

Spiritual Insight For The Week

with Rabbi Bentzion Kravitz

Do Jews Believe in The Devil?



When I was seven years old, our family gathered around our black and white TV to watch the first episode of “Mr. Ed,” the talking horse. We always wondered how they got the horse to move its lips.

That was make-believe. However, in this week’s Torah portion, *Balak* (Numbers 22:2–25:9), God

miraculously caused a donkey to speak, and it happened like this:

Balak, the king of Moab, summons the pagan prophet Bilaam to curse the people of Israel. On the way, Bilaam’s donkey sees that an angel is blocking their way. God then gives the donkey the power of speech to admonish Bilaam for agreeing to curse the Jews.

Our sages (Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah 20:14) explain that God made the donkey speak to teach Bilaam that *“the tongue and mouth [speech] are entirely in God’s hands.”* In other words, God wanted Bilaam to realize that if he decided to go against His will, the Almighty could control his speech. In the end, when Bilaam opens his mouth, he recites a blessing rather than a curse.

Our sages make clear that Bilaam did not lose his free will. Instead, the overwhelming revelation of Godliness influenced Bilaam to redirect his hatred toward the Jews.

Likewise, we are taught that in the Messianic age, the revelation of God will be so intense and personal that the Jewish people will no longer choose to disobey God, as it says, *“I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes and to carefully observe My ordinances”* (Ezekiel 36:27).

We also play a role in bringing spiritual sensitivity into our lives. Maimonides recommends meditating on God’s vast and spectacular creation, which will lead a person to be in awe of the Creator.

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God created free will to provide the opportunity and capacity to “*turn from evil and do good*” (Psalms 34:14). To facilitate this, God created a force to oppose and dissuade us from making proper decisions. This oppositional force is described as “*the inclination of man's heart is evil from his youth*” (Genesis 8:21) and is referred to as the “יצר הרע—*evil inclination*” or sometimes as the “שטן—*Satan*.”

Despite the challenges posed by our evil inclination, we are told that we can control the evil inclination as it says, “*Sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you should rule over it*” (Genesis 4:7).

It is noteworthy that the first time the word Satan is mentioned in the Torah is in this week's Torah portion, and it is significant that it is used as a verb [oppose] and not as a noun.

The angel [spiritual messenger] sent to Bilaam says, “*I have come out to oppose [לשטן—l'satan] you because your way is perverse before me*” (Genesis 22:32).

Although this angel was not actually the Satan—rather an angel of mercy—this story provides a better understanding of the meaning of the word “Satan” since its mission was to “oppose” Bilaam and stop him from doing evil.

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Clearly, the Torah's view of Satan is diametrically different from the Christian view. Christianity believes that Satan, or the devil, is a “fallen angel” that rebelled against God and seeks to seduce mankind to oppose God's will. This viewpoint has its roots in ancient pagan mythology.

The Jewish understanding of Satan is clarified in the book of Job, where Satan is portrayed as a spiritual force that acts only with God's permission to test Job's freedom of choice.

Ultimately, doing good or evil is in our hands, as it says, “*I have set before you, life and death, blessings, and curses. Now choose life*” (Deuteronomy 30:19). Therefore, the real role of Satan is to challenge mankind, thereby providing us with an opportunity to use our freedom of choice to make good and righteous decisions.

May this Shabbat enhance our spiritual relationship with God and strengthen us to make meaningful and holy choices.

Shabbat Shalom,

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