



RABBI AARON GOLDSCHIEDER

EDITOR, TORAH TIDBITS
RAV, THE JERUSALEM SHUL
BAKA, JERUSALEM

A Good Eye

“There has arisen no prophet in Israel like Moshe’ (Deuteronomy 34:10), but among the nations of the world there has arisen. Who is he? Bilam ben Be’or.”¹ That is some high praise for a non-Jewish prophet, no matter how accomplished. Note, however, that the verse says “like Moshe” (כְּמֹשֶׁה), and this is an instance where the *kaf* of comparison (כּ) remains in the realm of “not quite.” In fact, in one significant respect Bilam did not hold a candle to Jewish prophets of even non-Mosaic rank:

All the prophets [of the Jewish people] were motivated by the attribute of mercy toward both the Jewish people and the nations. [...] As for the prophets of the nations of the world, they were motivated by the attribute of cruelty, for [Bilam] arose to uproot an entire nation for no reason at all.²

Perhaps Bilam was bitten by the nasty bug of anti-Judaism, as his actions bespeak a blind hatred of the Jewish people. When offered a princely sum by an entourage from Moav to curse the Jewish people, he had the audacity to think God might see things his way (Numbers 22:19). He then woke early to pronounce his curse and even saddled his own donkey (Numbers 22:21). Our Sages observe that he broke with routine and did not wait for his servants, since “hate prevents

thinking straight.” Contrast this with Avraham’s saddling of his own donkey prior to the *Akedah*, the Binding of Yitzchak—“love prevents thinking straight.”³

The Midrash tells us that Bilam exhibited the “attribute of cruelty,” so it was in character for him to attempt to harness God’s “attribute of judgment.” For one moment every day, for a mere 1/58,888th of an hour, God gets angry, and “no living being can determine precisely when this moment occurs except for the wicked Bilam.”⁴ Bilam’s intention was to curse the Jewish people at this precise moment, so that God Himself would be the one to destroy them.

It is difficult to comprehend what exactly it means for God to get angry, since He is perfectly benevolent and is not an entity that experiences passions. Rav Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook viewed the notion of God getting angry as a way of teaching us about our own *midot*, our character and conduct.⁵ Every human character trait with which God has endowed us can be used positively. One *should* feel anger at injustice, corruption, cruelty, and other equally terrible human failings. Of the spectrum of emotions, though, anger should color our perception of the world only on the rare occasions it is truly warranted. This is what is meant by God’s anger lasting 1/58,888th of an hour. In modern parlance, this emotion should linger

1. *Yalkut Shimoni*, §966.

2. *Midrash Tanchuma, Balak*, §1.

3. *Ibid.*, §8, quoted by Rashi on Numbers 22:21, *וַיַּחֲבֹשׁ אֶת אֲתָנּוּ*.

4. *Berachot* 7a.

5. *Ein Ayah, Berachot*, 1:69.

for a microsecond, long enough for it to register and be acted upon, and then dissipate.

The wicked, entrenched in immorality and iniquity, use the raw power of negative emotions to further their diabolical ends. Bilam used his unusual gifts to tap into divine “anger” and pipe it onto the Jewish people. The righteous, according to Rabbi Yaakov Moshe Charlop, know that God is only merciful, and so they seek to bring blessing into the world and annul divine decrees made in divine “anger.”⁶

Our Sages contrast Avraham and Bilam in how they view the world:

Those who have a good eye, a humble spirit, and a modest soul are among the disciples of our forefather Avraham. Those who have an evil eye, an arrogant spirit, and an insatiable soul are of the disciples of the wicked Bilam.⁷

The Mishnah does not focus on all the great character traits of Avraham, but on the essential attributes that were at the root of his generous spirit.

A person with a good eye wishes that others be blessed with good fortune. The Mishnah in *Pirkei Avot* asks: “Who is rich? Whoever is happy with their lot.” Rebbe Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter, the *Sefat Emet*, imparted to his Chassidim that the very rich are those who are happy when their friends experience good fortune.⁸ Furthermore, by cultivating this outlook, we become more like Avraham in seeking to extend our own good fortune to others. Rabbi Tzvi Yehudah Kook drew the following contrast: “Bilam was a professional hexer. Avraham was a source of blessing... [all the families of the earth] shall be blessed

through you’ (Genesis 12:3).”⁹

Rav Kook the father explained that a good eye, arguably man’s most precious *midah*,¹⁰ does not come from working on a single character trait like compassion or generosity. It is an entire perspective on the world and on life. One recognizes God’s goodness and feels blessed to live in such a world. When a Jew awakens in the morning the first words uttered are *modeh*, an expression of thanks. Rav Kook explained that this prayer verbalizes a feeling of optimism and hope for oneself, one’s fellow Jew, and the entire world.¹¹

Rav Kook once advised: If you find yourself in a dark place, don’t waste your time cursing the darkness, just light a candle. This is the Jewish way. It is no coincidence that the titles of Rav Kook’s writings incorporate the Hebrew word for lights, *orot*. They strive to see the world from a benevolent God’s-eye-view, as it were, in which everything is rising and fractures are healing. Divine anger is—at worst—fleeting. The kindness and compassion Rav Kook and his writings promote light up the world. ■

9. *Sichot ha-Rav Tzvi Yehudah, Bereshit*, 137.

10. See *Pirkei Avot*, 2:14.

11. *Siddur Olat Re’iyah*, 1:1. See further *Parashat Vayetze*, “Jewishness is Thankfulness.”



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**Mazal Tov to
Stefan and Rochelle Somogyi
and family on the birth of their
great-granddaughter**

6. *Mo'ed Katan* 16b. See *Mei Marom, Nimukei Mikra'ot*, 201.

7. *Pirkei Avot*, 5:19.

8. See further *Parashat Yitro*, “*Baruch Hashem*.”