

Potomac Torah Study Center

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Sunday, July 13 is Shiva Asar B'Tammuz (Fast of 17th of Tammuz)

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 more than 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) at www.PotomacTorah.org. Thanks to Bill Landau for hosting the Devrei Torah archives.

May Hashem protect Israel and Jews everywhere. May Hashem's protection shine on all of Israel, the IDF, and Jews throughout the world. May the remaining hostages soon come home, and may a new era bring security and rebuilding for both Israel and all others who genuinely seek peace.

The story of Balak and Bilaam, which covers Bemidbar 22:2 through all of chapter 24 (all but the final nine pasookim of the Torah reading), involves only non-Jews. Balak, King of Moav, hires Bilaam, a famous non-Jewish "prophet" from Aram (thought to be around southeast Turkey), to curse the Jews and thereby enable Moav to defeat B'Nai Yisrael. Throughout the parsha, Balak and Bilaam interact, travel widely, and attempt to have Bilaam curse the Jews. Meanwhile, B'Nai Yisrael go about their lives, unaware of Balak and Bilaam's actions in the mountains above. Since none of the Jews are aware of the actions of Balak and Bilaam, and their efforts prove ineffective, why is this story even in the Torah?

Balak has connections back to Paro and shortcomings of the generation of the Exodus. Paro, Balak, and Bilaam all try to control God by manipulating Him. God defeats Paro and Egypt by using Paro's gods (such as the Nile, cattle, horses, and chariots) against Egypt. God also prevents Bilaam from cursing B'Nai Yisrael and turns his attempted curses into praises.

The generation of the Exodus repeatedly turns away from Hashem and fights accepting God's gifts. Rather than thanking Hashem for bringing water and manna, the generation of the Exodus turns to Moshe and Aharon when they are hungry or thirsty. They complain that the manna is boring. They attempt to pound it, bake it, and do whatever they can imagine to add to the manna rather than to accept it as a gift from Hashem that they can eat and have taste however they wish. They should instead thank our Creator for providing it. Whenever trouble arises, they turn to Moshe and Aharon rather than appealing directly to Hashem to come to their rescue. The people of this generation are unwilling to accept that all their blessings come from God. Balak and Bilaam also seek to manipulate God rather than accepting that He controls the world in which they live.

Bilaam's journey to fulfill Balak's mission mirrors activities of Avraham, especially when he obey's God's command to take his son (Yitzhak) and sacrifice him at the Akeidah. Both rise early in the morning, prepare their donkey, take two young men with them, and go forward to their tasks. God's blessings to Avraham include that his descendants will be too many to count, they will conquer the gates of their enemies, and they will be a source of blessing to the world. When God puts His words in Bilaam's mouth as the latter tries to curse the Jews, his three attempted curses make the same three points that God had given to Avraham.

The generation of the Exodus is unwilling to accept Hashem's control of the world, and ultimately they prove not to be ready to enter the land, perhaps God's greatest gift to our people. The second generation, however, quickly learns to

appeal directly to Hashem when they become thirsty, hungry, and realize that they need divine help to conquer their enemies. Their willingness to understand that all their blessings come directly from Hashem makes them worthy of His help, even when He acts with hidden face (with hidden rather than obvious miracles).

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, z"l, asks why the story of Balak and Bilaam is even in the Torah, because no Jew is aware of what they try to do. This story is only in the Torah because God tells it to Moshe and has him include it. The reason for including this parsha is that it shows Hashem's love for Israel. God chooses to make B'Nai Yisrael His chosen people out of love. Where do we see this love? In Bilaam's blessings. The words are not Bilaam's words – they are the words that Hashem puts in Bilaam's mouth:

That is what the story is about: not Balak, or Bilam, or Moab, or Midian, or what happened next. It is about God's love for a people, their strength, resilience, their willingness to be different, their family life (tents, dwelling places), and their ability to outlive empires. (Rabbi Sacks, below)

We have seen the story of Balak and Bilaam this month. After Israel and the United States bomb Israel and destroy Iran's nuclear capabilities, the Iranian leader states that Iran has severely damaged both Israel and the United States. He adds that Iran's punishment will be to curse these countries. We have seen this story before. Iran is hiring Bilaam to curse Israel and the United States, and therefore Iran claims that it will defeat both of them. Meanwhile, Israel goes on with our lives, performing mitzvot, helping widows, orphans, victims of war attacks, and refugees. As Rabbi Dr. Katriel (Kenneth) Brander reminds us, quoting from Micah in the Haftorah this week:

"God has told you what is good and what the Lord seeks from you: only to do justice, love goodness, and walk modestly with your God!" (Micah 6:8).

My beloved Rebbe, Rabbi Leonard Cahan, z"l, advocated for peace in Israel, our country, and all over the world. However, Rabbi Cahan understood that pursuing peace requires moral grounding (our mitzvot) and strength. Pursuing peace sometimes requires that we and Israel go to war to defeat our enemies, especially those who follow the legacy of Amalek. Rabbi Cahan served in the Navy for many years, both on active duty and in the reserves. Our son Evan, who served in the US Air Force for more than a decade, has been serving his shul as head of security for several years.

Shabbat Shalom,

Hannah and 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 and since the pandemic, despite many of its supporters having to cut back on their donations.

Please daven for a Refuah Shlemah for Velvel David ben Sarah Rachel; Moshe Aaron ben Leah Beilah (badly wounded in battle in Gaza but slowly recovering), Daniel Yitzchak Meir HaLevy ben Ruth; Ariah Ben Sarah, Hershel Tzvi ben Chana, Reuven ben Basha Chaya Zlata Lana, Avraham ben Gavriela, Mordechai ben Chaya, David Moshe ben Raizel; Zvi ben Sara Chaya, Reuven ben Masha, Meir ben Sara, Oscar ben Simcha; Miriam Bat Leah; Yehudit Leah bas Hannah Feiga; Miriam bat Esha, Chana bat Sarah; Raizel bat Rut; Rena bat Ilsa, Riva Golda bat Leah, Sharon bat Sarah, Kayla bat Ester, and Malka bat Simcha, and all our fellow Jews in danger in and near Israel. Please contact me for any additions or subtractions. Thank you.

Shabbat Shalom,

Hannah & Alan

Parshat Balak: Vulnerability, Struggle, and Victory

By Rabbi Dr. Katriel (Kenneth) Brander * 5785 / 2025

President and Rosh HaYeshiva, Ohr Torah Stone

Dedicated in memory of Israel's murdered and fallen, for the return of our hostages still in Gaza, for the refuah shlayma of our wounded in body or spirit, and for the safety of our brave IDF soldiers.

As we read the haftarah of this week's Torah portion, Parshat Balak, one cannot help but feel that it was written specifically for this moment. The words of the prophet Micha were originally spoken to an Israelite kingdom shattered and reeling in the wake of the Assyrian conquests. But they resonate in our world of twenty-first-century Jewry with an accuracy that seems providential. Verse by verse, let us explore how Micha's divine wisdom speaks to our situation today.

The haftarah begins by addressing Israel as the *"remnant of Yaakov"*)5:6(. Today, no less than in the time of Micha, the Jewish people are but a remnant of their former self. The decimation of Am Yisrael in the Holocaust and the ravages of assimilation have left an indelible mark on both our physical numbers and our psychology as a people. The horrors of October 7th drove home as never before the sense of vulnerability that has accompanied us wherever we have lived, at home or in exile. In our bones we know and feel that we are profoundly dependent on God for protection, and that none of our successes and achievements can be taken for granted.

The same verse continues to describe us *"as dew brought down from the Lord, as ample rains shower upon grass."* Our very existence is predicated on the nurturing dew of divine sustenance; as a nation, we live at the sufferance and mercy of God's will. And this summer, more perhaps than ever before, there is indeed no family in Israel not personally indebted to, not acutely aware of the miracles that God has wrought in our lives – wonders that have for the past weeks, months, and years protected us both on the battlefield and on the home front.

The people of Israel live *"among nations, countless peoples, like a lion among wild beasts of the forest"*)v. 7(. Surrounded by so many enemies, the State of Israel has against all odds shown that it can prevail. Less than two years after rising from the ashes of October 7th, we now live in a Middle East without Haniya, without Nasrallah, without Assad. And finally, through operation *"Rising Lion,"* with the aid of both God and our friends and allies, we have stymied the Iranian nuclear plan to destroy Israel. We continue to pray to God: *"Your hand shall be raised over your foes; your enemies will be cut down"*)v. 8(.

Continue to give us strength through our holy army to destroy those who seek to destroy us.

Moving on, the prophet gives voice to the vision we all share for a future where such struggles, heroism, and miracles are unnecessary. He describes a reality in which God *"will cut out the horses from among you"* – i.e., where vehicles and instruments of war are unknown)v. 9(. We yearn for lives in which we need not learn how to drive tanks, how to defuse bombs, and how to locate the nearest protective shelter: *"I will cut down the fortified cities of your land"*)v. 10(.

In a safe and secure future, Israel will not be dependent for its protection on the goodwill of foreign peoples, and its fate will not hinge on their empty and aimless predictions and theories about us: *"There will be no more fortune-tellers among you"*)v. 11(. We will no longer need to hear their representatives demanding we capitulate to our enemies in order to survive.

But to reach such a future, we have much of our own work to do.

In verse 13, Micha pivots to an exhortation against the Israelites' idolatrous ways: *"I will rip out the Ashera)tree of idolatry(from your midst."* We, like them, must tirelessly combat all the types of idolatry of our time. In some such areas we can already register successes.

The State of Israel today is witnessing a spiritual revival, and many secular Jews have learned during this remarkable, providential war to find their own unique, informal relationships with God.

On other fronts, however, we are more challenged: There are today ostensibly God-fearing Jews who in fact worship their own power and strength. They insist on misusing the precious sovereignty that Israel has been given in order to prey on the innocent, sowing vigilante terror in Arab towns or destroying the property of the IDF – chayalim who wear the “*priestly garments*” of this generation.

In our haftarah, God warns us: “*No longer will you bow down to the craft of your hands*”)v. 12(: We must never privilege our own idolatrous self-aggrandizement at the expense of those unable to defend themselves. We must stand up and speak out against the cruel predations of the few. If we can preserve our humility and our morality, God promises, “*I will lash out with my anger and wrath*” against those who call for Israel’s destruction from the river to the sea.

Finally, Micha extends a hand to those who have been hurt and suffered loss in the wars and struggles they have endured. “*Arise, argue your case before the mountains!*”)6:1(, he exhorts. You, the Jewish people, in your search for a relationship to God, have the right to voice complaints over all that you have lost, even to God. Now, as then, we are a nation tired of burying our fathers, our children, and our grandchildren.

God emphasizes that it is only natural to grapple with the challenges of chevlei Mashiach, the birth pangs of redemption. It is only natural that we should argue with God. But at the same time, we must also realize that in our complex, dynamic world, where history unfolds its convoluted thread before our eyes, and where light and darkness seem to constantly merge and blend, God has done and continues to work immense deeds for us, saving us from our enemies both through direct providence and through the wise counsel of our leaders.

All the numerous themes of our haftarah are manifest in the events we today are witnessing: our vulnerability and dependence on God, the ability with His aid to prevail over countless surrounding enemies against all odds, the yearning for a future of true peace and security, the struggle against the idolatry of hubris, and the recognition of the suffering and sacrifices necessary for redemption.

But perhaps the most appropriate and timely message of the prophet is his last. Micha closes by underscoring the ultimate purpose and mission of the Jewish people – to use its God-given power and sovereignty to create a society that embodies the values of justice and godliness in the world. “*God has told you what is good and what the Lord seeks from you: only to do justice, love goodness, and walk modestly with your God!*”)6:8(. It is this purpose, and no other, that gives meaning to the pain and the sacrifice, the struggles and the victories of the Jewish people. It is this purpose that has guided our steps throughout history, and it must continue to do so today.

* President and Rosh HaYeshiva of Ohr Torah Stone, a modern Orthodox group of 32 institutions and programs. Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Riskin is the Founding Director, and Rabbi Dr. Brander is President and Rosh HaYeshiva. For more information or to support Ohr Torah Stone, contact ohrtorahstone@otsyny.org or 212-935-8672. **Ohr Torah Stone is in the midst of its fund-raising drive. Please support this effort with Donations to 49 West 45th Street #701, New York, NY 10036.**

Dvar Torah: Chukas - Balak: A Real Yiddishe Kup! (2006)

By Rabbi Label Lam

“Who can count the dust of Jacob and the seed of Israel? May my soul die the death of the straight and may my end be like his.”)Bamidbar 23:10(

Who can count the dust of Jacob: It is incalculable the amount of Mitzvos they)the Jews(do with dust...)Rashi(

In spite of his bad intentions, Bilam was compelled to speak only words of truth. We need to know, though, why he coupled these concepts together in the same verse. What about observing the countless number of Mitzvos Jews do with dust caused Bilam to want to die the death of the straight ones?

The Talmud *Sukkah* 52A gives the following futuristic account:

“Rabbi Yehuda learns that in the future The Holy One Blessed Be He will bring the Yetzer Hora – the evil inclination – and slaughter him in front of the righteous and in front of the wicked. To the righteous he will seem like a mountain and to the wicked like a strand of hair. These ones will be crying and these ones will be crying. The righteous will cry and exclaim, ‘How were we able to conquer such a high mountain?’ The wicked will be crying and saying, ‘How is it that we could not overcome a single hair?’”

What’s this metaphor of the hair and the mountain about? With a searing insight the Maharsha points out that the archetype opponent of Jacob, Essau eventually settled in a place called Har Seir or literally the Mountain of Hair. How does that help us? The wicked are bemoaning, in that moment of clarity, that what prevented them from making personal and moral progress was something as feeble as a hair. People hold themselves back from Mitzvos because of some unfounded fear like *“what other might say”* only to see how proportionately minute it really is in the grand scheme of things. The righteous, on the other hand stand back in awe and can hardly believe that they were able to accomplish so much in a lifetime. How did they do it? What is so remarkable about this tall mountain? It is a mountain of hairs – constructed one courageous deed at a time.

One late Thursday night I visited one of the local bakeries to fetch a cake for “the guys.” I was directed to the back room from where all the intoxicating aromas were emanating. There I beheld row after row – hundreds of racks, maybe thousands – of freshly baked Challos for Shabbos! Then the baker himself emerged from the forest of delightfully baked goods wearing his white apron and all. Excitedly, I told him, *“You should have in mind that all these Challos are going to be eaten for the sake of the Holy Shabbos!”* With gleaming eyes he looked beyond me, and said, “Of course! Of course I do!” It’s such a simple thing. Every week, for a lifetime, with the dust of flour that emerges from the dust of the earth this simple baker weaves his way with intentionality onto thousands of Shabbos tables. I was in awe. Who can count the dust of Jacob?

Bilam too was stricken with a vision of the mountains and mountains of success that Israel would achieve over the course of its long history, one Shabbos at a time, and with the earthiest of stuff. Even still he couldn’t push past that first follicle and join. No! Instead he foolishly exclaimed his wish to die like the righteous and share their ultimate rewards. Why is Billy so silly?

A friend who became a grandparent joked, *“If I had only known how great it was to be a grandparent, I would have skipped being a parent and become a grandparent straight away.”* I told him what my father-in-law of blessed memory said – that it is like the fellow who entered a diner that advertised, “Second Cup of Coffee Free” and asked for the second cup. He was told, *“In order to get second one free, you have to pay for the first cup.”* Now, that’s a **real Yiddishe Kup!**

Good Shabbos!

<https://torah.org/torah-portion/dvartorah-5766-chukas/>

A Thought on the Parsha (Balak): Seeing Too Much of Yourself in Others

by Rabbi Dov Linzer, Rosh HaYeshiva, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah © 2012

Parashat Balak is the only parasha in the Torah which provides us with an outsider’s view of Children of Israel. As such, it affords us with a perspective not only on how others see us, but also on how others see, that is, on other ways of seeing.

The parasha begins with Balak, King of Moab, who sees “all that Israel had done to the Amorites.” Now, the Torah has already told us that Israel had attempted to pass peacefully through the Amorite land to get to the Land of Canaan and that only when they were attacked did they fight back and then conquer the territory that they now possessed. If Balak had been thinking rationally and objectively, he would have realized that he had nothing to be fearful of. And yet, *“Moab became very frightened of the people and Moab was distressed because of the Children of Israel”* (Bamidbar 22:3). What Balak, and indeed all of Moab, saw was not a nation trying to pass through, but rather a threat to their security and well-being.

What is even more striking is that they had concrete evidence that the Israelites were not interested in waging war against them. For as we find out in Devarim, and as is recorded in Shoftim (11:17), Moshe had previously sent emissaries to Moab requesting safe passage throughout the land (Devarim 2:29), and, when denied, he and the Israelites had circumvented the Moabite lands (Devarim 2:9-10). What reason, then, did Moab have to be fearful? The answer is none. And yet, they saw as we all do, subjectively, and they projected their own belligerent character onto others. If the Moabites had conquered such vast lands, then they certainly would not hold back from conquering all the surrounding territory as well. It was this seeing, a reflection of themselves, that lead to their fear and their actions.

This theme also emerges from Balak’s initial failed attempts to recruit Balaam. Balaam had told Balak’s messengers that he could not return with them because *“God has refused to let me go with you”* (22:13). On hearing this, Balak must have believed that this was merely a pretext, for he proceeds to send officers *“more and higher ranking”* than the first ones. Rashi (22:13) states that Balak was picking up on a hint that Balaam had dropped, but it seems more likely that Balak was just projecting his own character and motivations onto Balaam. For him, for Balak, it would have all been about money and honor, and thus he assumes the same is true for Balaam. What you see, so often, is really a reflection of what you yourself are.

It is one thing when we project our own pettiness or our character flaws onto others and think the worse of them for it. It is another thing when we bring God into it. For how should our relationship with God affect how we see others? Connecting to God can help us see more clearly what is good in this world, and also what is bad. What we do with that, however, is a function of who we are. If we are inclined to see the bad in others, then it is possible that this can lead to seeing others and their actions as not just flawed, but as religiously abhorrent. If, on the other hand, we are not so petty, then our connection to God will help us see the spark of holiness that can exist in every individual; it will help us see what is pure and what is beautiful.

There are two ways, then, of looking at the world religiously. The first way brings about a curse, the second way, a blessing. The first way is what results when we bring our own selves, our own mean-spiritedness, into the equation, when we are actually seeing with our own sight, but using God to justify it. The second way is when we strive to see as God sees, it is when we see the world *“that it is good”*; it is when we allow ourselves to see the holiness that infuses all of creation.

The first way is the way of Balaam. Balaam is, as the Mishna in Pirkei Avot (5:17) teaches us, a person of an evil, or one may say, a mean-spirited, eye. He knows his own craven desires, and this is all he can see in others as well. Balaam describes himself as *“the man with an open eye”* (24:3), not *“open eyes,”* to which the Rabbis comment that he had been blinded in one eye (Niddah 31a). Why? Because he could not understand how a holy God could look at the sexual life of a husband and wife. Balaam’s own inability to see the holiness in such a union, his ability to see in it only something profane, was his own shortcoming. And yet he projected it on God: *“How could it be that the One who is pure and holy... should look at such things?”* he asks, according to the Talmud. He was indeed partially blind, only able to see the world through his narrow vantage point, and not in its fullness and its beauty.

Balaam thus sets out to curse the Israelites. It is his hope that he can use God to serve his ends. He tries time and again to manipulate the circumstances so that he can see the people in a negative way. He wants to only see their margins, their periphery (22:41 and again in 23:13). Balaam knows however, that God has other plans, and that what he is able to do, whether what he says will be a blessing or a curse, will depend on *“what God shows me”* (23:3), what and how he will see. And, indeed, God does make him see otherwise: *“Behold from the top of the rocks I see him, and from the hills I*

behold him" (23:9). He is made to see the Israelites from above, in their entirety. He is not allowed to see them as he normally would, narrowly, with one eye, picking out the bad to criticize and to curse.

When one sets out with a narrow vision, with a mean-spirited eye, then one's invoking of God will likely result in a curse. However, if one truly strives to connect to God and to see the world as God does, then the curse can turn into a blessing. On his third excursion, Balaam realizes this and he chooses to no longer attempt to use God to serve his ends, but to truly see the world through God's lens. *"And when Balaam saw that it pleased the Lord to bless Israel, he went not, as at other times, to seek for enchantments, but he set his face toward the wilderness."* (24:1). He was not going to manipulate God, he was going to look directly at the Israelites in the Wilderness and see them as they truly were. And, thus: *"And Balaam lifted up his eyes, and he saw Israel abiding in his tents according to their tribes; and the spirit of God came upon him"* (24:2). He saw them in their diversity, in their unity, for he was now seeing them with *"his eyes,"* not with a limited vision, but with a full vision, with both of his eyes.

When Balaam chose to see thusly it was then that he was filled *"with the spirit of God."* It was then that he was filled with a sense of the beauty of creation and the good that is in people. And it was then that he articulated this abiding goodness, in a verse that we repeat every day before entering a synagogue: *"How goodly are thy tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel!"* (24:5). The connection to the synagogue, to a place of God's abiding, should fill us with the spirit of God, should allow us to see God in the world, and should evoke in us the proclamation: mah tovu, how goodly! How goodly is Thy world, how goodly is all of Thy creation!

Such a seeing, a seeing of blessing, does not need to be naïve. It does not mean that we must believe that there is no evil in the world. There is evil, and it needs to be rooted out. Indeed, the verse in Psalms declares that *"God is wrathful every day"* (Psalms 7:12). But as the Gemara in Berakhot clarifies: *"And how long is the wrath? For a moment."* (Berakhot 7a). Balaam, according to this passage, knew exactly that moment that God was angry. Balaam's goal was to capitalize on that moment of wrath. To make that his – and God's – defining character. Sometimes wrath is needed, sometimes there is true evil and righteous indignation is called for. But if one sees as God does, then that should be a tiny, tiny part of one's life. *"And how long is one moment?"* asks the Gemara, *"One fifty-eight thousand eight hundred and eighty-eighth part of an hour."*

It is our obligation to bring about blessing, to see what is good in the world, to bring it to the surface, to praise it. If we see the good, others will as well, and the good will spread. The world has more than enough people who are *"defenders of the faith,"* who are prepared to attack anyone they see as deviating from the true faith, who are on guard against all the real and perceived evil out there. What the world needs is more people who are spreaders of the faith. Who understand that the way goodness will prevail, is by seeing goodness and spreading it. *"Behold it is my charge to bless, and I will bless, and not take it back"* (23:20).

Shabbat Shalom!

From my archives.

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 ways 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 Kux 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 Kux 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 and rabbi emeritus of the historic Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue of New York City.

<https://www.jewishideas.org/bilam-effect-thoughts-parashat-balak>

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False Prophets and True Religion

By Rabbi Uzi Weingarten *

The account of Balak and Bil'am (Numbers 22-24) presents, in the form of a story, the great ethical and spiritual insights at the root of Judaism, as relevant today as it was when Abraham and Sarah first *taught "the way of God, which is to do tzedakah and mishpat"* (Genesis 18:19).

Let's first review the story briefly. Balak, King of Moab, feels threatened by Israel's presence in his vicinity, and hires Bil'am to curse them. Bil'am has a reputation for being able to pronounce blessings and curses that get results (Numbers 22:2-6). Arriving in Moab, Bil'am instructs Balak to build seven altars and offer seven bulls and seven rams (23:1).

Bil'am then receives an oracle from God, one that is quite different from what Balak had hoped for. Since God has not cursed Israel, Bil'am says in his oracle, neither can he. Bil'am then explains to an angry Balak that he can do only as God tells him (23:7-12). This entire sequence – altars, offerings, Bil'am's blessing, Balak's anger and Bil'am's apology – is repeated (23:13-26) and repeated again (23:27-24:13).

What emerges is that Bil'am is a prophet-for-profit. He is willing to use his real or imagined spiritual powers to do whatever will bring him money and fame, with no thought of moral or spiritual considerations. Balak wants a curse placed on an entire nation, so that he can smite them (22:6). This is perfectly acceptable to Bil'am, as long as the price is right. Balak knows this, and therefore tempts Bil'am with money and honor (22:17; 22:37).

One wonders why the Torah devotes so much space and attention to an unscrupulous charlatan. What I suggest is that this account conveys a deeper message: about how, and with what intention, we approach God.

The religion of the ancient idolators involved a combination of magical incantations and rituals. If done in the correct manner, the gods would be pleased and all would be well in the world. The role of the clergy was to know the details of these magical incantations and rituals and to perform them precisely. This was the essence of ancient idolatry.

Some idolators took this one step further. They served the gods with the intent of controlling and manipulating them. This is known as theurgy, which means *'operations intended to influence the Divine.'*

Where is Bil'am in all this? On the one hand, he repeatedly invokes the name of God and acknowledges him as the source of blessing. At the same time, he has an idolatrous mindset; he thinks that he can control the gods.

That is why, each time that Bil'am seeks to do Balak's bidding, he instructs Balak to build altars and offer up animals (23:1, 14, 29). And when God appears to Bil'am, he says, *"I have arranged the seven altars and offered up a bull and a ram on the altar"* (23:4). This is all he says, because he believes that through numerically-correct offerings he could manipulate God into doing his bidding.

The Bible allows for sincere sacrifices that reflect an authentic desire to draw close to God. The Torah (Deut. 33:19) and Psalms (51:21) speak of *ziv-chei tzedek*, sacrifices of righteousness, whose very name indicates that they are accompanied by a life of personal integrity. (See Isaiah 1:10-17, regarding sacrifices, and rituals in general, that are not accompanied by a life of integrity.) These are quite different from Bil'am's sacrifices, offered by a prophet-for-profit, in order to place a Divine curse on his employer's imagined enemies.

Let us look at two verses from the first oracle that God puts into Bil'am's mouth. One of the first verses is:

How shall I curse whom God has not cursed? (23:8)

The purpose of this statement is to inform Balak that God will not curse Israel. It also informs Bil'am that God cannot be manipulated, not by sacrifices and not by anything else.

That is the simple part of the story. What is of greater interest to us is the conclusion to Bil'am's first oracle. He prays for himself: *"May I die the death of yesharim"* (23:10). Yesharim (sing., yashar) means *'straight,'* and refers here to *'morally straight,'* the opposite of crooked. Bil'am prays that he die the death of 'upright people.'

This prayer is perplexing, because it seems to come out of nowhere. It has nothing to do with the subject at hand, which is Balak's desire to have Bil'am cursed Israel. What is it doing here?

It seems to me that **by having Bil'am say this prayer, God is teaching him what the true path is.** Unlike what Bil'am thought earlier, the way to God is not through magical incantations or precisely-performed rituals. Rather, the first step in walking with God is the way of yesharim, a life of spiritual awareness that begins with honesty and compassion. By putting in Bil'am's mouth a prayer that he die the death of yesharim, God is teaching him, and us, to what we should aspire. [emphasis added]

Let us look now at the haftarah (reading from the Prophets) for this week's Torah portion, which is a section from Micah (5:6 6:8). There would seem to be a self-evident connection, since Micah is the only prophet who mentions the incident of Balak and Bil'am. Micah (6:5) calls on Israel to

... remember what Balak, King of Moab, connived regarding you and what Bil'am son of Be'or answered him.

There is, however, a subtler, more profound connection between the two sections. As we saw, one of themes of the story of Bil'am is how to serve God. And this is also what Micah teaches us. Immediately following the mention of Bil'am in the above verse, Micah poses the question that every spiritual seeker asks:

With what shall I approach God, bow before God on high? (6:6)

How one comes near to God is a shared theme of our Torah portion and the haftarah. The 'common religion' of Micah's day was animal sacrifices, so Micah refers to that and asks: [emphasis added]

Shall I approach him with burnt offerings, with year-old calves?

The prophet reminds us that the essence of walking with God is a life of honesty and kindness and humility and spiritual awareness. It is only in that context that rituals have true spiritual value. Micah concludes this section with the verse (6:8) that is our guide on how to walk with God:

*He has told you what is good And what does God ask of you? **ONLY** To do what is just and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God* [emphasis added: see below]

CLOSING THOUGHT

The story of Bil'am, in the way we explained it, is a statement about true religion. And religion is "true," from the Torah's standpoint, when it does three things:

- First, when it teaches that the core of the Divine path is kindness, truth and walking with God humbly.
- Second, when religion gives concrete expression to these values, offering real-life guidance on how to live a life of honesty, compassion, gratitude and holiness.
- And third, when religion provides rituals, to serve as reminders and to build community, while making clear that they are in a supporting role. (In this understanding, the rituals do not carry the same level of obligation as Micah's three principles. Hence, Micah saying **ONLY**.)

* Rabbi Uzi Weingarten teaches a weekly no-charge class, via Zoom, titled "To Walk with God: An exploration of the moral and spiritual teachings of Tanakh." The class is open to all, Jews and non-Jews. It meets Sun evenings at 7:30 PM, EDT, and repeats Tues evenings at the same time. He can be reached at uziteaches@gmail.com.

<https://www.jewishideas.org/node/3363>

Bolok: Critical Moments

by Rabbi Mordechai Rhine* © 2018 Teach 613

In every person's life there are critical moments which decide the future, often for generations. One such moment occurred to Bilam, who was hired to curse the Jews. As Bilam passed through a narrow passageway, an angel of mercy is sent to try to stop him from destroying himself. At that moment he had a choice. He could turn back, or he could continue on his mission to try to curse the Jews. Bilam chose wrongly; within a parsha, he will be dead.

Another person who was at a critical moment was Bolok, the king of Moav, who hired Bilam to curse the Jews. When Bilam showed up, he told Bolok three strategies. First he told Bolok that he must bring offerings to the Jewish G-d. Then he said they will try cursing the Jews. Later he advised Bolok to try to get the Jews to sin.

The second two strategies landed Bolok in dismal failure. Instead of a curse, Bilam ended up declaring, "How goodly are your tents Yakov..." In an effort to get the Jews to sin, both Bolok and his daughter will end up dead.

Interestingly, however, the first strategy, which must have required much effort from Bolok, ended up giving him a place in eternity. When Bilam told him that to succeed he would have to bring offerings to the Jewish G-d, Bolok confronted a critical moment in his life. He certainly wasn't a worshipper of the Jewish G-d. But in order to curse the Jews, he would do almost anything. And he did.

Despite the terrible ulterior motives involved, the medrash tells us that in the merit of those offerings that Bolok brought at that critical moment, he merited that Rus, the matriarch of Shlomo, came from him. Shlomo, the builder of the Beis Hamikdash, where offerings to Hashem for the right reasons would be brought, would descend from him in the merit of those offerings.

Every person has critical moments in life at which time life is literally at a crossroads. A good choice means eternity can be achieved. A poor choice means that much is lost forever.

It is said that the Chofetz Chaim was once approached on Purim by a student who had had a bit too much to drink. The student blocked the Chofetz Chaim's path, and called out to him, *"Promise me that I will have a portion next to you in Gan Eden."* The Chofetz Chaim saw that he could not pass the young man without responding, so he made a very profound offer. He said, *"If you accept on yourself to learn two laws a day of ShemirasHalashon, and to be sincerely careful with your speech, then I guarantee you a portion next to me in Gan Eden."*

The young man apparently realized the magnitude of the offer, and he seemed to sober up a bit. He thought about the offer and began considering if he should take it. Did he really think that he would be able to guard his speech from now on?

But the Chofetz Chaim's offer was not to be taken lightly. When the Chofetz Chaim saw that an affirmative response was not forthcoming, he declared, *"Can you imagine. The young man is at the threshold of Gan Eden and refuses to enter!"* The Chofetz Chaim sidestepped the youth, and walked away intensely disappointed. *"Can you imagine,"* he repeated, *"I offered him Gan Eden... and he is not sure!"*

Every one of us is offered critical moments in the course of life. May we merit to recognize them and choose wisely.

With best wishes for a wonderful Shabbos!

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Rabbi Rhine is on summer vacation for a few weeks. He has given me permission to use some of his achived Devrei Torah during his absence.

<https://www.teach613.org/parshas-bolok-critical-moments/>

Balak – The Temple and Jewish Eternity

by Rabbi Yehoshua Singer * © 2021

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 "ראה" 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 יראה -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.

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Kosher Cheese *

By Rabbi Haim Ovadia (5782) *

What is the story with Kosher cheese?

There are many misconceptions regarding Kosher and non-Kosher (or non-certified) cheese. In addition, the Kashrut industry controls both the supervision on production and the halakhic literature, thus creating an exorbitant pricing system in which what is considered a “strictly” Kosher cheese, of rather inferior quality, could cost twice or three times as much as a similar “non-supervised” cheese. This creates a considerable economic interest in preserving a state of affairs where “non-supervised” cheese is deemed non-kosher, despite the difficulties it creates for observant Jews (as I have mentioned in other articles, one cannot brush aside the cost factor, since the Talmud stresses in many places that we must not cause people to spend more than what is necessary.)

Let us start from the current situation and then go back to the origins of the Halakha:

We can distinguish between the following levels of Kashrut of cheese, which are listed here in a descending order, starting with what people believe is most Kosher:

- Cheese made of Halav Israel (aka Cholov Yisroel), that is, milk which was milked under Jewish supervision, and was also produced under supervision. As we shall later see, labeling cheese as Cholov Yisroel has an element of misinformation.
- Cheese made of “regular” milk and supervised “only” during production.
- Cheese without supervision, with vegetable or microbial rennet – this cheese will be allowed according to some opinions.
- Cheese made with commercial or natural animal rennet – surprisingly, this cheese does not contain any non-kosher element, so its status is debatable.
- Cheese which contains pieces of meat (Yes! There is such a thing) – Definitely not kosher.

We will return to this list later, but for now let us start from the Mishna (Avodah Zara, 2:5), which is the first source to mention that one cannot eat cheese made by non-Jews:

Rabbi Ishmael asked Rabbi Joshua while they were traveling: why did the rabbis forbid cheese made by non-Jews?

He answered: because they use rennet from an animal which was not slaughtered properly.

R Ishmael asked: but some priests used to slurp the rennet from the stomach of an animal destined for sacrifice [meaning that if the rennet has a status of food it would have been forbidden, and this proves that it is not food, hence cheese made with it should not be forbidden.]

He answered: Because they use rennet from calves slaughtered for pagan ritual.

R Ishmael asked: if this is the reason, the cheese should have been forbidden not only for eating but also to derive benefit from it [as an item used for idolatry.]

At that point Rabbi Joshua distracted Rabbi Ishmael by bringing up an enigmatic verse from Shir Hashirim.

The Mishna reports, indirectly, that the consumption of cheese made by non-Jews was forbidden by contemporaries of Rabbi Ishmael, who seems to disagree with the prohibition as he tries to get an explanation from Rabbi Joshua. R Joshua first says that it is because of non-Kosher rennet, but R Ishmael proves that rennet is not considered food and therefore cannot be labeled as Kosher or non-Kosher.

R Joshua then claims that it is an idolatry-related prohibition, but R Ishmael points out an obvious incongruence with the laws of forbidden idolatry.

R Joshua realizes that he has no answer and diverts the conversation to a different subject.

In his commentary on the Mishna, Maimonides makes a distinction between using the rennet, which is allowed, and using the cow's stomach itself, which is forbidden, but the Mishna's text remains unclear. It seems that a prohibition was decided on insufficient grounds, and the idea that it was a barrier against mingling with pagans, remains unproven.

The Talmud (Avodah Zara, 35:1-2) struggles to explain the strange behavior of R Joshua, who dodges his colleague's questions. The Talmud argues that the prohibition was created in Israel and that the practice of the rabbis there was not to reveal the reason of a new decree for one year. The rationale was that once people start following the prohibition it would be more difficult to challenge it.

The Talmud then suggests several reasons for the prohibition:

For the fear that a snake bit the cheese and made it poisonous]this reason was rejected.[

There might be some milk which has not become cheese, and one cannot consume milk which was milked by a non-Jew without supervision.

The non-Jews use the stomach itself as rennet.

The cheese is polished with lard.

The cheese is made with non-Kosher vinegar.

The cheese is made with sap from immature trees, which cannot be used until the tree's fifth year.

So many different reasons point to a lack of knowledge as to the real reason of the prohibition. An additional problem is that the Talmud calls the prohibition a decree [גזרה], when as a matter of fact it is mentioned in the Mishnah only in passing as a prohibition. The difference between the two is that a decree is harder to revoke than a prohibition.

The Yerushalmi Talmud, however, presents a much clearer explanation of the Mishna, and states that the prohibition stems from the use of animals which were offered to idols.

This is then a clear case of a prohibition which depends on a certain condition or concern. Once this condition or concern is gone, so should the prohibition, and that brings us to the second part of the discussion:

There is]Almost[no non-Kosher cheese!]long quote in Hebrew or Aramaic in original omitted here[

So far, we have seen that already in the time of the Talmud there was lack of clarity regarding the reason of the prohibition against cheese made by non-Jews. The consensus seems to be that the prohibition had to do with some sort of non-Kosher ingredient. That ingredient, according to some opinions, was related to idolatry. If this is the case, then

cheese made without those non-Kosher ingredients should be deemed Kosher. As we shall soon see, this was indeed the opinion of leading rabbis in Medieval France, and apparently, there should be no reason not to follow their ruling today.

So what is the argument against using the ingredients of the cheese as the yardstick for its qualification as Kosher? The answer to this question is at the core of one of the most fundamental debates in Jewish law, a debate whose roots are in the Talmud, but which has crystalized in Medieval times.

Maimonides writes that if a Rabbinic Court [בית דין] created a decree, a regulation, or a practice, and it has become widespread, a future court cannot undo their decision, even if the reason for said decree, regulation, or practice, no longer exists, unless the later court is greater than the early one in both number of judges and wisdom.][

His harshest critic, Rabi Abraham ben David, cites a case in the Mishnah which shows that Rabban Yohanan Ben Zakkai nullified an earlier decree because the reason for that decree no longer existed, even though his court was not greater than the earlier one.][

Indeed, Maimonides' commentators cannot provide a sufficient explanation to the case Rabbi Abraham Ben David cites. It seems that this rule, as Maimonides presents it, is his own interpretation to a Talmudic rule which originally referred to two contemporary courts. In this case, it would be logical to determine the hierarchy of the courts based on number of members and their expertise. It is much more difficult to apply this rule to consecutive courts, because one would claim that the early courts were closer to the source and therefore more knowledgeable, thus paralyzing Halakha without leaving room for innovation and accommodation for changing reality.

This is, however, a matter for another discussion. What is important to our discussion of kosher cheese is that the prohibition of cheese made by non-Jews does not fall under any of the categories mentioned by Maimonides, since it is not a decree, a regulation, or a practice. It is a prohibition, based on certain conditions, and when these conditions do not exist, the cheese should be Kosher.

This brings us to a discussion by the authors of the Tossafot, the Talmud commentary written by the grandchildren of Rashi and their disciples, on the text quoted previously from tractate Avodah Zara, where the Talmud suggests six reasons for the prohibition. The Tossafot show that there is no reason to declare cheese as non-Kosher other than the presence of non-Kosher ingredients. In that discussion, we find out that there were great scholars who allowed the consumption of cheese, with vegetarian rennet, made by non-Jews.

[See original for direct quote, because my word processor does not reproduce Hebrew or Aramaic accurately]

1. Rabbeinu Tam says that now we have no logical reason to forbid cheese made by non-Jews, since the reason for the original prohibition was the fear of snake-bites. That reason was presented by Rabbi Yehoshua Ben Levy, and we always rule like him, even if he is challenged by Rabbi Yohanan, even more so when the challenger is Shemuel [who is lesser than Rabbi Yohanan]. Rabbeinu Hananel also rules that we follow the opinion of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levy, and so ruled the author of Seder Tanaim VaAmoraim.]The Tossafot refer to the fear of snakes biting the cheese, which was left out in molds to form, and leaving venom in it. They explain that this must be the reason since it was presented by a Talmudic scholar whose opinion is always the final word. They cite two sources from the Geonic period to support their argument. [

2. The opinion of Rav Ada bar Ahava [that the cheese is forbidden because it is polished with lard] does not have any weight, since he did not have the authority to challenge Rabbi Yehushua ben Levy.

3. The opinions of Rav Hisda and Rav Nahman bar Yitzhak [that the prohibition is because of the use of non-Kosher vinegar or sap] were also refuted.

4. There is no concern that non-Kosher milk was mixed into the cheese [as is the opinion of Rav Hanina] since the non-Jews are not so foolish to do so, as it is well-known that non-Kosher milk does not coagulate.]This comment by the Tossafot should serve as a sharp rebuke to the Kashrut Industry Behemoth which insists on labeling cheese as made

from Cholv Yisroel. This labeling is misleading because it does not apply to cheese. Cholv Yisroel means milk from Kosher animals, milked under Jewish supervision. Supervision was necessary to ensure that non-Kosher milk is not mixed with the Kosher milk, but as we see here, this fear does not exist regarding cheese, so even though it is technically accurate and the cheese was made from supervised milk, it has no added value in terms of Kashrut. It is equivalent to labeling water as fat-free.[

5. Obviously, the only reason is the fear of snakebites, which is not applicable where we live.

6. One cannot argue that the original prohibition was voted upon, and therefore would require a new session and voting by a Rabbinical Court, since it is obvious that the original prohibition was limited only to cases where the fear of snakebites exists, as I will explain further when dealing with the issue of wine]We will also deal with that issue, in due time.[

7. Also, in many places people eat]cheese made by non-Jews[because they use rennet made from flowers. The great scholars of Narbonne]Provence, France[ruled that the cheese is kosher for the same reason.

8. In our place]possibly Northern France or Germany[, however, Rabbi Y. son of Rabbenu Hayyim says that there is a reason, albeit a weak one, to forbid the cheese, since it is processed with]calves'[stomachs, and this could be a problem of meat and dairy]even though they are both cold, and the prohibition only applies to cooking[because heavy salting is like cooking. I have seen places where they use salted pigs' stomachs.

There are two conclusions to be drawn from this amazing discussion in the Tossafot, which is in plain sight for all Talmud scholars, Yeshiva students, and Kashrut organizations to see:

1. The only serious reason to consider cheese made by non-Jews as non-Kosher is that they used to be exposed during the process and thus susceptible to contamination by snakes;

2. If we accept the other opinions in the Talmud, that the prohibition is because of non-Kosher ingredients, once we ascertain that all ingredients are Kosher so is the cheese, and so was the practice in many Jewish communities. Since the main argument in this discussion is made by Rabbenu Tam, one cannot help but wonder why so many orthodox leaders, who constantly preach to their followers that one cannot "pick and choose" between rabbis or practices, and must adhere to one rabbi on all issues, do not follow their own advice when it comes to this renowned and venerated scholar, Rabbenu Tam.

They wait one extra hour to end the Shabbat, in accordance with Rabbenu Tam, and they encourage people to wear two pairs of Tefillin, to satisfy the demand of Rabbenu Tam, but they would not agree with the same Rabbenu Tam that there "is no logical reason now to forbid cheese made by non-Jews."

I do hope that the reason they abandoned Rabbenu Tam here is the religious fear of sin and the desire to be strict, rather than financial consideration]try and compare prices, per ounce, of "non-certified", kosher, and Cholv Yisroel cheese, and you will understand why there might be such a consideration in the 2B\$ Kosher market.[But even if it is this religious fear, it is about time to take care of people's needs and to have the courage to acknowledge the truth.

Conclusion:

We have seen that the Mishna mentions a prohibition against cheese made by non-Jews, and that the Talmud struggles to find a reason for the prohibition. There is an opinion that the prohibition should be upheld, because Maimonides says that a later court does not have the authority to change the decree of a previous one, even though the reason for the decree is no longer relevant.

To that argument, we answer that:

- This opinion of Maimonides is challenged by the Raavad, Rabbi Abraham ben David. Maimonides's statement refers to three specific types of Rabbinical decision, and the prohibition of cheese does not fall under any of them.
- The wide common practice in Medieval France and Germany was to judge Kashrut of cheese by the ingredients. The fact that it was made by non-Jews had no weight, and there was no hesitation to over-rule the ancient prohibition.
- One can choose to be "strict" and to avoid "non-supervised" cheese, or one could choose to rely on the Raavad, Rabbeinu Tam, and the Great Scholars of Narbonne, as well as common sense, and determine the Kashrut of cheese by its ingredients [with more caution when dealing with artisanal cheese and small dairy farms].

According to the second approach, all cheeses made with vegetarian rennet are kosher. Animal based rennet which underwent the standard industrial process has lost its status as food and cheese made with it is also kosher, as we have seen in Maimonides' commentary on the Mishna.

One is also allowed to purchase cheese marked as Kosher, or Cholov Yisroel, although the labeling, as previously explained, is somewhat misleading. *

Shabbat Shalom.

**** Rabbi Ovadia's analysis and conclusions are his opinions based on the sources. Not all Rabbis agree with his conclusions. Discuss with your Rabbi and follow his opinion.**

Shabbat Shalom.

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Many Devrei Torah from Rabbi Ovadia this year come from an unpublished draft of his forthcoming book on Tanach, which Rabbi Ovadia has generously shared with our readers. Rabbi Ovadia reserves all copyright protections for this material.

Balak: Cursing Israel

by Rabbi Moshe Rube*

Sometimes the Torah seems like it bears little resemblance to our everyday. It's laws, customs and way of talking seem so different from our modern 2025 reality. But not this week. Our parsha hits the nail on the head.

Our parsha tells the story of the Moabite king Balak, who wants to attack the Jews but knows he cannot win with military might. So he invites a professional wordsmith, Balam, to say terrible words against the Jewish people from afar so that the Jews will be cursed.

Does that ring familiar? The Jews have the upper hand militarily, so our enemies seek to besmirch and destroy us with carefully crafted lies and inflammatory rhetoric.

Back then God saved the Jews by putting blessings in Balam's mouth so that he could only say good and beautiful things about the Jews -- thereby causing his employer Balak serious consternation.

Our hope and prayer is that, in our time, the same miracle unfolds: that truth, righteousness, and beauty be placed in the mouths of all who speak of Jews and Israel -- and that their words uplift rather than tear down.

Shabbat Shalom.

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Rav Kook Torah Balak: Eliminating Idolatry

The Weird Worship of Peor

After failing to curse the people of Israel, Balaam devised another plan to make trouble for the Jewish people. He advised using Moabite and Midianite women to entice the Israelite men into worshipping Baal Peor.

How was this idol worshipped? The word 'Peor' means to 'open up' or 'disclose.' According to the Talmud, the worshippers would bare their backsides and defecate in honor of the idol. The Talmud)Sanhedrin 64a(illustrates the repulsive nature of this particular idolatry with the following two stories:

"There was once a gentile woman who was very ill. She vowed: 'If I recover from my illness, I will go and worship every idol in the world.' She recovered, and proceeded to worship every idol in the world.

When she came to Peor, she asked its priests, 'How is this one worshipped?'

They told her, 'One eats greens and drinks strong drink, and then defecates before the idol.'

The woman responded, 'I'd rather become ill again than worship an idol in such a]revolting[manner.'

Sabta, a townsman of Avlas, once hired out a donkey to a gentile woman. When she came to Peor, she said to him, *'Wait till I enter and come out again.'*

When she came out, he told her, *'Now you wait for me until I go in and come out.'*

'But are you not a Jew]and do not worship idols[?' she asked.

'What does it concern you?' he replied. He then entered, uncovered himself before it, and wiped himself on the idol's nose.

The acolytes praised him, saying, *'No one has ever served this idol so consummately!'*"

Exposing the True Nature of Idolatry

What was the point of this most odious idolatrous practice?

In truth, Peor was not an aberrant form of idolatry. On the contrary, Peor was the epitome of idolatry! Other forms of idolatry are more aesthetic, but they just cover up the true ugliness of idolatry. The Golden Calf was the opposite extreme,

a beautiful, elegant form of idol worship. But Peor, as its name indicates, exposes the true nature of idolatry. All other forms of idolatry are just branches of Peor, with their inner vileness concealed to various extents.

The repulsive service of Peor contains the key for abolishing idolatry. When the prophet Elijah fought against the idolatry of Baal, he taunted the people: *"If Baal is God, then follow him."* The people, in fact, were already worshippers of Baal. What was Elijah telling them?

Elijah's point was that Baal is just a sanitized version of Peor. [emphasis added] If Baal is God, then go all the way. You should worship the source of this form of worship — Peor. Elijah's exposure of Baal as just a cleaner version of Peor convinced the people. They were truly revolted by the scatological practices of Peor, and instinctively responded, *"Hashem is God! Hashem is God!"*) I Kings 18:39(

Historically, the uprooting of idolatry will take place in stages. The allure of Peor, the purest form of idolatry, was shattered after Moses rooted out those who worshipped Peor at Shittim. That purge gave strength to the men of the Great Assembly who subdued the temptation of idolatry in the time of Ezra)Sanhedrin 64a(. The final eradication of idolatry's last vestiges will take place in the end of days, through the spiritual power of Moses, whose burial place faces Beit Peor. This obliteration will occur as idolatry's innate foulness is exposed to all.

Why is idolatry so intrinsically vile?

The source of idolatry's appeal is in fact a holy one — an impassioned yearning for closeness to God. Ignorance and moral turpitude, however, prevent this closeness, blocking the divine light from the soul. The overwhelming desire for divine closeness, despite one's moral failings, leads to idol worship. Instead of correcting one's flaws, these spiritual yearnings are distorted into cravings for idolatry. The unholy alliance of spiritual yearnings together with immoral and decadent behavior produces the intrinsic foulness of idolatry. Instead of trying to elevate humanity and refine our desires, idolatry endeavors to debase our most refined aspirations to our coarsest physical aspects. This is the ultimate message of Peor's scatological practices.

True Victory over Idolatry

The Great Assembly in Ezra's time conquered the temptation of idolatry by generally diminishing spiritual yearnings in the world. They did not truly defeat idolatry; rather, they subdued its enticement. In the words of the Midrash, they cast the temptation of idolatry into a metal cauldron and sealed it with lead, *"so that its call may not be heard."* Thus we find that the Talmud)Sanhedrin 102b(records a dream of Rav Ashi, the fifth century Talmudic sage. In his dream, Rav Ashi asked the idolatrous King Menasseh, *"Since you are so wise, why did you worship idols?"* To which Menasseh replied, *"Were you there, you would have lifted up the hems of your garment and sped after me."*

The true cure for this perilous attraction, however, is through greatness of Torah. The highest goal of Torah is the appearance of inner light in the human soul, as divine wisdom is applied to all the spheres that the soul is capable of assimilating — be it in thought, emotion, desires, and character traits.

Even nowadays, poverty in Torah knowledge results in a weakness of spirit, similar to the spiritual darkness caused by idolatry. The world awaits redemption through greatness of Torah. Then idolatry will be truly defeated, and not merely subdued in a sealed metal cauldron.

)*Gold from the Land of Israel*, pp. 271-273. Adapted from *Shemonah Kevatzim* VIII: 132; IV: 56.(

https://ravkooktorah.org/BALAK_65.htm

Balak: The Hidden Meaning of the Bilam Story (5780)

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

Many questions have rightly been asked about the story of Balak and Bilam and the would-be curses that turned into blessings. Was Bilam a true man of God, or was he a fraud, a magician, a sorcerer, a practitioner of dark arts? Did he have genuine powers? Was he really – as some of the Sages said – the equal of Moses?¹ Was he driven by the prospect of reward and honour from the Moabites and Midianites, or was he motivated by animosity toward the Israelites and their seeming closeness to God? Why did God first tell him not to go, then seemingly change His mind and tell him to go? What is the meaning of the episode of the talking donkey? Did it really happen, or was it, as Maimonides argued, a vision in Bilam's mind?²

These are real questions, much debated. But there are more fundamental ones. What is the story doing here at all? The entire episode occurred away from the Israelites. No one from their side, not even Moses, was there to witness it. The only witnesses were Balak, Bilam, and some Moabite princes. Had the Israelites known the danger they were in, and how they were saved from it, it would have given them pause for thought before engaging in immorality and idol worship with the Moabite women, in the episode that follows on immediately from the story of Bilam. They would have known that the Moabites were not their friends.

Even Moses would not have known what happened, had God not told him. In short, the Israelites were rescued from a danger they knew nothing about by a deliverance they knew nothing about. How then did it, or could it, affect them?

Besides which, why did God need Bilam to go at all? He said 'No' the first time. He could have said 'No' the second time also. The curses would have been avoided, Israel would have been protected, and there would have been no need for the angel, the talking donkey and the various locations, sacrifices, and attempted curses. The entire drama seems to have been unnecessary.

Why did God put into Bilam's mouth the extraordinary poetry that makes the blessings among the most lyrical passages in the Torah. All He really needed Bilam to say – and Bilam did eventually say it³ – was the promise He gave to Abraham: *"I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse"*)Gen. 12:3(.

Who was to be affected by this episode? What was the intended change it was meant to bring about? Who was its target audience? It did not affect the Moabites. They proceeded to get their women to successfully entice the Israelite men. A plague then struck the Israelites, taking 24,000 lives.

It did not affect the Midianites, whose hostility to Israel was such that God later told Moses: *"Treat the Midianites as enemies and kill them"*)Num. 25:17-18(. Several chapters later God instructed Moses to take military vengeance against them)Numbers 31(.

It did not affect Bilam himself. The Torah is very subtle about this. First, we read about the Moabite seduction of the Israelites and the deadly plague it caused. Then, six chapters later, we read that in the course of the war against the Midianites, Bilam was killed)31:8(. Then, several verses later, *"They were the ones who followed Bilam's advice and enticed the Israelites to be unfaithful to the Lord in the Peor incident, so that a plague struck the Lord's people"*)Num. 31:16(. In other words, having gone through what should surely have been a transformative experience of finding curses turned to blessings in his mouth, Bilam remained implacably opposed to the people he had blessed, and seemingly to the God who put the words into his mouth, and was still capable of devising a plot to injure the Israelites.

It did not change the Israelites, who remained vulnerable to the Moabites, Midianites, and the enticements of sex, food and foreign gods. It did not change Moses, who left it to Pinchas to take the decisive act that stopped the plague and was soon thereafter told that Joshua would succeed him as leader.

So, if it did not change the Moabites, Midianites, Israelites, Bilam or Moses, what was the point of the episode? What role did it play in the story of our people? For it does play a significant role. In Deuteronomy, Moses reminds the people that the Moabites *"did not come to meet you with bread and water on your way when you came out of Egypt, and they hired*

Bilam son of Beor from Pethor in Aram Naharaim to pronounce a curse on you. However, the Lord your God would not listen to Bilam but turned the curse into a blessing for you, because the Lord your God loves you”)Deut. 23:4-5(.

Joshua, when he came to renew the covenant after the conquest of the land, gave an abridged summary of Jewish history, singling out this event for attention: *“When Balak son of Zippor, the king of Moab, prepared to fight against Israel, he sent for Bilam son of Beor to put a curse on you. But I would not listen to Bilam, so he blessed you again and again, and I delivered you out of his hand.”*)Josh. 24:9-10(.

The prophet Micah, younger contemporary of Isaiah, said in the name of God, *“My people, remember what Balak king of Moab plotted and what Bilam son of Beor answered,”* just before he delivers his famous summary of the religious life: *“He has shown you, O man, what is good and what the Lord requires of you: to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God”*)Micah 6:5, Micah 6:8(.

At the culmination of the reforms instituted by Ezra and Nehemiah after the Babylonian exile, Nehemiah had the Torah read to the people, reminding them that an Ammonite or Moabite may not enter *“the assembly of the Lord”* because *“they did not meet the Israelites with food and water but had hired Bilam to call a curse down on them. Our God, however, turned the curse into a blessing”*)Neh. 13:2(.

Why the resonance of an event that seemingly had no impact on any of the parties involved, made no difference to what happened thereafter and yet was deemed to be so important that it occupied a central place in the telling of Israel's story by Moses, Joshua, Micah, and Nehemiah?

The answer is fundamental. We search in vain for an explanation of why God should have made a covenant with a people who repeatedly proved to be ungrateful, disobedient and faithless. God Himself threatened twice to destroy the people, after the Golden Calf and the episode of the spies. Toward the end of our parsha, He sent a plague against them.

There were other religious peoples in the ancient world. The Torah calls Malkizedek, Abraham's contemporary, *“a priest of God most high.”*)Gen. 14:18(. Yitro, Moses' father-in-law, was a Midianite priest who gave his son-in-law sound advice as to how to lead. In the book of Jonah, during the storm, while Jonah the Hebrew Prophet was sleeping, the Gentile sailors were praying. When the Prophet arrived at Nineveh and delivered his warning, immediately the people repented, something that happened rarely in Judah/Israel. Malachi, last of the Prophets, says:

From where the sun rises to where it sets, My name is honoured among the nations, and everywhere incense and pure oblation are offered to My name; for My name is honoured among the nations - said the Lord of Hosts - but you profane it ...” Mal. 1:11-12

Why then choose Israel? The answer is love. Virtually all the Prophets said so. God loves Israel. He loved Abraham. He loves Abraham's children. He is often exasperated by their conduct, but He cannot relinquish that love. He explains this to the prophet Hosea. Go and marry a woman who is unfaithful, He says. She will break your heart, but you will still love her, and take her back)Hos. 1-3(.

Where, though, in the Torah does God express this love? In the blessings of Bilam. That is where He gives voice to His feelings for this people. *“I see them from the mountain tops, gaze on them from the heights: This is a people that dwells apart, not reckoned among the nations.” “Lo, a people that rises like a lion, leaps up like the king of beasts.” “How good are your tents, O Jacob, Your dwellings, O Israel!”* **These famous words are not Bilam's. They are God's** – the most eloquent expression of His love for this small, otherwise undistinguished people.]emphasis added[

Bilam, the pagan prophet, is the most unlikely vehicle for God's blessings.]4[But that is God's way. He chose an aged, infertile couple to be the grandparents of the Jewish people. He chose a man who couldn't speak to be the mouthpiece of his word. He chose Bilam, who hated Israel, to be the messenger of His love. Moses says explicitly: *“The Lord your God would not listen to Bilam but turned the curse into a blessing for you, because the Lord your God loves you.”*

That is what the story is about: not Balak, or Bilam, or Moab, or Midian, or what happened next. It is about God's love for a people, their strength, resilience, their willingness to be different, their family life)tents, dwelling places(, and their ability to outlive empires.]emphasis added[

The Rambam explains that all God's acts have a moral message for us.]5[I believe that **God is teaching us that love can turn curses into blessings. It is the only force capable of defeating hate. Love heals the wounds of the world.**]emphasis added[

FOOTNOTES:

]1[*Sifrei Deuteronomy* 357.

]2[*Guide for the Perplexed*, II:42. For Nahmanides' critical view on Maimonides' approach, see his Commentary to Gen. 18:1.

]3[Num. 24:9: "*May those who bless you be blessed, and those who curse you be cursed!*" Earlier, 23:8, he had said, "*How can I curse those whom God has not cursed?*"

]4[However, *Devarim Rabbah* 1:4 suggests that God chose Bilam to bless the Israelites because when an enemy blesses you, it cannot be dismissed as mere partiality.

]5[*Hilchot Deot* 1:6.

Around the Shabbat Table:

]1[What is distinct and unique about the story of Bilam and Balak compared to other stories in the Torah?

]2[How can a story about God's love for Israel help us)both Jews and non-Jews(to live our lives?

]3[With the current unrest in America and around the world, how does the message "*only love can defeat hate*" help?

<https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/balak/the-hidden-meaning-of-the-bilam-story/> 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.

Take the Blame

By Aharon Loschak *

I was talking with a friend — we'll call him Mendel — the other day, and he asked me if I'd heard of any job opportunities lately. I know he's into computer programming and nothing immediately came to mind.

I thought about it a little more and remembered that a mutual acquaintance, let's call him Yaakov, works with 3D renderings. "*It's not really the same thing,*" I told myself. "*It's a long shot, so why bother mentioning it?*"

But, hey, who knows? So I mentioned it to Mendel, and gave him Yaakov's number.

Long story short, Mendel did indeed follow up on my suggestion. He connected with Yaakov, and to everyone's pleasant surprise, he was able to arrange a job for Mendel in the field of virtual reality. I'm still not sure exactly how the two are related, but if it got Mendel a job, I'm happy.

Often, we think that a casual suggestion won't go anywhere, but it's still always worth trying. Sometimes, it can make all the difference.

Balak and Balaam

Parshat Balak begins with the Moabite king, Balak, who is nervous about the oncoming Israelites:

Balak the son of Zippor saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites. Moab became terrified of the people, for they were numerous, and Moab became disgusted because of the children of Israel.¹

Having witnessed what happened to those who previously stood in the way of G d's people, Balak frantically looked for a way to stem the Jewish threat. He understood that conventional methods such as war wouldn't work, so he figured he would beat the Jews at their own game.

This is where the main character of the story comes in — Balaam. The Bible's most famous non-Jewish prophet, Balaam regularly communicated with G d. Most importantly, Balak knew that Balaam alone would be the biggest threat to the Jews. He could curse them with G d's name and cut the Jewish bloom at its spiritual source. It's a long story, but in short, it was an epic failure. Balaam ended up blessing the Jews, and all's well that ends well.

The curious thing is that the parshah is named "Balak." Much ink has been spilled over why we would name an entire parshah in the Torah after a villain, but we're not going to talk about that today. Instead, we're going to ask an arguably simpler question: Why name the parshah after the secondary character? After all, Balaam is the main protagonist, both in stature and in screen time. If you read the verses, the entire story revolves around him.

Balak was, at best, a supporting character. While he may have deserved an Oscar for his role, why did he get the "Parshah Name" prize over Balaam, the main actor?

Blame the Creative Team

The short answer is that Balak came up with the idea, so he gets the credit, or, in this case, the blame. Yes, it was Balaam who possessed the power to actually do the damage, but it was Balak's idea.

Balaam was far greater in stature than Balak. He was the only person in the entire world with the unique power to go toe-to-toe with the Jewish people, while Balak was just a schnook grasping at straws to save his own skin.

And yet, the parshah is still named Balak. Because ultimately, credit and/or blame really does go to the originator of the idea, regardless of how sophisticated the person implementing it may or may not be.

Don't Hold Back

The lesson for us is obvious: If Balak gets an entire parshah in the Torah because of one diabolical idea, then certainly we should be able to rack up serious credit for giving good ideas and advice to others.

To add one more layer to the lesson, the dynamics between Balak and Balaam are very telling. Think about it: As argued above, Balak was a schnook relative to Balaam, yet he's the one we remember.

The same applies to us. Not everyone was born to be an activist, a leader, or a bigshot. In fact, most of us are just "regular" people. You know, ordinary folks with families, jobs, homes, who try their best to mind their own business. Maybe one out of a hundred will be a bigshot CEO, an influencer, therapist, celebrity, or whatever other position might put you in the steering wheel of others' lives.

But for the rest of us, our lives are just that: ours.

And so, when the opportunity presents itself to give advice or voice an idea that may be helpful to others, you shy away. You tell yourself, “*Who am I to say anything? I’m sure they’ll figure it out on their own, or they’re consulting smarter and more sophisticated people than me.*” With that, you let it go.

Or perhaps you have a great idea for your community shul or school, or a great plan that would make the carpool scheduling easier for everyone. But you hold back, figuring that you’ll leave it to the “smarter” and “bigger” people. “No one’s going to take me seriously anyway.”

Take a cue from Balak. He paled in comparison to Balaam. And yet, because he came up with the plan, he’s the one we blame.

Who knows? If you speak up, you may just get the credit.²

FOOTNOTES:

1. Numbers 22:2-3.

2. This essay is based on *Sichot Kodesh* 5733, vol. 2, p. 282

* Writer, editor, and rabbi; also editor of JLI's popular Torah Studies program.

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/5571732/jewish/Take-the-Blame.htm

Balak: Free Choice by Rabbi Moshe Wisniefsky

Balaam answered and said to Balak’s servants, “Even if Balak gives me his full storehouse of silver and gold, I cannot do anything small or great that would transgress the word of G-d, my G-d.”)Num. 22:18(

G-d created all of us, and the natural consciousness that He placed within us is aware of our intrinsic bond with Him. Our inborn nature is thus to be loyal to Him, never doing anything that He would not approve of and always seeking to align our lives with what He expects of us. This applies equally to Jews)who naturally seek to fulfill all 613 commandments(and non-Jews)who naturally seek to fulfill the seven categories of commandments incumbent on them(.

However, in order to give us free choice, G-d also created temptations and made us susceptible to them. This is why even those of us who – like Balaam – are aware of our obligations toward G-d can sometimes choose to go against G-d’s directives.

Nonetheless, we all possess the power to resist these temptations, thereby fulfilling our spiritual potential and responding to G-d’s challenge to lead fulfilled, meaningful lives.

– From *Daily Wisdom* #3

* An insight by **the Lubavitcher Rebbe** on parshat Beha’alotecha from our *Daily Wisdom* #3 by Rabbi Moshe Wisniefsky.

May G-d grant continued wisdom, strength and peace in the Holy Land.

Gut Shabbos,

Rabbi Yosef B. Friedman
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Shabbat Parashat Balak

5785 B"H

Covenant and Conversation

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l

A People That Dwells Alone?

The dictionary defines epiphany as "a sudden manifestation of the essence or meaning of something; a comprehension or perception of reality by means of a sudden intuitive realisation." This is the story of an epiphany I experienced one day in May 2001, and it changed my perception of the Jewish fate.

It was Shavuot and we were in Jerusalem. We had gone for lunch to a former lay leader of a major Diaspora community. Also present at the table was an Israeli diplomat, together with one of the leaders of the Canadian Jewish Community.

The conversation turned to the then forthcoming – now notorious – United Nations 'Conference against Racism at Durban. Though the conference would not take place until August, we already knew that it, and the parallel gathering of NGOs, would turn into a diatribe against Israel, marking a new phase in the assault against its legitimacy.

The diplomat, noting that the conversation had taken a pessimistic turn, and being a religious man, sought to comfort us. "It was ever thus," he said, and then quoted a famous phrase: "We are 'am levadad yishkon', the people that dwells alone."

It comes from this week's parsha. Bilaam, hired to curse the Jewish people, instead repeatedly blesses them. In his first utterance he says to King Balak King of Moab:

How can I curse whom God has not cursed?
How can I denounce whom the Lord has not denounced? From the top of the rocks I see them, and from the hills I gaze down: a people that dwells alone; not reckoned among the nations. Num. 23:8-9

Hearing these words in that context I experienced an explosion of light in the brain. I suddenly saw how dangerous this phrase is, and how close it runs the risk of being a self-fulfilling prophecy. If you define yourself as the people that dwells alone, you are likely to find yourself alone. That is not a safe place to be.

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"Are you sure," I said to the diplomat, "that this was a blessing, not a curse? Remember who said it. It was Bilaam, and he is not known as a friend of the Jews." Bilaam is one of the people mentioned in the Mishnah (Sanhedrin 10:2) as having no share in the world to come. Having failed to curse the Israelites, he eventually did them great harm (Num. 31:16).

"Remember," I continued, "what the Talmud says in Sanhedrin (105b), that all the blessings with which Bilaam blessed the Jewish people turned into curses with the sole exception of the phrase, 'How good are your tents, Jacob, your homes, O Israel'" (Num. 24:5). The Rabbis suggest that Bilaam was deliberately ambiguous in what he said, so that his words could be understood as blessings but also had another and darker meaning.

"Nor," I said, "is badad, being alone, a good place to be according to the Torah. The first time the words "not good" appear in the Torah are in the phrase *Lo tov heyot ha'adam levado*, 'It is not good for man to be alone' (Gen. 2:18). About a leper the Torah says, *badad yeshev michutz lamachaneh moshavo*, 'He shall dwell alone, outside the camp' (Lev. 13:46). When the book of Lamentations seeks to describe the tragedy that has overtaken the Jewish people it says *Eichah yashva vadad ha-ir rabati am*, 'How alone is the city once filled with people' (Lam. 1:1). Except in connection with God, being alone is rarely a blessing.

What I suddenly saw, when I heard the diplomat seeking to give us comfort, was how dangerous this Jewish self-definition had become. It seemed to sum up the Jewish condition in the light of antisemitism and the Holocaust. But that is not how the commentators understood the phrase. Rashi says it means that Jews are indestructible. Ibn Ezra says it means that they don't assimilate. Ramban says it means that they maintain their own integrity. It does not mean that they are destined to be isolated, without allies or friends. That is not a blessing but a curse. That is not a destiny; still less is it an identity.

To be a Jew is to be loved by God; it is not to be hated by Gentiles. Our ancestors were called on to be "a kingdom of Priests and a holy nation." The word *kadosh*, "holy," means set apart. But there is a profound difference between being apart and being alone.

Leaders are set apart, but they are not alone. If they really were alone, they could not be leaders. Athletes, writers, actors, singers, pianists may live apart when they are preparing for a major performance, but they are not alone. Their apartness is purposeful. It allows them to focus their energies, hone and refine their skills. It is not an existential condition, a chosen and willed isolation.

There is no suggestion in the Torah that Jews will live alone. God says to Abraham, "Through you all the families of the earth will be blessed." Abraham was different from his neighbours, but he fought for them and prayed for them. He was apart but not alone.

For some time now – the Durban conference was one sign of it – Israel and Diaspora Jewry have faced growing isolation. Israel has been the object of a sustained campaign of delegitimisation. Meanwhile, *shechitah* is under attack in Holland, and *brit milah* in San Francisco. Battles we thought we had won for the freedom to live as Jews, individually in the Diaspora, nationally and collectively in the state of Israel, are now having to be fought all over again.

These are important fights, good fights, whose outcome will affect more than Jews. In ancient times, Israel was a small nation surrounded by large empires. In the Middle Ages, Jews were the most conspicuous minority in a Christian Europe. Today the State of Israel is a vulnerable enclave in a predominantly Muslim Middle East.

Jews have long been cast in the role of the 'Other', the one who does not fit into the dominant paradigm, the majority faith, the prevailing culture. One of Judaism's central themes is the dignity of dissent. Jews argue, challenge, question. Sometimes they do so even with God Himself. That is why the fate of Jews in any given time and place is often the best index of freedom in that time and place.

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It is no accident that the story of Abraham begins immediately after the biblical account of the Tower of Babel, which opens with the words, "Now the whole world had one language and a common speech." Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin (Netziv) says that this means that there was no dissent. There was an enforced uniformity of opinion. Such a society leaves no room for dialogue, debate, disagreement and difference, the things essential for freedom.

When, therefore, Jews fight for the right to be, whether as a nation in its historic home, or as a religious group in other societies, they fight not for themselves alone but for human freedom as a whole. It was the Catholic writer Paul Johnson who wrote that Jews are "exemplars and epitomisers of the human condition. They seemed to present all the inescapable dilemmas of man in a heightened and clarified form... It seems to be the role of the Jews to focus and dramatise these common experiences of mankind, and to turn their particular fate into a universal moral."

As we prepare ourselves for the next battle in the long fight for freedom it is vitally important not to believe in advance that we are destined to be alone, to find ourselves without friends and allies, confronting a world that neither understands us nor is willing to grant us a place to live our faith and shape our future in loyalty to our past. If we are convinced we will fail, we probably will. That is why the Rabbis were right to suggest that Bilaam's words were not necessarily well-meant.

To be different is not necessarily to be alone. Indeed, it is only by being what we uniquely are that we contribute to humankind what we alone can give. Singular, distinctive, countercultural – yes: these are part of the Jewish condition. But alone? No. That is not a blessing but a curse.

Shabbat Shalom: Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

Does God Speak to Us Today? And If So, Can It Be through the Mouth of a She-Ass?
 "God opened the mouth of the she-ass and she said unto Bileam..." (Numbers 22:28)

Does God still speak to us today, and – if He does – where must we look in order to discover His message? The answer to this question lies in a fascinating Hasidic interpretation to one of the most amazing events recorded in the Bible, that of Bileam's talking she-ass.

Bileam, the central figure in the portion of Balak, is generally regarded as a wicked person, possessing "an evil eye, an arrogant spirit, and a greedy soul" (Mishna Avot 5:22), a summation easily backed up by the events

described in our portion. After all, for the right price and sufficient power, Bileam was willing to sell his soul and curse the Israelites.

And yet another view of Bileam, seemingly contradictory to the Mishna, is found in Sifrei where it's stated (Parashat Vezot HaBerakha) that in Israel no prophet ever arose like Moses, "but amongst the nations of the world there was such a prophet, and he is Bileam." How does the Midrash place the venal and grasping Bileam on the level of Moses, redeemer of Israel, transmitter of the message of the divine from the foot of Mount Sinai to all generations and all worlds? What can these two figures possibly share in common?

Perhaps by isolating the most unique element of the Bileam narrative, we can perceive what it is that the Midrash wants to tell us. Undoubtedly the magical and mystical moment in our portion is the encounter between Bileam and his she-ass. Bileam set out with Balak, king of Moab, to curse the nation of Israel, but his formerly trustworthy she-ass refused to allow him to continue his journey. The gentile prophet angrily beat his animal, and suddenly: "God opened the mouth of the ass and she said unto Bileam" (Numbers 22:28). The she-ass had seen an angel of the Lord standing in the way with drawn sword, chastising Bileam lest he plan to revile the nation most blessed by God. The gentile prophet's one-word response, "I have sinned" (Numbers 22:34), marks the turning point, and from then on Bileam – to the chagrin of his "sponsors" – rose to poetic heights regarding his praise of Israel which echo Moses' magnificent paean in the book of Deuteronomy. Most significant of all, however, is that Bileam the prophet was brought to a divine vision by the message of a she-ass!

Indeed, the miracle of the she-ass speaking is so profound that the Mishna lists the pi ha'aton (mouth of the she-ass) among the ten things created at dusk immediately preceding the first primordial Sabbath of the initial seven days of creation (Avot 5:8). We are being taught not to see this event merely as a fable, or a dream, but rather as a miracle built into the very blueprint of creation – an ass's mouth whose voice would be heard not only by Bileam, but would reverberate throughout the generations in the form of Bileam's praise of Israel. The most crucial message of this miraculous mouth is that no gentile leader will ever be allowed to curse and destroy Israel, that those who come to scoff will remain to praise.

But why did the Almighty choose such an unseemly messenger – a she-ass – to convey His message to Bileam? Clearly the mouth of this she-ass – emanating from the very dawn of creation – demonstrates how

God's message may emerge from the most unexpected sources. And what is important is not only that a she-ass can communicate the divine will; the most significant message of this tale may be that the individual must strive to develop the ability to hear, to discern from the harsh guttural hee-haws the message that is being sent to him. In effect, God's words may be found in the most unlikely of places – as long as we have the necessary spiritual antennae to receive them.

This principle may be the source of Rashi's explanation of the verse immediately following the Ten Commandments in Deuteronomy.

"These words God spoke unto all your assembly out of the midst of the fire, of the clouds, and of the thick darkness, with a great voice, and it did not cease [velo yasaf; Targum ad loc: velo pasak]" (Deut. 5:19). Rashi explains: "and since God did not pause, He did not have to resume, for His voice is strong and goes on continuously." How does God's voice go on continuously? The lesson seems to be that the sound waves released at Sinai are continually and eternally present in the world; we must simply attune our ears to be sensitive receptors.

In his Torah commentary, the Pri Tzaddik stresses this idea by citing a tale of the Hasidic master, Reb Zusha who, during one of his journeys, came upon a peasant whose wagon had turned over. Asked to help, Reb Zusha, no longer young and feeling himself too weak to struggle with an overburdened wagon, demurred, saying: "I'm sorry, I can't help you." "You can," said the peasant to Reb Zusha, "You certainly can. You just don't want to." The peasant's words sank into the very core of Reb Zusha's being, resonating with a message from above, as if the Shekhina herself was admonishing Reb Zusha for saying "I can't." "You can," he heard the Shekhina saying, "you just don't want to." Reb Zusha was able to accept the truth of the peasant's words on more than one level. How often do we say we "can't" when what we really mean is we "won't" or "we do not wish to"? And here, in this world, our Temple is destroyed, the Divine Presence has fallen, and we don't lift her (the Shekhina) up. And although it's because we say we cannot, the real reason is because we don't want to! Did the she-ass actually speak? The truth is that that is an irrelevant issue. What is important is what Bileam learned from his donkey, the divine message he perceived from the animal's stubborn refusal to continue the journey, the fact that he, visited with the gift of prophecy, dared not speak out words which were antithetical to the divine will. The she-ass knew not to continue such a sacrilegious

journey; Bileam understood that he had better learn from the she-ass!

Herein lies the essence of the teaching set forth in Avot (4:1): "Ben Zoma says, who is wise? He who learns from every person." If Reb Zusha can learn a major principle regarding our relationship to the divine from the simple words of a gentile peasant, if Bileam could learn from the she-ass, we must always be on guard to sensitize our ears and our hearts to receive a direct divine message from whoever, and wherever!

The Pri Tzaddik reminds us of the Talmud's dilemma regarding R. Meir, who continued to receive Torah from the rabbi-turned-apostate, Elisha b. Avuya (known as Acher, or "the other one"). After all, does not the prophet Malakhi teach: "The lips of the priest shall preserve wisdom, Torah shall be sought from his mouth, because he is an angel of the Lord of hosts" (2:7), interpreted by our sages to mean that only if a Torah sage is comparable to an angel on high may we study from his mouth? If so, how can R. Meir continue to study from a heretic? The answer in the Talmud is that a truly great individual has the ability and sensitivity to hear God's words even from the lowliest of places (CHagiga 15b). Hence R. Meir heard it from Acher, Reb Zusha heard it from a gentile peasant, Bileam heard it from a she-ass, and Moses heard it from the depths of a lowly, prickly thornbush.

In his Guide for the Perplexed, Maimonides points out that on Mount Sinai every Jew heard the divine sound, but each person heard only what he was capable of hearing, depending on his spiritual level and human sensitivity. God-waves continue from Sinai and are consistently prepared to deliver the divine word – even from the most unseemly messenger. The question is: are we prepared to receive them?

The Person in the Parsha **Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb**

No to Here and Now

Earlier this week, in an attempt to gain some space in my crowded apartment, I was going through some old records and discarding many of them. Uncertain about whether or not to keep some of them, I found myself guided by my mother-in-law's advice: "When in doubt, throw it out."

And so, although with some hesitation, I tossed into the trash folders containing my children's report cards from thirty or more years ago, letters of congratulations at various family milestones, and letters of condolences that I received while sitting shiva for my dear departed parents.

About an hour after consigning those precious mementos to oblivion, I began to have second

thoughts. I realized that I had chosen to eliminate documents of exquisite personal meaning. I had succumbed to the modern temptation to live only in the present and to ignore, nay suppress, the important role of the past in our lives. Luckily, I was able to retrieve these records, and restored them to their rightful place in my personal archives.

These days, we must vigilantly resist this growing and powerful tendency to live only in the moment and for the moment. We dare not forget the importance of the past, and yes, the future, upon our contemporary existence. Today's culture has aptly been called "ahistoric," and the loss of a historical perspective has taken its toll upon our society and upon each of us as individuals.

An excellent example of this anti-historical attitude is expressed in a passage in the writings of Hebrew author Haim Hazaz. I am indebted to Professor Yosef Yerushalmi's book, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, for this splendid illustration. Hazaz puts the following words in the mouth of his character, Yudka: "I want to state that I am opposed to Jewish history. I would simply forbid teaching our children Jewish history. I would just say to them, 'Boys, from the day we were exiled from our land, we've been a people without a history. Class dismissed. Go out and play football.'"

This attitude is personified by the hero, or perhaps better, the anti-hero, of this week's Torah portion, Bilaam. He is described as one who "knows the mind of the Almighty." The Talmud wonders about this and suggests that Bilaam is able to determine the one brief instant of each day when the Almighty is angry. As the Psalmist has it, "Regah b'apo chayim birtzono, His anger is for a moment, but his favor is for a lifetime."

In a typically brilliant and provocative insight, Rav Kook suggests that there are two modes in which the Divine operates. There is the constant goodness, peace, light, and life that comprise the mode "netzach, eternity." And then there are the transient moments when God, as it were, displays His fury, permits evil to get the upper hand, and allows strife, pestilence and war. That is the mode of "rega, the moment."

Fortunate are those human beings who can connect and draw from God's mode of "netzach." Beware those human beings who relate only to God's "rega" mode. Bilaam is the biblical archetype of the person who isolates present as all-important and denies both the past and the future.

In Rav Kook's terms, this week's Torah episode describes a confrontation between a

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people rooted in history, conscious of its past and proud of it, aware of its future and inspired by it, versus the villain Bilaam, who would excise past and future and condemn us only to the transience of fleeting time. It is the battle between "netzach yisrael," an eternal people, and a people without tradition and without hope.

Jewish tradition teaches us that our past is very much a part of who we are in the "here and now." Our religion is nothing if not a historical religion. Our personal lives are trivialized to the extent that we do not connect to both our recent past and our millennia-long history.

Permit me to relate these reflections to a contemporary concern, and to express yet one more criticism of former President Barack Obama's 2009 speech to the Muslim world in Cairo. In describing the Jewish people's claim to the land of Israel, he only mentioned the relationship between the horror of the Holocaust and the founding of the State of Israel. He neglected to put our claim to the Holy Land in proper historical perspective. For us, the Holocaust is part of our present moment—its survivors are still alive among us. What legitimizes our claim to the land of Israel is our millennia-long bond with that land, one which goes back to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and which has ancient biblical roots.

There is a lesson here for us as a people and for each of us as struggling mortals. The Jewish people cannot survive in this world if our legitimacy as a nation is limited to the here and now. We are an ancient people and must proudly assert the power of our pasts and not forget the promise of our future.

And as individual human beings coping with the ordinary and extraordinary challenges of daily existence, we are also lost if we limit our temporal perspectives to today. We must be informed and influenced by yesterday, and we must enthusiastically anticipate tomorrow.

Torah.Org: Rabbi Yissocher Frand **Bilaam Lost His Shock Value**

Apparently, Bilaam had a relationship with Hashem that we can only dream about. And yet we see that he had an attitude that is hard to fathom. When Hashem asked Bilaam, "Who are these people with you?" Rashi explains that Bilaam answers Hashem arrogantly: "Even though I am not important in your eyes, I am important in the eyes of kings."

Later, in one of the most mind-boggling incidents in the Torah, Bilaam does not appear to be at all phased by the fact that his donkey starts talking to him. He just answers back and begins a dialogue with his donkey as if it was an everyday occurrence.

How do we explain the paradoxical personality of Bilaam? Rav Schwab offers an interesting insight. Hashem gave us certain senses. Most of us are blessed with the senses of sight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell. But there is also a sixth sense. That is the sense of being able to be nispael (impressed). Hashem gave most human beings the ability to be impressed by certain phenomenon in this world.

This sense of being nispael is necessary for our avodas (service of) Hashem. The Rambam speaks of a person becoming impressed and overwhelmed with the awe of creation, and of the wisdom and beauty of nature. This is a sense that we need to develop within ourselves — emotions of love and reverence towards the Creator.

However, just like the other senses can be deadened and destroyed if they are abused, the same is true with the sixth sense. If a person listens to loud music for long enough, he can lose his sense of hearing. If a person continuously eats very spicy foods, he can damage his sense of taste. Likewise, a person can lose his sense of being nispael. How does that happen? What costs a person his sense of being impressed?

Rav Schwab suggests that a person can lose his sense of being nispael through gluttonous indulgence in every passion and lust in the world. If a person is obsessed with enjoying, taking, eating, consuming, and all he ever thinks about is indulging in the most obscene and gluttonous fashion, then after a while, nothing impresses him anymore. He is so consumed with just enjoying himself that nothing gets him excited anymore.

If it seems hard to relate to this concept, all we need to do is to open our eyes and look at what has happened in the western world. Nothing makes an impression anymore. Movies have become more and more violent and explicit. Music has become more and more outrageous. The way people talk and the words we hear have become more and more astounding, because nothing makes an impression anymore. As a society, we have lost our sense of wonder. We have become coarsened.

To quote a recent piece in the Op-Ed page of the Baltimore Sun, “America has lost its ‘shock value.’ Nothing shocks anymore.”

That is what happened to Bilaam. Nothing shocked him. His animal spoke to him and he took it in stride.

Everyone recognizes the seriousness of losing a sense of sight or hearing, chas v’shalom (Heaven forbid). We need to recognize that losing the sense of being nispael is a similarly

serious by-product of the gluttonous and indulgent life that Bilaam lived.

The Tircha D’tzibbura Of Reciting Parshas Bilaam Daily

The Torah testifies that Bilaam was “yodeah daas Elyon” (he knew the thoughts of his Creator). The Talmud (Brochos 7a) explains that this means that he knew how to precisely pinpoint the times that were auspicious for invoking the wrath of Hashem. The Talmud speaks of a certain moment each day when Hashem becomes angry with the world. Bilaam knew how to gauge that moment, and this knowledge was his secret weapon. He intended to synchronize his cursing of the Jewish people with that moment of Hashem’s wrath, and thereby bring Hashem’s wrath down upon the Jewish nation.

Rav Elyakim Schlessinger asks (in his sefer, Beis Av): If, in fact, Bilaam’s power was limited to knowing the moment of Hashem’s anger, that would seem to be a far cry from the Torah’s testimony that he was yodeah daas Elyon — he knew the mind of his Creator. The Beis Av therefore cites a Rabbinic teaching regarding the creation of the world.

Hashem originally intended to create the world using only His middas haddin (attribute of justice). In such a world, if someone would do an aveira, the punishment would be delivered immediately. But when Hashem saw that human beings would not be able to exist in such a world, He partnered the middas harachamim (attribute of mercy) with the middas haddin. This does not mean that if someone does an aveira, Hashem will just forget about it. It simply means that Hashem extends a grace period. Hashem gives the sinner some slack, so to speak, giving him the ability to ultimately repent. This combination of din (judgment) and rachamim (mercy) is the way the world operates.

Bilaam knew “daas Elyon”. That means that he was aware of Hashem’s original plan. He knew that Hashem originally wanted to create the world with only the middas haddin. Bilaam knew that every single day of every single year there is one moment when Hashem returns to his original plan and looks at the world with the middas haddin. This is what the Gemara means that during one moment of the day, Hashem gets angry. At that moment, chas v’shalom, anything can happen. The middas haddin has free reign at that moment. This knowledge was Bilaam’s great strength.

Bilaam’s power was to always look at the world askance. The Mishna (Avos 5:22) teaches that Bilaam had an ‘evil eye.’ This means that Bilaam looked at the world in a non-generous fashion, rather than with an eye toward the middas harachamim. He would

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always look with an eye toward invoking the middas haddin.

This explains why Bilaam refers to himself as the “one eyed man.” Who would ever describe himself as delivering “the speech of a one-eyed man?” Is being blind in one eye something to brag about and be proud of? Man was given two eyes: One eye to look at things with the middas haddin and one eye to look at things with the middas harachamim. Bilaam did not see the positive, only the negative. Bilaam bragged that he was a person who always looks only with an ‘evil eye.’ My claim to fame is that I can invoke judgment against the Jewish people because I know when the Creator utilizes only his attribute of judgment.”

Our great salvation was “Lo hibit avven b’Yaakov” (He perceived no iniquity in Jacob) (Bamidbar 23:21). In all the days that Bilaam tried to invoke the attribute of judgment, Hashem in His mercy, abstained from anger and never looked at us with middas haddin.

Finally, homiletically, the Beis Av suggests that this is the intention of the Gemara in Brochos that says that if not for the tircha d’tzibbura (great trouble for the congregation), the chachomim would have instituted the recital of the parsha of Balak in the middle of the daily recitation of Shema. The standard interpretation of this Gemara is that we would have included the reading of Balak within — in addition to — the reading of Krias Shema. However, the Beis Av cites an opinion from the Satmar Rebbe that the Gemara is making an even stronger statement: We would have REPLACED the reading of Krias Shema with that of Parshas Balak. If that is the case, how would that be tircha d’tzibbura? We can understand the tircha d’tzibbura if the option was to read both the three sections of Krias Shema AND Parshas Balak. The inclusion of such an additional paragraph in Shema would take more time, creating a burden for the congregation. If, however, the alternative was to replace Krias Shema with Balak, there would not have been a net increase in the amount of time required, so how would it trouble the congregation?

The answer is that the tircha d’tzibbura is from hearing twice daily — “Kel zoem b’chol yom” — that Hashem is angry every day at least momentarily and that at that time the middas haddin is given free reign. We would be demoralized. We would not be able to handle the thought. A smile would not appear on our faces the entire day. The thought is too chilling to contemplate daily. That is the tircha d’tzibbura to which the Gemara is referring.

Whether we recite it daily or not, this fact remains the truth. Chas v’shalom, when we see

tragedies in our midst – tragedies that seemingly should not have occurred and do not seem to make any sense – we ponder and ask ourselves, ‘Why?’ Sometimes, such tragedies can be the result of the severe middas haddin that can affect anyone at any time. This is why a person must constantly examine his actions on a daily basis. Teshuva is not something that should only be relegated to the Aseres Yemei Teshuva (Ten Days of Repentance). The antidote to middas haddin is the middas harachamim, which we will be granted if we show Hashem that we are constantly introspecting and that we are willing to improve.

Dvar Torah: Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

How is it possible that we name one of the key portions of the Torah, after the evil king of the Moabites, Balak?

It is in the Parsha of Balak, that we come across two foes of the Jewish people, Balak and Bilam, but there was a significant difference between the two.

With Bilam what you saw was not what you got. Bilam presented himself as a man of God, a great spiritual giant, a prophet, a person who is there always to do the right thing. A good individual, but deep down he was corrupt and that is what we find out as the story unfolds within the Parsha.

Balak however, was very different.

Balak was upfront, everybody knew he hated the Jewish people, he wanted to wipe us out, that is why he hired the services of Bilam.

With Balak, you knew where you stood with him and that was a tiny redeeming feature of an outrightly evil person.

I’ve always been fascinated by the fact that the archetypal treif food, is swine.

If you want to identify something that is most definitely non-kosher, it is food which comes from a pig.

But it is fascinating because actually, the pig scores 50% in the test of Kashrut, because there are two requirements in the Torah, for an animal to be kosher.

The pig has one of the requirements, it has cloven hooves, however it does not chew the cud.

So you see outwardly, the pig expresses to the world: ‘I am kosher, everything’s ok about me’, but inwardly it is outrightly treif.

That is dangerous. That is hypocrisy, which is totally unacceptable and that is why swine is

the worst of all treif foods in our minds.

In Parshat Terumah we’re taught that the aron, the ark, which was in the sanctuary and later the Temple, was laden with gold, both on the inside and the outside, in order to teach us the lesson of ‘Tocho kebaro’, your values internally, need to match the persona you have externally.

So therefore, from the title of the Sedra, we are reminded that unlike Balak, we should be as good as gold, both inside and out.

Ohr Torah Stone Dvar Torah

The Secret of Transforming Curses into Blessings - Dr. Miriam Weitman

In the fortieth year of its wanderings, as the prolonged period of initiation in the wilderness draws to a close, the people of Israel discover the profound secret of transforming curses into blessings. The journey’s end is already in sight. Israel has arrived at its final encampment before entering the Promised Land. They are stationed in the plains of Moav, across the Jordan at Jericho (Bemidbar 22:1), perhaps even glimpsing the Jordan Valley or the slopes of the Judean hills, green in winter and metamorphosing with the change of the seasons. At this critical juncture, on the threshold of the land, Bilam attempts to curse Israel, aiming to destroy the identity, purpose, and faith painstakingly built over forty years, whereby a group of slaves transformed into a nation.

The Torah devotes an entire portion to Bilam’s curse and its transformation into a blessing. Beyond this extensive narrative in the Book of Bemidbar, the Bible revisits this event four more times. Moshe recounts Bilam’s story in his address in the Book of Devarim (23:6), and Yehoshua echoes it in his farewell speech (Yehoshua 24:9-10). During the First Temple period, the prophet Micha urges his audience to remember this episode (Micha 6:5), and in the era of the Return to Zion, Nechemiah reminds the people of how God turned Bilam’s curse into a blessing (Nechemiah 13:2). Few stories, apart from the bondage and exodus from Egypt, are mentioned so frequently in all the sections of the Bible—Torah, Prophets, and Writings.

The Sages also underscored the unique importance of this episode, even contemplating its inclusion in the daily Shema recitation: “They wished to include the portion of Balak in the recitation of Shema, but they did not include it so as not to deem the prayer too burdensome for the congregation” (Berachot 12a). The Sages also referenced it in the prayer recited after one has dreamt a bad dream (Berachot 55b). Following their lead, the prayer arrangers chose to begin the morning prayers with the verse, “How goodly are your

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tents, O Yaacov, your dwellings, O Israel” (Bemidbar 24:5), taken from Bilam’s blessings.

What is it about this story that compels the Bible, the Sages, and the prayer arrangers to return to it repeatedly? What message does the Torah convey through the narrative of Bilam’s curse and its transformation into a blessing?

In Bilam’s story, the transformation of the curse into a blessing was performed by God. However, what makes the story truly powerful is that it conveys the message that we too can follow God’s example and transform curses into blessings.

On the most basic level, an individual can transform a curse into a blessing by engaging in actions that bring goodness into the world—turning sorrow into joy and darkness into light. This involves helping others, positively influencing reality, and striving to heal the wounds of the world and humanity. This is the key to a life of meaning and purpose, guiding us toward a fuller realization of our potential.

However, there is a deeper dimension. Even when a curse does not transform into a blessing, one can still derive a blessing from it. By leveraging the difficulty itself, one can extract strength and pave the pathways to bringing about blessing. This involves viewing the curse as a challenge for achieving progress and producing good. As the Midrash states: “Even though these curses come upon you, you survive and stand firm” (Tanchuma on Nitzavim 1). Challenges have the power to ultimately make one more grounded and propel them forward.

To understand how to go about deriving blessings from curses, let us revisit two foundational experiences of the Israelites during their formation as a nation—slavery in Egypt and the ensuing Exodus. The Torah seeks to commemorate these formative moments through commandments. Immediately following the Exodus, the people were given commandments to remember their deliverance from Egypt, including the mitzvah to redeem the firstborns, the eating of matzah, and the prohibition to eat leavened bread [during Passover]: “Remember this day, on which you went free from Egypt, the house of bondage... no leavened bread shall be eaten” (Shemot 13:3). By observing these commandments, each person internalizes the miracle of the Exodus.

In the fortieth year, however, the Israelites received a new set of commandments, of which the focal point was not remembering the Exodus but recalling the slavery and suffering in Egypt. This, for example, is the central message of the Sabbath commandment in the

Book of Devarim: "Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy... so that your male and female slave may rest as you do. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt" (Devarim 5:12-14). Through the memory of slavery, one is called to ensure the rest of those around him and to provide fair working conditions. It is not only one's immediate family that deserves rest, but also the servants, the foreigner residing within your gates, and even the working animals. The Torah emphasizes that the rest of the servant and the maidservant is "like yours," no less, for you were a slave...

A nation that has tasted the bitterness of slavery cannot ignore the memory of suffering. However, the Torah teaches how to process this memory. Instead of dwelling on the pain, we must harness the agony of slavery to cultivate sensitivity towards others, especially the vulnerable in society. Throughout the Book of Devarim, we are repeatedly called to remember the period of slavery and channel it toward compassionate treatment of the slave (15:12-15), the stranger, the orphan, and the widow (16:10-12; 24:10-18; 24:19-22). The period of slavery becomes a lever for creating an exemplary society founded on social justice and concern for the weak. These are the moral values the Torah imparts to Israel on the eve of their entering the land, ensuring that their life in it is based on these principles.

Approximately fifteen hundred years after the Torah taught us how to go about turning curses into blessings, Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai and the Sages of Yavneh demonstrated this principle de facto. The destruction of the Second Temple posed a profound existential threat to the Jewish people. Death, exile, the destruction of the Temple, the ruination of Jerusalem, and the loss of Israel's independence—all these threatened not just the physical survival of the people but also their spiritual endurance. In this seemingly hopeless situation, Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai and the Sages of Yavneh transformed the curse into a blessing, converting the military defeat into a spiritual victory. They established the world of prayer as a substitute for the sacrificial system and deepened Torah study, leading to the compilation of the Mishnah. This Mishnah formed the basis for the Talmud and all subsequent Jewish law. Thus, from the curse arose the enduring treasures of the Jewish people, which have accompanied them ever since.

Similarly, the expulsion from Spain led to a spiritual renaissance in Safed, endowing the Jewish people with profound developments in both Halacha and Kabbalah. Waves of anti-Semitism ignited waves of immigration to Israel, continuing even into modern times. Throughout history, the Jewish people have repeatedly shown that their spirit can transcend

adversity, and that it possesses the strength to turn curses into foundational blocks for higher achievements in the people's collective life.

Now, the question remains: what will be our contribution to the process whereby curses are turned into blessings and good is extracted from profound darkness? Can we draw blessings from the tragedies we faced on Simchat Torah 5784? Will we manage to forge new unity in the nation after the severe social crisis that engulfed us before the war? In the early days of the Simchat Torah War, we indeed experienced remarkable unity on both the front lines and the home front. While the blessing of unity cannot replace the curse of that dreadful day and the ensuing war, if we can muster personal and national resilience to maintain this unity, we will indeed be part of the process of turning curses into blessings.

Let us hope and pray that the spirit of togetherness will envelop the entire nation, that a new light will shine upon us from the ruins, and that redemption will come to a land so deeply yearning for complete salvation.

Dvar Torah: TorahWeb.Org

Rabbi Benjamin Yudin - Your Choice!

While there are no mitzvot in Parshas Balak, there are some very important hashkafic ideas that emerge from this parsha. One example is the belief in the coming of the Mashiach as alluded to by the passuk "Darach kochav m'Yaakov" (Bamidbar 24:17). Additionally, the Gemara (Makkos 10b) that teaches us that a person is helped to pursue the path that he desires. When Bilaam is initially invited to come and curse the Jewish people, Hashem appears to him and tells him emphatically not to go, as they are a blessed nation. Yet, when a second group of representatives from the king of Moav come and request again, Bilaam asks to go, clearly indicating his desire to curse the Jewish people despite Hashem's earlier refusal. This teaches us that every individual has the freedom of choice.

At the very end of the Torah we are taught that there never was a prophet in Israel as great as Moshe. The midrash in Bamidbar Rabbah explains that while there was no prophet as great as Moshe in Israel, among the nations of the world there was one: Bilaam. Had the nations of the world not had a prophet, they could have claimed that if they had a prophet like Moshe, they too would have been a wonderful people. Therefore, Hashem gave them Bilaam.

Bilaam, however, was a pervert and a wicked man, and used his prophetic gift negatively. Similarly, we find that after the death of Shlomo Hamelech, the kingdom was split into two: the tribes of Yehuda and Benjamin under Rechavam, and the other ten tribes under

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Yeravam. Despite Yeravam being appointed by Hashem, he became a great sinner and caused others to sin. This demonstrates that even those with great potential can fall due to their personal desires, as seen with Yeravam refusing to repent because he couldn't bear that Dovid would precede him in Gan Eden.

Bilaam had the gift of prophecy and could calculate the exact moment of Hashem's anger. However, instead of using his gifts positively, he intended to uproot the Jewish institutions of prayer and study.

We know that there are no extra words or even letters in the Torah. And yet in Bamidbar 22:25 we find two extra letters in the incident of Bilaam's donkey banging into "THE wall". Twice the Torah calls our attention to this special wall by specifying "el HAKir" with the declarative prefix of the letter hei. The Midrash Tanchuma teaches us that this was not just any wall but was the specific stone wall that Lavan and Yaakov set up in Parshas VaYetzei (Bereishis 31) to indicate a separation one from the other. Lavan called it by the Aramaic name Yegar Sa'Hadusa and Yakov called it by the Hebrew name Gal-Ed (these stones should bear witness to our separation). Lavan wanted his grandchildren to be assimilated, but acquiesced to the will of Hashem that Yakov's children go their separate way and this agreement was concretized at this "Stone Wall Bearing Witness". Bilaam, who according to the midrash was a reincarnation of Lavan, tried to undo the wall dividing the Jewish people from other nations, aiming to make them lose their uniqueness and commitment to Torah.

The Talmud (Megillah 14b) further explores the nature of prophecy. While most prophets had visions that required their interpretation, Moshe's prophecy was with perfect clarity ("aspaklaria hameira"). The Maharal explains that Bilaam's prophecy was also with perfect clarity, leaving no room for his personal interpretation, ensuring his negative characteristics did not influence the divine message.

This leads to a crucial lesson: each of us has the choice to use our unique characteristics and talents positively. As the Gemara (Makkos 10b) mentioned above teaches, a person is assisted from Above to pursue his desired path. We can choose to honor Hashem and His people through Torah study, mitzvot, and acts of kindness, or, Heaven forbid, go in the opposite direction. May we all be privileged to make the right decisions and utilize our special individual characteristics in a way that brings honor to Hashem.

Torah.Org Dvar Torah by Rabbi Label Lam

The Blessedness Continues

And Elochim said to Bilaam, "Do not go with them, do not curse the nation (Israel) because he is blessed." (Bamidbar 22:12)

Bilaam is cautioned by not other than the HaKadosh Baruch Hu Himself not to curse the people of Israel because they are blessed. Can you have a more- clear warning than that?! Yet, foolishly he went! He is not the only person to ignore explicit instructions and open signals that it is not advisable to curse the Jewish People.

Wherever I go here, now, in your Jerusalem, I'm reminded of a joke that a young man told me recently, "What is the national bird of Israel? Answer: The crane!" There is building and building going on everywhere. And wherever the Jewish people go things tend to improve and grow. Whichever neighborhood, and whichever city, and any country that we have visited in our long history, all the boats in the harbor predictably go up as our blessing travels with us. And so it is that from whichever the place we were chased, our absence is is felt.

This is an observable phenomenon. When I was a kid the two states that a presidential candidate needed to secure the electoral college were New York and California. They were the most populous and prosperous states and the also where the majority of American Jews lived. The two super- powers during that Cold War era were Russia and the United States. Those were again the two major centers of Jewish population. Later, when Jews began to exit from Russia it became a weakened and feeble version of its former self. Now, Israel is seen as a super-power and a dominant force militarily and economically in spite of its relative petite size, because a majority of the Jewish people reside here in Israel. Our blessedness is recognizable in location after location, large and small.

Maybe some people remember that during the Yom Kippur war in 1973, there was an oil embargo, oil prices sky-rocketed and bumper stickers began to appear reading, "We don't want Jews! We want oil!". A gentile named William Ikon wrote a letter to the editor of the Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph that was subsequently published in 250 dailies throughout America. He wrote the following:

"Jews go home, G-d forbid that you should think that these remarks made by a few sick people expresses the opinion of all the people of America and you would pack your belongings and go. Jews go home. We do not want Jews. We want oil. But before you leave, could you do us a favor?! Could you leave

behind the vaccine formula of Dr. Jonas Salk before you go?! You would not want our children to be paralyzed by polio. Will you leave behind the capability you have shown government, in politics, your influential prowess, your good literature and your tasty food.

Please have pity on us. Remember it was from you that we learned the secret of how to develop great men as Einstein and Steinmetz and many others who are of great help to us. We owe you a lot for the atomic bomb, research satellites and perhaps we owe you our very existence. Instead of observing from the depths of our graves how Hitler old but glad passes through our streets relaxed in one of our Cadillacs if he would have succeeded to reach the A-bomb and not us.

On your way out Jews, could you do me one more favor? Could you pass by my house and take me with you? I'm not sure I could live a secure life in a land in which you are not found. If at any time you will have to leave, love will leave with you. Democracy will leave with you and essentially everything will leave with you. G-d will leave with you. If you pass by my house, please slow down and honk, because I'm going with you."

Bilaam was not the first to fail to heed to this Divine warning and neither was he the last. We know all too well. To anyone with clear eyes the words delivered to Bilaam resonate even still, as the blessedness continues.

Mizrachi Dvar Torah

Rav Doron Perez

The Narrative War Against Israel

There is an incredible insight into the difference in vision between a bat and an eagle which Rabbi Baruch Halevi Epstein heard from Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin. It's the difference between a critical, condemning person as opposed to a person of love, blessing and encouragement.

The eagle does not see well at night but has amazing eyesight during the day, and the bat cannot see during the day, but has amazing eyesight during the night. This is the difference between a person who is a condemning curser and a person who is positive and full of light. One person can only see darkness and the other person, light.

Why did Balak hire Bilaam? Balak knew that he could not defeat Bnei Yisrael through a physical fight seeing how many other nations, failed. He knew that he had to act outside of the realm of military expeditions and rather act with politics and diplomacy. So, he brings Bilaam who was only able to see things in tunnel vision to curse Bnei Yisrael. Bilaam could only see in darkness, weaving a narrative

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of curses. He was unable to see things with complexity and depth. Moshe on the other hand had a vision of light and could see the complexity and depth of life with clarity.

Today we are facing such challenges where many of the enemies of the Jewish people have decided that the way to defeat Israel is not just militarily but also in the courts, and on social media, and academia. It is done from a simple single-minded wizardry and sorcery of hate, deception, critique, seeing with a tunnel vision which allows them to ignores the depth of the situation.

But just like Hashem changed Bilaam's curses into blessings, so too will all the bad-mouthing and cursing today, be turned into blessing, and the justness and love of life of the Jewish cause will be seen.

Rabbi Dr. Norman J. Lamm's Derashot Ledorot

The opening verse in the daily order of t'fillah be 'tzibbur, public prayer, is the familiar mah tovu ohalecha Yaakov, mishk'nosecha Yisrael, "How good are thy tents, O Jacob, thy dwelling places, O Israel." It must be quite an important verse to be so strategically and significantly placed, as the very first thing we say as we enter the synagogue. And indeed it is just that. For, as the opening chord in the overture to the Morning Service, mah tovu sets the key for the entire day of prayer, the symphony of the Jew's mind and heart and soul rising harmoniously with those of all of Israel to our Father in Heaven..

Just what does this verse mean? Our Sages interpreted "tent" and "dwelling place" to refer to batei k'neisiyot u'vatei midrashot, to synagogues and religious schools. How good are thy synagogues and thy halls of study, is the meaning of this blessing. May they increase in influence and grow in beauty and splendor. And this blessing, which is found in today's Sidra, comes from a most surprising source. It was first uttered, our Bible tells us, not by a Jew but by a non-Jew; and an enemy of Israel, at that. It was Bilaam ha'rasha, the wicked one, who, upon seeing Israel's tribes arrayed in the desert about the Tabernacle, exclaimed mah tovu. And there is yet something more surprising in the entire episode, something that makes the choice of this verse for our opening prayer even less understandable. Tradition consistently reports, in all its comments on this episode, that Bilaam fully intended to curse Israel. He had been hired to do so by the Moabite king Balak. Seeing Israel proudly and devoutly arrayed about the Temple, Bilaam arose and wanted to curse Israel, saying, shelo yiheyu lachem batei k'neisiyot u'vatei midrashot, may you not have any synagogues and schools, may they diminish in influence and in scope. But instead

of a curse, there issued forth from his mouth, by Divine command, the blessing of mah tovu.

Certainly, then, it is difficult to understand this choice of mah tovu. Was it not intended as a curse? Was it not uttered by an enemy of our people, by the ancient forerunner of the modern intellectual anti-Semite? Indeed, one of the outstanding Halachic scholars of all generations, the Maharshal (R. Solomon Luria, 16th century), wrote in his Responsa (#64): ani mas'chil be'rov chasadecha, umedaleg mah tovu she'amro Bilaam, v'af hu amro li'klallah, "I begin with the second verse and skip mah tovu, which was first recited by Bilaam, and he intended it as a curse." This is the weighty opinion of a giant of the Halachah..

And yet our people at large did not accept the verdict of the Maharshal. We have accepted the mah tovu, we have given it the place of honor, and, as we well know, it has become the "darling" of cantors and liturgical composers. And if all Israel has accepted it and accorded it such honors, then there must be something very special about it that somehow reflects an aspect of the basic personality of the Jew, and a deep, indigenous part of the Jewish religious character. That unique aspect of our collective character, that singularly Jewish trait which manifests itself in the choice of mah tovu under the conditions we mentioned, is the very ability to wring a blessing out of a curse. We say mah tovu not despite the fact that it was intended to harm us, but because of that very fact. It is Jewish to find the benediction in the malediction, the good in the evil, the opportunity in the catastrophe. It is Jewish to make the best of the worst, to squeeze holiness out of profanity. From the evil and diabolical intentions of Bilaam, shelo yiheyu lachem batei k'neisivot u'vatei midrashot, we molded a blessing of mah tovu, which we recite just as we enter those very halls of worship and study..

Hasidism, in the symbolic language of its philosophy, elevated this idea to one of its guiding principles. We must, Hasidism teaches, find the nitzotz in the klipah, the "spark" in the "shell"; that is, we must always salvage the spark of holiness which resides in the very heart of evil. There is some good in everything bad. The greatness of man consists of rescuing that good and building upon it. In fact, that is just how the entire movement of Hasidism had its beginning. European Jewry, suffering untold persecutions, was desperately seeking some glimmer of hope. There was a tremendous longing in every Jewish heart for the Messiah. There was restlessness and a thirst for elevation. Two "false messiahs," one a psychoneurotic and the other a quack and charlatan, proclaimed themselves messiahs and led their people astray. All European Jewry was terribly excited about these people. Soon, one led them into Mohammedanism, and the other into Catholicism.¹ The common, simple Jews of Eastern Europe, those who suffered

most and who bore the most pain, were completely depressed by this tragedy of seeing their only hopes fizzle and die. Now there was nothing to turn to. And here the Baal Shem Tov stepped in, took these yearnings and longings and pent-up religious drives, and directed them not to falseness and apostasy and tragedy, but channeled them into a new form, into sincere and genuine religious expression which, all historians now admit, literally rescued all of Jewry from certain annihilation. He wrung a blessing from a curse. He found the good in the evil. He saw opportunity in catastrophe. He knew the meaning of mah tovu..

Jewish history is rich in such examples of making the best of the worst, of transforming the k'lallah into the b'rachah. The Temple and its sacrificial service were destroyed, so our forefathers exploited the catastrophe and found new avenues for religious expression in prayer, the "sacrifice of the heart." Jerusalem and its schools were ruined, so they decided that Torah is unprejudiced in its geography, and they built Y avneh, where they accomplished even more than in Jerusalem. Ernest Bevin refused to permit 100,000 Jewish refugees to immigrate into Palestine, so, having no choice, we proclaimed and built a State of Israel for over a million Jews.² Remember the mourning and sadness and gloom when Bevin refused us? And remember our joy and thrill and simchah in May of 1948 when the State was declared? B'rachah from k'lallah. We have never completely surrendered to shelo yiheyu lachem batei k'neisivot u'vatei midrashot. We have always poked around in its wreckage, found the spark we were looking for, and converted the whole k'lallah into one great b'rachah. That is what is implied in reciting mah tovu as the opening chord of our prayers. G-d continues that power within us. Let us make the best of the worst, blessing from curse. Perhaps one of the most outstanding examples of one human being who was able to transform curse to blessing is the renowned Jewish philosopher, Franz Rosenzweig, who died in 1929. Rosenzweig was a German Jew, an assimilationist, who was profound, scholarly, and sincere in his intellectual pursuits. He is the one who, concluding that he was going to convert to Christianity, decided to follow the historical process, and so attempted to acquaint himself with Judaism as a stepping stone to his new faith. Interestingly, he experienced a great religious feeling during the Nei'lah Service on Y om Kippur in some small Orthodox synagogue in Germany, and thereafter became one of the leading Jewish philosophers of our time, a man who attracted many great students and colleagues and, in his criticism of Reform, led people back to our origins. Rosenzweig was an extremely active man. He was a thrilling and popular lecturer. He was a talented speaker, writer, and administrator, as well as thinker. But, at the

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prime of his life, in 1922, tragedy struck. In the wake of a cerebral hemorrhage came partial then complete paralysis. The widely traveled searcher could not move. The able lecturer could not speak. The writer could not move his hands, could hardly even dictate notes. Surely, this should have killed him. Surely, this should have marked the end of a fruitful and promising career. But no, Rosenzweig had rediscovered Judaism, and with it its inarticulate but very real insights. And so he learned to wring fortune from this misfortune. He dictated numerous letters, scholarly articles, and books to his wife, by virtue of a special machine. His wife would turn a dial, with the alphabet, and he would nod ever so slightly, at the letter he wanted. Thus, mind you, were letters, articles, diaries, and books written. Nor was this only a flurry of panicky activity, something to "make him forget." No, it was a state of mind; it was the Jewish genius ever seeking the "spark" in the "shell," the blessing in the curse. Shortly after the onset of illness, he wrote the following: "If I must be ill, I want to enjoy it... In a sense, these two months have been quite pleasant. For one thing, after a long spell, I got back to reading books." This from a man who couldn't move a limb, and who couldn't pronounce one consonant intelligibly! And listen now to what the same man writes even seven years later, just before his death: "I read, carry on business... and, all in all, enjoy life... besides, I have something looming in the background for the sake of which I am almost tempted to call this period the richest of my life... it is simply true: dying is even more beautiful than living." What a conversion of k'lallah to b'rachah! It is so, and should be so, with every individual. Misfortunes, may they never occur, have their redeeming qualities. Death brings an appreciation of life. Tragedy can bring husband and wife, father and son, brother and sister, closer together and bring out dormant loves and loyalties. Failure can spur one on to newer and greater successes than ever dreamt of. In the inner shells of curse, there lies the spark of blessing. The aim and goal of prayer, as our Jewish sages have pointed out through the ages, is not to change G-d, but to change ourselves. We come before G-d as humble petitioners, terribly aware of our shortcomings, our inferiorities, and our sins. Whoever prays truly knows that somewhere, sometimes, he or she has been caught in the web of curse. We feel tainted with evil. And so we pray. We pray and we want G-d to help us change ourselves. What sort of change is it that we want? The change from evil to good, from curse to blessing. We want to transform ourselves. That is the spirit of the prayerful personality. And that is the reason for beginning the day of prayer and petition with mah tovu. We enter the House of G-d, which stands and survives despite and because of its ancient and modern enemies. The synagogue

itself is the symbol of that transformation. We begin now to pray, with the object of such transformation in ourselves. Hence, mah tovu. Mah tovu. How good. Indeed, not only good, but how fortunate is a people who can forever hope and smile, knowing that even if, Heaven forbid, k'lallah could be its lot, it will wring out of it every drop of b'rachah. This, indeed, is the greatest b'rachah. Mah tovu. How good.

1 The reference is to Shabbetai Zevi (1626-1676) and Jacob Frank (1726-1791), false Messiahs who had devastating effects on the Jewish community.

2 Ernest Bevin, the British Foreign Secretary from 1945 to 1951, refused to permit 100,000 Jewish refugees, many Holocaust survivors, to immigrate into Palestine in 1945. This decision, influenced by British geopolitical interests and concerns about Arab reactions, led to significant criticism and exacerbated tensions in Palestine. The refusal is seen by many as a pivotal moment leading to the eventual establishment of the State of Israel in 1948.

Weekly Parsha

Balak

by Rabbi Berel Wein

Although Bilaam is the major villain of the piece in this week's parsha, we should not overlook Balak's nefarious role in the events described. Balak is the instigator of the whole plot to curse and destroy the Jewish people. He finances Bilaam and is most persistent in pursuing his evil goal. Even when Bilaam apparently despairs of the success of his mission and so informs Balak.

Balak nevertheless insists that he continue, for perhaps he will yet be able to curse the people of Israel. Often in Jewish history we find this scenario repeated, with those behind the scenes persistently encouraging the masses to destroy the Jews while they stay a pious distance behind, causing, but somehow apparently not participating in, the murderous mayhem.

As hate filled as Bilaam is he cannot operate alone. He needs financial and social backing for him to do his worst. Bilaam is eventually killed by the very people he attempted to destroy. But Balak always lives on to try again to accomplish the destruction of the Jewish nation. Balak never makes peace with the idea that the Lord does not allow him his goal. His tenacity for hatred and evil behavior is the true hallmark of his identity.

Centuries later the prophet reminds us of Balak's scheme and advice to Bilaam and warns us somehow not to overlook Balak's role in this story of aggression and unreasoned hatred. Through remembering the original Balak, the prophet informs us that we will be better able to identify and deal with his successors in deceit and hatred throughout the ages.

It is not the suicide bomber – Bilaam – that is the only guilty party in terrorist attacks. It is the Balaks who send them and support them that are certainly equally as guilty. The pious human rights organizations that promote only hatred and violence under the guise of doing good deeds are also responsible for the loss of the precious lives of innocents caused by those whom they nurture and support. The Talmud stated this reality by coining the famous Jewish aphorism: "It is not the mouse alone that is the thief. It is rather the hole in the wall that allows the mouse entry into the house that is the real 'thief.'" It is the persistence of those that are determined to undermine the Jewish people and the State of Israel that places them as direct immoral descendants of Balak.

In the Pesach Hagadah we read that in every generation we face this challenge. No matter how many Bilaams we dispose of, Balak somehow survives to continue to try again. The words of the prophet in this week's haftarah - to remember Balak's role in the story of the Jewish people in the desert of Sinai - are addressed to us and our times as well. We should not be shocked, though our sadness over this fact is understandable, that the malevolence against Jews of the 1930's can repeat itself in our time as well. As Balak still remains a force in the world, the Jewish problem will not go away.

Shabat shalom.

Rabbi Berel Wein

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

Not Reckoned Among the Nations

Balak

The year is 1933. Two Jews are sitting in a Viennese coffee house, reading the news. One is reading the local Jewish paper, the other the notoriously antisemitic publication *Der Stürmer*. "How can you possibly read that revolting rubbish?" says the first. The second smiles. "What does your paper say? Let me guess: 'The Jews are assimilating,' 'The Jews are arguing,' 'The Jews are disappearing.' Now let me tell you what my paper says: 'The Jews control the banks.' 'The Jews control the media.' 'The Jews control Austria.' 'The Jews control the world.' My friend, if you want good news about the Jews, always pay attention to the antisemites."

An old and bitter joke. Yet it has a point and a history, which begins with this week's Parsha. Some of the most beautiful things ever said about the Jewish people were said by Bilaam:

"Who can count the dust of Jacob ... May my final end be like theirs! ... How beautiful are your tents, Jacob, your dwelling places, Israel! ... A star will come out of Jacob; a sceptre will rise out of Israel."

Bilaam was no friend of the Jews. Having failed to curse them, he eventually devised a plan that worked. He advised the Moabite women to seduce Israelite men and then invite them to take part in their idolatrous worship. 24,000 people died in the subsequent plague that struck the people.[1]

Bilaam is numbered by the Rabbis as one of only four non-royals mentioned in the Tanach who are denied a share in the World to Come (*Sanhedrin* 90a). Why then did God choose that Israel be blessed by Bilaam? Surely there is a principle *Megalgelim zechut al yedei zakai*: "Good things come about through good people" (*Tosefta Yoma* 4:12). Why did this good thing come about through a bad man?

The answer lies in another principle, first stated in *Proverbs* (27:2): "Let someone else praise you, and not your own mouth; an outsider, and not your own lips." Tanach is perhaps the least self-congratulatory national literature in history. Jews chose to record for history their faults, not their virtues. Hence it was important that their praise come from an outsider, and one not known to like them. Moses rebuked the people. Bilaam, the outsider, praised them.

That said, however, what is the meaning of one of the most famous descriptions ever given of the people Israel:

"It is a nation dwelling alone, not reckoned among the nations."

Num. 23:9

I have argued against the interpretation that has become popular in modern times, namely that it is Israel's destiny to be isolated, friendless, hated, abandoned and alone, as if antisemitism were somehow written into the script of history.[2] It isn't. None of the Prophets said so. To the contrary, they believed that the nations of the world would eventually recognise Israel's God and come to worship Him in the Temple in Jerusalem. *Zechariah* (8:23) foresees a day when "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.'" There is nothing fated, predestined, about antisemitism.

What then do Bilaam's words mean? "It is a nation dwelling alone, not reckoned among the nations." *Ibn Ezra* says they mean that unlike all other nations, Jews, even when a minority in a non-Jewish culture, will not assimilate. *Ramban* says that their culture and creed will remain pure, not a cosmopolitan mix of multiple traditions and nationalities. *The Netziv* gives the sharp interpretation, clearly directed against the Jews of his time, that "If Jews live distinctive and apart from others they will dwell safely, but if they seek to emulate 'the nations' they 'will not be reckoned' as anything special at all."

There is, however, another possibility, hinted at by another noted antisemite, G. K. Chesterton[3], who we have already mentioned in *Beha'alotcha*. Chesterton famously wrote of America that it was "a nation with the soul of a church" and "the only nation in the world founded on a creed." That is, in fact, precisely what made Israel different – and America's political culture, as historian Perry Miller and sociologist Robert Bellah pointed out, is deeply rooted in the idea of biblical Israel and the concept of covenant. Ancient Israel was indeed founded on a creed, and was, as a result, a nation with the soul of a religion.

We discussed in *Beha'alotcha* how Rabbi Soloveitchik broke down the two ways in which people become a group, be it a camp or a congregation. Camps face a common enemy, and so a group of people bands together. If you look at all other nations, ancient and modern, you will see they arose out of historical contingencies. A group of people live in a land, develop a shared culture, form a society, and thus become a nation.

Jews, certainly from the Babylonian exile onward, had none of the conventional attributes of a nation. They did not live in the same land. Some lived in Israel, others in Babylon, yet others in Egypt. Later they would be scattered throughout the world. They did not share a language of everyday speech. There were many Jewish vernaculars, versions of Yiddish, Ladino and other regional Jewish dialects. They did not live under the same political dispensation. They did not share the same cultural environment. Nor did they experience the same fate. Despite all their many differences though, they always saw themselves and were seen by others as one nation: the world's first - and for a long time the world's only - global people.

What then made them a nation? This was the question Rabbi Saadia Gaon asked in the tenth century, to which he gave the famous answer: "Our nation is only a nation in virtue of its laws (torot)." They were the people defined by the Torah, a nation under the sovereignty of God. Having received, uniquely, their laws before they even entered their land, they remained bound by those self-same laws even when they lost the land. Of no other nation has this ever been true.

Uniquely then, in Judaism religion and nationhood coincide. There are nations with many religions: multicultural Britain is one among many. There are religions governing many nations: Christianity and Islam are obvious examples. Only in the case of Judaism is there a one-to-one correlation between religion and nationhood. Without Judaism there would be nothing (except antisemitism) to connect Jews across the world. And without the Jewish nation Judaism would cease to be what it has always been, the faith of a people bound by a bond of collective responsibility to one another and to God. Bilaam was right. The Jewish people really are unique.

Nothing therefore could be more mistaken than to define Jewishness as a mere ethnicity. If ethnicity is a form of culture, then Jews are not one ethnicity but many. In Israel, Jews are a walking lexicon of almost every ethnicity under the sun. If ethnicity is another word for race, then conversion to Judaism would be impossible (you cannot convert to become Caucasian; you cannot change your race at will).

What makes Jews "a nation dwelling alone, not reckoned among the nations," is that their nationhood is not a matter of geography, politics, or ethnicity. It is a matter of religious vocation as God's covenant partners, summoned to be a living example of a nation among the nations, made distinctive by its faith and way of life. Lose that and we lose the one thing that was and remains the source of our singular contribution to the heritage of humankind. When we forget this, sadly, God arranges for people like Bilaam and Chesterton to remind us otherwise. We should not need such reminding.

[1] Numbers chapter 25, and Numbers 31:16.

[2] For more on this debate, read Rabbi Sacks' book *Future Tense*.

[3] That Chesterton was an antisemite is not my judgment but that of the poet W. H. Auden. Chesterton wrote: "I said that a particular kind of Jew tended to be a tyrant and another particular kind of Jew tended to be a traitor. I say it again. Patent facts of this kind are permitted in the criticism of any other nation on the planet: it is not counted illiberal to say that a certain kind of Frenchman tends to be sensual.... I cannot see why the tyrants should not be called 'tyrants' and the traitors 'traitors' merely because they happen to be members of a race persecuted for other reasons and on other occasions." (G.K. Chesterton, *The Uses of Diversity*, London, Methuen & Co., 1920, p. 239). On this Auden wrote, "The disingenuousness of this argument is revealed by the quiet shift from the term 'nation' to the term 'race'."

Parshat Balak: Why They Hate Us, and Who Will Redeem Us?

Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Riskin is the Founder and Rosh HaYeshiva of Ohr Torah Stone

"Behold, it is a nation that will dwell in solitude, and will not be reckoned among the nations." (Numbers 23:9)

Is the biblical statement about our solitude within the family of nations a blessing or a curse?

From the biblical context of this prophecy, it is clearly meant to be a blessing, a vision of the remarkable ability of Israel to live in splendid

isolation and ultimately outlast – and ideologically triumph over – the nations of the world. The most classic commentary, Rashi, maintains that our forebears – the patriarchs and matriarchs – have merited us with a unique set of values and a consecrated lifestyle which prevents our degenerative assimilation into the licentious practices of the nations round about (see Ibn Ezra ad loc.); and although every other nation will eventually leave the stage of world history, we alone will emerge victorious.

And so Balak reviled Bileam for this very laudatory vision: "What have you done to me? I hired you to curse my enemies, and behold, you have blessed, yes blessed, them" (Numbers 23:1).

However, when we look upon the last two thousand years of Jewish history, at least the first part of Bileam's words have indeed been fulfilled – but not as a blessing; his prophecy has truly come to pass, but rather as a horrific curse. Until the establishment of the State of Israel we had been hopelessly and helplessly persecuted and exiled from pillar to post by the nations of the world – culminating in the Holocaust, when we truly stood alone in the midst of the Nazis' attempted genocide. And even now post-Medinat Yisrael – when we do have the ability to defend ourselves against the terrorism of Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran – we (and not the allies of Iran and Al Qaeda) have become the whipping boy not only of the Arab bloc, but also of the European Union, the entire United Nations, and even of the president of the United States. Yes, we stand in isolation – but "stinking" isolation rather than splendid isolation. How can we understand this in light of Bileam's prophecy?

Allow me to take a page from Hitler's *Mein Kampf* in order to understand the mentality of our enemies. Hitler – like his present-day heirs, fundamentalist and Jihadist Islam – sought world domination by the sword. But at the same time that he was building up military prowess to destroy the free world, he was also waging a deadly and diabolical campaign – replete with Kristallnachts and death camps – to dehumanize and decimate the Jewish people. Why the stateless and powerless Jews?

You see, Fascist Hitler believed in Aryan supremacy, in "might makes right," in "to the military victor belongs the spoils," and he, Hitler, belonged to the race of "über-menschen" who had conquered Germany today and tomorrow would conquer the world. But there was one fly in the ointment: the Jews. The Jews believed – a principle of faith deriving from their patriarch Abraham four thousand years ago – that "right would conquer might," that "compassionate righteousness and moral justice" would take over the world (Genesis 18:19), that through the Jews the world would be blessed with peace and freedom, divine ideals that would trump the sword and despotic domination.

Now Hitler wanted to believe that the Jews were "selling" a slave morality based upon their own self-serving need for the world's compassion and righteousness if they were to survive. But he could not deny the fact that they – the most powerless of people – had nevertheless survived the persecutions of Egypt, Persia, Greece, Rome, the Ottoman Empire, and the Catholic Church, giving credence to their claim that they were indeed God's witnesses, entrusted with the mission to enthrone the God of the Ten Commandments as the world's only Führer. And so he became obsessed with the Jews, and was hell-bent on destroying the last Jew, on obliterating Judaism – and its message of love, compassion, and morality – from the face of the world. Only then could he be sure that he would triumph, and would not be subject to eternal damnation.

Hitler is dead, having taken his own life in a Berlin bunker; the final expression of his "Jewish" obsession, a Talmudic tractate *Pesachim* (our festival of freedom and redemption) which was curiously found among the few personal effects he brought with him to his suicide sepulcher. The failed Führer probably believed he was burying the last remnant of the Jewish faith, the Talmud; instead, the Talmud buried him. And in his own Germany, a \$10 million Jewish Center – replete with synagogue, Hebrew school for children, and adult education classes – has just been completed in Munich. Jews throughout Germany are coming out of the woodwork and declaring themselves as Jews, hundreds of descendants of Jewish fathers are converting to Judaism, and in Hitler's own country Jewish life is slowly but surely being renewed.

Nevertheless, the world is still not ready to accept our morality, hypocritically siding with those who send out suicide bombers and target innocent civilians, with those who repress the rights of their own citizenry (the women, the Christians, the Kurds, the Jews within their own borders); they would rather revile Israel as an apartheid and terrorist state, Israel which enables enemy Arab voices to be heard in its parliament, Israel which avoids aerial bombing whenever possible even at the risk of her own soldiers to prevent the death of innocents, Israel who alone in the world is standing up to the scourge of terrorism, Israel who had an Arab judge serve as chief justice in the trial of its “esteemed” president.

And so the words of Bileam still remain as an eventual promise – but also as a challenge. At the conclusion of our biblical portion, Bileam understands that no external source can vanquish Israel; we can only vanquish ourselves if we fall sway to the immorality round about. But if indeed we continually check our morality not only against the perverted standards of our enemies but also against the morality of the Ten Commandments, then we are guaranteed that not only will we survive, but we will prevail.

Shabbat Shalom

In commemoration of my Rosh Yeshiva’s *yahrzeit*, which is this Thursday, the 14th of Tamuz:

The Rosh Hayeshiva, Rav Ruderman

By Rabbi Yirmiyohu Kaganoff

For clarity, I included the Rosh Yeshiva’s family name in the title, but, because of the way I always call him and because of my relationship with him, I will refer to him throughout this article simply as “the Rosh Yeshiva.” I cannot bring myself to refer to him any other way.

As a very American high school graduate, raised in a frum, New York family, I arrived in Ner Yisrael planning to stay one year in full-time yeshiva. My life was all planned out. I already had a scholarship to a good college in New York City and was the winner of a New York State Regents Scholarship, which would provide me with extra money while attending college. I planned to combine my daily college attendance with some yeshiva education while I achieved my B.A. degree, probably with a major in psychology, and then I intended to pursue my professional career, either to attend graduate school to become a psychologist or, more likely, to attend a top law school and become an attorney.

I had accepted my high school *menahel*’s suggestion to spend a year in yeshiva full-time before starting college. He suggested that I attend Ner Yisrael for a year, which did not pose any conflict with my long-term plans, either for myself or for my father, because of the yeshiva’s reputation for not being opposed to “college.”

Having arranged that my slot in college and the scholarship wait for a year, I arrived in Ner Yisrael. After one year in yeshiva, I decided to stay for another year and extended my slot in college and my scholarship for another year. After two years, I was told that my New York State’s Regents Scholarship would not be renewed anymore. I decided to spend another year in yeshiva, and then another. Now, decades later, I presume that there is still a place for me in the college I was supposed to attend but never did. Instead, extensive reading supplied my secular education, whereas learning, teaching and spreading Torah to Klal Yisrael became my life’s aspiration and commitment. Clearly, my vision for what I wanted to do with my life changed very significantly, albeit highly gradually.

How did this happen? Certainly not overnight. As a high school senior, I remember questioning the study of Bava Basra, a *mesechta* whose halachic issues discuss whether it is my financial responsibility to provide a neighbor privacy in his yard and whether using a field for three years enforces claiming ownership of the property. Obviously, these reasons would not establish a legal claim in today’s world, so why devote time to arcane, non-practical matters? Shouldn’t we be studying only practical topics like Shabbos or Berachos? This was the perspective of a senior from a frum background in a quality yeshiva high school. Yet, somehow the yeshiva changed my entire life’s priorities without my

ever feeling that I was threatened. To understand how the yeshiva accomplished this, we need to understand the greatness of who the Rosh Yeshiva was.

That the Rosh Yeshiva was one of the greatest *talmidei chachamim* of his era is an undisputed fact, but provides little understanding of his brilliance as an educator. That he had absorbed the wellsprings of the Slabodka approach to mussar and personal development from its original proponent and builder, Rav Nosson Tzvi Finkel, the Alter of Slabodka, is also true, but does not convey to us anything of meaning. Nor does the fact that his head stored the collected knowledge of tens of thousands of *seforim* explain the success of the yeshiva he founded. And noting his regal comportment does not clarify our perception of his pedagogic genius. Instead, I will attempt to show how I, as one young *talmid*, was influenced on a daily basis, without my noticing that it was happening. Others will have different stories but, the results were usually parallel. Parallel, but not identical, because the Rosh Yeshiva developed our latent, individual abilities far greater than I have seen by any master of the literature of contemporary educational theory.

Furthermore, the cultural difference between the Rosh Yeshiva and us American boys should have been overwhelming. The Rosh Yeshiva was the age of our grandfathers (the few of us who had grandfathers), he spoke only Yiddish (which none of us did), had grown up in the poverty of eastern Europe and had been raised from the cradle in a culture in which Torah study was the highest, and perhaps only, goal. We were all baseball playing, typically spoiled, middle-class American kids, interested in eventually developing a comfortable, professional lifestyle. Of course, the most important part of the daily newspaper was the sports section. How did the Rosh Yeshiva bridge this gap to be such a successful educator and role model!

Let me mention some specific observations and anecdotes about the Rosh Yeshiva’s method of teaching and the yeshiva he built. The Rosh Yeshiva, who had a serious case of *phlebitis*, was medically required to go for walks to the extent that he could. As *talmidim*, we would often take the Rosh Yeshiva for walks. (I note that this was done, officially, during the time that, according to the usual yeshiva schedule, we should be in the Beis Medrash studying with our *chavrusos*.) If you did not prepare questions to ask the Rosh Yeshiva, he would ask you where you were up to in the *Gemara*, and ask you questions that demonstrated your level of absorption of the material. These were usually inquiries that did not have obvious answers. He would ask you what you thought the correct approach was.

It was not until many years later that I realized the humor of the scenario. The Rosh Yeshiva knew thousands of *seforim* by heart. There was nowhere in Torah that we would have any information that he did not know. Yet, rather than bamboozle us with his *chiddushim*, his novel approaches, or his massive Torah knowledge, as many *roshei yeshiva* would do, he asked us, as if he did not know the answer to the question. Was it possible that we might think of an answer that he had not seen or thought of? Highly unlikely. His goal was to build confidence in us to think independently and seek answers to Torah questions from within ourselves.

Over the years, I have been able to write many articles and full-length works on Torah topics. Many have asked me, where did I learn to think so independently? Initially my answer was incredulous. Is there any other way to learn Torah? This is the way I was taught how to analyze Torah sources. And then I realized that in Ner Yisrael we received an education that included how to use our own best resources – that blessed brain that G-d gave us – and lots of sweat – to plumb the original Torah material until we were satisfied with the approach at which we arrived. And that approach would remain with us as the truth of Torah until such time as we realized that we may not have understood the sources correctly. At that moment, our need for absolute intellectual honesty would teach us to review and potentially revise our understanding.

I will include a few anecdotes that I witnessed during the Yom Kippur and Sukkos season of holidays. I note that these stories indicate very different aspects of the Rosh Yeshiva’s greatness: His skill at molding

people to serve Hashem and how to be a mensch, not by force of personality, but by example.

The machzor

There is a famous story, which I personally witnessed, about the Rebbitzen's machzor. One Rosh Hashanah musaf, we saw that the Rosh Yeshiva had davened his quiet shemoneh esrei near the doorway of the Beis Medrash, instead of at his usual place in the center of the front of the Beis Medrash. Why had he davened there?

The Rebbitzen was homebound in those days (her health had been failing; she predeceased the Rosh Yeshiva by several years). When the Rosh Yeshiva was about to begin the musaf shemoneh esrei, he realized that when he had left home (after making Kiddush before the shofar blowing), he had mistakenly taken the Rebbitzen's machzor with him. Realizing that the Rebbitzen would want to use her familiar machzor, the Rosh Yeshiva immediately walked home (not an easy walk for him at his age) to make sure that the Rebbitzen had her machzor, and then returned to yeshiva to join the davening of the quiet shemoneh esrei in progress. This became his uppermost concern prior to the musaf shemoneh esrei of Rosh Hashanah, a prayer that he told us annually was of utmost importance. A lesson in respect for one's wife that you never forget.

Prior to a Yom Tov, the wife of one of the prominent chavrei hakollel had given birth to twins, and they had one other child, about three years old, at the time. Because of the timing, no extended family was available to help out at the house. This young man understood that his responsibility for Yom Tov was to help his wife at home and not to attend davening in shul. Apparently, at the time that kerias haTorah would occur, things at home were quiet, and he came to the Beis Medrash, three-year-old in tow, because, after all, he could daven at home, but he could not hear kerias haTorah at home. Immediately, the Rosh Yeshiva called him over and sent him home. Your mitzvah for this Yom Tov is to take care of your wife and children, not to hear kerias haTorah or come to the Beis Medrash. A lesson in family responsibility that you never forget.

On the longer winter Friday nights, I would often visit the Rosh Yeshiva and his rebbitzen at their house on the yeshiva campus. The conversations were always about what life was like in Eastern Europe, in the town of Slabodka and similar matters. The rebbitzen participated in the conversations very freely, and the Rosh Yeshiva was very forthcoming with information, stories, insights and observations. It was completely natural and informal. I had no sense in the slightest that I was wasting his time or preoccupying him with matters when he would rather be studying Torah. He was too great for that. This is a lesson that I have thought about, although I admit to falling far short of his abilities in this area also.

One insight of mine is that the Rosh Yeshiva would answer any question that I asked him about any matter – with one major exception. When I asked him about the greatness of the Alter of Slabodka and his abilities to create so many gedolei Yisrael from his disciples, the Rosh Yeshiva would not answer. All he would do was allude to the incredible greatness of who the Alter was. Anything more than that was sacred territory on which the Rosh Yeshiva would not tread.

Perhaps I should follow his lead and refrain from discussing the greatness of the Rosh Yeshiva. But I feel this would deprive future generations of an appreciation of who he was, and, perhaps by some extension, a sense of the greatness of his rebbe, the Alter.

[CS – I'm adding 3 divrei torah that came out after Allen's parsha sheet. https://www.torahweb.org/torah/2025/parsha/rhab_chukas.html

Rabbi Yakov Haber

Total Victory, Partial Victory, Ultimate Victory

I Our parsha records the miraculous victories of Bnei Yisrael over Sichon, the king of the Emori, and Og, the king of Bashan, in battles led by Moshe Rabbeinu himself (Bemidbar 21:21-35 and Rashi to v. 35). The victories over their enemies were absolute; there were no survivors, and their land was conquered and later settled by some of the tribes

(ibid. v. 24-25, 35, Devarim 3:34). In direct contrast to these triumphs, stands the battle against Amaleik recorded in parshas Beshalach (Shemos 17:8-12). There, Yehoshua was sent by Moshe to fight Amaleik, and the outcome, although in the Jewish people's favor removing the immediate danger, was not absolutely decisive. "וַיִּהְיוּ יְהוֹשֻׁעַ וְכָל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִלְחָמָה אֶת עַמְלֵק לִפְנֵי הָרֹב" (ibid. v. 13). Since Hashem is the true Ish Milchama and it is He alone who determined the outcomes of these respective battles, why were there such pronounced differences? Why did Moshe lead the battles against Sichon and Og himself, whereas against Amaleik he sent Yehoshua?

Both Malbim and Ha'ameik Davar (to Shemos ibid. v. 9) postulate that the latter battles against Sichon and Og were guided by supernatural Divine Providence (hanhaga nisiyis) whereas the former one against Amaleik was fought within the confines of the natural order although also guided by Hashem (hanhaga tiv'iyis).[1] Moshe was the agent of the former type of Divine Providence; Yehoshua, as would be the case when he led the Jewish people in conquering the Land of Israel, was the agent of the latter form. Since the Jewish people had sinned soon after the Exodus from Egypt, questioning Divine Providence over them in the desert (ibid. v. 7), they did not merit a supernatural victory over Amaleik. Indeed, the very coming of Amaleik to war against them was a punishment for this spiritual lapse (see Rashi to v. 8). Knowing this, Moshe Rabbeinu sent Yehoshua, the appropriate individual to lead the Jewish people in a "natural" battle against Amaleik. Consequently, the results, although leading to a Jewish victory, were not complete; Amaleik was weakened but not destroyed.

Perhaps we can add some additional reasons for the difference in outcomes between these battles. Ha'ameik Davar (ibid. v. 4) notes[2] that although all the nations above were deemed evil by Hashem Yisbarach, Sichon and Og fought to defend against the threat of invasion of Bnei Yisrael and the conquest of their lands. Amaleik, by contrast, did not feel threatened by imminent conquest of their land. Their primary motives were 1) hatred of the Jewish people inherited from their ancestor, Esav and 2) hatred of G-d Himself and the concept of Divine Providence representing the relationship between the infinite Creator and His creations which His chosen people, Bnei Yisrael, were charged to bring to the world. Amaleik sought to impose the worldview of everything operating solely based on the rules of nature – to allow man to actualize only his animal nature, not his Divine one – not through Divine Providence calibrated to bring man to his ultimate spiritual destiny. Consequently, Amaleik attempted, and his spiritual descendants continue to attempt, to eradicate the nation representing elevated Divine ideals and relationship. The total victory over Amaleik and, even more fundamentally, the concepts he represents, will only occur in the long-awaited Messianic era when "בְּיוֹם הַהוּא יִהְיֶה ה' אֶחָד" – on that day G-d will be One and His name will be One" (Zecharya 14:9). While Amaleik exists, "אֵין ה' שָׁלֵם וְאֵין הַכֶּסֶף שָׁלֵם" (Rashi Shemos 17:16). Consequently, victory over Amaleik can only be partial, can only reach "וַיִּהְיוּ יְהוֹשֻׁעַ וְכָל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִלְחָמָה אֶת עַמְלֵק לִפְנֵי הָרֹב" – to weaken but not to eradicate totally – until that great day when "כָּל הָרָעָה כֹּלֵה כַעֲשֵׂן תִּכְלֶה כִּי תַעֲבִיר מִמֶּשֶׁלֶת זָדוֹן מִן הָאָרֶץ".

Furthermore, in the Jewish people's sacred mission to eradicate evil from the world both on a spiritual and a physical plane, there is a real and present danger that if their enemies are defeated totally, they will attribute the victory to their own military prowess and cease to recognize Hashem as the true overseer of Jewish and world history. As a result, perhaps we can suggest that Hashem only allows evil nations and regimes to be partially defeated leading to a more heightened need to recognize that Hashem alone determines total victory over the enemies of Israel and the concepts they represent. The more loyal the Jewish people are to their exalted mission, the closer they will be to total victory over their enemies.

II

The historic Divine salvation from the genocidal designs of the evil Iranian regime is still very fresh. Although tragically tens of Jews were killed, thousands were wounded, and thousands had their homes destroyed and still remain homeless, the enormous salvation on the

homefront was apparent to all the residents of Israel. The deadly missiles and drones had the potential to cause thousands of deaths and many more injuries. Many stories of near misses and last-minute evacuations abound. On the offensive front, the IDF's achievements are nothing short of extraordinary. The achievement of effective fly-over freedom through the destruction of Iranian anti-aircraft systems both from the air and from the ground in Iran by Mossad agents and the bombing of hundreds of missile batteries and sensitive nuclear sites were absolutely amazing. These recent last 12 days of battle come after two additional Iranian attempts at causing enormous Israeli casualties in the past year; practically all of the hundreds of missiles and drones were shot down in these Iranian attempts of wreaking havoc, and, in reprisal, the IAF destroyed most of Iranian air defenses before this last war even began. The immediate danger of Iran attempting to produce more than 8,000 missiles and the quite apparent rush to produce nuclear weapons was seemingly set back at least several years. The decision of the President of the United States to greatly assist by utilizing American advanced weaponry to destroy three Iranian nuclear facilities was unparalleled in US-Israel relations. The Prime Minister of Israel, not a religious man, stated that these accomplishments were clearly "b'siyata dishmaya" and offered prayers of thanksgiving at the Kotel Hama'aravi, something I do not recall his ever having done in the past. Clearly, the Divine hand in history was again openly manifest for all those who would open their eyes to see, but it was still all under the mask of the natural order: Iron Dome anti-missile batteries, F-15s, smart bombs, hundreds of covert Mossad missions and explosives, and intelligence gathering all contributed to the remarkable offensive successes and defensive protection. We did not yet merit hanhaga nisiyis, but G---d still directed enormous salvation even within hanhaga tiv'iyis.

Many (including myself) found themselves disappointed over the fact that through United States' pressure, the war was stopped (including a last minute IAF massive retaliatory bombing canceled by Trump's direct order) with the evil Iranian regime still in power and with a lot of uncertainty of how long it would take Iran to restore its march toward manufacturing nuclear weapons and its deadly missiles. I took solace in the concepts presented in the first section. Until the final redemption, evil as expressed by those who have taken up Amaleik's mission to destroy the nation representing Hashem's true Will in the world will only be weakened, not totally defeated. We always must rely on Hakadosh Baruch Hu and must constantly strive to increase our efforts toward actualizing our unique mission to bring the world to a place where *ויקבלו כלם את עול מלכותך* by increasing our tefilos, our Torah study, our *dikduk b'mitzvos* and our care for others. Over Shabbos, I heard from R. Reuven Jacobson, that the Chasam Sofer, after Napoleon mysteriously ended the battle of Pressburg, told his community that far from just collectively breathing a sigh of relief, they must view this as a *mechayeiv* to strive ever more in Divine service as a result of the Divine salvation they benefited from. The same applies in our situation. Whether living in Eretz Yisrael during personally experienced the frequent rushes to fortified rooms during sirens and seeing or hearing bursts of explosions in the air or living in Chutz La'aretz but hearing about and seeing from a distance the momentous salvation, I trust that Jews worldwide will internalize the magnitude of the deliverance that has occurred and will react accordingly as the Chasam Sofer taught. May we speedily witness the ultimate downfall of the *memsheles zadan* and the day when the whole world will recognize Hashem's unity and the uniqueness of his beloved people, and when Hashem's manifest Presence will return to the world in the *Beis Hamikdash*!

[1] The concept of these two distinct types of Divine Providence is an oft-appearing theme in the writings of these two commentaries. Also see *Harcheiv Davar* (to v. 10) for additional contrasts between the battles reflecting this fundamental difference. Also see *Ha'ameik Davar* on our *parsha* (20:8) who similarly explains based on the two types of Divine Providence why Moshe was told to speak to (or pray at) the rock rather than hit it with the *matei haElokim*.

[2] Also see *Malbim* to v. 8.]

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3000 Years Ago, One Man Got It Right

Essay by Rabbi YY Jacobson

3000 Years Ago, One Man Got It Right Why This Insane Obsession with Jews and Israel? On the Ultimate Meaning of Jewish Existence

Jerusalem

Balaam's Prose

It is fascinating that some of the most splendid prose in the Hebrew Bible emerges from the mouth of Balaam, a brilliant poet, a prophet, and an archenemy of the Jewish people, who, summoned by the Moabite king to curse Israel, ends up delivering the most poignant poetry ever uttered about the history and destiny of the Jewish people (1).

"From the top of mountains I see him from the hills I behold him; It is a people that dwells alone, And is not reckoned among the nations..."

"How beautiful are your tents, O Jacob; Your dwellings, O Israel! As winding brooks, as gardens by the river's side; like aloes which G-d has planted, like cedars beside the waters..."

"They crouch, they lie down like a lion and a lioness; who dare rouse them? Blessed is he that blesses you, And cursed is he that curses you..."

Even more interesting is the fact that the most explicit reference in the five books of Moses to Moshiach, the Jewish leader who will bring about the full and ultimate redemption, when heaven and earth will kiss and humanity will become one, is to be found in Balaam's prose: "I see it, but not now; I behold it, but it is not near. A star shall come forth from Jacob, and a scepter shall rise up from Israel..."

This is strange. The identity, nature, and calling of the Jewish people are naturally discussed throughout the Torah. Yet the most acute, potent, and finely tuned appreciation of Jewish identity is communicated through the mouth of a non-Jewish prophet who loathes Israel and attempts to destroy it. Why?

Clarity of Vision

The message, I believe, is quite clear. The Torah is teaching us that if you wish to understand who the Jew is, you must at times seek the perspective of the non-Jew. The non-Jewish individual, who is unbiased and unaffected by the "Jewish complex" and its inclination toward self-depreciation, sometimes possesses a keener appreciation of the Jew than many Jews themselves.

The non-Jewish world does not fall prey to the popular Jewish claim that we are a "normal secular people," a "cultural ethnic group" that enjoys love, money, food, and leisure as much as any good goy (gentile) in the world.

It makes us uncomfortable, but consciously or subconsciously, the gentile senses that something very profound and authentic sets the Jew apart from the other nations. Although he or she may not be able to put his or her finger on what exactly that otherness is, the non-Jew feels that Israel "is a people that dwells alone, and is not reckoned among the nations."

A Peculiar People

Eric Hoffer, an American social philosopher, author of the classic "The True Believer" and recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom, expressed Balaam's sentiments in a Los Angeles Times article decades ago.

It is tragically clear that almost nothing changed since Mr. Hoffer wrote these words in May of 1968.

"The Jews are a peculiar people: things permitted to other nations are forbidden to the Jews. Other nations drive out thousands, even millions of people and there is no refugee problem. Russia did it, Poland and Czechoslovakia did it, Turkey threw out a million Greeks, and Algeria a million Frenchmen. Indonesia threw out heaven knows how many Chinese — and no one says a word about refugees. But in the case of Israel, the displaced Arabs have become eternal refugees. Everyone insists that Israel must take back every single Arab. Arnold Toynbee called the displacement of the Arabs an atrocity greater than any committed by the Nazis."

"Other nations when victorious on the battlefield dictate peace terms. But when Israel is victorious it must sue for peace. Everyone expects the Jews to be the only real Christians in this world."

"Other nations when they are defeated survive and recover but should Israel be defeated it would be destroyed. Had Nasser triumphed last June he would have wiped Israel off the map, and no one would have lifted a finger to save the Jews."

"No commitment to the Jews by any government, including our own, is worth the paper it is written on. There is a cry of outrage all over the world when people die in Vietnam or when two Negroes are executed in Rhodesia. But when Hitler slaughtered Jews no one remonstrated with him. The Swedes, who are ready to break off diplomatic relations with America because of what we do in Vietnam, did not let out a peep when Hitler was slaughtering Jews. They sent Hitler choice iron ore, and ball bearings, and serviced his troop trains to Norway."

"The Jews are alone in the world. If Israel survives, it will be solely because of Jewish efforts."

"Yet at this moment Israel is our only reliable and unconditional ally. We can rely more on Israel than Israel can rely on us. And one has only to imagine what would have happened last summer had the Arabs and their Russian backers won the war to realize how vital the survival of Israel is to America and the West in general."

"I have a premonition that will not leave me; as it goes with Israel so will it go with all of us. Should Israel perish the holocaust will be upon us."

Three Non-Jewish Perspectives

In his book "The Meaning of History," Nikolai Berdyaev wrote the following about the meaning of Jewish history:

"I remember how the materialist interpretation of history, when I attempted in my youth to verify it by applying it to the destinies of peoples, broke down in the case of the Jews, where destiny seemed absolutely inexplicable from the materialistic standpoint. And, indeed, according to the materialistic and positivistic criterion, this people ought long ago to have perished."

Here are the splendid words of the great Russian novelist, Leo Nikolaevitch Tolstoy, who wrote this in 1908 about the Jewish people:

"The Jew is that sacred being who has brought down from heaven the everlasting fire, and has illuminated with it the entire world. He is the religious source, spring, and fountain out of which all the rest of the peoples have drawn their beliefs and their religions. The Jew is the emblem of eternity. He, who neither slaughter nor torture of thousands of years could destroy, he who neither fire, nor sword, nor Inquisition was able to wipe off the face of the earth. He, who was the first to produce the Oracles of God. He, who has been for so long the Guardian of Prophecy and has transmitted it to the rest of the world. Such a nation cannot be destroyed. The Jew is as everlasting as Eternity itself."

And here is a passage by contemporary historian Paul Johnson:

"All the great conceptual discoveries of the intellect seem obvious and inescapable once they have been revealed, but it requires a special genius to formulate them for the first time. The Jew has this gift. To them, we owe the idea of equality before the law, both divine and human; of the sanctity of life and the dignity of the human person; of the individual conscience and so of personal redemption; of the collective conscience and so of social responsibility; of peace as an abstract ideal and love as the foundation of justice, and many other items which constitute the basic moral furniture of the human mind. Without the Jews, it might have been a much emptier place."

And, of course, the immortal words of Nineteenth-century American president John Adams:

"I will insist that the Hebrews have done more to civilize man than any other nation. If I were an atheist who believed or pretended to believe that all is ordered by chance, I should believe that chance has ordered the Jews to preserve and propagate to all mankind the doctrine of a supreme, intelligent, wise, almighty sovereign of the universe, which I believe to be the great essential principle of all morality, and consequently of all civilization."

Another Non-Jewish philosopher, Peter Kreeft, wrote these words: "The prophetic spirit of the Jew finds a meaning and a purpose in history, thereby transforming mankind's understanding of history. Their genius for finding meaning everywhere -- for example in science and in the world of nature -- can be explained in only two ways: either they were simply smarter than anyone else, or it was G-d's doing, not theirs. The notion of the chosen people is really the humblest possible interpretation of their history."

A Confession

Some years ago, in his Rosh Hashanah sermon at Temple Israel in Natick, Mass., best-selling author the late Rabbi Harold Kushner made this candid confession:

"This past year [of terrorism and anti-Semitism] has compelled me to come to conclusions I didn't want to come to. For all of my years as a rabbi, I have believed and I have taught that Jews were no different from other people, that Judaism was different from Christianity and Islam, but Jews had the same feelings, the same strengths, and weaknesses, the same fears, and dreams that Christians and Muslims have. I took issue with the Chabad rabbis who argued that Jewish souls are essentially different than gentile souls."

"I opposed and discouraged interfaith marriage, not because I believed that Jews were better than non-Jews but because a family with two religions was likely to raise children with no religion to avoid arguments."

"But this year has persuaded me that Jews are in fact different. I find myself compelled to face the fact that the Jew plays the role for the world that the canary used to play for the coal miners. You've read about how the miners would take canaries with them into the mines because the canaries were extremely sensitive to dangerous gases. They responded to danger before the humans did. So if the miners saw the canaries get sick and pass out, they knew that the air was bad and they would escape as fast as they could."

"That's what we Jews do for the world. We are the world's early warning system. Where there is evil, where there is hatred, it affects us first. If there is hatred anywhere in the world, it will find us. If there is evil somewhere in the world, we

will become its target. People overflowing with hatred for whatever reason, including self-hatred, make us the objects of their hatred.

"This is the role we play in the world, not by choice but imposed on us by others, to be the miner's canary, to smoke out the bigots, the haters, the people who will be a menace to their communities if someone doesn't stop them, and we identify them early on by their hatred of us."

"Hitler attacked Jews before he attacked Western civilization, and that should have alerted the world to what kind of person he was, but the world misread the signal. Muslim fanatics practiced their terrorist skills on Israelis before turning those skills on the rest of the world, but the world never understood the warning."

"Our job is to live as Jews were summoned to live, because we can't escape the fate of being a Jew. Generations before us have tried and failed. We can claim the destiny of being a Jew, because when we do that, we discover how satisfying a truly human life can be."

He said this before October 7th, and the explosion of global Jewish hatred that followed. Imagine what he would say today!

How can any rational Jew explain the fact that in our elite universities, intelligent professors and students sided with Hamas against the Jewish people? Millions were murdered in countries around the world, from Syria to Darfur, from the Congo to Ethiopia, and yet we did not hear of one demonstration. Israel is trying to avoid another Holocaust, Heaven forbid, and it is demonized?

For me, this is the great proof that the Jewish people dwell alone at the epicenter of humanity, chosen by the Creator to be ambassadors of truth, morality, love, light, and hope. So nobody can be indifferent to Jews. Either you admire them, or you loathe them.

G-d's Witnesses

But why are the Jews the canaries of the world? What exactly placed the Jewish people in this position? This was well articulated by Professor Eliezer Berkovits in his book *Faith After the Holocaust*:

"The fear that so many different civilizations have of the Jew, the suspicion with which he is met, is utterly irrational, yet it has its justification. It is utterly irrational because it has no basis in the behavior of the Jew or in his character. It is a form of international madness when it is founded on a belief in Jewish power and Jewish intention to hurt, to harm, or to rule."

"Yet it has its justification as a metaphysical fear of the staying power of Jewish powerlessness. The very existence of the Jewish people is suggestive of another dimension of reality and meaning in which the main preoccupation of the man of 'power history' is adjudged futile and futureless in the long run... As long as the Jew is around, he is a witness that G-d is around. He is the witness, whether he knows it or not, whether he consciously testifies or refuses to testify."

"His very existence, his survival, his impact, testifies to G-d's existence. That he is here, that he is present, bears witness to G-d's presence in history. There lies the origin of the satanic idea of the Final Solution. If the witness were destroyed, G-d Himself would be dead."

Embracing Ourselves

Many of our beloved brothers and sisters, young and old, progressive and open-minded Jews, raised in the spirit of egalitarianism and equality, have for a long time attempted to suppress this historical truth. We have tried hard to convince ourselves and our children that we were equals with the nations of the earth; that we were seen as part of the collective family of the human race. Anti-Semitism, we told ourselves, was a relic of the past, existing in backward countries not permeated with the spirit of liberty. And if it did exist today, it is because Israel has sinned badly.

Yet the virulent anti-Semitism resurrected during the past decades across the world and the absolutely irrational obsession to demonize Israel, especially in the last two years (tens of thousands of rockets were sent into Israel with the attempt to murder as many Jews as possible; Hamas performed a mini-Holocaust, and yet Israel is blamed!), is beginning to open many of our eyes.

If you open almost any news website in the world or watch any television news station internationally, you can hear the message articulated 3,300 years ago by a sophisticated and spiritual non-Jew: "It is a people that dwells alone, And is not reckoned among the nations."

This is not a curse. It is a privilege, and it is a reality. We are the Divine ambassadors of love, light, hope, and truth. If we wish to thrive we must embrace this truth, acknowledged long ago by our fellow non-Jews. The world is embarrassed by Jews who are embarrassed with themselves; the world respects Jews who respect themselves. The world is ashamed of an Israel that is apologetic about its 4,000-year faith and tradition that the Holy Land is G-d's gift to the Jews.

Only when we acknowledge our "aloneness" will we become a true source of blessing to all of humanity.

1) This week's Torah portion -- Numbers chapter 24.]

[3rd

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Parshas Balak

Was Hashem Bilaam's Agent? Doing it for 'The Cause' vs. for the Money

Rav Yissocher Frand

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 153, Matrilineal vs. Patrilineal Descent In Determining Jewish Identity. Good Shabbos!

Was Hashem Bilaam's Agent? Doing it for 'The Cause' vs. for the Money

Parshas Balak contains the well-known story of Balak the King of Moav worrying about the imminent approach of the Jewish people. Moav correctly surmised that, given the fate of the other kings and nations that had challenged Bnei Yisrael with conventional military tactics, Moav would not stand a chance confronting Bnei Yisrael in traditional battle.

Therefore, Balak devised a "secret weapon" – the chemical weapon of his day. "And he sent messengers to Bilaam son of Beor..." (Bamidbar 22:5) Bilaam had the ability to curse. When he did so, the curse would in fact take effect on its intended victim. So Balak requested that Bilaam curse the "nation that has gone out from Egypt and covered the face of the land."

Bilaam asked the messengers to stay overnight so that he could answer Balak's request the next morning, based upon what Hashem would tell him. Hashem told Bilaam, "Do not go with them; do not curse the people, for they are Blessed" (22:12). Bilaam relayed that message to Balak's messengers.

When Balak heard that Bilaam would not come, he assumed that the reason was because the proposed compensation was inadequate – that he had tried to get away too cheap. Therefore, Balak sent a more prestigious delegation, promising Bilaam a great reward and granting his every request.

Bilaam, not being anyone's fool, casually mentioned to the messengers, "Even if Balak will give me his entire treasury filled with silver and gold, my hands are tied. I can only do that which the Ribono Shel Olam permits me to do." Again, they proceeded through the whole process of waiting overnight.

This time, the Ribono Shel Olam told Bilaam, "If these people are coming likra lecha (the calling is for you), then go with them – just only speak that which I tell you" (22:20). If we can even use such terminology, it appears as if Hashem changed his mind! The first time that Bilaam asked for permission, Hashem said "No. You cannot go!" Then, Hashem appeared to suddenly change His mind. What changed?

Rashi explains the words "Im likra lecha," that if these people are coming for your benefit – to give you payment, go with them. In other words, if you stand to make profit out of this venture, then I have no objection to your going.

That was the difference! The first time, when they asked Bilaam to come, they did not offer him anything – neither money nor honor. In that situation, Hashem told Bilaam, "Do not go." The second time, Balak offered Bilaam wealth and honor. In that situation, Hashem told him, "If you stand to gain from this, then you can go."

Is Hashem worried about Bilaam's livelihood? Is the Ribono Shel Olam acting as Bilaam's agent? Pro bono, you cannot go. If you charge by the hour, then you can go?

I heard a fantastic insight regarding this concept from Rav Shimon Schwab (1908–1995). The difference, says Rav Schwab, is that one of the most potent forces in the universe is doing something "lishma" – for its own sake, without ulterior motives. Doing something altruistically, for the sake of what you believe to be right, is a force beyond belief. However, something that is done in order to make a dollar, rather than for the sake of a cause, loses its potency.

Rav Schwab related this insight in the context of explaining the rise and fall of the Communist system during the previous century. Communism was a very successful movement. Until recently, there were more than a

billion and a half people who lived under Communist domination – and yet in recent times, we have seen Communism disintegrate.

What made Communism so successful? Rav Schwab argued that Communism became so successful because there were "lishma-niks." People like Lenin and Trotsky and Marx wanted to give the world a better order. They wanted to give the world a new system to replace the "bankruptcy of capitalism," in which some people are fantastically wealthy and some beg on the street. In a sense, Communism was based on very noble ideals. These were people who were – for lack of a better word – l'shem "shamayim" (for the sake of Heaven)! They did it for the sake of Communism. They were lishma!

Rav Schwab related that he remembered a Communists parade in his city in Germany in the 1920s. There was a Jewish boy who had rebelled against his parents and marched in the front line of this parade. He was despised. He was the outcast of the entire community. But this did not faze him, because he did it lishma. He believed in what he was doing, like so many of our Jewish brethren, who unfortunately believed in it.

When people are willing to give up their lives and souls for the sake of a cause, it creates a very potent force. We can look back now, over seventy years later, and try to discover what happened to the movement that caused it to collapse. We can suggest that to a large extent, the system failed because it lost this element of lishma. When people saw that the leaders of the various "Iron Curtain" countries had stashed away Swiss bank accounts, and when people saw all the corruption and graft, they quickly recognized that the lishma had been abandoned. Once they lost the element of lishma, the potency of the force was gone.

This is what the Ribono Shel Olam was telling Bilaam: When Balak came and said "Curse the Jews" without offering honor or money, the reason why Bilaam was going was because he hated Jews. "We need to curse Jews! I want to eradicate Jews." This is a philosophy. It is a cause. In that case, "Watch Out! You may not go." Hashem knows that a sincere cause is a lethal and potent force.

However, when Balak said, "I will give you honor and money," then Hashem told Bilaam: If this is for your own benefit – if you are doing it for the money, then go. That is a different story. If you are "in it" for the money and honor, rather than lishma – then your ability will not be nearly as potent.

Transcribed by David Twersky; Seattle, Washington. Edited by Dovid Hoffman; Baltimore, Maryland.

This week's write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tapes on the weekly Torah portion (#153). The corresponding halachic portion for this tape is: Matrilineal vs. Patrilineal Descent In Determining Jewish Identity. ... A complete catalogue can be ordered from the Yad Yechiel Institute, PO Box 511, Owings Mills MD 21117-0511. Call (410) 358-0416 or e-mail tapes@yadyechiel.org or visit <http://www.yadyechiel.org/> for further information.

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from: Ira Zlotowitz <Iraz@klalgovoah.org> date: Jul 10, 2025, 11:56 PM subject: Tidbits • Parashas Balak 5785 In memory of Rav Meir Zlotowitz ZTL

The fast of Shiva Asar B'Tamuz is this Sunday, July 13th. Five tragedies occurred on Shiva Asar B'Tamuz: 1) The first Luchos were broken. 2) In the waning days of the First Bais Hamikdash, the daily tamid offering ceased to be brought. 3) In the waning days of the Second Bais Hamikdash, the walls of Yerushalayim were breached, ultimately leading to its destruction. 4) Apostomos burned a Sefer Torah. 5) An avodah zarah was placed in the Bais Hamikdash.

During chazaras hashatz of Shacharis, the sheliach tzibbur adds Aneinu as a stand-alone berachah (between Go'el Yisrael and Refa'einu). Selichos, Avinu Malkeinu, Tachanun, and Kerias haTorah follow chazaras hashatz. Tefillas Minchah includes Kerias haTorah with the haftarah of Dirshu Hashem. Those fasting add Aneinu (as part of Shema Koleinu). Bircas Kohanim is recited in chazaras hashatz. Sim Shalom

replaces Shalom Rav (Nusach Ashkenaz). Chazaras hashatz is followed by Avinu Malkeinu.

The Three Weeks

The Y'mei Bein Hametzarim, the Three Weeks, begin at shekiya (sunset) on Motzaei Shabbos, July 12th. This period between the 17th of Tamuz and the 9th of Av is a national period of mourning over the Churban of both Batei Mikdash. One should give focus to the churban and galus during this period. Some halachic practices during this time period differ for sefardim. Activities restricted during this period include: Music and Dancing: Children of chinuch age are included. Many poskim are lenient when the music is secondary in nature (e.g. background music on a story recording) or when the listening is not purely for enjoyment (e.g. to help one stay awake while driving). Many poskim are stringent regarding a cappella "sefirah music". Playing and practicing music are permitted for the purpose of earning a livelihood (e.g. a professional musician). Playing music to develop one's skill is a matter of dispute amongst the poskim. Haircuts and Shaving: Men, women and children are included in the prohibition. In cases of discomfort, many permit women to tweeze and remove hair from areas other than the head. One should consult a Rav in regards to a father, sandek and mohel at a bris, and in regard to an avel who finishes the sheloshim mourning period during this time. Weddings: Weddings are not held during this period. An engagement may be celebrated, although without dancing or music. A Sheva Berachos may be held without music, although dancing (and singing) is permitted. Shehecheyanu: We avoid situations that would necessitate reciting the berachah of Shehecheyanu (e.g., eating new fruits, etc.). Miscellaneous: One should consult a Rav regarding signing a contract on a new home, moving into a new home, house decorating and elective surgery.

Summary BALAK: Balak sends messengers to Bilaam • Bilaam refuses to come • Balak sends more distinguished messengers, Bilaam again refuses • Hashem appears to Bilaam and 'permits' him to go • An angel impedes Bilaam's donkey three times • After striking his donkey, the donkey speaks and Bilaam is forced to admit that he wronged her • Bilaam tells Balak that he will speak only that which Hashem will put in his mouth • Balak prepares sacrifices three times • Bilaam blesses the Bnei Yisrael three times • An angry Balak sends Bilaam on his way • Bilaam predicts future events • Bnei Yisrael sin with the daughters of Moav • 24,000 perish in a plague • The plague ceases when Pinchas kills Zimri and Kozbi. Haftarah: The haftarah of Parashas Balak is leined. Michah (5:6-6:8) encourages Klal Yisrael to remember Hashem's many great chasadim, among them that He prevented Bilaam from cursing them.

(במדבר כג:י) "מי מנה עפר יעקב" "Who has counted the dust of Yaakov"

רש"י brings a מדרש that explains בלעם's words to mean: "Who can count the number of מצוות that ישראל כלל fulfills with earth," such as not plowing with a שור וחמור together, planting a mix of different seeds, and the earth mixed in the כוסה's drink. But what's so special about "doing מצוות with earth"?

The Halachah is that a Jew can bring an עולה or שלמים as a קרבן, but גוי can bring only an עולה. R' Yaakov Kamenetzky זצ"ל explains this is because a גוי cannot understand that earthly enjoyment could be uplifted into קדושה and רוחניות. The goy only understands the 100% sanctity of the קרבן עולה, which is completely burned on the מזבח. But a Yid brings even a קרבן שלמים, of which only a small part is burned on the מזבח; the majority of the קרבן is eaten by the owners and כהנים. This is because a Yid understands that גשמיות enjoyment can become רוחניות.

This explains בלעם's 'amazement' here: 'Who can count the many מצוות that ישראל כלל do with earth' — the most גשמיות object in the world! It's incredible how ישראל כלל attaches קדושה even to the most basic גשמיות found around them!]

The Pulpit Must Not be a Political Podium....Most of the Time By Rabbi Efreim Goldberg

The IRS announced it will break with a long-standing rule and now allow houses of worship to endorse candidates for political office

without losing their tax-exempt status. Since 1954, a provision in the tax code called the Johnson Amendment mandates that nonprofit organizations could lose their tax-exempt status if they participate in or intervene in "any political campaign on behalf of or in opposition to any candidate for public office."

The rule was violated regularly in some houses of worship, but the IRS rarely enforced it. In explaining the change, the agency advised that when a house of worship, "in good faith speaks to its congregation, through its customary channels of communication on matters of faith in connection with religious services, concerning electoral politics viewed through the lens of religious faith," it neither participates nor intervenes in a political campaign.

This means rabbis can now legally endorse candidate from the pulpit.

But should they?

I don't believe so. In many or even most elections, reasonable people can come to a reasonable conclusion in either direction. Sure, it is fair, maybe even constructive at times, to try to persuade others to see things as you do, but if you can't, the best practice is to acknowledge that not only is the other person entitled to his or her perspective, but their opinion is reasonable, legitimate, and fair. The fact that they arrived at a different conclusion, even one you are convinced is wrong, doesn't mean they have corrupt character, less patriotism, compromised commitment to Israel, or less devotion to Torah.

Rabbis and shuls should be spaces where people with diverse opinions can congregate, connect, learn together, daven together and work together on the issues that unite us. If rabbis begin to offer public endorsements, especially from the pulpit, will those who disagree with his conclusion still feel comfortable being part of that shul? What will the impact be on public discourse and debate within the community if the rabbi publicly weighs in endorsing one side, particularly invoking his Torah authority in doing so?

Will those who disagree with the rabbi's endorsement and choice continue to turn to him for direction, guidance, and support? Will they ask him their halachic questions, want him to officiate at their simchas and lifecycle events, trust him to advise on sensitive matters?

If the answers to these questions is no, even if it is a small percentage of the shul/community who will feel alienated, is the endorsement worth it? Rabbonim are shepherds, charged with loving and caring for their flock. If some will be driven from the herd or who walk away feeling unwanted, the shepherd has failed in his mission.

Ultimately, as Shlomo HaMelech taught (Mishlei 21:1) "פְּלִגְיִימִים לִב־מֶלֶךְ" – בְּיַד־ה' עֲלֵי-כִלְיָאֲשֶׁר יִחְפֹּץ יִטְוֶנוּ – The heart of a king is like a stream of water in the hand of God, wherever He wishes, He will direct it." We say every single day in our prayers, "Al tivtechu b'neivim, don't place your faith and trust in princes and diplomats."

As God-fearing Jews, we recognize that it is the Master of the Universe who orchestrates domestic, foreign, and of course all policies and their consequences. To be a student of Torah and of Jewish history is to recognize the Almighty's guiding hand. His hand guided our history and ultimately, it is His hand that is guiding our destiny.

I said above that in most elections reasonable people can come to a reasonable conclusion in either direction, but like almost every rule, there are exceptions and we are living through one.

One group of clergy didn't wait for the IRS to change its rule before making a public endorsement. In an article titled, "We are NYC rabbis who support Zohran Mamdani – Here's why," they write:

My co-authors (listed below) and I are among many New York City rabbis who voted for and proudly support Zohran Mamdani in the race for New York City mayor. Our religious tradition calls us to pursue justice and invokes our responsibility to bring it into the world. For many of us, the campaigns of Mamdani and mensch co-endorser Brad Lander marked the first time in a long while that we witnessed the Jewish call for justice clearly reflected in the platforms and character of mayoral candidates. We are confident that Zohran will carry those values forward – we hope, all the way to Gracie Mansion.

Supporting Zohran and Brad was, for us, an explicitly Jewish act, and we're kvelling over our contribution as Jewish New Yorkers to Mamdani's historic victory...

We believe that rent is too high, buses are too slow, and New York should be a welcoming, safe home for everyone – no matter where we came from or how long we've been here. Like Mamdani, we believe...that the Israeli government's treatment of Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank is horrific and cannot be ignored. These convictions reflect a shared political ethic – not identical political beliefs – and they are strong enough to support both real coalition and real community.

The blatant smear tactics we see used against Mamdani are frequently deployed against Muslim elected officials and leaders of color who dare to criticize Israel. These accusations are not about protecting Jews. They are about shutting down necessary reckoning with our city and country's complicity in Israel's occupation...

We believe that Jewish safety will not be secured by demanding unconditional support for Israel or imposing litmus tests on public officials around language. It will be secured through effective policy, education, solidarity, and shared struggle. That is what Mamdani offers...

Absurd, dangerous, and deeply disturbing articles like this one make this New York mayoral election an exception in which reasonable people should not be able come to certain conclusions and rabbis should be vocally opposing this article and this candidate. But let's be clear about the parameters. Mamdani's socialist views, calls to defund the police and dishonesty on his college application don't, in my opinion, justify rabbis issuing an endorsement for his opponents. We should, however, call out and voice opposition to a candidate who is openly against Israel in the clearest possible terms and who proudly stands with antisemites.

I recognize that people will disagree about where to draw the line and when to make the exception, but I hope that reasonable people can agree that stopping the election of a candidate who is undeniably and objectively anti-Israel and by extension antisemitic is not a violation of a rabbi's responsibilities but the fulfillment of it.

Mamdani has refused multiple times to recognize Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state, and he has supported the BDS movement against Israel. While he hasn't himself used the phrase, "Globalize the Intifada," he has refused to condemn those who do and defends their right to use the expression. As the intifada is actually being globalized with Jews suffering attacks around the world in growing numbers, in no place more than New York City, defending the expression is egregious and incites violence against Jews. The founder of the Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) at his alma mater, Mamdani has accused Israel of "genocide" and "apartheid," and has vowed that as mayor he would arrest Benjamin Netanyahu.

Despite the IRS's rule change, don't expect to see political endorsements from the BRS pulpit. But stopping Mamdani isn't a question of politics, it is about self-preservation and the safety and security of the Jewish community.

Drasha

By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

Parshas Balak

Partial View

You have to approach something from the right view. At least that's what Balak, the king of Moab, tried to convince his prime sorcerer who futilely tried to curse the Jewish nation. Though Bilaam had a notorious reputation, with for curses that never failed and the ability to cast spells upon whomever he desired, this time it didn't work. He tried, for a large fee, to curse the Jewish nation, who were camped opposite of Moab; but each time he opened his mouth blessings and not curses were emitted. "How can I curse when G-d is not angry," he exclaimed (Numbers 23:8).

Each time the mission failed, Balak flew into a rage. Bilaam attempted to subvert G-d's intentions and appease Him with sacrifices — all to no avail.

Balak tried another strategy. "Come with me to a different place from there you will see them; however, you will see its edge and not all of it — and you will curse it for me from there" (Numbers 23:13). It didn't work either.

I had a difficult time understanding the new strategy. What's the difference if Bilaam were to see all of Israel or he would stand in a place that only offers a partial view? Is the G-d of Israel not ever-present, protecting them in part as well as in whole? Why would a curse work when Bilaam only viewed Israel from a partial perspective?

A pious and very talented Jewish scholar was placed on trial in a small Polish town outside of Lvov. The charges, brought by a local miscreant, were based on some trumped-up complaint. The young scholar was beloved to his townsfolk as he served in the capacity of the town's shochet (ritual slaughterer), chazzan (cantor), and cheder rebbe. Thus, many people in town were worried as he appeared before a notoriously anti-Semitic judge.

As he presented the charges, the judge mockingly referred to him as Mr. Butcher. In fact all through the preliminary portion of the kangaroo court, the judge kept referring to the beloved teacher and cantor as a butcher, meat vendor or slaughterer. Finally, the young scholar asked permission to speak. "Your honor," he began, "before I begin my defense, I'd like to clarify one point. I serve in many capacities in this shtetl. The people at the synagogue know me as the cantor. The children at the school and all of their parents know me as the teacher. It is only the animals that know me as the butcher!"

The commentaries explain that Bilaam knew that the power of his curses would only take effect by finding a small breach in the beauty of Israel — a breach that he could expand with the power of his evil eye. He looked at all of Israel and could not find any flaw to amplify and use as a curse.

Balak advised him to use another ploy. He made a suggestion that would be followed for generations by all the detractors of Jews. "Only look at them," he said, "from a partial perspective. Go up to the edge of the mountain; you shall see their edge and not all of them — and you will curse them for me from there" (Numbers 23:13).

Balak told Bilaam to concentrate on some poor aspects of the people. It is always possible to find a few exceptions to a most ethical and moral nation. There are those who stand on the edge of the mountain and take a partial view. They talk about Jews who may be accused of crimes or improprieties. They dissect individuals and embellish what they perceive as character flaws or personal faults. They point to those flaws as if they represent the entire person, as others point to harmful Jews as if they were the entire nation. And then they shout their curses. But Bilaam could not find the breach that he was looking for. Because Israel as a nation, as well as each individual Jew, cannot be judged by anything less than a total picture – for we are all one. Good Shabbos

Dedicated in loving memory of our grandmother, Betty Blum of blessed memory.

By Mark & Jolene Bolender & their children Elchanan, Miriam, & Lana Mordechai Kamenetzky – Yeshiva of South Shore
Good Shabbos

Parashat Balak

by Rabbi Nachman Kahana

Taking Time Out to Think

PART ONE

It is now Wednesday morning, the 13th of Tamuz (July 9th) and our Prime Minister, Binyamin Netanyahu is in Washington meeting with the United States President Donald Trump, for the purpose of carving out new realities in the Middle East and elsewhere.

It's too early to know the outcome; nevertheless, the scenario is somewhat similar to what we will be reading from the Torah this coming Shabbat, parashat Balak.

The Parasha's story line is as follows:

The king of nation #1 invites B, a well-known wizard, to condemn and malign nation #2.

B arrives with full intentions to cause irreparable harm to nation #2.

But the fortunes of nation #2 turned out to be far, far better, and the wizard had no choice but to accept the reality and say AMEN and go home.

In our scenario, President Trump invited our PM to Washington for talks regarding the Iranians, Hamas of Gaza, Hezbollah of Lebanon, and Yemen. The PM came with the intention to underscore the evils inherent in those people and to seek extreme sanctions against them.

However, as matters proceeded, the President initiated a different set of plans: to make deals with all these enemies of morality and goodness in the world, to last for at least another three years.

And our PM would have to sign on and say AMEN and go home.

And the Nobel Prize committee, sitting in October, will award the Nobel Peace Prize to the President for presenting these enemies of good the oxygen to stay alive, to regroup their armies and develop the means of mass destruction, without interference.

But HaShem turns bad into good, and good into better and best, and we will all cry out AMEN as our fathers and mothers have done in the past in the face of danger when HaShem performed miracles for His chosen people.

PART TWO

A: Introduction

Tehillim (105,8)

זָכַר לְעוֹלָם בְּרִיתוֹ דְּבַר צִוֵּה לְאַלְפֵי דוֹר

He hath remembered His covenant forever, the word which He commanded to a thousand generations.

The Gemara (Chagiga 13b) explains this pasuk. HaShem recalls (is forever aware of) the bond He made with Avraham to reveal the Torah to his descendants (through Yitzchak and Ya'akov) at the 1000th generation of the world's existence. However, HaShem knew that the world could not exist that long without Torah, so He kept the Torah 974 generations in abeyance before creating the world, and with the 26th generation left to the number 1000 created the world with Adam and Chava and at the 26th generation, at Mount Sinai presented the Torah to Am Yisrael.

B: Time Out to Think

Because of the ongoing political-military-religious fireworks our concentration becomes distorted, and we are often oblivious to that factor which is closest to us, namely – ourselves.

1- Who are we, each and every individual Jew? And what is our role as vital parts of HaShem's collective chosen nation?

2- What are we supposed to do in the fleeting seconds within infinite time that HaShem has allotted to each of us in this transient world?

I suggest:

When studying our sources and learning from prestigious rabbis, it is obvious that Judaism points in one direction: that every Jew and Jewess is an MMM – a Mitzva Making Machine and in Ivrit מכונה מייצרת מצוות.

To be sure, not your ordinary machine, but a perpetual motion machine that man cannot produce due to the limitations imposed by the basic laws that control nature, specifically the laws of thermodynamics.

These laws dictate that energy cannot be created or destroyed (but only transferred. For example, electricity to create heat and light; whereas a perpetual motion machine, by definition, would need to produce more energy than it consumes, which violates this principle. In addition, all systems experience energy losses due to friction, heat, and other factors, leading to a decrease in usable energy over time. A perpetual motion machine would need to reverse these phenomena, which is not possible. Nevertheless, the Creator of all that exists, who designated the guidelines of natural law, is not subject to these laws. And indeed, HaShem has created a perpetual motion machine; it is called Am Yisrael – the Jewish nation.

What does this mean?

The Zohar (parashat Teruma) states:

קודש בריך הוא אסתכל באורייתא וברא עולמא

The holy one, blessed be He, after bringing forth the Torah, used it as a blueprint for all creation. From one of the largest objects in infinite space designated as UY Scuti, a red hypergiant star, with a radius about 1,700 times that of our sun and so immense that nearly 5 billion of our

suns could fit inside of it, down to the smallest sub-atomic particle or wave.

And the Midrash states that HaShem imposed a condition with created matter, that if the Jewish nation at Sinai agrees to accept the role of chosen nation, with all its implications, then there will be a spiritual justification for creation; however, if the nation refuses to accept the yoke of the holy Torah, there would be no reason to create matter and all will revert back to nothingness.

In short: The descendants of Avraham, Yitzchak and Ya'akov were chosen to actualize the potential that HaShem placed in His Torah in a world far away from spirituality. While the other races and nations were brought on the scene to create a living, breathing world of billions of individuals to create the background upon which the Jewish nation will keep HaShem's Torah.

Now what about the Jewish perpetual motion machine?

Pirkei Avot (chap. 4) states:

מצוה גוררת מצוה

A mitzvah begets a mitzvah

A single mitzva engenders another mitzva – even one which requires a greater degree of physical and spiritual energy; hence a Jewish perpetual motion machine that creates new and more powerful energy.

C: The Great Lesson of a Hospital

Several years ago, I spent a few days in Sha'arei Tzedek hospital. On the second day, a distinguished looking gentleman entered the room and introduced himself as Prof. Marin, Director of the hospital, and asked if I was Rabbi Kahana. We began talking and I told the Professor that during my stay I was learning what a hospital is all about. Obviously, it is to restore wellness to the sick. But that's only half the story. The great lesson of a hospital is, in my eyes as a rabbi, to educate people to value the importance of an ordinary so called mundane day in one's life, for two reasons. For the secular person, because the alternative of one more dull day could be a stay in the hospital; and for the Torah observant Jew there are no boring days in life; for every moment one can, and is expected, to be involved in performing mitzvot.

We parted, both more enriched for the half hour that we talked.

I recall often walking along Jaffa Road towards the Old City, consciously seeking opportunities to offer assistance to a passerby. Inevitably, I would come home richer in mitzvot than when I had left.

In Eretz Yisrael we are especially gifted in that we are living in an atmosphere of one big mitzvah – to be present in HaShem's holy acre even when sitting and daydreaming.

Shabbat Shalom,

Nachman Kahana

Ohr Somayach

Insights into Halacha

For the week ending 26 June 2021 / 16 Tammuz 5781

When Do 'The Three Weeks' Start?

by Rabbi Yehuda Spitz

Several years ago, a certain Talmid Chacham could not find an available wedding hall to marry off his daughter. The only open date was the night of Shiva Assar B'Tamuz. To the astonishment of many, he booked it! Although he made sure that the Chuppah was indeed before nightfall, he was heard to have commented that many people do not realize when the Three Weeks actually start...

Bein HaMetzarim

We are currently entering the period of mourning that the Midrash refers of "Bein HaMetzarim,[1] or Between the Confines (Straits)." This period of Three Weeks commemorates the heralding of the beginning of the tragedies that took place prior to the destruction of both Batei Hamikdash, from the breaching of the walls of ancient Jerusalem on the 17th of Tamuz, until the actual destruction of the Beis HaMikdash on the Ninth of Av. As detailed in the Mishnah and Gemara Taanis, both of these days have since become communal Fast Days, in remembrance of the tragedies that happened on these days.[2]

In order to properly commemorate and feel the devastation, halacha dictates various restrictions on us during these "Three Weeks,"[3] getting progressively stringent up until Tisha B'Av itself.[4] These "Three Weeks" restrictions include not getting married, not getting haircuts unless extenuating need,[5] refraining from public music and dancing, not putting oneself in an overly dangerous situation, and not making the shehechyanu blessing on a new item (meaning to

refrain from purchasing a new item which would require one to make said blessing).

Ashkenazic or Sefardic Halacha?

This timeline of restrictions follows Ashkenazic practice as instituted by many Rishonim and later codified by Ashkenazic authorities. Although there are several Sefardic authorities who maintain that Sefardim should at least follow the Ashkenazic minhag of starting the Nine Days restrictions from Rosh Chodesh Av,[6] nevertheless, most Sefardim are only noheg many of these restrictions from the actual week of Tisha B'Av (a.k.a 'Shavua Shechal Bo') as per the ruling of the Shulchan Aruch.[7]

In 5781, Tisha B'Av falls out on a Sunday. This means that accordingly, without an actual 'Shavua Shechal Bo Tisha B'Av,' generally speaking, this year Sefardim will not undertake any Three Weeks or Nine Days restrictions, save for the proscription of partaking of meat and wine from after Rosh Chodesh Av.[8] Hence, this year, Sefardim may shower, shave, and do their laundry all the way up until Shabbos Chazon – which is Erev Tisha B'Av this year. On the other hand, Ashkenazim do not share this dispensation, and would still need to keep all the Three Weeks and Nine Days' restrictions.[9]

Evening Commencement?

There is some debate in recent Rabbinic literature as to when the prohibitions of the 'Three Weeks' start. This author is seemingly annually asked some form of this sheilah quite a few times during the week prior to the 17th of Tamuz alone:

"Rabbi, I know tonight the Three Weeks technically start, as in Judaism the start of a halachic new day is the preceding evening, but since the Fast of the 17th of Tamuz only starts in the morning, can I still get a haircut and/or shave this evening?"

Wedding Permit

The Gadol Hador, Rav Moshe Feinstein, addressed a similar question over sixty years ago: whether one may get married on the night of the 17th of Tamuz.[10] He noted that there is some debate in the early authorities whether the restrictions depend on the fast day itself. Meaning, that if the 'Three Week' restrictions are dependant on the Fast of the 17th of Tamuz, then they would only start at the same time the fast does - on the morning of the 17th. But if they are considered independent of each other, then the restrictions would start on the preceding evening, even though the fast itself would only start the next morning.

Rav Moshe maintained that since this matter is not clear-cut in the Rishonim, and the whole issue of the restrictions of the 'Three Weeks' is essentially a minhag to show communal mourning - which is only recognizable in the morning when everyone is fasting, and especially as a wedding is considered l'tzorech, a considerable need, he ruled that one may be lenient and get married on the eve of the 17th of Tamuz.

The actual case Rav Moshe was referring to was a year with a similar calenderical makeup as ours – 5781 / 2021 – with Shiva Assur B'Tamuz falling out on a Sunday. Hence, with no other dates available, he permitted the chasuna to commence on Motzai Shabbos, before the onset of the actual fast.

However, it is important to note that this does not mean that in a regular year, if one can plan a wedding on the 16th of Tamuz with the Chuppah before shkiya that they should wait around until after nightfall to start the wedding. Obviously, Rav Moshe would only permit such a chasuna if one was stuck (l'tzorech) and would optimally prefer the wedding to at least commence while still the 16th of Tamuz (meaning before shkiya).[11]

Haircuts [not] Included

Several poskim, including the Rivevos Efraim and the She'arim Metzuyanim B'Halacha,[12] extrapolated that Rav Moshe would have ruled similarly for a haircut, that if there is great need, then one may be lenient as well, on the eve of the 17th of Tamuz.[13]

However, Rav Shmuel Halevi Vosner disagreed with this theory and maintains that for a wedding (especially on Motzai Shabbos, which actually was the original question asked to Rav Moshe) there is more halachic rationale to rely upon than for a simple haircut. Furthermore, he concludes, haircuts are generally not considered a great need. Therefore, he ruled that certainly one may not be lenient regarding a haircut.[14]

Interestingly, years later, Rav Moshe revisited the topic and actually addressed this issue directly. Rav Moshe maintained that in his opinion the same leniency as weddings does indeed apply to haircuts, and accordingly one may therefore take a haircut on the evening of the 17th of Tamuz in times of great need, and not as Rav Vosner understood his opinion.[15]

Contemporary Consensus [In Israel]

Nevertheless, many contemporary halachic decisors, especially those living in Eretz Yisrael, including Rav Vosner himself, as well as the Steipler Gaon, Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, Rav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv, Rav Yisrael Yaakov Fischer, the Tzitz Eliezer, Rav Chaim Kanievsky, Rav Moshe Halberstam, Rav Moshe Sternbuch, Rav Nissim Karelitz, and mv'r Rav Yaakov Blau,[16] maintain that the issue is essentially a moot point, and rule that even for a wedding, let alone a haircut, one should not exercise leniency, as the evening of

the 17th is already considered part and parcel of the "Three Weeks," and thus is included in the restrictions.[17]

So, even if one feels he needs a haircut desperately (perhaps someone suffering from lycanthropy[18]) on the 16th of Tamuz,[19] it is definitely preferable to get a haircut right away and not wait until evening and thereby subject oneself to a halachic dispute.

Nidcheh Nafka Minah

However, there is a practical difference as to when the fast of Shiva Assur B'Tamuz is observed. As mentioned previously, this year the 17th of Tamuz actually falls out on Sunday. Yet, in years when Shiva Assur B'Tamuz falls out on Shabbos, and thereby the fast being pushed off a day and observed on Sunday (such as last occurred in 5779/ 2019), this entire annual debate becomes academic.

This is because in such a year, Motzai Shabbos / Shiva Assur B'Tamuz is really Shemoneh Assur B'Tamuz, the 18th of Tamuz. As Rav Moshe concluded in his original responsum,[20] in such a case, everyone would agree that even in extenuating circumstances one may not celebrate a wedding, as certainly by that point the halachos of Bein HaMetzarim have already taken effect.

All the same, it's important for us not to lose the forest for the trees. Instead of exclusively debating the finer points of whether a haircut is permitted or forbidden, it is important for us all to remember that these restrictions were instituted by our Rabbanim as a public show of mourning during the most devastating time period on the timeline of the Jewish year. As the Mishnah Berurah (quoting the Rambam)[21] explicitly notes, the focus of these days of sorrow serve to remind us of the national tragedies that befell our people, and the events that led to them. Our goal should then be to utilize these restrictions to focus inward, at our own personal challenges in our relationship with G-d, and rectify that negativity which led to these tragic events in our history.

Postscript:

Recently, this author received a related interesting halachic query: "Someone was about to get married on the 16th of Tammuz, i.e. the night of the wedding would be the 17th of Tamuz. To avoid problems he made sure that everything was ready, in order that the Chuppah would be before sundown to ensure that the wedding would be permissible according to all opinions. Well, as you might expect, not everything went as planned and there was a hold up – due to the fault of the hall owner. The Chuppah could not actually start until after nightfall and the baal simchah – holding as the more stringent poskim - refused to "march the aisle." The hall owner, on the other hand, refused to reimburse them, claiming that running late is standard at weddings. Additionally, there are poskim who rule that there is room to be lenient on the night of the 17th, and therefore it is the baal simchah's own fault if he doesn't want to rely on them. Therefore, he feels that he is still entitled to his payment. Now what?"

This author replied that this is a painful question, but the monetary issues should depend on what the nature of the exact contract is. If they expressly made up that if this happens due to the hall owner's negligence they should get reimbursed, then they certainly should. If not, and they really held that it is a chiyuv to be machmir not to get married on the night of the 17th of Tamuz, then they shouldn't have taken the hall in the first place, as delays are quite a common occurrence at weddings.

Either way, once they were there and the chassan and kallah were ready to actually get married, it would be an extreme bizayon (embarrassment) not to let them get married. The baalei simcha would be at fault in that case, as this would become a prime example of a chumrah which leads to extreme kula! Halacha has many dispensations for chassan and kallah and one sticking to his shitta and ruining their wedding in the name of "halacha" is just plain wrong, especially as there is no specific mekor in Gemara for the Three Week restrictions and was actually established by later poskim (Rishonim).

To gain further clarity, this author raised this question with Rav Chaim Yosef Blau shlit"a, son of mv'r Rav Yaakov Blau zt"l and a Moreh Tzedek of the Badat"z Eida Hachareidis in Yerushalayim, and he answered similarly to what I responded previously, that even according to the machmirim (which he was as well), if the chasuna is ready to start and it is already the night of the 17th of Tamuz, nevertheless, they should still get married.

Rav Blau proceeded to cite an excellent proof to his ruling from the Rema in Hilchos Shabbos.[22] The Rema ruled that even though we hold that one may not get married on Shabbos, still, in a case when it was not previously possible, and only now when it is already Shabbos the wedding was ready to take place, they should still get married right then! This is due to Kavod HaBriyos of the chassan and kallah, and has the status of shaas hadchak, extenuating circumstance.

He added that the Rema was not just being hypothetical in his ruling; it was based on an actual Maaseh Shehaya (case) detailed in his response, Shu"t HaRema.[23] If so, Rav Blau concluded, then certainly in this case, they should have the wedding on the spot, especially as the whole restriction not to get married during the Three Weeks is at most Derabbanan, and the Gemara teaches us that "Gadol Kavod HaBriyos Shedocheh Lo Sa'aseh SheBaTorah", which is referring to

Issurei Derabbanan.[24] This refers to the rule that basic human dignity can at times trump Rabbinic consideration, this case included.

A fascinating insight indeed!

This article was written L'Iluy Nishmas R' Chaim Baruch Yehuda ben Dovid Tzvi and l'zechus Shira Yaffa bas Rochel Miriam v'chol yotzei chalatzeha for a yeshua sheleimah teikeif umiyad!

For any questions, comments or for the full Mareh Mekomos / sources, please email the author: yspitz@ohr.edu.

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His recently published English halacha sefer, "Insights Into Halacha: Food: A Halachic Analysis," focusing on the myriad halachos related to food, is now available in Jewish bookstores worldwide as well as through Feldheim.com.

A book review is available here: <https://www.theyeshivaworld.com/news/headlines-breaking-stories/1951391/seforim-in-review-food-a-halachic-analysis.html>

[1] This three-week season is referred to as such by the Midrash Rabbah (cited by Rashi in his commentary to Eicha Ch. 1, verse 3).

[2] See Mishnah in Masseches Taanis 26b and accompanying Gemara. According to Rav Saadia Gaon, as cited by the Shibolei Leket (263, Ha'arugah HaTishui, Seder Taanis, Din Arbah Tzomos, pg. 252), these three weeks are the same three weeks that Daniel fasted, and therefore maintains that we should not eat meat nor drink wine the entire 'Three Weeks'! Additionally, the Kol Bo (62) adds that since on Shiva Assar B'Tamuz the Korban Tamid and its Nisuch HaYayin were batul, there are those who are nahug not to eat meat or drink wine already starting from then. However, it must be noted that others, including the Shibolei Leket himself, are of the opinion that Daniel fasted during Chodesh Nissan; and that although several authorities cite such an opinion [see for example Tur & Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chaim 551, 9), Chayei Adam (vol. 2, 133, 8) and Ben Ish Chai (Year 1, Parshas Devarim 15); not that they actually rule that way], nevertheless, abstaining from meat and wine the entire 'Three Weeks' is not the normative halacha.

[3] This is following general Ashkenazic minhag; many Sefardim only start most restrictions on beginning of the week that Tisha B'Av falls out on. Although there is no mention of such in the Gemara, these 'Three Week' restrictions follow Ashkenazic practice as instituted by many Rishonim, including the Ramban (Toras Ha'Adam pg. 81, 4th column), Rashba (Shu"t vol. 1:306), Rokeach (310 s.v. mihu), Orchos Chaim (Hilchos Tisha B'Av 10), Ohr Zarua (vol. 2:414), Machzor Vitry (263), Tur (O.C. 551; citing the Yerushalmi), Kol Bo (62), and Abudraham (pg. 69b; citing Rav Hai Gaon), and later codified by Ashkenazic authorities including the Rema (Darchei Moshe - Orach Chaim 551, 5 and Hagahah ad loc. 2 and 4), the Derech Hachaim (ad loc. 1), the Shevus Yaakov (Shu"t vol. 2, 35), the Chayei Adam (vol. 2, 133, 8), the Kitzur Shulchan Aruch (122, 1), the Aruch Hashulchan (Orach Chaim 551, 8), and the Mishnah Berurah (ad loc. 18). Although there are several Sefardic authorities who maintain that Sefardim should at least follow the Ashkenazic minhag of starting the 'Nine Days' restrictions from Rosh Chodesh Av, nevertheless, most Sefardim are only nohag most of these restrictions from the actual week of Tisha B'Av as per the ruling of the Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chaim 551, 10).

[4] See Shulchan Aruch, Rema and their commentaries to Orach Chaim 551.

5 However, it is important to note that there are certain specific situations where many poskim do give dispensation for haircuts during the Three Weeks (and in certain extreme situations even during the Nine Days). See Bach (Orach Chaim 551, 7), Taz (ad loc. 14), Elya Rabba (ad loc. 27), Ba'er Heitiv (ad loc. 18), Shaarei Teshuva (ad loc. 18), Bais Meir (beg. Orach Chaim 551), Shu"t Sheilas Yaavetz (vol. 1, 77), Shu"t Chasam Sofer (Orach Chaim 158 and Yoreh Deah 348 s.v. v'ee golyach), Shu"t Noda B'Yehuda (Kamma, Orach Chaim 28 and Dagul Mervavah - Orach Chaim 551, 4), Shu"t Maharam Shick (Yoreh Deah 371), Mishna Berura (551, 87 and Shaarei Tziyun ad loc. 93), Kaf Hachaim (ad loc. 82), Shu"t Igros Moshe (Choshen Mishpat vol. 1, 93 and Orach Chaim vol. 4, 102 and vol. 5, 24, 9), Shaarim Metzuyanin B'Halacha (120, Kuntress Acharon 8 and 122, 5), and Maadanei Shlomo (on Moadim, Bein HaMetzarim pg. 53 and 54). For more on this topic, see R' Zvi Ryzman's recent excellent Ratz KaTzvi on Maagalei HaShana (vol. 2, Sefiras HaOmer, 14) at length.

[6] See Knesses Hagedolah (O.C. 551, Hagahos on the Tur 5), Ben Ish Chai (Year 1, Parashas Devarim 12), and Kaf Hachaim (O.C. 551:44, 77, 78, and 80).

[7] Shulchan Aruch (O.C. 551, 4), based on the Rambam (Hilchos Taanios Ch. 5:7). See Magen Avraham (ad loc. 17 and end 35), Pri Megadim (ad loc. E.A. 17 and 36), Mishnah Berurah (ad loc. 38 and Shaar Hatziyun ad loc. 40), Ben Ish Chai (ibid.), and Orach Chaim (ibid. 77 and 78). For more on this topic, see Shu"t Yabea Omer (vol. 6, O.C.46 and vol. 9, O.C. 50:1), Shu"t Yechaveh Daas (vol. 1:41 and vol. 4:36), Rav Mordechai Eliyahu's Darchei Halacha glosses to the Kitzur Shulchan Aruch (122:19), Rav Yaakov Hillel's Ahavat Shalom Luach (Dinei Shavua Shechal Bo Tisha B'Av), and Yalkut Yosef (Kitzur Shulchan Aruch, O.C. 551:1).

[8] Although generally speaking, even these restrictions most Sefardim do not observe on Rosh Chodesh Av itself. See Shu"t Ohr L'Tzion (vol. 3, Ch. 26:3), Shu"t Yechaveh Daas (vol. 1:41), Rav Mordechai Eliyahu's Darchei Halacha glosses to the Kitzur Shulchan Aruch (122:12), Ahavat Shalom Luach (ibid.), and Yalkut Yosef (ibid.). This was addressed in a previous article titled "Meat on Rosh Chodesh Av?"

[9] This does not mean there aren't any dispensations available for Ashkenazim. For example, more people are permitted to be invited to a fleishig Seudas Mitzva (see Rema O.C. 551:10, and Mishnah Berurah ad loc. 77; citing the Derech Hachaim 201:12). Also more permissibility regarding cutting one's nails (see Mishnah Berurah ad loc. 20) and washing children's clothing (Mishnah Berurah ad loc. 77; citing the Chayei Adam, vol. 2:133:18). Perhaps if one has a specific hetter to go swimming for his health "until Shavua Shechal Bo," he would also be able to benefit from Tisha B'Av being on Sunday this year, etc.

[10] Shu"t Igros Moshe (Orach Chaim vol. 1, 168).

[11] See Shu"t Rivevos Efraim (vol. 1, 375), as well as Shu"t Videbata Bam (vol. 1, 152 s.v. v'shamati and v'laasos), and Rabbi Yitzchok Frankel's Kuntress Yad Dodi (pg. 132, Hilchos Bein HaMetzarim, Question 1 a-c; who cite Rav Dovid Feinstein explaining his father, Rav Moshe's, position). This author has heard that Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky as well ruled akin to Rav Moshe and permitted a wedding on the eve of the 17th of Tamuz when there were no other alternatives except to wait until after Tisha B'Av.

[12] Shu"t Rivevos Efraim (ibid.) and Sh'erim Metzuyanin B'Halacha (122, Kuntress Acharon 1).

[13] However, the Rivevos Efraim makes an important point. He stresses that in light of the fact that the Kaf Hachaim (Orach Chaim 551, 207) mentions many machmirim that the prohibitions start from the night of Shiva Assur B'Tamuz (see footnotes 16 and 17) and not the following morning, therefore one may only rely on this to take a haircut only "l'tzorech gadol - great need." Indeed, when Rav Moshe later revisited this topic (Shu"t Igros Moshe - Orach Chaim vol. 3, end 100, s.v. u'vadavar and Orach Chaim vol. 4, 112, 2) he stressed that his hetter is only "l'tzorech gadol." This understanding was also stressed by Rav Dovid Feinstein as cited in Shu"t Videbata Bam (vol. 1, 152 s.v. v'shamati). See also Shu"t Shraga HaMeir (vol. 2, 13) who ruled similarly, that one may exclusively be lenient if it is "shayach nivul gadol."

[14] Shu"t Shevet HaLevi (vol. 10, 81, 2).

[15] Shu"t Igros Moshe (Orach Chaim vol. 3, end 100, s.v. u'vadavar and Orach Chaim vol. 4, 112, 2).

[16] See Shu"t Shevet Halevi (ibid. and vol. 8, 168, 7), Orchos Rabbeinu (vol. 2, pg. 127, 6), Halichos Shlomo (Moadim vol. 2, Ch. 13, footnote 1; quoting Rav Avigdor Nebenzahl), Doleh U'Mashkeh (pg. 207 - 208 and footnote 507; citing Rav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv and Rav Chaim Kanievisky; however Rav Elyashiv is quoted as maintaining that one only needs to be stringent from Tzeis HaKochavim, and not shkiyah),

Halichos Even Yisrael (Moadim vol. 1, Yemei Bein HaMetzarim, pg. 326, 1), Shu"t Tzitz Eliezer (vol. 10, 26), Shu"t Divrei Moshe (33), Moadim U'Zmanim (vol. 8, 338), Chut Shani (Hilchos Shabbos vol. 2 pg. 325), and Shu"t Shraga HaMeir (vol. 2, 13). This author has heard Rav Blau zt"l's shitta from his son Rav Chaim Yosef, Moreh Tzedek of the Badatz Eida Hachareidis aChraisid Hof Yerushalayim and Rav of Shechnas Pag"i. A similar assessment is given by Rav Efraim Padwa of London in his recent Shu"t Minchas Efraim (1).

[17] This consensus follows the opinion of the Chida (Shu"t Chaim Sha'al vol. 1, 34) who maintains that even though the walls of Yerushalayim were breached in the daytime of Shiva Assur B'Tamuz, nevertheless, the preceding night was also time of war and the puranios already started from that evening. Accordingly, Chazal were more lenient merely regarding eating and drinking. The Butchatcher Rav (Eshel Avraham, Orach Chaim 551, 2) was extremely stringent about this as well, and even starting from Bein Hashmashos. However, it is known that Rav Elyashiv held (cited in Doleh U'Mashkeh ibid.) that one needs to be stringent only from Tzeis Hakochavim, and not shkiyah. (Parenthetically, in all practicality, Rav Elyashiv's "Tzeis Hakochavim" might actually have been an earlier zman than the Butchatcher Rav's "Bein Hashmashos"). Additionally, as mentioned previously, the Kaf Hachaim (ibid.) cites many authorities who were makpid with the restrictions starting from nightfall.chaim

[18] For more on this topic, see Rabbeinu Efraim al HaTorah (Parshas Vayechi s.v. Binyomin ze'ev yitraf).

[19] This author has heard from Rav Efraim Greenblatt zt"l, the noted Rivevos Efraim, that "l'tzorech gadol" for a haircut to allow leniency would include meeting the president or an important dignitary, which attending while not properly groomed would be looked upon askance.

[20] Shu"t Igros Moshe (Orach Chaim vol. 1, 168 s.v. aval). See also the recently published Mesores Moshe (vol. 2, 258, pg. 132).

[21] Mishnah Berurah (549, 1), based on the Rambam (Hilchos Taanios Ch. 5, 1). See Rav Yosef Eliyahu Henkin's essential Ezras Torah Luach (5776; pg. 125 - 126) who exhorts us to the importance of this, especially in our times, to specifically rectify the Aveiros that caused the destructions of the Batei HaMikdash. He adds that it is a 'Mitzvah Gadol' to set a time daily to learn sefer Chofetz Chaim for this purpose. Other Gedolim, such as Rav Yisrael Yaakov Fischer (cited in Halichos Even Yisrael, Moadim vol. 1, Yemei Bein HaMetzarim, pg. 326, 2), would make sure to perform a special daytime Tikkun Chatzos (see Mishnah Berurah 551, 103, citing the Arizal) to this end.

[22] Rema (Orach Chaim 339, 4).

[23] Shu"t HaRema (125; see also Aruch Hashulchan, Orach Chaim 339, 14).

[24] Gemara Brachos (19b). This rule is invoked in many other cases regarding the importance of human dignity. See previous article titled "The Tattoo Taboo and Permanent Makeup Too". Disclaimer: This is not a comprehensive guide, rather a brief summary to raise awareness of the issues. In any real case one should ask a competent Halachic authority.

L'iluy Nishmas the Rosh HaYeshiva - Rav Chonoh Menachem Mendel ben R' Yechezkel Shraga, Rav Yaakov Yeshaya ben R' Boruch Yehuda.

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Rabbi Yochanan Zweig

This week's Insights is dedicated in loving memory of Yitzchak ben Avraham, Erwin Andisman. "May his Neshama have an Aliya!"

Master Manipulator

Balak the son of Zippor saw all that Yisroel had done to the Emori. Moav was very frightened of the people because they were many, and Moav was disgusted in the face of Bnei Yisroel (22:2-3).

This week's parsha opens with a remarkable statement: Balak took notice of what Bnei Yisroel had done to the great kings of the time – Sichon and Og. This seems peculiar as Sichon and Og were the two great world power leaders of that time; their defeat at the hands of this upstart nation had to have attracted worldwide notice. What was it that Balak "saw" that had escaped everyone else's attention?

Even more perplexing, if the nation of Moav was frightened by the death and destruction that Bnei Yisroel had wrought upon the Emori, logically Moav should be frightened of their incredible power – so why does the Torah say that they were frightened by the numbers of the Jewish nation? Additionally, what does the statement "Moav was disgusted in the face of Bnei Yisroel" add to the narrative?

What Balak saw was an opportunity for him to create a leadership role for himself. In reality, there was really no reason for Moav to be afraid. After all, Bnei Yisroel had purposefully avoided conflict with the nation of Edom because they were cousins (descendants of Eisav – Yaakov's brother). Both Moav and Midian were cousins as well; Moavites were descendants of Lot (Sarah's brother) and those of Midian were the children of Avraham (by second wife Keturah). Thus, Bnei Yisroel had no interest in a war with them.

But Balak's genius was in the creation of a fabricated animosity. He pointed out that the Jewish nation was exceedingly great in number and would undoubtedly want to settle in the vicinity. He may have even known that the great multitude of Erev Rav wouldn't have a portion in the land of Israel or that some of the tribes wished to settle on Moav's side of the Jordan.

Balak singlehandedly created the first immigrant and refugee crisis. This was the disgust that Moav felt; they were disgusted with the prospect of having to live and share land with a nation that would totally devour all the natural resources. This is why Bnei Yisroel are described as "this

nation will chew up our entire surroundings as an ox chews up grass of the field” (22:4).

Balak also highlighted the futility of trying to defeat Bnei Yisroel through a conventional war. In this manner, he created a desperate situation that seemingly had no solution. But of course Balak had a plan all along. After scaring Moav into looking to their perennial enemy (Midian – home country of Moshe Rabbeinu) for advice, Midian responded that the only solution was to find someone who had the power to get Hashem to act.

Balaam was the equivalent of Moshe Rabbeinu in prophecy. As Rashi notes (22:5), Balak and Balaam were from the same place and had known each other years earlier (Balaam had, in fact, prophesied that Balak would become a king someday). Balak, therefore, held the power to bring this solution into a reality. In effect, Balak created the mirage of a problem and then positioned himself to be the only path to a solution. That is why the Torah says “Balak son of Zippor was king of Moav at that time” (22:4) – Rashi points out that he was appointed king to deal with this emergency situation. What Balak saw that no one else saw was an opportunity for him to become appointed as king.

For the Love of Money

Balaam answered and said to the servants of Balak, “If Balak gives me his house full of silver and gold, I cannot transgress the word of Hashem, my God, to do anything small or great” (Bamidbar 22:18).

Rashi comments that this possuk reflects negatively on Balaam’s character, indicating that he was plagued by a desire for other people’s money. By speaking of the possibility that Balak would give him so much wealth, Balaam indicated that he coveted Balak’s assets, which the Torah views as a fundamental character flaw.

This desire for wealth is generally treated as a negative desire. Yet we find similar statements made by great figures in Jewish history, and their expression of this sentiment is actually to their credit. Dovid Hamelech, for instance, declares in Sefer Tehillim, “The Torah of Your Mouth is better for me than thousands of gold and silver” (119:72). If desiring thousands of gold and silver was an abominable character trait he wouldn’t be saying much about the value of the Torah. Similarly, the Tanna Rabbi Yosi ben Kisma relates in Pirkei Avos (6:9) that he told someone, “Even if you give me all the gold, silver, precious stones, and pearls in the world, I would live only in a place of Torah.”

The statements of these great men are certainly not viewed as indicative of a shameful lust for wealth; on the contrary, both Dovid Hamelech and Rabbi Yosi ben Kisma appreciated the value of money, but they considered Torah far more important and precious. That being the case, why is Balaam’s statement viewed as painting a negative picture of his personality?

There is one significant difference between the words of Balaam and the statements of Dovid Hamelech and Rabbi Yosi ben Kisma: Rashi notes specifically that Balaam desired the money of others while both Dovid Hamelech and Rabbi Yosi ben Kisma speak of its value in general terms. Balaam’s character flaw is his desire for other people’s money; not his appreciation of money’s inherent value.

It is not a shortcoming for a person to understand and appreciate the value of money. Many wonderful things can be accomplished with money; when used properly it is a vehicle for accomplishing much of what Hashem desires for our world – it is certainly needed to open Torah institutions and chesed organizations throughout the world.

Thus, Dovid Hamelech and Rabbi Yosi ben Kisma are applauded for their statements. Balaam’s flaw, meanwhile, lay in his desire for other

people’s wealth. If we just read his words literally we can see that he didn’t just want wealth; he wanted Balak’s house full of silver and gold. The tenth of the Aseres Hadibros is the prohibition of coveting another person’s belongings, which many Rishonim view as the most severe of the Ten Commandments. There is nothing wrong with having a desire for a beautiful home or for other assets, for if these things are used properly, they can make a positive impact. However, it is terribly improper to harbor a desire to take things for oneself that belong to someone else. Coveting another person’s belongings is where the sin begins, and that is the terrible character trait that Balaam exhibited.

And Loyalty Above All...

The officers of Moav came to Balak and reported that “Balaam refuses to return with us.” Balak continued (to try and recruit Balaam) by sending more officers of a higher rank than those previously. They came to Balaam and said “so said Balak – do not refrain from coming to me for I will honor you very much [...]” Balaam answered and said to the servants of Balak [...] (22:14-18).

Rashi (22:13) points out that Balaam had given Balak’s first emissaries the message that they were not important enough to request his presence at Balak’s behest. Balak, who was very keen on having Balaam come and curse Bnei Yisroel, therefore sent messengers that were of higher ranking than the first group.

Many Rishonim (Rosh, Rabbeinu Bachaye) question the Torah’s description of the higher ranking officers as “the servants of Balak.” Calling these high ranking officers “servants” seems to imply that they were of a very lowly stature. How does this fit in with the narrative that Balak actually sent higher ranking officers?

Balak, as we have seen, was a very astute political leader who certainly understood the tenets of building an effective hierarchy of command. Obviously, in order to be promoted to a position of responsibility one must be capable; but among those who are capable of doing the job how does a leader decide who is of a higher and who is of a lesser rank?

The answer is loyalty. Those who are most trusted and loyal are the ones who are brought closest to the king. The term “eved – servant” doesn’t always refer to one of lowly stature; often it implies the relationship between the master and the servant. The Gemara has the maxim “the hand of the servant is as the hand of the master.” In other words, the servant is an extension of the master. In such a situation, only the closest and most trusted confidant is placed into that position.

This was the position of both Moshe who is called “eved Hashem,” and Eliezer who is called “eved Avraham.” In both of those instances the term eved doesn’t mean a lowly servant. Quite the opposite – both of them acted in lieu of their master, in modern parlance it would be akin to a “power of attorney.”

By calling the second group “the servants of Balak,” Balaam was actually recognizing their unique position as trusted confidantes of Balak, and worthy of his consideration to mull Balak’s offer to come and curse the Jewish people.

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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 Pesachim 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'tzo" (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'hilim 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'kaleikha 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 Petorite 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 tragi-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 withhold 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 is 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 Ribbono 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 Ribbono 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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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 case 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':

Avraham

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 Tovv 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 prefaces 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