BERESHIT: Cain and the First Therapy Session

An AI tells Daniel his feelings are valid. God tells Cain to do better next time. Only one of them is helping.

BERESHIT: Three Things You Didn’t Know About Creation

Tohu vabohu does not mean chaos, the upper waters are not in space, and the sun was not created on the fourth day.

NITSABIM-VAYELEKH: Should We Bring Our Kids to Synagogue?

MOSHE’S LAST ASSEMBLY

In many Jewish homes the same conversation comes up every week. Do we bring the kids to synagogue or not? The service goes on for hours. They get bored. They don’t understand a word. And they can be a distraction for the adults. So more often than not, the decision is to leave them home. When they’re older and can follow what’s going on, we’ll bring them.

This week the Torah answers that question. And the answer is

3,500 years old.

Parashat Nitsabim-Vayelekh takes place as Moshe is about to die. He knows he will not enter the land of Israel. And one of the last things he does is neither a warning nor a farewell. He convenes an assembly, one to be held every seven years.

That mitsva is called Hakhel, “gather.” At the end of the Shemita year, during Sukkot, the entire people of Israel was to come together in the Bet HaMiqdash to hear the Torah read aloud. And the Torah spells out who has to be there:

“Gather the people: the men, the women, the little children (hataf), and the stranger who lives in your cities, so that they hear and learn, and revere HaShem your God, and take care to fulfill all the words of this Torah” (Debarim 31:12).

The men, of course. The women, too. But hataf means little children: four-, five-, six-year-olds, toddlers who don’t talk yet, babies carried in arms or pushed in a stroller. Why would the Torah command us to bring them to the Temple, to an event that consists of listening to a text they cannot possibly understand?

IT IS ALL ABOUT THE EXPERIENCE

Maimonides explains why (Mishne Torah, Hilkhot Hagiga 3:6), and his explanation changes the meaning of the whole event.

Hakhel is not a Torah class. If it were a class, where you are expected to understand everything, someone who doesn’t know the language would have no business being there. But Maimonides writes that even the foreigner or the convert who does not understand Hebrew is obligated to show up, pay attention, and listen “with the joy and the trembling of the day the Torah was given at Sinai.” And at the other extreme: even the great sages who already know the entire Torah must listen with total concentration. Every person, Maimonides says, “should see himself as if the Torah were being revealed

to him at this very moment, and he were hearing it from the mouth of the Almighty."

Hakhel is the mitsva of being present at a collective spiritual event. It is a reenactment of Mount Sinai, the day the entire people of Israel, men, women, and children, stood at the foot of the mountain. At Sinai, nobody asked whether the children understood. They were there. That was what mattered. Because that is what Jewish continuity depends on: not on what a child understands, but on where a child has been.

A CRADLE IN THE HOUSE OF STUDY

The Talmud Yerushalmi (Yebamot 1:6) preserves a memory of the childhood of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananya, one of the great sages of the Mishna. It comes from Rabbi Dosa ben Harkinas, a very old sage who had known him as a boy:

"I remember that his mother used to bring his cradle to the house of study, so that his ears would cling to words of Torah."

Rabbi Yehoshua's mother did not wait for her son to understand. She wheeled in the stroller, so to speak, and there the baby soaked up the melodies of Torah and heard voices arguing in a language he did not yet know. That baby grew up to be one of the greatest sages of the Mishna, the man of whom Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai said: "Happy is she who gave birth to him" (Avot 2:8).

My wife Coty likes to tell the story of a little boy whose mother took him to a Torah class that was obviously over his head. And yet his eyes lit up every time he went. One day his mother asked him: "Do you understand anything this rabbi is saying?" And the boy answered: "No. But his words taste like ice cream!"

Ask any adult what they remember of the Rosh HaShana of their

childhood. Almost nobody remembers the rabbi's sermon. But everyone remembers the sound of the Shofar. The melody, and the tears, of Oqed Vehane'eqad. The Kohanim on the Dukhan, barefoot, their heads covered. Standing under a father's or a grandfather's talet, his hands resting on their heads in blessing. Everything a child takes home from the synagogue comes in through the ears and the eyes, not through the intellect. And those are exactly the things they will want to come back to, twenty or thirty years later, when they decide they want their own children to have them too.

Moshe did not summon the children to the Temple for what they would learn. He summoned them so they would be there, enjoy it, and want to come back.

THE PRACTICAL DILEMMA

Most of the synagogues I know have a children's program, so that the kids are not running around during Tefila or the Torah reading, when the adults need to concentrate with as little noise as possible. It doesn't always work perfectly, because there is no such thing as a soundproof synagogue when there are children in the building. But it is essential that the children come to the Bet HaKeneset. And that they enjoy it: that what they remember of the synagogue is not an adult yelling at them, but a place where they are welcome, with prizes and activities made for them.

A synagogue without children has no future. And no present. Children are to a synagogue what flowers were to the Bet HaMiqdash: they give it life, color, and joy. If at times there is a little more noise, that is a small price to pay for having them there, and for letting them experience Hakhel: gathering with their elders before God, listening to the Torah.

We should encourage children's minyanim, with prizes and gifts, so that they leave the synagogue wanting to come back.

So that they associate the Bet HaKeneset with happiness, not with being scolded. There is no better formula for the future of a community than encouraging children to read from the Torah when they are little, to read the Maftir at four or five years old, as we do in my Bet HaKeneset, where we throw a party and give gifts every time a child reads for the first time.

The future of Am Israel depends on our children connecting to the Bet HaKeneset with joy.

SYNAGOGUE AND GRANDPARENTS



Whenever I see a little boy or girl playing on the steps that lead up to the Aron HaQodesh, I am reminded of this story, which I believe is true.

It is told that in the Spain of the Inquisition, the king, who

wanted to persuade Don Isaac Abravanel to convert to Christianity, asked him one day: "How do you explain that in church there is absolute respect and silence, from the adults down to the smallest children, while in your synagogue there are always kids running up and down the aisles?" Abravanel answered him without mincing words: "Your Majesty, at a wake, people stand before the dead in silence, in fear and with the utmost reverence. Everything is very formal, and nobody moves from his seat. But in their grandparents' house, children feel at home, and sometimes they jump around and play and have a good time. For our children," he said, "the synagogue is not a house of mourning. It is their grandparents' house."

KI TETSE: To Wait or Not to Wait for the Mashiach?

THE EMPTY TENT

This week's Haftarah, Roni Aqarah (Yeshayahu 54), presents an extraordinary image of redemption, the Geulah. The prophet speaks to Yerushalayim, which during the exile that followed the destruction of the Bet Hamiqdash had been left desolate, like a mother who suddenly finds herself alone in her tent—her home—without her children. But now, Yeshayahu tells Yerushalayim, everything is about to change! Your children are coming back, and there will be so many of them that you will need to make some renovations to the house: "Harchibi meqom aholekh"—"Enlarge the space of your tent." In other words: pull out the stakes, move them much farther apart, expand your home, and extend its boundaries, because they are already coming…

The prophet gives her that instruction—but no one returns. The poor woman is still without her children; the city remains completely empty and desolate, and now utterly disappointed. But Yeshayahu tells her: al tachsokhi—"Do not make your tent smaller." Do not lose hope that one day your children will return. Yeshayahu understands that after a loss, the temptation is to make yourself smaller: to shrink the tent, not to get your hopes up, not to take too many risks, not to nurture false expectations. In the name of Bore Olam, the prophet asks her to prepare a larger home and wait. Her children will return. In multitudes. But that "soon" would have to wait a very long time before becoming reality.

For centuries, we read this prophecy as a utopia, a dream beyond dreams. Jews scattered throughout the world prayed to return to Tziyon.

But eventually our tefilot were answered: once again, we have our State of Israel—the expanded tent that Yeshayahu prophesied.

Many waves of Aliyah were triggered by terrible circumstances: pogroms, persecution, antisemitism, wars. Millions of Jews arrived in Israel because they could no longer remain where they were. It was not a choice: someone or something was chasing them and pushing them—forcing them!—toward Israel.

RETURNING BY CHOICE

But there is another kind of Aliyah, with a unique merit of its own: Aliyah by choice. When a Yehudi does not flee to Israel, but deliberately moves toward Israel. When he or she voluntarily leaves behind a good and stable life because he wants Medinat Israel to become his home and the home of his children.

This is the kind of Aliyah—Aliyah motivated by conviction rather than convenience—that we experienced in my community a couple of weeks ago. A group of seven families, together with

their children, made Aliyah to Israel! I know these families extremely well: they are my congregants, my students, my friends. All are successful professionals or businessmen living very comfortably in Great Neck in beautiful, comfortable homes. Their families are established here; they have excellent schools, stable jobs, and an extraordinary community life.

As good Sephardic Jews, the value and importance of family and extended family are paramount. The pain of physically separating from siblings and parents—and taking their grandchildren away from them—has been the most difficult, painful, and heartbreaking part of this entire process. But when the conviction is so strong, one feels that these enormous sacrifices are being made with the hope that, BE"H, the path is being prepared for the rest of the family to eventually come to Israel as well. And when that happens, their integration will be easier because they will already have family established there.

Paying the very high price of sacrificing comfort and familiarity, and facing the challenges of uprooting themselves, these young families from our community decided to become part of Yeshayahu's prophecy and return to Israel's expanded tent. They chose Raanana, a beautiful city with excellent schools for their children and first-rate healthcare. There they will begin building their future.

I believe this awakening began, ironically, after October 7, when the war began—a war that still has not ended. We witnessed a religious awakening among less religious Jews, and a renewed interest in Israel among Jews who were already religious. I never thought this would happen. Great Neck is one of the places with the highest percentages of Jewish residents anywhere in the United States—a place where, when you walk through the neighborhood, it seems that 90% of the homes have a mezuzah. It is a place where absolutely nothing is missing for a full Jewish life… (except for "Israel").

THREE POWERFUL IDEAS THAT STAYED WITH ME

When these young families said goodbye, some of the husbands shared a Debar Torah at Seudah Shelishit and, directly or indirectly, explained what had led them to make this decision.

I will repeat some of these ideas in my own words.

MITSVOT MADE IN ISRAEL

There are 613 mitsvot in the Torah. According to the calculation of the Chafets Chayim, 271 of them can be observed today outside Israel, and an additional 26 can be fulfilled in Erets Israel—a total of 297. Many of the remaining mitsvot cannot be fulfilled today because they depend on the Bet Hamiqdash, the qorbanot, the service of the kohanim, or other conditions that no longer exist.

Those additional 26 mitsvot are not “difficult” to fulfill in Great Neck. They simply cannot be fulfilled there. A man with a small garden in Raanana can fulfill Torah mitsvot that no Jew in New York can fulfill, no matter how wealthy, observant, or learned he may be.

But there is something more—and even more important. Rashi, quoting the Sifre, explains that even in exile we must continue observing the mitsvot so that they will not be “new” to us when we return to our land. In other words, the mitsvot keep us connected to the road home:

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“Vesamtem et debarai”—Even after you are exiled, continue to distinguish yourselves through the mitsvot: put on tefillin, place mezuzot, so that they will not seem new to you when you

return.

Ramban takes this idea much further:

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“For the essential fulfillment of all the mitsvot is for those who dwell in the Land of HaShem.” (Ramban, Vayiqra 18:25)

Outside Israel, we remain fully obligated to observe the mitsvot—tefillin, mezuzah, Shabbat—but their natural home, the place where they reach their fullest meaning, is Erets Israel. A Yehudi in exile is like a flower growing in a greenhouse. The forest—the natural environment of that flower—is the Land of Israel.

I want to go to Israel because it is the natural place where all the mitsvot can be fulfilled as the Almighty intended them to be fulfilled.

PRAYING OR MOVING?

Three times a day, we ask HaShem to gather us back and pray that “our eyes may behold Your return to Zion.”

But praying without doing anything is like asking HaShem for parnasah—sustenance—in Barekhenu while making no effort to work. We pray for HaShem to crown our efforts with success, not to replace them. When we say Refaenu—”Heal us”—we do not pray instead of going to the doctor. We pray while also doing everything in our power—our hishtadlut—to become healthy. If we simply pray and refuse to go to the doctor, we are responsible for what happens to us!

What, then, is the difference between praying for sustenance and health and praying for the Geulah?

Every day we ask HaShem in *Teqa beshofar gadol lecherutenu*: “Gather us from the four corners of the earth.” HaShem has already heard our prayers and granted our request! The gates

are open, and we can return to Israel.

To continue praying for something that has already been granted to me, while doing nothing about it, is not prayer.

It is procrastination.

When Moshe stands praying to HaShem while the people of Israel are trapped between the Red Sea in front of them and the Egyptian army closing in from behind, HaShem tells him: “Ma titsaq elai? Dabber el Bene Israel veyissa’u!” –”Why are you crying out to Me? Tell the Children of Israel to move forward!” Rashi explains: this was not the time to prolong prayer. It was time to move.

There is a time to pray, and there is a time to act. At that moment, HaShem was telling Moshe: Stop praying. Move forward. Step into the sea. You do your part—and leave the rest to Me.

I want to live in Israel because HaShem has already answered our prayers. Now it is my turn to do my part—and move.

WAITING OR NOT WAITING FOR THE MASHIACH?

The great merit of living in Israel, like the merit of any other mitsvah, lies in bechirah chofshit: freedom of choice. And the more difficult the choice, the greater its merit. If someone forced me—or paid me—to go to minyan every morning, it would not be the same as choosing to go myself. And if going to minyan requires me to sacrifice some comfort because I sleep a little less, or costs me some income because I work a little less, then the merit is even greater. The greater the sacrifice involved in choosing to perform a mitsvah, the greater the merit of fulfilling it. As Ben He He teaches in Pirqe Abot (5:23): lefum tsaara agra—”According to the effort is the reward.”

I want to go to Israel by my own choice. Out of conviction. Even if it costs me. I do not want to leave because one day it

may become dangerous to remain in Great Neck. I do not want to flee from where I live because I can no longer afford health insurance while healthcare there is free. Because then it would not be my choice—it would be my convenience.

Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi (1075–1141), in his famous book The Kuzari, presents a very harsh and embarrassing warning to Jews who were able, but unwilling, to return to Israel. The King of the Khazars asks the Rabbi: What happened during the Second Temple period, when the Jews prayed to God to return them to Israel, and then, when this became possible in the days of Cyrus (or Achashverosh, Y.B.), they chose to remain in exile—while, ironically, continuing to pray for God to return them to Tziyon?

The Kuzari's response to this attitude was very severe:

"This sin—the failure to return to the Land of Israel when we had the opportunity—is what prevented the Divine plan from reaching its fulfillment during the Second Temple period. The prophet Zekhariah anticipated that all the Jews would return: 'Sing and rejoice, daughter of Tziyon' [for God is once again in His land, Zekhariah 2:14], and that when the majority of the Jewish people returned to Israel, the SHEKHINAH, the Divine Presence, and prophecy would return to Israel! The Yehudim were expected to return voluntarily to their land. But incredibly, this did not happen, and only some Jews returned [the poorest among them]. The great majority remained in Babylon [Persia], in a voluntary exile, because they were unwilling to separate themselves from their worldly affairs, their mansions, and their businesses."

This cannot happen a second time.

I want to arrive in Israel before the Mashiach comes. I want to go to Israel through my own merit, by choice, and out of love for Bore Olam.

THE ONLY DEPARTURE WE SHOULD CELEBRATE

For those of us who remain here, the departure of these wonderful families and their children—52 people altogether—leaves us with mixed emotions. We will miss them, and even though our community numbers 1,200 families, their absence will be felt! But at the same time, we feel tremendous pride and joy knowing that they are now inside Yeshayahu's tent.

It is the only kind of farewell that should be celebrated.

Because they are opening the way for those who may one day want to join them—by choice, or even by force.

To these seven families, and to all those returning to the land of our forefathers, we pray that HaShem accompany them through this enormous step; that their adjustment be easy; that they find in Israel a true home; and that their children and grandchildren grow up deeply connected to Am Israel and Erets Israel.

"Harchibi meqom aholekh." Make more room in your tent, Israel: your children are coming home.

BALAQ: Maimonides, Bil'am & Lord Voldemort

The Torah dedicates three entire chapters to a pagan sorcerer hired by the king of Moab to curse Israel with his spells. Apparently, this is proof that divination and sorcery exist and work…

But the key to understanding what the Torah thinks of this individual lies in how the text refers to him. Contrary to

popular opinion, the Torah and our Sages did not call Bil'am a prophet, but "Bil'am son of Beor, the sorcerer (or diviner)." In the book of Yehoshua (13:22) the Hebrew word qosem is used – the same term that appears in the list of occult divination practices presented in this week's Parashah (Devarim 18:10). And the Sages say it explicitly in the Talmud (Sanhedrin 106a): Bil'am qosem hayá – "he was a sorcerer."

For Maimonides, Bil'am was like the character of Voldemort in Harry Potter: the most feared dark wizard of his world, the name everyone pronounced with fear, the sorcerer to whom was attributed the power to curse and destroy with words. With one fundamental difference: Voldemort is a fictional character in a fictional world where magic works! Bil'am was a real character in a real world, where magic does not work. His reputation was that of Voldemort; his "power," that of any illusionist and manipulator. His profession, his international fame, and the fees that Balaq was willing to pay him belonged to the industry of deception and illusionism that we have just described. And Balaq was the perfect client: a terrified king, willing to pay any price to try to destroy Israel.

So how is it explained that his words came true? Maimonides answers this in the Guide for the Perplexed (Moreh Nevukhim, II:45). The Torah says: "Vayasem HaShem davar befi Bilam" – "And HaShem put the words in Bilam's mouth" (Bamidbar 23:5). The biblical text does not say that HaShem revealed Himself to Bilam, nor that Bilam saw or understood anything. It says that He put words in his mouth. Bilam's tricks and illusionism produced absolutely nothing: HaShem used him as an instrument, despite his arts, not thanks to them.

And the subtle but clear message for those who read the Torah carefully is pronounced by Bil'am himself, in the middle of his forced blessing: "Ki lo nachash beYaakov velo qesem beYisrael" – "[now I realize, says Bil'am] that there is no magic in Yaakov nor sorcery in Israel" (Bamidbar 23:23). The most famous sorcerer of the ancient world, hired for a fortune

to curse Israel, ends up publicly announcing that his own profession does not work! The Torah did not need a sermon against the industry of divination: it quoted the most prestigious sorcerer in the market, who confessed that his product did not exist.

SHOFETIM: How Much Do You Charge to Tell My Future?

THE TWO DESIRES

There are two things human beings have always wanted and never been able to have. The first is to know what the future holds. The second is to control it. And around those two desires — or anxieties — an entire industry was built, from antiquity onward: charlatans who claimed they could see the future, and others who sold solutions that supposedly could change it.

Our Parasha deals with both. And it does so with a list. The Torah does not settle for a general warning: it enumerates one practice after another. "There shall not be found among you anyone who passes his son or his daughter through the fire, or who practices divination, a soothsayer, a reader of omens, a sorcerer, an enchanter, one who consults spirits, a medium, or one who inquires of the dead" (Debarim 18:10–11). The first item on the list is surprising: passing a child through fire does not seem to be an act of divination. What is it doing at the head of a list of diviners and sorcerers? Maimonides explains it in the Guide for the Perplexed (III:37), and his explanation is an X-ray of how this mechanism worked. The promoters of this cult spread a terrifying threat: if a father did not pass his son through the fire, that son would die! It

was religious corruption in its most brutal form: manufacture the fear, then present yourself as the owner of the solution. A father did not subject his child to that ritual out of pagan fanaticism. He did it out of fear, to save him. The most monstrous practice on the entire list was born not from the desire to know the future but from the other desire: to control it. It was the extreme case of the amulet. The sorcerers of Baal had discovered that a parent's fear for his child's future is one of the easiest forces to exploit. And the logic that follows repeats itself again and again: identify a person's fear, and sell him a solution no one can verify.

IT IS DANGEROUS BECAUSE IT IS A LIE

Many people assume these practices were forbidden because they were considered "dangerous." That this was black magic, that it worked, that it had real power, and that this power came from a dark place best kept at a distance. Maimonides says exactly the opposite, and he says it with no diplomacy whatsoever. In the Mishne Torah, in the laws of Aboda Zara (chapter 11), after describing each of these practices one by one, he writes that "all these practices are lies and falsehood." And he adds that whoever believes in them, thinking they are true and wise but that the Torah forbade them anyway, "is nothing but a fool, lacking understanding."

For Maimonides, the pagan diviner was not a spiritual enemy with dark powers. There was no power coming from the wrong side: there was no power at all. And once you understand that, the subject stops being supernatural and becomes deeply human. The diviner was a swindler of the worst kind, because he preyed precisely on people at their most vulnerable: a frightening diagnosis, a marriage falling apart, a business going under, a child who has lost his way. He showed up exactly when someone was ready to believe anything and pay any price to recover hope. What he sold was not information about the future. He sold false hope to someone who desperately

needed real hope.

HOW THE TRICK WAS DONE

It is worth understanding where the impression that the diviner “got it right” came from. Some people have an enormous natural talent for reading another person: watching a face, catching a gesture that lasts a fraction of a second, noticing where someone’s breath catches, hearing how the tone of voice changes when a certain subject comes up. That ability exists and it is real, but there is nothing supernatural about it. Good salesmen have it too, and so do good poker players. And on top of that comes suggestion. The one who read palms, or cards, or the bottom of a cup did not need to say anything precise. Broad statements were enough — statements that could apply to almost anyone: “I see a problem with someone close to you.” “There is something from the past that was never resolved.” “I see a big change coming.” The listener filled in the blanks with his own life. Afterward he remembered the diviner’s “hits” and forgot everything he had missed. The work was done by the victim, not by the diviner.

In 1949, the psychologist Bertram Forer demonstrated something very similar experimentally. Thirty-nine students were each given a supposedly personalized analysis of their personality. In reality, they all received exactly the same text, composed mostly of sentences taken from an astrology book: statements general enough that almost anyone could recognize himself in them. The students were impressed by the supposed accuracy of the analysis. Only later did Forer inform them that everyone had received the same result. This phenomenon is known today as the Forer effect, or the Barnum effect: our tendency to interpret vague, general statements as if they described our own life specifically. For a fortune teller, that human tendency is pure gold!

AMULETS

The second desire, controlling the future, had its own market: amulets, objects with “powers,” metaphysical remedies. And here Maimonides is even harsher, because he is no longer talking about the pagans of Canaan. He is talking about a practice that once existed among Yehudim and that, B”H, has disappeared: in those days, certain charlatans would write on the parchment of the mezuza the names of angels and supposedly sacred names, to reinforce the “protection” of the home. Maimonides says that such people are among those who have no share in the World to Come. And he explains why: “It is not enough for them that they have nullified the mitzva [the mezuza becomes pesula, invalid, if other texts are written within its text]; these individuals turn a great mitzva – which expresses the unity of the Name of the Holy One, blessed be He, the love of Him and His service – into an amulet for their own benefit, because in their foolishness they think this will help them with the vanities of this world.”

In the same chapter 11 of Aboda Zara, he says something similar about using verses of the Torah to heal the body: whoever does this is among those who deny the Torah, because he turns the words of the Torah into a remedy for the body, when they are a remedy for the soul. Maimonides’ logic is always the same. The mezuzah is a constant reminder of God’s existence and unity, not an insurance policy against burglars. And the moment a mitzva becomes a “device” for obtaining something, it stops being a mitzva and turns into a pagan amulet.”

PINECHAS: Parenting and the Power of Empathy

By Rabbanit Coty Bitton

THE QUALITIES OF A JEWISH LEADER

When Moshe learns that his life is coming to an end, he begs HaShem to appoint the right successor to lead the people of Israel. And he says (Bamidbar 27:16): “Eloqe haruchot lekhol basar” (God, You who know the spirit of every living being). The Midrash explains that Moshe implored HaShem to appoint a leader with that very quality: a man “asher ruach bo,” capable of knowing the spirit of every living being. This means: a man who understands the character of each individual. The ideal leader of Israel must be patient, open-minded, and prepared to deal with different types of personalities. With those who need a firm hand, and with those who need a more sensitive approach. With those who can listen to a different opinion, and with those who are more resistant to change. Or with those who require additional explanations, or an unconventional strategy of persuasion.

THE MASTER

HaShem then appoints Yehoshua as Moshe’s successor. Yehoshua was a “master” of empathy. He understood that there are different types of intelligence and that when it comes to communication, a leader must adapt to others. The future Jewish leader, before reacting and getting angry, must take the time to understand the reasons behind the other person’s opinion. Yehoshua was able to put himself in the other person’s place and understand not only what his interlocutor was saying but also what he was trying to say. In ALL human relationships we need empathy: the ability to accept that, although we all come from the same ancestors, Adam and Chava,

we are all very different. As our Sages said: "*keshem shepartsufehem shonot…*," just as no two people have identical faces, no two people think or communicate in the same way (Berakhot 58a).

IS NEARSIGHTEDNESS CONTAGIOUS?

Empathy is fundamental in a leader. By empathy I mean the ability to perceive the feelings of another person and internalize them, without denying them or ignoring them. It is the ability to suspend, for a moment, our own point of view, and not judge the behavior of others according to the way "I" feel or behave. I cannot get upset with my husband if his taste in food is different from mine. I cannot tell my teenage daughter that it is ridiculous to be afraid of a roller coaster at an amusement park just because I am not afraid of heights. We have different temperaments, different ways of perceiving life, different fears, tastes, and sensitivities. Everyone has lived through different experiences that have shaped their personalities. My eyeglasses are custom-made. They help me read better and see better. But my glasses are useless to everyone else! In fact, if someone else puts on my glasses, they won't be able to see!

PARENTING AND EMPATHY

In our role as parents, empathy is absolutely necessary. Any parent with more than one child knows that children are very different from one another, even when they were raised in the same home by the same parents. We parents must pay close attention and understand each of our children according to their personality and individuality in order to be empathetic to their needs and to know the best approach for each one in particular. Let's start by convincing ourselves that our children are different. Each one has a different spirit!

In Hebrew we call preschool "Gan Yeladim," literally "a garden of children." But have you ever asked yourself why it is

called a “garden”? Because, in order to give little ones the right foundation at the beginning of their education, you have to be like a gardener, who knows that each of his plants has different needs. Some plants need water once a day. Others, ironically, will wilt if we water them daily. Some plants need plenty of sun; others, shade. Like plants, all our children need attention. But that attention must be personalized. Adapted to each of our children in particular.

We have to be for our children what Yehoshua was for the people of Israel: to understand that each of them has a mental universe of their own.

BALAQ: The Prophet Bilam and Radical Islam

Until now, most of the problems the people of Israel faced on their journey through the desert were internal: a discontented people, complaints about the food (the manna), the spies who demoralized the nation, Korach’s rebellion against Moshe’s leadership, and so on. That generation that left Egypt had, quite literally, to pass away.

Our Parasha, however, takes place 40 years after the Exodus. The problems have changed. They’re no longer internal; now they are conflicts with Israel’s external enemies.

The people of Israel are now on the eastern side of the Jordan River –today’s Jordan– ready to enter the Promised Land. Balak, king of the nation of Moab, watches the Jewish people from atop his mountain, and he is afraid. He sees that these Jews are different from the first generation: they know how to defend themselves and fight, as their stunning victories over

Sichon and Og made clear. Balak fears his own kingdom will end the same way. To prevent it, he comes up with an unconventional idea –something "outside the box."

THE SECRET OF JEWISH SURVIVAL

There has to be "something" supernatural to explain why Israel never lost a war, despite being neither aggressive nor warlike nor ruthless. And Balak concludes –correctly– that Israel's secret does not lie in military skill. There is something –he will later discover it is "Someone"– out of the ordinary that helps them win their wars. He assumes the secret of the Jewish victories lies in the relationship between Moshe and the God of Israel. Moshe's God, Balak reasons, is the superior one; He defeated all the gods of Egypt.

So Balak has to find a god more powerful than the God of Israel. And if he can't, he might use someone who knows how to manipulate Israel's "God" and turn Him against Moshe and his people. In the idolatrous world, this is not strange logic. But he needed to find someone with access to that God, someone who could persuade Him to turn against Moshe. Balak is told that such a person exists –someone truly remarkable, a prophet like Moshe, who believes in and serves the very same God of Moshe! His name is Bilam, and he belongs to the people of Midian, Moab's allies.

MERCENARY GODS

For the pagans, gods were bribable, mercenary, willing to sell their loyalty to the highest bidder. Balak summons Bilam and hires him, believing that with his knowledge of this God he could "curse" Israel and make God turn against them. Bilam was the right man –or the last resort– to carry out the plan. Bilam doesn't tell Balak the truth. He hides from him that the God of Israel is not some invented pagan idol but the true God, and that the people of Israel are His chosen people. The explanation Bilam offers, to cover himself, is that he doesn't

speak of his own will: “God will put the words in his mouth.”

The Midianite comes before Balak, enters a trance, and tries to call on God to curse Israel. The commentators say he tried to bring up Israel’s sins, the times they abandoned God, and so on. But God intervenes in Bilam’s words –inspires him, possesses him– and forces the most beautiful blessings out of his mouth instead of curses. Bilam doesn’t give up. He tries again and again, seven times in all, from different vantage points, with different sacrifices. But every single time, the curses he meant to hurl at Israel came out as blessings. Balak, furious, sends him away.

BILAM THE MONOTHEIST

Beyond this fascinating story, two questions remain open.

First: how did Bilam know about the God of Israel? Because when Bilam speaks of God, he isn’t referring to some generic “god.” When he calls on Him, he doesn’t use only the word ELOKIM, which generically means “God,” but the proper name of the God of Abraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov.

I don’t think the commentators take up this point. Perhaps because the answer is too simple: Bilam knows about God because he belongs to the nation of Yitro, Moshe’s father-in-law! In the book of Shemot we read that Yitro came to the camp of Israel praising and acknowledging the God of Israel. But later, before Israel set out for the Promised Land, Yitro returned to Midian and, according to some commentators, spread the monotheistic worship of the God of Israel there. Our episode takes place 40 years after that return. Bilam is a disciple of Yitro, and I imagine he practiced “a monotheism with some variant of Judaism.” Something not unlike Islam.

Second question: why does Bilam agree to help the enemies of Israel? It’s strange, because Bilam is, by all appearances, a religious man who acknowledges the same God as the Jews. If he believes in the same God as Moshe, if his religion and Moshe’s

were so alike –like Islam and Judaism– why does Bilam hate Israel and want to curse it? Bilam and Moshe share, ideologically, far more than what divides them. Bilam ought to be Israel's protector, or at least its most loyal ally. How do we explain his hostility?

TIME TUNNEL

Once again, I believe that to understand the biblical past we have to look at the political present. Consider: who are Israel's fiercest enemies today? Without question, the Islamists –the most "religious" Muslims– like Hamas, the Muslim Brotherhood, and Islamic Jihad. Remember that Islam itself was built out of biblical texts and ideas: the patriarch Abraham, the Bible, monotheism, prayer, fasting. So why this hatred toward the State of Israel, when Muslims –our cousins– ought to be our protectors, or at least our "natural allies"? How do we explain it?

REPLACEMENT THEORY

Professor Mordechai Kedar and other Israeli scholars of Islam explain that beneath all the political hatred and the idea of Jihad lies a foundation that is 100% religious. Who is the true representative of the God of the Bible –Israel, or the Islamic nation? Which is superior, the Quran or the Hebrew Bible? Who was the greater prophet, Moshe or Muhammad? Who are God's true representatives on earth–the Jews or the Muslims? Let me be clear: this religious struggle for supremacy comes from one side only, the Islamist side. We Jews, thank God, have no need to declare a religious war to validate our standing as the chosen people, because we suffer from no inferiority complex. But on the other side there is an almost "suicidal" desperation to prove religious supremacy.

NOTHING NEW UNDER THE SUN

This is exactly what happened with Bilam. Despite everything he had in common with Moshe, Bilam had no interest in drawing

close to him, no wish to join his people or become his ally. Once he came to know Moshe's religion, he appropriated it in his own mind, casting himself as the chosen prophet. From that moment on, Moshe stood in his way, eclipsing him. Bilam's hatred of Israel was born of his own ambition: to replace Moshe and Israel. Far from being an ally, Bilam became Israel's greatest enemy and sought its destruction.

WHAT NO ONE WANTS TO SEE

Let me illustrate with numbers. The war in Gaza, set off by Hamas's terrorist massacre on October 7th, has now lasted roughly two years. The reported death toll exceeds 70,000, and that figure fills front pages around the world, day after day, alongside marches, emergency sessions, and accusations of "genocide."

Now, how many people know what is happening, at the very same time, in the war between Russia and Ukraine? Last month alone, Russia suffered more than 35,000 dead and wounded. More than thirty-five thousand—in a single month. In other words, what took two years to unfold in Gaza recurs on the Russian front every few weeks. And yet that war—incomparably bloodier—barely surfaces in the headlines. No marches. No accusations of genocide. No special sessions at the United Nations.

Why? Because, just as in the days of Bilam, their problem was never the number of victims.

Their problem is Israel.

Professor Dror Eydar, former Israeli ambassador to Italy, put it plainly:

More than three thousand years have passed since then, and many peoples have followed in Bilam's footsteps, trying to halt the historical process of the Jewish people's return to their home in Tzion. The world is full of bloody conflicts whose victims vastly outnumber those of the conflict between

Israel and its neighbors, and yet the world's attention fixes mainly on the Arabs of Gaza. That very scandal –the world's indifference to other conflicts– proves that it is not the Palestinians who concern those who claim to support them, but Israel. There is no other nation whose policies are not what the salons of culture, academia, and the media debate but whose very right to exist is.

But God did not let them defeat us then. And He will not let them today.

CHUKAT: The Red Cow and How We Raise Our Children

Kill a red cow, burn it, and use its ashes to purify ourselves from contact with a corpse? It makes no sense at all!

Our Chachamim identify two kinds of Mitzvot. On one hand, the Mishpatim: the commandments that align with human reason, whose benefit to our personal lives and to society we can grasp, like the Mitzva of helping the poor or the prohibition against murder. On the other hand, the Chukim: commandments whose reason is beyond our logic. The Mitzva of the Para Aduma, mentioned at the opening of our Parasha, Chukat, is the Chok par excellence. It's hard to understand, too, how the cow's ashes purify the impure person while those who carry out the purification themselves become impure.

It's far easier to obey God and keep His commandments when we understand them, when they strike us as reasonable. But serving HaShem at the highest level, unconditionally, means accepting that sometimes we simply cannot grasp the "Divine logic," the reason behind some of His commandments. What

matters is to remember that in obeying the Chukim, we show that we accept Him as the supreme authority, and that we are willing to obey Him beyond our ability to understand what He asks of us. But how does that acceptance of HaShem as the ultimate authority take root in us?

With our children, it's important to be reasonable. Most of the time, when we ask them to do something or to refrain from it, we explain why our advice is good for them. That naturally makes it easier for them to obey willingly and with a good heart. And it helps us keep a good relationship with them, because they learn to appreciate that we care.

But every so often they'll have to obey us even when they can't see the logic of what we're asking or the good it holds for them. "I don't understand why I can't have ice cream for breakfast every morning." "I don't understand—if you love me, why do you let this nurse give me a shot that hurts?" "I don't understand why I can't go to my friend's house," or "to this party."

Children learn early that there are rules whose "logic" we all share, but that there are also rules and limits they have to accept "because Mom or Dad said so." The parents –not the logic– are the final authority. These are our children's Chukim! And parents shouldn't be afraid to exercise that authority, even when it doesn't seem reasonable to the child.

It's true that we parents sometimes get it wrong. We don't possess the Absolute wisdom of our Creator. But for our children's own good, we have to teach them to accept a higher authority. And when we win their trust in our authority –when they come to understand that our "decrees" are meant for what we believe is best for them– we are also preparing them to accept the authority of the Creator, even when they can't understand the Divine logic behind it.

Rabbanit Coty Bitton

KORACH: How to Lose a War in the Middle East

In this week's parashah, the Torah shows us that some conflicts can only be resolved by tearing them out at the root. When Korach challenged Moshe's leadership, Moshe refused to settle for an ambiguous or halfway outcome. He didn't ask for a sign in the heavens to prove he was right; he asked for something far more extreme. "If these men die a natural death," he said, "then God did not send me. But if God creates something never seen before, and the earth opens its mouth and swallows them alive…". And so it happened: the earth opened and they vanished from this world, leaving no trace and no doubt. Some conflicts cannot be settled with partial results.

After long months of fighting and a string of ceasefires, the United States and Iran signed a memorandum of understanding this week –a phrase that stirs grim memories for any Argentine Jew of a not-so-distant past–. Some rushed to celebrate; others took it with more caution, or with outright pessimism, because Iran's defeat was partial, ambiguous, unfinished.

Iran's Celebration

The loudest celebration, without a doubt, is Iran's. Picture a boxing match. Iran is the fighter flat on the canvas, knocked down, all but knocked out. The referee leans over him and begins the count: one… two… three… The crowd already considers the fight over. The count goes on: seven… eight… nine… One more second and it will all be finished. And then the unthinkable happens. It isn't Iran who rises, nor his own corner that calls off the fight: it's the rival's corner –the United States, with victory already in hand– that suddenly

throws in the towel! The referee stops the count. The bout is suspended. Iran, who was about to lose by knockout, is handed a victory or, at best, a technical draw. That is why the leaders of the ayatollahs' regime celebrate more than anyone: they know, better than anyone, how close they came to the end. They didn't win the fight in the ring. It was handed to them.

President Trump's Victory

For President Trump, this deal with Iran —call it an understanding, a peace, or a ceasefire— is a positive picture too: no active fighting, no American soldiers falling, and the reopening of the Strait of Hormuz has brought oil prices down, kept prices in check, and sent the markets ever higher. And for Washington, that is cause for celebration. Because in the United States —and for President Trump— victory and defeat are measured by one very specific gauge: the economy. If prices fall and the market rises, you celebrate. And the market rose.

There is also a political calculation. Even though much of his own administration is deeply uneasy with this deal, for the president it remains a win: one less problem on an agenda that, within a few months, will be dominated by November's congressional elections. The confrontation with Iran, which could have hurt his Republican candidates in that race, has just been defused. And that's no small thing: if the Republican Party loses the House or the Senate, Trump would be left all but paralyzed for any decision he might want to make in the final two years of his term. In those elections, what decides the vote is neither Iran nor Israel: it is, once again, the economy.

The Challenges for Israel

In Israel, the mood is far more sober.

On one hand, no one can deny what President Trump has done for Israel. No American president —nor, I would dare say, any leader of any country— has ever done so much for the Jewish

State. Whatever happens from here on, that legacy cannot be forgotten. Israel has benefited enormously from that support on several fronts: in Syria, where it has taken and now holds the northern part of the Hermon; in southern Lebanon, where the Jewish army has advanced to the Litani River and controls that entire sector, essential to peace in Israel's north; and in Gaza, where it now controls more than 60% of the territory. In the Middle East, victory is measured by the land you hold. And it is worth celebrating that Israel has won all that ground, that the United States cooperated directly or indirectly, and that the American president has not, for now, pressed Israel to pull back from any of those three zones. For Israel, that is an incredible, extraordinary, and undeniable triumph.

On the other hand, the deal with Iran —a sixty-day ceasefire— is a serious problem. It does not remove the concrete threat of Iran, which for Israel is not economic but existential. The elimination of nuclear material is left "subject to future negotiations": no one knows when that uranium will be inspected, when it will be destroyed, or under whose supervision. Nothing is said, either, about Iran's long-range missiles or its support for terrorist organizations like Hezbollah and the Houthis. Meanwhile, Iran will do what it does best: play for time and play at diplomacy. It will gain months, it will gain years. And when it is ready, it will enrich its uranium and once again threaten Israel with all its force.

Shaul and President Trump

From Israel's vantage point, the outcome of this war closely resembles what the Jewish people lived through three thousand years ago, when the first king of Israel, Shaul, had the chance to wipe out Amalek: the archetypal enemy of Israel, the first antisemite in history, the one who again and again sought our destruction with relentless obsession. The Divine instruction was clear: eliminate Amalek completely, and erase

that existential threat one hundred percent.

Shaul had a powerful army. He went to war –and he won! But he didn't finish the job. He let himself be swayed by his advisers' opinions and left the king, Agag –Amalek's political leadership– alive and standing, along with much of his wealth and resources. Shaul's victory was perhaps 90 percent. But in battles like these, when the threat is not eliminated to the very end, winning 90% amounts to a defeat!

And the facts bore it out. Some five hundred years later, a descendant of that same Amalekite line Shaul had spared –Haman– rose up against the Jewish people and tried to annihilate them, and only a miracle saved us from extermination. The terrible decision to leave the mission unfinished dragged us all the way to that conflict: the "seed" of Amalek survived, and once again threatened the Jews.

Netanyahu and the New Challenge

Israel's prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, knows full well that in the Middle East you cannot declare victory while the enemy is still standing. The consequences of not uprooting that Iranian political leadership today –of leaving it standing, surviving– are a terrible burden that Israel, and perhaps in the longer run the United States and the whole world, will bear in the future, once Iran has rearmed.

I trust that, with God's help and inspiration, Netanyahu will know how to navigate this stormy sea, in which he can neither fall out with Trump nor repeat the mistake King Shaul made: leaving unfinished the task of eliminating Amalek.

I believe the prime minister knows full well the historic role he has been given to play. And he must be weighing the possibility that now, or before long, Israel may have to face Iran "alone" –without the help of the United States–. Netanyahu's greatest achievement would be, and this is the most delicate part, for President Trump not to oppose Israel

finishing what it began exactly one year ago, in the Twelve-Day War, to remove the Iranian threat. For that, we will need a great deal of help from Heaven.

May HaShem enlighten our leaders and inspire them to attain the victory that, in the Middle East, is the only formula for achieving peace.