



**ALEPH
INSTITUTE**
No One Alone,
No One Forgotten.

TORAH WEEKLY

T"01

2 - 8 July, 2017

8 - 14 Tammuz, 5777

Numbers 22:2 - 25:9

Haftorah:

Micah 5:6 - 6:8

■ GRAPE JUICE & MATZAH

Aleph offers free Grape Juice and Matzoh for you to be able to make the blessings every Shabbos. Please have your chaplain / Rabbi contact us to enroll, it is available to all prisons.

■ ALEPH LIBRARY

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Please ask to see our catalog in the chapel in every institution.

You can then ask the librarian to order that book

■ TORAH STUDIES

Aleph offers many Judaic topics for study. Aleph Institute will provide the material and courses. Please write for more information.

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A LOUSY EXCUSE

In this week's parshah, we read the strange but famous Biblical narrative of the heathen prophet Balaam and his talking donkey. At one point an angel blocks the donkey's path and the animal stops in its tracks. Balaam is frustrated and strikes the donkey. "And G-d opened the mouth of the donkey and it spoke to Balaam saying: 'Why did you hit me?' ... And then G-d opened the eyes of Balaam and he saw the angel standing in the way...." So Balaam apologizes to the donkey and says, "I have sinned because I did not know" (Numbers 22:28-34).

I've always wondered: if he genuinely didn't know, why was it a sin?

The answer is obvious: for a prophet who is able to communicate with the Divine not to be aware of an angelic presence right in front of his nose is indeed sinful. A man of his spiritual stature should have known better.

There is no question that in many communities where organized Judaism is weak and not easily available, ignorance of what being Jewish entails may still be a valid excuse. For millions of Jews who grew up in the former Soviet Union under an atheistic regime, ignorance of Jewish law and lore is, undoubtedly, justifiable.

But for those of us who live in Jewish communities that are alive and vibrant, for those who are aware enough to be reading these lines, surely ignorance as a rationalization no longer holds water.

In my own community of Johannesburg, South Africa, thank G-d there are educational opportunities too numerous to mention. Day Schools for children, adult education programs; a recent series of lectures we had here on Jewish Mysticism attracted 250 men and women every Monday night for six weeks running.

The Internet, with all its serious flaws and dangers, is providing unparalleled opportunities for Jews, even in the remotest outposts, to connect with their heritage. In this modern mode of outreach, Chabad.org has been an outstanding pioneer. So today, while Jewish ignorance still remains Public Enemy Number One, there are thankfully ample avenues for Jews who were never exposed to Judaism, its teachings and its relevance, to become more aware and better educated.

I remember an advertising campaign that ran in the United States years ago for what was then known as the United Negro College Fund. The fund was established to provide a university education to promising black students from underprivileged backgrounds. To this day, I can

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still visualize that photograph of a young man studying and underneath the slogan, "A mind is a terrible thing to waste."

How many Jewish attorneys, advocates and judges have never perused a single page of Judaism's grandest legal repository, the Talmud? How many Jewish doctors and thinkers have never read any of the works of Maimonides, Judaism's great physician and philosopher? How many spiritually enlightened Jews who meditate daily have never been exposed to the teachings of authentic Kabbalah and Jewish mysticism?

Why do rabbis become rabbis? To teach. The word rabbi means "my teacher." True, there are many facets to a spiritual leader's position, but the main incentive for me and for so many of my colleagues is the privilege of educating Jews about Judaism -- especially those who for no fault of their own were not raised with that awareness.

In no way do I minimize the importance of the pastoral role a rabbi plays in his community. Helping people in times of distress, as on joyous occasions, can be deeply gratifying. Counselling troubled souls or ordinary people with moral dilemmas is equally significant. But the most stimulating part of the job for me is teaching Jews how to be Jewish. Teaching Torah and introducing it to the previous-

sly uninitiated. The privilege of opening a Jewish mind to the beauty of Jewish wisdom and to the eternal relevance of the Jewish way of life is what led me to the rabbinate.

During my tenure thus far I have officiated at many hundreds of Bar Mitzvahs, weddings and, sadly, at as many funerals and unveilings. While I always treat each case with the sensitivity and respect it deserves and do my best to make these milestones meaningful rites of passage, my true “job satisfaction” comes when a young person comes to see me for advice on how to explore his or her Jewish identity. Rabbis get a real “high” when young couples take the initiative and ask for guidance on how to establish a really successful Jewish home and family. That’s a rabbi’s nachas.

So wherever you are reading these lines, follow the wise counsel of Ethics of the Fathers and “Acquire for yourself a rabbi.” If you are out in the sticks, there are excellent virtual educators available via Aleph. If you live where there is a Jewish organizational infrastructure but don’t know where to start, use the facility on this Home Page to find your nearest real teacher.

In our age of the information explosion, ignorance has become a lousy excuse.

By Rabbi Yossy Goldman

A WHOLE, NOT MORE NOT LESS

Every so often, when I’m out there meeting and greeting, someone will trot out the old line: “Don’t waste your time, rabbi, I’m not (or he’s not) a good Jew.”

As proof of their irreligiosity and irredeemability, they will quickly point out their non-Jewish girlfriend or hold up their bacon sandwich, expecting you to recoil in horror and scurry off to find a more promising target.

It’s almost as if they think a rabbi’s job should be restricted to preaching to the converted—ministering only to those who believe already or have demonstrated interest in remaining within the fold. However, I would argue that it is precisely those Jews who have had the least previous exposure to Judaism, or who have fallen the furthest, who most deserve our attention.

It’s not where you are that counts, it’s what you’re doing. And we know that every single action by every single Jew is unique and invaluable to G-d.

We don’t force people to do the right thing. We’ll try to persuade you gently, using humor and affection rather than intolerance and fear. We don’t impose our values at the point of the sword or by judicial fiat. We bother because we care, and the moments when people respond positively to

our positive message make all of our efforts worthwhile.

This week we read the extraordinary story of the wicked prophet Balaam, who traveled through the desert to curse the Jews. On three separate occasions, a fiery angel attempts to block his path but is ignored. Balaam’s donkey is then miraculously granted the power of speech to try to caution Balaam to reverse his course and then, failing all else, Hashem shows Balaam the angel and warns him directly.

The Rebbe pointed out the lengths that G-d went to in an effort to prevent Balaam from sinning—first with gentle hints, and then a steady progression of more and more obvious signs that it was worth turning back from his life path.

Think about it. Balaam was a murdering fiend who pre-ached nothing but immorality, evil and bloodshed. According to the Talmud, he had no redeeming features and deserved punishment in this world and the next. And yet, Hashem granted him chance after chance to be redeemed.

How much more should we be ready to reach out with love to every one of our dearly beloved brothers and sisters. How much more should we be willing to try again and again to show them the way to G-d and the path of Torah. No Jew is beyond redemption. There is no such thing as a bad Jew. Every Jew is worth an unlimited amount of time and effort because every Jew is worth an entire world.

In Jewish History

Thursday, 12 Tammuz, 5777 - July 6, 2017
R. Yosef Yitzchak Born (1880)

Tammuz 12 is the birthday the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn of Lubavitch (1880-1950). This is also the day on which he was liberated from exile to the Soviet gulag 47 years later (see below).

Liberation of R. Yosef Yitzchak (1927)

On the 12th of Tammuz of 1927, the sixth Lubavitcher rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn, was officially granted release from his sentence of exile to Kastroma in the interior of Russia.

Twenty-seven days earlier, the Rebbe had been arrested by agents of the GPU and the Yevsektzia (“Jewish Section” of the Communist Party) for his activities to preserve Judaism throughout the Soviet empire and sentenced to death, G-d forbid. International pressure forced the Soviets to commute the sentence to exile and, subsequently, to release him completely. The actual release took place on Tammuz 13, and Tammuz 12-13 is celebrated as a “festival of liberation” by the Chabad-Lubavitch community.