

Potomac Torah Study Center
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NOTE: Devrei Torah presented weekly in Loving Memory of Rabbi Leonard S. Cahan z"l, Rabbi Emeritus of Congregation Har Shalom, who started me on my road to learning 50 years ago and was our family Rebbe and close friend until his untimely death.

Devrei Torah are now Available for Download (normally by noon on Fridays) from www.PotomacTorah.org. Thanks to Bill Landau for hosting the Devrei Torah. New: a limited number of copies of the first attachment will now be available at Beth Sholom on the Shabbas table!

I received an E-mail post from Israel last week reporting that a thug attacked an obviously Jewish boy on a street in Los Angeles. I did a Google search and found a photo of the boy, obviously Hassidic, and the thug who had been arrested. The incident took place on Melrose Avenue, and the cross street was Alta Vista. My family lived on Alta Vista Blvd., five blocks south of Melrose. A few weeks earlier, Arab thugs went seeking and physically attacking Jews on La Cienega Blvd., perhaps two miles west, this time no more than a five minute walk from where my family lived before we moved to Alta Vista. The Executive Director of Hillel at UCLA (Rabbi Aaron Lerner, a YCT alum) wrote that Jewish students at the university were afraid of physical attacks at school. In my twenty-nine years living in California (primarily in Los Angeles), I never experienced any anti-Semitism. Now Los Angeles seems to resemble Germany in the early 1930s.

My opening words fit in with our parsha, Balak. After months of reading about the history of the Jews, from Avraham through the final year in the Midbar, we suddenly encounter a parsha devoted entirely to non-Jews (until the final seven pasookim). The people of Moab and Midian plot to curse and destroy B'Nai Yisrael and occasionally observe them going about their lives unaware of the evil plans to destroy them. As Rabbi Moshe Rube reminds us (see below), the intense anti-Semitism of Moab and Midian are a fitting introduction to the Three Weeks, the period leading up to the destruction of the Temples in Jerusalem, a period that normally begins shortly after we read this parsha.

The United Nations devotes considerable time passing resolutions attacking Israel, a country with less than 0.1 percent of the world population. Looking at a world map or globe, Israel is so small that it would be difficult to find (if it would even be large enough to see in scale). One would think that Jews and Israel would be so unimportant that they would not be worth mentioning in the context of factors affecting the world. Why, then, are Israel and Jews in general such a focus in the world?

My beloved Rebbe, Rabbi Leonard Cahan, z"l, once discussed Bilaam as a satire. The Midrash (Pirkei Avot 5:22) makes the satire explicit by comparing and contrasting Avraham and Bilaam. The Devrei Torah below by Rosh Yeshiva Dov Linzer and by Rabbi Yitz Etshalom delve into the comparison in detail. The Torah uses the same language to describe Avraham's journey with Yitzhak to the Akeidah and Bilaam's journey with the representatives of Midian. Avraham understood God's wishes and rushed to follow them, while Bilaam understood God's wishes and tried to work around them (to curse those whom Hashem wished to bless). Avraham saw everything; Bilaam saw nothing and needed a speaking donkey to open his eyes.

The outstanding collection of Devrei Torah below delves into Bilaam's intense hatred of the Jews. While God would not permit Bilaam to curse the Jews, He did not prevent Bilaam, the political advisor, from telling Midian how to make the Jews curse themselves (by leading them into idolatry and sexual sin). We find soul mates of Bilaam among our people today – such as Jews active in BDS and J Street. These self hating Jews blame Israel and Jews for defending ourselves from neighboring people (in the spirit of Moab and Midian) who keep attacking, hoping to destroy Israel and support anti-Semites all over the world. Idolatry and senseless hatred (of our fellow Jews) led God to destroy the temples in Jerusalem. Many of our people believe that parallel sins are the reason why we are still waiting for Moshiach to come. We know the answer – and it is us (our people) more than anything else. If we do not learn from the past, our punishment

will be to live through the same mistakes again. The Germany of my parents' generation was bad enough for all time. Let us not help a new Hitler to bring it back again. Rather, let us start working on tikkun olam, doing our part to work toward a solution for hatred. We can increase our commitment to helping Israel. Rather than senseless hatred, we can look toward unqualified love for fellow Jews. By learning more about the situation and facts in Israel, we can prepare answers to those who blame Israel in every dispute involving neighboring people and countries. Let us do our part to work toward a better future for our children and grandchildren.

Shabbat Shalom,

Hannah & Alan

Much of the inspiration for my weekly Dvar Torah message comes from the insights of Rabbi David Fohrman and his team of scholars at www.alephbeta.org. Please join me in supporting this wonderful organization, which has increased its scholarly work during the pandemic, despite many of its supporters having to cut back on their donations.

Please daven for a Refuah Shlema for Menachem Mendel ben Chana, Eli ben Hanina, Yoram HaKohen ben Shoshana, Gedalya ben Sarah, Mordechai ben Chaya, Baruch Yitzhak ben Perl, David Leib HaKohen ben Sheina Reizel, Zev ben Sara Chaya, Uzi Yehuda ben Mirda Behla, HaRav Dovid Meir ben Chaya Tzippa; Eliav Yerachmiel ben Sara Dina, Amoz ben Tziviah, Reuven ben Masha, Meir ben Sara, Yitzhok Tzvi ben Yehudit Miriam, Yaakov Naphtali ben Michal Leah, Ramesh bat Heshmat, Rivka Chaya bat Leah, Zissel Bat Mazal, Chana Bracha bas Rochel Leah, Leah Fruma bat Musa Devorah, Hinda Behla bat Chaya Leah, Nechama bas Tikva Rachel, and Ruth bat Sarah, all of whom greatly need our prayers.

Hannah & Alan

Are Pregnant Women Obligated to Fast on Religious Fast Days

Opinion of Rabbi Moshe Zuriel *

Many Rabbis are questioned by pregnant women if they are obligated to fast on Yom Kippur and other fast days, such as Tisha B'Av. These women fear that fasting may lead to miscarriage or premature birth, with its consequent damages to the infant.

A respected rabbinic authority in Israel, Rabbi Israel Fisher, permitted pregnant women to eat and drink during Yom Kippur, if limited to small amounts, 30 grams of solids (about one ounce) and 40 grams of liquids, if no more than that is taken during any nine minute period. This can be done again and again at proper nine minute intervals. The reason for this, he claimed, is that to his knowledge tens of pregnant women doing this fast, had miscarriages. We know that Pikuah Nefesh, even of a fetus, takes priority over fasting.

Many prominent rabbis disagreed with this permissive ruling, citing the Shulhan Arukh which specifically prohibits eating or drinking anything on this day, even for pregnant women.

Rabbi Moshe Zuriel, a highly respected rabbinic scholar in Israel, has written an article in which he supports the view of Rabbi Fisher. Rabbi Zuriel checked with medical authorities and found that Rabbi Fisher is right!

Statistics gathered by the Siroka Hospital (Be-er Sheba) were drawn from the past twenty three years dealing with 744 births. The study (<http://dx.doi.org/10.3109/14767058.2014.954998>) has revealed that the risk factor was significantly higher among those Jewish women who were fasting on Yom Kippur. In cases of premature birth before 37 weeks of pregnancy, the percentages of death of the fetus were 75-80 percent. Premature births also face problems relating to proper lung development, damage to the nerve system, stomach problems, sight and hearing problems.

In the Hebrew article that was published in the Israeli Techumin (volume 37, pages 71-81), Rabbi Zuriel cites a prominent Halakhic authority, Havot Yair who ruled that eating less than the prohibited quantity (Shiur akhila) is only Rabbinically prohibited. Therefore, if a pregnant woman feels weak and unable to fast the full day, she should be permitted to eat and drink less than the prohibited quantity.

Rabbi Zuriel cites other halakhic authorities who concur with Rabbi Fisher's ruling. The halakha calls for leniency when there is a doubt concerning saving human life. Pregnant women who feel great weakness due to the fast and had no chance to ask their doctor's advice before the fast day, and during the fast day have not the ability to ask their rabbi, should eat and drink the modicum amounts aforementioned at no less than nine minute intervals. It is advised that pregnant women consult their doctor and rabbi prior to the onset of a fast day, in order to determine what is best in their own specific case.

* Rabbi Moshe Zuriel is a highly respected rabbinic scholar in Israel and author of numerous volumes on Torah topics. [Ed. Note: I have heard Rabbi Antine from Beth Shalom in Potomac, MD cite the 9 minute rule on previous fast days.]

<https://www.jewishideas.org/article/pregnant-women-and-fasting>

A Candidate for Blessings

By Rabbi Label Lam © 2007

[Please remember Mordechai ben Chaya (Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky) for a Mishebarach!]

How goodly are your tents Yaakov, your dwelling places Israel... (Bamidbar 24:5)

So flattering are the words of Bilaam that if not for their lengthiness our sages would have included them in our daily recital of the Shema. In the end Bilaam pronounced a great blessing about the Jewish People. My question is: Where is his blessing? It was told to Avraham by HASHEM that "I will bless those that bless you and those who curse you I will curse." (Breishis 12:3) If Bilaam effectively blessed the Jewish Nation so generously then we should see some manifestation of his blessing in return. There seems to be none. Why not?

In a futuristic story the Talmud (Avoda Zara 2A-B) tells us of conversation between The Almighty and the nations of the world when the Epoch of the Moshiach will have already dawned. Here it is in an abbreviated form: Rabbi Chanina Bar Papa -some say Rabbi Simai- expounded so: In the times to come the Holy One, blessed be He, will take a scroll of the Torah in His embrace and proclaim: "Let him who has occupied himself with this come and take his reward!"

There upon the Kingdom of Edom (Rome) will enter first before Him... The Holy One blessed be He will say to them: "With what have you occupied yourselves?" They will reply: "O' Lord of the Universe, we have established many market-places, we have erected many baths, we have accumulated much gold and silver, and all this we did only for the sake of Israel that they might have the leisure to occupy themselves with the study of Torah." The Holy One blessed be He will say in reply: "Fools of the world, all that you have done, you have only done to satisfy your own desires. You have established marketplaces for the purpose of prostitution, baths to indulge yourselves, and as for the silver and gold they are mine...Are there any amongst you those who have studied Torah?" They will go out with crushed spirits!

After Rome has departed Persia enters...And to the question of the Holy One Blessed be He, "What was your occupation?" They will answer, "We have constructed many bridges, conquered many great cities, we were engaged in many great wars, all for the sake of Israel to enable them to study Torah." The reply to which will be, "All that was done by you was done for your own sake! Fools of the world, bridges you made for the collection of taxes, cities you conquered to impose labor and as to waging war, I am the Lord of battles...Are there any amongst you who have studied Torah?" They too will leave with crushed spirits!

The Brisker Rav ztl. asked an important question about the truthfulness of this dialogue. These nations are making up a last minute story just to ride on the coattails of the Jewish Nation that did devote itself to Torah study. They're telling lies and making excuses about why they did what they did. Why then does The Almighty only refer to them as "fools of the world"? They should rather be called what they really are—"liars".

In the grand scheme of things they are really telling the truth. They made bridges and banks that benefited the Jewish People and actually enabled them to study Torah. The reason they are more fittingly titled "fools" is because they only failed to have that benefit in mind.

Bilaam too could say no different than what G-d had scripted him to proclaim. Sure, he blessed the Jewish Nation with his mouth, and what he said was true but his heart betrayed a contrary agenda. Therefore he foolishly fails to qualify as a candidate for blessings.

<https://torah.org/torah-portion/dvartorah-5768-balak/>

Believing is Seeing

by Rabbi Dov Linzer, Rosh HaYeshiva, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah © 2021

The rabbis tell us in Pirkei Avot (5:22) "Whoever has....an ayin tova, a good eye....is a student of Avraham; whoever has an ayin ra'ah, a bad eye....is a student of Balaam." Avraham sees well, whereas Balaam sees poorly. How so?

On the face of it, the stories of Avraham and Balaam are parallel. Both Avraham and Balaam are called to leave their land and go westward, to or near the land of Canaan. But while Avraham is called by God to go, lekh likha, Balaam is told by God to stay, lo teilekh. The first lesson, then, is that it is not the going that is important; it is the listening to God. If God says go, you go, and if God says stay, you stay. So they are both commanded by God, and Balaam, at least in principle, is willing to obey. But whereas Avraham follows God's command, Balaam resists it. Why? The difference lies not in how they are prepared to act, but how they are prepared to see.

God does not just command Avraham to go to Canaan. God commands him to go to the land asher ar'ekha, that I will show you. To fulfill that command, it is not enough to obey. One must also learn to see. To find the chosen land, Avraham has to be able to see what God is showing him. This is why the climax of Avraham's trials, the akeida, which also begins with a lekh likha, is all about seeing properly: seeing the place from a distance, telling Yitzchak that God will see the sheep, seeing the angel, seeing the ram, and even naming the place "the mount where God is seen." Avraham's career begins with seeing and ends with seeing, seeing what God is showing him, seeing as God would see.

Balaam is a different story. Balaam is prepared to do "as God speaks to me," that is, to listen to God (Bamidbar, 22:8). There is a huge difference between obeying and agreeing. Balaam continues to see things differently than God. If he obeys, he will do so with reluctance and resistance: "God refuses to let me go with you," he says (22:13). I still want to go, but God is holding me back.

God tries to teach Balaam otherwise. God tells him not to go with the messengers, not to curse the people, for "they are blessed." God is letting him know what the true, deeper reality is. But, of course, Balaam continues to see things his way. As Rashi comments, "He saw that it was evil in God's eyes, and yet he desired to go" (32:22). Balaam did not care how God saw the matter; it was his perspective that mattered.

However, as we see in the bizarre story of the speaking donkey, God isn't done with the education of Balaam. The point of the story is clear: the donkey is able to see what Balaam cannot. Three times we hear, va'teireh ha'aton, "and the donkey saw." It is remarkable that the verse does not indicate anything miraculous about the donkey seeing the angel; it is only when the donkey speaks that we read, "And God opened the mouth of the donkey" (22:28). Animals, as we know, can sometimes smell, hear, and see things that we as humans cannot. This is partly because of the way their senses have adapted to their environments, but it is also partly because they experience the world for what it is. They do not have the same subjective lens through which we humans view our experiences, filtering, shaping, and seeing things in ways that are consistent with our worldview. The simple, unfiltered seeing of the donkey is like the simple seeing of children, free from the rationalizations and self-deceptions of adults. It allows them to see what we so often cannot.

Balaam's arrogance, self-importance, and desire for fame and enrichment blind him to the obvious facts. And now, just as God opened the mouth of the donkey, God miraculously opens the eyes of Balaam so that he can see the angel, and the truth. But does Balaam learn? Hardly. "Now, if it is evil in Your eyes, I will return back," he responds (32:34). It is still not evil in my eyes. I understand that it may be evil in Your eyes, and if you tell me not to go I am prepared to listen. You can get me to obey, but I refuse to see things Your way.

At this stage, God allows for a compromise. If Balaam can't be taught to see right, God can at least get him to say the right thing, force-feeding him lines, putting the very words in his mouth. Perhaps there is a lesson here: Even when we disagree with someone, it can pay to say the words that they want to hear. "Yes, dear," can be the two most important words in a marriage. Insincerity is never good, but words do have a power of their own. If we choose to say the desired words, even if we do not fully believe them, then not only can they be helpful to the one hearing them, but they can also help shape our own perception, helping to change the way we see.

This is what happens with Balaam. When he begins working with Balak, he of course continues to see things his way, even as God is working against this. Balak helps with this, making sure that Balaam only sees the "edge of the people" and does not appreciate their totality and their blessedness (22:41, 23:13).

Choosing to see selectively is a key strategy in reinforcing the way we see the world. Consider how rare it is that we try to see the true complexity and scope of a matter, to realize that things aren't so black and white, to see all the nuances. In fact, it was initially thought that all the information easily available on the Internet would lead people to develop more informed and nuanced views. What actually happened, and what continues to happen, however, is that people choose to see only the "edge of the people," seeking out the information that reinforces their established position. It is so much easier to see selectively, to see just what we want to see.

That was the attempt. But the words that Balaam utters begin to have their effect. In his first two poetic prophecies, we hear him declaiming — with the words fed to him by God — how the people are truly to be seen: "For I see them from the tops of mountains, and from the hills I behold them"; "He has not beheld iniquity in Jacob, neither has he seen perverseness in Israel" (23:9, 21). It seems that these words start to seep in to his own consciousness, so that by the third prophecy, he begins to actually believe them. It is now, at this third and final stage, that Balaam truly begins to see: "And Balaam saw that it was good in the eyes of God to bless Israel" (24:1).

This is the turning point. Before it was "bad in God's eyes" to curse, but he refused to see and resisted. Now it is "good in God's eyes" to bless; he sees this and he embraces it. It is these very words vayar....ki tov, "and he saw...that it was good," that echo the very first act of seeing in the Torah: va'yar E-lohim ki tov, "And God saw that it was good." This is an act of divine seeing. Balaam is now seeing as God sees.

Finally, he can now see. He can now lift up his own eyes and see the people as they truly are (24:2). It is now that he declares that he can see "the vision of God" and see with "eyes open," self-descriptions that have been thus far absent (24:3). And it is now and only now that he is filled with the "spirit of God." He is not simply parroting back words. He is elevated and inspired by what he sees, and he speaks from his heart.

With this transformation, Balaam's education is complete. Sadly, however, the change is short-lived, as the remainder of the parsha bears out, for learning to see properly is not something that can be done in an instant. Even when our eyes are open, we often resist and choose to remain blind. It is a life-long struggle to be the students of Avraham, to learn to see the "land that God will show you." The keys are given to us in this parsha: See fully, not partially, and say the right words even if you do not yet believe them. Ultimately, you will be able to see rightly, to see with a "good eye," to see as God would have you see.

Shabbat Shalom.

<https://library.yctorah.org/2021/06/believing-is-seeing-2021/>

Bolok -- The Letter-Man

by Rabbi Mordechai Rhine* © 2017 Teach 613

The drama of this week's Parsha is certainly in the story of Bolok and Bilaam — how Bolok invited Bilaam to curse the Jews, but G-d switched the intended curse into a blessing. But, the Parsha also teaches us much about Bilaam as a person. Especially in giving him the title, "Pisora -- The Letter-Man." (Rashi)

Bilaam was a person who was so effective at cursing people that letters poured in from solicitors begging him to curse their enemies. In fact, Bilaam prided himself that he was so needed by so many. It seems to have boosted his ego. When G-d asks Bilaam about Bolok's messengers, Bilaam replies, "Even though I am not significant to You, but kings hold me in the greatest respect." (Rashi)

I had a Rebbe in yeshiva who used to say, "There is a little bit of Bilaam's attitude within each of us." Deep in our hearts, we know that all that really matters is G-d's opinion of us. Yet, being popular seems to count for something. And, although Bilaam was way out of touch with G-d's mandate of blessing for the world, Bilaam chooses to impress upon G-d that he, Bilaam, is popular.

When I was in high school, and my Rebbe made these comments, there were no cell phones or internet. There was no temptation to demonstrate ones importance by taking a phone call or reading a text message from one person while in the middle of a conversation with another person. Still, Rebbe observed a quality in human nature, which I think is even more relevant in our time. It seems to me that our generation needs to introspect on why we get a thrill from "You've got mail" or from having our phones ring in front of other people, affirming our popularity and worthiness. That is a middah / trait of "Bilaam, the letter-man," Bilaam, the person whose sense of self was defined by the number of letters he received.

In contrast, I am reminded of a story in the life of Rabbi Avraham Pam z"l, the Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshiva Torah V'Daas in New York. Rabbi Pam once sent a letter of encouragement to a Jew in his neighborhood who was confined to the hospital for an extended period of time. The man treasured the letter and showed it to many of those who visited him. Eventually the man died from the illness, and the funeral took place in the summer when many of those who knew the man were away on vacation. The Rabbi asked to officiate did not know the man personally, but he heard about Rav Pam's letter, and mentioned it in his eulogy, deducing that the man must have been quite special to have received a personal letter from the celebrated Rosh Yeshiva.

When Rav Pam heard what an impact his letter had made -- that it had heartened an ill person, and been the catalyst for a more respectable funeral -- he wept, realizing the magnitude of lost opportunities to bring encouragement and respect to other people. He said, "The letter took me just a few minutes to write, a stamp to mail, and look at its impact. Imagine how many lost opportunities there are in life, where we could have sent a letter and made a difference for the better in someone's life."

The Mishna in Avos tells us, "Who is honored, one who honors others." There is false sense that the more mail we receive, the more worthy and popular we are. The real mark of distinction in a letter-man is one who can send a letter of good-will, for such a letter elevates both the sender and the recipient.

With heartfelt blessings for a wonderful Shabbos!

* Rav of Southeast Hebrew Congregation, White Oak (Silver Spring), MD and Director of Teach 613. RMRhine@Teach613.org. Teach613, 10604 Woodsdale Dr., Silver Spring, MD 20901. 908-770-9072. **Donations welcome to help with Torah outreach.** www.teach613.org. Note: Rabbi Rhine is on summer vacation and has authorized his followers to use an archived Dvar Torah until he returns.

The "Bil'am Effect:" Thoughts for Parashat Balak

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel *

The Torah records in great detail how Balak hired Bil'am to curse the Israelites, and how Bil'am ultimately ended up blessing the children of Israel instead. This story is peculiar, in that the Israelites themselves had no awareness of the

actions of Balak nor of the words of Bil'am. If the Torah had not recorded this episode, we would have had no knowledge of it at all.

If this story had no impact on the ancient Israelites in the wilderness, perhaps it is intended to provide an important lesson for all future generations. What might that lesson be?

Psychologists have demonstrated that people generally interpret things according to their own preconceived notions. There is a strong tendency to see what we want to see and to hear what we want to hear. In one study, two groups — one favoring capital punishment and one opposing it — were given reports that “proved” that their own opinions were mistaken. After studying the material, none of the participants changed his/her mind. They found fault with the arguments and data that conflicted with their original opinion. Don’t confuse us with facts that challenge our views! In another study, people were asked to taste wine from two bottles, one priced \$90 a bottle and one priced \$10 a bottle. The volunteer wine tasters preferred the more expensive wine, and extolled its virtues in comparison with the inexpensive wine. Yet, the wine in both bottles was identical. The only difference was the price label. Since people expected that expensive wine would be of higher quality, they actually tasted it as being better. Preconceived notions have powerful impact on how we interpret and experience things.

Demagogues well understand how to manipulate people’s way of thinking and experiencing. They stoke fears; they promote falsehoods; they attempt to brainwash the masses. Once people have been suitably brainwashed, their power of reasoning is compromised. They come to interpret data according to the ideas they’ve absorbed. They will not be swayed by opposing facts, even when the opposing facts happen to be true.

Balak hired Bil'am because Bil'am was a highly regarded “authority” figure. If Balak could get Bil'am to curse the Israelites, Balak's own followers would gain confidence in their ability to defeat the Israelites. Balak's people, who already had negative views of the Israelites, would be re-enforced in those views if a man of Bil'am's stature would endorse their fear and hatred.

Bil'am could be expected to curse the Israelites. First, he too must have felt threatened by the Israelites' successes in their march toward the Promised Land. Second, he was being paid to curse them!

Yet, the amazing aspect of this story is that Bil'am did not curse the Israelites. In spite of his preconceived notions, in spite of his being paid to curse...he blessed the people of Israel! This was a sort of “miracle” defying the expected pattern of human behavior. The Almighty interceded and made Bil'am see the truth about Israel. Bil'am, against his own natural inclinations, was forced to overcome his biases and to see things clearly.

Balak's plan failed. He had expected Bil'am to rally the populace to fight and defeat the Israelites. He had expected Bil'am to follow his ingrained animosities, and not to be influenced by any virtues that the Israelites might have.

It turns out, then, that this story has profound importance for future generations, including our own.

For example, enemies of modern Israel view Israel through the prism of their preconceived notions. They are ready to curse, but are not ready to see the actual virtues of Israel. In order to bolster their biases, they engage “authorities” such as committees at the United Nations, or anti-Israel academics, to spew venom against Israel. It can be assumed in advance that the anti-Israel views will be espoused, regardless of actual facts.

The story of Bil'am demonstrates that it is possible, however unlikely and however miraculous, for people to overcome their biases and to offer blessings instead of curses. It is possible, even if not too likely, for haters to actually open their eyes with compassion, reason, and fairness.

Years ago, I had a warm correspondence with a man who had been a member of the Ku Klux Klan, and who was raised in an environment of hatred of Jews, blacks and other minorities. At some point, he decided he needed to understand more about Jews and Judaism. He got hold of one of my books, and it had an impact on him. He decided to learn more. During the ensuing years, he underwent a conversion to Judaism and became an active leader in his Jewish community. When we did ultimately meet in person, we embraced. He never thought he would hug an Orthodox rabbi, just as I had never imagined hugging a former member of the Ku Klux Klan. But this happened. It is a story of overcoming biases.

When Bil'am blessed Israel, the Torah quotes his words: “The saying of Bil'am son of Beor; and the saying of the man whose eye is opened; the saying of him who hears the words of God, who sees the vision of the Almighty, fallen down, yet with opened eyes” (Bemidbar 24:3-4). The Torah underscores how Bil'am overcame, with God's help, his biases and opened his eyes to see things more clearly and objectively.

In our world today, we are — unfortunately — accustomed to dealing with biased, hate-filled, and dishonest enemies. We sometimes wonder why people abandon reason and fairness in order to maintain hateful prejudices. We know that we must be vigilant in standing up to these demagogues and liars.

But we also know that the “Bil’am effect” is possible. Some special individuals — steeped in animosity and prejudice — can rise above their biases, can open their eyes, can offer blessings rather than curses.

In reporting the story of Balak and Bil'am, the Torah has given us a ray of hope for humanity.

* Founder and Director, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

<https://www.jewishideas.org/bilam-effect-thoughts-parashat-balak> **The Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals has experienced a significant drop in donations during the pandemic. The Institute needs our help to maintain and strengthen our Institute. Each gift, large or small, is a vote for an intellectually vibrant, compassionate, inclusive Orthodox Judaism. You may contribute on our website [jewishideas.org](https://www.jewishideas.org) or you may send your check to Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, 2 West 70th Street, New York, NY 10023. Ed.: Please join me in helping the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals at this time.**

Strictly, Major, Extremely: How Words Lose their Meaning

A Blog By Rabbi Marc D. Angel *

Some words get overused, misused and abused. The words become degraded so that they no longer can be taken at face value.

The word “kosher” is an example of a word that has become compromised.

The packaging on kosher foods reflects the problem. The word “kosher,” by itself, seems no longer to indicate that a product is actually kosher. Much packaging states that the product is under “strict rabbinic supervision,” or that it is “strictly kosher;” apparently, without the words “strict” or “strictly” we couldn’t trust its kashruth. Some packaging now states that the product is under the “strictest rabbinic supervision,” implying that just being “strict” or “strictly kosher” isn’t kosher enough. Only “strictest” should be trusted.

To complicate matters, we often find products that are under multiple rabbinic supervisions...as many as four or five different hashgahot per item. Does having multiple hashgahot make the product more kosher? Are those items with only one or even two hashgahot not kosher enough?

The word “kosher” has been degraded; many people apparently don’t trust the word unless it is accompanied by “strict,” “strictly” or “strictest;” or unless it is authenticated by multiple hashgahot. This may be the fault of manufacturers, or of kashruth agencies, or of consumers...but the result is to downgrade the word “kosher” and to confuse the public.

The word “major” is another example of a compromised word.

We receive notices from various congregations and organizations announcing lectures, shiurim, and a variety of programs. Apparently, it is felt that just announcing the topic is inadequate to gain people’s attention. So we are told that the upcoming lecture/shiur/program is “important.” But since everything seems to be “important” these days, the announcements inform us that the upcoming event is “special.” Recently, I’ve begun receiving notices for upcoming lectures/shiurim that are “major.” But if these lectures/shiurim are “major,” does that imply that they are more significant than if they were just “special” or “important?” And does that imply that all “non-major” lectures, shiurim/programs are “minor?” When hyping events as “major,” the result is to downgrade all other “non-major” events...and ultimately to downgrade “major” itself.

Another phrase that has been popping up is “extremely brilliant.” It seems that just being smart, intelligent or even brilliant is no longer enough; one needs to be “extremely brilliant.” Yet, if so many people are upgraded to being “extremely brilliant,” then the phrase loses its significance. If you really want to stand out, you’ll need to find a phrase that goes higher than “extremely brilliant.” But then, many others will adopt that new phrase too, in a never-ending effort to outdo others. The more hyperbole we use, the less the words really mean.

Wouldn’t it be nice if people used words carefully, without need for hyperbole? It would be a very strictly, major, and extremely brilliant thing to do!

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<https://www.jewishideas.org/blog/strictly-major-extremely-how-words-lose-their-meaning-blog-rabbi-marc-d-angel>

Balak – The Temple and Jewish Eternity

by Rabbi Yehoshua Singer *

One of the many lessons from the story of Bilaam is how far Hashem went to warn Bilaam. Hashem sends warnings to Bilaam throughout the parsha, despite Bilaam’s wickedness and extreme desire to curse Hashem’s treasured nation. Among the warnings sent to Bilaam is the miraculous rebuke from his donkey. Bilaam’s donkey strayed from the intended course three times, and each time Bilaam hit the donkey to continue on the intended journey. After the third time, Hashem opens the donkey’s mouth and has it rebuke Bilaam saying, “What have I done to you that you have hit me these three times?” (Bamidbar 22:28)

Rash”i notes that the donkey was given an unusual word for “times” – רגלים/Regalim. This word is also used to refer to the three pilgrimage festivals when we would travel up to the Temple for the Holiday. Rash”i explains based on a Medrash Tanchuma that the donkey was given this word to hint to Bilaam that he should turn back because the nation he is trying to curse observes the three pilgrimage festivals. (Rash”i ibid.)

The Sifsei Chachamim asks why this mitzvah was singled out from all of the mitzvos of the Torah? He quotes a Gemara in Chagiga (2a) which notes that the wording of the pilgrimage mitzvah is expressed by the word “יראה” which can be vowelized in two different ways. The verse can be read “three times a year יראה -yei'ra-eh - every male shall be seen”, or “three times a year ייראה – yir'eh – every male will see”. (Shemos 23:17; Devarim 16:16) The Gemara learns from here that just as there is a mitzvah to come to the Temple and experience G-d’s Presence during the holidays, so too is there a mitzvah to be “seen” by G-d, that G-d should “experience” our presence. G-d wants us to come “visit” so He can enjoy our company. This, explains the Sifsei Chachamim, was the message from Bilaam’s donkey. The Jewish nation is so beloved to G-d, that He desires them to “visit” three times a year. How can you possibly think to remove them from G-d’s world?!

This explanation of the mitzvah to travel to the Temple for the Festivals requires some understanding. In what way would we experience G-d’s Presence in the Temple? Moreover, in what way does G-d experience our presence when we come to the Temple, more than He would when we are at home?

Experiencing G-d in the Temple is more readily understood. The Temple was a magnificent and beautiful structure that inspired awe in all who saw it. The *Kohanim* who served in the Temple wore special garments and were alacritous and careful in their service. There was a sense of significance in all that occurred there. The Sanhedrin Hagadol, the High Court, would meet at the Temple, and it was a place of sages, elders, and high level learning and Torah study. There were mystical elements in the structure of the Temple and in all of its vessels. All of these factors combined would enable one to sense and experience G-d in the Temple, in a way that could not be experienced anywhere else. This experience is the first half of the mitzvah.

Why, though, does G-d need us to come to the Temple for Him to “experience” us? Perhaps this question can be answered with another question. How could there be a mitzvah upon us for G-d to experience something? Perhaps the mitzvah is not for G-d to experience us, but for us to know and feel that G-d cherishes our “visit.” When we would come to the Temple and sense the awesome nature of G-d’s greatness and majesty, we would simultaneously sense G-d’s deep

love for each and every one of us. As the Temple enabled us to sense G-d's greatness, it also enabled us to sense G-d's love for each of us.

As we approach the Fast of the 17th of Tammuz, beginning the period mourning the loss of the Temple, this message gives us an insight into the magnitude of our loss. At the same time, G-d's message to Bilaam can give us strength and hope. G-d yearns for us to experience not only His greatness, but also His love for us. If so, then -- as was hinted to Bilaam -- G-d will ensure that we live on and that we will have that experience again.

* Rabbi, Am HaTorah Congregation, Bethesda, MD.

Loving Our Neighbor

by Rabbi Moshe Rube*

As we prepare to commemorate of the Destruction of the Temples which was caused through baseless hatred, no Parsha hits home more than Balak.

I say that because there's a Dvar Torah on Balak that has stayed with me throughout the years. I don't even remember where I heard it but I will probably continue to repeat it every year. Something about it just gets me. I'll leave it here for you to draw your own conclusions.

There was once a Rabbi who said that we find the mitzvah to love your neighbor as yourself in every single Parsha in the Torah. His students asked, "But what about Balak? There are no Jews in this parsha and it's all about two people trying to curse the Jews rather than make peace."

The rabbi responded, "In Parshat Balak we learn the mitzvah of loving your neighbor from the word Balak. The word Balak in Hebrew has the letters Vet, Lamed and Kuf which has the same sounds as the first letters of the phrase "Viahavta Lirayacha Kamocha" (Love your neighbor as yourself)."

His students said, "But Rabbi, "Balak" starts with Vet and "Viahavta" starts with the Hebrew letter Vav. "Balak" ends with a Kuf and "Kamocha" starts with a Kaf. Yes the letters make the same sound but the letters are different."

The rabbi answered, "If you're so strict on every letter you can never fulfill the mitzvah to love your neighbor."

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi Moshe Rube

* Rabbi, Knesseth Israel Congregation, Birmingham, AL. Note: one of the members of Knesseth Israel was trapped in the collapsed building in Florida, fate unknown, as Rabbi Rube stopped to write these words.

Rav Kook Torah

Balak: An Eternal People

Together with Shema

In the parashah of Balak, we find prophetic verses of exquisite beauty and an inspiring story of God's vigilant watch over the Jewish people. But to truly appreciate this Torah portion, consider this remarkable teaching of the Sages.

The Talmud (Berachot 12b) relates that at one time the rabbis contemplated incorporating the parashah of Balak into the daily prayers, alongside the recitation of the Shema. This is truly astounding. What lesson is contained in the words of Balaam - a villainous prophet, steeped in blind hatred for the Jewish people — that could possibly compare to the Torah's most fundamental beliefs, as delineated in the Shema, the centerpiece of Jewish prayer?

Fortunately, the Talmud clues us in to what makes this parashah so special. Its unique message may be found in the following verse, comparing the Jewish people to a fearsome lion:

“[Israel] crouches; he lies like a lion and a lioness. Who dares rouse him?” (Num. 24:9)

Yes, it is a beautiful metaphor describing the timeless strength and vitality of the Jewish people. But does this verse justify reading the entire portion of Balak twice a day, together with the Shema?

The Missing Link

Clearly, the Sages saw an inner link between Balak and the Shema. In order to understand this connection, we must first analyze the principal themes of the Shema. The Sages taught (Berachot 13a) that the first passage of the Shema expresses God’s unity and our acceptance of His rule; and that the theme of the second passage is our acceptance of the mitzvot.

However, these two axioms of Judaism — accepting God’s reign and accepting His mitzvot — are missing a common link. What is it that combines them, leading to universal acceptance of God through the performance of mitzvot? The missing link is the Jewish people.

The lofty aspirations expressed in the Shema necessitate the existence of a nation who, throughout the generations, observes the mitzvot and introduces the concept of God’s unity to the world. This is the mission of the Jewish people. In fact, they were created specifically for this purpose: “This people I created for Me, [so that] they will proclaim My praise” (Isaiah 43:21).

Now we can understand why the Sages wanted to add this particular verse to the recital of the Shema. Balaam poetically compared the Jewish people to a sleeping lion that none dare disturb. Everyone fears the formidable powers of this majestic creature, even when it sleeps. The latent power of the Jewish people is such that, even when ‘sleeping’ — even when they are exiled from their land and many of their unique national institutions (the Temple, Sanhedrin, kohanim, prophets, etc.) are dormant — nonetheless, their eternal nature is legendary. [1]

The survival of the Jewish people throughout the generations, despite all odds, and in violation of all laws of history, enables them to persist in their mission of proclaiming God’s unity. Their indestructible nature is in itself a sanctification of God’s Name.

Jewish Nationalism

If the significance of the parashah of Balak can be reduced to this single verse, then why not just add that verse to the daily prayers? Why add the entire section?

The Talmud explains that we may not add the verse by itself, since the Torah should not be broken up arbitrarily. “Any section that Moses did not divide, we may not divide.”

This explanation is difficult to understand. We find many individual verses incorporated in the liturgy. Why not this one?

It appears that detaching this particular verse from the rest of Balaam’s prophecy poses a special danger. By itself, the verse could be construed as extolling nationalism for its own sake. The unique strength of the Jewish people is not meant to serve the goals of self-centered nationalism, military conquest, or national aggrandizement. The eternal nature of Israel must be understood within the context of their unique mission: to promulgate God’s Name in the world. Therefore we must take care not to separate this verse from the rest of the portion.

Appreciating the Message of Balak

In the end, the Sages did not add the parashah of Balak to the daily prayers. They felt that such a lengthy addition would be too great a burden for the people.

Reading this portion would be a burden, since its message is not applicable to every generation. Not every generation is able to appreciate the role that Israel’s timeless vitality plays in achieving its spiritual goals. Yet the very fact that the

Sages wanted to incorporate it in the prayers indicates that a time will come when this message will be accepted and internalized by the nation as a whole.

(Sapphire from the Land of Israel. Adapted from Ein Eyah vol. I, pp. 67-68.)

Footnote:

[1] Mark Twain wrote in 1898:

[The Jew] has made a marvelous fight in the world, in all the ages; and has done it with his hands tied behind him. He could be vain of himself, and be excused for it. The Egyptian, the Babylonian, and the Persian rose, filled the planet with sound and splendor, then faded to dream-stuff and passed away; the Greek and the Roman followed, and made a vast noise, and they are gone; other peoples have sprung up and held their torch high for a time, but it burned out, and they sit in twilight now, or have vanished.

The Jew saw them all, beat them all, and is now what he always was, exhibiting no decadence, no infirmities of age, no weakening of his parts, no slowing of his energies, no dulling of his alert and aggressive mind. All things are mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality? (Concerning The Jews, Harper's Magazine, March 1898).

<http://www.ravkooktorah.org/BALAK59.htm>

A people that dwells alone? (Balak 5775)

By Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l, Former Chief Rabbi of the U.K.*

In the course of blessing the Jewish people Bilaam uttered words that have come to seem to many[1] to encapsulate Jewish history:

How can I curse whom God has not cursed?

How can I doom whom God has not doomed?

I see them from mountain tops,

Gaze on them from the heights.

Look: a people that dwells alone,

Not reckoned among the nations. (Num. 23: 8-9)

That is how it seemed during the persecutions and pogroms in Europe. It is how it seemed during the Holocaust. It is how it sometimes seems to Israel and its defenders today. We find ourselves alone. How should we understand this fact? How should we interpret this verse?

In my book Future Tense I describe the moment when I first became aware of how dangerous a self-definition this can be. We were having lunch in Jerusalem, on Shavuot 5761/2001. Present was one of the world's great fighters against antisemitism, Irwin Cotler, soon to become Canada's Minister of Justice, together with a distinguished Israeli diplomat. We were talking about the forthcoming United Nations Conference against Racism at Durban in 2001.

We all had reasons to know that it was going to be a disaster for Israel. It was there in the parallel sessions of the NGOs that Israel was accused of the five cardinal sins against human rights: racism, apartheid, crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing, and attempted genocide. The conference became, in effect, the launch-pad of a new and vicious antisemitism. In the Middle Ages, Jews were hated because of their religion. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century they were hated because of their race. In the twenty-first century they are hated because of their nation state. As we were speaking

of the likely outcome, the diplomat heaved a sigh and said, “Twas ever thus. Am levadad yishkon: we are the nation fated to be alone.”

The man who said those words had the best of intentions. He had spent his professional life defending Israel, and he was seeking to comfort us. His intentions were the best, and it was meant no more than as a polite remark. But I suddenly saw how dangerous such an attitude is. If you believe your fate is to be alone, that is almost certainly what will happen. It is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Why bother to make friends and allies if you know in advance that you will fail? How then are we to understand Bilaam’s words?

First, it should be clear that this is a very ambiguous blessing. Being alone, from a Torah perspective, is not a good thing. The first time the words “not good” appear in the Torah is in the verse, “It is not good for man to be alone” (Gen. 2: 18). The second time is when Moses’ father-in-law Jethro sees him leading alone and says, “What you are doing is not good” (Ex. 18: 17). We cannot live alone. We cannot lead alone. It is not good to be alone.

The word *badad* appears in two other profoundly negative contexts. First is the case of the leper: “He shall dwell alone; his place shall be outside the camp” (Lev. 13: 46). The second is the opening line of the book of Lamentations: “How alone is the city once thronged with people” (Lam. 1: 1). The only context in which *badad* has a positive sense is when it is applied to God (Deut. 32: 12), for obvious theological reasons.

Second, Bilaam who said those words was not a lover of Israel. Hired to curse them and prevented from doing so by God, he nonetheless tried a second time, this time successfully, persuading the Moabite and Midianite women to seduce the Israelite men, as a result of which 24,000 died (Num. 25, 31: 16). It was this second strategy of Bilaam – after he had already said, “How can I curse whom God has not cursed? How can I doom whom God has not doomed?” – that marks him out as a man profoundly hostile to the Israelites. The Talmud (Sanhedrin 105b) states that all the blessings that Balaam bestowed on the Israelites eventually turned into curses, with the sole exception of the blessing “How goodly are your tents, Jacob, your dwelling places, Israel.” So in the rabbis’ view, “a people that dwells alone” eventually became not a blessing but a curse.

Third, nowhere in Tanakh are we told that it will be the fate of Israel or Jews to be hated. To the contrary, the prophets foresaw that there would come a time when the nations would turn to Israel for inspiration. Isaiah envisaged a day on which “Many peoples will come and say, ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the temple of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths.’ The law will go out from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem” (Is. 2:3). Zechariah foresaw that “In those days ten people from all languages and nations will take firm hold of one Jew by the hem of his robe and say, ‘Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you.’” (Zech. 8: 23). These are sufficient to cast doubt on the idea that antisemitism is eternal, incurable, woven into Jewish history and destiny.

Only in rabbinic literature do we find statements that seem to suggest that Israel is hated. Most famous is the statement of Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai “Halakhah: it is well known that Esau hates Jacob.”[2] Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai was known for his distrust of the Romans, whom the rabbis identified with Esau/Edom. It was for this reason, says the Talmud, that he had to go into hiding for thirteen years.[3] His view was not shared by his contemporaries.

Those who quote this passage do so only partially and selectively. It refers to the moment at which Jacob and Esau met after their long estrangement. Jacob feared that Esau would try to kill him. After taking elaborate precautions and wrestling with an angel, the next morning he sees Esau. The verse then says: “Esau ran to meet them. He hugged [Jacob], and throwing himself on his shoulders, kissed him. They [both] wept” (Gen. 33: 4). Over the letters of the word “kissed” as it appears in a Sefer Torah, there are dots, signaling some special meaning. It was in this context that Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai said: “Even though it is well known that Esau hates Jacob, at that moment he was overcome with compassion and kissed him with a full heart.”[4] In other words, precisely the text cited to show that antisemitism is inevitable, proves the opposite: that at the crucial encounter, Esau did not feel hate toward Jacob. They met, embraced and went their separate ways without ill-will.

There is, in short, nothing in Judaism to suggest that it is the fate of Jews to be hated. It is neither written into the texture of the universe nor encoded in the human genome. It is not the will of God. Only in moments of deep despair have Jews believed this, most notably Leo Pinsker in his 1882 tract Auto-emancipation, in which he said of Judeophobia, “As a psychic aberration, it is hereditary; as a disease transmitted for two thousand years, it is incurable.”

Antisemitism is not mysterious, unfathomable or inexorable. It is a complex phenomenon that has mutated over time, and it has identifiable causes, social, economic, political, cultural and theological. It can be fought; it can be defeated. But it will not be fought or defeated if people think that it is Jacob's fate to be hated by "Esau" or to be "the people that dwells alone," a pariah among peoples, a leper among nations, an outcast in the international arena.

What then does the phrase "a people that dwells alone" mean? It means a people prepared to stand alone if need be, living by its own moral code, having the courage to be different and to take the road less travelled.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch offered a fine insight by focusing on the nuance between "people" (am) and "nation" (goi) – or as we might say nowadays, "society" and "state." Israel uniquely became a society before it was a state. It had laws before it had a land. It was a people – a group bound together by a common code and culture – before it was a nation, that is, a political entity. As I noted in Future Tense, the word peoplehood first appeared in 1992, and its early uses were almost entirely in reference to Jews. What makes Jews different, according to Hirsch's reading of Bilaam, is that Jews are a distinctive people, that is, a group defined by shared memories and collective responsibilities, "not reckoned among the nations" since they are capable of surviving even without nationhood, even in exile and dispersion. Israel's strength lies not in nationalism but in building a society based on justice and human dignity.

The battle against antisemitism can be won, but it will not be if Jews believe that we are destined to be alone. That is Bilaam's curse, not God's blessing.

FOOTNOTES:

[1] A People that Dwells Alone was the title given to the collection of essays by the late Jacob Herzog. It was also the theme of the autobiography of Israeli diplomat, and brother of Israel's former Chief Rabbi Israel Meir Lau, the late Naftali Lau-Lavie.

[2] Sifre, Behaalotecha, 89; Rashi to Gen. 33: 4; see Kreti to Yoreh Deah ch. 88 for the halakhic implications of this statement.

[3] Shabbat 33b.

[4] See Rashi ad loc.

* Note: because Likutei Torah and the Internet Parsha Sheet, both attached by E-mail, normally include the two most recent Devrei Torah by Rabbi Sacks, I have selected an earlier Dvar. See

<https://rabbisacks.org/healing-trauma-loss/>

Parshas Balak: A Blessed Nation can not be Cursed

By Chaya Mushka and Nechama Krimmer* © Chabad 2021

There are several parshas in the Torah named after famous figures in early Jewish history: Noach. Sara, Yisro, Korach. Balak. Pinchas. Two of these six famous figures are Gentiles. Yisro (Jethro) and Balak. One righteous, one wicked.

Yisro, the priest of Midian, was, at heart, a truth seeker. He immersed himself in the study of scientific and spiritual lore and possessed a deep understanding of both. According to the commentary of Rashi, Yisro had knowledge of every idol in the land and had worshipped them all.

Hearing the rumors of the miracles that Hashem had performed on behalf of the Jewish people, Yisro traveled to their encampment. He was greeted warmly by Moshe and learned at Moshe's feet.

Acknowledging Hashem's eminence Yisro said to Moshe, "Now I know that Hashem is greater than all gods" (Shemos 18:11). Yisro's recognition of Hashem's greatness transformed the darkness of his idolatrous past into a G dly light that only one who experienced this darkness could reveal.

Balak, the wicked king of Moav, on the other hand, did not have the humility and insight that Yisro possessed. What he did have, however, was a deep hatred for the Jewish people.

In this week's parsha, as the Jewish people edged closer to the border of Moav, Balak summoned a powerful magician named Bilaam in order to curse the Jews. And Bilaam was no slouch. The Midrash teaches that Bilaam was as great a prophet as Moshe! As Hashem created the world in balance, everything positive has a negative counterpart; this was the relationship between Moshe and Bilaam.

Balak had faith in Bilaam's ability to effect change through his charms and incantations. He pleaded with Bilaam, saying, "Please come and curse this nation for me...for I know that he whom you bless is then blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed" (Bamidbar 22:6).

That night, Bilaam had a vision of Hashem. He asked Hashem whether he should honor Balak's request to go to Moav to curse the Jewish people. Hashem told Bilaam that a blessed nation can not be cursed.

When Bilaam relayed this message to Balak, Balak offered Bilaam riches to entice him to change his mind. Bilaam's own hatred of the Jews, however, was enticing enough.

The next night, Hashem again appeared to Bilaam. Going on the imperative that Hashem leads a person on the path he or she wants to go, Hashem tells Bilaam he may go to Moav but with one caveat: Bilaam must only speak the words that Hashem puts in his mouth.

When Bilaam reached Moav, he was greeted by Balak and they traveled to a place that overlooked the encampment of the Jews. Hashem again appeared to Bilaam, filling his mouth with words.

Not curses, but words of praise and blessings for the Jewish people tumbled out of Bilaam's mouth. As Hashem told Bilaam earlier, a blessed nation can not be cursed.

Balak became angry that his plans had failed and he ordered Bilaam to leave. Before Bilaam departed, however, Hashem placed a final blessing in Bilaam's mouth.

Bilaam's voiced resounded with a boom. "I see it, but not now; I observe it, but not in the near future. A star will rise from Yaakov, and a ruler will be appointed from Yisroel" (Bamidbar 24: 17).

Amazingly, Bilaam's last blessing predicted the coming of Moshiach. According to our Sages, "a star will rise from Yaakov" refers to Dovid HaMelech and "a ruler will be appointed from Yisroel" refers to Moshiach.

Although Balak's quest to curse the Jewish people failed, we may wonder why this parsha is named after the nefarious and corrupt king who wanted nothing more than to destroy the Jewish people.

In hindsight, the story of Balak is a vision of things to come. In the Messianic Era, the physical world will be transformed into a place of revealed goodness. Similar to Balak, there will be no curses, only blessings.

And, ironically, Balak himself has a direct connection to Bilaam's prophecy of the Messianic Era. Shockingly, perhaps, the lineage of Moshiach descends from Balak. The Moabite convert Ruth is a direct descendant of Balak and Dovid HaMelech is a descendant of Ruth. Moshiach, of course, descends from the House of Dovid.

The Chassidic Masters explain that the end is wedged in the beginning and the beginning is wedged in the end. In the Messianic Era, as Isaiah prophesied, "They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not lift up sword upon nation, neither shall they learn war any more" (Isaiah 2:4)

In essence, we will be back to the innocence of Eden but, this time, there will be no serpent, as evil itself will be annulled.

https://www.chabaddayton.com/templates/articlecco_cdo/aid/5170194/jewish/Balak.htm

Peaceful Coexistence

By Chaya Shuchat * © Chabad 2021

E pluribus unum, “Out of many, one,” the Seal of the United States proclaims, but as any politician can tell you, that’s easier said than done. Unity between people of diverse cultures and backgrounds is hard to achieve. As idealistic as we may be, we all have unique needs and desires which can be difficult to forgo for the sake of the common good.

So, how do we reach true unity?

This week’s Torah portion sheds some light on this issue. In Parshat Balak, Bilaam, a gentile prophet, conveys a vision of the future Redemption: “A star will go forth from Jacob, and a staff will arise from Israel, which will crush the princes of Moab and uproot all the sons of Seth.”¹

That sounds kind of extreme. Why would Moshiach, the leader of a peaceful and utopian era, start uprooting and destroying nations? A world that is peaceful only for the chosen few hardly seems like an ideal worth striving for.

And how are we to understand this prophecy in the context of other prophecies of redemption that describe the nations of the world serving G d together? In the book of Zephaniah, for example, it is written, “For then I will convert the peoples to a pure language, that all of them will call in the name of the L rd, to worship Him of one accord.”²

Furthermore, Bilaam’s prophecy states that Moshiach will “uproot all the sons of Seth.” Seth was the third son of Adam and Eve. Their first son, Abel, was murdered, and all of Cain’s descendants were wiped out in the Great Flood. Thus, all of mankind descends from Seth. This verse cannot possibly be interpreted literally, because if Moshiach would eliminate all the sons of Seth, nobody would be left.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe offers this interpretation: When Moshiach comes, there will be an unprecedented revelation of G dliness, leaving no room for evil or impurity. All people in the world will readily accept G d’s rule upon themselves, because His presence will be so obvious. And this is the “uprooting” that the verse refers to—the uprooting of our selfish tendencies, our egotistical desires and motivations.

Yet there are two ways in which this uprooting can take place. It is possible to imagine the rise of a leader so powerful, with a vision so compelling, that the entire world becomes subservient to him. In such a world, everyone behaves in an exemplary fashion—there is no killing, no theft, no discrimination, no selfishness. But these tendencies have not really been uprooted; they’ve merely been suppressed. As long as these beliefs and values do not become integrated into our own psyche, our own worldview, the redemption is incomplete.

The leadership of Moshiach will be different. It will not be an imposition from outside, but the culmination of a process of refinement that has been going on since the beginning of exile. Over the centuries of exile, the Jewish people have not just been wandering from place to place. We have also been painstakingly laying the seeds for the future Redemption—by infusing holiness wherever we went, through our observance of Torah and mitzvahs.

When the world and all that is in it will perceive G d of its own accord, when everyone will call out to G d in their own voice, then there will be true Redemption. This is the key to true unity—when our individual experiences and talents all contribute to a common goal.

On a personal level, I sometimes encounter people whose views are so offensive, whose behavior is so frustrating, that I wish they would just disappear. But individuals who are truly beyond redemption are extremely rare. I could focus on our areas of disagreement and try to convince them to move toward my viewpoint, or worse, condemn them for their wrongness. But all this does is add to the general discord. A more effective approach would be to focus on our common ground and cultivate the good that is within others.

In 1991, in the aftermath of the Crown Heights riots, New York City mayor David Dinkins visited the Rebbe and requested a blessing for the people of “all our communities.” The Rebbe responded, “. . . Forget that it is ‘both sides.’ It is one side, one people . . .”³

Unity among nations is within our reach. It may take effort, but by looking beyond superficial differences, we can see the many ways that we are one. Redemption is not a far-off dream, but a fast-approaching reality.

(Based on an address of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Likkutei Sichot, vol. 23, p. 172.)

Footnotes:

1. Numbers 24:17.
2. Zephaniah 3:9.
3. www.chabad.org/1599198.

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https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/2614907/jewish/Peaceful-Coexistence.htm

Balak: The Power of Modesty

by Rabbi Moshe Wisnefsky *

Balaam said, *“How good are your tents, O Jacob, your encampments, O Israel.* (Numbers 24:5)

Balak took Balaam to a third location, thinking that perhaps it would be easier for Balaam to curse the Jewish people from there. Balaam was about to curse them, but then he saw how the Jewish people were camped: First, they were organized by tribes, which was possible only because they had been faithful in their marriages.

Second, they set up camp in such a way that no one could accidentally look into another family's tent. The Jewish people's attention to detail in their modest conduct so impressed Balaam that he decided on his own to bless them rather than curse them.

The lesson for us here is that we must never think that it is important to be concerned only about the "larger" issues of modesty and intimacy, but that we can be lax about the "smaller," "innocent" details. Even the smaller details are important — important enough to be able to transform a curse into a blessing (or an accursed situation into a blessed one).

Lest we think that this alertness to the details of modesty is only required in our day-to-day behavior but not in temporary situations (such as when we are on vacation), we see here that the tremendous power of even the minor details of modest conduct was demonstrated when our forefathers lived in tents, their temporary homes in the desert.

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Covenant and Conversation

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l

Leadership and Loyalty

Is leadership a set of skills, the ability to summon and command power? Or does it have an essentially moral dimension also? Can a bad person be a good leader, or will their badness compromise their leadership? That is the question raised by the key figure in this week's parsha, the pagan prophet Bilaam.

First, by way of introduction, we have independent evidence that Bilaam actually existed. An archaeological discovery in 1967, at Deir 'Alla at the junction of the Jordan and Jabbok rivers, uncovered an inscription on the wall of a pagan temple, dated to the eighth century BCE, which makes reference to a seer named Bilaam ben Beor, in terms remarkably similar to those of our parsha. Bilaam was a well-known figure in the region.

His skills were clearly impressive. He was a religious virtuoso, a sought-after shaman, magus, spellbinder and miracle worker. Balak says, on the basis of experience or reputation, "I know that whoever you bless is blessed, and whoever you curse is cursed" (Num. 22:6). The rabbinic literature does not call this into question. On the phrase "no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face" (Deut. 34:10), the Sages went so far as to say: "In Israel there was no other prophet as great as Moses, but among the nations there was. Who was he? Bilaam." [1]

Another midrashic source says that "There was nothing in the world that the Holy One blessed be He did not reveal to Balaam, who surpassed even Moses in the wisdom of sorcery." [2] At a technical level, Bilaam had all the skills.

Yet the ultimate verdict on Bilaam is negative. In chapter 25, we read of the ironic sequel to the episode of the curses/blessings. The Israelites, having been saved by God from the would-be curses of Moab and Midian, suffered a self-inflicted tragedy by allowing themselves to be enticed by the women of the land. God's anger burns against them. Several chapters later (Num. 31:16) it emerges that it was Bilaam who devised this strategy: "They were the ones who followed Bilaam's advice and were the means of turning the Israelites away from the Lord in what happened at Peor, so that a plague struck the Lord's people". Having failed to curse the Israelites, Bilaam eventually succeeded in doing them great harm.

So the picture that emerges from the Jewish sources is of a man with great gifts, a genuine prophet, a man whom the Sages compared with Moses himself – yet at the same time a

figure of flawed character that eventually led to his downfall and to his reputation as an evildoer and one of those mentioned by the Mishnah as having been denied a share in the world to come. [3]

What was his flaw? There are many speculations, but one suggestion given in the Talmud infers the answer from his name. What is the meaning of Bilaam? Answers the Talmud: it means, "a man without a people" (belo am). [4]

This is a fine insight. Bilaam is a man without loyalties. Balak sent for him saying: "Now come and put a curse on these people, because they are too powerful for me . . . For I know that those you bless are blessed, and those you curse are cursed." Bilaam was a prophet for hire. He had supernatural powers. He could bless someone and that person would succeed. He could curse and that person would be blighted by misfortune. But there is no hint in any of the reports, biblical or otherwise, that Bilaam was a prophet in the moral sense: that he was concerned with justice, desert, the rights and wrongs of those whose lives he affected. Like a contract killer of a later age, Bilaam was a loner. His services could be bought. He had skills, and he used them with devastating effect. But he had no commitments, no loyalties, no rootedness in humanity. He was the man belo am, without a people.

Moses was the opposite. God Himself says of him, "He is [supremely] loyal in all My house" (Numbers 12:7). However disappointed Moses was with the Israelites, he never ceased to argue their cause before God. When his initial intervention on their behalf with Pharaoh worsened their condition, he said to God, 'O Lord, why do You mistreat Your people? Why did You send me?' (Exodus 5:22).

When the Israelites made the Golden Calf and God threatened to destroy the people and begin again with Moses, he said, "Now, if You would, please forgive their sin. If not, then blot me out from the book that You have written" (Exodus 32:32). When the people, demoralised by the report of the spies, wanted to return to Egypt and God's anger burned against them, he said, "With Your great love, forgive the sin of this nation, just as You have forgiven them from [the time they left] Egypt until now" (Numbers 14:19).

When God threatened punishment during the Korach rebellion, Moses prayed, "Will You be angry with the entire assembly when only one man sins?" (Numbers 16:22). Even when his own sister Miriam spoke badly about him and

was punished by leprosy, Moses prayed to God on her behalf, "Please God, heal her now." (Numbers 12:13) Moses never ceased to pray for his people, however much they had sinned, however audacious the prayer, however much he was putting his own relationship with God at risk. Knowing their faults, he remained utterly loyal to them.

The Hebrew word emunah is usually translated as "faith," and that is what it came to mean in the Middle Ages. But in biblical Hebrew it is better translated as faithfulness, reliability, loyalty. It means not walking away from the other party when times are tough. It is a key covenantal virtue.

There are people with great gifts, intellectual and sometimes even spiritual, who nonetheless fail to achieve what they might have done. They lack the basic moral qualities of integrity, honesty, humility and above all loyalty. What they do, they do brilliantly. But often they do the wrong things. Conscious of their unusual endowments, they tend to look down on others. They give way to pride, arrogance and a belief that they can somehow get away with great crimes. Bilaam is the classic example, and the fact that he planned to entice the Israelites into sin even after he knew that God was on their side is a measure of how the greatest can sometimes fall to become the lowest of the low.

Those who are loyal to other people find that other people are loyal to them. Those who are disloyal are eventually distrusted and lose whatever authority they might once have had. Leadership without loyalty is not leadership. Skills alone cannot substitute for the moral qualities that make people follow those who demonstrate them. We follow those we trust, because they have acted so as to earn our trust. That was what made Moses the great leader. Bilaam might have been but never was. Always be loyal to the people you lead.

[1] Sifre Devarim, 357.

[2] Tanna devei Eliyahu Rabbah 28; see also Bamidbar Rabbah 14:20; Brachot 7a; Avodah Zarah 4a.

[3] Mishnah Sanhedrin 10:2.

[4] Sanhedrin 105a

Shabbat Shalom: Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

"My nation, remember what Balak the king of Moab advised and what Bil'am the son of Be'or... answered him in order that you may know the compassionate righteousness of the Lord" [Micha. 6:5].

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Who, or what, defines Israel, and why does it matter? If deeply concerning trends continue in the United States, research and ample anecdotal evidence indicate that those succeeding in affecting views toward Israel are the very people who attack it as a racist, discriminatory occupier lacking any moral or political legitimacy. Noble attempts to brand Israel as a high-tech haven (“start-up nation”) notwithstanding, Israel is increasingly being effectively defined by foes, not friends. What, if anything, can be done to reverse these deeply troubling developments?

In our weekly Biblical portion, Balak, we read that efforts by enemies to define the Jewish People have ancient antecedents. King Balak of Moab, frightened by the “Biblical Israelis,” vastly overestimates their global designs as well as their military might: “This multitude will lick up all that is round about us as the ox licks up the grass of the field” (Num. 22:4). He therefore turns to Bil’am, a magician and a soothsayer, an accomplished poet and master of the spoken word, to curse the Israelis in order to vanquish them (*ibid.*, v.6).

Bil’am represents the giant media corporations and social media platforms that play a dominant role in shaping public opinion. Is it not true that these manipulators of minds have the power to destroy a world with a word? And indeed, Bil’am sets out to curse the Israelites.

Nevertheless, the Torah goes on to say that the prophet ultimately blesses the Israelites. At first he is struck by his donkey’s refusal to take him where he wanted to go. Apparently even a donkey can be amazed by the miraculous events that contributed to the preservation and preeminence of Israel from abject slaves to recipients of God’s Presence at Sinai, despite their smallness in number and scarcity of power.

And then Bil’am sees for himself—to the extent that at least he attempted to record the truth as he composes his tweets and Facebook posts. He may have come to curse, but he stays to praise. He evokes Jewish destiny in glowing terms, extolling the uniqueness of Israel (*ibid.*, 23:9) and evoking our ultimate Messianic victory (*ibid.*, 24:17–19). He affirms unmistakably that “no black magic can be effective against Jacob and no occult powers against Israel” (*ibid.*, 23:23) – evil words spoken by evil people are impotent before the modesty and integrity expressed by the Israelites in their daily lives.

Ultimately, however, it is not the speaking donkey that will succeed in changing the minds of the many Bil’ams around us; rather, it is the deeds of the Jewish People itself that will evoke change: “Your deeds will bring you close, your deeds will distance you” [Mishna, *Eduyot* 5:7].

First of all, Bil’am takes note of the military success of this fledgling nation against every one of her enemies—Israel had just emerged from a great military victory against the terrorizing Amorites. And, more importantly, the chaste and sanctified lifestyle of the Israelites and their commitment to their traditions and ideals made an even greater impact on Bil’am.

“How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your Sanctuaries, O Israel!” [Num. 24:5]. Bil’am was amazed as to how the Israelite encampment (*ohel*) was constructed to respect everyone’s privacy, so that no one could see into his neighbor’s home. He was moved by the sensitivity toward interpersonal relationships, the love and respect displayed toward one another by family members and the harmony with which neighbors lived together.

And when Bil’am saw the commitment the Israelites had to their study halls and synagogues (*mishkan*)—their fealty to traditional values and teachings and their faith in Divine providence—he understood, and proclaimed the invincibility of this Divinely-elected people.

Alas, what a person might—and words could not—do to the Israelites, the Israelites managed to do to themselves. Bil’am and Balak returned to their homes to leave Israel in peace—but the Israelites themselves self-destructed. They chased after the hedonistic blandishments of the pagan societies of Bil’am and Balak. The very next chapter opened with “And the people began to commit harlotry with the daughters of Moab...and Israel joined himself to the [idolatry of] Ba’al Peor [Bil’am ben Beor]” (*ibid.*, 25:1–3).

We failed in the desert not because of what our enemies did or said, but rather because of our own moral weakness and rejection of the birthright that had initially formed our nation’s definition and mission. Indeed, we are “a people who dwells alone, not subject to the machinations of other nations” (*ibid.*, 23:9).

In this generation, in which detractors and haters attacking the Jewish People and Israel are on the ascent in capturing public opinion, we must remember to ignore the noise, and to focus on our national mission. To rephrase Ben Gurion, indeed it is not what the nations say that matters, but rather it is what we do or what we do not do, especially in the spheres of ethics and morality, which is of supreme significance.

Torah.Org: Rabbi Yissocher Frand **Reading the Fine Print in Bilaam’s Refusal to Go**

There is a strange similarity between a pasuk in Parshas Balak and a statement in Maseches Avos. When Balak tries to entice Bilaam to come and curse Klal Yisrael, Bilaam at first refuses and says, “If Balak will give me a house full of silver and gold, I am unable to

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transgress the word of G-d.” This is strikingly reminiscent of a statement in the sixth chapter of Pirkei Avos, where somebody came to Rabbi Yossi ben Kisma and made him an offer that he seemingly could not refuse. A person approached the Tanna and invited him to come to his city to build a Yeshiva there. He made him an outstanding offer to which Rabbi Yossi ben Kisma responded, “My son, even if you offer me all the silver and gold and precious stones and jewels in the world, I refuse to live in any place other than a place of Torah.” [Avos 6:9]

Now, even though this sounds strikingly similar to what Bilaam said, Bilaam is condemned. Chazal take Bilaam’s statement as being an implicit hint to the officers of Moav that he would really like all that silver and gold, and that he thinks he is worth it. No one suspects Rabbi Yossi ben Kisma of intimating that for the right price he could indeed be convinced to come. What is the difference between the statement of Bilaam and, l’chavdil, the statement of Rav Yossi ben Kisma?

Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky makes a very interesting observation: “If Balak will give me a house full of gold and silver... I won’t do it!” What about two houses? What about five houses? For one house? Nu! What is one house full of gold and silver worth? For that price alone, I will not consider coming. By specifying that a single house is the offer he refuses, he implies that if the price were right – then maybe there would be what to discuss.

What is the language of Rabbi Yossi ben Kisma? It is “all the silver and gold and precious stones and jewels in the world.” There is nothing more to talk about! No money in the world can change my mind. I will only live in a place of Torah. That is the difference between Bilaam’s refusal and the refusal by Rabbi Yossi ben Kisma in Pirkei Avos.

OTS Dvar Torah

Bilaam’s Blessings

Max Davis

Keriyat Shema is 22 pesukim in length, but it could have been significantly longer. According to the Gemara, our Sages sought to include parshat Balak within Keriyat Shema. (Berachot 12b) This is generally understood to mean the blessings uttered by Bilaam totalling fourteen additional verses, however it is possible that the Sages intended all 104 verses of the parsha. Ultimately, they declined to include the extra verses due to concerns of tircha – making the Shema onerously long. Nonetheless, the discussion highlights the immense importance of parshat Balak and raises questions of what message our Sages deemed worth including in our thrice daily, most famous tefillah.

Among the explanations for the significance of parshat Balak is the fact that it is the only parsha without Jewish ‘witnesses’. Bnei Yisrael were apparently unaware of the danger

they faced nor the extent of divine protection they enjoyed in those moments. No Jews were present to record events as they unfolded and the only reason we discovered what happened was because Hashem included the story in Torah. Parshat Balak as a whole challenges us to maintain faith in Hashem as well as the divinity of Torah. Arguably, this exercise in faith would be appropriately situated in Keriyat Shema, the prayer that serves as our fundamental ‘Declaration of Faith.’

However, if our Sages were suggesting only the inclusion of Bilaam’s blessings, it is necessary to delve deeper into those fourteen verses to reveal their significance for our daily lives. One approach is to focus on Mah Tovu, the only one of Bilaam’s blessings to make it into our daily liturgy, albeit not as part of the Shema and not without some controversy. A responsum by the Maharshal rejects reciting the opening verse of Mah Tovu, in favor of beginning with the second sentence, Va’ani berov chasdecha. He argues essentially that the ends cannot justify the means. Bilaam spoke with a desire to curse us, and although Hashem righted the wrong, it would be inappropriate to include Bilaam’s words in our prayers.

Objections notwithstanding, Ashkenazi practice is to recite Mah Tovu at the outset of our daily tefillot. Sefer Baruch She’amar (R. Baruch HaLevi Epshteyn) inquires why Bilaam’s blessing receives such auspicious attention. He explains that these words of blessing convey an extra degree of potency precisely because they were spoken by a villain. The praise of a foe is far more astonishing than the same tribute offered by a friend. Mah Tovu and Bilaam’s blessings in general remind us of the lengths Hashem goes to protect and sustain us day and night. Perhaps this is why our Sages saw fit to include such words in Keriyat Shema, especially as it is recited at critical moments during the day.

Permit me to share an additional thought that emerges not from commentaries but from the lived experience of a congregant. This particular congregant recently related to me his volunteer efforts as guardian ad litem in our home state of Minnesota. The official definition of a guardian ad litem is a person “appointed by the Juvenile or Family Court to represent a maltreated child’s best interests in court proceedings.” (MN Guardian ad Litem Board). He described the certification process including several training exercises, one of which struck me for its subtly transformative power.

Participants were shown an image of the inside of a home. It was rundown, shabby and the sort of place many of us would prefer to avoid. The exercise was simple: Identify ten positive points in the photo. It could be a nondescript post-it note on the fridge – someone trying to remember something. It could be the simple bowl of fruit on the table – an attempt to feed.

Completing the exercise helped participants reevaluate their perceptions. The home they had dismissed minutes earlier became a place that was lived in, a place of family, a place of plans, interests, tastes, loves and challenges.

Mah tovu ohalecha Yaakov – How goodly are your tents, Oh Jacob!

Bilaam was certainly no guardian ad litem, but perhaps he was forced to take another look at the homes that lay before him. Did Hashem cause him to internalize the words that emerged from his mouth? Did he understand the tov when he said Mah tovu? We cannot know. The Maharshal implies not. Others including Rashi imply that he did perceive the good. (Rashi states that Bilaam noticed a remarkably subtle detail of the encampment; that tents were staggered for the sake of modesty, lest residents be able to peer in on one another. How remarkable that Bilaam should notice such a detail, much less discern its purpose!)

Whether or not Bilaam understood the blessings that Hashem placed in his mouth, what matters is the concept of taking a deeper look at the sights and sounds Hashem places before us each day. Where might we rediscover the tov in our homes, communities and societies? What assumptions deserve a fresh look and deeper reflection? Reciting the blessings of Bilaam as part of our liturgy allows us to reenact Bilaam’s experience – the moment when Hashem swept away his intentions and, perhaps his assumptions. The moment when Hashem opened Bilaam’s mouth, and perhaps his eyes, to a different, more thoughtful picture. Enemy tents became homes worth blessing.

May parshat Balak and the blessings of Bilaam inspire us to see and to name the tov wherever it resides, and to partner in the development of this world with Hashem, Who renews creation daily betuvo!

OU Torah: Parsha from OU Through the Eyes of a Donkey Rabbi Eliyahu Safran

Picture the unfolding scene – as the forty-year sojourn in the Wilderness is ending and the Promised Land is within reach, the Israelites have already defeated two kings and now Balak, King of the Moab, is fully awakened to their might. In fear, he sends Bilaam, the sorcerer, to curse the Jews. Stealthily approaching their camp, Bilaam is prepared to do whatever it took to curse and malign the Jewish people...

Chazal teach that deep hatred causes people to lose grasp of their most ‘basic norms of conduct.’ Here, Bilaam, the nations’ prophet, is so filled with hatred that he dispenses his own dignity and saddles his own donkey! Motivated by his evil emotion, he moves rashly, never considering his donkey might be

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more perceptive than he. Vayakam Bilaam! Bilaam arose!

The Torah devotes more than ten pesukim (Bamidbar 22:21-34) telling us about this donkey and her role in making clear Bilaam’s folly and wickedness. Bilaam had taken on this “assignment” only with God’s permission, hoping to ultimately and arrogantly flout His will. Fool! To demonstrate the weakness of Bilaam and his Moabite escort, God dispatched an angel with a drawn sword to block his way.

Of course, driven by his hatred and arrogance, Bilaam could not see what his “lowly” donkey could – an Angel of God blocking his way. What an odd, comical scene! This “prophet”, tasked to curse God’s chosen, finding himself in a shouting match with his donkey. He curses the animal. He beats her. The animal moves sideways rather than forward. This happens not once, not twice but shalosh regalim and still Bilaam continues to beat his donkey until God opens her mouth, so she can protest to her master, “What have I done to you that you struck me these three times?

“I’ve been your loyal donkey for years. Have I ever endangered you?”

Bilaam explodes in anger. “Because you mocked me! If only there were a sword in my hand I would have killed, you!”

Rashi mocks Bilaam and his pathetic response, picturing him humiliated by his donkey. Here was a man who could presumably wipe out an entire nation with his voice, yet he needs a sword to deal with one poor donkey!

Ultimately, of course, God awakens Bilaam to the Angel, sword drawn, blocking his path. The Angel chastises him for his cruelty and unfairness.

“I have sinned,” Bilaam admits. “For I did not know that you were standing opposite me on the road.” Yes, despite his boasts of knowing the mind of God, he – unlike his donkey – never saw an Angel of God. But what kind of an answer is this? Why not just concede, “I didn’t see you? I thought my donkey got lazy?” Sure, he grew angry but “I have sinned”? What was his sin really – that he hadn’t seen the Angel? Surely that wasn’t his fault, was it?

Malbim tells us that Bilaam’s sin was not that he didn’t see but that he should have seen! Had he considered his donkey’s stubbornness rather than been driven by hatred, he would have known that an Angel was present. “I’m sorry I didn’t get it,” isn’t enough. Why didn’t you get it? The Angel is as astonished as we are. “Don’t you recognize an omen when it’s right before you?”

Sefarim explain that a sin of omission is still a sin. Some things in life must be known. Not

knowing or seeing certain things is the failure. The great ba'al mussar Rav Shlomo Wolbe said it perfectly, "In life we often find ourselves in situations in which we perceive only the donkey and fail to see the angel!"

It is on us to see the Angel!

Pirkei Avot teaches us the difference between the disciples of Avraham and those of Bilaam. Whereas Bilaam's disciples possess an evil eye, an arrogant spirit and a greedy soul – characteristics which blind one to the spiritual; characteristics that prompt one to argue, to be shortsighted, to "beat one's donkey" –

Avraham's disciples possess a benevolent eye, a humble spirit and a meek soul. They get it where Bilaam didn't.

Bilaam was sure he "knew it all".

There are so many like Bilaam these days. Know it all's. They have their eyes on "the prize" – the right yeshiva, the right house, the right mate but then... things don't work out. So, they "double down." They beat "the donkey once, twice, three times", each time harder and harder. Yet, the more they strike the donkey, the more their "dream" job, their "perfect" home, their "ideal" wife slips away from them.

Why? Just like Bilaam's donkey "turning aside", life has a way of recognizing that the path is blocked. Just like Bilaam, we grow angry and blame others for our failings, for our inability to realize our goals, we blame circumstance and fate for our shortcomings when it is really our inability to see that has caused our failures.

But why should we not be able to realize our dreams? For the same reason Bilaam did not realize his. As Rashi writes, an angel of mercy was stationed in his path by God to stop him, in effect to save him from himself.

Rav Avraham Pam Zt'l teaches that we often convince ourselves that we must attain a particular goal, so we try harder and harder, redoubling our efforts with ever greater passion, frustration and anger. And each time, more obstacles seem to sabotage our efforts. We just don't get it. We need to "see" what we have ignored – an Angel of mercy God has stationed in our way to spare us from the impending disasters we cannot fathom along that path.

We need an angel to save us from ourselves; and we need to be aware of the warning signs blinking red at the boundaries of our determined desires. We need to know that if it doesn't happen, it's not meant to be.

Rav Dovid Feinstein Zt'l notes that when the donkey chastised Bilaam she said, "For you have struck me now three times (shalosh regalim)" (22:28). Generally, when the Torah uses the word regalim the term means "legs"

or "feet". If so, why use the term here. Why not use the term, peamim (times, occurrences)? Rav Dovid explains that regalim is also related to the word rageel, which means "habitual" or "regular". So here we understand that the donkey was complaining that her master had become so rageel, so habituated, to striking her that he no longer recognized the singularity of her behavior. Bilaam didn't "get it"; he didn't comprehend that the animal's unusual behavior was a message from God. As the Angel tells Bilaam a few verses on, had he not finally listened to the third message, there would have been no fourth one; the Angel would have killed him.

Insanity is said to be doing the same thing over and over but expecting a different result. Bilaam's behavior was textbook insanity! Only by being tuned in to God's message of mercy may we truly effectuate change; only God's mercy frees us from the insanity of our endless desires.

The Seforim notes that it was God who opened the donkey's mouth and gave her the power of speech so that Bilaam might "awake" to teshuva.

"Why did you hit your donkey three times" the Angel asks Bilaam. Seferim comments that, having seen all the "signs", Bilaam should have concluded that going out to curse the Jews was unacceptable. The onus was on Bilaam to have seen what he didn't see. Like Bilaam, we are too often arrogant, greedy, needy and petty. We intentionally blind ourselves to the Angel of mercy who stands in our path.

That is on us.

It is our choice and obligation to open our eyes and to see.

Balak and Korach: Who Not to Be Steven Genack

Rabbi Tzadok HaKohen of Lublin writes that the names of the parshiot speak to the heart of the parsha's message just as names do. Therefore, there is significance in the names of parshiot and in names in general. The fundamental question then becomes why are two parshiot in the Torah named Balak and Korach?

I can postulate why a parsha is named after Korach. Based on the idea that we know who we are by what we are not, Korach serves as the primary example of what not to be in life. By giving him a portion in the Torah, we are shown that one who is embroiled in the traits of kinah, taavah and kavod are literally "taken from this world," swallowed by the earth. The message is clear: adopt an opposite lifestyle of this person.

But what's the message of naming a portion after Balak? On the one hand he persisted in trying to realize a curse against Israel, yet Ruth

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is a descendant of his, due to his sacrificing to G-d, though he lacked any intent. How are we to identify Balak?

I believe the answer is that he is another person whose example we should use for how not to act. Balak missed a fundamental point. He hired Bilaam because he believed the Jewish military victories came by way of sorcery. This was a fundamental error. A king must be a student of history and internalize examples of the past.

Unlike Yitro, about whom the Torah testified, "Vayishma Yitro," by Balak it is written "Vayar Balak," he saw. There's a key difference between hearing and seeing. Hearing is indicative of pondering and internalizing while seeing indicates a superficial glance without probing to the depth of the matter. Yitro heard and internalized G-d's miracles while Balak glanced at them and failed to realize that Israel's conquests were not rooted in black magic but in the Almighty.

In Jewish law, hearing is worth much more than seeing. It's only if you cause deafness to another man that you pay his whole value, a reality that doesn't apply to any of the other senses. Balak failed to "hear" instead relying upon his periphery vision.

Balak also failed in realizing his name. Balak is known as Balak ben Tzipor. We are told that the Tzipor name hints to his performing magic through a certain bird, but it has another possible meaning. It can also hint to the metzorah, who can only be purified by a bird that chatters just as the metzorah chattered and slandered. Balak should have "chatted and deliberated" more with his senses to arrive at clearer conclusions. Here we see a person has a chance within his name to fulfill his destiny but fails.

On the other hand, in next week's parsha, Pinchas has a name that challenged his mission, but he overcame it. If you split up his name into two words, it spells "pen chas," – "maybe he will have mercy." Pinchas is challenged to leave his lineage's culture of altruism through words. He brings a new idea to the world: peace through military engagement and dichotomizes the ways in how peace can be achieved.

Indeed, the names of parshiot and people's names define their essence. Two parshiot in the Torah serve a great purpose by choosing to name them after doomed characters. By studying them we can clearly see how not to act. After all, there are only two ways one can learn how to act: either to model or not model one's behavior after someone else. The gift of Balak and Korach is that we are taught not to base our philosophies based on short sightedness and periphery glances, but rather on introspection and that we should not covet honor and glory, but rather seek humility, for it is in the humble that G-d resides.

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Reading the Fine Print in Bilaam's Refusal to Go

There is a strange similarity between a pasuk in Parshas Balak and a statement in Maseches Avos. When Balak tries to entice Bilaam to come and curse Klal Yisrael, Bilaam at first refuses and says, "If Balak will give me a house full of silver and gold, I am unable to transgress the word of G-d." This is strikingly reminiscent of a statement in the sixth chapter of Pirkei Avos, where somebody came to Rabbi Yossi ben Kisma and made him an offer that he seemingly could not refuse. A person approached the Tanna and invited him to come to his city to build a Yeshiva there. He made him an outstanding offer to which Rabbi Yossi ben Kisma responded, "My son, even if you offer me all the silver and gold and precious stones and jewels in the world, I refuse to live in any place other than a place of Torah." [Avos 6:9]

Now, even though this sounds strikingly similar to what Bilaam said, Bilaam is condemned. Chazal take Bilaam's statement as being an implicit hint to the officers of Moav that he would really like all that silver and gold, and that he thinks he is worth it. No one suspects Rabbi Yossi ben Kisma of intimating that for the right price he could indeed be convinced to come. What is the difference between the statement of Bilaam and, l'havdil, the statement of Rav Yossi ben Kisma?

Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky makes a very interesting observation: "If Balak will give me a house full of gold and silver... I won't do it!" What about two houses? What about five houses? For one house? Nu! What is one house full of gold and silver worth? For that price alone, I will not consider coming. By specifying that a single house is the offer he refuses, he implies that if the price were right – then maybe there would be what to discuss.

What is the language of Rabbi Yossi ben Kisma? It is "all the silver and gold and precious stones and jewels in the world." There is nothing more to talk about! No money in the world can change my mind. I will only live in a place of Torah. That is the difference between Bilaam's refusal and the refusal by Rabbi Yossi ben Kisma in Pirkei Avos.

Yeshivat Har Etzion: Virtual Bet Midrash

The Significance of the Story of Bilaam's Donkey By Rav Elchanan Samet

I. THE STRUCTURE OF THE PARASHA -

The plot of this week's parasha divides logically into two sections. The first part deals with negotiations regarding Bilaam's trip to Moav: first negotiations between Bilaam and Balak's two delegations, and then between Bilaam and God (or rather His angel). The turning point in the story begins in Bamidbar 22:36, with a description of the actual meeting between Balak and Bilaam. A description of the reciprocal relations between the two fills the second part of the story, until the last

verse which concludes the entire story with the "scattering of the characters" [24:25]: "And Bilam rose up, and went and returned to his place; and Balak also went his way." The parts of the story are differentiated, consequently, by the means of communication between the two main characters, Balak and Bilaam: in the first section it is an indirect communication conducted through messengers, and in the second section, it is a direct communication.

In the verses that introduce the second section of the story [22:36-40], the first direct meeting takes place between the two main characters. This meeting actualizes the double effort that Balak had invested in order to bring Bilaam to him. Therefore, it is parallel to the first twenty verses of our story [22:2-21], in which this intense effort of persuasion is described.

If the meeting between Balak and Bilaam at the beginning of the second section parallels the beginning of the first section (the story of the emissaries), then it stands to reason that the rest of the second section parallels the rest of the first section. (This creates an A-B-A-B structure to our parasha.) In other words, I contend that the description of Balak's blessings and prophecies (part II.B) parallels the story of Bilaam and his donkey (part I.B). What is the connection between these two sections?

I. THE LITERARY FORM OF 'THREE AND FOUR'

The shared quality that is most apparent and recognizable to the reader between the story of the donkey to the story of Bilaam's blessings is that both are constructed according to the same literary form called 'three and four.'

Professor Yair Zakovitch, in his Hebrew book "On Three... and on Four" (1979), collected and analyzed most of the sources in the Bible where this model appears, and this is what he writes in the introduction to his work: "The subject of this composition is the literary model three-four in the Bible, meaning literary units built in four layers. The first three repeat one another and there is not, usually, a monumental change from verse to verse, and only in the fourth unit begins the severe change, this change which is the central and climactic part of the literary unit."

In part I.B of our parasha, God's angel blocks Bilaam's path three times, and all three times the donkey recognizes his presence and responds by turning off the road. All three times Bilaam does not recognize the angel of God and only at the climax of the unit, the fourth encounter, does God open Bilaam's eyes and allow him to see the angel and converse with him. The first three parts include four repeating components, which either repeat themselves stereotypically or present a development:

Component A: The angel stations himself as a barrier in front of the donkey (developmental repetition).

Component B: The donkey's identification of the angel of God (stereotypical repetition).

Component C: Reaction of the donkey (developmental reaction).

Component D: Bilaam's beating of the donkey (development).

Bilaam's dialogue with the donkey in the third incident has no parallel in the previous two occurrences, but rather serves to pave the way for

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Bilam's dialogue with the angel in the fourth incident. For example, Bilam's donkey asks [verse 28], "What have I done to thee, that thou has struck me these three times?" and the angel asks Bilaam [32], "Why hast thou struck thy donkey these three times?" And in contrast to the words of Bilaam to his donkey [29], "I would there were a sword in my hand, for now I would kill thee," the angel of God shows his sword and tells Bilaam [verse 33]: "Unless she had turned from me, I would now have slain thee, and saved her alive."

Now we will move on to part II.B, Bilaam's blessings [22:41-24:25]. Balak and Bilaam make three attempts to curse Israel, and all three times what emerges from his mouth in actuality is a blessing, that only increases in grandeur. At the climax of the unit, in its fourth part, Bilaam makes no preparation to curse Israel, but rather informs Balak without prompting [24:14], "Come, therefore, and I will advise thee what this people shall do to thy people in the latter days."

The first three units (i.e. the failed attempts to curse Israel) include eight components, which repeat themselves in the same order: some of them are simple repetitions, some include mild changes and some express new developments, especially in the third unit.

Component A: Journey to the place which was chosen as fitting for cursing Israel.

Component B: Preparing the altars and sacrifices.

Component C: Bilaam setting out alone to receive God's word.

Component D: Bilaam's encounter with God.

Component E: Balak returns to Bilaam to take up his parable.

Component F: The blessings of Israel. (There are many internal parallels within these blessings, and also a clear development between them, but this is worthy of separate treatment.)

Component G: Balak's angry reaction when he hears the blessings.

Component H: Bilaam's answer to Balak.

One of the main purposes for using the form of "three and four" in Biblical stories is to describe how a certain phenomenon emerges as more than mere coincidence, turning it into an undeniable phenomenon whose reason becomes clear to all. It seems that this is the purpose for the use of the "three and four" form two times in our story.

Only after the donkey deviates from the path three times is Bilaam ready to understand that this is not coincidental. Therefore, only after three repetitions does the angel of God reveal himself to Bilaam, and the reason for the donkey's behavior becomes apparent.

Similarly, only after Bilaam blesses Israel three times are he and Balak ready to recognize that this is not coincidental. They realize that God wishes to prevent Israel from being cursed and to bestow upon them a blessing. Therefore, after the third blessing, Balak has no more desire for Bilaam's services (24:11): "I called thee to curse my enemies, and behold, thou hast altogether blessed them these three times. Therefore, now flee to thy place." Thus, when Bilaam prophesies for the fourth time, this time without an invitation on the part of Balak, it is completely apparent that Israel finds favor in God's eyes, not only now, but

in the distant future as well (24:17): "I see it, but not now, I behold it, but it is not near..."

Here revealed before us is a broad connection between the story of the donkey and the story of the blessings that Bilam bestowed upon Israel, but there is also more to explore.

II. THE MEANING OF THE PARALLEL -

The beast of burden (or the donkey) is the accepted means of transportation in the Bible. The relationship between the rider and the animal typifies the relationship between the master and his obedient and submissive servant, who serves loyally as a means for achieving his master's goals. As the donkey says to Bilam [22:30], "Am I not thy donkey, upon which thou hast ridden all thy life to this day? Was I ever wont to do so to thee?" Bilam, acknowledges her words, answers, "No."

Balak expects Bilam to serve loyally as a means to cIsrael. But something unexpected happens both in the relationship between Bilam and his donkey and between Balak and Bilam. The faithful "servant" deviates from the will of the "master" three times, angering the master more and more. The reason for the deviation in both places is similar: God's will causes the servant to act against both his wishes and the wishes of the master. However, the angel of God or God's word are revealed only to the "servant" and not to his master, and therefore the master mistakenly pins the deviation on his faithful servant, not recognizing that this "sin" is being forced upon him.

The truth is that the servant does not totally understand the occurrence that is happening by his hand. The donkey tries to bypass the angel time after time. Similarly, Bilam does not understand the full significance of God's word which is placed in his mouth and therefore he tries over and over to bypass it and to fulfill Balak's desire and curse Israel.

Let us now compare the reaction of Bilam to the donkey's third deviation, to Balak's reaction to Bilam's third parable:

22:28: And Bilam's anger burned, and he struck the donkey with a staff.

24:10: And Balak's anger was kindled against Bilam, and he smote his hands together.

If a staff had been in Balak's hands, he certainly would have wanted to hit Bilam. The smiting together of his hands is clearly an expression of his desire to hit, and therefore Balak says to Bilam in the continuation [24:11]: "Therefore now FLEE to thy place."

The parallel that exists between the story of the donkey and the story of Bilam's blessings leads us to the following conclusion. The incident of the donkey represents a kind of "simulation" (unbeknownst to its participants) for what is going to happen in the near future. The donkey and its master foreshadow the roles that Bilam and Balak respectively are soon to play. And only the angel of God appears in this story and subsequently in a similar role: the word of God placed in the mouth of Bilam. However, what is the purpose of this "simulation game" and for whom is it intended?

IV. THE MEANING OF THE TALE OF THE DONKEY - The purpose of our story is summarized in Devarim 23:5-6: "And because

they hired against thee Bilam, the son of Be'or, from Petor of Aram Naharayim to curse thee. But the Lord thy God would not hearken to Bilam; but the Lord thy God turned the curse into a blessing unto thee, because the Lord thy God loved thee."

It should be added that the purpose of this story is not only that Israel was saved from being cursed by Bilam, but also the manner in which this was achieved. According to a brilliant Divine plan, those who cursed became those who blessed against their will, and that the lesson was learned by the personalities involved: Bilam, Balak, and the ministers of Moav.

Have these personalities understood, at the end of the story, that the blessings bestowed upon Israel by Bilam were not a coincidental occurrence, but were proof of the permanent relationship between God and Israel? Have they understood that their actions were used as a medium by God, in a pre-ordained plan, to turn the curse into a blessing, and that they served to actualize A plan that was not in their interest? To the readers, the matter seems simple and clear. However, to the personalities within the story, perhaps the import of the events were not totally clear. They could have explained, for instance, that just as God "recanted" his first reply to Bilam and allowed him to go with Balak's messengers, so He changed His mind again and decided to bless Israel instead of cursing them. However, in the future, perhaps He will desire to curse them. What is a greater chillul Hashem than looking at the events from this perspective? Obviously, this perspective would only push Bilam and Balak farther from the lesson they were supposed to learn from these events.

Informing Bilam from the beginning about what was going to happen would have prevented any misunderstandings. However, this was not possible, since Bilam would have refused to participate in this program. The solution was this "game of simulation" with the donkey. When Bilam blesses Israel "three times" in opposition to his desire to serve Balak faithfully, and when Balak becomes angry and frustrated, Bilam remembers that this scenario is indeed familiar to him from the events with his donkey on the way here. Then it becomes clear that everything was pre-destined and was planned so that he would bless Israel three times. When God granted him permission to go on his way, it had always been with this final plan in mind.

Thus, the story of the donkey is not an interpolation within the greater story of Balak and Bilam, and its goal is not "to reduce the stature of the prophet Bilam and present him as an empty vessel: not only is he not a prophet but his ability to prophesy is even less than his animal's ability" (as Zakovitch says). As occurs in other places in the Bible, the chapter on the donkey represents a hidden message about the future. A hidden message such as this is given through a reality that is nothing but a costume for a parable that hides within it. However, the meaning of the parable can be understood only when the future events which it foreshadows actually occur.

A hidden message is used when there is a need to prophesy the future, but in such a way that when the message is relayed it is not understood

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by those who give it. Knowing the future may paralyze the person and prevent him from acting; but in hindsight, the message will be understood. The incident with the donkey teaches Bilam and us that all the events of the parasha were planned out by God from the beginning. (Translated by Nechama Barash)

Weekly Parsha BALAK 5781

Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog

The Talmud incisively comments that it is not the mouse that is a thief, but, rather, it is the hole in the wall that allows the mouse entry into the house that is the culprit. There is no question that the villain in this week's Torah reading is Bilaam. His hatred of the Jewish people is long-standing. He was one of the advisors to the Pharaoh of Egypt who encouraged that tyrant to enslave the people of Israel. Even though it is obvious, even for him, that the will of heaven is that he should not accept the invitation of Balak to embark on the mission of cursing the Jewish people, he forces the issue, and accepts the mission willingly and enthusiastically.

Even a talking donkey cannot sway him from pursuing his evil path and destination. Yet, it is Balak who initiates the entire scenario. He is, so to speak, the hole that allows the thieving mouse Bilaam to enter a situation that will enable him to curse the Jewish people. Balak is the king of Moav and was guaranteed by heavenly decree that his land would not be invaded or annexed by the people of Israel, as his ancestors were descended from Lot, the nephew of Abraham.

Because Lot kept faith with Abraham when they were in Egypt and did not inform against Abraham and Sarah, he was afforded almost continual protection and a guarantee that his descendants would not be harmed by the descendants of Abraham. According to the Midrash, even though Balak is aware of all of this, he is still determined to destroy the Jewish people by whatever means are required. And the curses of Bilaam are one part of the plan.

We are taught that hatred is unreasoning, illogical, destructive, and devoid of any rational behavior. All human history shows us the truth of this Talmudic observation. Hatred leads not only to the destruction of those hated but is equally destructive to the hater as well.

Even after the failure of the mission of Bilaam and the clear realization that the Lord is protecting the Jewish people, Balak searches for other means to annihilate the Jews. He makes a covenant with ostensibly the mightiest king in that area and of that time, Sichon, the head of the tribe of the Emorites. And Sichon will dutifully set out to attack and destroy the Jewish people. He is defeated by the Jewish nation, and because Balak and Moav entrusted their sovereignty and independence to Sichon, with his defeat, the lands of Moav also fall under Jewish sovereignty.

This is illustrative of the power of hatred. People will surrender their own rights and property in the mistaken belief that their hatred will somehow translate into the annihilation of their enemy. The whole exercise of the hatred by Balak of the Jewish people transforms itself into his own defeat and demise. Hatred blinds the eyes of even the most previously wise and powerful.

Shabbat shalom

Rabbi Berel Wein

Leadership and Loyalty (Balak 5781)

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks ZL

Is leadership a set of skills, the ability to summon and command power? Or does it have an essentially moral dimension also? Can a bad person be a good leader, or will their badness compromise their leadership? That is the question raised by the key figure in this week's parsha, the pagan prophet Bilaam.

First, by way of introduction, we have independent evidence that Bilaam actually existed. An archaeological discovery in 1967, at Deir 'Alla at the junction of the Jordan and Jabbok rivers, uncovered an inscription on the wall of a pagan temple, dated to the eighth century BCE, which makes reference to a seer named Bilaam ben Beor, in terms remarkably similar to those of our parsha. Bilaam was a well-known figure in the region.

His skills were clearly impressive. He was a religious virtuoso, a sought-after shaman, magus, spellbinder and miracle worker. Balak says, on the

basis of experience or reputation, "I know that whoever you bless is blessed, and whoever you curse is cursed" (Num. 22:6). The rabbinic literature does not call this into question. On the phrase "no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face" (Deut. 34:10), the Sages went so far as to say: "In Israel there was no other prophet as great as Moses, but among the nations there was. Who was he? Bilaam."^[1]

Another midrashic source says that "There was nothing in the world that the Holy One blessed be He did not reveal to Balaam, who surpassed even Moses in the wisdom of sorcery."^[2] At a technical level, Bilaam had all the skills.

Yet the ultimate verdict on Bilaam is negative. In chapter 25, we read of the ironic sequel to the episode of the curses/blessings. The Israelites, having been saved by God from the would-be curses of Moab and Midian, suffered a self-inflicted tragedy by allowing themselves to be enticed by the women of the land. God's anger burns against them. Several chapters later (Num. 31:16) it emerges that it was Bilaam who devised this strategy: "They were the ones who followed Bilaam's advice and were the means of turning the Israelites away from the Lord in what happened at Peor, so that a plague struck the Lord's people". Having failed to curse the Israelites, Bilaam eventually succeeded in doing them great harm.

So the picture that emerges from the Jewish sources is of a man with great gifts, a genuine prophet, a man whom the Sages compared with Moses himself – yet at the same time a figure of flawed character that eventually led to his downfall and to his reputation as an evil-doer and one of those mentioned by the Mishnah as having been denied a share in the world to come.^[3]

What was his flaw? There are many speculations, but one suggestion given in the Talmud infers the answer from his name. What is the meaning of Bilaam? Answers the Talmud: it means, "a man without a people" (belo am).^[4]

This is a fine insight. Bilaam is a man without loyalties. Balak sent for him saying: "Now come and put a curse on these people, because they are too powerful for me . . . For I know that those you bless are blessed, and those you curse are cursed." Bilaam was a prophet for hire. He had supernatural powers. He could bless someone and that person would succeed. He could curse and that person would be blighted by misfortune. But there is no hint in any of the reports, biblical or otherwise, that Bilaam was a prophet in the moral sense: that he was concerned with justice, desert, the rights and wrongs of those whose lives he affected. Like a contract killer of a later age, Bilaam was a loner. His services could be bought. He had skills, and he used them with devastating effect. But he had no commitments, no loyalties, no rootedness in humanity. He was the man belo am, without a people.

Moses was the opposite. God Himself says of him, "He is [supremely] loyal in all My house" (Numbers 12:7). However disappointed Moses was with the Israelites, he never ceased to argue their cause before God. When his initial intervention on their behalf with Pharaoh worsened their condition, he said to God, 'O Lord, why do You mistreat Your people? Why did You send me?' (Exodus 5:22).

When the Israelites made the Golden Calf and God threatened to destroy the people and begin again with Moses, he said, "Now, if You would, please forgive their sin. If not, then blot me out from the book that You have written" (Exodus 32:32). When the people, demoralised by the report of the spies, wanted to return to Egypt and God's anger burned against them, he said, "With Your great love, forgive the sin of this nation, just as You have forgiven them from [the time they left] Egypt until now" (Numbers 14:19).

When God threatened punishment during the Korach rebellion, Moses prayed, "Will You be angry with the entire assembly when only one man sins?" (Numbers 16:22). Even when his own sister Miriam spoke badly about him and was punished by leprosy, Moses prayed to God on her behalf, "Please God, heal her now." (Numbers 12:13) Moses never ceased to pray for his people, however much they had sinned, however

audacious the prayer, however much he was putting his own relationship with God at risk. Knowing their faults, he remained utterly loyal to them.

The Hebrew word emunah is usually translated as “faith,” and that is what it came to mean in the Middle Ages. But in biblical Hebrew it is better translated as faithfulness, reliability, loyalty. It means not walking away from the other party when times are tough. It is a key covenantal virtue.

There are people with great gifts, intellectual and sometimes even spiritual, who nonetheless fail to achieve what they might have done. They lack the basic moral qualities of integrity, honesty, humility and above all loyalty. What they do, they do brilliantly. But often they do the wrong things. Conscious of their unusual endowments, they tend to look down on others. They give way to pride, arrogance and a belief that they can somehow get away with great crimes. Bilaam is the classic example, and the fact that he planned to entice the Israelites into sin even after he knew that God was on their side is a measure of how the greatest can sometimes fall to become the lowest of the low.

Those who are loyal to other people find that other people are loyal to them. Those who are disloyal are eventually distrusted and lose whatever authority they might once have had. Leadership without loyalty is not leadership. Skills alone cannot substitute for the moral qualities that make people follow those who demonstrate them. We follow those we trust, because they have acted so as to earn our trust. That was what made Moses the great leader Bilaam might have been but never was. Always be loyal to the people you lead.

Parshat Balak (Numbers 22:2 – 25:9)

Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

Efrat, Israel – “My nation, remember what Balak the king of Moab advised and what Bil’am the son of Be’or...answered him in order that you may know the compassionate righteousness of the Lord” [Micha. 6:5].

Who, or what, defines Israel, and why does it matter? If deeply concerning trends continue in the United States, research and ample anecdotal evidence indicate that those succeeding in affecting views toward Israel are the very people who attack it as a racist, discriminatory occupier lacking any moral or political legitimacy. Noble attempts to brand Israel as a high-tech haven (“start-up nation”) notwithstanding, Israel is increasingly being effectively defined by foes, not friends. What, if anything, can be done to reverse these deeply troubling developments?

In our weekly Biblical portion, Balak, we read that efforts by enemies to define the Jewish People have ancient antecedents. King Balak of Moab, frightened by the “Biblical Israelis,” vastly overestimates their global designs as well as their military might: “This multitude will lick up all that is round about us as the ox licks up the grass of the field” (Num. 22:4). He therefore turns to Bil’am, a magician and a soothsayer, an accomplished poet and master of the spoken word, to curse the Israelites in order to vanquish them (ibid., v.6).

Bil’am represents the giant media corporations and social media platforms that play a dominant role in shaping public opinion. Is it not true that these manipulators of minds have the power to destroy a world with a word? And indeed, Bil’am sets out to curse the Israelites.

Nevertheless, the Torah goes on to say that the prophet ultimately blesses the Israelites. At first he is struck by his donkey’s refusal to take him where he wanted to go. Apparently even a donkey can be amazed by the miraculous events that contributed to the preservation and preeminence of Israel from abject slaves to recipients of God’s Presence at Sinai, despite their smallness in number and scarcity of power.

And then Bil’am sees for himself—to the extent that at least he attempted to record the truth as he composes his tweets and Facebook posts. He may have come to curse, but he stays to praise. He evokes Jewish destiny in glowing terms, extolling the uniqueness of Israel (ibid., 23:9) and evoking our ultimate Messianic victory (ibid., 24:17–19). He affirms unmistakably that “no black magic can be effective against Jacob and no occult powers against Israel” (ibid., 23:23) – evil

words spoken by evil people are impotent before the modesty and integrity expressed by the Israelites in their daily lives.

Ultimately, however, it is not the speaking donkey that will succeed in changing the minds of the many Bil’ams around us; rather, it is the deeds of the Jewish People itself that will evoke change: “Your deeds will bring you close, your deeds will distance you” [Mishna, Eduyot 5:7].

First of all, Bil’am takes note of the military success of this fledgling nation against every one of her enemies—Israel had just emerged from a great military victory against the terrorizing Amorites. And, more importantly, the chaste and sanctified lifestyle of the Israelites and their commitment to their traditions and ideals made an even greater impact on Bil’am.

“How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your Sanctuaries, O Israel” [Num. 24:5]. Bil’am was amazed as to how the Israelite encampment (ohel) was constructed to respect everyone’s privacy, so that no one could see into his neighbor’s home. He was moved by the sensitivity toward interpersonal relationships, the love and respect displayed toward one another by family members and the harmony with which neighbors lived together.

And when Bil’am saw the commitment the Israelites had to their study halls and synagogues (mishkan)—their fealty to traditional values and teachings and their faith in Divine providence—he understood, and proclaimed the invincibility of this Divinely-elected people.

Alas, what a person might—and words could not—do to the Israelites, the Israelites managed to do to themselves. Bil’am and Balak returned to their homes to leave Israel in peace—but the Israelites themselves self-destructed. They chased after the hedonistic blandishments of the pagan societies of Bil’am and Balak. The very next chapter opened with “And the people began to commit harlotry with the daughters of Moab...and Israel joined himself to the [idolatry of] Ba’al Peor [Bil’am ben Beor]” (ibid., 25:1–3).

We failed in the desert not because of what our enemies did or said, but rather because of our own moral weakness and rejection of the birthright that had initially formed our nation’s definition and mission. Indeed, we are “a people who dwells alone, not subject to the machinations of other nations” (ibid., 23:9).

In this generation, in which detractors and haters attacking the Jewish People and Israel are on the ascent in capturing public opinion, we must remember to ignore the noise, and to focus on our national mission. To rephrase Ben Gurion, indeed it is not what the nations say that matters, but rather it is what we do or what we do not do, especially in the spheres of ethics and morality, which is of supreme significance.

Shabbat Shalom!

Parshas Balak Rav Yochanan Zweig

This week's Insights is dedicated in loving memory of Moshe ben Avraham, Murray Turetsky.

Be Careful What You Wish For

Bilaam answered and said, “If Balak were to give me his houseful of silver and gold, I am unable to transgress the word of Hashem, my God, to do anything small or great” (22:18).

This week’s parsha opens with Balak, king of Moav, scheming to find some way to defeat Bnei Yisroel as they steadily conquered every nation in their path on the way to Eretz Yisroel. Balak decides to try to hire Bilaam, a master sorcerer and prophet, as well as an avowed hater of the Jewish people, to curse Bnei Yisroel 50 become vulnerable and be driven away from Moav by war. But hiring Bilaam proves tougher than Balak thought. Bilaam sends away the first delegation as being insufficient to persuade him.

Balak was no fool; he immediately understood that Bilaam was looking for a larger cash offer than was initially proposed. He then sends an even more prestigious delegation and promises to give him more than his usual asking price (see Rashi 22:17).

Eventually, Bilaam relents with the following cryptic remark; “If Balak were to give me his houseful of silver and gold, I am unable to transgress the word of Hashem, my God, to do anything small or great.”

Rashi (ad loc) explains that Bilaam is actually saying that, in reality, “Balak should really agree to give me all of his silver and gold. This is because Balak’s only other option would be to hire an army of mercenaries and, even then, there is no guarantee that these mercenaries would be able to defeat Bnei Yisroel. But if Balak hires me I will certainly be victorious.”

This is difficult to understand. Bilaam first states that he will absolutely guarantee his own success yet, in the same breath, he says, “that he cannot go against the word of Hashem, great or small.” This sounds like the ranting of a schizophrenic personality. How can he guarantee success yet at the same time have to yield to whatever Hashem desires? Perhaps as confusing: How does Bilaam, an avowed hater of the Jews, change from cursing Bnei Yisroel (which is what he was hired to do) to blessing them?

While it’s true that he received a message from Hashem to bless them, Bilaam had transgressed many of Hashem’s commandments, why does he start listening now? Bilaam still has free choice. What compels Bilaam to listen to Hashem and bless Bnei Yisroel?

Bilaam was actually brilliant. While it’s true that a curse can be very painful as well as extremely difficult to overcome, too many blessings, especially to someone who cannot handle them, can be much, much worse. The best example of this is too much money. Shlomo Hamelech (Mishlei 30:9) says that the test of being wealthy is much harder than the test of being poor. A poor person has the test that he may desire to steal, but a rich person has the test that he begins to deny that Hashem exists (i.e. he begins to feel that he is the center of the universe).

Almost everybody desires to become fabulously wealthy, and most would consider that a wonderful blessing. Yet, in a study done on Florida lottery winners, 70% of them had spent every last penny within five years of winning the lottery. In a study done in 2009 by SI, almost 80% of NFL players were broke within two years of their retirement. In other words, getting money doesn’t necessarily mean that they managed to hold onto their blessings. Getting rich did, however, lead to divorces and other family disputes.

Too much money can be very challenging. It can affect one’s character and can make one impossible to live with. People can become so self-involved that their children are raised by nannies and maids. This naturally leads to feelings of inadequacy that parents try to ameliorate by plying their children with “things” in place of a real relationship. Hence these children become self-centered and “spoiled,” and this often leads to life-long personal and relationship issues.

This holds true by most blessings; a brilliant child is going to be far more challenging than a typical one. If one has more blessings than he can handle, these blessings can actually ruin his life. That is what Bilaam is accomplishing. Of course, it is more enjoyable for him to watch Bnei Yisroel suffer his curses, but he knew that even if Hashem forced him to bless Bnei Yisroel he could still achieve his goal. Giving Bnei Yisroel more than they could handle is almost a guarantee that he will succeed in destroying them: Because being a runaway success is a much bigger challenge to someone than being a failure. In fact, Bilaam was right; the Talmud (Sanhedrin 105b) shows that in the end, except for one, all of Bilaam’s “blessings” turned to curses.

Ignoring the Pain

He sees no iniquity in Yaakov, nor does He see transgressions in Yisrael, Hashem his God is with him and the friendship of the king is with them (23:21).

Rashi (ad loc) explains this to mean that Hashem is not exacting in His judgement of Bnei Yisroel; in His great love for them, he disregards their transgressions even when they sin. This possuk’s reassuring expression of Hashem’s kindness in judgement readily explains why it was chosen to be included in our liturgy on Rosh Hashanah, notwithstanding that the evil Bilaam is the source of this observation.

Yet, this verse doesn’t seem to conform to normative Jewish thinking. On the contrary, we are taught that Hashem is extremely critical of the Jewish people; the Talmud (Bava Kama 50a) states that Hashem is exacting to a hairbreadth in His judgement of the righteous, and that

anyone who says that Hashem disregards sin is forfeiting his life. How can Rashi then say that Hashem simply disregards our sins?

There are two dimensions to every sin. When a person sins, his actions represent a defect in his character, a flaw that must be repaired in order for him to perfect himself. With regard to this aspect of sin, Hashem is infinitely exacting; He allows no imperfection to be ignored, after all, that is why we were created and put on this earth – to perfect ourselves. Hashem, therefore, judges His people with the greatest strictness in order for us to cleanse ourselves of all flaws.

However, there is another dimension to sin, one that Hashem does disregard: The pain and insult that we cause Him, so to speak, by rebelling against Him and ignoring His demands of us. In truth, of course, Hashem is never affected by us, our mitzvos do not add to Him and our sins do not detract from Him. But as R’ Chaim Volozhin explains (Nefesh Hachaim 1:3); our actions have very real affects in the myriads of worlds that have been created. We add “light and holiness” and sustain these worlds by doing righteous acts. The whole construct of creation is an expression of Hashem’s desire to have a relationship with mankind. The nature of this relationship is what is affected by our transgressions.

Thus, when Chazal say that on Rosh Hashanah Hashem ignores our sins, this is referring to the pain and hurt we have inflicted on our relationship with Him. He absolutely disregards the hurt from the pain that we have inflicted on the relationship by flouting His authority and rebelling against Him. He only judges us on the flaws in our character that have led to these transgressions; this is because He desires to see us perfect ourselves.

Did You Know...

This week’s parsha includes the story of Bilaam (a famed non-Jewish prophet and sorcerer) and Balak (the king of Moab). Balak feared that the Jews would attack his people and therefore employs Bilaam to curse the them. Hashem forbids Bilaam from doing so and each time he tries he ends up showering the Jews with blessings instead.

Here are some more additional facts about this dark sorcerer:

1. One of the better-known facts is that Bilaam was on a very high prophetic level, and there is actually a discussion comparing his prophecy to that of Moshe Rabbeinu’s. The reason for this was because Hashem knew that the gentile nations would, in defense of their many sins, claim that it was only because they didn’t have someone who was on Moshe’s prophetic level to guide them, so he provided them with Bilaam (Me’em Lo’ez Balak 1 22:5).

2. Balak knew of Bilaam because they were from the same town, and Bilaam even prophesied that Balak would one day be king. Additionally, he knew that Bilaam was powerful because he had hired him before in wars and they had been victorious (ibid).

3. At first, they tried performing various acts of sorcery on the Jews, but when those had no effect, they resorted to cursing. In actuality, Balak was a greater sorcerer than Bilaam, and it would have been below him to consult Bilaam, but when he saw that witchcraft was ineffectual, he sent for him.

4. Another fairly well known fact is that the Gemara says that Bilaam knew the precise moment every day when Hashem is angry at the world. This precise moment is known to be in the first three hours of the day, and is debated as whether it is 1/4 of a second, or even as little as 1/16 of a second. This tiny amount of time isn’t enough for most curses, obviously, but he actually only needed enough time for the word “kalem – annihilate them.” Interestingly, Hashem held back his anger at that time, otherwise the Jews would have been destroyed (Me’em Lo’ez Balak 1 22:6).

5. According to one source, Bilaam was actually Lavan (Yaakov’s father-in-law). According to another source, he was Lavan’s son, and yet others say that he was just metaphorically compared to Lavan (Sanhedrin 105a).

6. Bilaam has no share in the world to come, and was deformed; he was lame in one of his legs, and was blind in one of his eyes (ibid).

7. As a dirty sorcerer, he performed sorcery with his loins, and by means of certain phallic occult rites, he would call up spirits of the dead and cause them to settle upon it (ibid).

8. Showing an affinity for marketing, Bilaam was the architect of the plan to entice the Jews to sin with the women of Midian. He designed the tent situation in order for the women to lure the men in – old women selling silk outside, and young woman selling inside for less (ibid).

9. Interestingly, all four of the Jewish ways to execute somebody (stoning, burning, beheading, and strangulation) were used on him. They actually hung him over a fire, stoned him hanging there, and then cut his head off so he fell into the fire (Sanhedrin 106a).

10. Strangely, according to one opinion, Bilaam was only thirty-three years old when the Jewish people executed him (ibid).

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For the week ending 26 June 2021 / 16 Tammuz 5781

Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair - www.seasonsofthemoon.com

Parshat Parashat Balak

An Artist's Impression

"May my soul die the death of the upright...." (23:10)

In June 2012, the Israeli government expedited its "Tama 38" (National Outline Plan) mandate, which calls for the reinforcing of buildings against earthquakes. The incentive for builders is that they can build and sell an extra floor, and for apartment owners, that they receive an extra room that doubles as a rocket shelter.

I live in Ramat Eshkol in Jerusalem, an area where every second building seems to be in some stage of the "Tama." The signage outside these buildings always depicts an idyllic scene of a super-modern façade with nary a stroller to crowd the entrance, or an errant air-conditioner hanging from a window, or a porch covered over to make another much-needed bedroom.

Often in life, our aspiration fades in proportion to our perspiration. We start with high ideals, but sometimes things get very difficult. However, if we never had that "artist's impression" of our future, we would never have an ideal to aim for.

"May my soul die the death of the upright..."

Bilaam wanted to die the death of the upright — he just wasn't prepared to live the life of the upright.

Bilaam saw evil as the easy way to success. With all his gifts as a prophet, he never made the effort to get out of his spiritual armchair.

It is likely that most of us will never achieve our spiritual goals, but if we never had that "artist's impression" in our heads, we would never have even left our armchairs — let alone built an entire floor on the edifice of our spiritual lives.

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Bad Man. Can't Be a Good Prophet!

Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb

There is no doubt. People are hard to figure out. This is not only true of us twenty-first-century ordinary mortals, but is even true of biblical characters, be they heroes or villains.

Let us reflect upon the Torah readings of the past several weeks. Just two weeks ago, we read about Korach, a biblical villain. But he too is hard to figure out. As Rashi puts it, "Korach was such a clever man. What drove him to such foolishness?" It is hard to fathom that envy and jealousy can so cloud a person's judgment that he becomes capable of self-destructive decisions.

Just last week, we discovered just how difficult it is to figure out even the personality of the Torah's greatest hero, Moses. Pious, obedient, faithful, and yet capable of a sin so grievous that he is punished by being denied his life's dream, entry into the Promised Land. Yes, commentators struggle to understand just what he did to deserve such a dire punishment. Maimonides suggests that he lost his temper and referred to the Israelites as "you rebels!" The legendary Maharal of Prague goes so far as to see the fact that Moses struck the rock not once but twice as an indication of his uncontrollable anger.

Whatever was the Almighty's reason for punishing Moses so, we are left with our own dilemma. How can this most exemplary man express such inner anger? That's certainly hard to figure out.

This week's Torah portion, Balak, (Numbers 22:2-25:9), presents us with another person who is hard to figure out. On the one hand, he is compared, nay even equated, to Moses himself. As the Sages comment, "There was no prophet equal to Moses in Israel, but there was such a prophet for the other nations—Balaam!"

How, then, are we to understand how a man with such prophetic talents, a man who regularly experiences direct communication from the Lord Himself, is capable of spitefully defying the Lord and curses the people whom He wishes to bless?

Is Balaam the only man with superior intellect and authentic religious experiences who can yet be guilty of rebellion against the divine will?

Let us phrase the question more narrowly and more specifically: "Balaam was an exceptional individual in many ways, yet he was capable of what later generations would call anti-Semitism. Are there other examples, later in human history, of such individuals?"

Let me share with you a fascinating Talmudic passage (Gittin 57a):

Onkelos bar Kalonikus, the son of Titus's sister, wanted to convert to Judaism. He went and raised Titus from the grave through necromancy, and said to him: "Who is most important in that world where you are now?" Titus said to him: "The Jewish people!" Onkelos asked him: "Should I then attach myself to them here in this world?" Titus said to him: "Their commandments are numerous, and you will not be able to fulfill them. It is best that you do as follows: Go out and battle against them in that world, and you will become the chief, as it is written: 'Her adversaries have become the chief' (Lamentations 1:5), which means: 'Anyone who distresses Israel will become the chief.'" Onkelos said to him: "What is the punishment of that man [a euphemism for Titus himself] in the next world?" Titus said to him: "Every day his ashes are gathered, and they judge him, and they burn him, and they scatter him over the seven seas."

Onkelos then went and raised Balaam from the grave through necromancy. He said to him: "Who is most important in that world where you are now?" Balaam said to him: "The Jewish people!" Onkelos: "Should I then attach myself to them here in this world?" Balaam said to him: "You shall not seek their peace or their welfare all the days." Onkelos said to him: "What is the punishment of that man [again, a euphemism for Balaam himself] in the next world?"

The Talmud then reports Balaam's answer: He is tortured daily in a most degrading manner.

Apparently, Balaam had quite a famous disciple, albeit one who lived many centuries after him, Titus. Like Balaam, he was a very gifted individual who clung to his vicious enmity of the Jewish people even in the depths of hell.

Titus and Balaam are in Gehenna. They have passed into another world entirely, a world in which the truth is revealed to them with distinct clarity. They each assert that the Jewish people are important and special. Nevertheless, they cannot abandon their hatred for the Jewish people.

Balaam and Titus are archetypes of the anti-Semitic personality, of vicious anti-Semitism existing side-by-side within the psyche of individuals who should know better. They are both wise men, philosophically sophisticated men, politically accomplished men. Yet these virtues do not compel them to reconsider their attitude toward Jews. Quite the contrary, even after death, they perpetuate the poison they harbored in their lifetime. This is certainly hard to figure out.

However, as we consider the course of human history, there is no dearth of individuals since Balaam and Titus who are similarly hard to figure out. One of them has fascinated me since I was an adolescent and was first introduced to secular philosophy.

His name was Martin Heidegger. His work was introduced to me by a teacher in response to my question, "Who is considered the greatest philosopher of the twentieth century?" He immediately responded, "Heidegger!" The teacher referred me to a beginner's textbook which

outlined Heidegger's philosophy, and which taught me that the man's greatest contribution to philosophy was in the field of ethics, no less!

This teacher did not tell me anything about Heidegger's personal life and political affiliations. It was only upon further reading that I learned that Heidegger was an active member of the Nazi party and continued his active association with the Nazi party throughout the 1930s and the period of World War II. Indeed, he refused to renounce his previous misdeeds, even after the war, and remained silent until his death.

I have since been almost obsessed with this man, who was obviously very gifted, and who eloquently advocated proper ethical behavior between man and his fellow man. At one and the same time, however, he voluntarily cooperated with the most cruel and inhumane political regime in the history of mankind.

Did he find no contradiction between his philosophical convictions and his active participation in the horrific persecution of the Jewish people? Can one be an idealistic philosopher and an anti-Semite at the same time?

If I had to recommend one book on this painful topic to you, dear reader, it would be Heidegger's Silence by Berel Lang. It is to this book that I owe the following quotation:

Gilbert Ryle offers a terse and categorical judgment of Heidegger the philosopher that would obviate the need for even a look at his work once a verdict was reached on his character: "Bad man. Can't be a good philosopher."

Perhaps we can borrow Ryle's characterization of Heidegger and apply it to Balaam, the major character in this week's Torah portion: "Bad man. Can't be a good prophet."

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Rabbi Buchwald's Weekly Torah Message

Balaik 5781-2021

"Words of Eternal Truth from the Evil Prophet Bilaam"

(updated and revised from Balaik 5761-2001)

Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald

In this week's parasha, parashat Balaik, we encounter Balaik, the King of Moab, soliciting the services of Bilaam, the Midianite prophet, to curse the Jewish People.

As is well known, Bilaam is unable to curse the Jewish people, because G-d has forbidden Bilaam to do so, and also because of the protective power of the unified Jewish nation. As Bilaam says in Numbers 23:8, **מִנְשָׁמֶן לֹא קָבַב אֶל, וְגַם אָזֶעֶם, לֹא עַם הָשָׁמֶן**, "How can I curse, if G-d has not cursed? How can I be angry if G-d is not angry?"

Each of Bilaam's prophecies turns into a blessing, which, of course, agitates King Balaik to no end. While Balaik may be terribly disappointed with Bilaam's words, for the Jewish people, Bilaam's prophecies actually contain marvelous and enduring insights into the nature of our people. As Bilaam says, Numbers 23:9: **בְּרוּ אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל, וּבְגַם לֹא שָׁבַע, בְּרוּ אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל**, "Behold, Israel is a people that dwells alone and is not reckoned among the nations."

Let's face reality. Historically, the Jewish People have always been measured by a different yardstick. They truly dwell alone. Until the year 2000, the State of Israel was the only nation that was not part of the United Nations Regional Group, and was, consequently, unable to forward candidates for election to various bodies of the General Assembly. The nations of the world treat Israel with a double standard. No nation has ever been made to endure what Israel endures. Throughout the world, hundreds of thousands of people are murdered each year. People never learn of these atrocities because reporters are kept in the dark, or ignore these "insignificant" stories. Yet, every little incident in Israel is front page news in the New York Times and in the world media.

Many of us are often dismayed by this cruel double standard. We need not be. It takes an enemy like Bilaam to open our eyes to behold the uniqueness of the Jewish People. This uniqueness is too often seen as a hardship, but it is frequently a blessing. Continuing his prophecy, Bilaam says in Numbers 23:10: **מִן מְנֻהָּה עָפֵר יִצְחָקָב, וּמְסֻפֵּר אָתָּה רַבָּע יִשְׂרָאֵל**? "Who can count the dust of Jacob, or number even a quarter of Israel?"

On the surface it would seem as if Bilaam is referring to the numerical abundance of the Jewish People. But, obviously, this is not so. Bilaam compares the Jewish People to dust. Even though we don't see it or feel it, except when we sneeze, dust is all around. And, perhaps, that is exactly what Bilaam words intend to convey. Although, we Jews are small in number, the influence of the Jewish people is profound, way out of proportion to our numbers.

Why is the agenda of the United Nations so obsessed with the tiny State of Israel? It is after all, only one little state among hundreds of countries. Why are the "Jews news?"

Perhaps, the uniqueness of the Jewish people was best captured by Mark Twain in his famous essay Concerning the Jews. Although this essay is well-known, now is as good a time as any, to review it and kvell.

In the March 1898 edition of Harper's Magazine, Twain wrote:

If the statistics are right, the Jews constitute but one percent of the human race. It suggests a nebulous dim puff of star-dust lost in the blaze of the Milky Way. Properly, the Jew ought hardly to be heard of; but he is heard of, has always been heard of. He is as prominent on the planet as any other people, and his commercial importance is extravagantly out of proportion to the smallness of his bulk. His contributions to the world's list of great names in literature, science, art, music, finance, medicine, and abstruse learning are also way out of proportion to the weakness of his numbers.

He has made a marvelous fight in this world, in all the ages; and has done it with his hands tied behind him. He could be vain of himself, and be excused for it. The Egyptian, the Babylonian, and the Persian rose, filled the planet with sound and splendor, then faded to dream-stuff and passed away; the Greek and the Roman followed, and made a vast noise, and they are gone; other peoples have sprung up and held their torch high for a time, but it burned out, and they sit in twilight now, or have vanished.

The Jew saw them all, beat them all, and is now what he always was, exhibiting no decadence, no infirmities of age, no weakening of his parts, no slowing of his energies, no dulling of his alert and aggressive mind. All things are mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?

And, so, when you review this week's parasha, don't dismiss Bilaam's words. They are insightful-filled with unique observations about the Jewish People. Analyze each phrase, study each word. Because the truths of Bilaam's words are eternal.

Please note: The Fast of Shivah Assar b'Tammuz (the 17th of Tammuz) will be observed this year on Sunday, June 27, 2021, from dawn until nightfall. The fast commemorates the breaching of the walls of Jerusalem, leading to the city's and Temple's ultimate destruction on Tisha b'Av. The fast also marks the beginning of the "Three Week" period of mourning, which concludes after the Fast of Tisha b'Av, that will be observed on Saturday night and Sunday, July 17th and 18th.

Have a meaningful fast.

May you be blessed.

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Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

Dvar Torah Balaik

From where can the Jewish people derive comfort and consolation?

We're just about to commence the three weeks, which will take us from the 17th of Tammuz through to Tisha b'Av. It's a sad time of the year when we recall many tragedies which befall our people. This period of sadness reaches its climax during the month of Av and, interestingly, Av is one of two months whose titles have additions. The first is Cheshvan which is popularly known as Mar Cheshvan, the bitter Cheshvan, while Av is popularly called Menachem Av, the Av that comforts.

I find this intriguing. Cheshvan is called Mar Cheshvan because there's nothing special in it – no festivals, nothing exciting. However if there is one month on our calendar that should be called 'mar', bitter, surely it should be Av, because it's the bitterest time of the year. Av, however, is called Menachem and it is in the present tense; the month of Av continues to provide comfort and consolation to us. Why?

Defeats

There are very few nations in this world which mark on their calendar a moment of deep national embarrassment. Sometimes history is rewritten. On other occasions, it is conveniently forgotten about. But in Jewish tradition, our calendar is full of days on which we commemorate our defeats, our mistakes and our moments of national guilt.

This is because we recognise the importance of knowing where we've gone wrong in the past, and that it is a source of comfort and consolation for us. Coming into the three weeks, we will not only be recalling what happened but, perhaps more significantly, why it happened: why those sad and tragic events of the 17th of Tammuz transpired; why the loss of our temples and other national tragedies on Tisha b'Av took place. And once we recognise where we have gone wrong, we can begin to put our national house in order to guarantee a bright and successful future.

Lessons

Cheshvan therefore is understandably 'mar', bitter, because we don't learn anything special from it. Av, however, has the potential to be sweet, because it's a month that gives us comfort since by learning the lessons of our past we can hopefully carve out a glorious future. No wonder therefore that our prophets called the day of Tisha B'Av a 'moed' meaning festival, indicating that this is a time of year which will, please God, be transformed from sadness to celebration.

Thanks to the month of Av, may all of us be inspired to make that transformative impact on the world so that through our deeds, the ultimate redemption will happen speedily in our time.

Shabbat shalom.

Rabbi Mirvis is the Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom. He was formerly Chief Rabbi of Ireland.

Drasha Parshas Balak - Sorry for Nothing

Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

Dedicated to the speedy recovery of Mordechai ben Chaya

We are all fascinated by inanimate or animal objects that speak. The '60s had TV viewers kvelling over talking horses, even talking cars. And an entire industry was based on the concept of a talking mouse. But this week a talking animal is no joke. The Torah tells us about a talking animal that brought no laughs to its rider and teaches a serious lesson to us all.

Bilaam, the greatest prophet that the gentile world had seen, was hired by Balak, King of Moab, for one mission: curse the Jews. Bilaam's feigned reluctance was quickly turned to exuberance when offers of honors and great wealth were added as signing bonus, and first thing in the morning he saddled his trusted donkey and was on his way. He planned to travel to an overlook, where he would cast his spell on the Jewish Nation as they camped innocently beneath the wicked gaze of Balak and his employee, Bilaam, the prophet.

But Hashem had different plans. As Bilaam's donkey ambled toward a narrow passage, it saw a frightening sight. An angel, with a sword thrust forward, blocked its path. The beast turned off the road into a field, and Bilaam struck the animal to get it back on the road. But again the angel stood in the passageway and the poor donkey, in fear, squeezed tightly against a stone wall, pressing Bilaam's leg against the wall. The great prophet, who so haughtily straddled the donkey, did not see the angelic figure and reacted violently. Again he hit his donkey; this time harder. But the angel did not retreat. He began approaching the donkey and its rider. Suddenly the donkey crouched in panic, and Bilaam struck it again. But this time the donkey did not act like a mule. She spoke up. Miraculously, Hashem opened her mouth, and she asked Bilaam, "why did you hit me? Aren't I the same animal that you have ridden your entire life? Should not my strange behavior give cause for concern?" (Numbers 22:28)

When the angel, sword in hand, finally revealed himself, and chided Bilaam for striking the innocent animal, Bilaam was flabbergasted. He was left speechless save for one sentence. "I have sinned, for I did not know that you were standing opposite me on the road. And if you want, I shall return" (Numbers 22:34).

What is disturbing is Bilaam's immediate admission of sin. If he could not see the angel why did he admit guilt?

Many riders would hit a donkey that presses their foot against the wall or crouches down amidst a group of a king's officers. Bilaam should have simply stated to the angel, "I did not know you were there and thought my beast was acting in a manner that required discipline." Why the apology? If he truly did not know that the angel was there, why did he admit to sinning?

On one of the final days of the Six Day War the Israeli troops pierced through enemy fortifications and forged their way through the ancient passageways of Jerusalem. As if Divine gravitational force was pulling them, one group of soldiers dodged the Jordanian bullets and proceeded until there was no reason to continue. They had reached the Kotel HaMaravi, the Western Wall, the holiest place in Judaism, the site of both the First and Second Temples. The young men, some of whom had yeshiva education, others who came from traditional backgrounds, stood in awe and began to cry in unison. The Kotel had been liberated!

One young soldier, who grew up on a totally secular kibbutz in the northern portion of the state gazed at the sight of his comrades crying like children as they stared up at the ancient stones. Suddenly, he, too began to wail.

One of the religious soldiers, who had engaged in countless debates with him, put his arm around him and asked, "I don't understand. To us the Kotel means so much. It is our link with the Temple and the holy service. This is the most moving experience of our lives. But why are you crying?"

The young soldier looked at his friend, and amidst the tears simply stated, "I am crying because I am not crying."

Bilaam, the greatest of gentile prophets, realized that something must be wrong. A simple donkey saw the revelation of an angel. He did not. He realized that there are experiences he should have been able to grasp and appreciate. If he didn't it was not a donkey's fault. It was not an angel's fault. It was his fault. He realized then and there that it was he who was lacking.

How often does G-d cry out to us in newspaper headlines, be it earthquakes, wildfires, or human tragedies? We should stare at the sight and see the divine figure standing with an outstretched sword. We do not. We flip the paper and strike at the donkeys who struck out.

We ought to cry at the tragedies of life, and if we do not realize that they are there, we ought to cry about that. Then one day we will all smile. Forever.

Good Shabbos!

Dedicated by Marty and Irene Kofman in memory of Esther bas R' Yitzchak & R' Elzor ben R' Yehuda of blessed memory

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Chukat: The dearness of impurity

Ben-Tzion Spitz

We are not naïve enough to ask for pure men; we ask merely for men whose impurity does not conflict with the obligations of their job. - Jean Rostand

The concept of ritual impurity plays a significant role in the Torah and Jewish law. The Torah deals extensively with a variety of scenarios where one contracts ritual impurity. There are several places and activities that are prohibited to a ritually impure person, and likewise, there are several processes enacted to purify such individuals and allow their return to either the places and/or the activities they were previously barred from because of their impure designation. The consequences of all of these laws had their greatest impact during Temple times, though some aspects remain in our current reality.

In its essence, the concept of ritual impurity in Jewish law can be most closely associated with death. Death, in a sense, is the ultimate source of impurity. The level of impurity is often a measure of the proximity of contact with death. A dead body is the highest level of impurity. People or items that touched or were housed together with the dead body can both contract and transmit lesser levels of impurity.

The Bechor Shor on Numbers 19:2 explains that some seemingly unusual comparisons can be made. For example, even a person as exalted and holy as the High Priest (Kohen Gadol), if he has died, he becomes a source of impurity, while the bones of a lowly donkey are considered pure.

Such a contrast became a source of contention and even ridicule on the part of the ancient Sadducees against the Rabbis of old. The Bechor Shor quotes their debate and brings the answer of the Rabbis (Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai, Tractate Yadayim 4:6) who states that “according to the affection for them, so is their impurity.”

A parent is incomparably more beloved than a donkey, and their remains should be treated with significantly more honor and respect. Hence, the fact that their remains contaminate, means we cannot utilize their remains for any other purpose. It reinforces the need for us to treat those remains with the utmost respect and give them an honorable burial. There are no such restrictions on using the remains of an animal.

According to this, there is not necessarily something wrong with a state of impurity. In fact, it can be considered a type of defense mechanism or even a status that demonstrates how dear something is to us.

May we understand and respect the few laws of impurity relevant in our days.

Dedication - To the new Israeli government. Hoping good will come from it.

Shabbat Shalom

Ben-Tzion Spitz is a former Chief Rabbi of Uruguay. He is the author of three books of Biblical Fiction and over 600 articles and stories dealing with biblical themes.

Rav Kook Torah

Chanan Morrison

Balak - Psalm 128: Striving for Excellence

אָשָׁר־יָגַע־ה'־הַלְּלָךְ־בְּדָנָקִי. יְגַע־כְּפָךְ־יְהָלֵל, אָשָׁר־קָרְבָּנְךָ־לְךָ.

“Happy are all who fear God, who follow in His ways. You will eat the fruit of your labor; you will be happy and it will be good for you.” (Psalms 128:1-2)

The Fruit of Your Labor

According to the Talmud, the psalm is referring to two different types of individuals, and it makes an astonishing claim about the importance of self-reliance:

“One who supports himself with his own labors is greater than one who fears Heaven.

About a God-fearing individual, it says, “Happy are all who fear God,” while regarding one who lives from his own labor, it says, “You will eat the fruit of your labor; you will be happy and it will be good for you.” “You will be happy” in this world, and “it will be good for you” in the next world. Regarding the God-fearing person, however, it does not say that “it will be good for you.”

This statement of the Sages is surprising. Had they noted that piety is a valuable trait for the World to Come, while self-sufficiency is important for living in this world, this would have been understandable. But they claimed the exact opposite! Fear of Heaven reflects a form of happiness — “you are happy” — in this world; while self-sufficiency relates to the ultimate good — “it is good for you” — of the next world. How is that? Two Mindsets

We commonly think of self-reliance only in terms of livelihood. In fact, it is a mindset that relates to all our goals, whether material, intellectual, or spiritual. The Talmud is not just contrasting the hardworking farmer with the yeshiva student who is supported by charity. It is comparing two basic philosophies of life.

The first approach is that we should do our utmost to succeed, using our best efforts and talents. This trait may be found in industrious entrepreneurs, world-class athletes, and dedicated scholars, all of whom enjoy the benefits of their hard-earned labors. This work ethic applies to all areas, including the spiritual. When we devote our energies to grow in Torah scholarship, character refinement, generosity, and so on, we exhibit the trait of self-reliance.

The second attitude, as typified by God-fearing piety, ultimately boils down to a passive reliance on Divine intervention. The pious mindset

does not reject human effort, but is willing to settle for the minimum exertion needed. For the rest, one trusts that God will take care of things. This approach is expressed by a passive attitude not only with regard to one's livelihood, but also regarding spiritual aspirations. Such a person, unwilling to tax his brain, will settle for a superficial understanding of Torah wisdom. He will not struggle to achieve depth in Torah knowledge, nor greatness in other spiritual pursuits.

But what is so terrible with this pious mentality of relying on God? Why should we constantly struggle for excellence?

Bread of Shame

Were we to believe the sales pitches of travel agents, life's ultimate pleasure would be to relax on a secluded beach. This may be enjoyable, but our greatest pleasure comes, not from resting, but from hard work. Our greatest satisfaction in life comes from the fruit of our labors. Our happiest moments are when we attain hard-earned goals. This deeply-felt sense of fulfillment is innate to human nature.

In fact, of all our innate ethical qualities, this particular pleasure is the loftiest. Our choosing to take the initiative to better ourselves is a fundamental characteristic of the human soul. It is wrong to sit passively and rely on others to toil for us. Trust in God is a positive trait, but we should rely on Divine assistance only in those situations when we are unable to help ourselves.

The ethical benefit to be found in self-reliance is the foundation of the entire Torah. We are judged according to our actions and free choices. This is the very purpose of the soul's descent and its struggles with the body's physical desires. The Kabbalists referred to these efforts as avoiding *nehamah dekisufa* — the “bread of shame,” the embarrassment experienced when receiving an undeserved handout. True good is when we are able to support ourselves through our own efforts.

Good of the World to Come

Now we may understand the Talmud's comparison between the God-fearing pious and those who toil to support themselves. The essence of fear of Heaven is relying on Divine assistance. Paradoxically, fear of Heaven is a type of enjoyment — albeit, in its highest form — in that one ‘relaxes’ and relies on the current state of affairs. Thus, the Sages understood that the pleasantness of this trait — “Happy are all who fear God” — is a pleasure that belongs to this world.

The good that comes from self-reliance, from growth through our own efforts, on the other hand, belongs to the absolute good of the next world, “a world which is pure good.” Only there will this trait be properly appreciated.

Even in its lowest form, self-sufficiency is praiseworthy. It is proper to honor those who have acquired this trait even in its simplest form, supporting their families through honest labor. Such individuals will continue to utilize this valuable trait in all areas, including spiritual pursuits.

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Shema Yisrael Torah Network

Peninim on the Torah - Parashas Balak

פרשת בלק תשפ"א

עתה קבָה לִי אֶתָּו

Now go and curse it for me. (22:11)

In Bilaam's dialogue with Hashem, he related that Balak, king of Moav, had petitioned him to curse the Jewish people. The word Bilaam used for curse is *kavah*, imprecate, which is a stronger, more emphatic, tone of curse. *Rashi* observes that *kavah* is stronger than *arah*, which was the actual term which Balak employed. Bilaam changed the word from *arah* to *kavah*, because Bilaam's enmity for the Jews was more intense than that of Balak. Balak feared the Jews. He was anxious lest they overrun his country, as they did to the other pagan kings in the area. Bilaam's animus, however, was pure, devious hatred for no reason other than he despised the Jews. Such loathing is unforgivable, because it is implacable and unrelenting.

In the next *perek* (23:11), Balak said to Bilaam, *Lakov oyivai l'kachticha*, “To imprecate my enemy have I brought you.” Apparently, Balak ratcheted up his hatred of the Jews to the level of *kavah*,

imprecation. Balak and Bilaam were now on the same page, both focused on delivering the most efficacious, powerful curse against the Jews. Did Balak really change his stripes?

The *Zera Shimshon* says that he did not. Balak remained Balak; his hatred continued on the same level as before. The Moavite king told Bilaam, “Why do you think I commissioned you to curse the Jews? Do you think that I am incapable of issuing a curse? I called *you*, because your hatred of the Jews exceeds even mine. Your hatred is real, perverse and unrelenting. Hatred without ulterior motives instigates a curse that has a powerful effect on our enemies. You were supposed to issue a curse with the power of *kavah*. Not only did you not intensify your curse, but you blessed them! What got into you? Where is all the hatred for which you are infamous?”

Horav Shimon Schwab, zl, observes that when an act is executed *lishmah*, for its sake, not bound by ulterior motives, it has much greater efficacy than one not carried out *lishmah*. This is true even if the act that is performed is ignominious in nature, an evil act, purely for the purpose of causing harm to the other person, etc. When one’s act is driven by personal gain, revenge, the intensity of the act is diminished.

So, what happened to Bilaam? Did his hatred of the Jews decrease? Certainly not. The simple answer is that, just as Hashem controls the speech of a donkey, He can control the speech of a pagan prophet as well. Perhaps we might suggest another insight. Those who claim to hate do not really hate the subject they purport to hate. They actually hate themselves. They are self-loathing, and they express their self-disgust by directing it towards others, rather than admitting to their own deficiency. Thus, their hatred is really not *lishmah*. On the other hand, in many instances, they are so disgusted with themselves that they manifest a hatred toward others which is entirely irrational. Bilaam looked at himself and realized how great he could have been. Then he looked at his contemporary, Moshe *Rabbeinu*, and acknowledged how great he had become. This contrast was too much for Bilaam to absorb. His only outlet was implacable hatred toward everything that Moshe represented. At the end of the day, however, the one whom he hated most was himself.

וַיַּחֲזַב מֶלֶךְ דָ' בְּדַרְךָ לְשֹׁטֶן לוֹ

And an angel of Hashem stood on the road to impede him. (22:22)

It is well-known that the *Shem Hashem*, Name of G-d, *yud-kay, vov-kay*, denotes the *middah*, attribute, of *Rachamim*, Mercy. In other words, the angel of Hashem/*Rachamim*, who was sent to prevent Bilaam from going to curse the Jews, was sent on a mission of mercy. Since when is reproof attributed to mercy? It is much closer to *Din*, Strict Justice. Horav Chaim Toito, Shlita (*Torah V’Chaim*), explains this with the following story. During the tenure of the *Alter*, zl, *m’Kelm*, there lived a wealthy man whose enormous wealth was overshadowed only by his miserliness. He absolutely refused to share any of his fortune – even a dry piece of bread – with the unfortunate. Once a poor man came to his door and begged for food. The wealthy man replied, “We have no food to give out here.” The poor man did not despair. He stood on the steps waiting for some scraps, leftovers, anything that would placate his hunger.

Passersby told him that he was wasting his time. The wealthy man would never give him a morsel of food. The poor man refused to give up hope. He stood there all day. At night, when the wealthy man left for *shul*, he saw the poor man and he reiterated, “There is no way I will give you a drop of food. You can wait here forever... Your waiting will not change my mind.” The poor man’s response threw the wealthy man for a loop. “You will give me meat and bread – an entire meal!” was the poor fellow’s emphatic reply. When the wealthy man heard this, he became so angry that he pushed the poor fellow down the stairs. This did not deter the poor fellow. He was used to humiliation. He was also starving and needed to eat. He brushed himself off, walked up the stairs and assumed his original position at the top of the stairs. It would take more than a push down the stairs before this fellow would give up.

When the neighbors observed how penurious the wealthy man was, their hearts opened up to the plight of the poor fellow, and they

brought him food. His reaction was unusual: “I am grateful to you for your kindness; however, I will only eat from the wealthy man’s home. I will starve until *he* feeds me.”

Time passed, and the poor man became faint and disoriented from hunger. At this point, the miser took pity on him, brought him into his home and fed him a large, filling meal. Word spread through the community until it reached the ears of the *Alter*, who, when he heard the story, broke out in copious weeping.

His *talmidim*, disciples, wondered why their revered *Rebbe* was reacting in such a manner. “Why is *Rebbe* crying over the poor man? He received a full meal and left satiated.” The *Alter* was not one to react. Everything that he did, every action, was the result of deliberate consideration. The *Alter* explained, “I am not weeping for the poor man. I derived a powerful *mussar*, ethical character, lesson from this incident. The wealthy man clearly had a hard heart, closed to any reason, without compassion for his poverty-stricken brother. Yet, in the end, he acceded to the poor man’s request and fed him. *Avinu Malkeinu*, our Heavenly Father, our King, is compassionate, kind and slow to anger. Surely if one of His children would say to Him, “Hashem, I rely on no one other than You to return me to You, to once again be Your servant, I have no question in my mind that Hashem would listen and accept him back.” End of story.

A similar idea applies concerning Bilaam. I have no question that Bilaam’s actions were not unintentional. He was shrewd, calculated and evil. Whatever he did was purposeful with conscious forethought. Nonetheless, Hashem compassionately dispatched a Heavenly angel to prevent him from cursing the Jews. Hashem did not want Bilaam to commit a sin. Thus, the Torah uses the Name of Hashem which specifically denotes mercy. This should inspire our brain to reconnect with our body and realize that, if Hashem acted compassionately to an evil degenerate, to a pagan whose moral bankruptcy brought about the downfall and eventual deaths of 24,000 Jews, surely Hashem will shine His countenance upon us and welcome us back home. All we must do is ask.

וַיֹּאמֶר מֶלֶךְ דָ' אֶל בְּלָעֵם לְךָ עִם הַאֲנָשָׁם

The angel of Hashem said to Bilaam, “Go with the men.” (22:35)

Hashem originally instructed Bilaam not to go with the Moavite emissaries. Then, He changed the message. He could go with them. *Rashi* explains this based upon the Talmudic dictum, *B’derech she’adam rotzeh leilech bah molichin oso*, “The path that a person chooses to follow, they bring him (and allow him to go) down that path.” In other words, Bilaam indicated that he would like to join the officers of Moav. When Hashem saw that Bilaam yearned to accompany them, He said, “Go!” *Chazal*’s statement leaves us with a question about the text. What is the meaning of the word *bah*, it?

The *Maharsha* wonders who the “they” is that lead him on his selected path. He explains that, when one has a good *machshavah*, thought, he creates a good *malach*, angel. When his thought is bad, when he plans to do something that runs counter to the Torah, he creates a bad *malach*. It is those *malachim*, angels, whom he created with his positive or negative thoughts who lead him on his preselected path. The path one chooses for himself is not one that he travels alone. The angels that he created guide him along his selected path. Thus, the *Tanna* of this *Mishnah* teaches: On the path that one selects for himself – *bah* – it, the choice he made leads him. How does the choice lead him? He created angels that accompany him. They are his choice, and they are the ones who are *molichin oso*, bring him down that path.

Alternatively, *bah* means specifically “it,” with complete adherence to his will. Horav Chaim Toito, Shlita, relates an incident that occurred concerning Horav Moshe Aharon Stern, zl, *Mashgiach* of Kaminetz, Yerushalayim, which underscores this point. When *Rav* Moshe Aharon was a lad of eight years old, he became deathly ill. His parents took him to the finest doctors, the biggest specialists. They responded, “Say a prayer.” *Tehillim* was all that was left for them to do. People recited *Tehillim* for him around the clock. One day, his father looked at him and said, “Look, everyone is reciting *Tehillim* for you; everyone is petitioning Hashem for your speedy

recovery – everyone – but you.” The young boy asked his father, “What should I do? I, too, am reciting *Tehillim*. Is there anything else I can do?” His father replied, “Accept upon yourself a *hanhagah tovah*, good practice, a special deed to which you will commit yourself, regardless of the circumstances.” “Does Father have a suggestion for me?” the boy asked. His father thought a moment and replied, “Yes. Accept upon yourself that, upon being cured from this illness, you commit yourself to always daven with a *minyan*.” The young boy agreed to accept this policy as a commitment for life. Indeed, he doubled down on his learning, his *yiraas Shomayim*, fear of Heaven, and strengthened his *minyan* attendance. He would go out of his way to see to it that, under all circumstances, he would *daven* with a *minyan*.

Once he became *Mashgiach* of Kamenitz, his duties changed commensurably. He now had to shoulder responsibility for maintaining the fiscal obligations of the *yeshivah*. As the *yeshivah* grew in size, his obligations also grew. It meant taking off time from the *yeshivah* to travel to the diaspora to raise funds for the *yeshivah*. While this presented a problem concerning the time he spent with his students, it also presented a logistical nightmare with regard to his commitment to *daven* with a *minyan*. Therefore, whenever he purchased a ticket to travel out of the country, he made sure that either there was a *minyan* on the plane or he took a flight that had a layover which afforded him the opportunity to locate and *daven* with a *minyan*.

Once, on a trip to America, he asked the agent if there would be a *minyan* at the airport. The response was to be expected, “It is an airport, not a *shul*.” He could not promise him a *minyan*, but, if there were enough observant Jewish travelers (which there are at Ben Gurion airport), there would be a *minyan*. If *minyan* was so important to him, however, the agent suggested that the *Mashgiach* take a stopover flight which would allow him a few hours to leave the airport, locate a *shul* and *daven* before returning for the continuation of his flight. Thus, on his next flight to the United States, he booked a flight that had a layover in Amsterdam. He figured he would have sufficient time to take a taxi from the airport to a *shul*, *daven* and return in time for his flight to the States. The plane landed in Amsterdam for a two-hour layover. He walked outside the terminal and searched for a taxi/car service. He had been standing there a few moments when a car pulled up, and the driver asked him in *Ivrit*, “Where is the *Rav* going?” *Rav Moshe Aharon* replied, “I require a *minyan*.” During the trip, the driver informed the *Mashgiach* that he lived outside of the city, and every morning he drove into the city to *daven* and go to work. After a short while, the car came to a stop in a small alley. They alighted and went into a small *shul*, in which were assembled eight Jews, who were waiting for two more Jews to complete the *minyan*. The *Mashgiach* *davened* and returned to the airport in time for his flight. He did not miss *davening* with a *minyan*.

When the *Mashgiach* related this story, his eyes shone brightly as he would say, “Imagine, eight Jews arise in the morning prepared to *daven*, knowing that they are eight; number nine must drive in from the suburbs and they must hope that number ten will somehow, from somewhere, materialize. This time they were “gifted” a Jew who was traveling to the United States whose commitment to *minyan* was so strong that he was ‘availed’ the opportunity to join their *minyan* that morning.”

We derive from here that just, *rotzeh leilech*, wanting to go in a certain direction, is insufficient. One must commit strongly to this path. Then he can be assured that, if he commits *bah*, to it, with strong intention, he will be led there. He must, however, have a *bah*,” a specific, unequivocal commitment to “it.”

ישען בלבם את עיניו וירא ישראל שנ לשבטיהם

Bilaam raised his eyes and saw Yisrael dwelling according to its tribes. (24:2)

Rashi comments (Bilaam raised his eyes): “He sought to instill the evil eye in them.” The *Michtav Mei’Eliyahu* explains the concept of *ayin hora*, evil eye. The blessings which Hashem bestows upon an individual should not serve as a source of angst to others. If one allows his blessing (such as: wealth, children, good fortune) to cause pain to others who are less fortunate (especially if he is so callous as to flaunt

his good fortune), he arouses a Divine judgment against himself and a reevaluation of his worthiness for those blessings. *Chazal* in *Pirkei Avos* (5:19) distinguish between the disciples of Avraham *Avinu* and Bilaam *ha’rasha* in three areas. [The *Mishnah* uses the term *disciples*, because, when one looks and studies the actions of an individual’s *disciples*, he is allowed an unabashed, lucid window into the true character of the *rebbe/mentor*.] Each of Avraham’s *disciples* has a good eye, a humble temperament, and a lowly spirit. Bilaam’s *disciples* are in direct contrast. Each has an evil eye, a haughty temperament, and an insatiable spirit.

As a good eye denotes a generous person – tolerant, smiling, affable and helpful – the evil eye manifest by Bilaam betokens a grudgingly miserly soul, who would gladly deprive others of their good fortune. Rather than focus on Bilaam’s evil eye, we will try to zero in on the concept of a good eye as our Patriarch, Avraham expressed. In recent times, an individual who exemplified the epitome of *ayin tova*, a benevolent eye, was the *Gerrer Rebbe*, *zl*, the *Pnei Menachem*. The concept of *ayin tova* was manifest throughout the *bais ha’medrash*, with directives that anyone who stood up front during *davening* allow another Jew to take his place for the following *Tefillah*. “In the spirit of the *mitzvah* of *V’ahavta l’reicha kamocha*, “love your fellow as yourself;” and because this is the correct and proper way to act, we ask those standing in the front rows during *davening* (next to the *Rebbe*) to please allow others also to have the opportunity to stand in these places. He who has an *ayin tova* is blessed.”

The *Rebbe* emphasized that rejoicing in the good fortune of one’s fellow is much more than extra-credit; rather, it embodies the principle of *avodas Hashem*, service to the Almighty, rooted in pure *emunah*, faith. When a person came to Hillel and asked that the sage teach him the entire Torah on one foot, Hillel replied, “Do not do to another what you will not want someone else to do to you. That is the entire Torah.” He maintained that abundant *parnassah*, livelihood, was dependent upon *ayin tova*.

At a *tish*, festive table/meal, *chassidim* join together with their *Rebbe* to listen to his Torah thoughts, sing together and enjoy refreshments. It is an opportunity in which the *Rebbe* and his *chassidim* come together for spiritual ascendance and inspiration. During a *tish* conducted on *Parashas Bo*, 1996, a few short weeks prior to the *Rebbe’s* passing, he said the following: “The *Chiddushei HaRim* (first *Gerrer Rebbe*) said that *Chazal* possessed a keen sense of *ayin tova*. It was they who instituted that, at a wedding, we recite the blessings beginning with the words, *Sameach t’samach reeim ha’ahuvin*; ‘Hashem should gladden the beloved companions.’ They understood that every Jew, even the simplest, was to be considered a beloved companion and should be blessed as such. We must derive from *Chazal* that we need *ayin tova*, that we must bless and be *melamed z’chus*, give one the benefit of the doubt, even to those who are not worthy.”

The *Rebbe* took the concept of *ayin tova* to the next level when one of his *chassidim*, an ophthalmologist by profession, approached him for a *bircas preidah*, blessing prior to leaving *Eretz Yisrael*, to speak at an optamology conference. It was *Motzoei Shabbos*, shortly before the entire *Gerrer bais medrash* was to usher in *Selichos* for the *Yamim Noraim*, High Holy Days. A long line of *chassidim* was waiting to receive the *Rebbe’s* blessing; Jews of all walks of life were all standing at attention, waiting for that precious *brachah*. The doctor’s turn came, and he explained the reason for his trip. “What takes place at this conference?” the *Rebbe* asked. “Various physicians, many of them specialists in the treatment of illnesses of the eye, speak and present their novel treatments. We all learn from one another,” was the doctor’s reply.

The *Rebbe* asked, “Tell me, is it possible that a specialist who has discovered a novel approach to the treatment of an illness does not speak because he is not interested in sharing his discovery with anyone? Is it possible that he wants to be the first to innovate his treatment?” The doctor, who was taken aback by the *Rebbe’s* insightful question, thought for a moment and replied, “Yes, it is possible.”

The *Rebbe* implored the doctor, “When you speak, tell your colleagues that your *Rebbe* in Yerushalayim asked you to convey the following message to this assemblage, ‘Just as our life’s work is devoted to the betterment of each patient’s physical vision, so should our personal vision, how we view people around us, likewise not be impaired. We should view our fellow through benevolent, tolerant eyes, granting everyone the benefit of the doubt. We should seek to help others – rather than look for opportunities to glorify ourselves.’”

The doctor’s turn to speak arrived. He rose to the podium and conveyed the *Pnei Menachem*’s message. When he concluded his short speech, one could hear a pin drop. This had never happened before. Here they were, the premier eye specialists of the world, and they were being admonished by a rabbi in Yerushalayim. A few minutes passed as the assemblage sat dumbstruck. Then one of the most distinguished physicians, a professor in a prestigious university, a sought-after surgeon who had operated on the power elite of the global community, stood up and walked to the lectern, “My dear colleagues, I have listened to the message of the Rabbi, and I am moved. I must confess that I have with me in my briefcase a paper detailing my latest discovery, a new procedure that will immeasurably transform eye care as we know it. Veritably, for obvious reasons, I was not prepared to reveal the contents of this discovery in order to keep all the glory for myself. After listening to our distinguished colleague from Israel, however, I realize that, by not revealing this discovery, I would be depriving thousands of ill patients from this miracle treatment. I defer to the Rabbi’s petition that we think of others – and not of ourselves.” He revealed the discovery to the oohs and ahs of everyone in the room. The *Gerrer Rebbe* had made a point. We cannot correct someone else’s vision until we first correct our own.

Va’ani Tefillah

הברך את עמו ישראל בשלום – Ha’mevarech es Amo Yisrael ba’shalom.
Who blesses His nation *Yisrael* with peace.

Peace is a blessing which Hashem confers upon us. It is not always easy to come by. Sometimes one must wage war in order to establish peace. When someone or something stands in the way of the establishment or maintenance of a harmonious relationship, it is necessary to “remove” the impediment before he/she/it causes serious damage. This was the situation that Pinchas confronted. Zimri was undermining Moshe *Rabbeinu*’s leadership. The nation was gravitating towards the Midyanite women. Zimri sanctioned their actions with his own licentiousness. A major breach in *Klal Yisrael* was occurring. Enter Pinchas, who zealously killed Zimri together with his paramour, such that he became the vehicle to stop the insurrection and catalyze a return to peace. Hashem rewarded Pinchas with His Covenant of Peace, which would protect him from any tribal repercussions. Interestingly, *shalom* is spelled there (*Parashas Pinchas*) with the *vov* cut in half (*vov ketiya*), which generates much commentary. Perhaps, we may say that the message of the *vov ketiya* is: Sometimes it is necessary to shatter *shalom* in order to create lasting *shalom*.

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The Saga of Twelve Months

Rabbi Yirmiyahu Kaganoff

The end of parshas Balak includes a reference to the laws of kashrus:

Question #1: Sentimental China

“A family is in the process of kashering their home for the first time, and they own an expensive and sentimental, but treif, set of china. Is there any way that they can avoid throwing it away?”

Question #2: No Bologna

“I own an expensive set of fleishig china that I do not use, and, frankly, I desperately need money for other things now. Someone is interested in paying top price for this set because it matches their milchig china. Is there any way I can kasher it and sell it to them, and they may use it for milchig?”

Question #3: Hungary on Pesach

“Help! I just completed cooking the seudos for the first days of Pesach, and I realize now that I used a pot that was used once, more than two

years ago, for chometz. Do I have to throw out all the food I made? I have no idea when I am going to have time to make the seudos again!”

Introduction:

Every one of the she’ilos mentioned above shows up in one of the classic works of responsa that I will be quoting in the course of this article. They all touch on the status of food equipment that has not been used for twelve months. In order to have more information with which to understand this topic, I must first introduce some halachic background.

When food is cooked in a pot or other equipment, halacha assumes that some “taste,” of the food remains in the walls of the pot, even after the pot has been scrubbed completely clean. We are concerned that this will add flavor to the food cooked subsequently in that pot. This is the basis for requiring that we kasher treif pots, because the kashering process removes the residual taste.

Until the pot is kashered

Once twenty-four hours have passed since the food was cooked, the residual taste in the vessel spoils and is now categorized as nosein taam lifgam, a halachic term meaning that the taste that remains is unpleasant. Something is considered nosein taam lifgam even if it is only mildly distasteful.

The Gemara (Avodah Zarah 67b) cites a dispute between tana’im whether nosein taam lifgam is permitted or prohibited. The Mishnah (Avodah Zarah 65b) rules that nosein taam lifgam is permitted. This is the conclusion of the Gemara in several places (Avodah Zarah 36a, 38b, 39b, 65b, 67b) and also the conclusion of the halachic authorities (Rambam, Hilchos Ma’achalos Asuros 17:2; Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 103:5; 122:6). This means that, although it is prohibited to eat a food that includes a pleasant taste or residue of non-kosher, when the non-kosher food provides a less than appetizing flavor, the food is permitted.

Here is an example that bears out this rule. Glycerin (sometimes called glycerol), which is frequently manufactured from non-kosher animal fat, is often used as an ingredient in foods because, in addition to its other properties, it also adds a sweet flavor to the product. Therefore, when non-kosher glycerin is used in an otherwise kosher product, as I once found in a donut glaze, the product -- in this case the donuts -- are non-kosher.

On the other hand, if the ingredient adds an unpleasant taste, the finished product remains kosher.

Treif pots

Because of the halachic conclusion that nosein taam lifgam is permitted, min haTorah one would be allowed to use a treif pot once twenty-four hours have passed since it was last used. As mentioned above, at this point the absorbed flavor is considered spoiled, nosein taam lifgam. The reason that we are required to kasher equipment that contains nosein taam lifgam is because of a rabbinic injunction. This is because of concern that someone might forget and cook with a pot that was used the same day for treif, which might result in the consumption of prohibited food (Avodah Zarah 75b).

Chometz is exceptional

The above discussion regarding the rules of nosein taam lifgam is true regarding use of a pot in which non-kosher food was cooked. However, regarding chometz, the prohibition is stricter. Ashkenazim rule that nosein taam lifgam is prohibited in regard to Pesach products. Why is the halacha stricter regarding Pesach? Nosein taam lifgam still qualifies as a remnant of non-kosher food; it is permitted because it does not render a positive taste. However, regarding Pesach, we rule that even a minuscule percentage of chometz is prohibited. Thus, if a chometz-dik pot was used to cook on Pesach, even in error, the food is prohibited.

Fleishig to milchig

The rules governing the use of fleishig equipment that was used for milchig and vice versa are similar to the rules that apply to treif equipment, and not the stricter rules that apply to chometz-dik equipment used on Pesach. Someone who cooks or heats meat and dairy in the same vessel, on the same day, creates a prohibited mix of meat and milk. If the fleishig equipment had not been used the same day for

meat, the meat flavor imparted to the dairy product is nosein taam lifgam. Although the pot must be kashered, since it now contains both milk and meat residue, the dairy food cooked in it remains kosher (Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 93:1). The same is true regarding dairy equipment used to prepare fleishig.

Kashering from fleishig to milchig

Although non-kosher equipment can usually be kashered to make it kosher, and chometz-dik equipment can usually be kashered to make it kosher for Passover, there is a longstanding custom not to kasher fleishig equipment to use as milchig, and vice versa (Magen Avraham 509:11). The reason for this custom is because if a person regularly koshers his pots or other equipment from milchig to fleishig and back again, he will eventually make a mistake and use them for the wrong type of food without kashering them first (Shu't Igros Moshe, Yoreh Deah 1:43). By the way, it is accepted that someone who kasher their fleishig pot for Pesach may now decide to use it for milchig and vice versa.

Earthenware

We need one more piece of information before we begin to discuss the laws of equipment that has not been used for twelve months. That is to note that there is equipment that cannot usually be kashered. The Gemara teaches that we cannot kasher earthenware equipment, since once the non-kosher residue is absorbed into its walls, it will never come out. (Some authorities permit kashering earthenware or china, which is halachically similar, three times, although this heter is not usually relied upon. A discussion on this point will need to be left for a different time.)

Twelve months

Now that we have had an introduction, we can discuss whether anything changes twelve months after food was cooked. Chazal created a prohibition, called stam yeinam, which prohibits consumption, and, at times, even use, of wine and grape juice produced by a non-Jew. Halachically, there is no difference between wine and grape juice. Notwithstanding the prohibition against using equipment that was once used for non-kosher, we find a leniency that equipment used to produce non-kosher wine may be used after twelve months have transpired. The equipment used by a gentile to crush the juice out of the grapes, or to store the wine or grape juice is also prohibited. This means that we must assume that this equipment still contains taste of the prohibited grape juice.

The Gemara (Avodah Zarah 34a) rules that the grape skins, seeds and sediment left over after a gentile crushed out the juice are prohibited both for consumption and for benefit. This is because non-kosher grape juice is absorbed into the skins, seeds and sediment. However, after they have been allowed to dry for twelve months, whatever non-kosher taste was left in the skins, seeds and sediment are gone, and it is permitted to use and even eat them. Similarly, once twelve months have transpired since last use, the equipment used to process or store the non-kosher juice also becomes permitted. Thus, the Gemara rules that the jugs, flasks and earthenware vessels used to store non-kosher wine are prohibited for twelve months, but may be used once twelve months have elapsed since their last use. The conclusions of this Gemara are codified in the Shulchan Aruch (Yoreh Deah 135:16). The process of allowing twelve months to transpire and then permit the leftovers is called yishun. Several common products are permitted because of this halacha. One example is a wine derivative called tartaric acid, an organic compound with many practical usages. Among its food uses is in beverages, as a flavor enhancer and as baking powder. It is commonly considered kosher, notwithstanding that it is a by-product of non-kosher wine. (It should have a hechsher since it can be produced in ways that are non-kosher.)

It is important to note that this method of kashering, i.e., of waiting twelve months, is mentioned in the Gemara only with reference to kashering after the use of non-kosher wine. The halachic authorities debate whether this method of kashering may be used regarding other prohibitions, and this is the starting point for us to address our opening questions.

Hungry on Pesach

"Help! I just completed cooking the seudos for the first days of Pesach, and I realize now that I used a pot that was used once, more than two years ago, for chometz. Do I have to throw out all the food I made? I have no idea when I am going to have time to make the seudos again!" It would seem that there is no hope for this hardworking housewife, and indeed all her efforts are for naught. However, let us examine an actual case and discover that not everyone agrees.

A very prominent eighteenth-century halachic authority, the Chacham Tzvi, was asked this question: On Pesach, someone mistakenly cooked food in a pot that had been used once, two years before, for chometz. Since Ashkenazim rule that even nosein taam lifgam is prohibited on Pesach, it would seem that the food cooked on Pesach in this pot is prohibited, and this was indeed what some of those involved assumed. However, the Chacham Tzvi contended that the food cooked in this pot is permitted, because he drew a distinction between nosein taam lifgam after 24 hours, and yishun after 12 months. He notes that grape juice absorbed into the vessels or the remaining seeds and skins is prohibited, even for benefit, for up to 12 months, yet after 12 months it becomes permitted. Thus, we see that even the actual wine becomes permitted, because after twelve months it dries out completely and there is no residual taste. It must certainly be true, reasons the Chacham Tzvi, that chometz flavor absorbed into a pot or other vessel must completely dissipate by twelve months after use and that no residual taste is left (Shu't Chacham Tzvi #75, 80; cited by Pishei Teshuvah, Yoreh Deah 122:3).

Notwithstanding this reasoning, the Chacham Tzvi did not permit using treif equipment without kashering it, even when twelve months transpired since its last use. He explains that since Chazal prohibited use of treif equipment even when the product now being manufactured will be kosher, no distinction was made whether more than a year transpired since its last use -- in all instances, one must kasher the vessel before use and not rely on the yishun that transpires after twelve months. However, after the fact, the Chacham Tzvi permitted the food prepared by Mrs. Hardworking in a pot that had been used for chometz more than twelve months before.

Aged vessels

About a century after the Chacham Tzvi penned his responsum, we find a debate among halachic authorities that will be germane to a different one of our opening questions.

Someone purchased non-kosher earthenware vessels that had not been used for twelve months. He would suffer major financial loss if he could not use them or sell them to someone Jewish. Rav Michel, the rav of Lifna, felt that the Jewish purchaser could follow a lenient approach and use the vessels on the basis of the fact that, after twelve months, no prohibited residue remains in the dishes. However, Rav Michel did not want to assume responsibility for the ruling without discussing it with the renowned sage, Rabbi Akiva Eiger (Shu't Rabbi Akiva Eiger 1:43). Rabbi Akiva Eiger rejected this approach. First of all, he noted that the Chacham Tzvi, himself, did not permit cooking in vessels aged twelve months since last use, only permitting the product that was cooked in those pots.

Secondly, Rabbi Akiva Eiger disputed the Chacham Tzvi's approach that the concept of yishun applies to anything other than wine. Rabbi Akiva Eiger writes that, among the rishonim, he found the following explanation of yishun: The Rashba writes that the concept of yishun applies only to wine vessels, and the reason is because no remnant of the wine is left since it has dried out (Shu't Harashba 1:575). Rabbi Akiva Eiger writes that the only other rishon he found who explained how yishun works also held the same as the Rashba. This means that the kashering method known as yishun applies only for non-kosher wine, but to no other prohibitions. Since Rabbi Akiva Eiger found no rishon who agreed with the Chacham Tzvi, he was unwilling to accept this heter. In his opinion, the food cooked on Pesach by Mrs. Hardworking is chometz-dik and must be discarded.

Sentimental china

At this point, let us examine a different one of our opening questions:

“A family is in the process of kashering their home for the first time, and they own an expensive, but treif, set of china. Is there anyway that they can avoid throwing it away?”

Rav Moshe Feinstein was asked this exact question (Shu’t Igros Moshe, Yoreh Deah 2:46). Rabbi Shmuel Weller, a rav in Fort Wayne, Indiana, asked Rav Moshe about a family that, under his influence, had recently decided to keep kosher. The question is that they have an expensive set of porcelain dishes that they have not used for over a year and they do not want to throw it away. Is there any method whereby they may still use it? Rav Moshe writes that, because of the principle of takanas hashavim -- which means that to encourage people who want to do teshuvah we are lenient in halachic rules -- one could be lenient. The idea is that although Chazal prohibited use of an eino ben yomo, they prohibited it only because there is still residual flavor in the vessel, although the flavor is permitted. Once twelve months have passed, the Chacham Tzvi held that there is no residual flavor left at all. Although the Chacham Tzvi, himself, prohibited the vessels for a different reason, Rav Moshe contends that there is a basis for a heter. (See also Shu’t Noda Biyehudah, Yoreh Deah 2:51.)

Rav Moshe notes that there are other reasons that one could apply to permit kashering this china, and he therefore rules that one may permit the use of the china by kashering it three times. Because of space considerations, the other reasons, as well as the explanation why kashering three times helps, will have to be left for a different time.

No bologna

At this point, let us refer again to a different one of our opening questions: “I own an expensive set of fleishig china that I do not use, and, frankly, I desperately need money for other things now. Someone is interested in paying top price for this set because it matches their milchig china. Is there anyway I can kasher it and sell it to them, and they may use it for milchig?”

This question presents two problems:

(1) Is there any way to remove the residual fleishig flavor and kasher the china?

(2) Is it permitted to kasher anything from fleishig to milchig?

In a responsum to Rav Zelig Portman, Rav Moshe Feinstein (Shu’t Igros Moshe, Yoreh Deah 1:43) discusses this question.

We will take these two questions in reverse order. As I mentioned earlier, the Magen Avraham (509:11) reports that there is an accepted minhag not to kasher fleishig equipment in order to use it for milchig, and vice versa. Wouldn’t changing the use of this china violate the minhag?

Rav Moshe explains that the reason for this minhag is to avoid someone using the same pot, or other equipment, all the time by simply kashering it every time he needs to switch from milchig to fleishig. The obvious problem is that, eventually, he will make a mistake and forget to kasher the piece of equipment before using it.

Rav Moshe therefore suggests that the custom of the Magen Avraham applies only to a person who actually used the equipment for fleishig; this person may not kasher it to use for milchig. However, someone who never used it for fleishig would not be included in the minhag.

Regarding the first question, Rav Moshe concludes that, since twelve months have passed since the china was last used for fleishig, one may kasher it.

Conclusion

The Gemara teaches that the rabbinic laws are dearer to Hashem than are the laws of the Written Torah. In this context, we understand that Chazal established many rules to protect the Jewish people from violating the Torah’s laws of kashrus. This article has served as an introduction to one aspect of the laws of kashrus that relates to utensils. Not only is the food that a Jew eats required to be given special care, but also the equipment with which he prepares that food. We should always hope and pray that the food we eat fulfills all the halachos that the Torah commands us.

לע”ג
שרה משה בת ר' יעקב אליעזר ע"ה
ביליא בת (אריה) ליב ע"ה

Parshat Balak: Bilam: The Prophet and the Consultant

by Rabbi Menachem Leibtag

Is Bilam really such a 'bad guy?' Indeed, God's anger with his decision to travel with Balak's messengers (see 22:12,22) suggests that his true intentions may have been to curse Am Yisrael. However, this fact may prove exactly the opposite - that Bilam is a man of high moral stature! After all, over and over again, Bilam overcomes this personal desire to curse Yisrael and blesses them instead, "exactly as God commands him" (see 23:12,26 and 24:13). In fact, his final blessing of Am Yisrael appears to have been on his own initiative (see 24:1-6).

Why then do Chazal cite Bilam as the archetype "rasha" (a wicked person - see Pirkei Avot 5:19)? Simply for once having 'bad intentions'?

This week's shiur attempts to answer this question by reconstructing what really happens in Parshat Balak, based on other Parshiot in Chumash.

Introduction

From Parshat Balak alone it is hard to pinpoint any specific sin that Bilam commits. In fact, a careful reading of the entire Parsha shows that not only did he do nothing wrong, he is even quite a "tzadik" (a righteous man). Before leaving on his journey he clarifies to Balak's messengers that he will not stray one iota from whatever God will tell him (see 22:18). Upon his arrival in "sdeh Moav," he blesses Am Yisrael instead of cursing them, precisely as God commands him (see 23:1-24:9). Bilam is so 'pro-Israel' that by the conclusion of the story, Balak is so angry that he basically tells Bilam to 'get lost':

"Balak's anger was kindled with Bilam and, striking his hands together, Balak tells Bilam: I asked you to curse my enemy and instead you have blessed them three times! Now, run away to your own place..." (24:10-11)
Before Bilam leaves, as though he had not disappointed Balak enough, he informs Balak of how Yisrael will one day defeat Moav and Edom in battle. Finally:

"Bilam gets up and goes to his homeland, and Balak also went on his way." (24:25)

Clearly, Parshat Balak leaves us with the impression that Bilam and Balak split on 'no-speaking' terms. Bilam the 'loyal prophet' returns home, and Balak is left to deal with his problems by himself. Surely, had this been the only story in Chumash about Bilam, it would be quite difficult to judge him as a "rasha."

To take care with Bilam's behavior it is necessary to look elsewhere in Chumash - in Parshat Matot - where the Torah tells us about Bilam's untimely death.

We begin by showing how these two Parshiot are connected.

Bilam and the War with Midyan

Immediately after the story of Bilam (chapters 22-24), we find the story of Bnei Yisrael's sin with "bnot Moav" (the daughters of Moav and Midyan; see chapter 25). Although the Torah does not specify who instigated this sin, the juxtaposition of these two stories already suggests a thematic connection (see Rashi and Ramban 25:1).

Due to this sin, Bnei Yisrael are punished by a terrible plague, but finally they are saved by the zealous act of Pinchas (25:1-9). At the conclusion of that entire incident, God commands Bnei Yisrael to avenge the Midyanim with a reprisal attack (see 25:16-18). For some reason (to be discussed in the shiurim to follow), the details of that battle are only recorded several chapters later - in Parshat Matot (see 31:1-12).

In the brief detail of that battle, the Torah informs (almost incidentally) that Bilam is killed together with the five kings of Midyan (31:8).

Why is Bilam executed? What did he do to deserve the death penalty?

The answer to this question is alluded to in the story that follows. When the army returned from battle with Midyan, Moshe mentions Bilam in his censure of the military officers for taking female captives:

"And Moshe became angry at the military officers... saying: Were they not the very ones who - b'dvar Bilam - at the bidding of Bilam, induced Bnei Yisrael to sin against God in the matter of Peor!" (31:14-16)
What is Moshe referring to when he mentions "dvar Bilam?" The Gemara in Sanhedrin 106a explains that "dvar Bilam" refers to Bilam's advice to use the daughters of Moav and Midyan to lure Bnei Yisrael towards the idol worship of "Baal Peor." (See Rashi there.) Now, the connection between these two parshiot becomes clear. It was Bilam himself who instigated the entire incident of "chet bnot Moav!" It was his idea to lure Bnei Yisrael into sinning. Bilam is so involved that this entire incident is associated with his name!

[Furthermore, from this statement by Moshe, we see that Bilam's involvement in this scheme is 'common knowledge' for it takes for granted that the military officers are aware of what "dvar Bilam" is. In other words, everyone knows that Bilam

was the instigator.]

Therefore, when Bilam is executed, it is not because he had once intended to curse Bnei Yisrael. Bilam is found guilty for it is he who orchestrated the entire scheme of "chet bnot Midyan."

So why the sudden change of heart? Why, after blessing Am Yisrael, does he turn around and orchestrate their demise? Was "dvar Bilam" simply some last minute advice to Balak before leaving? It doesn't seem so. Recall from Parshat Balak that when Bilam was sent away, he and Balak were not exactly on speaking terms. Furthermore, what is Bilam doing in Midyan at all? Had he not gone home?

Before we can answer these questions, we must first determine where Bilam is from. [Time for a little Biblical geography.]

Bilam's Home Town

To better understand Bilam's true character, it is important to recognize that he lived in Mesopotamia, a very far distance away from Moav and Midyan! How do we know this? In the opening psukim of the Parsha we are told that: "Balak sent messengers to Bilam ben Be'or to city of Ptor which is by the river... to call him." (22:5)

In Chumash, the river ("ha'nhar") refers to the Euphrates ("n'har prat"), the main river flowing through Mesopotamia. (See Board #1.)

This assumption can be confirmed by Sefer Devarim, in a short reference to Moav and the story of Bilam:

"...and because they hired Bilam ben Be'or from Ptor Aram Naharaim [Aram (located between) the two great rivers (the Euphrates and Tigris)]." (23:5)

(See Board #2.) Furthermore, Bilam's opening blessing states specifically that he came from Aram, from the East (modern day Syria/Iraq):

"From Aram, Balak has brought me... from mountains in the East [har'rey kedem]." (23:7)
Why is it so important that we know that Bilam came from Mesopotamia, a location so far away?

The Return of Bilam

Recall that Bilam had returned home (see 24:25), i.e. to Mesopotamia, after blessing Bnei Yisrael (instead of cursing them). Nevertheless, only a short time later, when Bnei Yisrael sin with "bnot Midyan," we find that Bilam is back in the 'neighborhood,' together with the five kings of Midyan (31:8). Thus, we must conclude that after Bilam had returned home, he comes back to Moav - a second time!

For what purpose does he return? Why does he embark on another journey of several hundred miles to give some advice to Moav and Midyan? The answer is startling, but simple: Bilam the 'prophet' went home and Bilam the 'consultant' returns!

What motivates Bilam's lengthy trek back to Moav? Why is he so interested in causing Bnei Yisrael to sin?

Bilam the Rasha

Bilam's return to Moav proves that his true intention all along was to curse Bnei Yisrael. Yet as a prophet, he could not do so for 'how could he curse he whom God Himself does not curse' (see 23:8). However, even though he may be faithful to God as a prophet, he is far less faithful as a person. Overcome by his desire to cause Bnei Yisrael harm, he employs his prophetic understanding to devise an alternate plan - to create a situation where God Himself will curse Am Yisrael.

As reflected in his blessing of Bnei Yisrael, Bilam the prophet realizes the special relationship between God and His Nation. He fully understands why God does not allow him to curse them, for it is His will that Bnei Yisrael fulfill their Divine purpose to become God's special nation.

On the other hand, Bilam finds a loophole. Being a prophet, he also realizes that should Bnei Yisrael themselves fail in their obedience to God, He Himself would punish them. In other words - this special nation could not be cursed without reason. However, should they sin, God would punish them. Bilam's conclusion is shrewd: to cause Bnei Yisrael to be cursed - by causing them to sin. Bilam finally finds a method to curse Bnei Yisrael. He advises Moav and Midyan to cause Bnei Yisrael to sin.

This may be the deeper reason that Chazal consider Bilam the archetype "rasha," for he utilizes his prophetic understanding, the special trait that God gave him, to further his own desires rather than to follow God's will. Taking God-given qualities, and using them in an improper manner is the 'way of life' for a "rasha."

Between Avraham and Bilam

In the Mishnah in Pirkei Avot (5:19), not only is Bilam called the "rasha;" he is also contrasted with Avraham Avinu:

"Whoever has the following three traits is among the 'talmidim' (disciples) of Avraham Avinu; and whoever has three other traits is among the 'talmidim' of Bilam "ha'rasha":

Avaraham

Good Eye
Humble Spirit
Meek Soul

Bilam

Evil Eye
Arrogant Spirit
Greedy Soul

Both Avraham and Bilam are men of renowned spiritual stature. However, Bilam exploits this quality for his own personal pride and gain, while Avraham Avinu utilizes this quality towards the perfection of mankind. A "rasha" according to Chazal is one who harnesses his God-given traits and abilities towards an unworthy purpose. A disciple of Avraham Avinu is one who harnesses these qualities for a Divine purpose.

In Chumash, we find several textual parallels between Bilam and Avraham Avinu that support this comparison. We will note two examples:

A) Bracha and Klalah

Avraham: "And I will bless those whom you bless, and those who curse you shall be cursed, and through you all nations on earth shall be blessed." (Breishit 12:3)

Bilam: "For it is known, that he whom you bless shall be blessed, and he whom you curse shall be cursed." (22:6)

B) Aram Naharaim - the homeland of both Avraham and Bilam is in Aram Naharaim, the center of ancient civilization:

Avraham: see Breishit 24:4 and 24:10, and Breishit 11:27-31;

Bilam: see Bamidbar 23:7 and Devarim 23:5.

These parallels point to this thematic contrast between Bilam and Avraham Avinu. As Bnei Yisrael, the chosen offspring of Avraham Avinu, are about to enter the Land that God promised him in order to become a 'blessing for all nations' (Breishit 12:3), they meet a final challenge. Just as God's prophecy concerning Avraham is about to become a reality, Bilam - the prophet with the ability to bless and curse - together with Moav (the descendants of Lot) and Midyan (the descendants of Yishmael) make a last minute attempt to thwart the fruition of this destiny.

Professional Bias

One could suggest that this confrontation may be representative of a more fundamental conflict. Unlike Moav, who's fear was motivated by a practical threat upon their national security (22:3-4), Bilam's fear of Am Yisrael may have been more ideological.

The existence of Am Yisrael posed a threat to Bilam himself! Bilam, as echoed in his three blessings, perceived the Divine purpose of Am Yisrael: a Nation destined to bring the message of God to mankind. This novel concept of a Nation of God threatened to upset the spiritual 'status quo' of ancient civilization. Up until this time, Divine messages to mankind were forwarded by inspired individuals, such as Bilam himself. The concept that this purpose could now be fulfilled by a nation, instead of by an individual, could be considered a 'professional threat' to Bilam and the society that he represents.

On a certain level, this confrontation between Bilam and Am Yisrael continues until this very day. Is it possible for a nation, a political entity, to deliver a Divine message to all mankind? While Bilam and his 'disciples' continue to endeavor to undermine this goal, it remains Am Yisrael's responsibility to constantly strive to achieve it.

Shabbat Shalom,

Menachem

Virtual ClassRoom enhancements by Reuven Weiser.

For Further Iyun

A. Note the commentary of the Abrabanel where he explains that Bilam is a descendant of Lavan.

1. Does this support the basic points made in the shiur?

2. What parallels exist between Bilam and Lavan?

3. Did Lavan ever receive "n'vu'ah?" Did Hashem ever speak to him? If so, what was the content? Is it parallel to Bilam?
4. Could the struggle between Lavan and Yaakov also be considered of a spiritual nature?

B. Bilam was almost successful. Bnei Yisrael's sin with "Bnot Moav and Midyan" led to some 24 thousand casualties. The plague was stopped due to the zealous act of Pinchas (25:6-9). His act returned Bnei Yisrael to their covenantal partner. In reward, Pinchas receives the covenant of the 'kehuna' (25:10-13).

1. In what way does his reward reflect his deed?

2. What are the responsibilities of the 'kohanim' in addition to working in the Mikdash?

3/ How does this relate to the ultimate fulfillment of our national destiny?

C. An additional textual parallel exists between Avraham and Bilam - travelling in the morning with two servants:

Avraham: "V'yashkeim Avraham ba'boker, vayachavosh et chamoro va'yikach et shnei n'arav ito..." (Breishit 22:3)
Bilam: "V'yakom Bilam ba'boker, vayachavosh et atono... u'shnei na'arav imo." (Bamidbar 22:21-22)

Could this parallel be the source of the Midrash Chazal describing the 'satan' who challenges Avraham Avinu on his journey with Yitzchak to the Akeidah? If so, explain why.

D. Who wrote "Sefer Bilam"?

Parshat Balak seems to be an integral part of Chumash; however the Gemara in Baba Batra 14b makes a very strange statement:

"Moshe katav sifro (chumash - his book), parshat Bilam, and sefer Iyov (Job)."

It is understandable that we need to know that Moshe wrote Sefer Iyov, but why would there be any 'hava amina' they he didn't write Parshat Bilam?

Rashi (in Baba Batra) explains that every other parsha in Chumash is connected in some way to Moshe - either 'tzorcho,' 'torato' (mitzvot), or seder maasav (narrative). Rashi explains that everywhere else in Chumash, Moshe is in some way directly involved. In parshat Bilam, no one, including Moshe, should have known about the entire incident between Bilam and Balak.

The obvious question then arises: who wrote the story of Bilam that appears in Chumash? If not Moshe, what other navi was there, who could have?

This question is answered by Rabbeinu Gershom (al atar) that the possibility existed that this parsha was written by Bilam himself, since he was navi! His brachot and conversations are quoted directly! In order that we do not come to that conclusion, the Gemara must tell us that Moshe wrote down this entire Parsha directly from Hashem, and did not receive them via Bilam.

How does this relate to the machloket regarding: "Torah - megilah nitnah," or "sefer chatum nitnah?"

E. One could also ask how Bnei Yisrael are aware of Bilam's involvement in the sin of "bnot Moav." Why was "dvar Bilam" common knowledge among Bnei Yisrael? Who told them that it was Bilam's idea?

The answer could be quite simple. Most probably the daughters of Midyan (who sinned with Bnei Yisrael) had informed their 'patrons' as to who had sent them. [The 'word' got around.]

F. "Mah Tovu Ohalecha Yaakov"

From the time that Bnei Yisrael leave Har Sinai, Sefer Bamidbar has few positive events to record. The nation appears to be going from one sin to the next (mit'on'nim, mit'avim, meraglim, Korach, Mei M'riva etc.). With all the complaining, internal strife etc., it is difficult to find anything positive.

It 'davka' takes an outsider, like Bilam, looking from a distance at Am Yisroel, to perceive the greatness of this nation despite all of its problems. When Bilam recognizes that an entire nation is following Hashem through the desert, he proclaims:

"Mah tovu ohalecha Yaakov..."
(24:5)

This is an important insight for today also. Sometimes we become over disillusioned with ourselves, as we see so much disagreement, lack of unity, lack of commitment etc. We become so involved with the details that we sometimes are unable to take a step out and look at the whole picture, to see our achievements. With all the problems in Israel today, there continue to be great achievements in all walks of Jewish life. It is important to periodically take a step back and assess the good as well as the bad. It gives us the motivation to continue to achieve. "Mah tovu ohalecha Yaakov" - a nice attitude to start off the day!

PARASHAT BALAK

By Rabbi Eitan Mayer

QUESTIONS:

- 1) The elders of Mo'av and Midyan bring "kesamim" with them to Bil'am. What are they, and why are they brought? Where else in the parasha is this word mentioned, and how does that reflect back on the "kesamim" here?
- 2) When the elders come to Bil'am and solicit his sorcery, he invites them to stay the night so he can consult Hashem about the matter. Hashem asks him, "Who are these men with you?" Why does Hashem ask a question, since He certainly already knows the answer? Where else does Hashem ask questions like this, and what is the significance of the connection between this story and that story?
- 3) Our parasha is a great place to look at the ways in which people play "telephone" in real life. Hashem tells Bil'am one thing, but Bil'am reports something slightly (but significantly) different to the elders of Mo'av; they in turn report something slightly (but significantly) different to Balak. What are these subtle differences, and what accounts for them? Are they important to the theme of the parasha, or are they just an interesting side comment on the nature of communication? How is Balak's understanding of Bil'am's response reflected in his comments to Bil'am in 22:37 and later in 24:11?
- 4) Bil'am responds to Balak's second group of emissaries by consulting Hashem again about going with them. Hashem tells Bil'am to go (22:20). But, incredibly, just two pesukim later (22:22), Hashem "was angry because he was going." Well, does Hashem really want him to go or not?
- 5) Next comes the story with Bil'am and the donkey. But what is the point? Why is this story in the Torah? What are we supposed to get out of it?
- 6) Why does the angel show up to threaten Bil'am at all, if in the end he is going to tell Bil'am to keep going with Balak's men anyway? And what is the point of delivering to Bil'am again the same instructions Hashem had already given him in 22:20?
- 7) When Bil'am meets Balak, they embark on their joint effort to curse Bnei Yisrael. Why does Bil'am say nothing about himself in the first two "meshalim" he offers, but in the third and fourth "meshalim," he prefaces his words with extensive self-description? And what is the significance of the content of the self-description?
- 8) Bil'am makes several theological statements in the course of the "meshalim" he delivers. How does this theological information contradict his own behavior?
- 9) Finally, a very basic question which should have been on our minds all this time: who is this Bil'am, anyway? Is he a close friend of Hashem's who is believed to have power to bless and curse, or is he a sorcerer, a devotee of darker powers than Hashem? Or is he something else?

QUESTIONS WE WILL NOT ADDRESS:

- 1) Why, in the beginning of the parasha, is there so much switching back and forth between "Balak" as an individual and "Mo'av" as an entire nation? For example, if "Balak" sees what Bnei Yisrael have done to their enemies, then why is "Mo'av" afraid?
- 2) Where is the first time we come across the phrase "va-y-khas et ein ha-aretz" ["They covered the 'eye' of the land"]? By using this phrase, what is the Torah trying to tell us about the Moavites' perception of Bnei Yisrael?
- 3) Balak, Bil'am, and Hashem (in that order, in the parasha) use several terms for the word "curse." What do they each mean, and do they all indicate the same degree of cursing? If not, what is the significance of the shift between one term and the next?
- 4) In 22:7, we hear that the elders of both Mo'av and Midyan come to Bil'am to seek his cursing services, but in the very

next pasuk (verse), we hear that only the elders of Mo'av stay the night with Bil'am. Where have the elders of Midyan gone?

5) For that matter, there seems to be a lot of confusion about Mo'av and Midyan: in the beginning of our parasha, the elders of Mo'av and Midyan appear together, discussing the approaching threat. Soon, as noted, the elders of Midyan disappear. In the end of the parasha, we hear that Bnei Yisrael become involved in all sorts of bad doings with the people of Mo'av, but this seems to change into "Midyan" before long. What is going on?

PARASHAT BALAK:

In this week's parasha, several things seem to happen more than once. In fact, many things (three of them, in fact) seem to come in threes:

1) **WARNINGS TO BIL'AM:** In the beginning of the parasha, Balak, king of Mo'av, sends messengers to summon Bil'am, a local sorcerer, to curse Bnei Yisrael so that he (Balak) can defeat the powerful young nation in battle. Bil'am consults Hashem about going to curse Bnei Yisrael, and Hashem tells him not to go with Balak's men and not to curse the nation, "for it is blessed" (= warning #1). The messengers leave, but soon another group of Balak's messengers comes to urge Bil'am to offer his cursing services. Once again, Bil'am consults Hashem; Hashem tells him to go with them, but warns him to follow whatever directions Hashem gives him (= warning #2). Bil'am reports the good news to the messengers and travels with them back to their home. On the way, Hashem sends an angel to deliver another warning to Bil'am to follow his instructions carefully (= warning #3). In total, then, Bil'am is warned three times.

2) **THE SCENE WITH THE DONKEY:** Bil'am, riding on his donkey toward Balak's headquarters, is confronted by an angel which at first only his donkey can see. This hilarious scene provides us with three sets of three:

- a) The Torah tells us three times that the donkey sees the angel (22:23, 22:25, 22:27);
- b) Three times, the donkey turns aside from the path, or in other ways refuses to go on (turning into the field =1, pressing itself into a wall =2, crouching down under Bil'am =3);
- c) Three times, Bil'am hits his donkey with his stick to make it return to the path and behave itself. This thrice-repeated hitting is noted by the donkey itself in 22:28, when the donkey miraculously acquires the power of speech and complains to its master for hitting it thrice; the triple hitting is also noted by the angel when Bil'am's "eyes are opened" and he sees the angel (22:32 and 22:33).

3) **BIL'AM'S ATTEMPTS TO CURSE THE PEOPLE** also provide us with sets of 3:

- a) Bil'am and Balak erect a set of altars and sacrifices each time Bil'am attempts to curse Bnei Yisrael (i.e., three times in total).
- b) Bil'am delivers three prophetically inspired speeches in which he praises/blesses Bnei Yisrael.
- c) In response to each of Bil'am's blessings/speeches, Balak complains of "breach of contract"; he had hired Bil'am to curse, not to bless (23:11, 23:25, 24:10). In fact, after the third blessing, Balak notes explicitly that he and Bil'am have now been through the same thing for the third time: "I took you here to curse my enemies, but you have blessed three times!"

So not only do we have several patterns of triads, but we also have several explicit statements in the Torah which demonstrate awareness by the characters in the stories that there are triads here. It is almost as if the Torah is trying to direct our attention to the fact that there are these triads. But what are they supposed to mean?

There is no way to be sure, but to me they suggest the following: When something happens once, you can dismiss it completely. Even when it happens twice, you can still sort of pretend it didn't happen or wonder if maybe you misinterpreted it somehow. But when it happens for a third time, there's no denying it any longer: the number three has a certain solidity and certainty to it. This is perhaps related to the halakhic principle of "hazaka," a state which is created when something happens three times (e.g., once something has happened three times, we assume that it will happen again in the future).

For now, let us defer further development of this issue and look at other features of the parasha. Once we have greater clarity in the story as a whole, these patterns will provide deeper meaning.

BIL'AM THE SORCERER:

When Balak's men set out for Bil'am, they bring "kesamim" -- magical charms or totems -- with them. The fact that Balak provides these items for Bil'am tells us that Balak sees Bil'am as a professional sorcerer. As a magician, he will of course need the standard sorcerer's toolbox, full of the usual tools: amulets, figurines, spell books, colored powders, rare herbs, incense to burn, and sundry other items. Unlike today, when a service professional usually brings his own tools -- the plumber comes with his own plunger and wrench, the doctor brings his own medical bag, etc. -- Balak provided Bil'am with "kesamim," magical trinkets, tokens, or totems. (Without meaning to compare my son's mohel to Bil'am the Evil, I recall that the mohel instructed me to bring gauze, antibiotic creams, pillows, and several other things. On the other hand, he did bring his own scalpel and scissors.)

So whoever Bil'am really is, we know that Balak thinks he is a sorcerer, a magician, a practitioner of mystical arts. We will take a closer look at Bil'am as sorcerer as we move on.

BIL'AM DOESN'T TAKE THE HINT:

So Balak's men arrive and set their master's cursing-request before Bil'am, who consults Hashem. Hashem first wants to know who these people are who are spending the night at Bil'am's place: "Who are these men with you?" Bil'am tells Hashem that they are Balak's men. But this whole conversation certainly is a strange exchange. Why does Hashem have to ask Bil'am who the men are? Can't He "see" for Himself?

By way of seeking an answer, where else have we seen Hashem ask questions to which He knows the answer? Some examples which come to mind:

1) Bereshit 4:9 -- Hashem said to Kayyin, "Where is Hevel, your brother?"

This is, of course, just after Kayyin has murdered his brother Hevel.

2) Bereshit 3:9 -- Hashem, the Lord, called to the man and said, "Where are you?"

This is, of course, just after Adam has eaten from the Tree of Knowledge against Hashem's instructions. His eyes are opened, and he now knows that he has no clothing; he is hiding, he says, because he is naked. So Hashem has another question for him:

3) Bereshit 3:11 -- He said, "Who told you that you are naked?"

And then another question:

4) Bereshit 3:11 -- "Have you -- from the tree which I commanded you to not eat from it -- eaten?"

Without belaboring the point, one thing seems clear: Hashem asks questions when someone has done something wrong and He wants that person to own up to the deed: Kayyin is supposed to admit to the murder of his brother (he instead denies knowledge of Hevel's whereabouts). Adam is supposed to admit that he is hiding because he is afraid of being punished for his deed (instead he claims modesty, but Hashem traps him anyway because he is not supposed to know about modesty!). Adam is supposed to respond to Hashem's next question by admitting having eaten from the tree (but he instead blames it on his wife).

In other words, a question from Hashem usually signals that someone has done something wrong. And in the cases above, human nature attempts to hide the deed anyway.

Bil'am is no exception to the pattern: Hashem asks, "Who are these men with you?" because he wants Bil'am to understand that He knows who these men are -- and that Bil'am's relationship with them should end right here. But Bil'am doesn't take the hint, just as Kayyin and Adam didn't.

On the other hand, Bil'am is a bit different from Adam and Kayyin: instead of shrugging his shoulders ("Well, uh, how

should I know where my brother is?" or trying to sidestep the question ("Uh, I'm behind this tree because I, uh, have no clothes"), he decides to brazen right through: "Oh, these men here? You want to know who they are? They, uh, they're Balak's men. Yeah. From Mo'av. They came to me to ask me to curse someone. You know, that nation that left Egypt, the nation that's swarming across the desert towards Balak. Balak wants my help in defeating them. That's who these men are." Bil'am either pretends that he doesn't understand the significance of Hashem's question, or he really is blind and doesn't see the problem: that these are Hashem's most favorite people and that He is not excited about their being cursed.

Hashem listens to Bil'am and makes it explicit: don't do this job. Don't go with them, and don't curse this people, "for they are blessed."

BIL'AM DOESN'T TAKE THE HINT . . . AGAIN:

When Bil'am receives this first warning, he obeys the direct order not to go with the men, but he is still quite eager to do a little hexing on Bnei Yisrael if the opportunity presents itself. So instead of telling Balak's men that he will not do the job because the target nation is blessed, i.e., because he himself feels it would be wrong to curse them, he tells them that his Boss said no: "Hashem has refused to allow me to go with you." He himself, of course, would be delighted to do the job and take the money.

Balak's men return to their master and report Bil'am's response -- except that they make an important emendation to Bil'am's response: "*Bil'am* refused to go with us." This is not exactly how Bil'am himself had formulated it: Bil'am had said, "*Hashem* has refused . . .", making it clear that he was willing but that Hashem was not. But Balak's men don't notice this fine point, so in the game of telephone which is all of human communication, they flub it and change Bil'am's answer and make it sound like Bil'am himself doesn't want to do the job. Balak's thought, naturally, is that Bil'am must have refused his request because the messengers he sent weren't important enough to give Bil'am the honor he felt he deserved, and because Bil'am wasn't happy with the price (or didn't think Balak could afford his fees for a house call).

So Balak sends men again, "more numerous and more honorable than these" [i.e., than the first group], and they carry Balak's message that "I will surely honor you greatly," paying whatever you ask. Bil'am responds by correcting Balak; to paraphrase, "It is not I, Bil'am, who stand in the way here, it is Hashem! Even if you offered me your whole treasury, I could not go against Him!"

On the surface, Bil'am sounds like a faithful servant of Hashem. Nothing can make him disobey his God.

But we have already seen that Bil'am's dedication goes only so far. He is not so bold as to actually defy Hashem by going with Balak's men and cursing Bnei Yisrael, but he has not at all internalized Hashem's will as his own. In other words, he is only behaviorally saintly. He will not actually **do** anything to contravene Hashem's explicit instructions to him, but he is completely uninterested in Hashem's unexpressed will, even when it should be apparent to him what Hashem wants.

Of course, it is sometimes appropriate to want to do something which is forbidden. In such cases, we show our loyalty and dedication to Hashem by not doing the forbidden thing we want to do. But this is true only where the prohibition is not a moral or ethical one. For example, it is not praiseworthy to desire greatly to sleep with your neighbor's spouse but to refrain from doing so because you know it is forbidden. It is something we should not **want** to do because it is wrong, because to do so violates the sanctity of marriage and destroys the fabric of the family. On the other hand, we might say that it is praiseworthy to want to sample a piece of marinated squid but to refrain simply because it is forbidden. (Some might argue with this last example, too.) The point is that we are supposed to develop into ethical and moral people, not remain internally corrupt and simply **behave** externally the way ethical and moral people would behave.

Bil'am is a saint, externally. "Curse these innocent people for money? Sure! Let me just ask the Boss."

When Bil'am asks Hashem for the second time about going with Balak, Hashem allows him to go, but warns him to follow His directions carefully. As far as we can tell, Bil'am is ready to obey, and so he tells us himself: "I cannot transgress the mouth of Hashem, my God, to do a small or great thing." But as soon as he hits the road on his trusty donkey, we hear that "Hashem was very angry because he was going." Now, Hashem is the One who just told him to go -- so why is He angry?

Hashem is angry because Bil'am didn't take the hint. Bil'am tells Balak's men that he cannot do a thing without Hashem's approval -- but he is hardly making this journey just to be Hashem's mouthpiece to Balak, whether blessing or curse is to be delivered! Bil'am is hoping against hope that he will somehow be able to curse Bnei Yisrael and take home the jackpot Balak has offered him. So although he is making the journey with permission, he is quite eager to find a way to get around Hashem's earlier instruction: "Do not curse the nation, for it is blessed!" A true servant of Hashem, sensitive to His will, would not be making this journey at all.

WHO IS BIL'AM?

Here is the place to start to think about what Bil'am could possibly be thinking. Since Hashem has forbidden the cursing, what does Bil'am hope to accomplish? Don't we hear from Bil'am himself, later on in the parasha, that Hashem is not One to change His mind like a fickle human being ("No man is Hashem, that He should lie, or a son of man, that He should retract"), that once He has blessed, He will not turn around and curse?

This brings us to one of the central questions of this week's parasha: what exactly is Bil'am? A great prophet? A small-time seer? A sorcerer of the dark arts, a necromancer? What exactly is his relationship with Hashem? Where does he get his power?

I believe that a careful reading of the parasha indicates that Bil'am's ideas about Hashem, and his conception of his own function, undergo radical change as a result of his experiences in trying to curse Bnei Yisrael in our parasha. And as his own ideas change and he learns who Hashem really is and who he himself really is, his sponsor, Balak, learns along with him.

SORCERER AND PROPHET:

At the beginning of the parasha, Bil'am is really more sorcerer than prophet. Unlike a prophet, a sorcerer is not a moral giant -- he is simply a technician. The power of the sorcerer does not come from Hashem's gracefully performing the sorcerer's will out of regard for his moral stature and faithful dedication; instead, the sorcerer is trained in tapping into the Divine power grid (or other sources of power) to do his work.

While the prophet works primarily on himself, perfecting his moral character and devotion to Hashem and achieving a level of focus on the Divine which enables him to communicate with Hashem, the sorcerer works primarily on manipulating other things: he uses magical totems, sprinkles colored powders, writes secret amulets, pronounces special incantations and obscure spells, and sacrifices animals to "appease" the demanding deities. The sorcerer manipulates forces which exist and which he sees as external to himself; there is nothing intrinsically holy or exalted about the sorcerer. The prophet, on the other hand, is a profoundly moral and religious figure; above all, his aspiration is not to manipulate the external supernatural for external purposes, but to come into direct relationship with Hashem by changing himself.

These two mentalities control how the sorcerer and prophet each conceive of God (or gods, if he believes in several): the prophet sees God as the moral North star, a transcendent, highest good and benevolence whose will must be obeyed. It would be inconceivable, under normal circumstances, for him to flout God's will. And, more importantly, he does his best to match his own will to God's. He obeys not only God's spoken, explicit command, but attempts to ascertain God's unexpressed will and follow it. The sorcerer, however, sees God (or gods) primarily as a force to be tapped, not a source for imperatives or a Will to be matched with his own will. He therefore does not pay attention to the desire of the deity except insofar as disobeying explicit commands might interfere with the sorcerer's ability to tap the deity's power.

Bil'am begins the parasha as a sorcerer. He has tapped into Hashem's power grid and acquired a reputation as a powerful person: Balak says to him, "I know that whoever you bless is blessed, and whoever you curse is cursed." When Balak's men come to him and request a hex on Bnei Yisrael, Bil'am goes right away to check with Hashem, his power source. Hashem tells him not to go with the men and not to curse Bnei Yisrael. Bil'am sees that he has no support for this stunt, so he tells Balak's men he can't do the job.

Then Balak sends more men to Bil'am, and Bil'am asks Hashem again. Bil'am has completely ignored the internal side of

the issue -- that he is not supposed to curse Bnei Yisrael for an actual *reason* (which he himself will articulate later, in his own blessings to the people), and he once again checks the power grid for available "current." Hashem gives Bil'am what Bil'am sees as an equivocal response: go with the men, but take care to do what I tell you to do. Bil'am is encouraged: he has gotten approval from the power source for half of what he wants; maybe the next time he asks, he will be able to somehow get the other half: power to curse. As far as Bil'am is concerned, Hashem is not so much an identity with will as a power to be mechanically manipulated. If so, it may be possible to manipulate this power into serving his needs, as time goes on.

Hashem understands what Bil'am is up to and decides that he needs to be educated.

THE DONKEY:

As Bil'am rides along with Balak's men, an angel appears in front of him, sword drawn, looking menacing. As we know, Bil'am's donkey sees the angel, but Bil'am is blind to it. The donkey makes three attempts to turn aside and avoid the angel swordsman, and each time Bil'am beats the donkey with his stick (especially when it crushes his foot against a wall!).

After the third time, the donkey turns to Bil'am and miraculously says, "What have I done to you, that you have hit me these three times?" Again, like Hashem's question to Bil'am earlier on ("Who are these men with you?"), we have a question to which the answer is obvious! Of course, he hit the donkey for disobedience! But Bil'am is supposed to understand that he is being told something by Hashem, who is speaking through his donkey.

Hashem had caused the donkey to turn aside three times, but Bil'am didn't take those hints. Now Hashem opens the donkey's mouth and causes it to ask a question to which it knows (and Bil'am knows it knows) the answer. Bil'am is not supposed to answer the question, he is supposed to just turn himself around and go home. But Bil'am still doesn't take the hint; he simply gives the answer: "Because you have disobeyed me! If I had a sword in my hand, I would kill you now!" Bil'am does not know as he says this that there is a sword in the *angel's* hand ready to kill him, but he will soon see.

Hashem opens Bil'am's eyes (the donkey sees before the "seer" sees, and also acquires speech before he acquires sight!), and he sees the angel. In a flash, he is apologetic and humble: "Hey, I didn't know You were upset about this trip I'm taking. If You really want, I'll just turn around and go right on home!" Although Bil'am's eyes are opened physically, he remains blind. He cannot see that a prophet would turn around without an explicit command, that Hashem's will is enough for the prophet. Bil'am is thinking about all that money.

The angel, echoing the donkey, emphasizes that Bil'am has been given three subtle warnings through his donkey, but that he has ignored all of them. And then the angel *repeats* this to Bil'am to give him *another* chance to decide to go home. But instead of just going home, Bil'am *asks* if he should go home. Bil'am will obey only a direct behavioral order. He is not interested in God's unexpressed will: "I cannot transgress the *word* of Hashem, my God" -- but he certainly can and does transgress the desire of Hashem. He is a sorcerer, not a prophet; a manipulator of the spiritual, not a man of God.

NOW REPEAT AFTER ME:

The angel then warns Bil'am once again that even as he continues his journey, he is to do exactly what Hashem tells him to do. Why is it necessary to deliver this warning once again?

A careful look will show that this warning is different than the earlier ones: before, Bil'am was warned not to disobey Hashem behaviorally. Now, he is being told that he must not act as a sorcerer at all, but instead as a prophet! He was hired as a sorcerer, to speak his own will and make God perform it: to curse. But Hashem tells him here that he is not to speak his own thoughts at all: "Only the thing that I speak to you shall you speak." Bil'am is being forced to act as Hashem's mouthpiece. He cannot curse the people, he can only report what Hashem has said.

The message sinks in: when Bil'am arrives at Balak HQ and Balak scolds him for delaying his arrival -- "Why did you take so long?" -- Bil'am responds: "Look, I'm finally here. And let me tell you: I no longer do that cursing stuff on my own. I just say what Hashem tells me to say. Whatever He tells me to say, that's what I'll say." Now, Balak probably doesn't catch the

difference between the old Bil'am and the new, but he has just been told that Bil'am will act only as Hashem's mouthpiece. He has been expressly forbidden to do otherwise.

But Bil'am is still hoping that Hashem will change His mind and agree to curse the people! Twice, he has Balak prepare sacrifices to appease the Deity, and twice Hashem appears to him on schedule. But Hashem is not impressed with Balak's korbanot, and He sends Bil'am back to bless Bnei Yisrael.

BIL'AM'S EYES ARE OPENED:

As we know, Bil'am's first and second contacts with Hashem yield him only praises and blessings for Bnei Yisrael instead of the curses for which he had hoped. By the third time, Bil'am gives up. He has finally taken the hint: "Bil'am saw that it was good IN THE EYES OF HASHEM to bless Yisrael." He has not heard anything *explicit* from Hashem, but he decides of his own volition to stop pretending, to stop blinding himself to the Divine will. And he makes no further attempt to use sorcery to curse the people: " . . . and he did not go as he did in the previous times toward sorcery."

Bil'am has finally begun to listen to his own words, placed in his mouth by Hashem in his second vision: "Not a man is Hashem, to lie, nor a person, to retract. Would He say and not do, speak and not fulfill?" He sees that Hashem's will is iron, and he bends to it for the first time. He gives up the hope that Hashem will agree to curse the people, and he turns toward Bnei Yisrael to offer them a blessing of his own. This is why this third blessing is so repetitive of the second: he has taken Hashem's material and adopted it as his own. And Hashem, sensing his new approach, inspires him: "And there came upon him a spirit of God."

Bil'am for the first time prefacing his blessing with a self-description -- here and in the fourth vision, because he is now highly self-aware. He realizes that his eyes have been opened, and he is now the man who is "geluy eynayyim," "of opened eyes." Hashem has opened his eyes, and now he truly sees! He is now the "yode'a **da'at** Elyon," the one who knows not just what Hashem *tells* him, but also what Hashem *desires,* what His will is. And Bil'am finally becomes not a sorcerer, but a prophet.

[Of course, this does not make him a hero. Still hoping to collect Balak's reward money, but having realized that Hashem operates within a moral rather than magical/mechanical framework, he gives up his attempts to sabotage Bnei Yisrael through magic and turns to moral sabotage: he advises Balak to send the Moabite women out to tempt Bnei Yisrael into sexual immorality, betting that this will arouse Hashem's anger against them and enable Moav and Midyan to gain the upper hand in battle. He is partially successful, as Bnei Yisrael are drawn into the sexual trap and stricken by a plague, but Hashem maintains His fundamental support for them, and Bil'am is eventually killed by Bnei Yisrael in retribution for his key role in their stumbling.]

Shabbat Shalom

Parshas Balak: Heroes and Villains

by Rabbi Yitz Etshalom

One of the remarkable, often overlooked features of Torah narrative is that the text rarely passes explicit judgement on the various individuals we encounter. We are familiar with heroes (e.g. Avraham, Rivkah, Mosheh), villains (Lavan, Pharaoh, Bil'am) and persons of questionable character (Lot and his daughters, Nadav and Avihu), despite the fact that at no point does the text explicit "rate" these people. (There are two exceptions: Noach [B'resheet 6:9,7:1 - who, as we can see from his later behavior, is either "the best of the worst" [one opinion in the Midrash] or blessed with a fleeting righteousness; and Mosheh Rabbenu, of whom the text states: Mosheh was the humblest of all men [Bamidbar 12:3])

We recognize these classifications - which have engendered a typology so ingrained that "Esav" is a Midrashic code-word for Rome (at its most despicable and terrifying), "Yitzchak" is the ultimate model of martyrdom and so on - we must admit that at no point in the text are any of these people defined as good or evil. How did each of them achieve their storied place in our tradition, in our liturgy and literature and, most significantly, in our mindset? How did Lavan become more evil than Pharaoh? How did Bil'am become "Bil'am haRasha" (the evil Bil'am - see below)?

There are contemporary writers who maintain that these descriptions are the creation of the Rabbis, chiefly through the vehicle of Midrash. They argue that painting certain characters "white" and others "black" helped to promote an ability to villify contemporary conquerors, internalize a necessary distancing from modern-day "Pharaohs" etc.

Midrashic literature is, to be sure, the richest source for this type of "classification"; most of the characters found in Toraic narratives are drawn in very bold, nearly black & white lines in Midrashim.

As I hope to demonstrate conclusively in this brief article, these approaches not only challenge (quite unsuccessfully) the integrity of the Oral Tradition; they are also academically weak and unsophisticated.

II. WHO IS BIL'AM?

The central character in this week's Parashah is the enigmatic Bil'am. He is an enigmatic character because we are told nothing about him until he enters our stage - even though he is evidently a powerful and spiritually endowed man. We know nothing of his training or background (where did he gain his powers?); we are only told that which we need to know.

He is also a curious character because, despicable and frightening as his anti-Israelite project may be, he ends up blessing our people with blessings so rich in texture, so elevating and ennobling, that we begin our daily T'fillot with a quote from his prophecy/blessing: "Mah Tovu Ohalekha Ya'akov, Mish'k'notekha Yisra'el". (How good are your tents, Ya'akov, your dwelling places, Israel). In addition, he must be blessed with great spiritual powers in order to be called on to curse an entire people - and for God to use him as the vehicle for blessing us! (Indeed, our Rabbis maintain [Sifri, v'Zot haB'rakhah #16] that Bil'am was a greater prophet than Mosheh Rabbenu!).

Nevertheless, as pointed out above, Bil'am's reputation is unanimously and unequivocally sealed by the Rabbis: Bil'am haRasha! Not only that, but our Rabbis are quick to inform us of some of Bil'am's evil traits (see next section). From where did they get this information? If we do not accept the approach prevalent among secular scholars of the past 200 years, that the Rabbis "made up" the personality of Bil'am, then how do we explain this one-sided judgement?

Although it would be tempting to argue "Torah sheba'al Peh" (Oral Tradition; i.e. we have an oral tradition that Bil'am behaved in such-and-such a fashion) and to close the book (literally) on the discussion, it would be eminently more satisfying - not to mention persuasive - to identify a discernible bridge between the information supplied by the written Torah and the descriptions afforded us by the tradition. (For further reading on this approach to the Midrash, see the final chapter of the first volume of my series "Between the Lines of the Bible")

We will begin by examining perhaps the quintessential Rabbinic statement about Bil'am - and then work "backwards" to identify possible textual sources for this characterization.

III. BIL'AM vs. AVRAHAM - AVOT 5:19

The Mishnah in Avot teaches:

Whoever possesses these three things, he is of the disciples of Avraham Avinu; and whoever possesses three other things, he is of the disciples of Bil'am haRasha'. The disciples of Avraham Avinu possess a good eye, a humble spirit and a lowly soul; the disciples of Bil'am haRasha' possess an evil eye, a haughty spirit and an over-ambitious soul. (Avot 5:19)

We have six "detail" questions here - in short, how do we know that Avraham had "a good eye(1), a humble spirit(2) and a lowly soul(3)" and how do we know that Bil'am had "an evil eye(4), a haughty spirit(5) and an over-ambitious soul(6)"?

Before dealing with these questions, we need to ask the "key question" which will help solve the rest: Why are Avraham and Bil'am "pitted" against each other? Most of the "protagonist vs. antagonist" pairs with which we are familiar met head-on: Mosheh vs. Pharaoh, Esav vs. Ya'akov, Haman vs. Mordechai etc. How did Avraham, who was long-dead and buried,

become the hero against the villainy of Bil'am?

IV. MIDRASHIC METHODOLOGY

As students of Rabbinic literature are all too aware, the methodology of Midrash has its own wisdom and its own mechanics. Specifically in the area of Midrash Halakhah (exegesis of legal texts with Halakhic implications), we are familiar with many "tools" which are (arguably) unique to this system and by which inferences are made. The famous "B'raita of R. Yishma'el" which forms the introduction of the *Torat Kohanim* (Halakhic Midrash on *Vayyikra*) and which is "recited" just before Shacharit every morning is but one of a number of Rabbinic lists of Midrashic tools: *Kal vaHomer*, *K'lal uP'rat* etc.

One of those tools is known as "Gezera Shava" and works as follows: If a [seemingly superfluous] word or phrase appears in two disconnected passages, it may indicate that these passages are to inform each other and become sources for information - filling in the gaps, as it were - for each other. For instance, regarding the daily Tamid offering, the Torah states that it be brought "in its time" ("b'Mo'ado" - *Bamidbar* 28:2) - an apparently extra word. Regarding the Pesah offering, the same word ("b'Mo'ado" - *Bamidbar* 9:2) is used. This "Gezera Shava" is one of the methods employed by Hillel (BT *Pesahim* 66a) to prove that the Pesah offering is brought even on Shabbat (i.e. when the 14th of Nissan falls on Shabbat). The reasoning goes as follows: Since the daily offering (by definition) is brought on Shabbat, in spite of the many necessary activities which would otherwise constitute a violation of Shabbat (e.g. stripping the skin, burning), similarly the Pesah is brought "in its time" (Nissan 14), even if it means slaughtering the animal etc. which would otherwise be prohibited.

The methodology known as Gezera Shava is formally limited to Midrash Halakhah. In other words, the Rabbis do not refer to this tool, by name, when making non-legalistic inferences and drawing comparisons. Nevertheless, the basic methodology is quite common in - and central to - all Midrashic literature.

For example, when the Rabbis identify a connection between Lot's flight from S'dom (*B'resheet* 19) and the David dynasty, they do so by noting the common word "M'itzo" (find) in both stories (*B'resheet Rabbah* 41:4).

The underlying concept here is that, of course, the Torah tells us much more than appears on the surface. One of the ways in which it imparts information is through allusion, common phrasing etc. which help to draw two (or more) narratives, characters, locations etc. together.

Sometimes, the Torah will draw them together for purposes of comparison - in order to highlight the significant differences between them. For instance, the Midrash notes that Haman, Esav, Y'rav'am, "the fool" [T'hillim 141], Hannah, Daniel, David and even the Almighty "speak to their heart". Yet, the Midrash immediately points out the salient difference: Whereas the first four speak "baLev" ["in the heart"], implying that each of them is enfolded, encircled and enslaved to his heart; the latter four speak "el (or al) haLev" ("to the heart"), implying that each is in control of the heart.

V. BIL'AM AND AVRAHAM

The first part of this week's Parashah involves Balak's hiring of Bil'am to curse the B'nei Yisra'el. Although he first refuses, apparently on "religious grounds" (see *Bamidbar* 22:13), he ultimately agrees (with what seems like reluctant Divine consent - see 22:20) and sets off to meet his employer, Balak, king of Mo'av.

Much as the details of his journey to Mo'av serve to generate the (unfavorable) comparison with Avraham, we are already introduced to this association at the onset of the Parashah:

Compare Balak's message to Bil'am:

...for I know that he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed. - "et Asher T'vareikh M'vorakh va'asher Ta'or Yu'ar" (22:6),

with God's charge to Avraham:

And I will bless those who bless you, and curse him who curses you - "va'Avarkha M'varakhekha uM'kalekh A'or". (*B'resheet* 12:3).

Although the speakers are diametrical opposites (God as opposed to the Moabite king), and the theological underpinnings of the messages are similarly dissimilar (for Balak, Bil'am is the one who causes the blessing/curse; in Avraham's case, it is God who blesses and curses); nevertheless, there is a commonality both in phrasing and theme which draws these two temporally disconnected personalities together.

When we begin reading the story of Bil'am's journey to see Balak, we are immediately assaulted by a sense of dissonance and near-surrealism. Since the beginning of chapter 12 in *B'resheet*, the focus of the Torah has been exclusively devoted to the development of the B'nei Yisra'el and their ongoing relationship with God. Like a bolt from the blue, Parashat Balak is at once surprising and unnerving: Why is the Torah bothering to tell us this story at all? Besides the beautiful prophecies which make up the second half of the Parashah, why would the Torah concern itself with this

Petoret prophet and his negotiations with our enemy - and why, above all, would the Torah outline, in painstaking detail, the story of Bil'am, his donkey and the angel?

As mentioned before, the Torah is telling us much more than a superficial reading lets on. In our case, besides the fundamental theological and socio-historical lessons about monotheism vs. pagan beliefs, the "Bil'am narrative" (as distinct from the "Bil'am prophecies" found in Chapters 23-24) also provide precious and valuable insights into another biblical character - Avraham!

VI. THE AKEDAH AND BI'LAM'S JOURNEY: A STUDY IN CONTRASTS

The pinnacle of Avraham's life - and the ultimate test of his greatness - is the tragic-heroic story of the Akedah (B'resheet 22:1-19). Since the Torah has already drawn these two personae dramatis together when we are introduced to each (via the "bless/curse" formula), let's see how these two journeys - Bil'am's trek to meet Balak and do his evil bidding and Avraham's pilgrimage to Mount Moriah - match up against each other:

And it came to pass after these things, that God tested Avraham, and said to him, Avraham; and he said, Behold, here I am. And he said, Take now your son, your only son Yitzchak, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell you. And Avraham rose up early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and Yitzchak his son, and broke the wood for the burnt offering, and rose up, and went to the place of which God had told him. Then on the third day Avraham lifted up his eyes, and saw the place far away. And Avraham said to his young men, Stay here with the ass; and I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come back to you. And Avraham took the wood of the burnt offering, and laid it upon Yitzchak his son; and he took the fire in his hand, and a knife; and they went both of them together. And Yitzchak spoke to Avraham his father, and said, My father; and he said, Here am I, my son. And he said, Behold the fire and the wood; but where is the lamb for a burnt offering? And Avraham said, My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering; so they went both of them together. And they came to the place which God had told him; and Avraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Yitzchak his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood. And Avraham stretched out his hand, and took the knife to slay his son. And the angel of Hashem called to him from heaven, and said, Avraham, Avraham; and he said, Here am I. And he said, Lay not your hand upon the lad, nor do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, seeing that you did not withhold your son, your only son from me. And Avraham lifted up his eyes, and looked, and behold behind him a ram caught in a thicket by his horns; and Avraham went and took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt offering in place of his son. And Avraham called the name of that place Adonai-Yireh; as it is said to this day, In the Mount of Hashem it shall be seen. And the angel of Hashem called to Avraham from heaven the second time, And said, By myself have I sworn, said Hashem, for because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son; That in blessing I will bless you, and in multiplying I will multiply your seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore; and your seed shall possess the gate of his enemies; And in your seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because you have obeyed my voice. So Avraham returned to his young men, and they rose up and went together to B'er-Sheva; and Avraham lived at B'er-Sheva. (B'resheet 22:1-19)

And God came to Bil'am at night, and said to him, If the men come to call you, rise up, and go with them; but only that word which I shall say to you, that shall you do. And Bil'am rose up in the morning, and saddled his ass, and went with the princes of Mo'av. And God's anger was kindled because he went; and the angel of Hashem stood in the way as an adversary against him. Now he was riding upon his ass, and his two servants were with him. And the ass saw the angel of Hashem standing in the way, and his sword drawn in his hand; and the ass turned aside out of the way, and went into the field; and Bil'am struck the ass, to turn it to the way. But the angel of Hashem stood in a path of the vineyards, a wall being on this side, and a wall on that side. And when the ass saw the angel of Hashem, it pushed itself to the wall, and crushed Bil'am's foot against the wall; and he struck her again. And the angel of Hashem went further, and stood in a narrow place, where there was no way to turn either to the right hand or to the left. And when the ass saw the angel of Hashem, it fell down under Bil'am; and Bil'am's anger was kindled, and he struck the ass with a staff. And Hashem opened the mouth of the ass, and it said to Bil'am, What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times? And Bil'am said to the ass, Because you have mocked me; I wished there was a sword in my hand, for now would I kill you. And the ass said to Bil'am, Am not I your ass, upon which you have ridden ever since I was yours to this day? Was I ever wont to do so to you? And he said, No. Then Hashem opened the eyes of Bil'am, and he saw the angel of Hashem standing in the way, and his sword drawn in his hand; and he bowed down his head, and fell on his face. And the angel of Hashem said to him, Why did you strike your ass these three times? Behold, I went out to withstand you, because your way is perverse before me; And the ass saw me, and turned from me these three times; if it had not turned aside from me, surely now also I would have slain you, and let her live. And Bil'am said to the angel of Hashem, I have sinned; for I knew not that you stood in the way against me; now therefore, if it displeases you, I will go back again. And the angel of Hashem said to Bil'am, Go with the men; but only the word that I shall speak to you, that you shall speak. So Bil'am went with the princes of Balak. (Bamidbar 22:20-35)

These two narratives are clearly associated - the "arising early in the morning", the "saddling of the donkey", the entourage, made up of two lads, the encounters with the angel of Hashem, and so on.

This is, shall we say, the first step in utilizing Midrashic tools: Identifying the association between stories/personae/events etc.

Now that the association has been identified, let's take the next step: Noting how differently these two characters act - and

react - within their given set of circumstances.

Avraham responds to God's initial call - terrifying though it may be - and arises early the next day to begin his pilgrimage; Bil'am, on the other hand, "comes back" to God a second time, to ask again for permission to go with the Moabite princes.

Avraham moves towards greater levels of isolation, first taking only Yitzchak and his two servants - then leaving the servant behind; Bil'am takes his two servants and then catches up with the entourage of princes before reaching Balak.

Avraham nearly slaughters his son, following the Divine command; Bil'am threatens to slaughter his donkey, who is the one responding to the Divine presence (the angel).

Avraham is praised by the angel; Bil'am is threatened with death by the angel.

Avraham says nothing to the angel, merely following the Divine command of "staying his hand"; Bil'am is cowed by the presence of the angel and offers to return home.

Most significantly - Avraham sees everything whereas Bil'am sees nothing.

This last one requires some explanation. Parashiot of Tanakh usually feature a "Milah Manhah" - a guiding phrase or word. This is often an unusual word or phrase, or one that shows up in an inordinately high frequency. As is obvious, our own understanding of the significance of a narrative, prophecy, psalm etc. is enhanced if we can successfully identify the "Milah Manhah".

[An example of a Milah Manhah is the word "Et", meaning "time", as it appears in the prophecy of Haggai. Although the entire book of Haggai is 38 verses long, this relatively uncommon word shows up 7 times within those verses. This becomes a - or the - Milah Manhah and helps define the entire purpose and undercurrent of his message. See Haggai 1:2 against the background of Yirmiyah 29:10]

The "guide-word" in Parashat ha'Akedah is clearly a combination of the two roots: Y*R*A and R*A*H; the first meaning "fear" and the second relating to "vision". No less than seven occurrences of these roots can be found in this brief section of 19 verses. Indeed, the two names given to the place where Avraham ascends - Moriah (see Divrei haYamim II 3:1) and "Hashem Yir'eh" (see Sh'mot 23:17)

A central part of the message of the Akedah is Avraham's vision - his ability to see the place and all it implies - and to recognize the substitution ram for his son. His vision is closely tied in to his fear of God, as it his recognition of his place in this world that is driven by his awareness of God's grandeur and awe.

When this story is "played" against the apparently similar trek made by Bil'am, we see that Bil'am, the great visionary, the one who feels he can outfox the Ribono shel Olam, sees absolutely nothing. His donkey sees more clearly than he and, when finally forced to face his angelic adversary, he retreats. The cowardice and blindness are as inextricably wound together, just as Avraham's vision and fear (very far, morally and spiritually, from "cowardice") are of one piece.

VII. BACK TO THE QUESTIONS

Earlier, we noted that three qualities are ascribed to students (i.e. followers of the path) of Avraham and three opposite qualities to the students of Bil'am.

We have answered the key question: Bil'am is "faced off" against Avraham by virtue of the many textual associations in these two key Parashiot. The Torah, beyond telling us about the trip a certain Petorite prophet made, in which his mission was turned upside-down by the Ribono shel Olam, also tells us much about our beloved father Avraham. We appreciate his vision, his valor and his moral greatness much more when seen against the backdrop of the self-serving, morally blind and cowardly Bil'am.

How do we know that Avraham had a "good eye" and that Bil'am had an "evil eye"? We have already seen that clearly presented in these two Parashiot.

How do we know that Avraham had a humble spirit? "I am dust and ashes" is Avraham's stand in front of God (B'resheet 18:27); Bil'am, on the other hand, believes himself able to overrule the Divine decision of who should be blessed and who should be cursed - demonstrating his haughty spirit.

How do we know that Bil'am had an overambitious soul? Note that his willingness to challenge the Almighty grows as his potential reward - both financial and political - become greater. If Avraham is the epitome of everything that Bil'am is not - then Avraham is blessed with a "lowly soul", which is demonstrated by his willingness to sacrifice everything to fulfill the Divine command.

Bil'am went to become enriched and lost everything; Avraham went to lose everything and became enriched for generations.

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OH RNET

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PARSHA INSIGHTS

by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair

An Artist's Impression

“May my soul die the death of the upright....” (23:10)

In June 2012, the Israeli government expedited its “Tama 38” (National Outline Plan) mandate, which calls for the reinforcing of buildings against earthquakes. The incentive for builders is that they can build and sell an extra floor, and for apartment owners, that they receive an extra room that doubles as a rocket shelter.

I live in Ramat Eshkol in Jerusalem, an area where every second building seems to be in some stage of the “Tama.” The signage outside these buildings always depicts an idyllic scene of a super-modern façade with nary a stroller to crowd the entrance, or an errant air-conditioner hanging from a window, or a porch covered over to make another much-needed bedroom.

Often in life, our aspiration fades in proportion to our perspiration. We start with high ideals, but

sometimes things get very difficult. However, if we never had that “artist's impression” of our future, we would never have an ideal to aim for.

“May my soul die the death of the upright...”

Bilaam wanted to die the death of the upright – he just wasn't prepared to live the life of the upright.

Bilaam saw evil as the easy way to success. With all his gifts as a prophet, he never made the effort to get out of his spiritual armchair.

It is likely that most of us will never achieve our spiritual goals, but if we never had that “artist's impression” in our heads, we would never have even left our armchairs – let alone built an entire floor on the edifice of our spiritual lives.

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TALMUD TIPS

by Rabbi Moshe Newman

Balak: Yoma 65-71

The “Great Knesset”

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi explained why they were given the title of “Great”: “They restored the crown (of Torah Judaism) to its former glory.”

Anyone who has opened a Siddur is familiar with the blessing that begins, “Blessed are You, Hashem, our G-d and the G-d of our ancestors; G-d of Avraham, G-d of Yitzchak and G-d of Yaakov; the great, mighty and awesome G-d....” This blessing is the first blessing of the foremost formalized prayer, which is known as the *Shmoneh Esrei* – the standing, silent prayer.

It was composed by the “*Anshei Knesset Hagedola*” – “The Men of the Great Assembly.” This special group of 120 great Torah scholars and Prophets led the Jewish People at the onset of the era of the Second Beit Hamikdash. Our *gemara* addresses why they were given the title of “Great,” explaining that they restored the crown to its former glory by “restoring” the original description of Hashem’s traits, matching the words used by Moshe Rabbeinu.

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi expounds on this in our *sugya* by citing four verses with very specific words which describe Hashem’s traits.

Moshe Rabbeinu referred to Hashem as “great, mighty and awesome.” (Devarim 10:17) Later, the Prophet Yirmiyahu described Hashem as “great and mighty” (Yirmiyahu 32:18), but intentionally omitted the word “awesome.” Then, even later, Daniel in his prayer referred to Hashem as “the great and awesome G-d” (Daniel 9:4), without mentioning “mighty.”

And then came the *Anshei Knesset Hagedolah* and “restored” both of these words in praise of Hashem: “mighty” and “awesome.” They referred to Hashem as “great, mighty and awesome.” (Nehemia 9:32)

This important change returned and restored the description of Hashem’s traits to the original description that Moshe Rabbeinu used in Sefer Devarim.

The obvious question is: Why did Yirmiyahu and Daniel find it to be correct to alter the descriptive words for Hashem’s nature? What did they find “wrong” with the original words established by Moshe? Why did each one delete a word from the original, until the *Anshei Knesset Hagedola* “restored the crown to its former glory”?

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi explains in our *gemara* how these traits – mighty and awesome – were not truly perceived correctly by others throughout history. Allow me to try to explain.

When the Prophet Yirmiyahu saw the idolatrous Babylonians treat the First Beit Hamikdash with utter disdain and disgrace, he wondered: “Where is Hashem’s awesomeness?” They acted in the “House of Hashem” without awe or fear of Hashem. Seeing no trait of awesomeness, Yirmiyahu deleted the word “awesome” when praising Hashem.

Later, in the seventy years of exile following the destruction of the First Beit Hamikdash, Daniel saw the Jewish People utterly subdued and suppressed by the Babylonians and Persians. He wondered: “Where is Hashem’s might?” Therefore, Daniel deleted “mighty” from his praise of Hashem.

But the *Anshei Knesset Hagedola* came and provided a novel and powerful insight into understanding Hashem’s ways. They did not see a lack of Hashem’s might in failing to prevent the pagan oppression of the Jewish People, as Daniel understood. And they

did not see a lack of Hashem's awesomeness in allowing the Babylonians to make merry in their disgusting and heathen ways when gallivanting around in the ruins and ashes of the First Beit Hamikdash.

Rather, said Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, the *Anshei Knesset Hagedolah* correctly perceived what happened as meaning exactly the opposite! That which others had understood as a "lacking" on Hashem's part in showing His mightiness and awesomeness, was, in reality, an intentional and successful display of those very traits!

They reasoned: "Hashem's restraint in allowing the heathens to suppress and oppress the Jewish People was not due to lacking mightiness, but, rather, *a sign of His mightiness*." (Note, the Hebrew word for might is *gibor* or *gevura*, which, in human terms, means to conquer one's "negative" impulses and instincts.) In fact, Hashem acted with "might" — *gevura* — in showing restraint in not saving the Jewish People from oppression throughout the years (the seventy years of exile — Rashi). Hashem did this so that the Jewish People would hopefully feel humbled and choose to do *teshuva*.

Likewise, explained the Sage, Hashem actually displayed the trait of awe — *norah* — in allowing the heathens to destroy the First Beit Hamikdash and frivolously revel in its ruins. The *Anshei Knesset Hagedolah* understood that Hashem's awesomeness

is manifest in the survival of the Jewish People: "If not for the awe of Hashem and the fear of Hashem, how could it be possible for one lone nation to continue to survive in the face of the nations of the world who constantly seek its destruction?" The Midrash explains this concept with a dialogue between a Roman ruler and a great Rabbi. Adrianus said that Jewish survival is a result of a Jew's tenacity: "How great is the lamb that survives against seventy wolves!" Rabbi Yehoshua corrected him, explaining that the praise is really due to Hashem: "How great is the Shepherd Who saves them!"

This is the explanation given by Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi for the decision made by the *Anshei Knesset Hagedola* to recognize and praise Hashem's traits of might and awe. Based on this explanation, we can understand why this group of Sages and Prophets who led the Jewish People following the destruction of the first Beit Hamikdash was called the *Anshei Knesset HaGedola* — The Men of the Great Assembly. They exhibited extraordinarily great understanding of Hashem's traits, thereby returning "the crown" — i.e. the recognition Hashem's greatness, mightiness and awesomeness — to the manner in which it was originally written in the Torah. (See the Maharsha in his *Chiddushei Aggadot* for a fascinating treatment of the disagreement of the praises taught in our *sugya*. He begins by pointing out that each person praised Hashem according to what he witnessed in his own time.)

• *Yoma* 69b

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Q & A

Questions – Balak

1. Why did Moav consult specifically with Midian regarding their strategy against the Jews?
2. What was Balak's status before becoming Moav's king?
3. Why did G-d grant prophecy to the evil Bilaam?
4. Why did Balak think Bilaam's curse would work?
5. When did Bilaam receive his prophecies?
6. G-d asked Bilaam, "Who are these men with you?" What did Bilaam deduce from this question?
7. How do we know Bilaam hated the Jews more than Balak did?
8. What is evidence of Bilaam's arrogance?
9. In what way was the *malach* that opposed Bilaam an angel of mercy?
10. How did Bilaam die?
11. Why did the *malach* kill Bilaam's donkey?

12. Bilaam compared his meeting with an angel to someone else's meeting with an angel. Who was the other person and what was the comparison?
13. Bilaam told Balak to build seven altars. Why specifically seven?
14. Who in Jewish history seemed fit for a curse, but got a blessing instead?
15. Why are the Jewish People compared to lions?
16. On Bilaam's third attempt to curse the Jews, he changed his strategy. What was different?
17. What were Bilaam's three main characteristics?
18. What did Bilaam see that made him decide not to curse the Jews?
19. What phrase in Bilaam's self-description can be translated in two opposite ways, both of which come out meaning the same thing?
20. Bilaam told Balak that the Jews' G-d hates what?

All references are to the verses and Rashi's commentary, unless otherwise stated.

Answers

1. 22:4 - Since Moshe grew up in Midian, the Moabites thought the Midianites might know wherein lay Moshe's power.
2. 22:4 - He was a prince of Midian.
3. 22:5 - So the other nations couldn't say, "If we had had prophets, we also would have become righteous."
4. 22:6 - Because Bilaam's curse had helped Sichon defeat Moav.
5. 22:8 - Only at night.
6. 22:9 - He mistakenly reasoned that G-d isn't all-knowing.
7. 22:11 - Balak wanted only to drive the Jews from the land. Bilaam sought to exterminate them completely.
8. 22:13 - He implied that G-d wouldn't let him go with the Moabite princes due to their lesser dignity.
9. 22:22 - It mercifully tried to stop Bilaam from sinning and destroying himself.
10. 22:23 - He was killed with a sword.
11. 22:33 - So that people shouldn't see it and say, "Here's the donkey that silenced Bilaam." G-d is concerned with human dignity.

12. 22:34 - Avraham. Bilaam said, "G-d told me to go but later sent an angel to stop me. The same thing happened to Avraham: G-d told Avraham to sacrifice Yitzchak but later canceled the command through an angel."
13. 23:4 - Corresponding to the seven altars built by the *Avot*. Bilaam said to G-d, "The Jewish People's ancestors built seven altars, but I alone have built altars equal to all of them."
14. 23:8 - Yaakov, when Yitzchak blessed him.
15. 23:24 - They rise each morning and "strengthen" themselves to do *mitzvot*.
16. 24:1 - He began mentioning the Jewish People's sins, hoping thus to be able to curse them.
17. 24:2 - An evil eye, pride and greed.
18. 24:2 - He saw each tribe dwelling without intermingling. He saw the tents arranged so no one could see into his neighbor's tent.
19. 24:3 - "Shatum ha'ayin." It means either "the poked-out eye," implying blindness in one eye; or it means "the open eye", which means vision but implies blindness in the other eye.
20. 24:14 - Promiscuity.

WHAT'S IN A WORD?

Synonyms in the Hebrew Language

by Rabbi Reuven Chaim Klein

Balaam's Numa

The Hebrew word *ne'um* ("word") appears 373 times in the Bible, of which 362 times it refers to "the word" of G-d. The only other people whose "words" are characterized as *ne'um* are King David (II Shmuel 23:1), King Solomon (Prov. 30:1), and Balaam (Num. 24:3, 24:4, 24:15, 24:16). When the true prophet Yirmiyahu criticized false prophets for speaking through a *ne'um* (Yir. 23:31), the Bible uses a verb form of the word *vayinamu*, which appears nowhere else in the entire Bible! What is so special about the word *ne'um* that it is overwhelmingly used to denote the Word of G-d? What is this word's etymology, and how does it differ from other words for "speech," such as *amirah*, *dibbur*, and *sichah*? These questions and more will be addressed in the following paragraphs.

Although Menachem, Ibn Janach, and Radak trace the word *ne'um* to the three-letter root NUN-ALEPH-MEM, Rabbi Shlomo Pappenheim of Breslau (1740-1814) offers a more thorough approach. In *Yeriot Shlomo* he contends that *ne'um* is a poetic word used to underscore the veracity of a given statement. It serves to emphasize that whatever is being said is not merely a collection of "random" words haphazardly spewed out, but reflects deliberate and accurate declarations. Rabbi Pappenheim thus explains that the biliteral root of *ne'um* is ALEPH-MEM, whose core meaning is "if." Other words derived from that root include *emet* ("truth") and *amen/ne'eman* ("true," "trustworthy"). When one preaches with the *ne'um* style, one speaks in absolute terms, as if everything he utters is completely true. When Yirmiyahu criticized the false prophets for speaking a *ne'um*, his critique focused on their pretending to tell the truth, even though he knew they clearly were not. (Radak's *Sefer HaShorashim*, in entries ALEPH-MEM-NUN and NUM-ALEPH-MEM, also connects *ne'um* with "truth.")

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the English word *word* in Ebonics and hip-hop slang expresses affirmation or agreement, such that when one exclaims "Word!" it is as if he has said, "That's the truth!" or "There's no denying it!" This usage of the word likely stems from the influence of Christian preachers who read from the Bible and translated *ne'um* as "word."

Although one of the Dead Sea Scrolls (4Q339) contains a list of false prophets, with Bilaam on the list, rabbinic tradition maintains that Bilaam was not a *false* prophet, *per se*, but an *evil* prophet. He tried to use his jaundiced outlook to have G-d convey to him a malevolent prophecy against the Jews, but in the end, quite the opposite happened.

When all is said and done, Bilaam's prophetic declarations and utterances were "true" in the same way that the Word of G-d elsewhere in the Bible is true. In that spirit, *Peirush HaRokeach* and *Rabbenu Efrayim* explain that the word *ne'um* represents speech that relays the content of an irrevocable decree/oath – even when it comes to Bilaam's use of the word *ne'um*. Additionally, it seems that King David and King Solomon also used the word *ne'um* to describe their own words because, as Divinely chosen kings, they were able to speak assertively and decisively in a way that whatever they said was/became true.

In his work *Cheshek Shlomo*, Rabbi Pappenheim traces the word *ne'um* to the biliteral root ALEPH-MEM ("if," "on condition"), explaining that *ne'um* focuses on the severity of the situation that spurs the speaker into making his address. Thus, the term *ne'um* stresses the serious situation/conditions that make for the backdrop of the speaker's *ne'um*.

While the verb form of *ne’um* appears only once in the Bible, it is much more common in later post-Biblical Hebrew. For example, the Mishna (*Yevamot* 16:7) uses the word *numati/nimati* to mean “I said” when relating Rabbi Akiva’s report about what he said to a Sage in Babylonian about a complex halachic issue. Another form of this word found in the Mishna is *numeinu* (“we said”), used in *Gittin* 6:7 (see also *Tosefta, Sanhedrin* 2:1, *Nazir* 4:7).

Halachic Midrashim like *Mechilta* (to Ex. 12:6, 12:21, 12:43) and *Sifrei* (*Beha’alotcha* 65, *Shlach* 110, *Pinchas* 142) sometimes use the non-standard phrase *nam lo* (“he said to him”) instead of the more common expression *amar lo*, which means the same thing. But, fascinatingly, those works use this verbiage only when discussing disputes between Rabbi Yonatan and Rabbi Yoshiyah, but not when relating debates between other rabbis!

The *Sefer HaAruch* lists the root of these Rabbinic Hebrew words as NUN-MEM and does not explicitly link them to the Biblical Hebrew *ne’um*. However, Rabbi Gershon Shaul Yom Tov Lipmann Heller (1579-1654) contends that these words are cognates of *ne’um*, even though they are spelled without an ALEPH, because the letter ALEPH often disappears from different morphological inflections of a given word. In his responsa *Noda B’Yehudah*, Rabbi Yechezkel Landau (1713-1793) points out that the common Talmudic term *neimah* (“let’s say”) is also a cognate of the Hebrew word *ne’um* and Aramaic *nam*. As both Rabbi Landau and Rabbi Binyamin Mussafia note, a cognate of *ne’um* without the middle ALEPH is already found as early as in Biblical Aramaic (*Ezra* 4:8, 5:4, 5:9, 6:13). (See *Ibn Ezra* to *Isa.* 1:24, who seems to explain that spelling the Rabbinic Hebrew *nam* without an ALEPH is a mistake, despite that deficient spelling being the standard form of the word in rabbinic sources.)

In one particular poem customarily recited on Yom Kippur Mussaf, we pray to G-d: “Remember, O You who said (*namta*) ‘testimony shall not be forgotten from the mouth of his descendants.’” Abudraham explains that the word *namta* in this poem serves as a cognate of the Hebrew word *ne’um*. In discussing this particular *piyyut*, Rabbi Pappenheim argues that the word cannot possibly be read as *namta*, as that would mean “you who slumbered,” with the word in question being a verb cognate of the Hebrew noun

tenumah (“sleep”). Instead, Rabbi Pappenheim suggests that the proper rendering of the word in question should be *ne’umta* (if the poet meant to follow a Biblical Hebrew style), or *numita* (if following Rabbinic Hebrew style). Rabbi Pappenheim also mentions an alternate version that registers the word as *sachta*, a cognate of the word *sichah*, and endorses that version. This alternate version is also found in the *Mazchor* edited by Ernst Daniel Goldschmidt (1895-1972). Nevertheless, Rabbi Landau ultimately concludes that *namta* as “You said” is also correct.

Dr. Shlomo Mandelkorn (1846-1902), in his concordance of Biblical Hebrew *Hechal HaKodesh* (page 710), notes that an Arabic cognate of the Hebrew *ne’um* means “to whisper.” I am not sure what to make of that.

There are three more Hebrew words that refer to the act of “speech” or “speaking,” which I would like to discuss in this essay: *yichaveh, yabia, and sach.*

Ibn Chayyuj, Ibn Janach, and Radak trace the words *yichaveh* (Ps. 19:3), *achaveh* (*Iyov* 13:7, 32:10, 32:17), and the like to the trilateral root CHET-VAV-HEY. Similarly, Menachem Ibn Saruk traces those words to the biliteral root CHET-VAV. However, Rabbi Pappenheim explains that the root CHET-VAV itself derives from the roots CHET-YOD (“life”) and/or ALEPH-CHET (“brotherhood”, “unity”), both of which ultimately derive from the monoliteral root CHET. As Rabbi Pappenheim explains, speech in the sense of *yichaveh/achaveh* gives “life” to an idea by expressing it verbally instead of leaving it hidden away in one’s thoughts. In accounting for the interchangeability of VAV and YOD in this instance, Rabbi Pappenheim adduces the case of the VAV in the name *Chava* (Eve), which is said by the Bible to be related to the word *chai* (Gen. 3:20), spelled with a YOD. Alternatively, Rabbi Pappenheim explains that *yichaveh/achaveh* relates to the word *ach* (“brother”), because speech creates connection and comradery by linking the speaker with the listener.

Interestingly, *Peirush HaRokeach* explains that *yichaveh/achaveh* refers to “speech” for the purpose of explaining the reasoning behind something, but he does not offer an etymological account of how this can be better understood.

Rabbi Pappenheim explains that *yabia* (Ps. 19:3) and *abiah* (Ps. 78:2) in the sense of “speaking” are derived

from the two-letter root BET-AYIN, which refers to “revealing from beneath the surface.” In its crudest sense, this root yields the word *mabua/novea* (Prov. 18:4, Ecc. 12:6, Isa. 35:7) – i.e. a “wellspring” whose waters spring forth from a hidden, underground source. In a similar way, *yabia/abiah* refers to “speech” as an expression that flows from the depths of one’s heart and reveals itself in an attention-grabbing way. A similar point has already been made by Ibn Janach and Radak in their respective *Sifrei HaShorashim*. *Siddur HaRokeach* and *Peirush HaRokeach* likewise explain that *yabia/abiah* entails speaking continuously, non-stop, like an ever-flowing “wellspring.”

The words *yasiach* (Ps. 119:23), *asichah* (Ps. 55:18, 77:4-13, 119:15, 145:5, Iyov 7:11) and the infinitive

la’suach (Gen. 24:63) are related to the word *siach/sichah* (“speech”). Ibn Chayyuj, Ibn Janach, and Radak trace this word to the triliteral SIN-VAV-CHET, while Menachem traces it to the biliteral SIN-CHET. Rabbi Pappenheim, on the other hand, sees SIN-CHET as a derivative of SAMECH-CHET (“uprooting,” “removing,” “transferring”), explaining that it refers to the type of speech that involves a stream of consciousness and/or wandering of the mind intended to help the speaker forget about (i.e., “uproot”) his sorrows. Similarly, *Peirush HaRokeach* writes that *sichah* refers to “speaking” about various topics/examples in one speech/conversation, which can be looked at as somebody “transferring” the discussion from one subject to another.

PARSHA OVERVIEW

Balak, King of Moav, is in morbid fear of the *Bnei Yisrael*. He summons a renowned sorcerer named Bilaam to curse them. First, G-d speaks to Bilaam and forbids him to go. But, because Bilaam is so insistent, G-d appears to him a second time and permits him to go.

While en route, a *malach* (emissary from G-d) blocks Bilaam's donkey's path. Unable to contain his frustration, Bilaam strikes the donkey each time it stops or tries to detour. Miraculously, the donkey speaks, asking Bilaam why he is hitting her. The *malach* instructs Bilaam regarding what he is permitted to say and what he is forbidden to say about the Jewish People.

When Bilaam arrives, King Balak makes elaborate preparations, hoping that Bilaam will succeed in the curse. Three times Bilaam attempts to curse, and three times blessings are issued instead. Balak, seeing that Bilaam has failed, sends him home in disgrace.

The *Bnei Yisrael* begin sinning with the Moabite women and worshipping the Moabite idols, and they are punished with a plague. One of the Jewish leaders brazenly brings a Midianite princess into his tent, in full view of Moshe and the people. Pinchas, a grandson of Aharon, grabs a spear and kills both evildoers. This act brings an end to the plague – but not before 24,000 people died.

LETTER AND SPIRIT

Insights based on the writings of Rav S.R. Hirsch by Rabbi Yosef Hershman

Freedom of Speech

The nation of Moav was terrified of the Jewish People after their conquest of the Emorites. Israel had shown itself to be an overwhelmingly powerful people, and was great in number. The Moabite king, Balak, sought out Bilaam, the prophet to the nations, to employ his power to curse the Jews.

Bilaam was a monotheist and a prophet, but was morally inferior to the monotheists like Malki Tzadek and Iyov who came before him. His spiritual aptitude to draw near to G-d is stunted by his egoism. He places himself at the service of earthly powers and potentates and their base desires. He thinks nothing of uprooting an entire nation without cause. This entire portion of Bilaam is written to reveal how G-d removed a spirit of holiness from the nations of the world because of the misuse of such spiritual gifts.

G-d instructs Bilaam not to go with Balak's emissaries, warning him that he will not be able to accomplish his mission. *You will not curse the (Jewish) people, for they are blessed! The element which makes this people a people is precisely the purpose which I have determined to promote with My sovereignty...Even the nations of the world conceive of this people as destined to be blessed!*

If Bilaam had been a true prophet, he would have conveyed the same to Balak's emissaries, and Moav and Midian, instead of fearing Israel's conquering might, would have recognized the moral element which is the object of G-d's blessing, and would have befriended Israel. Instead, Bilaam hints that G-d refuses to allow him to travel with the plebeians like them, instead of true princes. When Balak responds with a more impressive delegation, Bilaam hints again to this insatiable desire for money and honor.

When Bilaam's greed and base desires so confused him, he lost his gift of intelligence and eloquence.

Instead, G-d showed favor to his donkey's intelligence, by granting it the gift of human speech. In doing so, He prepared Bilaam for what was to come. The human speech of Bilaam's mouth would no longer be a product of his own will. The mouth that abused the gift would be placed in the service of Divine speech — against his will — to herald the Divine truth which he could not bear to utter at the expense of his greed. He Who gives speech to an animal can also put His Word in the mouth of Bilaam.

In his first attempt to curse Israel, Bilam proclaims: *Can I curse what G-d has not cursed?! ...Who would count the earthly element of Yaakov? Who would count the births among Israel as one would count the animal young?* Here, he communicates to Balak that while the fortune of other nations may depend on their number of bodies, no so Israel. Balak was frightened by their numbers, but Bilaam adds insult to his injury. It is not their earthly element that determines their significance, and it is not their material conditions which lead to their success — even should you diminish their numbers, they will still prevail. To this, Bilaam adds a personal coda: *I would like to die as they do — the death of the straight ones.* Their death is more blessed than my own life, proclaims Bilaam, because they are straight. They measure up to the purpose for which humans were created. In his first blessing of the people he sought to curse, he recognizes at once that his misuse of Divine gifts of speech and intelligence resulted in his inability to use those gifts freely, and that the eternal blessing of the Jewish People stems from the exalted use of those Divine gifts, in moral freedom.

- Sources: Commentary, Bamidbar 22:28; 23:10

COUNTING OUR BLESSINGS

by Rabbi Reuven Lauffer

TO BELIEVE IS TO BEHAVE (PART 10)

(LAILAH GIFTY AKITA)

“These are the precepts whose fruits a person enjoys in this world, but whose principal remains intact in the World to Come. They are: honoring one’s parents; acts of kindness; early arrival at the study hall in the morning and the evening; hosting guests; visiting the sick; providing the wherewithal for a bride to marry; escorting the dead; praying with concentration; making peace between two people; and Torah study is the equivalent of them all.” (Tractate Shabbat 127a)

The tenth and final mitzvah listed here is studying Torah. “And Torah study is the equivalent of them all.” When I was a teenager, I was greatly troubled by this statement each time I recited it. To my adolescent mind, it seemed incomprehensible that our Sages – who were imbued with an otherworldly grasp of the human psyche – could possibly teach that the worth of learning Torah is equal to the sum totality of all of the other mitzvahs! How is it possible that a genuinely good person, who “just so happens” to be not yet religious, who sincerely cares about all those around them and can be relied upon at all times, is considered to be on the same level as someone who is a phenomenal Torah scholar but who “just so happens” to be short-tempered, nasty and difficult to tolerate. In my youthful indignation there was no question about which kind of person I would prefer to spend time with – and it was not the scholar! At some point, I was so vexed that I went to speak with my Rabbi. His insightful answer, laced with his customary sagacity, has remained with me ever since.

As with so many of their disarmingly simple lessons, our Sages are actually teaching us here a fundamental understanding about ourselves. In my experience, it seems that, generally, we have been created in such a way that we are intrinsically selfish. The first person we worry about is ourselves, and, after that, those in our immediate circle. Only afterwards, if we have the time and patience, will we begin to interest ourselves in the wellbeing of anyone else. But, as we have learned previously, the Torah demands of us to behave in a G-d-like manner to *everyone* and not to be self-absorbed. This mindset, however, entails going against our natural instincts, which is a very difficult thing to do.

Question: Where do we learn the techniques and acquire the ability to be able to ignore our innate predisposition to selfishness, so we can tend to the individual and communal needs of others?

Answer: In the Torah.

Every single component required to bring us to the understanding that we must think of others and assist them is found in the Torah. When we learn Torah, we are exposing ourselves to Hashem’s blueprint for a successful sojourn in this world. Of course, just as with all blueprints, the plans must be transformed from the theoretical into the practical in order for them to make – and leave – an impression in this world. Otherwise, they remain as mere unfulfilled potential. They are exciting plans that never came to fruition. And this is, perhaps, the saddest prospect of all.

It is the Torah which guides us, and it is the Torah which instructs us how to allow ourselves to open our hearts to the needs of others. And it also teaches us how to then act on that awareness in order to fulfill G-d’s

Will. Without learning Torah, the vast majority of us would not even have an inkling that we are *obligated* to interact with kindness to all those around us. Granted, there are certain individuals who are blessed with an innate goodness that makes it an absolute pleasure to be in their presence. But for the rest of us, we need the Torah to teach us that we, too, must be sympathetic and solicitous. To reach the point where we *want* to help others whenever we can.

In the timeless teachings of Pirkei Avot, Rabbi Yishmael states, “One who studies Torah in order to practice is given the means to study *and* to teach *and* to observe *and* to practice.” Rabbi Ovadiah from Bartenura (1445-1515) authored a magnificent commentary on the Mishna, one that is considered to be foundational for accurately understanding the Mishna. He explains that the phrase “in order to practice” means to perform acts of kindness. The true route to connecting to G-d in the fullest possible way is through learning His Torah and acting with thoughtfulness and sensitivity to all those around us.

And this is why our Sages teach us that learning Torah is the equivalent of all the other mitzvahs. The more Torah we learn, the greater is our *awareness* of our obligation to think of others. And the more Torah we learn, the greater is our *ability* to act with kindness to everyone. The *raison d'être* of learning Torah is not simply to acquire huge amounts of knowledge. It is not to be able to dazzle everyone with our erudition. Rather, it is to make ourselves into better people than we were before. To become more thoughtful and gentler. To be empathetic and caring. To become better attuned to the needs of others, and try to attend to them as best we can. By doing so, we are emulating G-d. And this is what we are commanded to do.

However, one who learns Torah is not guaranteed to automatically become a paragon of beautiful character traits. Improvement requires both self-awareness and a great desire to want to become better. In addition, continuing hard “work” is necessary to make it happen. Unfortunately, it is possible for someone to become an extremely accomplished scholar, to be intimately familiar with the vastness of the Torah, and yet still be uncaring and oblivious to the needs of others. My Rabbi ended his reply with a stark pronouncement that has remained embedded in my consciousness: “Anyone who studies Torah and does not become a better person – *every single word of Torah that they learned is flawed.*”

The need to constantly fine-tune our character traits is so incredibly fundamental, which is why Rabbeinu Bachya ben Asher points out that the greatest personalities in the Torah are not praised in the Torah for their wisdom or intelligence. Rather, they are praised by the Torah’s portrayal of their outstanding characteristics. The primary aspect of wisdom is to improve ourselves.

In closing, there is a charming passage in the Talmud (Yoma 86a) that reveals a profound dimension to everything we have just learned. The Torah states in Deuteronomy 6:5: “You shall love Hashem, your G-d.” The Sage Abaye teaches that this verse can be understood as telling us that the Name of G-d becomes beloved through our behavior. Abaye continues by saying that a person should learn Torah and serve Torah scholars. And that all of his business transactions should be performed faithfully, and his dealings with other people should be conducted in a pleasant manner. What do people say about someone like this? “Fortunate is this person who learned Torah. Fortunate are his parents (see Rabbeinu Chananel) who taught him Torah. Fortunate is his teacher who taught him Torah. This person who learned Torah, see how pleasant are his ways, how refined are his deeds. Regarding him, the Torah says in Isaiah 49:3: ‘He (G-d) said to me, ‘You are my servant, Israel, through whom I am glorified.’”

When we are exposed to such exceptional role models, we understand that their exemplary character traits are founded in the Torah. They serve as an incentive to us to learn yet more Torah in order to try emulating them to better ourselves. Such a person sanctifies G-d’s Name on a continual basis. And there really is no greater aspiration in this world than to enhance G-d’s Glory and Majesty, and to show all those around us – through our actions and our interactions – that we, too, reflect the Divine.

The students, alumni, staff and events of Ohr Somayach

by Rabbi Shlomo Simon

Rabbi Pinchas Kasnett

Born: Washington, DC

Raised: Pittsburgh, PA and Washington, DC

Wesleyan University

Pomona College, BA

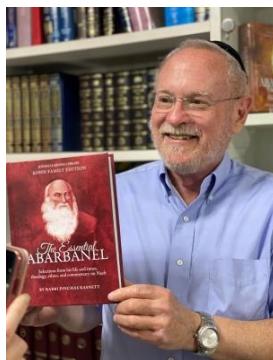
Claremont Graduate School

Ohr Somayach

Director of JLE Program

Executive Director of Ohr Somayach's Executive Learning Program

Author



I came to Ohr Somayach in 1986. At that time the Yeshiva was fourteen years old. As I got to know the staff members, I was amazed at the longevity of their tenures and also at the number of former students who had become staff. This spoke volumes about the institution. I had come from the US where about 25% of the working population was changing jobs every year. Job security and loyalty to one's employer were more or less non-existent. After 35 years at our Jerusalem campus, I think I've discovered Ohr Somayach's secret recipe for success – it's the mutual loyalty and love that students and staff have for each other. The result is "The Ohr Somayach Family". You don't divorce your family members and you don't abandon them. That's why today many of our staff members have been with us for their entire working lives.

Pinchas Kasnett is one of them. Pinchas was born a few years after WWII in Washington, D.C., his father's hometown. When his father was offered a better job, the family moved to Pittsburgh. Pinchas was one year

old. The family was, like most Jewish families at that time, not observant, but it had a strong Jewish identity. When Pinchas reached school age, his parents enrolled him in a conservative Hebrew afternoon school. When he was 10, his father changed jobs again and they moved back to Washington.

In Washington, because of the fortuitous involvement of his paternal grandfather in an Orthodox *shul*, *Beis Shalom*, the grandfather's whole family was given life membership. They were regular attendees for the High Holidays. Pinchas and his three first cousins had private Hebrew lessons on Sundays before his *bar mitzvah*. The only thing he remembers learning was how to read Hebrew and how to *daven*.

His main connection to Judaism after *bar mitzvah* and during his high school years in Silver Spring, Maryland was through his Jewish friends and his attendance at Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services. Pinchas was not otherwise interested in the religion.

He attended Wesleyan University, an elite institution in Connecticut, where, he estimates, about a third of the student population was Jewish, but there were no Jewish activities on campus. Not that he would have been interested in attending even if there were.

After a year-and-a-half at Wesleyan, he felt the need for a change in atmosphere. He chose to go West, to Pomona College in Pomona, California. There he found people who were just as smart and academic, but much more down-to-earth. In his junior year he had an American dream girl for a girlfriend: blonde hair, blue eyes, very pretty and not Jewish. Since travel between LA and Washington was expensive, he decided to spend his winter vacation at the school. His girlfriend invited him to Seattle to stay with her family for a traditional Xmas holiday. There was no reason for him not to go. It was one of the best decisions he made in his life.

On Xmas eve, the scene was evocative of Woody Allen's "Anne Hall." The large dining room table was laden with all the traditional Xmas foods – none of them remotely kosher. And as they sat around the Xmas tree singing Xmas carols, Pinchas recalls, "For the first time in my life I felt a wave of existential nausea. I was a traitor to my G-d and to my people. I just wanted to get out of there."

During the first semester of his last year of college, he was an exchange student in a small town in France. He lived with a quite assimilated Jewish family, but the *shul* in town was Orthodox and he saw his first *sukkah* in the *shul*'s courtyard. His *neshama* was awakening. At the end of the semester, his parents sent him money for a ticket to Israel, where his first cousin Nesanel lived. He spent Xmas eve in Bethlehem and visited a small Arab town where his cousin had some Arab friends.

Back in Pomona for his last semester, he went to a lecture by Alan Watts, a famous British lecturer on Zen Buddhism. Before launching into his speech about the subject, he asked the audience:

"Are there any Catholics here?" A goodly number of students raised their hands. Then he proceeded to ask them questions about Catholic theology. No one knew the answers.

"Are there any Protestants here?" A larger number of students raised their hands.

"How about Presbyterians? Congregationalists? Episcopalians? He asked them similar questions about their respective theologies and the differences between each sect. No one knew the answers.

Lastly, he asked: "Are there any Jews in the audience?" Pinchas and a few others raised their hands. None among them could answer any of the questions that Watts posed. He then told them that before they learn about Zen Buddhism, they should first learn about their own religion. That made a deep impression on Pinchas.

In the early 1970s, his cousins Nesanel and Binyamin Kasnett started learning Torah with Rav Noach Weinberg in Yerushalayim. Binyamin returned to the States and entered *Shaar Yashuv Yeshiva* in Far Rockaway, and Nesanel went to Borough Park, where he studied in yeshiva, went to law school and married his religious second cousin. He also began learning with Pinchas. Upon his recommendation, Pinchas read Herman Wouk's "This is my G-d". The book was pivotal in changing the direction of Pinchas' life. He decided that he wanted to go to Israel and join a religious kibbutz.

In June of 1972, Pinchas was ready to move to Israel. He applied to a kibbutz and they invited him to become a volunteer. Binyamin was now studying in Yeshivat Ohr Somayach, located somewhere on Shmuel Hanavi Street in Jerusalem.

Pinchas made arrangements with his cousin to meet him at the airport and take him to his destination. Pinchas arrived on Thursday the 17th of Tammuz, but his cousin was not at the airport. This was B.C. (before cell phones). Pinchas made his way to Yerushalayim from the airport to find Binyamin. He trudged down a hot Shmuel Hanavi Street, with his heavy backpack, looking for him. When he asked in Dushinsky's Yeshiva where he might find an American *baal teshuva*, one of the yeshiva students there walked with him across the street to the Navardok Yeshiva, where the fledgling program of Ohr Somayach was then housed. It was there that he found his cousin. Binyamin claimed that he had mixed up the date of the arrival, and was very sorry. But, since he was there, and it was Thursday afternoon: Why not stay for Shabbos, and on Sunday he would drive him up to the kibbutz? Pinchas agreed. And, suggested his cousin, since Pinchas was staying in the yeshiva, it wouldn't hurt to hear a *shiur*. And for Shabbos they would go to Reb Noach's home for the Friday night meal.

That *shiur*, on the Prophets, was nothing like he had ever heard in his life. Rav Nachman Kahana was more animated and excited about the topic than any professor he had heard in college. And the excitement was contagious. Pinchas wanted to hear more.

One Friday night, Reb Noach asked: "I hear you are planning to go to a kibbutz. You will probably be picking oranges and grapefruits, right?"

"Yes, I suppose so," answered Pinchas.

"If I could get a monkey to pick the oranges, would you stay and learn here in the Yeshiva?"

Pinchas heard the logic and stayed.

Rav Mendel Weinbach, *zatzal*, taught *Gemara* in the afternoons at the Yeshiva. Pinchas instantly bonded with him and his family. He saw both Rav Mendel and his wife as role models for parents of a Jewish family and was a frequent guest at their home.

By 1973 he had made a commitment to be *shomer Shabbos* and *shomer mitzvahs* and was committed to Ohr Somayach. He had also begun to do some work for the Yeshiva, including designing a new application form. After Pesach of that year he was learning in Rabbi Aharon Feldman's *shiur*.

After his marriage in 1974, he and his wife settled in Givat Ada, on the Mediterranean coast, north of Hadera and close to Zichron Yaakov, where Ohr Somayach had opened a branch. He learned in their *kollel*. After three years, they moved to another branch of Ohr Somayach, located in Zichron Yaakov. When Ohr Somayach opened a *tefillin* factory in Givat Ada, they asked Pinchas to be the general manager.

In 1980, after years of living in the hinterlands, the family decided to relocate to Yerushalayim, where Pinchas became the dorm manager for the Yeshiva.

As the family grew and the pressure to support them increased, Pinchas began a job search in the States. He was offered jobs as a *rebbe* in day schools in Cleveland and Baltimore, but, upon the advice of Rav Aharon Feldman, he stayed in Israel and received *smicha* (rabbinical ordination). The Yeshiva then offered him a position teaching in the Beginners' Program (today called "Mechina").

In 1983, the JLE Program needed a director in the New York office, and Pinchas answered the call, moving his family to Monsey. The job included travel to campuses across the country, recruitment of JLE participants and follow-up of attendees. Pinchas was very successful. At the same time, he saw the need to educate not just college-age students, but older singles and families as well. Ohr Somayach had recently begun running a weekend retreat on national holidays at a resort in the Catskills, and Pinchas extended the program to include Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. He instituted services for beginners, and, along with other rabbis, he taught the fundamentals of Judaism to an ever-increasing number of attendees.

Eventually, he turned over the JLE directorship to a fellow Cohen and Wesleyan alumnus, Rabbi Zalman Corlin, and Pinchas accepted the new and challenging position of teaching Torah to businessmen and professionals in the New York area, and fundraising from them.

In 2010, he contacted Rabbi Moshe Newman, the editor for Ohr Somayach's weekly Torah publication – Ohrnet Magazine – and asked if the Yeshiva would be interested in publishing a weekly column reflecting Abarbanel's commentary on the *Chumash*. The answer was positive, and that began a new chapter in Pinchas' life – that of an author. Since then, he has published "Abarbanel on the Torah" (Menucha Publishers 2017) and "The Essential Abarbanel" (Menucha Publishers 2021). He and his wife moved to Israel in the summer of 2019 and are living in Ramat Beit Shemesh.

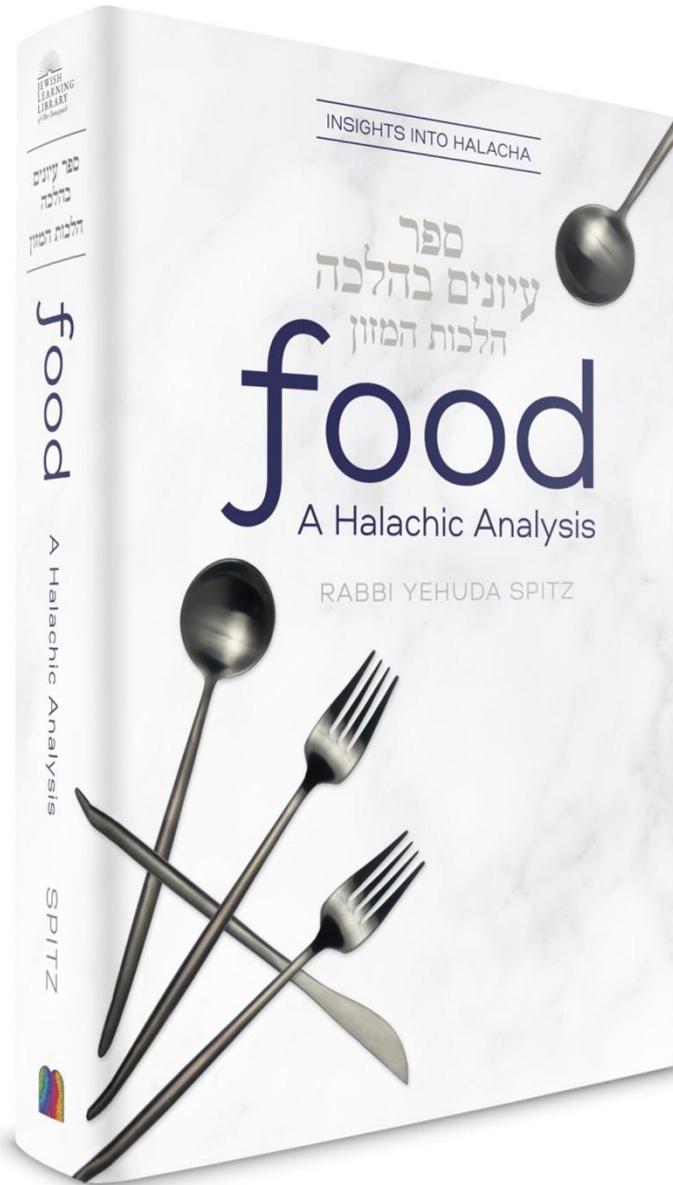
May his contributions to the Yeshiva continue, *iy'H*, for many more years to come.

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