

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

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**Devrei Torah are now Available for Download (normally by noon on Fridays) from [www.PotomacTorah.org](http://www.PotomacTorah.org). Thanks to Bill Landau for hosting the Devrei Torah archives.**

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In thinking about a personal message for this Shabbat, I reviewed what I have written in the past. I soon realized that I probably cannot improve on my message for Balak from last year. I am therefore reprinting some sections, and adding some additional comments.

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

Increasing numbers of anti-Semitic attacks in many parts of the world fit with our parsha, Balak. After months of reading about the history of the Jews, from Avraham through the final year in the Midbar, we suddenly encounter a parsha devoted entirely to non-Jews (until the final seven pasookim). The people of Moab and Midian plot to curse and destroy B'Nai Yisrael and occasionally observe them going about their lives, unaware of the evil plans to destroy them. The intense anti-Semitism of Moab and Midian is a fitting introduction to the Three Weeks, the period leading up to the destruction of the Temples in Jerusalem, a period that normally begins shortly after we read this parsha.

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

As many commentators have written, the Torah provides numerous parallels between Bilaam and other individuals in the Torah. With specific language and incidents, the Torah compares Bilaam's journey with his donkey and two young men with Avraham's journey taking Yitzhak and two young men to the Akeidah. (The Devrei Torah by Rabbis Eitan Mayer and Yitz Etshalom, attached by E-mail, delve in depth into this parallel.) Rabbi David Fohrman also observes that Balak's fear of B'Nai Yisrael in many ways, and with some identical language, mirrors Paro's fear of the Jews in Egypt before the plagues and Exodus.

Balak wants Bilaam to curse B'Nai Yisrael, because he believes that God curses those whom Bilaam curses and blesses those whom Bilaam curses. God's promise to Avraham is different. His promise is that He will bless those who bless Avraham (and his descendants) and curse those who curse them. The promise to Avraham and we Jews is reflexive – we follow the mitzvot and the blessings come to us. Balak wanted Bilaam to do the cursing rather than rely on God to do the cursing. The promise does not work that way – indeed, God promises to curse any who curse the Jews. The formula that Balak and Bilaam pursued was a way to get them cursed, not a way to curse the Jews!

My friend Arnold Rosenthal elaborated on this difference in a recent E-mail to me:

*Hashem protects us from the nations who seek to destroy us -- and even non Jews can end up appreciating what we have to offer and bless us. History proves that Hashem does answer our prayers, and He saves us. Developing a personal relationship with Hashem takes lots of work but is something we all need to strive for. This personal relationship with our Creator is the sine qua non of yiddishkeit.*

While God would not permit Bilaam to curse the Jews, He did not prevent Bilaam, the political advisor, from telling Midian how to make the Jews curse themselves (by leading them into idolatry and sexual sin). We find soul mates of Bilaam among our people today – such as Jews active in BDS and J Street. These self hating Jews blame Israel and Jews for defending ourselves from neighboring people who keep attacking (in the spirit of Moab and Midian), hoping to destroy Israel. They also support anti-Semites all over the world. Idolatry and senseless hatred (of our fellow Jews) led God to destroy the temples in Jerusalem. Many of our people believe that parallel sins are the reason why we are still waiting for Moshiach to come. We know the answer – and it is us (our people) more than anything else. If we do not learn from the past, our punishment will be to live through the same mistakes again. The Germany of my parents' generation was bad enough for all time. Let us not help a new Hitler to bring it back again. Rather, let us start working on tikkun olam, doing our part to work toward a solution for hatred. Efforts to help new Jewish immigrants from the Ukraine are an excellent example of positive tikkun olam. We should also increase our commitment to helping Israel. Rather than senseless hatred, we can look toward unqualified love for fellow Jews. By learning more about the situation and facts in Israel, we can prepare answers to those who blame Israel in every dispute involving neighboring people and countries.

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. Rabbi Cahan joined us in our pride for our son Major Evan Fisher, MD, and his service for the U.S. Air Force.

As we start our three weeks of mourning over the destruction of the Temples in Jerusalem and many other disasters during this period, let us do our part to protect B'Nai Yisrael and to work toward a better future for our children and grandchildren. Shabbat Shalom.

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**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](http://www.alephbeta.org). Please join me in supporting this wonderful organization, which has increased its scholarly work during the pandemic, despite many of its supporters having to cut back on their donations.**

**Please daven for a Refuah Shlema for Yehoshua Mayer HaLevi ben Nechama Zelda, Yonatan Ophir ben Ilana, Leib Dovid ben Eitel, Asher Shlomo ben Ettie, Mordechai ben Chaya, Hershel Tzvi ben Chana, Uzi Yehuda ben Mirda Behla, David Moshe ben Raizel; Zvi ben Sara Chaya, Eliav Yerachmiel ben Sara Dina, Reuven ben Masha, Meir ben Sara, Oscar ben Simcha; Sharon bat Sarah, Noa Shachar bat Avigael, Kayla bat Ester, and Malka bat Simcha, who need our prayers.** Please contact me for any additions or subtractions. Thank you.

Shabbat Shalom,  
Hannah & Alan

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**Dvar Torah: Balak: Such a Rebbe!**  
by Rabbi Label Lam © 2010

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

Our sages tell us that Bilam's praise of the Jewish People are worthy of consideration to be included in the twice daily SHEMA. One might wonder how that wicked guy almost made "the big time." The answer is that he did not almost make it, he did make it. That is wildly incongruous. How do the words of some misguided wordsmith looking to sell his powers of prophecy for profit make it into the heart of our scriptures? Bilam's descriptions of our people are amongst the most flattering yet true one can find in the whole Torah or anywhere. Why do such great praises emanate from a degenerate like that while the rest of TANACH is replete with hyper-critical comments and reports about our people and our leaders?

Shlomo HaMelech writes, "Indeed good is open rebuke out of hidden love. Faithful are the wounds of a friend, while the kisses of an enemy are abundant? (Mishlei 27:5-6) A secret is revealed in these words. Consider the motivation of the one that delivers either a plethora of praise or a stinging rebuke. The Malbim explains that this is manifested in the way loving parents discipline their children. We are meant to understand and appreciate that when a real friend chastises it is out of love and concern. He wants to return his friend to the proper path. The enemy, however, showers his victim with words of affection only to encourage him to act inappropriately or to lull him into a false sense of security the way a calf is fattened for the slaughter. Therefore, rebuke from a friend is better than a multitude of compliments from an antagonist.

The following is excerpted from Yaffa Eliach's Chassidic Tales of the Holocaust: There had been for whatever reason a long standing rivalry that raged between the Chassidim of Munkacs and Belz. In the city of Munkacs there was a Belzer Chassid by the name of Moshe Silber.

There he maintained his oppositional stance which was the cause of many a lively argument. During one of these heated debates the Munkacser Rebbe turned suddenly and lashed out at this Belzer Chassid with a sharp rebuke, "You will die with your Tallis Katan (Tsitsis) on!"

The words penetrated the heart of this Belzer Chassid, Moshe Silber and there they remained. Years passed. World War II engulfed Europe. In April 1944 a brutal deportation Aktion was initiated in Munkacs, and by May 30 the city was pronounced Judenrein (Jew free). The ghetto had been liquidated and all its Jews deported to Auschwitz. Among the deportees was that same Belzer Chassid, Reb Moshe Silber.

Despite the hunger, slave labor, and the constant threat of selections, the Belzer Chassid was sure he was going to survive the war, for in Auschwitz it was impossible and punishable by death to wear a Tallis Katan. Since words spoken by a Tzadik must be fulfilled, the Belzer Chassid was sure that death had no power over him so long as he was not wearing his ritual garment.

Indeed, the Belzer Chassid survived the Auschwitz inferno. Today (she writes, then when the interview took place in 1977), wearing a Talis Katan he resides in Monsey, New York, and although he is not a Munkacser Chassid, he frequently shares his personal experience of the miraculous powers of his former adversary, the Munkacser Rebbe.

After telling his tale, Reb Moshe Silber added as if an afterthought, "A Chassidic Rebbe is like a master diamond cutter. He takes a man and cuts away all the roughness, all the waste. He does it with a tale, a niggun/tune, and lots of wisdom. What you get is a polished stone a Chassid. Only great masters can do it. The Muncacser, he was such a Rebbe!"

Good Shabbos!

<https://torah.org/torah-portion/dvartorah-5770-balak/>

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## Decisively Indecisive: Thoughts for Parashat Balak

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel \*

This week's Torah portion begins (Bemidbar 22:2): "And Balak the son of Zippor saw all that Israel had done to the Ammorites." Interestingly, the Torah doesn't tell us at this point who Balak is!

The passage then continues with two verses describing how the Moabites feared the advent of the large contingent of Israelites. Only at the end of verse 4 are we informed that "Balak the son of Zippor was king of Moab at that time." Wouldn't it have been more logical to tell us from the outset that Balak was king of Moab?

Apparently, the Torah is alluding to aspects of Balak's personality and leadership style. When Balak first surveyed the problem, he did not know what to do. He did not act in a kingly manner. He vacillated, choosing not to make an independent decision. But then he heard the murmurings of his people. They were afraid. They wanted action against a perceived threat. Only after hearing their complaints did Balak realize he had to make a decision: he was, after all, the king of Moab.

Balak the king still did not know what to do — only that he had to do something to calm his fears and the fears of his people.

A strong and confident king might have presented the people with a clear strategy, such as: 1) we will send emissaries to the Israelites to see what their intentions are; perhaps we can reach a peaceful understanding with them; 2) we will muster our troops and be ready for battle, if necessary; 3) we will reach out to our neighboring allies to see if they will stand with us in our confrontation with the Israelites.

But Balak does not do these things. Rather, he sends emissaries to hire a soothsayer, Bil'am, to curse the Israelites! Balak decides to rely on magic rather than on practical diplomatic and military tactics. He puts his hopes in the skills of a noted orator whose words supposedly had supernatural powers.

But the Torah goes on to make a mockery of this orator soothsayer. Bil'am is outwitted by his own donkey! The donkey sees reality more clearly than he does. And then when Bil'am is supposed to use his great oratorical powers on behalf of Moab, he is unable to utter his intended words. Rather, the Almighty puts words into his mouth that give blessings, rather than curses, to the Israelites.

A weak and frightened king Balak chooses a highly praised — but obviously imperfect — magician: and the problem facing the Moabites is not abated at all.

The story of Balak and Bil'am highlights wrong ways to make decisions. Balak is indecisive and feels he must act only when he senses pressure from the public. When he does make a decision, it is not based on tested diplomatic and military knowledge, but on wishful thinking, relying on a notorious wonder-worker. Balak and his advisors had an illusion of validity, thinking that their course of action was correct, even though it meant dismissing sound practical tactics in favor of following a smooth-talking soothsayer.

And, of course, Balak and Bil'am failed to achieve their goals.

When making important decisions, one must make pragmatic judgments based on as much fact as possible.

To base decisions on wishful thinking and the aid of glib soothsayers is to follow the leadership style of Balak. Failure is an inevitable result.

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

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

<https://www.jewishideas.org/decisively-indecisive-thoughts-parashat-balak>

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**Lot: Compromising Principle for Comfort**  
Dr. Rabbi Hayyim Angel \*

Our Spring 2023 issue of Conversations will be dedicated to standing up for our core principles. This value is paramount for us at the Institute.

Over the summer, I will be writing a series of reflections on biblical stories that speak to this topic.

## **Lot: Compromising Principle for Comfort**

Lot is one of the most fascinating figures in the Torah. As the nephew of Abraham and Sarah (known as Abram and Sarai during the first stages of the narrative), he joins them on their long journey to the Land of Canaan.

From the very beginning, God repeatedly promises the Land to Abraham's descendants. As Abraham sees no possibility of biological descendants as he and Sarah are barren, Lot seems like the obvious heir.

Then, famine strikes, and Abraham, Sarah, and Lot descend to Egypt to obtain food. It is a traumatic experience, as Pharaoh takes Sarah as a wife. The episode ends well thanks to God's direct intervention. Abraham and Lot emerge from Egypt much wealthier, as a result of Pharaoh's gifts (Genesis 12).

While Abraham and Sarah rebuilt their lives in Canaan afterwards, Lot never forgot the fact that the Nile provided material stability for Egypt. Canaan precariously depended on rainfall, leaving its inhabitants prone for future famines.

When the shepherds of Abraham and Lot quarreled over room for pasture, Lot chose to move to Sodom. The Torah describes Sodom's appeal: "Lot looked about him and saw how well watered was the whole plain of the Jordan, all of it — this was before the Lord had destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah — all the way to Zoar, like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt" (Genesis 13:10). The steady rise of the Jordan River resembled that of the Garden of Eden and Egypt. Lot wanted that stability and comfort.

The Torah immediately reports the price of that comfort: "Now the inhabitants of Sodom were very wicked sinners against the Lord" (Genesis 13:13). By moving to the depraved city of Sodom, Lot abandoned the lifestyle Abraham and Sarah exemplified.

Over the next several years, Lot married a woman of Sodom, and two of his daughters later married men of Sodom. Deeply entrenched as he was, he still maintained a sense of Abraham and Sarah's hospitality. He invited the angels to his home when the other inhabitants of Sodom ignored the visitors (Genesis 19).

Lot remained head and shoulders above the people of Sodom. Nevertheless, he compromised the dearest principles of the household of Abraham and Sarah by moving to the wicked city, all in the name of comfort. In the final analysis, he never won the respect of his neighbors, he lost his home, his two married daughters, and his wife. On a different plane, Lot also forfeited his position as the potential heir of Abraham and Sarah.

Lot's descendants, the nations of Ammon and Moab, were characterized by Sodom's anti-hospitality culture: "No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted into the congregation of the Lord; none of their descendants, even in the tenth generation, shall ever be admitted into the congregation of the Lord, because they did not meet you with food and water on your journey after you left Egypt, and because they hired Balaam son of Beor, from Pethor of Aramnaharaim, to curse you. — But the Lord your God refused to heed Balaam; instead, the Lord your God turned the curse into a blessing for you, for the Lord your God loves you. — You shall never concern yourself with their welfare or benefit as long as you live" (Deuteronomy 23:4-7).

Yet, some trace of good remained in Lot, and that streak of hospitality was manifest in Lot's stellar descendant, Ruth the Moabite. Ruth married Boaz, and became the great-grandmother of King David.

The Lot saga reminds us of how easy it is for generally good people or institutions to be overly tempted by financial gain and comfort to the point where they compromise their integrity and core principles. Today's Lots may rationalize this behavior on the grounds that everyone needs financial security. Nonetheless, the price they pay in compromising their values far outweighs whatever temporary gains they obtain.

The Torah enjoins us to emulate Abraham and Sarah — righteous, hospitable, principled individuals who stood firm in their faith and ideals. With all of their struggles, they worked hard to build a righteous family with authentic values, and they prospered among their neighbors.

\* Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

<https://www.jewishideas.org/article/lot-compromising-principle-comfort>

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## **Are Pregnant Women Obligated to Fast on Religious Fast Days \*\***

Opinion of Rabbi Moshe Zuriel \*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

\*\* I ran this piece last year but consider it important enough to run again. Here is a quote from the Rabbi at Shomrei Emunah in Kemp Mill (Silver Spring, MD) regarding practice for Ashkenaz Jews: "Standard practice is for pregnant and nursing women to refrain from fasting on Shiva Asar B'Tammuz, but to fast on Tisha B'Av."

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

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## Balak – Mouth for Hire

by Rabbi Mordechai Rhine \* © 2015

Bilaam was a powerful man. Blessed with a heightened spiritual awareness, Bilaam had trained himself in negative spirituality. No one could curse smile -- think, talk effectively the way Bilaam could. For the right price, Bilaam was willing to provide his services. And because so many people have enemies, Bilaam's talents were in great demand.

What happened in this week's parsha, however, is quite interesting. When Bilaam was hired to curse the Jews, it didn't work. Although Bilaam came full of malicious intent, Hashem decided that he did not want Bilaam to curse His beloved people. So instead, each time Bilaam tried to open his mouth with curses, Hashem miraculously controlled his lips and the words that came out were those of blessing.

I find this event so enormously noteworthy. The idea that a person can intend to speak negatively, and have it changed to blessing, is such an exhilarating concept. I wondered if there is a way that we can emulate it in our own daily lives.

I believe there is.

Picture the scene of a person attending the chasunah of a close friend. The person came to the wedding expecting to have a wonderfully enjoyable evening. But as it turned out the air conditioning in the wedding hall was woefully inadequate. Throughout the evening this person was sweating profusely from the heat.

At the end of the chasunah, he approaches the host to say "Goodbye" and "Mazal Tov." The host- smiling blissfully, and oblivious to the heat, asks him, "So how did you like everything?"

What goes through this person's mind is, "Well it was a little bit... hot." But what actually comes out of his mouth is something totally different. Knowing how much the host has paid trying to make a beautiful chasunah, and knowing how much this day means to him personally, the person replies, "Oh, everything was just wonderful!"

The Talmud teaches us that we must use our mouths for a higher purpose. Usually we must speak the absolute truth. For example, if someone asks us advice, or to testify, we must do so with integrity. But if we see that someone has already decided, or an event has already taken place with no recourse, then our job is to praise, to be pleasant.

Despite the thoughts that pass through our minds, we make the extra effort that what emanates from our mouths are words of pleasantness and blessing. That too is a most noteworthy miracle.

Wishing you and yours a wonderful Shabbos!

Rabbi Mordechai Rhine is a certified mediator and coach with Rabbinic experience of over 20 years. Based in Maryland, he provides services internationally via Zoom. He is the Director of TEACH613: Building Torah Communities, One family at a Time, and the founder of CARE Mediation, focused on Marriage/ Shalom Bayis and personal coaching. To reach Rabbi Rhine, his websites are [www.care-mediation.com](http://www.care-mediation.com) and [www.teach613.org](http://www.teach613.org); his email is [RMRhine@gmail.com](mailto:RMRhine@gmail.com). **For information or to join any Torah613 classes, contact Rabbi Rhine.**

<http://www.teach613.org/balak-mouth-for-hire/> Note: Rabbi Rhine is on vacation for a few weeks, and he has authorized me to reprint selected Devrei Torah from his archives during this period.

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## 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 "יראה" which can be vowelized in two different ways. The verse can be read "three times a year י'ראה -yei'ra-eh - every male shall be seen", or "three times a year י'ראה - 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 17<sup>th</sup> of Tammuz, beginning the period mourning the loss of the Temple, this message gives us an insight into the magnitude of our loss. At the same time, G-d's message to Bilaam can give us strength and hope. G-d yearns for us to experience not only His greatness, but also His love for us. If so, then -- as was hinted to Bilaam – G-d will ensure that we live on and that we will have that experience again.

\* Rabbi, Am HaTorah Congregation, Bethesda, MD. Note: Because Rabbi Singer and his Congregation are moving this month, he is using an archive Dvar Torah this week.

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### Chukas – Forever Faith

by Rabbi Yehoshua Singer \* © 2021 \*\*

We read this week of the fateful incident known as Mei Merivah – the Waters of Strife, when Moshe hits the Well of Miriam to provide water for the nation. Throughout the forty years in the desert, the Well of Miriam had provided endless water. When Miriam passed away, the well stopped. The nation came to Moshe and Aharon crying out in thirst and demanding water. Hashem instructed Moshe to speak to the rock and tell it to give forth water. When Moshe and Aharon err, hitting the rock instead, G-d takes them to task saying that they did not believe in G-d to sanctify Him and therefore they will not lead the nation into the land of Israel.

At face value, Hashem's challenge to Moshe and Aharon is difficult to understand. Where did they display a lack of faith in G-d by mistakenly hitting the rock instead of speaking to it? The Yalkut Shimoni (Remez 764) brings a puzzling

Medrash regarding this lack of faith. The Medrash says that Hashem was telling them that they should have learned to have faith from the story of Hagar. When Hagar was sent away from Avrohom's house with her young son Yishmael, she ran out of water and feared for his life. Hashem then miraculously provided her with a well in the desert. If Hashem provided a well for an individual in the merit of his father Avrohom, then how much more so would Hashem provide a well for the Jewish people who have the merits of all of the forefathers, the merit of their own acceptance of Torah and the merit of their mitzvos!

This Medrash seems to indicate that the lack of faith was a lack of trust in Hashem's kindness. They were concerned that Hashem would no longer provide water for the nation. This statement in and of itself is an important lesson for us. As human beings, we can always fall prey to being affected by the reality we see with our eyes, no matter what we know in our hearts. Moshe and Aharon have now been living with G-d's miraculous protection and love for His people for forty years, beginning with the plagues in Egypt and the Splitting of the Sea. G-d now tells them directly that He is going to continue to provide water. Yet, somewhere within them there was a concern that Hashem's kindness had run out.

Yet, this Medrash is still puzzling. How does this explain why they hit the rock instead of speaking to it? If they were concerned that the miracle of the well would not continue, hitting the rock would not work either.

Perhaps this Medrash is teaching us the importance of equilibrium. As they came to provide water for the nation, they harbored within their psyches a slight concern for the nation's survival. This concern left them unsettled and inhibited their ability to properly handle the pressures of the moment and determine the proper course of action. It was because of this lack of equilibrium that they erred in judgement and hit the rock.

Faith and trust in G-d's kindness is a valuable tool in life. Beyond the obvious benefit of faith in enabling one to have the strength to do what one knows is right, faith enables one to maintain calm and stay focused knowing that Hashem will provide. This enables one to better judge and handle their challenges.

This Medrash also provides us with an insight into how we can develop this faith in G-d's kindness. Even though Moshe and Aharon had lived through forty years of miraculous sustenance, they are being told that they should have studied the story of Hagar. Every story of G-d's Providence carries its own message and can add a new depth to our appreciation of the depth of G-d's love and kindness.

No matter how much we have personally experienced, or how deeply we have developed our faith and trust in G-d's kindness, we can gain from remembering and studying the stories in the Torah, and the many stories that abound throughout history. The more different examples we hear, the deeper and more complete will be our understanding of G-d's endless love and kindness. The more complete our understanding, the greater will be our ability to maintain our equilibrium and to think clearly even in difficult situations.

\* Rabbi, Am HaTorah Congregation, Bethesda, MD.

\*\* This Dvar Torah arrived too late to include it last year.

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### **Kosher Cheese \***

By Rabbi Haim Ovadia \*\*

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[i] 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 [גָּזָרָה], 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 crystallized in Medieval times.

Maimonides writes that if a Rabbinic Court [בְּנֵית דָין] 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.[i]

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.[ii]

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. Rabbenu 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]. Rabbenu 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 Yehoshua 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 Cholov Yisroel. This labeling is misleading because it does not apply to cheese. Cholov 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 the 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 Cholov 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, Rabbenu 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.

\*\* Torah VeAhava (now SephardicU.com). Rabbi, Beth Shalom Sephardic Minyan (Potomac, MD) and faculty member, AJRCA non-denominational rabbinical school). **New: Many of Rabbi Ovadia's Devrei Torah are now available on Sefaria: <https://www.sefaria.org/profile/hafton-ovadia?tab=sheets>** Hebrew quotes from the Torah, omitted here, are in Rabbi Ovadia's original in Sefaria.

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## Balak: Ma Tovu: Sanctity and Sacredness in our Communal Spaces

By Rabbi Yonah Berman \*

I recently traveled to Poland with a group of students from our Yeshiva. Our main goals were to help members of the Polish Jewish community prepare for Passover and to provide assistance to Ukrainian refugees, Jewish and non Jewish, as they crossed the border, fleeing the Russian invasion of their country. During the forty eight hours or so that we were in Poland, we found ourselves davening in numerous places, including four different synagogues. All of those shuls had been defiled but were kept standing during World War Two by the Nazis. They used those shuls for ammunition storage, as stables, or for other unholy purposes. One, in Medyka, just a few blocks from the Ukrainian border where we spent our time volunteering, remains a shell of its former self, having never been rebuilt after its destruction some eighty years ago.

Why did the Nazis keep these synagogues standing? I suggest that perhaps beyond the practical purpose that they needed buildings to use for various functions, that there is a deeper, more symbolic reason as well. These buildings represented such an important aspect of Jewish life, the conversation between us and our Creator.

Synagogues and yeshivot, shuls and schools, are places where humans speak to God through the vehicle of prayer and where God speaks to us through the vehicle of our study of Torah. Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik so beautifully describes this. He says that "learning Torah is a total, all encompassing and all embracing involvement... ecstatic experience in which one meets God."

Let us turn to our parsha and appreciate Bilam's berakha, his blessing of praise for the Jewish people, that was, of course, not his original intention. "Ma tovu ohalecha Ya'akov mishkenotecha Yisrael – How goodly are your tents Jacob, your dwelling places Israel "(Num. 24:5). Rav Ovadia Seforno, an Italian commentator who lived during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, suggests that the terms used here "ohalecha" and "mishkenotecha" – "your tents" and "your dwelling places," refer to houses of study and houses of prayer respectively. He explains that "Ma tovu – how goodly" means that these institutions do not merely benefit those who attend them, but all of the members of the Jewish people as well (Seforno Num. 24:5:1).

The very fact that we as a community build, maintain, and value these sacred spaces speaks to what lies at the core of who we are as Jews: our covenantal connection, our ongoing connection and conversation with God.

To return to our original question, perhaps the Nazis chose to defile rather than destroy so many of our holy buildings because of the symbolism of showing that they were no longer used for their original holy purposes. It is therefore even more meaningful to daven and to learn in those spaces today. Their structures may be damaged. Their decorations, their furniture, their Sifrei Torah and their holy books have been removed. But their sanctity remains in their connection to God and to the generations of Jewish people who prayed and studied within them. All of these cannot be destroyed.

Let us be inspired by the knowledge that even though there are those who will try to curse us and try to destroy us and our way of life, that every time we daven and every time we learn, whether at shul, at home or anywhere else we may find ourselves, that we are continuing to connect to an unbroken chain in our relationship with our Creator. This connection unites all of us with God and with each other across the bounds of time and space.

Shabbat Shalom.

\* Mashgiach, Director of Alumni Engagement and Chair of Professional Rabbinics, YCT Rabbinical School, Riverdale, NY.

<https://library.yctorah.org/2022/07/balak22/>

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### **It's Not So Bad**

by Rabbi Moshe Rube\*

I heard a story once about a Nazi who decided to make an example out of a town rabbi. They rounded up the Jews in the town square and dragged the rabbi out by his beard.

The Nazi officer shouted to the rabbi, "Are the Jews the chosen people?!" The rabbi said yes and the officer punched him in the face. As the rabbi lay on the ground, the Nazi smiled and asked again, "Do you still think the Jews are the chosen people?" The rabbi said yes again and received a kick in the abdomen. Over and over the Nazi kept kicking and beating the rabbi all the while shouting this question over and over. But the rabbi kept insisting that the Jewish people were the chosen people.

Frustrated, the Nazi yelled, "Look at you on the ground! Why would you think you're the chosen people?!" The rabbi looked up and from his bruised and bloodied face he managed to say, "As long as we're not beating up people who have never done us any harm, we can call ourselves the Chosen People."

Sometimes I think this is the reason why the Torah tells the story of Bilam, who tried to massacre the Jewish nation with a curse, after it describes most of the mistakes the Jewish nation made in the desert.

For all the issues the Jews had in the desert, for all the missteps it made, for all the problems that exist in the Jewish community, it's good to step back and gain some perspective. At least we're not like the nation of Moav who tried to commit genocidal harm against a people who never did harm against it.

When all is said and done, the Jewish community has its issues, problems, and crises like any other community. But we're not that bad. We actually have a lot of wonderful things about us that we would see if we would only allow ourselves to zoom out and gain some perspective.

Perhaps it's necessary for us to focus on issues and problems and worry about them. Maybe that's how they get fixed. But once in a while, let's do what God would do and accept and love what we are, all that we are with all our imperfections. We can appreciate that there is so much about us that is worthy of appreciation.

Granted our standard should be a little higher than "at least we're not Bilam," but if the Torah saw fit to zoom out and give us a more global perspective, maybe we could do the same.

After all, what we pay attention to tends to grow. So if we placed our attention on what's great about the Jewish community (instead of the next crisis), maybe that would grow too.

Shabbat Shalom.

\* Rabbi, Knesseth Israel Congregation, Birmingham, AL.

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## Rav Kook Torah

### Balak: Tents and Dwelling Places

*"How goodly are your tents, Jacob; your dwelling places, Israel"* (Num. 24:5).

Is the repetition in Balaam's blessing only poetic? Or is there a deeper significance to these two forms of shelter: the "tent" and the "mishkan" (dwelling place)?

#### The Journey of the Soul

As we strive to grow spiritually, we make use of two contradictory yet complementary methods.

The first method is our aspiration to constantly improve ourselves. We strive to attain greater wisdom and enlightenment. We seek to continually refine the emotions and ennoble the spirit.

The second method is the necessity to restrain our striving for spiritual growth, in order to assimilate changes and guard against spiritual lapses. We want to internalize our spiritual and ethical gains, and maintain our current level. This means that we must curb the desire for growth, so that our ambitions do not overextend the soul's natural capacity for change.

The "tent" and the "mishkan" are both forms of temporary shelter. Both relate to the soul's upwards journey. However, they differ in a significant aspect. The "tent" is inherently connected to the state of traveling. It corresponds to the aspiration for constant change and growth. The "mishkan" is also part of the journey, but it is associated with the rests between travels. It is the soul's sense of calm, its rest from the constant movement, for the sake of the overall mission.

Surprisingly, it is the second method that is the loftier of the two. The desire to change reflects a lower-level fear, lest we stagnate and deteriorate. Therefore, the blessing mentions "tents" first, together with the name "Jacob," the first and embryonic name of the Jewish people.

The need to stop and rest, on the other hand, stems from a higher-level fear, lest we over-shoot the appropriate level for the soul. For this reason, the blessing mentions "mishkan" together with the name "Israel," Jacob's second and holier name.

In any case, we need both aspects in order to achieve stable spiritual growth. Balaam's prophetic blessing praises the balanced union of "How goodly are your tents, Jacob" — the soul's longing for change — together with the more restful state of "your dwelling places, Israel," restricting growth in order to avoid unchecked advancement, thus enabling the soul to properly absorb all spiritual attainments.

(Gold from the Land of Israel, pp. 269-270. Adapted from Olat Re'iyah vol. I, pp. 42-43.)

<https://www.ravkooktorah.org/BALAK58.htm>

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

By Lord Rabbi 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 it[3] – 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" (Mic. 6:5, 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.

Bilam, the pagan prophet, is the most unlikely vehicle for God's blessings.<sup>[4]</sup> 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.

The Rambam explains that all God's acts have a moral message for us.<sup>[5]</sup> **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.**

#### 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.

\* 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.

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

## Was Moses in a Forbidden Marriage? Not Every Attack Deserves a Response

By Yossi Ives \* © Chabad 2022

To question the legitimacy of someone's marriage is to cut right to the bone. That is what happened when a leader of the Tribe of Simeon – a man we later discover1 went by the name of Zimri ben Salu – faced off against Moses over his assertion that he had a right to marry a Midianite woman. This is what happened:

*"An Israelite man came [we find out his identity later] and brought the Midianite woman to his brethren, before the eyes of Moses and before the eyes of the entire congregation of the children of Israel..."*<sup>2</sup>

What was this all about? Rashi explains:

*"[Zimri and his friends] said to Moses, "Moses, is this [woman] forbidden or is she permitted [for marriage]? If you say it is forbidden, who permitted for you the daughter of Jethro [who was likewise a Midianite]?"*

There is, however, one huge difference. Moses married his wife Zipporah – indeed a Midianite whom he met at the well, having fled Egypt as a young man – decades before Sinai. At that time, there was no Jewish People or Jewish Law in the real sense that Jewish identity and Torah law came into being after the Revelation at Sinai. Moses' wife would have "converted" to Judaism at the Sinai Revelation.<sup>3</sup> Thus, Zipporah was not a Midianite but a Jew. By contrast, the woman brought before Moses had not joined the Jewish faith, and was thus indeed a Midianite.

There is no comparison at all.

### Could It Be So Simple?

It is perplexing that someone of Zimri's caliber, leader of a tribe, would be capable of making such a ridiculous comparison. Equally surprising is the fact that no one seems to have pointed this out to Zimri and his friends.

Moreover, neither the Torah nor the vast canonical texts (such as the Talmud and Midrash) offer this obvious defense against such an absurd and offensive attack. The argument that Moses had married outside of the faith was subject to the easiest of rebuttals, so why did no one offer that justification and contradict the clearly unfair comparison between Moses and Zimri?

It must be, the Rebbe suggests, that the story is not as we have always thought it to be. The line of criticism that Moses married out of the faith is so absurd that it must mean this is not actually the fault they found in Moses' marriage. What, then, was the confrontation about?

### The Priest and the Convertess

The Rebbe offers a novel answer. Moses had the status of a Kohen, and a Kohen is not allowed to marry a convertess.<sup>4</sup> This is because the sacred role of the Kohen meant that he could only marry someone whose purity could be ascertained. A convert had a previous life outside of the Jewish faith, and the culture from which she hailed could not be assumed to have had the appropriate moral values.<sup>5</sup> That is the law, and it applies equally to any convertess.<sup>6</sup>

They could not find fault in Moses' marriage on the basis of Zipporah being a gentile, because she had converted. But that is exactly what they were criticizing: that Moses had married a convert. Moses had served as the High Priest during the inauguration of the Tabernacle, as the Torah describes in detail. Moreover, there is a debate in the Talmud<sup>7</sup> about whether Moses had the status of a Kohen, and according to the great Talmudic sage Rav, "Moses was a high priest" from the moment he was appointed to inaugurate the Tabernacle – "for the rest of his life."<sup>8</sup>

Zimri's point was that Moses was in an invalid relationship, as a Kohen to a convert, and therefore had no business objecting to his choice of partner. If Moses' marriage was in violation of the priestly rules, it would indeed seem hypocritical for him to object to someone else violating the rule against intermarriage. Given that in both cases the women were Midianite just added spice to his barb, even if the exact issue was different in each case.

### **In Moses' Defense**

In reality, the objection to Moses' marriage was incorrect. Kohen or not, Moses was already married to his wife when he assumed the priestly role – which changes the situation entirely. Moses had not chosen his wife after he was given the priestly status; he had been married to her for decades by that time. Indeed, the Mishnah – the earliest Jewish code of law – rules that, "If a Kohen betroths a widow (which he is ordinarily permitted to do), but is then appointed as Kohen Gadol (High Priest, who may not marry a widow)<sup>9</sup>, he may proceed to marry her."

Thus, since Moses was already married to Zipporah there was no issue with him staying married to her, even after he attained the status of a kohen. Zimri had his facts wrong and was using an incorrect understanding of the law to justify his own transgressions. Moses was not in a problematic marriage, while what Zimri was seeking to do was most certainly problematic.

### **Why Did Moses Remain Silent?**

We are left with a serious question: If, indeed, Moses was entirely justified in his marriage, why didn't he defend himself? By not arguing in his own defense, it almost seems as if he concedes his guilt.

The answer has an important lesson for us all: Sometimes the best policy is to say nothing at all. Moses could have easily defended himself, but since he was directly implicated, the correct thing to do was to keep silent. The integrity of the Torah requires that its teachers have no personal bias. If Moses had given the ruling that he was allowed to be married to his wife because he was already married when he became a kohen, this would have had the appearance of a self-serving ruling.

Had Moses been accused of making halachic decisions that affected him directly, the integrity of all of Judaism would have been called into question. Thus, Moses took the insult and remained silent. Better his honor be attacked but the trustworthiness of Torah be protected.

Proverbs instructs, "Do not answer a fool according to his foolishness."<sup>10</sup> Zimri's whole purpose was to justify his own wrongdoing; he had no interest in an honest discussion. Under those circumstances, it was best to forego the argument, for it was not based on a desire for truth. Not every attack deserves a response, not every insult needs a rebuttal.

In the end, Zimri created a public provocation, which led to Pinchas meting out swift vengeance. For this act, Pinchas was awarded by the Almighty "My covenant of peace."<sup>11</sup> And Moses was ultimately vindicated, his silence notwithstanding.

Adapted from Likkutei Sichot, vol. 18, Parshat Shemot III.

### **FOOTNOTES:**

1. Numbers 25:14.

2. Numbers 25:6.
3. Rashi to Talmud, Sanhedrin 82a.
4. Talmud, Kiddushin 78a.
5. Maimonides, Mishneh Torah Hilchot Issurei Bi'ah 18:3.
6. For a spiritual perspective on this law see Why Can't a Convert Marry a Kohen?
7. Zevachim 102a.
8. Rashi to Zevachim 102a.
9. Leviticus 21:14.
10. 26:5. See Talmud, Shabbat, 30b.
11. Numbers 25:12.

\* Rabbi of Cong. Ahavas Yisrael, Pomona, N.Y.; also founder and Chief Executive of Tag International Development, a charitable organization that focuses on sharing Israeli expertise with developing countries.

[https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article\\_cdo/aid/5163568/jewish/Was-Moses-in-a-Forbidden-Marriage.htm](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/5163568/jewish/Was-Moses-in-a-Forbidden-Marriage.htm)

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### **Responsible Leadership**

By Rabbi Moshe Wisnefsky \*

Balak, the king of Moab, heard how the Jewish people miraculously overcame the two powerful Amorite kings, Sichon and Og. He became terrified that the Jews would now attack his country. Even though it was common knowledge that G-d had not promised the Jews the territory of Moab, Balak feared that their recent victories over these kings would embolden them to exact revenge from the Moabites for not having allowed them to pass through their country on the way to the Land of Israel.

*"Due to Balak's predictions, Moab became terrified of the Jewish people."* Numbers 22:3

Balak had nothing to gain by making the Moabites afraid of the Jewish people. As the Torah will recount, he did not ask them to do anything to counter the supposed threat posed by the Jews. But inasmuch as "the wicked are ruled by their hearts," he could not contain himself, and needlessly spread fear among his people.

In contrast, although Moses was afraid of King Og, he did not disclose his fear to the Jewish people. Moses realized that he must refrain from doing anything that would weaken the people's morale, and instead bolstered his own inner morale. Because of his positive attitude and steadfast trust in

G-d, he successfully preserved the Jewish people's self-image and pride in their Divine mission.

Moses knew that we earn G-d's helpful intervention in our lives by trusting Him to provide it. Moses set the standard of fearless behavior for all Jewish leaders who would succeed him.

We are all leaders, to one degree or another, whether in the context of our jobs, our families, or our circle of friends. We should learn from Moses' example, taking care to foster others' optimism and confidence in their Divine mission, rather than the opposite, as did Balak.

\* *From Daily Wisdom*

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#### Covenant and Conversation

**Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l**

#### Not Reckoned Among the Nations

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 tell you: '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 read the antisemites."

An old and bitter joke. Yet it has a point and a history and it 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 suggested that Moabite women 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 (Num. 25, 31:16). 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 Megalgeлим זechut 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 the principle 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 (in my book,

Future Tense) 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. 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[1], who we have already mentioned in *Beha'alotecha*. 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'alotecha* 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 long the world's only, global people.

What then made them a nation? This was the question R. 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 selfsame 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] 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."

### **Shabbat Shalom: Rabbi Shlomo Riskin**

"There is no sorcery for Jacob, there is no magic for Israel." (Numbers 23:23) What is the true message of an entire Torah portion dedicated to the hiring of a gentile soothsayer to curse the Israelite nation – but who instead becomes inspired to bless Israel and portray the ultimate messianic destiny of Israel in the most exalted and majestic of poetic metaphors? Are there indeed individuals with true power to foretell future events – and ought we seek out such individuals to help us tackle difficult moments in our lives which threaten to overwhelm us? And if indeed Bileam is a superior human being with profound prophetic insights emanating from a divine source, why does the Torah triumphantly record the fact that "Bileam ben Beor the magician" was killed by Israel with the sword amongst the corpses of our Midianite enemies during the conquest of Israel (Joshua 13:22)? And why does our biblical text juxtapose the sublime poetry of Bileam with the seemingly ridiculous tale of the talking donkey?

I believe that from a certain perspective, the entire portion of Bileam is a study in contrasts between the legitimately earned prophecy of Moses and the venally inspired sorcery of Bileam. The Torah understands that individuals may exist who appear to have been born with special powers: superior physical strength, a phenomenal photographic memory, sharp vision which can penetrate the thickest of partitions, intense concentration that can cause physical objects to explode, and perhaps even the ability to bring messages from the dead.

There is even a difference of opinion amongst our sages as to whether such phenomena reflect actual occurrences or are merely sleight-of-hand trickery. When the Bible records King Saul's last-ditch attempt to discover his destiny by asking the witch of Endor to seek the counsel of the dead Samuel – and she indeed provides the true message

that "the Almighty will tear the kingdom from your hands and give it over to your friend David" – the commentaries are divided as to the factual truth of the account: Rabbenu Sa'adia Gaon accepts the biblical story as it is written, and Rabbi Shmuel ben Hafni Gaon insists that the witch of Endor deceived King Saul (I Samuel 28 and its Geonic commentaries; see Radak, the end of chapter 28).

In a later generation, the arch-rationalist Maimonides calls all pronouncements emanating from supernatural communications and insights – including the writing and wearing of mystical amulets (kmeot) – "false and vain," bordering on idolatry (Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkhot Avoda Zara* 1:16 and *Guide for the Perplexed*, I:61). On this basis, Rabbi Yosef Karo similarly dismisses all magical incantations as "not availingly in the least," but merely exercising positive psychological influence upon individuals in distress (*Shulhan Arukh*, *Yoreh De'ah* 179:6). The Gaon of Vilna, on the other hand, suggests that Maimonides' philosophical study "misled or corrupted him," insisting that there are amulets and incantations, and perhaps even communications from the beyond, which are rooted in the sacred and the divine" (ibid., paragraph 13). Perhaps the most important and representative view on the issue is presented by Rabbi Shlomo ben Aderet (Rashba, *Responsa* 548), when he had to judge the credibility of a Rabbi Nissim who claimed to have received messages from an angel; the great Talmudic scholar Rashba insists that divine communication akin to prophecy can only rest on one who is truly wise and pious, strong and courageous, and sufficiently wealthy as to not be in need of monetary contributions from those seeking his advice. Claims, and even what seem to be empirical facts, of supernatural abilities by individuals who are not outstanding in Torah scholarship and piety dare not be taken seriously – at the risk of flirting with idolatrous and even demonic blandishments.

The truth is that the Bible is indubitably clear when it warns us against seeking after any manner of magic or sorcery and exhorts us to be whole-hearted and pure in our service of the divine (Deut. 18:9–14). Our prophets did not major in futuristic prophecies but rather in inciting more ethical and genuine behavior; they certainly did not take remuneration for their words. Any individual devoid of the proper – and difficult to acquire – intellectual and spiritual prophetic attainments who makes pronouncements which even may appear to be vindicated by future discoveries is no better than the "talking donkey" in our Torah portion; a prophet of God must first and foremost be a model of Torah scholarship and piety.

Hence, the "talking donkey" may serve as a metaphor for all soothsayers devoid of proper qualifications of piety and intellect. Moses was a prophet of God, Bileam was a soothsayer.

### **Likutei Divrei Torah**

Moses sought divine truth while Bileam yearned for gold and silver.

Bileam's conclusion is most succinct and specific: "There is no sorcery for Jacob nor magic for Israel.... Behold the people shall rise up as a lioness, and lift up himself as a lion, he shall not lie down until he eats of the prey, and makes corpses of the wicked." (Numbers 23:23–24)

Rashi explains this verse metaphorically: When individuals rise early for their Torah study, they triumph like the lion cub, grabbing onto the commandments, wearing the ritual fringes, reciting the Shema, and putting on the phylacteries. They do not eat before reciting the Evening Prayer. And they destroy the wicked as when they killed Bileam the soothsayer.

Numbers 23:24, as interpreted by Rashi through the eyes of our sages; see, too, Joshua 13:22.

We must search for God by performing the commandments as sincerely and punctiliously as possible; going after wonder-workers or soothsayers is at best a waste of time and at worst flirting with idolatry!

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

#### **Bad Man. Can't Be a Good Prophet!**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

His name was Martin Heidegger. His work was introduced to me by a teacher in response to my question, "Who is considered the greatest philosopher of the twentieth century?" He immediately responded, "Heidegger!" The teacher referred me to a beginner's textbook which outlined Heidegger's philosophy, and which taught me that the man's greatest contribution to philosophy was in the field of ethics, no less!

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

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

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

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

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

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

### Torah.Org: Rabbi Yissocher Frand

#### The Nations' Non-Prophet

Parshas Balak contains Bilaam's Blessings/Curses from when he was hired to curse the Jewish people. (He intended to curse but instead he blessed, for the most part.) Chazal say that Bilaam was a prophet. Not only was he a prophet, but Chazal infer from the pasuk, "There did not arise again in Israel a prophet like Moshe" [Devorim 34:10] that in Israel such a prophet did not arise again, but a prophet of that stature did arise among the nations of the world, and that was Bilaam.

At the beginning of Parshas Balak, Rashi addresses the obvious question: Why did the Ribono shel Olam do this? Why did He give Bilaam profound prophetic powers? The Rambam in Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah says that in order to merit prophecy, there are requirements of spirituality and elevated status. A person needs to be wise, righteous, and modest to qualify. Why was Bilaam—who was wicked, and seemingly had none of the requisite attributes—given prophecy?

Rashi answers that Hashem gave Bilaam this gift so that the nations of the world not have a complaint against Him. Hashem gave Bilaam prophecy to preempt the claim—"If we had a prophet (like Israel) we would have repented." To use a popular expression, they would claim, "It was not a fair playing field! The deck was stacked against us. They had Moshe Rabbeinu and other prophets and we did not have anybody."

Therefore, Hashem gave them a great prophet, and they became even more immoral and corrupt. Rashi spells it out—originally at least, they were inhibited from transgressing sexual sins and they maintained a modicum of morality. Then Bilaam advised them to allow their daughters to become promiscuous. So much for the claim "Had we been given a prophet, we would have been better people."

Many question this explanation of Rashi. It is still not a fair playing field! Had Hashem given them a Moshe or a Shmuel HaNavi or Yeshaya HaNavi, or a Yechezkel or even any of the Twelve Minor Prophets, then He could have

preempted the claim of the nations that the deck was stacked against them. Moshe was an almost perfect human being. When he spoke, people were impressed, and they listened to him. However, the nations of the world were given Bilaam! A paradigm personifying all that a person should NOT be was Bilaam. He was haughty. He was lustful. He had an evil eye. He was stingy. He was depraved. He committed acts of bestiality. Bilaam is certainly not a role model for improving behavior, to say the least. The claim “It’s not fair” is still very much in place.

I heard an interesting approach to this question in the name of Rav Yaakov Galinsky [1920-2014]. Rav Galinsky was a Magid in Eretz Yisrael. He advanced the following thesis: Any prophet is no greater than the people for whom he prophesizes. Put succinctly, the nation makes the prophet!

An elevated people receive an elevated prophet; in a depraved society, the prophet will not be any better than the people are. Each generation gets the Navi it deserves. In a nutshell, that is the insight of Rav Galinsky. He demonstrates this principle from several places: One example is when Klal Yisrael sins with the Golden Calf, the Almighty says to Moshe “Go descend, for your people has acted corruptly.” [Shemos 32:7] Rashi there interprets “Go, descend” — go down from your greatness (lech reid m’gedulasecha). The descent was not only in terms of elevation above sea level. Lech reid implied a spiritual descent. The people have sinned, how does that affect Moshe? The answer is that the prophet is who the people are. When the people fall, the Navi falls.

Another example: “If the anointed Priest will sin by the guilt of the people...” (Im haKohen haMoshiach yechetah l’Ashmas ha’Am) [Vayikra 4:3].

The most compelling proof is from a famous Mishna in Tractate Rosh HaShannah [3:8]. “And it was when Moshe raised his arms, Israel became strong...” In that epic battle between Amalek and Klal Yisrael, when their leader kept his hands raised, Israel was victorious and when he lowered his hands then Amalek became victorious. The Mishna itself inquires – does, then, Moshe’s arm movement have military significance? Rather, this teaches —the Mishna answers—that as long as Israel would cast their gaze upwards and subjugate their hearts to their Father in Heaven, they would be victorious, otherwise they would fall.

So the obvious question is, if that is the case, let Moshe Rabbeinu keep his hands up no matter what. The answer is that Moshe Rabbeinu’s strength was dependent on the actions of the people. When the people subjugated their hearts to their Father in Heaven, Moshe Rabbeinu had the strength to keep his hands held high. When the people veered from that for whatever reason, Moshe

Rabbeinu lost some of his strength. The Navi is the people and the people are the Navi.

Rav Yaakov Galinsky offers an amazingly novel idea: Moshe Rabbeinu and Bilaam had the same potential. Bilaam did not have to become the person he became—the evil eye; the haughty spirit; the stingy person; the depraved moral degenerate. He could have been a Moshe Rabbeinu. It was all dependent on the people—the prophet’s “customers,” so to speak. Because of the inherent character traits of the nations of the world, he became a Bilaam.”

With this idea, Rav Galinsky explains a famous Medrash Rabbah at the beginning of Parshas Emor. The Medrash says that the Almighty showed Moshe each generation and its leaders, each generation and its wise men, each generation and its teachers, and he even showed Moshe the great thieves of every generation along with the prophets of every generation (Dor, dor v’chomsvav; Dor, dor v’gazlanav; Dor, dor u’Neviav).

Why did Moshe Rabbeinu need to know all this information? Rav Galinsky answers that it is because Moshe Rabbeinu had a question: Why were there not any prophets after the destruction of the second Bais Hamidash? Why in later generations (including our own) do we no longer have Neviim? The Ribono shel Olam says, “Because look at the generation. It is a generation with thieves and robbers. They did not deserve to have prophets among them.” The prophet is dependent on his generation.

That is how Rav Galinsky answers this question on Rashi. Bilaam had the potential to have been a Moshe Rabbeinu. But we see that the generation impacts the spiritual capabilities of their prophets. In effect, the nations of the world could not complain that they were given an imperfect prophet, because the prophet only reflects the spiritual essence of the nation to whom and for whom he prophesizes.

### The Brisker Rav Asks a Question on the Rambam

I would like to share with you a brilliant observation from the Brisker Rav (Rav Yitzchak Ze’ev HaLevi Soloveitchik [1886-1959]). The Rambam [Hilchos Melachim 11:1] rules as follows: “The Messianic King will in the future arise and restore the Davidic Dynasty to the glory of its original sovereignty. He will build the Temple and gather the dispersed of Israel, and all the laws will return in his days as they were in prior times. Sacrifices will be brought, and the Sabbatical and Jubilee years will be observed according to all the details that are set forth in the Torah. And whoever does not believe in him, or someone who does not ‘wait for his coming,’ not only does he deny the teachings of the other prophets, but he denies the Torah and Moshe Rabbeinu. For the Torah has testified about him as it is written: ‘Then

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Hashem, your G-d will return your captivity and have mercy upon you, and He will gather you in from all the peoples to where Hashem your G-d has scattered you. If your dispersed will be at the ends of the heavens, from there Hashem your G-d will gather you in, and from there He will take you. Hashem your G-d will bring you to the land of which your forefathers took possession, and you shall take possession of it...” [Devorim 30:3-5]. And these words, which are explicit in the Torah, include all the words that were spoken by all the prophets. Even in Parshas Bilaam, it is mentioned and there [Bamidbar 24:17] he spoke of ‘two anointed ones’ (shnei Meshechechem) – the first anointed one being Dovid who saved Israel from the hands of their enemies, and the final anointed one who will arise from Dovid’s descendants and bring salvation to Israel [at the end of days]. And there [Devorim 24:17] Bilaam says ‘I see him but not now’ — this refers to Dovid, ‘I view him, but he is not near’ – this refers to the Messianic King.”

We use the term heretic (kofer) loosely today; but it is a serious term, and the Rambam applies it to someone who does not believe in the Moshiach’s coming, or who does not personally anticipate it and await for it to happen.

The Brisker Rav asks a question which is worthy of the one who asks it: Yes, it says in the Torah that Moshiach is going to come, but where does it say that we are obligated to want and anticipate and wait for his coming and his bringing salvation?

The Rambam specifies two requirements: (1) I believe in the coming of the Messiah; and (2) And even if he tarries, I will wait for him (achakeh lo). Then the Rambam says that someone who fulfills the first requirement but does not fulfill the second requirement is a ‘kofer’ in the Torah of Moshe! The Rambam does not seem to bring any Biblical source to back up this second requirement!

The Brisker Rav says, “I will tell you where this requirement is stated. It is written in our parsha!”

The Brisker Rav cites a pasuk from Trei Asar [the Twelve Minor Prophets]: “And I shall be to them like a lion; like a leopard al derech Ashur.” [Hoshea 13:7] What does this pasuk mean? We would be tempted to say that the last three words al derech Ashur means “on the way to Assyria.” However, Rashi in Hoshea says that Ashur in this pasuk is not a proper noun, indicating the name of a place. Rashi says that every time Scripture mentions the place named Assyria, there is a grammatical dot (dagesh) in the letter Shin. In the word Aleph Shin Vov Reish in this pasuk in Hoshea, there is not a dagesh in the Shin. Rashi therefore translates the word as a verb meaning, “to lie in wait”. So the pasuk is saying, “As the leopard lies in wait, anxiously anticipating its prey.” Rashi says, “How do I

know that the word Ashur in Hoshea means to want and anticipate and expect? Because it is parallel to the expression used by Bilaam – “Ashurenu, v’lo Karov” [I view him, but he is not near.] [Bamidbar 24:17] – the pasuk in our parsha.

This pasuk means that even though Moshiach may not be near, nevertheless – Ashurenu – I anticipate him; I want him; I expect him, I long for him. According to the Brisker Rav, this is the Rambam’s source in “Toras Moshe” for waiting anxiously for Moshiach.

### **Dvar Torah** **Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis**

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

I find this intriguing. Cheshvan is called Mar Cheshvan because there’s nothing special in it – no festivals, nothing exciting. However if there is one month on our calendar that should be called ‘mar’, bitter, surely it should be Av, because it’s the bitterest time of the year. Av, however, is called Menachem and it is in the present tense; the month of Av continues to provide comfort and consolation to us. Why? Defeats - There are very few nations in this world which mark on their calendar a moment of deep national embarrassment. Sometimes history is rewritten. On other occasions, it is conveniently forgotten about. But in Jewish tradition, our calendar is full of days on which we commemorate our defeats, our mistakes and our moments of national guilt.

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

#### Lessons

Cheshvan therefore is understandably ‘mar’, bitter, because we don’t learn anything special from it. Av, however, has the potential to be sweet, because it’s a month that gives us comfort since by learning the lessons of our past we can hopefully carve out a glorious future. No wonder therefore that our prophets called the day of Tisha B’Av a ‘moed’ meaning

festival, indicating that this is a time of year which will, please God, be transformed from sadness to celebration.

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

### **Rabbi Dr. Nachum Amsel** **Encyclopedia of Jewish Values\***

#### **Jewish Prophecy**

The idea of a non-Jewish prophet in our Parsha, Bilaam, who acted in such un-holy matter, including the willingness to prophesy for money, to curse the Jewish people and hit his animal, is very difficult for anyone to comprehend. Why was prophecy given to this individual who does not seem so special? Rather than answer these difficult questions, let us first understand what a Jewish prophet was. Today the concept of prophecy seems strange to both the Jew and non-Jew of the twenty first century, because people have not seen an actual, legitimate prophet in two thousand years. This time gap causes everyone to doubt if prophecy ever existed in the world. In addition, the people nowadays who do claim to be prophets and declare that they have spoken to God, are usually psychopaths, “kooks” or strange individuals without prestigious credentials, like the prophets who were looked up to as leader of society with great values. Since there are no longer any prophets (Bava Batra 14b), it is hard for us to today in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to comprehend such a person, especially since almost all people predicting the future today are looked down upon by society, and not revered as holy, as the prophets were. But because belief in prophecy is one of the bedrocks of Judaism (Maimonides, Hilchot Yesodai HaTorah 7:1 and #6 of his Thirteen Principles of Faith), as one of the cardinal beliefs of Judaism, it is important to analyze what was unique about a Jewish prophet, what made him or her special, and what exactly is Jewish prophecy. It is incumbent upon Jews to understand how prophecy affected Jews and Jewish history and why it no longer exists today.

Aspects of Prophecy - What is a prophet and prophecy? Put simply, God makes His will known to specifically chosen individuals in each generation. Sometimes, God relates only to the prophet himself or herself, sending a private message, not to be shared with others (Bava Batra 14b). Generally, however, the prophet’s task is to share God’s message with others. Thus, the prophet is a mediator between God and the Jewish people. The sources, however, give us a more precise understanding of the prophet’s relationship to God and to the people. Though Abraham was called the first prophet (Genesis 20:6-7), Moses was called a prophet (in addition to all his other titles such as “Our Teacher”) because the people specifically asked that he mediate between them and God at Mount Sinai (Deuteronomy

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5:21), as they were fearful of being spoken to directly by God (Deuteronomy 5:5). In a similar vein, Moses’ brother, Aaron, was called a prophet when God appointed him to mediate between Moses and Pharaoh (Exodus 7:1).

The prophet is called the “mouthpiece of God (Jeremiah 15:9),” as God puts His words in the mouth of the prophet (Deuteronomy 18:18). The prophet “stands” before God and receives His word (Jeremiah 15:1 and 19). It is true that God did communicate with the Jewish people through other methods, such as the Urim VeTummim covering placed upon the High Priest (Exodus 28:30), and the Ephod, the Breastplate of the High Priest (Samuel I 23:9), which also indicated the desires of God. Nevertheless, His principal mode of communication was through prophecy.

How is a Prophet Chosen & Can He or She Prepare? - Although some commentaries believe that there is a degree of randomness in God’s choosing prophets, Maimonides states (Maimonides, Hilchot Yesodai HaTorah 7:5) that one can indeed prepare to receive prophecy, although he emphasizes that not everyone who prepares and not everyone who is “qualified” to be a prophet will be guaranteed a prophecy from God. What are the qualities necessary to qualify to be a prophet and how does one prepare?

The Talmud (Shabbat 92a) explains that a potential prophet must be a Torah scholar and have the qualities of courage and wealth, as is proven from Amos who was wealthy, says another Talmudic passage (Nedarim 38a). Maimonides (Maimonides, Hilchot Yesodai HaTorah 7:1) writes that a prophet must be great in wisdom, courageous in the Jewish sense, in that he can overcome all of his evil desires (Avot 4:1), and generally be an outstanding and upright individual with high moral character. One did not have to be Jewish to be a prophet, as there were seven non-Jewish prophets, including Bilaam in our Torah portion, according to the Talmud (Bava Batra 15b).

Maimonides continues by describing the training process of the person who has all of these qualities (Maimonides, Hilchot Yesodai HaTorah 7:1). This individual must train himself or herself not to have any idle thoughts, with his or her mind concentrating constantly on the Divine. Then, *Ruach Hakodesh*, the Divine Spirit, will rest upon his or her head. In addition, the person must be in a joyous mood to receive the prophecy, as prophecy will not come upon anyone who is not joyous (Maimonides, Hilchot Yesodai HaTorah 7:4). There seemed to be specific places or “schools” where potential prophets gathered to prepare, based on allusions in the Bible (Samuel I 10:5 and 10). In addition, the concept of meticulous preparation is based in a Talmudic source (Avodah Zarah 20b) that outlines the various steps by which a person achieves holiness and high moral character,

readying oneself for the Divine Spirit and the highest level of piety.

How God Communicates to Prophets - God speaks to all of His prophets in a dream state, whether it is during the night or even during the day (Maimonides, *Hilchot Yesodai HaTorah* 7:2). There are numerous Biblical examples showing God appearing in a dream, from King Avimelech, who was given a message by God in a dream how to behave towards Abraham (Genesis 20:3), to King Solomon, who saw God in a dream (Kings I 3:5). So, it was as well with the prophets Joel (Joel 3:1) and Job (Job 33:14-18). In addition to the dream state, God often did not speak a message directly, but showed the prophet a symbol whose meaning the prophet understood (Maimonides, *Hilchot Yesodai HaTorah* 7:3).

There was only one exception in history to this mode of prophecy in a dream -- Moses. God spoke to Moses while he was in the state of being awake, without any symbols, according to the Torah (Numbers 12:6-8). As a person speaks to his or her friend, so God spoke to Moses (Maimonides, *Hilchot Yesodai HaTorah* 7:6). Maimonides continues to explain another difference between Moses and all other prophets. Every other prophet had to sit and wait until God decided to speak to him or her and did not know when it would come. Moses could "summon" the Divine Spirit any time he wished.

Was the prophet merely an instrument of God, a microphone or was he or she able to inject something into the prophecy involving the person's own personality? It is clear from the sources that each prophet interpreted the vision in his or her own style, using his own personality and experience to relate the prophecy in his or her own unique manner (Sanhedrin 89a), as no two styles of prophecy were ever the same. The Midrash (Midrash, *Yalkut Shimoni*, Job 28) informs us that another individualized aspect of prophecy was that each prophet received a dissimilar amount of Divine Spirit, based on his or her merit and abilities. Pointing out yet another disparity between prophets, Maimonides (Midrash, *Yalkut Shimoni*, Job 28) says that there were different levels of prophecy itself.

What Were the Messages of Prophecy? - Based on a Torah verse (Leviticus 27:34) stating that these and only these are the commandments given by God to the Jewish people, the Talmud (Shabbat 104a) concludes that a prophet could not add anything to the Torah or decree any additional Jewish law. Another Talmudic passage (Shabbat 104a) states that a prophet could not remove anything or any law from the Torah either. Of course, as the Rabbis did this when adding Rabbinic laws, and the prophet could add a law that was temporary and for a specific reason, but it could not be claimed under the aegis of Torah law. In addition, the prophet as a prophet could not decide Jewish law or interpret Jewish law, as this was the

purview of the Rabbis and not the prophet (Megillah 2b).

Therefore, the goal of the prophet was simple: to exhort the people to keep the laws and customs of Judaism, and not to abandon God and His precepts (much like the role of a Rabbi today) (Maimonides, *Hilchot Yesodai HaTorah* 7:7). From this straightforward but important task, we can easily differentiate the prophet from modern day fortunetellers or predictors of the future. The role of the prophet was essentially thought to be the moral conscience of the people.

Determining If a Prophet Was Legitimate - If a prophet arose and said that he had been spoken to by God, how were the people to know if this prophet was telling the truth or not? If the person did not meet the criteria of personality and background mentioned earlier, he would immediately be deemed a false prophet. Therefore, if the person did not have a high moral character or was not a Torah scholar or courageous or rich (these necessary characteristics would exclude legitimacy from virtually all people today claiming to be prophets), this person could not be eligible to even be considered a prophet. But if a person who had all these characteristics claimed that God appeared to him or her, how should the people determine the legitimacy of this person's claim? If this person tells over a message that runs contrary to the Torah, i.e., that the Jews should worship another God or that it is time to either add or remove a Mitzvah from the Torah, then even if the person fits the "profile" of a prophet, and even if he performs supernatural miracles to back up his claim, the Torah says he is a false prophet and is to be killed (Deuteronomy 13:2-6). (To answer why God would let such a false prophet perform supernatural miracles, the Torah itself it was to test the people if their belief in God was superior to what they saw with the eyes or not.)

However, if the person claiming to be a prophet has all the right characteristics and has the "right" message from God, then the people can test legitimacy of this prophet by asking him or her to perform any supernatural miracle until the people are satisfied that the person is legitimate (Maimonides, *Hilchot Yesodai HaTorah* 7:7 and Introduction to his commentary on the Mishnah). Thus, they can ask this person to change nature, predict the stock market closing or sports scores or any other miracle until they are satisfied. Once they are satisfied that this person is for real, and his or her legitimacy is established, then the people are bound by what the prophet says (Deuteronomy 18:19).

Why are There no Prophets Today?- First, there is no Holy Temple in Jerusalem. After the destruction of the Temple, the Talmud says (Bava Batra 12b) that prophecy was given over to children and idiots. Second, there is only

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prophecy in the Land of Israel (Megillah 14a). After being forced to leave the Land and live in the Diaspora, there could be no prophecy. But these "reasons" are mere symptoms of the true reason there is no prophecy: the lack of spirituality in the world and in the Jewish people. Without spirituality in the people and in the potential prophets, there cannot be prophecy. Because of the Temple's destruction (or possibly leading up to it), there was and is a far smaller degree of spirituality than there was beforehand. The Jews outside the Land possess a far smaller degree of holiness than they did when they were in the Land. This is one of the reasons for the exile itself, as the Jews are not spiritually elevated to stay and live in the Land (Deuteronomy 11:16-17).

At one time, when the Jews possessed a high degree of spirituality, the amount of prophecy was very high and intense, and prophets were very common. The Talmud (Megillah 14a) records that at one time there were double the number of prophets that left Egypt. Thus, there were about six million prophets!! The reason that we do not know about these individuals, continues the Talmud, is that only those prophecies that would be needed for later generations to be studied and learned from, were recorded, and incorporated into the Bible. This is the same reason that there are no miracles today -- a lack of spirituality (Berachot 20a), and, thus, people would not appreciate miracles or prophecy even if it did exist. Imagine a true supernatural miracle today. People who saw would ignore it, saying it was a hoax or talented magician. Scientists would analyze it, but few would embrace it feel the awe of God. So, too, with prophets, were they to exist and prophecy today. People are not ready spiritually to embrace prophets or prophecy today. Instead of the true Divine Spirit of prophets, the Talmud says (Sanhedrin 11a) that we have a *Bat Kol*, an occasional voice from heaven. There are those commentaries who claim that each time a holy idea is spoken, originated, or written down, it is given to a person in a form of *Ruach Hakodesh*, a form of Divine spirit, but we cannot really understand what this signifies, and objectively formulate when this spirit is upon a person and when it is not.

\* This column has been adapted from a series of volumes written by Rabbi Dr. Nachum Amsel "The Encyclopedia of Jewish Values" available from Urim and Amazon. For the full article or to review all the footnotes in the original, contact the author at [nachum@jewishdestiny.com](mailto:nachum@jewishdestiny.com)

### OTS Dvar Torah

#### Chezi Zecharia

#### The Wind that Leads in the Desert

Bilaam is fortunate enough to experience divine revelation and "walk on air" for a few moments, and it is this spirit that lifts him out of the muck in which he had wallowed. However, he misses his opportunity. Alongside the sweltering heat and extreme conditions of the desert, the wind plays a

major role in shaping the experiences and sensations of the young nation trudging through the desert sands. The Israelites would feel this wind with each step they took into the vast expanses of the wilderness. At times it was a desert breeze, and at times, it will a bone-chilling draft. It seems as though it was no coincidence that the wind motif, which symbolizes the spirit, recurs consistently throughout the chapters of the Book of Numbers, as in this verse concerning the prophesying of Eldad and Meidad: "Would that all of Hashem's people were prophets, that the Lord put His spirit upon them!" A different spirit has taken hold of Caleb: "But My servant Caleb, because he was imbued with a different spirit...". This spirit persists as a new leadership is chosen: "Let Hashem, source of the breath of all flesh" anoint Joshua, "a man with spirit".

"And the spirit of Hashem came upon him" (Numbers 24:2). What was this spirit, and why does Bilaam merit being counted among the people of great spirit listed in this book? Ehud Manor, one of Israel's greatest songwriters, wrote about the sweetly-scented spirit and harbinger of good tidings:

What shall the wind bring? What shall a new day impart?  
The smell of rain, or waves of heat.  
What shall the wind bring? What shall a new day impart?  
The laughter of a child, or warm greeting.  
If spring has come to the garden, the wind will bring me a lily,  
and if summer has returned to the seashore, the wind will smell of hot corn.

The human spirit is tucked deeply within a person's soul. It will manifest itself in what the person says – "the living spirit". Will a person's spirit express "a child's laughter"? Or a "warm greeting"? This is how reality subjectively manifests itself in the way a person views the world, through his or her own lenses. Through the eye used to observe what is happening. Read properly, ruah nehona, i.e. the proper spirit, should be read as revah – something that would benefit the person with that spirit. If the Hebrew word is reversed, we would end up with hiver – pallid. The opposite of the proper spirit is pallor, and a lack of vitality.

Bilaam's disposition, as we are told in Pirkei Avot, is the antithesis to the people of Abraham – a good eye, humble spirit and a contented soul are all traits of the disciples of Abraham, our forefather, while an evil eye, a haughty spirit and a ravenous soul are traits exhibited by Bilaam's disciples.

On the one hand, we could say that these three traits are separate and distinct – the eye, the spirit and the soul. Yet on the other hand, we could also suggest that the manifestation of reality, as we see it through our objective eyes, is what leads to a humble spirit, as our spirit

should be. This will have a positive impact on the inner workings of our soul. If so, we must now consider three causal components. The first – the "good eye" – leads to the second (the spirit), which, in turn, brings about the third (the soul). According to this explanation, the eye, through which we reflect the reality we perceive on a deeper level, will produce the spirit. A "good eye" will lead to the right spirit – the humble spirit – which will cause our souls to be contented.

Why would a man like this, someone who teaches his disciples to see the bad, and behave haughtily, merit to experience an encounter with the highest spirit that exists – the spirit of God? Moreover, how could the memory of Bilaam be an everlasting abhorrence, if the spirit of God had dwelled upon him?

It would seem that Bilaam, the man with the penetrating eye, had momentarily decided to "switch his eyes": "Now Bilaam, seeing that it pleased Hashem to bless Israel, did not, as on previous occasions, go in search of omens..." Bilaam removed his eyepatch, and for one rare moment in his life, he chose to view the reality of the Israelites through real eyes, the eyes of Hashem: "As Balaam looked up and saw Israel encamped tribe by tribe...". If we take a closer look at this case, we'll realize that unlike his previous proclamations, this time, he doesn't just "take up his theme". Here, he lifts up his (real) eyes before taking up his theme: "As Balaam looked up... and took up his theme". He was gazing at our people, in their full splendor, with new eyes. These weren't the eyes of the past, those that saw "only a portion of them", and not "all of them". This time, he saw all of the goodliness of the tents of Jacob and the dwellings of Israel.

This entire episode is steeped in irony and contempt for a prophet, or a seer, that cannot truly see. The expectation is that he would see what would become of this nation at the end of days, and prophesy destruction and an accursed future, but he isn't even able to visualize what his bestial donkey could see. He may have had a penetrating eye, but his other eye – the evil eye – perceived reality with contempt.

For one brief moment, Bilaam shifted his perception of reality, using his good eye. Just this one time, Bilaam adopts the genome of Abraham, the progenitor of the Jewish people, and correctly depicts the shining core of the Jewish people, and the backbone of the nation, which was formed from the families with the goodly tents. Next, he pronounces the wonderful prophecy about the nation's future land, a land promised to Abraham long ago, during the Brit Ben Habetarim (the "covenant of parts"). A land whose streams are like palm groves that stretch out, whose gardens are beside a river. During those moments, even Bilaam, the man who, for so many years, had an evil eye, a haughty spirit and a ravenous soul, could have been transformed.

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Indeed, the Divine spirit might be ushered in, when the "good eye" is used, and when "the eyes of Hashem" are reflecting on reality. Unlike Bilaam the son of Beor, Caleb, the son of Jefuneh, emerges with a "different spirit", one based the good eye that only he possessed when he set that eye on the Land of Israel. With that other eye, the good eye, he peered out toward the land, taking in the same geography and topography that his fellow spies had seen. "The eye shall influence the spirit". Even Moses sees those who began to prophesy in the camp with a "good eye" (and not, heaven forbid, with short-sighted envy), and he even wishes that Hashem would imbue everyone with His spirit. Nevertheless, and perhaps even because of all of this, Bilaam, the son of Beor will forever be remembered as an everlasting abhorrence. The Midrash Tanhuma on this chapter is quoted by Rashi:

A parable! People say to the hornet: neither any of your honey nor any of your sting! (Rashi commentary on Numbers, 22:12)

Bilaam merits to reach a high level of prophecy – "and the spirit of Hashem was upon him". These were the "moments of honey", the moments when his "good eye" made it possible for the divine spirit to dwell upon him. Bilaam is fortunate enough to experience divine revelation and walk on air for a few moments, and it is this spirit that lifts him out of the muck he had wallowed in and enhances his poor vision. Once a sorcerer-prophet with a "hook in his mouth", Bilaam now experiences magical, cosmic moments. The same Bilaam assumes the approach of "let me advise you" ... and what is that advice? "Yet they are the very ones who, at the bidding of Balaam, induced the Israelites to trespass against Hashem in the matter of Peor, so that Hashem's community was struck by the plague" (Numbers 31:16). Once again, after reaching the pinnacle of divine spirit, Bilaam turns back and returns to his devious ways. On that road which a man is resolved to go, he is allowed to go. After reaching the top, Bilaam corrupts the pure and genuine prophecy he was given, opting for the way of the evil eye, the haughty spirit and the ravenous soul. He thus squanders this great opportunity he was given, only to harm the people of Israel. "Not from your honey", Bilaam, "and not from your sting". You have come to merit, but you've botched everything. You could have been one of the most spiritual characters in the Book of Numbers, but without a "good eye", the wind has carried you away: "and Bilaam the son of Beor was killed by the sword".

The "good eye" and the true spirit have been passed down consistently, beginning with the generation of Abraham, the forefather of the Jewish people, continuing with the leaders of the nation, Moses, Caleb and Joshua, and culminating in the great spectacle that imbued the greatest of the non-Jewish prophets with

sublime spirituality: "How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel!"

### Dvar Torah: TorahWeb.Org

#### **Rabbi Mordechai Willig**

#### **Mashiach: When and How**

אראנו ולא עתה אשרנו ולא קרוב דרך כוכב מיעקב וכם שבט מישראל ומהן פאתי מואַבְרָהָן - I see it, but not now. I view it, but it is not near. A star shot forth from Yaakov, and a tribe has risen from Yisrael, and he will strike down the extremities of Moav and undermine all the children of Sheis" (Bamidbar 24:17)

The Or Hachaim notes the seemingly repetitive phraseology, and associates it with the two different scenarios of mashiach described in the Gemara (Sanhedrin 98a). The phrase (Yeshayahu 60:22) "בָּעֵת הַזֶּה אָמַר הָאֱלֹהִים לְעֵמֶק יְהוּדָה - I, Hashem, in its time I will hasten it" is self-contradictory. Will the ultimate redemption occur at a preordained time, or will Hashem hasten it?

The Gemara answers: If they [Am Yisrael] merit it [zachu] I will hasten it. If not [lo zachu], it will come in its time. "I will see it but not now" implies not now but any time, even soon, just beyond my sight. This, says the Or Hachaim, is the scenario of zachu, I will hasten it. "I view it but it is not near" means it is far beyond one's view, not even close, describing the scenario of lo zachu, in its time.

The Gemara raises an additional contradiction, not about the time of the messianic redemption but about its nature. Daniel (7:13) saw a vision of mashiach coming with the cloud of Heaven, i.e. of a swift, miraculous nature. However, Zecharia (9:9) describes him as humble and riding on a donkey, i.e. slowly and gradually, not miraculously.

Once again, the Gemara answers: If they merit it, zachu, it will be with the cloud of Heaven, swiftly and miraculously. This, says the Or Hachaim, is the shooting star from Heaven in Bilam's prophecy, a supernatural redemption. If not, lo zachu, it will be as a humble man riding on a donkey, slowly and gradually, not miraculously. This refers to a tribe from Yisrael arising as others in the world, naturally [b'derech hateva], as it says (Daniel 4:14) "וְשָׁפַל אָנָשִׁים קִים הַלְּעִילָה - Hashem will appoint the lowest of men over the kingdom". This tribe will reign and do what the pasuk states, namely as militarily victorious over its neighbors.

II. The Rambam (Hilchos Melachim 12:2) describes the messianic era based on the words of the prophets. He concludes: No one knows what will happen until it will happen. There are disputes among the Sages. Neither the order nor the details are fundamentals of religion. Lengthy discussions of these matters lead neither to love or fear of Hashem. Rather one should wait and believe, in general terms, in Mashiach.

Attitudes towards, and developments in, Eretz Yisrael in the last one hundred and forty years have engendered protracted and bitter controversies in Am Yisrael. The seventy years of the Zionist movement featured widespread support of, and fiery opposition to, the establishment of a Jewish state. Since 1948 the wars, policies and leaders of the State of Israel are a constant source of controversy extending well beyond its changing borders. In the religious community, it is viewed positively as proto-messianic, neutrally as a necessary development, or negatively as Satanic.

While, as the Rambam taught, the details are, and will remain, unknown, the words of the Or Hachaim may be a prescient description of our time. The slow and gradual process of redemption may refer to the Zionist movement, self-described as non-religious. Its achievements included the agricultural renewal of Eretz Yisrael after 1800 years of near desolation. The Gemara (*ibid.*) states: There is no clearer indication of the End, i.e. the signs of Mashiach, than this, as it says (Yechezkel 36:8), "אֶתְתֶּן לְעֵמֶק יְהוּדָה מְרוּכִים תְּשַׁאֲלָל עַמִּים יִשְׂרָאֵל - Mountains of Yisrael you shall give your branches and bear your fruit for my nation Yisrael".

The State of Israel, led primarily by non-observant Jews, including some atheists and anti-religious ones, has, as the Or Hachaim predicted, done what the pasuk says. With divine assistance, recognized even by some otherwise non-believers, the Israel Defense Force has prevailed against overwhelming odds, and has been consistently victorious over its neighbors. Taken together, these developments may indeed be a partial fulfillment of Bilam's prophecy of the slow and gradual process described in the Gemara and the Or Hachaim.

III. The Rambam describes speculation about the details of the messianic era as essentially futile, as they will remain unknown until Mashiach comes. Argumentation over these matters, which often descends into vitriolic and even violent controversies, is counterproductive. It leads to baseless hatred, sinas chinam, which caused the destruction of the Beis Hamikdash. Every generation in which the Mikdash is not built, it is as if it was destroyed in its days (Yerushalmi Yoma 1:1). This means that the underlying cause, namely sinas chinam, still exists in that generation, preventing the messianic era, about which people and communities argue to the point of hatred, from arriving. These arguments, like the speculation described in the Rambam, will be resolved only by the Mashiach himself.

This Shabbos, Parshas Balak, is Shiva Asar B'tamuz, the beginning of the three weeks of mourning over the churban, which culminate with Tisha B'av, its anniversary. We must recall the cause of the churban, and studiously avoid

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repeating sinas chinam and, thereby, extending the churban.

Differing opinions about the theological approaches to eschatology are unavoidable, as the Rambam taught. Political arguments about the practical approaches to the intractable problems facing the Jewish people in Eretz Yisrael and throughout the world are, likewise, unresolvable. Yet every Jew, by exhibiting the humility attributed by Zecharia to the Mashiach himself, can hasten his arrival by avoiding the acrimony and the hatred which result from absolute assuredness of the correctness of one's opinion and approach.

The application of the Or Hachaim's interpretation of Bilam's prophecy to our time does not predict the future. The details of the timing and nature of the messianic era will, as the Rambam wrote, remain unknown until they actually transpire. With appropriate humility and uncertainty, we can foster greater mutual love among Jews of different opinions and communities, which can actually hasten the redemption we all crave and pray for daily.

As the Rambam ruled, we must wait and believe, in general terms, in Mashiach. As the famous formulation of the Rambam's twelfth fundamental of faith says, "I believe with complete faith in the coming of Mashiach, and even though he may tarry, nevertheless I wait for him every day that he will come".

### **Bar Ilan University Dear Torah**

#### **Balaam's Blessings in Our Prayerbook**

#### **By Eliezer D. Jesselson\***

**Balaam's Poem** - The blessings of Balaam are presented as a poetic prophecy, comparable in scope only to the poem, Ha'azinu. The Sages considered the latter an epic poem, describing it thus in Sifre Deuteronomy:

This is an epic poem, for it contains present, as well as past, and also future, it contains this world and the world to come.

These characteristics can also be found in the blessings of the wicked Balaam, hence one could say that here, too, we are dealing with an epic poem.

The Rabbis apparently had their doubts regarding this poem. Their vacillation is evident as far back as Tractate Berakhot (12a):

Rabbi Abbahu b. Zutrathi said in the name of Rabbi Judah ben Zebida: They wanted to include the section of Balak in the Shema', but they did not do so because it would have meant too great a burden for the congregation.

As it turns out, this was not the end of their vacillations. Even centuries later we encounter its impact as our prayer books began to assume a fixed formulation.

Reciting Ma Tovu ("How fair are your tents, O Jacob") upon entering the synagogue.

The authors of the siddur in its fixed form, in the geonic period,<sup>1</sup> saw fit to add a group of verses at the beginning of the siddur whose aim was "to prepare for prayer" the person who, taking time off from his daily routine, was entering the synagogue to pray.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This first appears in *Seder Amram Gaon* (9th century) in the chapter on benedictions and petitions: "Upon entering the synagogue one says, 'How fair are your tents, O Jacob, your dwellings, O Israel'" (Gershon Harpanas edition, Bnei Brak 1984).

<sup>2</sup> The notion of preparing for prayer goes back to the Mishnah, Tractate *Berakhot* (5.1): "One should not stand up to pray except with deep earnestness. The early *hassidim* would wait [in the place of prayer] for an hour in order to direct their minds to Gd."

Hence, by the late geonic period, it had been established that upon entering the synagogue a person would recite the following five verses: How fair are your tents, O Jacob, your dwellings, O Israel (Num. 24:5). But I, through Your abundant love, enter Your house; I bow down in awe at Your holy temple (Ps. 5:8). O Lord, I love Your temple abode, the dwelling place of Your glory (Ps. 26:8). As for me, may my prayer come to you, O Lord, at a favorable moment; O Gd, in Your abundant faithfulness, answer me with Your sure deliverance (Ps. 69:14).

And I shall prostrate myself, bowing down and kneeling before the Lord my Maker.<sup>1</sup>

This is not stipulated in the Shulhan Arukh proper, but only in secondary texts to it. For example, Arukh ha-Shulhan (by Rabbi Yehiel Michael Halevy Epstein, 19<sup>th</sup> cent.), writes more precisely (Orah Hayyim 46):

The formulation for the prayers that precede Barukh she-Amar (Blessed is He who spoke and the world came into being) is printed in the prayer books. Upon entering the synagogue one says, "How fair are your tents, O Jacob."

Also the Mishnah Berurah (Rabbi Israel Meir Hacohen of Radin, 19-20<sup>th</sup> cent.) makes a similar remark but presents a different combination of verses. The most striking change is his omission of the opening line, "How fair are your tents, O Jacob": Before entering the synagogue, while still in the outer court, he recites: "In the House of the Lord let us proceed with feeling." At the entrance to the synagogue he pauses momentarily, then says, "But I, through Your abundant love, enter Your house; I bow down in awe at Your holy temple," and afterwards he enters.

Refraining from reciting the verse, because it was uttered by Balaam

It turns out that the Mishnah Berurah refrained from citing "How fair are your tents" because, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Rabbi Solomon Lurie instructed that verses from Balaam's poems not be mentioned. Thus it is written in Res. Maharshal, par. 64:

In the morning, when I come to the synagogue, I begin with the verse, "But I, through Your abundant love....," and skip the first verse, for it was said by Balaam, and he even said it by way of a curse, as is explained in Perek Halak.

Maharshal based his approach on the words of Rabbi Johanan in Tractate Sanhedrin (105b), who said that Balaam's original intentions must be examined by looking at the inverse of his blessings:

He wished to curse them, that they not have synagogues and houses of study—[so he found himself blessing them, saying] How fair are your tents, O Jacob;

that the Divine spirit not dwell over them—[so he said] your dwellings, O Israel;

that their kingdom not endure—like gardens beside a river....

that they not have a king of stature—like cedars beside the water....

that their kingdom not rule over other nations—its seed have abundant water, that their kingdom not be strong—their king shall rise above Agag.

Therefore Maharshal believed that since Balaam's intention was to do evil, we should not quote his blessings in our prayers.

So that it not be said his blessing bore fruit Rabbi Barukh Epstein, in Torah Temimah, backs up the approach taken by Maharshal by quoting another homily about our matriarch Rebekah being barren. According to this homily, it was decreed that Rebekah be barren so that her family not take it into their heads that their blessing, "O sister! May you grow into thousands of myriads," was what made her fertile. The homily goes as follows (Sekhel Tov, Toledot 25):

For this reason she [Rebekah] lived with him for twenty years [before bearing], so that her brother and other relations not say that the blessing they implored for her brought results.

From this the author of Torah Temimah deduced that it is important to prevent the wicked from the misguided thought that their actions can affect the course of events. In his opinion, this was the reason why Maharshal ruled that one should not quote the blessings of the wicked Balaam, lest it be said that Balaam's blessings were heeded.

Did Balaam's blessing come to pass?

This appears to have been the guiding principle for Rabbi Abba, who in Tractate Sanhedrin relates to the words of Rabbi Johanan, cited above. Rabbi Abba examines Balaam's blessings and correlates them with the history of the Jewish people. His conclusion is clear: the Jews did not have the good fortune of the blessings being realized, thus Balaam's original intention won out. Rabbi Abba, however, holds that one of his blessings did come to pass. We quote (Sanhedrin, loc. cit.):

Rabbi Abba b. Kahana said: All of them reverted to a curse, excepting the synagogues and houses of study, for it is written, instead the Lord your Gd turned the curse into a blessing for you, for the Lord your Gd loves you (Deut. 23:6). It says the curse, not the curses.

Rabbi Abba arrives at this precise analysis on the basis of the account given by Moses on the plains of Moab regarding the affair of Balaam, and from the use of the singular (curse and not curses). Because of the Lord's love for us, no matter what the circumstances or the time, one of Balaam's blessings came to pass for us, namely, "How fair are your tents, O Jacob." This blessing essentially meant that the Jews would always manage to maintain synagogues and houses of study, assuring the people's continued existence, no matter what the time or place.

This provides an explanation for the controversy over reciting the verse, "How fair are your tents, O Jacob." Maharshal unequivocally ruled out quoting Balaam, no matter what, and therefore said this verse should not be recited. Those who took issue with him sided with the view of Rabbi Abba; since the specific blessing uttered by Balaam, "How fair are your tents, O Jacob," had come to pass for the

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Jewish people, it was in line to recite this verse whenever entering the synagogue.

Including "No harm is in sight for Jacob" in the verses of Malkhuyot

In view of what we have said above, it is remarkable that the Sages did not refrain from including the above verse from Balaam's poem in the Malkhuyot liturgy of Rosh ha-Shanah, and that we find no opposition expressed against its inclusion. We are talking about the verse (Num. 23:21):

No harm is in sight for Jacob, no woe in view for Israel. The Lord their Gd is with them, and their King's acclaim in their midst.

As we know, in the Malkhuyot, Zikhronot and Shofarot service ten scriptural quotes are included in each section. The first three verses, as well as the last verse, are taken from the Torah. The first series of verses express the majesty of the Holy One, blessed be He, the second, His remembering, and the third, His revelation through the blast of the shofar. When it came to setting the verses for Malkhuyot, it turned out that the Sages could find only a single verse in the entire Torah that speaks of the Lord's kingship, and only two verses in which the Holy One, blessed be He, is called "King." The first of these two is the verse mentioned from Balaam's poem, and the other is from Parashat Ve-Zot ha-Berakhah: "Then He became King in Jeshurun, when the heads of the people assembled, the tribes of Israel together" (Deut. 33:5).

In all other occurrences of the word "King" in the Torah, the reference is to a king of flesh and blood.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, when it came to picking the three verses from the Torah that would be recited in the

Malkhuyot, the Sages were compelled to cite the verse from Balaam's poem, and so they ruled:<sup>3</sup>

The first verse: "The Lord will reign for ever and ever" (Ex. 15:18). The second verse: "No harm is in sight for Jacob, no woe in view for Israel. The Lord their Gd is with them, and their King's acclaim in their midst" (Num. 23:21). The third verse: "Then He became King in Jeshurun, when the heads of the people assembled, the tribes of Israel together" (Deut. 33:5).

Conclusion - The Sages expressed contradictory opinions regarding Balaam's blessings. Some took utter exception to them because they came from his impure mouth, and also so that it not be said that the blessing of the wicked has an impact. Opposing them were others who consented to quote "How fair are your tents, O Jacob," since this blessing came to pass despite what Balaam wished. The Jewish people survived through every situation by virtue of their houses of study and houses of prayer, and therefore, according to their view, no more fitting verse could be found to begin the prayer service in the King's sanctuary. *Translated by Rachel Rowen*

<sup>1</sup> This, the fifth verse, is a re-writing in the singular of a verse from Psalms (95:6): "Come, let us bow down and kneel, bend the knee before the Lord our maker." The call to the many, *Bo'u* (= come [pl.]), was replaced with the word *va-ani* (= I), to complete a threefold repetition of the opening "I." The earliest origin of this practice eludes me.

<sup>2</sup> The word "king" appears 88 times in the Torah, 86 of them referring to a king of flesh and blood, as in this week's reading: "Balak son of Zippor was king of Moab at that time."

<sup>3</sup> As we said, in each section four verses are cited from the Torah. It is clear from what we have said that the Rabbi did not find a fourth verse in the Torah which speaks of the Lord's majesty, and therefore they used the first verse of the *Shema*: "Here, O Israel, the Lord is our Gd, the Lord alone" (Deut. 6:4). Perhaps the absence of the epithet "King" for the Holy One, blessed be He, in the *Shema* was one of the factors leading to the inclusion in this prayer of the tannaitic expression, "Blessed is the Name of His glorious kingdom for all eternity"—a surprising and artificial interpolation.

## Weekly Internet Parsha Sheet

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#### Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog

We are taught in the book of Mishlei-Proverbs by King Solomon that it is better to hear criticism from a friend than compliments from someone who is truly one's enemy. This week's Torah reading abounds in compliments given to the Jewish people by the leading prophet of the non-Jewish world, Bilaam. From all of the compliments showered upon us by this person of evil, we are able learn the true intentions of the one blessing us. Our sages remark that the criticism leveled by our father Jacob against Shimon are to be counted amongst the blessings that he bestowed individually on each of his children.

The words of review and correction serve to save these tribes from extinction and wrongdoing. It is not only the superficial words of blessing that are important but, perhaps, much more importantly, it is the intent and goal of the one who is blessing that determines whether these seemingly beautiful words contain within them the poison of hatred and curses.

The Talmud teaches us that from the words of blessing that escaped the mouth of Bilaam, we can determine what his true intent was. The rabbis read his blessings as being delivered with a voice of sarcasm and criticism. Words and inflections can have many meanings, and since we did not actually hear the tone of voice used by Bilaam, we may be tempted to accept his words at face value and become flattered and seduced by the compliments he granted to us. The Talmud, however, judged his words more deeply, and realized that unless the Jewish people were careful in their observance of the Torah's commandments, the words of blessing of Bilaam would only serve to mock them in later generations.

It is difficult in the extreme to resist the temptation of actually believing that flattering words could have an inglorious deception. A thousand years later, the prophets would warn us to remember the true intent of both Balak and Bilaam. Over our long history, and especially during the millennia of exile, we have suffered much persecution and negative hatred directed towards us. We also, paradoxically, have had to withstand the blandishments and false compliments paid to Judaism by those who only wish to destroy our faith and our future.

There is no question that one would rather be liked in this life. The true intent has to be judged correctly, and factored into the acceptance of compliments, seemingly bestowed by our former or current enemies and critics. The compliments given by Bilaam caused the death of thousands of Jews. That is the reason that the Jews felt justified in avenging themselves upon Bilaam.

Poison is often injected into candies and other sweet objects that are pleasant to the pallet but are destructive to the existence of the human being. This is one of the overriding messages contained in this week's reading.

Shabbat shalom

Rabbi Berel Wein

#### The Curse of Loneliness

#### BALAK - Rabbi Jonathan Sacks zt"l

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

How can I curse whom God has not cursed?

How can I denounce the Lord has not denounced?

From the tops of crags I see them,

From the hills I gaze down:

A people that dwells alone[1],

Not reckoning itself among nations.

Num. 23:8-9

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

In my book Future Tense[2] I describe the moment when I first became aware of how dangerous a self-definition this can be. We were having lunch in Jerusalem, on Shavuot 5761/2001. Present was one of the world's great fighters against antisemitism, Irwin Cotler, soon to become Canada's Minister of Justice, together with a distinguished Israeli diplomat. We were talking about the forthcoming United Nations Conference against Racism at Durban in 2001.

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

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

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

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

Second, Bilaam who said those words was not a lover of Israel. Hired to curse them and prevented from doing so by God, he nonetheless tried a second time, this time successfully, persuading the Moabite and Midianite women to seduce the Israelite men, as a result of which 24,000 died (Num. 25, Num. 31:16). It was this second strategy of Bilaam – after he had already said, "How can I curse whom God has not cursed? How can I doom whom God has not doomed?" – that marks him out as a man profoundly hostile to the Israelites. The Talmud (Sanhedrin 105b) states that all the blessings that Balaam bestowed on the Israelites eventually turned into curses, with the sole exception of the blessing "How goodly are your tents, Jacob, your dwelling places, Israel." (Num. 24:5) So in the Rabbis' view, "a people that dwells alone" eventually became not a blessing but a curse.

Third, nowhere in Tanach are we told that it will be the fate of Israel, or Jews, to be hated. To the contrary, the prophets foresaw that there would come a time when the nations would turn to Israel for inspiration. Isaiah envisaged a day on which "Many peoples will come and say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the temple of the God of Jacob. He will teach us His ways, so that we may walk in His paths.' The law will go out from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem." (Is. 2:3)

Zechariah foresaw that "in those days ten people from all languages and nations will take firm hold of one Jew by the hem of his robe and say 'Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you.'" (Zech. 8:23) These are sufficient to cast doubt on the idea that

antisemitism is eternal, incurable, woven into Jewish history and destiny.

Only in rabbinic literature do we find statements that seem to suggest that Israel is hated. Most famous is the statement of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai:

“Halachah: it is well known that Esau hates Jacob.”<sup>[3]</sup>

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai was known for his distrust of the Romans, whom the Rabbis identified with Esau/Edom. It was for this reason, says the Talmud, that he had to go into hiding for thirteen years (Shabbat 33b). His view was not shared by his contemporaries.

Those who quote this passage do so only partially and selectively. It refers to the moment at which Jacob and Esau meet after their long estrangement. Jacob has feared that Esau will try to kill him. After taking elaborate precautions and wrestling with an angel, the next morning he sees Esau. The verse then says:

“Esau ran to meet him and embraced him [Jacob], and throwing his arms around his neck, he kissed him and they [both] wept.”

Gen. 33:4

Over the letters of the word “kissed”, as it appears in a Sefer Torah, there are dots, signalling some special meaning. It was in this context that Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai said: “Even though it is well known that Esau hates Jacob, at that moment he was overcome with compassion and kissed him with a full heart.” (See Rashi ad loc.) In other words, precisely the text cited to show that antisemitism is inevitable, proves the opposite: that at the crucial encounter, Esau did not feel hate toward Jacob. They met, embraced, and went their separate ways without ill-will.

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

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

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

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch offered a fine insight by focusing on the nuance between “people” (am) and “nation” (goy) – or as we might say nowadays, “society” and “state.”<sup>[4]</sup> Israel uniquely became a society before it was a state. It had laws before it had a land. It was a people – a group bound together by a common code and culture – before it was a nation, that is, a political entity. As I noted in Future Tense, the word peoplehood first appeared in 1992, and its early uses were almost entirely in reference to Jews.<sup>[5]</sup> What makes Jews different, according to Hirsch’s reading of Bilaam, is that Jews are a distinctive people, that is, a group defined by shared memories and collective responsibilities, “not reckoned among the nations” since they are capable of surviving even without nationhood, even in exile and dispersion. Israel’s strength lies not in nationalism but in building a society based on justice and human dignity.

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

[1] A People that Dwells Alone was the title given to the collection of essays by the late Jacob Herzog. It was also the theme of the autobiography of Israeli diplomat, and brother of Israel’s former Chief Rabbi Israel Meir Lau, the late Naftali Lau-Lavie (Balaam’s Prophecy: Eyewitness to History [ Jerusalem: Toby Press, 2015]).

[2] Published by New York: Schocken, 2012.

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

[4] Samson Raphael Hirsch, Commentary to Numbers 23:9.

[5] Rabbi Sacks, Future Tense, p. 25.

## Parashat Balak

by Rabbi Nachman Kahana

Take My Hand

Diminutive in size but giant in spirit, our beloved Medinat Yisrael has made the world stand still (figuratively) more than once since its re-establishment 74 years ago.

The world looked on in disbelief when, in 1948, a mere handful of fighters with limited weapons and resources trounced the standing armies of seven Arab nations. At the end of the British Mandate on May 14th, 1948, “His Majesty” King George the Fifth’s army waited in ships off the coast of Haifa to be implored by the beleaguered, desperate Jews to return and save them from annihilation. They have grown old waiting. Once again, we figuratively made the world stand still in the Six Day War (interesting to note that the war in Afghanistan was in its 10th year), when our young flying angels destroyed the combined Air Forces of all the Arab states in the Middle East in two hours on the morning of the 26th of Iyar 5727. The “mouths” of the world’s leaders dropped in incredulous disbelief, not only at the military success, but even more at the fact that HaShem had restored His people to much of the Biblical lands of Eretz Yisrael.

In one of the boldest and most successful military operations of all time was the daring feat that occurred on the 6th of Tamuz 5736 (July 4, 1976). Israeli planes carried 100 commandos over 4,000 kilometers (2,500 miles) to Uganda for the rescue of 106 Jews who were kidnapped by German and Arab terrorists to Entebbe, Uganda. The “Hand of Hashem” commanded that legendary military operation.

The world now stands at attention when perusing the statistics of what 7 million Jews have accomplished in every important field of endeavor, in a land almost devoid of natural resources – save for the Yiddishe Kop (mental agility and common sense) of its children.

The revival of Torah life and scholarship after the Shoah, our military and all that that implies, science, technology, the humanities, democratic institutions, financial stability, a growing economy, a super strong shekel and, above all, the happiness and satisfaction level of its citizens are amazing accomplishments, especially on the background of a tenuous security situation.

We have indeed stopped the world in its tracks several times, figuratively. However, even more impressive, HaShem literally “stopped the world” for us 3300 years ago.

The Book of Joshua (chapter 10) relates that five city states of the Amorites attacked the Jewish people. Yehoshua’s army was devastating the enemy, but as night approached, Yehoshua feared that many of them would escape under cover of darkness. Yehoshua appealed to HaShem to halt the sun’s and moon’s movements in order to continue in daylight until the Jewish army could complete the destruction of the enemy. And so it was, that the sun and moon stood fixed in their places, or in modern scientific terms, the earth stopped rotating for a period of time, creating the appearance that the heavenly bodies were at rest.

Today, the 3rd of Tamuz, at the writing of these words, is the anniversary of that miraculous happening. The day the world stood still! There is a concept called “the invisible hand”. It originally appeared in the book “An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations”, authored in 1776 by the renowned economist Adam Smith.

The essence of the book was to promote a non-regulatory economic system, based on the premise that there is an “invisible hand” (unexplainable phenomena) that guides the divergent economic forces in society to an end that provides the most good for the most people. Or stated plainly: Leave the economy alone – it will take care of itself.

The term “invisible hand” has been applied generally to any action whose consequences were unplanned and unintended, even not wanted. But they just happened (the definition of coincidence is the way

HaShem directs the world while remaining anonymous). The “invisible hand” looms larger than life in the history and survival of the Jewish nation. The “Invisible Hand” of HaShem was at work when the heavenly bodies stopped in their tracks to help the Jewish people defeat the five Amorite nations. It was the “Invisible Hand” that guided our fathers in their wandering in the desert, and the Hand that guaranteed our survival in the long 2000-year galut and opened the gates of Eretz Yisrael for us to enter.

Balak and Bil'am both learned “the hard way” of the “Invisible Hand” that protects the Jewish people.

Bil'am used all of his experience as an arch messenger of bad tidings to curse the nation that HaShem had blessed. The consequences of his efforts were “unplanned and unintended”. Every anathema, blasphemy, damnation, denunciation, obscenity, profanation, and vilification that his evil mind sought to express emerged from his mouth as blessings!

The Gemara (Brachot 7a) states that Bil'am's success as a master of vilifying, was due to his knowledge of the one, instantaneous split second of time that HaShem angers every day. And Bil'am would curse at that time. But what Bil'am did not know was that during the forty years the Jewish people were in the desert, HaShem did not bring forth the quality of anger even when the people sinned. The “Invisible Hand” of HaShem was at work.

In my lifetime, I have seen the “Invisible Hand” at work in quite ordinary situations of life.

Here are just three:

One of our granddaughters graduated from the elementary school in the Old City of Yerushalayim, and the class presented a play depicting an incident that occurred when the Romans conquered the city. It was quite inspiring to see the talent that these 11–12-year-olds are gifted with – but that's not the story.

While viewing the play, I became overwhelmed by the thought that while there is no one in this wide world who can claim with any veracity that they are a descendant of the ancient Romans who destroyed the Bet Hamikdash and sent our people into a 2000-year exile, these young children on stage who have returned to live and study in the Old City, are direct descendants of the Kohanim and Levi'im who served in the Bet Hamikdash, and of the Jewish people who brought their sacrifices to the Bet Hamikdash. Is this not the “Invisible Hand” of HaShem at work? The following night I was invited to speak at the home of Abba and Pamela Claman, two extraordinary people who have devoted themselves, through many diverse activities, in expressing their and our love and honor to our soldiers. They were hosting two seemingly very diverse groups. One was the crew of a “Jewish” submarine, and the other a group of about 50 young college aged men and women from across the USA. When I arrived, the two groups of Jewish young people were sitting on the roof eating a sumptuous meal, in the Claman tradition. What could I say to two groups, one of which would be spending their nights learning the secret codes of the Israeli Navy and then submerging into the deep waters of the oceans to protect Am Yisrael, while the other would be planning their next Saturday night dates? But in reality, as diverse as they might seem, they have more in common than that which makes them different.

I spoke of the “Invisible Hand” of HaShem that sustains us today as it has done for over 3300 years. I spoke of our common destiny; that what happens to Medinat Yisrael affects every Jew in the world, regardless of their religious observance or non-observance. I quoted the second verse in the Torah, that the earth was covered with water and the spirit of HaShem hovered over the waters; and that these young submariners take the spirit of HaShem even below the waters. I told them that education is the planting of a seed, but it is up to the individual to decide if he or she wants to nurture that seed or let it wither away.

The third incident occurred when my wife and I were at the remarkable Israel Museum. We arrived at the meticulously constructed model of Yerushalayim during the Second Temple period, put together with over one million pieces of stone. There was a group of older high school aged boys and girls from the US, listening to their guide who was explaining what they were viewing. He was very informative regarding the

buildings and streets etc., but I felt that the neshama (spirit) was missing. I asked the guide for permission to say a few words and, surprisingly, he agreed.

I told these youngsters that my wife and I were born in the USA, just like them; but came to Eretz Yisrael many years ago. Our only regret was that we didn't come sooner. Their bored look started to turn into a more positive one, so I continued. I spoke of our 3300-year history and that we were chosen by HaShem to be His unique nation, as proven by our return to the Promised Land by the “Invisible Hand” of HaShem. The seed was taking root – the group was smiling and clapping. Indeed, the “Invisible Hand” is always outstretched, but there is a condition.

The Torah says (Devarim 15:18)

*תעשה אשר בכל ליהך-א 'וברכך*

HaShem will indeed bless us, but we have to initiate and do.

Had Moshe not gone out of his way to approach the burning bush, there would not have been an exodus.

Had Nachshon ben Aminadav not jumped into the churning waters of the Red Sea, the waters would not have split.

Had the first chalutzim (pioneers) not dried out the malarial swamps in the Chula Valley, there would be no skyscrapers today in Tel Aviv.

If you live in New York, LA, Cleveland, London, Paris, Sao Paolo, etc., you will never realize your Jewish potential; and it would be a life wasted.

In conclusion:

A man fell into a deep pit, and the rescue workers failed to extract him because for some reason he did not cooperate. When hope was all but lost, an onlooker asked for permission to try and pull him out. He approached the pit and in an instant the poor fellow was out. Upon being asked by the police how he succeeded in getting the man's cooperation, he asked the police what they said to the man in the pit. The officer in charge replied, “I told him again and again ‘give me your hand’, but to no avail”. Then the hero said “that was your mistake. I said to him, ‘Take my hand’”.

The spiritual situation in which the Jewish people now find ourselves after such a long galut, makes it almost impossible for us to initiate “giving a hand to HaShem”. So HaShem brought about the greatest miracle since Biblical times – the return of the Jewish people to our ancient homeland.

By this HaShem is beckoning to us, “Take My Outstretched Hand”.

Am Yisrael Chai!

Shabbat Shalom

Nachman Kahana

### **Rabbi Eliezer Melamed**

#### **Understanding the 'Heter' of Rabbi Moshe Feinstein**

Even after his wife the Rebbetzin begged him to rescind his halakhic permit of artificial insemination due to the terror of the zealots who threatened it and burned his books, he refused to change his mind, due to concern for barren women.

Before Pesach, an evening of study and a siyyum of the books ‘Peninei Halakha’ took place in Efrat. I was privileged to have Rabbi Riskin shlita, the rabbi of the city for decades and the founder of Ohr Torah Stone participate in the evening, wishing to strengthen my halakhic position, and to that end, he told the audience a story from his personal testimony about two of the greatest rabbis of the previous generation – his teacher and rabbi, Rabbi Soloveitchik (1903-1993), and Rabbi Moshe Feinstein (1895-1986). They were relatives: Rabbi Soloveitchik's mother was a cousin of Rabbi Feinstein. Their positions were somewhat different: Rabbi Soloveitchik supported the Mizrachi movement, and Rabbi Feinstein, Agudat Yisrael.

I asked Rabbi Riskin to write the story so that I could present it accurately, and here it is:

The Grief of Rebbetzin Feinstein

“After I had studied for seven years, and received a teaching permit from my teacher and Rabbi, the Gaon Rabbi Yosef Dov Halevi Soloveitchik ztz”l, and after I started serving as a teacher at Yeshiva University and

as a synagogue rabbi for baalei teshuvas in a new neighborhood in New York, I realized how essential it was for me to sit with my Rabbi and teacher for guidance and consultation with him. The Rav agreed to sit with me in his apartment located in the Yeshiva dormitory on Thursday evenings, before his flight back to his home in Boston.

"On one of those Thursday evenings, as I was sitting with the Rav, the phone rang. Rav Soloveitchik answered, but I was also able to hear the voice across the line. I realized that the speaker was Rebbetzin Feinstein, and she cried, begged, and said that only Rabbi Soloveitchik, who her husband Rabbi Moshe Feinstein is so respectful and fond of, would be able to convince her husband to withdraw his heter (halachic permission) for artificial insemination!

"She said the Haredi fanatics had burned her husband's books in ultra-Orthodox neighborhoods in Brooklyn, and phone the Feinstein house at all hours of the night with curses in their mouths.

"I heard how Rabbi Soloveitchik tried to reassure her, and promised he would make an effort to persuade Rabbi Feinstein to withdraw his heter. However, afterwards, he told me that there was no chance that he would succeed, because when Rabbi Moshe believes that his ruling is true – seeing as there is no question of ishut (laws of marriage) in artificial insemination – he will not move from his position, and will defend his heter like a lion!

"The next day, Friday morning, after a sleepless night, out of worry and sorrow for the Rabbi and Rebbetzin Feinstein alongside many doubts if I, a young rabbi, was allowed to express an opinion on the subject, I arrived at the Tiferet Yerushalayim Yeshiva to meet with Rabbi Feinstein.

"I thought that I, the young rabbi that I was, had to try to convince him. After all, I also had the privilege of learning rulings from him in the laws of niddah two years before, when Rabbi Soloveitchik sent me to Rabbi Moshe to study practical rulings. It was then that I realized that Rabbi Moshe Feinstein and Rabbi Soloveitchik were relatives, with a lot of respect and love between them.

"Although I did not ask permission in advance to arrive, Rabbi Moshe received me with great joy and warmth. 'Rabbi,' I began, 'I apologize, but this is a question of Torah, and I need to study it. I realize I'm a young rabbi, involving myself in things that are not my business, but last night, I was sitting with Rabbi Soloveitchik when Rebbetzin Feinstein called him, and I could not help but hear her pain and sorrow'. I also cried. 'They burn your books, they drive your Rebbetzin crazy, why don't you retract? After all, they are not asking you to give a heter, but merely to hold-off the prohibition, please, Rabbi, forgive me'.

"Rabbi Moshe took my hand in his and said: 'I have a lot of respect for your request, however, I cannot back down. Yes, they burn my books, but even if they burned me – I would not change my mind. It is a matter of pikuach nefesh! Have you forgotten what our mother Rachel said to our forefather Jacob, 'Give me children, or I will die'? A woman who is unable to give birth feels like she is dead if she is barren. Do you know how many daughters of Israel I gave life to, based on my ruling?! After all, from a halakhic point of view, artificial insemination is not at all an act of ishut! No, it is forbidden for me to change my mind!'

"I left Rabbi Moshe at least with an understanding of what the greatness of Torah is, and who the great men of Torah are."

#### The Heter of Rabbi Feinstein

The heter was that spouses, who could not give birth, due to a problem with the husband's fertility, were allowed to receive a sperm donation from a stranger, and so, the wife would conceive and give birth. This is because there is no prohibition of ari'ot (forbidden conjugal relations) in a way when there is no sexual relations as the way of marriage, and therefore the child will be considered a kosher Jew, and if the baby born is a girl, she will also be able to marry a kohen (Igrot Moshe Ibn Ha'ezer, Vol. 1 10:71; Vol.4 32:5).

Incidentally, a couple once came to me with a similar question. The woman very much wanted another child. The husband, who loved his wife, complied with her, but felt uncomfortable. They wanted to ask if this was allowed. I answered it was permitted, but added that the husband would be considered his father for two reasons. One, without

his consent the child would never have come into being, and consequently, thanks to him he was born. Second, our Sages said (Sanhedrin 19: 2): Anyone who raises an orphan in his house, the verse ascribes him credit as if he gave birth to him. All the more so as a father who accompanies him from the time of his pregnancy and raises him from his first day, will be considered as if he had given birth to him. The man's face lit up, and so did his wife.

#### Should a Son who does Not Respect his Parents be Deprived of His Inheritance

Q: I have several children, one of whom hardly comes to visit me. It could be his wife is influencing him. I would expect him to respect me more, just as the rest of my children respect me. I am a rich person. Is it proper to write in my will that his share of the inheritance will be smaller than his brother's share? And should he be told that?

A: It is forbidden for a person to discriminate against one of his sons in his inheritance, even if he is behaving improperly and is not meticulous in keeping mitzvot (Bava Batra 133b). The reason is that even if the son himself is not good, his grandson may turn out well. However, if his father deprives him – he will regret and distance himself from the family tradition, and the fear will increase that he will not educate his sons' properly. Similarly, Shmuel the Amora instructed his disciple Rabbi Yehuda, not to be present in a situation where an inheritance is transferred, even from a bad son to a good son. This is also ruled in the Shulchan Aruch (Choshen Mishpat 382:1).

Of course, parents can give gifts to children while they are alive, and even prefer the children who are in continuous and better contact with them, but in an inheritance, which expresses the absolute connection to the children, they must not be discriminated against. Parents who discriminate in inheritance between their children cause controversy and destroy their family. The deprived sibling will accuse his brothers and sisters that through flattery, they distanced him from his parents in order to take his share of the inheritance, and will carry a grudge against them all his life, and the family will be torn apart.

Even the siblings that the parent tried to draw closer will eventually feel distant towards the brother deprived of his inheritance. Indeed, at first they may be happy that they received a greater inheritance, but later they will regret the damage caused to their family, and feel alienated from their father. This is because the connection between children and their parents should be absolute and eternal – a relationship that is not dependent on anything. If they see that the connection to their father depends on their respect or flattery towards him, they will not remember him as a good father, rather as a man who was too sensitive about his dignity, and even with his sons, behaved in a petty and vengeful way.

#### A Son Who Curses His Parents

Rabbi Shimon ben Tzemach (Rashbatz) was asked about a son who cursed his father and mother and called his father a bastard, what is his punishment, and whether to agree with his father who wanted to dispossess him of his inheritance (Teshuvot Rashbatz 3: 192).

Before I relate his answer, I will give a brief description of him. The Rashbatz lived at the end of the Rishonim period (1361- 1444). He was born on the island of Mallorca near Spain, and due to disturbances in Spain in 1391, fled to North Africa and settled in Algeria. Like many of the eminent rabbis of Spain, the Rashbatz was also a physician.

The Rashbatz explained that even though the son did not curse his parents with the name of God as the most severe Torah prohibition, about which it is said (Leviticus 20: 9): "Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death. Because they have cursed their father or mother, their blood will be on their own head" – in any case, even in cursing without the name of God it is a severe prohibition, and when he sins in it, he is called accursed, as the Torah says (Deuteronomy 27:16): "Cursed is anyone who dishonors their father or mother." Nevertheless, even such a son should not be deprived of his inheritance, for a father who does so is not looked upon favorably by our Sages. And it is to be hoped and presumed that in time, he will repent and regret his conduct towards his parents.

#### A Wayward Son

Q: What is the law when one of the children does not keep Torah and mitzvot? Is it appropriate to deprive him of his inheritance?

A: As long as the child is connected to the people of Israel and its heritage – according to the instruction of our Sages, he must not be deprived of the inheritance. However, if it is a child who has decided to alienate himself from his family and people, since he disconnected himself from his family and Am Yisrael, there is room to consider his expropriation from the inheritance (see, Peninei Halakha: Mishpacha 1:30).

#### Advice for Parents

Parents who have a large inheritance and want to encourage their children to continue on the path of Torah, can stipulate in their will that part of the inheritance will be allocated for Torah education for grandchildren and great-grandchildren, as well as for weddings ke'dat Moshe ve'Yisrael (according to Jewish tradition). By doing so, all their children will be encouraged, without exception, to educate their children to Torah and mitzvot, and to marry ke'dat Moshe ve'Yisrael. Whoever is not interested, will lose out on his own accord.

**Jacob Solomon Parsha@torahinaction.com**

**FROM THE MESHECH CHOCHMA**

**BALAK - 5782**

Even now it is said regarding... Israel: [See] what G-d has done! The [Israeli] nation will arise as a lion cub, and raise itself as a lion... will not lie down until eating the prey, and drinking the blood of those who are slain (23:23-24).

With these words, Bil'am continued to proceed with his berachot to the Israelites. The Midrash quotes R. Hiyya bar Abba as saying: "The approbation of a woman is not when she is praised by her friends, but when she is praised by her rivals" (Devarim Rabba 3,6). Admiration from friends is one thing, but being commended by your enemies puts you into a most positive light.

Possibly with that in mind, Rashi applies this pasuk homiletically to show Bil'am's insight into the Jewish day of the future. With the power of a lion cub that grows up to be a lion, Am Yisrael will start every day with strength and with fortitude, and finish every day with strength and with fortitude. Their day opens with tallit, tefillin, and tefillot, and moves on mitzvah after mitzvah, serving G-d and humanity with integrity and lion-like determination even when tempted to do otherwise. And the day concludes with the mitzvot of the evening, finishing with placing their verbally placing their spirits into the Hand of G-d as they fall asleep. And in harmony with their devotion shown throughout the day, G-d protects them by destroying potential destructive forces.

The Meshech Chochma explains this whole beracha in a broad context that includes more dimensions, a context that gets to heart of G-d's relationship with His people. This bracha reflects the fascinating insight that G-d gave Bil'am into His relationship with Israel, and what it can show the nations of the world who will say: "Even now it is said regarding... Israel: [See] what G-d has done!"

For in the future, Israel: "...will rise as a lion cub, and raise itself as a lion... will not lie down until eating the prey, and drinking the blood of those who are slain". There will be struggles in the future as with the Egyptians in the past. They will face peoples and nations under whose domination they will have to use what powers of endurance are available to them and temporarily will have to lie low, but ultimately they will rise as a lion cub, succeeding as lions growing from strength to strength until their much larger and mightier oppressors disappear one after the other into history. As the lions, they will endure. They will not rest until "eating the prey and drinking the blood of those who are slain". And the nations will not say that the Jews achieved what they achieved through magic: "there is no sorcery... in Israel" (23:23). They will say that the People of Israel got to where they got to because G-d was with them: "the friendship of the King is with them" (23:22).

The Ramchal (Otzrot Ramchal 105-106, as well as the RaMad to Parashat Balak) adds an additional dimension. In Egypt, the "prey and the blood" was the wealth they took with them. In future exiles, the "prey and the blood" include the various good things that they have

learnt from each nation, in culture, scientific discoveries, use of technology, social welfare, and positive, effective administration. The Ramchal develops the idea that it will be the task of Israel at the end of the days to integrate those contributions and qualities within the framework of the Torah to the ultimate purification of humanity within the Geula Sheleima, the Final Redemption.

Thus G-d had given Bil'am the picture of who Am Yisrael is: where they came from, what they were doing, and their destiny in the Creation. Nations would rise and fall, but Am Yisrael would be the people who would integrate their best qualities to contribute to the final destiny of the Creation: being brought to purification and full harmony with the Creator.

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#### Joining Gentiles

**By Rabbi Yirmiyahu Kaganoff**

Question #1: Client's celebration

A non-Jewish client is marrying off his daughter and expects his business associates to attend the reception. Knowing him, he expects me to spend a considerable amount of time there. Is this permitted, and, while there, may I eat or drink something that is kosher?

Question #2: Meeting a new client

My boss asked me to attend a lunch meeting with a new client in a non-kosher restaurant. Is this permitted, and, if it is, may I order a cup of coffee or a fruit plate?

Question #3: Company picnics and parties

May I attend the company end-of-year parties and picnics?

Answer:

Each of the above questions involve situations that may arise in today's professional work environment. The Gemara teaches that the injunctions created by Chazal are dearer to Hashem than Torah laws. In this context, we can explain the vast halachic literature devoted to the many prohibitions created to protect the Jewish people from major sins. These include bishul akum, the prohibition against eating food cooked by a non-Jew, pas akum, which, under certain circumstances, prohibits bread baked by a non-Jew, and sheichar akum, which prohibits drinking certain types of beer in a non-Jew's home or tavern.

The Rambam codifies these laws as follows: "There are activities that have no basis in the Torah that our Sages prohibited... to make sure that Jews and non-Jews do not ... intermarry. These are the prohibitions: They prohibited drinking with them even when there is no concern about sacramental wine [yayin nesech]. They prohibited eating their bread or what they have cooked even when there is no concern that there are non-kosher ingredients or flavors added. What is an example of this prohibition? A person may not drink in a gathering of non-Jews even cooked wine that is not prohibited [as stam yeinam, wine handled by a non-Jew], or even if the Jew drinks only what he brought himself. If most of the assemblage is Jewish, it is permitted. It is prohibited to drink beer made from dates or figs or anything similar. But this prohibition [drinking beer] is prohibited only where it is sold. If he brought the beer home, it is permitted to drink it there, because the primary reason for the decree was that he should not come to eat a meal at a non-Jew's house" (Rambam, Hilchos Ma'achalos Asuros 17:9-10).

Why is beer different?

There is a very obvious question here: The three other prohibitions mentioned here because of concerns of social interaction – bishul akum, pas akum and stam yeinam – are not dependent upon where you are. Consuming these items is prohibited, regardless of your location. However, the prohibition concerning the beer, as well as the prohibition of eating and drinking with non-Jews, applies only in the non-Jews' venue. Among the rishonim, we find several approaches to explain this question. I will present just one approach, that of the Tosafos Rid (Avodah Zarah 65b), who explains that, in the instances of wine, cooked food and bread – the main concern is that you will find the foods served by the non-Jew to be very tasty, and this eventually might lead to inappropriate social interactions. However, in the instance of beer, the concern is not the food, but the socializing – and prohibiting drinking beer where the non-Jew lives and works is a sufficient safeguard to discourage the inappropriate activity.

I have written previously many times on the topics of bishul akum, pas akum, stam yeinam and sheichar akum that are mentioned in this Rambam. I have also written about the questions germane to mar's ayin implicit in several of the opening questions. However, I have never written on what the Rambam prohibits here: not to drink kosher beverages "in a gathering of non-Jew's," nor "to eat a meal at a non-Jew's house."

This ruling of the Rambam is subsequently quoted and accepted by all the halachic authorities, including Tur, Shulchan Aruch, Derisha, Shach, Taz, Pri Chodosh, Or Hachayim, Darkei Teshuvah, Chasam Sofer and Igros Moshe. Rambam's source

There is much discussion among later authorities attempting to identify the source in Chazal whence the Rambam inferred this prohibition. Among the acharonim, we find several suggestions for the Rambam's ruling, including mention of some passages of Gemara. Let us examine these sources.

The first instance cited is based on a Mishnah that prohibits many types of financial dealings with an idolater on the days near a pagan holiday, out of concern that he will thank his deity for the business. If this happens, the Jew has "caused" the pagan to worship idols. Bear in mind that being a "light unto the nations" precludes causing someone else to violate his commandment.

The conclusion of this Mishnah states, "When an idolater makes a celebration in honor of his son, it is prohibited to deal only with that man on that day (Avodah Zarah 8a). This conclusion is cited by the halachic authorities (Rambam, Hilchos Avodas Kochavim 9:5; Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 148:7).

The Gemara adds the following to the discussion: "Rabbi Yishmael said: Jews living in chutz la'aretz are idol worshippers who think that they are acting properly. Why is this? An idolater makes a party to celebrate a family event and invites all the Jews in his town to attend – even if they eat their own food and drink their own beverages and their own waiter serves them, the Torah treats it as if they ate from the offerings of idols." This passage is also cited by the halachic authorities (Rambam, Hilchos Avodas Kochavim 9:15; Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 152:1).

At the end of his censure, Rabbi Yishmael quotes the Torah as the source for his ruling: And he calls to you and you eat from his slaughter (Shemos 34:15). The halachic authorities disagree whether this quote demonstrates that this prohibition is min haTorah (Taz, Yoreh Deah 152:1) or only rabbinic (Nekudos Hakesef ad locum).

A potential difference in halacha resulting from this dispute is whether one may attend the event if missing it might antagonize the host (mipnei eivah). The rishonim note that, despite the fact that the Mishnah, quoted above, prohibits dealing with a non-Jew near his holiday, this prohibition does not apply in our day since the non-Jews among whom we live do not worship idols (Rishonim to Avodah Zarah; Tur, Yoreh Deah 148). In addition, even in a situation in which the Mishnah's concerns are applicable, it is permitted when there are concerns of eivah (Tur, Yoreh Deah 148). The Derisha conjectures whether the prohibition against attending a party applies in a situation of eivah (Derisha, Yoreh Deah 152:1). As we will soon see, Rav Moshe Feinstein ruled leniently in this last issue.

#### Achashveirosh's party

A different source cited as basis of the Rambam's ruling is a passage of Gemara which states that the reason why the Jews in the era of Haman deserved to be destroyed (before they did the teshuvah brought about by Mordechai and Esther) was because they enjoyed the party thrown by Achashveirosh (Megillah 12a).

Several later authorities question whether these sources are indeed the origins of the Rambam's prohibition (cf. Lechem Mishneh; Mirkeves Hamishneh; Aruch Hashulchan; Tzafnas Panei'ach). However, whether or not we know the source of the Rambam's ruling, all authorities accept it to be binding.

How did the Rambam ascertain that this prohibition exists only when a majority of the people at the meal are not Jewish? The following passage of Gemara is quoted as a possible source: Shmuel, the great amora, and Avleit, a non-Jewish friend of his who is mentioned frequently by Chazal (Shabbos 129a, 156b; Avodah Zarah 30a; Yerushalmi, Shabbos 3:3 and Beitzah 2:5; Midrash Lekach Tov, Parshas Shoftim), were eating a meal together when they were brought some yayin mevushal, wine that had been cooked. Avleit, who was familiar with his friend's Jewish customs, adjusted himself so that he would not touch the wine and prohibit it for Shmuel. Shmuel then explained to Avleit that the prohibition against using wine handled by a non-Jew does not apply to yayin mevushal. The question raised by some authorities is, how could Shmuel have been enjoying a repast together with Avleit when it is prohibited to eat a meal or drink wine at a non-Jew's house? The Lechem Mishneh answers that since only Shmuel and Avleit were eating, there was no non-Jewish majority at the meal and, therefore, it was permitted (Avodah Zarah 30a).

However, this argument is weak for a few reasons, as noted by several later authorities. For one matter, there is nothing to indicate that Shmuel and Avleit were at a non-Jew's venue? Furthermore, is two people eating together considered a party (Aruch Hashulchan)? We would usually assume that a "party" involves a large number of people -- although from Esther's party, mentioned in the Purim story, we can derive that three is not only company but also a party.

In this context, Rav Moshe Feinstein was asked the following question: May a yeshiva conduct a parlor meeting in the home of a non-Jew? Rav Moshe prohibits this although he permits attending a personal celebration of a non-Jew conducted in a non-Jewish venue where it is difficult to provide a good excuse for one's absence. Rav Moshe permits this so as not to antagonize the non-Jew. Since this is why one may attend, Rav Moshe permits drinking kosher beverages, and presumably would also permit eating kosher food. However, this does not permit conducting a parlor meeting in a non-Jew's home, since Jews are choosing to conduct this celebration there (Shu't Igros Moshe, Yoreh Deah 2:117).

#### Client's celebration

At this point let us examine one of our opening questions: " A non-Jewish client is marrying off his daughter and expects his business associates to attend the reception. Knowing him, he expects me to spend a considerable amount of time there. Is this permitted, and, while there, may I eat or drink something that is kosher?"

According to Rav Moshe Feinstein, I may attend the wedding and eat and drink kosher food while there if my absence might antagonize the client.

#### Company picnics and parties

May I attend the company end-of-year parties and outings?

The reasons why it might be permitted to attend these functions include offending people and loss of livelihood. It would seem to be permitted if you do not eat or drink there with everyone else. A talmid chacham I know went to the company's annual picnic and spent his time while there on the ball fields. The other employees assumed that he was a baseball enthusiast, while his family was surprised to discover that he owned sneakers and a baseball glove!

#### Mostly Jews

Here is another heter that sometimes applies: Because the Rambam wrote, "If most of the assemblage is Jewish," the Pri Chadash permits this when there are more Jewish attendees than non-Jews.

#### Conclusion

We are meant to be "a light onto the nations," which charges us with the responsibility to act in a manner that we create a kiddush Hashem. However, Chazal clearly felt that there is a difference between acting as a role model while behaving according to Hashem's wishes, and social interactions, which can lead to undesirable outcomes.

## Can I See Anxiety as an Opportunity?

### Looking Up: The Meaning behind the Snake on the Pole

#### Rabbi YY Jacobson

##### No Complaining

After seventy years of communist oppression and seven hours of flying, Boris, a burly immigrant from Moscow steps off the plane in a free land to begin his new life in his new home, Israel. Standing at the Ben Gurion airport in Tel Aviv, a young and enthusiastic Israeli reporter plunges a microphone in front of him with a level of excitement that is only seen when an inside scoop is about to be caught. The reporter asks with focus: "Tell me, what was life back in Russia like?"

To which the Russian immigrant replies: "I couldn't complain."

An obviously unexpected answer, the young reporter continues to probe: "Well how were your living quarters there?" To which the Russian responds "I couldn't complain."

Not expecting this answer either, the reporter decides to hit him with a question that is bound to get the answer he is looking for: "What about your standard of living?" To which the Russian replies again: "I couldn't complain."

At this point, the reporter's frustration with the new immigrant's answers reaches a crescendo, and so in a derogatory tone the reporter yells out, "Well, if everything was so wonderful back in Russia, then why did you even bother to come here?" To which the new immigrant replies with gusto: "Oh, here I can complain!"

##### The Serpents

It is a strange biblical episode -- in this week's portion of Chukas.

When poisonous snakes attack the Jews in the desert, G-d instructs Moses to fashion a special healing instrument: a pole topped with the form of a snake. Moses sculpts a snake of copper and duly places it on top of a pole. Those who had been afflicted by the snake bite would gaze on the serpentine image on the pole and be cured [1].

According to some historians, this was the forerunner of the caduceus, the snake-entwined rod which is today the emblem of the medical profession.

Yet the question is obvious: What was the point of placing a snake on top of the pole to cure the Jews who were bitten? If it was G-d who was healing them miraculously, why the need to look up at a copper snake atop a pole? The question is raised in the Talmud [2]:

"But is the snake capable of determining life and death!?" the Talmud asks. And the answer is this: "Rather, when Israel would gaze upward and bind their hearts to their Father in Heaven, they would be healed; and if not, they would perish." Fixing their eyes on the snake alone would not yield any cure; it was looking upward toward G-d, it was the

relationship with G-d, which brought the cure. But if so, why bother to carve out a copper snake in the first place, which can only make people believe that it is the copper snake that is the cause of healing?

In fact, this is exactly what occurred. The copper snake that Moses made was preserved for centuries. In the passage of time, however, its meaning became distorted, and people began to say that the snake possessed powers of its own. When it reached the point of becoming an image of idolatry, the Jewish King Hezekiah (in the 6th century BCE) destroyed the copper snake fashioned by Moses, and that was the end of that special copper snake [3].

Which only reinforces the question: Why ask people to look up at a man-made snake which can lead down the path to a theological error of deifying the snake?

There is another question. The snake was the reptile that caused the harm in the first place. Healing, it would seem, would come from staying far away from serpents. Why in this case was the remedy born from gazing at the very venomous creature which caused the damage to begin with [4]?

#### A Tale of Two Snakes

The snake in the biblical story -- as all biblical stories capturing the timeless journeys of the human psyche -- is also a metaphor for all of the "snakes" in our lives. Have you ever been bitten by a "venomous snake"? Poisoned by harmful people, burnt by life, or by abusive situations? Have you ever been crushed by a clueless principal, a manipulative boss, a deceiving partner, a toxic relationship? Were you ever back-stabbed by people you trusted? Is your anxiety killing you? Are you weary and demoralized by your life experience?

What is the deeper meaning of suffering? And how do some people know how to accept affliction with love and grace?

These are good questions that cannot be answered easily, if at all. But one perspective is presented in the story of the serpents. G-d tells Moses: "Make a serpent and place it on a pole. Whoever gets bitten should look at it and he will live." The key to healing, the Torah suggests, is not by fleeing the cause of the suffering, but by gazing at it. Don't run from the snake; look at it. Because deep inside the challenge, you will find the cure. Deep inside the pain, you will find the healing light.

But there is one qualification: you must look up to the snake; you must peer into the reality of the snake above, on top of the elevated pole, not on the serpent crawling here below.

The Austrian-British philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951), who had three Jewish grandparents and was considered by many to be one of the greatest philosophers of the 20th century, once said that his aim as a philosopher was, "to show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle." The fly keeps banging its head against the glass in a vain attempt to get out. The more it tries, the more it fails, until it drops from exhaustion. The one thing it forgets to do is look to the sky.

Every experience in life can be seen from two dimensions – from a concrete, earthly perspective, or from a higher, more sublime vantage point, appreciating its true nature and meaning from the Divine perspective. There is the "snake" down here, and there is the very same "snake" up there. I can experience my challenges, struggles, and difficulties in the way they are manifested down here. But I can also look at these very same struggles from a more elevated point of view. The circumstances may not change, but their meaning and significance will. From the "downer" perspective, these challenges, curveballs, painful confrontations, and realizations can throw me into despair or drain me of my sap. From the "higher" perspective, the way G-d sees these very same realities, every challenge contains the seeds for rebirth. Within every crisis lies the possibility of a new and deeper discovery.

Many of us know this from our personal stories: Events that at the time were so painful to endure, in retrospect were those that inspired the most growth. Those painful events moved us from the surface to the depths, challenging us to become larger than we ever thought we can be, and stimulating conviction and clarity unknown to us before.

This is not about suppressing the pain. On the contrary, it is about taking the pain back to its deepest origin; going with it back to its primal source, seeing it for what it really is in its pristine state.

To perceive clarity from the midst of agonizing turmoil we must train ourselves to constantly look upward. When faced with a "snake," with a challenge, many people look to their right or to their left. Either they fight, or they cave in. But there is another path: look upwards. See the "snake" from the perspective above.

And in that upward gaze, you might find a new sense of healing: the questions might become the very answers, the problems may become the solutions, and the venom may become the cure. Remarkably, snakebites today are cured with anti-venom manufactured from small quantities of snake venom that stimulate the production of antibodies in the blood.

It's the same idea taught by Moses: The source of the affliction itself becomes the remedy [5]. This is true in all areas of life. As viewed by the Creator, from the perspective above, transgression is the potential for a new self-discovery; failure is the potential for deeper success, holes in a marriage are the seeds of "renovation" to recreate a far deeper relationship, the end of an era is always the beginning of a new one, pain is a springboard for deeper love and frustration is the mother of a new awareness [6].

#### Bless Me

This is surely the meaning in that famous, enigmatic passage in Genesis 32 in which Jacob, far from home, wrestles with an unknown, unnamed adversary from night until the break of day. The mysterious man maims Jacob, causing him to limp.

And yet at the end of a struggling night, a night to remember, Jacob says to the stranger/angel/God: "I will not let you go until you bless me."

"Bless me!?" Is this how you bid farewell to a man who attempts to destroy you?

Jacob was teaching us the secret of Jewish resilience. To be a Jew is to possess that unique ability to say to every crisis: "I will not let you go until you bless me." I know that deep down your entire objective is to elevate me, to bring me to a higher place, to climb the mountain leading to the truth, allowing me to emerge stronger, wiser, more blessed.[7]

[1] Numbers 21:6-10.

[2] Rosh Hashana 29.

[3] II Kings 18:4.

[4] See Ramban: "This was a miracle within a miracle." The literal answer is that it was indeed insufficient to just ask G-d to save them, without the snake-on-a-pole therapy. The people had to gaze upon the snake and focus on the fact that only G-d, who created the snake in the first place, could transform that same venomous creature into a medium of healing. The people had to acknowledge that albeit they were bitten by a snake it was not the snake itself, but the creator of the snake, which was responsible for their life and death. They were looking at a snake but they were seeing G-d. The deeper perspective is presented below.

[5] This same method of healing is used elsewhere. Moses used a bitter stick to sweeten bitter waters (Exodus 15:25). And it was salt that Elisha used to purify the harmful water (II Kings chapter 2).

[6] The verse in Deuteronomy (13:4) "For G-d is testing you," is interpreted also as "For G-d is elevating you." In Hebrew, the same word – Nesayon – is used for a "test" and for "elevation." Every test, each challenge, is essentially also an invitation, an opportunity, for an elevation, for growth. In the story of the serpents too, the word used is "place it on a pole," "sim oso al nes," on an elevated object.

[7] This essay is based on Rabbi Schnuer Zalman of Liadi, Likkutei Torah Chukas pp. 61d-62b. For an elaborate explanation of this discourse in Likkutei Torah, see Sichas 12 Tamuz, 5729 (1969).

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#### Rav Kook Torah

#### Pinchas' Ancestry

#### Rabbi Chanana Morrison

When Pinchas killed Zimri - the Israelite prince who paraded his Midianite woman in front of Moses and all of Israel - the tribal leaders mocked Pinchas for his act of zealotry: "His maternal grandfather [Jethro] fattened up calves for idolatrous sacrifices, and he had the audacity to murder a prince of Israel!" (Sanhedrin 82b)

Why did the tribal leaders belittle Pinchas due to his grandfather? Either killing Zimri was the right thing to do, or it was very wrong. Why malign him for his ancestry?

#### Clashing Commands

While performing a mitzvah is usually a straightforward matter, sometimes the situation is more complicated. There are instances when we must choose between two conflicting precepts. For example, the korban pesach is offered after the daily Tamid offering of the afternoon, even though the afternoon Tamid is ordinarily the last offering of the day. The mitzvah of korban pesach overrides the lesser mitzvah of hashlamah, that the Tamid completes the day's Temple offerings (Pesachim 59a).

And there can be more serious conflicts, when a positive mitzvah will override a prohibition. This is the category of **�שה דזהה לא תעשה**. The classic case of **�שה דזהה לא תעשה** is the permit to wear Tzitzit made of white and tekhelet-blue strings of wool on a linen garment. Even though it is forbidden to wear wool and linen together, the mitzvah of Tzitzit takes precedence over the prohibition of Sha'atnez.<sup>1</sup>

A more extreme example results in suspending a far more serious injunction. The Torah forbids marrying the wife of one's brother, even after his death. Such a union is considered incest and carries the severe punishment of kareit. Yet, if the brother had no children, the prohibition is waived by the mitzvah of Yibbum - levirate marriage.

Due to the seriousness of the prohibition, the mitzvah of Yibbum must be fulfilled with pure intentions. "Abba Shaul said: one who consummates a levirate marriage for the sake of her beauty, or for the sake of marital relations, or for another reason [e.g., he wants to inherit her late husband's estate], it is considered as though he married a forbidden relation" (Yevamot 39b). Even according to the opinion that mitzvot do not require intent, in this case, one's intentions must be pure, to fulfill the mitzvah of Yibbum. According to Abba Shaul, only then is the prohibited act of marrying the widow of one's brother transformed into a permitted and commendable deed.

The prohibition in the case of Pinchas was even more severe. His act of zealotry required overriding the prohibition against murder - a horrific act and cardinal sin that causes the Shechinah to leave Israel (Shabbat 33a). If questioned, the court does not even teach the rule that one may kill a transgressor in these circumstances - **הכלכה ואין מרים כן** (Sanhedrin 81b). For who can know what truly motivates a person? The act of zealotry may only be performed if one's intentions are pure, when one acts solely for the sake of heaven, with no personal motives. Otherwise, the deed acquires an element of bloodshed, as the transgressor is killed without witnesses and without due process.

#### Evaluating Pinchas' Motives

The tribal leaders were highly critical of Pinchas. They suspected that his background - his maternal grandfather, who worshiped idols before he converted to Judaism - influenced his motives and attitude, preventing him from acting with pure intent. How could Pinchas perform such a complex deed, one that requires a pure heart to suspend the prohibition of "Thou shall not kill"?

Therefore, the Torah defends Pinchas by declaring his lineage on his father's side: "Phincha, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest" (Num. 5:11). His ancestry did have an impact on him - but it was the ancestry of his grandfather Aaron, the beloved high priest who "loved peace and pursued peace, loving all people and drawing them near to the Torah" (Avot 1:12). That legacy enabled Pinchas to act with full intent and pure motives, out of love for his people and perfect love for God, thus validating his zealous act.

(Adapted from *Shemu'ot HaRe'iyah II*, pp. 229-233). 1 Yevamot 4a. In practice, the Rama rules that our custom is not to wear linen tzitzit (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 9:2). Copyright © 2022 Rav Kook Torah

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#### Shema Yisrael Torah Network

#### Peninim on the Torah - Parashas Balak

**וַיַּגֵּר מוֹאָב מִפְנֵי הָעָם מִאָדָם כִּי רַב הָוָא יִקְצַץ מוֹאָב מִפְנֵי בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל**

Moav became very frightened of the people, because it was numerous, and Moav was disgusted in the face of Bnei Yisrael. (22:3)

The Torah uses two terms to refer to Klal Yisrael: Am, people/nation, Bnei Yisrael, children of Yisrael. Moav was frightened of the nation due to their numbers, which imply a physical battle, a physical victory for the Jewish nation. Concerning the children of Yisrael, which is the term most often used to describe our People, Moav was disgusted. Fear means that one is afraid, but he still has hope for victory. A change of tactics might be necessary in order to quash the Jewish threat. Disgusted, the term which is used in a confrontation with the children of Yisrael, sounds more like resignation, despair, giving up without a fight. How do we understand this, and what is the Torah's message?

Horav Yosef Nechemia Kornitzer, zl (Rav of Prague, pre-World War II) quotes David Hamelech (Sefer Tehillim 8:3), **מִפְנֵי יְמִינֵךְ יִשְׁאָדֵת אֹזֶן**, "Out of the mouth of babes and suckling's You have established strength." David asserts that our nation's strength, its ability to survive, is predicated on the Torah study of Jewish children. Their Torah is pure, untainted by sin. He cites Midrash Eichah (Pesichta Rabbasi, 2), which records the statement of Rabbi Abba bar Kahana, "There have never risen wise men among the non-Jewish nations like Bilaam and Avnimus HaGardi." (The latter was a Greek philosopher who was an acquaintance of Rabbi Meir.)

The nations of the world asked these two (Bilaam and Avnimus), "Will we be successful in engaging them (go to war against the Jews)?" They replied, "Go to their synagogues and study halls; if the children are vocally chirping in Torah study, you will not emerge victorious. If, however, you do not hear the sounds of Torah being studied, you will be successful against them. Thus, their Patriarch, Yaakov, assured them, 'Any time that the voice of Yaakov is chirping in the synagogues and study halls, there is no validity in Eisav's hands. (He cannot vanquish them.) If the sound has been stilled, then Eisav's hands will rule.'

Balaam was a greater sorcerer than Bilaam. Hence, the Torah writes that Balaam was frightened of the Jews due to their numbers. Nonetheless, he did not despair; he was not yet miserable and disgusted. He would have to work harder, have better strategy. It was doable. When he saw that the Bnei Yisrael, the children of Yisrael, were devoted to their learning, however, he became outraged, repulsed by the reality that had set in. He would be unable to triumph over the Jews because their children were learning.

Horav Moshe Aharon Stern, zl, observes that, throughout the Torah, we see that nashim tzidkaniyos, righteous women, did everything in their power to ensure that their children would be availed a strong, uncompromising Torah education, devoid of any negative influence. Sarah Imeini wanted Yishmael to be away from Yitzchak. Chana gave birth to Shmuel HaNavi, and she immediately dedicated him to spend his life in the Sanctuary. When Shimshon was born, his mother dedicated him to be a nazir. All these women conceived by miraculous intervention. They each understood that her son was a gift; thus, they each sought to ensure that the child grow up pious and a credit to his people. Sadly, so many of us take our children for granted. They are a gift - a miracle from Hashem.

The Mashgiach (Kaminetz, Yerushalayim) points out that in contradiction to the women cited above, the Shunamis that Elisha blessed, also gave birth miraculously. Instead of his being sanctified to Torah, however, he went out and worked in the fields. His life came to an untimely end, after which Elisha miraculously resurrected him. The Navi instructed the Shunamis, "Lift up your son!" (Melachim 4:36). He meant elevate him, sanctify him, teach him Torah and give him the opportunity to grow spiritually. She listened, and the boy ultimately grew up to be the Navi Chavakuk.

**לَا אָכֹל לְעַבּוֹר אֶת פֵּי דָ' אֱלֹקִי לְעַשְׂתָּו קְטָנָה אָוֹ גְּדוֹלָה**

I cannot transgress the word of Hashem, my G-d, to do anything small or great. (22:18)

In Kuntres Divrei Sofrim (24), Horav Elchanan Wasserman, zl, notes that Bilaam ha'rashah said that he would not transgress Hashem's word to him - Hashem's tzivui, command. He did not think that he could act in a manner counter-intuitive to Hashem's ratzon, will. He was acutely aware that Hashem did not want him to curse Klal Yisrael, but, if

Hashem had not expressly said so, Bilaam could have gone along his merry way to carry out his evil intentions. The pasuk (22:22) relates that Hashem's anger flared because Bilaam was going to Balak. Why was Hashem angry? Did the Almighty not give Bilaam permission to go to Balak? Apparently, Bilaam knew that Hashem's ratzon was that he not curse the Jews. Going to Balak was an affront to Hashem. Bilaam did not care. If he did not receive a clear cut "no," as far as he was concerned, it was a "yes." What about Hashem's will? Did Hashem really want him to go? Clearly not, but this did not concern Bilaam.

This, explains Horav Moshe Shternbuch, Shlita, best characterizes Bilaam. He knew Hashem, but did not care. He only listened to what Hashem expressively told him, and, even then, only when he could not avoid complying. He served Hashem because he was compelled to do so. This is unlike Klal Yisrael who serve Hashem as a son serves his father. He wants to serve. He wants to carry out his father's will, so that he can make his father happy.

Rav Shternbuch cites the Ramchal in Mesillas Yesharim (18, Middah HaChassidus) who explains that a chassid, pious individual, seeks to make his Father in Heaven happy. His love for Hashem is such that he does not aim to absolve himself of his obligations to Him merely by complying with the obligatory minimum of a mitzvah. Like a good son, he seeks every opportunity to provide nachas, satisfaction, for his Father. Horav Matisyahu Solomon, Shlita, offers an example: If a father tells his son that the room is cold, an uncaring son will reply, "So, turn on the heat." A decent son will personally turn the heater on for his father. A loving son will immediately turn on the heater, bring his father a warm blanket or a sweater, and then offer him a hot drink – all out of his love for his father, which impels him to do whatever will make his father feel well.

The term chassid in present-day vernacular is not as "generic" as that of Ramchal, who translates it as pious. The basic ideas of present-day (last two centuries) chassidus, however, do not digress from their focus on piety and closeness to Hashem. Chassidic thought stresses: joy; song and dance in mitzvah performance, and service to Hashem; the centrality of davening and all forms of prayer (Tehillim); the appreciation of every Yid/amcha, the simple, ordinary Jew who is not a scholar; attachment to a Rebbe; and being partial to one's Jewish identity (connecting cumulatively with Klal Yisrael) as opposed to focusing on one's selfhood. We are part of the larger family unit of Am Yisrael. To encapsulate Chassidic thought: Chassidus remains focused completely on Hashem (Horav Shraga Feivel Mendlowitz, zl). The Baal HaTanya would say (in speaking to Hashem), "I want not Your Gan Eden; I want not Your Olam Habba; I seek only to be attached to You."

The Manchester Rosh Yeshivah, Horav Yehudah Zev Segal, zl, was the consummate eved Hashem, servant of Hashem. His life was about performing mitzvos: elevating any given situation to determine which mitzvos were inherent in it. He would view helping a parent as the fulfillment of both Kibbud av v'eim and gemillas chassadim. Indeed, he prefaced every mitzvah (even d'Rabbanan) with a verbal declaration of Hineni muchan u'mezuman, expressing his intent to carry out a mitzvah. He recognized no degrees or levels of importance in observance. Every mitzvah was a tzivui, command, from Hashem, and, as such, had supreme significance. Likewise, his devotion to absolute emes was his criterion for mitzvah observance. In his view, not to execute the mitzvah to its fullest with all the halachic minutiae indicated a lack of emes, spiritual integrity.

While the Rosh Yeshivah was very demanding concerning his avodas HaKodesh, sacred service; he neither imposed his personal chumros, stringencies, on others, nor caused his personal practices to be an inconvenience to others. An example of this sensitivity to others is the following vignette. The Rosh Yeshivah visited Bournemouth, England. During the time he spent there, a man offered to drive the Rosh Yeshivah to shul in the morning and pick him up at the conclusion of davening. Aware that this man had to be at work at a certain time and not wanting to take advantage of his kindness, the Rosh Yeshivah recited parts of davening only after he returned to his place of lodging.

He was once a guest in someone's home and was served leben with his breakfast. He was meticulous not to eat anything which he felt was a delicacy. He adhered to a diet of necessities. He recited the appropriate berachah acharonah, after-meal blessing, then sat meditating for a moment before making a new blessing on the leben and partaking from it. He later explained that he did this in order not to hurt the feelings of the hostess who went out of her way to do everything just right for him. He added, "To eat l'shem Shomayim, for the sake of Heaven, is also a mitzvah." When one serves Hashem as a son should serve his father, he jumps at every single opportunity that presents itself during which he is able to honor his father. Indeed, practices which we might push aside, even ignore, were for him activities of profound love for Hashem. I could fill pages concerning the various mitzvos he undertook and the manner in which he performed them. He did something about which we are complacent, and, in many instances, we ignore. What inspired me was his attitude towards kissing the mezuzah. Whenever entering a room, he would touch the mezuzah and pause long enough to concentrate on love of Hashem and His Oneness. He did this even when hurrying from room to room to answer the phone – pause, concentrate, kiss. How often do we complacently touch the mezuzah, give it a peck with our fingers and move on? When one cares – one stops to think what kissing the mezuzah represents. After all, Hashem is our Father.

**ויאמר בלבם אל בלך... היכל אוכל דבר מAMA הדבר אשר אלקים ישים בפי אהו אדבר**

Bilaam said to Balak... "Am I empowered to say anything? Whatever words G-d puts into my mouth, that shall I speak." (22:38)

Bilaam is a lesson in stark contrasts. On the one hand, he personifies evil and depravity at their nadir. Arrogant, condescending, avaricious and profligate, he was the consummate symbol of unmitigated evil. Yet, this same person spoke to Hashem and was able to maintain a dialogue on subjects that were of the loftiest esoterical and spiritual nature. How do these two polar opposites exist in one person? Horav Eliezer HaLevi Turk, Shlita, quotes from Horav Chunah Kletzki, zl, a student of the Radin Yeshivah, who, in his old age, made his domicile in Lakewood. He related that there was a man in Radin who was strange. He did things his way, regardless of how others perceived him. Additionally, he thrived on garnering attention for himself. As a result, he taught his dog to understand Yiddish! Even those Jews who felt the "need" to raise a dog "conversed" with it in Polish – never Yiddish. But, as I prefaced above, this man was not the run-of-the-mill, ordinary member of the community. The children of the community would follow the dog, attempting to get its attention. They pulled on his tail, his ears. After all, a dog that understood Yiddish was a novelty for them, and, thus, an opportunity for some fun.

Even a dog loses its patience, and one day after numerous assaults by the fun-loving children, the intelligent dog lost it and bit one of the young boys. They were shocked. How could such a "refined" dog act so viciously? He was acting like a dog! Rav Chunah explained, "A dog remains a dog regardless of its ability to speak Yiddish! The same idea applies to serving Hashem." Continued Rav Chunah, "One who is deficient in his middos, his character traits, leaves much to be desired, does not change until he expunges these deficiencies and cleanses himself of his ethical and moral impurities. He will remain the same lowlife as before – despite his exposure to G-dliness.

This was Bilaam's life story. A man who personified every ethical and moral shortcoming – yet received prophecies from Hashem. His comfortable relationship with – and access to – the highest spiritual spheres, notwithstanding, Bilaam remained Bilaam – a dog remains a dog – even if he is taught to speak Yiddish. In fact, he employed his unique knowledge of what angers Hashem – moral depravity – to cause the Jews to sin with the Midyanite women. He knew that Hashem loves us for our moral chastity. He sought to undermine that relationship.

I think this is why Bilaam could not come to grips with mussar, rebuke, his donkey issued to him. Bilaam was acutely aware that his moral hypocrisy was so blatant that even his donkey understood

what he was. This was too much for him to grapple with. Nothing shatters arrogance like the rebuke of a donkey.

**מראש צרים אראו ומבועת אשורי**

From its origins, I see rock-like, and from hills do I see it. (23:9)

Bilaam was looking for every way to render Klal Yisrael a death blow. His power was in his tongue, his ability to deliver a curse that would be effective and lethal. He begins his litany by acknowledging that it is difficult to curse a nation whose origins are likened to craggy rocks (Patriarchs) and hills (Matriarchs). He intimated that when he looked back at the roots of the Jews, he saw them as firmly established as rocks and hills. The loyalty to their forebears is what distinguishes them and makes them that more difficult to curse. I would like to employ my writer's license to embellish this idea and suggest a powerful lesson to be derived about the predominance of the Jew, specifically as a result of his ancestry.

Horav Yechiel Tzuker, Shlita, relates a story that took place in the winter of 2016. Horav Avraham Altman, Shlita (Rosh Yeshivas Ateres Tzvi), and his son, Horav Eliyahu Meir, take an annual trip to Argentina on behalf of their yeshivah. They spend a few weeks meeting members of the community, speaking in the various shuls and raising badly-needed funds for the yeshivah. It was Shabbos morning after Musaf, and Rav Altman had delivered a powerful speech that shook up the congregation. Everyone was impressed and complimented him. As he was leaving, he was approached by a middle-aged Jew who said that he, together with his partner, owned a large factory which produced trousers. He offered to invite the Rav and his distinguished son to visit the factory. He would make it worth their while. They visited the next day and, as the owner had promised, he gave them a check that made the trip worth their while. Suddenly, in the midst of the conversation, the man broke down in bitter weeping. He explained that he had a partner who was dealing with a female client. One thing had led to another, and the relationship between him and the client had breached the parameters of pure business, and a not-so-platonic relationship ensued. He was now bent on marrying her. She was a gentile, and he was now prepared to turn his back on Yahadus, on the religion for which his ancestors had died. The man continued to weep.

Rav Altman asked to meet the partner. The man was a bit nervous to meet a Rosh Yeshivah from Eretz Yisrael, but his partner came out and graciously received the Rosh Yeshivah. Rav Altman said, "Your partner gave me a generous check from the business. I would like to thank you since it is a joint account. Perhaps we could all go out to lunch tomorrow before we fly back to the Holy Land." The partners agreed to meet at a restaurant for lunch.

During lunch, Rav Altman interrupted the conversation twice to express his fascination with the partner. He said he did not know why, but something about his visage had impressed him. Clearly, receiving such compliments made the partner feel very good. It was not every day that he was complimented so much. "Tell me, are you married?" the Rosh Yeshivah asked. "No, not yet," was his response. "I give you a blessing that this year should be the year that you find your bashert, Heavenly-designated spouse. Indeed, I will attend the wedding and dance with you!"

The partner was clueless that Rav Altman was aware that he was about to marry out of the faith. "What will I do?" he mused to himself. "The Rosh Yeshivah will dance with me in a church and the priest will be 'mesader kiddushin,' perform the service?" A few months passed, and the religious partner received a call from his partner. He was weeping bitterly, "I cannot go through with it! How can I, a distinguished Jew with whom the Rosh Yeshivah from Eretz Yisrael is fascinated, marry a gentile? I am breaking the engagement!" A few months passed, and he was engaged again – only this time to a frum, observant girl. What happened? How did someone who had fallen to such a nadir arise from the pits of spirituality and return to normative observance?

Rav Tzuker explains this with an incident recorded in Midrash Eichah (1:9). A wise man from Athens came to Yerushalayim and chanced upon a young Yerushalmi boy. The Athenian considered

himself wise, but he failed to perceive the wisdom of young Jewish boys. He told the boy, "Here are some coins. Please purchase some cheese and eggs for me." The boy returned with the cheese and eggs. The Athenian then asked the boy, "Can you tell me which brick of cheese came from a white goat and which came from a black goat?" The boy countered, "You are a grown man, so it is only proper for you to first show me which egg is the egg of a white chicken and which is from a black one." The Tiferes Tzion understands the exchange between the Athenian and the young boy as a metaphor for the Jewish People's unique relationship with Hashem, Who favors us because of our Patriarchal ancestry. As a result, we, too, take immense pride in our illustrious lineage. This pride should be a cornerstone of our observance.

The Athenian asserted that ancestry had no enduring value, since progeny do not necessarily resemble their ancestors. He presented as proof positive that the Jews do not look any different than anyone else, regardless of their religion. This is the message he intimated when he asked the boy to identify the source of the cheeses. He alluded thereby that, just as two types of goats produce identical cheeses, it makes no difference whether one descends from righteous, virtuous individuals or average lineage.

The young boy oppugned to the Athenian, asking him to show which egg had come from a black hen and which had come from a white one. He implied that just because no external differences appeared between the two eggs, it does not mean that internally no differences existed. Indeed, place the eggs under a hen to incubate, and the chicks that emerge will have the color of its mother. Likewise, the Jewish People may externally appear to be similar to everyone else; when given the opportunity, however, they will manifest a clear, abiding relationship with the Avos, Patriarchs. This is the same metamorphosis that took place with the partner. Rav Altman made him feel a sense of relief in knowing that they are, by virtue of being Bnei Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, on a higher spiritual plateau. Come what may, we are not like them. The Jew is always welcomed back home, because he actually has never left.

*Sponsored in loving memory of our dear mother, grandmother and great grandmother on her yahrzeit Mrs. Hindy Herskowitz ז"ל מרת הינה בת ר' יוסף צבי הלוי נ"ע Avi Herskowitz and family נ"ע*

## Rabbi Yissacher Frand Parshas Balak

A "Tense" Exchange and the Limitations of Bilaam's Power

A "Tense" Exchange Between Balak and Bilaam Reveals the Limitations of Bilaam's Power

When Balak is trying to entice Bilaam to curse Klal Yisrael, he says to Bilaam: "...I know that those whom you bless are blessed, and those who you curse will be cursed." (Bamidbar 22:6). There are two difficulties in this pasuk. First of all, would it not make more sense for Balak to ask Bilaam to bless Moav so that they would be able to defeat Klal Yisrael? Why does he ask Bilaam to curse Klal Yisrael in order to be able to defeat them, rather than taking the more positive approach of asking for a blessing for his own nation? Second of all, and more problematic, there is an inconsistency in this pasuk. "I know that those whom you bless are blessed" is present tense. However, "those who you curse, will be cursed" is future tense.

The Netziv, in his Emek She'eilah, asked why the grammar in this pasuk is inconsistent. The Netziv suggests a very interesting answer. Bilaam, as we all know, was an extremely wicked individual, a degenerate and terrible person. In fact, Bilaam DID NOT HAVE the power to bless. He was not a "Rebbe" and he could not give brochos. Bilaam had one power, and that was that he knew the moment at which the Ribono shel Olam got angry. That was his entire power—the power to curse when he knew the Almighty was angry.

No one knew this secret power of Bilaam better than Balak. Balak knew exactly who Bilaam was. He knew there was no point in asking Bilaam for a bracha for Moav, because Balak knew that Bilaam's words were futile. But the fact is that people did go to Bilaam for brachos. Why was that? The Netziv says that the pasuk says that Bilaam was a sorcerer (Kosem) (Yehoshua 13:22)—he knew the future. Basically, he had this

great racket going: People would come to him and say “Bilaam, I am sick. Give me a bracha that I should get better.” Bilaam would “consult with his sorcerer material” and see if this fellow was going to get well or not. He might “see” that this fellow was destined to recover in two months and bless him that he should get better in two months. Lo and behold, the fellow got better in two months, and Bilaam’s fame spread far and wide. On the other hand, when he would consult his sorcerer paraphernalia and see that the fellow was not going to get better, Bilaam would say to him “Sorry. I can’t help you. You are doomed.” Either way, he established his reputation as a person who possessed the “Koach HaBracha”.

But if truth be told, Balak was also a sorcerer, and he knew that Bilaam’s whole “power” to bless was a mirage, using sorcery. Therefore, when Balak came to Bilaam, Balak said: “Listen, I know that the person you bless IS BLESSED (already). I know that is the only reason your “blessings” work, so I am not going to ask you to give us a bracha. But I know that those who you curse, they WILL BE CURSED. I can ask you to curse because you have the power to recognize the auspicious moment when the Almighty is Angry, and therefore when your curses may be effective. For this reason, I ask you to curse our enemies – Klal Yisrael.

#### Why Consult With the Elders of Midyan?

I would like to share an observation on a Rashi in this week’s parsha, which I saw in a sefer called Birkas Ish.

Moav had a problem. Their problem was Klal Yisrael, who was going through the land and destroying everyone in their path. Moav approached the Elders of Midyan and asked them: “What are we going to do about our ‘Jewish problem’?” Rashi explains why Moav decided to seek counsel from the Elders of Midyan: They recognized that Klal Yisrael was experiencing unnatural success, and they knew that the leader of Klal Yisrael (Moshe Rabbeinu) grew up in Midyan. So they sought out the Elders of Midyan to elicit their insight into what gave Moshe his strength. The Elders of Midyan responded that Moshe’s power was the power of his mouth (i.e., his ability to pray). The Moavites therefore decided to confront Klal Yisrael with another individual whose power came from his mouth (i.e., Bilaam). Those are the words of Rashi.

However, let us pose the following question: Suppose someone was to “Google” Moshe Rabbeinu. What might a search engine reveal about this well-known individual? “Born in Egypt. Raised in Egypt. Spent the majority of his life in Egypt. Fugitive from justice. Runs to Midyan. Occupation there: Shepherd. Spends a few years as a shepherd in Midyan. Returns to Egypt. Leads the Jewish people out of Egypt. Brings Egypt to its knees. Destroys the entire country. Has Pharaoh begging for mercy.” This might have been Moshe’s online resume. Now let us ask: Where did Moshe have a more glorious career? Was it in Midyan or in Egypt?

It would seem that if the Moavite Intelligence Agency wanted to get valuable background information about the leader of Klal Yisrael, it would have made far more sense to go ask the Egyptians, rather than the Midyanites! In Midyan, his “big resume” was a few years in the fields as a shepherd! Moshe’s glory years were clearly in Egypt. Why then did the Moavites consult with the Elders of Midyan, who might, at best, be privy to a small footnote in Moshe Rabbeinu’s career, when his major life successes took place in Egypt? Moshe was born there, he was raised there, he was part of the palace there. And look what he did on his ‘return home’! Why on earth did they consult with Midyan?

This teaches us an insight into human nature. This is an example of hatred interfering with clear logic (ha’Sinah mekalkeles es ha’Shurah). The Medrash Tanchuma says that Moav hated Klal Yisrael more than any other nation. Hate (or love, for that matter) can pervert judgement. Strong emotions get in the way of clear thinking.

There is an old principle in life: You believe what you want to believe and you hear what you want to hear. Let us say you are seeking legal advice and you know what a certain lawyer is going to tell you. But it is not the advice that you want to hear. This lawyer is going to tell you, “Drop the case. It is not going to work. You are going to get slaughtered in court. It does not pay to pursue it. It will cost you hundreds of thousands of dollars in legal fees and you are not going to win. You are going to fall on your face.”

Another lawyer might tell you: “Yeah! Go for it. Take the chance. You may win.” You hate the other party so much that you want to go after him in court. You know what Lawyer A is going to tell you, but you don’t want to listen to Lawyer A. Lawyer A is a better lawyer, he has a better reputation but you don’t want to hear “Don’t go after him!” You DO WANT TO GO AFTER HIM!! YOU HATE HIM!!!

People hear what they want to hear and believe what they want to believe.

Had Balak gone to Egypt and inquired “Listen, how do I deal with these Jewish people? How do I deal with Moshe Rabbeinu?” The ‘Elders of Egypt’ would have clearly responded — “STAY AWAY! They will kill you! Do you know what they did to our country? They destroyed it! Take it from us – sue for peace and don’t say another word to them. Whatever they want, give it to them and you will be better off!”

Midyan does not know this. Midyan says “Sue! Go for it! Make war!” Midyan and Egypt are like the two lawyers. Balak wants to hear what Midyan will tell him, not what the Egyptians will tell him. Moav hated the Jews and would not listen to anyone who would warn against starting up with Klal Yisrael. This is a level worse than “You hear what you want to hear.” They were on the level where they didn’t even bother asking, LEST THEY HEAR what they don’t want to hear.

לע”ג

שרה משא בת ר' יעקב אליעזר ע"ה  
בillya bat (Aviha) Lieb U"ah  
אנא מלכה בת ישראל ע"ה

## 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 prefacing his words with extensive self-description? And what is the significance of the content of the self-description?
- 8) Bil'am makes several theological statements in the course of the "meshalim" he delivers. How does this theological information contradict his own behavior?
- 9) Finally, a very basic question which should have been on our minds all this time: who is this Bil'am, anyway? Is he a close friend of Hashem's who is believed to have power to bless and curse, or is he a sorcerer, a devotee of darker powers than Hashem? Or is he something else?

### QUESTIONS WE WILL NOT ADDRESS:

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

4) In 22:7, we hear that the elders of both Mo'av and Midyan come to Bil'am to seek his cursing services, but in the very next pasuk (verse), we hear that only the elders of Mo'av stay the night with Bil'am. Where have the elders of Midyan gone?

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

### **PARASHAT BALAK:**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **BIL'AM THE SORCERER:**

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

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

### **BIL'AM DOESN'T TAKE THE HINT:**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And then another question:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **WHO IS BIL'AM?**

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

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

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

## **SORCERER AND PROPHET:**

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

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

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

for imperatives or a Will to be matched with his own will. He therefore does not pay attention to the desire of the deity except insofar as disobeying explicit commands might interfere with the sorcerer's ability to tap the deity's power.

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

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

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

#### **THE DONKEY:**

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

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

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

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

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

#### **NOW REPEAT AFTER ME:**

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

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

The message sinks in: when Bil'am arrives at Balak HQ and Balak scolds him for delaying his arrival -- "Why did you take so long?" -- Bil'am responds: "Look, I'm finally here. And let me tell you: I no longer do that cursing stuff on my own. I just say what Hashem tells me to say. Whatever He tells me to say, that's what I'll say." Now, Balak probably doesn't catch the difference between the old Bil'am and the new, but he has just been told that Bil'am will act only as Hashem's mouthpiece. He has been expressly forbidden to do otherwise.

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

#### **BIL'AM'S EYES ARE OPENED:**

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

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

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

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

Shabbat Shalom

## Parshas Balak: Heroes and Villains

by Rabbi Yitz Etshalom

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

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

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

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

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

### II. WHO IS BIL'AM?

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Mishnah in Avot teaches:

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

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

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

#### **IV. MIDRASHIC METHODOLOGY**

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

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

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

For example, when the Rabbis identify a connection between Lot's flight from S'dom (B'resheet 19) and the David dynasty, they do so by noting the common word "M'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'hillim 141], Hannah, Daniel, David and even the Almighty "speak to their heart". Yet, the Midrash immediately points out the salient difference: Whereas the first four speak "baLev" ["in the heart"], implying that each of them is enfolded, encircled and enslaved to his heart; the latter four speak "el (or al) haLev" ("to the heart"), implying that each is in control of the heart.

#### **V. BIL'AM AND AVRAHAM**

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

Much as the details of his journey to Mo'av serve to generate the (unfavorable) comparison with Avraham, we are already

introduced to this association at the onset of the Parashah:

Compare Balak's message to Bil'am:

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

with God's charge to Avraham:

And I will bless those who bless you, and curse him who curses you - "va'Avarkha M'varakhekha uM'kalekha 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 withheld your son, your only son; That in blessing I will bless you, and in multiplying I will multiply your seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand

which is upon the sea shore; and your seed shall possess the gate of his enemies; And in your seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because you have obeyed my voice. So Avraham returned to his young men, and they rose up and went together to B'er-Sheva; and Avraham lived at B'er-Sheva. (B'resheet 22:1-19)

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

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

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

Now that the association has been identified, let's take the next step: Noting how differently these two characters act - and react - within their given set of circumstances.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

[An example of a Milah Manhah is the word "Et", meaning "time", as it appears in the prophecy of Haggai. Although the

entire book of Haggai is 38 verses long, this relatively uncommon word shows up 7 times within those verses. This becomes a - or the - Milah Manhah and helps define the entire purpose and undercurrent of his message. See Haggai 1:2 against the background of Yirmiyah 29:10]

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

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

When this story is "played" against the apparently similar trek made by Bil'am, we see that Bil'am, the great visionary, the one who feels he can outfox the 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 care with Bilam's behavior it is necessary to look elsewhere in Chumash - in Parshat Matot - where the Torah tells us about Bilam's untimely death.

We begin by showing how these two Parshiot are connected.

### Bilam and the War with Midyan

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

was the instigator.]

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

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

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

### **Bilam's Home Town**

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **The Return of Bilam**

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

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

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

### **Bilam the Rasha**

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

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

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

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

### **Between Avraham and Bilam**

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

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

**Avaraham**

Good Eye  
Humble Spirit  
Meek Soul

**Bilam**

Evil Eye  
Arrogant Spirit  
Greedy Soul

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

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

**A) Bracha and Klalah**

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Professional Bias**

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

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

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

Shabbat Shalom,

Menachem

Virtual ClassRoom enhancements by Reuven Weiser.

**For Further Iyun**

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

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

2. What parallels exist between Bilam and Lavan?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

D. Who wrote "Sefer Bilam"?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

F. "Mah Tovu Ohalecha Yaakov"

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

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

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

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

## **SUMMARY OF THE LAWS OF THE “THREE WEEKS”**

The following is a summary of the laws of the Three Weeks.

This is intended as a general summary of Ashkenazi practice. Sephardi practice differs with much of what is listed below.

- Standard practice is for pregnant and nursing women to refrain from fasting on Shiva Asar B’Tammuz, but to fast on Tisha B’Av. Any woman with specific medical concerns in fasting should contact Rabbi Rosenbaum or Rabbi Postelnek.
- We refrain from getting married during this period.
- We refrain from listening to music and dancing during this period.
- We refrain from making the Beracha of Shehecheyanu during this period. Therefore, we refrain from purchases of special garments or wearing them for the first time.
- We refrain from haircuts during this period.
- This summary covers the period beginning Saturday night, July 16 until Thursday night, July 28. The “Nine Days” have more stringent practices.

## **SUMMARY OF THE LAWS OF THE “NINE DAYS”**

The following is based on the traditional Ashkenazi practice. Most Sephardim follow most of these halachot only during the week of Tisha B’Av. When Tisha B’Av falls out on Shabbat, as it does this year, there is also a question regarding whether or not the laws of the week of Tisha B’Av apply at all. Common Sephardic practice is to not apply the laws of the week of Tisha B’Av this year.

1. Eating meat and drinking wine or grape juice is prohibited except on Shabbos and at a Seudas Mitzvah such as a Bris. This applies to adults and children and includes chicken as well as beef.
2. Havdalah may be said over wine or grape juice. If a child who is old enough to learn brachos but young enough to not understand the mourning of Tisha B’Av is available (we are likely discussing a child between the ages of 6 and 9), the child should drink the wine or grape juice. If no such child is available, the person making the havdalah should drink the wine or grape juice. See below for issues involving havdalah on or after Tisha B’Av itself.
3. Laundering of clothes is prohibited. This includes preparation for after Tisha B’Av and includes giving clothes to a non-Jew for laundering. Similarly, one may not wear freshly laundered clothing. It is acceptable to wear freshly laundered undergarments, though the laundering must occur before the “Nine Days.” There are certain allowances for the laundering of young children’s clothing. Please contact Rabbi Rosenbaum or Rabbi Postelnek for further explanation.
4. Swimming and bathing for pleasure are prohibited.

5. Purchasing of major items is prohibited. One may not wear new articles of clothing.
6. Home improvements should not be made during this time.
7. These halachos are in effect as of Thursday night, July 28. A review of the laws of Tisha B'av will detail when the different practices are no longer in effect. This is intended as a general review. If you have questions about any of these restrictions (e.g. a sick person who needs to eat meat; home improvement projects that started before the 9 days, etc.) please contact Rabbi Rosenbaum or Rabbi Postelnek.

These restrictions are intended to help us feel the terrible loss of the destruction of the Temples during this period. May our mourning be a merit for the building of the third Temple, speedily in our days.