

In the Holy Tongue, this paradigm shift is represented by a pair of words: *vayikar* and *Vayikra*. *Vayikar* means "and he happened upon"; *Vayikra* means "and he called upon." When G-d talks to the evil prophet Bilaam, the Torah uses the term *vayikar*--"And G-d happened upon Bilaam"; when G-d talks to Moses, it is in the form of *vayikra*--"And G-d called upon Moses."

The difference between these two words hinges upon the presence of a single letter--the Hebrew letter *aleph*--which transforms *vayikar* into *vayikra*. In fact, in the opening verse of the Book of Leviticus, *vayikra* is written in the Torah with a miniature *aleph*, further emphasizing how ostensibly similar the two words are. Yet the apparent similarity enfolds within it a vast difference: the difference between arbitrary happenstance and purposeful engagement.

We all stand poised, every moment of time, on the cusp of these two faces of reality. At every juncture of our lives we face a choice: Do we surrender to the anti-truth of happenstance? Or

do we embrace the divine calling of meaningful life?

Live & Laugh

I never wanted to believe that my Dad was stealing from his job as a road worker. But when I got home, all the signs were there.

Today a man knocked on my door and asked for a small donation towards the local swimming pool. I gave him a glass of water.

Diamond Jubilee Celebrations
 Sunday 6 August – Siyum Sefer Torah:
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An Evening of History & Destiny:
Celebrating the Past as we Shape the Future
 Wednesday 9 August. Watch this space.

Calendar

- ◆ Shacharis 8:30 am; Shütl 8:45 am
- ◆ Shul Brocha in the Seeff Hall.
- ◆ **Smorgasbord of Shiurim.**
- ◆ Mincha: 4:55 pm
- ◆ Pirkei Avos: Chapter 6
- ◆ Shabbos ends: 6:04 pm
- ◆ Mincha next week 5:25 pm
- ◆ **Fast of the 17th of Tammuz:** Tues 11 Jul.
 Fast begins 5:42 am; Fast ends 5:49 pm

- ◆ **The Scottish Leader Signature** whiskey at Shul is sponsored by **Distell &** available for purchase at **Norman Goodfellows.**
- ◆ **Nathan Fine** of Ideal Furnishers at Midway Mall, Bramley Gardens wishes all congregants a Good Shabbos. Call 011-887-5456/082-854-5706. **Furniture, Bedding & Appliances.**
- ◆ **Vehicles wanted. Any make, any condition. Best prices. Phone ARNOLD ORKIN 082 823 7826**
- ◆ Acknowledgements: Chabad.org
- ◆ Please take Good Shabbos Sydenham home if you will only carry it within the Eiruv.

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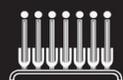
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Good Shabbos SYDENHAM!

Published by the Sydenham Highlands North Hebrew Congregation Johannesburg, South Africa



8 Jul 2017 Parshas Balak 15 Tammuz 5777

A Lousy Excuse

by: Rabbi Yossy Goldman

In this week's parshah, we read the strange but famous Biblical narrative of the heathen prophet Balaam and his talking donkey. At one point an angel blocks the donkey's path and the animal stops in its tracks. Balaam is frustrated and strikes the donkey. "And G-d opened the mouth of the donkey and it spoke to Balaam saying: 'Why did you hit me?' ... And then G-d opened the eyes of Balaam and he saw the angel standing in the way...." So Balaam apologizes to the donkey and says, "I have sinned because I did not know" (Numbers 22:28-34).

I've always wondered: if he genuinely didn't know, why was it a sin?

The answer is obvious: for a prophet who is able to communicate with the Divine not to be aware of an angelic presence right in front of his nose is indeed sinful. A man of his spiritual stature should have known better.

There is no question that in many communities where organized Judaism is weak and not easily available, ignorance of what being Jewish entails may still be a valid excuse. For millions of Jews who grew up in the former Soviet Union under an atheistic regime, ignorance of Jewish law and lore is, undoubtedly, justifiable.

But for those of us who live in Jewish communities that are alive and vibrant, for those who are aware enough to be reading these lines, surely ignorance as a rationalization no longer holds water.

In our own community of Johannesburg,

South Africa, thank G-d there are educational opportunities too numerous to mention. Day Schools for children, adult education programs; a recent series of lectures we had here on Jewish Mysticism attracted 250 men and women every Monday night for six weeks running.

The Internet, with all its serious flaws and dangers, is providing unparalleled opportunities for Jews, even in the remotest outposts, to connect with their heritage. In this modern mode of outreach, Chabad.org has been an outstanding pioneer. So today, while Jewish ignorance still remains Public Enemy Number One, there are thankfully ample avenues for Jews who were never exposed to Judaism, its teachings and its relevance, to become more aware and better educated.

I remember an advertising campaign that ran in the United States years ago for what was then known as the United Negro College Fund. The fund was established to provide a university education to promising black students from underprivileged backgrounds. To this day, I can still visualize that photograph of a young man studying and underneath the slogan, "A mind is a terrible thing to waste."

How many Jewish attorneys, advocates and judges have never perused a single page of Judaism's grandest legal repository, the Talmud? How many Jewish doctors and thinkers have never read any of the works of Maimonides, Judaism's great physician and philosopher? How many spiritually enlightened Jews who meditate daily have never been exposed to the teachings of authentic Kabbalah and Jewish mysticism?

Why do rabbis become rabbis? To teach. The word rabbi means "my teacher." True, there are many facets to a spiritual leader's position, but the main incentive for me and for so many of my colleagues is the privilege of educating Jews about Judaism -- especially those who for no fault of their own were not raised with that awareness.

In no way do I minimize the importance of the pastoral role a rabbi plays in his community. Helping people in times of distress, as on joyous occasions, can be deeply gratifying. Counselling troubled souls or ordinary people with moral dilemmas is equally significant. But the most stimulating part of the job for me is teaching Jews how to be Jewish. Teaching Torah and introducing it to the previously uninitiated. The privilege of opening a Jewish mind to the beauty of Jewish wisdom and to the eternal relevance of the Jewish way of life is what led me to the rabbinate.

During my tenure thus far I have officiated at many hundreds of Bar Mitzvahs, weddings and, sadly, at as many funerals and unveilings. While I always treat each case with the sensitivity and respect it deserves and do my best to make these milestones meaningful rites of passage, my true "job satisfaction" comes when a young person comes to see me for advice on how to explore his or her Jewish identity. Rabbis get a real "high" when young couples take the initiative and ask for guidance on how to establish a really successful Jewish home and family. That's a rabbi's *nachas*.

So wherever you are reading these lines, follow the wise counsel of Ethics of the Fathers and "Acquire for yourself a rabbi." If you are out in the sticks, there are excellent virtual educators available via this very website. If you live where there is a Jewish organizational infrastructure but don't know where to

start, use the facility on this Home Page to find your nearest real teacher.

In our age of the information explosion, ignorance has become a lousy excuse.

Parsha Pointers

*Balak: Artsroll Chumash pg 856;
Living Torah pg 779*

Balak, the king of Moab, summons the prophet Balaam to curse the people of Israel. On the way, Balaam is berated by his ass, who sees, before Balaam does, the angel that G-d sends to block their way. Three times, from three different vantage points, Balaam attempts to pronounce his curses; each time, blessings issue forth instead. Balaam also prophesies on the end of the days and the coming of Moshiach.

The people fall prey to the charms of the daughters of Moab, and are enticed to worship the idol Peor. When a high-ranking Israelite official publicly takes a Midianite princess into a tent, Pinchas kills them both, stopping the plague raging among the people.

A Lonely Nation

By Rabbi Shimon Posner

Are you a statistics person? Do you remember the numbers you read; can you retain and, when necessary, retrieve them? Or are you more the graphics type, who relates to visuals of pies and colored blocks and zigzaggy lines to make a point? I like anecdotes, little stories that (as someone once put memorably) when you add them up, you have data.

No matter, you've seen or heard something like this before: Israel is .000001% of the earth's land mass. Israel (Jews) amount to point oh-oh-oh-oyvey of the world population. 45% of the United Nations' condemnations have been directed at Israel.

I know a woman who was raised in an activist Zionist home in the thirties and forties. She tells of how weekly, sometimes nightly, there were meetings for the cause that lasted well into the night. She tells me of how her father stood there the day the Israeli flag was raised for the first time at the UN, and how he cried.

That was the thought then, that we would finally "take our rightful place amongst the family of

nations." What happened?

America has changed somewhat, and with it the world. Homogeny is no longer the ideal; particularism is no longer the pariah. So it is hard for us to put ourselves in their place, in that time, after the events of that decade.

"We are different, but we are proud of that difference too." I just paraphrased a young teenage girl writing in her diary. In between writing of her fights with her big sister and her discovery of the boy next door, she charmingly meanders into what it means to her to be a Jew. She was later murdered for being a Jew, but the words Anne Frank penned in hiding illuminate a clarity that was painful then and wanted to be ignored.

Holocaust history reads: "Six million Jews were killed, as were Gypsies, artists, Poles, Communists . . ." There was an unspoken comfort in that—not alone were we singled out.

But of course we are singled out, even after the ovens of Oswiecim are cold. Those UN numbers don't make us comfortable.

Am levadad yishkon, a nation that dwells alone, *uwa-goyim lo yit'chashav*, and in the nations they are not reckoned.

A soothsayer (ancient word meaning "lead editor-in-chief") was hired to curse the Jews, but instead his words, recounted in this week's Torah portion, emerged as a power of goodness.

The nation dwelleth alone, and this tiny nation birthed the civilizations of Christianity and Islam—nearly three billion people—a numerical absurdity when you think of it.

But think about it: had this family ceased to be a people apart in their first millennium of existence, there would have been neither Christianity nor Islam. The course of history has been played only because of this family's particularism.

Destiny is history without hindsight. From a timeless perspective, destiny is as compelling as history. And what is eminently clear from the UN: the world is looking at us. Historically, that is the logical thing for them to do. But it perplexes the Jew. "Alone, we feel very ordinary" said one after the '67 war, "just a mess of mortgage payments, bills and errands. But together, great things seem to happen through us and around us."

Am levadad yishkon, a nation dwells alone. In ways we can't always appreciate, that dwelling is a benefit to us and to the world. History attests to that, even as it does not explain it. May destiny do that for us, and until then, may we do our jobs.

Calling Moses

By Rabbi Yanki Tauber

Grab a pencil and a piece of paper. This is one of those insta-quizzes that psychoanalyze your personality, improve your marriage and solve the world's problems -- all in a single go.

Ready? Here goes: Write down the most negative sentence that comes to mind. It should be a short (3-to-10 word) common phrase you might use every day with no particularly malevolent intensions, but which does untold damage to your inner self and outer universe.

Examples: "I hate you." "What's in it for me?" "I couldn't care less." "Everyone does it." "It's hopeless." You get the idea.

Here's what I wrote:
"It so happened that...."

Sounds pretty benign, doesn't it? But according to the Chassidic masters, these four seemingly innocuous words are at the root of the difference between the holy and the profane, and--ultimately--between good and evil.

Holiness is purposeful; profanity is arbitrary. In the realm of the sacred, actions and events have significance; in the realm of the profane, they are adrift in a void of futility. Goodness is the faith that life has meaning and the commitment to actualize it; evil is the denial of meaning and the absence of commitment.

The difference will often be quite subtle. Two people will look at the same set of occurrences, and one will see a splatter of coincidences while the other sees an intricate and purposeful process. Two people will contemplate an earth-shaking event; one will regard it as a hiccup of history, while the other discerns a milestone in the unfolding purpose of Creation. But they are really not that far apart: the merest shift in perspective will take one from one view to the other. Yet that tiny shift will make all the difference in the world.

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