

INTERNET PARSHA SHEET
ON PARSHAS BALAK - 5757

B'S'D'

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Parshas Balak Ohr Somayach

LETTING IT ALL HANG OUT "...the people began to commit harlotry with the daughters of Moav." (25:1) It is axiomatic in our times that nothing is worse than having æhang-ups.Æ Our role model is unrestrained freedom: Freedom from complexes. Freedom from guilt. The pundits of the media invite us constantly to ælet it all hang out.Æ There is almost nothing of which we should be ashamed. Homosexuality is no more than a matter of personal choice. Casual physical relationships are the norm. Nakedness, we are told, is absolutely no cause for embarrassment. The body is natural and therefore its processes should give us no cause for shame whatsoever. Interestingly enough, a vestige of modesty still creeps in here and there: We have not reached the stage where all bodily functions are performed openly in public. But really, according to current morality, there seems to be little reason why this should be so. We might think that æletting it all hang outÆ is a modern phenomenon. However, there is a striking similarity between our own times and events that happened over three thousand years ago. After the Jewish People left Egypt, Balak, who was King of Moav at that time, sent word to Bilaam, the prophet of the nations, to curse the Jewish People. Bilaam was unsuccessful in his direct attacks on Israel. However, he was able to make the Jewish People stumble by other means: His advice was that the Moabite women should lure the Jewish men into immorality. The mission of the Jewish People is to be a holy nation, and thus Bilaam knew that licentiousness would provoke Divine wrath. The Moabite women, however, exacted a price for their services. They refused to have anything to do with the Jewish men until they had worshipped their idol, baal peor. How was baal peor worshipped? A devotee of baal peor would eat lentils and beer, and then perform his bodily functions in front of the idol. In fact, the more that one abused the idol, the more devout was oneÆs worship considered. How was it possible for the Jews to be drawn after such a disgusting cult? What was its allure? The essence of the cult of baal peor was ælet it all hang out.Æ The underlying intention was to shatter all barriers. Once there are no barriers, anything is permissible. If no physical process causes shame then all morality speedily goes out the door.

ASININE TALK "And Hashem opened the mouth of the donkey..." (22:28) What does it mean when a donkey starts to speak? The essential difference between Man and the animals is the power of speech. Man is called "The Speaker." This is the quality that epitomizes his elevation above the animals. The power of speech is given to Man to elevate the physical world, to inject spirituality into the physical. Describing the creation of Man, the Torah says that Hashem "blew into his nose a spirit of life." The Targum Onkelos translates this phrase as "He blew into his nose a speaking spirit." In the Hebrew language, the word for "thing" ù "davar" ù is connected to the same root as "dibur" ù "word." Speech is the interface between the world of things ù the physical world ù and the spiritual world. When Man uses his power of speech to add spirituality to the world, he fulfills his true purpose, he epitomizes the æspeaking spirit.Æ He elevates both himself and the world with him. But when he degrades the power of speech by using it to curse and to denigrate, then Man becomes no more than a talking donkey.

SWEETER THAN HONEY? "Do not go with them; do not curse this people, for they are blessed." (22:12) "Hashem said to Bilaam æYou shall not curse the people.Æ Bilaam said to Hashem æIf so, I will bless them.Æ Hashem said æThey do not need your blessing, for they are blessed.Æ As the proverb says: "We tell the bee æNeither your honey, nor your sting.Æ" (Rashi) Which non-kosher animal produces kosher food? The Bee. Although

the bee is a non-kosher animal, honey is itself Kosher. The reason that honey is Kosher is because honey doesnÆt actually come from the beeÆs body. Rather, bees manufacture honey from the pollen that they gather. However, the beeÆs poisonous sting does come from the beeÆs body itself. (Yoreh Deah 81) Bilaam was like the bee. All of his "honey" ù his sweet blessings and prophecies about the Jewish People ù did not come from him. In no way were they part of his nature. Rather, they were gathered from an outside source. BilaamÆs venomous curses and foul plots, however, emanated from his true poisonous essence.

TUMOR AND TUMAH "Amalek is the first of nations." (24:20) One of the most critical factors in operating on a patient with a pathological disease is the necessity to remove all of the tumor. If any of the diseased tissue is allowed to remain it will grow back and attack the patient with renewed vigor. The physical world mirrors the spiritual. Israel and Amalek stand at opposite ends of the spectrum. IsraelÆs role is to be a holy nation, to live a life of kedusha. Everything that Amalek does is aimed at destroying that life. The Torah refers to both Israel and its arch-enemy Amalek as æfirst.Æ That which is first contains everything that needs to be: A seed is a perfect microcosm of the oak that it will be one day. A microscopic cell has the entire genetic code to build a human life. In fact, any part of the human anatomy has the genetic code to build the entire structure. Israel is called æfirst.Æ "Holy to Hashem is Yisrael, the first of His produce." To fulfill the Torah obligation of tithing to the Levites, all it takes is one grain (Chullin 137). Amalek is also called æfirst.Æ "Amalek is the first of nations." Similarly, all it takes is one grain of tumah (spiritual corruption) to spread throughout the entire body and infect everything. Thus, the Torah commands us in the strongest terms to eradicate every last vestige of the spiritual pathogen whose name is Amalek. For if even the slightest trace remains, it will grow back with an awesome virulence. Sources: Letting It All Hang Out - Rabbi Chaim Shmulevitz Asinine Talk - Rabbi Nota Schiller Sweeter than Honey? - SheÆeris Menachem Tumor and Tumah - Rabbi Mordechai Y. L. Zakash

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PARSHA Q&A Ohr Somayach Parshas Balak

Parsha Questions 1. Why did the Moabites consult the Midianites regarding the best strategy to use against the Jewish people? 2. What was Balak's position before he became king of Moav? 3. Bilaam was an evil person. Why, then, did Hashem grant him prophecy? 4. On what basis did Balak think that Bilaam's curse would be effective? 5. Why didn't the elders of Midian remain overnight with Bilaam? 6. When did Bilaam receive his prophecies? 7. Hashem opened his conversation with Bilaam by asking, "Who are these men with you?" What did Bilaam deduce from this question? 8. How do we know that Bilaam hated the Jewish People more than Balak? 9. What is evidence of Bilaam's greed? 10. In his conversation with his donkey, how did Bilaam shame himself in front of the princes? 11. Why was Bilaam's donkey slain by the malach? 12. Bilaam compared his encounter with an angel to someone else's encounter with an angel. Who was the other person and what was the comparison? 13. What does the word `shefi' mean? 14. Why did Bilaam tell Balak to build seven altars? 15. What tragedy befell the Jewish People at Rosh Hapigah? 16. Why are the Jewish People compared to lions? 17. On Bilaam's third attempt to curse the Jewish People he changed his strategy. What did he do differently? 18. What were Bilaam's three primary characteristics? 19. What did Bilaam see that made him decide not to curse the Jewish People? 20. In verse 24:19, Bilaam stated that a king, "shall rule and destroy the remnant of the city." Who is the king and which city?

Bonus QUESTION: And Hashem put speech into the mouth of Bilaam.(23:4) Why didn't Hashem allow Bilaam to curse the Jewish People? Hashem could simply ignore Bilaam's curse, so what bad affect would the curse have had?

I Did Not Know That! ".May my soul die the death of the righteous, and my end be like theirs." (23:10) The word "righteous" -- "yesharim" -- has the same numerical value as "Avos Haolam" -- "the universal Patriarchs." Add the last letters of the names of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov and you get 142, the same numerical value as the name "Bilaam." This is what Bilaam referred to when he said "May my end be like theirs"! (i.e., the end of their names) Ba'al Haturim

Recommended Reading List Ramban 22:5 Balak's Rise to Power 22:20 Bilaam's Mission 22:23 The Donkey 23:16 Bilaam's Prophecy 24:20 Amalek Sforno 22:2 What Balak Saw 22:6 Bilaam's Power 23:22 Jewish Conquest

Answers to this Week's Questions All references are to the verses and Rashi's commentary, unless otherwise stated 1. 22:4 - Since Moshe, the leader of the Jewish people, grew up in Midian, the Moabites thought the Midianites might know wherein lay Moshe's power. 2. 22:4 - He was a prince of Midian. 3. 22:5 - So that the Gentile world could not say "If we also had prophets, we would also return to be good." 4. 22:6 - He knew that Bilaam had helped Sichon to defeat Moav. 5. 22:7 - They set for themselves a sign that if Bilaam didn't come right away, he would not be of help to them. 6. 22:8 - Only at night. 7. 22:9 - That Hashem isn't omniscient. 8. 22:11 - Balak wanted to drive the Jewish People from the land. Bilaam sought to exterminate them. 9. 22:18 - He told the princes that Balak should give him all of his gold, since otherwise Balak would need to hire many armies. 10. 22:29 - He told his donkey, "Were there a sword in my hand, I would slay you." He was hired to destroy an entire nation through his power of speech, yet for a donkey he needed a sword! 11. 22:33 - So that people should not point to it and say, "This is the donkey that silenced Bilaam." Hashem is concerned with human dignity. 12. 22:34 - Avraham. Bilaam said, "Hashem told me to go, but later sent an angel to stop me. The same thing that happened to Avraham: Hashem commanded Avraham to sacrifice his son Yitzchak, and later He rescinded the command through an angel." 13. 23:3 - Alone, silent. 14. 23:4 - Corresponding to the seven altars built by the Avos. Bilaam said to Hashem, "The ancestors of the Jewish People built seven altars, but I alone have built a number equal to all of them." 15. 23:14 - Moshe died there. 16. 23:24 - They arise in the morning, and 'strengthen' themselves to perform mitzvos. 17. 24:1 - He realized that enchantments wouldn't convince Hashem to allow him to curse the Jewish People. He hoped that by calling attention to their sins, he would be permitted to curse them. 18. 24:2 - An evil eye, pride, and greed. 19. 24:2 - He saw each Tribe dwelling without intermingling. He saw the tents arranged so that no 20. one could see into his neighbor's tent. 21. 24:19 - The king is the Mashiach and the city is Rome.

Bonus ANSWER: The surrounding nations had faith in Bilaam's power of speech -- as Balak said "I know that whoever you bless is blessed, and whoever you curse is cursed." Therefore, Bilaam's curse would have nullified their fear of the Jewish people, and given them courage to wage war against them. (Abarbanel)

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Peninim on the Torah by Rabbi A. Leib Scheinbaum Hebrew Academy of Cleveland Parshas Balak

And Balak ben Tzipor saw. (22:2) Horav Ze'ev Weinberger, Shlita, writes that he once heard stated in the name of Horav Moshe M'Rozvandov, zl, an ambiguous statement regarding the relationship among Parshios Korach, Chukas, and Balak. He said that the letter "Kuf," "e" is found in all three parshios. Kuf begins one, is in the middle of the next, and ends the third parsha. Korach, begins with a kuf; Chukas has the letter kuf in the middle, and Balak has it at the end. Needless to say, this statement is enigmatic. What lesson is to be derived from the position of the kuf in the names of the three parshios? This question was presented to Horav Gedalyah

Shorr, zl. After thinking for a few moments, he said, "The letter kuf alludes to kedushah, holiness, which begins with the letter kuf. Korach had kedushah in the beginning. His ancestors were great people. He descended from Shevet Levi. Parshas Chukas, which discusses the laws concerning the Parah Adumah, has a kuf in the middle, since the red cow is burned in the present. The kedushah is here and now. Balak has the kedushah in the end, in the future. Rus, a future Moavite descendant, after converting became the mother of royalty, the House of David Ha'Melech. We infer from this idea a valuable lesson. Kedushah is present at some point, either in the beginning, the middle, or the end. Holiness must be present in order to sustain the inherent value of a situation. This kedushah will not, however, protect the individuals involved. We see that Korach met a tragic end, despite his noble pedigree. Balak was a rasha until his demise, despite his virtuous descendants. What do we learn from here? We see that kedushah must be consistent; in the beginning, the middle, and the end. One cannot be inclined to holiness at his convenience. Selective virtue has no place in living a Jewish life. "And Balak the son of Tzipor saw all that Yisrael had done to the Emorites...Behold a people has come out of Egypt, see, they cover the face of the earth." (22:2, 5) This is a paradigm of the sad tale of history, notes Horav Moshe Swiftz, zl. The gentiles acknowledge only that which the Jews have done to the Emorites. Did Balak also notice the violence which the Emorites perpetrated upon us? The gentiles see the Jew through their unique spectacles. They stand ready to condemn any Jewish action committed rightly or wrongly, without consideration and without empathy. Their eyes are closed; their senses are numbed with indifference to the plight of the Jew. Balak said, "Behold, a people has come out of Egypt. See, they cover the face of the earth." The gentile vision was distorted. The face that they saw, this handful of broken desert-worn ex-slaves as rulers who dominated the face of the earth, was reflective of selfish aims! The vast world provides space for everyone, but the Jew covers the earth. There is no room to move, no place to live, because the world is inundated with Jews! This is gentile hypocrisy, an anti-Semitic view of reality. We have lived with this superficially innocuous -- but realistically vicious -- diatribe throughout our sojourn in exile. If we reflect upon the source of these statements, we will be able to give them their due recognition: total disregard!

"Hashem's wrath flowed because he was going. And an angel of Hashem stood on the road to impede him....The angel of Hashem stood in the path of the vineyards." (22:22,24) The Torah does not consistently use Hashem's Name. In the beginning, when it states that Hashem's wrath flared, the Torah uses the Name Elokim, which implies the attribute of din, justice. Afterwards, it says that Hashem dispatched an angel to save Bilaam from sin. The Torah now employs the Name Hashem which implies the attribute of rachamim, compassion. Why is there a change in Hashem's relationship to the situation? The Chofetz Chaim, zl, explains that Bilaam was ostensibly endowed with a special neshama, soul. He had the ability to attain very high levels of spiritual achievement. Alas, he used his G-d-given gift for the wrong purpose. Yet, Hashem attempted to reach him, to avail him of the opportunity to be saved from sin. Bilaam either did not see -- or did not care. At first Hashem was angry. This explains the use of the Name Elokim, referring to the attribute of justice. Due to His awareness of Bilaam's lofty spiritual potential, Hashem compassionately sent an angel to dissuade him from sin. Hashem even altered the course of nature in order to prevent Bilaam from sinning. Bilaam regrettably saw what he wanted to see, and he heard only what he chose to hear. Hashem sends us "little" messages. If we are cognizant, if we open our eyes, we will take note and realize the purpose of these communiqués. The Chofetz Chaim claims that it was such a subtle message that motivated Rav Chaim Volozhiner, zl, to make his famous "yeshivah". The story goes that Rav Chaim, who was a businessman at the time, came to the city on the major market day to conduct business. Another merchant recognized Rav Chaim and came over to ask him, "Why are you here today, Reb Chaim? What business are you involved in here?" At the time, Rav Chaim responded that he was present as a money-changer. Later on, however, it dawned on him that perhaps there was a deeper meaning to the questions. The question's focus placed upon "you" -- "Why are you here

today? What business are you involved in today?" --glared down at him. Really, what was he doing there? Sure, he was "exchanging." Was it only money or Olam Habbah -- the eternal world -- for Olam Ha'zeh, this temporary world? Was he right in devoting his life to business when he could be devoting himself to Torah? Rav Chaim heard; he took note--and he founded what became the great Volozhiner Yeshivah. How did it all begin? It started with a simple question--but it was one directed to a person who did not take anything for granted. He felt that this question carried with it a message that was directed to him. He took immediate action. The results of that action are with us until this very day. We must realize that Hashem is always sending us little messages, encouraging us to live our lives in a more meaningful manner, intimating to us that we should be doing things differently on changing our focus in life. We just have to begin listening. <http://www.shemayisrael.co.il>

Outlooks & Insights by HaRav Zev Leff Parshas Balak

The Bad Eye For I know what whom you bless will be blessed, and whom you curse will be cursed (Bamidbar 22:6). Sforno comments that Balak knew very well that Balaam had no ability to bless but only to curse. Had Balaam had such a power, Balak would have requested that he bless him in addition to cursing Bnei Yisrael. But Balak felt that even for a rasha like Balaam it would be insulting to describe him as having only the power to curse. So he falsely attributed to him the power to bless as well.

The Gemara relates that when RAE Shimon Bar Yochai and his son RAE Elazar left the cave in which they had hidden from the Romans for twelve years -- totally immersed in Torah study the whole time -- every place they cast their eyes was set aflame. The sight of people engaged in mundane, everyday pursuits, with apparently not a thought of those matters on which they had dwelled day and night was more than they could bear. Finally a Heavenly voice resounded, "I did not release you from the cave to destroy My world. Return to the cave." A year later, they once again left the cave. This time wherever RAE Elazar set his gaze was still set afire, but RAE Shimon Bar Yochai was able to rectify the damage with his gaze. Two questions can be asked, First, it would seem that their twelve years of isolation and intense involvement in learning caused them to be too critical of those not on their level. If so, what was to be gained by sending them back to the cave? Secondly, why wasn't RAE Elazar sent back again, inasmuch as his gaze still destroyed whatever he looked upon. The answer is that being overly critical, rather than being a sign of having learned too much, is a sign of not having learned enough. Extreme and constant negativism is the product of not being able to evaluate a situation in its totality. To properly function in this world one needs to eyes: one to see what needs correction in any given situation and the other to appreciate the positive aspects of the situation. When RAE Shimon Bar Yochai and RAE Elazar functioned together as a team, one using his critical eyes to uncover the negatives and the other applying a positive healing eye, then all was fine. Only when the critical or the positive healing eye functions alone, are the results distorted. One needs to be fully learned and fully pure in order to be able to see things in their proper perspective.

Balaam is described as having but one eye. Using one eye alone robs a person of the perspective necessary to assess a situation properly and to see both the positive and negative sides. That is why excessive negativity is referred to as the evil eye, not the evil eyes. The overly critical eye focuses on a small part of the picture or one portion of a historical tableau. Thus Balak showed Balaam only a small portion of the Jewish people prior to Balaam's attempt to curse them. When Balaam's donkey challenged him for beating her by citing her long years of faithful service, Balaam replied that the donkey deserved to be killed for what she had just done. The past was irrelevant in his eyes. But the Torah teaches us a diametrically opposed lesson in how we should relate to actions of others which may displease us. We are commanded to throw an animal that has been rendered unfit for consumption to the dogs. The BaEalei Tosfos explain that even though the dog guarded the flocks and failed to prevent an attack, one should

nevertheless give the dog the flesh of the slain animal in recognition of its past service. If this is how we are to treat dogs, how much more so a fellow Jew. Rather than breaking off friendships of years over one incident, for instance, shouldn't we balance one negative act against a history of acts of friendship? The Mishnah exhorts us, "Judge the entire person favorably." If one does not consider the entire person in his totality, he most certainly will judge him critically on the basis of one or two negative traits. But when the entire individual is considered, a clearer picture will emerge that enables one to make a more favorable judgment. The followers of Balaam inherit Gehinnom (Pirkei Avos 5:22). Some explain that their way of life makes this world a Gehinnom. People who know only how to criticize and find faulty create Gehinnom for everyone -- themselves as well as others. Conversely, one who has a good eye to counterbalance the evil eye, creates a Gan Eden for others and for himself.

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Parshas Balak Partial View

by Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

You have to approach something from the right view. At least that's what Balak, the king of Moab, tried to convince his prime sorcerer who futilely tried to curse the Jewish nation. Though Bilaam had a notorious reputation, with for curses that never failed and the ability to cast spells upon whomever he desired, this time it didn't work. He tried, for a large fee, to curse the Jewish nation, who were camped opposite of Moab; but each time he opened his mouth blessings and not curses were emitted. "How can I curse when G-d is not angry," he exclaimed (Numbers 23:8). Each time the mission failed, Balak flew into a rage. Bilaam attempted to subvert G-d's intentions and appease Him with sacrifices -- all to no avail. Balak tried another strategy. "Come with me to a different place from there you will see them; however, you will see its edge and not all of it -- and you will curse it for me from there" (Numbers 23:13). It didn't work either. I had a difficult time understanding the new strategy. What's the difference if Bilaam were to see all of Israel or he would stand in a place that only offers a partial view? Is the G-d of Israel not ever-present, protecting them in part as well as in whole? Why would a curse work when Bilaam only viewed Israel from a partial perspective?

A pious and very talented Jewish scholar was placed on trial in a small Polish town outside of Lvov. The charges, brought by a local miscreant, were based on some trumped-up complaint. The young scholar was beloved to his townfolk as he served in the capacity of the town's shochet (ritual slaughterer), chazzan (cantor), and cheder rebbe. Thus, many people in town were worried as he appeared before a notoriously anti-Semitic judge. As he presented the charges, the judge mockingly referred to him as Mr. Butcher. In fact all through the preliminary portion of the kangaroo court, the judge kept referring to the beloved teacher and cantor as a butcher, meat vendor or slaughterer. Finally, the young scholar asked permission to speak. "Your honor," he began, "before I begin my defense, I'd like to clarify one point. I serve in many capacities in this shtetl. The people at the synagogue know me as the cantor. The children at the school and all of their parents know me as the teacher. It is only the animals that know me as the butcher!"

The commentaries explain that Bilaam knew that the power of his curses would only take effect by finding a small breach in the beauty of Israel -- a breach that he could expand with the power of his evil eye. He looked at all of Israel and could not find any flaw to amplify and use as a curse. Balak advised him to use another ploy. He made a suggestion that would be followed for generations by all the detractors of Jews. "Only look at them," he said, "from a partial perspective. Go up to the edge of the mountain; you shall see their edge and not all of them -- and you will curse them for me from there" (Numbers 23:13). Balak told Bilaam to concentrate on some poor aspects of the people. It is always possible to find a few exceptions to a most ethical and moral nation. There are those who stand on the edge of the mountain and take a partial view. They talk about Jews who may be accused of crimes or improprieties. They dissect individuals and embellish what they

perceive as character flaws or personal faults. They point to those flaws as if they represent the entire person, as others point to harmful Jews as if they were the entire nation. And then they shout their curses. But Bilaam could not find the breach that he was looking for. Because Israel as a nation, as well as each individual Jew, cannot be judged by anything less than a total picture - for we are all one. Good Shabbos

Dedicated in loving memory of our grandmother, Betty Blum of blessed memory. By Mark & Jolene Bolender & their children Elchanan, Miriam, & Lana Mordechai Kamenetzky - Yeshiva of South Shore Good Shabbos Text Copyright _ 1997 by Rabbi M. Kamenetzky and Project Genesis, Inc.

weekly-halacha@torah.org Parshas Balak-17th of Tammuz
By Rabbi Doniel Neustadt A discussion of Halachic topics related to the Parsha of the week. For final rulings, consult your Rav.

One from Jacob will rule and destroy the remnant of the city (24:19) Israel will dominate Edom and destroy its most prominent city, Rome. (Rashi)

THE 17th DAY OF TAMMUZ

The three-week period known as Bein ha-Metzarim, the time of year when we mourn the destruction of the two Batei Mikdash, begins this Monday evening, the 17th of Tammuz. The Three Weeks begin with a fast day and end with a fast day, Tishah B'av. In this issue, we will review the laws of 17th Day of Tammuz(1). The fast begins 72 minutes before sunrise Tuesday morning (alos amud ha-shachar)(2) and ends 50 minutes after sunset Tuesday evening (tzeis ha-kochavim). Sunrise and sunset times are calculated by various government agencies and are readily available to the general public. Food and drink may be consumed any time Monday night - but only if one remains awake all night(3). Once a person retires for the evening - the fast begins, because people do not normally eat until breakfast the following morning which is well past alos amud ha-shachar. Retiring the evening before, therefore, is tantamount to starting the fast. Consequently: Unless one explicitly states(4) before going to sleep that he plans to wake up early to eat before the fast begins, he may not eat in the morning upon awakening, even before alos amud ha-shachar. For him, the fast has already begun(5). One who normally drinks coffee, juice, etc., in the morning upon arising, does not need to stipulate that he will drink this morning as well. One who normally does not drink anything in the morning should stipulate before retiring that he is planning to get up in the morning to drink. B'dieved, if he failed to do so, he may drink nevertheless(6). "Going to sleep" means deep sleep, whether in a bed or not. Napping or dozing does not mean that the individual has finished eating and begun the fast(7). Although, as stated, it is permitted to eat before alos amud ha-shachar [if one intended to do so the evening before the fast], one who eats then must contend with another halachic issue - the strict prohibition against eating before davening Shacharis(8). The rules are as follows: According to the Zohar(9), one who wakes up at any time during the night [after midnight] may not eat before davening - even though the time of davening is several hours off. Although there are special individuals who abide by the Zohar(10), the basic halachah is not like the Zohar and the prohibition does not begin until the earliest time for davening, which is alos amud ha-shachar(11). As stated, it is permitted to eat until alos amud ha-shachar. However, one who did not begin to eat until he was within half-an-hour of alos amud ha-shachar must do one of the following(12): Limit his food intake: Eat fruit (any amount)(13), eat any she'hakol type of food but without being koveia seudah (eating a regular scheduled meal)(14), or eat less than 2.2 fl. oz. of bread, cake, cereal, etc.(15). All drinks - except intoxicating beverages - are permitted in any amount(16). Eat any kind and any amount of food but appoint another person to remind him to recite Kerias Shema and Shemoneh Esrei(17). Once alos amud ha-shachar arrives, it is questionable if it is permitted to go back to sleep before davening. If he does go back to sleep, he should appoint another person to wake him up for davening(18). A reliable alarm clock may also be sufficient.

FAST-DAY ACTIVITIES Although it is permitted to bathe

according to the basic law, it has become customary not to take a hot shower or bath on the 17th of Tammuz(19). It is also proper to refrain from swimming(20). The poskim differ as to whether it is permitted to rinse one's mouth with water on the 17th of Tammuz(21). Some permit rinsing the front part of the mouth, taking care that no water enters the throat area(22), while other poskim allow this only when in distress (tzaar)(23). According to the second view, then, one may not schedule a fast-day visit to a dentist [which will require him to rinse his mouth] unless he is in pain(24). Medically prescribed medication may be taken on the seventeenth of Tammuz. One who has difficulty swallowing pills without water may drink the amount of water required to swallow them. There is no need to ruin the taste of the water before drinking it(25). When suffering from a severe headache, etc., aspirin or Tylenol may be taken. The poskim, however, do not permit taking those medications with water(26).

DAVENING ON A FAST-DAY: During the reading of the Torah on a fast-day, the custom is that certain verses are read aloud by the congregation. The individual who is called up for that aliyah should not read the verses aloud with the congregation. Instead, he should wait until the reader says them aloud and read along with him(27). One who mistakenly ate on a fast day must resume and complete the fast(28), and he may recite aneinu at Minchah(29). One who is not fasting altogether should not say aneinu(30). One who is davening Shemoneh Esrei together with the Sheliach Tzibur should not say aneinu as a separate blessing like the Sheliach Tzibur does; he should say it as it said in private recitation, in Shema Koleinu(31). At the Minchah service, Avinu Malkeinu is recited - even when davening without a minyan(32).

FOOTNOTES: 1 Note that different fast days have different halachos. We are discussing the 17th of Tammuz only. 2 Some Jewish calendars list alos amud ha-shachar as 50 minutes before sunrise. There is no halachic basis for this calculation. 3 Some authorities maintain that it is improper to eat more than one normally does on the night before the fast, since that defeats the purpose of fasting (Eliyahu Rabbah 563:1). This stringency is quoted by some poskim but omitted by the Mishnah Berurah and many others (see Elef ha-Magen 602:6; Kaf ha-Chayim 563:11; Igros Moshe O.C. 3:80; B'tzail ha-Chachmah 2:48). 4 It is preferred to do so verbally, but it is valid as long as one had the condition in mind. 5 O.C. 564:1. 6 Mishnah Berurah 564:6 and Aruch ha-Shulchan 564:2 based on Rama, ibid. See, however, Mateh Efrayim 206:6 who is more stringent. 7 Mishnah Berurah 564:3. 8 O.C. 89:3. According to the Minchas Chinuch (#248), this may be a Biblical prohibition. 9 Quoted by the Magen Avraham 89:14 and by all the latter poskim. 10 Aruch ha-Shulchan 89:26. 11 Consensus of all the poskim, see Mishnah Berurah 89:28; Aruch Hashulchan 89:26; Yalkut Yosef pg. 12 Women are exempt from this procedure - Harav S.Z. Auerbach (written responsum published in Lev Avraham, vol. 2, pg. 20). 13 Based on Mishnah Berurah 232:34 and 286:9. 14 Based on Mishnah Berurah 639:15. 15 Mishnah Berurah 89:27. 16 Based on Mishnah Berurah 232:35. 17 Based on Mishnah Berurah 235:18. 18 See Siddur ha-Gr"a pg. 88 quoting Harav Y.L. Diskin and Binyan Olam 1. See Siach Halachah pg. 149. 19 Sha'ar ha-Tziyon 550:8; Aruch ha-Shulchan 550:3. 20 Harav M. Feinstein (oral ruling quoted in Moadei Yeshurun, pg. 108). See also Biur Halachah 551:2. Minors, however, may swim - Nitei Gavriel, pg. 34 quoting Poppa Rav. 21 O.C. 567:3. 22 Aruch ha-Shulchan 567:3 This seems to be the view of Be'er He'itev 567:5 and Da'as Torah 567:3 as well. See also Magen Avraham who allows rinsing the mouth as long as less than 3.3 fl. oz. of water are used at a time. 23 Mishnah Berurah 567:11 following the view of the Chayei Adam. Kaf ha-Chayim 567:13-14 also rules stringently. 24 Nishmas Avraham O.C. pg. 290. 25 Harav S.Z. Auerbach (quoted in Nishmas Avraham, vol. 5, pg. 46). This is permitted on Tishah B'av as well - ibid.; Harav M. Stern (Debreciner Rav, written responsum in Nitei Gavriel, Bein ha-Metzarim, pg. 30). 26 See Nishmas Avraham O.C. pg. 282, concerning Tishah B'av. 27 Mishnah Berurah 566:3. 28 Mishnah Berurah 549:3. 29 Ibid. 568:3. 30 Biur Halachah 565:1. 31 Ibid. 565:1. 32 Sha'arei Teshuvah O.C. 584:2 quoting Shevus Yaakov and Kitzur Shalah; Harav M. Feinstein (oral ruling quoted in Mo'adei Yeshurun, pg. 112). See, however, Da'as Torah 584:1 who states

that some have a custom that they do not recite Avinu Malkeinu when praying without a minyan.

This issue has been graciously sponsored in loving memory of Herbert Harris, M.D. (Chaim ben David, Tammuz 19, 5754) whose "maasim tovim" and integrity remain our source of inspiration and strength by Dr. and Mrs. Michael Harris and Family

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Aish HaTorah's Shabbat Shalom Weekly by Rabbi Kalman Packouz
Q & A: What is the Significance of the 17th of Tamuz and How is it Observed? The 17th of the Hebrew month of Tamuz begins a three week national period of semi-mourning which culminates with the Ninth of Av (Tisha B'Av). It is a period where many tragedies have historically occurred and is considered in Jewish cosmology such an inauspicious time period that one is, as mentioned above, advised to push off court cases and during which no marriages take place. Traditionally, we refrain from hair-cutting, purchasing or wearing new clothing, listening to music and pleasure trips. It is a time for self-reflection and improvement. On the 17th of Tamuz five calamitous events occurred: 1. Moshe broke the first Tablets of the Ten Commandments when he descended from Mt. Sinai and saw the worshipping of the Golden Calf. 2. The Daily Sacrificial Offerings ceased in the First Temple due to lack of sheep. 3. The walls of Jerusalem were breached during the siege of the Second Temple. 4. Apustumus-the-Wicked burned a Sefer Torah and 5. An idol was placed in the Sanctuary of the Second Temple. The 17th of Tamuz is a fast day and this year is observed on Tuesday, July 22. The fast begins approximately an hour before sunrise and continuing until about an hour after sunset. The purpose of the fast is to awaken our hearts to repentance through recalling our forefathers' misdeeds which led to tragedies and our repetition of those mistakes. The fasting is a preparation for repentance -- to break the body's dominance over a person's spiritual side. One should engage in self-examination and undertake to correct mistakes in his relationship with G-d, his fellow man and with himself. It is interesting to note that Saddam Hussein is a student of Jewish history. He named the nuclear reactor (from which he planned to create a bomb to drop on Israel) -- you guessed it, Tamuz 17! (Want the source? "Ten Minutes Over Baghdad") For more history, read "Book of Our Heritage" by Eliyahu Kitov.

business-halacha@torah.org Wednesday, July 16, 1997 3:53 PM
Business-Halacha - Items Left In Public Areas

Question: [A] There are people who leave their possessions in public areas such as schools, Laundromats, swimming pools, and repair shops and do not return to claim them. In order to fulfill the Mitzvah of HaShovas Avedah (Returning Lost Articles), what are the obligations of the school administrators, shop owners, etc., regarding locating the proper owners and returning the items? [B] What action can be taken to ensure that in the future they will not be obligated to return every lost item left on their premises, and that they will be permitted to do with the items as they see fit?

Answer: A. If the items that were left have identifying marks, the store owner, etc., may inform the owner of the unclaimed items that if he does not come to claim them within a reasonable period of time (generally one week is sufficient), the items will be disposed of. If he is a repairman and the owner has not been paid for the work that the repairman did to the item, the repairman may inform the owner that he will sell the item, keep the money owed for the repair, and return any additional money to the owner when the owner chooses to come claim the item. B. To ensure that in the future there is

no obligation to track down the owner of every item left on their premises, the store owner or school administrator may post a sign in a noticeable area on their property, stating that they only permit personal possessions to be brought onto their property on condition that after a certain reasonable period of time (for example, after the school year is completed), any lost or unclaimed items will be disposed of, without further notice. If they post such a sign, they may do as they see fit with the items, after the stated period of time.

Sources: The Gemara in Bava Metzia 101b states that if someone leaves his possessions in someone else's property without permission, the property owner is permitted to remove the items and throw them into the marketplace. This is quoted as the Halacha in the Shulchan Oruch, Choshen Mishpat 319:1. The Rema there quotes the opinion of the Rosh that the property owner should first inform the owner of the items, regarding the consequence if the possessions are not removed within a reasonable period of time. After the owner of the items is notified and the period of time is past, the property owner may remove the items from his domain, despite the fact that doing so will most likely result in the items being stolen or vandalized. Alternatively, the property owner may decide to charge the owner "storage fees," in the form of a certain amount of money, per day that the item remains in his property against his wishes. In this case, once the total amount of the fees equals the total value of the items, the property owner may keep the items for himself. However, the property owner should not assess the value of the item. This determination should be made by three other objective people. All of the above also applies to items that have been left at a shop or store to be fixed or cleaned, as long as the owner of the item was told that the item must be picked up by a certain time and did not do so. The advice in Answer B is considered acceptable practice by the majority of Rabbis, although there does not seem to be an explicit source for this in the Gemara and the Shulchan Oruch. The advice in Answer B seems to apply to all situations, whether the item was left there intentionally or unintentionally. If the items were left there intentionally, the Mitzvah of HaShovas Avedah does not at all obligate the store owner to return them, since they were never lost. Therefore, the sign informs the owner that the item will be disposed of after a certain period of time, as per the requirement of the Rosh above, and after that time, it is considered like an item placed in someone else's property without permission. Even if the items were left there unintentionally, in which case it would seem that the store owner would be obligated in the Mitzvah of HaShovas Avedah, the sign informs the person who owns the items that entrance into this property with personal possessions is conditional on acceptance of the terms mentioned in the sign. Consequently, if the owner does not agree to these conditions, he is trespassing, which is a form of theft. We can therefore assume that if the items are left there for longer than the stated period of time, the owner of the items relinquishes his rights of ownership, even without his knowledge, rather than insist on those rights and violate the prohibition of theft. This week's class is based on a column by Rabbi Tzvi Shpitz, who is an Av Bet Din and Rosh Kollel in the Ramot neighborhood of Jerusalem. His column originally appears in Hebrew in Toda'ah, a weekly publication in Jerusalem. It has been translated and reprinted here with his permission and approval.

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YESHIVAT HAR ETZION VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH PROJECT (VBM)
PARASHAT BALAK SICHVA OF HARAV LICHTENSTEIN SHLIT"AA
Summarized by Aviad Hacoen

"How Good Are Your Tents, Yaakov..." "How good are your tents, Yaakov; your dwelling places, Israel. Like winding brooks, like gardens by the riverside, like tents which God has planted, like cedars by the waterside..." (Bamidbar 24:5-6). The gemara, in Massechet Berachot (12b), teaches that "originally they wanted to institute Parashat Balak as part of Keri'at Shema, and why did they not do so? Because of the inconvenience to the community [that would result from such a lengthy

recitation]. And what is so special about parashat Balak that it was considered worthy of being included in Keri'at Shema? The fact that it contains the words, 'He crouched, he lay down like a lion (ari), and like a great lion (lavi) - who shall rouse him?'" A different version in the Mekhilta maintains that the key words of the blessing, making it worthy of inclusion in Keri'at Shema, are "The nation shall rise up like a great lion (lavi) and lift itself like a young lion (ari)." Bilam's words depict the tranquility of the Israelite encampment: brooks, tents, gardens by the riverside. Imagine the scene: against the background of the barren desert, the peaceful and pastoral encampment of Bnei Yisrael - orderly rows of tents, trees and gardens, lawns and peaceful streams. The midrash teaches, "How good are your tents, Yaakov" - that the entrance to one tent was never facing the entrance to another." Even in this idyllic setting, modesty is being maintained. As Bilam continues speaking, we witness a sudden and radical change of atmosphere: After all the water has dripped slowly out of the bucket (24:4), quietly and peacefully, there suddenly appears a powerful torrent, a crashing waterfall, and the storm grows ever more fierce: "He shall consume the nations, his enemies; and shall break their bones, and pierce them with his arrows." There is no peace here; instead there is unceasing war and turmoil. Does this not contradict our previous scene? It is as if the fifth and sixth symphonies of Beethoven are being featured together here, with no acknowledgment of the tremendous contrast between the peace and tranquility which characterizes the one, and the storm and turmoil depicted by the other.

One verse in particular stands out in its radical imagery: "The nation shall rise up like a great lion... he shall not lie down until he has eaten the prey and drunk the blood of the slain." Here the lust for the flesh of the enemy and the thirst for their blood reach new heights. Rashi, to our amazement, ignores the harsh tone altogether and explains all the imagery on a completely different level: "When they arise from their sleep in the morning, they are strong like a lion and like a young lion to 'pounce' on the mitzvat, to wear the tallit, to recite the Shema and to don their tefillin. At night as they lie down to sleep they 'devour' and destroy any harmful thing that comes to attack them - how? By reciting the Shema while upon their beds, and surrendering their souls to God, and God strikes down their enemies."

Rashi "ignores" the literal meaning of the text. Instead of their drinking blood and devouring prey, Rashi depicts Israel eagerly donning tefillin, "conquering" their tzitzit, "devouring" Keri'at Shema with awe and fear.

At the foundation of this wondrous combination - of war and the sword on one hand and observance of the mitzvat on the other - lies the strength of the Israelite camp. A military encampment, which by its very nature usually tramples any hint of shame, has become a holy camp where no tent entrance faces any other. There is a dual heroism here: the lion which devours, and the lion which lies down; i.e. knowing when to fight and when to overcome the temptation posed by the power to kill. The nations of the world cannot grasp such a combination. Tumult and war in the midst of gardens and tents by the waterside? On the other hand, they find it equally difficult to understand the presence of modesty within a military camp. The exclamation of surprise is born of this wonder in the eyes of the gentile prophet: "How good are your tents, Yaakov" - tents wherein both aspects of heroism form a creative and fruitful combination.

(Originally delivered on Shabbat Parashat Balak 5744. Translated by Kaeren Fish.)

"RavFrاند" List - Rabbi Frاند on Parshas Balak

Was G-d Acting as Bilaam's Agent? This week's Parsha contains the well known story of Balak the King of Moab worrying about the imminent approach of the Jewish people. Moab correctly surmised that, given the fate of the other kings and nations that had challenged Bnei Yisrael with conventional military tactics, he would not stand a chance confronting them in traditional battle. Therefore, Balak devised a "secret weapon" -- the chemical weapon of his day. "And he sent messengers to Bilaam son of Beor..." [Bamidbar 22:5] who had the lethal ability to curse someone and have that curse take effect on its intended victim. Balak requested that

Bilaam go out and curse the "nation that has gone out from Egypt and covered the face of the land." Bilaam asked the messengers to stay overnight so that he could answer Balak's request the next morning, based upon what G-d would tell him. G-d told Bilaam, "Do not go with them; do not curse the people, for they are Blessed" [22:12]. Bilaam relayed that message to Balak's messengers. When Balak heard that Bilaam would not come, he assumed that he "tried to get away too cheap." Balak then sent a more prestigious delegation promising Bilaam great reward and granting his every request. Bilaam, not being anyone's fool, casually mentioned to the messengers, "If Balak will give me his entire treasury filled with silver and gold (the old 'what is four hundred Shekel silver between you and me' [Bereshis 23:15] trick) my hands are tied -- I can only do what G-d permits me." Again, they proceeded through the whole process of waiting overnight. This time, G-d told Bilaam, "If these people are coming for your advantage (likra lecha), then go with them -- just only speak that which I tell you" [22:20]. If we can use such terminology, it appears that G-d changed his mind! When Bilaam first asked permission from the Ribono shel Olam, G-d said, "No. You can't go!" All of a sudden, He appears to change His mind. What changed? Rash"i says, on the words "Im Likra Lecha" -- if these people are coming to give you payment, go with them. In other words, if you stand to make profit out of this venture, then I have no objection to your going. That was the difference! The first time, when they asked Bilaam to come, they didn't offer him anything -- neither money nor honor, they just said "Come." In that situation, G-d told Bilaam, "Don't go." The second time, Balak offered Bilaam wealth and honor. In that situation, G-d told him, "If you stand to gain from this, then you can go." What difference does that make? Is G-d worried about Bilaam's livelihood? Is He acting as Bilaam's agent? Pro bono, you cannot go. If you charge by the hour -- then you can?

Doing It For 'The Cause' vs. Doing It for the Money I heard from Rav Schwab a fantastic insight -- a fantastic truth in what this means. The difference, says Rav Schwab, is that one of the most potent forces in the universe is the doing of something "Lishma," for it's own sake. Doing something altruistically, for the sake of what one believes to be right, is a force beyond belief. However, when people do things not for the sake of a cause, but because they stand to make a dollar, that is a much weaker force. Rav Schwab said this in the context of explaining the rise and fall, during this century, of the Communist system. Communism was a very successful movement. Until very recently, there were more than a billion and a half people who lived under Communist domination - and yet in recent times we have seen Communism disintegrate. What made Communism so successful? Rav Schwab argued that what made Communism so successful was that there were "Lishma-niks." People like Lenin and Trotsky and Marx and all the other Jews, "nebech," (the Politburo in the 1930s was mostly Jewish until Stalin purged them) were people who wanted to give the world a better order. They wanted to give the world a new system to replace the bankruptcy of capitalism, in which some are fantastically wealthy and some beg on the street. It was a very noble movement. These were people who were -- for lack of a better word -- L'shem Shamayim (for the sake of Heaven)! They did it for the sake of Communism. They were Lishma! Rav Schwab relates that he remembers in his city in Germany there was a parade by the Communists in the 1920s and there was a Jewish kid who had rebelled against his parents and marched in the front line of this parade. He was despised amongst the Jews, the outcast of the entire community; but this did not faze him, because he did it Lishma. He believed in what he was doing, like so many of our Jewish brethren who believed in it. When we have people who are willing to give up their lives and souls for the sake of a cause, that is a very potent force. We look back now, 70 years later and try to discover what happened to the movement to cause it to collapse. We can say that to a large extent it is due to the fact that it lost this 'Lishma' element. When we see how all the leaders of the various "Iron Curtain" countries had stashed away Swiss bank accounts and we discover all the corruption and the graft we quickly recognize that the Lishma had been abandoned. And once they lost that, the potency of the force was gone. This is what G-d said to Bilaam: When Balak comes and says "Curse the Jews" without offering honor or money, then the

reason why Bilaam is going is because he hates Jews. "We have to curse Jews!" I want to eradicate Jews. This is a philosophy. It is a CAUSE. In that case, "Watch Out! Don't go." G-d knows that a sincere CAUSE is a lethal and potent force. However, when Balak says, "I'll give you Honor. I'll give you Money..." then G-d tells Bilaam: If this is for your own benefit, if you are doing it for the money, then go. This is a different story. If you are in it for the money, for the honor, and not Lishma -- this is nothing to worry about, it is not the same force.

Speech Is A Miracle, Regardless of Who Does the Talking
Inasmuch as this week will be the Rosh Yeshiva's Yahrzeit, I will offer a comment from the Sforno that Rav Ruderman, zt"l, always used to mention. The Sforno says something that sounds very strange on the verse, "And G-d opened the mouth of the donkey" [22:28]. Regarding this amazing miracle, when G-d gave the power of speech to the donkey, the Sforno says, "G-d allowed the donkey to speak, just like 'Hashem, Open my Lips and my mouth will speak your praises'" [Tehillim 51:17]. The Sforno says that the act of G-d opening up the mouth of the donkey is just like G-d's gift of the power of speech to people. In other words, human speech is a miracle. The ability to communicate, to express, is an amazing miracle. Man is the only creature on earth which has this amazing capability. It is truly a miraculous capacity. Before we begin Shmoneh Esrei, which represents our communication with G-d, we must testify to Him that without this great Kindness on His part, we would be no different than a bird. Unfortunately, we take this for granted, not realizing that our very existence, the gift of speech, the gift of intelligence, the gift of life, are all just that, Gifts. There is no difference at all between a donkey talking and a human talking... except that G-d performs one miracle constantly and He rarely performs the other miracle. The Talmud says that the One who tells oil to ignite, will tell vinegar to ignite [Taanis 25a]. G-d places into nature the power that causes oil to burn. It is no more or less of a miracle for G-d to cause the vinegar of one of the Talmudic Sages to burn. There is no difference. So too, the Sforno reminds us, our own ability to speak is no less miraculous than the phenomenon mentioned in this week's Parsha in which Bilaam's donkey speaks.

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SHABBAT SHALOM: Foiled curses

By RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

(July 19) "Come now, therefore, I pray you, curse me this people, for they are too mighty for me..." (Num. 22:6)

This week's portion of Balak introduces us to curses, sorcerers and blessings. Balak, king of Moab, witnesses the defeat of the Amorite nation at the hands of the Israelites. Israel had made a simple request of the Amorites, to pass through their land - promising to remain strictly on the king's highway. Nevertheless, the request was denied. Moreover, the Amorites then gathered forces and attacked the Jews, who turned the tables, staging a stunning victory and conquering much land. Convinced that the Israelite military machine is impregnable, Balak, king of Moab, fears that he might well become Israel's next conquest. Without the military option, he goes the only other route he knows - magic, enchantment, spells, curses. He seeks out the most powerful sorcerer in the world, Balaam, with the goal of co-opting him to curse - and thereby defeat - the newly formed nation of Israel. As the Torah portion unfolds, we are thrust into an account of all the steps taken to tempt Balaam to come and curse the Israelites. The reddest carpet is rolled out, and gold, silver and honor are promised. Although Balaam understands that Israel has been chosen by God and that it would be against the divine will to curse God's people, he does everything he can to accept Balak's offer. As he sets out on a journey to perpetuate the evil act, an angel with an outstretched sword blocks his path. Balaam, however, is blind to the angel; only his donkey is able to see this awesome sight, and refuses to continue the

journey. Not until the donkey engages his master in conversation are Balaam's eyes opened, and he - prophet and sorcerer - perceives what a 'dumb' animal was able to perceive all along. Declares the Midrash: "Despite the fact that the donkey is the most foolish of animals and Balaam the wisest man in the world, once the donkey spoke, Balaam could not withstand its message." (Bamidbar Rabbah, Piskah 12) Hence it would seem that in order to stop Balaam, the Torah must provide a talking ass, a phenomenon so astounding that the Midrash in Ethics of the Fathers lists Balaam's donkey as having been one of the phenomena created at twilight of the first primordial Sabbath.

Does this then mean that if the Jews had been cursed by Balaam, they would have had good reason to tremble? According to the commentary of Don Isaac Abarbanel (1437-1508), there is no efficacy to a human curse. But the events of our Torah reading transpire in the context of the mentality of the nations of the region, who clearly did believe in the power of a curse. Therefore Balaam's negative utterance, even if eventually proven worthless, would have provided the nations with a psychological boost. Joseph ibn Caspi (1279-1340) goes one step further. He agrees that there is no objective power to a sorcerer's curse. But since the Jews were still imprinted with their slavery experience, they could easily be subject to a primitive belief in the power of sorcery. And the last thing the Jews in the desert needed was the fear that they were a cursed nation. Therefore God, in His love for His people, preempts Balaam by turning the curses into blessings.

Prof. Nehama Leibowitz, citing the little known Midrashei haTorah of Rabbi Anselm Astruc of Barcelona, explains that even if there is no objective power to a curse, subsequent Jewish history has been so filled with tragedies that later generations might have attributed our suffering to the curse of Balaam. Were this to happen, the next step might have been the abandonment of our faith in God.

I'd like to consider two more ways of looking at this strange tale of a talking donkey. First, it seems obvious that the central message of the story is precisely the point that there is no power in the words of a sorcerer. Our Torah portion makes it clear that the ultimate power resides exclusively with God: if He so chooses, He can close the eyes of the greatest sorcerer, and open the mouth of a stupid donkey! And should there still remain a lingering doubt as to the effectiveness of a human curse against Israel, the issue is laid to rest in the following declaration of Balaam: "Surely there is no enchantment with Jacob, nor is there any divination with Israel." (Num. 23:23)

There is a second point to the story, one which sets down the ultimate point of our existence as a holy nation of "priests-teachers." Balaam is considered the wisest of gentiles, and it is his desire - and in his best interest - to curse the Jewish people. In the end, he who came to curse remained to bless - and not only because God forced him to do so. The modesty and uprightness of the Israelite encampment inspired him to such an extent that the blessing burst from his mouth. The Torah is therefore using this opportunity to teach the Jews one of its most important lessons: When faced with evil "sorcerers" whose tongues have the power to write history, our task is to create the conditions that will force them to acknowledge our good deeds and modest behavior, transforming the sorcerer's curse into words of praise. "How goodly are your tents O Jacob, your dwelling places O Israel!" (Num. 24:5).

The ultimate vocation of every Jew is to sanctify God's name among the gentiles, even in hostile environments. "I shall be made great and holy among the nations of the world," says the prophet Ezekiel, and the blueprint for this task can be found in our portion. There is no greater Kiddush HaShem - sanctification of God's name - than when a hired gun comes to grips with the enormous contributions of Jewish civilization. Shabbat Shalom
Rabbi Riskin, dean of the Ohr Tora institutions, is chief rabbi of Efrat.