

A rabbi forges a second signature on a synagogue check so as to move forward in a direction he thinks is critical. That's a pivotal moment in the movie "The Women's Balcony", but since it will be shown in this fall's Silicon Valley Jewish Film Festival, I don't want to tell you too much more lest I spoil this delightful movie for you.

Still that moment is an excellent illustration of the rabbinic principal, "In the way that a person wants to go, they will be lead," (Makkot 10B) derived from this week's Torah portion, Parashat Balak.

As Brody will explain to us more fully tomorrow morning, the portion begins as King Balak requests the prophet Bilaam come and curse the Israelites. Seeming like an honest prophet, he requests that the king's delegation linger for the night, so that he could seek direction from Adonai. The next morning he regretfully informs them that God has said no, and that he can't come. But when a second delegation comes with great riches, the word he hears from God is different, and off he goes.

Reading the story carefully, our sages note that Bilaam should have known from the beginning that this would not be acceptable. In inviting the delegation to stay overnight, he is already bargaining with his own conscience and when the second

delegation comes and he seeks a second message from God, he hears only the first part, "if those men have come to invite you, you may go with them," and ignores the second half of the message, "But whatever I command you, that you shall do." Rabbi Joshua Minkin explains: "Balaam is presented with a desirable opportunity that he knows to be wrong. At first he seems willing to live by his scruples. However, as the payoff increases, he convinces himself it is possible to concede and reap the harvest while not disobeying God. He rationalizes and represses his guilt."

From Bilaam's experience the rabbis concluded that when a person wants to do something that they know is wrong, they will begin a process of self-justification. It will seem so right to them, even to the point to feeling that God is leading them in this direction, thus the conclusion of the rabbis, "A man is lead in the way he wants."

They relate this to two other teachings. The first is a familiar statement from Pirke Avot, which we often sing, "Mitzvah goreret Mitzvah, one commandment leads to another commandment, Aveirah goreret aveirah, and one sin leads to another sin." Once we are headed down a particular path, it is more likely that we will continue in that direction.

This is what social scientists have found as well in exploring how it is that people will do things that initially they understand to be wrong.

Social Psychologists set up situational tests to see if people will steal or hurt others. They have found that if they initially ask someone to do something they perceive as a large wrong, they will resist. But if they get that same person to do one small thing, some borderline wrong act, then they are more likely to take the next step and the next until they do the very thing they would have resisted initially. They write, "Transgressions don't start with monstrous acts, but with little things." Wandering over one boundary, then excuses other larger crossings.

This also operates with regard to those who are the victim of crime as in the case of child molesting. The molester begins with a process of grooming, slowly crossing one boundary after another. As the child allows one little thing to happen, it becomes more difficult for them to object to the next and so forth. Further the child becomes habituated to behavior which at first would seem unacceptable and feels responsible for allowing the process to have begun. This grooming strategy takes advantage of built in structures of our minds.

In studies that tested what happened when people had an opportunity to cheat or to act in selfish ways, they found that once a person did something they previously thought was unacceptable, they found ways of convincing themselves that it really was not such a big deal.

Rabbi Hiyya knew about this as well when he wrote almost 2,000 years ago, “When a person has sinned and repeated it, then it becomes to him as if it were permitted.”

How then can we protect ourselves from our propensity to self-justification, to our own inner confirmation bias? One strategy used in the musar movement, the movement for Jewish ethical education and training, is bechirah points, choice points.

They teach: we are each in different places with different bechirah points. An extreme example: the sight of an old lady at a street corner, might present a boy scout with the choice, will I stop and help her, or continue on more directly to my destination. For a mugger, it might be whether to beat this woman up or just to steal her purse.

Musarists suggest we think about what our own bechirah points are. Is our focus on being more honest, then a bechirah point might be that moment when we are on the edge of adding a little more excitement to a story are telling by embellishing the truth, or a situation in which we are holding back details that don't reflect as well on ourselves. If our focus is on being more compassionate, then we might want to catch ourselves at that moment just before we judge someone else, or the instant when we are deciding to help or step away.

Bechirah points have been described as the place where our instincts and our insights meet, where what we know to be right conflicts with our craving to win at all costs, where winning is understood in the broadest sense. The idea of bechirah points negates the sense that others force us into things, whether that is to yell at them, to be angry or even to be depressed. It returns power into our own hands.

Rabbi Victor Frankel, the famous psychoanalyst and Holocaust survivor, Author of Man's Search for Meaning, writes about how "between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom."

Sometimes at funerals I read the following which echoes this sense of human freedom which is so central to Jewish ethics.

It was written by Joseph Epstein, an American essayist and critic, and editor of The American Spectator. He writes: "We do not choose to be born. We do not choose our parents. We do not choose our historical epoch or the country of our birth. We do not, most of us, choose to die, nor do we choose our time of death...But within all this realm of choicelessness, we do choose how to live: courageously or with cowardice, honorably or dishonorably, with purpose or in drift. We decide what is important and what is trivial, what to do and what to refuse. And no matter how indifferent the universe may be to our choices and decisions, they are ours to make. We decide. We choose, and so are our lives formed." (Excerpted from "Reaching for Holiness: Study Guide for Selichot and Yom Kippur," New York: URJ Press)