

## A MITZVA DILEMMA FOR THE SHABBOS TABLE



### THE HANDYMAN'S LADDER

By Rabbi Yitzi Weiner

In this week's Parsha we learn about the importance of showing hakaras hatov, gratitude. We find that the angel rebuked Bilam for hitting his donkey. The Sefer Chasidim (668) writes that one should not hit their donkey and certainly one has an obligation to relate in a pleasant way to people who benefit him. This leads us to the following true story.

Aron was a handyman. He owned a van where he kept all of his tools. He also had a ladder tied to a roof rack on the top of the van.

One day Aron had a hard day of work. He wanted to get home quickly, so he attached the ladder to the top of the roof, but he didn't take the time to tie it securely. As he parked in front of his home, he thought about the loose ladder and told himself that he would secure the ladder later.

Aron went to his Daf Yomi shiur at night, came home and fell asleep. As you might have guessed, he forgot about the loose ladder.

At about 2:00 in the morning there was a knock at his door. It was his neighbor Levi. "My wife is going into labor and our car is now at the mechanic, can we please borrow your van to rush to the hospital?," Levi asked excitedly.



### A CHINK IN THE ARMOR

Balak saw how the Jewish nation was eating the nations that stood in her way and feared that his nation would be eaten up soon as well. In explaining to Bilam why he wants to hire him, Balak actually uses the metaphor of the ox who eats the grass beneath him leaving nothing behind. With that in mind he hired Bilam to curse this devouring nation and bring about their demise. Bilam was the world's greatest seer and sorcerer whose curse brought about the downfall of the greatest of nations. Balak knew that the Jewish people had a special protector and needed a super curse to bring them down.

Both he and Balak understood that no mortal being lives forever. We all have vulnerabilities and faults. Sooner or later one or more of those vulnerabilities express themselves and the person begins to fall. Some live long, others shorter but in the end everyone falls. The same is true with all organic matter; plants, insects, fish, mammals and even nations. Anything that is alive will reach its end - no life force endures forever.

Bilam's plan in cursing the Jewish people was to find that vulnerability. He knew well that HaShem loved His people and the only way he could succeed was to find their point of weakness. He looked to find the sins that our people had perpetrated and perhaps even the sins that we would perpetrate in the future. He calculated that if he could focus on those weaknesses his curse could be implanted and our demise would occur.

To do so, he climbed a mountain top to see our nation from a very high point. This was to gain a vantage point from which he could see the entire nation in one

Without hesitation, Aron tossed Levi the keys. "Of course. And everything should go with mazel, and beshaa tova", Aron called out with a smile. Levi and his wife took the keys to Aron's van and drove the van as fast as they could to reach the hospital.

Suddenly, a car in front of them stopped short, because of a red light. Levi hit the breaks hard. Suddenly a large projectile shot off from the roof of the van. As Levi watched in horror a large metal object flew into the rear window of the car in front of them.

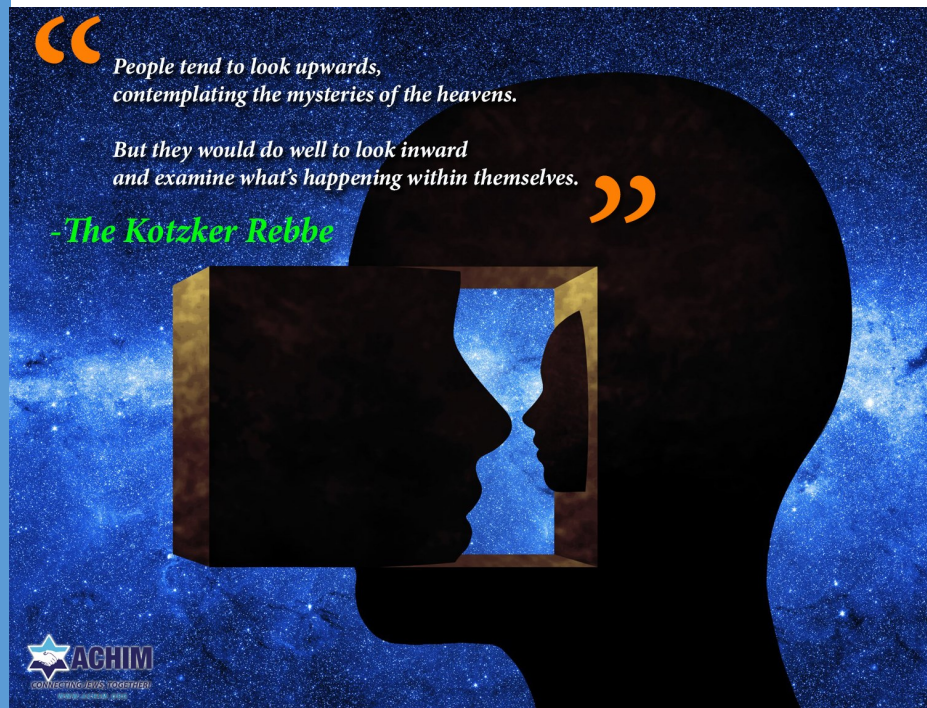
Levi jumped out to make sure everyone was ok. The driver of the car was shocked but unhurt. The car however was a different story. Levi knew his cars and he recognized that the car was an expensive one. It was a new model of the Mercedes Maybach S 580.

After assessing the scene Levi understood what happened. The ladder on the roof of the van was not secured properly. Levi was driving very quickly, and when he stopped short the ladder shot out and smashed into the Mercedes in front of him. He understood that the damage was going to be very expensive.

Levi quickly gave the driver ahead of him his insurance information and told him that his wife was in labor. The man was very considerate and understanding and Levi was able to continue to the hospital. Thankfully a healthy child was born shortly after.

After the dust settled, Levi thought about his accident. He was very grateful to Aron for lending him his van but was frustrated about the fact that he was never told about the loose ladder. Levi wondered who was responsible to pay for the damage according to the Torah. On one hand, he was the driver and he was driving very fast. Perhaps it was his responsibility. But on the other hand, the van had a loose ladder on top, and Aron, the owner of the van, never told him that it was insecure. Perhaps it was Aron's responsibility. And finally, perhaps both Aron and Levi could argue that the accident was out of their hands and that both of them were exempt from paying the damage and the owner of the Mercedes should swallow the loss.

What do you think?  
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glance. As one climbs higher their scope of vision enlarges and one could see much more than from a lower point. Considering the footprint of the Jewish encampment was 12 km x 12 km, Bilam needed a very high point. From that vantage point Bilam begins his prophecy "For I see it from the summit of the rocks and from the hills do I gaze at it, it is a people that shall dwell apart and will not reckon itself among the nations. Who then counts the dust of Yaakov and numbers the quarter of Israel."

Rav Hirsch explains the message Bilam delivers to Balak as follows.

"Balak, you wish to find the chink in their armor. You want me to penetrate their protective layer and snag them on their weakness. You, Balak, see this nation like any other nation who is on a roll of success. They are succeeding at all of their campaigns. You think that they are like all other nations and

will sooner or later succumb to their vulnerabilities. However, from my vantage point at this height I can see far into the future and I see a nation quite different than anything you can imagine. I see in the distant future that this nation will achieve their national mission and complete their purpose. Their existence is eternal and will not succumb. There is no vulnerability to which they will fall.

"Balak, you measure the strength of a nation by its numbers; the size of their population and the number of their troops, by their rounds of ammunition and number of their tanks, their advancement of technology and the strength of their economy. However, relating to this nation, 'Who counts the dust of Yaakov and the numbers of Israel.' This is a nation that does not use those measuring units. Their strength is measured by their commitment to their Guide. If there are only a few committed people they will persevere. They are impenetrable."

How fortunate we are! The measure of our strength and viability lies in our personal and communal commitment to the teachings of our Torah. We need not focus on any numerical measures.

Have a wonderful Shabbos.

**Paysach Diskind**





## SHABBOS: CELEBRATING HASHEM'S CREATION

### FIREFLIES

This week's Parsha talks about king Balak who was a powerful Mechashef, sorcerer. We aren't aware of people who practice real magic today, but let's discuss the next best thing. What is more magical than a firefly light show on a warm summer night? To me walking in the street in the summer evening, and seeing so many fireflies light up the surroundings, always seemed magical.

Fireflies are found in temperate and tropical climates. Many live in marshes or in wet, wooded areas where their larvae have abundant sources of food. Fireflies thrive in forests, fields and marshes near lakes, rivers, ponds, streams and pools. They need a moist environment to survive. The larval stage is the longest period of a firefly's life. They spend approximately two years in the larval stage. They remain in the soil during the day and crawl around weeds and grasses at night. In damp weather, they can climb up a few inches on stems. They are found under mulch and in moist and loose soil. They are predaceous and feed on slugs and snails. Firefly larvae resemble serrated flatworms. After about two years they become adults and are ready to give birth to the next generation. An adult firefly lives only long enough to mate and lay eggs—so they may not need to eat during their adult life stage.

There are more than 2,000 species of fireflies. And only some of those species have the ability to light up. Adults differ in size depending on the species, with the largest up to one inch long. The lights they give off can be of different colors, depending on the species. The light may be yellow, green, or pale red. Some species such as the dimly glowing "blue ghost" of the Eastern US emit blueish-white light from a distance and in low light conditions. **(Pictured: red, orange, yellow, green & blue fireflies.)**

Adult fireflies aren't the only ones that glow. In some species, the larvae and even the eggs emit light. Firefly eggs have been observed to flash in response to stimulus such as gentle tapping or vibrations.

What is almost magical about the light of fireflies is that they produce a "cold light." They don't heat up when they light. Why is this significant? This means that Firefly lights are the most efficient lights in the world—100% of the energy is emitted as light. Let's compare that to an incandescent bulb, which emits 10% of its energy as light and the rest as heat, or a fluorescent bulb, which emits 90% of its energy as light. Even LEDs produce heat. The fact that fireflies are cold means no energy is wasted producing heat and it is completely converted into light. So far no human technology has been able to reach this efficiency.

So how do the fireflies create this perfectly efficient light? A chemical reaction within the firefly's light organ, called its lantern, produces the light. Oxygen combines with calcium, adenosine triphosphate (ATP—the energy-carrying molecule of all cells) and a chemical called luciferin, when an enzyme called luciferase is present. Oxygen is supplied via a breathing tube.

So why do fireflies light up? Fireflies talk to each other with light. Scientists say that there are at least four main messages that fireflies send with their lights. One, it is to attract mates. In most species both genders glow. Often the male will fly, while females will wait in trees, shrubs and grasses to spot an attractive male. If she finds one, she'll signal it with a flash of her own. Two, it is a warning to predators that they are distasteful. Most fireflies are distasteful to vertebrate predators, as they contain the steroid pyrones lucibufagins, similar to the chemicals found in poisonous toads. Three, it is to defend their territory and warn others away.

There is a fourth reason is quite fascinating. Fireflies often use their flashing signals to trick others in a variety of ways. Female fireflies of the genus *Photuris* mimic the flash pattern of another smaller genus called *Photinus* to trap their males as prey. Scientists call them "femme fatale" fireflies. *Photuris* fireflies mimic the signaling patterns of the smaller *Photinus*, attracting males to what appears to be a suitable mate, and eating them. This provides the females with a supply of the toxic defensive lucibufagin chemicals.

The truth is the females aren't the only ones who trick other fireflies. The male *photuris* imitates the light of the smaller male *photinus* to attract females of their own species. She shows up looking for food, but instead, he gets a mate.

What is even more interesting is that some *photinus* males, the victims of the aggressive *photuris* females, imitate the flashes of *photuris* females. They do this to scare off other *photinus* males and reduce competition.

Can the genius of the fireflies' light be harnessed for human technology? So far it is used in the following ways. The two chemicals found in a firefly's tail, luciferase and luciferin, light up in the presence of ATP. Every animal has ATP in its cells in amounts that are more or less constant—or should be. In diseased cells, the amount of ATP may be abnormal. If the chemicals from fireflies are injected into diseased cells, they can detect changes in cells that can be used to study many diseases, from cancer to muscular dystrophy. They are also used for food safety testing to detect food spoilage and bacterial contamination. They are also used in some forensic tests. Fascinatingly, electronic detectors built with these chemicals have been fitted into spacecraft to detect life in outer space.

Aside from technological uses, humans harness the beauty of fireflies as well. Fireflies are especially appreciated aesthetically in Japan. There, fireflies are called *hotaru*, and hold a special place in Japanese culture. To many Japanese, the lights of fireflies represent the souls of soldiers who died in the Japanese wars. The particular genus of Japanese fireflies are named after famous warrior families from history. In Japan special parks are set aside to watch the beautiful lights of fireflies. They also have special firefly festivals to watch the fireflies.



## WE HAVE TO MAKE A SEUDAH! I HAVE FOUND STERNEVITCH

The Brisker Rav would travel to Switzerland periodically for some needed rest. One year, news of the Brisker Rav's arrival in Switzerland spread quickly, and many came to him, some to ask his advice, others just to spend time in his presence. One of the Brisker Rav's visitors, a local Jew, came and asked the Brisker Rav a question. After giving his answer, The Brisker Rav asked him his name. "Sternevitch," the man responded. "Sternevitch?" asked The Brisker Rav. His face changed completely, "Did you live in such-and-such a town before the war?" No, the man said. "Perhaps," The Brisker Rav continued, "one of your relatives lived there?" "Yes," he answered. "I had a cousin with the same name, and he lived in that town."

The Brisker Rav's then face lit up, and he quickly called his host, R. Wolf Rosengarten. "R. Wolf, we have to make a seudah! I have found Sternevitch!"

Seeing the perplexed expressions on the faces of those present, The Brisker Rav explained: Toward the end of 5699 (1939), when the war began, we were stranded in Krenitze, the resort town where I would go every year for a vacation at the end of the summer. The war front was approaching, and everyone was escaping from the area. As we began our flight, I realized I didn't have enough money to continue the journey, and my son suggested that we stop in a local village and ask members of the local Jewish community for a loan. I, on the other hand, thought there was no need for this. I was sure Hashem would send us help where we were and there was no need to make extra efforts. Before the train that was to take us away from the danger zone would arrive, the money would be there! "And indeed, through Divine intervention, a Jew came up to us, and when he heard about our predicament, he lent us the money we needed. We asked his name, and he told us, 'Sternevitch, from such-and-such place.' I told him that as soon as we arrived home, we would send him the money with someone." At that point no one knew the scope of the war and the extent of the destruction that was about to descend upon Europe. The Brisker Rav assumed that after some time he would return to his home in Brisk and from there he would be able to send the payment to this good-hearted person. Of course, this was not to be: The Brisker Rav never returned to Brisk.

"From the day I arrived in Eretz Yisrael until today, fifteen years have passed, and I've had no rest over this debt," The Brisker Rav continued. "Every time a guest comes to my house from anywhere in the world, I ask him if he knows a family by the name of Sternevitch. I've even attempted to locate a list of the survivors of that town and where they settled after the war, but all my efforts proved futile. "And so, I continued my search, the matter being extremely distressing to me. I lost much sleep thinking about the loan: how will I face the Beis Din in Heaven after I die with an unpaid debt on my ledger?"

But now, finally, I have found a relative of that Jew who took care of me in my time of trouble, and after all the distress I've experienced, the opportunity has finally come to fulfill the mitzvah of paying off this debt that has worried me so — how can I not be ecstatic?"

The astonished guest related to the Brisker Rav that his uncle and entire family had been killed in the Holocaust. He was the last living Sternevitch. The Rav calculated the sum of the old loan and paid the debt in full.

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### THE ANSWER

Regarding last week's question about selling the apartment to the people who might have contributed to his wife's death, Rav Zilberstein answered as follows. Normally one would have to overcome their anger and sell the apartment. But in a case that beis din feels that the neighbors might have been negligent in contributing to her death, beis din can say that the husband should not sell it. This is in order not to reward people for their sin of carelessness. This is based on the principle of Hefker Beis din hefker.

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