

Weekly Parsha BALAK 5781

Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog

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

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

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

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

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

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

Shabbat shalom
Rabbi Berel Wein

Leadership and Loyalty (Balak 5781)

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks ZL

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Parshat Balak (Numbers 22:2 – 25:9)

Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Parshas Balak Rav Yochanan Zweig

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

Be Careful What You Wish For

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ignoring the Pain

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Did You Know...

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

Here are some more additional facts about this dark sorcerer:

1. One of the better-known facts is that Bilaam was on a very high prophetic level, and there is actually a discussion comparing his prophecy to that of Moshe Rabbeinu’s. The reason for this was because Hashem knew that the gentile nations would, in defense of their many sins, claim that it was only because they didn’t have someone who was on Moshe’s prophetic level to guide them, so he provided them with Bilaam (Me’em Lo’ez Balak 1 22:5).
2. Balak knew of Bilaam because they were from the same town, and Bilaam even prophesied that Balak would one day be king. Additionally, he knew that Bilaam was powerful because he had hired him before in wars and they had been victorious (ibid).
3. At first, they tried performing various acts of sorcery on the Jews, but when those had no effect, they resorted to cursing. In actuality, Balak was a greater sorcerer than Bilaam, and it would have been below him to consult Bilaam, but when he saw that witchcraft was ineffectual, he sent for him.
4. Another fairly well known fact is that the Gemara says that Bilaam knew the precise moment every day when Hashem is angry at the world. This precise moment is known to be in the first three hours of the day, and is debated as whether it is 1/4 of a second, or even as little as 1/16 of a second. This tiny amount of time isn’t enough for most curses, obviously, but he actually only needed enough time for the word “kalem – annihilate them.” Interestingly, Hashem held back his anger at that time, otherwise the Jews would have been destroyed (Me’em Lo’ez Balak 1 22:6).
5. According to one source, Bilaam was actually Lavan (Yaakov’s father-in-law). According to another source, he was Lavan’s son, and yet others say that he was just metaphorically compared to Lavan (Sanhedrin 105a).
6. Bilaam has no share in the world to come, and was deformed; he was lame in one of his legs, and was blind in one of his eyes (ibid).

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

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

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

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

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Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair - www.seasonsofthemoon.com

Parshat Parashat Balak

An Artist's Impression

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Bad Man. Can't Be a Good Prophet!

Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This teacher did not tell me anything about Heidegger's personal life and political affiliations. It was only upon further reading that I learned that Heidegger was an active member of the Nazi party and continued

his active association with the Nazi party throughout the 1930s and the period of World War II. Indeed, he refused to renounce his previous misdeeds, even after the war, and remained silent until his death.

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

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

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

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

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

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Rabbi Buchwald's Weekly Torah Message

Balak 5781-2021

"Words of Eternal Truth from the Evil Prophet Bilaam"

(updated and revised from Balak 5761-2001)

Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald

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

As is well known, Bilaam is unable to curse the Jewish people, because G-d has forbidden Bilaam to do so, and also because of the protective power of the unified Jewish nation. As Bilaam says in Numbers 23:8, מָה אֶעֱשֶׂה לְיִשְׂרָאֵל כִּי אֵלֹהִים אֵלֵינוּ, וְיָמָּה אֲנִי עֹשֶׂה הַשֵּׁם הַשֵּׁם? How can I be angry if G-d is not angry?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Have a meaningful fast.

May you be blessed.

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Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

Dvar Torah Balak

From where can the Jewish people derive comfort and consolation?

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

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

Defeats

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

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

Lessons

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

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

Shabbat shalom.

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

Drasha Parshas Balak - Sorry for Nothing

Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

Dedicated to the speedy recovery of Mordechai ben Chaya

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Good Shabbos!

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

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Rabbi M. Kamenetzky is the Dean of the Yeshiva of South Shore.

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Chukat: The dearness of impurity

Ben-Tzion Spitz

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rav Kook Torah

Chanan Morrison

Balak - Psalm 128: Striving for Excellence

אֲשֶׁר יִקַּח יְהוָה ה', הַלֵּל בְּדַרְכָיו. יִגַּע כַּפֶּיךָ, בִּי תֹאכַל, אֲשֶׁר יָדְךָ נָטוּב לָךְ.
“Happy are all who fear God, who follow in His ways. You will eat the fruit of your labor; you will be happy and it will be good for you.” (Psalms 128:1-2)

The Fruit of Your Labor

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

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

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

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

Two Mindsets

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

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

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

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

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

Bread of Shame

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

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

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

Good of the World to Come

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

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

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

*(Adapted from Ein Eyah vol. I, pp. 41-42 on Berachot 8a)
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Shema Yisrael Torah Network

Peninim on the Torah - Parashas Balak

פְּרִשְׁת בַּלַּק תַּשְׁפִּי"א

עַתָּה קִבַּה לִי אֶתוֹ

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

ויתיצב מלאך ד' בדרך לשטן לו

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

ויאמר מלאך ד' אל בלעם לך עם האנשים

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

ישא בלעם את עיניו וירא ישראל שכן לשבטי

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Va’ani Tefillah

המברך את עמו ישראל בשלום – *Ha’mevarech es Amo Yisrael ba’shalom.*

Who blesses His nation *Yisrael* with peace.

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

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The Saga of Twelve Months

Rabbi Yirmiyohu Kaganoff

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

Question #1: Sentimental China

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

Question #2: No Bologna

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

Question #3: Hungary on Pesach

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

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

Introduction:

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

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

Until the pot is kashered

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

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

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

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

Treif pots

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

Chometz is exceptional

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

Fleishig to milchig

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

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

Kashering from fleishig to milchig

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

Earthenware

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

Twelve months

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

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

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

Hungry on Pesach

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

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

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

Aged vessels

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

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

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

Sentimental china

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

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

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

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

No bologna

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

This question presents two problems:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

לע"נ

שרה משא בת ר' יעקב אליעזר ע"ה
ביילא בת (אריה) לייב ע"ה