



BS"D

To: parsha@groups.io
From: cshulman@gmail.com

INTERNET PARSHA SHEET ON CHUKAS BALAK - 5780

parsha@groups.io / www.parsha.net - in our 25th year! To receive this parsha sheet, go to <http://www.parsha.net> and click Subscribe or send a blank e-mail to parsha+subscribe@groups.io Please also copy me at cshulman@gmail.com A complete archive of previous issues is now available at <http://www.parsha.net> It is also fully searchable.

Sponsored in memory of
Chaim Yissachar z"l ben Yechiel Zaydel Dov

Dedicated by
Ezra Friedberg to mark the yohrzeit
(18 Tammuz) of his grandmother,
Mrs. Norma Harris (Naomi bas Menachem Mendel a"h)

Dedicated for a refuah shleimah to **Yisrael Yaakov ben Rut**

To sponsor a parsha sheet contact cshulman@parsha.net
(proceeds to tzedaka)

from: Rabbi Yissocher Frand <ryfrand@torah.org>
reply-to: ryfrand@torah.org,
to: ravfrand@torah.org
subject: Rabbi Frand on Parsha

Rabbi Yissocher Frand - Parshas Chukas- Balak
Dedicated to the speedy recovery of Mordechai ben Chaya
Chukas: An Answer for Which I Waited Over Fifty Years

I finally found an answer to something that has been bothering me for over fifty years! When I was in the eighth or ninth grade, our Hebrew teacher assigned us a term paper. The class members were supposed to summarize the opinions of a list of commentaries as to the nature of the sin of Mei Merivah. I believe there were over twenty different explanations as to what Moshe Rabbeinu did wrong at Mei Merivah. My assignment was to research the opinion of Rav Yosef Albo in his Sefer HaKrim.

Rav Yosef Albo's opinion is as follows: Moshe Rabbeinu faced a crisis: His sister Miriam just died. The Rock was no longer giving water. The people were crying, "We are going to die of thirst." What did Moshe Rabbeinu do? He went to ask a 'shaylah' to the Ribono shel Olam – "What should I do?" The Ribono shel Olam told him to speak to the Rock. Moshe Rabbeinu hit the Rock. According to some commentaries, that was the sin. The Sefer HaKrim has another opinion.

Rav Yosef Albo says that Moshe Rabbeinu had a golden opportunity here. There was no water. He should have taken the bull by the horn. He should have gone over to the Rock and said: "Rock – Give water!" Why

should he have thought that would work? Because of the principle that "A Righteous person decrees and the Holy One Blessed Be He will fulfill his decree." There is a rule "Tzadik gozer, v'HaKodosh Baruch Hu Mekayem." Eliyahu HaNavi did this. He decreed that fire come down from heaven and consume his offering. Did he ask G-d beforehand? No. He did it on his own. Yehoshua bin Nun said, "Sun in Givon stand still, and the moon over the Valley of Ayalon". He did not ask for advice or permission from the Almighty beforehand. He decreed and the Almighty fulfilled the Tzadik's decree. According to the Sefer HaKrim, that was the sin of Moshe Rabbeinu. He had the opportunity to sanctify G-d's Name by showing that the Almighty fulfills the decree of the Tzadik. He did not take advantage of this opportunity. In effect, that is a desecration of G-d's Name.

It always bothered me—that is a Chillul Hashem? Moshe Rabbeinu—if you look at his record—never did anything on his own. He did not bring the Plague of Blood on his own, he did not bring the Plague of Frogs on his own, and he did not turn his staff into a snake on his own. Everything Moshe Rabbeinu did was always based on the Command of G-d. So, what is the complaint here? Moshe could answer back, "That is not the way I operate. That is not my modus operandi. My modus operandi is that I ask the Ribono shel Olam: What should I do? The Ribono shel Olam always tells me what to do.

This question has bothered me for fifty years! Not so many things have bothered me for fifty years. This year, I found a Meshech Chochma that explains the deeper intent of this Sefer HaKrim. The Meshech Chochma asks: Why in fact did Moshe Rabbeinu never perform miracles on his own? There are Biblical figures who did miracles on their own, such as Yehoshua and Eliyahu. There are Talmudic figures who did miracles on their own, such as Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa, who put his heel on the hole of the snake. There are such stories throughout the Talmud! Moshe Rabbeinu never did anything on his own.

The Meshech Chochmah explains that this was because Moshe Rabbeinu was different than every other prophet. When every other prophet received their prophecy from the Almighty, they literally fell into a trance. They lost bodily control. They were no longer in charge. So, when the Navi said something, everyone knew that it is not the Navi talking, it is G-d talking. The person could be lying on the floor having convulsions. He was not in charge—he was a conduit.

On the other hand, Moshe Rabbeinu's prophecy was "Aspaklaria haMeira". He spoke "mouth to mouth" with the Almighty as a person talks to his friend. Therefore, Moshe Rabbeinu was afraid that if he would dare to "call the shots on his own," he might be deified. He was afraid that people would make him into a god. By the other prophets, it was obvious they were not in control. Moshe Rabbeinu was in control, so he never ever did anything on his own, lest the people say, "He is G-d!" (We know that such things have happened in history.) Therefore, he did not act independently.

There is only one time in Moshe Rabbeinu's career that he "took the law into his own hands" and acted on his own. That was in last week's Parsha. Korach challenged Moshe Rabbeinu, "the entire congregation is holy, why do you take it upon yourselves to rule over the congregation of Hashem?" There, without asking the Ribono shel Olam, without seeking guidance from Above, Moshe Rabbeinu proclaimed, "If like all other men these men die, G-d has not sent me..." He proclaimed on his own "I am going to make a miracle. These people are going to die an unnatural death. The ground is going to open up and swallow them."

Here he deviated from his methodology. Why? The Meshech Chochma says it was because at the time of Korach's rebellion, there was no fear that the people would deify Moshe. On the contrary, he was being attacked, "Who are you? You are no better than anyone else!" No one could be accused of harboring thoughts that Moshe was a god when they were proclaiming that he had no better status than the rest of the nation.

Here Moshe was prepared to say, "Okay, I will show you! I am going to make a miracle on my own to prove that what you claim is incorrect." That was Parshas Korach. However, next is Parshas Chukas and the people now realize that Moshe can take the law into his own hands and can change nature by his own decree. Suddenly, Miriam dies and there is no water, people are in the desert dying of thirst and they say to Moshe Rabbeinu, "We need water." Moshe's response is, "Nu, I need to ask the Ribono shel Olam what to do." The people became disillusioned. "Oh, is that so? Last week in Parshas Korach when your honor was on the line, you did not ask any questions. You were concerned about your own kavod, so you made a miracle on the spot! Now when we are all thirsty, you suddenly need to stall and ask the Ribono shel Olam? There was a popular complaint against Moshe Rabbeinu.

That is what the Sefer Halkrim means that this was a Chillul Hashem. "Since you did not believe in Me to sanctify my Name before the Children of Israel." Just like by Korach, when your honor was on the line, you took nature into your own hands and made an open miracle, now that we are suffering and dying of thirst, you hold back your power... This, says the Sefer Halkrim, was the complaint and was a desecration of G-d's Name, for which Moshe was punished.

Balak: Reading the Fine Print in Bilaam's Refusal to Go

There is a strange similarity between a pasuk in Parshas Balak and a statement in Maseches Avos. When Balak tries to entice Bilaam to come and curse Klal Yisrael, Bilaam at first refuses and says, "If Balak will give me a house full of silver and gold, I am unable to transgress the word of G-d." This is strikingly reminiscent of a statement in the sixth chapter of Pirkei Avos, where somebody came to Rabbi Yossi ben Kisma and made him an offer that he seemingly could not refuse. A person approached the Tanna and invited him to come to his city to build a Yeshiva there. He made him an outstanding offer to which Rabbi Yossi ben Kisma responded, "My son, even if you offer me all the silver and gold and precious stones and jewels in the world, I refuse to live in any place other than a place of Torah." [Avos 6:9]

Now, even though this sounds strikingly similar to what Bilaam said, Bilaam is condemned. Chazal take Bilaam's statement as being an implicit hint to the officers of Moav that he would really like all that silver and gold, and that he thinks he is worth it. No one suspects Rabbi Yossi ben Kisma of intimating that for the right price he could indeed be convinced to come. What is the difference between the statement of Bilaam and, l'havdil, the statement of Rav Yossi ben Kisma?

Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky makes a very interesting observation: "If Balak will give me a house full of gold and silver... I won't do it!" What about two houses? What about five houses? For one house? Nu! What is one house full of gold and silver worth? For that price alone, I will not consider coming. By specifying that a single house is the offer he refuses, he implies that if the price were right – then maybe there would be what to discuss.

What is the language of Rabbi Yossi ben Kisma? It is "all the silver and gold and precious stones and jewels in the world." There is nothing more to talk about! No money in the world can change my mind. I will only live in a place of Torah. That is the difference between Bilaam's refusal and the refusal by Rabbi Yossi ben Kisma in Pirkei Avos.

*Transcribed by David Twersky; Jerusalem DavidATwersky@gmail.com
Technical Assistance by Dovid Hoffman; Baltimore, MD dhoffman@torah.org
Rav Frand © 2019 by Torah.org.*

The command of the parah adumah, the Red Heifer, with which our parsha begins, is known as the hardest of the mitzvot to understand. The opening words, zot chukat ha-Torah, are taken to mean, this is the supreme example of a chok in the Torah, that is, a law whose logic is obscure, perhaps unfathomable.

It was a ritual for the purification of those who had been in contact with, or in, certain forms of proximity to a dead body. A dead body is the primary source of impurity, and the defilement it caused to the living meant that the person so affected could not enter the precincts of the Tabernacle or Temple until cleansed, in a process that lasted seven days. A key element of the purification process involved a Priest sprinkling the person so affected, on the third and seventh day, with a specially prepared liquid known as "the water of cleansing." First a Red Heifer had to be found, without a blemish, and which had never been used to perform work: a yoke had never been placed on it. This was ritually killed and burned outside the camp. Cedar wood, hyssop, and scarlet wool were added to the fire, and the ashes placed in a vessel containing "living" i.e. fresh water. It was this that was sprinkled on those who had become impure by contact with death. One of the more paradoxical features of the rite is that though it cleansed the impure, it rendered impure those who were involved with the preparation of the water of cleansing.

Though the ritual has not been practised since the days of the Temple, it nonetheless remains significant, in itself and for an understanding of what a chok, usually translated as "statute," actually is. Other instances include the prohibition against eating meat and milk together, wearing clothes of mixed wool and linen (shatnez) and sowing a field with two kinds of grain (kilayim). There have been several very different explanations of chukim.

The most famous is that a chok is a law whose logic we cannot understand. It makes sense to God, but it makes no sense to us. We cannot aspire to the kind of cosmic wisdom that would allow us to see its point and purpose. Or perhaps, as Rav Saadia Gaon put it, it is a command issued for no other reason than to reward us for obeying it.[1] The Sages recognised that whereas Gentiles might understand Jewish laws based on social justice (mishpatim) or historical memory (edot), commands such as the prohibition of eating meat and milk together seemed irrational and superstitious. The chukim were laws of which "Satan and the nations of the world made fun." [2]

Maimonides had a quite different view. He believed that no Divine command was irrational. To suppose otherwise was to think God inferior to human beings. The chukim only appear to be inexplicable because we have forgotten the original context in which they were ordained. Each of them was a rejection of, and education against, some idolatrous practice. For the most part, however, such practises have died out, which is why we now find the commands hard to understand.[3]

A third view, adopted by Nahmanides in the thirteenth century[4] and further articulated by Samson Raphael Hirsch in the nineteenth, is that the chukim were laws designed to teach the integrity of nature. Nature has its own laws, domains and boundaries, to cross which is to dishonour the divinely created order, and to threaten nature itself. So we do not combine animal (wool) and vegetable (linen) textiles, or mix animal life (milk) and animal death (meat). As for the Red Heifer, Hirsch says that the ritual is to cleanse humans from depression brought about by reminders of human mortality.

My own view is that chukim are commands deliberately intended to bypass the rational brain, the pre-frontal cortex. The root from which the word chok comes is h-k-k, meaning, "to engrave." Writing is on the surface; engraving cuts much deeper than the surface. Rituals go deep below the surface of the mind, and for an important reason. We are not fully rational animals, and we can make momentous mistakes if we think we are. We have a limbic system, an emotional brain. We also have an

from: Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks <info@rabbisacks.org>

subject: Covenant and Conversation

Kohelet, Tolstoy and the Red Heifer (Chukat – Balak 5780)
Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

extremely powerful set of reactions to potential danger, located in the amygdala, that lead us to flee, freeze or fight. A moral system, to be adequate to the human condition, must recognise the nature of the human condition. It must speak to our fears.

The most profound fear most of us have is of death. As La Rochefoucauld said, "Neither the sun nor death can be looked on with a steady eye." Few have explored death and the tragic shadow it casts over life more profoundly than the author of Kohelet (Ecclesiastes): "The fate of man is the fate of cattle; the same fate awaits them both, the death of one is like the death of the other, their spirits are the same, and the pre-eminence of man over beast is nothing, for it is all shallow breath. All end in the same place; all emerge from dust and all go back to dust" (Eccl. 3:19-20).

The knowledge that he will die robs Kohelet of any sense of the meaningfulness of life. We have no idea what will happen, after our death, to what we have achieved in life. Death makes mockery of virtue: the hero may die young while the coward lives to old age. And bereavement is tragic in a different way. To lose those we love is to have the fabric of our life torn, perhaps irreparably. Death defiles in the simplest, starkest sense: mortality opens an abyss between us and God's eternity.

It is this fear, existential and elemental, to which the rite of the Heifer is addressed. The animal itself is the starkest symbol of pure, animal life, untamed, undomesticated. The red, like the scarlet of the wool, is the colour of blood, the essence of life. The cedar, tallest of trees, represents vegetative life. The hyssop symbolises purity. All these were reduced to ash in the fire, a powerful drama of mortality. The ash itself was then dissolved in water, symbolising continuity, the flow of life, and the potential of rebirth. The body dies but the spirit flows on. A generation dies but another is born. Lives may end but life does not. Those who live after us continue what we began, and we live on in them. Life is a never-ending stream, and a trace of us is carried onward to the future.

The person in modern times who most deeply experienced and expressed what Kohelet felt was Tolstoy, who told the story in his essay, A Confession.[5] By the time he wrote it, in his early fifties, he had already published two of the greatest novels ever written, War and Peace and Anna Karenina. His literary legacy was secure. His greatness was universally recognised. He was married, with children. He had a large estate. His health was good. Yet he was overcome with a sense of the meaninglessness of life in the face of the knowledge that we will all die. He quoted Kohelet at length. He contemplated suicide. The question that haunted him was: "Is there any meaning in my life that will not be annihilated by the inevitability of death which awaits me?"[6]

He searched for an answer in science, but all it told him was that "in the infinity of space and the infinity of time infinitely small particles mutate with infinite complexity." Science deals in causes and effects, not purpose and meaning. In the end, he concluded that only religious faith rescues life from meaninglessness. "Rational knowledge, as presented by the learned and wise, negates the meaning of life." [7] What is needed is something other than rational knowledge. "Faith is the force of life. If a man lives, then he must believe in something ... If he does understand the illusion of the finite, he is bound to believe in the infinite. Without faith it is impossible to live." [8]

That is why, to defeat the defilement of contact with death, there must be a ritual that bypasses rational knowledge. Hence the rite of the Red Heifer, in which death is dissolved in the waters of life, and those on whom it is sprinkled are made pure again so that they can enter the precincts of the Shechinah and re-establish contact with eternity. We no longer have the Red Heifer and its seven-day purification ritual, but we do have the shiva, the seven days of mourning during which we are comforted by others and thus reconnected with life. Our grief is gradually dissolved by the contact with friends and family, as the ashes of

the Heifer were dissolved in the "living water." We emerge, still bereaved, but in some measure cleansed, purified, able again to face life. I believe that we can emerge from the shadow of death if we allow ourselves to be healed by the God of life. To do so, though, we need the help of others. "A prisoner cannot release himself from prison," [9] says the Talmud. It took a Kohen to sprinkle the waters of cleansing. It takes comforters to lift our grief. But faith – faith from the world of chok, deeper than the rational mind – can help cure our deepest fears. Shabbat Shalom

fw from hamelaket@gmail.com

from: Destiny Foundation/Rabbi Berel Wein <info@jewishdestiny.com>

reply-to: info@jewishdestiny.com

subject: Weekly Parsha from Rabbi Berel Wein

Weekly Parsha CHUKAT

Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog

The Jewish people find themselves in great difficulty after the death of the prophetess Miriam. Her miraculous well had sustained them with water during their long sojourn in the desert of Sinai. And now that she was no longer alive, this water, so identified with her being, also disappeared from their midst. They complain to Moshe and clamored for water. People can go on for days without solid food but not without water, especially in a desert. Moshe strikes the rock instead of speaking to it, as he was instructed to do, but water flows miraculously in abundance from the rock, and the situation is stabilized.

There will be sad consequences for Moshe from this incident, but apparently the people are not subject to punishment for their demands to Moshe that he provide them with water, which precipitated the entire matter. In fact, the people will break into song and poetry over this new well of blessed water. Yet, we find that when the people requested meat, the meat miraculously arrived, but the people were severely punished for their request. It seems that requesting and even demanding water, a necessity of life for human existence, is permissible. However, demanding meat, which is a luxury food is inappropriate. There is a great lesson for all of us in this matter. Demanding and even praying for more than we really need and are entitled to carries with it the seeds of subsequent problems and even disaster.

Chassidic legend and tradition records a discussion between Rav Yitzchak Vorker and Rav Menachem Mendel Morgenstern, the Kotzker Rebbe, regarding why the Jewish people escaped immediate punishment for the sin of the Golden Calf, while for the sin of the Spies and their rejection of entering the land of Israel, the punishment was immediate and harsh.

The Vorker Rebbe explained that when the Jewish people repented after the sin of the Golden Calf they were yet unaware that repentance could nullify decrees and punishment. Nevertheless, they repented sincerely without expectations of forgiveness, and their repentance was accepted. After the sin of the spies, they already knew that repentance could bring about forgiveness, so their repentance was insufficiently sincere. The Kotzker Rebbe thought otherwise. He said that the sin of the Golden Calf had in it the seeds of searching for and serving a higher power. They went about it incorrectly, but there was a spark of holiness in their quest for divinity. However, the sin of the spies was of a different nature. Its motivation was that they wished for an easy life of luxuries, without the challenges that a nation-state automatically inflicts on its inhabitants. Such a base motive was unacceptable to Heaven. We pray for health and prosperity to be able to serve God with more sincerity and more effectively. If we pray only out of selfish motives, then we have missed the mark with our prayers. This week's Torah reading is a powerful reminder of this truth,

Shabbat Shalom

fw from hamelaket@gmail.com
from: Rabbi Chanan Morrison <chanan@ravkooktorah.org>
to: rav-kook-list@googlegroups.com
subject: [Rav Kook Torah]

Balak: Sweet Dreams
Rav Kook Torah

Have you ever dreamt a disturbing dream but cannot remember it? The Sages recommended saying the following prayer while the kohanim are blessing the people:

“Master of the World! My dreams and I belong to You. If the dreams are good, then bolster them like the dreams of Joseph. And if they need to be remedied, fix them like the bitter waters that Moses sweetened.

Just as You transformed wicked Balaam’s curses into blessings, so too, make all of my dreams be for the best.” (Berachot 55b)

Transforming Bad Dreams

There are two ways in which evil tidings may be transformed into good ones. In the first way, the means remain disturbing, but the final outcome is good. One example of this is Joseph being sold into slavery and his subsequent imprisonment in Egypt. All of the various causes were adverse, incurring much hardship for Joseph. But the ultimate result - Joseph’s rise to greatness, and his ability to provide sustenance during the years of famine - was certainly for the best.

However, it is even better when the causes are also transformed into positive ones, so that the end is achieved through propitious means. An example of this type of transformation occurred with Balaam. God could have let Balaam curse the people of Israel, and only later changed his curses to blessings. But instead, God “placed a hook in Balaam’s mouth,” as the Midrash describes God’s complete control over Balaam’s powers of speech. Only blessings came out his mouth. Thus, even the means - Balaam’s prophecies - were favorable.

We pray that our dreams should be completely transformed for the good. Like Balaam’s “curses,” we want both the ends and the means to be auspicious and beneficial.

(Sapphire from the Land of Israel. Adapted from Ein Eyah vol. II, p. 274)
ravkooktorah.org

fw from hamelaket@gmail.com
from: Rabbi Chanan Morrison <chanan@ravkooktorah.org>
to: rav-kook-list@googlegroups.com
subject: [Rav Kook Torah]

Balak: Sweet Dreams
Rav Kook Torah

Have you ever dreamt a disturbing dream but cannot remember it? The Sages recommended saying the following prayer while the kohanim are blessing the people:

“Master of the World! My dreams and I belong to You. If the dreams are good, then bolster them like the dreams of Joseph. And if they need to be remedied, fix them like the bitter waters that Moses sweetened.

Just as You transformed wicked Balaam’s curses into blessings, so too, make all of my dreams be for the best.” (Berachot 55b)

Transforming Bad Dreams

There are two ways in which evil tidings may be transformed into good ones. In the first way, the means remain disturbing, but the final outcome is good. One example of this is Joseph being sold into slavery and his subsequent imprisonment in Egypt. All of the various causes were adverse, incurring much hardship for Joseph. But the ultimate result - Joseph’s rise to greatness, and his ability to provide sustenance during the years of famine - was certainly for the best.

However, it is even better when the causes are also transformed into positive ones, so that the end is achieved through propitious means. An example of this type of transformation occurred with Balaam. God could have let Balaam curse the people of Israel, and only later changed his curses to blessings. But instead, God “placed a hook in Balaam’s mouth,” as the Midrash describes God’s complete control over Balaam’s powers of speech. Only blessings came out his mouth. Thus, even the means - Balaam’s prophecies - were favorable.

We pray that our dreams should be completely transformed for the good. Like Balaam’s “curses,” we want both the ends and the means to be auspicious and beneficial.

(Sapphire from the Land of Israel. Adapted from Ein Eyah vol. II, p. 274)
ravkooktorah.org

fw from hamelaket@gmail.com
www.matzav.com or www.torah.org/learning/drasha
Parsha Parables By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

Drasha Parshas Balak
Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

You have to approach something from the right view. At least that’s what Balak, the king of Moab, tried to convince his prime sorcerer who futilely tried to curse the Jewish nation. Though Bilaam had a notorious reputation, with for curses that never failed and the ability to cast spells upon whomever he desired, this time it didn’t work. He tried, for a large fee, to curse the Jewish nation, who were camped opposite of Moab; but each time he opened his mouth blessings and not curses were emitted. “How can I curse when G-d is not angry,” he exclaimed (Numbers 23:8). Each time the mission failed, Balak flew into a rage. Bilaam attempted to subvert G-d’s intentions and appease Him with sacrifices — all to no avail.

Balak tried another strategy. “Come with me to a different place from there you will see them; however, you will see its edge and not all of it — and you will curse it for me from there” (Numbers 23:13). It didn’t work either.

I had a difficult time understanding the new strategy. What’s the difference if Bilaam were to see all of Israel or he would stand in a place that only offers a partial view? Is the G-d of Israel not ever-present, protecting them in part as well as in whole? Why would a curse work when Bilaam only viewed Israel from a partial perspective?

A pious and very talented Jewish scholar was placed on trial in a small Polish town outside of Lvov. The charges, brought by a local miscreant, were based on some trumped-up complaint. The young scholar was beloved to his townfolk as he served in the capacity of the town’s shochet (ritual slaughterer), chazzan (cantor), and cheder rebbe. Thus, many people in town were worried as he appeared before a notoriously anti-Semitic judge.

As he presented the charges, the judge mockingly referred to him as Mr. Butcher. In fact all through the preliminary portion of the kangaroo court, the judge kept referring to the beloved teacher and cantor as a butcher, meat vendor or slaughterer. Finally, the young scholar asked permission to speak. “Your honor,” he began, “before I begin my defense, I’d like to clarify one point. I serve in many capacities in this shtetl. The people at the synagogue know me as the cantor. The children at the school and all of their parents know me as the teacher. It is only the animals that know me as the butcher!”

The commentaries explain that Bilaam knew that the power of his curses would only take effect by finding a small breach in the beauty of Israel — a breach that he could expand with the power of his evil eye. He looked at all of Israel and could not find any flaw to amplify and use as a curse. Balak advised him to use another ploy. He made a suggestion that would be followed for generations by all the detractors of Jews. “Only look at

them," he said, "from a partial perspective. Go up to the edge of the mountain; you shall see their edge and not all of them — and you will curse them for me from there" (Numbers 23:13).

Balak told Bilaam to concentrate on some poor aspects of the people. It is always possible to find a few exceptions to a most ethical and moral nation. There are those who stand on the edge of the mountain and take a partial view. They talk about Jews who may be accused of crimes or improprieties. They dissect individuals and embellish what they perceive as character flaws or personal faults. They point to those flaws as if they represent the entire person, as others point to harmful Jews as if they were the entire nation. And then they shout their curses. But Bilaam could not find the breach that he was looking for. Because Israel as a nation, as well as each individual Jew, cannot be judged by anything less than a total picture – for we are all one.

Good Shabbos

Dedicated in loving memory of our grandmother, Betty Blum of blessed memory.

By Mark & Jolene Bolender & their children Elchanan, Miriam, & Lana

fw from hamelaket@gmail.com

from: Rabbi Yochanan Zweig <genesis@torah.org>

to: rabbizweig@torah.org

subject: Rabbi Zweig

Insights Parshas Chukas-Balak Tammuz 5780

Yeshiva Beis Moshe Chaim/Talmudic University

Based on the Torah of our Rosh HaYeshiva HaRav Yochanan Zweig

This week's Insights is dedicated in loving memory of Faiga bas Rav Nachum z"l.

Sponsored by Mrs. Channah Finkel & Family.

"May her Neshama have an Aliya!"

A Giant Debt

...Og, king of Bashan, went out against them, he and his entire people, to do battle in Edrei. Hashem said to Moshe, "Do not fear him, for into your hand I have given him..." (21:33-34)

This week's parsha ends with the tale of the remarkable encounter between Moshe Rabbeinu and Og, the giant-king of Bashan. Og had been one of the Nephilim (those that fell or "fallen angels" see Rashi on Bereishis 6:4); a race of giants from the time before the great flood. He was known as "the escapee" because he survived the destruction of the flood (see Rashi on Bereishis 14:13). The possuk tells us that Moshe was worried about meeting Og in a war.

At first glance, this seems a little odd. Bnei Yisroel had just soundly decimated Sichon king of Cheshbon, who had a reputation as one of the mightiest warriors in the world. Why was Moshe suddenly worried about fighting Og? Rashi (21:34) explains that almost 500 years prior Og had done a favor for Avraham Avinu. Moshe was afraid that the merit of this kindness to Avraham Avinu would stand for him and, perhaps, render him invulnerable.

What kindness had Og done for Avraham? In Parshas Lech Lecha (Bereishis 14:1-12), the Torah relates some of the details of the epic war that embroiled nine kingdoms. Four kings went to war against five kings and soundly defeated them and many other nations that were in their path. One of the nations that was utterly destroyed was the Rephaim, a nation of giants, and Og was the lone survivor ("fugitive"). In addition, one of the five kings who was defeated was the king of Sodom, where Avraham's nephew, Lot, resided. Og came to Avraham to inform him that his nephew had been taken captive by the four kings. This was the kindness that Og did for Avraham Avinu, that had Moshe concerned about meeting Og in battle.

However, this is difficult to comprehend. Rashi (Bereishis 14:13) very clearly states that the reason Og came to inform Avraham what had happened to Lot was for his own selfish reasons. He desired to marry Sarah, who according to the Gemara (Megillah 15a) was one of the most beautiful women to have ever lived. Og hoped that Avraham would feel

impelled to enter the war and in the course of the fighting he would be killed; thereby clearing a path for Og to be with Sarah. Thus, Og had very selfish reasons for giving Avraham Avinu news about his nephew; so how is this act considered such a great merit for him?

Imagine for a moment that someone is attacked by a mugger and struck upon the head. Following this unfortunate event, the victim heads to the nearest hospital to be examined. The doctors decide to perform a CT scan of his head to be sure that there isn't any more extensive damage.

Miraculously, the CT scan reveals that while there is no permanent damage from the mugger's blow, there is a tumor that is slowly growing inside the skull that must be removed. This tumor might have very likely killed this person and perhaps not have been caught in time had he not been mugged. Does this victim now owe a debt of gratitude to the mugger?

Of course not. In the case of the mugger, the victim never wanted to suffer a severe blow to the head. That it, providentially, happened to work out is really just the hand of Hashem. However, in the case of Og, Avraham was well aware of risks he was taking by entering a war with the four kings. Yet, Avraham desired to have the information that Og was providing. The fact that Og had his own agenda doesn't lessen the kindness to Avraham; Og was providing Avraham a service that he wanted. Doing a kindness for someone as great as Avraham Avinu was reason enough to give Moshe pause. Therefore, Hashem had to reassure him.

The Torah is teaching us a remarkable lesson in hakaras hatov, and something most of us strive hard to avoid. We see from this story that we must feel indebted to someone who does us a kindness even if he has his own reason for doing it. Often, we work very hard to try to ascribe a motivation to a benefactor that would seem to paint them as self-serving, or in the very least as not totally altruistic. Naturally, we do this to lessen our feeling of obligation to this person. This is wrong. The Torah is teaching us that we must appreciate any kindness that is done for us, irrespective of the benefactor's motivation.

Ignoring the Pain

He sees no iniquity in Yaakov, nor does He see transgressions in Yisroel, Hashem his God is with him and the friendship of the king is with them (23:21).

Rashi (ad loc) explains this to mean that Hashem is not exacting in His judgement of Bnei Yisroel; in His great love for them, he disregards their transgressions even when they sin. This possuk's reassuring expression of Hashem's kindness in judgement readily explains why it was chosen to be included in our liturgy on Rosh Hashanah, notwithstanding that the evil Bilaam is the source of this observation.

Yet, this verse doesn't seem to conform to normative Jewish thinking. On the contrary, we are taught that Hashem is extremely critical of the Jewish people; the Talmud (Bava Kama 50a) states that Hashem is exacting to a hairbreadth in His judgement of the righteous, and that anyone who says that Hashem disregards sin is forfeiting his life. How can Rashi then say that Hashem simply disregards our sins?

There are two dimensions to every sin. When a person sins, his actions represent a defect in his character, a flaw that must be repaired in order for him to perfect himself. With regard to this aspect of sin, Hashem is infinitely exacting; He allows no imperfection to be ignored, after all, that is why we were created and put on this earth - to perfect ourselves.

Hashem, therefore, judges His people with the greatest strictness in order for us to cleanse ourselves of all flaws.

However, there is another dimension to sin, one that Hashem does disregard: The pain and insult that we cause Him, so to speak, by rebelling against Him and ignoring His demands of us. In truth, of course, Hashem is never affected by us, our mitzvos do not add to Him and our sins do not detract from Him. But as R' Chaim Volozhin explains (Nefesh Hachaim 1:3); our actions have very real affects in the myriads

of worlds that have been created. We add "light and holiness" and sustain these worlds by doing righteous acts. The whole construct of creation is an expression of Hashem's desire to have a relationship with mankind. The nature of this relationship is what is affected by our transgressions. Thus, when Chazal say that on Rosh Hashanah Hashem ignores our sins, this is referring to the pain and hurt we have inflicted on our relationship with Him. He absolutely disregards the hurt from the pain that we have inflicted on the relationship by flouting His authority and rebelling against Him. He only judges us on the flaws in our character that have led to these transgressions; this is because He desires to see us perfect ourselves.

Did You Know...

This week's parsha includes the story of Bilaam (a famed non-Jewish prophet and sorcerer) and Balak (the king of Moab). Balak feared that the Jews would attack his people and therefore employs Bilaam to curse them. Hashem forbids Bilaam from doing so and each time he tries he ends up showering the Jews with blessings instead. Here are some additional facts about this dark sorcerer:

One of the commonly known facts is that Bilaam was on a very high prophetic level, and there is actually a discussion comparing his prophecy to that of Moshe Rabbeinu's. The reason for this was because Hashem knew that the gentile nations would, in defense of their many sins, claim that it was only because they didn't have someone who was on Moshe's prophetic level to guide them, so he provided them with Bilaam (Me'em Lo'ez Balak 1 22:5).

Balak knew of Bilaam because they were from the same town, and Bilaam even prophesied that Balak would one day be king. Additionally, he knew that Bilaam was powerful because he had hired him before in wars and they had been victorious (ibid).

At first, they tried performing various acts of sorcery on the Jews, but when those had no effect, they resorted to cursing. In actuality, Balak was a greater sorcerer than Bilaam, and it would have been below him to consult Bilaam, but when he saw that witchcraft was ineffectual, he sent for him.

Another fairly well known fact is that the Gemara says that Bilaam knew the precise moment every day when Hashem is angry at the world. This precise moment is known to be in the first three hours of the day, and is debated as to whether it is 1/4 of a second, or even as little as 1/16 of a second. This tiny amount of time isn't enough for most curses, obviously, but he actually only needed enough time for the word "kalem - annihilate them." Interestingly, Hashem held back his anger at that time, otherwise the Jews would have been destroyed (Me'em Lo'ez Balak 1 22:6).

According to one source, Bilaam was actually Lavan (Yaakov's father-in-law). According to another source, he was Lavan's son, and yet others say that he was just metaphorically compared to Lavan (Sanhedrin 105a). Bilaam has no share in the world to come, and was deformed; he was lame in one of his legs, and was blind in one of his eyes (ibid).

As a dirty sorcerer, he performed sorcery with his loins. By means of certain phallic occult rites, he would call up spirits of the dead and cause them to settle upon it (ibid).

Showing an affinity for marketing, Bilaam was the architect of the plan to entice the Jews to sin with the women of Midian. He designed the tent situation in order for the women to lure the men in - old women selling silk outside, and young women selling inside for less (ibid).

Interestingly, all four of the Jewish ways to execute somebody (stoning, burning, beheading, and strangulation) were used on him. They actually hung him over a fire, stoned him hanging there, and then cut his head off so he fell into the fire (Sanhedrin 106a).

Strangely, according to one opinion, Bilaam was only thirty-three years old when the Jewish people executed him (ibid).

Talmudic College of Florida

Rohr Talmudic University Campus

4000 Alton Road, Miami Beach, FL 33140

fw from hamelaket@gmail.com

<http://www.israelnationalnews.com/Articles/Author.aspx/1199>

Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

chiefrabbi.org

Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

Dvar Torah: Chukat

Some of the greatest blessings are wrapped up in a curse

An example of this can be found in Parshat Chukat. The Torah tells us how Hashem had sent a plague of fiery serpents among the people. The nation called to Hashem for mercy and in reply he said to Moshe, "Place a fiery serpent at the top of a pole, 'vhaya im hashach hanachash et ish,'" – "and it shall come to pass if any person had been bitten by a snake," – "vilibit el nachash hanechoshet vechai" – "that person should just look at the fiery serpent on the pole and he would live."

Notice that this statement starts with the word, "vhaya," and there's an alternative word in Tanach which is, "vayehi" and they mean the same thing.

According to the Gemara in Masechet Megila, a statement starts with vayehi when it introduces bad news. However if a statement starts with vhaya, according to the Midrash in Bereishit Rabba, that's a sign that good news will follow.

So surely this was a 'vayehi' moment and not a 'vhaya' scenario?

Somebody had been bitten. The person's life was in danger. Others around them had died. And yet the Torah says, "vhaya?"

The Meshech Chochma explains beautifully. He points out that just before this there is another 'vhaya': "vhaya kol hanashuch vra'ah otoh v'chai." This would follow for every person who had been bitten.

The Meshech Chochma says, this includes even somebody who was already ill and now on top of this a snake had bitten them. So if somebody were suffering from a terminal illness and during the course of that illness they were bitten, they had only to look at the snake on the pole and they would be cleared of their entire illness. They had a total refuah shleimah. What started out to be a double plague for them ended up opening the door to them becoming fully healed.

And so it is often in life. We see what for us appears to be a 'vayehi moment'. We are full of dread and yet, in reality, it provides a great opportunity, good things follow. And on the contrary, sometimes we appear to be facing a 'vhaya scenario' where everything looks wonderful, but actually, there is a lot that we should be concerned about.

And that is why in our Rosh Chodesh bentsching at the beginning of every month we pray to Hashem: please give us "chayim sheyimalu mishalot libenu letova" – we add the word 'letova' for good. Please God, answer all of our prayers for the good. Don't give us all that we ask for because sometimes we might be praying for the wrong thing. Please channel our prayers in the right direction so that what we ask for will always be a blessing, recognising that sometimes the best of blessings are wrapped up in a curse.

Shabbat shalom.

Rabbi Mirvis is the Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom. He was formerly Chief Rabbi of Ireland.

fw from hamelaket@gmail.com

from: TorahWeb <torahweb@torahweb.org>

to: weeklydt@torahweb2.org

subject: TorahWeb

www.torahweb.org/thisweek.html

torahweb.org

Rabbi Eliakim Koenigsberg

A True Chassid

When Balak sends messengers to convince Bilam to curse Klal Yisrael, initially Bilam refuses to come; only after repeated cajoling does Bilam finally agree. Bilam cautions Balak, however, "I cannot transgress the word of Hashem (Balak 22:18)", and later he adds, "Whatever word G-d puts in my mouth, that is what I will speak (22:38)." Bilam promises to follow Hashem's command precisely. And yet, when Bilam sets out on his journey with the officers of Moav, the posuk says that Hashem was angry at Bilam for going (22:22). Why was Hashem angry if He had given Bilam permission to go and Bilam had promised to listen to all of His instructions?

Rav Elchonon Wasserman (Kuntres Divrei Sofrim 1:23-24) explains that while Hashem did not explicitly demand that Bilam not go to Balak, Bilam understood that Hashem really did not want him to go. Nevertheless, Bilam went with the hope that he would be able to convince Hashem to agree to curse Klal Yisrael (Rashi 22:20). Hashem was not angered by Bilam because he disobeyed Him, but rather because he did not care to follow Hashem's true desire (ratzon Hashem).

The navi Yirmiyahu warns that those who sacrifice to Ba'al will be punished for acting in a way that Hashem never commanded, nor spoke of, nor even considered in His heart - "lo tzivisi, lo dibarti, v'lo alsa al libi (19:17)." The Targum there explains that these three expressions refer to three parts of Torah: Hashem's commands are the mitzvos of the Torah, His speech is the words spoken by the prophets, and "considerations of His heart" refer to his true desire (ratzon Hashem) even if it is not expressed explicitly by the Torah or the prophets.

What does this third category include? Rav Elchonon explains that Hashem's will refers to mitzvos d'rabbanan. Although these mitzvos are not expressly decreed by the Torah, they are included in the general command to listen to the chachamim of every generation - "lo asur" (Devarim 17:11). What's more, sometimes there is a hint (asmachta) to a mitzvah d'rabbanan in the Torah itself. The Ritva (Rosh Hashana 16a) writes that whenever there is an asmachta in the Torah to a mitzvah d'rabbanan it shows even more so that Hashem wanted that mitzvah to be observed. He just left it to Chazal to institute the mitzvah.

But there are other behaviors, besides mitzvos d'rabbanan, that are included within this category of ratzon Hashem. The Ramban comments in several places that sometimes the Torah mentions a general principle but does elaborate on any specifics related to that principle. The purpose of the Torah is to give an all-encompassing directive which can serve as a guideline in multiple circumstances, a sort of spirit of the law which can inform our behavior in many different contexts. That is the idea behind the concept of "kedoshim tihiyu" (Vayikra 19:2) - to exercise self-control in all mundane activities, not to be overly indulgent in physical pleasures. Similarly, the word "shabboson" (Vayikra 23:24) teaches that one should act on Shabbos in a way that demonstrates that Shabbos is different than the rest of the week. It is not enough to simply abstain from the thirty-nine biblically prohibited types of work. One must also behave in a manner that is in the spirit of Shabbos. A third overarching principle mentioned by the Torah is the concept of "v'asisa hayashar v'hatov" (Devarim 6:18). This idea demands, in a general sense, that a person act in an exemplary fashion in all of his interpersonal dealings. He should be a model of honesty and fairness; he should go beyond the call of duty (lifnim mishuras hadin) to compromise and to make peace; he should speak pleasantly with other people.

Each one of these three concepts does not legislate any specific actions. But they do give us a general sense of what kind of behavior Hashem desires, what is included in the spirit of the Torah, and they obligate us to live up to that ratzon Hashem.

The Steipler Gaon (Birchas Peretz, Vayikra) points out that there are many mitzvos which are voluntary in nature (mitzvos kiyumiyos), like the offering of certain korbanos, separating extra money for tzedakah, and eating matza throughout the yom tov of Pesach. The purpose of these

mitzvos is to give us the opportunity to demonstrate our love for the Ribbono Shel Olam and our desire to fulfill his ratzon. The Ramchal (Mesillas Yesharim, Ch. 18) suggests that this idea is really the essence of the middah of piety (chassidus). He writes, "The root of chassidus can be epitomized by the statement of Chazal, 'Praiseworthy is the man whose labor is in Torah, and who pleases his Creator - v'oseh nachas ruach l'yotzro,' (Berachos 17a)" One who truly loves Hakadosh Boruch Hu will not be satisfied with simply fulfilling his obligations. Rather, he will look for opportunities to demonstrate his love. He is like a son who adores his father and is always looking for a chance to show his affection. If his father were to barely express his desire for something, even in a half sentence, the son would do everything he could to fulfill his father's desire. That is the attitude of a true chassid. He so desires to please Hakadosh Boruch Hu, to give him a nachas ruach, that he will try to fulfill mitzvos in the best possible way, and to even expand on his obligations in order to demonstrate his love for Hashem.

Too often, when it comes to mitzvos, people are minimalists. They are satisfied with simply carrying out what is demanded of them. As long as they fulfill the letter of the law, they feel that they are beyond reproach. But the true ben Torah appreciates that fulfilling ratzon Hashem involves much more than simply doing what is dictated explicitly by the Torah. When we strive to perform mitzvos meticulously, and we are careful not just with the letter of the law but the spirit of the law as well, we demonstrate our boundless love for Hakadosh Boruch Hu, and we can hope to merit His loving embrace in return.

Copyright © 2020 by TorahWeb.org

fw from hamelaket@gmail.com

http://ohr.edu/this_week/insights_into_halacha/

Ohr Somayach

Insights into Halacha

Rabbi Yehuda Spitz

blogs.timesofisrael.com

Ben-Tzion Spitz

Chukat: The Blessing of Satiation

Wealth after all is a relative thing since he that has little and wants less is richer than he that has much and wants more. - Charles Caleb Colton

During the fortieth year of the wandering of the Jewish people in the desert, Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron, dies. The Midrash states that the well which miraculously followed the people of Israel throughout their desert journey disappeared after Miriam's death. Now the people of Israel are thirsty without water. They cry out. God tells Moses to take his staff, take Aaron, and talk to a particular rock, a rock which will provide them with water. The text tells us that Moses hits the rock (as he did forty years earlier, but we don't see him talking to the rock, as God had directed this time). God subsequently punishes both Moses and Aaron with the decree that they won't cross the Jordan river into the Promised Land, but that rather, they would both die in the desert.

However, Moses' hitting the rock is nonetheless effective and a stream of water gushes out of the rock, enough to quench the thirst of the people and their flocks.

The Meshech Chochma on Numbers 20:8-11, based on the verses of the miraculous provision of water, analyses the idea of the blessings of sustenance and perhaps challenges our conventional notions of wealth and success.

It would be reasonable to believe that the more possessions we have, the more money, property, investments, and resources we can draw on, the wealthier we are, the greater the material success we have achieved. But the Meshech Chochma states that such plenty is not the highest form of blessing. It's not the quantity, but the quality that counts. And the

quality he's referring to is the blessing of being satiated, of being satisfied with little. He explains that when God truly gives the most exalted and elevated material blessings that He can, he doesn't rain down quantities of material wealth on the person. Rather, God bestows the much more refined and pleasant blessing of making sure the person is satisfied and content with little.

He quotes the Midrash which states that the people of Israel weren't truly comforted until they were told that they would be satiated with little, that a little bread and a little water would be all they would need to be satisfied.

When the people of Israel don't live up to God's expectations, then they get the secondary level of sustenance: quantity. At that level they are compared to the animals, hence the verse states that the water was "for them and their flocks."

May we achieve true levels of wealth, where our needs and desires are reduced and we become satiated and satisfied with little.

Dedication - To all the people that need to reinvent their careers and businesses.

Balak: God's time versus human time

It is only in appearance that time is a river. It is rather a vast landscape and it is the eye of the beholder that moves. - Thornton Wilder

In the Torah reading of Balak, the anti-hero, the sorcerer Bilaam, famously sets out to curse the nation of Israel. Bilaam also famously fails, but his failure created some of the most beautiful and poetic blessings to be bestowed upon Israel. Out of his flowery language, the Meshech Chochma on Numbers 23:21 teases out a profound understanding of time, both from a human as well as from a divine perspective.

In our current "scientific" linear thinking, when we think about the passing of time, we typically think in terms of Past, Present, and Future. First is what came before, then we reach our present time and finally, time leads us into the unknown future. However, there are some common patterns in the description of events which can be found in biblical verses that differ from our modern way of thinking about time. One pattern can be described as "Present, Past, and Future." For example, the verse "God rules, God ruled, God will rule." First, we see the present, then we look back at the past and only at the end do we look forward to the future. The Meshech Chochma explains that according to human nature, we first deal with what's in front of us, the present. After that, we examine our memories of the past, a record of which we may find in our minds. Finally, we may look to the future, a hazy and unclear vision that our imagination might conjure. The progression is from firm sensing to memory to tenuous imaginings.

However, God's perspective on time vis-à-vis humans is entirely different. God created Time. God is beyond Time. It is ultimately incomprehensible to try to describe Time from God's point of view. Nonetheless, the prophets, when they deliver God's messages, are attempting just that, and their description of God's time is indeed different. One example is from Isaiah 44:6: "I am First (Past), I am Last (Future), and besides Me, there is no god (Present)." God's time refers to the Past first, the Future second, and the Present third.

The Meshech Chochma describes that for God, Time is one tapestry. He sees in one glimpse, if you will, a timeline that for us mortals stretches into eternity in both directions. God mentions the Past first, which stretches backward into infinity. He then moves on to the future, which ventures forwards into infinity. Finally, He mentions the Present, that infinitesimal slice of reality suspended between the two poles of eternity. May we, mere mortals, seize the present, appreciate the past, and look forward to the future.

Dedication - To Technion's discovery of the "branched flow" of light.

Illuminating.

Shabbat Shalom

Ben-Tzion Spitz is a former Chief Rabbi of Uruguay. He is the author of three books of Biblical Fiction and over 600 articles and stories dealing with biblical themes.

fw from hamelaket@gmail.com

<http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Columnists/>

Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz

Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz is rabbi of the Western Wall and Holy Sites

Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz

Parashat Chukat

Logic and Obedience

This week's Torah portion of Chukat tells us one of the commandments that became a conceptual symbol: the commandment of "para aduma", the red heifer. To someone unfamiliar with it, it sounds odd, but perhaps that is one of the commandment's important messages. Let's learn about the red heifer...

According to the Torah's statutes, a person who comes in contact with a human dead body, or was even under the same roof as a dead body, becomes impure. The implications of this impurity focus on the proximity of this person to the Temple. Nowadays, when we have no Temple, there is almost no practical significance to these halachot (Jewish laws) about impurity. In actuality, we have probably all been under the same roof as a body, in a hospital or at a funeral, for example. But when the Temple stood in Jerusalem, it had significance. Such a person could not enter the area of the Temple or come in contact with the sacrifices, and certainly could not eat food that had purity, such as certain sacrifices or "truma" that was given to the kohanim (priests) from the agricultural harvest.

So, what was this person supposed to do? The Torah offered him a way to purify himself using the red heifer. The details of the commandment are less important for our purposes, but we will describe them briefly. A red heifer is located that has never been used. It is slaughtered and its meat is burned, and then the ashes are mixed with pure stream water followed by a special ceremony that lasts seven days during which drops of this water are sprinkled on the impure person. This description sounds foreign to our western ears, but this does not mean that western culture is better than ancient rituals customary thousands of years ago. The significance of these ceremonies can only be understood after profound intellectual and emotional efforts.

For the sake of historical accuracy, it should be noted that the ceremony of the red heifer was mocked even in ancient times. The well-known commentator Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, France, 11th century) said the following about the words "This is the statute of the Torah" at the beginning of this week's parasha:

"Because Satan and the nations of the world taunt Israel, saying, 'What is this commandment, and what purpose does it have?' Therefore, the Torah uses the term 'statute.' I have decreed it; You have no right to challenge it."

(Rashi, Numbers 19, 2)

This is not to say that the commandment has no reason or logic. It would be mistaken to think that G-d gives commands that are meaningless.

Maimonides, the great Jewish thinker, writes adamantly about this:

"But the truth is undoubtedly as we have said, that every one of the six hundred and thirteen precepts serves to inculcate some truth, to remove some erroneous opinion, to establish proper relations in society, to diminish evil, to train in good manners, or to warn against bad habits."

(Guide to the Perplexed 3, 31)

This doesn't mean we understand everything. This definitive statement is a general one, but when we look at each commandment individually, we definitely find some we don't understand. This is where the value of obedience comes into play, or as Rashi put it: "I have decreed it; You

have no right to challenge it.” As people, as Jews, we obey G-d’s statutes and are sure this is the right and best way to live.

When we look at the stories in the book of Exodus of the tabernacle being built, we find a sentence that is repeated many times. Everything that was done, was done “as the Lord had commanded Moses.” The significance of the repetition is to emphasize that when we are facing a commandment from G-d, we must obey. We can try to understand it, to research and delve into its meaning, to ask and to search for answers. But at the same time, the obligation to obey cannot be undermined. The commandment of the red heifer reminds us, today as well, of the limits of human understanding, and of the obligation and need to recognize our proper place in the face of a commandment from G-d.

Parashat Balak

Loyalty to Family and Nation

This week’s Torah portion, Balak, is almost completely about seeing the Jewish nation from the outside. It describes Balak, the Moabite king who lives on the eastern side of the Jordan, who fears the Israelites encamped opposite his land. This fear leads him to a famous sorcerer named Balaam who lives in Mesopotamia. After a double negotiation, Balaam agrees to go with Balak’s emissaries in order to curse the Jewish nation. On the way, Balaam has a unique experience with a talking donkey who admonishes him for his deeds. At the end, Balaam arrives in Moab, stands on the mountain, and looks out onto the plain where the Israelites are camped. He tries to curse the nation from the top of the mountain, but surprisingly, the words that come out of his mouth are words of blessing and praise.

The end of the parasha is much less pleasant. It tells us about the nation that was seduced by the daughters of Moab and of the plague that spread through the nation. The reader can’t help but ask himself if there is a connection between the stories. We will see the answer to this question only in two weeks, in Parashat Matot, where we hear Moses say who it was who advised Moab to use the weapon of sexual temptation. It was no other than Balaam himself.

If we listen to Balaam’s words, we can understand his devilish scheme. Balaam understood what the Jewish nation’s unique qualities were and it was those he tried to harm.

When Balaam was at the top of that mountain looking out at the Jewish nation camped in the valley, he expressed his wonderment:

“How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel!” (Numbers 24, 5)

What was Balaam so amazed by when he saw the tents in the Israelites’ camp? The great commentator, Rashi, explains this based on the words of the midrash: “For he saw that the entrances were not facing each other”. Balaam noticed the norms of modesty that were customary in the Jewish nation. He saw that each family made sure not to look into the tent of its neighbor, and he appreciated this. He understood that family values require effort, and he understood that marriage requires effort, restraint, and loyalty.

Balaam noticed something else as well. He defined the Jewish nation with the following sentence:

“...it is a nation that will dwell alone, and will not be reckoned among the nations” (Ibid 23, 9)

Balaam noticed not only the loyalty exhibited in a marriage or a family, but also that which was national – cultural loyalty. He understood that the value that was the foundation of the Jewish people is loyalty to its unique traditions and values. We know that Balaam was right, because thousands of years after him, we can look back on the history of the Jewish nation. Indeed, the Jews have been amazingly loyal to their values. The Jewish nation that was dispersed all around the world remained the eternal nation due to its values and traditions.

Balaam maliciously tried to destroy the values of modesty and the national uniqueness of the Jewish people. When he saw that he wasn’t

able to curse them, he advised the king of Moab to send Moabite girls to seduce the Israelites into promiscuity and idol worship. Balaam discovered the nation’s weak point in that moment in time and tried to destroy its values of morality and faith in this despicable manner. And we have to admit that Balaam was right. Preserving the values of modesty and family and being careful not to assimilate has protected the Jewish nation for generations. Nowadays, it’s even harder. At a time when permissiveness prevails and values that were clear-cut are now ambiguous, it becomes harder to preserve these values. But if we remember that our very national and cultural existence depends on this, we can have the fortitude to face these challenges, draw courage from the glorious heritage of our forefathers, and bequeath this heritage to future generations.

The writer is rabbi of the Western Wall and Holy Sites.

fw from hamelaket@gmail.com

from: Torah in Action /Shema Yisrael <parsha@torahinaction.com>

subject: Peninim on the Torah by Rabbi A. Leib Scheinbaum

Shema Yisrael Torah Network

Peninim on the Torah - Parshas Chukas-Balak

פרשת חקת-בלק תש"פ

Chukas

ויקחו אליך פרה אדומה תמימה

And they shall take to you a completely red cow, which is without blemish. (19:2)

The *mitzvah* of *Parah Adumah*, Red Cow, which is used to purify one who is *tamei meis*, spiritually defiled by coming in contact with a dead body, has become known as the paradigmatic *mitzvah* whose reason is beyond human cognition. Actually, this is true with regard to all *mitzvos*. We have no idea of the reason for any one of the 613 *mitzvos*; it is just that some are easier to relate to, because they are common-sensical. The laws of *Parah Adumah* are replete with anomalies. The most difficult to accept is the fact that the *Kohen* who carries out the purification process himself becomes contaminated, while the subject of the process is rendered *tahor*, spiritually clean. The *Talmud Kiddushin* 31a records a well-known story relating to *Parah Adumah*, which is pertinent to our *parsha*.

The *Talmud* asks how far one must go to carry out the *mitzvah* of *Kibbud Av*, honoring one’s father, properly. *Chazal* cite a story from which they derive the extent to which one should go in fulfilling this *mitzvah*. In the city of Ashkelon, a gentile by the name of Dama ben Nesinah lived, whom the sages approached concerning a business deal. He explained that the key to his storage room lay beneath his father’s pillow, upon which he was presently sleeping. The sages were prepared to spend 600,000 *shekel* for stones required for the *Eiphod*. He was willing to forgo the extraordinary profit in order not to disturb his father’s rest. A year later, his herd produced a *Parah Adumah*, which would obviously warrant a high price from the sages. When they approached him again, he said, “I know that I can charge you anything that I want. All I ask, however, is the amount of money I lost due to the *kavod*, honor, I gave my father.” The question is obvious: Hashem could have rewarded Dama ben Nesinah with any form of compensation. Why did Hashem choose the *Parah Adumah* as His medium?

The *Kotzker Rebbe, zl* (quoted by *Horav Yissachar Shlomo Teichtal, zl*), explains that the answer lies in Dama’s response to the Sages: “I know that you will give me all that I ask.” When a gentile is prepared to forgo a huge compensation in order to fulfill the *mitzvah* of honoring his father, it presents a demanding allegation against the Jewish people. [Our devotion and commitment to Hashem is under scrutiny when a gentile who does not live by Torah values and is impacted by societal mores also demonstrates strong commitment.] In order to remove this implication

from *Klal Yisrael*, Hashem provided the *Parah Adumah* as Dama's financial remuneration. For the most part, the *mitzvos* which Hashem has commanded us to observe are *sichliyuis*, logical. They make sense and do not challenge our way of thinking. *Chukim* are those *mitzvos* for which a facile and logical rationale is unavailable.

Dama ben Nesinah had not been commanded to honor his father. He did so simply out of logical deduction, as repayment for his father having raised him. Gratitude was his motivator, not *mitzvah*. Thus, while Dama was prepared to lose money in order to honor his father, it was not to be compared to the extent to which a Jew will go to carry out Hashem's command – even when it defies rationale, such as with the *Parah Adumah*. When the sages visited Dama and offered to pay him an enormous sum of money for his *Parah Adumah*, they manifested true Jewish commitment to a *mitzvah*. What the gentile did was for something he understood to be appropriate. What *Chazal* did was for something they did not understand, but rather, for something in which they believed. This is a powerful lesson for us. It is not about reward. We serve Hashem because we are His chosen children. Children neither question a father (or mother), nor do they have to understand why they are being told to do something. (Obviously, this is a broad statement and requires qualification according to the specific case.) “Why?” is a question that plagues everyone at one point or another. “Why suffering?” “Why me?” “Why this *mitzvah*?” There is no end to the “whys.” I saw an insight from *Horav Shlomo Freifeld, zl (Reb Shlomo, by Rabbi Yisrael Besser)*, that is inspiring. *Rav Freifeld* would visit a certain school that addressed the spiritual educational needs of students who were encountering challenges in these areas. During one such visit, he asked the students whether they had any questions for him. These are some of the questions that troubled them: “Have the Jews not suffered enough?” “Why must we continue to suffer?” “I want so badly to be religious, to keep *Shabbos*, but my parents fight me every step of the way. Why does Hashem make it so difficult for me?”

The *Rosh Yeshivah* listened and was visibly moved by their sincere questions: “I wish I had such profound questions as you do. Truthfully, I really do not know the answers to your questions. You see, every one of us confronts challenges, *nisyanos*, trials, which makes his particular job/mission very difficult. Our responsibility is to persevere, not to figure out why we have these trials and tribulations. Success means to try to be normal, to enjoy life as much as possible even with these obstacles in our path. We just have to face each day with a smile and do our jobs, not understand why. Remember, we are here to enjoy life.”

I would like to present one more aphorism which is pertinent to this Torah thought. *Rav Freifeld* quoted his revered *Rebbe, Horav Yitzchok Hutner, zl*, “My *Rebbe, zl*, explained the two phrases in the *brachah, Asher bachar banu*, ‘That He chose us,’ and *u'nasan lanu es Toraso*, ‘and He gave us His Torah,’ as follows: The first part, that Hashem chose us, refers to the fact that we are *Yidden*; the second part is thanking Him for giving us the *mitzvos*.

“I believe that, in the early part of the century (twentieth), the *nisayon*, the struggle, was for the second part of the *brachah*. Every single man, woman and child felt like a *Yid*. They took pride in their identity as Jews. They thanked Him, *Asher bachar banu*.

“Their battle was for *kiyum ha' mitzvos*, the second part of the *brachah*. It was difficult for them to keep the *mitzvos b'poel*, practically. Today, we have it so easy. We no longer have to struggle to keep *mitzvos*. (We are able to serve Hashem wherever we want.) The battle has shifted to the first part: *asher bachar banu*. The struggle today is to be *Yidden*.

“We must remember: Without the *asher bachar banu*, there is no *v'nasan lanu*. We must be *Yidden* first.” Bearing the mantle of Judaism means that one is proud of his chosenness, of his distinction. His commitment to serve Hashem demonstrates this pride; it is the only way.

וישלח ד' בעם את הנחשים השרפים ... ויאמרו חטאנו ... והיה הנשוך וראה אתו וחי

Then Hashem let the poisonous snakes loose against the people ... They said, “We have sinned” ... that everyone who is bitten when he looks upon it he shall live. (21:6,7,8)

It was not the first time; once again, the people did not receive what they perceived they needed. Their first reaction was to complain, “This is no good; that is no good.” Immediately, they directed their discontent against Hashem. They did not doubt the authenticity of *Moshe Rabbeinu's* leadership; they had issues with Hashem's guidance. They would never reach the Promised Land if they were to continue along this path in the wretched wilderness. Veritably, they had nourishment from the *manna*, but what about some real food and drink? Furthermore, obtaining *manna* was effortless, almost monotonous. They wanted some excitement in their lives. Life was too easy. They had become so accustomed to Hashem's beneficence that they took it for granted. When we take something for granted, we fail to appreciate not only our benefactor, but also the value of the gift. The people had convoluted and slanted the excellent quality of their gift, processing it as if it were insufficient for them.

How does one punish an ingrate? Simply retract the gift, allow him to see that all of the protection and good life to which he had become accustomed was not natural; it was the super-natural result of Heavenly intervention, or miracle.

Vayishalach has been translated, “Then (Hashem) let loose,” rather than “(Hashem) sent.” *Horav S.R. Hirsch, zl*, explains the difference between “sending” and “letting go.” *Shlach*, send, in the *kal* form (*vayishlach*), means to send something in motion towards a goal. *Shaleach*, in the *piel* form (*va'yeshalach*) predominantly means to let something go, to allow it to follow its natural course, to refrain from holding it back. *Rav Hirsch* explains that here, too, Hashem did not send the serpents, but rather, let them go; He did not hold them back.

These serpents made their home in the wilderness. They were standard fare of which the wilderness travelers should be wary. Hashem withdrew His restraining power, and the serpents returned to their natural habitat. When the people came to the stark realization that their “boring” life was actually far from monotonous; when they opened their eyes to see the constant dangers which dog a person's steps as he journeys through the wilderness of life, they realized – and were prepared to acknowledge – that their “monotony” was a miracle. Their Heavenly Father, concerning Whom they had been complaining, had sponsored this miracle.

The cure? When the snake bit an individual he had only to fix his gaze upon the image of the serpent and allow it to be embedded in his mind. In this way, he came to grips with the reality of life, with the verity that each and every Jew must repeat and hold dear: Every breath we take in our life is a fresh gift from Hashem's might and goodness. The next time that they might be moved to complain, the people would remember what it means to live without the Heavenly protection to which we have all become accustomed. The image of the serpent will be permanently impressed upon the mind of the one who has been bitten. There is no more effective therapy.

Balak

וישלח מלאכים אל בלעם בן בעור

He sent agents to Bilaam ben Beor. (22:5)

Is it possible that, concerning all outward appearances, one not only manifests himself as righteous, but he even receives the fringe benefits and special treatment accorded to a *tzaddik*; yet, he remains throughout a despicable *rasha*, wicked person, of the lowest order? Yes! *Bilaam* showed us that it can be done. *Bilaam* was Hashem's “gift” to the pagan/gentile world, so that they could not assert that they had no worthy spiritual leadership. *Bilaam* was on a lofty spiritual plane, a prophet of the highest order. He was the gentile world's *Moshe*. So what happened? He refused to purge himself of his flawed *middos*, character traits. He was a wise man who knew quite well how to conceal his moral turpitude.

Everything that he said and did could have two connotations. As a spiritual leader to the pagans, they looked at Bilaam's positive side and assumed that what he was doing had a lofty moral/spiritual foundation, while, in truth, he was an immoral, perverted megalomaniac who probably even believed his own ruse.

Wherein lay the difference between our quintessential leader, Moshe *Rabbeinu*, and the pagan's poor excuse for a leader? Outwardly, Bilaam acted the part of the prophet. Where did Moshe and Bilaam part ways? Let us look at one instance in which they both demurred listening to Hashem, and observe the difference. The mere fact that Bilaam stalled in accepting Hashem's instructions indicated the spiritual place that he had achieved. The Almighty instructed Bilaam to go with Balak's agents. Bilaam stalled for more money and greater honor. He (of course) attributed his delay to G-d, claiming that He was not pleased with the idea that he would go with Balak's agents. This was but one more indication of a man who spoke out of both sides of his mouth, or that his heart (intention) and his mouth (what he said) were not aligned.

Moshe also delayed going to Egypt. He demurred accepting the leadership role of the nation out of respect for his older brother, Aharon *HaKohen*, who had until then been the acting spiritual leader of the people. Thus, we observe two members of the spiritual elite: one who is truly righteous; and one who is evil-incarnate. For all intents and purposes, however, to the unsuspecting, superficial observer, they appear to be one and the same.

I write this during the coronavirus plague that has assaulted the world. It is the day after that first *Shabbos* when thousands of observant Jews throughout the world were compelled to *daven* without a *minyan*, relegated to their homes for *davening*, *krias haTorah*, *Rosh Chodesh bentching*, etc. It was trying for everyone, but nonetheless spiritually uplifting as each one of us poured out our hearts in unison, albeit physically apart, to the Almighty, pleading for mercy and an end to the scourge that was devastating the world. The next day, I met someone who remarked that he, too, did not go to Temple, so now, for a change, we were both the "same." I replied that actually there was a major difference between us: I felt bad that I did not go. This was more than I could say for him. (Veritably, he never had the opportunity to attend services as a youth – growing up in a totally secular family. As a result, he was alienated from Jewish religious observance.) The reality is that *Yiddishkeit* is much more than going to *shul*. It is what takes place in *shul*: *Davening* to Hashem makes the experience special. During the especially difficult period of isolation which we all are experiencing it is evident that our *davening*, our actual speaking to Hashem, is what has created the relationship and makes the *shul* experience so meaningful. Sadly, unless one has undergone the spiritual uplift experienced upon *davening* with a *minyan*, it is nothing more than *shul* attendance.

Horav Arye Leib Heyman, zl, explains that Bilaam is a prime example of *ohr v'choshech meshamshin b'arvuyyah*, fusion/intermingling of light and darkness. Indeed, in Bilaam's case, the very light itself was corrupted and distorted by his darkness, his flawed character traits. If a person does not expunge the evil/darkness within him, then light and darkness will coexist and influence him equally. Does not a bit of light dissipate much darkness? *Horav Chaim Shmuelevitz, zl*, explains that a human being is different. The darkness of a human being is not merely the absence of light. It is, rather, a powerful force in its own right, asserting itself within a person, demanding equal time, even in the company of such a powerful force of light.

Regrettably, one is able to achieve exemplary erudition, to be a scholar of note, a man whose words inspire many, an individual whose students cling to him and are even spiritually elevated by his words and actions, even though his character may be defective. One might argue that Bilaam was a pagan. What more can we expect from an individual whose concept of spiritual devotion and service was the Peor godhead, who was serviced

by relieving oneself in its presence. Could one of "ours" set such an example? Doeig Ha'Adomi was the head of the *Sanhedrin*, Achatofel was David *HaMelech's rebbe*; and who can ignore the "greatest" of all: Yaravam ben Nevat? Concerning these three individuals who personified *ohr v'choshech mishamshin b'arvuyyah*, *Chazal (Sanhedrin 106B)* teach: *Ein lahem chelek l'Olam Habba*; "they forfeited their portion in the World to Come." Apparently, *choshech*, darkness, evil, can take a front row to light, even in a Jew.

We derive from here that external activity and expression do not define a person's true relationship with Hashem. In order to authenticate our superficial actions, we must purge whatever inner blemishes we have that impugn their integrity. Then, others can see us as we really are.

מה מבו אהליך יעקב

How goodly are your tents, Yaakov. (24:5)

What impressed Bilaam about the Jewish tents? Bilaam saw that the entrances to one another precluded intrusions on the privacy of other families. Furthermore, tents refer to the *batei medrash*, study halls. (According to *Rashi*, it refers to the *Mishkan* and *Batei Mikdash* when they were extant). At first glance, *tznius*, privacy and modesty, and study halls do not seem to coincide, unless the Torah is suggesting to us that the study hall – or Torah study of those who occupy the *bais hamedrash*, who devote themselves wholly to studying Hashem's Torah – should reflect *tznius*, privacy and modesty, in their every demeanor. Studying Torah is the loftiest ideal, reserved for the few who are willing to relinquish the material fringe benefits of this world for the eternal spiritual reward associated with Torah learning. It should not become a source for one-upmanship and calling attention to one's own achievements. Everything that we do should be executed with modesty.

It is notable that Bilaam focused on *tznius* more than any of the other wonderful attributes in which *Klal Yisrael* excels. The nation that had reached the apex of spirituality during the Revelation at *Har Sinai* was merciful, meek and kind. Why did Bilaam curtail his curse, blessing them instead, specifically because of their modesty? *Horav Tzvi Kuschlevsky, Shlita*, cites a life-saving case in which modesty played a leading role. In the struggle between Shaul and David, the king wanted to kill the man who would marry his daughter and ultimately assume the position as king. The story goes that Shaul was pursuing David, so that David and his entourage fled to a cave and made it their hiding place. Shaul was unaware of this. At some point, Shaul required use of the "facilities." Indoor plumbing was not yet available, so he entered the cave which afforded him a degree of privacy. He had no clue that he was entering David's hiding place.

David saw the king entering his place of refuge and resisted killing him. *Halachically*, Shaul was a *rodef*, pursuer; thus, pursuant to the laws of self-defense, David could save himself by taking his pursuer's life. Instead, David cut a corner of Shaul's garment, later sending a message: "It could have been you." What did David observe about Shaul that impelled him to change his mind, to restrain himself from killing Shaul?

The *Rosh Yeshivah* explains that David saw this element of modesty in the way Shaul covered himself, even though he was in an apparently empty cave. No one would see him, so why did he bother? He understood that modesty is not only from others, but for oneself. Hashem is always with us wherever we go. To act immodestly is to imply, "I do not care." Respect for Hashem and respect for oneself should motivate a person's modesty. A person who dresses or acts immodestly indicates that he or she is insecure and requires public recognition, regardless of the consequences.

The *Maharal* suggests that the trait of *tznius* protects one from being subjugated. One who makes himself hidden and covered will not be covered by anyone else. When Bilaam took note of our *tznius*, he realized that Hashem would grant us an extra dose of protection. We have the added protection that accompanies concealment.

Horav Eliyahu Dushnitzer, zl, was one of the premier *talmidim*, students, of the *Chafetz Chaim*. As *Mashgiach* of the nascent Lomza *Yeshivah* in *Eretz Yisrael*, he was spiritual mentor to many of the future *gedolim*, Torah giants, in the Holy Land. He was extremely careful in areas of *kashrus*; thus, he did not ever eat the food served by the *yeshivah*. He had a woman cook for him in accordance with his exacting standards.

During the British Mandate, the British were paranoid about spies. They would send anyone whom they remotely suspected of sabotage to labor camps in British-controlled Kenya. Understandably, conditions in a labor camp situated in a third world country were deplorable, at best. Sadly, one of those incarcerated by the British and destined to be sent to Kenya was Motke, the only son of the woman who cooked for the *Mashgiach*. Distraught and filled with anguish, the woman ran to *Rav Elya* and pleaded with him to give her a blessing that would spare her son.

Rav Elya was acquiescent, and he said that not only would he give her a *brachah*, he would also give her a *z'chus*, merit, to ensure the blessing's successful outcome. He then went on to suggest that she strengthen herself in her *tznius*. While her dedication to *kashrus* was peerless, she could improve certain aspects of the way she dressed. *Rav Elya* told her that he was certain that her son would be spared if she would initiate certain changes to her dress code. In fact, he said, "If you listen to my directive, Motke will be home on Friday two weeks hence."

The cook listened intently. She loved her son, but the manner of her dress represented who she was. She was prepared to upgrade her performance of any other *mitzvah*, but *tznius* was asking too much. *Rav Elya* was adamant about her son's safety in return for her commitment to *tznius*: Which would it be?

When the woman came home and related her conversation with *Rav Elya* to her husband, he was floored, "You are ready to turn over the world to get our Motke back, but you refuse to augment the way you religiously dress? If the *Mashgiach* made you a promise, why would you refuse to listen to him?" Her husband's words penetrated her mind, and she immediately made the halachic alterations to her clothing. She was now confident that Motke would arrive in two weeks, in time for *Shabbos*.

Two weeks passed, and all Friday she stood waiting by the window. Finally, she could wait no longer, and, with tears streaming down her face, she went to *bentch licht*, light the *Shabbos* candles. Right then, the door flung open, and Motke was home! Tears of joy replaced those of anguish as she lit the candles with her son standing next to her.

"Tell me, Motke," she asked, after the candles were lit, "how were you able to leave jail? How did you get home from there?"

"Today, we were instructed to pack our belongings in preparation for our trip to Kenya," Motke began. "I stood in line with the other prisoners, knowing that this was it. I would never return to my Land, my house, my family. Suddenly, a British general called and motioned for me to follow him. He led me from one gate through another until I was out of the jail. He said to me, 'Run home!' I had no idea where I was. I jumped into the first car that stopped when I waved, and the driver brought me home."

The mother and father were certain that the British general was none other than *Eliyahu HaNavi*, who was sent to intervene in Motke's behalf. All this was in the merit of *tznius*.

Va'ani Tefillah

על חיינו המסורים בידך – Al chayeinu ha'mesurim b'Yadecha. For our lives which are entrusted in Your hand.

First and foremost, we thank Hashem for giving us our lives. We take life and health for granted until they hang precariously in the balance right before our eyes. It is crucial that we not take them for granted and that we appreciate their Source and appropriately express our gratitude. Hashem is with us from our first breath until our last. *Al kol neshimah u'neshimah tehallel Kah*; "For each and every breath that we take, we must praise Hashem." Nary a moment of our existence passes that He does not will it to be. Perhaps this idea is best expressed by the words,

ha'mesurim b'yadecha; "which are entrusted in Your hands." Why hands? Do "hands" grant life? I would think that the gift of life is issued from the mouth through a command. The concept of the mouth granting life is pejorative, however, since it might imply that Hashem says, "Live" and a person lives. When we attribute life to Hashem's hands, it is as if we are saying that He holds us up. Without Hashem's constant support, we would fall flat on our face.

Sponsored in memory of our dear Mother and Grandmother

Gizi Weiss – גיזל בת ישראל ע"ה

Morry & Judy Weiss, Erwin & Myra Weiss and Grandchildren

Gary & Hildee Weiss, Jeff & Karen Weiss, Zev & Rachel Weiss, Elie & Sara Weiss, and Brian

"Love and memories are gifts from G-d that death cannot destroy"

Hebrew Academy of Cleveland, ©All rights reserved

prepared and edited by Rabbi L. Scheinbaum

fw from hamelaket@gmail.com

From Jeffrey Gross <jgross@torah.org>

reply-To neustadt@torah.org, genesis@torah.org

To weekly-halacha@torah.org

Subject Weekly Halacha

by Rabbi Doniel Neustadt (dneustadt@cordetroit.com)

Yoshev Rosh - Vaad HaRabanim of Detroit

Weekly Halacha :: Parshas Chukas :: Amplified Sound Waves

Rabbi Doniel Neustadt

Dedicated to the speedy recovery of Mordechai ben Chaya

Question: Can one fulfill a mitzvah which involves hearing something recited or read, e.g., hearing Havdalah or the reading of the Megillah, by hearing the words over a telephone or from the loudspeaker of a public address system?

Discussion: The answer to this question, extensively debated by the poskim, depends on the halachic interpretation of certain technical facts. Both the telephone and the public address system "transform" sound waves in air, e.g., spoken words, into an electrical current within the instrument, and, ultimately, back into sound waves. It is debatable, though, how the halachah views these sound waves: 1) Are they an extension of the speaker's voice, merely amplified or carried to a distance that the unassisted human voice cannot reach; or are they 2) distinct from the speaker's voice, since the loudspeaker or receiver "creates" new sound waves from something—an electrical current, which is not sound? Translated from technical into halachic terms, the question is whether the mitzvah in question can be fulfilled only with the authentic, original voice of the speaker, or also by means of sounds generated by electrical impulses derived from the original voice and occurring simultaneously with it.

Some earlier authorities were of the opinion that the sound heard over the telephone or from the loudspeaker is the original speaker's voice[1]. It is permitted, therefore, in their opinion[2] to listen to the Megillah read over a public address system or to Havdalah over the telephone. Other authorities[3] maintained that the halachic view of amplified sounds is difficult to resolve and cannot be clearly decided. Thus in their opinion it remains questionable if mitzvos can be performed by means of a public address system or telephone. It follows, therefore, that only under extenuating circumstances—when no other possibility exists—is it permitted to fulfill a mitzvah by means of a loudspeaker or telephone[4]. However, the majority of the authorities[5] who have studied this issue, including *Rav S.Z. Auerbach*[6] who researched it extensively with the aid of a team of technical experts[7], have ruled conclusively that the sound waves emitted by a loudspeaker or telephone receiver are definitely not the speaker's original, authentic voice. In addition, they rule unequivocally that one's obligation cannot be discharged by hearing an electrically generated sound even if the original speaker's voice is

heard simultaneously. Accordingly, one cannot fulfill a mitzvah by listening to sound waves from a microphone or a telephone[8]. In practice, therefore, it is clear that when another possibility exists, mechanical voice amplifiers should not be used to fulfill a mitzvah. For example, a woman who is home alone and has no one to make Havdalah for her should rather recite Havdalah herself[9] than listen to it being recited by someone else over the telephone. Even if she cannot or will not drink wine, grape juice, or beer, it is preferable for her to recite Havdalah over coffee[10], tea (with or without milk)[11], or milk alone[12] (and, according to some poskim[13], undiluted grapefruit, orange or apple juice as well) than to listen to Havdalah recited over the phone[14]. If one finds himself in a situation where otherwise he cannot recite Havdalah or hear the Megillah at all, e.g. in a hospital, and there is no one who can come until Tuesday evening[15] to make Havdalah for him, he may have to rely on the poskim who permit listening to blessings, etc., over the telephone[16]. But in a situation where someone could come and recite Havdalah for him before Tuesday evening, the correct procedure is to wait until then for Havdalah to be recited[17]. If he is weak, he may eat before hearing Havdalah. If he is not weak, and he anticipates that he would be able to hear Havdalah before chatzot Sunday, he should refrain from eating until then[18].

A related issue is whether or not it is permitted to answer Amen to a blessing or Kaddish heard over a microphone, telephone, or during a live telecast transmitted by satellite. Some poskim[19] permit this and do not consider the answering of Amen etc., to be *l'vatalah* (“for nothing”), since they remain undecided about the halachic status of amplified sound waves, as explained above. In addition, some poskim[20] permit it, based on the ancient precedent set in the great synagogue in Alexandria[21], where most people did not hear the blessings being recited because of its vast size, but were nevertheless permitted to answer Amen when signaled to do so by the waving of a flag.

Rav Auerbach, though, rejects this comparison and rules clearly that it is prohibited to answer Amen upon hearing a blessing in this manner. He agrees, however, that one who is in the vicinity of the speaker, even though he hears the speaker’s voice only over a microphone, etc., is permitted to answer Amen, as was the case in Alexandria where everyone was inside the shul and part of the congregation that was davening[22].

1. *Minchas Elazar* 2:72; *Minchas Aharon* 18 (quoted in *Tzitz Eliezer* 8:11).
2. Their argument is based partially on the fact that sound waves—even without being mechanically transmitted—are carried through the air before they are heard by the listener. The fact that the microphone amplifies those sounds and furthers their distance should not be considered halachically problematic.
3. Rav T. P. Frank (*Mikraei Kodesh, Purim* 11 and in *Minchas Yitzchak* 2:113); *Igros Moshe, O.C. 2:108; O.C. 4:126*. [See, however, *Igros Moshe, E.H. 3:33 and O.C. 4:84*.] Rav Y.E. Henkin (*Eidus l’Yisrael, pg. 122*) also does not render a clear decision on this issue. See also *Minchas Shelomo* 1:9 quoting an oral conversation with the *Chazon Ish*.
4. *Igros Moshe, O.C. 4:91-4* (and oral ruling quoted in *Kol ha-Torah, vol. 54, pg. 18*); *Tzitz Eliezer* 8:11. See also *Shevet ha-Levi* 5:84.
5. *Da’as Torah, O.C. 689:2; Gilyonei ha-Shas, Berachos* 25a; *Eretz Tzvi* 1:23; *Kol Mevasser* 2:25; *Mishpatei Uziel* 1:5; 1:21; *Minchas Yitzchak* 1:37, 3:38; *She’arim Metzuyanim b’Halachah* 129:25; 193:6; *Yagel Yaakov, pg. 280*, quoting Rav Y.S. Elyashiv and Rav C. Kanievsky; *Kinyan Torah* 1:75; *Yechaveh Da’as* 3:54; *Moadim u’Zemanim* 6:105. See also *Teshuvos P’eas Sadcha* 1:126 who quotes a similar ruling from Rav C. Soloveitchik.
6. *Minchas Shelomo* 1:9.
7. Rav Auerbach and *Yechaveh Da’as* opine that those poskim who dissented from this ruling were not familiar with the relevant technology.
8. Rav Auerbach makes clear that the same ruling applies to hearing-impaired individuals who cannot hear without a hearing aid. *Igros Moshe, O.C. 4:85* is hesitant over whether a hearing aid works exactly like a microphone.
9. Women are obligated to recite Havdalah and may recite it themselves. Although there is a well-established custom that women do not drink the wine from the Havdalah cup, this custom is discounted when a woman needs to fulfill her obligation of Havdalah; *Mishnah Berurah* 296:35; *Aruch ha-Shulchan* 296:5.

10. Instant or brewed (Rav S.Z. Auerbach, *Shemiras Shabbos K’hilchasah* 60, note 18).
 11. The tea or coffee should be cooled off enough to drink at least 1.6 fl. oz. within 3-4 minutes.
 12. *Aruch ha-Shulchan* 272:14; *Igros Moshe, O.C. 2:75*.
 13. *Tzitz Eliezer* 8:16; *Shemiras Shabbos K’hilchasah* 60:5.
 14. If a woman refuses to recite Havdalah on her own and there is no one available to recite it for her, her husband (or another man or woman) may repeat it for her, even if he has already fulfilled his obligation earlier; see *Mishnah Berurah* 296:36; *Aruch ha-Shulchan* 296:5; *Da’as Torah* 296:8; *Ben Ish Chai, Vayeitzei* 22. The blessing over the candle, though, should be omitted, in the opinion of several poskim.
 15. *O.C. 299:5*.
 16. *Igros Moshe, O.C. 4:91-4; Tzitz Eliezer* 8:11.
 17. In this case, one should specifically not listen to Havdalah over the phone, since then it may not be repeated for him when the visitor comes.
 18. *Mishnah Berurah* 296:19, 21. Rav Y.S. Elyashiv, too, is quoted (*Yad le-Yoledes, pg. 135*) as ruling that it is better to eat before Havdalah than to listen to it over the telephone.
 19. *Igros Moshe, O.C. 4:91-4*.
 20. *Yechaveh Da’as* 3:54.
 21. See *Succah* 51b and *Tosafos, ibid*.
 22. See *Halichos Shelomo* 1:22-15.
- Weekly-Halacha, Text Copyright © 2012 by Rabbi Neustadt, Dr. Jeffrey Gross and Torah.org.*
 Rabbi Neustadt is the *Yoshev Rosh* of the *Vaad Harabbonim of Detroit and the Av Beis Din of the Beis Din Tzedek of Detroit*. He could be reached at dneustadt@cordetroit.com
Weekly Halacha © 2020 by *Torah.org*.