

"Open my eyes so that I may see the **wonders** of Your Torah"



Wonders

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שַׁבַּת בָּלַק 🌿 יא-יב תמוז תשפ"ו



“How have you done this evil deed, to speak of mundane matters while wearing these holy tefillin?” They checked the tefillin and found that they had no letters, for they had all ascended to the heavens.”

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The Lubavitcher Rebbe to Rav Ginsburgh, Elul 5741

*"...It would be proper
to publish your classes
in book form.
With blessings for success..."*

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הגאון
המפורסם
הרב
יצחק
גנז'ן
השני
הזו"ר.

Wonders

An anthology from the shiurim and farbrengens
of Harav **Yitzchak Ginsburgh**

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FUNDAMENTALS OF CHASIDUT

THE NINE PRINCIPLES OF FAITH: ALL DESCENT IS FOR THE PURPOSE OF ASCENT, EVEN SIN

We continue our review of the 9 Principles of Faith of the Torah's inner dimension with the fourth principle: that all descent is for the sake of a subsequent ascent, meaning that all failures are meant to lead to an ultimate higher state, even those failures that the Torah deems to be sins.

*The contents of this series first appeared in Hebrew, in HaRav Ginsburgh's book, *Emunah VeMuda'ut* (Faith and Consciousness). It is being translated here for the first time.*

We now come to the fourth principle of faith of the Torah's inner dimension. God created our world to present our souls with the opportunity to rise higher, to an elevated state. To access this opportunity, our soul must be willing to descend from heaven into our physical body. Despite this initially being a descent from the soul's high spiritual state, ultimately, by traversing the difficulties inherent in life, the soul merits to ascend to a higher state. This is the root of the principle that every descent is for the purpose of an ascent.

Every descent from one's earlier, higher status, is brought about by the *sefirah* of might (*gevurah*), also known as the attribute of judgment (מדת הדין) and of contraction (or, sometimes, concentration). Every descent is for the purpose of a subsequent ascent to a place incomparably higher than the initial starting point. It requires a keen sense, but

for one who can “see,”¹ present already within the descent itself is its purpose—the peak of the ascent.²

This principle applies not only to the descent of the soul into our mundane reality, or any other descent that accords with God's will, but even to a descent caused by sin or transgression committed by a person through his free will and contrary to God's will. Though sin is against God's supreme will, concealed within the unwanted act their lies a hidden intention that originates from God's highest essence, a realm that is higher than God's revealed will,

1. In the *Zohar* (see also *Tanya* ch. 37), one who can see is described as the wise man who has “eyes in his head” referring specifically to the supernal wisdom, the supernal eyes in the crown, the super-consciousness, which is known as “the concealed wisdom,” a manifestation of the might (*gevurah*) of *Atik Yomin*, the higher part of the crown.

2. See *Likkutei Moharan* 1:22 ch. 11. See also *Torat Menachem* 5712, vol. 2, p. 192.

as explained in Chasidut regarding the verse, “God is... held in awe for His deeds toward humanity”³ (לְכוּ וְרֵאוּ מִפְעֻלוֹת אֱלֹהִים נוֹרָא עֲלֵיהֶּ עַל (בְּיַ אֲדָר)), which is explained in the *midrash* as follows⁴:

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korchah said: Even the terrible things You bring upon us, You bring them through entrapment (עֲלִילָה, *alilah*). Come and see: when the Holy Blessed One created the world, from the very first day He created the Angel of Death.... Adam was created on the sixth day. Yet the scheme was pinned on him and he was blamed that *he* had brought death into the world, as it says: “for on the day you eat of it [the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge] you shall surely die.”⁵ To what may this be compared? To a man who wishes to divorce his wife. Before going home he wrote the bill of divorce, then entered his house with the get already in hand, seeking a pretext to give it to her. He said to her: “Pour me a cup to drink.” She poured it for him. As soon as he took the cup from her hand, he said: “Here is your bill of divorce.” She said to him: “What is my offense?” He replied: “Leave my house, for you poured me a lukewarm cup.” She said to him: “You already knew that I was going to pour you a lukewarm cup, for you wrote the *get* [Bill of Divorce] and brought it in your hand!”

So too, Adam said before the Holy Blessed One: “Master of the Universe, You did not create Your world until two thousand years had passed, during which the Torah was with You.... And in the Torah it was already written, ‘This is the Torah: when a man dies in a tent.’⁶ Had You not already ordained death for Your creatures, would You have

written such a thing in it? Rather, You have come to pin the scheme upon me.”⁷

Let us explore this for a moment from God’s perspective. God knows all human deeds, including those defined by the Torah as sin in advance. Nonetheless, He sustains and makes even these actions possible, despite their being contrary to His revealed will as stated in the Torah. The sinner could argue that because of this, he is not to blame for the sin, for if God had only willed otherwise, God could have prevented the sin from ever happening. Yet, God chose that free-will would be a fixture of human existence and based on man’s freedom of will, God would judge man and his actions. Given all of the above, every individual is responsible for his or her deeds and must answer for them. However, when a sinner returns to God in complete *teshuvah* and cleaves to God’s primal will and desire for Creation that transcends Creation and the ways of the created world, they reveal how the sin is actually a connection to God Himself—to God’s essential and transcendent Being that is beyond understanding and definition.

EVIL AS A THRONE FOR GOOD

Accordingly, the ultimate purpose of all evil in the world is to serve as a means for refinement and redemption. Evil is destined to become “a basis for good,” as expressed in the famous teaching of our teacher the Baal Shem Tov: “evil is like a throne upon which the good sits.”⁸ In other words, once evil serves its true

3. Psalms 66:5.

4. *Tanchuma Vayeishev* 4.

5. Genesis 2:17.

6. Numbers 19:14.

7. See also *Torat Chaim* of the Mittler Rebbe, *Toldot*, s.v. *VeYiten Lekha*, ch. 10 and onwards; *Sefer HaMamarim* of the Rayatz, *Kuntresim* vol. 1, 191b and ff.; *Sefer HaMamarim Melukat*, *Kuntres Yud Shevat 5751*, that the pretext applies even to the sin itself.

8. The precise words from the Baal Shem Tov are in Hebrew and read, “Evil is a throne for good” (הָרַע כְּסֵדָא לְטוֹב (כְּסֵדָא לְטוֹב)). The initials of this phrase spell the word “all” (הַכֹּל), alluding to the mysterious meaning of the conclusion (and the inception) of Ecclesiastes.

purpose, it will be instrumental in elevating the good in our world to a level incomparably higher than it was when it stood in direct opposition to evil. After evil is refined, the good need not confine itself to definitions that prove it is not evil, and it can rise above all definitions to become infinite and ever more similar to its source—God—who is infinite.

In a similar vein, the Maggid of Mezritch explained that the linguistic origin of the Hebrew word for evil (רע) is related to the word meaning, “lower” (מלרע). Thus, evil entered our world with what fell, shattered, and died with the Breaking of the Vessels, the Kabbalistic idea that parallels (and includes) Adam and Eve’s sin of eating from the Tree of Knowledge. Evil is meant to act as a scaffolding for the good. It supports from the bottom.

Evil has two dimensions. There is the “real” part of evil. This part includes the Divine spark that is trapped within it and sustains its existence together with the shard of the broken vessels; they constitute its very existence.⁹ This part is destined to be refined and redeemed, and it will fulfill the purpose of evil as a throne for good. But there is also an imaginary part to evil, about which the prophet says, “I shall remove the spirit of impurity from the Earth.” This will happen once the real part of evil is refined.

“NONE SHALL BE LOST”

The ascent that follows the descent is an act of *teshuvah*—a return to God. *Teshuvah*

The book begins with the verse, “Vanity of vanities, says Ecclesiastes, vanity of vanities, all is vanity” (הכל הבל). The conclusion reads, “The end of the matter, with all having been heard is: fear God and observe His commandments, for this is all that man is” (הכל נפש חיה). See *Sod Hashem LiYerei’av, Hara Kise LaTov* (Sha’ar 21).

9. As known from the writings of the Arizal concerning lights, sparks, and vessels.

governs both the ascent of the individual and of the collective. Maimonides writes that regarding the Jewish people: “Israel will ultimately return to God at the end of their exile, and they will be immediately redeemed.”¹⁰

One who has returned to God by ascending out of his descent attains a higher level of closeness to God than even the righteous who have never sinned. The Talmud tells us that, “where masters of *teshuvah* [of return to God] stand, the completely righteous cannot stand.”¹¹ Because of this, one of the most important tasks of the Mashiach is “to bring the righteous to do *teshuvah*,”¹² so that even the righteous individuals will merit to stand at the level that the penitents—the masters of *teshuvah* can stand. The distance opened between them and God, between their being and all that is Godly and good, creates a yearning like no other to ascend and that energy catapults them above the state they were in before they sinned. The point is that those who have done *teshuvah* for their sins, for having engaged with evil, reach their greater proximity to Godliness because they have completed the full cycle of “descent is for the sake of ascent, even with sin,” and they have done so out of love for God, love for what is good.

Teshuvah that is born of love for God—and within every Jew there is a hidden love destined to be revealed as *teshuvah* from love—has the power “to transform even intentional sins into merits.”¹³ The sin and the distance from God become, retroactively, propulsions toward greater and more powerful closeness. This is the deep meaning of the verse said about each and every individual soul of Israel, “none shall be lost.”¹⁴

10. *Hilchot Teshuvah* 7:5.

11. *Berachot* 34b.

12. *Zohar* 3:153b

13. *Yoma* 86b.

14. 2 Samuel 14:14.

REWARD AND PUNISHMENT

This fourth principle of faith of the Torah's inner dimension—"All descent is for the sake of ascent," even regarding sin—corresponds to Maimonides' 11th principle of faith regarding the reward that comes to those who observe God's commandments and the punishment that is administered to those who transgress His will. The Torah's inner dimension adds that punishment is nothing more than a concealed act of loving-kindness. Its function is to refine evil itself so that it may become a throne for good.

According to Maimonides, "evil does not descend from Above," meaning that it does not originate in God.¹⁵ Evil is entirely man made. But according to the wisdom of the Torah's inner tradition, nothing in the world is truly created by the lower beings themselves—everything is created from Above. The meaning of the phrase "evil does not descend from above" is that since everything in the world, including all evil within it, is from Above—it is not true evil¹⁶ whose purpose is to punish and cause suffering, but rather it comes to ascend itself and to elevate the good to be encompassed within the infinite.

THE CHAMBER OF MERIT

We have already explained the connection between descent and the left axis of the sefirot and particularly the *sefirah* of might (*gevurah*), to which we correspond this fourth principle of faith of the Torah's inner dimension. Let us add another point in this respect.

The Zohar and the writings of the Arizal speak of another parallel nomenclature for

the seven emotive sefirot—a nomenclature that is rooted in the idiom of heavenly chambers. Among them, the "Chamber of Merit" (היכל הזכות), where the Heavenly Court sits to judge reward and punishment, is the chamber associated with might, the attribute of judgment. It is telling that it is not called the Chamber of Justice, but rather the Chamber of Merit. From this we learn that the true purpose of reward and punishment is to vindicate the person, to refine even the evil within him so that it can become a throne for the good, and to transform every descent into the purpose of ascent.

This principle of faith is associated with the left axis of the sefirot also because it is sensitive to the inherent limits—limits are related to contraction—of created beings, just as it is the power of contraction that limits the Divine revelation so that it can be understood by the lower creatures, and on the other hand produces the attribute of judgment that evaluates each and every act of the creatures. Because it corresponds with the *sefirah* of might, this principle situated just under the principle of faith in "Our Divine service is a need of the Most High," which corresponds with the *sefirah* of understanding. The relationship between understanding and might is captured in the verse, "I am understanding, I have might."¹⁷ Applied to these two principles of faith of the Torah's concealed tradition, this verse means that when a person, in serving his Creator and does good below, in the mundane realm, Above he is also doing good, as it were, for God. This is governed by the principle that, "an awakening below generates an awakening Above. But even when a person sins below, the supernal intent (concealed within God's highest essence, as above) descends to transform the descent caused by the sin into an ascent that will bring God endless pleasure and satisfaction

15. *Bereishit Rabbah* 51:3.

16. That which is truly evil—not a spark of Divinity or a shard of a holy vessel, the dimension of evil described as "imaginary" earlier—it is illusory and it will disappear entirely at the time of the Redemption.

17. Proverbs 8:14.

(especially with the ultimate repentance of the entire Jewish people, as above). Thus, “I am understanding” refers to good that is needed

by the Most High and “might is mine” refers to the might needed to transform a descent into an ascent, might that is possessed by God Above.

STORY

THE HOLY OR HACHAIM: THE LETTERS OF THE TEFILLIN

Rabbi Chaim ben Attar, known eponymously by his Torah commentary as the holy Or HaChaim, was born in 5456 (1696) in Salé, Morocco, to his father Rabbi Moshe, and learned Torah from his grandfather Rabbi Chaim ben Attar the Elder. He married his relative Petzunyah and was appointed to lead the yeshivah in Salé. He became known there as a holy man of God, regularly taught Torah before the community, and served as a charity collector. Since his wife did not bear him children, he married a second wife, Esther, and both his wives lived with him until the end of his days in Jerusalem. After a series of disputes and persecutions against him, he made aliyah to the Land of Israel, passing through Livorno, Italy, where he printed his famous commentary on the Torah. There is a tradition that he wrote his commentary especially for his daughters. In Italy, he raised financial support for his move to the Land of Israel and for maintaining the yeshivah he planned to establish there.

At the end of 5741 (1741), he arrived with his students in Acco, where the yeshivah was first established. The invitation from the Jews of Tiberias to establish his seat in their city was not followed through, and after a brief period of settlement in the village of Peki'in in the Galilee, they moved to Jerusalem at the end of 5742 (1742), where his yeshivah Midrash Keneset Yisrael was reestablished. Less than a year later, he departed this world and was laid to rest on the 15th of Tammuz 5743 (1743) in the ancient cemetery on Mount Olives.

The holy Rebbe Avraham Shalom Halberstam, head of the Stropkov dynasty and the author of *Divrei Shalom*, of blessed memory, related at a *Melaveh Malkah* in Cracow in the name of his father, the holy Rebbe Yechezkel Shraga Halberstam, author of *Divrei Yechezkel* of Shineve (Sieniawa, Poland), of blessed memory, who related the following story upon his return from the Land of Israel:

[It is known that in 5629 (1869), the Shinever Rebbe visited the Land of Israel and stayed in Tzfat and Jerusalem, and in 5631 (1871) he returned to Galicia]:

The holy and pure Rabbi, awesome and sublime, Rabbi Chaim ben Attar, of blessed memory, author of the holy book *Or HaChaim*, had two wives. Before his passing, the women wept before him, asking him to advise them how they would earn their livelihood after his death. He said to them: “Behold, I give you my *tefillin* (phylacteries), and after my death, publicize in all places that whoever wishes to pray with my *tefillin* may come and pray with them. In exchange, each person who prays with them will pay a certain sum, and from this you will earn your livelihood. But one extremely important warning: you must take great care that anyone who places the *tefillin* on his head must not, God forbid, speak mundane words while the *tefillin* are on his head. The *tefillin* are holy, and with mundane speech, God forbid, their holiness will be blemished and the letters inked on the parchments will disperse into the air and the *tefillin* will immediately become invalid for use.

After the *Or Hachaim* passed on, the widows followed his instructions and announced the opportunity to pray with his *tefillin*. Jews came with great longing to pray with the holy *tefillin*, and from this his widows earned their livelihood.

Once, a great merchant came and prayed with the *tefillin*, and suddenly a distinguished gentleman came and said he had to urgently speak with the merchant and could not wait until after the prayer because he was hurrying on his way. The widows always guarded the entrance to the study hall when someone had put on the *Or HaChaim*’s *tefillin*, requiring him to pray in seclusion so that it would not be possible for him to speak mundane words while wearing the holy *tefillin*.

That gentleman had come in great haste and entered without permission, and the women had not noticed. He exchanged some words with the merchant. When the widows saw that he had entered, they cried out with a great cry, “How have you done this evil deed, to speak of mundane matters while wearing these holy *tefillin*?” They checked the *tefillin* and found that they had no letters, for they had all ascended to the heavens.

The holy *Or HaChaim* was a messianic figure. In Chasidut, many stories and sayings have been handed down about this, and we particularly note the following story:

Once, a printer named Asher brought the holy Rebbe, Pinchas of Koritz, a set of the Five Books of Moses that he had printed with the commentary *Or HaChaim* inside. When the *tzaddik* opened the books, he happened upon the Torah portion of *Re’eh* at the verse, “If there will be among you a needy person from one of your brothers,” (Deuteronomy 15:7). Rebbe Pinchas knew that the *Or HaChaim* had explained that this verse alludes to the “one” among your brothers, i.e., the Mashiach, and he wrote in his commentary: “the Mashiach—his name is Chaim.”

But in this printing, Rebbe Pinchas saw that the words, “his name is Chaim” had been omitted. He immediately turned to the printer and asked him, “Why did you omit these

words?” The printer replied: “Because he was referring to himself!”

Immediately, Rebbe Pinchasa opened the Book of Numbers to the Torah portion of Naso, to the verse, “And the woman shall say, ‘Amen, Amen’ (Numbers 5:22) and looked at Rashi’s commentary. Rashi explains why the woman says “Amen” twice, “Amen if [she has been intimate] with this man, Amen if with another man.” The word for “another” is *acher* (אחר), but Rebbe Pinchas showed the printer that in his printing it was copied erroneously and read, “Asher” (אשר), the printer’s name. Rebbe Pinchas said to him, “Here is where you have signed your name,” and the man’s face turned pale.

Befitting such a *tzaddik* who was the Mashiach of his generation, the wives of the holy Rabbi Chaim ben Attar were also special women. Despite being married to the same man, they lived in peace and exceptional friendship. Moreover, they embody in many ways the so-called elevation of kingdom—the Kabbalistic idea that as the Messianic era approaches, the status of the feminine is elevated until the masculine and the feminine become equal in stature.

The Or HaChaim’s first wife, Petzunya, was particularly distinguished in this regard. She was known for her deep wisdom and even donned *tefillin*, a practice the Sages say was upheld by Michal, the daughter of King Saul. In our story, the connection between both women together and their husband’s *tefillin* stands out.

In Kabbalah, it is said that when a husband puts on *tefillin*, the *tefillah* (singular of *tefillin*) of the hand is considered and acts like it is the *tefillah* of the head for his wife. In an inner dimension, the husband thereby fulfills his wife’s “obligation,” as it were, regarding the *mitzvah* of *tefillin*. This is also why he first dons the hand *tefillah* and only then the head *tefillah*, which is his alone. But the wife of the Or HaChaim was not satisfied with this, and she put on *tefillin* herself. Later, both of her husband’s *tefillin*—the head and the hand—

passed into her possession and to that of her peer Esther. It would seem that the head *tefillah* belonged especially to the scholarly Petzunya, while the hand *tefillah* belonged to Esther, with whom the holy Or HaChaim had children thereby fulfilling the commandment to “be fruitful and multiply.”

What can the women of our era learn from this? It is known in Chasidut that *tefillin* is “draw down Divine consciousness” (מוחיין). What does this mean? In the story, the drawing down of Divine consciousness was expressed in bringing the Or HaChaim’s *tefillin* to the worshippers and in his wives’ careful attention to the words of those putting them on. As a directive for the women of our generation, drawing down Divine consciousness means spreading Torah and teaching it to others, as it is written in the *midrash*¹ that performing the commandment of *tefillin* is comparable to learning Torah all day and all night. A woman who engages in this, within the family and even more so outside of her family (by organizing Torah classes and women’s groups), merits thereby the spiritual wearing of *tefillin*: drawing down Divine consciousness—the light of Torah, to all who hear.

1. *Midrash Tehillim* on Psalms 1:2. See in length in the essay *Itta BeMidrash Tilim* 5653, the essay recited traditionally in Chabad by a Bar Mitzvah boy.

PARASHAT BALAK

PROPHETIC POWERS

Parashat Balak recounts the attempt of Balak, the king of Moab, to hire the heathen prophet Balaam to curse the Israelites. Balak was terrified that his country would be overrun by the Children of Israel as they entered the Land of Israel. Balaam, despite his deep hatred (fueled by jealousy) of the Israelites and his insatiable desire to curse the Jews, was coerced by the Almighty to bless them instead. In fact, some of the most beautiful and descriptive blessings in the Torah come from the mouth of Balaam. He also prophesied regarding what would occur in the Messianic, “end of days,”¹ reminiscent of what later Jewish prophets prophesied as well. Maimonides, in his influential treatment of traditions regarding the Mashiach, view Balaam’s prophecies and blessings as the source for many of these traditions.²

ATTAINING PROPHETIC POWERS

The idea that an idolatrous prophet could attain such prophetic powers raises many deep questions regarding how a person as impure and morally base as Balaam could achieve such a level of consciousness. To answer this question, we must probe various ideas and traditions regarding prophecy and Divine inspiration.

We begin with the Ramchal, Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (1707-1746) who wrote extensively about the entire realm of prophecy in his classic work, *Derech HaShem*.³ He discusses at length the

influence that negative and evil forces can exert when an individual delves into higher powers of consciousness. Since imagination, according to all the commentaries, especially Maimonides,⁴ plays a fundamental role in the prophetic experience, it can be tainted by all sorts of false ideas and fantasies if it is not purified. In one case, a person may unwittingly experience a false vision due to these unconscious influences. In other cases, a person may become totally corrupted by these forces and knowingly mislead people as to his true nature and the validity of his prophecies. The psychic power released when contacting higher forces of consciousness unfortunately can, like other temptations and powerful energetic experiences, lead a person astray. The phrase, “power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely,” regrettably may also apply to spiritual or supernatural matters, as it does to the material desire for riches, power, glory, fame, and control.

On a deeper level, we may apply the well-known formula, which works equally in both the physical and spiritual dimensions, that every action has an equal and opposite reaction. Thus, the possibility of true prophecy carries with it the equal possibility of error, falsehood, lack of understanding, and even misuse. This idea is put forward to explain how Balaam, who was considered by the Sages to be an immoral, unsavory character, could reach such heights of prophecy. The Midrash relates that the nations said to God: “If we had a prophet the likes of Moses we too

1. Numbers 24:15-24.

2. *Hilchot Melachim* chs. 11-12.

3. 3:3-5.

4. *Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah*, chapters 7-10 and *Guide to the Perplexed*.

would serve You.” Therefore, God gave them Balaam, who in potential was Moses’ equal in prophecy, but whose nature was corrupt and under the influence of his own inner evil. Balaam’s corruption proves that having a prophet of Moses’ caliber is not enough to lead people to serve God and the nations’ argument is disclaimed.⁵

It is interesting to note that according to tradition, Balaam was a master of all sorts of witchcraft, yet he was also able to receive visions and messages directly from God, as attested to many times in *parashat Balak*. This phenomenon parallels the juxtaposition in the Torah of warnings against forbidden magical practices and witchcraft, which are then followed directly by instructions regarding prophecy.⁶ Both witchcraft and prophecy are in a sense tuning into the same paranormal energies. The differences lie in the spiritual level of the one seeking this wisdom. This dynamic can be expressed using Kabbalistic terminology: *the quality of the light revealed is dependent upon the integrity of the vessel which receives it*. When unbridled ego, pride, lust, and uncontrolled passion mix with these spiritual energies, the results are illusory at best and dangerous at worst. This is exactly what happened to Balaam.

WALKING WITH GOD EARNESTLY

Between the sections in the Torah of forbidden magical practices and prophecy is a very important transitional verse: “Be earnest with *Havayah*, your God.”⁷ *Rashi* comments: “Walk before Him earnestly, and

put your hope in Him, and Do not attempt to probe the future, but rather accept whatever happens to you earnestly, and then, you shall be with Him and will be part of His portion.” *Rashi* is articulating the psychological nature of the prohibition against magical forms of fortune telling because, as his comments indicate, a Jew should not seek to know the future through divination but rather should have simple faith in Divine Providence.

Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneersohn, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, proposes that *Rashi*’s explanation may even indicate that some of the forbidden practices could be effective, but nonetheless the Torah forbids them as they are deemed counterproductive to being “simple hearted with God.” We see this, for example, in the Book of Samuel when King Saul consults a fortune-teller out of desperation, to raise the deceased spirit of his teacher, the prophet Samuel, with whom he wanted to consult about his war with the Philistines. The fortune-teller is successful and the spirit of Samuel seems to speak to Saul.⁸

The Lubavitcher Rebbe explains that Nachmanides, on the other hand, felt that the prohibition against fortune telling was because only God knows the future; therefore, these magical attempts to reveal the future are inherently false and unreliable. It therefore follows that prophecy is meant to be a true and Divinely sanctioned alternative to those who practiced magic and witchcraft to foresee the future.

Yet, according to *Rashi*, prophecy itself might be considered problematic, as it too predicts the future. Similarly, the Lubavitcher Rebbe asks: how does *Rashi* understand the practice of consulting with the High Priest, who wore his breastplate, which included the mysterious *Urim* and *Tumim* that were used as divination devices, as prescribed

5. *Bamidbar Rabbah* 14:20. For more on the spiritual relationship between Moses and Balaam see *Sha’ashuim Yom Yom, Balak*.

6. Deuteronomy 18:9-22.

7. *Ibid* 18:13. For an in-depth study of this verse see the many classes by HaRav Ginsburgh appearing in the series *Mivchar Shiurei Hitbonenut*, vols. 14, 15, 17, 18, and 20.

8. 1 Samuel ch. 28.

in the Torah. He answers these formidable questions by pointing out that *Rashi* stresses in his above comment that not probing the future means not *intensively* investigating one's personal destiny, while the Torah does permit consulting a prophet, or the breastplate, if this will assist one in their service of God and personal growth, as long as it does not contradict the injunction to be simple-hearted and to ultimately trust God above all else.⁹

ACCESSING THE PARANORMAL

With all of this in mind, we now return to the connection between prophecy, Divine inspiration and various practitioners of the occult, like Balaam. Although a vast majority of people claiming to possess special healing powers or paranormal abilities to foretell the future are certainly charlatans, there are those who do in fact have these powers. How do these individuals tap into these psychic forces?¹⁰

Firstly, it should be stated that Divine inspiration is open to any person regardless of gender, race or nationality. This tradition comes from no less than Elijah the Prophet who exclaimed: "I call heaven and earth to witness, that any individual, man or woman, Jew or gentile, freeman or slave, can have *ruach hakodesh* ("Divine inspiration") come upon him. It all depends on his deeds."¹¹ Similarly, Moses, the greatest of the prophets, pronounced his fervent hope: "Would it be that all God's people were prophets and that God would put His spirit upon them!"¹²

Therefore, certain individuals are able to access information in a paranormal manner by tapping into a more expansive level of

consciousness, which then unlocks certain concealed layers of information. However, the problem is that those who are born with these abilities, or who practice certain types of meditative disciplines without the hard work of character refinement, are often psychologically unstable and unprepared for such an immense and sudden download. Since these powers tend to amplify any unrealistic or overblown egocentric self-image, this is an easy trap to fall into.¹³ This explains the Talmudic teaching that states that when the era of the prophets ended, prophecy was given over to seriously unstable characters and children.¹⁴ Additionally, these powers, when misused, can have a negative influence on others or, in many cases, may even be truly dangerous.

THREE GARMENTS OF THE SOUL

According to Chasidut, the psyche has three garments: thought, speech and action. When a person develops and refines these garments through hard spiritual work, he or she may merit an experience of Divine inspiration, although that is not the explicit goal of serving God. Those who possess these abilities without having gone through the proper course of soul development are considered to have figurative holes or rips in their garments, which then allow powerful lights and information to seep into their unprepared consciousness. These holes reveal a certain nakedness of soul, similar to one wearing tattered clothing. In this sense, they reveal a certain soul blemish despite whatever clairvoyant powers they may attain.¹⁵

There have been many righteous people who were gifted with clairvoyant powers from birth or were even granted these abilities as the

9. *Likkutei Sichot*, vol. 14, p. 64ff.

10. *A Sense of the Supernatural*, Letter 3.

11. *Tanna DeBei Eliyahu* 9.

12. Numbers 11:29.

13. *A Sense of the Supernatural*, *loc. cit.*

14. *Bava Batra* 12b.

15. *A Sense of the Supernatural*, *loc. cit.*

result of a long and arduous spiritual process of refinement, but once they experienced the burden of such knowledge, they actually prayed for these powers to be taken away because they realized they were hindering their spiritual service, which was predicated on being simple-hearted with God. Other righteous people maintained these powers but were ever aware of the true Divine source of their inspiration and made sure to only use them for positive and holy purposes.¹⁶ Balaam, on the other hand, is a prime example of one

16. *Ibid.*

who attained real prophetic powers, but due to his unrectified soul, descended into immoral behavior, witchcraft, sexual aberrations, and became a prophet for hire who thrived on his reputation as one who could curse and whose curses were potent. Yet, God had other plans and turned his desire to curse into blessings, and his evil intent into good, as the Ba'al Shem stated: evil is the throne of good,¹⁷ and the ultimate good is God.

17. Keter Shem Tov 70, Ba'al Shem on the Torah, parashat Bereishit, 45.

PARASHAT BALAK

DEFEATING BALAM AND BALAK: CONNECTING THOUGHT WITH DEED

In a concise and foundational lesson on the weekly Torah portion, we explore how the forces of impurity, represented by Balak and Balam, wage war against the observance of mitzvot in deed (or in speech) and in thought. These forces stand in opposition to Rachel and Leah, who together built the House of Israel. This short meditative class charts the basic and primary model that divides our world into the Concealed World and the Revealed World.

This class was originally taught on the 9th of Tammuz, 5784 and was first published in Hebrew in the Balak 5784 issue of Niflaot.

THE CONCEALED AND REVEALED WORLDS

In *parashat Balak*, two figures wish to curse the Jewish people—Balak and Balam. There are many linguistic and numerical analyses of their names.¹⁸ First of all, both begin with the letters *bet-lamed* (לב), which can be read either as *Bel* (לב), a term of negation, or as *Bel* (לב), the name of Babylon's chief idol.¹⁹ What is the difference between them? It is written²⁰ that Balak, the king of Moab, embodies the *sefirah* of kingdom, corresponding to the second (and lower) *hei* in God's essential Name, *Havayah* (יהוה). Balam, on the other hand, corresponds to first *hei* in God's essential Name and to the *sefirah* of understanding.

These two sefirot understanding and kingdom represent thought and speech, respectively. Thought and speech are called the Concealed World and the Revealed World in the *Zohar*,²¹ respectively. Thus, Balam manifests

the power of impure thoughts and Balak the power of impure speech.

It is written²² that Balak was an even greater sorcerer than Balam—in fact more dangerous—for it was specifically Balak who identified the place where a breach would someday occur in Israel,²³ while Balam knew how to time the moment when God is, as it were, is angry.²⁴ Thus, the relationship between them corresponds to the relationship between space and time, which itself correspond to speech and thought, to the Revealed World and the Concealed World.²⁵

It is written²⁶ that Balam's name literally means “without a people” (עלֵי־לֵבַי), meaning that he was a cosmopolitan man without a national identity; he is universal. By contrast, Balak is more specific and defined, the king

18. See, for example, *Sanhedrin* 105a; *Aderet Eliyahu* on Numbers 22:5.

19. Isaiah 46:1–2 and 51:44.

20. See *Sha'ar HaPesukim, Balak*.

21. See *Zohar* 1:152a; 158a; 2:29b.

22. *Zohar* 3:112b and elsewhere.

23. See *Rashi* on Numbers 23:14.

24. *Sanhedrin* 105b.

25. See *Mivchar Shiurei Hitbonenut*, vol. 15.

26. *Zohar* 3:199b. See the discourse “*Velo Avah HaShem Elohekha Lishmoa El Bilam*” 5680 (1919–1920).

of a particular nation. This too attests to their correspondence with the concealed—undefined, without identity—and the revealed—which is clear and specific.

With regard to the relationship between understanding and kingdom, between the Concealed and Revealed Worlds, the Ba'al Shem Tov cites²⁷ the verse “Who is she who rises from the wilderness?”²⁸ He explains that this verse instructs us that our Divine service in life should be to unite the two: “Who” (מי), which corresponds to the *sefirah* of understanding and the word, “she” (תאז), which corresponds to the *sefirah* of kingdom. Uniting thought with speech, the concealed with the revealed, connects to the Baal Shem Tov’s explanation²⁹ of another verse, “One with a wise heart acquires commandments,”³⁰ according to which every commandment contains two commandments as it were, referring to the commandment’s physical deed and to its inner intent. He has a wise heart strives to unite the two. But what opposes us in this sacred service of unifications are Balam and Balak, who join forces to sever our mind from our speech, our intent from our actions thereby ensuring that we don’t mean what we say and that we do not do what we intend to.

BABYLON AND AMALEK

There is another famous linguistic allusion regarding Balam and Balak.³¹ When one writes Balam above Balak (the Concealed World above the Revealed World)

ב | ל | ע | ם
ב | ל | ק

and reads each half from top to bottom, the letters in the first half spell “Babylon” (בבל) and those in the second half spell “Amalek” (עמלק),

another pair of impure forces. In the soul, Babylon represents confusion (בלבול) while Amalek represents doubt, whose Hebrew value (ספק) is the same as Amalek (עמלק).³² In our Divine service, we are challenged by both doubt and confusion. Doubt poisons our thought, our Concealed World, while confusion poisons our deeds (or speech).

It is generally explained³³ that Amalek corresponds to knowledge, i.e., to the *sefirah* of *da'at* (knowledge), in the sense of “Know the God of your father and serve Him”³⁴—but in Amalek’s case it is the shadow-opposite of holy knowledge. Amalek injects doubts into one’s knowledge, into one’s mind. It is written: “If there is no knowledge, there is no understanding; if there is no understanding, there is no knowledge,”³⁵ thus knowledge and understanding are interconnected, and Amalek fills the entire Concealed World of the mind with doubt. The core of the curse Balam wished to place upon the Israelites was to implant doubts in faith.

Confusion with respect to Divine service belongs to the Revealed World, specifically those matters in reality that confuse a person. The story of Babylon begins with the Tower of Babel, in the generation of the dispersion. There we see the clear connection of Babylon to speech. At first, all the people in Babylon spoke one language, specifically the holy tongue (meaning they drew sustenance from the holy tongue whose root is in the Holyland³⁶), and God confused their speech, “Let us descend and confuse their tongues so that one will not understand the language of the other.”³⁷ This is why the place, “was named

27. *Keter Shem Tov* (Kehot) §67a and §405.

28. Song of Songs 3:6 and 8:5.

29. *Keter Shem Tov* (Kehot) §9a.

30. Proverbs 10:8.

31. Zohar 1:25a.

32. Addendums to *Keter Shem Tov* (Kehot), §118.

33. *Torah Or* 85c–d.

34. 1 Chronicles 28:9.

35. *Avot* 3:17.

36. See *Sifrei, Ha'azinu* 333.

37. Genesis 11:7.



Babylon, for there God confused the language of the entire world.”³⁸ The entire confusion is in language — people do not understand one another. The multiplicity of the world’s languages causes the separation of humanity into seventy nations.³⁹ In the Torah, Babylon signifies the secret of the Babylonian Talmud, which, relative to the Jerusalem Talmud, represents the intellect of Imma, the intellect of the *sefirah* of understanding.⁴⁰ The Babylonian Talmud’s primary topic is the clarification of the *halachah*, the Revealed World of deeds and how one should conduct oneself in it.

THE TWO PARALLELS

It is written⁴¹ that the sum of Balam and Balak (בלקם בלק) is equal to the sum of Rachel and Leah (רחל לאה). Rachel and Leah are the archetypal souls related to the lower *hei* and the upper *hei*, the Revealed and Concealed worlds of speech and thought, respectively. Rachel is kingdom and Leah is the supernal mother, understanding who has six sons (the six emotional attributes) and a daughter, kingdom. Rachel is relatively local and therefore associated especially with the Land of Israel, in which the construction of the *partzuf* [persona] of Rachel unfolds, while Leah is relatively universal, and therefore the *partzuf* of Leah signifies the reality of the Jewish people throughout the entire period of

exile, during which they are forced to dwell among the nations.⁴²

The shared numerical value of both pairs—Leah and Rachel as well as Balam and Balak—is 274. The average value of each is therefore 137, a number of great importance even in modern science, as is well known.⁴³ 137 is also the value of “Kabbalah” (קבלה). It follows that Rachel and Leah essentially represent two variants of Kabbalah—the Torah’s inner teachings. We generally speak of three variants of Kabbalah⁴⁴: the Kabbalah of the Ramak, the Kabbalah of the Arizal, and the Kabbalah of the Ba’al Shem Tov. But in more general terms there are only two variants. Everything prior to the Ba’al Shem Tov counts as one Kabbalah.

The Arizal certainly added upon the Ramak, moving from the concept of the sequential emanation of worlds (*hishtalshelut*) to enclotment (*hitlabshut*), but this is a natural and expected development (and as discussed elsewhere in this issue, was already a concealed part of the Ramak’s Kabbalah). But relative to the Kabbalah of the Ba’al Shem Tov, which introduced the concept of divine omnipresence (*hashra’ah*), they are both one Kabbalah. The Kabbalah that preceded the Baal Shem Tov is, relatively speaking, the Revealed World (which is itself subdivided into two aspects: speech and deed), while the Kabbalah of the Ba’al Shem Tov emerges from the Concealed World (the world of thought). The Ba’al Shem Tov, who already reveals the Torah of Mashiach, stands on his own distinct level.

38. Ibid. v. 9.

39. Just as Egypt is the womb from which the Jewish people were born (see the Passover discourses in *Sha’ar HaKavanot* and *Pri Etz Chaim*), so too Babylon is the womb from which the seventy nations with their seventy languages were born.

40. See in length *Sha’arei Orah*, s.v., “BeChaf-Hey BeKislev” chs. 54ff.

41. *Bnei Yissachar*, Adar, §5 and §15.

42. See *Channah Ariel, Shelach*.

43. See our volume *137 – The Riddle of Creation*.

44. See the article on the Seventeenth of Tammuz in this issue.



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