

THREE FESTIVALS: THE HOLY JOURNEY

by Rabbi Osher Chaim Levene

The Mitzvah:

There was an obligation for a male Jew to ascend to Jerusalem on the three annual festivals of Pesach, Succos and Shavuos - also known as the Sholosh Regalim, "Three Pilgrim Festivals". He cannot arrive empty-handed but was to bring with him three types of offerings (Devarim 16:16).

In Bilaam's journey to Balak, king of Moav, the wicked prophet struck his ass on three separate occasions. That the Torah describes this using the phrase Regalim "occasions" (Bamidbar 22:28) is significant, explains the Midrash, insofar as it denotes his nefarious wiles to target the nation who celebrate the Sholosh Regalim, Three Pilgrim Festivals (Bamidbar Rabbah 20:14).

This is not just a play on words. Clearly, our Sages detect how Bilaam's energies were - on some dimension - channelled to oppose Israel's deep- rooted affinity to the Three Festivals.

In what way do the Three Festivals "characterise" the chosen people? And what symbolism lies within this mitzvah that Bilaam opposed?

In contrast to the Sabbath that arrives every seventh day of the week regardless, the festivals are dependent upon man. The Jewish court pronounces the new moon which beckons in the Jewish months and in turn, the festivals whose point of reference is the determination of the Jewish calendar. So, as reflected in the phraseology of the Amidah blessing, while it is G-d who sanctifies the Sabbath, it is Israel who sanctifies the festivals. That G-d confers jurisdiction to the Jewish nation to fix the Jewish calendar underscores their holiness and their eternal nature.

The rabbinical sources detail 3 components of existence: (1) Shanah, "time", (2) Olam, "space" and (3) Nefesh, "soul".

What a Jew does is that he sanctifies all three.

Their confluence is magnificently manifest on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem.

"Time" began upon the genesis of the universe. Place took shape as the world and "space" expanded from its originating point in Jerusalem, outwards. And on the hallowed ground of the Temple, Adam the first human being was fashioned from the earth and into his body G-d blew a spark of life, "a soul".

The Three Festivals themselves sanctify these three realms.

Succos celebrates man's control over "space" as the Jew dwells within the spatial confines of a booth to commemorate the shelter enjoyed in the wilderness. Pesach sees the consumption of matzah, unleavened bread eaten where a constriction of "time" in the hasty exodus from Egypt which prevented the dough from rising. And Shavuot, which marks the acceptance of Torah at Sinai, was where every Jewish "soul" was present to readily embrace his spiritual lofty level given by his innate relationship to Torah (Rabbi Aharon Lopiansky).

Striving to relive and recapture this sanctification did the Jew trek to make the long pilgrimage - called Olah Regel, "the pilgrim ascent" - up to Jerusalem.

What the Jew was achieving, in effect, was to tap into all three realms of holiness: him and his "soul" were to visit the holiest "space" on Earth - the Temple - three "times" during the year.

A Jew is holy. Holiness is an integral part of his identity. Thus, his every visitation to Jerusalem witnessed him reaffirming his membership of the holy nation. Of his roots. Of his mission in life such that all three spheres were sanctified in the service of G-d. And how his life's journey was that of achieving holiness in all his endeavors - in the merging of physical and spiritual worlds.

It was this holiness - the pillars which come to define the Jewish nation's eternal existence and their innate connection to G-d - which Bilaam targeted. His scheme sought to sever their supernatural link to holiness. It was duly aimed at the Three Festivals and the pilgrimage to the Holy Temple.

However, like all of Israel's enemies, Bilaam's attempts to destroy them miraculously failed. His curses were transformed into blessings. And he affirmed the wonderful uniqueness and G-dliness of the chosen people whose holiness permeates all three realms of existence and signals their eternity and indestructibility. Text Copyright © 2007 by Rabbi Osher Chaim Levene and **Torah.org**.