

# The Yom Kippur Debate

5776



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## INTRODUCTION

Welcome to *The Yom Kippur Debate 5776*. This is a powerful opportunity to gather together the great minds and opinions of youth and students who fill our shuls on Yom Kippur so that we can discuss contemporary issues within the framework of our Jewish community.

This year, in synagogues across the UK, we will be debating the principle and parameters of **Freedom of Speech**, during which we will consider questions such as:

- ❖ *Is it the role of the government to stop hate speech?*
- ❖ *How “free” is speech?*
- ❖ *Do we REALLY support freedom of speech?*

To facilitate an informed debate, we have compiled some useful resources from general and Jewish sources on the topic of **Freedom of Speech** for you to consider. Above each resource you will find a brief introduction as well as key points to look out for. **Planning is key so please take time to prepare!**

Central to the discussion is a thought-provoking presentation of the story of Bilam and the talking donkey (*Numbers*, Chapters 22-23). As an alternative to having a single motion on such a broad topic we have constructed a discussion with 4 different perspectives on free speech. Each of the 4 debate presenters can represent one of the 4 points of view outlined in the context of this fascinating narrative. What did Bilam think? What did Balak think? How about G-d? And...what about the donkey?

Tremendous thanks to **Rabbi Johnny Solomon**, Director of the Jewish Education Consultancy, for his expertise in preparing this resource pack, to **Rabbi Garry Wayland** of Woodside Park Synagogue for his insightful contributions, to **Rabbi Baruch Davis**, Chairman of the RCUS for reviewing the content & for his on-going support and to **Rabbi Yisroel Binstock, David Collins & Yael Peleg** of Tribe for their valuable input.

We hope you have a stimulating debate, an engaging communal experience and a meaningful Yom Kippur!

Shana Tova!

*Rabbi Eli Levin.*



## **MODERATORS INTRODUCTION**

Yom Kippur is a day on which we reflect on the past in order to live better lives in the future, and when we look back at the past year it is clear that one of the hottest topics has been **the principle and parameters of Freedom of Speech**. Freedom of Speech is the right to communicate one's opinions and ideas without fear of government retaliation or censorship, and it is recognized as a human right under article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

By having Freedom of Speech, individuals and organisations can express dissent and challenge institutions of authority. As John F. Kennedy once remarked, “without debate, without criticism no administration and no country can succeed and no republic can survive”. Thus, Freedom of speech is understood to be fundamental in a democracy.

At the same time, Freedom of Speech allows people to express views that may be deeply offensive. In fact, it is because of this right that individuals and organisations have been allowed to express Anti-Zionist and Anti-Semitic sentiments in the past year, and while it eventually was moved elsewhere, Freedom of Speech laws would have protected the Neo-Nazi rally from going ahead in Golders Green in July 2015.

However, while Freedom of Speech is a right, there are also laws that limit this right. Thus, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which itself is part of the International Bill of Human Rights, states that limitations can be placed on free speech when such speech ceases to respect the rights or reputations of others or when such speech is deemed to be a threat to national security, public order, public health or morals. This is why David Cameron stated in his speech to the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) that “we must ban preachers of hate from coming to our countries, we must proscribe organizations that incite terrorism against people at home and abroad, we must work together to take down illegal online material like the recent videos of ISIL murdering hostages, and we must stop the so-called non-violent extremists from inciting hatred and intolerance in our schools, our universities and, yes, even our prisons.”

Given the importance of this subject, and in particular, the Jewish interest, we believe that a debate about the principle and parameters of Freedom of Speech can provide a stimulating and valuable addition to your Yom Kippur programming. However, in addition to the general discussion about free speech, we would also like to bring a Jewish dimension to this debate which is why we have put together a thought-provoking presentation of the story of Bilam (Numbers Chapters 22-23) which we encourage you to use in order to frame the discussion. In addition to this, we have included a number of additional sources about free speech including a fascinating letter by Chief Rabbi Jakobovits in response to the publication of Salman Rushdie's 'The Satanic Verses'.

**Let the debate begin!**



## International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

*The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which is part of the International Bill of Human Rights, is a multilateral treaty adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 16 December 1966, and in force from 23 March 1976. It commits its parties to respect the civil and political rights of individuals, including the right to life, freedom of religion, freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, electoral rights and rights to due process and a fair trial. Below is a copy of Article 19 of the ICCPR. This states how each person has the right to free speech, while also stating how government has the right - and perhaps even the duty - to place limits on free speech.*

*We see from here that there is a perpetual struggle in protecting the right to free speech, and maintaining a civilized society to avoid libelous statements or other expressions of free speech which may lead to violence.*

### **International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights** **Article 19**

1. Everyone shall have the right to hold opinions without interference.
2. Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his choice.
3. The exercise of the rights provided for in paragraph 2 of this article carries with it special duties and responsibilities. It may therefore be subject to certain restrictions, but these shall only be such as are provided by law and are necessary:
  - (a) For respect of the rights or reputations of others;
  - (b) For the protection of national security or of public order, or of public health or morals.

# CASE STUDIES IN FAVOUR OF FREE SPEECH

## 1. CHARLIE HEBDO

*Charlie Hebdo* is the name of a French satirical weekly magazine featuring cartoons, reports and jokes. Since its launch, *Charlie Hebdo* has published countless cartoons and features that have offended Christians, Jews and Muslims. However, on each occasion, the editors of *Charlie Hebdo* insisted that they were performing an important role of stimulating public discourse and expressing their right to free speech. Between the period 2011-2013, *Charlie Hebdo* published a number of cartoons which mocked Islam, and on the 7<sup>th</sup> of January 2015, two Islamist gunmen attacked the offices of *Charlie Hebdo* and killed 12 people. After the attacks, the phrase *Je suis Charlie*, French for "I am Charlie", was adopted by supporters of free speech and freedom of expression who were reacting to the shootings.



## 2. WESTBORO CHURCH



The Westboro Baptist Church (WBC) is an unaffiliated Baptist church known for its hate speech, especially against LGBT people (homophobia), Jews (anti-Semitism), and politicians. The WBC regularly pickets events throughout the United States such as the funerals of individuals whom they believe have not led a moral life, and they describe the Holocaust as God's punishment on Jews. In March 2006, the WBC picketed the funeral of Marine Lance Corporal Matthew A. Snyder. The Snyder family sued the WBC for defamation, invasion of privacy, and intentional infliction of emotional distress. After a series of court appearances, the Supreme Court ruled in favour of the WBC, with Chief Justice Roberts explaining his ruling by noting that "what Westboro said, in the whole context of how and where it chose to say it, is entitled to 'special protection' under the First Amendment and that protection cannot be overcome by a jury finding that the picketing was outrageous".

## 3. NEO-NAZI RALLY, LONDON

On July 4th 2015, Neo-Nazis planned to destroy Israeli flags during a protest in Golders Green. Prior to the march, London Assembly member for Barnet Andrew Dismore asked London Mayor Boris Johnson to take more action ahead of the protest. Mr Johnson responded: "There's a great deal of concern in the Jewish community about this potential demonstration. I have spoken to the Met on a number of occasions. "It's a very difficult balance to strike. People have a right in a democratic society to express their views, however abhorrent we might find them. There has to be a pretty high bar before the police will actually move in to stop a demonstration in London."



## 4. BDS ON CAMPUS



In June 2015, the leadership of Britain's National Union of Students voted to boycott Israel and affiliate itself with the BDS (boycott, divestment and sanctions) movement. Those who supported this vote claimed that they were merely expressing their right to free speech.

# CASE STUDIES IN FAVOUR OF LIMITING FREE SPEECH

## 1. THE ANTI-SEMITIC PHONE LINE



In 1981, a Canadian man was banned from operating an anti-Semitic telephone service which allowed members of the public to dial in and listen to tape-recorded messages warning them of “the dangers of international finance and international Jewry leading the world into wars, unemployment and inflation and the collapse of world values and principles.” He responded by explaining that he should be able to express his own views and how the ban was a violation of his right to freedom of expression. The case was taken to the United Nations Human Rights Committee who found the application inadmissible, principally because “the opinions which [the applicant] seeks to disseminate through the telephone system clearly constitute the advocacy of racial or religious hatred which Canada has an obligation under Article 20(2) of the Covenant to prohibit.”

## 2. THE OFFENSIVE FACEBOOK COMMENT

In April 2014, teacher Ann Maguire was stabbed to death by a pupil in Leeds. Two days later, Jake Newsome posted on his Facebook page: “Personally I’m glad that teacher got stabbed up...”. A few days later, after his post had been shared more than 2,000 times, West Yorkshire police arrested and charged Newsome under the 2003 Communications Act with having sent “by means of a public electronic communications network a message or other matter that is grossly offensive or of an indecent, obscene or menacing nature” and he was jailed for six weeks. However, Thomas Hughes, executive director of free speech organisation Article 19, believes that “Nobody should go to prison simply for causing offence. This is not only our view but a violation of international legal standards that protect speech that shocks, offends or disturbs.”

facebook

Comment



## 3. SOUTHAMPTON UNIVERSITY

This year, the University of Southampton planned to hold a conference to discuss the right of Israel to exist. For many, this was an important opportunity to express their opinions about Israel and their belief that Israel is an Apartheid state. After considerable pressure from the Jewish community, the University cancelled the conference because of concerns about security. In response to this ruling, Oren Ben-Dor, professor of law and philosophy at the University of Southampton, and one of the event organisers, said: “It is very clear that the health and safety issue was not serious, it’s a way of creating bogus reasoning. The real reason was political pressure. The controversial nature of the conference is precisely where [the principle of] freedom of speech leads - that’s where the commitment to freedom of speech is tested.” For many, the cancellation of the conference demonstrated that there are limits on the freedom of speech, while others, such as Ben-Dor, this decision undermined the right to free speech.

## 4. JOSHUA BONEHILL

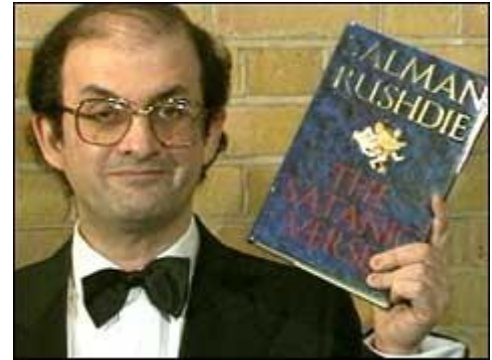
Joshua Bonehill is an English far-right nationalist and describes himself as being “a proud anti-Semite”. Bonehill was the organiser of the planned Neo-Nazi rally in London. However, having circulated offensive images and joking that the demonstration would be an “absolute gas”, he was arrested by the Metropolitan Police and charged with inciting racial hatred.



## THE RUSHDIE AFFAIR & THE CHIEF RABBIS

### RESPONSE

In September 1988, novelist Salman Rushdie published his fourth book called 'The Satanic Verses'. This book sought depicted Muhammad in an irreverent manner, and was described by the Ayatollah Khomeini (the religious leader of Iran) as being "blasphemous against Islam". Soon after its publication, riots occurred across the Muslim world and the Ayatollah issued a fatwa (a million pound bounty) against Rushdie and he was forced to live under police protection for several years. On 7 March 1989, the United Kingdom and Iran broke diplomatic relations over the Rushdie controversy.

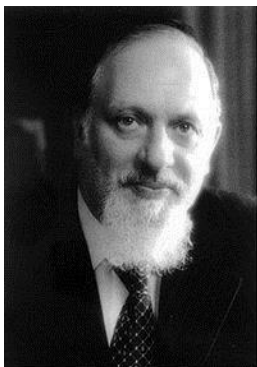


In response to this controversy, Chief Rabbi Immanuel Jakobovits penned a letter to The Times, published on 9<sup>th</sup> March 1989, which presented his opinion about what had become known as 'The Rushdie Affair'.

Among the numerous issues that Chief Rabbi Jakobovits addresses is whether 'The Satanic Verses' should have been published and whether the blasphemy laws that exist in the UK against Christians should also be extended to Jews and Muslims.

#### Letter to The Times by Chief Rabbi Immanuel Jakobovits, 9th March 1989

The appalling Rushdie affair has released, like Newton's Law, equal and opposite forces of elemental magnitude. It has incited religious passions on the one hand and freedom crusades on the other on a scale and of an intensity probably unmatched in modern times.



In a search for legislative controls to defuse the current super-tensions and to promote inner religious co-existence, it has been suggested that the existing laws of blasphemy be extended beyond their strictly Christian confines. Some Christian and Muslim leaders have supported this idea. But I believe the solution lies elsewhere.

When the Chairman of the Islamic Society for the Promotion of Religious Tolerance in the UK asked me last October to support the protest against the publication of The Satanic Verses, I readily agreed, and he was informed that I deprecate not only the falsification of established historical records but the offence caused to the religious convictions and susceptibilities of countless citizens. In a civilized society we should generate respect for other people's religious beliefs and not tolerate a form of denigration and ridicule which can only breed resentment to the point of hatred and strife.

While I fully share the world-wide outrage at the murderous threat against the book's author, publishers, and distributors, I stand by my view that the book should not have been published for the reasons I gave, now reinforced by subsequent events which have already cost



many lives and may yet erupt into more sinister national and international upheavals.

In my view Jews should not seek an extension of the blasphemy laws. In any event, the Jewish definition of blasphemy is confined to “cursing God” and does not include an affront to any prophet (not even Moses, in our case). Living in a predominantly Christian society, with an established Church, we should be quite content to leave the legislation on blasphemy as it stands, enshrining the national respect for the majority faith.

What should concern us are not religious offenses but socially intolerable conduct calculated or likely to incite revulsion or violence, by holding up religious beliefs to scurrilous contempt, or by encouraging murder.

Both Mr. Rushdie and the Ayatollah have abused freedom of speech: the one by provocatively offending the genuine faith of many millions of devout believers, and the other by a public call to murder, compounded by offering a rich material reward for an ostensibly spiritual deed. It should be illegal to allow either provocation to be published or broadcast.

We already have legislation proscribing by common consent many excesses in the freedom of expression precious as this is. There are many laws not only on blasphemy, but on pornography, libel, incitement of race hatred, subversion, and breaches of national security. There may be arguments on the precise definition of these offenses, but the principle is universally accepted.

Likewise there should be widespread agreement on prohibiting the publication of anything likely to inflame, through obscene defamation, the feelings or beliefs of any section of society, or liable to provoke public disorder and violence. It must obviously be left to public and parliamentary debate to determine where the lines of what is to be illegal are to be drawn.

If Britain were to pioneer such legislation, other nations would no doubt follow suit, perhaps even leading to an international agreement among all civilized peoples to protect the supreme value of innocent human life and freedom by outlawing the amplification of words which, as experience has now shown, by poisoning the atmosphere can be as lethal a threat to mankind as any physical pollution.

### **REFLECTIONS ON THE RUSHDIE AFFAIR & THE CHIEF RABBIS RESPONSE**



According to Chief Rabbi Jakobovits:

- ❖ Is it the role of the government to stop hate speech?
- ❖ How “free” is speech?
- ❖ Do we REALLY support freedom of speech?

## BALAK, BILAM & THE POWER OF SPEECH

Having defeated the mighty powers of Sichon and Og, the Israelites encamped on the Moabite border as they planned the next stage of their journey towards the promised land. Seeing the Israelites on their border and fearing an attack, the Moabites sought an effective strategy to protect themselves from the impending Israelite attack. They therefore hired Bilam to curse the Israelites and therefore, halt any possible attack. This means that the story of Bilam is all about the power of words. However, as we will soon see, it also teaches us valuable lessons about our freedom of speech.



Please read the text below which comes from Bemidbar 22:4-23:12, and then consider the different ways in which this story can be understood.

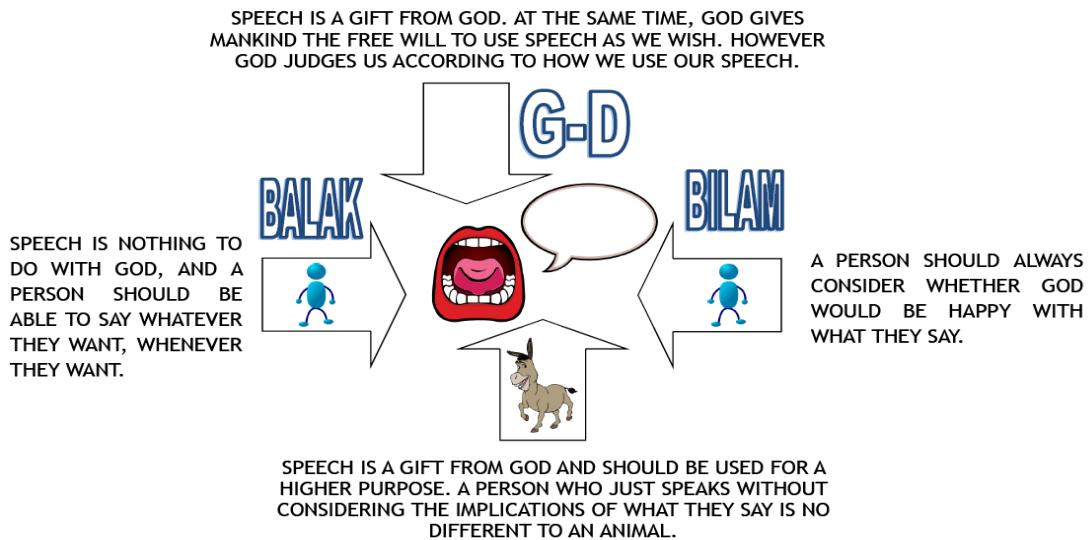
### Bemidbar 22:4-23:12

Balak son of Zippor, who was king of Moab at the time, sent messengers to Bilam son of Beor ...to invite him, saying, "There is a people that came out of Egypt...Come then, **put a curse upon this people for me**, since they are too numerous for me; perhaps I can thus defeat them and drive them out of the land. **For I know that he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed.**" The elders of Moab and the elders of Midian.. set out. They came to Bilam and gave him Balak's message. He said to them, "Spend the night here, and **I shall reply to you as the Lord may instruct me.**" So the Moabite dignitaries stayed with Bilam. God came to Bilam and said, "What do these people want of you?" Bilam said to God, "Balak son of Zippor, king of Moab, sent me this message: Here is a people that came out from Egypt and hides the earth from view. Come now and curse them for me; perhaps I can engage them in battle and drive them off." But **God said to Bilam, "Do not go with them. You must not curse that people, for they are blessed."** Bilam arose in the morning and said to Balak's dignitaries, "Go back to your own country, for the Lord will not let me go with you." The Moabite dignitaries left and they came to Balak and said, "Bilam refused to come with us." Then Balak sent other dignitaries, more numerous and distinguished than the first. They came to Bilam and said to him, "Thus says Balak son of Zippor: Please do not refuse to come to me. I will reward you richly and I will do anything you ask of me. Only come and damn this people for me." Bilam replied to Balak's officials, "**Though Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not do anything, big or little, contrary to the command of the Lord my God.** So you, too, stay here overnight, and let me find out what else the Lord may say to me." That night God came to Bilam and said to him, "If these men have come to invite you, you may go with them. But **whatever I command you, that you should do.**" When he arose in the morning, Bilam saddled his donkey and departed with the Moabite dignitaries. **But God was incensed at his going;** so an angel of the Lord placed himself in his way as an adversary. He was riding on his donkey, with his two servants alongside, when the donkey caught sight of the angel of the Lord standing in the way, with his drawn sword in his hand. The donkey swerved from the road and went into the fields; and Bilam beat the donkey to turn her back onto the road. The angel of the Lord then stationed himself in a lane between the vineyards, with a fence on either side. The donkey, seeing the angel of the Lord, pressed herself against the wall and squeezed Bilam's foot against the wall; so he beat her again. Once more the angel of the Lord moved forward and stationed himself on a spot so narrow that there was no room to swerve right or left. When the donkey now saw the angel of the Lord, she lay down under Bilam; and Bilam was furious and beat the

donkey with his stick. **The Lord opened the donkey's mouth, and she said to Balaam,** "What have I done to you that you have beaten me these three times?" Bilam said to the donkey, "You have made a mockery of me! If I had a sword with me, I'd kill you." The donkey said to Bilam, "Look, I am the donkey that you have been riding all along until this day! Have I been in the habit of doing this to you?" And he answered, "No." Then the Lord uncovered Bilam's eyes, and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the way, his drawn sword in his hand; thereupon he bowed right down to the ground. The angel of the Lord said to him, "Why have you beaten your donkey these three times? It is I who came out as an adversary, for the errand is obnoxious to me. And when the donkey saw me, she shied away because of me those three times. If she had not shied away from me, you are the one I should have killed, while sparing her." Bilam said to the angel of the Lord, "I sinned because I did not know that you were standing in my way. If you still disapprove, I will turn back." But the angel of the Lord said to Bilam, **"Go with the men. But you must say nothing except what I tell you."** So Balaam went on with Balak's dignitaries. When Balak heard that Bilam had arrived, he went out to meet him in the City of Moab, which was at the extreme end of his territory, on the edge of the Arnon. Balak said to Bilam, 'I had to make so much effort to get you. Why did you not come to me [right away]? Did you think that I couldn't honor you?' 'And now that I have come to you,' replied Bilam to Balak, **'do you think that I can say anything? I can only declare the words that God places in my mouth.'** Bilam went with Balak, and they came to the city's suburbs. Balak sacrificed cattle and sheep, sending some to Bilam and the dignitaries who were with him. In the morning, Balak took Bilam, and brought him to the High Altars of Baal, where he could see [as far as] the outer edges of the [Israelite] people...**God placed a message in Bilam's mouth and said, 'Go back to Balak, and declare exactly [what I have told you].'**...[Bilam] declared his oracle, and said, 'Balak, king of Moab, has brought me from Aram, from the hills of the east, [telling me] to come curse Jacob and conjure divine wrath against Israel. But what curse can I pronounce if God will not grant curse? What divine wrath can I conjure if God will not be angry? I see [this nation] from mountain tops, and gaze on it from the heights. It is a nation dwelling alone at peace, not counting itself among other nations. Jacob [is like] the dust; who can count his [hordes]? Who can number the seed of Israel? Let me die the death of the upright, but let my end be like his!' Balak said to Bilam, 'What have you done to me? I brought you to curse my enemies, but you have made every effort to bless them!' [Bilam] interrupted and said, **'Didn't [I tell you that] I must be very careful to say only what God tells me?'**

## FOUR PERSPECTIVES ON THE BILAM STORY

The story of Bilam is about the power of words and our freedom of speech. The fact that Bilam's services were sought indicates how words can be used to harm others, and the fact that God initially forbade Bilam to accompany the messengers points to the fact that there are times when words should not be said. The subsequent scene where his donkey spoke provides further material regarding the question of whether speech is a uniquely human gift, and if so, whether it is a right or a privilege. Below are four different ways of looking at this story, and consequently, four different approaches to the question of freedom of speech.





## 1. BALAK'S POINT OF VIEW - NO LIMITS TO SPEECH

Balak recognises that speech is powerful but he also believes that all human beings have the right and should have the freedom to use the power of speech in any way they wish. According to Balak, speech can and should be harnessed for all types of human endeavors and he is frustrated when Bilam limits the law he uses his power of speech.

## 2. BILAM'S POINT OF VIEW - CONSIDER WHAT G-D WOULD WANT

Bilam recognises that speech is powerful and endeavors to use his speech in accordance with the guidance that he receives from God. A key turning point of this story is when the donkey speaks to Bilam, as if to convey that even animals have the ability to communicate but the gift to humankind is to use speech as a force for good. The story ends by Bilam being reminded that a person should only say what is deemed acceptable according to the wisdom received from God.



## 3. G-D'S POINT OF VIEW - FREE CHOICE MEANS FREE SPEECH BUT YOU WILL BE JUDGED FOR WHAT YOU SAY



God provides all humanity with the power of speech which can be harnessed for either good or bad. At the same time, God reserves the right to reward or punish humanity according to the way in which they use the power of speech. Given the possibility that Bilam may actually curse the Israelites, God provides clear guidance to Bilam regarding how he should respond to King Balak. Yet it is clear that He is disappointed by the way Bilam responds to these instructions. Overall, this story appears to teach us that we have free speech but God takes an active interest in how we use the power of speech.

## 4. THE DONKEY'S POINT OF VIEW - LIMIT FREE SPEECH OR YOU WILL BE CONSIDERED AN ANIMAL

The donkey is temporarily given the gift of speech and addresses his master Bilam. For the donkey, speech is a gift which should be used solely for the good, but the fact that the donkey is able to speak shows that speech alone does not indicate the moral qualities of an individual. We learn from here that a person can either act like an animal while having the freedom to say what they wish, or they can live a life in which they have control over their speech, which will allow them to achieve an awareness of the divine.



## FURTHER SOURCES IN FAVOUR OF FREE SPEECH

- ❖ You must admonish your neighbour, and not bear sin because of him (*Leviticus 19:17*)
- ❖ Learn to do good, seek justice, vindicate the victim, render justice to the orphan, take up the grievance of the widow (*Isaiah 1:17*)
- ❖ One who walks with righteousness and speaks with truthfulness... shall dwell in heights... his bread will be granted, his water assured (*Isaiah 33:15-16*)
- ❖ A person should not reject something which is against his own views... especially if it is not presented as an attack on religion but is simply an honest expression of the other person's beliefs. Even if it is against his own religious beliefs and faith, he should not say, "Be quiet and shut your mouth," because there will not be a clarification of that person's religious understanding. In fact, in such cases we should tell a person to speak his mind freely and fully express how he feels, such that he should not feel that he has not been able to fully speak his mind. If sincere questions are silenced, this is indicative that the religion is weak... This attitude is the opposite of what some people think. They mistakenly think that forbidding people from discussing religion strengthens religious faith, but this is not the case. Suppression of dissent and prohibiting people from speaking is a weakening of religion. (*Maharal, Be'er HaGolah 7*)

## FURTHER SOURCES IN FAVOUR OF LIMITING FREE SPEECH

- ❖ Whoever curses his father or mother shall be put to death (*Exodus 21:17*)
- ❖ Do not go around as a gossip among your people (*Leviticus 19:16*)
- ❖ Anyone who curses God... shall be put to death (*Leviticus 24:15-16*)
- ❖ To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven...a time to keep silence, and a time to speak (*Kohelet 3:1, 7*)
- ❖ Come and see how great the power of an evil tongue is! How do we know [that the tongue is so powerful]? From the spies: for if people were punished so badly having spoken badly about wood and stones, how much more punishment will there be for someone who speaks badly about another person! (Babylonian Talmud, *Arakhin 15a*)
- ❖ Just as one is commanded to say that which will be obeyed, one is commanded not to say that which will be disobeyed. (Babylonian Talmud, *Yevamot 65b*)
- ❖ Free speech does not mean speech that costs nothing. It means speech that respects the freedom and dignity of others. Forget this and free speech will prove to be very expensive indeed. (Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Thought for the Day* 9<sup>th</sup> August 2013)



## CONCLUDING NOTES FOR THE MODERATOR

People often understand our freedom of speech in the same spirit as Balak, meaning that all human beings have the right and should have the freedom to use the power of speech in any way they wish, even if this means that speech is used to harm others. In many ways, this is the attitude that was adopted by Charlie Hebdo who remain staunch defenders of the concept of free speech, even when - and especially when - their content causes offence to others.

However, as becomes clear from the story of Bilam, while the Jewish tradition teaches us about the importance of speaking up against injustice, it also teaches us that there are limits on what can and should be said. As we see from the behaviour of Bilam, a person should always consider whether God would be happy with what we say. Moreover, the fact that God was unhappy that Bilam accompanied the Moabite messengers even after He had given permission appears to indicate that speech is defined not only by the words we say, but also, by the context in which they are said. At the same time, while there are rules about what can and cannot be said, ultimately we are free to say what we wish because, in order for our good choices to be rewarded by God, we need to have the ability to make the wrong choices.

In his response to 'The Rushdie Affair', Chief Rabbi Jakobovits remarked that 'in a civilized society we should generate respect for other people's religious beliefs and not tolerate a form of denigration and ridicule which can only breed resentment to the point of hatred and strife.' While certainly this may be so, the question remains how we should respond to beliefs which are not way worthy of respect such as those of ISIS.

In conclusion, Jewish sources appear to indicate that while there should be freedom of speech, this always must be balanced with the freedom and dignity of others. At the same time, where someone is not acting with dignity and abusing their power, it is our duty to speak up.