



## לא הביט און ביעקב He Sees No Iniquity in Yaakov

Though Bil'am, the Prophet of the Gentiles, sought to curse Israel at Balak's behest, he actually ended up blessing the nation, serving as G-d's mouthpiece: "*G-d placed a word/message into Bil'am's mouth, and said, 'Return to Balak and thus shall you say.'*" (Bamidbar 23,5)

Among Bil'am's blessings for Israel was this one:

...לא הביט און ביעקב ולא ראה עמל בישראל...  
*He [G-d] looked at no evil in Yaakov,  
and saw no sin in Israel...* (verse 21)

This is hard to explain literally. Does Hashem truly never see anything wrong with Israel's actions? Does Israel never sin? Alternatively, are their sins not considered as such in G-d's eyes?

The key to understanding this concept is found in the following famous Mishna in Pirkei Avot (Chapters of the Fathers 4,18), featuring this four-part teaching by R. Shimon ben Elazar:

1. Do not appease your friend when he is angry,
2. do not comfort him when his dead lies before him,
3. do not ask him if he's sure about his vow while he is uttering it,
4. and try not to see him when he sins.

The common denominator of the four is this: Refraining from that which will achieve the opposite of the desired objective. Let us review them one by one.

*Do not appease your friend when he is angry.*

The goal of trying to appease and calm someone down is certainly a worthy one – but it doesn't work in real time. This is because one who is angry has lost his self-control and is emotionally imbalanced. If we choose this time to calm him down, or to defend his opponent in any way, he will simply become even angrier – precisely because he is no longer in control. It is like pouring water into a pan filled with burning oil; it will not extinguish the flames, but will rather result in an even stronger fire, and evoke thick smoke to boot.

*Do not comfort him when his dead lies before him.*

The hours between the death and burial of a loved one are times of utter sorrow and pain. The mourner is wrapped up in himself, steeped in sadness at the abyss that suddenly faces him. Attempts to comfort him at this time will seem totally irrelevant and detached from reality. What he needs then is only empathy and solidarity with his pain. When there is a vacuum in one's soul, nothing can be absorbed, and one who tries to give comfort can be perceived as coming "against."

*Do not ask him if he's sure about his vow as he is making it.*

When a person makes a vow, he is generally in a state of excitement: he is either overjoyed at a miracle or some other good news; frightened and helpless; or possibly angry and vengeful. Whatever the occasion, it is very likely that later, after the passing of the extreme emotions that caused him to take extra obligations upon himself, he might sincerely regret those commitments, in whole or in part.

Fortunately, there is often a way out. He must go to a rabbi, who will ask him whether he meant the vow to apply under various sets of circumstances. Let's say, for instance, a man drinks too much and becomes intoxicated, and later takes an oath never to drink wine again. Comes Sabbath night, the man wants to make Kiddush - and suddenly remembers his vow. Filled with regret, he goes to the rabbi, who asks him, "At the time you took the oath, did you have Sabbath Kiddush in mind?" If he says he did not, the rabbi declares the vow null and void – for it did not cover all ramifications and circumstances.

A well-meaning person can easily cause harm to one who takes a vow by asking him, right in the middle of his furious oath, "Are you sure? Don't forget that Sabbath Kiddush is coming up in a few days!" One who is angry

and therefore unbalanced is liable to respond in an extreme manner and say, “I don’t care! Yes, my vow applies to the Sabbath – and even Yom Tov, too!” Though he is trying to help, the well-meaning friend actually causes him not to be able to annul his vow later.

*Try not to see him sinning.*

The reason for this is that if the sinner finds out that someone was watching him at the time of his transgression, he will feel such a great sense of shame that he might never be able to repent. He will always remember those eyes looking at him... and will feel that the picture of him sinning can never be erased. Therefore, if you see someone committing a transgression, turn your head away and act as if you didn’t see him. Do not cause the door of repentance and atonement to be closed upon him.

With these four examples, the Mishna teaches us that we must sometimes let time take its course. We need not give immediate solutions for problems that stem from emotional imbalance. Unnecessary intervention at moments of weakness can often aggravate a situation, instead of alleviating it.

### ■ **Where Art Thou?**

The approach that we have just learned is the basis for the strange dialogue that took place between Hashem and Adam. The first human being had sinned by eating from the forbidden Tree of Knowledge, and then hid in the garden for fear of G-d:

וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ אֶת קוֹל ה' אֱלֹהִים מְתַהַלֵּךְ בְּגֶן לְרוּחַ הַיּוֹם  
וַיִּתְחַבֵּא הָאָדָם וְאִשְׁתּוֹ מִפְּנֵי ה' אֱלֹהִים בְּתוֹךְ עֵץ הַגֵּן.

*They heard G-d's voice moving about in the garden ...  
and the man and his wife hid from before G-d  
amid the trees of the garden. (B'reshit 3,8)*

Adam could not face the idea of standing exposed before the Creator of the World, after having disobeyed His express command. Two unpleasant emotions impelled him to try and hide from Hashem: Shame, stemming from the sin and failure, and embarrassment, at having shown such ungratefulness.

G-d then called out to him, אִיכָּהָ?, *Where are you?* This appears to be a strange question. The entire world is like an open book before G-d, as the Prophet Jeremiah relayed: “*Behold, I am the Lord, G-d of all flesh; is*

*anything concealed from Me?”* (Jer. 32,27) There is no such thing as hiding from G-d, so how can He not know where Adam is?

In essence, it is clear that this Divine question is aimed at creating the illusion, somewhere deep in Adam’s consciousness, that perhaps G-d really does not see him and does not know where he is. Adam will then think, “Perhaps He did not see me even when I ate from the forbidden fruit...?”

Adam decides to respond to Hashem without admitting his sin:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֶת קוֹלְךָ שָׁמַעְתִּי בַגֶּן וָאִירָא כִּי עִירָם אָנֹכִי וָאֶחְבֵּאתָ.

*He said, “I heard Your voice in the garden and I became afraid, for I am naked, and I hid.”* (verse 10)

Does G-d then attack Adam frontally and say, “I saw you eating!?” Not at all. He makes sure to phrase His response in a delicate, dry manner, leaving Adam a way out:

מִי הִגִּיד לְךָ כִּי עִירָם אָתָּה?

הַמִּן הָעֵץ אֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתִיךָ לִבְלֹתִי אֲכַל מִמֶּנּוּ אֲכַלְתָּ?

*“Who told you that you are naked? Did you eat from the tree from which I told you not to eat?”* (verse 11)

G-d implies that He does not know for sure that Adam had sinned; rather, He says, “I can *infer* from your words that you ate, for otherwise you could not have known that you were naked.” Adam thus understands that G-d only deduced his guilt, but did not actually see him sin. If Adam would have felt that G-d had watched him as he sinned, he would have felt humiliated and disgraced until his dying day, possibly unable ever to repent. Hashem is trying, as the Mishna taught, not to “see” Adam in the act of sinning, enabling him to feel that nothing is final and that his door of repentance is still open.

## ■ Where is Your Brother?

Hashem used the same approach with Adam’s son Cain. After Cain killed his brother, G-d turns to him and asks: “*Where is your brother Abel?*” (4,9)

Again, it is not that G-d does not know. He wishes rather to keep the door of regret and *teshuvah* open for Cain in the future. By asking the question in this manner, G-d enables Cain to convince himself that Hashem does not know precisely what happened to Abel. But unlike his father, Cain answers G-d with impudence, and certainly not with shame: “*I do not know; am I my brother’s keeper?*” (verse 9)

Not only does Cain lie straight out by saying he doesn't know, he innocently and smoothly takes the offensive by declaring that he needs not be held responsible for his brother's welfare. To this, Hashem replies quite sharply: ***"What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying out to Me from the earth"*** (verse 10). The voice of a murdered soul rises up from the earth and can be heard succinctly.

But note that here too, despite G-d's sharp rebuke, He still leaves the impression that He did not actually see the murder. Once again, Hashem speaks to the guilty party not from the position of "knowing all;" instead, He leaves open a slight crack for Cain so that he can feel regret and choose a path of repentance.

### ■ **The Sun and the Moon**

These insights will aid us in interpreting a most puzzling Talmudic passage (Rosh HaShanah 23b). Since Rosh HaShanah is also the first day of the month of Tishrei, the tractate begins by discussing the High Court's sanctification of the new month, based on the testimony of witnesses who saw the first signs of the lunar crescent. The judges question the witnesses by asking, *inter alia*, "When you saw the moon, was it in front of the sun, or behind it?" The rationale is that the illuminated side of the moon always faces the sun, and not away from it – and thus a wrong answer to this question means that the witnesses cannot be believed.

The Gemara continues:

**R. Yochanan said: What does this verse (Job 25,2) mean: *".. He makes peace in His High places"*?**

**It means that the sun never sees the concave [dark] side of the moon [that is, the dark side of the moon never faces the sun]. Why? Because it is "ashamed" of its dark side.**

Since the moon has no feelings, and moon-shame can certainly not explain why the sun never faces the moon's darkness, what does the Gemara mean? We all know that the reason the moon is dark on one side is because the sun's rays light up the side of the moon that faces it; the other side is dark because it faces away from the sun! Just as on Earth, only the side facing the sun at any given time is lit up, forming daylight, while the other side is left in darkness.

The message of this Gemara, of course, is allegorical, depicting the relationship between G-d and Israel as parallel to that of the sun and moon. G-d is likened to the sun – “*For a sun and a shield is the Lord G-d*” (Psalms 84,12) – and Israel is compared to the moon. Just like the moon’s light is simply a reflection of the sun’s illumination, so too the light of Israel stems from the light of G-d. As the Prophet proclaims:

קוּמִי אוֹרֵי כִּי בָא אוֹרְךָ וּכְבוֹד ה' עִלְיֶךָ זָרַח.

*Arise, give light, for your light has come  
and the glory of G-d has shined upon you.* (Isaiah 60,1)

When the Gemara says the sun never sees the dark side of the moon, it means that Hashem does not look towards Israel’s direction when they are sinning. He rather “hides His face,” as if He does not see, giving us the sense that He does not see us in our abasement, just as with Adam and Cain. He does so in order that Israel will not be so ashamed that it refrains from repenting. Thus, when the Gemara says that the moon never had to feel ashamed before the sun, it means that the Nation of Israel should not have to feel ashamed before G-d.

This then answers our original question: “*He saw no sin in Yaakov*” (verse 21) means that G-d turns His head away from our “dark side,” our sinful acts, in order not to impede our *teshuvah*. He does not want Israel to be ashamed and keep away from repentance. The profundity of this point is as follows, based on this verse in King Shlomo’s Proverbs:

בְּצַפּוֹר לְנוֹד בְּדָרוֹר לְעוֹף בֶּן קִלְלַת חָנָם לֹא תִבָּא.

*Like a wandering sparrow and a flying swallow,  
so too a groundless curse will not come true.* (Mishlei 26,2)

This is of course most valid and logical: It is inconceivable that Hashem can be “forced” to harm an innocent person merely because someone cursed him. Balak did not understand this, as he tells Bil’am, “*I know that he whom you bless shall be blessed, and he that you curse shall be cursed*” (Bamidbar 22,6). Bil’am explains by responding with a rhetorical question: “*Can I then curse those whom G-d has not cursed?*” (23,8)

If Bil’am cannot initiate curses, what, then, is his power? The answer is: He can “home in” on G-d’s existing wrath and use it for his own evil purposes. As our Sages taught: “Bil’am knew the exact hour of G-d’s anger.” (B’rachot 7a)

Why would G-d agree, from an ethical standpoint, to allow His anger to be arbitrarily used to punish those who might be innocent? The answer is again supplied by King Shlomo:

כִּי אָדָם אֵינוֹ צַדִּיק בְּאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה טוֹב וְלֹא יִחַטָּא.

*No man is perfectly righteous,  
doing only good and no wrong.* (Kohelet 7,20)

That is, everyone is potentially liable to be punished. Sometimes, however, one's sins are not worthy of immediate punishment – but with the “guidance” of Bil'am's curse at the appropriate time, the Divine wrath is activated and the punishment is applied.

What brings about Divine wrath against the world? The Talmud tells us that every day at sunrise, G-d is angered at the galling lack of gratefulness shown by the “kings of east and west,” who place their crowns atop their heads at that moment and bow down to the sun (B'rachot 7a). Such a sin can actually be attributed not only to the shameless kings themselves, but to each and every individual in the world: Who can say he is not guilty of lack of gratefulness?

Similarly, during times of war, the innocent are in danger along with the guilty. It is true that in “regular” days they may not have been punished, but during times of danger, there is no one to defend them by highlighting their merits.

Thus Bil'am says, “*Can I rage against those at whom G-d was not angered*” (23,8)? Only when there is Divine anger can he curse. However, Israel can come out unscathed even then:

לֹא הִבִּיט אֶן בְּיַעֲקֹב וְלֹא רָאָה עֲמָל בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל...

*G-d looked at no sin in Yaakov, and saw no evil in Israel...* (verse 21)

How so? Because Hashem does not “look at” Israel when they sin; He allows the laws of nature to take their course. For instance, when they complained that the manna was “*rotten bread*” (21,5), G-d promptly removed His providence from them, enabling natural law to take over: The ever-present desert snakes began to attack them, as the next verse states. Israel then concluded: “*G-d is not with us and therefore these evils have overtaken us*” (D'varim 31,17). But the advantage is that by not “watching” Israel sin, Hashem paves the way for Israel to then do *teshuvah* and avoid the naturally-occurring dangers.

## ■ Rainbow in the Cloud

Let us conclude by explaining the continuation of R. Yochanan's words in the above-quoted Gemara: "The sun never sees the concave side of the moon, nor the concave side of the rainbow."

This means that the sun is never on the "open" side of the rainbow, where the pull-chord of the "bow and arrow" would be placed. The Gemara asks why this is so, and gives a very strange answer: "So that those who worship the sun should not be able to say that the sun is shooting arrows at those who do not worship it."

How strange! The appearance of a rainbow has a very physical explanation: It is an optical and meteorological phenomenon that occurs when the sun's white light shines on round droplets of moisture in the Earth's atmosphere. The light is refracted and breaks up into the seven colors of the rainbow, based on their wavelengths. The angle of refraction is that which dictates the angle of the rainbow's curve. How can this possibly be applied to what the Gemara says about angrily-fired arrows from the direction of the sun?

Once again, of course, the Gemara is using a natural phenomenon to deliver a profound message: The appearance of a rainbow in the sky is not an expression of Divine *anger* at His world, but rather of Divine *sorrow* at the fact that mortals – the crown of Creation – are corrupting their ways and not fulfilling their mission. As the Torah states regarding the Generation of the Flood, which brought about the first rainbow:

וַיֵּרָא ה' בִּי רְבֵה רָעַת הָאָדָם בְּאָרְץ... וַיִּתְעַצֵּב אֱלֹהִים לְבוֹ.

*G-d saw that man's evil was great ...  
and He grieved in His heart.* (B'reshit 6,5-6)

The Flood had destroyed all the plant and animal life in the world, and G-d now vowed never to bring another flood to destroy the world. The sign given by G-d showing that He would forever guarantee this promise was the "*rainbow in the cloud*":

אֶת קִשְׁתִּי נָתַתִּי בְּעָנָן וְהַיְתָה לְאוֹת בְּרִית בֵּינִי וּבֵין הָאָרֶץ.

*My rainbow I have placed in the cloud, and it will be  
a sign of the covenant between Me and the world.* (9,13)

That is to say, G-d promises to disperse the rainclouds in such a way that the sun will peek through them and illuminate the raindrops. This will necessarily bring about the breaking of light into colors of the rainbow.

The dispersal of the clouds and the break-up of the light represent sorrow over the “breaking” of G-d’s will and the Free Choice of mortal men not to fulfill it.

The rainbow thus represents Divine sadness, as we said, and not G-d’s anger, as would be depicted by shooting arrows at His enemies. This is portrayed by the convex side of the rainbow, or the outer curve, facing the sun. One who is angered stands on the concave side of a bow and arrow, so that he can use it as a weapon. Standing on the other side, however, transmits a message of peace and unwillingness to fight.

When people choose evil, they cause sorrow to the Creator of the World, and raise questions and doubts about the value of their very existence. But when they choose to do good, they gladden Hashem, and He views them as partners in the existence of His glorious Creation.

