

THE SOD OF A BEST-SELLER

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

He sent messengers to Bilaam son of Beor to Petor, which is by the River of the land of the members of his people, to summon him . . . (Bamidbar 22:5)

The timing is uncanny, and couldn't have been better planned. Just as the latest Harry Potter novel has hit the shelves amidst wild fanfare and commotion, and the most recent movie version continues to rake in BIG money, we have "chanced" upon Bilaam the sorcerer.

Some of you may be rolling your eyes right about now. "No, don't bring that into the parshah - PLEASSSSSE," you may be pleading. "Is it not enough," you may be thinking in your heart, "that we have to be bombarded by Potter-mania on a daily basis, even nagged by our cheder children to go out and buy that book for them?"

It is. However, there is one point that I wish to bring out, while we're on the topic, and I can guarantee you that I will barely touch on anything more than the concept itself. Indeed, the only real question I wish to deal with here is, why has it been so successful, a question that I have noticed surfacing even among the media giants.

Judging by the critics, the books have been well-written, and knowing Hollywood, the movies are probably well produced. I understand the author is even a nice, somewhat down-to-earth individual, who hasn't let stardom get to her all that much, even though she is worth over 450 million dollars, give or take 50 million.

However, the worldwide response is overwhelming, and that is eye-opening. It is eye-opening because I was taught many years ago:

This is from G-d, that which is wondrous in our eyes. (Tehillim 118:23)

Thus, when the world becomes so pre-occupied with a single book that has VERY little to do with REAL life, personally, I can't help but wonder, "What's the message for the Jewish people?" Does everyone dream of being a sorcerer, even a nice one?

At the same time, I understand, there is a movie that is having the same cult-like effect. I have been told about it, read the write-ups, and have even seen an "edited" (read: cleaned-up) version of the

first script (a yeshivah did a Purim-variation of it, and the script found its way to me). You guessed it, I am talking about "The Matrix."

Whatever Hollywood did with the movie to make it sell to the masses, the script I saw was quite remarkable. It was remarkable because, if I hadn't known better, I would have thought they had hired a resident Kabbalist to work behind the scenes providing mystical input. The script was laced with Kabbalistic ideas, though, in the end, I don't think the writers had much of an idea as to why and how.

Again, it was a clever script, and I have read that the special effects were awesome by movie standards, but I still believe that reaction surpasses the power of the medium. I also believe, that both Harry Potter and The Matrix came into being, and have succeeded to the extent that they have, because of something that has happened to the world. And, it is something that the makers of both unwittingly tapped into, something much bigger than both of them combined.

It is that SOMETHING that is the message for the Jewish people today.

Shabbos Day:

"For I know that whomever you bless is blessed and whomever you curse is cursed." (Bamidbar 22:6)

Balak was the king of Moav. And, even though he had little to fear about the advancing Jewish nation, who had no permission to attack Moav, still he worried about them. Therefore, he contracted Bilaam the Sorcerer to curse the Jewish people, saying:

"For I know that whomever you bless is blessed and whomever you curse is cursed."

Was Bilaam only a magician? Magicians today don't really perform magic, but something called "sight of hand." A good magician's hand is faster than the audience's eye, and his art is that of convincing people to assume that they are seeing something they really aren't seeing at all. In some circles, they call that "Marketing and Advertising."

As to whether or not it is permissible to be a Jewish magician is a point of controversy among the poskim, even when the magician reveals at least one of his tricks to the audience in order to make it clear that he is not really practicing magic. It is worthwhile to check the issue out for oneself before getting involved in such an expensive and time-consuming practice.

However, Bilaam had not been a magician, at least not by today's standards. He had been a sorcerer, someone capable of actually manipulating the spiritual and physical reality at will, and this is what Balak meant when he said:

"For I know that whomever you bless is blessed and whomever you curse is cursed."

However, even so, and as Bilaam informs Balak:

"If Balak will give me his houseful of silver and gold, I cannot transgress the word of G-d, my G-d, to do anything small or great." (Ibid. 18)

For, as the Nefesh HaChaim points out, even Black Magic is a function of G-d's will, for to assume otherwise would be to believe in false gods.

What happened to the sorcerers of the past? Is sorcery a lost art, once known to ancient peoples, but lost along the way? What did they know that we don't, something that is hard for us to believe and accept for a technologically advanced society like ours. Or, is it all just legend and product of over-active imaginations, perhaps just ignorance of how the world works and what it is capable of achieving?

To answer that question, you have to appreciate that there are two dynamics working throughout our history, two different undercurrents flowing since Adam HaRishon was first banished from the Garden of Eden until Moshiach comes. One is the spiritual undercurrent, and one is the material undercurrent, and for the most part, they seem to relate to each other in an inverse matter.

For example, mankind today, without question, is the most scientifically advanced society to have ever existed. Even everyday products of daily life are so amazing that, if we didn't know how they physically worked, we'd call them magical. In the last 10 years alone, technology has moved at a breakneck pace that is breathtaking even for the technocrats.

On the other hand, mankind today, without question, is the most spiritually weak society to have ever existed. Whereas once just about everyone belonged to either a religion or a cult, today, resting on the laurels of scientific advancement, many feel no compulsion to be anything more than a believer in mankind (according to the Montreal Gazette, all major world religions, with the exception of Islam, are shrinking in numbers). As one person once put it, "When the great Stephen Hawkings believes in G-d, then I will too!"

Right! Well, moving right along, the question becomes, did belief in G-d dwindle because science and technology advanced and "disproved" His existence, or did this happen for another reason, and people mistakenly believe that science is a good enough reason not to believe? For, it may turn out that our technological prowess may be a little more than an indication of how removed we are from the true spiritual reality, and the opposite could be said of the earlier generations.

That is certainly the way it is viewed in the Torah world, where the painful concept of "yeridas hadoros" is an everyday reality. The term means that, as the generation moves on in time, in spite of advancing worldly knowledge, Torah knowledge and appreciation of that knowledge weakens. From the moment the Jewish people left Mt. Sinai, it's been downhill ever since with few, if any, recoveries at all, as the following says in no uncertain terms:

If the earlier generations are regarded as angels, then we may be regarded as human beings; if, however, they are regarded as human beings, then we must be regarded as donkeys. (Shabbos

112b)

Rav said: There will be a time in the future when the Torah will be forgotten by Israel . . . Rebi Shimon bar Yochai said: G-d forbid that Torah be forgotten by Israel . . . It means they shall not find an uncontested halachah, nor a mishnah beyond refutation any more. (Shabbos 138b)

Just like Rebi Meir's generation couldn't understand him, neither could Reb Oshia's generation understand him . . . The Rishonim were like the opening to the Hall, and the later generation is like the opening to the Heichal . . . (Eiruvim 53a)

With the passing of Rebi Akiva came the cessation of Torah glory; with the passing of Rebi Chanina ben Dosa came the cessation of performers of good deeds; with the passing of Rebi Yose HaKatan came the end of piety . . . With the passing of Rebi Yochanan ben Zakkai came the end of the radiance of wisdom; with the passing of Rabban Gamliel HaZaken came the cessation of Torah glory . . . purity and sanctity; with the passing of Rebi Yishmael ben Pabi came the cessation of the glory of priesthood; and with the passing of Rebi Yehudah HaNassi came the cessation of true humility and fear of sin. (Sotah 49a)

SEUDAH SHLISHIS:

Eisav said to his father, "Is there only one blessing that you have, my father? Bless me too." And Eisav raised his voice and wept. Yitzchak, his father answered, and said to him, "Your settlements will be in fat places of the earth, and [you will also have] from the dew of heaven above. You shall live by your sword, and serve your brother. Yet it shall be that when you are aggrieved, you may cast off his yoke from upon your neck." (Bereishis 27:38-40)

Rabbi Mendel Kessin, shlita, on one of his tapes on the power of speech, speaks about the relationship between the Jewish people and the Sitra Achra, another name for the yetzer hara, or Angel of Death. He explains that there is an agreement between G-d and the Sitra Achra that whatever spiritual force G-d puts into the world for the sake of the Jewish people, but they don't use, he can take it and use it for his own purposes, that is, for pulling Jews away from G-d and Torah.

That is, he gives it to Eisav to use for his own purposes, over whom the Sitra Achra watches. Every nation has its own Heavenly protecting angel, and Eisav's is the Sitra Achra. If "Ya'akov" doesn't use the spiritual "energies" that G-d puts in the world for his own growth and well-being, then his twin brother Eisav gets to use it instead, in his own way.

For, that's what G-d is constantly doing, albeit via the Sefiros. In order to help direct creation towards its ultimate goal, while at the same time preserving man's free-will, G-d creates spiritual atmospheres that influence the way man thinks and creates. It is these "atmospheres" that set the tone for a particular millennium, century, or even decade, and the reason why creation often takes

curious turns on what often appears to be "a dime."

Most the time the "theme" of a particular period has to do with what happened during the corresponding period of time during the six days of creation. As we have quoted before:

Know that each day of creation alludes to a thousand years of our existence, and every little detail that occurred on these days will have its corresponding event happen at the proportionate time during its millennium. (Safra D'Tzniusa, Chapter Five)

Thus, the sixth millennium corresponds to Day Six of creation, and based upon previous calculations, we are now living in a period of time that corresponds to when Adam HaRishon ate from the forbidden Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. The period actually began in the year 5750 from creation, or 1990 CE, 13 years ago, which also corresponds to the "last quarter" of Day Six in advance of the Shabbos of history (6000-7000).

In other words, history is nearing its end, and preparation has to begin for the next period of history, which including Yemos HaMoshiach and Techiyas HaMeisim, resurrection of the dead.

But where are we holding? We are close to the top of the totem pole when it comes to technological accomplishments, but near the bottom of it when it comes to spiritual perfection. As one might imagine, it is the latter that counts most when it comes to G-d and creation. How are we to rectify the situation, and quickly? The only way we can is with G-d's merciful help.

The Arizal revealed:

For these ten colleagues, all the secrets of Torah were revealed and explained without any suffering. This will not occur again until the Generation of Moshiach, as mentioned in the Zohar in many places. (Sha'ar HaGilgulim, Chapter 39)

Why? How? When?

According to the Vilna Gaon, this happened sometime in the middle of this millennium, which is why he focused his attention of revealing Sod and gathering in the Jewish exiles to Eretz Yisroel. However, it has certainly been happening over the last little while, as one can see by how much more accessible Kabbalah has become, and how much attention it has received from all over.

However, we have not used it as much as we can, and maybe even far less than necessary. As the Vilna Gaon says, the main weapon we have against Amalek is Sod, and considering that we are confronting Amalek on so many fronts, we need all the spiritual ammunition we can get. But, if we don't take that Heavenly assistance, then it goes to the "Other Side," and can show up in all kinds of "magical" forms: technology for one and, yes, even forms of media, such as Harry Potter books, and movies such as "The Matrix."

MELAVE MALKAH:

"Place it in the ears of Joshua, that I will surely erase the memory of Amalek . . ." (Shemos 17:14)

I kid you not. Everything in this world, whether it is Jewish or gentile, is always going to be a function of a spiritual reality that emanates from G-d. And, everything in creation is, by definition inter-related, and part of the master plan for creation, whether we can or cannot understand how.

Certainly when something is worldwide and can be classified as phenomenal, such as Technology and those things that affect the way man looks at reality, it is a large piece of that puzzle. It is Heaven's way of letting us know what is going on at a particular point in history, and how to respond to becoming a partner with G-d in helping Him to bring creation to fulfillment.

At the time that Bilaam lived, people believed in spirituality. They may not have wanted to be responsible to it, but they knew it existed. Unlike other despots, Pharaoh believed in "Elokim," as he told Moshe Rabbeinu, and even Nebuchadnetzar (which, ironically, is the name of the ship in the Matrix) showed respect to the Jewish G-d.

People today like to think that people were once religious only because they didn't understand the nature of Nature. What we take for granted today as scientific fact they could only chalk up to some all-powerful gods, which allowed them some sense of security and power to change their fortunes via service of that god.

Perhaps that was true for some religions. However, the Jewish people became "religious" not out of necessity, but as the result of a national experience that included redemption from Egypt and Torah from Sinai, among other fantastic miracles. It was a real experience that produced real knowledge, and that is why science can never be a true obstacle to belief in the Jewish G-d and Torah. After that, there is the awesomeness of Torah on all levels of Pardes that clearly reveal the hand and mind of G-d in creation.

However, as the generations grew tired and weaker, G-d compensated by putting deeper levels of Torah into the world without the same amount of need to progress from level to level. He was arming us in our spiritual war against Amalek, more and more as the generations became weaker and older.

Some of it we used, but most of it, apparently, fell to the Sitra Achra and Eisav. And thus, rather than produce outstanding evidence for God's existence and the profundity of Torah, it was snatched up and applied in the material world, mimicking, on some level, the mysterious aspects of Kabbalah, but lacking all of its holiness and ability to transform mankind into followers of G-d.

Thus, as the GR"A teaches, it will take Moshiach Ben Yosef to right the situation:

"Place it in the ears of Joshua, that I will surely erase the memory of Amalek" (Shemos 17:14). In gematria, the word "b'aznei" - "in the ears of" equals "Sod," for the way to fight Amalek is at first secretly, as already explained above, because work in gathering in the exiles is the waging of war against Amalek in order to subdue Sama"el (another name for the Sitra Achra) in the gates of Yerushalayim. Yehoshua was part of the mission of Moshiach Ben Yosef. (Kol HaTor, Chapter 2:148)

According to the Gaon, one of the main functions of MB"Y is to reveal Sod to the Jewish people, and by doing so, he will bring it back to the side of holiness and the purpose for which it was meant.

We have that to look forward to. However, in the meantime, we must do whatever we can on our own to pull that holy light to the side of Torah, and in doing so, hasten the Final Redemption in order to make it more merciful.

Have a great Shabbos,
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