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Divine Coercion, Human Autonomy

Dr. Jon Levisohn | BronfmanTorah | Balak 2017

This summer, we will be bringing you divrei torah written by the 2017 Bronfman Fellowship educational team.

The first contribution in this series is written by Professor Jon A. Levisohn, who is teaching a five-session shiur on Autonomy and Obligation. Fellows will study texts from the Tanakh, rabbinic tradition, philosophy, and modern Jewish thought to make sense of the tension between these two concepts, and to envision ways to embrace both.

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The story of Balak and Bil'am (Balaam) seems to be a case of divine coercion. We read, in Numbers 22:12, "God said to Bil'am, 'Do not go with [these men;] you must not curse the nation [of Israel] because it is blessed'." When God does eventually permit him to go with the men, it is a conditional permission; Bil'am must only say what God tells him to say. Apparently, by explicitly forbidding Bil'am from cursing the Israelites, God robs Bil'am of his autonomy to carry out his own will or for that matter the will of Balak.

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This may seem rather foreign to us. After all, God does not typically tell us explicitly to do something or not to do so something. But in the biblical picture, it's not so unusual. We can think of other biblical instances like the plagues in Egypt, which coerced Pharaoh into letting the people go, or in the very same Exodus story, the hardening of Pharaoh's heart whenever he seemed inclined to, yes, let the people go.

For the rabbis, too, there are certainly texts that reinforce the paradigm of submission to God's will. This summer, we are studying one of these texts, a rabbinic *midrash* that has become something of a classic: the story of *Har Kegit*, the "Mountain as a Barrel" (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 88a). In this retelling of the story of the revelation at Sinai, the rabbis imagined that God held Mount Sinai over the heads of the Israelites in a quite literal sense, "like a barrel." With this threat looming over them, God then said to the people, "If you accept my Torah, all will be well, and if not, this spot will be your grave." Not a lot of free will in that story.

So in the Bil'am story, in the Exodus narrative, and in this rabbinic *midrash*, the perspective seems to be a consistent one: God's role is to command, and humanity's role is to be commanded. The image of human beings, according to these texts, is one of obedience, submission and obligation.

This is a challenging idea, to be sure. Ever since Kant (we are also studying a bit of Kant this summer), modern Western thought has assumed that complete and mature human beings are people who think for themselves, who make up their own minds, who are autonomous. We are not so quick to give up that idea, nor should we be. So it's worth thinking: what insight into the human condition does this alternative perspective preserve? In what ways are we actually not quite as free as we think? In what ways does a world in which we are actually commanded, obligated, compelled, to do certain things, to behave in certain ways—in what ways does that actually make sense to us, or help us to make sense of aspects of our own experience?

Now, if we just stop there, we might imagine that there are two competing intellectual traditions—a modern Western tradition that emphasizes autonomy, and a Jewish tradition that emphasizes obligation—each of which is important and valuable. But as usual, there's more here than meets the eye. Specifically, within the Jewish tradition, we have biblical narratives of autonomy and agency alongside the biblical narratives of obedience and submission. To take one obvious and important example, the same Abraham who meekly submits to God's command to sacrifice his son (in Genesis 22) also courageously argues with God about the destruction of Sodom (Genesis 18). The same God who forces the hand of Bil'am and Pharaoh proposes to the Israelites that the whole system of divinely-ordained laws should be followed, not out of blind obedience, but because they should "choose life" (Deuteronomy 30:19).

And when we turn to the rabbis, well, what they have to say about God can sometimes just blow your mind. This summer, alongside the *Har Ke-Gigit* text, we will also examine a very different take on the covenant between God and the Jewish people (from *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, Yitro, Bahodesh 5*). In this *midrash*, the rabbis imagined God as a king without a country, wandering around rather pathetically, looking for someone to take him in. In the parable, the king approaches a particular people in a particular province and plaintively asks, "May I rule over you?" The people, exercising their autonomy, respond incredulously: "What have you done for us, that we should accept your rule?" So much for God's ability to command obedience.

(Since the original Hebrew text in the Talmud has no punctuation, we might equally understand the king not to be asking a question but rather declaring, "I will rule over you!" On this interpretation, the king is not plaintive but rather arrogant and buffoonish, assuming that the people are just waiting for a ruler. The people, on the other hand, have other ideas, and the king's arrogance is instantly deflated.)

The parable continues. We might imagine that the king is wounded by their dismissal. Or perhaps, chastened, he recognizes the justice in their retort: in fact, he has not done anything for them, and he has no right to authority. But either way, the king's response is to get to work. He builds a protective wall around the province. He brings in water. He fights battles on behalf of the people. In other words, the king serves the people, meets their needs, and earns their trust. And

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then, after all these things, the king asks again: “May I rule over you?” At that point, the people respond: “Yes, yes!”

I find this parable fascinating. First, of course, there’s a stark contrast between this midrash, with its emphasis on human autonomy, and the *Har Ke-gigit* narrative that we saw before, with its emphasis on divine coercion. But beyond that point, the parable suggests that authority is something which is earned, over time, through a process that builds trust and even a kind of indebtedness. In this picture, God doesn’t simply command our allegiance. Instead, that allegiance emerges, over time, by virtue of an ongoing relationship.

Does God in fact do for us the kinds of things that the king, in the parable, does for the people? Does God earn our trust and our indebtedness? That depends, in part, on how we think about God.

But over and above the question of God’s role, there’s an important lesson here about the human existential condition. We are thrown into a world not of our making, a world of in which we are indebted to others for everything—our language, our culture, and on a physical level, our very creation and sustenance at least in our early stages. We do have choices to make, about what to do in the world, but at the most fundamental level, our choice is whether to acknowledge our indebtedness or not.

There is still obligation, in the parable, but it’s a kind of obligation that we’re familiar with from our lives—the kind of obligation that we feel towards our families, or to friends, or to institutions or communities. Those are obligations that we freely accept. We don’t think about them as threats to our autonomy. On the contrary! We are eager to live our lives enmeshed in a web of such obligations.

Earlier, I noted that complete and mature human beings are people who think for themselves and make up their own minds. We want to be, and we want others to be, autonomous. That’s still true. But now we can add something else, namely, that complete and fulfilling human lives are led by people who have the kinds of relationships that come with meaningful obligations. We want to be, and we want others to be, obligated. That is true as well.

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Continue the conversation. Send Professor Levisohn your thoughts: levisohn@brandeis.edu.

P.S.: We're always looking for more dvar torah writers. Interested? Contact stefanie@byfi.org. We look forward to hearing from you.



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