



A Taste of Torah

Too Much of A Good Thing

By: *Rabbi Akiva Stern*

We all want to live a comfortable life. We desire the monetary means to fulfill our whims and desires without worry or penny-pinching. G-d created a wonderful world for us and gave us the capacity to desire it and appreciate it. It certainly seems that we are meant to partake of it all! But the lingering question remains... is there a point where we should pull back and refrain even from permitted pleasures? Is there ever too much of a good thing?

In this week's parsha, the gentile prophet Bilaam requested permission from G-d to curse the Jewish Nation. When G-d denied this request, our Sages teach us that Bilaam had yet another request. He asked if he could bless the nation instead. Surprisingly, this request was denied, as well. Our Sages explain that just as one might say to a bee, "I don't want your honey or your sting - just stay away from me!" so, too, G-d said to Bilaam, don't give My children your blessings or your curses; just stay away from them.

This teaching is a bit puzzling, as we have all enjoyed honey at some point. We recognize that, at times, we make a cost-benefit analysis and decide it is worth dealing with the possible sting simply to get the honey.

Lest you claim that Bilaam's blessings are not, in fact, worth the price of dealing with that wasp of a man, I refer you to the later parts of our Torah portion. You will find that Bilaam blesses the Jewish People not once, not twice, but three times. The Torah feels that his blessings are potent and powerful enough to

transcribe them entirely. To place a cherry on top, we even include part of these blessings into the canon of our morning prayers! What is the truth? Do we want his blessings or not?!

Rabbi Yitzchak Volozhiner (d. 1849), in his work *Peh Kodesh*, explains that when G-d told Bilaam he couldn't curse the Jews, he cunningly came up with plan B. He would bless the Jews with such an overabundance of materialism and physical pleasures that he wouldn't need to curse them any more, as they would do the work for him. By providing the Jewish People with distractions that pull their hearts and minds away from the service of G-d, they would inevitably self-destruct! Of such sickly sweetness we say, we don't want your honey or your sting! In marked contrast are the multiple blessings Bilaam ultimately bestows upon the Jewish People, which are dictated by G-d. They are blessings of gentle prosperity which enable and strengthen the people's connection to G-d. These blessings are truly welcome, even from a vicious wasp like Bilaam.

Certainly, we are meant to enjoy the world G-d has lovingly provided us. Yet there is a point where it becomes too much of a good thing. We must ask ourselves if our pursuit of pleasure is bolstering our life's mission to serve G-d or detracting from it. Only when we honestly answer this difficult question can we really know if it is a blessing or, G-d forbid, a heinous curse in disguise.

Stories For The Soul

Get the Picture?

In 2007, a number of prominent American rabbis travelled to Israel to provide support and encouragement to the students and faculty of Shuvu, a network of Torah schools in Israel that caters to Jewish-Russian immigrants. There was no fanfare surrounding their arrival; they had come to support the school, not to make a tumult.

On Friday morning, the rabbis visited the Kosel, where they were quickly surrounded by Jews who recognized them.

Off to the side was a recent baal teshuva, Moshe. He turned as someone addressed him. "Would you like to get a blessing from one of the rabbis?" asked a man kindly.

"Sure," he replied, "but I don't know any of them!"

The man offered to take him to meet Rabbi Aharon Schechter, rosh yeshiva (dean) of Yeshivas Rabbi Chaim Berlin in Brooklyn. The man introduced the fellow to Rabbi Schechter, and the latter warmly blessed Moshe with much success in his new path in life.

That Shabbos, Moshe was a guest at a friend's home, and he excitedly related how he had merited to receive a blessing from Rabbi Schechter. Some time later, someone brought a picture from the local paper to the table; it was a photograph of the American rabbis.

"There's Rabbi Schechter!" exclaimed Moshe. Then he noticed another man in the picture, and he pointed and said, "And there's the man who introduced me to Rabbi Schechter."

"That man," said his host, "is Rabbi Shmuel Kamenetzky, a very great rosh yeshiva from the United States!"

Our Sages teach us that one of the defining traits of the students of the wicked Bilaam is arrogance, and a defining trait of the students of our forefather Avraham is humility. Humility is the hallmark of greatness.

Kollel Happenings

LEARN 2 LEARN

You have long dreamed of acquiring the tools to achieve proficiency in learning Gemara on your own. But how? The Denver Community Kollel offers a comprehensive, step-by-step, level-by-level program crafted for people just like you. All you need is the ability to read Hebrew; we will teach you the rest. For more information, contact rmh@denverkollel.org.

THE M.B. GLASSMAN FOUNDATION GOLD LUNCH & LEARN PROGRAM

The M.B. Glassman Foundation GOLD Program is a division of the Denver Community Kollel dedicated to bringing Torah study to seniors in the community. Don't miss a great Lunch and Learn class on the weekly parsha at the East Side Kosher Deli, 499 S. Elm St. at 11:30 am. There is no charge for the lunch or the learning! Transportation can be arranged. For more information, contact rmf@denverkollel.org or call 303-820-2855.

THE FAR SIDE OF THE TALMUD

Aggada, the passages of the Talmud that focuses on Jewish thought and outlook, provides keen insights into human nature, and offers advice on how to live our lives, can be difficult to understand, but the knowledge and wisdom hiding beneath the surface is ample reason to make the effort. Be fascinated and inspired as Rabbi Moshe Heyman presents a whole new dimension in Torah learning based on the classic work *Ain Yaakov*. Tuesdays, 1:45-2:45 pm at the Kollel Torah Center, 9550 Bellevue Ave. For more info, contact rmh@denverkollel.org.

Increase Your Jewish IQ

By: Rabbi Yaakov Zions

Last week we asked: Hallel is recited on Yom Tov (festivals) and Rosh Chodesh. What are the origins of this recitation?

A: Hallel on Rosh Chodesh is based on custom (see Ta'anis 28b). According to most Rishonim (medieval halachic authorities), Hallel on Chol Hamo'ed and the final days of Pesach is based on custom, as well (see Bais Yosef Orach Chaim 490:4). On other days of Hallel recitation, the opinion of the Rambam

(Sefer Hamitzvos, Shoresh 1) is that it is of Rabbinic origin, but the Ramban (glosses on Rambam's Sefer Hamitzvos, *ibid.*), says that it is Scriptural.

This week's question: What halachic stringency applies to half-Hallel but not to whole-Hallel, and in what way is it more lenient?

To submit an answer to Rabbi Zions, email ryz@denverkollel.org

Ask the Rabbi

Do Good Guys Wear Black Hats?

Zalman from Toronto asked:

Dear Rabbi,

When I went home, my parents got really upset by the way I dress. I think this is really hypocritical since they are the ones who are supposedly liberal and who believe in equality and tolerance. If everybody can do whatever they want, why can't I wear a black hat? Also, even though my Hebrew name (that THEY gave me) is Zalman, they insist on calling me Steve. How can I get them to understand?

Dear Zalman,

The Torah's ways are "ways of pleasantness and all its paths are peace. (Proverbs 3:17)." If your actions do not bring peace, it may be that you are not following the ways of the Torah.

Rav Moshe Feinstein rules that although it's better to use a Hebrew name, there's no prohibition in using a non-Hebrew one. According to this, if your parents address you by your non-Hebrew name you should respond, and you should not correct them.

Regarding dress, Rav Feinstein maintains that there is no halachic obligation to wear any particular style that has become traditional for Jewish communities in various places and times. He also rules that there is no prohibition of "following the ways of the pagans" in adopting fashions of the gentile world. This is all providing that the clothing has no pagan religious significance and conforms to the prohibitions against *sha'atnez*, immodesty, and cross-dressing.

I'm not advising you to wear ripped jeans and a Grateful Dead T-shirt. In Orthodox

communities, as in all societies, specific styles of clothing are the norm. Integrating into these groups without dressing "frum" would be difficult. Therefore, you should see your dress as an intrinsic part of your development, and not necessarily accede to your parent's tastes.

You should take their feelings into account, however. If your dress causes them great distress, a compromise would be to wear "civilian clothing" at home, or to tone down religious clothing styles.

Respecting parents will demonstrate that Judaism does not seek to alienate children from their families, and is concerned with the preservation of family ties even when not every member of the family observes Jewish law.

Respecting parents requires proper communication, as the following incident illustrates:

A mother told her daughter, "There are two words which you use constantly, and I'd appreciate if you'd eliminate them from your vocabulary ... One is "drippy" and the other is "disgusting."

"O.K., Mom," said the daughter, "Tell me what the words are and I'll stop saying them."

Sources:

Mishlei 3:17. *Iggros Moshe*, *Orach Chayim* 4:66, *Yoreh Deah* 1:81.

After the Return - Mordechai Becher & Moshe Newman, 2:1, *Feldheim* 1995.

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