

ARE THERE ANY HEATHENS AMONG US?

By Rabbi Moshe ben Asher, Ph.D. & Magidah Khulda bat Sarah

What is a “heathen,” from a traditional Jewish point of view?

We could propose an elaborate and scholarly definition—unlike the more commonplace dictionary definition that emphasizes simple non-belief in God—but the primary test of heathenism is the belief in practice that one or more gods can be manipulated by “magical charms.”

We recognize, of course, that Jewish belief requires us to subject ourselves to God’s will, not vice-versa. But that raises the question of how we understand God’s will, whether or not we believe in its existence in any practical sense.

Torah is the main source of our understanding of God’s will. Torah specifies particular behaviors, elaborated as *chukim* and *mishpatim* (statutes and ordinances), which we are to observe. More to the point, Torah specifies consequences for respecting or ignoring those statutes and ordinances.

Do we in fact believe that, for the most part, there are negative consequences for lying, cheating, stealing, gossiping, etc., and positive consequences for promoting justice, showing kindness, and upholding righteousness?

We venture to say that even the cynics among us recognize that when we’re speaking not primarily of individuals, but whole communities and peoples, historical consequences for observing or ignoring the Torah’s statutes and ordinances are virtually certain and unmistakable. But, nonetheless, we often manage to convince ourselves that individually we can escape those consequences.

How do we manage to persuade ourselves that we personally can thwart God’s will?

In the Torah reading Balak, the non-Israelite prophet Balaam also sought to circumvent God’s will. So potentially he offers us some insight into our own behavior.

The Moabites were at war with Israel, a war they feared they would lose. Balak, the king of Moab, invited the prophet Balaam to come and curse Israel, hopefully ensuring a Moabite victory.

Balaam initially refused Balak’s invitation, because God instructed him not to go. But when Balaam saw the potential for enriching himself and gaining high position and honor, he avoided refusing a second invitation from Balak and, instead, sought another “consultation” with God.

Balaam ultimately set out to do Balak’s bidding, although God had warned him to say “only the thing that I shall say to you” (Numbers 22:20).

Setting out to serve Balak, his travel was interrupted by his own donkey, who refused to go forward upon seeing the angel of God blocking the way—which, ironically, was not apparent to Balaam, who we may assume nonetheless considered himself a great prophet. In anger, Balaam repeatedly struck his donkey, until finally the animal protested aloud: “What have I done to you that you should strike me three times?” (Numbers 22:28)

The angel’s message to Balaam was that his mission, as he had conceived it from Balak’s commission, contravened the will of God. However we may understand this encounter, it comes to teach us that Balaam’s humiliation had the net effect of making him more responsive to God’s will. That is, his moral consciousness was raised—at the expense of being humiliated in front of his servants—by “voices” from the most unlikely of sources, first from his donkey, then from an angel of God.

What was it about Balaam’s mission—as devised by Balak—that presumably offended God?

For the sake of enriching himself by serving the most contemptible ambitions of a politically powerful ruler, he was willing to place his prophetic powers, such as they were, real or imagined, in the service of a corrupt purpose, to destroy an innocent people.

But for all his efforts, including repeated sacrifices to the One God from different venues, Balaam’s attempts to curse Israel not only failed, they produced blessings instead.

Withal, Balaam, a monotheist who was nonetheless motivated by the misguided notion that he could manipulate God by some form of heathen “magic,” began, according to Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888), to speak in the “pure spirit of prophecy.” By confessing to the angel of God that his purpose was to pervert the will of God (Numbers 22:34), it became possible for him to serve that will with authentic prophecy.

Yet notwithstanding the authenticity of his prophecy—since God could as well put words in Balaam’s mouth as He had put them into the mouth of his donkey—Balaam was ready, willing, and able to advise Balak on how to entice Israel’s young men into the cult of Peor. Difficult as it may be for the modern mind to grasp, Moabite women seduced thousands of Israelites into worship of Ba’al Peor by requiring that the men defecate on their idol before the women gave themselves up to them sexually.

By his own prophetic words, Balaam knew Israel to be not beautiful but good—upholding a moral ideal, revealed by the placement of its tents around the Sanctuary of the Torah. He allied himself with Balak’s aim to curse (קבה, from the root קבב), more specifically to “hollow . . . out” the *ya-shar* (ישר—morally straight) core of the Israelites, thereby undermining the source of their national strength. (Numbers 22:11)

Are we not in some significant ways like Balaam?

Many of us have been sufficiently educated and exposed to a godly way of life to be convinced that One God is masterminding the Creation, arranging educational rewards and punishments for our moral integrity and lapses. Like Balaam in this respect, we’re capable of seeing the future, not as “fortune-tellers,” but as servants of God, with insight into his design for moral human life and society. Like Balaam, we are monotheists.

But like Balaam, we are also invited to serve powerful interests that are largely driven by their appetite for power and privilege, with little or no regard for the ultimate effects of their actions, whether on the well being of individuals, families, communities, nations, or even the whole planet.

Like Balaam, we occasionally encounter an “angel” of God—one way or another receiving a reminder, often from the most unlikely of sources, of how we are to serve God—so we occasionally

speak, if only in a low voice to ourselves, the words of authentic prophecy: we speak truth to (worldly) power, at least in our imagination, confirming that we have the potential to do so.

But like Balaam, our prophetic words are not our own, because our true character remains unchanged. Our implicit conviction is that we can serve the purposes of perverted power without suffering any personal consequences, because—like Balaam—we’re caught up in the absurd heathen self-delusion that we can manipulate the Mastermind of all Creation. Like Balaam we delude ourselves with the belief and practice of affecting or even effecting piety and other hallmarks of service to God. We go to synagogue and pray (that we can change God’s behavior, while maintaining our own behavioral status quo), we hang *mezzuzot* on our doorposts as if they were magic amulets, we give lip service to the *mishpatim* (social ordinances)—like Balaam, not acting *l’shem shamayim* (for the sake of heaven, i.e., for God’s sake), but to manipulate heaven so as to escape the consequences of serving perverted worldly powers for the sake of enriching and inflating ourselves.

And to the extent that we engage in any or all of these behaviors, they have the potential to curse and destroy the moral core of an innocent nation, and to make us like Balaam, heathens in spite of our monotheism.

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