, one can use this same knowledge to try to avoid (or delay) the consequences of going against His will, to undermine those who are trying to grow, or to take advantage of those who adhere to His laws. To give a painful example, having an intimate understanding of how the business markets operate could be used to maximize profits by working within the system, or to take advantage of the system through fraud or unethical loopholes. It's the same knowledge; the difference is in how that knowledge is used.

A prophet provides a more direct communication between man and his Creator. The prophet's intimate relationship with G-d allows for a greater knowledge and understanding of how G-d operates, how He runs the world and what He expects of us. For those trying to do the right thing, trying to become as spiritual as possible and trying to become as close to G-d as possible, having access to a prophet is irreplaceable. By the same token, those trying to go against Him (or around Him, as if it were possible) will also want access to this information, except that they want it in order to know how to accomplish their unfortunate undertaking.

Bilam first used his knowledge of the divine to become the master sorcerer and curser, in demand by all the powerful kings (Pharaoh, Sichon, and then Balak). Then he tried to use it to curse a nation he knew G-d said was blessed. Finally, he used it to find a way to bring G-d's wrath upon them. But the main thing he had to offer was his insider's information of how G-d operates; what will be done with this knowledge depends on the consumer. Balak shared Bilam's desire

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WORLD WIDE WEB AT [HTTP://AISHDAS.ORG](http://AISHDAS.ORG).
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to curse the Children of Israel, so tried to use the information provided to accomplish that.

Why would G-d allow Bilam to have access to such information? So that the nations could not claim that if they had such access they would have done better. For even when they did have a prophet that could share this information with them, instead of using it to become better, they used it to try to undermine what G-d wanted. © 2009 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

There is an old adage in both the Jewish and non-Jewish world which states something like this: "I can deal with my enemies but Lord please help me with my friends." The problem figure in this week's parsha is not so much Balak, who is easily identified as the enemy of the Jewish people, as it is Bilaam whose mouth utters soaring blessings and compliments to the Jews.

Hypocrisy has always abounded in the world and we should not be surprised at its presence in our personal and national lives. Bilaam's blessings are seductive to our ears - he was a wordsmith of extraordinary ability - and everyone likes to hear compliments and praise even when we know deep down in our being that they are not really sincere or meant.

Bilaam's praises led to disasters and death for thousands of Jews and eventually he was killed by the very people that he blessed with his false praise. All of us may have many acquaintances but good, reliable, truthful, loyal friends are certainly a rarer commodity. If this is true even regarding personal matters and friends how much truer is it regarding nations and allies.

The well-known and very accurate description of the situation is that there are no friendships between nations, only interests. Bilaam's interest was to destroy us, even with kindness and blessings if necessary. Many Jews foolishly succumbed to his blandishments with fatal results.

We still treasure Bilaam's words of how goodly are our tents and dwelling places. Yet deep down in our souls we are aware of his enmity and poisonous hatred of us. He is only the forerunner of many others of his

type over the long centuries of our existence. And they are certainly still around today.

As a minority in the world and with a very small state we are understandably desirous of acceptance by the outside world. We constantly cast about for ways, policies, speeches, and actions that will somehow achieve this desired goal. Yet Bilaam himself informed us that we are pursuing an unattainable object. He characterized us as being a singular and lonely nation that will not be counted fairly and equally among the nations of the world.

Rashi points out that when Israel rejoices very few if any of the outside world rejoices with us. Jews have always been the ultimate outsider and now our state of Israel is treated as such by the other nations of the world. Bilaam's characterization of us has been proven to be exactly correct. We certainly do not desire to be the pariah of the world but we have survived being in that situation for centuries on end.

Bilaam is not our friend because his financial and personal interests lie with Balak and Moab. And as mentioned above, interests always trump friendship. There is therefore much to be learned from Bilaam's words and actions in this week's parsha.

The rabbis portrayed Bilaam as the quintessential evil prophet - vain, arrogant, corrupt, unscrupulous but very accurate in his assessments and predictions. We should continue to be astute enough to recognize him in whatever form he now manifests himself. © 2009 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com

MACHON ZOMET

Shabbat B'Shabbato

by Rabbi Yehoshua Shapira, Rosh Yeshivat Ramat Gan; Translated by Moshe Goldberg

Bilam failed in his mission. Bnei Yisrael were saved from his plan because he was not able to rebel against G-d's commands and curse the people as he and his employer Balak had wanted. But in the end he still had one weapon in his possession, and he advised Balak about it: "The G-d of these people hates illicit relations, you should tempt them with the daughters of Midyan." This advice led to the war with Midyan. Right after the war we become involved in the laws of Eretz Yisrael - specifically the requests of Reuven and Gad and the boundaries of the land.

There is a link between the actions of the women of Midyan and the heritage of the land, and to a large extent we can feel the effects of this link to this very day. We are in the midst of a struggle whose objective is taking possession of the land and its settlements, fighting with all our might to implement the eternal link between us and the land of our forefathers. And while this struggle is going on we are engaged in a

second one whose burden is almost impossible to bear. Waves of promiscuity and illicit relationships are prominent in our streets, wash over the written and broadcast media, and engulf us in their filth. Why is this happening?

The entry into the land is not just a matter of geography, and it is not merely a link to its awesome holiness. It requires a deep revolution in the structure of our souls and a complete transformation of the way we serve the Almighty. It rejuvenates the flow of material forces within us, forces which were dormant for thousands of years of exile, suppressed and depleted. In our land, the laws of "Zera'im"-planting and harvesting-return to their primary position at the beginning of the Talmud, and the involvement in material matters once again becomes the basis for our attachment to G-d.

It should therefore not be a surprise that all kinds of lust, and most of all the strongest type, burst forth just at this time. This is a byproduct of the reawakening of physical factors, and among all the many challenges that we face we have not yet achieved the power to take care of this in a proper way.

What is the cure for this malady? In the case of the daughters of Midyan, Pinchas responded with covert extremism towards an abomination performed in public. His fanaticism led to a cure for the crisis of our ancestors and granted him a covenant of eternal peace. It is not easy to imagine today a cure that will come about as a result of fanaticism. However, the Torah is not limited to a specific era, and all of its passages are eternal truth. It is clear that the people of every generation have their own unique traits, and it is up to the leaders to find the proper track, the one which is most appropriate for the current time and place.

Perhaps the fanaticism of today will be revealed in the development of an internal enthusiasm of "lovers of G-d, who hate evil," showing disgust of immorality and a with clear declaration that such activity will not be tolerated in our nation. This is appropriate in terms of both the proper behavior which preceded the Torah, that human beings should not behave like animals, and mainly with respect to the holiness of the Torah, which impels us to keep away from ugly things. If we can learn to make this declaration with the same fervor that Pinchas showed when he rose from within the community, we will truly be able to find a cure for the ancient satanic feeling that has returned to us from the fields of Midyan attempting to restrict our path within our holy land.

RABBI KALMAN PACKOUZ

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

The Torah states regarding Moshe's hitting the rock instead of speaking to it (as he was commanded to do by the Almighty): "And the Almighty said to Moshe and Aharon, because you did not believe in Me

to sanctify Me in the eyes of the Children of Israel, therefore, you will not bring this congregation to the Land which I gave them." (Numbers 20:12)

Rashi elucidates that if Moshe were to have spoken to the rock (instead of hitting it) and it would have given forth water, there would have been a greater sanctification of the Almighty in the eyes of the congregation. The people would say, "If this rock which does not speak and does not hear fulfills the word of the Almighty, all the more so should we."

We see from here that the essence of sanctifying the Almighty's name is not merely that someone should be impressed by another person's righteous behavior or to think that a person is acting in an elevated manner. Rather, the key factor is that other people should be influenced to improve their own behavior. Whenever you behave in a manner that influences others to follow the Almighty's will, you sanctify His name. *based on Growth Through Torah by Rabbi Zelig Pliskin © 2009 Rabbi K. Packouz and aish.com*

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

There are differing opinions concerning the meaning of hok (commonly translated as statute), the type of law discussed at the beginning of this week's portion. (Numbers 19)

Some maintain that hok is a law that although not understood today, one day in the future will be understood. The most mainstream approach to the meaning of hok is that it is a law that does not and will not ever have a reason besides the fact that it is a decree from G-d. For this reason alone, it must be kept. In the words of the Talmud "It is an enactment from Me, and you are not permitted to criticize it." (Yoma 67b)

The idea that a law must be observed even if it has no rationale runs contrary to the modern, critical approach to law-that everything must have a reasonable explanation. However, this mainstream approach to hok is at the very core of the Jewish legal process.

That process is based on a belief in Torah mi-Sinai, the law given by G-d at Sinai to which the Jewish people committed itself. Torah mi-Sinai is a form of heteronomous law, a structure of law that operates independent of any individual or group.

Torah mi-Sinai reflects a system of ethics that comes from G-d. Halakha (from the root halakh, "to go,") is not random; it rather guides us, and is the mechanism through which individuals and society can reach an ideal ethical plateau. In the words of King Solomon: "Its ways are ways of pleasantness, and all its paths are peace." (Proverbs 3:17) One of the challenges of halakha is to understand how this law contributes to the repairing of the world (tikkun olam).

This system of G-d ethics differs from ethical humanism. Ethical humanism is solely based on what human beings consider to be proper conduct. Yet, this

can be a dangerous approach to deciding law. Human thinking can be relative. What is unethical to one person is ethical to another. Freud is purported to have said, "When it comes to self deception, human beings are geniuses."

If however, the law at its foundation comes from G-d, it becomes inviolate. No human being can declare it null and void. Heteronymous law assures that one does not succumb to one's subjective notions or tastes when the law does not suit her or him. Therefore the law ought to be kept even when its ethical underpinnings are not understood.

And this in no small measure is why the idea of *hok* is so central. It reminds us of the limits of the human mind. As Rabbi Elie Munk points out: "An essential component of wisdom is the knowledge that man's failure to understand truth does not make it untrue. © 2009 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale.

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"This is the statue of the law which the Lord has commanded, saying: Speak unto the children of Israel, that they bring thee a red heifer, faultless, wherein is no blemish, and upon which never came yoke." (Numbers 19:2)

This week's Torah portion contains two major episodes which initially seem completely unconnected. The first is the strange ritual of the red heifer, whereby an individual defiled by contact with death is purified by being sprinkled with the heifer's ashes mixed with living spring waters. This mystical and puzzling procedure is considered to be beyond human understanding: the very mixture which purifies the impure serve to defile the priest/kohanim who are involved in making the mixture and in transporting it to the designated place where the ritual is to be performed.

The second incident is the castigation of our great prophet Moses. The Israelites once again find themselves without water, and the Almighty asks Moses to speak to a rock from which water will emerge. However, instead of speaking to it, Moses strikes the rock. G-d then turns upon His faithful servant, informing him that he will not bring the congregation of Israel into the Promised Land. This 'punishment' also seems to be beyond human understanding. Why is Moses being judged so harshly? Is it any less of a miracle when water emerges from a rock which has been struck by a rod than from a rock which has been spoken to by a prophet? Did the young prince who abandoned Pharaoh's palace and elite power structure in order to liberate the Hebrew slaves, who nurtured his freed nation throughout its wanderings in a difficult and alien desert, deserve the staggering punishment of being refused entry into the Promised Land merely because

he didn't conform to the exact details of the Divine command? And in addition to our attempt to understand the essential nature of these two incidents, can we discover the subtle thread that both links them and yet at the same time causes them to be juxtaposed within the same biblical reading?

I believe that the connecting thread between both incidents is the empowering strength of love. The ritual of the red heifer is a prime example of a *hok*, or a law for which there is no obvious or rational reason; there are many such laws within our Bible, like the law of circumcision and the laws of *kashrut*. The performance of the more understandable or rational laws - such as returning lost objects and giving charity to the poor - emanates from the conscious understanding of the Jew that he/she must strive to form a more perfect and moral society. The existence of *hukim*, however, emerges from the need to create a reality that will allow the individual to love the Divine simply because the Divine wills it so. Performing a *mitzvah* rooted in *hok* allows us to express this profound love. Even if I do not understand why, my relationship with G-d is such that I will joyfully do whatever He asks of me, whether the reason is apparent or shrouded in mystery.

Moreover, my teacher Rav Soloveitchik explains that the ritual of the red heifer is really not so difficult to understand. If someone falls into a muddy pit, and I lift him out of it, I shouldn't be surprised if mud sticks to my cuffs and I now have to send my pants to the cleaners; similarly, if the kohen/priest leaves the Temple precincts or the House of Study to purify the impure, his very contact with impurity will result in his own defilement. This is almost built in to human life and the daily exchanges that take place between people. But we need to clarify what exactly is it in the red heifer ritual that causes the kohen to purify others at the risk of his own defilement? I believe the answer is the enormous love that he has for every Jew, a love expressed by the fact that he is ready to lose a little bit of his world-to-come so that his fellow Jew can receive some spirituality. Such is the power of love!

From this perspective we can more readily understand Moses' punishment. The most important quality of a leader of Israel must be his unconditional and uncompromising love for his people. Moses was just such a leader. By slaying the Egyptian task-master because of his love for his Hebrew brethren, he was willing to give up the luxurious comforts bestowed upon a member of Egypt's First Family, if not a pyramid of his own certainly burial in one. Later, when he descends from Mt. Sinai right into the shocking tableau of the nation worshipping a calf of gold, Moses was willing to be blotted out of G-d's book-uprooted from this world-unless G-d agreed to forgive the Israelites after the sin of the golden calf.

But then Moses went through 39 difficult years in the desert with complaining Jews; they refuse to

conquer the land of Israel, they cry out for meat and fish and watermelon and garlic and they support every manner of rebellion against his leadership. Their 'kvetch' never ends. At this point, G-d instructs him "to take a rod, to gather together the witness-assemblage (edah) and to speak to the rock before their eyes." (Numbers 20: 8). Moses however gathers the assemblage (kahal), cries out "...listen now rebels," and strikes the rock with the rod twice. (20:10,11).

Rav Charlap, a major student of Rav Kook, points out that a transformation has taken place: Moses can no longer see the Jewish people as a nation of witnesses (edah) but rather as an aggregate assemblage of rabble (kahal). Long before Rav Charlap, Maimonides also alerts us to the fact that Moses refers to the Israelites as rebels. And the 19th century figure (1823-1900), Rabbenu Zadok of Lublin, prefigured Freud in his understanding of the rock incident. His interpretation of the striking of the rock sounds almost like a Freudian interpretation of a dream in which objects can symbolize people: G-d instructs Moses to speak to the people; Moses sees the people as a hard, stiff-necked rock, which is why he strikes the rock because in his mind Moses has created an identity between a stubborn nation and a 'stubborn' rock. Thus he's not just striking a rock to produce water, but striking a nation out of anger.

A leader of Israel must love his nation; he will then empower them with his love to improve and ultimately redeem. Striking the rock instead of talking to it is not simply a curious variation of heeding G-d's command, in the end producing the same results -water for a thirsty people. Rather it marks the perfectly understandable deterioration of what had once been Moses' total and inexhaustible love for his people. Not being allowed to enter the land is less of a punishment and more of an indication of the kind of love required for the final effort of bringing the nation to the promised land. Only a leader with empowering love could do that. And this is why Moses must step aside, and remain behind, as the mantles of love (and leadership) are passed down to Joshua. © 2009 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI ZEV LEFF

Outlooks & Insights

G-d said to Balaam, "You shall not go with them! You shall not curse the people, for it is blessed." (Numbers 22:12)

Ibn Ezra asks why G-d did not permit Balaam to curse the Jewish people since He could have easily protected the Jewish people from the effects of any curse. He answers that G-d knew that the Jewish people would soon sin at Ba'al Pe'or, and if Balaam had cursed the Jews, the world would have attributed the subsequent plague which killed 22,000 to Balaam's

curse. Out of deference to the honor of the Jewish people, G-d prevented the utterance of any curses.

At first glance, this explanation is difficult to comprehend. Why was it more honorable to the Jewish people that the world attribute their misfortune to their immorality rather than to Balaam's curse? A full understanding of Ibn Ezra requires us to understand the essence of the Jewish people.

Rashi comments on the verse, "G-d does not see iniquity in Yaakov" (Numbers 23:21): "Even when they sin, He is not exacting with them." Rashi's comment seems to contradict the principle of G-d's precise retribution. As the Sages tell us, "Whoever says G-d overlooks sin should have his internal organs overlooked" (Shekalim 5:1).

Midrash Rabba comments on the same verse: "He does not look upon their sins, but rather upon their pride." Underlying the Midrash is the idea that the Jew's essence is pure and good, his soul part of the collective soul of the Jewish people. As a group, the Jewish people are tzaddikim, as it says, "Your nation are totally righteous." The corollary is that all Jews have an automatic share in the World to Come due to their bond to the purity and holiness of this collective soul. This is the "pintele Yid," the spark of the Divine that forms the inner foundation of each Jew.

Belief in this unattainable essence underlies the ruling that even when a Jew is coerced to comply with the halacha, the subsequent act is volitional, since every Jew wants to do the will of G-d. Until the positive expression of desire to comply with halacha becomes evident, we view his yetzer hara as suppressing his inner will. It is the yetzer hara which is literally beaten away, giving his true inner will freedom to surface and be expressed.

As long as one has not severed his ties to the Jewish people by deliberately estranging himself spiritually or physically from the community, he embodies this pure, unattainable essence. Hence, sin cannot contaminate the essence of the Jew. That, then, is the intention of Rashi and the Midrash. G-d never views the sin as an expression of the essence of the Jew. Thus, any punishment is only for the purpose of removing barriers to that essence caused by sin. (Or HaChaim HaKadosh and Ksav Sofer both explain Rashi's words in this vein.)

Rashi explains, in a similar fashion, the verse, "Can I curse that which G-d Himself has not cursed?" (Numbers 23:8). Even when a Jew deserves to be cursed, as when Jacob cursed the anger of Shimon and Levi, it is not they who are cursed, but rather their anger. The essence of the Jewish people is incapable of being maligned. Only their external actions require correction, atonement and purification.

Rabbi Sholom Ostrach, author of *Midrashei HaTorah*, argues that Moses' sin at Mei Merivah consisted of calling the Jewish people rebels. Moses should have reproved their actions; but to characterize

them as rebels earned him the Divine rebuke, "You did not believe me, you had little faith in Me to sanctify Me" (Numbers 20:12). The designation of the Jewish people in a negative manner is a lack of faith in G-d, for He has chosen us and sworn not to forsake us eternally. That promise is predicated on the eternal purity of the Jewish people. One who impugns that essence, even Moses, is guilty of lack of faith in G-d. Similarly, we find that Isaiah was criticized for designating the Jewish people as "a nation of defiled lips." Due to this sin, he eventually met his death (Talmud - Yevamos 49b).

The Midrash (Yalkut Shimoni, Melachim 218) relates that Elijah the Prophet became exasperated with the conduct of his generation and ran into the desert to Mount Sinai. There the Almighty confronted him, asking, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

Elijah should have answered, says the Midrash, "Almighty, they are Your children, the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who fulfill Your will in the world," Instead he proclaimed, "I am a zealot, zealous for G-d's honor, and the people have transgressed Your covenant."

At that point, G-d told Elijah, "When I descended to give the Torah to the Jewish people, only angels who desired the benefit of the Jews descended with me." G-d then gave Elijah three hours to ponder the point. But Elijah still maintained his initial zealotry. Finally G-d told him: "You are constantly zealous. You were zealous at Shittim against immorality and now you are zealous. By your life, no Jew will perform brit milah without your being present and witnessing it with your own eyes." With that, Elijah was commanded to turn over his leadership to Elisha and to ascend alive heavenward.

G-d's critique of Elijah is contained in the words, "Why are you here, Elijah?" If in fact the Jewish people have sinned, G-d says, they are not in essence so degenerate that you should abandon them. Go to them. Rebuke them. Their condition is not hopeless. Ultimately they can be influenced, and their true desire to follow My commandments will surface and express itself.

Elijah at Shittim was also zealous for G-d but with a difference. There he acted, "among the Jewish people." His zealotry was motivated by a respect for them. Here, however, it reflected a disgust for the Jewish people. Hence G-d decreed that Elijah would have to witness every brit. Brit demonstrates that the essence of every Jew is pure and holy from birth, and therefore fit to enter a covenant with G-d. That covenant is immutable and impervious to taint by any peripheral sin.

Now, the commentary of Ibn Ezra is easily understood. In order for a curse to take effect, there must be a flaw in the essence of the one cursed. Therefore G-d prevented Balaam from uttering the curse.

Even essentially pure and holy individuals can at times commit sins, even serious sins, which demand severe corrective measures. But the sins still remain peripheral and do not affect the essence and foundations of the Jewish people.

All rebuke - to one's fellow Jews and to oneself - should reflect this awareness of the Jew's essential goodness. Alshich explains the verse, "Don't rebuke a scoffer lest he hate you; rather rebuke the wise one and he will love you": Do not address the negative in one's neighbor, but rather the wisdom - his essential nature - and contrast his sins with his elevated essence. The motivation for rebuke must emanate from an appreciation of every Jew's potential for righteousness. It is only in this light that his negative actions can be condemned.

So, too, in self-criticism. When we confess our sins we say, "We have turned from your commandments and goodly laws, and it was not befitting us." We must never lose sight of our inherent holiness or belittle our inborn potential for good: "Do not be wicked in (your) own eyes" (Avot 2:18). © 2009 Rabbi Z. Leff & www.aish.com

RABBI BORUCH LEFF

Kol Yaakov

The authorship of the Torah has one of two possibilities: either G-d wrote it, or a human being wrote it. Let's take for argument's sake the side that a human being wrote it. If so, we discover a very strange phenomenon.

This human being could not have been a Jew! Can we actually believe that a Jew would write such negative, detrimental, and destructive descriptions of his ancestors?

Listen to what the author of the Torah describes: That his patriarch, Jacob was a liar and tricked his father, Isaac; that the sons of Jacob kidnapped and sold their brother Joseph into slavery; that the Jews of the Desert preferred slavery in Egypt rather than freedom; that the Jews are a stiff-necked people; that Moshe, the true prophet of G-d, complains to Him and does not want to be the leader of what he describes as such a rebellious nation; that the Jews of the Desert worshiped a golden calf; that they showed a lack of trust in G-d by believing the spies' evil reports concerning Israel.

The list goes on and on.

Included in this list is the event in Parshat Chukat (Vayikra 20:7-13) that tells the story of Moshe and Aharon's failure in hitting the rock instead of speaking to it, in order to draw water to quench the people's thirst. Moshe and Aharon are punished and not permitted to enter the Land of Israel.

Of course, the real meaning and interpretation of these difficult passages are explained by all the commentaries and they are not as negative as they

seem. Sometimes the verses are simply misunderstood at the surface level and not meant negatively at all (as is the case with Jacob seeming to trick Isaac). But no Jew would ever risk the tarnishing of his ancestors' reputations even if only at the superficial level of understanding.

Why would a Jew write such terrible things about his ancestors? No other nation records an unfavorable history of their ancestors. One cannot read of a single defeat of Egypt in Egyptian history books. One must turn to the Assyrian texts to read of Egyptian failures, and vice versa. Even today, there are major distinctions between British and American history books in their accounts as to what happened in the American Revolutionary War. But somehow the fact that descendants generally look at their ancestors with reverence in their historical writings is not true when it comes to the Jews and the Torah.

So which human wrote the Torah? It could not have been a Jew! The only possibility then is that an anti-Semite wrote it! But then we are left perplexed as to how this anti-Semite could have persuaded the Jews to accept it!

To suggest that a human wrote the Torah is not a realistic possibility.

If G-d wrote it, then we understand how the Jewish people accepted it. They knew what G-d writes is true and they trusted that He, at times, writes negative and critical descriptions only in order to teach important lessons. G-d, in writing such fact, does so to engage in constructive criticism.

This unique aspect of revealing negative-sounding ancestral history makes us stop and realize that G-d must have written the Torah. But there are other distinct facets described in the Torah that also lead to the conclusion of its Divine authorship.

The Torah makes prophecies that have come true. Now, there are many books that have made prophecies of the future such as Nostradamus, that some claim to have been true. But a close examination of these prophecies reveals them to be ambiguous and it is virtually impossible to prove their accuracy. Any 'prophecy' that can only be understood after an event has already taken place cannot be accepted as prophecy.

True prophecy is clearly comprehended before an event takes place and then we can see for ourselves whether the prophecy came to fruition or not. We find exactly such prophecies in the Torah. These prophecies are impossible for a human being to have predicted.

The fate of the Jewish nation, if they are to abandon G-d, is specifically described in horrid detail (See Vayikra 26, Devarim 28:15-68, 29:17-28, 30:1-10, 31:16-21, much of Yeshaya and Yechezkel). Sure enough, all of the details have indeed occurred throughout history. The Torah writes that the Jews will be thrown out of their land, return, and then thrown out again. It then foretells that the Jews will come back to

Israel much later. The Jews held on to their faith in the Torah's promises of their return to Israel for 2,000 years. And now in modern times, the Jews have come back. It is surely not coincidental that there have been no other nations who have not assimilated into their occupying or host nation after hundreds of years of exile and destruction. Moreover, not only did the Jews survive 2,000 years of exile, but they did so despite being scattered among various nations without a common language or culture.

This was all stated way in advance! The Torah, written over 3,000 years ago, teaches that the Jews will be dispersed to all the corners of the earth but would maintain their distinct identity. What human being would write such nonsense? How could he expect the Jews to accept it and live with faith in it?

But if G-d wrote it, it is obviously understandable. He can know that the Jews would never assimilate into the nations of the world. And if the Jews knew G-d wrote it by their witnessing G-d speak to them at Sinai, their faith in their eventual return to Israel is comprehended.

(There are more points to ponder concerning the veracity of the Torah's claim that it was written by G-d. See Kol Yaakov V'etchanan and Behar)

If one takes the time to stop and think about the unique aspects of the Torah, one is inevitably drawn to the conclusion that the Torah could not have been written by a human being. It must have been authored by G-d. © 2009 Rabbi B. Leff & www.aish.com

RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY

A Never Ending Story

With Divine intervention ensuring that Balak the King of Moav would be governed by Murphy's Law, everything that could go wrong for him went wrong.

Balak, the King of Moav saw that the Jewish nation was camped near his land and he became frightened. He employed the greatest sorcerer of the generation, Bilaam, to curse the Children of Israel, but alas, Hashem ensured that all potential curses were turned into blessings. In one of the early attempts to curse the Jews, Bilaam erected seven altars with sacrifices. He set out to accomplish his mission but he failed. Instead of cursing the Jews, Bilaam blessed them and longed for their eternal fortune.

"He declaimed his parable and said - 'From Aram, Balak, king of Moab, led me, from the mountains of the east, 'Come curse Jacob for me, come bring anger upon Israel.' How can I curse? - G-d has not cursed. How can I anger? G-d is not angry. For from its origins, I see it rock-like, and from hills do I see it. Behold! It is a nation that will dwell in solitude and not be reckoned among the nations. Who has counted the dust of Jacob or numbered a quarter of Israel? May my

soul die the death of the upright, and may my end be like his!" (Numbers 23:6-10)

Though I am no expert in sorcerer's spells or Bilaamic blessings, the juxtaposition is difficult to comprehend. Why did Bilaam suddenly ask to die the death of the upright after extolling the uniqueness of his adversaries, the Israelites? If he gave them blessings, why didn't he ask to live in the bounty of their goodness?

Last year my son was in fourth grade and had to do a report on President Abraham Lincoln. He did a fine job recounting his log-cabin childhood, his early career as an attorney, and his tumultuous presidency. He detailed the difficult period of the Civil War and Lincoln's bold stance in signing the Emancipation Proclamation.

I looked over his report and frankly, I was quite impressed - until I reached the last sentence. It read: "Abraham Lincoln died on Friday morning, April 15, 1865, and was buried in Oak Ridge Cemetery, outside Springfield, Illinois."

"Zvi," I exclaimed, "Abraham Lincoln died on Friday morning?" I rhetorically reiterated, stressing the passivity of the underreported, yet most traumatic event. "Died?" I repeated. "He was shot to death! In fact, Lincoln was assassinated! In fact," I added, "he was the first President to be assassinated! How can you ignore that significant part of his life in your report?"

Zvi looked at me quizzically. "My report was on 'the Life of Abraham Lincoln. Who cares how he died? He died!" Bilaam understood that death, too, is an integral part of life. Our attitude toward death is part of our larger attitude toward life. And the way we leave this world is part of a greater outlook of how we aspire to live our lives.

A neighbor of mine was a former Yeshiva boy back in the early 1920's in one of America's first yeshivas. Time and circumstances eroded both his practice and belief. He had joined the army and rose to the rank of a General. He and his wife often ate in our sukkah and we became quite friendly. When he was diagnosed with a fatal illness, he asked me to perform his funeral service in the right time. I agreed only if he would be buried in accordance with the halacha. And though in his life he disregarded the daily practices of an observant Jew, in death, he forewent burial in his army uniform and instead chose traditional tachrichim (shrouds) and a talis.

When one sees the ultimate spiritual eternity of the Jew, he realizes that death is just a portal to a greater world, Olam HaBah. Bilaam declared that we are a nation that dwells in solitude, and that our ways in life are not compatible with those nations who outnumber us. It is after he comprehended our eternity that he beseeched the Almighty with the haunting bequest, "May my soul die the death of the upright, and may my end be like his!" The Chofetz Chaim, however, added a very cogent caveat: In asking for the death of

the righteous, Bilaam understood that there is more to the legacy of life than life itself. And so, Bilaam wanted to live his perverted life as a hedonistic heretic, yet he wanted to die the death of the righteous. "Truth be told," says the Chofetz Chaim, "our mission is not only to die the death of the upright, but to live the life of the upright as well." Because if you want to sleep the sleep, you first have to walk the walk. ©2002 M. Kamenetzky & Project Genesis, Inc.

RABBI SHLOMO KATZ

Hama'ayan

This parashah relates that the King of Arad heard that Yisrael was coming, and he fought Yisrael. Chazal ask, "What did he hear?" and answer that he heard that Aharon had died.

Rav Chaim David Halevi shlita (Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv) writes: How can Chazal ask what the King of Arad heard? Doesn't the Torah state explicitly that he heard that Yisrael was coming? The answer, says Rav Halevi, is that Chazal wondered where the King of Arad found the courage to attack Bnei Yisrael. All the other nations (we read in Shmot 15:14-16) were terrified of Bnei Yisrael!

What gave the King of Arad that courage? He heard that Aharon had died. Aharon had devoted himself to making peace between Jews, whether two friends or a husband and wife. As long as Aharon lived, the Jewish people remained united; when Aharon died, the Jews became divided. Then the King of Arad knew that he could fight the Jews. (Aseh Lecha Rav IV p.31)

"And the pure individual shall sprinkle [the ashes] on the defiled individual. . ." (19:19)

The Talmud Yerushalmi (Demai ch.3) quotes Rav Yehoshua ben Kabsoi who said: "I used to understand from this verse that any one pure individual can purify only one other person. Then I learned from the treasure-house of Yavneh that one individual can purify many people."

Rav Elazar Shach shlita explains that the treasure-house of Yavneh refers to the yeshiva which Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai was able to save from the Roman sword. That Yeshiva guaranteed the future of Torah Judaism. Who would have thought that one person (in that case, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai) could make such a difference?

The truth is, however, that one person can purify many people. (Michtavim Uma'amaramim p.32)

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