

Balak 5768

Parashat Balak 5768

We know that Hashem created yesh mei'ayn (something from nothing), but what was that "something?"

The Torah opens with the spirit of Elokim merachefet al penei hamayim – hovering over the waters. Are we to conclude from this that there was "nothing" and suddenly POP there was water? Not exactly!

Physicists have concluded from the efforts of 100 years of modern physics, and formulated most succinctly by Albert Einstein in his equation $E=MC^2$ (energy equals mass times the square of the speed of light), that all matter is no more than condensed (concentrated) energy.

For instance, in one kilogram (1000 grams) of pure water, the mass of hydrogen atoms amounts to just slightly more than 111 grams. And the amount of energy in just 30 grams of hydrogen atoms is equivalent to burning hundreds of thousands of gallons of gasoline!

Energy is force.

Three examples to explain what this means:

1. Stretch out your hand while holding a book. Your hand should begin to get "tired" after about a minute (ask a kohen who has to hold up his hands under a heavy talit while the chazan takes his time cantillating the words). If you would do the same act on the smaller-size moon, it would take several minutes before you would feel the effort. On the larger planet of Venus, you would not be able to even lift up the book.

The difference between these solar bodies is a downward force or energy called gravity. Now, no one understands why gravity does what it does, but we know that it is a function of the

size of the particular body mass. The larger the body, the stronger the gravity or force.

2. Take two magnets, hold them an inch apart with equal polarity (north to north and south to south), and then run your finger between them. You will feel the energy pulsation between them.

We don't understand that either.

3. Pick up a feather. It's quite light. Now pick up one of the steel beams supporting the Empire State Building. It is quite heavy. Both are less than 1% matter and 99.9999% empty space. The entity which keeps their matter together is the energy or force holding the miniscule iotas of matter together. What you feel when touching an object is the force holding the less than 1% of matter in the object.

The atomic bomb is the release of the energy within the uranium isotope 238. If we could release the energy holding together the wings of a butterfly or a drop of water, we would get the same explosive results.

But the problem is that no one knows what this energy of force is, and what caused it. This is the secret of creation.

Hashem created force or energy from nothing, and a miniscule part of that energy contracted to create atoms, and the atoms combined to create molecules and hence we have "matter."

This is the cutting edge of today's physics, beyond which scientists have not been able to advance. However, where physics ends, metaphysics begins; and that's where rabbis can make suggestions based on the Torah and Kabbala.

What is the core or basic structure of the energy or force, which is the physical basis of our existence?

Hashem created "something" from "nothing," that is to say, that what was created did not exist before. But since God by

definition is the totality of all things – the perfect wholeness where nothing is omitted – what could be created which did not exist within Hashem, and which is the basis of all energy and force?

One thing did not exist, and that is called ratzon or desire. Hashem by definition has no “desire,” since He is the totality of whatever is, and lacks nothing.

Ratzon or desire is the energy which underpins all existence. The ratzon that Hashem created is the ratzon to exist. Ratzon is the essence of all matter and the energy which drives people to action.

Adam and Chava had within them the potential for desire; but since they were in Gan Eden where existence is perfect, they never felt desire. The expulsion from Gan Eden was the inevitable result of Adam and Chava’s discovery that they desire and, therefore, are lacking.

The essence of all things, beginning with the energy or force which condensed into matter, and ending with the desire within each human, is the ratzon to be what was prescribed to exist by the Creator.

What does this mean and what does it have to do with the prophet Bil’am?

Balak of old, the King of Moav, was a great deal smarter than the evil men we have to deal with today.

Balak knew that militarily there was no way he could defeat the Jewish people, so he sought to upgrade the level of engagement from the physical to the metaphysical.

Towards this end, he had to bring in the only man in his time who was connected to the source of the metaphysical – and this was the prophet Bil’am.

Rabbi Yochanan (Sanhedrin 105:b) reveals the workings of the

malevolent mind of this arch anti-Semite, Bil'am. Behind the impressive rhetoric were the most menacing and forbidding thoughts against God's chosen people.

Bil'am looks out over the Israelite camp and says:

And Rabbi Yochanan explains what Bil'am really meant:

*How beautiful are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places,
O Israel!*

(May they not have synagogues and the Divine Presence should not dwell among them)

*Like valleys they spread out, like gardens beside a river,
like aloes planted by the LORD, like cedars beside the
waters.*

*(May their monarchy not extend, and may they not have olives
nor vineyards, and may their kings not be prominent)*

*Water will flow from their buckets; their seed will have
abundant water.*

*(May they not have succession of kings, and may their kings
not rule over other peoples)*

*Their king will be greater than Agag; their kingdom will be
exalted.*

(May their kings be weak and their enemies unafraid of them)

*Like a lion they crouch and lie down, like a lioness—who
dares to rouse them?*

*"May those who bless you be blessed and those who curse you
be cursed!"*

*(May they never be confident as a lion, and may those who
curse them be blessed)*

If we consider all of Bil'am's curses together, they create a definite pattern. He wanted to see the Jewish people and our leaders as being meaningless, sordid, cowardly, irrelevant, immaterial, inconsequential, insignificant, nonessential,

peripheral, pointless.

Hashem reversed his curses and blessed us to be a great, monumental and historic nation – the soul and conscience of humanity.

Notwithstanding these blessings, Bil'am's curses have had an impact on us, as R. Aba bar Kahana says in Sanhedrin 105b:

They all returned to be curses, except the curse to abolish our synagogues and yeshivot

But I am not sure that this is an accurate assessment of today's reality.

It would not be far-off to say that even our houses of prayer and yeshivot are infected with the curse of mediocrity – if not worse.

The curse was that the people of Israel will not have the desire to be anything more than irrelevant. The innate desire for greatness, which Hashem placed in every Jew when we received the Torah, and the energy to rise above the mundane and achieve greatness, have dissipated into mediocrity.

The energy to achieve more than mere existence is lacking in most Jews today. We have all seen photos of Jews in the shtetls with the peddlers selling herring in the marketplace, and the cart pushers rushing to their destinations. They were satisfied with the life they led. Each had his little shack, a little income, his shtiebel to daven in three times a day – what was missing? If the day passed without being beaten by the local Gentiles, it was a blessed day.

Did they ever dream that the Divine prediction of the prophets would be realized, and that the Jewish nation would return to our ancient homeland? Where were the dreams of the Beit HaMikdash rebuilt anew on the Temple Mount; the Sanhedrin in the Lishkat Hagazit and the restoration of the Davidic

monarchy? The Jews of the shtetl could not break out of the limited ambitions imposed on them by the galut.

The Jewish energy was depleted in the security of the shtetlekh.

But are we any different? The homes we own in the galut are not the shacks of the shtetlekh, but the mind set is the same. Millions of Jews are seduced by the security of their four walls, a little nest egg in the bank and a 9-to-5 job. Where are the big dreams of God's Chosen People?

Are the yeshivot educating their thousands of students to dream the great dream? Are they being taught the details of the Beit Hamikdash and its service? Do they know the history and geography of God's holy land? Are the yeshivot preparing their students for the day when we will have to take over the leadership of this land?

Bil'am succeeded more than he could ever have hoped. By staying in the galut, the Jew is renouncing and abdicating the great energy of holiness which is his God-given gift.

You are no more than the desires of your heart, just as everything else in the world.

Where do your desires take you – to be part of God's greatest miracle since the Exodus, or to cling to the mediocrity of your lives in the exile?

Shabbat Shalom

Nachman Kahana

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