

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l

Covenant & Conversation

It took me two years to recover from the death of my father, of blessed memory. To this day, almost twenty years later, I am not sure why. He did not die suddenly or young. He was well into his eighties. In his last years he had to undergo five operations, each of which sapped his strength a little more. Besides which, as a rabbi, I had to officiate at funerals and comfort the bereaved. I knew what grief looked like.

The rabbis were critical of one who mourns too much too long. (Moed Katan 27b) They said that God himself says of such a person, "Are you more compassionate than I am?" Maimonides rules, "A person should not become excessively broken-hearted because of a person's death, as it says, 'Do not weep for the dead nor bemoan him' (Jer. 22:10). This means, 'Do not weep excessively.' For death is the way of the world, and one who grieves excessively at the way of the world is a fool." (Hilkhot Avel 13:11) With rare exceptions, the outer limit of grief in Jewish law is a year, not more.

Yet knowing these things did not help. We are not always masters of our emotions. Nor does comforting others prepare you for your own experience of loss. Jewish law regulates outward conduct not inward feeling, and when it speaks of feelings, like the commands to love and not to hate, halakhah generally translates this into behavioural terms, assuming, in the language of the Sefer ha-Hinnukh, that "the heart follows the deed." (Command 16)

I felt an existential black hole, an emptiness at the core of being. It deadened my sensations, leaving me unable to sleep or focus, as if life was happening at a great distance and as if I were a spectator watching a film out of focus with the sound turned off. The mood eventually passed but while it lasted I made some of the worst mistakes of my life.

I mention these things because they are the connecting thread of parshat Chukat. The most striking episode is the moment when the people complain about the lack of water. Moses does something wrong, and though God sends water from a rock, he also sentences Moses to an almost unbearable punishment: "Because you did not have sufficient faith in Me to sanctify Me before the Israelites, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land I have given you."

The commentators debate exactly what he did

wrong. Was it that he lost his temper with the people ("Listen now, you rebels")? That he hit the rock instead of speaking to it? That he made it seem as if it was not God but he and Aaron who were responsible for the water ("Shall we bring water out of this rock for you")?

What is more puzzling still is why he lost control at that moment. He had faced the same problem before, but he had never lost his temper before. In Exodus 15 the Israelites at Marah complained that the water was undrinkable because it was bitter. In Exodus 17 at Massa-and-Meriva they complained that there was no water. God then told Moses to take his staff and hit the rock, and water flowed from it. So when in our parsha God tells Moses, "Take the staff... and speak to the rock," it was surely a forgivable mistake to assume that God meant him also to hit it. That is what he had said last time. Moses was following precedent. And if God did not mean him to hit the rock, why did he command him to take his staff?

What is even harder to understand is the order of events. God had already told Moses exactly what to do. Gather the people. Speak to the rock, and water will flow. This was before Moses made his ill-tempered speech, beginning, "Listen, now you rebels." It is understandable if you lose your composure when you are faced with a problem that seems insoluble. This had happened to Moses earlier when the people complained about the lack of meat. But it makes no sense at all to do so when God has already told you, "Speak to the rock... It will pour forth its water, and you will bring water out of the rock for them, and so you will give the community and their livestock water to drink." Moses had received the solution. Why then was he so agitated about the problem?

Only after I lost my father did I understand the passage. What had happened immediately before? The first verse of the chapter states: "The people stopped at Kadesh. There, Miriam died and was buried." Only then does it state that the people had no water. An ancient tradition explains that the people had hitherto been blessed by a miraculous source of water in the merit of Miriam. When she died, the water ceased.

However it seems to me that the deeper connection lies not between the death of Miriam and the lack of water but between her death and Moses' loss of emotional equilibrium. Miriam was his elder sister. She had watched over his fate when, as a baby, he had been placed in a basket and floated down the Nile. She had

had the courage and enterprise to speak to Pharaoh's daughter and suggest that he be nursed by a Hebrew, thus reuniting Moses and his mother and ensuring that he grew up knowing who he was and to which people he belonged. He owed his sense of identity to her. Without Miriam, he could never have become the human face of God to the Israelites, law-giver, liberator and prophet. Losing her, he not only lost his sister. He lost the human foundation of his life.

Bereaved, you lose control of your emotions. You find yourself angry when the situation calls for calm. You hit when you should speak, and you speak when you should be silent. Even when God has told you what to do, you are only half-listening. You hear the words but they do not fully enter your mind. Maimonides asks the question, how was it that Jacob, a prophet, did not know that his son Joseph was still alive. He answers, because he was in a state of grief, and the Shekhinah does not enter us when we are in a state of grief. (Eight Chapters, ch. 7, based on Pesachim 117a) Moses at the rock was not so much a prophet as a man who had just lost his sister. He was inconsolable and not in control. He was the greatest of the prophets. But he was also human, rarely more so than here.

Our parsha is about mortality. That is the point. God is eternal, we are ephemeral. As we say in the Unetaneh tokaf prayer on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, we are "a fragment of pottery, a blade of grass, a flower that fades, a shadow, a cloud, a breath of wind." We are dust and to dust we return, but God is life forever.

At one level, Moses-at-the-rock is a story about sin and punishment: "Because you did not have sufficient faith in me to sanctify Me... therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land I have given you." We may not be sure what the sin exactly was, or why it merited so severe a punishment, but at least we know the ball-park, the territory to which the story belongs.

Nonetheless it seems to me that -- here as in so many other places in the Torah -- there is a story beneath the story, and it is a different one altogether. Chukkat is about death, loss and bereavement. Miriam dies. Aaron and Moses are told they will not live to enter the Promised Land. Aaron dies, and the people mourn for him for thirty days. Together they constituted the greatest leadership team the Jewish people has ever known, Moses the supreme prophet, Aaron the first High Priest, and Miriam perhaps the greatest of them all. (There are many midrashim on this theme about Miriam's faith, courage and foresight.) What the parsha is telling us is that for each of us there is a Jordan we will not cross, a promised land we will not enter. "It is not for you to complete the task." Even the greatest are mortal.

That is why the parsha begins with the ritual of the Red Heifer, whose ashes, mixed with the ash of cedar wood, hyssop and scarlet wool and dissolved in "living water," are sprinkled over one who has been in contact with the dead so that they may enter the

Sanctuary.

This is one of the most fundamental principles of Judaism. Death defiles. For most religions throughout history, life-after-death has proved more real than life itself. That is where the gods live, thought the Egyptians. That is where our ancestors are alive, believed the Greeks and Romans and many primitive tribes. That is where you find justice, thought many Christians. That is where you find paradise, thought many Muslims.

Life after death and the resurrection of the dead are fundamental, non-negotiable principles of Jewish faith, but Tanakh is conspicuously quiet about them. It is focused on finding God in this life, on this planet, notwithstanding our mortality. "The dead do not praise God," says the Psalm. God is to be found in life itself with all its hazards and dangers, bereavements and grief. We may be no more than "dust and ashes", as Abraham said, but life itself is a never-ending stream, "living water", and it is this that the rite of the Red Heifer symbolises.

With great subtlety the Torah mixes law and narrative together -- the law before the narrative because God provides the cure before the disease. Miriam dies. Moses and Aaron are overwhelmed with grief. Moses, for a moment, loses control, and he and Aaron are reminded that they too are mortal and will die before entering the land. Yet this is, as Maimonides said, "the way of the world". We are embodied souls. We are flesh and blood. We grow old. We lose those we love. Outwardly we struggle to maintain our composure but inwardly we weep. Yet life goes on, and what we began, others will continue.

Those we loved and lost live on in us, as we will live on in those we love. For love is as strong as death, (Shir ha-Shirim 8:6) and the good we do never dies. (see Mishlei 10:2, 11:4) *Covenant and Conversation is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl zt"l © 2016 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks z"l and rabbisacks.org*

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom



“I see it but not now; I look at it, but it is not near. A star has stepped forth from Jacob and a scepter-bearer has risen from Israel; [Israel] will pierce and vanquish the nobles of Moab...” (Numbers 24:17). The interaction of Jew and Gentile is a prominent theme in Judaism recurring throughout Jewish history, and, according to our prophets, a feature of the End of Days. What will the Jew-Gentile dynamic be at that time, and what implications does that have for us in present times?

In this week's Biblical reading, we read of the vision of the gentile prophet, Bilaam, that Israel will eventually trounce its nemesis, the nation of Moab. Indeed, Ruth, a descendant of Moab, will eventually convert to Judaism, settle in Israel, and become the great-grandmother of King David, progenitor of the

Messiah!

In the meantime, however, in an effort to short-circuit the Jews' long-term destiny by assimilating them into Moab now, Bilaam advises his Moabite benefactor to send Midianite women to seduce the Israelite men. In this, he partially succeeds, enticing many thousands to sin, including prominent Israelites such as Zimri ben Salou, a prince from the Tribe of Simeon.

I would like to suggest that this sordid incident serves as a foil to the paradigm for Jewish-Gentile relations at the End of Days. In a cryptic comment from Rabbi Avraham Azulay in his "Chesed L'Avraham", we find that "Rabbi Akiba was the repair [tikkun] for Zimri ben Salou." What connection can there possibly be between the major architect of the Oral Law and the Simeonite prince who publicly fornicated with a gentile woman in front of Moses?!

Rashi (Nedarim 50b) records an incident towards the end of the life of Rabbi Akiba involving a Roman personage named Rufus. Rufus would often debate on matters of Torah with Akiba, though Akiba always bested him in argument. The Roman personage became embarrassed, and upon his return home, told his wife of his defeat.

She said to him, "I will tempt Rabbi Akiba and cause him to stumble! [Then you will not have to worry about him any longer.]" She was a very beautiful woman. She came before Rabbi Akiba and, [when they were alone] she revealed her [naked] thigh before him.

Rabbi Akiba spat, and laughed and wept. She said to him, "Why do you act in such a [strange] manner?" He said to her, "I will explain to you two out of my three activities. "I spat, because you came from a fetid drop [of sperm, of which I had to remind myself, to prevent me from sinning with you]. "I wept, because in the end your beauty will decay beneath the earth."

But why he laughed, he did not wish to tell her. Nevertheless, after she entreated him many times, he explained that it was because she would eventually convert to Judaism and would marry him. Whereupon she said to him, "And is there the possibility of repentance?" He said there was. And after her husband died, she converted, married Rabbi Akiba, and brought him great wealth.

Bilaam was sure that with the proper sexual blandishments, the Israelites could blend into the culture of Moab and Midian. Inter-marriage would create one humanity without Jews. Rabbi Akiba, on the other hand, believed in true messianism. Rabbi Akiba was a moral universalist who taught, "Beloved is the human being, for he was created in God's image" (Avot 3:14).

Rabbi Akiba believed that the cardinal commandment of the Torah is "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18) – because every human being is like you; every human deserves to be free and all humanity are siblings because each emerged from the womb of the Divine Presence

(Shekhina). He believed that eventually, every nation will merge with Israel and accept the Torah (Talmud Berachot 56b; Maimonides, Laws of Kings 12:11).

Rabbi Akiba himself came from a family of proselytes, and died with the universal watchword of our faith in world unity on his lips: "Hear, O Israel, [right now] the Lord is [accepted by us as] our God, [but eventually] He will be [accepted by all nations] as the One [God of unconditional love]."

This was the goal of universalist Akiba-ism, which will usher in the true messianic age, when "everyone will accept the yoke of God's kingship" when "nation will not lift up sword against nation and humanity will not learn war anymore" (Isaiah 2:4), and everyone will learn Torah and lovingkindness from the people of Israel (ibid.). ©2023 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The Torah records for us in this week's parsha the appearance of an old enemy in a new guise.

According to Midrash, which reflects traditional rabbinic thinking on the subject matter being discussed, Bilaam had advised Pharaoh decades earlier to exterminate the Jewish people. Pharaoh, for various reasons and circumstances beyond his control, was unable to finish the job though vast numbers of Jews were consumed in his slave house and crocodile infested rivers.

Now Bilaam returns to the scene, this time as an ostensible agent of Balak but in reality as an independent agent of his own hatred of the Jews, determined to enforce his own nefarious plans to destroy the Jewish people. He is prevented from so doing by God's restraint placed upon him. Nevertheless thousands of Jews will die because of his advice and behavior.

Bilaam is the first Human Rights Organization of history. He speaks beautifully. Some of the finest Hebrew poetry spills from his tongue and mind. He has many complimentary things to say about Israel but as the rabbis put it: "From his words of blessing one can easily deduce what curses he really meant to utter against the Jewish people."

One need merely look behind the sanctimonious facade that defines Bilaam in order to glimpse the enemy that leers with hatred against the Jewish people, its Torah and its faith. Bilaam is the father of all hypocrisy and pious sounding criticism leveled against the Jewish people throughout the ages and currently against its lonely embattled great little state. Bilaam states, "How goodly are your tents, Jacob" and yet he compares us to a raging lion and a destroyer of other nations. Subtly, his compliments and blessings are clearly his curses.

In the last century much of the world attempted and abetted the murder of millions of Jews. Again, for various reasons the "Final Solution" to the "Jewish Problem" was not completed. So, like Bilaam, much of

the world has withdrawn from outright advocacy of the genocidal destruction of Jews and has resorted to “blessing” the Jewish people and the State of Israel with pious NGO’s, human rights organizations, UN commissions – all of which are dedicated to saving Israel from itself.

Unfortunately, but not surprisingly, there are many Jews overwhelmingly ignorant of their own faith and traditions, naïve in believing the façade of Bilaam as being genuine, that have joined the chorus of Bilaam’s hypocrisy and hatred.

Jews love Bilaam, his words, his lofty ideas, and his flattery. They find it hard to believe the worst about him and therefore the Jewish people and the State of Israel continually suffer grievous injury from his subtle attempts to harm and destroy. Bilaam builds altars to God and proclaims his righteousness and presents his credentials as prophet, wise man and noble human being.

He not only knows what is best for Israel if they would only listen to his counsel and wisdom, but boasts that he knows the details of God’s will as well. He possesses eternal truths and no facts or realities should be allowed to contradict his set ideas. He will kill us with kindness, with Rose Garden ceremonies and Nobel Prizes. But kill us he will, if he only can. So once again the Lord will have to stop him, as He undoubtedly will.

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ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

MiDoor I’Door

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

When Bilaam noticed that the openings of the Jews’ tents did not face each other, he said, “These people deserve to have the Divine Presence rest upon them.” This is the basis of the *halacha* which prohibits a person from installing a window that faces his neighbor’s window. Even if the neighbor waived the right to object, and gave him permission to install it, that willingness is irrelevant since the result is immodest. Alternatively, some explain that the reason the neighbor’s willingness is not good enough is because at a later date the neighbor may say, “At first I thought I could live with it, but now I realize that I cannot.”

This restriction even applies to a person installing a window that overlooks a jointly-owned courtyard. True, he could argue that it should not matter to anyone if he puts in a window there, since in any case he can go into the courtyard and see what is going on there. Nevertheless, the neighbors may object, “If you are with us in the courtyard, we can hide from you; however, if you are watching us through the window, we are not aware of it (and cannot protect ourselves).”

Based on this reasoning, neighbors can object to someone installing a window which faces the courtyard, maintaining that they do not want to be tempted to peek into his window. Also for this reason, a person may not install a window which faces the public domain, even if he says he has nothing to hide and is not worried about people looking into his home. ©2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and Encyclopedia Talmudit

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

The Lesson From Pinchas

At the end of Parashat Balak, we find the sin of the B’nei Yisrael which kindled the anger of Hashem. The Torah says, “Israel settled in the Shittim and the people began to commit harlotry with the daughters of Moav. They invited the people to the feasts of their gods; the people ate and prostrated themselves to their gods. Israel became attached to Baal-Peor, and the wrath of Hashem flared up against Israel. Hashem said to Moshe, ‘Take all the leaders of the people. Hang them before Hashem against the sun – and the flaring wrath of Hashem will withdraw from Israel.’ Moshe said to the judges of Israel, ‘Let each man kill his men who were attached to Baal-Peor.’ And behold a man of the B’nei Yisrael came and brought the Midianite woman near to his brothers before the eyes of Moshe and before the eyes of the entire assembly of the B’nei Yisrael, and they were weeping at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting. And Pinchas the son of Elazar the son of Aharon the Kohein saw, and he stood from among the assembly and he took a spear in his hand. And he went after the Yisrael man into the tent and he pierced them both, the Yisraelite man and the woman into her stomach and the plague was halted from upon the B’nei Yisrael. And those who died in the plague were twenty-four thousand.”

The harlotry that took place was initiated by the daughters of Moav. The Midrashim make clear that this “attack” was designed by Bilaam when his “curses” of the B’nei Yisrael were changed into “blessings” by Hashem. Bilaam understood the power of sexual depravity to entice the men and was able to convince the people of Moav to prostitute their daughters. HaRav Shmshon Raphael Hirsch explains that “the sword of no stranger, the curse of no stranger had the power to damage Israel. Only it itself could bring misfortune, by seceding from Hashem and His Torah.” But the daughters of Moav might never have agreed to harlotry on their own. The Moabite fathers were convinced to use their daughters to protect themselves against the B’nei Yisrael.

Our Rabbis point to the phrase, “Let each man kill his men who were attached to Baal-Peor.” The Ramban quotes the Gemara Yerushalmi in Perek Cheilek, “And how many were the judges of Israel? Seventy-eight thousand and six hundred. Moshe said to them, ‘Each one of you should kill two (as “men” is plural).’ Thus you find that those killed were one hundred

and fifty-seven thousand and two hundred.” The Ramban disputes the numbers, since the Torah tells us that only twenty-four thousand died, and if the original number was more accurate, it would mean that there was a remarkable increase of numbers in the desert. Since judges of a thousand and judges of a hundred have an overlap of the same people, it is more likely that the Yerushalmi means that the judges should be responsible for finding whichever men participated fully in bowing to Baal-Peor and eliminating them. The Ramban also suggests that “there ought to have been more than one hundred and fifty thousand killed, ... but that the act of Pinchas protected them.”

One question which the Rabbis tackle is the due process for the sinners. In every death penalty in Jewish Law, the sinner must have been warned before his actions with both the fact that he was committing a sin and the appropriate punishment that would be given for this act. The Ramban points out that “Hashem, in His mercy told Moshe that the judges should (first) try and then hang those who ‘joined themselves (to Baal-Peor),’ so that the wrath will not ‘indeed swipe away the righteous with the wicked.’” We can understand that there was a trial, then, for each of the sinners, yet the punishment appears to be incorrect. The punishment for harlotry is stoning, yet here it says to hang the sinners. That is because the punishment of stoning is only concluded when the bodies of the sinners are hung for a short period of time after the stoning.

This explanation of the hanging works for all the sinners except Zimri the son of Salu, who is identified in next week’s parasha as the Man of the B’nei Yisrael who “brought the Midianite woman near to his brothers before the eyes of Moshe and before the eyes of the entire assembly of the B’nei Yisrael, and they were weeping at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting.” Pinchas ben Elazar “went after the Yisrael man into the tent and he pierced them both (with a spear), the Yisraelite man and the woman into her stomach and the plague was halted....” Rashi explains that Pinchas saw Zimri take the Medianite woman into the Tent of Meeting. He remembered the Law of the zealot and went to Moshe and reminded him that Pinchas had previously learned the laws of a zealot from Moshe. HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin disagreed with this explanation. By definition, if Pinchas went to Moshe for clarification about whether this case fit the description of a zealot, Pinchas, by asking, was not a zealot. A zealot is one who acts emotionally and then physically after seeing a serious desecration of the Law of Hashem. Had Pinchas stopped to ask, he would no longer have been acting as a zealot, and he would have had to try Zimri in a court and, only then, punish him according to the Law. The fact that he did not ask allowed him to act spontaneously and kill Zimri without a trial.

The Torah tells us that the plague ended after the actions of Pinchas. HaRav Sorotzkin explains that

the actions of Pinchas not only stopped the plague, but we can understand from this that the people stopped their worship of Baal-Peor. If this were not the case, the plague would have continued in spite of Pinchas’ actions. “When one man rose from amongst the nation and slew one sinner ‘at the hands of Man,’ not only did the plague end, but he drove out the sins from the camp.” HaRav Sorotzkin explains that when a man is twisted by temptation and cannot overcome it, he is incapable of following the statutes of the Torah; it is impossible for flesh and blood alone to conquer that desire. The B’nei Yisrael were the only people who willingly accepted Hashem’s Torah; when the other nations were offered the Torah, they rejected it as too difficult to perform on the Earth. The B’nei Yisrael now also began to question whether the Torah could only exist in the Heavens. They continued to sin and give in to temptation even when the plague began to kill them. It was only when they saw that one man, Pinchas, was able to conquer temptation and observe Hashem’s rules on Earth, that they realized that it was possible for them also to do as Pinchas did. Pinchas gave the people the strength to return to Hashem’s Laws.

We each face temptations which lead us away from Hashem’s Laws. We tell ourselves that we are unable to control that temptation, it is too difficult, the Law is too stringent. We must remember Pinchas and know that we, too, are capable just as he was. May we learn to control our actions, and follow the Will of Hashem. © 2023 Rabbi D. Levin



RABBI AVI SHAFRAN

Cross-Currents

It’s commonly, but erroneously, assumed that the symbol commonly used for the medical profession, a snake, or a pair of them, wrapped upon a pole, is meant as a depiction of the nachash hanechoshes that Moshe Rabbeinu fashioned, as per Hashem’s command. The Jewish people were to gaze upon it and be cured of the plague of poisonous snakes they were facing.

But the symbol used today comes to us from Greek mythology, associated with the imagined divinities, a depiction of the “Rod of Asclepius” (or, when there is a pair of reptiles, the caduceus).

How a staff and snake (or snakes) came to be associated with those Hellenistic “gods” is anyone’s guess. But it is certainly possible that the Torah’s narrative about the nachash hanechoshes found its way into ancient cultures, which may have repurposed the image for inclusion in their own idolatrous belief systems.

But that the symbols have come to represent the power of medicine is fascinating. Because the original staff and snake, although it was intended to focus our ancestors’ attention on the dangers of the desert and how Hashem had been protecting them (see Rav Hirsch), was kept over generations by the Jews and

eventually came to be an object of worship. The melech Chizkiya put an end to that by deriding it as nechushtan ("the snakey thing") and grinding it to copper dust (Melachim Beis, 18:4).

The medical profession itself has followed a similar trajectory.

It has enjoyed the public's reverence since the time of Hippocrates and Galen. Even when the reigning medical theory revolved around the "four humors" or when lobotomies and trepanning were considered normative treatments for mental illness.

Medicine has come a long way since then. But even today, it is considered legitimate medical practice to abort healthy fetuses for any (or no) reason and to help people end their lives.

Medical knowledge is a blessing. As are doctors who employ it without hubris. But medical professionals who see themselves as gods (tov shebirof'im...) are self-made idols. And those who revere them as such mistake the messenger for the true Rofei cholim.

No modern-day Chizkiya has yet appeared. But the contemporary snake and staff deserve the treatment the ancient one received. ©2023 Rabbi A. Shafran and torah.org

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

After Moses hits the rock, God tells him he will not lead the Jews into Israel. What precisely did Moses do wrong to elicit such a harsh response? Rashi insists that while God told Moses to speak to the rock, Moses instead hit it (Numbers 20: 8–12).

Others disagree, asserting that God never told Moses to speak to the rock but rather told Moses to speak about the rock. Ibn Ezra suggests that Moses had the right to hit the rock once but not twice, as the text records (Ibn Ezra, Numbers 20:8).

Maimonides and Nachmanides, however, see Moses's mistake not in his actions, but in the words he utters just prior to striking the rock. For Maimonides, Moses's misstatement was his reference to the people as hamorim (rebels; Numbers 20:10). Such displays of anger, rather than eliciting the best from others, often bring out the worst (Shemoneh Perakim, chapter 4).

For Nachmanides, Moses's error was his declaration, "notzi" (we will bring forth; Numbers 20:10), that he and Aaron would bring forth the water. This statement left the impression that the miracle of water coming from the rock came from Moses and Aaron alone – not from God. This was a serious mistake, especially bearing in mind that the Jews often confused Moses with God. In some faith communities, leaders become god; not so in Judaism. As great as Moses was, he was human. Unintentionally, Moses's declaration sent a mixed message to his people (Nachmanides, Numbers 2:7).

Another thought comes to mind. When Moses

hits the rock, the Torah tells us, "va'yach et haselah" (and he hit the rock; Numbers 20:11). The only other time in the Torah that a similar phrase appears is when Moses kills the Egyptian for smiting the Jew. There the Torah states, "va'yach et haMitzi" (and he smote the Egyptian; Exodus 2:12).

Some suggest that Moses overreacted by killing the Egyptian; surely he could have stopped the assailant with less force (Haktav v'Hakabbalah, Exodus 2:11). For taking life unnecessarily, he should have been ruled out immediately as a prospective leader of the Jewish People. God, however, gives Moses a reprieve, with the understanding there will be zero tolerance for future unnecessary uses of force.

Only when Moses hits the rock and again uses too much force is he denied entry into the land of Israel. In itself, hitting the rock was a negligible miscue. It is viewed, however, as a cumulative wrong, linked to Moses's killing of the Egyptian.

Thus we learn that leaders must be very careful with the power invested in them. As the English historian John Dalberg-Acton once said, "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." Precisely because Moses was the prophet of prophets, he was scrupulously judged for even the slightest abuse of power.

Yet another approach to the connection between these incidents is to recognize they are separated by almost forty years. Smiting the Egyptian, breaking the tablets, and asking that Korach be swallowed up by the earth may have been the combative leadership Israel needed when becoming a people. Now, the second generation, on the cusp of entry into Israel, needs a softer leadership.

Thus, as Rabbi Nathaniel Helfgot has suggested, hitting instead of speaking to the rock was not the reason Moses did not enter the land but the sign that he lacked the capacity to change his leadership approach.

Moses, although the greatest of the great, was human. He, too, had limitations. And so it was necessary for him to step back, making space for Joshua, a younger leader who could adopt a new tone to better relate to and inspire the Israelites as they entered and settled the Land of Israel. ©2023 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 JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"The donkey saw the angel of Hashem... sword drawn... and it swerved... Bilaam struck the donkey to redirect it onto the path." (Bamidbar 22:23) Hashem told Bilaam not to curse the Jewish People. However, Bilaam REALLY wanted to go (Balak promised lots of money and honor), so Hashem told him

to go but warned that he would only be able to say what Hashem allowed him to. When Bilaam went so excitedly, it was apparent that his intent to curse the Jews had not changed.

Out of mercy, Hashem sent an angel to deter Bilaam. This messenger appeared on the road in front of the donkey but Bilaam didn't see him. Three times, the angel appeared to the donkey but not to the man. Each time, Bilaam struck the animal in anger to get it to move properly. Finally, when the donkey spoke to Bilaam pointing out the illogic of what he was doing, and Bilaam acknowledged it, he was able to see the angel.

If Hashem sent the angel to help Bilaam, why was Bilaam unable to see it? Had Bilaam seen the angel immediately, he would have turned around sooner. Why did Hashem make it that only the donkey saw the angel, leading to this whole sequence of events and requiring the special creation of the speaking donkey nearly 2500 years prior?

To help frame this question, let's look at what Bilaam did when the donkey didn't do what he wanted. The moment it strayed, Bilaam lashed out in anger. It was to no avail, because the angel was still there and the donkey still swerved. The juxtaposition of the two wills being flouted is quite telling.

When the donkey strayed, it upset Bilaam because he wasn't going where he wanted. He therefore tried to get the donkey to obey by force. When Bilaam strayed, Hashem sent an angel but did not physically stop Bilaam from going where he pleased. Had Bilaam gone to curse the Jews, it would not have affected Hashem, though He was not being heeded. The mercy was in giving Bilaam the chance to change his path without being prevented from following it.

It required Bilaam being able to come to his own realization that he was not doing what G-d wanted from him. Similarly, we find that at the end of Parshas Chukas, when the Jews complained about the water and the man, Hashem sent snakes into the camp to bite people. Moshe erected a copper snake and anyone bitten had to look at it to be healed. The intent was that they recognize that the snake doesn't kill, but the sin.

The purpose of the snakes wasn't to punish, but to remind people of what they knew was right. That's why Hashem also sent the angel but he could not be seen until Bilaam was ready to acknowledge his own flaws. When people lash out, it's for themselves. When Hashem strikes us, it is for us. We just have to see it that way.

In a small town in Europe, someone frantically came to the Rabbi's home one Shabbos, telling him that a Jewish man had opened his store on Shabbos! The Rabbi took his young son with him and hurried to the store. Sure enough, it was open. He sent the child to ask the man to meet him upstairs, in the storeowner's apartment. The man came up, trembling in fear of what the Rabbi would say. He sat down at the table facing the

Rabbi, who dissolved in a fit of tears.

Instead of berating the man or crying about the sanctity of Shabbos, the Rabbi said, "What kind of leader am I? That one of my congregants should be so desperate for parnasa he feels he must open his store on Shabbos?! How could I have been so blind to his needs?!" The man replied, "It's true! I had no choice. We're in such dire straits."

The Rabbi sympathized but explained that we get no bracha or benefit from work done on Shabbos and the man agreed to close the store - because the Rabbi was concerned about him, not himself. – As heard from R' Ephraim Wachsmann ©2023 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr

RABBI PINCHAS WINSTON

Perceptions

The story of Amalek begins, at least in the Torah, in Parashas Beshallah. That is where he first attacked the Jewish people and went down in history as the antithesis of the Jewish people and nemesis of God. Like most anti-Semites he did some serious damage, but eventually the Jewish army prevailed, and Amalek was almost completely destroyed.

Who was Amalek? Where did they come from? Why did they go out of their way to attack the Jewish people and earn the wrath of God? The Torah doesn't answer those questions, but the Gemora does somewhat: "What is the reason for [writing the verse], 'And Lotan's sister was Timna' (Bereishis 36:22)? Timna was a royal princess...Wanting to become a convert, she went to Avraham, Yitzchak and Ya'akov, but they did not accept her. So she went and became a concubine to Eliphaz, the son of Eisav, saying, 'I'd rather be a servant to this people than a mistress of another nation.' From her Amalek descended who afflicted the Jewish people. Why? Because they should not have rejected her." (Sanhedrin 99b)

Talk about cutting off your nose to spite your face! It's a troubling gemora because we can assume that Avraham Avinu, who lived to make "converts," must have had a pretty good reason to reject Timna into the program. Yitzchak and Ya'akov too. And even if they had been mistaken about her, why should her union with Eliphaz result in the quintessential anti-Semite? If ever there was an example of Alillus...

You remember alillus, right, from last week's parsha? That's when God uses a pretext to fulfill a more hidden agenda, like the Jewish people being "strangers in a land that is not theirs...for 400 years" (Bereishis 15:13). Ever since God told Avraham about that we knew it was coming. We just didn't know that the sale of Yosef was Divinely-arranged just to make it happen.

Therefore, it is a safe bet that Amalek was Divinely-destined to live and be Amalek, and that Timna was meant to approach and be rejected by the Avos so

that she would "marry" Eliphaz and give birth to him. But when it comes to God there is always method to the "madness," just as there was in the sale of Yosef. The sale of their brother may have led to the fulfillment of the prophecy of 400 years of exile, but it also built Yosef into the leader he had to become for the rest of the family. However, what did the Timna story add to the historic narrative of the Jewish people?

The Zohar explains that the combination of the names of Balak and Bilaam provide the letters for two other words: Bavel (Babylonia) and Amalek. This of course is not random gematria, but a hint to the spiritual origin of both characters, and how their unholy alliance actualized the reality of Amalek.

It's like taking two inert chemicals and combining them to make an explosive. Balak and Bilaam on their own were bad enough. But together, they could have destroyed the entire Jewish people had God not neutralized them. We thank God to this very day for that great miracle.

But then again, who brought Balak and Bilaam together in the first place if not God Himself? That took a different kind of "miracle": "But did they not always hate each other, as it says, 'who defeated Midian in the field of Moav' (Bereishis 36:35), when Midian came against Moav in battle? However, because of their mutual fear of the Jewish people they made peace with each other." (Rashi, Bamidbar 22:4)

It is somewhat wondrous that two nations that hated each other so much could temporarily bury the hatchet to destroy the Jewish people. But as the verse says, "This is from God, that which is wondrous in our eyes" (Tehillim 118:23), implying that it had been God who had unified such mortal enemies.

And how did God do it? Hashgochah Pratis. It was Divine Providence that made Moav turn first to Balak to be their king, and then to Bilaam to be their savior. Furthermore, both Balak and Bilaam became who they were because of all the Divine Providence that shaped them. All of it was just for their encounter with the Jewish people in this week's parsha.

To what end? To shake up the Jewish people to avoid complacency? To give Zimri and his 24,000 followers a chance to blow everything and die in the process? To provide Pinchas with his chance to rise to the occasion and save the day...and become Eliyahu HaNavi along the way? Yes, yes, and yes...and more, as in a Plan B. Plan A may have failed miserably, but Plan B had a disastrous impact, resulting in the deaths of 24,000 from the tribe of Shimon by plague, and the 176,000 by capital punishment for idol worship.

And it didn't end there. In fact, their original plan had really been to hold off the final redemption. They knew, as did Amalek, that once redemption happens, evil will be gone for good. With only a partial redemption, not only does evil still exist, it



must exist. So the real success came later when the tribes of Reuven, Gad, and the half-tribe of Menashe chose to stay outside of Eretz Yisroel, and push off the final redemption for millennia to come.

It may have been Balak and Bilaam who engineered that, but it was the Amalek within them that made it work. More specifically, it was the union of Timna and Eliphaz, and we need to know why.

It's kind of like milk and meat, or wool and linen. On their own, milk and meat are no problem. Wearing wool or linen is perfectly fine. It's the combination of the two that creates the prohibition. Not every mixture is a safe combination, and some can even be deadly.

The combination of Timna and Eliphaz was one such example of the latter. In fact, Timna was not only the concubine of Eliphaz, but she was also his illegitimate daughter from an adulterous relationship with the wife of Seir. That certainly makes it more understandable why the Avos rejected her, despite their conversion program at that time.

It is one thing to be a mamzer, as Timna technically was. But as a "gentile" -- it was still before Mt. Sinai -- mamzeress, she could have lived a relatively "normal" life. It was not like being a Jewish mamzer, who can only marry another Jewish mamzer. In those days, most people probably wouldn't have cared about her spiritual status. When she went ahead and had a child from her own corrupt father however, that was a choice she herself had made, and the spiritual perversion was compounded and resulted in an embodiment of it, Amalek. This made him the very antithesis of the Jewish people.

As the Midrash reveals and Rashi brings down, Bilaam not only rode his donkey for transportation, it was also his female companion, a tremendous Amalekian perversion. Balak had his own Amalekian tendencies, which is why he had no problem prostituting his own women to trap the Jewish people in sin. And when these two perversions of man came together, they compounded the spiritual distortion, like Timna had done when she chose to become Eliphaz's concubine.

This is why Amalek will always show up on the scene, just before the Jewish people are going to accept another level of Torah. What makes a ba'al teshuvah stronger in some respects than a person who has been righteous all their life is that they know, firsthand, the evil that Torah fights against, of which Torah is the opposite. Amalek epitomizes spiritual impurity, but Torah is the basis of kedushah.

As the expression goes, "there is nothing worse than a reformed sinner" because that is what they are, someone who previously sinned and left it behind. It tends to make them more vigilant against sin everywhere (which is why others often find them annoying). This is why Amalek was destined to be an integral part of Jewish history, regardless of what the Avos did, until Moshiach comes. ©2023 Rabbi P. Winston & torah.org