

Weekly Internet Parsha Sheet

Balak 5782

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Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog

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

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

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

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

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

Poison is often injected into candies and other sweet objects that are pleasant to the pallet but are destructive to

the existence of the human being. This is one of the overriding messages contained in this week's reading.

Shabbat shalom

Rabbi Berel Wein

The Curse of Loneliness

BALAK - Rabbi Jonathan Sacks zt"l

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

How can I curse whom God has not cursed?

How can I denounce the Lord has not denounced?

From the tops of crags I see them,

From the hills I gaze down:

A people that dwells alone[1],

Not reckoning itself among nations.

Num. 23:8-9

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Third, nowhere in Tanach are we told that it will be the fate of Israel, or Jews, to be hated. To the contrary, the prophets foresaw that there would come a time

when the nations would turn to Israel for inspiration. Isaiah envisaged a day on which "Many peoples will come and say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the temple of the God of Jacob. He will teach us His ways, so that we may walk in His paths.' The law will go out from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem." (Is. 2:3)

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

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

"Halachah: it is well known that Esau hates Jacob." [3] Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai was known for his distrust of the Romans, whom the Rabbis identified with Esau/Edom. It was for this reason, says the Talmud, that he had to go into hiding for thirteen years (Shabbat 33b). His view was not shared by his contemporaries.

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

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

Gen. 33:4

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

There is, in short, nothing in Judaism to suggest that it is the fate of Jews to be hated. It is neither written into the texture of the universe nor encoded in the human genome. It is not the will of God. Only in moments of deep despair have Jews believed this, most notably

Leo Pinsker in his 1882 tract *Auto-emancipation*, in which he said of Judeophobia, “As a psychic aberration, it is hereditary; as a disease transmitted for two thousand years, it is incurable.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Parashat Balak

by Rabbi Nachman Kahana

Take My Hand

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

The world looked on in disbelief when, in 1948, a mere handful of fighters with limited weapons and resources trounced the standing armies of seven Arab nations. At the end of the British Mandate on May 14th, 1948, “His Majesty” King George the Fifth’s army waited in ships off the coast of Haifa to be implored by the beleaguered, desperate Jews to return and save them from annihilation. They have grown old waiting.

Once again, we figuratively made the world stand still in the Six Day War (interesting to note that the war in Afghanistan was in its 10th year), when our young flying angels destroyed the combined Air Forces of all the Arab states in the Middle East in two hours on the morning of the 26th of Iyar 5727. The “mouths” of the world’s leaders dropped in incredulous disbelief, not only at the military success, but even more at the fact that HaShem had restored His people to much of the Biblical lands of *Eretz Yisrael*.

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

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

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

We have indeed stopped the world in its tracks several times, figuratively. However, even more impressive,

HaShem literally “stopped the world” for us 3300 years ago.

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

Today, the 3rd of Tamuz, at the writing of these words, is the anniversary of that miraculous happening. The day the world stood still!

There is a concept called “the invisible hand”. It originally appeared in the book “An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations”, authored in 1776 by the renowned economist Adam Smith.

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

The term “invisible hand” has been applied generally to any action whose consequences were unplanned and unintended, even not wanted. But they just happened (the definition of coincidence is the way HaShem directs the world while remaining anonymous). The “invisible hand” looms larger than life in the history and survival of the Jewish nation. The “Invisible Hand” of HaShem was at work when the heavenly bodies stopped in their tracks to help the Jewish people defeat the five Amorite nations. It was the “Invisible Hand” that guided our fathers in their wandering in the desert, and the Hand that guaranteed our survival in the long 2000-year galut and opened the gates of Eretz Yisrael for us to enter.

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

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

The Gemara (Brachot 7a) states that Bil’am’s success as a master of vilifying, was due to his knowledge of the one, instantaneous split second of time that HaShem angers every day. And Bil’am would curse at that time. But what Bil’am did not know was that during the forty years the

Jewish people were in the desert, HaShem did not bring forth the quality of anger even when the people sinned. The “Invisible Hand” of HaShem was at work.

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

Here are just three:

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

While viewing the play, I became overwhelmed by the thought that while there is no one in this wide world who can claim with any veracity that they are a descendant of the ancient Romans who destroyed the Bet Hamikdash and sent our people into a 2000-year exile, these young children on stage who have returned to live and study in the Old City, are direct descendants of the Kohanim and Levi’im who served in the Bet Hamikdash, and of the Jewish people who brought their sacrifices to the Bet Hamikdash. Is this not the “Invisible Hand” of HaShem at work?

The following night I was invited to speak at the home of Abba and Pamela Claman, two extraordinary people who have devoted themselves, through many diverse activities, in expressing their and our love and honor to our soldiers. They were hosting two seemingly very diverse groups. One was the crew of a “Jewish” submarine, and the other a group of about 50 young college aged men and women from across the USA. When I arrived, the two groups of Jewish young people were sitting on the roof eating a sumptuous meal, in the Claman tradition. What could I say to two groups, one of which would be spending their nights learning the secret codes of the Israeli Navy and then submerging into the deep waters of the oceans to protect Am Yisrael, while the other would be planning their next Saturday night dates? But in reality, as diverse as they might seem, they have more in common than that which makes them different.

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

The third incident occurred when my wife and I were at the remarkable Israel Museum. We arrived at the meticulously constructed model of Yerushalayim during the Second Temple period, put together with over one million pieces of

stone. There was a group of older high school aged boys and girls from the US, listening to their guide who was explaining what they were viewing. He was very informative regarding the buildings and streets etc., but I felt that the neshama (spirit) was missing. I asked the guide for permission to say a few words and, surprisingly, he agreed.

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

Indeed, the "Invisible Hand" is always outstretched, but there is a condition.

The Torah says (Devarim 15:18)

תעשה אשר בכל להיך-א' וברכך

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

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

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

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

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

In conclusion:

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

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

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

Am Yisrael Chai!

Shabbat Shalom

Nachman Kahana

Rabbi Eliezer Melamed

Understanding the 'Heter' of Rabbi Moshe Feinstein

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

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

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

The Grief of Rebbetzin Feinstein

"After I had studied for seven years, and received a teaching permit from my teacher and Rabbi, the Gaon Rabbi Yosef Dov Halevi Soloveitchik ztz"l, and after I started serving as a teacher at Yeshiva University and as a synagogue rabbi for baalei teshuvot in a new neighborhood in New York, I realized how essential it was for me to sit with my Rabbi and teacher for guidance and consultation with him. The Rav agreed to sit with me in his apartment located in the Yeshiva dormitory on Thursday evenings, before his flight back to his home in Boston.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Heter of Rabbi Feinstein

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

Incidentally, a couple once came to me with a similar question. The woman very much wanted another child. The husband, who loved his wife, complied with her, but felt uncomfortable. They wanted to ask if this was allowed. I answered it was permitted, but added that the husband would be considered his father for two reasons. One, without his consent the child would never have come into being, and consequently, thanks to him he was born. Second, our Sages said (Sanhedrin 19: 2): Anyone who raises an orphan in his house, the verse ascribes him credit as if he gave birth to him. All the more so as a father who accompanies him from the time of his pregnancy and raises him from his first day, will be considered as if he had given birth to him. The man's face lit up, and so did his wife.

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

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

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

Of course, parents can give gifts to children while they are alive, and even prefer the children who are in continuous and better contact with them, but in an inheritance, which expresses the absolute connection to the children, they must not be discriminated against. Parents who discriminate in inheritance between their children cause

controversy and destroy their family. The deprived sibling will accuse his brothers and sisters that through flattery, they distanced him from his parents in order to take his share of the inheritance, and will carry a grudge against them all his life, and the family will be torn apart.

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

A Son Who Curses His Parents

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

Before I relate his answer, I will give a brief description of him. The Rashbatz lived at the end of the Rishonim period (1361- 1444). He was born on the island of Mallorca near Spain, and due to disturbances in Spain in 1391, fled to North Africa and settled in Algeria. Like many of the eminent rabbis of Spain, the Rashbatz was also a physician. The Rashbatz explained that even though the son did not curse his parents with the name of God as the most severe Torah prohibition, about which it is said (Leviticus 20: 9): “Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death. Because they have cursed their father or mother, their blood will be on their own head” – in any case, even in cursing without the name of God it is a severe prohibition, and when he sins in it, he is called accursed, as the Torah says (Deuteronomy 27:16): “Cursed is anyone who dishonors their father or mother.” Nevertheless, even such a son should not be deprived of his inheritance, for a father who does so is not looked upon favorably by our Sages. And it is to be hoped and presumed that in time, he will repent and regret his conduct towards his parents.

A Wayward Son

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

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

from the inheritance (see, Peninei Halakha: Mishpacha 1:30).

Advice for Parents

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

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FROM THE MESHECH CHOCHMA

BALAK - 5782

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

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

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

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

For in the future, Israel: "...will rise as a lion cub, and raise itself as a lion... will not lie down until eating the prey, and drinking the blood of those who are slain". There will be struggles in the future as with the Egyptians in the past. They will face peoples and nations under whose

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

The Ramchal (Otzrot Ramchal 105-106, as well as the RaMad to Parashat Balak) adds an additional dimension. In Egypt, the “prey and the blood” was the wealth they took with them. In future exiles, the “prey and the blood” include the various good things that they have learnt from each nation, in culture, scientific discoveries, use of technology, social welfare, and positive, effective administration. The Ramchal develops the idea that it will be the task of Israel at the end of the days to integrate those contributions and qualities within the framework of the Torah to the ultimate purification of humanity within the Geula Sheleima, the Final Redemption.

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

Joining Gentiles

By Rabbi Yirmiyohu Kaganoff

Question #1: Client's celebration

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

Question #2: Meeting a new client

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

Question #3: Company picnics and parties

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

Answer:

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

under certain circumstances, prohibits bread baked by a non-Jew, and sheichar akum, which prohibits drinking certain types of beer in a non-Jew's home or tavern.

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

Why is beer different?

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

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

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

Rambam's source

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

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

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

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

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

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

Achashveirosh's party

A different source cited as basis of the Rambam's ruling is a passage of Gemara which states that the reason why the Jews in the era of Haman deserved to be destroyed (before they did the teshuvah brought about by Mordechai and

Esther) was because they enjoyed the party thrown by Achashveirosh (Megillah 12a).

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

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

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

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

Client's celebration

At this point let us examine one of our opening questions: "A non-Jewish client is marrying off his daughter and expects his business associates to attend the reception.

Knowing him, he expects me to spend a considerable amount of time there. Is this permitted, and, while there, may I eat or drink something that is kosher?"

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

Company picnics and parties

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

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

Mostly Jews

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

Conclusion

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

Can I See Anxiety as an Opportunity?

Looking Up: The Meaning behind the Snake on the Pole

Rabbi YY Jacobson

No Complaining

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

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

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

Not expecting this answer either, the reporter decides to hit him with a question that is bound to get the answer he is looking for: "What about your standard

of living?" To which the Russian replies again: "I couldn't complain."

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

The Serpents

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

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

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

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

"But is the snake capable of determining life and death?!" the Talmud asks. And the answer is this: "Rather, when Israel would gaze upward and bind their hearts to their Father in Heaven, they would be healed; and if not, they would perish." Fixing their eyes on the snake alone would not yield any cure; it was looking upward toward G-d, it was the relationship with G-d, which brought the cure. But if so, why bother to carve out a copper snake in the first place, which can only make people believe that it is the copper snake that is the cause of healing?

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

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

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

A Tale of Two Snakes

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

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

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

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

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

Every experience in life can be seen from two dimensions -- from a concrete, earthly perspective, or

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

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

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

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

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

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

pain is a springboard for deeper love and frustration is the mother of a new awareness [6].

Bless Me

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

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

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

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

[1] Numbers 21:6-10.

[2] Rosh Hashana 29.

[3] II Kings 18:4.

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

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

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

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

Rav Kook Torah

Pinchas' Ancestry

Rabbi Chanan Morrison

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

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

Clashing Commands

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

And there can be more serious conflicts, when a positive mitzvah will override a prohibition. This is the category of עשה דוחה לא תעשה. The classic case of עשה דוחה לא תעשה is the permit to wear Tzitzit made of white and tekhelet-blue strings of wool on a linen garment. Even though it is forbidden to wear wool and linen together, the mitzvah of Tzitzit takes precedence over the prohibition of Sha'atnez.¹ A more extreme example results in suspending a far more serious injunction. The Torah forbids marrying the wife of one's brother, even after his death. Such a union is considered incest and carries the severe punishment of karet. Yet, if the brother had no children, the prohibition is waived by the mitzvah of Yibbum - levirate marriage.

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

The prohibition in the case of Pinchas was even more severe. His act of zealotry required overriding the prohibition against murder - a horrific act and cardinal sin that causes the Shechinah to leave Israel (Shabbat 33a). If questioned, the court does not even teach the rule that one may kill a transgressor in these circumstances - הלכה ואין כן מורין (Sanhedrin 81b). For who can know what truly motivates a person? The act of zealotry may only be

performed if one's intentions are pure, when one acts solely for the sake of heaven, with no personal motives. Otherwise, the deed acquires an element of bloodshed, as the transgressor is killed without witnesses and without due process.

Evaluating Pinchas' Motives

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

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

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

Shema Yisrael Torah Network

Peninim on the Torah - Parashas Balak

יִגַּר מוֹאֵב מִפְּנֵי הָעַם מֵאֵד כִּי רַב הוּא וַיִּקַּץ מוֹאֵב בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל

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

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

Horav Yosef Nechemia Kornitzer, zl (Rav of Prague, pre-World War II) quotes David Hamelech (Sefer Tehillim 8:3), Mipi olelim v'yonkim Yisadeta oze, "Out of the mouth of babes and suckling's You have established strength." David asserts that our nation's strength, its ability to survive, is predicated on the Torah study of Jewish children. Their Torah is pure, untainted by sin. He cites Midrash Eichah (Pesichta Rabbasi, 2), which records

the statement of Rabbi Abba bar Kahana, "There have never risen wise men among the non-Jewish nations like Bilaam and Avnimus HaGardi." (The latter was a Greek philosopher who was an acquaintance of Rabbi Meir.)

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

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

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

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

לֹא אוֹכַל לַעֲבֹר אֶת פִּי ד' אֱלֹקֵי לַעֲשׂוֹת קְטָנָה אוֹ גְדוּלָה

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

In Kuntres Divrei Sofrim (24), Horav Elchanan Wasserman, zl, notes that Bilaam ha'rashah said that he would not transgress Hashem's word to him – Hashem's tzivui, command. He did not think that he could act in a manner counter-intuitive to Hashem's ratzon, will. He was acutely aware that Hashem did not want him to curse Klal Yisrael, but, if Hashem had not expressly said so, Bilaam could have gone along his merry way to carry out his evil intentions. The pasuk (22:22) relates that Hashem's anger flared because Bilaam was going to Balak. Why was Hashem angry? Did the Almighty not give Bilaam permission to go to Balak? Apparently, Bilaam knew that Hashem's ratzon was that he not curse the Jews. Going to Balak was an affront to Hashem. Bilaam did not care. If he did not receive a clear cut "no," as far as he was concerned, it was a "yes." What about Hashem's will? Did Hashem really want him to go? Clearly not, but this did not concern Bilaam.

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

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

The term chassid in present-day vernacular is not as "generic" as that of Ramchal, who translates it as pious. The basic ideas of present-day (last two centuries) chassidus, however, do not digress from their focus on piety and closeness to Hashem. Chassidic thought stresses: joy; song and dance in mitzvah performance, and service to Hashem; the centrality of davening and all forms of prayer (Tehillim); the appreciation of every Yid/amcha, the simple, ordinary Jew who is not a scholar; attachment to a Rebbe; and being partial to one's Jewish identity (connecting cumulatively with Klal Yisrael) as opposed to focusing on one's selfhood. We are part of the larger family unit of Am Yisrael. To encapsulate Chassidic

thought: Chassidus remains focused completely on Hashem (Horav Shraga Feivel Mendlowitz, zl). The Baal HaTanya would say (in speaking to Hashem), "I want not Your Gan Eden; I want not Your Olam Habba; I seek only to be attached to You."

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

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

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

to concentrate on love of Hashem and His Oneness. He did this even when hurrying from room to room to answer the phone – pause, concentrate, kiss. How often do we complacently touch the mezuzah, give it a peck with our fingers and move on? When one cares – one stops to think what kissing the mezuzah represents. After all, Hashem is our Father.

ויאמר בלעם אל בלק... היכל אוכל דבר מאמה הדבר אשר אלקים ישים בפיו אתו אדבר

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

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

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

This was Bilaam’s life story. A man who personified every ethical and moral shortcoming – yet received prophecies from Hashem. His comfortable relationship with -- and access to -- the highest spiritual spheres, notwithstanding, Bilaam remained Bilaam – a dog remains a dog – even if he is taught to speak Yiddish. In fact, he employed his unique knowledge of what angers Hashem – moral depravity – to cause the Jews to sin with

the Midyanite women. He knew that Hashem loves us for our moral chastity. He sought to undermine that relationship.

I think this is why Bilaam could not come to grips with mussar, rebuke, his donkey issued to him. Bilaam was acutely aware that his moral hypocrisy was so blatant that even his donkey understood what he was. This was too much for him to grapple with. Nothing shatters arrogance like the rebuke of a donkey.

מראש צרים אראנו ומגבעות אשורנו

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

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

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

Rav Altman asked to meet the partner. The man was a bit nervous to meet a Rosh Yeshivah from Eretz Yisrael, but his partner came out and graciously received the Rosh Yeshivah. Rav Altman said, “Your partner gave

me a generous check from the business. I would like to thank you since it is a joint account. Perhaps we could all go out to lunch tomorrow before we fly back to the Holy Land.” The partners agreed to meet at a restaurant for lunch.

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

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

Rav Tzucker explains this with an incident recorded in Midrash Eichah (1:9). A wise man from Athens came to Yerushalayim and chanced upon a young Yerushalmi boy. The Athenian considered himself wise, but he failed to perceive the wisdom of young Jewish boys. He told the boy, “Here are some coins. Please purchase some cheese and eggs for me.” The boy returned with the cheese and eggs. The Athenian then asked the boy, “Can you tell me which brick of cheese came from a white goat and which came from a black goat?” The boy countered, “You are a grown man, so it is only proper for you to first show me which egg is the egg of a white chicken and which is from a black one.” The Tiferes Tzion understands the exchange between the Athenian and the young boy as a metaphor for the Jewish People’s unique relationship with Hashem, Who favors us because of our Patriarchal ancestry. As a result, we, too, take immense pride in our illustrious lineage. This pride should be a cornerstone of our observance.

The Athenian asserted that ancestry had no enduring value, since progeny do not necessarily resemble their ancestors. He presented as proof positive that the Jews do not look any different than anyone else, regardless of their religion. This is the message he intimated when he asked the boy to identify the source of the cheeses. He

alluded thereby that, just as two types of goats produce identical cheeses, it makes no difference whether one descends from righteous, virtuous individuals or average lineage.

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

Sponsored in loving memory of our dear mother, grandmother and great grandmother on her yahrzeit Mrs. Hindy Herskowitz מרת הינדא בת ר' יוסף צבי הלוי ע"ה נפ' מרת הינדא בת ר' יוסף צבי הלוי ע"ה תמוז תשע"ד
Avi Herskowitz and family

Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Balak

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

A “Tense” Exchange Between Balak and Bilaam Reveals the Limitations of Bilaam’s Power

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

The Netziv, in his Emek She’eilah, asked why the grammar in this pasuk is inconsistent. The Netziv suggests a very interesting answer. Bilaam, as we all know, was an extremely wicked individual, a degenerate and terrible person. In fact, Bilaam DID NOT HAVE the power to bless. He was not a

“Rebbe” and he could not give brochos. Bilaam had one power, and that was that he knew the moment at which the Ribono shel Olam got angry. That was his entire power—the power to curse when he knew the Almighty was angry.

No one knew this secret power of Bilaam better than Balak. Balak knew exactly who Bilaam was. He knew there was no point in asking Bilaam for a bracha for Moav, because Balak knew that Bilaam’s words were futile. But the fact is that people did go to Bilaam for brachos. Why was that? The Netziv says that the pasuk says that Bilaam was a sorcerer (Kosem) (Yehoshua 13:22)—he knew the future. Basically, he had this great racket going: People would come to him and say “Bilaam, I am sick. Give me a bracha that I should get better.” Bilaam would “consult with his sorcerer material” and see if this fellow was going to get well or not. He might “see” that this fellow was destined to recover in two months and bless him that he should get better in two months. Lo and behold, the fellow got better in two months, and Bilaam’s fame spread far and wide. On the other hand, when he would consult his sorcerer paraphernalia and see that the fellow was not going to get better, Bilaam would say to him “Sorry. I can’t help you. You are doomed.” Either way, he established his reputation as a person who possessed the “Koach HaBracha”.

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

Why Consult With the Elders of Midyan?

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

Moav had a problem. Their problem was Klal Yisrael, who was going through the land and destroying everyone in their path. Moav approached the Elders of Midyan and asked them: “What are we going to do about our ‘Jewish problem’?” Rashi explains why Moav decided to seek counsel from the Elders of

Midyan: They recognized that Klal Yisrael was experiencing unnatural success, and they knew that the leader of Klal Yisrael (Moshe Rabbeinu) grew up in Midyan. So they sought out the Elders of Midyan to elicit their insight into what gave Moshe his strength. The Elders of Midyan responded that Moshe’s power was the power of his mouth (i.e., his ability to pray). The Moavites therefore decided to confront Klal Yisrael with another individual whose power came from his mouth (i.e., Bilaam). Those are the words of Rashi.

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

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

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

There is an old principle in life: You believe what you want to believe and you hear what you want to hear. Let us say you are seeking legal advice and you know what a certain lawyer is going to tell you. But it is not the advice that you want to hear. This lawyer is going

to tell you, “Drop the case. It is not going to work. You are going to get slaughtered in court. It does not pay to pursue it. It will cost you hundreds of thousands of dollars in legal fees and you are not going to win. You are going to fall on your face.”

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

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

Had Balak gone to Egypt and inquired “Listen, how do I deal with these Jewish people? How do I deal with Moshe Rabbeinu?” The ‘Elders of Egypt’ would have clearly responded — “STAY AWAY! They will

kill you! Do you know what they did to our country? They destroyed it! Take it from us – sue for peace and don’t say another word to them. Whatever they want, give it to them and you will be better off!”

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

לע"נ

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