

SHABBAT SHALOM FROM CYBERSPACE**BALAK****Haftarah: Michah 5:6-6:8****JULY 23, 2016 17 TAMUZ 5776****The fast of the Seventeenth of Tamuz will be on Sunday, June 24.****DEDICATIONS: In memory of Reuben Ben Farha – our grandfather Reuben J Bibi – 22 Tamuz**

To subscribe or to unsubscribe, please reply to
ShabbatShalomNewsletter@gmail.com
 Newsletter archives now at BenaiAsher.Org

**Daily Minyan Mon – Thurs at 979 Third Avenue, 17th Floor,
 Artistic Frame at 4:00PM – Please join us! 212-289-2100 –
 Mincha– The most important tefilah of the day –Give us 11
 minutes and we'll give you the World To Come!**

Editors Notes

Recently I went out of my way to help someone. A friend asked me why? I explained that although I wasn't very close to the person, I knew that this person always had my back. The Urban dictionary defines, "Got Your Back" as an expression assuring someone that you are watching out for them. It comes from making sure one is safe by watching what's behind you when you're busy looking ahead.

Towards the end of this week's portion of Balak, the Torah tells us how Benai Yisrael were seduced by the women of Moab. The men succumbed to worshiping Baal Peor and subsequently sleeping with these women. The result of their idol worship, and their involvement with the Moabite women was tragic. The Torah writes: "The wrath of Hashem flared up against Israel". A devastating plague descended upon the people. Even more tragic was that this combined idolatry and harlotry went beyond the common man. Zimri, the son of Salu the Prince of the Tribe of Shimon took a princess of Midian, possibly the daughter of balak himself, Cozbi the daughter of Tzur into his tent. The Rabbis tell us that Moses froze. Pinchas the grandson of Aaron took note of the lack of action and stepped forward.

Pinchas consulted with Moses saying, "You taught us that one who commits an act as Zimri is committing in a public setting is guilty and if one is zealous he is permitted to kill those who are involved in the desecrating Hashem's name." The Midrash continues and explains that Moses tells had forgotten this law that was transmitted to him at Sinai. Moses responded to Pinchas by saying, "The one who reads the proclamation should be the agent to carry out the order!"

With that Pinchas grabbed a spear and risking his own life, personally executed Zimri and Cozbi in the midst of their act within Zimri's tent running a spear

through the man and the belly of the woman. His action brought an end to a plague

One has to feel for Moses. His dream of leading the people into the land will not be. His sister who watched over him as a child has died. His partner and right hand, his older brother Aaron has died as has pretty much every man who accompanied him out of Egypt, save for Joshua and Caleb. He must have felt very lonely in the midst of three million people. Who had his back?

It must have been a tremendous relief to Moses that in someone close to eighty years his junior, in his grandnephew Pinchas, he found someone who really had his back.

On Shabbat in our Synagogue we will celebrate something that very few people get to celebrate. We will be celebrating the 101st birthday of my friend David Golden. Mr. Golden is an amazing guy. He comes to Synagogue. He reads a book a day. He walks longer and faster than most of us. And he tells it like it is. He is a brilliant man, an inventor and a thinker. He has a tremendous love for the Jewish people and wishes more than anything that we would come together. He is generous and kind. He is the source for me at least of tremendous inspiration and encouragement. There is one more thing. Although he is close to twice my age, I know that David Golden has my back. He's proven this more than once, rising to defend me when others were afraid to. For this I am deeply grateful.

Knowing what it feels like when someone like David Golden has my back, I can imagine how much comfort Pinchas brought to Moses on that tragic day.

I pray that Hashem grant many, many more years of health and happiness to my friend, if not for his sake, than at least for mine and the rest of us.

Happy Birthday, Abal 120 and more, peaceful, prosperous, healthy and happy years.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Bibi

UK: It Wasn't a Gaffe Shoshana Bryen • July 18, 2016

The naming of Boris Johnson as Britain's Foreign Minister set off in his home country a storm of name-calling and hand-wringing that approximates the Democrat reaction to Donald Trump. Without wading into British politics, there is one specific incident that the Daily Mail called an impolitic "gaffe" that should be assessed at greater length -- and from a different angle:

Last November local [Palestinian] officials called off a visit to Palestine on safety grounds after the then-London mayor told an audience in Tel Aviv that a trade boycott of Israeli goods was "completely crazy" and supported by "corduroy- jacketed, snaggletoothed, lefty academics in the UK."

Palestinian officials accused him of adopting a "misinformed and disrespectful" pro-Israel stance and said he risked creating protests if he visited the West Bank.

Johnson was right on the merits: The Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement is largely a function of university campuses and has little to do with Israel-UK trade, which is robust and growing. But the incident should be understood as a window into Palestinian strategy, and as such should not be overlooked.

Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas did not use the opportunity presented by Mr. Johnson's visit to offer his view, to explain why Johnson was wrong, to promote UK-Palestinian trade, or even to argue for BDS. He reflexively threatened a prominent European guest with violence. It surely would have erupted on schedule if Johnson had continued his visit. The Palestinians are no longer interested in discussing their interests/demands/wishes. They have entered a period of ultimatum: one-hundred percent or nothing; my way or violence even with their friends.

It was in the atmosphere of "no criticism/no negotiation" that Abbas went to a European Parliament meeting in Brussels in June, following an inconclusive French-sponsored "peace process" meeting that included neither Israelis nor Palestinians -- a mechanism Abbas assumed would result in French demands on Israel. It did not -- putting Abbas in a foul mood for the European Parliament meeting that was prelude to the release of the Middle East Quartet report on prospects for Israeli-Palestinian peace. Again, Abbas expected to hear only criticism of Israel.

Then, European Parliament President Martin Schulz tried to arrange a meeting between Abbas and Israeli President Reuven Rivlin. Rivlin agreed, Abbas declined -- and it was later revealed that Abbas even changed hotels when he discovered he and Rivlin were sharing a roof. It was in Brussels where Abbas claimed that some Israeli rabbis were calling for Israel to poison Palestinian water -- an echo of Suha Arafat's claim in 1999 that Israelis were poisoning Palestinian air and water. Abbas received a standing ovation at the end of his remarks; Suha received a kiss from then-First Lady Hillary Clinton.

Under pressure from people who recognized a centuries-old debunked piece of anti-Semitism, Abbas recanted and admitted that his claim had been false. But such was the desire of the European parliamentarians to protect him that his blood libel was erased from all official documents. Which makes his next move even less understandable.

After much wrangling, the Middle East Quartet report on the future of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations and the "two state solution" was released on 1 July. Before the release, leaks to the press strongly suggested that

"The focus on Israel will be its most contentious aspect." [Ha'aretz] quoted a senior Israeli government official as stating: "The main question is how harsh criticism of the settlements will be. All the members of the Quartet can rally around this issue without a problem."

Calling it an "eagerly awaited report," Reuters said it would demand that "Israel should stop building settlements, denying Palestinian development and designating land for exclusive Israeli use that Palestinians seek for a future state."

And it did, as reported [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and even [here](#). The Quartet said that Israeli building policies raise

"legitimate questions about Israel's long-term intentions, which are compounded by the statements of some Israeli ministers that there should never be a Palestinian state... Israel should cease the policy of settlement construction and expansion..."

But that wasn't enough for Abbas, because even Quartet members found it impossible to ignore the seven-month-long so-called "stabbing intifada" and the drumbeat of incitement from the Palestinian Authority that encourages and honors the murderers of Israeli civilians. Nor could members ignore

definitive evidence of Hamas rebuilding the Gaza tunnel infrastructure to attack Israel. In a relatively mild section, the Quartet criticized Palestinian leaders for "not consistently and clearly" condemning terrorist attacks and, for the first time, said the arms buildup and military activities in Gaza must stop.

Nabil Abu Rudainah, spokesman for Mahmoud Abbas, was furious, saying:

"Any report that does not include the full withdrawal to the 1967 borders, including occupied Jerusalem, and does not include a recognition of the illegality of settlement will not lead to real and lasting peace and will lead to more tension and more instability in the region."

In other words, more Palestinian-incited violence.

The fit of pique continued as Abbas announced that the PA would boycott the Quartet -- its best friends in Europe plus Russia and the U.S. -- and attempt to block consideration of the report in the UN.

Unable to countenance even mild criticism, and unwilling or unable to engage in serious conversation even with European interlocutors, much less with Israel, Abbas may finally have made the Palestinian cause too difficult for the Europeans, bring the circle back around to Boris Johnson. Not only did he criticize BDS (in which he clearly criticized British academics more than Palestinians), he continued, "I cannot think of anything more foolish" than to boycott "a country that when all is said and done is the only democracy in the region, the only place that has in my view, a pluralist, open society."

If there was a gaffe, it wasn't by Johnson.

The dream of Muslim outreach has become a nightmare

**By Victor Davis Hanson
Published July 21, 2016**

When President Obama entered office, he dreamed that his hope-and-change messaging and his references to his familial Islamic roots would win over the Muslim world. The soon-to-be Nobel Peace Prize laureate would make the U.S. liked in the Middle East. Then, terrorism would decrease.

But, as with his approach to racial relations, Obama's remedies proved worse than the original illness.

Obama gave his first presidential interview to Al Arabiya, noting that he has Muslims in his family. He implicitly blamed America's strained relations with

many Middle Eastern countries on his supposedly insensitive predecessor, George W. Bush.

The new message of the Obama administration was that the Islamic world was understandably hostile because of what America had done rather than what it represented.

Accordingly, all mention of radical Islam, and even the word "terrorism," was airbrushed from the new administration's vocabulary. Words to describe terrorism or the fight against it were replaced by embarrassing euphemisms like "overseas contingency operations," "man-caused disaster" and "workplace violence."

In apology tours and mythological speeches, Obama exaggerated Islamic history as often as he critiqued America. He backed the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. He pushed America away from Israel, appeased Iran, and tried to piggyback on the Arab Spring by bombing Libya. He even lectured Christians on their past pathologies dating back to the Crusades.

Yet Obama's outreach was still interpreted by Islamists as guilt and weakness to be exploited rather than magnanimity to be reciprocated. Terrorist attacks increased. Obama blamed them on a lack of gun control or generic "violent extremism."

Careerist toadies in government parroted the party-line message and even tried to outdo their politically correct boss.

Former Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano focused on returning veterans as terrorist risks. Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry said that global warming, not the Islamic State, was the real threat. NASA Administrator Charles Bolden said the president asked him to make Muslim outreach a top priority for the agency. CIA Director John Brennan said that jihad "is a holy struggle, a legitimate tenet of Islam." Director of National Intelligence James Clapper opined that the Muslim Brotherhood was largely secular.

The president often blamed the detention facility at Guantanamo Bay for needlessly provoking Islam. Obama said that terrorist dangers were no more deadly than falls in bathtubs. He wrote off the Islamic State as an inept jayvee squad, assuring that they posed no existential threat. He campaigned on the premise that al-Qaida was on the run. Obama pulled all troops out of Iraq, which instantly degenerated into chaos.

Obama kept insisting that guns, not Islamic terrorists, were the real danger -- even as assassins used bombs from Boston to Paris, knives from California to Oklahoma, and, most recently, a truck to run over innocents in Nice, France.

Intelligence and law enforcement agencies got the message and worried more about charges of "Islamophobia" than preempting deadly terrorist attacks. Authorities had either interviewed and then ignored the Boston, Fort Hood, San Bernardino and Orlando terrorists, or they had blindly ignored their brazen social media threats.

There was never cause for such weak-horse contrition.

Radical Islam never had legitimate grievances against the West. America and Europe had welcomed in Muslim immigrants -- even as Christians were persecuted and driven out of the Middle East.

Billions of dollars in American aid still flows to Islamic countries. The U.S. spent untold blood and treasure freeing Kuwait and later the Shiites of Iraq from Saddam Hussein. America tried to save Afghanistan from the Soviets and later from the Taliban.

For over a half-century, the West paid jacked-up prices for OPEC oil -- even as the U.S. Navy protected Persian Gulf sea lanes to ensure lucrative oil profits for Gulf state monarchies.

Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, the original architects of al-Qaida, were so desperate to find grievances against the West that in their written diatribes they had to invent fantasies of Jews walking in Mecca. In Michael Moore fashion, they laughably whined about America's lack of campaign finance reform and Western culpability for global warming.

The real problem is that Islamic terrorism feeds off the self-induced failures of the Middle East. Jihadists try to convince the Arab street that returning to religious fundamentalism and exporting jihad will empower Muslims to recapture lost primacy over a decadent and guilty West, just as in the mythical glory days of the caliphate.

In truth, religious intolerance, gender apartheid, illiteracy, autocracy, statism, tribalism and religious fundamentalism all guarantee poverty, economic stagnation and scapegoating. While much of Asia and Latin America progressed through reform, the Middle East blame-gamed its miseries on affluent Western nations and on Israel.

More disturbing, millions of Middle Easterners fled to the safety of Europe and the United States -- but on occasion, only to resist assimilation and show ingratitude once they got there.

In short, the dreamy Obama approach to terrorism has proved a nightmare -- and it is not over yet.

Summary of the Perasha

Parashat Balak is very unique in that it contains an event that no one from Benei Israel ever witnessed or knew about. If not for the Torah telling us about Balak and Bilam trying to destroy Benei Israel none of Benei Israel would ever have known about it. And this begs the question, why did the Torah dedicate an entire parasha to tell us about these events. I heard a nice idea that the message is to make us aware as to the extent of how much Hashem loves us and protects us. We generally only appreciate the events we witness Hashem saving us from, like when a person almost gets hit by a car. But we have to know that for every time Hashem protects us in a way that we see there are many more situations that Hashem protected us without us even knowing about it. For every suicide bomber that actually carries out an attack in Israel where several people somehow come out unharmed there are many other attempts that Hashem prevents from even being carried out. Hashem is constantly protecting us. Like we say in modim of the amida, "ve'al nifle'otecha ve'tobotech she'be'kol eht (and all the miracles and kindnesses that you do for us every second)". Every second Hashem is protecting us from things that might occur to us. Hashem is constantly protecting us whether we know it or not! We just have to realize it. This is the message of Parashat Balak! And maybe this is why remembering the events of Balak and Bilam is one of the 10 items that we have a mitzvah to say and remember every single day. Maybe the reason is remind ourselves on a daily basis of Hashem's constant love and protection!

Balak - Bilam tries to curse Benei Israel (year 40)

- 1- Moab fears Benei Israel will attack them and hires Bilam to curse Benei Israel
- 2- Bilam refuses to come at first after Hashem tells him not to go. After asking a second time Hashem allows him to go if he will only speak the words Hashem tells him.
- 3- Hashem sends an angel to block Bilam's donkey's path on his way to go curse Benei Israel. Bilam fights with his donkey to continue on the path. Bilam finally reaches Balak.
- 4- Bilam attempts to curse Benei Israel and ends up blessing them

5- Bilam again tries to curse Benei Israel and ends up praising and blessing them

6- Bilam a 3rd time tries to curse Benei Israel and ends up praising and blessing them

7- Benei Israel falls prey to the Midyanite women and the avoda zara of baal peor. A plague ensues. Zimri brings a Midyanite women in front of Moshe to sin with her. Pinchas heroically kills Zimri.

**FROM THE JERSEY SHORE NEWSLETTER
"Bilam saw Israel dwelling according to its tribes." (Bemidbar 24:2)**

Our perashah talks about Bilam and his efforts to curse the Jewish nation. Despite his desire to curse, he was compelled to bless the nation. One such instance occurred when he saw the tents of Israel, and the way they were set up. Rashi says: "He saw that the entrances of their tents were not aligned opposite each other, so that one should not peer into the tent of his friend." The pasuk quoted above continues and says, "And the spirit of G-d was upon him." The powerful message here is that when a low character, like Bilam, saw the modest and pure ways of Israel, he became inspired. We shouldn't think that if we dress properly and don't look in the wrong place, that it is not picked up on by the gentiles. It is, and they become changed.

This is the one year anniversary of the Supreme Court ruling allowing and recognizing same gender marriages. Many of you might ask, why are we discussing this? Baruch Hashem, we are not contemplating doing this. Besides the legal aspects of discrimination in a situation when it conflicts with religion, it has a profound impact on us.

The Gemara says that there was once a great Rabbi known as Shemuel Hakatan. He was so great that he was worthy that Hashem's shechinah (Hashem's presence) should rest upon him, but his generation was not worthy to be able to see this. So we see that the generation we live in can cap our spiritual growth. What occurred a year ago with the Supreme Court and the follow up of many marriages has the power to limit our own growth.

What do we do about this? Do we just groan about it? Rabbi Avraham Ausband, shlit"ah, once told this true story. A woman was hired by a company in Riverdale. She dressed very modestly but she appeared somewhat different. They asked her about her past, and she said she is a religious Jewish convert. She used to live in Bayonne, NJ, and she used to dress inappropriately. Very inappropriately. Many times she would see the yeshivah students from the Yeshivah of Bayonne walking the streets. She was curious who they were, so she went over to them to ask directions (in her usual garb). They were very courteous and answered her, but they always looked down. She

was amazed and looked into it, and she converted. This woman who lived on a low moral standard was inspired when she was confronted by modest and purity in the same way that Bilam was.

Rav Shach, zt"l, once said that the prayer of Alenu that we say at the end of our prayers says: "All the evil-doers of the Earth will recognize and know... that every knee will bow to you and that we will take oaths by Your Name." This means that in the last generation before Mashiah, all the evil-doers will be turned over. It's our job to turn them over to good. How can we? Our own actions inspire them to change. In that way, this generation we live in will not cap our growth. This generation of ours is both a challenge and an opportunity. Rabbi Reuven Semah

As we read the story of Bil'am and how he wanted to curse the Jewish people, we can't help but be amazed at his determination. He first asked Hashem whether he could go with Balak's messengers, and Hashem told him no. Then he asked again, and although this time he was given permission, still his donkey stopped three times until the angel revealed himself that he was sent to prevent Bil'am from going. He still proceeded to try to curse the Jews, and every time he attempted it, it came out as a blessing but he still didn't give up.

From here we see the rule that if a person has a real will to do something, he will ultimately reach his goal. Bil'am persevered and would have succeeded had Hashem not turned his curses into blessings. Nothing stands in the way of a strong will. The reason we are not accomplishing what we want is that we don't want them strongly enough. This applies to business, to doing certain projects, and most certainly to spiritual endeavors. It is up to us to intensify our wills to accomplish. The stronger the will, the more we will succeed. Let's work on developing a strong desire for spiritual growth and we'll be amazed at the positive changes we will experience! Rabbi Shmuel Choueka

Angel of Mercy

"And Hashem was angry that [Bil'am] went, and an angel of Hashem stood in the way as an adversary against him." (Bemidbar 22:22)

Rashi explains that the angel that stood in Bil'am's way was an angel of mercy that wanted to prevent him from sinning. Later, we read that the angel had a drawn sword. Rabbi Zalman Sorotzkin commented on this that at times an angel of mercy, who is trying to save a person, will appear to him as an adversary who is out to harm him.

When a person has many faults, he will often have friends and relatives who keep trying to influence him to improve. He is likely to view their nagging as extremely irritating and painful and will

consider them as his enemies. But the truth is that they have his best interests in mind. He shouldn't only not be angry at them, but should even be appreciative and grateful that they are concerned about his welfare. When someone tries to have a positive influence on you, thank him for it.

Rabbi Sorotzkin also commented that from here we see that at times an angel of mercy has to be willing to take an aggressive stance in order to prevent someone from destroying himself and others.

True compassion is based on seeing the entire picture. For instance, a parent who allows his child to do whatever he wants, just because he does not want his child ever to cry, might allow his child to do all kinds of things that are destructive both spiritually and to his physical well-being. When you really care about someone, you do not want him to harm himself, and will be willing at times to be strict in order to protect him from his own ignorance or foolishness. (Growth through Torah)

Window Shopping

"It's really nasty outside today. What do you want to do on your day off?" Esther asked her husband, Ezra.

"I am content to sit and study. I missed a few of my classes last week and want to catch up," replied Ezra.

"Why don't we go to the mall and do some shopping?" Esther suggested.

"Shopping costs money and we don't have much to spare right now," Ezra declined.

"We could window shop," Esther responded. "That doesn't cost anything, and it will give us a chance to spend time together and to dream."

One of the good parts of the pastime (or ordeal, depending on your point of view) of shopping is window shopping. You can safely view a variety of products without having to deal with a pushy salesperson and without waiting on line or reaching into your pocket for cash. When you are just looking in the window, you may enjoy the esthetics of retail – creative displays, and all the offerings the store may have to offer, coordinated by color and style for easy selection should you be lured into the shop.

And that is the point of the window. It is not to entertain, but to attract.

Often, after we enter a store, we find that the product we chose from the window's attractive display is inferior to what we imagined it would be. What a letdown!

Life is nothing but a picture window, displaying, in an alluring fashion, all the wares of the Yesser Hara. How often, when we "buy" what he offers, are we disappointed with the quality! The thrill is just not what we imagined it to be, and the lasting

quality we thought we would get endures but a fleeting moment.

Next time you see something that gets your heart beating wildly, something you've just got to have, remember that many things look good in the window but disappoint when you get them home. You are in a 24/7 battle with a very tricky foe who lures you with things that are dressed up and blown out of proportion. Look past the gloss, and chase after reality. (One Minute with Yourself – Rabbi Raymond Beyda)

RABBI ELI MANSOUR

Visit DailyHalacha.com, DailyGemara.com,
MishnaBerura.com, LearnTorah.com
"Ma Tobu Ohalecha Yaakob" - Blessing or Curse?

Among the blessings proclaimed by Bilam in Parashat Balak is one of the most famous verses in the entire Torah – "Ma Tobu Ohalecha Yaakob, Mishkenotecha Yisrael" – "How good are your tents, Yaakob, and your residences, Yisrael!" (24:5). This blessing is so significant that it is customary in our community to sing this verse as we accompany a bride and groom to the Hupa. Ironically, a blessing uttered by Bilam, a vicious foe of Am Yisrael, became the words sung at the most significant and auspicious moments of Jewish life.

The Gemara teaches that nearly all of Bilam's blessings were fulfilled also in the reverse. The blessings themselves materialized, but in addition, there were occasions when the converse of every blessing was realized, when we suffered calamities that were the direct opposites of the blessings conferred upon us by Bilam. The one exception, the Gemara says, is this verse - "Ma Tobu Ohalecha Yaakob, Mishkenotecha Yisrael." As opposed to all of Bilam's other blessings, this one never reverted into a curse.

The Ketab Sofer (Rabbi Abraham Shemuel Binyamin Sofer of Pressburg, 1815-1871) suggested a fascinating, though sobering, explanation of the Gemara's comment. He explained that this blessing was never turned into a curse for the simple reason that it did not have to – it is already, in a certain sense, a curse!

The Sages interpreted this Beracha as referring to our religious institutions, mainly our synagogues. While synagogues are certainly a great blessing, Bilam speaks here of an overabundance of synagogues, the scattering and distillation of Jewish communities into countless little "sub communities." The Ketab Sofer lamented the situation he witnessed in his city, where there were dozens of small little

synagogues, rather than one or several large, centralized congregations. He perceptively noted that the plethora of synagogues resulted from infighting and quibbling, from the townspeople's inability to get along with one another. First a group breaks off from the major synagogue because they disapprove of the Hazan, and they establish a new congregation with their own Hazan. Then a group of people decide that they do not like the new congregation's Rabbi, so they start their own synagogue. Then people disagree over the Minyan schedule, the protocols, the décor, or whatever else, and before they realize it, one synagogue has divided and subdivided itself into dozens of small congregations.

In this sense, Bilam's blessing is actually a curse. He wasn't blessing us with spiritual success; he was wishing us disunity and conflicts that would result in a plethora of "dwelling places" and "residences," in many different institutions that resent and look disdainfully upon one another.

Although our community can legitimately take pride in our unity and cooperation, there is plenty of room for improvement in this regard. We must work together as one community – notwithstanding the many differences that exist among its different segments – rather than forming different factions and parties. This will help ensure that "Ma Tobu Ohalecha Yaakov, Mishkenotecha Yisrael" remains a blessing and not a curse, that our religious institutions will be a source of Beracha that bring us all closer to Hashem, rather than a focal point of strife and contention

**VICTOR BIBI
SOD HAPARASHA**

**Will be distributed under a separate list
If you want to receive this article every week,
please let us know and we will add you to that list**

**Rabbi Wein
RABBINIC RESPONSIBILITY**

Since the myth of rabbinic infallibility has become entrenched, exaggerated and untrue as it may be, it has unwittingly caused many other dire consequences. Since rabbis are somehow not able to discern the future and to be aware of the true motives and behavior patterns of those congregants and strangers who avail themselves of rabbinic services, rabbis are held accountable for the behavior of those people in their future lives decades later.

I remember that as a young rabbi I prided myself on the fact that for about the first twenty years of my rabbinic career no couple for whom I had performed

a marriage ceremony divorced. I began to believe that I had some sort of heavenly magical power and that simply my performance at a wedding ceremony was in itself a guarantee of a couple living together happily ever after.

This arrogant and unfounded thought on my behalf has come crashing down upon me over the past number of decades when unfortunately a number of couples – who were undoubtedly in love with each other and planned to live together for the rest of their lives – divorced, sometimes in bitterness and acrimony.

I have often questioned myself as to whether I somehow bear some responsibility in this later breakup of the marriage. My rational self exonerates me completely. I am not a prophet and I did my duty faithfully according to Jewish halacha and tradition. The fact that the couple years later decided to end the marriage is not my fault and in no way invalidates the marriage ceremony that I performed.

I wish to therefore extrapolate this idea and attitude to the current controversy regarding conversions to Judaism performed in good faith and according to the letter of halacha. If decades later after the actual conversion ceremony, or even a relatively short time later, the convert for whatever reasons is not strictly observant of Jewish law or custom, does that invalidate the previous conversion ceremony itself?

It seems to me to be self-evident that it could not and should not invalidate that conversion nor should the rabbinical court that performed the conversion be held accountable for the later lapses in observance of that convert. The rabbinical court that performs the conversion can only go by what it sees at the moment of the conversion.

If it is convinced that the potential convert will lead a Jewish life and observe Torah, then it has fulfilled its obligation. It cannot peer into the future and know for certainty how the convert will behave in later life. It can only judge, and this is always subject to the errors that accompany every human judgment, the sincerity and commitment of the potential convert that stands before them at that time.

Overwhelmingly, most converts remains sincere and committed Jews. But there will always be exceptional cases when it becomes obvious that somehow the convert has changed his or her mind-or at least their mode of behavior. It is a far stretch to try and invalidate the halachically valid conversion process because of the later behavior of the convert.

Retroactive cancellation of conversions was rarely allowed in Jewish tradition and only under dire circumstances. Resorting to it today because of dubious reasons is very questionable and an unfortunate reminder to us of the weakness of rabbinic leadership in our time.

Attributing prophetic and psychic powers to religious leaders often times results in greater tragedy. Jewish tradition tells us that there are no prophets amongst us, as prophecy disappeared from the Jewish scene millennia ago. Those who hold themselves out to be all-knowing run the risk of being responsible for the later behavior of their students, congregants and the general public that they speak to and influence.

We were cautioned long ago “wise men should be careful with their words,” and certainly with their deeds. There is no rabbi in the world that has not, at one time or another, made a mistake in judgment, speech or in performing religious services. The fallibility of human beings – even of the greatest human beings – is a well-established principle with numerous examples recorded for us in the Bible and in the Talmud.

We are all responsible for the consequences of our errors. However the Talmud explicitly teaches us “a judge can only decide upon what he sees at the given moment when he renders his decision.” Heaven eventually may correct all errors but not all errors will appear on the ledger of the one who was unable to foretell the future. That ability is an interest only to heaven itself.

Chief Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks What Makes God Laugh?

There is an old saying that what makes God laugh is seeing our plans for the future.[1] However, if Tanakh is our guide, what makes God laugh is human delusions of grandeur. From the vantage point of heaven, the ultimate absurdity is when humans start thinking of themselves as godlike.

There are several pointed examples in the Torah. One whose full import has only recently become clear occurs in the story of the Tower of Babel. Men gather together in the plain of Shinar and decide to build a city and a tower “that will reach to heaven.” As it happens, we have archeological confirmation of this fact. Several Mesopotamian ziggurats, including the temple of Marduk in Babylon, have been found with inscriptions saying that they reach heaven.[2]

The idea was that tall buildings – man-made mountains – allowed humans to climb to the dwelling

place of the gods and thus communicate with them. The Mesopotamian city states were among the first places of civilisation, itself one of the turning points in the history of human life on earth. Before the birth of agriculture, the ancients lived in fear of nature: of predators, of other tribes and bands, and of the vicissitudes of heat and cold, drought and flood. Their fate depended on matters beyond their control.

Only with the spread of domesticated animals and agriculture did people gather in towns, then cities, then empires. A tipping point occurred in the balance of power between nature and culture. For the first time humans were not confined to adapting to their environment. They could adapt their environment to suit them. At this point they – especially the rulers – began to see themselves as gods, demigods, or people with the power to influence the gods.

The most conspicuous symbol of this was buildings on a monumental scale: the ziggurats of Babylon and other Mesopotamian cities, and the pyramids of Egypt. Built on the flat land of the Tigris-Euphrates valley and the Nile delta, they towered over their surroundings. The great pyramid of Giza, built even before the birth of Abraham, was so monumental that it remained the tallest man-made structure on earth for four thousand years.

The fact that these were artificial mountains built by human hands suggested to their builders that humans had acquired godlike powers. They had constructed a stairway to heaven. Hence the significance of the phrase in the Torah’s account of the tower, “And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built.” This is God laughing. On earth, humans thought they had reached the sky, but to God the building was so infinitesimal, so microscopic that he had to come down even to see it. Only with the invention of flight do we now know how small the tallest building looks when you are looking down from a mere 30,000 feet.

To end their hubris God simply “confused their language”. They no longer understood one another. The entire project was turned into French farce. We can visualise the scene. A foreman calls for a brick and is handed a hammer. He tells a worker to go right and he turns left. The project foundered in a welter of incomprehension. Men thought they could climb to heaven but in the end they could not even understand what the person next to them was saying. The unfinished tower became a symbol of the inevitable failure of vaunting ambition. The builders achieved what they sought but not in the way they intended. They wanted to “make a name for themselves” and they succeeded, but instead of

becoming a byword for man's ability to reach the sky, Babel became babble, an emblem of confusion. Hubris became nemesis.

The second example was Egypt during the early plagues. Moses and Aaron turned the water of the Nile into blood, and filled Egypt with frogs. We then read that the Egyptian magicians did likewise to show that they had the same power. So concerned were they to show that they could do what the Hebrews could do, that they entirely failed to realise that they were making things worse, not better. The real skill would have been to turn blood back into water, and make frogs not appear but disappear.

We hear the Divine laughter especially in the third plague: lice. For the first time, the magicians tried and failed to replicate the effect. Defeated, they turned to Pharaoh and said, "It is the finger of God." The humour comes when we remember that for the Egyptians the symbol of power was monumental architecture: pyramids, temples, palaces and statues on a massive scale. God showed them His power by way of the tiniest of insects, painful yet almost invisible to the eye. Again hubris became nemesis. When people think they are big, God shows them they are small – and vice versa. It is those who think themselves small – supremely so Moses, the humblest of men – who are truly great.

This explains the otherwise curious episode of Bilam's talking donkey. This is not a fanciful tale, nor simply a miracle. It arose because of the way the people of Moab and Midian thought of Bilam – and perhaps, by extension, the way he thought of himself. Balak the Moabite king, together with the leaders of the Midianites, sent a delegation to Bilam asking him to curse the Israelites: "Come now, curse this people for me, since they are too mighty for me ... for I know that whom you bless is blessed, and whom you curse is cursed."

This is a pagan understanding of the holy man: the shaman, the magus, the wonder-worker, the person with access to supernatural powers. The Torah's view is precisely the opposite. It is God who blesses and curses, not human beings. "I will bless those who bless you and those who curse you I will curse," God said to Abraham. "They shall place my name on the children of Israel and I will bless them," he said about the priests. The idea that you can hire a holy man to curse someone essentially presupposes that God can be bribed.

The narrative is admittedly obscure. God tells Bilam not to go. Balak sends a second delegation with a more tempting offer. This time God tells Bilam to go

with them but say only what he instructs him to say. The next morning Bilam sets out to go with the Moabites, but the text now states that God was "angry" with him for going. That is when the episode of the donkey takes place.

The donkey sees an angel barring the way. It turns aside into a field but Bilam hits it and forces it back to the path. The angel is still barring the way and the donkey veers into a wall, crushing Bilam's foot. Bilam hits it again, but finally it lies down and refuses to move. That is when the donkey begins to speak. Bilam then looks up and sees the angel, who had been hitherto invisible to him.

Why did God first tell Bilam not to go, then that he should go, and then was angry when he went? Evidently God could read his mind and knew that Bilam did really want to curse the Israelites. We know this because later, after the attempt to curse the Israelites failed, Bilam succeeded in causing them harm, advising the Midianites to get their women to seduce the Israelite men, thus provoking the anger of God (Num. 31:16). Bilam was no friend of the Israelites.

But the story of the talking donkey is another instance of Divine laughter. Here was a man reputed to be a maestro of supernatural forces. People thought he had the power to bless or curse whomever he chose. God, the Torah tells us, is not like that at all. He had two messages, one for the Moabites and Midianites, another for Bilam himself.

He showed the Moabites and Midianites that Israel is not cursed but blessed. The more you attempt to curse them the more they will be blessed and you yourself will be cursed. That is as true today as it was then. There are movements throughout the world to curse the state and people of Israel. The greater the malice of Israel's enemies, the stronger Israel becomes, and the more disasters its enemies bring upon their own people.

God had a different message for Bilam himself, and it was very blunt. If you think you can control God, then, says God, I will show you that I can turn a donkey into a prophet and a prophet into a donkey. Your animal will see angels to which you yourself are blind. Bilam was forced to admit:

How can I curse those whom God has not cursed?
How can I denounce those whom the Lord has not denounced?

Hubris always eventually becomes nemesis. In a world in which rulers engaged in endless projects of

self-aggrandisement, Israel alone produced a literature in which they attributed their successes to God and their failures to themselves. Far from making them weak, this made them extraordinarily strong.

So it is with us as individuals. I have mentioned before a beloved friend, no longer alive, about whom it was said that "he took God so seriously that he didn't need to take himself seriously at all." Pagan prophets like Bilam had not yet learned the lesson we must all one day learn: that what matters is not that God does what we want, but that we do what He wants. God laughs at those who think they have godlike powers. The opposite is true. The smaller we see ourselves, the greater we become.

[1] The John Lennon version is: "Life is what happens while you are making other plans."

[2] The tower of Babel is referred to in the Enuma Elish as "Esagila," which means "the house of the lifting up of the head." Nabopolassar and Nebuchadnezzar both repaired this building, inscriptions to which say that they "raised high the head" of the tower "to rival the heavens." Nahum Sarna, Understanding Genesis, 73.

AS HEARD FROM RABBI AVIGDOR MILLER Z'TL "Let me die the death of the righteous and let my afterward be like his" (23:10)

Here Bileam envies the reward of the Afterlife which is promised to Israel, and he expresses the wish that he could be worthy to share their lot. It is noteworthy that this open declaration of the reward of the Afterlife was made by a non-Israelite prophet. Although the Afterlife is hinted elsewhere, yet no Israelite prophet spoke openly on this matter; and it was left to Bileam to proclaim publicly the reason why Hashem numbers Israel.

The Rambam says "sadeekim yoshvim", the sadeekim sit forever in Olam Haba. They never get tired of it.

Every minute the simha in Olam Haba gets bigger and bigger. And "their crowns are on their heads." What are those crowns? The Rambam says they are the da'at Hashem, the understanding of true knowledge that you gain in this world. You have to know that Hakadosh Baruch Hu is the Bore' (Creator); He is the Mehave', the One who brings everything into existence. The whole world was made bidvar Hashem, with His word, and not only did He make it, He maintains it all the time.

All of these things are part of the crown of true understanding/da'at. The love of Hashem, going in His ways, and other things that make the crown on your head. The Rambam explained that in Olam

Haba the sadeekim have pleasure in proportion to the kind of crown they have acquired in this life. The reward in Olam Haba is measured by how much knowledge of Hashem you gain (de'ah). Misvot are very good, but if you want to get more reward, do Misvot with De'ah, and De'ah is something you have to work on.

That is why Talmud Torah is so important. You have to learn Hashkafa (Torah outlook) and Emunah and all the topics dealt with in the Hovot Halevavot (Duties of the Mind), in order to recognize Hashem's Hesed and Wisdom in the world. "Gudlo v'tubo male' olam", His kindness and greatness and wisdom fill the world (Shabbat prayers). Adapted from "Journey Into Greatness" by Rabbi Avigdor Miller ZT'L

Parts of this newsletter are courtesy of Project Genesis: Torah on the Information Superhighway. Permission is granted to redistribute, but please give proper attribution and copyright to the author and Project Genesis, and refer to learn@torah.org and <http://www.torah.org/>. Both the authors and Project Genesis reserve certain rights. For full information on copyrights, send email to copyrights@torah.org.

Shabbat Shalom From Cyberspace E Mail Edition is published each week since 1995 and is distributed to 18,000 readers. Our goal is to spread torah knowledge. Articles are downloaded from sites and from e-mail forwarded to us. We encourage you to reprint the newsletter and distribute it to co-workers, friends and family. You can retransmit copies by fax, mail or by hand. Be a part of the Mitzvah of spreading torah. It takes so little to make copies and distribute them. And with E Mail it just takes a click to send this along. To subscribe directly or have us send to a friend or family member Send a request to ShabbatShalomNewsletter@Gmail.com with your name, phone, fax and E-Mail Address