

The **בין המצרים** period is closely identified with the series of Haftoras that prophesy the destruction of the temple and the impending exile in its aftermath. Prophecy after the Temple destruction of the Temple notably limited in scope and depth when compared to prophecy in the Temple era. Ezekiel and Zechariah, and to a certain degree Jeremiah, are representative of the change in prophetic format to vision and riddle, what the Rambam calls **מראות הנבואה**. Chazal compare the more succinct prophecy of Isaiah, who regularly saw the functioning Temple and Divine Countenance, to the city dweller describing the King, who he saw regularly. Ezekiel, who saw Gd from exile in the midst of a concentration camp, is far more verbose, like a village dweller that encounters the King for the first time and is very verbose in his description of the event. The members of the Great Assembly, **אנשי כנסת הגדולה**, which according to the Gemara included some number of prophets, concluded the prophetic period.

The prophet's role is to assimilate the message of Gd and transmit it to the people. Sometimes the prophet must admit that he does not comprehend the message and requires clarification of the vision he was shown. Moses' mode of communication with Gd was unique in its directness. Moses saw the vision and the message clearly, where other prophets saw a vision that required deep contemplation and clarification. Yet, Moses, the greatest of prophets, would readily admit when he did not know something and would seek the answer directly from Gd, never claiming that he was privy to Gd's thoughts so to speak. The prophet is asked "what do you see?" Afterwards he is told the meaning of his vision, why it was shown to him, to ensure that he understands the importance of his mission.

In sharp contrast to Moses and our other prophets, Bilam represented himself as **יודע** **דעת עליין**, privy to Gd's thoughts. He parlayed his ability to calculate the moment when he could successfully curse his enemies into a reputation of being a great prophet. He boasted he knew Gd's thoughts and was therefore able to manipulate Gd, so to speak, into agreeing to curse Bnay Yisrael. Bilam, who could not discern the thoughts of his donkey, represented himself as the confidante of Gd! What drove Bilam to such statements and hubris?

A fundamental tenet of Judaism is to be willing to acknowledge I don't know, to admit that I am limited and fallible, that there are enigmatic **חוקים** I cannot comprehend on my own. Moses, the greatest of men as well as the most modest of men, understood this. Moses did not engage in false modesty. He knew when to assert his position. But he also knew when to withdraw, to set an example that sometimes we don't know the answer and have to turn to **גדולי ישראל** and others for assistance. He

embodied a love for the Jewish People and a desire to enhance their lives and relationship with Gd.

In sharp contrast, Bilam exaggerated his abilities and his relationship with Gd. He claimed to be יודע דעת עליון. He could not allow himself to admit "I don't know". This terrible character flaw manifested itself in his negative ability to curse, to destroy and divide. He did not have the power to affect positive change, only to tear others down. We can derive his true intentions from the blessings that he was coerced to pronounce, against every fiber of his being. He saw שבטי י-ה, discretely encamped in peace and harmony and was moved to curse them in an attempt to disrupt their equanimity and unity. Instead Gd forced him to bless them with מה טובו אהליך יעקב משכנותיך ישראל. After 40 years wandering the desert, the deaths of Miriam and Aaron, the impending death of Moses, the Jewish People had come together as a cohesive whole. Bilam and Balak attempted to exploit any weakness. If not for the heroic action of Pinchas, the sins of idolatry, sexual immorality with the daughters of Midyan and Moab, and the attack upon Moses by the Tribe of Simeon, could have had terrible consequences. Bilam persevered to subvert the message of Gd to his own needs, as seen by his repeated attempts to convince Gd to allow him to accompany Balak's emissaries. His plan was foiled, but at a great cost.

When man attempts to interpret or subvert Gd's message through malice, malevolence or ignorance, he ultimately ends up perverting that message. The Haftoras we read during the בין המצרים period are taken from the prophets who were at the forefront of the events that culminated in the destruction of the Temple. Isaiah, Ezekiel and Jeremiah, the true prophets of Gd, warned the people of the impending destruction and pleaded with them to repent. Their pleas fell on deaf ears as the people chose to heed the false prophets whose message, that all was well and there was no need to change course (Eicha 2:14), resonated with them. That reluctance to listen resulted in the destruction of the Temple and the exile that we endure to this day. Ezekiel prophesied about decorating a brick to symbolize a siege around the city of Jerusalem, representing the impending siege by Nebuchadnezzar and his army. He was also commanded to himself lay siege to the city and to place a symbolic pan over the model city separating it from his siege. Ezekiel was commanded to symbolically storm the gates of Jerusalem to exhort the people to recognize their dire situation and reject the false prophets and repent. Just as the residents of the city relied on the wall to protect them from the armies at their doorstep, they also erected a virtual wall around their hearts to repel the rebuke of the true prophets who demanded they repent. No one enjoys rebuke, people instinctively erect barriers to it. Ezekiel was commanded to employ military-like strategies to tear down the facade of haughtiness

that separated the people from Gd, and exhort them to reject the arrogance of the false prophets who emulated Bilam. He had to persevere to breach the iron wall, not with missiles and tanks, but through heart penetrating prophecy to influence them to repent.

The iron pan represented an iron curtain the people erected to hide their refusal to admit their ignorance and lack of control of their destiny. The prophets were shown visions through the cloud of prophecy, prophecies that were difficult to understand initially but whose message was intended to push the people to repent. Each person erects his own iron walls around his character like haughtiness and refusing to admit a mistake. Another personal iron wall is the inability to change a corrupt life style developed over time. We recognize our ways are wrong, but we lack the fortitude to change them. Gd is waiting for everyone to repent, no matter to what depths he sank. The Torah never forecloses repentance, even to a sinner like Elisha Ben Avuyah, who heard a heavenly voice that all may repent except Acher. Had he repented and broken with his agnostic acquaintances, he would surely have been accepted back into the fold. But he couldn't. Man must always realize that his situation, no matter how seemingly secure, can change in an instant. King David called out מן המיצר. The king of Israel always felt uncertain, in a constant state of siege. Likewise, every Jew, no matter how successful, must recognize that he is under siege daily. He must attune himself to the persistent message of the prophet, whether spoken or conceptual, and tear down the barriers he erected that separate him from Gd. The race was to see who would breach their targeted wall first, Nebuchadnezzar reaching the physical wall that surrounded the city resulting in the destruction of the Temple and city, or Ezekiel, breaching the iron wall against rebuke erected by the people, resulting in their salvation. The false prophets offered a false message reinforcing the hubris of the people that ultimately doomed the Temple and city.

The prophet's message of repentance comes in different forms and should never be underestimated. The prophet Zechariah was murdered by the residents of Jerusalem and his blood continued to flow at the spot of his murder. The Babylonian general Nevuzaradan, seeing the flowing blood, investigated the story behind it and decided to avenge the prophet. He ultimately recognized the hand of Gd and decided to convert. The prophet's message affected Nevuzaradan years later, not through his words but through his relentless blood. His descendant was the great Rabbi Meir, the student of Acher, who never lost hope that his teacher would eventually hear the message of the prophet and repent.

The Rav noted the iron wall is evident regarding attitudes towards Eretz Yisrael. With the isolation of the Jewish people, historical and most notably contemporary, we must break down the iron wall that separates Jews who reject Judaism and Israel from the community. It is amazing that with our unique history, Jews can advocate against Eretz Yisrael and Torah Judaism. We must inspire them, like prophets of old, to recognize the uniqueness of the Jewish people, our history, destiny and return to Gd.

All of us encounter Chukim in our personal and communal lives. 3 boys hitch hike from their Yeshiva and Lo Alaynu end up as Kdoshim; a Chok, an enigma we cannot penetrate. The Torah teaches us to resist Bilam's hubris, to admit that we are not יודע דעת עליין and cannot answer the question "why" or claim to be privy to the cause of this tragedy. All we can do is ask what lessons can I learn to bring me into greater harmony with the Torah? How can these beautiful Neshamos inspire me to perform Mitzvos that perpetuate their memories and be מליץ יושר for us and a זכות for them? How can we encourage their families and ourselves? How do I perpetuate the unity engendered within Klal Yisrael who prayed to Gd with one united heart? How do we emulate the ways of Moses, focusing on self-sacrificing Mitzvos like visiting the sick, and avoid tearing ourselves apart using the divisive language and methods of Bilam and the false prophets who enabled the destruction we commemorate during this period? How do I tear down the iron walls I erected that separate me from my fellow Jew and Gd?

In good times and bad, joy and ר"ל tragedy, we must emulate the ways of Moses and pray to Gd for guidance and relief, hear the message of the prophets to return to Gd and maximize אהבת ישראל. These will be the catalysts for the coming of Mashiach speedily in our days.

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