

# OHRNET

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## PARSHA INSIGHTS

by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair

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### **Balak** **Serenity**

*“...a Nation that will dwell in solitude...” (23:9)*

Our world becomes increasingly hectic, less and less private, as web crawlers and chatbots trawl our lives, our likes, our weaknesses and our politics.

More than 1 in 3 adolescents globally report symptoms of anxiety or depression (UNICEF, 2023). In the U.S., 42% of high school students felt persistently sad or hopeless in the past year (CDC, 2023). About 20% of U.S. high school students seriously considered suicide in the past 12 months. Suicide is the second leading cause of death for individuals aged 15–24 worldwide.

Teens now average 7-9 hours of screen time per day, with increased screen use linked to reduced mental well-being. Around 60–70% of adolescents with mental health issues do not receive adequate treatment. Mental health services are often underfunded, especially in lower-income regions.

Why is it so much harder to find serenity today?

We struggle to make the voice of the soul heard above the constant digital noise. In secular society, social media creates comparison, FOMO, and overstimulation, and addiction. It becomes more and more difficult to find fewer quiet, disconnected spaces in our lives for reflection.

One of the great gifts of Judaism to the world is hitbadadut, which means seclusion, being alone with who you are, conversing with your soul, being in touch with yourself.

More than ever nowadays, where our whole environment tries to tear our attention hither and thither, this way and that, in a whirl of confusion and self-doubt, we need to set aside time to reflect, to contemplate on what it is that we are doing in the world, a time for introspection on what is really important to us and who we are.

The Mesilat Yesharim lists this as an essential part of the path to self-knowledge and closeness to Hashem.

“...a Nation that will dwell in solitude...”

The only way that we, the Jewish People, can be ‘a light to the nations’ is if we ‘dwell in solitude.’ We step off the treadmill of the digital world and spend serious time reflecting on our true destiny as individuals and as a Nation.

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## PARSHA OVERVIEW

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Balak, King of Moav, is in morbid fear of the Bnei Yisrael. He summons a renowned sorcerer named Bilaam to curse them. First, G-d speaks to Bilaam and forbids him to go. But, because Bilaam is so insistent, G-d appears to him a second time and permits him to go. While en route, a malach (emissary from G-d) blocks Bilaam's donkey's path. Unable to contain his frustration, Bilaam strikes the donkey each time it stops or tries to detour. Miraculously, the donkey speaks, asking Bilaam why he is hitting her. The malach instructs Bilaam regarding what he is permitted to say and what he is forbidden to say about the Jewish People. When Bilaam arrives, King Balak makes elaborate preparations, hoping that Bilaam will succeed in the curse. Three times Bilaam attempts to curse, and three times blessings are issued instead. Balak, seeing that Bilaam has failed, sends him home in disgrace. The Bnei Yisrael begin sinning with the Moabite women and worshipping the Moabite idols, and they are punished with a plague. One of the Jewish leaders brazenly brings a Midianite princess into his tent, in full view of Moshe and the people. Pinchas, a grandson of Aharon, grabs a spear and kills both evildoers. This act brings an end to the plague — but not before 24,000 people died.

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# TALMUD TIPS

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by Rabbi Moshe Newman

## Balak

### Masechet Avodah Zarah 16-22

#### What Your Heart Desires

*Rebbi said, “A person learns Torah only from a place that his heart desires.”*

In the gemara, a seemingly identical statement is made by Rava: “A person should always learn Torah in a place where his heart desires.” Both teachings are based on a verse in Tehillim (1:2) that states, “But his desire is in the Torah of Hashem, and in His Torah he meditates day and night.” The words “his desire” indicate that the Torah’s learner’s desire is essential for his Torah study.

Question: Are Rebbi and Rava in fact expressing the same idea? This would seem unlikely: the gemara would be teaching a redundancy, which is something we would not expect to find in Shas. And are we able to clarify this idea, or these ideas, in a more concrete and practical manner?

First, let us examine the context of Rebbi’s statement. The Sages Levi and Rabbi Shimon the son of Rebbi were sitting in front of Rebbi and learning the meaning of certain verses in Tanach from him. When they finished the sefer they were learning, they each made differing requests regarding what sefer to learn next. Levi said he wanted to learn Mishlei, and Rabbi Shimon the son of Rebbi asked for Tehillim. Somehow, Levi was overruled and Sefer Tehillim was brought for them to learn. When they reached the second verse — “But his desire is in the Torah of Hashem” — Rebbi expounded it to be teaching that “A person learns Torah only from a place that his heart desires.” Upon hearing this, Levi said, “Rebbi, with this teaching you have given me permission to stand up (from learning Tehillim, and to learn Mishlei instead, as I desire).” Rashi explains: A Rav should teach his student only a masechet that the student requests to learn from him, because if the Rav teaches a different masechet, the learning will not be successful since the student’s heart is distracted by his interest in the other subject that he desires.

The Maharsha explains that the statements of Rebbi and Rava are in fact emphasizing two different aspects of what a student needs in order for his Torah study to produce the greatest fruits. Rebbi emphasizes the importance of studying the masechet and sefer that the student desires. This is what Rebbi conveys with his choice of wording: *mi'makom*, from the place in the Torah that the student desires. This was illustrated in the gemara's story about Rebbi, that involved his students Levi and Rabbi Shimon his son. Rava, on the other hand, selects the word *ba'makom*, meaning "in the place that the student desires". This, the Maharsha explains, refers to the importance of a student of Torah to choose a teacher whom he feels will be best suited to teach him, and from whom he will learn Torah in an optimal manner. This reference to "in a place" might also mean going to another city or changing to another yeshiva in order to find the best Rabbi to learn from. Both teachings, Rebbi's and Rava's, are true and complementary.

I personally recall being told this principle of learning what one's heart desires, as the response to a question I asked Rav Moshe Shapiro, *zatzal*, some 45 years ago. I was a student in his kollel at the time, and it was on the final day of the *zman*. As we travelled together to Bayit Vegan, after the final shiur until the next *zman*, I asked him, "Why do the *bein hazmanim* (intercession) periods in a yeshiva or kollel seemingly constitute more days per year than a person would normally receive as days off if he were working at a typical job?" His reply to me at the time was that these days are an opportunity to learn parts of the Torah, commentaries and Torah sefarim — "*k'fi sh'libo chafetz*" — according to the desire of each person's heart.

During the *zman* there is a strict regimen of what is studied at each hour of the day, generally being the same subjects for all of the students. But part of the year is left for the Torah student to leave his home, go to a *beit midrash* and study "that which his heart desires". The practical decision of how to do this in an optimum manner, however, should be made with the guidance of a Rav. And although the underlying goal in every case is to learn "that which one's heart desires," the exact path to achieving this goal will almost certainly vary from student to student, and from one time to the next.

- Avoda Zara 19a

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## Q & A

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### Questions

1. Why did Moav consult specifically with Midian regarding their strategy against the Jews?
2. What was Balak's status before becoming Moav's king?
3. Why did G-d grant prophecy to the evil Bilaam?
4. Why did Balak think Bilaam's curse would work?
5. When did Bilaam receive his prophecies?
6. G-d asked Bilaam, "Who are these men with you?" What did Bilaam deduce from this question?
7. How do we know Bilaam hated the Jews more than Balak did?
8. What is evidence of Bilaam's arrogance?
9. In what way was the malach that opposed Bilaam an angel of mercy?
10. How did Bilaam die?
11. Why did the malach kill Bilaam's donkey?
12. Bilaam compared his meeting with an angel to someone else's meeting with an angel. Who was the other person and what was the comparison?
13. Bilaam told Balak to build seven altars. Why specifically seven?
14. Who in Jewish history seemed fit for a curse, but got a blessing instead?
15. Why are the Jewish People compared to lions?
16. On Bilaam's third attempt to curse the Jews, he changed his strategy. What was different?
17. What were Bilaam's three main characteristics?
18. What did Bilaam see that made him decide not to curse the Jews?
19. What phrase in Bilaam's self-description can be translated in two opposite ways, both of which come out meaning the same thing?
20. Bilaam told Balak that the Jews' G-d hates what?

## Answers

- 22:4 - Since Moshe grew up in Midian, the Moabites thought the Midianites might know wherein lay Moshe's power.
2. 22:4 - He was a prince of Midian.
3. 22:5 - So the other nations couldn't say, "If we had had prophets, we also would have become righteous."
4. 22:6 - Because Bilaam's curse had helped Sichon defeat Moav.
5. 22:8 - Only at night.
6. 22:9 - He mistakenly reasoned that G-d isn't allknowing.
7. 22:11 - Balak wanted only to drive the Jews from the land. Bilaam sought to exterminate them completely.
8. 22:13 - He implied that G-d wouldn't let him go with the Moabite princes due to their lesser dignity.
9. 22:22 - It mercifully tried to stop Bilaam from sinning and destroying himself.
10. 22:23 - He was killed with a sword.
11. 22:33 - So that people shouldn't see it and say, "Here's the donkey that silenced Bilaam." G-d is concerned with human dignity.
12. 22:34 - Avraham. Bilaam said, "G-d told me to go but later sent an angel to stop me. The same thing happened to Avraham: G-d told Avraham to sacrifice Yitzchak but later canceled the command through an angel."
13. 23:4 - Corresponding to the seven altars built by the Avot. Bilaam said to G-d, "The Jewish People's ancestors built seven altars, but I alone have built altars equal to all of them."
14. 23:8 - Yaakov, when Yitzchak blessed him.
15. 23:24 - They rise each morning and "strengthen" themselves to do mitzvot.
16. 24:1 - He began mentioning the Jewish People's sins, hoping thus to be able to curse them.
17. 24:2 - An evil eye, pride and greed.
18. 24:2 - He saw each tribe dwelling without intermingling. He saw the tents arranged so no one could see into his neighbor's tent.
19. 24:3 - "Shatum ha'ayin." It means either "the poked-out eye," implying blindness in one eye; or it means "the open eye", which means vision but implies blindness in the other eye.
20. 24:14 - Promiscuity.

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# COUNTING OUR BLESSINGS

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by Rabbi Reuven Lauffer

## KRIAT SHEMA AL HAMITAH (PART 19)

*“The amount of sleep required by the average person is five minutes more.”*

Wilson Mizener – American Playwright

Kriat Shema al Hamitah continues: Hashem said to the Satan, “May Hashem denounce you, O Satan! May Hashem, who chooses Yerushalayim, denounce you again! Indeed, this [man] is like a firebrand rescued from a fire.” (Zechariah 3:2)

According to the Ibn Ezra, our verse is an inspirational and resounding message that attests to the enduring and eternal nature of the Jewish Nation. Hashem announces that anyone who tries to stop the Holy Temple from being rebuilt will be crushed and destroyed. Hashem then declares that it is enough that His chosen nation has been continuously forced into the fires of exile and persecution throughout history

Much to the astonishment and bitter disappointment of the evil empires that have risen and fallen throughout history, the Jewish People have been snatched from the fires of destruction over and over again. Despite their best efforts to rid the world of the Jews, the anti-Semitic nations of the world have failed. Yet, without pausing even for a moment to wonder if there is any logical or rational explanation for the failure of their cowardly and despicable efforts, they renew their attempts to annihilate Hashem’s nation. And our illogical and unnatural existence enrages the anti-Semites of the world, motivating them to keep trying to achieve the impossible.

Paradoxically, the Bishop of Bristol, Thomas Newton (1704-1782), wrote, “The preservation of the Jews is really one of the most signal and illustrious acts of Divine Providence. And what but a Supernatural Power could have preserved them in such a manner as none other nation upon earth hath been preserved. Nor is the providence of G-d less remarkable in the destruction of their enemies, than in their preservation... We see that the great empires, which in their turn subdued and oppressed the people of G-d, are all come to ruin... And if such



hath been the fatal end of the enemies and oppressors of the Jews, let it serve as a warning to all those, who at any time or upon any occasion are for raising a clamor and persecution against them.”

Rabbi Yonatan Eibeshitz was once asked by the mayor of Metz why the Jews celebrate Purim if the Torah states that it is forbidden to take revenge. Rabbi Eibeshitz answered that we are not celebrating our revenge on Haman. Rather, we are warning all the present day “Hamans” what fate awaits them if they try to harm us!

Or, as Marceline Loridan-Ivens (1928-2018), Auschwitz survivor and French award-winning author, wrote, “Our history, the history of European Jews, is that they [the non-Jews] will never forgive us for the evil they have done to us!”

On Seder night we jubilantly sing Vehi Sheamdah. And we sing the words “...Sheb’chol dor vador, omdim aleinu l’chaloteinu – in every generation they rise up to destroy us.” Make no mistake, Vehi Sheamdah is not a song that is sung only on Seder night. Far from it. Vehi Sheamdah encapsulates the very essence of our history. In effect, it is on a loop, being “sung” every moment of every day. And its final words define, to the disgust of all those who hate us, why we are still here. “VeHaKadosh Baruch Hu matzileinu miyadam – the Holy One, Blessed be He, delivers us from their hands.” If only the world would take note. If only the world would finally comprehend that there is no way that they can succeed in eradicating the Jewish nation. If only the world would stop trying to change the ending to the song and actually listen to what is being sung.

The Russian Count, Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910), considered to be one of the most influential writers of secular literature in the nineteenth century, wrote, “What is the Jew? What kind of unique creature is this whom all the rulers of all the nations of the world have disgraced and crushed and expelled and destroyed; persecuted, burned and drowned, and who, despite their anger and their fury, continues to live and to flourish? What is this Jew whom they have never succeeded in enticing with all the enticements in the world, whose oppressors and persecutors only suggested that he deny (and disown) his religion and cast aside the faithfulness of his ancestors? The Jew is the symbol of eternity. He is the one who for so long had guarded the prophetic message and transmitted it to all mankind. A people such as this can never disappear. The Jew is eternal. He is the embodiment of eternity.”



Outside of the traditional Jewish sources, perhaps one of the most evocative and stirring descriptions of what it means to be a Jew was, ironically, penned by a non-religious Jewish writer, Vikki Baum (1888-1960): “To be a Jew is a destiny.”

Words so poignantly and irrevocably true.

\*To be continued...

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## WHAT'S IN A WORD?

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### Synonyms in the Hebrew Language

by Rabbi Reuven Chaim Klein

#### **Balak: An Asinine Essay (Part 1/2)**

The famous scene of Balaam and his talking donkey serves as our springboard for a discussion about various Hebrew words for “donkey” in the Bible and beyond. In antiquity, donkeys were common beasts of burden, often prized for their endurance. Although the common word for “donkey” in Biblical Hebrew is chamor, technically-speaking, Balaam’s donkey is actually called an aton (Num. 22:21–23, 22:25, 22:27–30, 22:32–33). Besides for chamor and aton, this essay also discusses the words pere, ayir, yeimim, and sayach that are likewise associated with the so-called *Equus asinus* family to which donkeys belong. As this essay makes clear, these different Hebrew words are not simply synonyms, but rather refer to different members of the broader donkey family.

Before we turn to the Hebrew words at the core of this essay, we begin by surveying English words for this animal that will help us later on in defining our terms. In English, we have many overlapping names for what is often just called the domestic donkey. Modern science identifies the donkey as a subspecies of the African wild ass (*Equus africanus*), and it should be noted that historically the more common word for that animal was ass (from the Latin *asinus*). Indeed, ass has cognates across the Indo-European family, like the Greek *onos* (and possibly even the Sumerian *anse*). Other cognates that appear in English include onager (a Middle English word for a “wild donkey”), easel (a wooden structure

that looks like a donkey), and asinine (literally, “like a donkey” but colloquially refers to somebody or something “stupid”).

By contrast, the English word donkey is actually comparatively late (first attested to in the 1780s) and is of uncertain etymology, with no clear cognates in other languages. Because the word ass in English developed a pejorative, and even offensive, meaning, it became less popular over the 18th and 19th centuries until the word donkey gradually became the more popular word. Rabbi Ernest Klein in his etymological dictionary of English proposes that donkey is derived from the Old English word *dun/dunn* (or *dwn* in Welsh) which means "brown," with the *k* and *y* elements serving as double diminutives. He further notes that the form of the Modern English word donkey was influenced by the spelling of the English word monkey (which ends in *-onkey*, just like donkey does). By the way, the Old English *dunn* is the first element in the originally-Gaelic personal name Duncan (which literally means "brown head").

For our purposes, it is important to note that English also has distinct words for donkeys based on their gender and age. An adult male donkey is called a jack or jackass, and an adult female donkey is called a jenny or jennet. A young donkey of either sex is simply called a foal (which is a general term also used for young animals other than donkeys). There are also two terms used in reference to hybrid animals that descend from donkey parentage, but are not of full donkey lineage: a mule is the offspring of a male donkey mated with a female horse, while a hinny (from the Latin *hinnus*) results from a male horse bred to a female donkey.

The first time that the Hebrew word *chamor* appears in the Bible is when Pharaoh gifted Abraham various livestock and slaves as reparations for the ordeal of him kidnapping Sarah (Gen. 13:16). Subsequently, the word *chamor* appears close to one-hundred time throughout the Bible. Although grammatically the word *chamor* is male-gendered, Radak in his *Michlol* (Shaar Dikduk Ha'Paalim, as well as in his comments to II Sam. 19:27) writes that the word *chamor* can refer to a donkey of either sex.

Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenburg (HaKtav VeHaKabbalah to Lev. 22:28) adds that when talking about the commandment of redeeming the firstborn donkey, the Torah uses the term *peter chamor* (Ex. 13:13, 34:20), implying that the foal exited the womb of a *chamor*. Since the mother is always a female *chamor*, this usage supports Radak's assertion that in Biblical Hebrew, *chamor* is a unisexual term.

Outside of the Bible, the word chamor also appears many times in the Mishnah, but for our purposes it is apposite to note that Mishnaic Hebrew once uses a feminine form of the word chamor — chamorah — in reference to a female donkey (jenny) that gives birth (Bechorot 1:2). This word is clearly derived from chamor, with the appendage of the feminine HEY suffix. It is noteworthy that this word never appears in the Bible, and it only appears once in the Mishnah. In the Talmud, the word chamorah appears several more times (Talmud Yerushalmi Brachot 8:5, Kilayim 8:3, Maaser Sheini 3:6, Pesachim 4:8, Talmud Bavli Moed Katan 12a, Avodah Zarah 20b, Bechorot 20a). Thus, while in Biblical Hebrew chamor that can refer to either a male or female donkey, Rabbinic Hebrew coined the term chamorah in order to more clearly differentiate between the two.

The Hebrew chamor is such a basic word that it has cognates in all the major Semitic languages, such as the Aramaic/Syriac chamara, Ugaritic hmr, Arabic himar, Akkadian imeru. That said, the Hebrew lexicographers all agree that chamor derives from the Hebrew trilateral root CHET-MEM-REISH, which yields words that mean "donkey," "wine," "brown," "clay / mortar / cement / material / asphalt / bitumen," "pile," and a unit of measuring area (chomer). In an earlier essay I cited Rabbi Aharon Marcus' contention that the core meaning of this three-letter root is "brown," so the word chamor actually invokes the reddish-brownish hue of many donkeys. I also discussed in that essay how chamor as a pack animal represents the utterly materialistic aspects of creation, hence the connection to the "clay/mortar/cement/material" meaning of this root. Others explain the word chamor as related to the "wine" meaning of this root, as the dumb donkey's intellectual capacity parallels that of a drunkard fumbling in his own drunken stupor.

Before we move on to the next word in our study, I thought it would be pertinent to point out that the personal name Chamor (Hamor) appears thirteen times in the Bible in reference to the father of Shechem (Gen. 33–34, Joshua 24:32, Judges 9:28).

The word pere appears ten times in the Bible (sometimes spelled with a final ALEPH and sometimes, with a final HEY). It refers to a "wild ass," which is a non-domesticated type of donkey. The term is also used in reference to a human being whose wild, uncurtailed behavior resembles that of a wild ass. For example, Hashem famously told Abraham that his son Ishmael "will be an ass of a man [pere adam]" (Gen. 16:12). As we discussed in an earlier essay, there is a rabbinic taxonomy of animals that differentiates between a behemah (domestic

animal) and a chayah (wild animal). Radak explicitly refers to this taxonomy when he writes that a chamor is a behemah, while a pere is a chayah.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (to Gen. 16:11) compares the root of pere, PEH - REISH - ALEPH, to other phonetically-similar words, like PEH-REISH-AYIN (“revealed”), PEH-REISH-CHET (“growing, sprouting”), PEH-REISH-HEY (“cow, fruitful”), BET-REISH-ALEPH (“created”), BET-REISH-CHET (“fled”), and BET-REISH-HEY (“clear/outside”). He sees the common denominator among all these words as relating to the concept of freedom and the unhindered ability to move/grow without restriction. Hence, the wild ass is an animal whose movements are likewise unrestrained, and a human compared to such an animal is one who lacks the proper inhibitions and boundaries.

The Biblical Aramaic word for the “wild ass” is aradaya which appears once in the Bible (Dan. 5:21). In Targumic Aramaic, the word pere is always rendered as arud (or perhaps vocalized arod). The word arud also occurs in Mishnaic Hebrew (while pere does not), with the Mishnah stating that crossbreeding a chamor and an arud is forbidden, even though the animals are very similar to each other (Kilayim 1:6). Indeed, Rabbi Akiva (Brachot 9b) draws on this similarity between the two species in stating that the proper time to recite Shema in the morning is when there is enough light that one can tell the difference between an arud and a chamor.

The Mishnah also clearly states that an arud is a type of chayah (Kilayim 8:6), which echoes Radak's way of explaining the difference between a chamor and a pere. The word arud also appears in the Talmud Bavli in reference to a wild ass (Brachot 9b, Rosh HaShanah 3a, Bava Kamma 37a, Chullin 59a, Menachot 103b). But we should also clarify that there is another word arud in the Talmud which refers to a type of poisonous lizard that is seen as a cross between a snake and turtle (Brachot 33a, Chullin 127a), rather than to an equid beast.

The term aton first occurs in Biblical Hebrew alongside the word chamor when Pharaoh gave presents to Abraham after having taken Sarah (Gen. 12:16). Just as the word chamorim (plural for chamor) appears in that list of presents, so does the word atonot (plural for aton). When celebrating the Jews' victory against the Canaanite general Sisera, Deborah's Song praises those Jewish judges who “rode white atonot” (Jud. 5:10). All in all, the word aton appears thirty-four times in the Bible. The most populated cluster of occurrences of this word in the Bible is in Parashat Balak, when the Torah relates the story of Balaam and his talking ass that was the tie-in that we mentioned at the beginning of this essay.

The word aton is typically understood to mean “jenny” (also known as a “she-ass”). Indeed, while Radak explained chamor as referring to either a male or female donkey, he clarifies that aton refers specifically to a female one. Rabbi Ernest Klein's etymological dictionary of Hebrew makes clear that the Hebrew aton is a quintessentially Semitic word that has parallels in Aramaic/Syriac (atana), Ugaritic (atnt), Arabic (atan), and Akkadian (atanu) — all of which mean "jenny." It remains an open question as to why there are two different root-words in Semitic languages for the male and female donkey, while the male and female versions of other animals are often derived from the same root, like the Hebrew words par (“bull”) and parah (“cow”); egel and eglah; and keves and kivsah.

Rabbi David Chaim Chelouche (Ohr Chadah to Gen. 13:16) proposes that the word aton derives from the Hebrew word et, which generally has no semantic meaning but rather serves a grammatical role and is typically attached to another word. The way he explains it, male donkeys are known for their elevated libido (see Ezek. 23:20), so the aton's role is to be “attached” to the male donkey just like the word et is attached to other words.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (to Gen. 13:16, Ex. 14:27) connects ALEPH-TAV-NUN (from whence aton derives) to ALEPH-DALET-NUN (via the interchangeability of TAV and DALET). In doing so, he explains that the very name aton refers to the jenny's capacity for carrying loads, as its phonetic counterpart aden (“based” as in the adanim which were silver bases that supported the wooden beams that comprised the Tabernacle's walls) refers to something which holds up and carries something else atop it.

Nonetheless, not all exegetes agree that the aton is the female counterpart to the chamor. Rabbi Shmuel David Luzzatto (Shadal to Gen. 12:16) argues that aton is not simply the feminine equivalent to chamor because — as noted above — the word chamor itself can also refer to female donkeys. Rather, he explains that aton actually refers to a different species than chamor, with the chamor referring to the standard domesticated donkey, while aton is the female version of the pere (i.e., the undomesticated “wild ass”). Based on this, he explains an interesting textual oddity in Gen. 12:16: when listing the gifts that Pharaoh gave to Abraham, that verse places “slaves and maids” in between chamor and aton, implying that chamor and aton are not just the male and female versions of the same species that ought to be grouped together, but are two unrelated types of animals. Despite this argument, Shadal notes that elsewhere the Bible states that



the Shunamite woman rode an aton when attempting to reach the prophet Elisha (II Kgs. 4:24), and he finds it highly unlikely that a lady would ride such a wild asininity. Therefore, Shadal concludes that even though aton originally referred specifically to a female wild donkey (pere), at some later time the word evolved to also include the female version of a domesticated donkey (chamor). He adds that the young version of this type of animal is called an ayir (see Gen. 49:11).

Rabbi Shlomo Pappenheim in Cheshek Shlomo offers an original philological analysis of the word aton, defining it a donkey at certain stage of growth (rather than a donkey of a distinct species or gender). Rabbi Pappenheim presents the monoliteral root TAV as referring to a "sign/symbol/border," and from that explains that words derived from the biliteral root ALEPH-TAV refer to the "connection/linkage" of individual units. For example, the word et means "with" (a conjunction that denotes connection), while the word at/atah means "you," the second-person noun that connotes an interaction or connection with the speaker.

Along these lines, the word eitan ("strong/hard") refers to a specific form of strength that derives from multiple constituent parts being very strongly connected to each other. Finally, Rabbi Pappenheim views aton as an etymological relative of eitan, explaining that aton refers to a donkey when it has reached its peak strength. In offering this explanation, Rabbi Pappenheim explicitly rejects the conventional view that aton is the feminine counterpart to chamor squarely because the word chamor itself can also refer to a female donkey (as we have already seen). It should be noted that Aton is also a non-standard way of spelling the Hebrew name Eitan in English. Moreover, as far as this author knows, there is no connection between the Hebrew aton and the Egyptian sun-god Aten/Aton; any similarity between those words seems purely coincidental.

To be continued...

*“Study improves the quality of the act and completes it, and a mitzvah is more beautiful when it emerges from someone who understands its significance.” (Meiri, Bava Kama 17a)*

## ACCEPTANCE OF THE EGYPTIAN CONVERT

### Mitzvah #564

As with the Edomite convert, whose status was discussed in the previous article, the Egyptian convert may only marry Jews of a similar restricted status, but his grandchildren and following generations may marry unrestrictedly. In the words of the Torah (Devarim 23:8-9): “Do not detest the Egyptian, for you were a sojourner in his land. Children born to them in the third generation may enter the community of Hashem.” In other words, while we have good reason not to want to marry Egyptians after all they did to us, we are commanded to accept them after three generations because they initially treated us well and allowed us to settle in their land during a time of famine.

Rambam (Moreh Nevuchim 3:42) and Radvaz (Metzudas David) comment that we may learn from here that even when a person causes harm to us, it does not give us the right to forget the one time we needed him, for ingratitude is a despicable trait. The Midrash expounds (Devarim Rabbah 10, cited in Otzar HaMidrashim, Taryag Mitzvos): It is the way of flesh and blood that when one person harms another, the grudge never leaves his heart - but Hashem is not that way. Even though the Egyptians committed many crimes against His people, He commands us not to detest the Egyptian. All this is because of the importance of pursuing peace, as it is written, Seek peace and pursue it (Tehillim 34:14).

From the prohibition against detesting the Egyptian, we can learn the extent to which a person is obligated to show appreciation to his host (Rabbeinu Meyuchas). As the Midrash comments (Sifri, cited in Otzar HaMidrashim), this prohibition teaches us how much Hashem regards the kindness of hosting people. If He rewards the Egyptians for hosting the Jewish people even though they had an ulterior motive of economic gain, He certainly rewards those who host others altruistically.



Rav Menachem HaBavli explains that the three generation limit is linked to the three generations of increasing purity through which the Jewish community was built. It began with Avraham and culminated with Yaakov, whose family is called a “community.” The wickedness that the Egyptians displayed by subjugating our ancestors and embittering their lives indicated a serious flaw in their spiritual genes. Only once the Egyptian convert has undergone a similar three-generation process of purification may he marry into the Jewish community without compromising its degree of purity through his spiritual flaw.

There is a similar restricted status that applies to male Amonite and Moavite converts for all generations, for reasons discussed in an earlier article. According to the Midrash (Bamidbar Rabbah 21:4), the reason for the more severe restriction of Amon and Moav is that they sent their daughters to induce the Jewish men to sin (see Eitz Yosef), as related at the end of Parashas Balak. The Midrash remarks: Edom and Egypt, who came at us with the sword, are restricted only until the third generation, whereas Amon and Moav, who sought to make us sin, are restricted for all generations. From this, the Midrash derives that making a person sin is more severe than killing him, for a murderer only kills a person in one world while making someone sin can cause him to forfeit both worlds.

The restrictions of these four nations reminds us of our own elevated spiritual status. Our Patriarchs and Matriarchs worked hard to build our nation, and our ancestors sacrificed many benefits and sometimes even their own lives in order to maintain our sacred line. It is the privilege and responsibility of every Jew to retain the hard-earned purity that makes us distinct wherever in the world we may be.

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