

## The Art Of Balancing Heart And Mind (Edited Transcript)

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Thank you for listening. I feel very grateful for the opportunity to share some thoughts with you.

I was just thinking how different every person is from the other. The uniqueness of every human being is discussed in many different places in the Talmud where it points out that there are no two human beings alike. This reflects the greatness of G-d because He creates every single human being differently. That uniqueness and difference of each one of us is reflected in many different ways. But let's look at it on a simple, physical level. As I am talking, turn over your hand and look at your finger prints. Look at your thumb, and look very closely at the detail of its design. And then think about the fact that that design is unique. There is nobody else in the world that has your fingerprints, because each and every single one of you is different from the other. But this difference on a physical level applies even more so on the emotional, psychological and intellectual level.

Every single person is different. No two people are the same and, in fact, no two people have ever been the same. And that, says the Talmud, shows the remarkable nature of G-d's Creation because we all descended from Adam and Eve. And, in fact, according to one interpretation in the Talmud that is why G-d created all human beings from one father and one mother. However; that is an unusual way of creating the world because when G-d created the trees and the flowers and the animals he created them en mass and yet with human beings He created one man and one woman.

A variety of different answers are given by the Talmud. One is that G-d wanted to eradicate racism to show that we all descended from Adam and Eve. Another answer is to show the preciousness of human life, that if someone had murdered Adam or Eve then there wouldn't be a single person alive today. One person is an entire world is a famous statement of the Talmud. But another answer, the Talmud says, is it shows the greatness of G-d because we are all created from the same mould ? the original Adam and Eve mould and yet every single one of us is different. That is something quite awesome and quite remarkable and shows the greatness of our Creator that we all come from the same basic physical components but yet physically, emotionally and intellectually we are different ? everything about us is different from the other. And that is why human life is so precious because there is no human being that is really replaceable. Every single one of us occupies a unique place in the universe and in the world that G-d has created.

### **Working together with G-d**

The uniqueness of each person is divided into two parts. One part is given to us by G-d and ordained by G-d. Another part is that which we create ourselves. And the Talmud actually says that at the moment of conception an angel takes the embryo before G-d and says what will be with this embryo? And G-d decrees certain things for that person's life circumstances. As we know that much of our life circumstances are determined by G-d and we have no control. The exact make-up of our DNA which affects levels of intelligence, the families into which we are born, the place where we are born and a variety of other factors that determine who we are. Even emotional and psychological approaches to life can be linked to DNA and to the physical programming of a person; and so much of this is in G-d's hands. However; what the Talmud is careful to point out is that G-d says to the angel, we decree all of this, but whether this person is righteous or wicked in their hands. And that connects to another statement of the Talmud which says, ?Everything is in the hands of heaven except the fear of heaven?. But when we talk about being afraid, we mean to be in awe, to have that sense of the awe of heaven ? the awesomeness of G-d. It says everything, all of these life circumstances, are in the hands of heaven except our response to it; our moral choices, our commitment to doing good and following His Commandments and our commitment to helping people. All of these things are in our hands and we can determine ourselves.

There is so much which is given to us, but whatever is given to a person, it is ultimately their decision of whether to do good or to do evil in the world. It is in our hands and it is for those decisions that we are held responsible. And there is a perfect example of it in

this week's portion. On Shabbat morning we are going to be reading the portion of Balak and in this portion we are introduced to a great prophet at that time ? a man by the name of Bilam. Now Bilam, according to Talmudic tradition, was truly a great person. He was a person of immense intellectual and spiritual powers ? so much so that he was a prophet in his times. He had certain powers to bless and curse and he was well known for it. So when Balak who was the king of a nation called Moav wanted to harm the Jewish people, what he decided to do was hire the services of Bilam.

The Jewish people had left the land of Egypt and they had already wandered in desert for almost 40 years on G-d's instructions. Now they were preparing to enter into the land of Israel. And the king of Moav, one of the neighbouring nations to the land of Israel, was very afraid. So he hired the services of Bilam together with the nation of Midian to curse the Jewish people. And the portion describes how in the end he tried to curse the people but G-d blocked his attempts and he, in fact, blessed the people.

### **Making the choice**

What is the purpose of this portion? Why is it even in the Five Books, in the Chumash? There was an attempt to curse the people and it ended-up becoming a blessing. Why is so much made of this particular incident? There are many lessons to be drawn from it. But one is the power we have in our hands to determine who we are. Because, in essence, this prophet Bilam who was such a great man was juxtaposed and placed next to another great prophet who did good in the world and not bad and that, of course, was Moses or as we say in Hebrew ? Moshe Reibenu ? Moses our teacher. And, in fact, on the contrary our Sages explain in the Talmud that Bilam had greater powers of prophecy and spiritual influence than even Moses. In potential he had even greater power. And so here you have a brilliant man with great leadership capabilities, great intellectual spiritual capabilities and yet Bilam was a man of wickedness and Moses was a man of righteousness ? placing before us the message from G-d to say: it's our choice. G-d will dish out the cards and set up our life circumstances in accordance with certain things over which we have absolutely no control. But once that hand is dealt, so to speak, then it is in our hands ? we have to say how we are going to play it. And the decisions that we make in respect of good and evil in the world, those are the decisions that we have complete control over. G-d doesn't push us in any direction, we have complete control and therefore we take complete responsibility.

And so the whole episode of Bilam was to show a man of brilliance going off the path. A man of brilliance who was unable to rise to the challenge of making the most of what G-d had given him and instead of making the world a better place, he turned the world into a worse place and he allowed himself to be hired, almost as a hired gun, against the Jewish people.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, one of our great commentators from the 19th Century, makes this point about Bilam because he says the real message of Judaism and its founding father Avraham, as it was given at Mount Sinai by G-d, is a message of monotheism ? which is belief in one G-d. And in that respect Bilam believed in one G-d. Bilam connected with G-d and he understood the existence of one G-d ? he followed that philosophy of monotheism. But Rabbi Hirsch says that Judaism is not just about belief in one G-d, its belief in one lifestyle: meaning, it's a belief in living in accordance with the will of that one G-d. Its about good living, its about being a decent person, its about being a good person, its about saying life is not just about philosophy and insight and spirituality and intellect; life is about becoming a good person, a decent person where we transform ourselves and refine ourselves.

You see the contrasted examples between Bilam on the one hand and Moses on the other hand. Bilam is grasping the intellectual component of Judaism, this monotheism but failing on becoming a decent person. And that's why Judaism is filled with commandments ? physical, practical commandments ? that are there to purify us and uplift us because we are physical beings. If we were just intellect and soul then we would just suffice with that, but we are not. We are physical beings and we need to be uplifted and purified and refined both on the physical level of personal sanctity but also on an emotional level in terms of humility and kindness and generosity. All of these are important qualities that we have to work on and change ourselves. And we have that power to change. That is what free choice is all about. It's the belief that we have the capacity to reinvent ourselves, to change ourselves, to uplift, to refine ourselves ? that is really what free choice is all about.

### **Intellect versus emotion**

And that is why it says we have one of the greatest mitzvot, commandments, the study of Torah. We know that Judaism is a system

of the most intellectual power. On the other hand the Talmud says that one of the reasons that the study of Torah is so important is that it leads us to action, it leads us to become changed people, to be uplifted and to see things from a different perspective. This idea is explained by the Maharal of Prague. He raises the following paradox. On the one hand we are told that the study of Torah is equal to all of the other commandments. If you combine all of the other commandments in level of importance and reward ? the study of Torah actually equals all of them combined. On the other hand, the law, the Halachah, is that if you are studying Torah and a mitzvah comes along ? a physical, practical commandment to fulfil and there is nobody else who can do it and you are required to do it. You stop your learning in order to do it. So for example, you are studying Torah and it comes the time for prayers or for the saying of the Shema, or for putting on tefillin, or for helping a person that nobody else can help or whatever it may be; where an opportunity to fulfil a commandment comes along that cannot be fulfilled except through you getting involved, then you should stop your learning in order to do that.

Why? The Maharal says the loftiest part of the human being is the intellect and the soul which is connected to it. In fact, the Maharal, explains in many different places how a human being is made up of three different components. There is the physical body, their emotions and then there is the intellect or spirit ? the soul. And each one of those is loftier than the next. The body is on the most basic physical level, and the emotions that are intermeshed with the body, and then there is the intellect. The intellect or the neshoma, the soul, is the loftiest of them all. But in that respect, the Maharal, says although it?s the loftiest it also therefore, in some way, has the least grip on a person. You know we like to think that we are governed by rationality but very often our emotions take over, and emotions can sometimes be much more powerful than the intellect even though intellect is transcendent. But the Maharal explains that the very strength of the intellect, its transcendence is that which weakens because it is almost beyond the physical person. G-d?s Plan in the Torah is to give us commandments that relate to all aspects of a person. We have some commandments that are related to the physical body that can only be done with the physical body, for example taking of a lulav or sitting in a succah; commandments around food; commandment not to do the 39 categories of forbidden work on Shabbat. We have certain commandments that are related to the emotions, for example the importance of being slow to anger; the emotional service of G-d which is defined by the Talmud as prayer which is an emotional interaction with G-d. Those are emotional commandments. Then we have the intellectual spiritual commandments and the classic in this category is the study of Torah. And so there are 613 different commandments that relate to different aspects of who the person is.

The Maharal says if a person were to merely study Torah and even when an opportunity came to fulfil the physical commandments he didn?t do so, the result then would be a person who is top heavy, meaning: they would have a very well developed intellect and spirit but their emotions would not be as well developed and certainly their physical body would not be on the highest levels of holiness and sanctity and what would develop then would be a person who is top heavy. The purpose of Judaism is to develop a holistic person. Someone who is all-rounded and not compartmentalised into different components. Where the entirety of the person is elevated and uplifted. In order to do that we need commandments that relate to every aspect. So if we were to ignore all the physical commandments only in favour of the intellectual commandment and the spiritual commandment of the study of Torah, then we would have a person that is a weird hybrid of accepting advance in the area of intellect and the spirit but having no sanctity in terms of the body. And, therefore, you need all aspects. So a person has to interrupt their studies in order to do a commandment that nobody else can do for them. On the other hand, once a person is doing everything, then the greatest commandment of all is the study of Torah because that relates to the highest level of a person which is the intellect and the spirit. And so it is the greatest of all the commandments because it relates to the highest level of a person. But, it cannot be dominant to the exclusion of all else because then what results is a person who is lopsided. There is lack of proportionality. What Judaism argues for is proportionality, a sense of completeness. Completeness is when everything is in proportion and symmetry and every dimension of what it means to be a human being is addressed and uplifted together and in proportion to each other.

### **Sanctity of the body and spirit**

And it is that proportionality that Bilam lacked. You see Bilam the prophet was a brilliant intellect and a brilliant spiritual person but he didn?t have the sanctity of the body and the sanctity of the emotions. With regard to sanctity of the body, there are all kinds of Talmudic traditions that refer to Bilam?s immorality and depravity especially in sexual matters. Bilam didn?t have the purity and sanctity of emotions in that we see his arrogance in the text coming through time and time again where the kings came to see him and say will you come and curse the people. There are a number of details in the text where Bilam is asking for more honour. He

says, look I am not coming with you, I want a more prestigious grouping. Have a look carefully in the commentary of Rashi ? in the portion you will see where he draws out all of that. And so he was filled with this arrogance and sense of self-importance and self-power.

By contrast look at Moses. Moses, our teacher, is defined by his humility. He was the most humble of all men. So here was a person who was a total human being. We see his outrage at injustice that was exhibited when he grew up in the palace of Pharaoh where he left the comforts of the palace in order to defend the oppressed. We see that coming out in all different ways, and coming to the fore in leading the people out of Egypt leaving the comforts of his place in exile in Midian, and coming to lead the people at great personal sacrifice. Moses was a man of totality and completeness. A person who was holistically devoted to G-d and holistically devoted to doing the right thing. By contrast Bilam is lopsided and top heavy ? a brilliant intellect, brilliant spirit but lacking in the completeness. And that?s free choice.

Sometimes people say you don?t have free choice to work on your emotions and your character, and you don?t have free choice to work on the sanctity of the body. We exercise free choice on body, on emotions, on intellect, on every dimension of who we are and we can change ourselves. And that is what G-d calls upon us to do ? to change ourselves to be holistic in our service of G-d.

### **Enhancing all relationships**

And we see this in a passage in the Talmud where it says, if a person wants to be truly saintly they have to be involved in three things. They have to achieve perfection in matters of blessings that are said before food or experiencing other things; they have to be a saint in matters of damages and not hurting other people, and one has to be a saint in the matters of Pirkei Avot, Ethics of our Fathers.

And the Maharal says that these three areas that the Talmud refers to refer to the three different kind of relationships that a person has. To be a saint in matters of damages ? not to cause damage to another person ?is a relationship between us and our fellow human beings. Then there is a second relationship that we have and that is between us and G-d and that is referred to as being a saint in matters of blessings. That?s the symbol of that relationship between us and G-d. And the third is Pirkei Avot, Ethics of our Fathers, which is a tractate that deals extensively with character development and internal development. That?s the third relationship ? the relationship with self. Says the Maharal, we have three relationships. One is between a human being and another, between man and his fellow; between man and G-d is the second; and then the third is between a person and themselves. And one has to develop a high level in each one of those three relationships. We don?t just focus on being a good person unto other people; we don?t focus on just being a good person to G-d and having a spiritual relationship; and we don?t focus merely on character development internally. We work on every component of it.

And this is a theme that comes through the Maharal?s philosophy time and time again, of how he draws out of the Talmudic text one of the central philosophies of Judaism. It seeks to build whole people, great people from every aspect of what it means to be a great human being and every different kind of relationship in life. And that is why the laws of Judaism are so extensive.

Why are there so many? In fact the Talmud says it was a sign of merit. It said G-d wanted to give us merit so he gave us extra commandments. Why? Where is the merit in having so many commandments? Because the commandments touch on every aspect of life. Judaism is so holistic it doesn?t just deal with the areas that traditional religion deals with. It deals with every aspect of what it means to be a human being and seeks to uplift every aspect of that, every aspect of the person, every aspect of life ? we try to uplift and bring to the fore. And so it is that that becomes such an important part of what Judaism is all about. And that is why for us our role model is Moses. Moses is the role model because he was the person who was all-rounded in every aspect of his life. And then the contrast to him is Bilam. The message of power for us is that we are empowered to create ourselves into Moses in the sense that obviously we are different so no one can be like Moses. It says no-one will ever achieve the greatness that he achieved. But we have that free choice, and that?s what the Rambam ? Maimonides ? writes. He says, what lies before us is the choice to be as righteous as Moses or, he says, as wicked as Yeravam ? one of the wicked kings. That?s what lies before us.

And this week?s portion throws before us that same choice. Be as righteous as Moses or as wicked as Bilam. We have that power

and we are given the tools. What Judaism gives us is the tools to achieve that, but we have to believe that we have the power. We have to believe that although so much is in the hands of heaven, but it is our moral choices of who we are and how we relate to G-d, to our fellow human beings and to ourselves that is ultimately in our hands.

Thank you for listening. Have a wonderful Shabbos and I look forward to being with you again this time next week.