

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.

Devrei Torah are now Available for Download (normally by noon on Fridays) at www.PotomacTorah.org. Thanks to Bill Landau for hosting the Devrei Torah archives.

Hamas continues to manipulate the media while pretending to negotiate with Israel. Hersh Polin Goldberg, cousin of very close friends of ours and a U.S. citizen, remains a captive. Concerns are increasing that fewer than half of the hostages may still be alive. We continue our prayers for the hostages and all our people stuck in Gaza. May Hashem enable us and our people in Israel to wipe out the evil of Hamas, protect us from violence by Hezbollah and other anti-Semites around the world, and restore peace for our people quickly and successfully.

Of all the stories in the Torah, one of the best remembered is our parsha, which includes the comic incident of Bilaam's donkey – an animal that sees what Bilaam cannot see and speaks sense when Bilaam acts like a blind and arrogant jerk. Similarly, I vividly remember a television show of sixty years ago, Mr. Ed, a talking horse that was a comic treat for several years. Talking animals are easy to remember. However, why is Balak in the Torah, and what are we to learn from this parsha, in which no Jews appear until the final few pasookim?

Rabbi Dr. Katriel (Kenneth) Brander observes that Tanach contains ten different episodes in which an individual takes a journey by donkey – and in none of these incidents does the individual realize the purpose of his trip. The lesson in these stories is not the donkey. As Rabbi Brander observes, we cannot control what will happen at the end of our journeys. We can only control our integrity and values. Bilaam tries to manipulate God to curse B'Nai Yisrael and benefit Moab and Midian, despite God's repeated messages that He will not permit Bilaam to curse the Jews. Bilaam goes to Moab despite Hashem's order not to do so, but God remains in control and ensures that Bilaam's attempts to curse turn out to be blessings. Indeed, Bilaam's blessings are so beautiful that the Rabbis would have included them in the Shema if they were not so lengthy.

The story of Balak and Bilaam connects to episodes early in the Torah, as Rabbi David Fohrman discusses (alephbeta.org). Balak's concern that the huge population of Jews covers the land as far as he can see reminds us of Paro's concern of the swarming Jews who cover the land and might threaten the existence of Egypt. Paro and Balak both seek to conquer the Jews. Bilaam's journey, including rising early, preparing his donkey, and taking two assistants, parallels Avraham's steps setting out to take Yitzhak to sacrifice at the Akeidah. The blessings from Bilaam's mouth reinforce the blessings that God gives to Avraham and that the angel gives him after the Akeidah. The Mishnah recognizes that we are to compare Avraham and Bilaam (see Pirkei Avot 5:22 in the Art Scroll Ashkenaz Siddur – numbering varies slightly across editions).

Rabbi Haim Ovadia discusses lessons from the Talmud to conclude that evil prayers do not work. God retains the ability to control events and frustrate attempts to pray for evil. Rabbi Ovadia concludes that our goal should be to pray to fulfill

Hashem's mission by making the world a better place, one prayer at a time and with as many good actions as possible. Rabbi Yehoshua Singer gives a very similar message in his Dvar Torah.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, z"l, asks why we Jews generate such hatred that vicious anti-Semitism erupts frequently over the course of history. After Hitler murdered a third of all the Jews living in the 1930s, with horrific concentration camps and cruel acts on many Jews, who would expect that within the lifetime of many of the survivors we would encounter an explosion of anti-Semitism all over the world? Jews represent not quite 0.2 percent of the world population. The United Nations probably spends more time and money condemning Jews and supporting Arab hatred than on anything else. Rabbi Sacks observes that Jews have generally not been able to assimilate into other cultures because of anti-Semitism. Both Orthodox rabbis and secular Jewish scholars agree that whenever there is malaise in a prevailing culture, anti-Semitism arises to provide a convenient scapegoat. The difference now versus in the 1930s and 1940s is that we now have Israel, the one country that is always ready to accept Jews.

Rabbi Brander frequently reminds us that we Jews must come together to remain strong and to keep Israel strong. This week he discusses the difficulty Israel has in finding acceptable candidates for the Chief Rabbi position (or two positions if one Ashkenaz and one Sephardic). Should these positions remain Haredi or represent a broader consensus of the Orthodox position (and also be more open to non-Orthodox groups)? Since I am neither a rabbi nor an Israeli, I shall not express a position on the issue. However, I share Rabbi Brander's wish for more unity among our people. Our goal as Jews should be to do our part to make the world a better place – and coming together with our fellow Jews is an important part of this mandate.

Unity among all Jews and support for our fellow Jews throughout the world were two very important goals of my beloved Rebbe, Rabbi Leonard Cahan, z"l. Rabbi Cahan was a child during the anti-Semitic 1940s and a youth during the 1950s, when anti-Semitism was still active but more underground. I vividly remember some of his Torah discussions about Balak and the donkey who taught him important lessons.

Shabbat Shalom,

Hannah and Alan

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

Please daven for a Refuah Shlemah for Hersh ben Perel Chana (Hersh Polin, hostage to terrorists in Gaza); Moshe Aaron ben Leah Beilah (badly wounded in battle in Gaza but slowly recovering), Hershel Tzvi ben Chana, Reuven ben Basha Chaya Zlata Lana, Yoram Ben Shoshana, Leib Dovid ben Etel, Avraham ben Gavriela, Mordechai ben Chaya, David Moshe ben Raizel; Zvi ben Sara Chaya, Reuven ben Masha, Meir ben Sara, Oscar ben Simcha; Chai Frumel bat Leah, Rena bat Ilsa, Riva Golda bat Leah, Sarah Feige bat Chaya, Sharon bat Sarah, Kayla bat Ester, and Malka bat Simcha, and all our fellow Jews in danger in and near Israel. Please contact me for any additions or subtractions. Thank you.

Shabbat Shalom

Hannah & Alan

Parshat Balak: The Destination and the Journey

By Rabbi Dr. Katriel (Kenneth) Brander * © 5784 (2024)

President and Rosh HaYeshiva of Ohr Torah Stone

Dedicated in memory of Israel's murdered and fallen, the refuah shlayma of the wounded, the return of those being held hostage in Gaza, and the safety of our brave IDF soldiers.

Earlier this month Michal Loewenstern, the 10 year old daughter of Elisha Loewenstern z"l who fell in Gaza in December, sent a question to Rav Yosef Zvi Rimon asking him when will her father z"l return through tehiyat hameitim ? Will it be immediately after Mashiach comes? How will he look? Will he look the same as he did when he left home to protect Am Yisrael?

Ten times in Tanach, we are informed that a donkey is the mode of transportation in a biblical drama. These include Avraham's journey to the Akeda)Genesis 22:3(, Moshe's family's travels back to Egypt)Exodus 4:20(, and of course our parsha, where the donkey even has a speaking part)Numbers 22:28(. These donkey references stand out because in most cases when someone travels in Tanach, we are not told how they travel. Avraham is told in Lech Lecha to set out for the promised land, but we're not told how. He and his wife then descend to Egypt, but we're not told how. Moshe is forced to flee from Egypt, but we are not told how. And all this makes sense; the modes of transportation are not really information that the Torah really needs to tell us. They don't seem to be relevant or important. So why, then, are there ten stories in which we are informed that the journey was made on a donkey?

In truth, there is a commonality between all these stories. Every time a biblical figure is described as traveling on a donkey, the intended purpose of the stated trip is never realized as first envisioned. Avraham travels to sacrifice his son – it doesn't happen. Moshe travels to bring his family back to Egypt – his family never arrives, but returns to the house of Yitro. Bilam rides on a donkey with a mission to curse the Jewish people – but instead, his words are transformed into blessings.

This reflects how often even in our own journeys through life, we can't really control the destination. Many times we travel great distances to actualize our dreams; we wish to participate in the redemptive march, the march of the sacrifice of Avraham, the march of the liberation by Moshe, the messianic march that includes all people, as is represented by the inclusion of the Bilam story in our canonized Torah)Baba Batra 14b(. But sometimes it is much more challenging to reach our ultimate goals than we expected, as we have been witness to over these troubling nine months. Like in Tanach, we're never fully guaranteed that we will arrive at the final destination that we have in mind, and all we can do is set out on the journey.

In the human experience, there's no guarantee of a safe and successful landing and return. What is critical is not the ultimate destination but the values we bring to the journey of life. Elisha Loewenstern and nearly 700 other fallen heroes left their homes with one thought, to honor the values that they have lived throughout their lives: a concern for Am Yisrael and Eretz Yisrael. They did not know they would fall after saving hundreds, but it was never about the destination – it was always about the journey.

For those of us who have lost family and friends -- and for many others in our small nation who feel a deep connection to the sacrifices made during this war — we seek and pray for a good ending. But even the Messiah arrives on a donkey, because getting to the messianic era is also part of our journey, giving us the strength to go on, to live and hope deeply for the best.

In reality, the only thing in our control is the integrity and the values that we bring to the journey. It's the vision for Jewish living, the vision of a state with holiness; it's the creation of a full, robust Jewish life; it's about taking with us on the journey a commitment to civic responsibility, and the ability to show resilience even in troubling times. It's about the transformation that we see happening in Israeli society through our youth, and the national ethos that we can create along our journey. It's about the new narrative and the new normal that we can't yet fully grasp but we are beginning to shape. It's about a generation that is thirsty for spirituality and purpose, and although one would not blame this generation for rebelling

against God after everything that we've gone through, just the opposite has happened, with so many young people newly engaging with faith. Our vision must be one in which we continually ask ourselves what values we bring to the journey, and we can only pray that God allows us to arrive at the destination.

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

I believe in Israel's Chief Rabbinate. Here's how we can ensure its legitimacy.

By Rabbi Dr. Katriel)Kenneth(Brander * © 5784)2024(
President and Rosh HaYeshiva of Ohr Torah Stone

[ed. note: The Chief Rabbi position(s) in Israel is)are(open, because of disagreements on how best to fill the position(s). Rabbi Brander's astute discussion deserves wide circulation, so I am printing it here.]

The only time that Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik visited Israel was in 1935, on a trip to seek out the position of Tel Aviv's chief rabbi. His candidacy was ultimately unsuccessful, and he returned to the United States and went on to lead the growth and development of Modern Orthodoxy.

When, as a curious student at Yeshiva University in the 1980s, I asked the Rav why he thought he lost that election all those years ago, he told me it was because of a drasha)sermon(he gave during his visit to Israel. Speaking on Shabbat in one of the preeminent synagogues in Tel Aviv, Rabbi Soloveitchik discussed how the Biblical verse "*How beautiful are the tents of Jacob, the dwellings of Israel*")Numbers 24:5(could be understood as an aspiration for Ashkenazim and Sephardim, religious and secular, to live together in the growing Jewish communities of the modern Land of Israel, soon to become a state.

"They didn't like my vision of inclusion," the Rav told me.

Whether or not his loss was because of this — or because the Rav, then a member of Agudath Israel of America, was not seen as sufficiently Zionist — his answer is haunting in its sustained truth: Today's state rabbinate is the opposite of any vision of unity. That is why the institution is increasingly unable to serve the public.

The issue is especially relevant now, as it's election season again for Israel's chief rabbis. It is still not even clear when the elections, required by law to happen by July 1, will take place. Various politicians, government ministries and rabbinate officials are only taking steps to further delay the elections in hopes of rigging the system to meet their narrow interests. Not only is this an embarrassment, but it also shows how urgent it is to make changes that restore trust in the rabbinate.

It should be taken seriously that 72% of Israelis think that Israel should not have a state rabbinate at all or it should have one in a different form, according to a recent survey from the Israel Democracy Institute. More than half of Israelis surveyed by IDI said the rabbinate should be less conservative, a view held by more than 76% of secular Israelis as well as a third of those who identify as religious.

Israel needs a rabbinate that uses halacha to serve the wide spectrum of the state's Jewish public while also playing a leadership role in the changing needs of the Diaspora. The status quo will only continue to fuel public cynicism about religion, promote divisions in society and put the state's role in the Jewish world at risk.

Above all, a functioning rabbinate would serve the diverse Israeli public, especially on the matters over which it has legal mandate: marriage, divorce and kashrut. This is not the case today: The number of people getting married through the rabbinate or its partner organizations like Tzohar, which must follow rabbinate standards for weddings, is rapidly dropping.

There are, horrifyingly, hundreds of agunot — women seeking divorce from husbands who are refusing to grant them a get, a requirement for legal divorce in Israel — and the rabbinate is not taking enough steps to help them.

Ironically, much of the Haredi population, whose political interests are served by the state rabbinate, do not even rely on them for practical matters in their own daily lives, instead operating their own religious courts and kashrut-certifying organizations. If the rabbinate continues catering only to the political interests of the Haredi and a small slice of the most conservative wing of the national religious population, it will continue to lose legitimacy not only at home but also in the Diaspora, alienating more Jews from Israel. It goes without saying that this is already the case with many secular Diaspora Jews, but it is increasingly becoming the case for Orthodox Jews — and their community leaders — as well.

There are ways within the bounds of halacha to allow Israel's state rabbinate to better serve the public. When it comes to weddings, for instance, simply being more friendly to couples, including those who do not identify as religious, would go a long way to make sure they get married under a halachic chupah. The agunah issue can also be greatly alleviated if the rabbinate would only gather the courage to use existing instruments like the heskem l'kavod hadadi, halachic prenuptial agreements, which have been endorsed by major rabbinic leaders including Rav Ovadya Yosef, Rabbi Zalman Nechamya Goldberg, Rabbi Asher Weiss and 21 roshei yeshiva from Yeshiva University. During the Yom Kippur War, Rav Ovadya Yosef spent long hours and sleepless nights working on halachic solutions for difficult agunot situations, including those women whose husbands were missing in the war, which ultimately led to him releasing nearly 1,000 women from their agunah status — showing that solutions to this challenge do indeed exist.

An effective rabbinate would also acknowledge the real spiritual needs of the population and cater to those according to Jewish law. This includes recognizing the needs and potential of women to participate in Jewish community life and leadership. At present, the rabbinate does the opposite: For example, former Sephardi Chief Rabbi of Israel Yitchak Yosef has accused women who seek accreditation for their Torah knowledge of imitating Reform Jews. Why not acknowledge and support this development and use it to support a broader engagement in Torah by a larger population?

Along similar lines, the rabbinate also made a costly mistake, losing yet more public credibility, when it blocked the creation of an egalitarian prayer space with a separate entrance away from the current Western Wall plaza — a project that the rabbi of the Kotel himself had even approved. Our sages tell us that Jerusalem was never divided into tribes like the rest of the Land of Israel because it needs to be a place that is a common area and creates peace, not division. It is time for the state rabbinate to reflect this founding Torah value and find ways, without compromising halacha, to enable a spiritual space for all Jews.

The state rabbinate also needs to respect the state and democracy. The fact that Rabbi Yosef encouraged our Haredi brothers to leave Israel rather than serve in the IDF, instead of exploring a manner in which it would be comfortable for them to serve as the recent Supreme Court ruling demands, showed that the rabbinate lacks respect for the state even as other Jewish soldiers are dying for its continued security and existence. Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem Shlomo Moshe Amar refusing to shake hands with Knesset speaker Amir Ohana at the funeral of IDF Captain Yisrael Yudkin at Har Herzl and leaving the funeral when Ohana was about to eulogize Yudkin, all because Ohana is openly gay, showed a disrespect for the fallen officer and for the personal freedom that is necessary for democracy. Rather than embracing people according to the principle of darchei noam — making sure the Torah is taught and lived with pleasantness — this type of behavior serves to further push people away from religion.

The Rav's story with the Israeli rabbinate extended beyond his unsuccessful bid for the office of rabbi of Tel Aviv. He ultimately rejected an opportunity three decades later, in the early 1960s, to run for chief rabbi of Israel, saying that the office was too administrative, ceremonial and political — another statement that still rings true today.

The Rav also underwent a transformation in the decade following his visit to Israel. He left the Agudath Israel movement, aligning himself spiritually with religious Zionism and becoming the chairman of the Central Committee of the Religious Zionists of America. He openly recognized the contributions of and importance of including non-religious Jews in the state, and he described sleepless nights and losing friendships and family relationships due to this decision.

Rabbi Soloveitchik recognized that with the establishment of the State of Israel, the needs of the Jewish people had changed — and if he wanted to continue to lead, he needed to change too.

The same is true today for the state rabbinate, which I desperately want to work. It needs to change before it is too late.

Balak: A Candidate for Blessing

By Rabbi Label Lam © 5767)2007(

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Balak – The Rosh Yeshiva Responds – Understanding One's Personality through Zodiac Signs

Rabbi Dov Linzer *

President and Rosh HaYeshiva of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah

"There shall step forth a star out of Jacob" (Bamidbar 24:17).

QUESTION – New York **

I was informed by someone that there are ways to understand one's personality based on the zodiac signs. This involves looking at not only the astrological sign, but also the time and location of birth, as well as the position of the moon, stars, and planets. I don't actually believe in this, but I am curious to explore it with my student who very much does believe it.

I'm concerned about any kind of divination issurim (prohibitions). From my understanding, you could stop before you get to predicting the future with this Zodiac stuff. This is just about understanding one's personality and in that way is very similar to Myers-Briggs or the Enneagram or other personality tests that exist. If that is the case, and exploring the Zodiac is just understanding one's personality more, I would think it would be permissible provided that does not leech into questions about predicting the future. What is your opinion?

ANSWER

Your analysis is correct. The Gemara and Rishonim, as I am sure you know, give credence to astrology both in terms of identifying propitious times for action (e.g., Adar — see Taanit 29b) and suggesting that the star one is born under can influence one's personality (i.e., Mars being associated with violent tendencies — see Shabbat 156a).

Rambam, not surprisingly, entirely rejects the validity of astrology and rules that one who uses it gets malkot — lashes (*Mishnah Torah, Hilkhos Avodah Zarah* 11:8-9). Importantly for our purposes, he limits this to using astrology to determine good and bad times for doing something (since it is based on the prohibition of מעון = עונה – Devarim 18:10). Rambam does not mention any problem with using astrology as a means of gaining insight into one's character traits, or with studying it without acting upon it.

So – yes, you are correct that using Zodiac signs/astrology in this way would not be prohibited.

* Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, Bronx, NY.

** This question is taken from a WhatsApp group in which Rabbi Linzer responds to halakhic questions from rabbis and community members.

<https://library.yct Torah.org/2024/07/ryrbalak/>

Don't Play Dumb With Me!

By Rabbi Daniel Blumenthal Hoffman *

If you read the pshat, or simple meaning, of the story of Bilaam, he seems to be a slow learner, but redeemable as a person. He accepts the request of Balak, the king of Moab, to curse the Jewish people while providing the caveat that he can only say what God tells him to. He tries twice to curse the nation, each time providing a blessing instead, and by the third time he understands God's intention and willingly blesses the people.

Yet if you read the descriptions of Bilaam in *Sanhedrin* 106, a very different picture emerges. He had the potential to be a prophet but lost that due to his behavior. He is described as a bloody and deceitful man who is subsequently executed by the Jews using all four permitted methods of capital punishment simultaneously. The brazen seduction of the Midianite

princess at the end of this parsha, which ultimately leads to a plague among the Israelites, is thought to be Bilaam's idea when his curses failed to achieve their aims.

So what was Bilaam's grave sin? Is it merely that he attempted to curse our ancestors? To attempt to find an answer, we have to go back to the point when he is first approached by the ministers of Moav.

Bilaam approaches God with the request that Moab has made of him and receives an unequivocal response:

"Don't go with them, don't curse the nation because it is blessed."

Indeed, after this denial, Bilaam sends the ministers away, but when a second delegation arrives with greater prestige and greater gifts, he decides to bring the renewed request to God. When God gives him permission to go with them the second time, he says:

"If these men have come in order to invite you, get up and go with them, however the words that I speak to you, that is what you should do."

In other words, Bilaam accepts Balak's charge knowing that his speech is restricted to what God commands him, and that God has already told him that the Jewish nation is blessed. Ramban (Nachmanides, 13 cent. Spain) notes that while Bilaam turned Balak's messengers away the morning after his communication with God the first time, when he wakes up in the morning this second time, he simply goes without saying anything. This silence is meant to indicate assent, and Ramban holds Bilaam to account for failing to inform the Moabite leaders of the limitations that have been put on him. From their perspective, he has simply "changed his mind" and he will go along with whatever they ask. He misled them through a lie of omission to believe that he was going to curse the nation.

Moreover, even when Bilaam turns the messengers away, as well as at every subsequent time that he does address the limitations of his powers with Balak, he only shares that God has said no or that he must say whatever God tells him to. Bilaam knows more from God telling him, *"you may not curse the nation."* He never mentions that God has forbidden him to curse the Jewish nation, despite numerous opportunities to do so. While he warns them that he can only say what God allows him to, he does not share with them that he knows full well that God seeks only blessing. This act of disingenuously playing dumb is the major moral failing of Bilaam.

Leading someone on when you know full well that you won't follow through is a form of אונאה — deception. The classic case brought in Tractate *Bava Metsia* is someone who enters a store and signals a genuine interest in making a purchase, for example by trying on clothes or asking detailed questions about merchandise, without an intention of doing so. By creating the hope of a sale in the eyes of the merchant when you know you are not going to go through with it, you have in a sense "stolen" something from that person. The sages use the term אונאה which is also applied to charging above market value, suggesting that giving false hope is a form of cheating a person. We are meant to be candid in all of our interactions, and not to mislead anyone along the way.

Even in our closest relationships, are we always straightforward? When my children ask me for something and I know that my answer is no, do I give them a clear no or do I say something like *"We'll see,"* in order to avoid being the bearer of bad news? It is often easier to push off a negative confrontation, but it harms the relationship in the long term.

Bilaam chose a path of deception — even with his allies. He deceived them in the hope of being able to appear to help, but as a result created only deepened their disappointment in him. By being honest with ourselves and others we can avoid this pitfall and build our ability to communicate even hard truths to those around us.

* Associate Head of School for Judaic Studies and Administration, Jewish Middle School of Nashville.

<https://library.yctorah.org/2024/07/balak5784/>

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.

<https://www.jewishideas.org/decisively-indecisive-thoughts-parashat-balak> Note: Rabbi Angel originally prepared this Dvar Torah for June 22, 2013.

Macro, Micro, and Balanced Perspectives: Thoughts for Parashat Balak

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel *

Standing on a mountain and gazing down at the Israelite camp from a distance, Bil'am offers magnificent words of blessing and praise. *"None has beheld iniquity in Jacob, neither has one seen perverseness in Israel; the Lord his God is with Him...(Bemidbar23:21) How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwellings, O Israel (24:5)."* Bil'am had come to curse the Israelites, but ended up blessing them for their virtues.

After informing us of Bil'am's lofty praises of Israel, the Torah provides a close up view of the Israelite camp: *"...and the people began to commit harlotry with the daughters of Moab. And they called the people unto the sacrifices of their gods; and the people did eat, and bow down to their gods...and the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel (25:1-3)."*

Will the real Israel please stand up? Is this a virtuous, righteous nation as described by Bil'am? Or is this a nation engaged in harlotry and idolatry as described in the later passages of this Parasha? The answer: both are true...but only partially true.

Bil'am offered a macro-perspective. A macro-perspective sees the big picture, but does not focus on specific details. From this grand perspective, the Israelites were a blessed nation, beloved by God, characterized by orderliness and righteousness.

The Torah then provided a micro-perspective. A micro-perspective focuses on specific details, but omits the larger picture. It sees every blemish close up. If one looks at an oil painting masterpiece from a proper distance, one experiences its beauty and majesty — but one will not see individual brush strokes. If one looks at the same painting while standing one inch away from it, one will see dabs of paint and some blurred colors, but will not see the picture in its fullness. It is the same painting, but our perspective dramatically affects our reaction to it.

Perhaps the Torah juxtaposes the macro and micro perspectives in order to underscore an important point: life is complex. Each individual, community and nation has its overarching character — which hopefully is marked by idealism and piety; but also has its blemishes and weaknesses. A wise observer must seek to maintain a balanced perspective by keeping both the macro and micro aspects in mind. To see only the virtues and greatness of an individual, community or nation is misguided. To focus only on the sins and errors of an individual, community or nation is wicked.

We who love and respect the State of Israel and all that it means to the Jewish People are often frustrated and angered by the unfair treatment Israel receives in the political sphere and in much of the media. Even when criticism of Israel may be legitimate, the overall tone of the criticism is not legitimate when the critics only take a micro perspective. They ignore the noble ideals upon which Israel is based; they do not focus on the incredible idealism, righteousness, and fairness that characterize the Israeli nation. They only seem to see flaws, and they magnify these flaws very far out of proportion. Sometimes the micro-perspective stems from ignorance, and sometimes from outright malice. But without the macro-perspective, the true nature of Israel is totally misunderstood and misrepresented.

On the other hand, it is also an error only to take a macro perspective where Israel is absolutely perfect, and to ignore real problems and shortcomings which exist. The test of any individual, community or nation is not to be perfect — since this is a human impossibility. The test is to strive for greatness and to confront problems honestly.

Some years ago, I participated on a panel that dealt with American civilization. One of the panelists spoke bitterly of American shortcomings. He only seemed to be able to see vulgarity, materialism, hedonism, racism, social anomie. Everything was wrong with America. While not discounting the many failings of American society, I reminded this panelist and the audience that the United States is a tremendous experiment in democracy, a monumental advance in human civilization. America is indeed the greatest bastion of freedom, democracy and opportunity in the world. The Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776 changed the course of human history dramatically and very positively. Yes, of course, we

must continue to address the flaws in American society, and the American people is blessed with many idealistic citizens who devote their lives to improving our society in every way.

To only see the virtues of individuals, communities or nations is to engage in unhealthy fantasy. To only focus on the flaws of individuals, communities or nations is to engage in destructive misrepresentation of truth. This week's Torah portion provides a vivid reminder to maintain an all-encompassing macro and micro perspective. Our goal must be not to engage in propaganda, but in an honest and sincere search for truth.

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

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<https://www.jewishideas.org/macro-micro-and-balanced-perspectives-thoughts-parashat-balak>

Parshas Bolok – The Letter-Man

By Rabbi Mordechai Rhine * © 2017

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

With best wishes for a wonderful Shabbos!

* Rabbi Mordechai Rhine is a certified mediator and coach with Rabbinic experience of more than 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 and www.teach613.org; his email is RMRhine@gmail.com. **For information or to join any Torah613 classes, contact Rabbi Rhine.**

Rabbi Rhine is on vacation, so I am reprinting a Dvar Torah from his archives: <https://www.teach613.org/the-letter-man/>

Divine Direction

By Rabbi Yehoshua Singer * © 2020

Perhaps one of the most enigmatic episodes in all of Torah is G-d’s interaction with Bilaam as Bilaam seeks permission to curse the Jewish people. G-d initially tells Bilaam he cannot go with Balak’s messengers. When new messengers come and Bilaam asks again, G-d seemingly gives in and allows Bilaam to go. However, as soon as Bilaam leaves with G-d’s permission, the Torah tells us that G-d is angry with Bilaam for going and an angel is sent as an adversary to him. Perhaps most astounding of all is Bilaam’s interaction with the angel. When Bilaam finally is shown that an angel has been sent with sword drawn against him, the angel tells Bilaam that he would have been killed had his donkey not stopped. After a brief exchange, this adversarial angel then tells Bilaam he may continue on his way and seems to leave Bilaam unharmed.

One cannot read these pesukim without wondering what was going on behind the scenes, and what deeper messages we are to learn from Bilaam’s attitude and from G-d’s dealings with him. A careful study of Rash”i’s explanation shows us that indeed the story of Bilaam is a lesson for all times and for all of humanity, highlighting the most fundamental elements of G-d’s dealings with mankind.

Rash”i)22:12(tells us that G-d was initially very clear with Bilaam. G-d told Bilaam that he may not go with Balak’s messengers, nor may he curse the Jews nor even bless the Jews from home. When Balak’s second messengers arrive, G-d continues to warn Bilaam against cursing the Jews. However, G-d now tells Bilaam *“If you think you will receive reward go with them, but against your will the words that I tell you, you will do.”*)Rash”i 22:20(When Bilaam decided to go, he went with the hopes of convincing G-d to allow him to curse the Jews. He was not going on G-d’s terms. It was for this reason that G-d was upset with Bilaam for going. Bilaam recognized that his goals were antithetical to G-d’s and still desired and wanted to go.)Rash”i 22:22(

It was at this point that G-d supernaturally intervened and sent an adversarial angel. Rash”i)22:22(tells us, though, that this angel was not an adversary against Bilaam, but rather was an angel of mercy. G-d sent the angel as an adversary to

Bilaam's chosen path, due to G-d's love and concern for Bilaam. The angel's mission had been to stop the donkey, in order to save Bilaam's life, by preventing him from pursuing his evil plan.

Yet, when Bilaam admitted his guilt, oddly the angel tells him to go. Says Rash"i)22:35(*"They lead a person on the path he wants to follow."* Though, Bilaam admitted his guilt and asked the angel if he should turn around and go home, Bilaam had not repented and did not have any change of heart. Rather, Rash"i tells us)22:34(Bilaam was merely admitting he was bound by G-d's command. As such, G-d would not prevent Bilaam from expressing his free will. If Bilaam still wished to go, the Heavenly Court will allow him to follow the path he desires for himself. Though the angel had been sent to spare him, the angel's mission was limited to slowing him and cautioning him. Once Bilaam maintained his desire to go, the angel had to relent and allow him to continue on his chosen path.

The free will of human beings is as elemental to G-d's creation as science and nature are. Just as G-d does not change the rules of nature, G-d will allow us to express our free will if that is what we truly want. Yet, at the same time, G-d worries and is concerned for us. No matter how far we push and insist on using the gift of free will against G-d, He yet loves us and hopes for our betterment. As Bilaam continued to ignore G-d's warnings and messages, G-d supernaturally intervened, sending an angel to deter him. Yet, when even that did not help, G-d would not force Bilaam's hand.

G-d's love for us knows no bounds. No matter how much we fight against Him and anger Him, he continues to love us and direct us to success. Yet in the end, the decision and the responsibility are ours alone.

* Savannah Kollel; Congregation B'nai Brith Jacob, Savannah, GA. Until recently, Rabbi, Am HaTorah Congregation, Bethesda, MD. Rabbi Singer will become Rosh Kollel next year.

Balak

by Rabbi Herzl Hefter *

]Rabbi Hefter did not send in a Dvar Torah for Balak. Watch this space for his future Devrei Torah[

* Founder and dean of the Har'el Beit Midrash in Jerusalem. Rabbi Hefter is a graduate of Yeshiva University and was ordained at Yeshivat Har Etzion. For more of his writings, see www.har-el.org. To support the Beit Midrash, as we do, send donations to America Friends of Beit Midrash Har'el, 66 Cherry Lane, Teaneck, NJ 07666.

Balak -- Prayer for Evil

By Rabbi Haim Ovadia *

Prayer is not a biblical commandment. According to Nahmanides, that is. According to Maimonides, it is a biblical commandment, but even he agrees that the original concept was much more limited than it is today, because one would pray once a day, in a language and format which suited him or her. Though Nahmanides is more emphatic in his statement that prayer is a personal and emotional concept, Maimonides agrees with him that it should not turn formulaic and mechanical. There is no use in chanting pages from the siddur and chapters from psalms without understanding, intention, or emotion. Indeed, the Bible has warned us against the vacuous prayer which has no actions to back it up. Samuel, David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Malachi, and Job all address the problem, but unfortunately, many still pray without understanding the words. Even some observant Jews believe that prayers work automatically, as if pulling levers and depositing coins in God's big vending machine in heaven. For health, press A3; B2 to win the lottery; and a blinking red light on C1 means we ran out of potential dates for you.

That corrupt understanding of prayer leads to the preposterous idea that one could pray for evil things to happen, that we should therefore be afraid of curses cast by religious leaders, and that terrorists succeed because they offer prayers to

God. I, for one, would not want to adhere to a concept of God who allows terrorists to wreak havoc because they prayed with intention and devotion, but those who argue in favor of this worldview point to Jewish sources, so I would like to examine them here.

There are three main sources which support the idea of “evil prayers.” One is the statement of the Talmud (Ber. 63:1) that a burglar says a prayer before breaking into a house. This is obviously a rebuke by the Talmud and not a sign of approval. The Talmud quotes this phrase as a popular saying, and it is used to show the cognitive dissonance between the knowledge that stealing is a transgression and the urge to offer a prayer to guarantee success.

In the same discussion in the Talmud the following statement appears:

Always be aware of God, even when you are about to commit a crime, and he will straighten your path.

Some understand this statement as saying that God will help the one who prays in carrying out his evil plans, and cite it as proof that one may pray for an evil outcome. Others try to refute it by saying that the meaning is that if one is always aware of God, he will never sin. The truth is much more prosaic, though. In rabbinic literature, the words עבירה דבר - an issue of transgression, are sometimes a euphemism for intimate relationships (Ber. 22:1; Megilah 12:1; Sotah 11:2 and 36:1; San. 82:2, and more). The Talmud is saying that intimate relationships should not be a carnal affair but rather invested with spirituality, thus strengthening the bond between the spouses.

The most solid proof, however, that “evil prayer” works, is the story of Balaam, especially in its Talmudic rendition. According to the Talmud (San. 105:1), Balaam knew the exact moment in which God gets angry, and he was able to present his requests for the destruction of his enemies at precisely that moment. Fortunately for the Israelites, God maintained His calm during Balaam’s attempts at cursing them, thus saving them from disaster. Those who rely on this story miss, in my opinion, the Talmudic message here: “evil prayers” do not work. Even if you believe that there is such a moment, the moment is in God’s hands, and if He chooses not to get angry, that moment would not materialize. In other words, while it is true that in a state of religious devotion people are capable of doing things they would not do under regular circumstances, their prayers do not affect God. God’s decision whether one will be punished is not based on the requests or curses of a mercenary prophets or fanatic clerics, but rather on the actions of humans.

This is also the message of the Torah in describing Balaam as a narrow-minded, greedy, and stubborn person, who kept pressing for a curse and for the big prize from Balak, even after being repeatedly told by God that he will not be able to curse the Israelites, and after being thwarted three times during his journey to Moab. He is portrayed as an arrogant and hot-headed person who was bested at prophecy by his own donkey. The story comes to show us that of all the dangers lurking in the desert, this was not one that the Israelites should have been afraid of.

Following the Talmud’s statement of God’s “angry moment,” there is a story of a rabbi who was harassed by his heretical neighbor. The rabbi decided to wait for the appropriate moment to curse his neighbor, but kept falling asleep and missing the “golden” opportunity. He realized that praying for destruction or punishment is inappropriate, and this is the message we should apply to our prayers and our religious life, which should never have a negative bent. We should focus our intentions and prayers on creating better conditions for us and for others to love and respect each other. We should pray to be able to fulfil God’s mission in making this world better place, one little prayer at a time, and as many great actions as possible.

Shabbat Shalom

* Torah VeAhava. Until recently, Rabbi, Beth Sholom Sephardic Minyan (Potomac, MD). Faculty member, AJRCA non-denominational rabbinical school. **Many of Rabbi Ovadia’s Devrei Torah are now available on Sefaria:** <https://www.sefaria.org/profile/haim-ovadia?tab=sheets>. The Sefaria articles usually include Hebrew text, which I must delete because of issues changing software formats.

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

Balak: The Bitter Cost of Evil Prayer

By Rabbi Moshe Rube *

Balak and Bilam, the dynamic duo who tried to curse the Jewish people, must have been fit individuals.

They climbed three mountains in one day to get different visual vantage points of the Jewish encampment. For reference, I'm about to go on a mountain climbing course in the center of the South Island, and climbing one mountain in a day is challenge enough. So three in one day should earn Balak and Bilam some kind of award.

Obviously they were used to it. They and their entire people had grown up among the mountains, so their muscles, bones, and rock hard abs must have been toned throughout their whole life as they did daily feats of strength that for us would be extraordinary.

And yet, with all their strength, we still see that they preferred to curse the Jewish people with words. They knew that warfare wouldn't work, and they didn't even want to try despite their athletic prowess. Words contain a power that athletes do not possess.

It's exactly the war that faces the Jews right now. Our enemy cannot stand up to our military might, but throughout the world, words are flying back and forth cursing the Jews. Words spewed whether in person or on social media have already hampered much of our efforts and led to horrible acts of antisemitism around the world. It's the Balak and Bilam of our generation.

However, Balak and Bilam did not succeed. God turned the curses that Bilam spoke into blessings in the same way we fashion menorahs out of Hamas rockets. It is our sincere hope that all the words spoken against us face the same fate of Bilam's words. I can only imagine the millions of blessings that will come our way soon.

Shabbat Shalom.

* Senior Rabbi of Auckland Hebrew Congregation, Remuera)Auckland(, New Zealand. Formerly Rabbi, Congregation Kneseth Israel)Birmingham, AL(.

Rav Kook Torah Balak: Sweet Dreams

Have you ever dreamt a disturbing dream, but cannot remember it? The Sages recommended saying the following prayer while the kohanim are blessing the people:

"Master of the World! My dreams and I belong to You. If the dreams are good, then bolster them like the dreams of Joseph. And if they need to be remedied, fix them like the bitter waters that Moses sweetened.

Just as You transformed wicked Balaam's curses into blessings, so too, make all of my dreams be for the best.")Berachot 55b(

Transforming Bad Dreams

There are two ways in which evil tidings may be transformed into good ones. In the first way, the means remain disturbing, but the final outcome is good. One example of this is Joseph being sold into slavery and his subsequent imprisonment in Egypt. All of the various causes were adverse, incurring much hardship for Joseph. But the ultimate result — Joseph's rise to greatness, and his ability to provide sustenance during the years of famine — was certainly for the best.

However, it is even better when the causes are also transformed into positive ones, so that the end is achieved through propitious means.

An example of this type of transformation occurred with Balaam. God could have let Balaam curse the people of Israel, and only later changed his curses to blessings. But instead, God "*placed a hook in Balaam's mouth*," as the Midrash describes God's complete control over Balaam's powers of speech. Only blessings came out his mouth. Thus, even the means — Balaam's prophecies — were favorable.

We pray that our dreams should be completely transformed for the good. Like Balaam's "*curses*," we want both the ends and the means to be auspicious and beneficial.

)Sapphire from the Land of Israel. Adapted from Ein Eyah vol. II, p. 274.(

<https://www.ravkooktorah.org/BALAK60.htm>

Balak: A People that Dwells Alone (5778)

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

This is an extraordinary moment in Jewish history, for good and not-so-good reasons. For the first time in almost 4,000 years we have simultaneously sovereignty and independence in the land and state of Israel, and freedom and equality in the Diaspora. There have been times — all too brief — when Jews had one or the other, but never before, both at the same time. That is the good news.

The less-good news, though, is that Anti-Semitism has returned within living memory of the Holocaust. The State of Israel remains isolated in the international political arena. It is still surrounded by enemies. And it is the only nation among the 193 making up the United Nations whose very right to exist is constantly challenged and always under threat.

Given all this, it seems the right time to re-examine words appearing in this week's parsha, uttered by the pagan prophet Balaam, that have come to seem to many, the most powerful summation of Jewish history and destiny:

*From the peaks of rocks I see them,
From the heights I gaze upon them.
This is a people who dwell alone,
Not reckoning themselves one of the nations. Num. 23:9*

For two leading Israeli diplomats in the twentieth century — Yaacov Herzog and Naphtali Lau-Lavie — this verse epitomised their sense of Jewish peoplehood after the Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel. Herzog, son of a Chief Rabbi of Israel and brother of Chaim, who became Israel's President, was Director-General of the Prime Minister's office from 1965 to his death in 1972. Naphtali Lavie, a survivor of Auschwitz who became Israel's Consul-General in New York, lived to see his brother, Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau, become Israel's Chief Rabbi. Herzog's collected essays were published under the title, drawn from Balaam's words, *A People that Dwells Alone*. Lavie's were entitled *Balaam's Prophecy* — again a reference to this verse.]1[

For both, the verse expressed the uniqueness of the Jewish people — its isolation on the one hand, its defiance and

resilience on the other. Though it has faced opposition and persecution from some of the greatest superpowers the world has ever known, it has outlived them all.

Given, though, the return of Anti-Semitism, it is worth reflecting on one particular interpretation of the verse, given by the Dean of Volozhyn Yeshiva, R. Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin (Netziv, Russia, 1816-1893). Netziv interpreted the verse as follows: for every other nation, when its people went into exile and assimilated into the dominant culture, they found acceptance and respect. With Jews, the opposite was the case. In exile, when they remained true to their faith and way of life, they found themselves able to live at peace with their gentile neighbours. When they tried to assimilate, they found themselves despised and reviled.

The sentence, says Netziv, should therefore be read thus: *"If it is a people content to be alone, faithful to its distinctive identity, then it will be able to dwell in peace. But if Jews seek to be like the nations, the nations will not consider them worthy of respect."*²

This is a highly significant statement, given the time and place in which it was made, namely Russia in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. At that time, many Russian Jews had assimilated, some converting to Christianity. But Anti-Semitism did not diminish. It grew, exploding into violence in the pogroms that happened in more than a hundred towns in 1881. These were followed by the notorious Anti-Semitic May Laws of 1882. Realising that they were in danger if they stayed, between 3 and 5 million Jews fled to the West.

It was at this time that Leon Pinsker, a Jewish physician who had believed that the spread of humanism and enlightenment would put an end to Anti-Semitism, experienced a major change of heart and wrote one of the early texts of secular Zionism, *Auto-Emancipation* (1882). In words strikingly similar to those of Netziv, he said, *"In seeking to fuse with other peoples [Jews] deliberately renounced to some extent their own nationality. Yet nowhere did they succeed in obtaining from their fellow-citizens recognition as natives of equal status."* They tried to be like everyone else, but this only left them more isolated.

Something similar happened in Western Europe also. Far from ending hostility to Jews, Enlightenment and Emancipation merely caused it to mutate, from religious Judeophobia to racial Anti-Semitism. No-one spoke of this more poignantly than Theodore Herzl in *The Jewish State* (1896):

We have honestly endeavoured everywhere to merge ourselves in the social life of surrounding communities and to preserve the faith of our fathers. We are not permitted to do so. In vain are we loyal patriots, our loyalty in some places running to extremes; in vain do we make the same sacrifices of life and property as our fellow-citizens; in vain do we strive to increase the fame of our native land in science and art, or her wealth by trade and commerce. In countries where we have lived for centuries we are still cried down as strangers ... If we could only be left in peace ... But I think we shall not be left in peace.

The more we succeeded in being like everyone else, implied Herzl, the more we were disliked by everyone else. Consciously or otherwise, these nineteenth century voices were echoing a sentiment first articulated 26 centuries ago by the prophet Ezekiel, speaking in the name of God to the would-be assimilationists among the Jewish exiles in Babylon:

You say, "We want to be like the nations, like the peoples of the world, who serve wood and stone." But what you have in mind will never happen. Ez. 20:32

Anti-Semitism is one of the most complex phenomena in the history of hate, and it is not my intention here to simplify it. But there is something of lasting significance in this convergence of views between Netziv, one of the greatest rabbinic scholars of his day, and the two great secular Zionists, Pinsker and Herzl, though they differed on so much else. Assimilation is no cure for Anti-Semitism. If people do not like you for what you are, they will not like you more for pretending to be what you are not.

Jews cannot cure Anti-Semitism. Only Anti-Semites can do that, together with the society to which they belong. The reason is that Jews are not the cause of Anti-Semitism. They are the objects of it, but that is something different. The cause of Anti-Semitism is a profound malaise in the cultures in which it appears. It happens whenever a society feels that something is badly amiss, when there is a profound cognitive dissonance between the way things are and the way people think they ought to be. People are then faced with two possibilities. They can either ask, "*What did we do wrong?*" and start to put it right, or they can ask, "*Who did this to us?*" and search for a scapegoat.

In century after century, Jews have been made the scapegoat for events that had nothing to do with them, from medieval plagues to poisoned wells to inner tensions in Christianity to Germany's defeat in the First World War to the underachievement of many Muslim states today. Anti-Semitism is a sickness, and it cannot be cured by Jews. It is also evil, and those who tolerate it when they could have protested are accomplices to evil.

We have nothing to apologise for in our insistence on being different. Judaism began as a protest against empires, symbolised by Babel in Genesis and ancient Egypt in Exodus. These were the first great empires, and they achieved the freedom of the few at the cost of the enslavement of the many.

Jews have always been the irritant of empires because of our insistence on the dignity of the individual and his or her liberty. Anti-Semitism is either the last gasp of a declining culture or the first warning sign of a new totalitarianism. God commanded our ancestors to be different, not because they were better than others – "*It is not because of your righteousness that the Lord your God is giving you this good land*" (Deut. 9:6) – but because by being different we teach the world the dignity of difference. Empires seek to impose unity on a plural world. Jews know that unity exists in heaven; God creates diversity on earth.

There is one fundamental difference between Anti-Semitism today and its precursors in the past. Today we have a State of Israel. We need no longer fear what Jews discovered after the Evian Conference in 1938, when the nations of the world closed their doors and Jews knew that they had not one square inch on earth they could call home in the Robert Frost sense, namely the place where "*when you have to go there, they have to let you in.*"^[3] Today we have a home – and every assault on Jews and Israel today only serves to make Jews and Israel stronger. That is why Anti-Semitism is not only evil but also self-destructive. Hate destroys the hater. Nothing has ever been gained by making Jews, or anyone else, the scapegoat for your sins.

None of this is to diminish the seriousness with which we must join with others to fight Anti-Semitism and every other religious or racial hate. But let the words of Netziv stay with us. We should never abandon our distinctiveness. It is what makes us who we are. Nor is there any contradiction between this and the universalism of the prophets. To the contrary – and this is the life changing idea: In our uniqueness lies our universality. By being what only we are, we contribute to humanity what only we can give.

FOOTNOTES:

[1] Yaacov Herzog, *A People that Dwells Alone*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1975. Naphtali Lau-Lavie, *Balaam's Prophecy*, Cornwall Books, 1998. In the Introduction, Amichai Yehuda Lau-Lavie quotes this verse. In Hebrew, however, the work was entitled Am ke-Lavie, a reference to the later words of Balaam, "*The people rise like a lion; they rouse themselves like a young lion*" (Num. 23:24) – a play on the Hebrew name Lavie, meaning "*lion*."

[2] Ha-amek Davar to Num. 23:9.

[3] Robert Frost, "The Death of the Hired Man." <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44261/the-death-of-the-hired-man>

LIFE CHANGING IDEA #37:

In our uniqueness lies our universality. By being what only we are, we contribute to humanity what only we can give.

* 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://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/balak/people-dwells-alone/>

Because Likutei Torah and the Internet Parsha Sheet, both attached by E-mail or saved in my archives at PotomacTorah.org, normally include the two most recent Devrei Torah by Rabbi Sacks, I have selected an earlier Dvar.

Balak: Finding the Hidden Good -- Life Lessons From the Parshah

By Yehoshua B. Gordon, z"l * © Chabad 2024

Spiritual Warfare

The Torah portion of Balak opens with the Jewish people camped on the bank of the Jordan River, opposite the city of Jericho. The narrative picks up from the previous parshah, Chukat, which concluded with Moses and the Jewish people successfully vanquishing Sichon, king of the Emorites, and Og, king of Bashan, battling their respective armies and conquering their lands. These wars occurred because Sichon refused Moses' request for safe passage through his land and Og attacked the Jews unprovoked.

The Moabites, fearful after witnessing the Jewish nation's recent victories, appointed Balak, a Midianite prince, as their king to help protect them from what they believed would be an attack by Moses and the Jewish people. Moab and Midian were not the best of friends; the two nations were constantly warring with one another. However, they made peace and joined forces to oppose the Jewish people, following the principle of "the enemy of my enemy is my friend."

Understanding that Moses' power was spiritual, Balak knew that military might would prove useless against the Israelites. Therefore, he enlisted the services of Balaam, who was renowned for his prophetic abilities and the efficacy of his curses. Balak sent a delegation to recruit Balaam, hoping his curse would enable Moab to wage a successful war and drive the Jews away.

"Money is no object," the delegation told Balaam. "Name your price; we want to hire you because you're the best. We need you to come with us and curse the Jews."

From Curses to Blessings

This appears to be a terrible story in the making — Balak, king of Moab, conspires with the wicked prophet Balaam to curse and weaken the Jewish people. Yet, what was the end result? Tremendous blessings! Instead of cursing, Balaam praised Israel:

*"How goodly are your tents O Jacob, your dwelling-places O Israel."*¹

*"They are a nation that in the ultimate future will dwell alone, for they alone will inherit the earth."*²

*"They are a people that rises [in the morning] like a lion and raises itself like a lion [to do G d's will fearlessly]."*³

*"Those who bless you shall be blessed, and those who curse you shall be cursed."*⁴

These and many other beautiful blessings and praises were the result of Balak and Balaam's failed conspiracy to harm

the Jewish people.

Why, indeed, was Balaam unable to accomplish what he set out to do? As Moses would later say, *“The L-rd your G d turned your curse into a blessing for you, for the L-rd your G d loves you.”*⁵

No Good Deed Goes Unrewarded

In the midst of all this, King Balak erected seven altars and offered 42 sacrifices to G d. Now, Balak was a pretty bad guy, and on top of that, his sacrifices were brought in an attempt to convince G d to allow Balaam to curse the Jewish people, even after He already told Balaam quite explicitly that the Jewish people were not to be cursed. Nevertheless, in a fantastic demonstration of how good things can come from seemingly terrible events, the Talmud teaches that, *“As a reward for the 42 sacrifices which Balak, king of Moab, offered, he merited that Ruth should issue from him and that from her issued [King David and King] Solomon.”*⁶

Balak offered sacrifices to G d, hoping to harm the Jewish people, and G d said, *“Sacrifices are good! You will be rewarded!”* From Balak came Eglon, the father)or grandfather(of Ruth, the matriarch of the Davidic dynasty, and our righteous Moshiach! Balak’s sacrifices — a wonderful act by a wicked person — ultimately will lead to our Ultimate Redemption.

See No Evil

During his second attempt at cursing the Jewish people, Balaam proclaimed, *“He [G d] does not look at evil in Jacob, and has seen no perversity in Israel.”*⁷

The Third Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Lubavitch, known as the Tzemach Tzedek, provides a beautiful explanation of this verse in his book *Derech Mitzvotcha*:⁸

Why is it, he asks, that it is so easy for us to see the negative in others, especially those closest to us? All too often, we focus on other people’s bad traits, while overlooking our own shortcomings.

This happens because we rationalize our own behavior; self-love conceals our sins. The wise King Solomon declared, *“Love covers all transgressions.”*⁹

Consider this: Two people fall in love, marry, and initially think their spouse is perfect, that they have no flaws. Thirty years later, they have a list of 100 things wrong with their spouse. What happened? Did he or she change and become a terrible person? Of course not. What changed is that the powerful love at the beginning of the relationship has waned, no longer covering up the shortcomings that were always there.

When love is present, you see no evil. So great is G d’s love that He *“sees no evil in Jacob.”* He sees no iniquity because love conquers all.

Seeing the Good in Everyone

Balaam said to Balak, *“How can I curse those who G d has not cursed?”*¹⁰ Rashi explains that even when the Jewish people may have deserved to be cursed, they were not: Jacob could have cursed Simeon and Levi for wiping out the city of Shechem, but he did not; he only cursed their anger, saying, *“Cursed be their wrath.”*¹¹

This highlights a fundamental lesson in effective communication and healthy relationships:

When a child needs to be disciplined, or when someone upsets us, we must be careful to direct

our criticism at their behavior, not at them.

We should say, “*You’re a wonderful kid. What you did was not acceptable.*” We must never, G d forbid, say, “*You are bad.*”

Good parenting involves criticizing unhealthy or bad behavior, while being careful not to say anything negative about the child.

Abraham vs. Balaam

When the Moabites sought a prophet with a powerful tongue, they chose the best: Balaam. According to some opinions, Balaam’s prophetic abilities were on par with Moses’. But, while Moses used his prophecy to promote holiness, Balaam used his to oppose it.

The Mishnah in *Ethics of the Fathers* contrasts Balaam and our patriarch Abraham:

*“The disciples of our father Abraham have a good eye, a meek spirit and a humble soul. The disciples of the wicked Balaam have an evil eye, a haughty spirit, and an arrogant soul.”*¹²

The first trait common to the disciples of Abraham, a “*good eye*,” means that they are happy with whatever they see and, more importantly, with the success of others. In Yiddish, there’s a wonderful word —*fargin*— which loosely translates to wholeheartedly appreciating the success of others. The second trait, “*a meek spirit*,” signifies their extreme modesty and attitude of, “*It’s not all about me.*” Lastly, “*a humble soul*” means they are not arrogant, self-centered, or greedy.

In contrast, the disciples of Balaam possess the opposite traits: they have an evil eye and are upset when others succeed. Additionally, they have “*a haughty spirit and arrogant soul*”: everything is about them, they are driven by power and greed, and they always want more.

It All Begins with Our Choices

Balaam, as mentioned, may have been endowed with prophetic ability on par with Moses. Why would G d cause His Divine presence to dwell on such a wicked person?

There are many wonderful non-Jews, whom the Torah calls “*righteous gentiles*,” who have done amazing things for the Jewish people. But Balaam was not a righteous gentile; he was a *rasha* — a wicked man. If so, why give him prophecy?

Rashi explains that G d did this to level the playing field, so to speak. The Jewish people had Moses, a prophet and leader of the highest caliber. The nations of the world might have turned around and said, “*We have no leaders! We have no prophets! Had you, G d, given us a leader like Moses, or leaders like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, we’d be good people. If we had prophets who would tell us to change our evil ways, we’d have done so!*”

To preempt this, G d gave them a prophet. He gave them Balaam. And it was not a subterfuge. Balaam had the potential to be as great as Moses, but he made some bad choices. Why? Because as the saying goes, “*Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.*” Just because you’re a leader doesn’t mean you’re a good leader.

G d says, “*Behold, I have set before you today life and good, and death and evil ... you shall choose life.*”¹³ G d wants us to have free choice, and He wants us to use that power to choose wisely, to choose good. Balaam and his ilk did not choose good.

Before Balaam, the nations of the world had boundaries with respect to their morality. They had fences to protect the sanctity of marriage and family life. Instead of encouraging such practices and strengthening these boundaries, Balaam encouraged the people to tear them down. At the conclusion of the parshah, we find that after failing to curse the Jews,

Balaam advises the Midianites to send their daughters out to seduce the Jewish men, and in the course of their seduction, to entice them to worship the pagan idol Baal Peor. This was one of Balaam's many poor choices.

G d made it very clear: good and bad, life and death, are there for the choosing. Choose well. This applies to Jews and non-Jews alike.

May G d grant us the wisdom to choose well, to choose to lead with dignity and morality, to choose to parent with patience and discernment, to choose to see the good in others. May our efforts pay off, making the world a better place, and may we merit the Ultimate Redemption with the coming of our righteous Moshiach speedily in our days. Amen.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Numbers 24:5.
2. Numbers 23:9.
3. Numbers 23:24.
4. Numbers 24:9.
5. Deuteronomy 23:6
6. *Sotah* 47a.
7. Numbers 23:21.
8. *Mitzvat Ahavat Yisrael*.
9. Proverbs 10:12.
10. Numbers 23:8.
11. Genesis 49:6.
12. Avot 5:19.
13. Deuteronomy 30:15,19..

* Rabbi Yehoshua Gordon directed Chabad of the Valley in Tarzana, CA until his passing in 2016. Adapted by Rabbi Mottel Friedman from classes and sermons that Rabbi Gordon presented in Encino, CA and broadcast on Chabad.org. "Life Lessons from the Parshah" is a project of the Rabbi Joshua B. Gordon Living Legacy Fund, benefiting the 32 centers of Chabad of the Valley, published by Chabad of the Valley and Chabad.org.

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/6514156/jewish/Finding-the-Hidden-Good.htm

Balak: The Coverup by Rabbi Moshe Wisnefsky *

"He]Balak[sent messengers to Balaam son of Be'or – to Petor on the river, the land of his people – to call for him, saying, *"A people has come out of Egypt, and behold, they have covered the*

view of the land, and they are stationed opposite me.”)Num. 22:5(

The consistent laws of nature obscure G-d's presence in the world. Nature thus “covers” Divinity, and it is our Divine mission to reveal the Divinity behind nature's façade.

As we gradually spread Divine consciousness, we are, so to speak, substituting one cover for another, “covering” the world with Divine consciousness instead of letting nature cover over G-d's presence. Allegorically, this is what the evil King Balak was afraid of: the Jewish people were “covering the land” with Divine consciousness, threatening the power of evil.

What enabled the Jewish people to do this was the fact that they “came out of Egypt,” meaning that the tribulations of exile had prepared them for their unique spiritual destiny. Similarly, the spiritual consciousness that we attain by overcoming the challenges of our present exile enables us to reveal G-d's presence in the world today, preparing us for when “the world will be filled with knowledge of G-d as water covers the seabed.”

— from *Daily Wisdom 3*

May G-d grant resounding victory and peace in the Holy Land.

Gut Shabbos,

Rabbi Yosef B. Friedman
Kehot Publication Society

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5784 B"H

Covenant and Conversation

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l

What Makes God Laugh

There is an old saying that what makes God laugh is seeing our plans for the future.[1] However, if Tanach is our guide, what makes God laugh is human delusions of grandeur. From the vantage point of heaven, the ultimate absurdity is when humans start thinking of themselves as godlike.

There are several pointed examples in the Torah. One whose full import has only recently become clear occurs in the story of the Tower of Babel. Men gather together in the plain of Shinar and decide to build a city and a tower "that will reach to heaven." As it happens, we have archeological confirmation of this fact. Several Mesopotamian ziggurats, including the temple of Marduk in Babylon, have been found with inscriptions saying that they reach heaven.[2]

The idea was that tall buildings – man-made mountains – allowed humans to climb to the dwelling place of the gods and thus communicate with them. The Mesopotamian city states were among the first places of civilisation, itself one of the turning points in the history of human life on earth. Before the birth of agriculture, the ancients lived in fear of nature: of predators, of other tribes and bands, and of the vicissitudes of heat and cold, drought and flood. Their fate depended on matters beyond their control.

Only with the spread of domesticated animals and agriculture did people gather in towns, then cities, then empires. A tipping point occurred in the balance of power between nature and culture. For the first time humans were not confined to adapting to their environment. They could adapt their environment to suit them. At this point they – especially the rulers – began to see themselves as gods, demigods, or people with the power to influence the gods.

The most conspicuous symbol of this was buildings on a monumental scale: the ziggurats of Babylon and other Mesopotamian cities, and the pyramids of Egypt. Built on the flat land of the Tigris-Euphrates valley and the Nile delta, they towered over their

surroundings. The great pyramid of Giza, built even before the birth of Abraham, was so monumental that it remained the tallest man-made structure on earth for four thousand years.

The fact that these were artificial mountains built by human hands suggested to their builders that humans had acquired godlike powers. They had constructed a stairway to heaven. Hence the significance of the phrase in the Torah's account of the tower, "And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built." This is God laughing. On earth, humans thought they had reached the sky, but to God the building was so infinitesimal, so microscopic that he had to come down even to see it. Only with the invention of flight do we now know how small the tallest building looks when you are looking down from a mere 30,000 feet.

To end their hubris God simply "confused their language". They no longer understood one another. The entire project was turned into French farce. We can visualise the scene. A foreman calls for a brick and is handed a hammer. He tells a worker to go right and he turns left. The project foundered in a welter of incomprehension. Men thought they could climb to heaven but in the end they could not even understand what the person next to them was saying. The unfinished tower became a symbol of the inevitable failure of vaunting ambition. The builders achieved what they sought but not in the way they intended. They wanted to "make a name for themselves" and they succeeded, but instead of becoming a byword for man's ability to reach the sky, Babel became babble, an emblem of confusion. Hubris became nemesis.

The second example was Egypt during the early plagues. Moses and Aaron turned the water of the Nile into blood, and filled Egypt with frogs. We then read that the Egyptian magicians did likewise to show that they had the same power. So concerned were they to show that they could do what the Hebrews could do, that they entirely failed to realise that they were making things worse, not better. The real skill would have been to turn blood back into water, and make frogs not appear but disappear.

We hear the Divine laughter especially in the third plague: lice. For the first time, the magicians tried and failed to replicate the effect. Defeated, they turned to Pharaoh and said, "It is the finger of God." The humour comes when we remember that for the Egyptians the symbol of power was monumental architecture: pyramids, temples,

palaces and statues on a massive scale. God showed them His power by way of the tiniest of insects, painful yet almost invisible to the eye. Again hubris became nemesis. When people think they are big, God shows them they are small – and vice versa. It is those who think themselves small – supremely so Moses, the humblest of men – who are truly great.

This explains the otherwise curious episode of Bilam's talking donkey. This is not a fanciful tale, nor simply a miracle. It arose because of the way the people of Moab and Midian thought of Bilam – and perhaps, by extension, the way he thought of himself. Balak the Moabite king, together with the leaders of the Midianites, sent a delegation to Bilam asking him to curse the Israelites: "Come now, curse this people for me, since they are too mighty for me ... for I know that whom you bless is blessed, and whom you curse is cursed."

This is a pagan understanding of the holy man: the shaman, the magus, the wonder-worker, the person with access to supernatural powers. The Torah's view is precisely the opposite. It is God who blesses and curses, not human beings. "I will bless those who bless you and those who curse you I will curse," God said to Abraham. "They shall place my name on the children of Israel and I will bless them," he said about the priests. The idea that you can hire a holy man to curse someone essentially presupposes that God can be bribed.

The narrative is admittedly obscure. God tells Bilam not to go. Balak sends a second delegation with a more tempting offer. This time God tells Bilam to go with them but say only what he instructs him to say. The next morning Bilam sets out to go with the Moabites, but the text now states that God was "angry" with him for going. That is when the episode of the donkey takes place.

The donkey sees an angel barring the way. It turns aside into a field but Bilam hits it and forces it back to the path. The angel is still barring the way and the donkey veers into a wall, crushing Bilam's foot. Bilam hits it again, but finally it lies down and refuses to move. That is when the donkey begins to speak. Bilam then looks up and sees the angel, who had been hitherto invisible to him.

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on the occasion of the 3rd yearzeit
of Moshe's father , יוסף בערל בן משולם ע"ה ,
on 17 Tamuz.

And in honor of the recent marriages of their
nephews Akiva Brody to Zohar Ben Chamu,
and Matan Tobin to Adi Farkash

Why did God first tell Bilam not to go, then that he should go, and then was angry when he went? Evidently God could read his mind and knew that Bilam did really want to curse the Israelites. We know this because later, after the attempt to curse the Israelites failed, Bilam succeeded in causing them harm, advising the Midianites to get their women to seduce the Israelite men, thus provoking the anger of God (Num. 31:16). Bilam was no friend of the Israelites.

But the story of the talking donkey is another instance of Divine laughter. Here was a man reputed to be a maestro of supernatural forces. People thought he had the power to bless or curse whomever he chose. God, the Torah tells us, is not like that at all. He had two messages, one for the Moabites and Midianites, another for Bilam himself.

He showed the Moabites and Midianites that Israel is not cursed but blessed. The more you attempt to curse them the more they will be blessed and you yourself will be cursed. That is as true today as it was then. There are movements throughout the world to curse the state and people of Israel. The greater the malice of Israel's enemies, the stronger Israel becomes, and the more disasters its enemies bring upon their own people.

God had a different message for Bilam himself, and it was very blunt. If you think you can control God, then, says God, I will show you that I can turn a donkey into a prophet and a prophet into a donkey. Your animal will see angels to which you yourself are blind. Bilam was forced to admit:

How can I curse those whom God has not cursed?

How can I denounce those whom the Lord has not denounced?

Hubris always eventually becomes nemesis. In a world in which rulers engaged in endless projects of self-aggrandisement, Israel alone produced a literature in which they attributed their successes to God and their failures to themselves. Far from making them weak, this made them extraordinarily strong.

So it is with us as individuals. I have mentioned before a beloved friend, no longer alive, about whom it was said that "he took God so seriously that he didn't need to take himself seriously at all." Pagan prophets like Bilam had not yet learned the lesson we must all one day learn: that what matters is not that God does what we want, but that we do what He wants. God laughs at those who think they have godlike powers. The opposite is true. The smaller we see ourselves, the greater we become.

[1] The John Lennon version is: "Life is what happens while you are making other plans."

[2] The tower of Babel is referred to in the Enuma Elish as "Esagila," which means "the house of the lifting up of the head." Nabopolassar and

Nebuchadnezzar both repaired this building, inscriptions to which say that they "raised high the head" of the tower "to rival the heavens." Nahum Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, p. 73.

Shabbat Shalom: Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

"I see it but not now; I look at it, but it is not near. A star has stepped forth from Jacob and a scepter-bearer has risen from Israel; [Israel] will pierce and vanquish the nobles of Moab..." (Numbers 24:17).

The interaction of Jew and Gentile is a prominent theme in Judaism recurring throughout Jewish history, and, according to our prophets, a feature of the End of Days. What will the Jew-Gentile dynamic be at that time, and what implications does that have for us in present times?

In this week's Biblical reading, we read of the vision of the gentile prophet, Bilaam, that Israel will eventually trounce its nemesis, the nation of Moab. Indeed, Ruth, a descendant of Moab, will eventually convert to Judaism, settle in Israel, and become the great-grandmother of King David, progenitor of the Messiah!

In the meantime, however, in an effort to short-circuit the Jews' long-term destiny by assimilating them into Moab now, Bilaam advises his Moabite benefactor to send Midianite women to seduce the Israelite men. In this, he partially succeeds, enticing many thousands to sin, including prominent Israelites such as Zimri ben Salou, a prince from the Tribe of Simeon.

I would like to suggest that this sordid incident serves as a foil to the paradigm for Jewish-Gentile relations at the End of Days. In a cryptic comment from Rabbi Avraham Azulay in his "Chesed L'Avraham", we find that "Rabbi Akiba was the repair [tikkun] for Zimri ben Salou." What connection can there possibly be between the major architect of the Oral Law and the Simeonite prince who publicly fornicated with a gentile woman in front of Moses?!

Rashi (Nedarim 50b) records an incident towards the end of the life of Rabbi Akiba involving a Roman personage named Rufus. Rufus would often debate on matters of Torah with Akiba, though Akiba always bested him in argument. The Roman personage became embarrassed, and upon his return home, told his wife of his defeat.

She said to him, "I will tempt Rabbi Akiba and cause him to stumble! [Then you will not have to worry about him any longer.]" She was a very beautiful woman. She came before Rabbi Akiba and, [when they were alone] she revealed her [naked] thigh before him.

Rabbi Akiba spat, and laughed and wept. She said to him, "Why do you act in such a [strange] manner?" He said to her, "I will explain to you two out of my three activities.

Likutei Divrei Torah

"I spat, because you came from a fetid drop [of sperm, of which I had to remind myself, to prevent me from sinning with you]. 'I wept, because in the end your beauty will decay beneath the earth.'"

But why he laughed, he did not wish to tell her. Nevertheless, after she entreated him many times, he explained that it was because she would eventually convert to Judaism and would marry him. Whereupon she said to him, "And is there the possibility of repentance?" He said there was. And after her husband died, she converted, married Rabbi Akiba, and brought him great wealth.

Bilaam was sure that with the proper sexual blandishments, the Israelites could blend into the culture of Moab and Midian. Inter-marriage would create one humanity without Jews. Rabbi Akiba, on the other hand, believed in true messianism. Rabbi Akiba was a moral universalist who taught, "Beloved is the human being, for he was created in God's image" (Avot 3:14).

Rabbi Akiba believed that the cardinal commandment of the Torah is "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18)—because every human being is like you; every human deserves to be free and all humanity are siblings because each emerged from the womb of the Divine Presence (Shekhina). He believed that eventually, every nation will merge with Israel and accept the Torah (Talmud Berachot 56b; Maimonides, *Laws of Kings* 12:11).

Rabbi Akiba himself came from a family of proselytes, and died with the universal watchword of our faith in world unity on his lips: "Hear, O Israel, [right now] the Lord is [accepted by us as] our God, [but eventually] He will be [accepted by all nations] as the One [God of unconditional love]."

This was the goal of universalist Akiba-ism, which will usher in the true messianic age, when "everyone will accept the yoke of God's kingship" when "nation will not lift up sword against nation and humanity will not learn war anymore" (Isaiah 2:4), and everyone will learn Torah and lovingkindness from the people of Israel (ibid.).

The Person in the Parsha Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb Who Was Your Teacher?

Except for the saints among us, we all boast. Sometimes we boast about our own natural endowments, our good looks, or our athletic prowess. Often we boast about our achievements, social or professional.

There is one type of boasting that seems to be unique to the traditional Jewish community. That is a boasting not about oneself, but rather about one's teachers, or rebbeim. Thus, you will find young people saying, "My rebbe is

greater than yours!” Or, “I am a student of so-and-so, so you better respect me for that!”

For some of us, it sounds strange that a person would claim religious or intellectual superiority on the basis of the identity of his teacher. After all, the piety or wisdom of a teacher does not necessarily filter down to the disciple. Nevertheless, boasting about the greatness of one’s master is fairly common in some of our circles.

My paternal grandfather, Reb Chaim Yitzchak Weinreb of blessed memory, was particularly perturbed about this phenomenon. As loyal readers of this column know, my zaide taught me many things. One lesson which he repeatedly emphasized was the importance of not falling prey to the tendency of boasting about whose student one was. He felt it was much more important to be able to claim that one was actually walking in the footsteps of the master, behaviorally emulating his virtues and accomplishments.

One of the prooftexts which he adduced to help drive this lesson home was a passage in the fifth chapter of Pirkei Avot, Ethics of the Fathers, which reads:

“Whoever possesses these three traits is one of the disciples of our father Abraham; whoever possesses the three opposite traits is one of the disciples of the wicked Balaam. A generous eye, a modest demeanor and a humble soul are the traits of the disciples of our father Abraham. An evil eye, an arrogant demeanor and an insatiable soul are attributes of the disciples of the wicked Balaam. What is the difference between our father Abraham’s disciples and those of the wicked Balaam? Our father Abraham’s disciples enjoy this world and inherit the world to come...The wicked Balaam’s disciples inherit Gehinnom and go down to the pit of destruction...”

My grandfather would expound upon the above text by saying: “Imagine that a person studied for years under some great Chassidic Rebbe, dressed like him, and imitated his every gesture. Or imagine the student who attended the lectures of some great yeshiva head and could actually repeat every word verbatim. But if that person or student was guilty of envy, of arrogance, or of selfishness, he would be categorized by our Sages not as a disciple of the great Rebbe or Talmudist, but as the disciple of the wicked Balaam.”

He would continue to drive home his point by stressing the flip side of the teaching of Pirkei Avot: “On the other hand, imagine the person to whom circumstances denied the privilege of spending time with a great Chassidic Rebbe or the chance to study under the tutelage of a Talmudic giant. But if that person was generous, modest and humble, he could lay claim to the title ‘disciple of our father Abraham’.”

Balaam is the main character in this week’s Torah portion, Parshat Balak (Numbers 22:2-25:9). There is much to be gained from a careful study of Balaam’s behavior. One major lesson is that a person can be wise and famous, internationally renowned, and endowed with mystical powers and the gift of prophecy, yet be done in by the flaws of his personal character.

I no longer remember whether or not I asked my grandfather the question that occurred to me long ago about this passage in Pirkei Avot. I remain puzzled by why our Sages choose not to compare Balaam with his contemporary and adversary Moses. Why do they instead choose to contrast him with Abraham, who lived centuries before Balaam?

I have come to believe that our Sages had good reason for preferring the Balaam/Abraham comparison. I suggest that our rabbis were fascinated by the many similarities between the two. They were both prophets, but prophets whose missions were not confined to the Jewish people. Balaam was designated as a prophet for all the nations of the world, and Abraham, although the biological father of the Jewish people, was also the *av hamon goyim*, the spiritual father of all of humanity.

Both Abraham and Balaam shared the unusual power of being able to bless others effectively. Of Abraham, it is written, “I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and curse him that curses you; and all the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you.” (Genesis 12:2-3) And Balak, king of Moab, is sufficiently confident of Balaam’s abilities to say, “For I know that he whom you bless is blessed indeed, and he whom you curse is cursed.” (Numbers 22:6)

Furthermore, both Abraham and Balaam set off on long journeys, one to the binding of Isaac, and the other to nefariously undermine the people of Israel. Both wake up in the early morning to load their donkeys in preparation of their journeys. And each of them is accompanied upon his journey by two young servants.

The message seems clear. Two individuals who are similar to each other in so many ways can ultimately be so different that one’s disciples “inherit the World to Come,” whereas the disciples of the other “inherit Gehinnom and go down to the pit of destruction.”

One fails to properly use his Divinely given blessings and, because of his “evil eye, arrogant demeanor and insatiable soul,” becomes the archetype of perversion and treachery.

The other cultivates “a generous eye, a modest demeanor and a humble soul” with such success that those of us who emulate him, even

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if we live millennia after his death, can lay claim to being his disciples.

The next time someone asks you, “Under whom did you study? Whose disciple are you,” I hope that you can say that you are at least striving to become a disciple of Abraham.

Torah.Org: Rabbi Yissocher Frand

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.

Dvar Torah Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

Is it possible that Hashem was chopping and changing His mind? That's what appears to be the case at the beginning of Parshat Balak!

Balak the King of Moav sent messengers to Bilam the heathen prophet, inviting him to go with them to curse the Jewish people. Bilam

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enquired of Hashem as to what he should do and Hashem's answer (Bamidbar 22:12) was emphatic: "Lo teileich imahem." – "You may not go with them."

The messengers came back to Balak and this time he decided to send ambassadors and ministers, who were more significant than the previous messengers. They came to Bilam. Again Bilam enquired of Hashem, and this time Hashem said to him (Bamidbar 22:20), "Kum, leich itam." – "Arise! You can go with them."

So the next morning Bilam goes on his way and now the Torah (in Bamidbar 22:22) tells us, "Vayichar af Elokim!" – "God was angry with Bilam!" What sense can we make of all of this?

The Vilna Gaon in this instance enables us yet again to appreciate why he was called a 'gaon', a true genius. He explains that there are two ways in which the Torah describes going with people. Sometimes it's 'im' and sometimes it's 'et'. If you go 'im' someone, it means you're aligned with that person; you're a partner of that person; you're absolutely together with them in that particular mission. But if it is 'et', it means you're accompanying that person but actually you're not really identifying with what they are doing.

For example, at the beginning of Parshat Lech Lecha when Lot accompanied Avraham on their aliyah to the Holy Land, the Torah says (Bereishit 12:4), "Vayeilech ito Lot." Lot went 'et' – he went with Avraham. He wasn't aligned with him. Our mefarshim explain, Lot went with his homeless uncle in order one day to inherit his fortune. On the other hand the Torah tells us (Devarim 18:13), "Tamim tiyeh im hashem elokeicha" – We should always be at one with the Lord our God, and it's 'im' absolutely together with him in every possible way.

So now let's go back to our text. When Bilam first asked permission of Hashem, Hashem said, "Lo teileich imahem." That's im, don't go with them, don't be a partner of theirs. Next time around, Hashem said to Bilam, "Kum, leich itam." That's 'et' – you can accompany them, maybe you might even be able to persuade them to be better people. What then happened? Bilam gets up the next morning very early. He saddles his ass (Bamidbar 22:21), "vayeilech im sarei moav." – "He went with the princes of Moav," using im and not et! He rebelled against the law of Hashem. He was absolutely with them, partners of theirs, seeking the destruction of the Jewish people and that's why Hashem was angry with him.

I believe that a very important message emerges from this narrative for each and every one of us. When it comes to our choice of company, who will our best pals be? What chevra, what social circle might we be part of or might we not be part of? Whether it's im or

et will make all the difference.

Ohr Torah Stone Dvar Torah

Jews: Assimilation vs. Integration Rabbanit Elisheva and Rabbi Binyamin Goldstein

For from the top of the rocks I see him, and from the hills I behold him: lo, it is a people that shall dwell alone, and shall consider not the nations.” (Bamidbar 23:9)

“It is a people that shall dwell alone” – does this mean we should avoid assimilation, or does this also advise us against integration?

We are all familiar with Bil’am’s words which express the separateness of the People of Israel – a nation unto itself, one which has preserved its unique character traits throughout time. And yet this description of the People of Israel has been interpreted as both a blessing as well as a curse. (I recall a moment back in the 1990s when a certain politician, who was extremely enthusiastic about the peace process that was underway at the time, proclaimed with great festivity – “No more a nation unto itself!” I imagine he had read this verse as a curse...)

Notwithstanding the above, it is quite clear that Bil’am perceived the People of Israel as unique, a nation that does not share the same fate as that of the other nations of the world – merely to be born, to live, to grow and then to die. No, this nation is destined for greater things. Despite being a minority group among the Gentiles, this People will not assimilate and blend into the nations living around them, but will remain eternally separate, distinct in its nature, unique in its destiny.

Throughout the generations there were Jews who wished to assimilate (on a human level, this is quite understandable) in the hope of putting an end to what they perceived to be intolerable suffering. But these attempts were never successful (at least not collectively), which only goes to show that the words of the Torah are true for all times.

However, one might ask whether assimilation equates with integration. These two terms are usually perceived as denoting one and the same; however, in my opinion, there is a huge difference between them.

Assimilation usually refers to the utter and complete integration of a minority group into the general public, so much so, that after a short time (no more than a generation or two) the minority group has completely blended into the majority group and is no longer distinguishable in any way (except, perhaps, for a few folklore signs and symbols, which are mostly preserved for commercial purposes).

I think the best example of this would be the American melting pot. The first waves of immigration arriving in the New World from

Europe in the 20th Century assimilated completely into the local population. I was astonished to hear from an American acquaintance of mine that Americans of Italian descent have preserved almost nothing of their Italian culture or language except for their original family name.

I think this is what the verse is referring to when it says: “It is a people that shall dwell alone”. In other words, it is a nation that does not assimilate.

“Integration,” however, refers to an entirely different situation: The minority group preserves its unique identity, language, religion and culture, but concurrently adheres to local customs and norms. “A people that shall dwell alone” does not refer to this situation.

Jews living in different places have always differed from each other in the clothes they wore, the food they ate and the language they spoke. This is typical of a minority group living within a local majority.

And so it happened that I heard the same piyyut [Jewish liturgical song recited during the prayer services] about the Binding of Yitzhak recited during the Yom Kippur service in a number of different places. When I heard it sung in the synagogue of the Lebanese Jewish community, it was sung to a typical eastern melody. However, when I heard the same piyyut sung in an Italian synagogue it was set to the tune of one of Giuseppe Verdi’s operas.

It follows then that when it comes to assimilation, the Torah warns us against it and says – “It is a people that shall dwell alone”; however, as to integration – one might say “and the nations shall you definitely consider.”

Dvar Torah: TorahWeb.Org

Rabbi Mordechai Willig Tents and Dwellings

I. "How good are your tents, Yaakov, your dwellings, Yisrael" (Bamidbar 24:5). The duality of this most famous passuk is explicated by our classical commentaries in various ways.

Rashi (citing Bava Basra 60a) notes that the openings of our tents do not face each other. The Kli Yakar adds that Balak wanted to curse Am Yisrael with an evil eye (24:1). However, since Am Yisrael were careful not to injure one another by peering into their neighbors' tents, Bilam was unable to do so.

Rashi translates dwellings as encampments, as does Onkelos. Am Yisrael dwelt according to its tribes (24:2), not intermingled (Rashi). Each group of Am Yisrael recognized its place, and did not attack or interfere with the others. Just as each home respected the privacy of neighboring homes, so too, each tribe respected the different paths in serving Hashem of the other tribes.

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This connects to Rashi's second interpretation of dwellings, which understands them to refer to the Beis Hamikdash, both built and destroyed. The Netziv (Meishiv Davar, I 44) attributes the destruction of the second Beis Hamikdash to our failure to respect others who had a different path (derech) in serving Hashem. Instead of recognizing legitimate diverse paths with one aim, to serve Hashem, we accused one another of heresy, which even led to bloodshed. Thus Rashi's literal explanation and Onkelos's translation, i.e. camps separate yet respectful of one another, is critical to preserve that which is referred to by the Midrashic interpretation - the Beis Hamikdash.

II. The Seforno understands tents as batei medrash. They are good not only to those who learn Torah there, but to the entire nation. We survive, as the name Yaakov connotes, until the end (eikev), because we learn Torah.

Dwellings refer to places of tefila, shuls and Batei Mikdash designated for Hashem to dwell there and to accept our prayers. This enables us, as the name Yisrael implies (Bereishis 32:29), to overcome angels and men.

The next two phrases (24:6) compare us to brooks and gardens, and parallel houses of Torah and tefila. "Those who study Torah in tents draw and give to drink of their waters of Torah to the masses. Those who pray are like gardens that do not cease to produce fruit. Our prayers are never ineffective" (Rosh Hashana 17b). This refers to communal prayer, such as the thirteen attributes of mercy which require a minyan. But the good extends to all of Yisrael whose tefillos are answered.

III. The Ohr Hachaim relates transient tents to those who study Torah only at given times, and permanent dwellings to those who learn Torah constantly. He then proceeds to describe four groups of tzaddikim. The first are like rivers, winding their way, like Shmuel Hanavi (Shabbos 56a), spreading Torah, quenching the thirst of those who drink the living waters of Torah. The second group learn, teach, and rule on Torah law from their place, particularly the Beis Hamikdash. They are compared to gardens, available to all those who wish to taste. The fruits can be brought far and wide, as it is written, "from Tziyon Torah will go out." The passuk (24:6) concludes by comparing us to ahlim, spices, planted by Hashem, and cedars by water. Ohr Hachaim reads it as ohalim, tents. This represents the third group of tzaddikim who learn Torah themselves, but lack the ability to influence others, as Yaakov in his youth who learned Torah by himself in a tent (Bereishis 25:27). As they grow, their roots in Torah grow stronger. The final group are supporters of Torah, wealthy people. Like cedars, they are tall and strong in this world. However, they do not produce Torah fruits because they are not scholars. Nevertheless, because they are by

water, supporting those who learn Torah which is likened to water (Bava Kamma 82a) they share equally in the reward of those who learn Torah by their support. Thus, all of Yisrael stand on the roots of the holy Torah, even those preoccupied with worldly matters.

IV. Finally, the Netziv (Ha'amek Davar) relates the four descriptions (24:6) to the two tents and the two dwellings, each in plural form in 24:5. The first tent of Yaakov refers to women. They personify the purity of water. Moreover, their chessed grants more immediate aid to the needy (Ta'anis 23b), as rivers flow to where water is needed. Their greatest chessed is helping others to purify themselves by learning Torah (Berachos 17a). The second tent of Yaakov, that of the men, is compared to gardens, which produce many types of fruit. Every man does many mitzvos, but, like in a garden, should specialize in one. The riverside gardens flourish based on a constant water supply. A Jewish man must strengthen himself daily to maintain his level of avodas Hashem.

The first dwelling is compared to spices planted by Hashem. This refers to leaders who gather to do chessed, which is compared to spices, and perform tzorchei tzibbur - communal needs. While these activities are universal, Am Yisrael's spices are planted by Hashem. Our chessed and community are unique, as they are based on Torah activity and principles. The second dwelling is the gathering of Torah scholars, compared to trees. Cedars represent the greatest Torah personalities, captains of the ship which sails on water.

In most siddurim, Ma tovu is the first passuk recited upon entering shul each morning. In this sense, the Seforno's reference to houses of study and prayer is the most accurate. However, by carefully learning and internalizing the lessons of all the classical commentaries, we become better servants of Hashem. And, as Seforno notes, this is good not only for those who enter the shuls and batei medrash, but for all of Am Yisrael.

OU Dvar Torah: Dr. Erica Brown

Day One: 17 Tammuz – Fast of Shiva Asar B'Tammuz

Seeking God - Do we achieve holiness, kedusha, through seeking God or through finding God? To answer this question, we turn to one of our sacred texts. The haftara for Mincha, the afternoon service, on a fast day is an excerpt from Isaiah 55. It begins mid-chapter, at verse six and closes in the next chapter, verse eight. It contains some of the most religiously inspiring language in all of prophetic literature.

“Seek God where He can be found. Call to Him while He is near” (Isaiah 55:6). Isaiah offers wise, spiritual advice that is no less applicable to God than it is to all of our relationships. Reach out to God in a place where holiness can be found, when God feels

near. Use the fast day as a mechanism for the contraction of the material and physical to create a greater space for the Shekhina, the Divine Presence. The tone of the day invites greater awareness of God. But Isaiah did not utter these words for a fast day; its incorporation into the service was a later adaptation of a text to enhance the day's emotional demands.

What did the prophet mean when he pronounced these words? Perhaps Isaiah spoke from his awareness that God's presence was not always apparent during the average working day of an Israelite. Busy with harvesting fields, winnowing on the threshing floor or finding a fertile place to graze sheep, our ancestors could have spent their days preoccupied with the demands of family and making a living, not making a place for God. If this was a challenge for those who worked outside in nature every day, imagine how much greater an obstacle today's work environment presents to those of us who sit in offices all day. Without creating a clearing for God, a time and place for thinking above and beyond life's prosaic cares, how can we expect to find Him? If we are not searching, then that which we do not look for can hardly be expected to make itself known. It is like playing hide-and-seek and then not looking. The Kotzker Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Morgensztern (1787–1859) once poignantly remarked, “God is where you let Him in.”

Isaiah continues to exhort his listeners, offering them both a reason that God may seem hidden and some sound advice about creating room for God:

Let the wicked give up his ways, the sinful man his plans. Let him turn back to the Lord, and he will pardon him to our God, for He freely forgives. For My plans are not your plans, nor are My ways your ways – declares the Lord. But as the heavens are high above the earth, so are My ways high above your ways and My plans above your plans. (Isaiah 55:7–9)

God is not like human beings – “My plans are not your plans” – in that God grants true forgiveness. If we genuinely make room for God, God will make room for us.

Human relationships do not always offer that degree of reciprocity. They are more like the gazelles of the Song of Songs. When one is ready to mate, the other cannot be found. One appears at the door to find the other asleep. When the sleeping one wakes, the other is already gone. This back-and-forth game of emotional hide-and-seek can prove exceptionally frustrating. Our own willingness to start afresh, to forgive, to seek forgiveness, may or may not be matched in the mind and heart of someone else. God, on the other hand, is poised and waiting for us when – and only when – we finally make room for God in our lives; when we are compassionate, forgiving, thoughtful people.

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Among commentators, there is a division between those who regard seeking God as a challenge of time and those who consider it a challenge of space. Either certain times create the possibility of holiness, or certain places do. Rashi, citing a midrash, identifies a moment in time that is ripe for relationship with God: “Before the verdict takes place, when He still says to you, ‘Seek Me.’” Seek God before life gets difficult, when God is reaching out to you, do not wait till things go wrong. There are always moments of tenderness in a relationship that should be enlarged, leveraged, expanded. Respond to those moments. Sometimes we let go too soon. We had the chance to say something that needed to be said, and the moment presented itself, but we let it go. There was a kind word or a compliment that should have been uttered, but wasn't. It's true in sacred times with others and also with God. There was a word of praise or gratitude we could have said in our tefillot, prayers, that we let slip away, or an apology that might have brought us closer to God, but we weren't seeking and so we lost it. If you're not looking then you won't find God.

The second-century Aramaic translation of the text, Targum Yonatan, embellishes this reading in its paraphrase: “Pray to God while you are still alive.” Repent while you can, not when it is too late to fix what is broken. And so much is broken.

In an interesting Talmudic interpretation, King Manasseh, who ruled in Isaiah's day, challenged this prophecy, saying that it contradicted something that Moses himself taught. In Deuteronomy, Moses tells the people that God responds whenever people call to Him. Should we seek God where God is or does God respond to us where we are? The Talmud reconciles this contradiction by saying that Moses was referring to communal repentance which is always accepted, whereas Isaiah's pleas are for individual repentance, which has greater effectiveness during the ten days between Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur. There are specific times in the calendar year that nurture repentance. Seek God during those times, when the very air seems ready for transformation. But if you are part of a community then any time works since the power of seeking God in community is stronger.

The readings above interpret “where He is found” as a reference to time, but there are also readings that relate the search to place. According to the great medieval commentator Abraham Ibn Ezra, the verse refers to a changed historical reality: Once Isaiah predicted salvation from Babylon and the removal of the bonds of exile, the people could finally imagine finding God back in the land of Israel. Exile wears us down, leaving little time or mental space to engage in spiritual pursuits. Israel becomes the place to search for God.

The Jerusalem Talmud, in contrast, sees the place-of-finding as referring to synagogues and study halls. There are spaces that are specifically designated for spiritual behaviors and rituals, and these locations stir us to seek God. In the kinetic energy of a room full of genuine religious feeling or of people exchanging ideas, you can find God more easily. In between the pews of a synagogue, among people immersed in prayer, in the lofty sanctuaries that we build, we can make more room for God. Imagine being in a synagogue at night when all the people are gone and only the eternal light – the ner tamid – is alight. There is something holy about that place: the small flame in the big space, the darkness that removes visual distractions, the weight of silence – all of it signals transcendence.

It is not easy to predict where God is to be found, so sometimes we can fulfill Isaiah's demand by identifying where God is not in our lives. We know that there are specific times when we feel too anxious to pray or too preoccupied with mundane chores and the needs of others to seek God. There are also places where it seems impossible to focus. There is too much going on, or too many people talking, or too much havoc for us to find God. Seek God in places not only where God is likely to be found but also where you are most receptive to God's presence. Receptivity can happen in the least likely of places. An open heart helps the spiritual seeker keep all possibilities present and ready. We may never find God, but the search brings us closer.

Kavana for the Day - Seeking is about discovery. Isaiah tells us to seek God where God is to be found. Think about where you might find God. People have a custom to pray and study in a "makom kavua," a fixed location or place, every day. The idea is that we create spaces that are receptive to spiritual activities, where we have all that we need: the right light, the right balance of privacy and companionship, the right amount of noise or silence to induce spiritual behaviors. Think hard. Where does God seem most apparent in your life? What times and places seem more open and receptive to spiritual seeking and finding? Recreate those times and spaces and make your own makom kavua.

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Torah.Org Dvar Torah by Rabbi Label Lam

It Will End for Good

When he saw Amalek, he took up his parable and said, "Amalek was the first of the nations (Reishis goyim Amalek), and his fate shall be everlasting destruction." (Bamidbar 24:20)

Reishis goyim Amalek- Amalek was the first of the nations: He came before all of them to make war with Israel, and so Targum renders. And his fate shall be to perish by their hand, as

it says, "You shall obliterate the remembrance of Amalek" (Devarim 25:19). – Rashi

After 40 days and 40 nights on Mount Sinai, when it came time for Moshe to deliver the first set of The Luchos – The Tablets he received shockingly bad news. The Jewish People had strayed while he was gone, and they were engaged in celebrating with the Golden Calf.

As Moshe was beginning his descent Yehoshua reported to him, "the sound of war is in the camp". The Sefas Emes wonders, "Which war?" He answers, "The war with Amalek!" How so!?

Right after the miraculous exodus from Egypt, with ten months of ten plagues that brought the superpower of that time to its knees and after the splitting of the sea, Amalek had the moral audacity or the immoral audacity to attack the Jewish People. We have an all-time Mitzvah to remember what they did to us, "ASHER KARCHA B'DERECH" – "that they cooled you off on the way".

Rashi offers a number of approaches as to what that cooling off was. One explanation is that they were like kamikaze suicide attackers who knew that even though they themselves would perish, they still felt it was worth it to injure the Jewish People even slightly, just to show that they are not untouchable.

The world was quaking in the presence of HASHEM's People at this moment. Rashi gives an analogy of someone jumping into a boiling hot tub just to cool it off, even though they know they will get burnt in the process.

Amalek was so dedicated and determined to lower the status and the stature of the Jewish Nation and HASHEM that they were willing to sacrifice their lives. At the same time, they cooled us off by remaining unconvinced in the miraculous events of the splitting of the sea, assuming it was a strong wind and a series of coincidental factors that accounted for the sea opening at that time. That too cooled off the mentality of some part of the Jewish Nation. The name AMALEK has the numerical value of SAFEK which means doubt. That is their mission in this world, to cast doubt about HASHEM's involvement.

About this strategic attack, this war, the Sefas Emes asserts that a poison was injected into the system of the Jewish People at that time which had a chilling effect on the hearts of the Jewish People that weakened ever so slightly the actual reception of the Torah on Mount Sinai which later opened the door for the Sin of the Golden Calf. That was the KOL MILCHAMA B'MACHENA – The sound of war in the camp that Yehoshua detected.

Amalek therefore can be held accountable for all the fallout throughout Jewish History that would come about because of the Sin of the Golden Calf. All the suffering stemming from

Likutei Divrei Torah

antisemitism can be traced backed to Amalek. Reishis Goyim Amalek. They are the ones that started this. They lit the fuse.

That is what it means to be REISHIS, the one who plants the seed, starts the ball rolling, initiates that matter whether for good or for bad gets credit or blame for everything that follows. Amalek is a Reishis indeed and the source of a lot of undoing in this world. The Mishne in Avos says, "Don't give up on retribution..." and so Bilaam concludes his portrait of Amalek that ultimately, they will be utterly destroyed. Shlomo HaMelech writes in Koheles, "Tov achris davar m'reishiso" – "the end of a matter is good from its beginning." If it was good in the beginning, then so it will be in the end, but if its beginning is so horrific the only good news is that it will end for good.

Mizrachi Dvar Torah

Rav Doron Perez

Viewing the World in a Positive Light

What is the month of Tammuz all about?

The Sefer Yetzirah says that it is about rectifying the sin of the sense of sight, of seeing things in a negative light. The entire month of Tammuz is when the Spies spent their time in the Land of Israel, from Rosh Chodesh Tammuz until Tisha B'Av. They were viewing and interpreting everything they saw in a negative light, so much so that they spoke about it so badly leading the Jewish people to not want to go into the Land.

Therefore, the Sefer Yetzirah says, this month is for rectifying that sin and to view the world in a positive light. The only way to prevent speaking bad about others is not to think badly about others. If we want to speak positively about others, we need to see them in a positive light.

Tisha B'Av was the negative expression of speaking badly about the land, because they saw – in Tammuz – the land in a negative light. Hence the rectification is for us to see our surroundings in a positive light, then we will speak positively.

May we use this period of Tammuz and Av to work on ourselves and see everything around us positively, because when we see the world through positive eyes, we will speak about everything positively, and see a world of blessing all around us.

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date: Jul 17, 2024 subject: Rav Frand - Bilaam Lost His Shock Value
Parshas Balak

Bilaam Lost His Shock Value

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

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

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

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

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

Rav Schwab suggests that a person can lose his sense of being nispael through gluttonous indulgence in every passion and lust in the world. If a person is obsessed with enjoying, taking, eating, consuming, and all he ever thinks about is indulging in the most obscene and gluttonous fashion, then

after a while, nothing impresses him anymore. He is so consumed with just enjoying himself that nothing gets him excited anymore.

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

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

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

Everyone recognizes the seriousness of losing a sense of sight or hearing, chas v'shalom (Heaven forbid). We need to recognize that losing the sense of being nispael is a similarly serious by-product of the gluttonous and indulgent life that Bilaam lived.

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

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

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

Bilaam knew "daas Elyon". That means that he was aware of Hashem's original plan. He knew that Hashem originally wanted to create the world with only the middas haddin. Bilaam knew that every single day of every single year there is one moment when Hashem returns to his original plan and looks at the world with the middas haddin. This is what the Gemara means that during one moment of the day, Hashem gets angry. At that moment, chas v'shalom, anything can happen. The middas haddin has free reign at that moment. This knowledge was Bilaam's great strength. Bilaam's power was to always look at the world askance. The Mishna (Avos 5:22) teaches that Bilaam had an 'evil eye.' This means that Bilaam looked at the world in a non-generous fashion, rather than with an eye toward the middas harachamim. He would always look with an eye toward invoking the middas haddin.

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

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

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

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

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

Transcribed by David Twersky; Jerusalem DavidATwersky@gmail.com
Edited by Dovid Hoffman; Baltimore, MD dhoffman@torah.org This week’s write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissochar Frand’s Commuter Chavrusah Series on the weekly Torah portion. A complete catalogue can be ordered from the Yad Yechiel Institute, PO Box 511, Owings Mills MD 21117-0511. Call (410) 358-0416 or e-mail tapes@yadyechiel.org or visit <http://www.yadyechiel.org/> for further information. Rav Frand © 2024 by Torah.org.

from: **Ira Zlotowitz** <IrAZ@klalgovoah.org>

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subject: Tidbits for Parashas Balak in memory of Rav Meir Zlotowitz ZTL Parashas Balak • July 20th • 14 Tamuz 5784

The fast of Shiva Asar B’Tamuz is this Tuesday, July 23rd. Five tragedies occurred on Shiva Asar B’Tamuz: 1) The first Luchos were broken; 2) In the waning days of the First Bais Hamikdash, the daily tamid offering ceased to be brought; 3) In the waning days of the Second Bais Hamikdash, the walls of Yerushalayim were breached, ultimately leading to its destruction; 4) Apostomos burned a Sefer Torah; and 5) An avodah zarah was placed in the Bais Hamikdash.

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

The Y’mei Bein Hametzarim, the Three Weeks, begin at shekiya (sunset) on Monday evening, July 22nd. These Three Weeks between the 17th of Tamuz and the 9th of Av, are a national period of mourning over the Churban of both Batei Mikdash. One should give focus to the churban and galus during this period. Activities restricted during this period include: Music and Dancing: Children of chinuch age are included. Many poskim are lenient when the music is secondary in nature (e.g. background music on a story CD) or when the listening is not for enjoyment (e.g. to help one stay awake while driving). Many poskim are stringent regarding a cappella “sefirah music”. Playing and practicing music are permitted for the purpose of earning a livelihood (e.g. professional musician). Playing music to develop one’s skill is a matter of dispute amongst the poskim.

Haircuts and Shaving: Men, women and children are included in the prohibition. In cases of discomfort, many permit women to tweeze and remove hair from areas other than the head. One should consult a Rav in regards to a father, sandek and mohel at a bris, and in regard to an avel who finishes the sheloshim mourning period during this time.

Weddings: Weddings are not held during this period. An engagement may be celebrated, although without dancing or music. A Sheva Berachos may be held without music, although dancing (and singing) is permitted.

Shehecheyanu: We avoid situations that would necessitate reciting the berachah of shehecheyanu (e.g. eating new fruits, etc.).

Miscellaneous: One should consult a Rav regarding signing a contract on a new home, moving into a new home, house decorating and elective surgery. The final opportunity for Kiddush Levanah in the USA is this Motzaei Shabbos Parashas Balak, July 20th.

As the precarious situation in Eretz Yisrael unfortunately continues, each person should increase reciting tehillim and performing other mitzvos as a zechus for the many Acheinu Beis Yisrael in travail and captivity as well as for the soldiers in battle.

Pirkei Avos: Perec 6

Daf Yomi - Friday: Bavli: Bava Basra 24 • Yerushalmi: Maaser Sheni 46 • Mishnah Yomis: Kiddushin 1:8-9 • Oraysa: Next week is Succah 32b-34b. When Bilaam’s donkey stops him on his way to Balak, Bilaam tells the malach that “If it is bad in your eyes then I will return home” (22:34). To which the Malach replies, “Go with these people”. Rashi explains with the Midrash, “B’derech she’adam rotzeh leleich ba, molichin oso” i.e., a person is led along the path he wishes to travel, even a path of wrongdoing. Thus, Bilaam was allowed to go ahead on the evil path he chose.

Rav Moshe Chodosh zt”l asks: Why didn’t Rashi bring this lesson earlier in the parasha, when Hashem gave Bilaam initial permission to go?

Rav Chodosh answers that while Bilaam may have been agreeable to return home had he been forced to, this was obviously not his desire. This was evident now that he sought to forge ahead despite repeated warning signs that this was not Hashem’s will. Thus, we see here specifically that the inner will of a person has the ability to overpower him and lead him down the road he seeks to take.

It can be added that Bilaam says to Balak “Lo uchal laavor es Pi Hashem” (24:13), I am unable to violate the word of Hashem. It was only the direct word of “Pi Hashem” that would be an obstacle for Bilaam, yet he still sought any means to circumvent it. When it comes to a country’s civil laws it is indeed possible to find loopholes to get around the ‘letter’ of the law, despite violating the spirit of the law. But when dealing with Hashem, Who seeks our hearts and our love for Him, it is not enough merely to follow the letter of the law as recorded in Shulchan Aruch. We need to adhere to His underlying will and make His will, ours (Pirkei Avos 2:4). By ensuring that our actions abide not only to the language of the command, but to Hashem’s true intent, we are promised that He in turn will take care of our own wishes. klalgovoah.org Ira Zlotowitz - Founder | iraz@gparency.com | 917.597.2197 Ahron Dicker - Editor | adicker@klalgovoah.org | 732.581.5830

<https://www.jewishpress.com/indepth/opinions/belief-in-redemption-belief-in-every-jew/2024/07/17/>

Belief in Redemption, Belief in Every Jew

Rabbi Moshe Taragin

History has a beginning and an end. The process of advancing history toward its conclusion is called *but* a core value of Jewish belief.

Yet, the specific details of redemption remain murky and cryptic. According to the Midrash, Ya'akov, on his deathbed, assembled his children, hoping to provide a road map for the messianic era. However, his plan was thwarted from above, as his prophetic spirit or *ru'ach hakodesh* was temporarily suspended. Ironically, the only person in the Torah who provides a coded road map of redemption is the Gentile Prophet Bilam, whose fourth and final *nevuah* addresses events that will unfold in "the end of days." Broadly speaking, though, the details of redemption remain shrouded in secrecy.

For numerous reasons our Masorah intentionally avoids excessive scrutiny of *Yemot HaMashiach* or Messianic matters. Too much focus on the future can lead to runaway messianic fervor, raising unrealistic expectations which, when unfulfilled, can be dispiriting. Secondly, focusing too sharply on the bright utopian future can easily distract us from the relatively dreary affairs and responsibilities of our current situation. Messianism can easily slip into escapism and fantasy. Jewish consciousness is delicately balanced between the here and now and the golden future we anxiously await.

Finally, as redemptive belief is predicated on a strong, unshakable sense of historical mission, extreme and radical actions can mistakenly be justified to achieve a higher, divine goal of redemption.

For these and other reasons Judaism was always cautious about peering too deeply into the mystery of redemption. To paraphrase the Rambam (*Melachim* 12:2), we will know the details of *Moshiach* only after he arrives. Yet, despite the obscurity of the messianic details, Judaism's unconditional belief in redemption profoundly shaped both Jewish identity and general human history.

Navigating Adversity

Redemption assures us that the world is constantly surging to a better state. No matter how dark or dysfunctional the world appears to be, we resolutely cling to the belief that God continues to drive our world to its inevitable better future. Though evil can temporarily sidetrack this trajectory, the overall arc of redemption is woven into the fabric of history.

Belief in redemption offers us strength and solace during gloomy periods of history. For this reason, redemptive interest often surged in the wake of national tragedies. As early as the second century, the great Tana, Rabbi Akiva assumed that Bar-Kochba was the *Moshiach*. How else to explain the brutal and vicious Roman persecution of our people?

About 1,200 years later, redemptive enthusiasm spiked in the aftermath of the Spanish Inquisition. Once the epitome of Jewish cultural and intellectual achievement, Spanish Jews were now scattered as refugees across the globe, homeless and penniless. This dramatic surge in messianic eagerness accounted, in part, for the renewed interest in the study of Kabbalah.

Redemptive fervor also swelled in the late 17th century, in the aftermath of the bloody Khmelnytsky Uprising, during which tens of thousands of Jews were brutally murdered, a tragedy that abruptly and violently ended the first golden era of Polish Jewry. This messianic intensity fueled the rise of the Chassidic movement, which spotlighted Jewish hopes for, and belief in, redemption. Throughout our history, we remained convinced that a better world awaits us, regardless of the adversity and hostility we faced. Steadfast optimism in a hopeful future and in the possibility of redemption provided us with the strength to overcome stiff historical challenges. During the bleakest moments of history, when the world around us came crashing down, redemptive belief strengthened our national resilience.

A Dynamic World

Viewing history as a redemptive journey also fosters belief in historical dynamism. Redemption implies that history is moving toward a divinely ordained goal and suggests that current conditions are not permanent and can be improved. To the redemptive imagination history is malleable and can be transformed.

The conviction that Hashem propels the world to a better state also empowered man to take accountability and participate in this process, as Hashem's partner. It encouraged belief in human potential and emphasized

that individuals and societies are capable of profound change and improvement.

Furthermore, redemption, as part of a larger covenant with Hashem, implies that human actions matter and are capable of influencing both divine favor and historical outcomes. By asserting that history is purposeful and has direction, belief in redemption inspires us to view our lives as part of a larger, dynamic story. Finally, belief in redemption assumes that there is order and purpose to our world. As there is a divine author directing history, events aren't random. Belief in a rational and orderly universe supervised by a purposeful Hashem encouraged man to pursue knowledge as a way of understanding that divine will. This pursuit of knowledge yielded exploration, discovery, and innovation.

Redemption fixes our imaginations on this world and its vast potential while shifting our attention away from the afterlife. Utopia isn't deferred to a different world but can be crafted in this one.

Religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism, which view history as cyclical rather than linear, do not acknowledge the end point of historical redemption. Not incidentally, these cultures aren't as developed as Western civilization, which, under the Judeo-Christian influence, experienced dramatic political, economic, scientific and educational advancements, many of which were fueled by a redemptive outlook of history.

Redemption is Inclusive

Aside from framing this world as dynamic, belief in redemption also cultivates collectivism by emphasizing the interconnectedness of all individuals possessing a shared destiny. Our historical covenant is not just individual but communal, binding the entire Jewish community into a collective relationship with Hashem. Additionally, belief in historical redemption reinforces our belief in personal redemption. If history can change, so can individuals. Appreciating the potential for change in other people makes us more patient and supportive of them, and, hopefully, less judgmental of their flaws or limitations. Belief in redemption stretches our imagination beyond the present and beyond the individual or even the communal. Redemption opens our imagination to the future and stretches our interest to an entire nation and ultimately to the entire world, which we hope one day to redeem.

Chabad

Last week marked the 30th anniversary of the death of the seventh Lubavitcher rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson zt"l. One of the most distinguished and influential rabbis of the past few centuries, he almost single-handedly turned the Chabad movement into one of the most expansive, inclusive, and important worldwide Jewish movements.

The Rebbe deepened redemptive awareness. His lectures, writings, and teachings constantly examined the redemption that he thought was imminent and for which he so fervently prayed. His heightened redemptive passion generated a deep love for, and embrace of, every Jew regardless of their religious level of observance. Every Jew became part of his redemptive vision, and every Jew had a role in accelerating his longed-for historical end point of redemption.

Based on the Rebbe's influence, Chabad's extensive network of *shluchim* or emissaries continues to tirelessly and selflessly perform outreach to every Jew in a friendly and nonjudgmental fashion, making every Jew feel valued and accepted, regardless of their level of observance or knowledge.

During this moment in history, as we all search for formulas to unite our people, the Rebbe's life and his legacy remind us that one route to unity is pondering our common redemptive destiny. During the past nine months since October 7, we have spent so much energy contemplating our common past as our unifying narrative. Perhaps we should also visualize the future as a common destiny which includes every Jew.

One of the many legacies of the Rebbe was how his longing for redemption stoked his love for every Jew.

<https://www.yutorah.org/lectures/1104122>

Rav Soloveitchik on Balak: Giving Charity with Charity

Rabbi Aaron Goldscheider (Excerpted from Torah United, Teachings on The Weekly Parashah From Rav Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, and The Chassidic Masters (Ktav, 2023)

The Apter Rebbe, Avraham Yehoshua Heschel, was known after his principal written work, *Ohev Yisra'el*. As the title signals, the rebbe was an exceptional proponent and exemplar of ahavat Yisra'el, the mitzvah to love one's fellow Jew. He was fond of saying that every single parashah contains some reference to this mitzvah, and on one occasion was asked by a stumped Chassid where to find it in Parashat Balak. The rebbe answered that there is an obvious allusion: the name Balak (בלק) is an acronym for the very words of the mitzvah, "love your fellow as yourself" (ואהבת לרעך כמוך) (Leviticus 19:18). The Chassid protested that this is forced, since it requires pairing the bet and kof of Balak (בלק) with a vav (ואהבת) and kaf (כמוך). The rebbe responded with a profound insight: "You have been my Chassid all these years. Haven't you learned yet that when it comes to ahavat Yisra'el, you can't be so precise about the exact lettering?"

The Apter Rebbe knew very well how to spell Balak. He was teaching his disciple that when it comes to ahavat Yisra'el, we have to be a little more flexible and tolerant. If we require that all the stars—or letters in this case—align, we will never get anywhere. One who is too precise will never be a true *ohav Yisra'el*; one must follow the heart. Love of one's fellow Jew perhaps most often finds expression through the physical act of giving tzedakah. However, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, famous for conceptualizing certain mitzvot as having two aspects, one physical and the other attitudinal or emotional, said that tzedakah is properly fulfilled not only by handing over bills or signing a check, but by demonstrating ahavat Yisrael in the form of genuine concern for those down on their luck and willingly opening one's hand to give.

A compelling halachic source for this idea can be found in the formulation of the Shulchan Aruch itself: "One must give tzedakah with a pleasant countenance, joyfully and wholeheartedly, empathizing with the plight of the poor person and offering words of comfort. If one gives with an angry or unpleasant countenance, then he loses his merit."² Apparently, one can actually lose the credit of performing this mitzvah if one's heart is not in the right place. The internal ahavat Yisra'el is essential.³

Among other reasons, tzedakah must be given out of love because it defines us. Unlike Bilam and his spiritual disciples, who have "an evil eye, an arrogant spirit, and an insatiable soul," Jews descend from Avraham, and so "have a good eye, a humble spirit, and a modest soul." The 4Talmud tells us that "Jews are compassionate, modest, and charitable." Accordingly, the Rav categorized tzedakah as one of the mitzvot that "expresses a fundamental principle of Judaism, a characteristic trait of the Jewish people, and a firmly established foundation of its worldview." The Rambam went so far as to say that one must be more meticulous about tzedakah than about any other positive commandment, for the following reason: Tzedakah is a mark (*siman*) of the righteous of our forefather Avraham's progeny.... The throne of Israel is established, and the true religion maintained, only through tzedakah.... Israel is redeemed only by the merit of tzedakah, as it is said, "Zion shall be redeemed through justice, and her returnees through tzedakah" (Isaiah 1:27).⁷

The Rav derived three aspects of tzedakah from this passage.

(1) The Rambam described tzedakah as a *siman*, a distinguishing mark, of the Jew. In the same way a *siman* is used to identify a lost object and return it to its owners, so does tzedakah make a Jew easy to spot among the sea of non-Jews. Avraham was the first prophet to teach the world about tzedakah and practice it, and he instructed his descendants to do the same. When we engage in tzedakah, we reaffirm a link that is thousands of years old.⁸

(2) Tzedakah maintains "the true religion" because it generates a *kiddush Hashem*, a sanctification of God's reputation in this world. "People are impressed by actions of this sort and begin, willy-nilly, to honor and esteem a nation devoted to tzedakah. The throne of Israel is established through tzedakah."⁹

(3) The messianic ideal will come to fruition only through tzedakah because the messianic era marks the removal of wickedness, cruelty, and violence.

Tzedakah constitutes an overabundance of kindness, compassion, and love. As the Rav beautifully wrote, "the justice through which Zion will be redeemed will be tempered by tzedakah and softened by kindness and compassion."¹⁰

Holiday Giving

The act of giving charity takes on heightened significance during the holiday seasons:

(1) The High Holidays: We declare in our prayers on the High Holidays that tzedakah (together with repentance and prayer) can overturn an evil decree. The Rambam 11 incorporated charitable giving into the act of teshuvah (repentance): "As part of teshuvah the penitent ought to constantly cry out before God tearfully and pleadingly, and to perform tzedakah accordingly to his ability." Why is 12tzedakah integral to teshuvah?

The Rav located the paradigm for this notion in the sin of the golden calf. Note that after the sin, the nation was charged to donate to the construction of the Mishkan. An act of charity was called for in order to teach each person to be less selfish and self-absorbed, which is in fact the root of all sin. Therefore, whenever one does teshuvah for any sin, the negation of the ego, accomplished by giving tzedakah, is a desideratum. It has a purifying effect on man's entire personality. 13

(2) Purim: The Rambam wrote that on Purim it is preferable to invest more in *matanot le-evyonim* (gifts to the poor) than in the festive meal or *mishlo'ach manot* (gifts to friends). The Rav posed a simple question: If there are 14three obligatory mitzvot, how does the Rambam know that tzedakah takes precedence? He answered that the Rambam himself provided the solution. The Rambam said all three revolve around joy, which is the mood of the day. The greatest joy is generated and spread when those who have fallen on hard times are lifted up by a helping hand: There is no greater or glorious joy than to gladden the heart of the poor, orphans, widows, and converts. For one who brings joy to the heart of these unfortunate people is similar to the Shechinah (divine presence)....¹⁵

(3) Pesach: At the outset of the Seder we engage in the curious custom of *yachatz*, splitting the middle matzah in two. The Rav reminds us that the servitude of Egypt was not borne equally by all Israelites. According to the Sages, the entire tribe of Levi never experienced enslavement at all. This means that some had ready access to food while others did not. Enter the custom of *yachatz*, which symbolizes the Jews of means breaking bread to share with the have-nots. This act of tzedakah, commemorated yearly on Pesach, demonstrates true ahavat Yisra'el. 16

A Dynasty of Charity

The Soloveitchik family is legendary for its acts of tzedakah and kindness, and one of the most well-known stories involving the Rav's great-grandfather, Rabbi Yosef Dov ha-Levi Soloveitchik, shows how the tzedakah of Pesach was not only something to be commemorated. The story begins with a man knocking on Rabbi Soloveitchik's door a few weeks before Peach:

"Rabbi, I have a religious problem and I want your opinion."

"Tell me your problem and I'll try to help you."

"Rabbi, am I permitted to use four cups of milk instead of wine for the Seder?"

"Why milk? Are you sick? Did the doctor forbid you to drink wine? If that is the reason, then there's a very simple solution; cook some raisins and use the juice for the four cups instead of wine."

"No, no, Rabbi," answered the man, "I'm not sick. I can't drink wine because I can't afford it."

"What do you do for a living?"

"I am a blacksmith, and I've had a very hard time making ends meet."

The Rav called in his wife and said, "Tzirel, give this man twenty-five rubles."

The man began to protest. "Rabbi, I didn't come here to ask for charity. I came to inquire whether it is permissible to use milk instead of wine. Believe me, this is the first time in my life that I cannot afford to buy all the necessities for the holiday. I'm in a dilemma, I don't know what to do."

"I didn't intend it as an act of charity," replied Reb Yoshe Ber. "I'm not a rich man who can afford to give away 17twenty-five rubles. I mean it as a

loan. When business improves, you'll pay me back. Right now, take the money and hurry home to make proper preparations for the holiday." [...] After the man left, the Rebbetzin confronted her husband, saying, "Yoshe Ber, why did you have to give him twenty-five rubles? Wine doesn't cost that much. Five rubles would have been more than enough...." "...Didn't you hear him say he wanted to drink four cups of milk? That means he didn't have money for meat. What kind of a Seder would his family enjoy?" 18 Here is the second, less known part of the story, as told by the Rav's sister: News travelled fast. The poor learned of the incident, and soon the rabbi's house was swamped with needy people.... [...] Reb Yoshe Ber helped each and every one who came asking for assistance.

When all the transactions were finished and the Rav was alone with his family, his young son, Chaim'l, came over to him and said, "Father, you didn't have to be so distressed when your acts of charity became public knowledge. It worked for the best. It afforded you the opportunity to perform some more mitzvot. Don't our rabbis say that the highest reward for a mitzvah is when one mitzvah leads you to do another?"

Touched by the wise words of his young son, Reb Yoshe ber replied, "My dear Chaim'l, may the Lord of the Universe always be with you and help you become not only a great Talmudic scholar, but also an outstanding sage in the performance of charity and merciful deeds."

This paternal blessing became a legacy of his son, Chaim. 19

Exploring the Rav's Insight

The Rav opined that there are two Hebrew words to describe a Jew's kindness that are not, in fact, synonymous: *merachem* and *rachaman*. The former denotes a person who does acts of kindness, but the term does not commit him emotionally. The latter starts with the emotion, describing someone as filled with compassion and *ahavat Yisrael*, and the *tzedakah* follows automatically. In the same way, it would not be fitting to describe the *Chafetz Chayim* as someone who acted righteously, but as a *tzaddik*. In both instances, the good quality forms part of the persona.

This is the level we strive to achieve in our *tzedakah* and *ahavat Yisrael*, because we are *rachmanim benei rachmanim*, a people whose compassion and communal responsibility are in our genes. In the Rav's case, his 20 approach to *tzedakah* and *chesed* (kindness) can be easily traced all the way back to his illustrious ancestor, Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin. Rabbi Chaim's son Yitzchak wrote in the introduction to *Nefesh ha-Chayim* that his father constantly exhorted him to live his life dedicated to helping others, for this is the very purpose of man in this world.

1. Rabbi Yissocher Frand, "The Apter Rebbe Bends The Rules For Ahavas Yisrael," <https://torah.org/torah-portion/ravfrand-5768-balak/> (accessed October 24, 2021). 2. Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah, 249:3. 3. See Rabbi Binyamin Zimmerman, "Shiur #20: Tzedaka, the Heart of the Mitzvah," <https://torah.etzion.org.il/en/shiur-20tzedaka-heart-mitzva> (accessed October 24, 2021). This also accords with the Rambam's position that one ought to give pocket change on a consistent basis than to write a large check once. See his *Perush ha-Mishnah* on *Pirkei Avot*, 3:15. 4. *Pirkei Avot*, 5:19. Rabbeinu Yonah ad loc. cites proof for Avraham having a "good eye" from the verse which says, "Avraham ran to the herd and took a calf, tender and choice" (Genesis 18:7). Avraham slaughtered for each angel his own head of cattle and prepared tongue with mustard for each. 5. *Yevamot* 79a. 6. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Morality*, 123. 7. *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilchot Matenot Aniyyim*, 10:1. 8. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Morality*, 124–125. 9. *Ibid.*, 127. 10. *Ibid.* 11. Right before *Kedushah* during the repetition of the *Mussaf Amidah*. 12. *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilchot Teshuvah*, 2:4. 13. Rabbi Bernie Fox, "Tzedakah's Role in the Teshuvah Process," https://www.ou.org/holidays/how_much_tzedakah_should_we_give/ (accessed October 24, 2021). 14. *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilchot Megilah*, 2:17. 15. *Ibid.* For the full analysis see Shurkin, *Harerei Kedem*, 337. 16. Goldscheider, *Night that Unites*, 64. 17. The Yiddish equivalent of Yosef Dov. 18. Soloveitchik Meiselman, *Soloveitchik Heritage*, 58–59. 19. *Ibid.*, 59–60. 20. Besdin, *Reflections of the Rav*, 192.

https://blog.artscroll.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/artscroll-shabbos-newsletter_balak5784-pgs-1.pdf?utm_campaign=marketing&utm_content=marketing&utm_medium=email&utm_source=artscroll&utm_term=marketing

Not Abusing the Gift of Speech

Twerski on Chumash by **Rabbi Abraham J. Twerski**

Rav Itzele of Ponevezh once attended a community issues were to be resolved. However, instead of discussing the pros and cons of the issues, a heated verbal battle erupted among the attendees. Some claimed that they were greater contributors to the community coffers and had the right to be heard first. Others claimed seniority, while yet others said that as officials of the community, they should speak first. Soon there was a clamor, with each one asserting his rights, and no one addressing the issues for which the meeting had been called.

R' Itzele pounded on the lectern and demanded silence. Out of respect for him, everyone was quiet. R' Itzele said, "I must tell you a story which explains a portion of the Torah.

"The donkeys came before Hashem with a bitter complaint. 'Why have we been singled out from all animals to suffer? Wild animals roam the jungles freely, and have no master over them. Cows and sheep give their milk and wool, but are left at leisure all day to graze in the pasture. We alone are beasts of burden. We know no peace. Our masters place heavy loads on our backs and whip us if we don't move fast enough for them. It would only be fair for us to be able to speak to our masters and tell them when we are tired and not to overburden us.'

'Hashem said, 'You have a just complaint. I will give you the ability to speak.' "So Hashem gave Balaam's donkey the ability to speak. But instead of explaining to Balaam that there was an angel standing in her way, what did the donkey say? 'Am I not your she-donkey that you have ridden all your life until this day?' It started telling how important it was. Hashem then took the power of speech away. 'Donkeys who know nothing other than to assert their importance do not deserve to speak.' "

We would do well to remember R' Itzele's parable.

from: Rabbi YY Jacobson <rabbiiyy@theyeshiva.net> date: Jul 18, 2024, 8:14 PM subject: Stalin Vs. Schneersohn - Essay by Rabbi YY Stalin Vs. Schneersohn -- 97 Years Later: Who Won?

Rabbi YY Jacobson

Dedicated by Cynthia Carsley wishing her dear parents Moshe ben Tzirel and Naomi bas Esther blessings for good health.

A Vain Battle

If there was ever a battle fought in vain, this was it. Or at least, so it seemed at the time.

The year is 1924. Vladimir Lenin, the father of the communist revolution, is dead; over 900,000 people pass through the Hall of Columns during the four days and nights that Lenin's body lay exposed to the public.

Josef Stalin succeeds him as the new leader of the Soviet Union. During the following thirty years, he would murder 50 million of his own people. Jews and Judaism would be one of his primary targets. He sets up a special government organization, the *Yevsektzye*, to ensure that Russian Jewry in its millions embraces the new ethos of Communism, introducing a paradise constructed of bullets and gulags.

Stalin would rule with an iron fist till his death in March 1953, when four million people would gather in Red Square to bid farewell to the tyrant still revered and beloved by much of his nation and by many millions the world over.

At his home in Leningrad (today Petersburg), a 44-year-old rabbi, heir to some of the great Jewish thinkers and leaders of Russian Jewry, summons nine young disciples. He offers them an opportunity most would refuse: to take responsibility for the survival of Judaism in the communist Soviet Union; to ensure that Jewish life and faith would survive the hellish darkness of Stalin's regime. He wants them to fight—in his words—"till the last drop of blood."

They embrace the mission. He gives his hand to each of them as a sign that they are accepting an oath, one that would transform their destiny forever. "I will be the tenth, he says; together we have a minyan"...

An Underground Revolution

The nine men were dispatched throughout the country. With assistance from similar-minded colleagues, they created an impressive underground network of Jewish activity, which included Jewish schools, synagogues, mikvaot (ritual baths used by Jewish woman for spiritual feminine reinvigoration), adult Torah education, Yeshivot (academies for Torah learning for students), Jewish textbooks, providing rabbis for communities, teachers for schools, etc. Over the 1920s and 1930s, these individuals built six hundred (!) Jewish underground schools throughout the U.S.S.R (1). Many of them last for only a few weeks or months. When the KGB (the secret Russian police) discovered a school, the children were expelled, the teacher was arrested. A new one was opened elsewhere, usually in a cellar or on a roof.

One of the nine young men was sent to Georgia. There were dozens of mikvaot there, all shut down by the communists who buried them in sand and gravel. This young man decided to do something radical. He falsified a letter written supposedly by the KGB headquarters in Moscow, instructing the local offices in Georgia to open two mikvaot within 24 hours.

The local officials were deceived. Within a day, two mikvaot were open. Several months later, when they discovered the lie, they shut them down again.

And so it went. A mohel (the person performing the mitzvah of circumcision) was arrested, and another one was dispatched to serve the community; a yeshiva was closed, and another one opened elsewhere; a synagogue was destroyed and another one opened its portals in secrecy. It is a chapter in Jewish history unbeknownst to most.

But it sure seemed like a lost battle. Here was an individual rabbi, with a small group of pupils, staging an underground rebellion against a mighty empire that numbered in the hundreds of millions, and aspired to dominate the world. It was like an infant wrestling a giant, an ant attempting to defeat a military tank. The situation was hopeless.

Finally, in 1927—ninety-three years ago—they lost their patience with this man. The rabbi behind the counter-revolutionary work was arrested and sentenced to death by a firing squad. Foreign pressure and nothing less than a miracle convinced the KGB to alter the sentence to ten years in exile. It was then converted to three years, and then—quite unbelievable in the Soviet Regime where clergy and laymen alike were murdered like flies—he was completely exonerated. The 12th and 13th of the Hebrew month of Tamuz (this year it is July 18-19), mark the 97th anniversary since he was liberated from Stalin's death sentence in 1927.

The individual behind the spiritual mutiny was the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn (1880-1950), who became the leader of Chabad in 1920, after the passing of his father. He selected nine of his young pupils to wage battle with him. The one sent to Georgia, falsifying the KGB document, was my grandfather, Simon Yakabashvili, my father's father (1900-1953). He, together with hundreds of his colleagues, Chassidim throughout the Soviet Union, was arrested in 1938, tortured mercilessly and given a 25-year sentence in the Gulag. Most of his eight colleagues who accepted the oath never made it out of Stalin's hell. They perished in the Soviet Union.

(My grandfather, Reb Simon, made it out of the USSR, but died several years later at the age of 53 in Toronto. He died on 2 Tamuz, 5713-1953, leaving behind three young sons, Gershon, Bezalel and Sholom. My father died in 2005, my uncle Bezalel died seven years ago. Their mother, Freida, passed on in 1954, one year after her husband. She was 44. One child remains, may he enjoy many long and healthy years).

Investing in Eternity

More than nine decades have passed. This passage of time gives us the opportunity to answer the question: Who won? Stalin or Schneerson? one century ago, Marx's socialism and Lenin's communism heralded a new era for humanity. Its seemingly endless power and brutality seemed unbreakable.

Yet one individual stood up, a man who would not allow the awesome war machine of Mother Russia to blur his vision, to eclipse his clarity. In the depths of his soul, he was aware that history had an undercurrent often invisible to most but discernible to students of the long and dramatic narrative of our people. He knew with full conviction that evil might thrive but it will die; yet goodness, holiness, G-dliness—embodied in Torah and Mitzvos—are eternal.

And he chose to invest in eternity.

He probably did not know how exactly it would work out in the end. I am not sure he believed he would survive. But he knew that his mission in life was to sow seeds, though the trees were being felled one by one.

Cynics scoffed at him; close friends told him he was making a tragic mistake. Even many of his religious colleagues were convinced that he was wasting his time and energy fighting an impossible war. They either fled the country or maintained a low profile. Some great rabbis at the time felt he was trying to do the impossible and it was futile.

But more than 90 years later, this giant and what he represented have emerged triumphant. Today, despite uneasy times in Russia, in the republics of the former Soviet Union stand hundreds of synagogues, Jewish day schools, yeshivot, mikvaot, Jewish community centers. Since communism fell, the Lubavitcher Rebbe (the son-in-law of the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe who was liberated in 1927) sent hundreds of ambassadors to create a Jewish renaissance. They span the entire length and breadth of the country, from Siberia to Tashkent; from Tbilisi to Krasnoyarsk. Over the last 30 years, they have built more than one hundred (!) full-time Jewish day schools, in which more than 100,000 Jewish children received a Jewish Torah education. As this summer season began, dozens of Jewish day camps opened up throughout the former Soviet Union with tens of thousands of Jewish children who will enjoy a blissful summer coupled with the celebration of Jewish life.

I have a cousin, Rabbi Yerachmiel Garelick, who serves as the Chabad ambassador to Western Siberia. Jewish women had to travel for seven hours to visit a mikvah. He just completed building a magnificent mikvah in Tuman, Siberia!

And the Chabad couple in Birobidzhan, located on the Trans-Siberian Railway, near the China-Russia border, where Stalin wanted to exile three million Russian Jews, opened a Glat kosher restaurant there.

On Chanukah, a large menorah stood tall in the Kremlin, casting the glow of Chanukah on the grounds where Stalin walked with Berya and Yezhov. On Lag Baomer (a Jewish holiday), thousands of Jewish children with kippot on their heads marched the streets of Moscow with signs proclaiming, "Hear oh Israel... G-d is One." Jewish life is bustling in Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, Lithuania, Uzbekistan, etc.

Visiting Russia a number of years ago, Russia's Chief Rabbi, Berel Lazar, pointed to a massive Jewish school he built in Moscow stretching over a full block. "Right across from here were some of the main offices of the KGB, where the orders to decimate Judaism came from," he said.

Across the street was a massive Jewish museum, one of the nicest I have ever seen, attracting thousands of weekly visitors, and telling the story of the Jewish people and their heritage.

I then entered, two streets over, the Marina Rashtze synagogue in Moscow, a massive and beautiful 8-story structure. Hundreds of Jews were praying and studying Torah.

Comrade Stalin is dead; communism has faded away as hopelessly irrelevant and destructive. The sun of the nations is today a clod of darkness. The ideology of the Soviet Empire which declared "Lenin has not died and Stalin will not die. He is eternal," is now a mockery. Stalin and Lenin are as dead as one can be. But the Mikvaot built by the Lubavitcher Rebbe in 1927, they are still here, from Siberia to Moscow, to Tashkent.

If you will visit Russia this coming Shabbos, I am not sure you will find anybody celebrating the life and vision of Stalin, or even Khrushchev, Brezhnev, and Andropov. But you will find tens of thousands of Jews celebrating the liberation of the Lubavitcher Rebbe in 1927 and the narrative of one holy man's triumph over one of the greatest mass-murderers in human

history, sharing his vision, committing themselves to continue saturating the world with the light of Torah and Mitzvos.

So on this day, the 12th of Tamuz, lift your glasses and say L'chayim! L'chayim to a Rebbe who inspired such heroism in so many disciples, many of them who paid the ultimate price. L'chayim to the incredible Jews of Russia who maintained the embers burning for seven decades, and then—when the opportunity came—fanned them into glowing flames. L'chayim to my dear Zeide, Reb Simon, whom I never met but whose life story is engraved in the core of my heart.

Today, we have many battles to fight, and plenty of darkness to conquer. Our brothers and sisters in Ukraine and Russia are enduring a terrible war. Our eternal homeland is under attack. It is easy to become cynical or depressed, leading to emotional paralysis. But our greatest leaders always knew better. They never allowed the mask of evil to define the narrative of history; they ensured that another story would dominate our imaginations and actions.

So can we.

1) This figure was given to me by Rabbi Sholom Ber Levin, chief librarian of the Central Lubavitch Library in Brooklyn, NY.

<https://vinnews.com/2024/07/16/rav-yitzchok-feigelstock-zatzal-on-parshas-balak/>

Rav Yitzchok Feigelstock zatzal on Parshas Balak

July 16, 2024

By Rabbi Yair Hoffman

by Rabbi Yair Hoffman for the Sefas Tamim Foundation

This Dvar Torah was adapted from shmuessin found in the newly published Sefer, “Yehge Chochma” Vol. II – The Mussar Shmuessim of HaGaon HaRav Yitzchok Feigelstock zt”l of the Long Beach Yeshiva. Rav Yeruchem Olshin Shlita told this author that his own mehalech in Shmuessim was heavily influenced by Rav Feigelshtok when he gave Mussar Vaadim and Chaburos in BMG.

“And he [Balak] sent messengers to Bilaam Ben B’or (BaMidbar 22:5) The Sifrei (veZos HaBracha 357) cited by Rashi darshans, “While no Navi arose in Israel like Moshe Rabbeinu – one did arise among the gentiles with his power of prophecy – and that is Bilaam ben B’or.” This, however, begs the question: How could it be that someone so vile and lowly, so steeped in depraved behavior (See Sanhedrin 105) could have a level of prophecy equal to K’la Yisroel’s greatest prophet?

Furthermore, the Rambam (Yesodei Torah Chapter 7) writes that prophecy can only reside in someone who is both brilliant and who has mastered his character traits.

Rashi answers the question somewhat when he explains that he did not wish the nations of the world to say, “Well if we had a prophet like Moshe, then we would have also sought growth and truth...” and, therefore, Hashem gave the nations such a prophet. However, that may address the issue of Hashem overlooking the requirement of mastering character traits, but, nonetheless, Bilaam did have the intellectual brilliance that was necessary to possess prophecy. Why then did he not see so many obvious truths? How could he have thought that there are times when Hashem does not know all?

We must perceive that there is another factor that prevents a person from seeing truths – even obvious ones. Let us explore what that other factor is. Bilaam bragged to Hashem about the fact that Balak sent for him. Rashi explains his intent was as follows: “You may not consider me important, but the king of Moav certainly does.” This is the height of audacity and Chutzpah – taking back in such a way with the Creator of the world.

It is clear that the other factor is self-absorbance and hubris. Hubris can blind and obscure truth from even the brightest of people. Examples abound. Edison was known as one of the greatest inventors in the world, and his self-absorption caused him to be blind to the limitations of DC power which he advocated for, while the rival AC power picked up speed. Nobel Prize winner, Dr. Verner Heisenberg, was already a winner of the Nobel Prize and yet he failed to properly understand how little “heavy water” was needed to produce a nuclear bomb. This was something that even a first year physics student can calculate.

In Pirkei Avos (5:19), students of Avrohom are described as very humble, whereas students of Bilaam are described as haughty and filled with hubris. There is a grave lesson that can be learned here. We must actively seek to avoid any form of hubris if we wish to live a life of everyday emes.

To Subscribe to a weekly Parsha Sheet highlighting Emes please email yairhoffman2@gmail.com with the word subscribe in the subject line.

from: **Alan Fisher** <afisherads@yahoo.com> to: Beth Sholom Landau Bill <latemaariv@bethsholom.org>, Alan Fisher <afisherads@yahoo.com> date: Jul 18, 2024, 9:59 PM subject: **Potomac Torah Study Center: Devrei Torah for Shabbat Balak 5784**

Of all the stories in the Torah, one of the best remembered is our parsha, which includes the comic incident of Bilaam’s donkey – an animal that sees what Bilaam cannot see and speaks sense when Bilaam acts like a blind and arrogant jerk. Similarly, I vividly remember a television show of sixty years ago, Mr. Ed, a talking horse that was a comic treat for several years. Talking animals are easy to remember. However, why is Balak in the Torah, and what are we to learn from this parsha, in which no Jews appear until the final few pasookim?

Rabbi Dr. Katriel (Kenneth) Brander observes that Tanach contains ten different episodes in which an individual takes a journey by donkey – and in none of these incidents does the individual realize the purpose of his trip. The lesson in these stories is not the donkey. As Rabbi Brander observes, we cannot control what will happen at the end of our journeys. We can only control our integrity and values. Bilaam tries to manipulate God to curse B’Nai Yisrael and benefit Moab and Midian, despite God’s repeated messages that He will not permit Bilaam to curse the Jews. Bilaam goes to Moab despite Hashem’s order not to do so, but God remains in control and ensures that Bilaam’s attempts to curse turn out to be blessings. Indeed, Bilaam’s blessings are so beautiful that the Rabbis would have included them in the Shema if they were not so lengthy.

The story of Balak and Bilaam connects to episodes early in the Torah, as Rabbi David Fohrman discusses (alephbeta.org). Balak’s concern that the huge population of Jews covers the land as far as he can see reminds us of Paro’s concern of the swarming Jews who cover the land and might threaten the existence of Egypt. Paro and Balak both seek to conquer the Jews.

Bilaam’s journey, including rising early, preparing his donkey, and taking two assistants, parallels Avraham’s steps setting out to take Yitzhak to sacrifice at the Akeidah. The blessings from Bilaam’s mouth reinforce the blessings that God gives to Avraham and that the angel gives him after the Akeidah. The Mishnah recognizes that we are to compare Avraham and Bilaam (see Pirkei Avot 5:22 in the Art Scroll Ashkenaz Siddur – numbering varies slightly across editions).

Rabbi Haim Ovadia discusses lessons from the Talmud to conclude that evil prayers do not work. God retains the ability to control events and frustrate attempts to pray for evil. Rabbi Ovadia concludes that our goal should be to pray to fulfill Hashem’s mission by making the world a better place, one prayer at a time and with as many good actions as possible. Rabbi Yehoshua Singer gives a very similar message in his Dvar Torah.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, z”l, asks why we Jews generate such hatred that vicious anti-Semitism erupts frequently over the course of history. After Hitler murdered a third of all the Jews living in the 1930s, with horrific concentration camps and cruel acts on many Jews, who would expect that within the lifetime of many of the survivors we would encounter an explosion of anti-Semitism all over the world? Jews represent not quite 0.2 percent of the world population. The United Nations probably spends more time and money condemning Jews and supporting Arab hatred than on anything else. Rabbi Sacks observes that Jews have generally not been able to assimilate into other cultures because of anti-Semitism. Both Orthodox rabbis and secular Jewish scholars agree that whenever there is malaise in a prevailing culture, anti-Semitism arises to provide a convenient scapegoat. The difference now versus in the 1930s and 1940s is that we now have Israel, the one country that is always ready to accept Jews.

Rabbi Brander frequently reminds us that we Jews must come together to remain strong and to keep Israel strong. This week he discusses the difficulty Israel has in finding acceptable candidates for the Chief Rabbi position (or two positions if one Ashkenaz and one Sephardic). Should these positions remain Haredi or represent a broader consensus of the Orthodox position (and also be more open to non-Orthodox groups)? Since I am neither a rabbi nor an Israeli, I shall not express a position on the issue. However, I share Rabbi Brander's wish for more unity among our people. Our goal as Jews should be to do our part to make the world a better place – and coming together with our fellow Jews is an important part of this mandate.

Unity among all Jews and support for our fellow Jews throughout the world were two very important goals of my beloved Rebbe, Rabbi Leonard Cahan, z"l.

Shabbat Shalom,

Hannah and Alan

Please daven for a Refuah Shlemah for Hersh ben Perel Chana (Hersh Polin, hostage to terrorists in Gaza); Moshe Aaron ben Leah Beilah (badly wounded in battle in Gaza but slowly recovering), Hershel Tzvi ben Chana, Reuven ben Basha Chaya Zlata Lana, Yoram Ben Shoshana, Leib Dovid ben Etel, Avraham ben Gavriela, Mordechai ben Chaya, David Moshe ben Raizel; Zvi ben Sara Chaya, Reuven ben Masha, Meir ben Sara, Oscar ben Simcha; Chai Frumel bat Leah, Rena bat Ilsa, Riva Golda bat Leah, Sarah Feige bat Chaya, Sharon bat Sarah, Kayla bat Ester, and Malka bat Simcha, and all our fellow Jews in danger in and near Israel. Please contact me for any additions or subtractions. Thank you.

from: **Rabbi Yochanan Zweig** <genesis@torah.org> to: rabbizweig@torah.org date: Jul 17, 2024, 4:02 PM subject: Rabbi Zweig on the Parsha - A Different Kind Of Friend

Parshas Balak

A Different Kind Of Friend

"He perceived no iniquity in Yaakov, and saw no perversity in Yisroel. Hashem his G-d is with him, and the friendship of the King is in him." (23:21)

The commentators translate "teruas melech" as "the friendship of the King", "teruas" being from the word "rayus" – "friendship". Rashi explains the verse as Balaam expressing the futility of any attempt to curse Bnei Yisroel, for Hashem does not scrutinize their iniquity nor criticize them for their shortcomings, even when they provoke Him by maliciously violating His word[1]. Why would not criticizing a person for his wrongdoing be an expression of friendship? On the contrary, a true friend is not afraid to criticize, for that is the manner in which he expresses his concern for his friend's well-being.

In Parshas Kedoshim we find the commandment "ve'ahavta lerayacha kamocho" – "you should love your friend as you love yourself[2]." Translating "rayacha" as "neighbor" is incorrect. Rayacha is derived from the word "rayus" – "friendship". From this verse we can derive that in the hierarchy of relationships, love is greater than friendship, for we are commanded to love a person who already is our friend: "ve'ahavta lerayacha". In the last of the Sheva Berachos, the seven blessings established by the Rabbis as part of the wedding ceremony, we thank Hashem for the various levels of relationships which can be attained by the bride and groom. Presumably, we give thanks in ascending order. Here we say "ahava ve'achva shalom verayus" – "love, brotherhood, harmony, and friendship". The implication is that the relationship of friendship transcends that of love. How do we reconcile this apparent contradiction?

In his commentary that introduces Pirkei Avos, the Shmoneh Perakim, the Rambam cites Aristotle who defines various levels of friendship. The most common type are friends with whom a person shares experiences. Although he may enjoy their company, a person still maintains a facade, unwilling to present his vulnerabilities to them, for fear that they may use this information against him. Very rarely, do we find a friend in whom we place our complete trust and for whom we are willing to let down our guard and share our

insecurities. This only occurs if we sense that this friend is completely dedicated to our growth and his actions are motivated by his concern for our best interests.

There is no contradiction between the verse in Parshas Kedoshim and the terminology used at the Sheva Berachos. The verse is teaching us that we should learn to love our friends who fall into the first category. The Rabbis bless the married couple that their relationship should transcend from love to the friendship of the second category.

It is difficult to accept criticism graciously, especially when the criticism emanates from an injured party. The reason for this is that we convince ourselves that the criticism is not being levied because the person cares for us, rather because he is an injured party. This is only true of a friend from the first category. However, if the criticism is given by a person who we know to have our best interests at heart, we can accept that the rebuke is meant to prevent us from harmful behavior. Rashi's interpretation of the verse is thus: It is because of our "rayus" – friendship with Hashem that He does not criticize us for what we have done to Him. Hashem is willing to overlook the hurt that we cause Him. It is only for the damage which we cause ourselves that Hashem rebukes and punishes us, for Hashem's only agenda is our best interests.

1.23:21

2.19:18

"Who has counted the dust of Yaakov..." (23:10) In his second explanation of this verse, Rashi offers the Midrashic interpretation: Who can count the agricultural mitzvos that Bnei Yisroel perform, for they are so numerous[1]. The Maharal asks why it is particularly the agricultural mitzvos that are drawn to Balaam's attention[2]?

On the third day of creation Hashem instructs that there should be "aytz pri oseh pri" – "fruit trees yielding fruit[3]". However, when the trees are actually created, we find that the verse states "v'aytz oseh pri" – "trees yielding fruit[4]". Rashi comments that Hashem commanded the earth to produce trees which were edible themselves and had the same taste as the fruit that they yielded. However, the earth produced trees which were inedible themselves, but yielded edible fruit. Therefore, when man was cursed for the sin of eating from the Tree of Knowledge, Hashem cursed the earth as well: "Accursed is the ground[5,6]". What is the notion of the earth disobeying Hashem's will? Furthermore, why is the punishment of the earth delayed until Adam's punishment?

Clearly, the earth cannot rebel against Hashem's wishes, rather Hashem must have programmed that instead of the earth producing trees in their perfect state, i.e. having the same taste as their fruit, the earth brought forth an imperfect product. The question that must then be addressed is why would Hashem create the illusion that one of His creations rebelled against Him? Since man is created from the earth, as is verified by his name "Adam" – "from the adama (the ground)[7]", it is the very perception that the ground chose not to follow the will of Hashem that gives man his ability of free choice, the ability to either conform to or rebel against the will of Hashem. Since man's ability to sin stemmed from being created out of the earth, it is only once he does sin that the earth is punished as well. Punishing the earth is a furthering of the illusion that the earth has its independence and the ability to choose not to conform to the will of Hashem.

The ultimate purpose of mitzvos which involve the use of the earth is to take the element in creation that appears to be the most separate from Hashem and has the greatest expression of Hashem distancing Himself from the world, and reconnect it back to Hashem. It is specifically those elements which appear most alienated from Hashem that when connected back to Him reveal His glory in the greatest manner. It is this ability that Bnei Yisroel have to take that which is cursed and turn it into beracha – blessing, i.e. being reconnected back to Hashem, which impacts upon Balaam. Balaam recognizes that Bnei Yisroel view that which is cursed as an opportunity to reveal Hashem's glory, and not as an obstacle. Therefore, ultimately Bnei Yisroel will be impervious to his curses.

1.23:10 2.Gur Arye ibid 3.1:11 4.1:12 5.1:11 6.3:17 7.1:7

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from: **Michal Horowitz** <contact@michalhorowitz.com> date: Jul 18, 2024

Be of the Students of Avraham

Mrs. Michal Horowitz

In this week's parsha, Parshas Balak, the Torah tells us of Balak, the king of Moav, who feared the approaching hired the famous seer, Bilaam, to come and curse the Jews. King Balak was certain that the power of Bilaam's curses would be stronger than the power of Balak's swords, and through these curses, he and his nation would be able to bring ruination, and defeat, upon the nation of Israel. It took a number of delegations, and many persuasions, to convince Bilaam to go with the officers of Moav to King Balak, but after much deliberations, Bilaam finally accepted the job.

Bilaam was self-centered and greedy, and desired only the most honorable and important, high-level government representatives to come hire him and accompany him back to Moav (Bamidbar 22:13 with Rashi), as well as vast amounts of gold and silver (ibid, v.18) as payment for the job.

Though he tried repeatedly to curse the Jews, ultimately, all of his curses turned to blessings, as G-d puts words into his mouth, for he was a mere spokesman for the Almighty (ironically, he was no different than his donkey, a lowly animal, that spoke to him on his journey, who was also simply a messenger of G-d - ibid, v.28-30).

The Sages tell us הִזָּי [יט] כָּל מִי שִׁישׁ בּוֹ שְׁלוּשָׁה דְּבָרִים הֵלֵל, הִי זֶה מִתְלַמְּדֵי שֶׁל אַבְרָהָם; וְכָל מִי שֶׁאֵין בּוֹ שְׁלוּשָׁה דְּבָרִים הֵלֵל, הִי זֶה מִתְלַמְּדֵי שֶׁל בְּלָעַם; אֲבָל תְּלַמְּדֵי שֶׁל ... ;תְּלַמְּדֵי שֶׁל אַבְרָהָם--עֵין טוֹבָה, וְנֶפֶשׁ שְׁפֵלָה, וְרוּחַ נְמוּכָה בְּלָעַם--עֵין רַעָה, וְנֶפֶשׁ רַחֲבָה, וְרוּחַ גְּבוּהָה

Whoever possesses the following three traits is of the students of our father Avraham; and whoever possesses the opposite three traits is of the students of the wicked Balaam. The students of our father Avraham have a good eye, a meek spirit and a humble soul. The disciples of the wicked Balaam have an evil eye, a haughty spirit and a broad soul (Pirkei Avos 5:22).

Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch, in his commentary to Pirkei Avos, teaches, "The life of Avraham was characterized by these virtues: ayin tovah, he truly loved his fellow-men and therefore he could rejoice without envy or reserve in their every good fortune; he was modest (הָיָה מְזֻנָּן), and he was undemanding (שֶׁשֶׁפֶּן שֶׁשֶׁפֶּן). These qualities immediately came to the fore, when Avraham left his father's house, and gave up all the pleasures, riches, and inhospitable unknown; all in order to advance the comforts, and honors of home to go out into the strange welfare of his fellow-men... The picture of his long and trial-laden life shows no trace whatever of conduct at variance with these noble traits.

"In striking contrast to this, we behold the arrogance, the insatiable ambition and the greed of the malicious Bilaam who was ready to pronounce a curse over an entire people. We cannot find in Bilaam's character sketch even one stroke that might mitigate this unsavory picture in the gallery of history.

"The disciples of Avraham love their fellow-men, they are modest, humble, and utterly untainted by envy. These sterling qualities not only open for them to portals of bliss in the world to come, but give them serenity and happiness even here on earth, regardless of the lack of material wealth and pleasures, and the burden of trials and privation that life may bring. Their measure of calamities seems small in their eyes, and the happiness of others which they create, promote, and observe affords them a source of joy which the disciples of Bilaam cannot possibly surmise. As for the disciples of Bilaam, their malice, arrogance, and insatiable greed and ambition not only make it impossible for them to walk upon the road to salvation in the world to come, but also keep them from finding one moment's true contentment, even in the midst of their abundant riches and pleasures. Any joy, honor or prosperity that comes to others is a bitter drop in their cup of joy and whatever they may already have achieved loses all value in their eyes when they contemplate those of their desires that are still unfulfilled... The world to come is closed to them and the happiness possible in this world is truly lost to them as well" (Chapters of the Fathers, Commentary by R' Samson Rafael Hirsch, Feldheim, p.92-93).

We - Am Yisrael - are the children of Avraham Avinu. To be, not only the children of Avraham, but of the students of Avraham, is to learn from his

ways, go in his path, and emulate his actions. To be a Jew is to embody the middos of a generous and kind eye towards others, to be able to 'fagin', and rejoice with them, in their success. To be a Jew is to be modest and and think about the well-being of others in life; not only what are my needs, but what are the needs of another Jew? And to be a Jew is to have a undemanding spirit, and be content with what Hashem sends our way in life. "W ho is a wealthy person? One who is satisfied and happy with his portion" (Avos 4:1).

Those with a negative, evil and stingy eye, a haughty spirit, and a broad soul, are of the students of Bilaam.

We live in a world that abounds with the students of Bilaam. An even cursory glance at world events, at societies, and at the enemies that arise to destroy us, may their names be blotted out, reminds us that we are living in a world of the Bilaam's of the modern age. The evil eye of destruction abounds, may G-d save us: the haughty spirit of each man wanting what is best for himself, even at the expense of his fellow man is ravaging our world; and the broad and greedy soul of governments and many world leaders, and their followers, brings destruction upon many innocents.

Every Jew is a child of Avraham. Every day we must - each of us - make a personal choice anew to be of the students of Avraham - to learn from his ways and to walk in his path. We must see each other - every other Jew who is part of Am Yisrael - with a kind and loving ayin tova (good eye); we must strive to work for the benefit and welfare of our families, communities, nation and Land; and we must be content with what G-d sends our way, and appreciate all the bounty in our personal - and national - lives.

Perhaps then, the curses of our enemies today - the Bilaam's of the modern time - will be turned into blessings, as happened with the Bilaam of old.

And then we will truly merit to see the fruition of the blessing of "mah tova o'halecha Yaakov, mish'ke'nosecha Yisrael" (Bamidbar 24:5) - the beauty and goodness in the Jewish home, in our batei kenesisyot and batei midrashos, and in our every dwelling place where the Shechina longs to reside.

May I Divine?

By Rabbi Yirmiyohu Kaganoff

Question #1: Skipping the Thirteenth Floor "May a frum builder skip the number 13 when naming the floors of a building?"

Question #2: Snakes and Ladders "Is there a halachic source that one should change his plans if he sees a snake when he leaves on a trip?"

Question #3: Monkey Business As I was preparing this article, Reuvein asked me the following question: "I am in the middle of negotiating the acquisition of a business. On the way to the meeting, a quirk accident happened. Should I interpret this as a reason to avoid the deal?" Introduction: Several mitzvos of the Torah prohibit different practices used to predict the future. Many of these are mentioned in parshas Kedoshim, including the prohibitions against ov and yide'oni, both ancient methods of necromancy (Vayikra 20:27), and the commandments: Lo senachashu velo se'oneinu (Vayikra 19:26), which I will translate as Do not make use of omens and do not divine times. These four prohibitions are repeated together with three similar ones in parshas Shoftim (Devorim 18:10-11): Lo yimatza'ei becha... koseim kesamim, me'onein, umenacheish umechasheif... vesho'eil ov veyide'oni vedoreish el hameisim, "There shall not be found among you... a soothsayer, a diviner of times, an interpreter of omens or a sorcerer... or one who asks of ov or of yide'oni or one who consults the dead." Subsequently, in parshas Shoftim, the Torah commands Tamim tih'yeh im Hashem Elokecha, "You shall be whole-hearted with Hashem, your G-d" (Devorim 18:13). This means that we should not allow our relationship with Hashem to become diffused by placing confidence or decision-making in the hands of superstitions or worse.

Practicing omens -- in Hebrew, nichush or nachash -- includes taking action or avoiding taking action because of superstitious reasons. Divination, me'onein, can be defined as "attempting to foretell future events by use of supernatural powers," although, as we will soon see, the Torah's prohibition is more inclusive. According to the Rambam (Moreh Nevuchim 3:37), all of these practices are forbidden because they are similar to idol worship.

The basics of the prohibition of nichush are that one should not use methods that are outside of Torah to try to determine whether one should pursue a particular course of action. What exactly is included within these prohibitions? As we will see shortly, the rules here are not at all obvious and, indeed, are often disputed by the rishonim.

First source A beraisa, quoted by the Gemara (Sanhedrin 65b-66a), presents the following list of situations that are prohibited because of nichush. In each of these, someone was planning a course of action, perhaps leaving on a business trip or similar mission, and then, because something occurred, he changed his plans. The situations listed are:

- His bread fell out of his mouth. - He dropped his walking stick. - His son called him from behind (presumably as he was leaving the house). - He heard the call of a raven. - A deer crossed his path. - He saw a snake on his right side or a fox on his left. Apparently, during the time of the Gemara, there were superstitious beliefs that any of these events bode poorly for the results of the trip. One can compare this to contemporary superstitions about black cats or the number thirteen. This Gemara teaches that one may not base a decision on an omen or other factor that bears no rational influence on the planned course of action. In all of the above cases, someone who changes his plans because he feels that he has just seen a bad omen violates a Torah law. Snakes and ladders At this point, we can answer one of our opening questions: "Is there a halachic source that one should change his plans if he sees a snake when he leaves on a trip?"

Quite the contrary, there is a halachic source prohibiting changing one's plans under these circumstances.

Should I pay my taxes? The above-quoted passage of Gemara continues with several other applications of this prohibition:

Someone requests from the tax collector, "Don't begin your collecting with me," because he feels that this is a bad omen. Similarly, someone who postpones paying a debt at the beginning of the week or the month, because of a belief that this will portend a bad week or month, also violates the prohibition of nichush.

The Gemara (Sanhedrin 66a) concludes its discussion there by quoting a different beraisa: The Rabbis taught, "Do not use omens or lucky times – such as those who use omens of weasels (in Hebrew, chuldos), birds or stars." (Although our text of the Gemara says fish, the Rambam, Commentary to Mishnah, Avodah Zarah 4:7, and other rishonim cite stars as the correct version.) Similarly, a person who changed his plans because a black cat crossed his path has violated a prohibition of the Torah. Someone who knowledgeably does this would be invalid as a witness for a wedding, because he has violated a lo saaseh of the Torah.

No causal connection The Ran (Sanhedrin ad loc.) explains that nichush is prohibited when there is no logical causal connection between the event that transpired and the plans that one is changing. The only reason one is changing his plans is because of a belief that the events (the bread falling, the deer crossing the path, etc.) are meant to foretell something.

On the other hand, it is permitted to change your plans because of a logical reason. For example, someone planning a trip who sees thunderclouds on the horizon may change his travel plans for the day because it appears that it will rain, making travel unpleasant or even potentially dangerous. Since this is a logical reason to postpone his trip, it has nothing to do with the prohibition against nichush (Ran). Similarly, it is permitted to follow a procedure that can be shown to have medical benefit, as we will now explain (Moreh Nevuchim; Meiri, Shabbos 67a).

Locust eggs and fox teeth The Mishnah (Shabbos 60a) rules that an ill person may wear a ke'meia, an amulet, whose efficacy is established, into or through a reshut harabim, a public area on Shabbos. For someone ill, this is considered the halachic equivalent to wearing an ornament or a garment (Rashi ad loc.). A later Mishnah (Shabbos 67a) cites a dispute whether one is permitted to walk through a public area on Shabbos while wearing the egg of a grasshopper, the tooth of a fox or the nail used to hang someone from a gallows. The tanna who permits this considers these items halachically the same as an amulet whose efficacy is established. The tanna who forbids wearing these items prohibits doing so even on a weekday, because he

considers this to be a form of nichush (see Rashi). The Gemara concludes that, since the medical value of this treatment is demonstrable, wearing it does not violate the laws prohibiting nichush. We rule according to this tanna.

Dispute among rishonim At this point, we need to introduce a dispute concerning the extent of what the Torah prohibited. The precise question is whether the Torah prohibits being influenced only by prevalent superstitious practices, or whether any method of foretelling the future not firmly grounded in Torah is forbidden. In other words, we know that the Torah provided methods to foretell the future by consulting the urim vetumim worn by the kohen gadol or via information gained from a prophet. These are certainly permitted. There is, however, a dispute regarding whether one may create one's own method as a basis to decide whether to proceed with a specific course of action. In the Rambam's opinion, anything that one would rely upon to base one's decision or plan of action is prohibited (Hilchos Avodas Kochavim 11:5). However, according to the Radak (Shemuel I 14:9), only practices that are based on superstition, sorcery, idol worship or similar nefarious bases are prohibited. It is permitted to do something as a sign or symbol, because this strengthens one's resolve. (See also Ra'avad, Hilchos Avodas Kochavim 11:4, 5, who also follows this approach.) Shortly, I will show a few examples of this dispute.

Dependent on this dispute will be two very different ways of understanding the following passage of Gemara (Chullin 95b), quoting the great amora, Rav: "Any nachash that is unlike what was performed by Eliezer, the slave of Avraham, and unlike that performed by Yonasan, the son of Shaul, is not a nachash." Prior to presenting the two approaches to understanding this Gemara, let us examine the two events quoted.

The story of Eliezer When Eliezer was on his mission to find a wife for Yitzchak, the Torah describes that upon his arrival in the city of Nachor, he asked Hashem for a specific sign to identify the woman he was seeking. Eliezer prayed for G-d to send him the chosen woman on the following basis: Should he ask her to provide him with a bit of water, and she would respond, "I will also provide water for your camels," this girl is to be Yitzchak's bride, without any other questions or research (Bereishis 24:14). According to some rishonim, what Eliezer did qualifies as an act of nichush, since he made his action totally dependent on an outside factor.

The story of Yonasan The other example mentioned by the Gemara is that of Yonasan, the crown prince son of King Shaul. At a time when the Jews had almost no weapons and were the underdog in an incredibly lopsided war against the Pelishtim, Yonasan, accompanied only by his armor-bearer, advanced towards a garrison of Pelishtim soldiers. Yonasan told his armor-bearer, "If they say to us, 'wait until we reach you,' we should remain in our place and not advance towards them. However, if they say, 'come forward to us,' then we should attack, because this is our sign that Hashem has given them over to our hands (Shemuel I 14:8-10)." This, notwithstanding that Yonasan and his armor-bearer were only two attacking an entire garrison! Why did the Gemara refer to what Yonasan did as an act of nachash, divining?

We find a major dispute among the rishonim how to interpret the words of the Gemara, "Any nachash that is unlike what was performed by Eliezer, the slave of Avraham, and unlike that performed by Yonasan, the son of Shaul, is not a nachash." Most early rishonim (Rashi, Rambam, Tosafos) understand the Gemara to mean that anyone who follows an approach similar to what Eliezer or Yonasan did has violated the prohibition of nichush. These rishonim contend that other than prophecy or the use of the urim vetumim, using events over which I have no control to determine my course of action is included under the prohibition of nichush.

Of course, the obvious problem with this approach is that if these actions indeed violate the prohibition of nichush, why were Eliezer and Yonasan permitted to perform them? Here are some of the answers provided for this question:

Eliezer's heter The prohibition against nichush applies only to Jews and not to benei Noach, and Eliezer had the status of a ben Noach (Tosafos, Chullin

95b s.v. Ke'eliezer). According to this approach, the story of Yonasan is difficult to explain, since he certainly did not qualify as a ben noach. Another problem with this answer is that the Gemara (Sanhedrin 56b) records a dispute whether the prohibition against nichush applies to gentiles. Should one hold that the prohibition against nichush does apply to gentiles, one would answer that Eliezer did not rely on Rivkah's offering the water to propose the marriage to her, but waited until he had verified that she was indeed from Avraham's family (Tosafos, Chullin 95b s.v. Ke'eliezer). Yonasan's heter Tosafos and the Ran (ad loc.) explain that Yonasan was planning to attack and was not using the nichush to make a decision. He used the nichush only so that his armor-bearer would be more confident that their attack would be successful. Since Yonasan was planning to proceed regardless of the outcome of his test, it was permitted to make the sign. The Radak's approach On the other hand, other rishonim dispute the understanding of the mitzvah of nichush and, furthermore, understand the passage of Gemara in a very different way. In their opinion, the prohibition of nichush applies only to things that are commonly perceived to have predictive value, either because of superstition, sorcery, idolatry or a similar reason. However, to base a decision on a sign that has no superstitious or clairvoyant basis is permitted. Therefore, neither Eliezer nor Yonasan was in violation of any halachic issue by using their signs to divine. The Gemara's purpose, when referring to Eliezer and Yonasan as examples of nichush, has nothing to do with the prohibition of the Torah banning nichush, but is teaching us that the simanim used by Eliezer and by Yonasan were both effective (Ra'avad, Hilchos Avodah Zarah, 11:4). This opinion holds that proper use of simanim is halachically permitted, but, as a matter of advice, should not be used, unless one can be reasonably certain that the siman is effective.

The entire passage Having explained the dispute defining what is included within the prohibition of nichush, I'll now present the entire passage of Gemara in which we find this quote.

Rav was traveling to the house of his daughter and son-in-law, Rav Chanan. The trip required crossing a river, which usually meant getting to the riverbank and waiting until appropriate transport showed up. As Rav approached the river, he saw that a ferry was approaching; this would shorten the time for him considerably. Rav then said: "The ferry came in my direction; we will have a celebration as a result!"

When Rav arrived at his daughter's house, they were in the process of butchering an animal. With the meat of that animal, Rav's family made a lavish meal in his honor, yet Rav did not partake in any of the meat. The Gemara suggests that Rav did not eat any of the meat because, since Rav had declared that the ferry's proximity had indicated a good omen which would be a reason for celebration, this would violate the Torah's law against nichush. The Gemara retorts that Rav himself had defined nichush as something similar to what was done by Eliezer, Avraham's slave, or by Yonasan the son of Shaul; any other practice does not constitute nichush. The Gemara's conclusion is that Rav did not eat meat for a completely unrelated reason — because he never participated in a festive meal unless it was a seudas mitzvah (Chullin 95b).

According to the Radak, Rav's original statement would never be a prohibited nichush practice, since the proximity of the ferry was not commonly used as a superstitious omen. Therefore, one may use such a sign as a means of deciding on a future course of action.

How do we rule? The Rema (Yoreh Deah 179:4) cites both opinions without reaching a clear conclusion, and then closes by saying that one who lives his life sincerely and is confident in Hashem's ways will be surrounded by kindness, thus implying that it is better not to follow such signs.

The pesukim of children The Gemara (Chullin 95b) shares with us that Shmuel "checked with seforim" and Rabbi Yochanan "checked with children." What does this mean? According to most authorities, this means that when planning what to do, Shmuel used some method of having the words of seforim assist him in his decision what to do. This is probably similar to, or identical with, the famous goral haGra, literally, the Gra's lottery, which involves turning pages a certain way for divine direction as to

what to do in difficult circumstances. Rabbi Yochanan relied on a different approach, in which he would ask children what verses of the Torah they had just learned and would rely on their answer for direction. Some early authorities explain that relying on a pasuk of a child is like relying on the answer of a prophet, which is permitted (Semag; Ran; Shach, Yoreh Deah 179:5). Notwithstanding this approach, the Rambam still feels that one should not use either holy books or children's verses to choose what to do, and Shmuel and Rabbi Yochanan also did not do so. They would simply note, after the fact, that what resulted could have been foretold on the basis of these methods, but they would not use these methods to plan in advance what to do.

Conclusion As Rav Hirsch explains, serving Hashem is something that we must do in a whole-hearted way, and includes understanding that all that Hashem does is for the good. Hashem alone decides our future, directs and guides our actions. The sole criterion to decide whether we should or should not do something is Hashem's Will. The goal of the truly sincere person is to perform what Hashem wants from him at the moment, and he will thus be impervious to worry (Commentary, Devorim 18:13).

Parshas Balak: Heroes and Villains

by Rabbi Yitz Etshalom

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

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

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

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

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

II. WHO IS BIL'AM?

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Mishnah in Avot teaches:

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

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

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

IV. MIDRASHIC METHODOLOGY

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

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

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

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

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

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

V. BIL'AM AND AVRAHAM

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

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

introduced to this association at the onset of the Parashah:

Compare Balak's message to Bil'am:

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

with God's charge to Avraham:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

VII. BACK TO THE QUESTIONS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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PARASHAT BALAK

By Rabbi Eitan Mayer

QUESTIONS:

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

QUESTIONS WE WILL NOT ADDRESS:

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

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

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

PARASHAT BALAK:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

BIL'AM THE SORCERER:

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

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

BIL'AM DOESN'T TAKE THE HINT:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And then another question:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

WHO IS BIL'AM?

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

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

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

SORCERER AND PROPHET:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

THE DONKEY:

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

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

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

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

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

NOW REPEAT AFTER ME:

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

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

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

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

BIL'AM'S EYES ARE OPENED:

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

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

Bil'am for the first time prefaces his blessing with a self-description -- here and in the fourth vision, because he is now highly self-aware. He realizes that his eyes have been opened, and he is now the man who is "geluy eynayim," "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

Parshat Balak: Bilam: The Prophet and the Consultant

by Rabbi Menachem Leibtag

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

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

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

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

We begin by showing how these two Parshiot are connected.

Bilam and the War with Midyan

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

was the instigator.]

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

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

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

Bilam's Home Town

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Return of Bilam

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

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

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

Bilam the Rasha

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

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

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

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

Between Avraham and Bilam

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

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

Avraham

Good Eye
Humble Spirit
Meek Soul

Bilam

Evil Eye
Arrogant Spirit
Greedy Soul

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

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

A) Bracha and Klalah

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

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

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

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

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

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

Professional Bias

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

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

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

Shabbat Shalom,
Menachem
Virtual Classroom enhancements by Reuven Weiser.

For Further Iyun

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

1. Does this support the basic points made in the shiur?
 2. What parallels exist between Bilam and Lavan?
 3. Did Lavan ever receive "n'vu'ah"? Did Hashem ever speak to him? If so, what was the content? Is it parallel to Bilam?
 4. Could the struggle between Lavan and Yaakov also be considered of a spiritual nature?
- B. Bilam was almost successful. Bnei Yisrael's sin with "Bnot Moav and Midyan" led to some 24 thousand casualties. The plague was stopped due to the zealous act of Pinchas (25:6-9). His act returned Bnei Yisrael to their covenantal partner. In reward, Pinchas receives the covenant of the 'kehuna' (25:10-13).
1. In what way does his reward reflect his deed?
 2. What are the responsibilities of the 'kohanim' in addition to working in the Mikdash?
 - 3/ How does this relate to the ultimate fulfillment of our national destiny?
- C. An additional textual parallel exists between Avraham and Bilam - travelling in the morning with two servants:

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

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

D. Who wrote "Sefer Bilam"?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

F. "Mah Tovv Ohalecha Yaakov"

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

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

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

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