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**Commonly Overlooking the Not Simple Gift of Life**

**By Rabbi Ozer Alport**



**Rabbi Ozer Alport**

 The Gemora in Sotah (11a) records that three of Pharaoh’s advisors were consulted regarding his concerns about the Jewish population. Bilaam suggested the wicked plan of enslaving and oppressing them and was ultimately punished by being killed. Iyov remained silent and was punished with tremendous afflictions, while Yisro fled because he disagreed with the plan and was rewarded with descendants who were Torah scholars.

 Why did Bilaam, who deserved the harshest punishment for his active role in Pharaoh’s diabolical scheme, get off relatively easily with an instant death while Iyov was forced to suffer excruciating, unbearable pains throughout his life?

**A Question that Stems from a Fundamental Error**

 Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz explains that this question stems from a fundamental error. Rashi writes (Kiddushin 80b) that being alive is the greatest present and kindness that Hashem could ever give a person, regardless of what difficulties may transpire in his life. Dovid HaMelech – who was no stranger to suffering – expressed this idea explicitly (Tehillim 118:18): – Hashem afflicted me greatly, but at least He didn’t give me over to death.

 Rav Shmuelevitz adds that a person who does not appreciate the gift of life may have it taken away from him. The Daas Z’keinim (Bereishis 47:8) quotes a midrash that teaches that Yaakov died prematurely as a punishment for complaining to Pharaoh that his life had been bitter and painful. Hashem answered him, “I saved you from Lavan and from Eisav, and I returned to you Dina and Yosef, and you complain about your difficult life? If so, I will shorten your life by 33 years, one year for each word of your complaint to Pharaoh; your father lived until 180, but you will only live until 147.” The mathematics of this midrash are difficult to understand. Counting Yaakov’s words yields only 25. Where are the additional eight words for which he was punished?

**Punished for Demonstrating a Lack of Gratitude to Hashem**

 Rav Shmuelevitz answers that in order to arrive at 33, we must begin counting from Pharaoh’s question at the beginning of the verse, which yields the desired additional eight words. While this produces the appropriate number, it begs another question. Even if Yaakov deserved to be punished for talking in a manner that seemed to demonstrate a lack of gratitude to Hashem, why should he be punished for Pharaoh’s question as well?

 Rav Shmuelevitz explains that it is not respectful to ask an old person about his age, and certainly not to inquire about it immediately upon meeting him. Why did Pharaoh ask Yaakov about his age? Yaakov must have appeared so aged and ragged from his travails that Pharaoh was astonished at seeing such an elderly-looking person still alive, to the point that he could not help but ask how old he was. Had Yaakov accepted his suffering properly, it would not have caused him to appear so ancient. He was punished for Pharaoh’s question, as it was the feeling of bitterness evident in his answer that indirectly prompted the question in the first place.

 With this introduction, we now understand that the excruciating agony endured by Iyov is still considered infinitely preferable to the quick death of Bilaam, due to the sheer fact that Iyov remained alive. As we inevitably suffer various difficulties and setbacks throughout our lives, we would do well to recall this lesson. Perhaps every time that we recite the aforementioned verse in Tehillim during Hallel, we should focus on internalizing the idea that we must be eternally grateful to Hashem for the wonderful gift that we call life.

*Reprinted from the Parshas Balak 5781 email of Parsha Potpourri.*

**Rabbi Berel Wein**

**On Parshat Balak**

 The Talmud incisively comments that it is not the mouse that is a thief,but, rather, it is the hole in the wall that allows the mouse entry into the house that is the culprit. There is no question that the villain in this week's Torah reading is Bilaam. His hatred of the Jewish people is long-standing. He was one of the advisors to the Pharaoh of Egypt who encouraged that tyrant to enslave the people of Israel. Even though it is obvious, even for him, that the will of heaven is that he should not accept the invitation of Balak to embark of the mission of cursing the Jewish people, he forces the issue, and accepts the mission willingly and enthusiastically.

**Not Even Influenced by a Talking Donkey**

 Even a talking donkey cannot sway him from pursuing his evil path and destination. Yet, it is Balak who initiates the entire scenario. He is, so to speak, the hole that allows the thieving mouse Bilaam to enter a situation that will enable him to curse the Jewish people. Balak is the king of Moav and was guaranteed by heavenly decree that his land would not be invaded or annexed by the people of Israel, as his ancestors were descended from Lot, the nephew of Abraham.

 Because Lot kept faith with Abraham when they were in Egypt and did not inform against Abraham and Sarah, he was afforded almost continual protection and a guarantee that his descendants would not be harmed by the descendants of Abraham. According to the Midrash, even though Balak is aware of all of this, he is still determined to destroy the Jewish people by whatever means are required. And the curses of Bilaam are one part of the plan.

 We are taught that hatred is unreasoning, illogical, destructive, and devoid of any rational behavior. All human history shows us the truth of this Talmudic observation. Hatred leads not only to the destruction of those hated but is equally destructive to the hater as well.



**Rabbi Berel Wein**

 Even after the failure of the mission of Bilaam and the clear realization that the L-rd is protecting the Jewish people, Balak searches for other means to annihilate the Jews. He makes a covenant with ostensibly the mightiest king in that area and of that time, Sichon, the head of the tribe of the Emorites. And Sichon will dutifully set out to attack and destroy the Jewish people. He is defeated by the Jewish nation, and because Balak and Moav entrusted their sovereignty and independence to Sichon, with his defeat, the lands of Moav also fall under Jewish sovereignty.

 This is illustrative of the power of hatred. People will surrender their own rights and property in the mistaken belief that their hatred will somehow translate into the annihilation of their enemy. The whole exercise of the hatred by Balak of the Jewish people transforms itself into his own defeat and demise. Hatred blinds the eyes of even the most previously wise and powerful.

*Reprinted from the current website of rabbiwein.com*

**Parshas Balak**

**Through the Eyes of History**

**By Rabbi Bentzion Shafier**

**Founder of TheSmuz.com**



**The Plot to Destroy the Jews**

 Parshas Balak ends with the daughters of Moav enticing the young Jewish men to sin. This quickly led to idol worship, and many Jewish men served *Baal Peor*.

 At the height of the debacle, Zimri, one of the heads of *shevet* Shimon, took a Moabite princess and brought her into the encampment of the Jews, making a public spectacle of the act. Because he was a leader of the Jewish people, this was a grave threat to the survival of the nation. A plague broke out, and thousands of Jews died.

**Pinchas Runs to Moshe**

 Pinchas saw what was happening and ran to Moshe for advice. Moshe directed him to take action. At the risk of his life and against all odds, Pinchas walked into the mob and miraculously killed both Zimri and the Moabite woman. No sooner did their dead bodies hit the floor than the plague stopped. It was a clear and obvious sign that Pinchas had acted correctly. By acting with courage and alacrity, he saved the Jews from destruction. Clearly, he was a hero.

 Yet the very next *parsha*, which is called Parshas Pinchas, opens up with a *posuk* repeating his lineage: “Pinchas, the son of Elazar, the son of Aharon.” Rashi explains that the Torah delineates his ancestry because he was the subject of derision. The other *shvatim* mocked him, “Did you see this son of idol worshipers? His mother’s father fattened calves to serve to idols, and he has the audacity to kill the head of a *shevet*!” The Torah therefore repeats that he was a direct descendent of Aharon to let us know that he was justified in what he did.

 This Rashi is difficult to understand as it implies that people looked at what Pinchas did and assumed that he was wrong. Yet he had direct orders from Moshe Rabbeinu. Many miracles happened to allow him to succeed, and a plague that killed 24,000 people stopped only when he finally killed Zimri. How is that possible that anyone could see Pinchas as anything other than a hero?

**The Eyes of History**

 The answer to this question is that there are often two distinct perspectives of an event: the perspective from living in the moment, and the perspective of history. While the episode is playing out, it is often difficult to identify the real issues and motives being challenged. Changes are happening too quickly, things are moving at too feverish a pace, and clarity is elusive. After the fact, when the dust settles and some time has passed, what transpired is often viewed from a different focus, and what was then obscure is now obvious.

 When we look back at events in history, all is clear and evident. The heroes stand out wearing shining armor, the villains appear in black garb, and everyone fits nicely into their camp. But to those living at the time, it wasn’t that neat and clean. The good guys didn’t appear as all white, and the bad guys didn’t appear as all black. It was somewhere in between.

**Understanding the Criticism of Pinchas**

 To the people living during Pinchas’ times, there was justification for what Zimri did. The rationale might well have been that by bringing the Moabite woman into the Jewish camp, she wouldn’t pull the Jewish men away to serve idols. But whatever the logic, there were arguments for and arguments against. The point was that a great man – the head of a *shevet* – did this act, and it wasn’t at all clear that he was wrong. It is only now after the fact, when we have the perspective of history, that we can see the test and the temptation with absolute clarity.

 Each generation has it tests, and one of the most difficult tasks for a later generation is to look back and understand the test of an earlier era. Often times, when we look back, we can’t understand how the people living then could have done what they did. We flippantly assume, “We would never have acted that way! Had we been living in Spain in the mid-1500’s, we would have fled the country or given up our lives – no question about it. Had we come over to these shores in the 1920’s,of course, we would have kept Shabbos and *kashrus*.” In fact, we can’t understand how anyone could think otherwise.

**A Vastly Different Social Environment**

 The reason we can’t even see the temptation is that we are judging the generation according to our social climate. We are assuming that the winds that blew then were the same as now. But the social environment was vastly different. The norms of society – what was expected and accepted, what was valued and revered – were quite different. And as such, the social pressure was very different than it is now.

 This concept has great relevance to us. We face *nisayonos* today that previous generations would laugh at. Most of us live in two-income households, are working long, hard hours, and are still barely able to make ends meet. If our great-grandparents were to look down at our generation, they would be flabbergasted.

**Our Great-Grandmother’s Question**

 “What in the world did you need such a fancy house for? A separate bedroom for each child? Each family needs it own car? Each child gets a new outfit?Different types of shoes for weekdays and for Shabbos?” Our great-grandmothers would ask us, “What in the world do you need this lavish wedding for?” And we would sheepishly answer, “*Alta Bubbie*, this is only the *vort*!” The reality is that we live a lifestyle that previous generations couldn’t envision or imagine.

 But it comes at a cost. The greatest cost is time. Time to learn. Time to daven. Time to be good parents. Time to be a supportive spouse. And more than anything, time to think about what we are on this planet to accomplish.

 While we live in the wealthiest of times, in many ways we are the poorest of the poor. By refocusing on our priorities and understanding the pull of our times, we can recognize the tests of our generation and fortify ourselves to overcome them.

*Reprinted from this week’s website of Theshmuz.com.*

# Rav Avigdor Miller on

# Luxurious Spending



 **QUESTION: What should be our reaction to excessive luxurious spending by frum Yidden?**

 **ANSWER:** Our reaction is disgust. Plain disgust. When people spend large sums even on bar mitzvas, we should despise that — even though it’s a simchah shel mitzvah. Expensive weddings should be an occasion of learning a lesson about how silly people are.

 Money is a great thing for people to have; we don’t discourage having money but it must be kept, it must be protected. It shouldn’t be spent. If a person wants to waste money, there are many important causes that deserve his money. The yeshivas are waiting for money; they need a great deal of help. If a man can find it within his heart to spend huge sums on a wedding which he could have given to yeshivas, that man is a disloyal treasurer.

 The money was given to him only as a pikadon by Hakodosh Boruch Hu; he’s a gizbar, a treasurer for Hakodosh Boruch Hu and he is wasting the money. And he is going to be held accountable for all the money that could have encouraged Torah learning that could have helped poor boys go to yeshivas — poor boys who couldn’t afford to pay tuition, who couldn’t afford to buy food or buy sefarim. And all these things could have been supported by his money and instead he wasted it on catering to feed people who had plenty to eat at home anyhow.

*Reprinted from the June 10, 2021 email of Toras Avigdor. Adapted from Tape #440.*

**EU High Court Tells Rabbis to Change Rules of Kosher Slaughter**

**By Cnaan Liphshiz**



**Kosher slaughter: Slaughterer checking knife** Flash 90

 Jewish leaders in Europe say the European Union is not only banning some methods of kosher and halal slaughter, but telling Jews and Muslims how to practice their religions.

 That’s according to many who have read a recent ruling by the EU’s highest court. It upholds bans in Belgium on producing kosher and halal meat, outlawing a practice whereby livestock is slaughtered without first being stunned electrically into unconsciousness.

 Jewish and Muslims authorities forego stunning under similar religious laws that require animals be conscious when they are killed for meat. The court and animal rights activists say that’s cruel.

 But the decision on Dec. 17 by the Court of the European Union goes a step further: Remarkably, the 11,000-word document suggests that Jews and Muslims should and could find a way to allow animals to be stunned using electricity.

 This aspect of the ruling is already rekindling internal communal debates in Muslim and Jewish communities amid allegations that the court is eroding the separation of church and state.

**Arguing tht Secular Courts Have**

**No Rights to Regulate Religious**

 “That part of it is astonishing,” said Shimon Cohen, campaign director for Shechita UK, a London-based organization that lobbies against attempts to ban shechita, or kosher slaughter. A secular court does not have “the authority to tell people if they can practice elements of their faith. I may disagree with some of the restrictions, but not with the mandate. But a secular court has no right to tell me how to practice. That’s gross overreaching.”

 Pinchas Goldschmidt, the president of the European Conference of Rabbis, told the Jewish Telegraphic Agency that for the court “to seek to define shechita is absurd.”

 Goldschmidt rejected the court’s apparent interpretation of electric stunning as compatible with Judaism. Meat from animals that had been stunned by any means, including electricity, prior to their slaughter cannot be considered kosher, he said.

 The court declined JTA’s request for comment.

 The bans in Belgium are part of a struggle across Europe between animal welfare activists and Muslim and Jewish community representatives over the halal and kosher slaughter methods.

**A Target of Anti-Immigration Activists**

 In recent years, anti-immigration activists and politicians have joined the debate in an apparent push to minimize the footprint of Muslim presence in Europe, and in some cases also the Jewish one. A similar fight is unfolding around nonmedical circumcision of boys, or milah, which some children’s rights activists say is cruel.

 The ruling on slaughter, rejecting a petition filed by Muslim and Jewish groups in Belgium, suggests that because “electronarcosis” is itself nonlethal, religious authorities should be able to adapt it within their religious rituals.

 Additionally, the ruling said that since the ban is limited to parts of Belgium, Jews and Muslims may still obtain a supply of kosher and halal meat, mitigating the encroachment on their freedom of worship.

 Cohen objects to these arguments. The science on what causes an animal to suffer less — an electric shock or a sharp, swift slash of a knife — is far from settled, Cohen argued, and subject to religious interpretations that are beyond the court’s purview. As for the supply argument, he noted that kosher meat shortages are already common in Europe today.

 The court appeared to rely on the authority of a Muslim veterinarian who testified before a Belgian parliamentary committee on the environment. Jamal Zahri, a representative of the Executive of Belgian Muslims, seemed to endorse electric stunning.

**Some Muslims Willing to Compromise**

 “We’re not closed, it’s not that we don’t want it,” Zahri said about electric stunning. “We’re only looking to preserve two Muslim requirements: That the animal be alive [when its neck is cut] and that it bleeds out.” He added: “This is my position as a doctor representing the Executive of Belgian Muslims.”

 Zahri’s position was based on some religious Muslim edicts that permit electronarcosis if no other choice is available. Judaism has no such edicts, Goldschmidt said.

 Zahri also favored a procedure in which an animal is stunned very shortly after its neck is cut, limiting convulsions and, according to some, suffering. Some Jewish communities and rabbis have accepted this method, as have some Muslim ones. But it is not widely accepted in either religion.

 Nonetheless, during the parliamentary debate, where no Jewish community representatives were present, Zahri said that both post-cut stunning and electronarcosis are acceptable compromises for Belgian Muslims.

 His statements triggered an uproar in his community. The Executive of Belgian Muslims disavowed Zahri, publishing a statement that calls his position “merely his personal opinion” and representing a minority view.

**Court Has Lumped Muslim and Jewish Customs Together**

 In addition to wading into religious areas in which it has no business, Cohen said, the court “lumped Muslim and Jewish customs together.” The two religions have distinct methods for ritual slaughter

 “The court’s ruling makes as much sense as moving Shabbat to Sunday because Christians are fine with it,” Cohen said.

 Ironically or not, the court’s ruling is being cited by Jewish advocates of post-cut stunning. They say the method satisfies animal welfare considerations and would modernize halacha, Jewish law, without sacrificing its core values.

 “Post-cut stunning happens after all the demands of kosher shechita have been met,” one of those advocates, Lilianne Vana, an associate professor specializing in Jewish studies at the Université libre de Bruxelles in Brussels, said. “It satisfies all the parties’ requirements. And it’s already happening.”

 Across the European Union, kosher meat has a negligible share of the market, accounting for less than a percent of the 2.5 million cattle slaughtered in the United Kingdom annually, Cohen said. The far larger halal meat industry accounted in 2012 for 6% of the total market, according to a European Parliament document.

 The post-cut stunning technique was once used in some abattoirs in Austria, that country’s previous chief rabbi, Arie Folger, told JTA, but is no longer taking place. Austria has no kosher slaughter of bovines today.

**A Hodgepodge of Laws Regarding Ritual Slaughter**

 Europe currently has a hodgepodge of laws about ritual slaughter. In the Netherlands, an arrangement allows a 40-second delay between cutting an animal’s neck and applying the electric charge. That was the compromise that allowed for the reinstatement of ritual slaughter after it was temporarily banned in 2011.

 In 2011, the Netherlands briefly joined several EU countries where ritual slaughter is illegal, including Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Estonia and Slovenia. The Dutch Senate reversed the ban in 2012, citing freedom of worship. Poland also outlawed the practice in 2013 but has since scaled back the ban to include only meat for export.

 The ruling by the EU court, which is based in Luxembourg, “isn’t helping the fight to keep shechita legal,” Cohen said, adding however that so far his group isn’t losing the fight.

 Kosher slaughter in Europe of cattle and sheep is done by shochtim, or kosher slaughterers, in regular slaughterhouses. Jewish communities and organizations in Europe own no abattoirs for larger animals and only a handful of poultry factories, Cohen said.

 To Vana, the ruling highlights questions on how Orthodox Judaism can adapt, she said.

 “Sadly, Jewish communal leaders have become entrenched in their opposition” even when halacha would allow changes, she told the La Libre Belgique newspaper.

**The Debate is Not About Animal Welfare**

 Rabbi Mencahem Margolin, chairman of the Brussels-based European Jewish Association, disputes that premise.

 “On a continent where hunting sports are cherished traditions and the fur trade thrives, this debate is not about animal welfare,” he said. Animal welfare arguments on shechita and children’s rights debates on milah “are cloaking a broader ideological clash between secular judges and governments who regard religion essentially as something silly, and people of all faiths who must stand together and insist on their freedoms,” he told JTA.

 Despite repeated statements by officials about Europe not being Europe without Jews, Margolin said “the practical implication of the ruling and inaction about it by EU leaders tells Jews clearly that they have no place on the continent.”

Reprinted from the June 16, 2021 email of Arutz Sheva, from a dispatch of the JTA (Jewish Telegraphic Agency)

**Flatbush Farbrengen Marks**

**The Yahrtzeit of the Lubavitcher Rebbe**

**By Daniel Keren**

 Thousands of Chabad farbrengens (joyous gatherings) have been held around the world earlier this month to celebrate the Gimmel Tammuz Yahrtzeit (27th Memorial Anniversary) of the Lubavitcher Rebbe (Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson) of blessed memory.

 On Sunday, June 13th the Bais Menachem Mendel of Flatbush shul invited their congregants and the outside community to participate in a special farbrengen at the Veretzky Hall that not only paid tribute to the memory of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, but also focused on the simultaneous Siyum (completion of the study) of Rabbi Moses Maimonides, 1138-1204 the Rambam’s classic magnus opus – the Mishne Torah).

 The event which included lively niggunim (traditional Chabad melodies) began with an actual Siyum, the completion of the annual cycle of the study of Rambam’s Mishne Torah. In 1984 the Lubavitcher Rebbe came out with a call for all of his Chassidim to take upon themselves to daily study Maimonides classic sefer Mishne Torah (Repetition of the Torah) also called Sefer Yad Ha-Hazaka (Book of the Strong Hand).

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**The Rambam**

 The Mishne Torah, an impressive 14-volume work was authored by the Rambam during the years 1170 and 1180 after having fled his homeland of Spain (and later Morocco) due to religious persecutions by radical Islamists. Not only was it a complete explanation of the Oral Law, but it is to this day regarded as a major code of halacha (Jewish religious law) and is respected by all classes of the Jewish nation whether Sephardic or Ashkenazi or Chassidic or Yeshivish or Modern Orthodox.

 The Flatbush Rambam Siyum was conducted by Rabbi Yochanon Marosow, the Rav of the host shul (Bais Menachem Mendel of Flatbush). One of the many interesting points he brought up regarding the power of Maimonides’ Mishne Torah was a fascinating disagreement made by one of Rambam’s most famous critics – the Raavad (Rabbi Abraham ben David 1125-1198) who is a highly respected commentator of the Talmud and one of the founders of the school of Kabbalah.

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**Rabbi Yochanon Marosow**

 One of the many important points that Rambam writes in his magnus opus is that anyone who literally believes the verses in the Torah that (i.e. allude to the hand of Hashem and other allusions that G-d has a physical image is a min and apikorus (heretic). Rabbi Marosow said that as a result of that declaration by the Rambam, almost immediately the melachim (angels) in shomayim (heaven) began to chase out the many supposed tzadikim (righteous Jews) from Gan Eden because in their lifetimes they had believed those verses in the Toran and thought that G-d did indeed have some physical form.

 In response to that sharp reaction in shomayim, the Raavad according to something that Rabbi Marosow heard from his own grandfather who learned from another Lubavitcher chasid in Russia in 1932; the Raavad sharply disagreed with the Rambam by declaring that many of those individuals in heaven who were being evicted were greater in righteousness and learning than Maimonides and therefore could not be evicted from heaven as a result of the declaration by the author of the Mishne Torah.

 It was not that the Raavad was disagreeing with the Rambam’s teaching that Hashem has no physical appearance. Rather the Raavad was stating that until the Rambam wrote that halachah in the Mishne Torah, since no one else had taught this important principle, all of the tzadikim who erroneously thought that Hashem had a physical image, could not be punished and they were on the basis of the Raavad’s declaration allowed to return to heaven. However any Torah scholar after the publication of the Mishne Torah would not be excused because of their ignorance and they would not be allowed entrance into shomayim.

 Rabbi Leibel Schapiro, a prominent Chabad leader in Miami Beach, Florida was the key speaker at the farbrengen and spoke about his memories of the Lubavitcher Rebbe. One of the stories he told occurred after the Rebbe suffered his stroke in 1992 and lost his ability to speak.

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**The Lubavitcher Rebbe**

 In August 1992 Miami was threatened by Hurricane Andrew. The weather forecasters were warning people in Miami Beach where Rabbi Schapiro lived to immediately evacuate. Rabbi Schapiro called Rabbi Leibel Groner, one of the

Rebbe’s secretaries to ask the Lubavitcher Rebbe whether or not the Chabad community in Miaimi should evacuate. The Rebbe responded by both shaking his head that his followers should not run away. As the forecasts became more dire and Rabbi Schapiro called again a second and third time and he was told by Rabbi

Groner that the Lubavitcher Rebbe was insistent that there was no need to run away from Miami Beach.

Groner told him that the Rebbe continued to insist that nobody evacuate Miami.



 **Rabbi Leibel Schapiro**

 The police warned that anyone refusing to evacuate should contact their next of kin and inform that of their suicidal decision. One Miami radio station found out that the Chabad community was not running away for safety and they told their listeners that a rabbi in Brooklyn was telling his followers to ignore the warnings and not evacuate Miami Beach.

 Rabbi Schapiro said that in the end, Hurricane Andrew a Category Five storm changed direction and only minor damage was recorded in his community. Ironically, many people who did flee Miami Beach in response to the warnings of the weatherman suffered damages or injuries in other areas that originally were supposed to be safe and were unfortunately hard hit by the hurricane.

*Reprinted from thia week’s edition and email of The Jewish Connection.*