



BAMIDBAR

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Secret of Immortality
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SECRET OF IMMORTALITY

ABSTRACT

From the ancient pyramids to cryogenic freezing, human beings have done everything possible to find immortality. Today's plastic surgery and certainly the cosmetics industry capitalize on the timeless quest for the "fountain of youth" – something, anything that would abort or reverse the aging process.

But the truth is that the secret of immortality is revealed in the Torah ... and guess what? ... those special passages are part of this week's reading.

As the Israelites travel through Moab, the Moabite king, Balak, fearing their power, commissions the evil prophet Balaam to curse them. But, instead of cursing them, Balaam – being no more than a medium for divine revelation – ends up blessing them with some of the greatest of blessings, including: "Who can count the dust of Jacob!"

What sort of blessing is it to compare a people to "dust"? (Isn't dust synonymous with dirt?) And what virtue is there in the fact that no one can count them?

The answers to these questions reveal the secret of immortality and why the Jews are known as the "eternal nation."

And they also explain the Previous Rebbe's enduring words to his Bolshevik captors 90 years ago this week (in connection with *Yud Beis Tammuz*, which we just celebrated): *Mir velen zeh'n ver vemen*, "Yes indeed, we will see who will prevail over whom." Look at Russia today and see how these prescient words were fulfilled...

1. Longevity and Immortality (A Selection of Jokes)

Operation Magic Carpet is a widely known nickname for Operation On Wings of Eagles (in Hebrew: *Kanfei Nesharim*), an operation between June 1949 and September 1950 that brought 49,000 Yemenite Jews to Israel. Upon arrival, many of the immigrants claimed tremendous old age; some of them said they were 140, 150 and even 160 years old. It seemed hard to believe, but it was impossible to substantiate their claims, for they brought with them no accurate birth records¹.

¹ As related by Rabbi Joseph Telushkin in *Jewish Humor*, New York: Morrow, 1992, pp. 35-36.

One day, a newly resettled Yemenite Jew appeared in the Tel Aviv office of an insurance broker, saying he wanted to buy a life insurance policy. The broker looked at the man, saw he was no youngster, and asked him:

- “How old are you?”
- “Seventy two,” came the reply.
- “Seventy two?! That’s too old. We can’t sell you a life insurance policy.”
- “That’s not fair,” the man said. “Last week you sold my father a policy.”
- “Your father?! How old is he?”
- “Ninety-five.”
- “Impossible.”
- “Go check your records.”

The agent went to check his records and found to his amazement that the preceding week the man’s 95-year-old father had applied, that a physician found him to be in perfect health, and that he had been issued a policy. The agent came back:

- “You’re right. We sold your father a policy, and we’ll sell you one. But you have to come in on Tuesday for a medical checkup.”
- “I can’t come in on Tuesday.”
- “Why not?”
- “My grandfather is getting married.”
- “Your grandfather is getting married?! How old is he?”
- “One hundred and seventeen.”
- “A hundred and seventeen?! At that age he is getting married?! Why?”
- “His parents keep pestering him.”

OR:

An elderly Jewish immigrant was sitting at a table with so-called connoisseurs. The year was approximately 1964. Speaking about music, someone mentioned Mozart.

- The old Jew piped up: “Ah, Mozart. What a wonderful man he is.”
- The others began to snicker. “Do you know him?” one of them mockingly asked him.
- “Of course, I know him,” the immigrant replied. “He lives right down my block.”

- Now, these seasoned experts all felt that they could have a good laugh at this old man's expense. "Really!" one of them exclaimed. "Do you know that Mozart is dead?"
- Without missing a beat, the old Jew nodded, "*Abh takeh*, you're right. Now I remember. He died and had a big funeral."
- “He died over 200 years ago!”
- To that the Jew simply replied: *Oy vi the zeit layft*, “Oh, how time flies...”

OR:

- “Daddy, daddy,” the little boy says after his first day in Hebrew school. “I know what the Bible stands for.”
- “Okay son,” smiles the father, “What does it stand for?”
- “It stands for: Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth.”

I guess the reason so many of us fail to pay attention to these “basic instructions” is that we are not expecting to leave earth anytime soon ...

As the rabbi said to the gas station attendant ...

After a long wait to have his gas tank filled on a Friday morning before a three-day-weekend, the rabbi was offered an apology by the gas station attendant:

- “So sorry, rabbi, it seems as if everyone waits until the last minute to get ready for a long trip.”
- “I know what you mean” said the rabbi, “it’s the same in my business.”

OR:

Word reached earth that a deluge will flood all civilization, and nothing will stop it. Religious leaders across the planet gathered their flocks to prepare for the final day. The Christian ministers implored their people to offer final confession and to use these last two weeks to get ready for the kingdom in heaven. The Muslim imams called their constituents to pray and repent, and prepare to enter paradise. The rabbis gathered the Jews and told them: “Listen brothers and sisters. We have two weeks to figure out how to live underwater...”

2. Fountain of Youth

From the ancient pyramids to cryogenic freezing, human beings have done everything possible to avoid (or at least delay) that final trip to the beyond. We have always been in search of immortality.

Today's plastic surgery and certainly the cosmetics industry both capitalize on the timeless quest for the "fountain of youth" – something, anything that would abort or reverse the aging process.

But the truth is that the secret of immortality is revealed in the Torah ... and guess what? ... those special passages are part of this week's reading.

But first, a few words of background:

3. Balak and Balaam

As the Israelites travel through Moab, the Moabite king, Balak, fearing their power, commissions the evil prophet Balaam to curse them.

Balaam saddles his donkey and, after some misadventures, arrives at the cursing site.

Speaking of donkeys ... have you heard about the Mississippi rabbi who was shocked to discover a dead donkey on the front steps of his synagogue? Fearing this was a hate crime, and not knowing what to do under the circumstances, he called the local sheriff.

"Heh, heh, heh," chuckled the sheriff, who had a reputation for being hostile to Jews. "So you have a dead donkey on your hands. I thought you rabbis take care of the dead?"

"Of course, we do," replied the rabbi. "But it is customary to first notify the relatives."

Now Baalam's donkey does not die, and it gets him where he wants to go.

And there, instead of cursing the Jews, Balaam – being no more than a medium for divine revelation – ends up blessing them with some of the greatest of blessings, including: "How good are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel!"

Much has been written about the transformational power of these blessings, for they demonstrate the ability to convert liabilities into assets. Coming from Balaam, these blessings are especially potent. They express the "profound light that emerges from darkness³."

And indeed, Balaam's words reverberate through history with their prescient vision and their prophetic description of the Jewish people.

² Numbers 24:5. This blessing is recited to this day by many upon entering a synagogue.

³ Ecclesiastics 2:13.

4. The Way to Reach Eternity

Of all people, Balaam – no friend of Israel – is the one that teaches us the way to reach eternity, as he declares:

“Who can count the dust of Jacob, and the number of the seed of Israel?”⁴

At first glance, this verse is quite cryptic. And even contradictory. What sort of blessing is it to compare a people to “dust”? (I mean, isn’t dust synonymous with dirt?) And what virtue is there in the fact that no one can count it?

As well, the people of the nations of the world are much larger in number than the people of Israel. In fact, the Jewish people have always been “fewest of all peoples⁵” – so why exactly is Balaam using large numbers to describe their uniqueness?

5. Previous Blessings

Before we answer these questions, we must note that this is not the first or only time that the Jewish people were blessed to multiply like the “dust of the earth.”

Both Abraham and Jacob had been blessed by G-d in this fashion:

“And I will make your descendants as the dust of the earth; so that if a man could count the dust of the earth, then your descendants also will be countable⁶.”

Here again the seemingly derogatory reference to “dust” is used!

If one wanted to describe large numbers why not use a more lofty analogy? I mean, one could speak of the “stars in heaven” (an analogy that is used elsewhere⁷).

And here again the question arises – what large numbers? The Jewish people have always been “few in number,” hardly countable, never exceeding even 1% of the population of the world⁸!

Good questions, right?

Now for the answers.

⁴ Numbers 23:10.

⁵ Deuteronomy 7:7.

⁶ Genesis 13:16. See also Genesis 22:17 and 28:14, and Hosea 2:1.

⁷ Genesis 15:5 and 22:17.

⁸ Today Jews represent one-quarter of one percent of the world’s population.

6. Uniqueness of the Jews

Balaam's blessing actually answers all these questions and explains the uniqueness of the Jewish people, whose numbers cannot be counted.

It is not their quantity but their quality that makes them uncountable. Their numbers may be small, but their influence is vast, for Jews are the people chosen by G-d to bring Torah values into the world. As many non-Jewish scholars and historians have documented, values such as respect for life, equality before the law, justice, peace, and social responsibility for the poor and downtrodden (just to name a few) were unknown in civilization before the Jewish people received the Torah.

As Paul Johnson, the Christian historian has written:

To [the Jews] we owe the idea of equality before the law, both divine and human; of the sanctity of life and the dignity of human person; of the individual conscience and so of personal redemption; of the collective conscience and so of social responsibility; of peace as an abstract ideal and love as the foundation of justice, and many other items which constitute the basic moral furniture of the human mind. Without the Jews it would have been a much emptier place. Above all, the Jews taught us how to rationalize the unknown. The result was monotheism and the three great religions which profess it. It is almost beyond our capacity to imagine how the world would have fared if they had never emerged⁹.

What is the secret to the eternal power of the Jewish people and the enduring values they brought to the world? It is a secret quality best expressed with the metaphor of dust.

7. Bittul

This brings us to the concept of *bittul*.

Bittul is nearly impossible to translate into English, perhaps because the concept is not (yet) contained or tolerated in the English-speaking (secular) world.

Bittul is a combination of selflessness, humility and modesty. And it is even more than that. It is a form of submission, but submission out of strength, not weakness. And even more than that, *bittul* is the art of self-suspension – suspension of self to serve a cause greater than the self.

Dust is a metaphor for *bittul*. As we say at the conclusion of the Amidah prayer: “Let my soul be as dust to all.”

Dust does not have an ego. When our soul feels like dust, it means that it is not filled with its proud self. The soul feels like dust, because it stands in awe of something far greater. The soul does not experience itself as a

⁹ Johnson, Paul, *A History of the Jews*, New York: Harper Collins, 1988, p. 585.

self-standing entity, but simply as an extension of a higher reality.

This expression of dust is not to be confused with its disparaging use, as in dismissing something that is insignificant and meaningless as dust ... something that people ignore, step all over or see as dirt.

The dust I am referring to is quite the opposite – it is a sense of being lifted to a far greater place than we could ever reach on our own. For after the *Amidah* prayer states, “Let my soul be as dust to all,” it continues: “Open my heart to Your Torah.”

8. Nothing and Nothing

There is nothing, and then there is nothing. There are two types of nothingness – one belittles and minimizes, the other enlarges ... makes grand, makes great.

There is a nothing that is *lower* than something, like the dust beneath your feet. Psychologically, this type of nothingness is expressed in feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem, lack of confidence and security.

Then there is a nothing that is *greater* than something, for it transcends the very boundaries of something. And the smaller it is, the greater it is, for it transcends all definitions and boundaries ... until it becomes one with, and an extension of, the Ultimate Undefined Reality, G-d.

This experience of nothingness – that is, of *bittul* – expresses itself in humility, which should not be confused with low self-esteem. Humility is a strength that is completely aware of its power, yet recognizes that its power comes from a higher source. Humility is utter self-assuredness, but one that is always cognizant of a higher presence.

9. Most Powerful Force in Life

As such, *bittul* is the single most powerful force in life.

It is the recognition that you are not an entity unto yourself, but a channel for that which is greater than you.

Without *bittul*, there is no growth. A gold nugget must be melted down before a beautiful ornament can be fashioned from it. A seed must decompose before it turns into a sapling that will grow into a powerful tree. A caterpillar must give up its form to become a butterfly. A mother must go through labor pains before a child can emerge.

This is the rule of existence and beyond. The *bittul* of one state is necessary to reach a higher state. A filled cup cannot be filled. The Kabbalists call it the *ayin* (“nothing”) that comes between two states of *yesh* (“being”).

Bittul, therefore, can never be counted and can never die. *Bittul* is immortal.

10. Balaam's Blessing

The meaning of Balaam's blessing -- "Who can count the dust of Jacob, and the number of the seed of Israel?" -- is as follows:

The nation of Jacob/Israel embodies *bittul*. Since it is like dust -- for "Jacob is the small one" -- it is not consumed with self-value, but has suspended itself and become an extension of that which is beyond itself. And therefore, Jacob/Israel can never be counted.

As long as there is a "self" -- a sense of your own being -- then you are measurable and countable. But if you free yourself of your own boundaries and feel like "dust" in the company of a higher presence, then you no longer can truly be counted.

To count you, to measure you, to define you in any way would require inclusion of that which you are a channel of. Being that you are a channel of the eternal and infinite, then you are as uncountable as eternity itself. In fact, G-d has promised that the people of Israel will be an "eternal nation¹⁰," and about this amazing fact, even Leo Tolstoy was moved to remark:

The Jew is the emblem of eternity. He whom neither slaughter nor torture of thousands of years could destroy, he whom neither fire nor sword nor inquisition was able to wipe off the face of the earth, he who was the first to produce the oracles of G-d, he who has been for so long the guardian of prophecy, and who transmitted it to the rest of the world -- such a nation cannot be destroyed. The Jew is as everlasting as is eternity itself¹¹.

11. Two Choices

Of all people, Balaam, *our enemy*, tells us that we have two choices:

We can be dedicated to our own needs, to our own being, expanding and self-actualizing in every which way. If this is our choice, we can be great, but only as great as a mortal can be, within our particular parameters.

Or we can dedicate our life to a cause far greater than ourselves. And then we can become so much greater than we could ever be on our own.

¹⁰ Genesis 17:7 and 17:19-21. Exodus 3:6, 13-16, and 4:5. Leviticus 26:44.

¹¹ Tolstoy, Leo, "What is a Jew?" *Jewish World*, London, 1908.

The formula is simple:

If we are dedicated to something mortal and finite, then we are mortal and finite. If we dedicate ourselves to the immortal and infinite, then we become immortal and infinite.

[May we all be blessed to choose well. Amen.]

12. Who Will Prevail: Stalin or the Jews?

It is now a couple of days after *Yud Beit Tammuz*, the day when the previous Lubavitcher Rebbe was miraculously freed 90 years ago, in 1927, from the clutches of the cruel Bolsheviks who were ready to kill him for his “counterrevolutionary” activities in spreading Judaism across the former Soviet Union.

Many fascinating – and horrifying – episodes took place during the Rebbe’s incarceration. I would like to share one, which captures the power of eternity -- the subject of this week’s Torah reading -- and offers us a tremendous lesson in our lives today.

In his diary, aptly titled *Mesechta Gehennim* (“Tractate from Hell”), the Rebbe documents the events that transpired during his imprisonment, interrogation and torture at the hands of the brutal Communists, especially the Jewish ones called the *yevsektziya*.

Upon his arrest, the Rebbe writes, he decided not to cooperate with the authorities, simply to preserve his own dignity and pride. During one confrontation, one of his captors kicked him and snickered, “We will see who will prevail.” The Rebbe calmly replied, *Mir velen zebn ver vemen*, “Yes indeed, we will see who will prevail. But we will see who will prevail over whom.

Where did the Rebbe gain such courage and confidence to stand up to these monsters, who held his sacred life in their profane hands?

Another episode answers the question. During another threatening encounter in which the Rebbe refused to cooperate, one of the interrogators put a gun to the Rebbe’s head and said with a bloodcurdling laugh: “This device has caused many a man to cooperate with us.” The Rebbe gazed at him and replied (in Yiddish): “This toy can frighten someone who has one world and many G-ds, but not someone with one G-d and two worlds.”

The Rebbe revealed the formidable formula for his unwavering fortitude: When all you have and all you worship are the G-ds of your impermanent, mortal, transient life, then a gun – death – can frighten you. For it represents the end to all you know and all you have to hold on to. But when you have one G-d and two worlds, when you know that the soul and the world of spirit lives on forever (even when the material one does not), death (as unwelcome as it may be) is not the end. The values, the legacy, the children and families you leave to

carry on your principles live on forever.

Despite the momentary abyss, the Rebbe had much to hold on to, and it allowed him the absolute certainty to know who will prevail...

Now let us remember that the year was 1927 – I repeat 1927 – and things would soon be getting far worse for the Jewish people before they would get better. Stalin would go on to murder multitudes of Jews, not to mention over 30 million Russians. Hitler would go on to annihilate a third of the Jewish people, and leave the rest of them utterly broken and displaced.

Now I ask you my friends to turn the clock forward 90 years. The eight decades between 1927 and today include some of the harshest years of Jewish history. Many a time everything seemed lost. Following the devastation of the Jews during World War II, everyone predicted the eventual demise of the Jewish people. Who could have known then what we know today? The return of Israel. The Jewish renaissance. Jews thriving all over the globe.

And so...

Ultimately, who has prevailed? The Bolsheviks? Or the Rebbe?

Just as the Rebbe said, *Mir velen zehbn ver vemen*, we see today who prevailed over whom.

Today, in Russia, Judaism is thriving. The children and students of the previous Rebbe have built and continue to build remarkable institutions – *shuls*, *yeshivot*, *mikvaot*, community centers.

And all this – due to the *mesirat nefesh* and sacrifice of the previous Rebbe. He did indeed persevere and was released from prison on *Yud Beis Tammuz*. Were it not for that liberation I would not be standing here today. You see, due to his freedom he was able to finally make it to the American shores in 1940, ultimately bringing along his son-in-law, who would become our Rebbe in 1950. And it was the Rebbe who inspired me and my wife to come to this city, and meet all of you, our wonderful friends – together with whom we have built our beautiful Jewish community.

So, my friends, we see who has prevailed

Is there no greater demonstration than this of Balaam's blessing – “Who can count the dust of Jacob, and the number of the seed of Israel?”

13. Call to Action: Become Immortal (Optional)

Today, thank G-d, we are not faced with the harsh difficulties of the past generation. And today we do not face any impediments to a proactive life – we are free to dedicate ourselves to an immortal cause.

In practical terms this means that each of us ought to commit to a cause that is beyond our personal gain, beyond the immediate here and now. Volunteer to visit the sick and needy. Dedicate extra time to counsel another. Give some additional charity.

You want to prevail? You want your children to prevail? Devote your life to spiritualizing your corner of the material world. Remember always, that life is far bigger, far greater than the immediate and the temporal. There is only one G-d and many, many worlds.

Take yourself (and your needs) a bit out of the picture and be selfless like dust – and you become uncountable. Embrace an eternal value that lives on forever – and you become eternal. Build something that is G-d-centered instead of self-centered – and you become immortal.

May we all be blessed to embody that teaching. Amen.