

Ki Seitzei 2023

Make it Right

2 minute read | Straightforward

The Western world we inhabit is dominated by Christian dogma. One particular widespread belief is that sin corrupts us in some fundamental and irredeemable way.

But that's not how the Torah talks about wrongdoing:

כי-יִהְיֶה רִיב בֵּין אָנָשִׁים, וְנִגְשׂוּ אֶל-הַמִּשְׁפָּט וּשְׁפָטוּם; וְהִצְדִּיקוּ, אֶת-הַצְדִּיק, וְהִרְשִׁיעוּ, אֶת-הַרְשָׁע. וְהָיָה אִם-בֶּן הַכּוֹת, הִרְשָׁע-וְהִפִּילוּ הַשֹּׁפֵט
– If there is a dispute between men; they shall approach the court, and the judges will judge them, and acquit the innocent one and condemn the guilty one. If the guilty one has incurred lashes, the judge shall make him lean over and flog him in front of him, commensurate with his crime, in number. He shall beat him with forty lashes; he shall not exceed, lest he give him a much more severe flogging than these forty lashes, and your brother will be degraded before your eyes. (25:1-3)

The Torah suggests that the very instant the crime is remediated, the Torah reclassifies the formerly guilty party as your brother – רִשָּׁע / אָחִיךָ.

The Sifri derives from here the fundamental principle of rehabilitating offenders. Once a wrongdoer has made amends, he becomes your brother again. So for example, he is permitted to be a witness like anyone else, and his testimony is no less credible. The stain on his character is temporary, not permanent. He is not an ex-convict or Baal Teshuva; he is your brother.

One of the most influential ideas in Judaism, mentioned in the book of Job and popularized by the Baal Shem Tov, is the idea that our souls are a small fragment of godliness, and God as well in some sense – חֵלֶק אֱלֹהִים מִמֶּעַל. This motif is formidable – not only is God a piece of us, but equally, we are a piece of God.

There is a part of the soul, whatever it may be, that is fundamentally pure and incorruptible – אֱלֹהִים, נִשְׁמָה שֶׁנִּתְמַתְּ בִּי טְהוֹרָה הִיא.

R' Jonathan Sacks teaches that Judaism believes in rehabilitation both spiritually and in civil law, to help wrongdoers rebuild and make amends.

When someone sins or stumbles, the Torah condemns the act, not the person. The moment a wrong has been made right, anyone can become your brother, once again.



Hate the sin, not the sinner.

What Do You See?

2 minute read | Straightforward

The Torah's civil laws consistently emphasize the duties and responsibilities humans owe to each other.

In one of them, the Torah considers what happens when you find someone's animals wandering unsupervised:

לֹא תִרְאֶה אֶת שׂוֹר אֲחִיךָ אוֹ אֶת שֵׂיׁוֹ נִדְחִים וְהִתְעַלְמָתָּ מֵהֶם הֲשִׁיב תְּשִׁיבָם לְאֲחִיךָ – Do not see your brother's ox or sheep straying and ignore them – you should return them to your brother. (22:4)

This law is simple and consistent with the Torah's vision, but its phrasing is unusual.

The law as practiced is about not ignoring someone's lost animal but is phrased in terms of seeing – לֹא תִרְאֶה וְהִתְעַלְמָתָּ / לא תראה / תתעלם.

Why does the law talk about what we see instead of what we ignore?

R' Shlomo Freifeld teaches that sight is not an exclusively visual function. Our eyes govern a physical aspect of perception, but there is also a mental and emotional aspect, the way you process optical inputs. A deficiency in the physical element will result in actual blindness, but lacking the mental component also results in functional blindness, if only in the figurative sense.

As the Sfas Emes explains, the Torah does not charge us with a simple instruction against ignoring; there are genuinely things that we don't see! But the Torah here makes us responsible for the way we look at things, and especially the things in our peripheral vision – the things we see but ignore – לֹא תִרְאֶה וְהִתְעַלְמָתָּ.

When you change how you look at things, the things you look at change.

In this instance, the person you are helping isn't even an active participant; your obligation to help exists independently of that person. There is no one on the other side seeking your help here, so it's an easy one to avoid, and so the Torah warns us against the tendency to ignore our brothers and sisters.



Being unaware or not noticing aren't good enough excuses. The errors and omissions for things we weren't paying attention to are still sins that require rectification on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur – שוגג / על חטא שחטאנו ביודעים ובלא יודעים.

Every day, we ask God to open our eyes – פוקח עורים – which takes on new meaning in light of this teaching; it's a prayer for clarity and perception, and it's hard to overstate how important that is.

Your eyes aren't enough when it's your mind that's blind.

Is there something you might be blinding yourself to right now?

Teach Your Children

3 minute read | Straightforward

One of the weirder laws in the Torah is the law of the rebellious son, where parents ask the government to execute their child:

כי יִהְיֶה לְאִישׁ בֶּן סוֹרֵר וּמוֹרֵה אֵינָנו שֹׁמֵעַ בְּקוֹל אָבִיו וּבְקוֹל אִמּוֹ וַיִּסְרוּ אֹתוֹ וְלֹא יִשְׁמַע אֶלְיֵהֶם וְתִפְשׁוּ בוֹ אָבִיו וְאִמּוֹ וְהוֹצִיאוּ אֹתוֹ אֶל זִקְנֵי עִירוֹ וְאֶל שַׁעַר מְקוֹמוֹ. וְאָמְרוּ אֶל זִקְנֵי עִירוֹ בְּנֵנו זֶה סוֹרֵר וּמוֹרֵה אֵינָנו שֹׁמֵעַ בְּקוֹלֵנוּ זֹלִל וְסָבָא. וְרָגְמָהוּ כָּל אַנְשֵׁי עִירוֹ בְּאֲבָנִים וּמַת וּבַעֲרָתָּהּ – If a man has a wayward and rebellious son, who does not obey his father or his mother, and they rebuke him, and he still does not listen to them; his father and his mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his city, and to the gate of his town. They shall say to the elders of his city, “This son of ours is wayward and rebellious; he does not obey us; he is a glutton and a guzzler.” All the men of his city shall pelt him to death with stones, and he shall die. So shall you cast out the evil from among you, and all Israel will listen and fear. (21:18-21)

It's probably safe to say that capital punishment against children offends our sensibilities. Even if it were certain that such a child will eventually become a murderer, it shouldn't sit well to punish someone for a crime they haven't yet committed.

Apparently, it didn't sit well with our sages either, who disqualified any practical applications for as long as we know.

Our sages set tight parameters to meet the definitional requirements of the mitzvah: the age bracket is limited to a boy in the three months following his 13th birthday; he needs to have stolen and eaten impossible quantities of meat; cooked in a particular way; paired with a precise amount of wine; all while on his father's property. What's more, both parents must agree that their son ought to be executed.



The concurrence of all these restrictive conditions is not just improbable – it is impossible, and the Gemara records that no court ever carried out this law, concluding that the law exists exclusively for us to study the law and merit its reward.

But the Torah isn't short of laws and stories, and there is no minimum page count or word count target that requires bulk or filler.

What is the particular reward for studying the law never-practiced law of the rebellious son that is absent from the rest of the Torah?

R' Moshe Mordechai Epstein suggests that by inverting the parameters of what goes wrong in a rebellious son, the Torah reveals its guidelines for decent parenting.

The behavioral problems the Torah discusses result from overindulgence. We use the term “spoilt” to describe it, literally meaning that the person has been ruined. Parents must discipline through rewards and punishments to teach self-control, working towards curbing excessive, self-centered behaviors.

With this law, the Torah tells us to recognize the signs a child is growing out of control and to do something about it – וּבַעֲרַף הָרֶע מִקְרֹבָה. It's not filler content at all; it's an instruction to study the pitfalls and frightening consequences of poor parenting – וְכָל יִשְׂרָאֵל יִשְׁמְעוּ וְיִרְאוּ.

While the purpose of child discipline is to develop and entrench desirable social habits in children, the ultimate goal is to foster particular judgment and morals, so the child develops and maintains self-discipline throughout the rest of their life.

When a young plant grows curved, fastening a splint is all it requires to grow straight and strong. Hitting children is no longer culturally acceptable, and that's an overwhelmingly good thing. But if you love your children, you must correct and discipline them in a way they'll understand.

It is hard work, but then again, it takes twenty years to grow an oak tree and only a couple of months to grow a cucumber.

Tests And Consequences

3 minute read | Straightforward

War is bad.



Apart from the carnage between opposing forces, one of the awful consequences is that nearby civilians are typically subject to collateral damage at best and direct atrocities at worst. The Jewish people know this fact better than most, and history students will know of countless others.

For the vast majority of the history of warfare, women were raped and enslaved. Although international humanitarian law has deemed wartime sexual violence a war crime in the last century, it was a common practice in antiquity for millennia and still occurs frequently in less civilized parts of the world.

There's a law about it in the Torah, permitting soldiers at war to capture women:

כי תצא למלחמה על איבויך ונתגוה אלקיך בידך ושביתי שביי. וראית בשביה אשה יפת תאר ורשקת בה ולקחת לה לאשה – If you go out to war against your enemies, and the Lord, your God, will deliver them into your hands, and you take captives; if you see among the captives a beautiful woman and you desire her, you may take her for yourself as a wife. (21:10,11)

This mitzvah flies in the face of what we consider ethical and moral today. Why does the Torah endorse such a barbaric act?

Rashi quotes our sages' explanation that the Torah does not command anyone to practice sexual violence proactively; instead, it gives a license to human inclination in the heat of the moment and provides discretionary permission for people in a moment of weakness.

That doesn't seem substantially better, but it makes a difference, minimizing its occurrence and brutality.

R' Daniel Rowe notes that the Torah places heavy restrictions on people who practice this law; she must be shaved bald and grieve for thirty days in rags in the soldier's home. It's supposed to be distressing, not attractive. If the soldier comes to his senses over thirty days, he will probably regret abducting this poor stranger and forcing her to live under his roof, and will send her home.

Our sages note the juxtaposition of the two laws that follow, the law of a hated wife and the rebellious son, which our sages took to mean that this is a slippery slope. A person who exploits this permission to take an unsuitable wife will come to hate her, and their abusive relationship will produce dysfunctional children.

With this law, the Torah requires a total departure from thousands of years of normalized slavery and rape. Instead of conforming to a convention that classified women as spoils of war like other property to be exploited, the Torah demands that a woman's personhood be acknowledged and respected by giving her certain minimum rights. She preserves an element of dignity and status despite the fact she has been captured and her autonomy destroyed.



TorahRedux

This radical polemic represents a total paradigm shift, and perhaps that's the real message to take from the law of the captive womeweains lofty ideals; it also has words for the moments we are not at our best, even in our basest, most primal moments, in the moments of anger, passion, or lust.

The Torah is not some distant ideal that is beyond the reach and understanding of humans – לא בַּשְׁמַיִם, הָיָא.

The Torah is written for humans, with all our fallibility – דיברה תורה כלשון בני אדם.

The Torah talks about rape and slavery, but that's not the final word. The fact they are in the Torah does not mean they are ideals we aspire to practice again.

Because if we look a little closer, the Torah is steering us away from a world that tolerates rampant immoral practices and toward the more civilized world we are familiar with today.

The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.

Amalek Redux

4 minute read | Straightforward

The Torah has lots of laws. Some are fun and easy to understand, like Shabbos, and some are fun and challenging to understand, like shaking the Lulav. A rare few are difficult to understand and might also leave us with a sense of moral unease.

One of them is the laws concerning Amalek.

On the back of the miraculous Exodus and escape at the Red Sea, the Jewish People were exhausted and weary when a band of raiders called Amalek attacked the stragglers in the group.

Seeing as the Jewish People are the protagonists and our ancestors, we understand that Amalek is the antagonist. But of all the adversaries of Jewish history, Amalek has a unique distinction, sitting in a class of its own. From the earliest Jewish writings, Amalek is the code word for everything that is wrong with the world ideologically.

The story of the Land of Israel is a story of conquest. In many stories, the inhabitants recognize the geopolitical risk and act accordingly, such as Balak, Sichon, and Og. But that's not how the Torah tells the story of Amalek, who attack not out of self-defense, but because they could, and with great dishonor, by targeting weak stragglers.



By most counts, there are no less than three separate duties incumbent on all Jews as it pertains to Amalek: to remember that Amalek attacked the Jewish People just as they left Egypt; not to forget what they did; and the big one, to eradicate the memory of Amalek from the world.

These laws are serious and are part of the rare category of mitzvos that apply to all people at all times under all circumstances.

But isn't it a little unsettling?

It sounds uncomfortably like a mitzvah to commit genocide, the moral argument against which is certainly compelling, especially for a nation who heard the commandment “do not kill” from God’s voice at Sinai, even more so having suffered a genocide in living memory. Although some people have no trouble understanding it that way, you’re in good company if you find difficulty in a commandment to kill Amalek today.

Long ago, the Gemara dismissed the notion of practicing the straightforward interpretation, pointing to a story in the Prophets where the Assyrian king Sennacherib forcibly displaced and resettled the entire Middle East, eliminating distinct bloodlines of racial descent.

While this elegantly eliminates the problem in a practical sense – there is no problem because the law can no longer apply – the moral issue remains open.

Over centuries, a substantial number of prominent halachic authorities have clarified that the status of Amalek is not racial; that although a tribe called Amalek attacked the Jewish People and formed the context for the law, the law is not and never was an instruction to commit genocide against those people. While the Gemara says that Amalek can never join the Jewish People, it also says that descendants of Amalek taught Torah in Israel, suggesting that their women, or children of women who married out, could lose their identity as Amalek. If Amalek isn't a race, there is no law to kill such a particular group, and there is no moral dilemma.

R' Chaim Brisker explains that Amalek is not a particular group of humans; it is a conceptual category. It's an attitude and ideology that transcends any specific race or individual and persists forever, an archetype of evil that we must fundamentally stand against and be on alert for. Writers through the ages have labeled enemies or opposition as Amalek, which, although often lazy, correctly categorizes and formalizes this eternal struggle.

The perpetrators of the original crime are all dead, and modern society does not believe in the heritability of guilt. But the offense isn't simply that they physically attacked the Jewish People; as Rashi explains, it's that they cooled us off along the way while we were weary – אֲשֶׁר קָרָה בְּדֶרֶךְ וַיִּזְנֶב בָּהּ – כְּלִי-הַנְּשָׁאִלִים אֲחֲרֶיהָ וְאֵתָהּ עָנָה וַיִּגַע.



As the Netziv points out, it would be self-defeating and tautological to have an eternal command to destroy something's memory; the Torah makes that impossible simply by mentioning it.

The Kedushas Levi goes further and suggests that Amalek's legacy lies in the heart of every person.

We might stop to wonder if the ideology of Amalek is all around us in the social Darwinist culture we have built ourselves, which is, at its core, a simple application of survival of the fittest behavior.

Sure, the malignant form of Amalek looks like a Haman or a Hitler. But the benign form is all around us, in ourselves and others. It's not any particular humans we need to overcome, but their attitude and ideology. The fight against Amalek does not end even though the nation is long gone; its legacy remains, and it's the legacy that poses a threat.

A Chassidic aphorism observes that Amalek is numerically equivalent to doubt – עמלק / ספק.

In our day-to-day lives, that looks like when you consider doing something bold or different, and someone, perhaps even yourself, pokes holes or second-guesses the new initiative. “I want to try this new idea, but maybe I shouldn't? What if it's the wrong choice? Maybe I don't deserve it?” Or perhaps, “Why start or support that project—aren't there far more important ones?”

The attack in Rephidim only happens opportunistically when people are caught off guard – רפידים / רפיון ידים.

Anthropologists and psychologists have long observed the phenomenon of crab mentality in some groups. The metaphor derives from a pattern of behavior noted in crabs when trapped in a bucket – any individual crab could easily escape, but the others will undermine its efforts, ensuring the group's collective demise. In some groups, members will attempt to reduce the self-confidence of any member who achieves success beyond the others, whether out of envy, resentment, spite, or competitive feeling, to halt their progress. The wrong circles have powerful inertia that draws members towards conformity and mediocrity in a self-fulfilling negative feedback loop.

Letting feelings of self-doubt and personal incompetence persist is called impostor syndrome. You can baselessly hold back from doing things that could transform your life because you're not ready to face the reality of your own potential greatness.

As the Mishna in Pirkei Avos says, eliminate doubt – הסתלק מן הספק.

If it sounds pithy or trite, just know that that's quite literally Amalek's great crime – trying to hold the Jewish People back just as they were beginning to break through, discouraging them just as they were getting started and finding their feet – אֲשֶׁר קָרָה בְּדַרְדָּרָה וַיִּזְנֹב בָּהּ כְּלִי-הַנְּחֹשֶׁשׁ לִים אֶתְרִידָה וְאַתָּה עָנַף וַיִּגְעַע –



It's not apologetics or mental gymnastics; it neatly fits the words and is something we recognize all around us.

Haters rarely hate you; far more often, they hate themselves because you're showing them a reflection of what they wish they could be, and they don't like feeling inadequate.

Shine bright and soar, and forget about the people who tried to hold you back.

Pure Priorities

5 minute read | Straightforward

In the Jewish Tradition, the human body and human life are sacrosanct, seeing as humans are created in God's image – **הָרַבִּיב אָדָם שֶׁנִּבְרָא בְצַלְמֵם**.

Traditional burial is mandatory for Jews; other funeral rites, including cremation, are prohibited. The mitzvah of burial includes a component of urgency that, for certain close relatives, nearly all positive obligations are suspended until after the burial has concluded to facilitate prompt burial. It is degrading to allow a body, which remains sacred even in death, to lie idle and unburied – **קְבוּרַת הַתְּקַבְּרָנוּ** – **בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא כִּי־קָלְלַת אֲלֵקִים תִּלְוִי**.

But although there are tangible and practical laws relating to death, the Torah also talks about intangible laws, the laws of ritual impurity which result from death.

In the Torah's conception of a Jewish nation-state, ritual purity was a prominent element of daily life. All people were to be mindful of their purity status at all times, because a state of impurity makes people unsuited to specific activities and puts them at risk of contaminating sanctified foods and objects. A person in a state of impurity must undergo a predefined purification process that usually includes the passage of a specified amount of time.

Although we no longer practice most purity laws today, we still retain certain ritual practices such as immersion for our bodies or kitchenware as a legacy of these laws.

Traditionally, the job description for any practicing Kohen was to be knowledgeable and fluent in this arcane and specialized body of law, which was essential given their role in Temple service as well as their year-round consumption of sacred foods that only a Kohen could interact with and only while in a state of ritual purity.



The way the Torah categorizes impurity doesn't neatly correlate with anything we can relate to today; it has nothing to do with hygiene or sin.

But perhaps it's something like this.

Death is the archetypal trigger of existential dread; the confusion and disorientation that result from contemplating our subjective experience of thinking, feeling, and acting in this mode of existence as meaningless and absurd. All you have ever known is your conscious attachment and connection to the universe we experience; one day, that will cease to exist.

The notion of death exposes the fleeting fragility of human life, a thought antithetical to our entire primary experience in this living universe, undermining any real meaning or value to our lives, and exposure to it imparts a status-affecting condition called tuma, which loosely translates to impurity.

Someone out of the state of ritual purity is disqualified from a realm of everyday activities in the land of Israel. Still, for most people, it doesn't matter most of the time, so most people didn't have to be mindful of these laws and can attend to the dead with no issue.

Given that a kohen's life and work revolve around purity, it follows that a kohen's attending to the dead is more restricted; even today, a kohen may not intentionally come into contact with a dead body nor approach too closely graves within a Jewish cemetery, except for certain legally defined close relatives.

The Kohen Gadol was held to even stricter standards; he wasn't even allowed to contaminate himself to attend to a deceased parent.

Beyond the hierarchy of purity standards that exists for people, there is also a hierarchy of purity in time. Before Yom Kippur, the Kohen Gadol would isolate for seven days to attain the highest purity status and perform his most sacred ritual duties in the Holy of Holies on the holiest day of the calendar.

While it's clear that ritual purity plays a central and pervasive role in the Torah's conception of Jewish life, there is a revealing exception. In a landscape where purity is everything, the Torah obligates all Jewish people to take responsibility for the burial of an unattended Jewish body; this obligation supersedes every purity law and is almost if not entirely overriding – מת מצוה.

If you hear about a Jewish person who has died and has no one to perform a Jewish burial, there is a rare mitzvah to handle the burial personally, and even a Kohen is obligated. Usually, since the Kohen is unrelated, he would not otherwise be permitted to handle the burial. But there is no one else, and the obligation to immediately bury unattended dead is so compelling that it even obligates a Kohen Gadol on Yom Kippur.



The Lubavitcher Rebbe highlights this hierarchy of laws to reveal the Torah's sense of where human priorities ought to lie.

Even the holiest person, on the most sacred day of the year, about to perform his holiest and most core function, must roll up his sleeves and wade into someone else's mess and get their hands dirty. This explicitly states that no one is above serving others; it is a grave mistake to be too good for that. The correct decision under the circumstances is to forgo performing his duties on Yom Kippur; the Torah that demands his Yom Kippur service states that it is subject to his duty to bury the dead.

The Torah obligates all of us to take responsibility for the unattended dead; the Lubavitcher Rebbe asks us to wonder what it might ask of us concerning the living dead, people born Jewish and yet totally unaffiliated, cut off, and isolated from any trace of Judaism?

While the analogy isn't precise, perhaps it's directionally accurate.

The Jewish People are a sanctified nation where all are called to serve – *מִמְלַכֶּת כְּהִנִּיּוֹם וְגוֹי קְדוֹשׁ*.

However holy or self-righteous, the Torah demands that you get off your high horse, roll up your sleeves, and attend to physical and spiritual orphans, people who don't have anyone else. If the Kohen Gadol encounters an unattended dead body on Yom Kippur, his role and duties are suspended entirely; his only responsibility is to help the person in front of him.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe's followers took this teaching to heart; pioneering heroes and their brave families moved across the globe to set up a Jewish presence. They stepped far beyond their comfort zones with enormous self-sacrifice out of concern for others.

It might be a bit much to ask that of yourself, but you don't have to move to the middle of nowhere to recognize that attending to the needs of others is one of the Torah's highest priorities. The Kotzker mocked the Tzaddik in pelts, a holy man in his fur coat. When people are cold, does the righteous man gather materials to light a fire, or does he huddle in his warm jacket, praying intensely for their wellbeing?

When God talks to Avraham about what it would take to save the people of Sodom, God's conception of righteous people worth saving is people who are out on the streets, engaging with and influencing their surroundings – *צְדִיקִים בְּתוֹךְ הָעִיר*.

We don't live with purity at the forefront of our minds. But the Torah consistently reminds us where the purity of our priorities must lie.

Caring for others is a core part of the spiritual life. A spiritual life that doesn't engage the world with acts of care and compassion towards others isn't spiritual at all.



When Something is Off

6 minute read | Straightforward

As the Jewish People approached the Land of Israel, bordering nation-states were alarmed. A chieftain of Moav, Balak, had become familiar with the Jewish People's encounters and victories over the tribes and states who had crossed them and correctly anticipated imminent conflict and geopolitical upheaval in his neck of the woods.

Seeking divine aid, he sent elders to engage Bilam, a mystic and shaman whose magical abilities the Torah treats as an actual genuine threat – unlike say, Pharaoh's wizards.

Bilam accepted the job, setting out to curse the Jewish People and bring their unstoppable march to a halt. He saddled his donkey and departed with the dignitaries, but God, the source of his abilities, would not endorse his mission. God arranges many obstructions along the way by sending an angel – an especially intimidating one.

The donkey saw this angel standing in the way holding a flaming sword, so the donkey veered off the road into a field, until Bilam beat the donkey to turn her back onto the road. The angel soon reappeared in a narrow walled lane, and the donkey cowered against the sidewall, crushing Bilam's leg, so he beat her again. The angel then repositioned itself in a narrow spot that allowed no room for maneuver, and the donkey lay down, so Bilam beat the donkey one last time.

After the third beating, God gave the donkey the power to speak, and she complained to Bilam that she had always been a loyal steed and did not deserve these beatings. God then gives Bilam the ability to see the angel, and Bilam bows to the ground; the angel then berates Bilam for beating the donkey, noting that she saved Bilam's life. Bilam admits his error and the story proceeds.

While our modern sensibilities suggest that it's wrong to beat animals, the story seems to assume that some part of animal training plausibly includes negative reinforcement, so that wouldn't be why the donkey and angel are so angry at Bilam. Instead, the sense we get as readers is that the beating is wrong because it's not fair! It's not disobedient; it's scared of the scary thing – the donkey is innocent.

Yet Bilam is missing the crucial piece of information that unlocks the story – that there is an invisible threat ahead, and only his donkey is aware of the imminent danger! Without this missing piece, it would seem exactly how Bilam thought it seemed to him; his donkey was misbehaving and not following directions, so he did what animal trainers do – he hit the donkey, consistent with what he



understood was happening. His trained animal was behaving erratically for no apparent reason, wandering off and walking into walls.

Bilam hitting the animal was a rational conclusion to draw if he didn't have the key to understanding what was really going on, undermining his wrongdoing. What was so wrong about his actions that both the angel and talking donkey told him off?

The Kedushas Levi suggests that this exact line of thinking was Bilam's mistake, and it's something we do all the time.

If you've ever noticed that something is a little off, you typically feel a sense of unease, as the sense of wrongness slowly but undeniably creeps up on you. Bilam should have noticed that something strange was happening and taken a moment's pause to contemplate, but he missed the cue; something incredibly unusual happened, not once, not twice, but three times, and he totally missed it.

Instead of noticing and contemplating, he got angry and beat his donkey, powering right on with his plan, blaming rather than understanding. That's not the way a purported man of God ought to behave.

A person professing to live their lives according to their understanding of God's mission and the right thing to do ought to keep their eyes wide open. But Bilam couldn't see past his ego; he sought the fortune and power this prestigious mission would bring, and nothing was going to put him off course.

There's a classic joke about a flood, and the waters reach the top of the priest's home. The priest climbs to the roof, and a neighbor with a boat comes by and says, "Hop on, I'll take you to safety." The priest replied, "No, no, the Lord will save me." Then the water reaches his waist when a helicopter comes by and drops a ladder. The priest shouts up, "No, no, the Lord will save me." Finally, the water goes over his head, and he paddles to the surface. A disaster relief boat comes by and offers to bring the priest to safety. Once again, he declined, "No, no, the Lord will save me." The priest paddles until he is exhausted, and he drowns and dies. He reaches the gates of Heaven, puzzled, and asks God, "Lord, why didn't you save me?" only for God to smile, "My guy, I sent you two boats and a helicopter!"

The signal isn't only when God opens Bilam's eyes to see the angel. As the Shelah notes, the donkey's initial misbehavior was already an interaction with the divine; the flaming angel and magic sword don't reveal any additional information. By that point, he'd already missed it three times and had only been spared from disaster at the very last moment in a stroke of fortune, mercy, and providence.

Even if he could excuse the first time the donkey misbehaved as a one-off, the second and third time in quick succession were moments he ought to have realized something was off, and he might have reconsidered whether he was doing the right thing. But instead of acknowledging the obstacles in his



way with humility and understanding and adjusting accordingly, he responded with anger, ego, and pride, lashing out in rage at his poor donkey.

The nature of our universe is that life doesn't go according to plan; no plan survives contact with the enemy, as one proverb put it. So when we hit speed bumps and obstacles, we ought to be strategic in responding; some obstacles need to be climbed, and some obstacles require a full detour and rerouting.

To be clear, an obstacle doesn't mean you stop. An obstacle means you are required to recalibrate around, over, or through.

They are signs, and we should respond to them with the serious consideration they deserve and consider which way they point, where we are in the physical and spiritual universe, where we are going, and how we'd best get there.

R' Elchanan Wasserman powerfully suggests that knowing what God wants, even without explicit instruction, is sufficient information to impose a duty to act on that knowledge. Bilam was punished for following Balak's entourage because he could already recognize from the outset that God did not want him to curse the Jewish people, regardless of any formal instruction.

Bilam's mistake wasn't that he hit the donkey; that is somewhat excusable. Bilam's mistake was that he had all the tools necessary to recognize the obstacles that pointed him away from his ill-fated mission. Instead, he ignored the cues, responding with anger and ego three times, without one moment of introspection and self-reflection. If the unusual and extraordinary make no impression and fail to spark a moment of reflection and reorientation, we are ignoring the signs; you probably shouldn't count on a flaming angel wielding a magic sword showing up with the helpful feedback you need.

But to put it another way, if it takes a flaming angel with a magic sword to let you know you're on the wrong track, you haven't been paying attention, and you probably should have realized it quite some time ago already.

R' Yitzchok Berkovits suggests that this story highlights Bilam's central flaw – his character. Bilam had abilities equal to or greater than even Moshe, but he wasn't a teacher or leader. With all the unique knowledge and power he possessed, he was just a wizard for hire, a simple mercenary in the venal pursuit of money, power, and prestige.

Our Sages suggest that Bilam had the ability to identify the most opportune moment to curse people. So while God neutralized this specific scheme against the Jewish People, we are left with a story about who Bilam was, a man who, with all his abilities and wisdom, used them to carve a profession out of knowing when to curse people most effectively – assuming the pay was good enough, of course.



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The Mishna in Avos contrasts upright students from the school of Avraham with students from the crooked school of Bilam. It's not that the school of Bilam isn't learned or wise; Bilam is never characterized as ignorant or stupid! But perhaps the Mishna suggests that our wisdom is reflective of our character. We don't see the world as it is, but rather as we are.

If we focus our gifts and wisdom on pursuing fame, money, and power, we channel the evil eye of Bilam. But if we utilize our gifts to show compassion and generosity, kindly and selflessly giving to and serving others, then we are students from the school of Avraham, who prayed for Sodom, even though its people were the antithesis of all he stood for.

The story of Bilam stands as an example for all time of the folly of skill without character, of being plugged in but not tuned in. We need to understand who we are and where we are, striving to become caring, good, kind, and honest human beings; or else our gifts are useless, or worse, dangerous.

Next time you encounter obstacles, check your ego and open your eyes.

You might need to course-correct, and you might not; but if you're attentive and responsive to your particular path, you probably already know if you're on the right track or not.

I present TorahRedux l'ilui nishmas my late grandfather, HaGaon HaRav Yehuda Leib Gertner ben HaRav HaChassid Menachem Mendel.

I hope you enjoyed this week's thoughts. If you have questions or comments, or just want to say hello, it's a point of pride for me to hear from you, and I'll always respond. And if you saw, heard, read, or watched anything that spoke to you, please send it my way - Neli@TorahRedux.com.

If you liked this week's edition of TorahRedux, why not share it with friends and family who would appreciate it?

Neli

PS - *TorahRedux is my pride and joy, the product of thousands of hours of learning, research, writing, editing, and formatting. My business, Hendon Advisors, allows me to dedicate time to TorahRedux, and I welcome your assistance in furthering my goal to keep publishing high-quality Parsha content that makes a difference. I source and broker the purchase and sale of healthcare businesses; I kindly ask for your blessings and prayers. If you are a buyer of healthcare businesses or can make introductions to healthcare operators who might buy or sell, just reply to this email to get in touch.*



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Redux: *adjective* – resurgence; refers to being brought back, restored, or revived; something familiar presented in a new way. Not to see what no one else has seen, but to say what nobody has yet said about something which everybody sees.