

OHRNET

THE OHR SOMAYACH TORAH MAGAZINE ON THE INTERNET

PARSHA INSIGHTS

LETTING IT ALL HANG OUT

"...the people began to commit harlotry with the daughters of Moav." (25:1)

It is axiomatic in our times that nothing is worse than having 'hang-ups.'

Our role model is unrestrained freedom: Freedom from complexes. Freedom from guilt. The pundits of the media invite us constantly to 'let it all hang out.' There is almost nothing of which we should be ashamed. Homosexuality is no more than a matter of personal choice. Casual physical relationships are the norm. Nakedness, we are told, is absolutely no cause for embarrassment. The body is natural and therefore its processes should give us no cause for shame whatsoever.

Interestingly enough, a vestige of modesty still creeps in here and there: We have not reached the stage where all bodily functions are performed openly in public. But really, according to current morality, there seems to be little reason why this should be so.

We might think that 'letting it all hang out' is a modern phenomenon. However, there is a striking similarity between our own times and events that happened over three thousand years ago.

After the Jewish People left Egypt, Balak, who was King of Moav at that time, sent word to Bilaam, the prophet of the nations, to curse the Jewish People. Bilaam was unsuccessful in his direct attacks on Israel. However, he was able to make the Jewish People stumble by other means: His advice was that the Moabite women should lure the

Jewish men into immorality. The mission of the Jewish People is to be a holy nation, and thus Bilaam knew that licentiousness would provoke Divine wrath.

The Moabite women, however, exacted a price for their services. They refused to have anything to do with the Jewish men until they had worshipped their idol, *baal peor*.

How was *baal peor* worshipped?

A devotee of *baal peor* would eat lentils and beer, and then perform his

"When Man uses his power of speech to add spirituality to the world, he fulfills his true purpose..."

bodily functions in front of the idol. In fact, the more that one abused the idol, the more devout was one's worship considered.

How was it possible for the Jews to be drawn after such a disgusting cult? What was its allure?

The essence of the cult of *baal peor* was 'let it all hang out.' The underlying intention was to shatter all barriers. Once there are no barriers, anything is permissible. If no physical process causes shame then all morality speedily goes out the door.

ASININE TALK

"And Hashem opened the mouth of the donkey..." (22:28)

What does it mean when a donkey starts to speak?

The essential difference between Man and the animals is the power of speech. Man is called "*The Speaker*." This is the quality that epitomizes his elevation above the animals.

The power of speech is given to Man to elevate the physical world, to inject spirituality into the physical.

Describing the creation of Man, the Torah says that Hashem "*blew into his nose a spirit of life*." The Targum Onkelos translates this phrase as "He blew into his nose a **speaking** spirit." In the Hebrew language, the word for "thing" — "*davar*" — is connected to the same root as "*dibur*" — "word." Speech is the interface between the world of things — the physical world — and the spiritual world.

When Man uses his power of speech to add spirituality to the world, he fulfills his true purpose, he epitomizes the '*speaking spirit*.' He elevates both himself and the world with him. But when he degrades the power of speech by using it to curse and to denigrate, then Man becomes no more than a talking donkey.

SWEETER THAN HONEY?

"Do not go with them; do not curse this people, for they are blessed." (22:12)

"Hashem said to Bilaam 'You shall not curse the people.' Bilaam said to Hashem 'If so, I will bless them.' Hashem said 'They do not need your blessing, for they are blessed.'

As the proverb says: "We tell the bee 'Neither your honey, nor your sting'." (Rashi)

Which non-kosher animal produces kosher food?

The Bee. Although the bee is a non-kosher animal, honey is itself kosher. The reason that honey is

PARSHA OVERVIEW

Balak, the king of Moav, is in morbid fear of the *Bnei Yisrael*. He summons a renowned sorcerer named *Bilaam* to curse them.

First, Hashem appears to *Bilaam* and forbids him to go. But because *Bilaam* is so insistent, Hashem appears to him a second time and permits him to go. While en route, a *malach* (angel, messenger from Hashem) blocks the path of *Bilaam's* donkey. Unable to contain his frustration, *Bilaam* strikes the donkey each time it stops

or wants to make a detour. Miraculously, the donkey speaks, asking *Bilaam* why he is hitting her. The *malach*

instructs *Bilaam* regarding what he is permitted to say, and what he is forbidden to say regarding the Jewish People. When *Bilaam* arrives, King *Balak* makes elaborate preparations in the hope that *Bilaam* will succeed in the curse. Three times *Bilaam* attempts to curse, and three times a blessing issues instead. *Balak*, seeing that *Bilaam* has failed, sends him home in disgrace. The *Bnei Yisrael* begin sinning with the Moabite women, and worshipping the Moabite idols, and are punished with a plague.

One of the Jewish leaders brazenly brings a *Midianite* princess into his tent, in full view of Moshe and the people. *Pinchas*, a grandson of Aaron, grabs a spear and kills both evildoers. This halts the plague, but not before 24,000 have died.

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FATHERLY ADVICE

*Tidbits From the 'Ethics of the Fathers'
Traditionally Studied on Summer Sabbaths*

*IF I DO NOT ACHIEVE ON MY BEHALF WHO WILL ACHIEVE FOR ME?
IF I HAVE ACHIEVED, WHAT AM I? IF NOT NOW, THEN WHEN?*

Hillel, Avos 1:14

No one but myself can achieve anything for me in spiritual growth. But even when I have already achieved a measure of growth I must humbly measure this gain against what is expect-

ed of me, always bearing in mind that the opportunity I have in my youth may not be available in later life and the chance I have to achieve in this world will certainly not be repeated in the World to Come.

לע"ן
מדת נחמה בת ר' אברהם ע"ה
נלב"ע ח"י תמוז תש"מ
ת.נ.צ.ב.ה.

PARSHA Q&A ?

1. Why did the Moabites consult the Midianites regarding the best strategy to use against the Jewish people?
2. What was Balak's position before he became king of Moav?
3. Bilaam was an evil person. Why, then, did Hashem grant him prophecy?
4. On what basis did Balak think that Bilaam's curse would be effective?
5. Why didn't the elders of Midian remain overnight with Bilaam?
6. When did Bilaam receive his prophecies?
7. Hashem opened his conversation with Bilaam by asking, "Who are these men with you?" What did Bilaam deduce from this question?
8. How do we know that Bilaam hated the Jewish People more than Balak?
9. What is evidence of Bilaam's greed?
10. In his conversation with his donkey, how did Bilaam shame himself in front of the princes?
11. Why was Bilaam's donkey slain by the *Malach*?
12. Bilaam compared his encounter with an angel to someone else's encounter with an angel. Who was the other person and what was the comparison?
13. What does the word '*shefi*' mean?
14. Why did Bilaam tell Balak to build seven altars?
15. What tragedy befell the Jewish People at Rosh Hapisgah?
16. Why are the Jewish People compared to 'lions'?
17. On Bilaam's third attempt to curse the Jewish People he changed his strategy. What did he do differently?
18. What were Bilaam's three primary characteristics?
19. What did Bilaam see that made him decide not to curse the Jewish People?
20. In verse 24:19, Bilaam stated that a king, "shall rule and destroy the remnant of the city." Who is the king and which city?

BONUS QUESTION?

And Hashem put speech into the mouth of Bilaam...(23:4) Why didn't Hashem allow Bilaam to curse the Jewish People? Hashem could simply ignore Bilaam's curse, so what bad affect would the curse have had?

I DIDN'T KNOW THAT!

"...May my soul die the death of the righteous, and my end be like theirs." (23:10) The word "righteous" — "*yesharim*" — has the same numerical value as "*Avos Haolam*" — "the universal Patriarchs." Add the last letters of the names of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov and you get 142, the same numerical value as the name "Bilaam." This is what Bilaam referred to when he said "May my **end** be like theirs"! (i.e., the end of their names)

• *Ba'al Haturim*

HAFTORAH: MICHA 5,6

WALKING HUMBLY

"O Man, what is good and what does Hashem seek from you, only to do justice and love kindness, and walk humbly with your G-d." (6:8)

"To walk humbly with your G-d" — this refers to the *mitzvos* of providing for a bride and escorting the dead — (Rashi).

To perceive the true essence of a person, one

must see him both in moments of transcendent joy — providing for a bride — and abject sorrow — escorting the dead.

For in these moments of extremity, the inner qualities are revealed in stark relief. Only then can it be seen whether he can be said "to walk humbly with your G-d."

• *Kochav M'Yaakov*

WEEKLY DAF

TAMID 33 - MIDOS 34 -37 - NIDDAH 3

THE MIRACULOUS DOOR

In the *Beis Hamikdash* there were seven gates opening into the *azarah* courtyard. The doors of all of them were made of gold except for the doors of Nikanor which were made of bronze, and stood at the eastern end of the main part of the courtyard where everyone entered from the *Ezras Nashim* to the *Ezras Yisrael*.

What was so special about these doors that they were placed in such an important place and remained in their original form, uncovered by gold?

In *Mesechta Yoma* (38a) we find that the answer is because miracles happened to these doors of Nikanor. What were those miracles?

Nikanor traveled to the Egyptian city of Alexandria in order to bring two special doors for the *Beis Hamikdash*. On the sea journey back with the doors, a storm threatened to sink the ship he was on. In a desperate effort to lighten the ship's load the sailors threw one of his doors overboard. As the storm continued to rage they wanted to throw the second door into the raging sea. Nikanor tied himself to the remaining door

and insisted that if it goes overboard he goes along with it.

At that moment the storm came to a halt and the door was saved. But Nikanor was distressed at having lost the other one. When they reached the Port of Akko the missing door suddenly appeared at the bottom of the boat. Another version is that a giant sea creature had swallowed it and spit it out on shore.

Since Heaven had so miraculously interceded to save the doors of Nikanor, they were considered special enough to occupy a place of honor in their original state and to bear the name of the hero who was ready to sacrifice his life to preserve them.

• *Midos 34a*

THE MAGICIAN'S OFFICE

One of the six offices in the *azarah* courtyard of the *Beis Hamikdash* had the interesting name of *Beis Haparveh*. It served as the site for salting the skins of animals which had been sacrificed, and on its roof was the mikveh used by the *Kohen Gadol* for his immersion on Yom Kippur each time he switched from his golden priestly garments to the special white ones he

wore while performing the Yom Kippur service.

But why was it called by this strange name?

The Gemara (*Mesechta Yoma* 35a) informs us that Parveh was the name of a sorcerer. There are two different explanations as to why the name of this mysterious sorcerer became attached to this office.

Rashi says that Parveh built this office through magic and it is therefore called by his name. Other commentaries such as Rabbeinu Chananel and Rambam provide a radically different and dramatic explanation.

This sorcerer Parveh was extremely curious to see the *Kohen Gadol* as he entered the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur to offer incense. He knew that no one was permitted to enter that area, so he dug a tunnel from somewhere in Jerusalem to underneath the Temple Mount in order to achieve his treacherous purpose. The point at which he was discovered and put to death was where this office was located and this incident which so dramatically highlighted the sanctity of the *Beis Hamikdash* was considered significant enough to memorialize it by calling the office by his name.

• *Midos 37b*

continued from page one

PARSHA INSIGHTS

kosher is because honey doesn't actually come from the bee's body. Rather, bees manufacture honey from the pollen that they gather. However, the bee's poisonous sting does come from the bee's body itself. (*Yoreh Deah* 81)

Bilaam was like the bee. All of his "honey" — his sweet blessings and prophecies about the Jewish People — did not come from him. In no way were they part of his nature. Rather, they were gathered from an outside source. Bilaam's venomous curses and foul plots, however, emanated from his true poisonous essence.

TUMOR AND TUMAH

"Amalek is the first of nations." (24:20)

One of the most critical factors in operating on a patient with a pathological disease is the necessity to remove all of

the tumor. If any of the diseased tissue is allowed to remain it will grow back and attack the patient with renewed vigor.

The physical world mirrors the spiritual. Israel and Amalek stand at opposite ends of the spectrum. Israel's role is to be a holy nation, to live a life of *kedusha*. Everything that Amalek does is aimed at destroying that life. The Torah refers to both Israel and its arch-enemy Amalek as 'firsts.'

That which is first contains everything that needs to be: A seed is a perfect microcosm of the oak that it will be one day. A microscopic cell has the entire genetic code to build a human life. In fact, any part of the human anatomy has the genetic code to build the entire structure.

Israel is called 'first.' "Holy to Hashem is Yisrael, the first of His produce." To fulfill the Torah obligation of tithing to the Levites, all it takes is one grain (*Chullin* 137).

Amalek is also called 'first.' "Amalek is the first of nations." Similarly, all it takes is one grain of *tumah* (spiritual corruption) to spread throughout the entire body and infect everything.

Thus, the Torah commands us in the strongest terms to eradicate every last vestige of the spiritual pathogen whose name is Amalek. For if even the slightest trace remains, it will grow back with an awesome virulence.

Sources:

Letting It All Hang Out -

Rabbi Chaim Shmulevitz

Asinine Talk - Rabbi Nota Schiller

Sweeter than Honey? -

She'earis Menachem

Tumor and Tumah -

Rabbi Mordechai Y. L. Zakash

HISTORICAL VERIFICATION OF THE TORAH

C E. K. from
Los Angeles, California
<kill@worldnet.att.net> wrote:

Dear Rabbi,
In Ask the Rabbi for Parshat Beha'aloscha, you wrote the following:

“Our tradition is a faithful, unbroken chain dating back to Sinai. (The evidence for this is a topic for another discussion.)”

I have often debated this with my learned, pious Talmudic scholar of a cousin. The discussion usually starts with me saying: “How can you rely on information ‘passed down’ orally, when it’s impossible to even get a phone message communicated correctly?” My cousin usually replies that the information is ‘correctly passed down’ because the entire known world witnessed the event, or made the law, what have you, and thus everything witnessed is supported. Myself, I still am not convinced. So here’s one vote for opening of the discussion of unbroken chains of oral tradition. As usual, thanks so much for your service, and keep up the good work. Shalom

Dear C. E. K.,

Because this is such a broad subject, I can only offer a partial answer in this short column. There won't even be room for a joke (but keep your eyes open for a pun or two).

First let's start with a fact everybody agrees upon: There exists today a group of people, the Jews, who claim the following: “3,300 years ago, millions of our ancestors experienced what they felt was G-d talking to them. We, their descendants, have an unbroken chain passed on through the millennia that tells us two things: (1) That the event took place, and (2) The contents of the message.” The Jews are the only people to ever make such a claim.

Let's first look at point number one.

How can you explain a group of people who claim to be descendants of millions of people experiencing the splitting of the sea, the manna and the Revelation at Sinai?

How did the first generation start believing it? A charismatic leader? A slowly evolving story? Mass hypnosis?

Could a leader rewrite the oral history of a people and get them to believe it happened to their own ancestors? Imagine Napoleon telling the French “In the year 750, G-d split the Rhine river for your ancestors, commanded them a set of all-encompassing laws, and they passed that experience down from generation to generation.” The people would say “What? Dad never told us that! Hey, Grandma, did your grandparents ever tell you about this?” Remember: We not only believe in the Exodus and Sinai, we also believe that we have an unbroken chain back to those events.

Or the slowly evolving story: The people ate sap from bushes that grew in the desert, but used to say “G-d sent us food from heaven” because they wanted to express the idea that all nature comes from ‘Above.’ One day, Johnny comes home from kindergarten and says “Dad, the teacher told us that food fell from the sky.” The father, reading a newspaper, grunts, “Uh huh,” and Johnny grows up with a misconception. Eventually, Johnny's misconception becomes the predominant belief. Slightly absurd. And What about Sinai? Was it really a volcano that ‘grew’ to become a mass prophecy of 613 commandments that we all agree upon?

Mass hypnosis? Martians? Now we come to a second problem. No matter what theory you concoct to imagine how such a belief got started, you must answer the following question: Why are we the only ones in history ever to make such a claim. Why, indeed, didn't Napoleon create such a belief? Why didn't Pharaoh or Hammurabi, Paul or Mohammed, Alexander or Julius, Lenin or Mao? They all could have ‘propheted’ greatly. No people, clan or country across the globe at any time in recorded history ever claimed that G-d convened their nation and spoke to them. Except us. Why?

Is it that the Jews were simply the most ignorant, superstitious, stupid and gullible people ever to walk the face of the earth? But then, having accepted this belief, they became the most scholarly, unyielding, skeptical people in the world, earning the title ‘People of the Book,’ surviving the ideological onslaughts of Christianity and Islam, giving their lives to pass on this belief, becoming a ‘light to the nations’ and spreading morality and monotheism to all humanity?

The Torah itself predicts that no one

else in history will ever make a similar claim: “Inquire into the earliest days, the past, from the day G-d created people on the earth, and from one end of the universe to the other: Was there ever such a great thing as this, or was there ever even heard a claim like it? Did a nation ever hear the voice of G-d speaking from the midst of the fire as you heard, and live (to tell about it)? Or did G-d ever attempt to come and take a nation out from the midst of another nation with miracles, signs, wonders, and with open expressions of Divine might, and with great awe, like all that Hashem your G-d did for you in Egypt in front of your eyes?” (Deuteronomy 4:32-34)

Now, how do we know the events and laws were transmitted faithfully? Well, we see Jewish communities dispersed across the globe for millennia: Europe, North Africa, Asia, Yemen, the Middle East. And although they had no central authority and limited means of communication, they all have the exact same Torah and the exact same oral explanations of it. (Obviously, there are some minor differences, but only the type you would expect. What's astounding is how few there are.) Even our Torah scrolls agree to the very last word.

Obviously, therefore, we have a remarkably faithful method of transmission. And the reason is also obvious: We never treated the Torah like a party-game or a ‘telephone message.’ Rather: “He heard it from his teacher 40 times.” “One who studies a chapter 101 times is incomparable to one who studies it only 100 times” “His father left him hundreds of ships, hundreds of fields. but he never saw any of them — rather, he traveled from teacher to teacher and studied Torah.” “Rabbi Akiva studied 40 years, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai studied 40 years...”

The Talmud is replete with examples of the Jewish People's total dedication to Torah study, sometimes suffering even torture and death for it. It's easy to see how such a nation kept the message intact.

YIDDLE RIDDLE

Lev Seltzer <levs@virtual.co.il> asks:

What holiday addition to the ‘grace after meals’ is it that most people don't say and hope they never have to?

Answer next week...

PARSHA Q&A!

Answers to this Week's Questions!

All references are to the verses and Rashi's commentary unless otherwise stated.

- 22:4 - Since Moshe, the leader of the Jewish people, grew up in Midian, the Moabites thought the Midianites might know wherein lay Moshe's power.
- 22:4 - He was a prince of Midian.
- 22:5 - So that the Gentile world could not say "If we also had prophets, we would also return to be good."
- 22:6 - He knew that Bilaam had helped Sichon to defeat Moav.
- 22:7 - They set for themselves a sign that if Bilaam didn't come right away, he would not be of help to them.
- 22:8 - Only at night.
- 22:9 - That Hashem isn't omniscient.
- 22:11 - Balak wanted to drive the Jewish People from the land. Bilaam sought to exterminate them.
- 22:18 - He told the princes that Balak should give him all of his gold, since otherwise Balak would need to hire many armies.
- 22:29 - He told his donkey, "Were there a sword in my hand, I would slay you." He was hired to destroy an entire nation through his power of speech, yet for a donkey he needed a sword!
- 22:33 - So that people should not point to it and say, "This is the donkey that silenced Bilaam." Hashem is concerned with human dignity.
- 22:34 - Avraham. Bilaam said, "Hashem told me to go, but later sent an angel to stop me. The same thing that happened to Avraham: Hashem commanded Avraham to sacrifice his son Yitzchak, and later He rescinded the command through an angel."
- 23:3 - Alone, silent.
- 23:4 - Corresponding to the seven altars built by the Avos. Bilaam said to Hashem, "The ancestors of the Jewish People built seven altars, but I alone have built a number equal to all of them."
- 23:14 - Moshe died there.
- 23:24 - They arise in the morning, and 'strengthen' themselves to perform *mitzvos*.
- 24:1 - He realized that enchantments wouldn't convince Hashem to allow him to curse the Jewish People. He hoped that by calling attention to their sins, he would be permitted to curse them.
- 24:2 - An evil eye, pride, and greed.
- 24:2 - He saw each Tribe dwelling without intermingling. He saw the tents arranged so that no one could see into his neighbor's tent.
- 24:19 - The king is the *Mashiach* and the city is Rome.

BONUS ANSWER!

The surrounding nations had faith in Bilaam's power of speech — as Balak said "I know that whoever you bless is blessed, and whoever you curse is cursed." Therefore, Bilaam's curse would have nullified their fear of the Jewish people, and given them courage to wage war against them.

• Abarbanel

RECOMMENDED READING LIST

RAMBAN

22:5 Balak's Rise to Power
22:20 Bilaam's Mission
22:23 The Donkey
23:16 Bilaam's Prophecy
24:20 Amalek

SFORNO

22:2 What Balak Saw
22:6 Bilaam's Power
23:22 Jewish Conquest

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