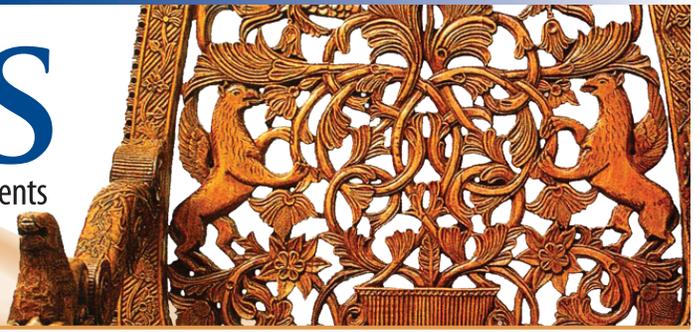


PATHWAYS

Crossing the Narrow Bridge with Rebbe Nachman and His Students

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Stop Me If You Can

By Yossi Katz

WHAT WAS BALAAM thinking? Did he really believe he could convince God to curse His Chosen People? And considering he was profane enough to have relations with his own donkey, how did he achieve his prophetic abilities?

The key to unlocking this mystery lies in the Midrash. “From the blessings of that evil man, we learn what was in his heart” (*Bamidbar Rabbah* 20:19). Balaam said, “How can I curse when God has not cursed, and what Divine rage can I evoke if God is not angry?” (Numbers 23:8). Rashi explains that Balaam felt he could pinpoint the exact moment that God was angry, and at that moment present an argument to sway God against His People. But isn’t this presumptuous? The Supreme Being knows all and sees all; how could Balaam think he could manipulate the Almighty?

Balaam was neither crazy nor foolish. Rather, he reasoned that if God was so great and powerful, He certainly had better things to do than involve Himself in His creation. In Balaam’s view, God had created a world and set it to run on autopilot according to various rules. Balaam saw himself as the person most capable of manipulating these rules in his favor, and his history of success gave him lots of confidence.

We often hear self-help gurus say things like “Think success and you will breed success. Think rich and you will become rich.” Without oversimplifying this idea, there is ultimately truth to it. Our Sages teach, “The way a person wants to go, God will lead him” (*Bamidbar Rabbah* 22:35). To allow freedom of choice to exist, God empowers the individual to choose the life he wants to lead. Everything is dependent on the person’s willpower. Furthermore, just as the tzaddikim have mastered the ability to pour out their hearts in prayer and direct God to influence events according to their will, there is an

equilibrium which allows those who want with all their selfish and malicious might to also express themselves and even influence global events.

Our *parashah* therefore recounts how the elders of Moab and Midian approached Balaam and implored him to devise a plan to do away with the Jews. He replied to them, “Stay here overnight. When God speaks to me, I will give you an answer” (Numbers 22:8). While God tells Balaam not to go with them and not to curse the Jews, Balaam tells the elders, “God *refuses* to let me go with you” (*ibid.* 22:12-13). Rashi explains that with them he refused to go, but with more important officials he might relent. Balaam emboldened his willpower, thinking he could will God to concede to his plan. At each stage, Balaam continues expecting his will to prevail. Even after his donkey refuses three times to move ahead, even after the donkey supernaturally rebukes him, and even when he sees an angel standing in his way to kill him, Balaam perseveres.

This is the awesome power of will. When we seek to do a great mitzvah, rectify a failing relationship or change a bad character trait, we are immediately confronted by challenges that seem impossible to overcome. Yet as we persevere, the desperate answer we seek will often fall from left field. We must only prove that we are steadfast in our sincere and holy desire for change. Consequently, the evil person also prevails and imposes his ironclad will on everything around him. Balaam therefore forced himself on his donkey, and that had such influence that the donkey gained Balaam’s ability to speak.

But Balaam missed one very important point: God cares deeply about His creations and closely observes their every action. Free will is but a creation of His to serve this purpose. Therefore the donkey that was empowered with Balaam’s ability to speak, turned around and rebuked him.

May we merit to “dwell alone” (*ibid.* 23:9) with God, so that our every desire is to bring His blessed presence into our lives and the lives of those around us. Amen!

Based on Likutey Halakhot, Birkhot HaShachar 5

You Are Bigger Than Your Mistakes

By Yehudis Golshevsky

THE STUDENTS OF the Baal Shem Tov were often ridiculed for their allegiance to their rebbe. But they stood strong, committing themselves to serve God.

One student of the Baal Shem Tov would eat only on Shabbat. He would secretly refrain from food and drink for the rest of the week as he immersed in study and prayer.

Once, during such a fast, he felt extremely ill. He felt as though he would expire if he didn't put something in his mouth. The only food available was the matzah set aside for the communal *eruv*. It was kept safe in a glass case in the synagogue, but the young man couldn't help himself.

He ate the matzah.

When the town's opponents of Chassidut realized the matzah was missing, they searched for it. When they didn't find it and inferred that only this student could have eaten it, they were delighted. They publicly insulted him and mocked him as a lowly thief.

"What kind of a lowlife would eat food that was set aside for a religious purpose for the community? Is it the one who calls himself so religious?" they jeered.

Wherever he went, the abuse followed him. Eventually, this man couldn't take it any more and did the unthinkable: he left the Jewish faith.

When this sad story was recounted to Reb Noson, he made a poignant comment: "He only fell because he didn't have enough encouragement. He should have thought to himself, 'It's true that I ate the matzah, and I feel ashamed for it. But it's not as if I ate non-kosher food. Is it such a crime to eat communal matzah when in need? Why does this failing make me so bad?'"

Based on Siach Sarfey Kodesh I:468

SIDEPATH

Advice (Likutey Etzot) translated by Avraham Greenbaum

HONOR. 27. There are people who impose themselves as leaders and rulers over our poor, bereft nation not because they have been appointed by Heaven, but purely through their own arrogance and assertiveness. The sword of pride that they wield draws strength from the converts, who bring arrogance into the Jewish



people. They can attain so much power that they can even exact penalties from those who do not wish to bow to their rule. ... The arrogance of these leaders brings rampant immorality to the world. The only escape is by turning to the Guardians of the Earth (*Likutey Moharan II, 5:5*).

28. The foundation of true spiritual leadership is love. No one can be a true leader unless he has genuine love for the Jewish people. But he must understand how to show this love. It is forbidden to show love to the wicked, to murderers and robbers. He must know how to guide and direct each individual along the path that will lead to his ultimate good. The essence of love is to draw him away from his sins. There is no greater love than this (*ibid. II, 7:1-3*).

29. It is very dangerous for a tzaddik to be revealed and widely known and occupy a position of leadership. ... When men of true stature accept positions of leadership and teach Torah publicly, they run the risk of falling into immorality, theft and murder with every step they take (*ibid. II, 18*).



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The photo on the front is a close-up of Rebbe Nachman's chair, which is displayed in the main Breslov synagogue in Jerusalem.