

Weekly Internet Parsha Sheet

שבת פרשת בלק

In My Opinion :: Rabbi Berel Wein *The Messenger And The Message*

It is a well-known and almost instinctive response to attack the messenger when one feels that the message being delivered is incorrect, unwanted or unfair. The poor messenger usually finds one's self in a hapless and hopeless predicament. It then becomes a contest of personalities and not of ideas, a shouting match instead of a reasoned debate.

A seasoned American political leader once sagely observed, "All politics are local." Well in our current world, especially here in Israel, all politics and social issues are unfortunately very personal. And because of this most disturbing tendency to personalize everything, a healthy and constructive debate about the issue involved, about objective facts and possible solutions to difficult problems, never occurs.

Shooting the messenger and disregarding the message is the norm here but it is a dangerous and very self-defeating norm. For people are very impermanent in the political world – literally here today and gone tomorrow – while social and existential problems seldom are solved by themselves but always remain to be dealt with by succeeding generations and societies.

Attacking the messenger may prove to be psychologically satisfying but it does nothing to deal with the realities of the problem under discussion. In fact, dealing with the messenger is a tempting but an ultimately foolish procrastination from dealing with the message involved. One needs not like or admire the messenger in order to act sensibly regarding the message that was delivered. The messenger is completely peripheral to the veracity and acuteness of the message itself.

The current debate about Charedi society's participation in the general obligations and tenor of Israeli life is a case in point. Most of the Charedi media and its political representatives and spokesmen have expended their efforts in personally attacking those individuals who have proposed legislative and social changes that will undoubtedly affect Charedi life here in Israel.

Politics in this country is a rough game and religious politics is an even rougher game. The Charedi defense to the message being sent to them – that the rest of Israeli society is unwilling to condone their lack of participation in the defense of the country and in their abstention from the workforce – is to accuse the bearers of this message as being "haters" and "blasphemers."

Yair Lapid, Naftali Bennett, Dov Lipman may be the messengers and they bear the brunt of the personal attacks being leveled against them by the Charedi world's spokesmen. But let us ignore who the messengers are and listen to the message. The current social and economic situation of the Charedi society in Israel is no longer tenable. There is a limit as to how many generations can consecutively be raised in poverty without there being a breakdown in that society.

I am quite certain that there are thousands in the Charedi world who secretly desire that this cycle of poverty, unemployment and dependency be broken. I personally know many Charedim who have expressed this to me. It is time to deal with the message and ignore the messengers completely and finally.

The current public controversies regarding the forthcoming election to choose the new Chief Rabbis of Israel also fall into this messenger-message category. The entire discussion, much of it quite vitriolic and personal, revolves about the persona of one of the announced candidates for the position of Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi. The discussion should center, in my opinion, about the institution of the Chief Rabbinate itself.

The message that is being delivered by the Israeli public is that the institution has degenerated into an anachronistic and almost irrelevant bureaucracy. To survive and perform the noble purposes that its founders

had in mind ninety years ago, requires a change of mindset and a clear articulation of purpose and policy.

It requires an obvious redirection of strategies and tactics no matter who the new Chief Rabbis will be. Instead of besmirching candidates for the positions, those who are involved in its defense and seek its survival would be wise to clearly define the goals and limitations of the office and make the case for the necessity of its continuance and communal support.

Rabbi Yisrael Lipkin of Salant interpreted the verse in Psalms "that when others rise against me I should listen (and be forewarned)," meaning that "I should have the wisdom to listen and hear what they – my opponents – have to say, so that I can improve and create."

But as long as we are more concerned with the messenger than we are with the message, with the person and not with the real issue, we have ignored Rabbi Lipkin's wise teaching. History teaches us that the message must eventually be addressed no matter who the messenger may be.

Shabat shalom

Weekly Parsha :: Rabbi Berel Wein *Balak*

There is an eternal debate amongst philosophers and criminologists as to whether the mob boss or the actual hit man is most culpable in the murder of a rival gang leader. Though both are certainly morally guilty, the question as to which one bears the legal onus for the crime, absent statutory law on the matter, is an issue of discussion and differing opinions.

In Judaism there is a concept "that there is no excuse of agency present when a sin or crime is being committed." This means that the hit man who pulled the trigger or planted the explosive is certainly the more guilty party, in such a scenario of an ordered murder. In the words of the Talmud "regarding the instructions from the Master and contrary instructions from the student – who should one listen to?!"

Thus in this week's parsha, even though it is the malevolent Balak who engages Bilaam in the nefarious scheme to curse the Jewish people, it is Bilaam who actually intends and agrees to do the cursing. He and not Balak emerges as the ultimate villain of the event. There is much discussion in the Talmud and in rabbinic sources as to whether any of the laws of agency, and this law in particular, exists outside of Jewish society generally.

If there is no agency outside of Jewish society, it appears that, generally speaking, there would be liability on both the instigator and the agent as well in such circumstances. In any event, it certainly is inherently wrong to engage an agent to perform an illegal or sinful (they are no longer the same today) act whether in Jewish or general society, whatever the technical legal liabilities may be.

The instigator of a crime is deemed in today's society to be as guilty as the criminal who perpetrated the crime. Osama bin Laden was the guilty party in the World Trade Center assassinations as much as were the murderous suicide-pilots he sent forth to do the deed. Balak is responsible for Bilaam's curses. Heaven, in its exquisite way, administers justice to all concerned in as it pleases and in its own time frame.

Balak will pay the penalty for his unwarranted hatred and enmity of Israel just as Bilaam does. The rabbis of the Talmud even extended the penalties for wrongful and criminal acts committed to include those who remained silent when they should have spoken out against evil and cruelty. Bilaam's donkey is commended while his associates are undoubtedly condemned and eventually punished – hence the plethora of laws in our world and statutes about conspiracy to commit crimes and criminal negligence.

In fact, the actual perpetrator oftentimes attempts to hide behind the façade that one was only following orders. Judaism does not recognize that excuse and yet the one who issued the orders is also deemed guilty of the crime. Balak and Bilaam are the forerunners of Hitler and Mengele, Stalin and the NKVD. All are to be condemned not only in Heaven's good time but also by all of us mortals on earth as well.
Shabat shalom

Ohr Somayach :: Torah Weekly :: Parshat Balak

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by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair - www.seasonsofthemoon.com

Insights

A Clear Shot

"How goodly are your tents, O Yaakov!" (24:5)

What was so 'goodly' about the tents of Yaakov?

Bilaam noted that not one of Israel's tent entrances was aligned opposite the other. Every tent was angled so that its entrance looked out only onto the side of the tent of its neighbor.

But what was so special about that? True, it showed discretion and a respect for privacy, but why specifically should it be this non-alignment of the tent-openings that caused Bilaam to proclaim Jewish People deserving of the Divine Presence to dwell among them?

In fact, Bilaam's whole intention was to find some universal flaw in the Jewish People which would allow him to bring them down - to curse them by accusing them of some endemic sin.

However, he could find no such common flaw. For, even though one Jew might stumble in one area, his neighbor would, as it were, step into the breach and excel in that same area, compensating for him.

And so on throughout the entire people. Bilaam could not find one ubiquitous vice that ran throughout the body politic of the Jewish People, try as he might.

That's the hidden meaning of his words here, "How goodly are your tents, Yaakov!" None of your entrances (to sin) are aligned corresponding to the entrance of your neighbor. None of your sins are aligned opposite the sins of your neighbor. And so, I can't get a 'clear shot' through to the middle! I can't wound you by lobbing a shot clear into your midst, into your heart. For each one of you steps into the breach, the weakness of one is the strength of the other and leaves no opening to the sin that crouches at the door.

Animal Crackers?

"What have I done that you have struck me these three times?" (22:28)

Bilaam's donkey was no slouch. When the donkey said "these three times" he was alluding to the three festivals of Pesach, Shavuot and Succot.

The donkey was asking Bilaam how he could have imagined that he would uproot the Jewish People who make the three pilgrimage festivals. But what is so special about the three festivals that they are singled out as such a protective force for the Jewish People?

The Jewish People are above time. Since they can establish the day on which the month begins, they are essentially 'partners in time' with the Creator, and not totally subject to time's constraints.

Bilaam, however, could only receive prophecy at night. His prophecy was time-dependent. Thus the donkey was reminding Bilaam that he was 'yoked' to time and how could he possibly imagine that he would be able to dominate a people who were above time? A smart donkey.

You Lose - I Win!

"So now, please come and curse this people for me, for it is too powerful for me." (22:6)

What does a Jew do when he finds himself in trouble? He goes to a big tzaddik and asks him to give him a beracha. He davens to the Creator of the world to save him. But how do other nations react to trouble?

When Balak ben Tzipor, the king of Moav, was frightened of the Jews, he went to Bilaam and asked him to do something. He didn't ask him to bless him, but rather to curse the Jews!

This is the way of the wicked, explains the Chafetz Chaim. Rather than seek a blessing for themselves, they would prefer a curse for someone else!

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Penim on the Torah by Rabbi A. Leib Scheinbaum

Parshas Balak

Balak saw... all that Yisrael had done to the Emori (22:2). Pinchas saw... and he stood up from amid the assembly. (25:7)

Our parsha begins with one re'iyah, observation, and closes with another re'iyah. Balak opens the parsha with Va'yaar Balak ben Tzipor, "And Balak ben Tzipor saw." Pinchas, heir to the Priestly throne of his grandfather Aharon HaKohen, concludes the parsha with his re'iyah, Vayaar Pinchas ben Elazar ben Aharon HaKohen va'yakom mitoch ha'eidah, va'yikach romach b'yado, "And Pinchas ben Elazar ben Aharon HaKohen saw, and he stood up from amid the assembly and took a spear in his hand" (25:7). We understand that, whenever the Torah states that someone "saw," it is important to explain what in particular caught his attention. This observation motivated his immediate reaction. A person responds to something which comes into his line of vision. If this "something" is powerful enough to catalyze a reaction, it is necessary to explain what produced that response. Furthermore, clearly, neither was Balak the only person who "saw," nor was Pinchas the only person who witnessed a seditious act of perversion taking place. Pinchas was part of a congregation of people who beheld Zimri's aberrational behavior. Balak was not the only person in the world who had heard about the exodus of Klal Yisrael from Egypt. The Splitting of the Red Sea and the consequent drowning of the Egyptians were major world events.

Concerning Pinchas, Rashi writes, Raah maaseh v'nizkar halachah, "Pinchas saw an action and he immediately remembered the halachah." In other words, while everyone in Klal Yisrael saw what Pinchas saw, only he remembered the appropriate halachah which determines the reaction one should have to such an insurrection. What about Balak's observation characterized it as emanating from the Torah? Was he the only one who saw?

In his Shemen HaTov, Horav Zev Weinberger, Shlita, quotes Ramban who questions the timing of the Torah's mentioning that Balak was king of Moav. Why does the parsha not mention his monarchy right at the beginning, when it acknowledges his observation of the Jewish People's prowess in overpowering the Egyptians? It is almost as if the Torah was intimating that, at that point, Balak had not yet become king of Moav. Horav Chaim Soloveitchik, zl, comments that this was truly the case. Originally, Balak was neither a ruler, nor was he in line for the Moavite monarchy. Only once he became a rabid anti-Semite, after he took notice of the Jewish problem and how they dealt with the Egyptians, did people begin to give him respect, to the point that he was declared king over Moav. Did we not see this same scenario in Germany, when a maniacal outcast became chancellor of one of the most powerful European countries - all because of the anti-Semitic diatribe which his mouth spewed forth as a result of his demented mind?

Thus, Balak saw an opportunity to ascend to leadership and power by denigrating the Jews. Balak discovered a way to unify his country through hatred of the Jew. We did nothing to his people; yet, he rose against us for personal reasons. This was his chance to achieve distinction. This is what Balak saw that others did not.

An observation can be misunderstood if one does not possess the proper capabilities for seeing correctly. One who has dirty lenses will invariably see everything through a smudged perspective. Likewise, one whose glasses are tinted blue will see everything through a blue hue. Bilaam's vision was subjectively stigmatized, such that he saw only what he wanted

to see. Later in the parsha, Bilaam had his famous dialogue with his donkey. The donkey was able to see a Heavenly Angel barring the path. Bilaam could not understand why his donkey had decided to rest. He beat the donkey three separate times. Yet, it still did not move forward.

The donkey asked Bilaam, "What did I do to you that [provoked] you to strike me three times?" Rashi notes the donkey's use of the word *regalim*, rather than *pe'amim*, which means times. *Regalim* is a reference to the Shalosh *Regalim*, Three Festivals, during which Klal Yisrael is *oleh regel*, goes up in pilgrimage to Yerushalayim. Rashi explains the donkey's rebuke: "How can you dare to uproot a nation that celebrates the *Regalim*?" Obviously, Rashi's explanation begs elucidation. What connection is there between Bilaam's striking his donkey and our nation's thrice yearly pilgrimage to Yerushalayim? Rav Weinberger quotes Chazal's comment to the Talmud Chagigah's explanation of the pasuk which deals with Shalosh *Regalim*: *Shalosh pe'amim ba'shanah yeira'eh kol zechurcha es Pnei Hashem Elokecha*, "Three times a year all your males should appear before Hashem, your G-d" (Devarim 16:16)." Chazal derive from the word *yeira'eh*, which actually means to be seen - rather than to see - that, *k'derech sheba liros kach ba leiraos*, "As he has come to see, so, too, is he seen (by Hashem)." This means that any Jew, regardless of background and affiliation, is able to experience "seeing" the Shechinah. He will be transformed by the experience.

Let us now return to the donkey's comment to Bilaam and explain it in light of Chazal's commentary. The donkey was intimating, "You, Bilaam, want to uproot a nation that is worthy of seeing and experiencing the Shechinah three times a year. You - who are unable to see a Heavenly Angel standing right in front of your eyes - want to take on a nation that sees the Divine Presence - not once but three times yearly. You - who sees less than your own donkey - want to curse a nation whose gift of vision extends to the supernatural." Basically, the donkey was telling Bilaam, "You are out of your league. Stick to pagans."

Korach had a similar form of myopia, seeing only what he wanted to see. Chazal question what possessed him to dispute Moshe and Aharon's leadership. What galvanized him to think that he would emerge triumphant in his quest for power? Chazal explain: *eino hitaso*, "His eye misled him." Korach saw a distinguished lineage descending from him. Shmuel HaNavi was at the helm of this spiritually distinguished lineage. How could he go wrong? The *Chozeh*, zl, m'Lublin, derives from here that one can err even with *Ruach HaKodesh*, Divine Inspiration. The source of one's vision is no guarantee that he will correctly interpret it.

Pinchas, however, saw - *raah*, *maaseh*, *v'nizkar halachah*. He saw a repugnant act and immediately remembered the *halachah*. Pinchas was an *ish halachah*, a man closely attuned to - and whose entire life was relegated and guided by - *halachah*. Thus, as soon as he saw Zimri's act of hedonistic mutiny, he was immediately aware of the *halachic* response to this action.

How one lives defines his perspective. A Torah Jew always views life through the lens of Torah. Thus, he is able to shape his views and responses to events that occur by applying the Torah's interpretive barometer.

"May my soul die the death of the upright, and my end be like his."
(23:10)

It is the old story. The wicked want to live a life of abandon, yet, they want to die as the righteous and upright. The *Chafetz Chaim*, zl, explains that Bilaam did not want to live like a Jew. After all, Torah Judaism makes "difficult" demands on a person. Morality, ethicality, spiritual integrity: these are not simple qualities to which someone like Bilaam is able to adhere. He wants to have his cake and eat it. For a Jew, on the other hand, it is much simpler to deal with death than life. The Jew views death as a bridge which one traverses from temporary life to eternal life. When a Jew leaves this world, he has a "destination" for which he has been striving his entire life. A Jew believes in the immortality of the soul and in reward and punishment. Thus, a Jew does not fear death. Bilaam wanted to "take part" in the Jew's perspective on death. He made one mistake: It does not take a

rocket scientist to understand the advantage of dying as a Jew. It does, however, take abundant wisdom to live as a Jew. Now, Bilaam was certainly no fool. He achieved distinction as the greatest pagan prophet. Could he not figure it out? Could Bilaam not understand on his own that to die as a Jew one must live as a Jew? What part of Jewish living did he not understand?

This question does not apply only to Bilaam. It applies to the archetypical hypocrite throughout the generations, our co-religionists who choose to live a life of desire - yet expect to receive the reward of a Jew who has lived a life of obedience to Hashem. One wonders from where they derive the *chutzpah* to make such demands.

It goes even further. I recently had occasion to have a conversation with one such individual. When one flies from America to Eretz Yisrael, the flight traverses a number of time zones. Davening *Shacharis b'zmano*, at its proper time, can be somewhat difficult to determine. This is especially true when one's flight leaves New York in the late afternoon, arriving in Eretz Yisrael in the late morning. *Shacharis* occurs in middle of the night. Today we are blessed with incredible technology through which one can punch the flight number and airline into our smartphone, and the appropriate app will tell us the exact time of *alos ha'shachar* and *netz ha'chamah*, dawn and sunrise.

During a recent flight to Eretz Yisrael, a man who was apparently Orthodox - or at least considered himself so - approached my son and asked him what time was *vasikin*, sunrise. He wanted to daven on time. During the ensuing conversation, I discovered that this individual was practicing a lifestyle that the Torah refers to as *toeivah*, abomination. Indeed, this fellow is proud of what he is doing, considering himself intellectually honest. Rather than be a hypocrite, he observes the "other" 612 *mitzvos*. Over the years, he has developed a following among others who sadly have adopted such a depraved lifestyle. Imagine one who practices a *toeivah* and wants to be treated as an Orthodox Rabbi.

At this point, I realized that some of these modern-day Bilaams really believe that they deserve to be treated as Orthodox Jews, despite their "one" spiritual failing. Indeed, many of them believe that "coming out of the closet" removes the stigma of spiritual failing. This perverted sense of right and wrong stems from their concept of intellectual honesty. They feel that if they do not conceal their nefarious activities, they are at least acting as upright Jews. What they fail to consider is that there is no greater *sheker*, falsehood, than living such a life. Just because one is not acting in a hypocritical manner, it does not justify his miscreancy. Wrong is wrong no matter how one presents it.

Nonetheless, these are not foolish people. Bilaam certainly was no fool. How did he seek a righteous death while living a wicked life? The answer, I think, is in the carefully selected word used by Bilaam to describe himself: *Tamos nafshi mos yesharim*. *Yesharim* means upright, just - intellectually honest. Bilaam knew he was no *tzaddik*. He was as far from righteous as one could be. This did not prevent him however from considering himself to be an upright person. He believed in G-d. He even conversed with the Almighty, but Bilaam had a problem: he was a *baal taavah*, a man obsessed with physical desire. He did not conceal this behind a facade of piety. He was what he was! Therefore, he wanted to die like the upright. What eluded Bilaam was that such "uprightness" is the nadir of perversion and distortion.

Judaism is not a religion which allows for one's personal religious expression. It is a religion of strict obedience. Hashem decides what is and what is not appropriate, and He has indicated the exact manner in which He is to be served. If this does not conform with our idea of religious expression, it is unfortunate. Serving Hashem transcends sincerity. It is about doing what we are told. *Nadav* and *Avihu* were intensely sincere and consummately righteous, but they offered a sacrifice that was not mandated by Hashem. I am sure that many misguided people desire to express themselves to Hashem in total sincerity, but if this expression does not conform with Hashem's bidding, the sincerity is meaningless. *Yashrus*

is important, but Judaism is about listening to Hashem. Without this sense of obedience, one is not only not righteous, he is also not upright.

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

Bilaam tried hard to find something iniquitous about the Jewish People - to no avail. This pasuk is the Scriptural exhortation to look for the positive in every person. While it is clearly the right thing to do, it is often difficult to ferret out the positive when there is so much negativity staring us in the face. The Admor m'Mishkoltz, Shlita, interprets this pasuk in a novel manner. (If) he perceives no iniquity - if he looks for a justifiable rationale for a behavior which appears nefarious, then he will ultimately discover that "his G-d is with him." Every Jew has that Jewish spark within him. While in some it appears to burn with greater intensity than in others, we all have the "Hashem-component" within us. In some, it is just buried deeper.

A group of concerned members of his community approached the Mishkoltzer during Chol Ha'moed Pesach with a complaint concerning a Jewish storekeeper in Petach Tikvah. Apparently, he was selling chametz on Pesach. While this may seem difficult to accept, it does happen. For those who are unaware - not all Jews are observant. The Rebbe was greatly distressed and said that he would pay the storekeeper a visit.

The Rebbe went to the store and remained outside. He called to the storekeeper, "Tzaddik, Pesach kasher v'sameach, 'Righteous person, (I wish you) a kosher and happy Pesach."

When the storekeeper beheld the presence of the Rebbe, bedecked in his Yom Tov finery, his countenance shining, he immediately ran to the front of the store. When he came over, the Rebbe placed his hand on his shoulder and asked, "How are you, tzaddik?"

The man immediately countered, "Why do you call me a tzaddik? I am anything but righteous. Look at me; you will see that I do not even resemble a righteous person."

"Do not say this," the Rebbe said. "Every Jew is a child of the Patriarchs; thus, he has righteousness imbued within him."

So the Rebbe began and continued until he had explained the laws of Pesach to the man - after which, he promptly shuttered his store for the rest of the Festival.

It all depends on how one approaches another Jew. If he looks for "signs" of G-d within him - he will surely discover them.

Pinchas saw... and he stood up from amid the assembly, and took a spear in his hand. (25:7,8)

Pinchas saw Zimri acting in a morally aberrational manner. He immediately grabbed a spear and put an end to the mutinous repugnancy that was taking place. Everyone else stood around wondering what to do. Pinchas saw and acted. Why does the Torah emphasize that Pinchas went to secure a spear and then used it to slay the two sinners? Could it not simply have said that Pinchas saw what was occurring, and he responded accordingly? Why did the Torah underscore that he took a spear?

The Tolna Rebbe, Shlita, offers a practical, but powerful, response. The Torah is teaching us that there are two types of kanaim, zealots: There are those who walk around with spears in their hands, searching for someone to kill. These are sick people whose mission in life is to stir up trouble and destroy lives. They do not care what the protest is about, nor against whom they are protesting. They are like sharks who swim in the water ready to pounce upon the first sign of blood.

Pinchas was not like that. He was a peace-loving Jew who saw a tragedy taking place. He then searched for a spear to carry out the appropriate halachah. Raah maaseh v'nizkar halachah, "He saw an action, and (then) he remembered the halachah." Pinchas acted reluctantly out of a need to respond to a desecration of Divine Authority.

One may express his passion for serving Hashem in various ways. Some call attention to their davening or learning by the high volume level of their recitation. Others do the same thing - but without fanfare. It is from the heart. When the "pot" is boiling, it gives off steam.

A Karliner Chasid once had occasion to be in Vienna for Shabbos. He visited Horav Yisrael Chortkover, zl, and asked his permission to daven in the Chortkover bais ha'knesses, shul. The Rebbe responded, wondering why one would need permission to daven in the shul. A synagogue is open and free to all who enter. Why should the Chortkover shul be any different? The chasid explained that he was from Karlin, a chassidus whose service to the Almighty is expressed with great passion amid high volume. The chassidim literally raise their voices to screaming level as they expound the glory of Hashem. A polite person, the chasid did not want to offend or disturb another Jew with his davening.

The Rebbe replied with an invitation to join them for davening, with one stipulation: tone it down. In Chortkov, the service was much more disciplined, and they wanted to maintain this form of prayer service. The chasid accepted the Rebbe's request, saying that he would "restrain" himself from any form of high volume self-expression.

On Shabbos morning, the chasid came to shul, took a seat and began to pray. His voice was controlled, as he poured out his love for Hashem in the Pesukei D'Zimra prayers. All was going well until he reached the Nishmas prayer, which is an exaltation of Hashem's glory. The chasid "lost it." Forgetting that he had given his word to the Rebbe, he allowed his emotions to reverberate with the inspirational text of the tefillah, prayer. He screamed with adulation as he articulated Hashem's praises. His voice and passion reached a frenzy with each passing word. He realized too late that he had reneged on his word to the Rebbe. One does not play with fire, and only a fool starts up with a tzaddik, righteous person. He was determined to apologize for his lack of self-control.

After waiting in line for a while, he finally entered the Rebbe's office. With tears streaming down his face, he brokenheartedly apologized for breaking his word by screaming during davening. "Why should a Jew who davens with passion feel the need to apologize?" asked the Rebbe.

The chasid was shaken up. What did the Rebbe mean? He had expressly told him the other day that he must tone it down. Now he was saying that a Jew should be allowed to express his fervor in prayer. "Rebbe, prior to Shabbos, the Rebbe expressed his displeasure with my high decibel davening. Why does the Rebbe now change his position?" the chasid respectfully asked.

The Rebbe laughed and said, "When you approached me prior to Shabbos, I responded negatively to your request. The reason is simple: We are not interested in - nor do we countenance - "made-to-order screaming." Prepared high decibel prayer is frowned upon in my bais medrash. When you came to daven, however, and your passion got the better of you - that is davening! Such passion is acceptable and encouraged."

In his Nitzotzos, Horav Yitzchak Hershkowitz, Shlita, quotes an episode which took place concerning the Strelisker Rebbetzin, wife of the holy Horav Uri, zl, m'Strelisk, who once told a German Jew who had come to visit, "When one's heart is on fire, he screams!" She made the comment in regard to the following incident:

Rav Uri was referred to as the Saraf, Fiery (Angel), of Strelisk. A Saraf is one level above the "average" Heavenly Angel. He was known to scream loudly during his davening. One day, this German Jew visited the Chasidic court of Strelisk. After spending a few days in the proximity of the holy Rebbe, he was approached by the Rebbetzin, who asked, "Nu, how do you feel here? What are your observations of Strelisk?"

"Everything is wonderful. I am very impressed and inspired. There is, however, one thing which troubles me, but it is not important."

The Rebbetzin was not accepting this as an answer. If something troubled the Jew, she wanted to know what it was. Perhaps she could enlighten him. "What is it that troubles you?" she asked.

"I have a problem with the Rebbe screaming during davening. Prayer is a personal thing and should be expressed in a quiet, almost intimate manner," the German Jew respectfully replied.

"When the heart is aflame, one must cry out. The Rebbe's heart is burning with passion and love for Hashem. Therefore, he expresses himself accordingly" said the Rebbetzin.

"I, too, have a burning heart; yet, I control myself," the man countered. The Rebbetzin understood that there is no end to such a debate. She bid the man good day and they both went about their business. That Erev Shabbos, the German Jew approached the Rebbetzin with a request. Since he was traveling with a considerable sum of money, which he felt was not safe to leave over Shabbos at the inn where he was staying, could he perhaps deposit it with the Rebbetzin for the duration of Shabbos? The Rebbetzin gladly acquiesced. On Motzoei Shabbos, the man returned and asked the Rebbetzin for his money. The Rebbetzin asked him, "What money?" "Rebbetzin, my money that I gave you before Shabbos. I need it." the man replied somewhat impatiently. "Perhaps you are mistaken," the Rebbetzin replied. "What money did you leave with me?" "Rebbetzin, this is not a time for games! I need my money - and I need it now!" the man began to scream. "Please do not test my patience!" "Perhaps you gave the money to someone else," the Rebbetzin suggested. This was the proverbial straw that changed this calm, disciplined, refined man into a screaming lunatic. "How dare you take my money?" the man began to scream. "I gave you money; I trusted you; and now you deny me my money?" the man began to rant and rave. Finally, the Rebbetzin said, "You must relax, calm down. You will get sick from all the screaming." "Calm down!" the man screamed. "How can I calm down when my heart is burning?" "Ah ha! Your heart is burning," the Rebbetzin began. "When it hurts, one cries out. It all depends when one cries. If one's heart is aflame during davening, this is an indication that his heart burns with yiraas Shomayim, Fear of Heaven. If one cries, however, when he thinks he has lost money, such tears are, regrettably, an indication of his real values."

Va'ani Tefillah

Shema Yisrael Hashem Elokeinu Hashem Echad.

It is difficult - perhaps impossible - for man to grasp the meaning of Hashem's Oneness. The idea that Ein Od Milvado, "There is no One other than He Alone," is something we say, but we do not really understand. In his commentary to the pasuk of Shema in the Torah, Rashi teaches us its meaning: Hashem, Who is our G-d - now, for He is our G-d; only Yisrael recognizes Hashem as Sovereign of the Universe. In the future, however, the entire world will come to acknowledge Hashem as G-d. He will be the only accepted Deity. Even the Christian and Muslims, who maintain some belief in G-d, combine Him with other entities. This is called shituf - partnership. Hashem has no partners. One day, even these nations will come to accept this verity.

Shema Yisrael means that we believe today with emunah sheleimah, complete and perfect faith that there is no entity other than Hashem. Ein Od Milvado; "One day, this belief will become universal." Ba'yom ha'hu yiheyeh Hashem Echad u'Shemo Echad, "One day, there will be no evil, no yetzer hara, evil inclination, and people will finally see the truth." In the meantime, we are alone.

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Rabbi Weinreb's Parsha Column, Parshat Balak

"Who Was Your Teacher?"

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

There is one type of boasting that seems to be unique to the traditional Jewish community. That is a boasting not about oneself, but rather about one's teachers, or rebbeim. Thus, you will find young people saying, "My rebbe is greater than yours!" Or, "I am a student of so-and-so, so you better respect me for that!"

For some of us, it sounds strange that a person would claim religious or intellectual superiority on the basis of the identity of his teacher. After all, the piety or wisdom

of a teacher does not necessarily filter down to the disciple. Nevertheless, boasting about the greatness of one's master is fairly common in some of our circles.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The other cultivates "a generous eye, a modest demeanor and a humble soul" with such success that those of us who emulate him, even if we live millennia after his death, can lay claim to being his disciples.

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

The Hardest Word To Hear

The story of Bilaam, the pagan prophet, begins with a bewildering set of non-sequiturs - a sequence of events that seems to have no logic.

First, the background. The Israelites are approaching the end of their forty years in the wilderness. Already they have fought and won wars against Sihon king of the Amorites and Og king of Bashan. They have arrived at the plains of Moab - today, southern Jordan at the point where it touches the Dead Sea. Balak king of Moab is concerned, and he shares his distress with the elders of Midian. The language the Torah uses at this point is precisely reminiscent of the reaction of the Egyptians at the beginning of the book of Exodus.

Egypt: said to his people: "Here, The children of Israel is more numerous and powerful than we . . ." and felt a disgust at the children of Israel.

Moab: And Moab was very fearful because of the people because it was numerous, and Moab felt a disgust at the children of Israel.

The strategy Balak adopts is to seek the help of the well known seer and diviner Bilaam. Again there is a literary evocation, this time of the words of God to Abraham:

God to Abraham: I will bless those who bless you, and those who curse you I will curse.

Balak to Bilaam: "I know that whoever you bless is blessed and whoever you curse is cursed."

This time the parallel is ironic (indeed the Bilaam story is full of irony). In the case of Abraham, it was God who blessed. In the case of Bilaam, the power was thought to reside in Bilaam himself. In fact the earlier statement of God to Abraham already prefigures the fate of Moab - one who tries to curse Israel will himself be cursed.

The historical background to the Bilaam narrative is well-attested. Several Egyptian pottery fragments dating from the 2nd millennium BCE have been found containing execration texts - curses - directed against Canaanite cities. It was the custom among pre-Islamic Arabs to hire poets thought to be under Divine influence to compose curses against their enemies. As for Bilaam himself, a significant discovery was made in 1967. A plaster inscription on the wall of Deir Alla in Jordan was found to make reference to the night vision of a seer called Bilaam - the earliest reference in archaeological sources to a named individual in the Torah. Thus, though the story itself contains elements of parable, it belongs to a definite context in time and place.

The character of Bilaam remains ambiguous, both in the Torah and subsequent Jewish tradition. Was he a diviner (reading omens and signs) or a sorcerer (practising occult arts)? Was he a genuine prophet or a fraud? Did he assent to the divine blessings placed in his mouth, or did he wish to curse Israel? According to some midrashic interpretations he was a great prophet, equal in stature to Moses. According to others, he was a pseudo-prophet with an "evil eye" who sought Israel's downfall. What I want to examine here is neither Bilaam nor his blessings, but the preamble to the story, for it is here that one of the deepest problems arises, namely: what did God want Bilaam to do? It is a drama in three scenes.

In the first, emissaries arrive from Moab and Midian. They state their mission. They want Bilaam to curse the Israelites. Bilaam's answer is a model of propriety: Stay the night, he says, while I consult with God. God's answer is unequivocal:

But God said to Bilaam, "Do not go with them. You must not put a curse on those people, because they are blessed."

Obediently, Bilaam refuses. Balak redoubles his efforts. Perhaps more distinguished messengers and the promise of significant reward will

persuade Bilaam to change his mind. He sends a second set of emissaries. Bilaam's reply is exemplary:

"Even if Balak gave me his palace filled with silver and gold, I could not do anything great or small to go beyond the command of the Lord my God."

However, he adds a fateful rider:

"Now stay here tonight as the others did, and I will find out what else the Lord will tell me."

The implication is clear. Bilaam is suggesting that God may change His mind. But this is impossible. That is not what God does. Yet to our surprise, that is what God seems to do:

That night God came to Bilaam and said, "Since these men have come to summon you, go with them, but do only what I tell you."

Problem 1: first God had said, "Do not go." Now He says, "Go." Problem 2 appears immediately:

Bilaam got up in the morning, saddled his donkey and went with the princes of Moab. But God was very angry when he went, and the angel of the Lord stood in the road to oppose him.

God says, "Go." Bilaam goes. Then God is very angry. Does God change His mind - not once but twice in the course of a single narrative? The mind reels. What is going on here? What is Bilaam supposed to do? What does God want? There is no explanation. Instead the narrative shifts to the famous scene of Bilaam's donkey - itself a mystery in need of interpretation:

Bilaam was riding on his donkey, and his two servants were with him. When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road with a drawn sword in his hand, it turned off the road into a field. Bilaam beat it to get it back on the road.

Then the angel of the Lord stood in a narrow path between two vineyards, with walls on both sides. When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord, it pressed close to the wall, crushing Bilaam's foot against it. So he beat it again.

Then the angel of the Lord moved on ahead and stood in a narrow place where there was no room to turn, either to the right or to the left. When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord, it lay down under Bilaam, and he was angry and beat it with his staff. Then the Lord opened the donkey's mouth, and it said to Bilaam, "What have I done to you to make you beat me these three times?"

Bilaam answered the donkey, "You have made a fool of me! If I had a sword in my hand, I would kill you right now."

The donkey said to Bilaam, "Am I not your own donkey, which you have always ridden, to this day? Have I been in the habit of doing this to you?" "No," he said.

Then the Lord opened Bilaam's eyes, and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road with his sword drawn. So he bowed low and fell facedown.

The commentators offer various ways of resolving the apparent contradictions between God's first and second reply. According to Nachmanides, God's first statement, "Don't go with them" meant, "Don't curse the Israelites." His second - "Go with them" - meant, "Go but make it clear that you will only say the words I will put in your mouth, even if they are words of blessing." God was angry with Bilaam, not because he went but because he did not tell them of the proviso.

In the nineteenth century, Malbim and R. Zvi Hirsch Mecklenberg suggested a different answer based on close textual analysis. The Hebrew text uses two different words for "with them" in the first and second Divine replies. When God says, "Don't go with them" the Hebrew is *imahem*. When He later says "Go with them" the corresponding word is *itam*. The two prepositions have subtly different meanings. *Imahem* means "with them mentally as well as physically," going along with their plans. *Itam* means "with them physically but not mentally," in other words Bilaam could accompany them but not share their purpose or intention. God is angry when Bilaam goes, because the text states that he went *im* them - in other words he identified with their mission. This is an ingenious solution.

The only difficulty is verse 35, in which the angel of God, having opened Bilaam's eyes, finally tells Bilaam, "Go with the men." According to Malbim and Mecklenberg, this is precisely what God did not want Bilaam to do.

The deepest answer is also the simplest. The hardest word to hear in any language is the word No. Bilaam had asked God once. God had said No. That should have sufficed. Yet Bilaam asked a second time. In that act lay his fateful weakness of character. He knew that God did not want him to go. Yet he invited the second set of messengers to wait overnight in case God had changed his mind.

God does not change His mind. Therefore Bilaam's delay said something not about God but about himself. He had not accepted the Divine refusal. He wanted to hear the answer Yes - and that is indeed what he heard. Not because God wanted him to go, but because God speaks once, and if we refuse to accept what He says, God does not force His will upon us. As the sages of the midrash put it: "Man is led down the path he chooses to tread."

The true meaning of God's second reply, "Go with them," is, "If you insist, then I cannot stop you going - but I am angry that you should have asked a second time." God did not change His mind at any point in the proceedings. In scenes 1, 2 and 3, God did not want Bilaam to go. His "Yes" in scene 2 meant "No" - but it was a No Bilaam could not hear, was not prepared to hear. When God speaks and we do not listen, He does not intervene to save us from our choices. "Man is led down the path he chooses to tread." But God was not prepared to let Bilaam proceed as if he had Divine consent. Instead he arranged the most elegant possible demonstration of the difference between true and false prophecy. The false prophet speaks. The true prophet listens. The false prophet tells people what they want to hear. The true prophet tells them what they need to hear. The false prophet believes in his own powers. The true prophet knows that he has no power. The false prophet speaks in his own voice. The true prophet speaks in a voice not his ("I am not a man of words," says Moses; "I cannot speak for I am a child" says Jeremiah).

The episode of Bilaam and talking donkey is pure humour - and, as I have pointed out before, only one thing provokes Divine laughter, namely human pretension. Bilaam had won renown as the greatest prophet of his day. His fame had spread to Moab and Midian. He was known as the man who held the secrets of blessing and curse. God now proceeds to show Bilaam that when He so chooses, even his donkey is a greater prophet than he. The donkey sees what Bilaam cannot see: the angel standing in the path, barring their way. God humbles the self-important, just as He gives importance to the humble. When human beings think they can dictate what God will say, God laughs. And, on this occasion, so do we.

Some years ago I was making a television programme for the BBC. The problem I faced was this. I wanted to make a documentary about teshuvah, repentance, but I had to do so in a way that would be intelligible to non-Jews as well as Jews, indeed to those who had no religious belief at all. What example could I choose that would illustrate the point?

I decided that one way of doing so was to look at drug addicts. They had developed behaviour that they knew was self-destructive, but it was also addictive. To break the habit would involve immense reserves of will. They had to acknowledge that the life they led was harming them and they had to change. That seemed to me a secular equivalent of teshuvah.

I spent a day in a rehabilitation centre, and it was heartbreaking. The young people there - they were aged between 16 and 18 - all came from broken families. Many of them had suffered abuse. Other than the workers at the centre, they had no networks of support. The staff were exceptional people. Their task was mind-numbingly difficult. They would succeed in getting the addicts to break the habit for days, weeks at a time, and then they would relapse and the whole process would have to begin again. I began to realize that their patience was little less than a human counterpart of God's patience with us. However many times we fail and have to begin again, God does not lose faith in us, and that gives us strength. Here were people doing God's work.

I asked the head of the centre, a social worker, what it was that she gave the young people that made a difference to their lives and gave them the chance to change. I will never forget her answer, because it was one of the most beautiful I ever heard. "We are probably the first people they have met who care for them unconditionally. And we are the first people in their lives who cared enough to say No."

"No" is the hardest word to hear, but it is also often the most important - and the sign that someone cares. That is what Bilaam, humbled, eventually learned and what we too must discover if we are to be open to the voice of God.

To read more writings and teachings from the Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, please visit www.chief Rabbi.org.

Parshat Balak: The corrupt prophet **By Shmuel Rabinowitz**

When a person's negative traits take control, he can act in a seemingly irrational manner.

The Torah portion we read this Shabbat is called Parshat Balak. It is named for Balak ben Tzippor who ruled in Moab when Am Yisrael was in the desert after its exodus from Egypt and before it entered Eretz Yisrael. But the character in our parsha who is the most dominant and significant - as well as the most interesting and intriguing - is the character of Bilaam who comes to curse but ends up blessing Am Yisrael.

Here is how the story in our parsha goes: Balak, the king of Moab, is afraid that Am Yisrael will conquer his land. He sends a group of respected people from Moab and Midian to Bilaam with a desperate plea: Please, curse Am Yisrael, this dangerous nation parked at the entrance of my land which could conquer it at any time.

Bilaam listens to the request and adamantly replies: I must consult with G-d about this. And he indeed gets a clear answer: Don't go with them. Do not curse the nation, because it is blessed! Balak does not despair and he sends an even more respectable delegation than the first with the same request. Again Bilaam consults with G-d, but this time he receives a different answer: Do you want to go with them? Go! But know that I will put into your mouth the words which I want you to say.

Bilaam goes with them to curse Am Yisrael, and the rest is well known: Instead of curses, G-d "planted" moving and special blessings in his mouth.

When we look at this story, we ask ourselves a relatively simple question. How could it be that a person as exalted as this, a prophet who can talk to G-d, would want to go - against the will of G-d - and curse Am Yisrael? And, since G-d made it clear that He will put words in his mouth, why, therefore, would he go to curse? Our sages described Bilaam's character in this way: "Whoever possesses these three things - a generous eye, a humble spirit, a meek soul - is among the disciples of Avraham; whoever possesses an evil eye [jealousy], an arrogant spirit, and a greedy soul is among the disciples of the wicked Bilaam." (Mishna, Masechet Avot 5, 19) And here we find a concise definition of the corrupt character of Bilaam: Jealousy, pride, and unlimited greed. These were not minor traits in Bilaam's character, but this was the message he bequeathed to generations that caused him to fall so far into a deep hole. Whoever has these shortcomings is defined as a disciple of Bilaam's.

These traits clarify for us how he behaved the way he did and went of his own free will to curse Am Yisrael.

A person who cannot be happy in someone else's joy due to his jealousy, a person who looks upon another from "above" in pride, a person who is swept up in his desires without self-control - this person is capable of anything.

He is capable of clearly knowing the will of G-d and doing the opposite! He is capable of knowing that G-d will plant the desired words in his mouth - and will try anyway! There is a message embedded here for every person. When a person's negative traits take control, he can act in a

seemingly irrational manner, against all logic, and do things which are damaging to himself and his surroundings.

His urges, his pride and his jealousy can lead him to ruin, and if he is not careful, he could end up being among "Bilaam's evil disciples."

Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz is rabbi of the Western Wall and Holy Sites.

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The Search for Truth

The TorahWeb Foundation

Rabbi Dr. Abraham J. Twerski

Did Bilam really think he could outsmart Hashem?

The Talmud cites several "all inclusive" principles. Hillel told the proselyte that the essence of Torah is, "Love your fellow as yourself," and Rabbi Akiva said that this is the all-encompassing principle of Torah. Ben Azai said that the verse "This is the book of the generations of Adam" (Breishis 5:1) is all-encompassing. The Talmud says, "Which is a small verse upon which all the essentials of the Torah depend? 'Know Him (Hashem) in all your ways' (Mishlei 3:6, Berachos 63a)."

I would like to suggest that there is an all-encompassing verse of mussar, human behavior and psychology: "All the ways of a person are right in one's own eyes" (Mishlei 21:2). Some people may do something wrong even though they know that it is wrong, but the overwhelming number of people believe that what they are doing is right, and are often very resistant to any suggestion that they may be wrong.

Perhaps this is the greatness of the patriarch Abraham in his willingness to sacrifice his son, Isaac. For decades, Abraham vociferously protested the pagan ritual of human sacrifice. "G-d would never desire human sacrifice. This is an abomination!" If he carried out the Divine command to bring Isaac as an offering, he would have to declare, "All my life, I have been in error." Abraham was willing to do so. It is a sign of greatness to admit that one was wrong.

We are often victims of self-deception. When we have a desire to do something, the defense mechanisms in our subconscious minds can develop ingenious reasons why what we wish to do is right and proper. This is termed rationalization. We concoct logical reasons for what we wish to do and we believe them, and if criticized, we vigorously defend our mistakes.

Rabbi Eliahu Dessler in *Michtav M'Eliahu* (Search for Truth) has a powerful essay on "the Perspective of Truth." He cites the Torah statement that "a bribe will blind the eyes of a judge and distort even the thoughts of the righteous" (Devarim 16:19). We are all bribed by our desires, and we cannot think objectively. We rationalize our behavior. The Talmud says that even the minutest bribe can bring about a distortion of judgment.

The tzaddik of Apt was a judge in a litigation that went on for several days. Abruptly, he withdrew from the case, saying he had lost his objectivity.

On Friday evening, when he put on his Shabbos kaftan, he found an envelope with money that one of the litigants had put into a pocket. "Now I understand why I lost my objectivity. A litigant had tried to bribe me by putting money in my kaftan. Even though I did not discover the bribe until several days later, my thinking had shifted to favoring him. I did not know why this was happening, but I felt that I had lost my objectivity. That is the power of a bribe. It can distort your judgment even if you are unaware of the bribe."

How much more so are we subject to distortion when the "bribe" is within us, and has the power of a strong desire!

A chassid asked Rebbe Yisrael of Rhizin for a guideline to avoid faulty decisions. The rebbe told him that the way a tightrope walker keeps his delicate balance to avoid falling to his death, is that when he feels a tug to one side, he leans a bit to the other side. "Many of your desires arise from the yetzer hara. When you feel an urge to do something, pause and think of reasons why you should not do it. That may enable you to keep your balance, to do what is right."

Forty years of treating people with alcohol addiction have shown me the validity of Rabbi Dessler's observation. One recovered alcoholic said, "In all my years of drinking, I never took a drink unless I decided it was the right thing to do at the time." The calamitous results of alcohol and drug abuse are totally ignored. The craving for the pleasant effect of the chemical blinds one to its disastrous consequences. One is bribed into rationalization. Rabbi Dessler states that intense learning of mussar and sincere prayer for Divine guidance can protect us from dangerous self-deception.

Bilam was no fool. He was told in no uncertain terms that Hashem would not allow him to curse Israel, and he obviously knew the infinite power of Hashem. Yet, his hatred for Israel distorted his judgment, and he tried to do what he logically knew he could not do.

If we wish to do what is right, we must be on the alert and on the defensive. Our defense mechanisms operate in the subconscious part of our minds which is "cunning, baffling and powerful." We must exercise our conscious mind to the limit with prayer and mussar to avoid self-deception. Copyright © 2013 by The TorahWeb Foundation. All rights reserved.

Rav Kook List

Rav Kook on the Torah Portion

Balak: Eliminating Idolatry

The Weird Worship of Peor

After failing to curse the people of Israel, Balaam devised another plan to make trouble for the Jewish people. He advised using Moabite and Midianite women to entice the Israelite men into worshipping Baal Peor.

How was this idol worshipped? The word Peor means to 'open up' or 'disclose.' According to the Talmud, the worshippers would bare their backsides and defecate in honor of the idol. The Talmud (Sanhedrin 64a) illustrates the repulsive nature of this particular idolatry with the following two stories:

"There was once a gentile woman who was very ill. She vowed: 'If I recover from my illness, I will go and worship every idol in the world.' She recovered, and proceeded to worship every idol in the world. When she came to Peor, she asked its priests, 'How is this one worshipped?' They told her, 'One eats greens and drinks strong drink, and then defecates before the idol.' The woman responded, 'I'd rather become ill again than worship an idol in such a [revolting] manner.'"

"Sabta, a townsman of Avlas, once hired out a donkey to a gentile woman. When she came to Peor, she said to him, 'Wait till I enter and come out again.' When she came out, he told her, 'Now you wait for me until I go in and come out.' 'But are you not a Jew?' she asked. 'What does it concern you?' he replied. He then entered, uncovered himself before it, and wiped himself on the idol's nose. The acolytes praised him, saying, 'No one has ever served this idol so consummately!'"

Exposing the True Nature of Idolatry

What was the point of this most odious idolatrous practice?

In truth, Peor was not an aberrant form of idolatry. On the contrary, Peor was the epitome of idolatry! Other forms of idolatry are more aesthetic, but they just cover up the true ugliness of idolatry. The Golden Calf was the opposite extreme, a beautiful, elegant form of idol worship. But Peor, as its name indicates, exposes the true nature of idolatry. All other forms of idolatry are just branches of Peor, with their inner vileness concealed to various extents.

The repulsive service of Peor contains the key for abolishing idolatry. When the prophet Elijah fought against the idolatry of Baal, he taunted the people: 'If Baal is God, then follow him.' The people, in fact, were already worshippers of Baal. What was Elijah telling them?

Elijah's point was that Baal is just a sanitized version of Peor. If Baal is God, then go all the way. You should worship the source of this form of worship - Peor. Elijah's exposure of Baal as just a cleaner version of Peor

convinced the people. They were truly revolted by the scatological practices of Peor, and instinctively responded, 'Hashem is God! Hashem is God!' (I Kings 18:39)

Historically, the uprooting of idolatry will take place in stages. The allure of Peor, the purest form of idolatry, was shattered after Moses rooted out those who worshipped Peor at Shittim. That purge gave strength to the men of the Great Assembly who subdued the temptation of idolatry in the time of Ezra (Sanhedrin 64a). The final eradication of idolatry's last vestiges will take place in the end of days, through the spiritual power of Moses, whose burial place faces Beit Peor. This obliteration will occur as idolatry's innate foulness is exposed to all.

Why is idolatry so intrinsically vile?

The source of idolatry's appeal is in fact a holy one - an impassioned yearning for closeness to God. Ignorance and moral turpitude, however, prevent this closeness, blocking the Divine light from the soul. The overwhelming desire for Divine closeness, despite one's moral failings, leads to idol worship. Instead of correcting one's flaws, these spiritual yearnings are distorted into cravings for idolatry. The unholy alliance of spiritual yearnings together with immoral and decadent behavior produces the intrinsic foulness of idolatry. Instead of trying to elevate humanity and refine our desires, idolatry endeavors to debase our most refined aspirations to our coarsest physical aspects. This is the ultimate message of Peor's scatological practices.

True Victory over Idolatry

The Great Assembly in Ezra's time conquered the temptation of idolatry by generally diminishing spiritual yearnings in the world. They did not truly defeat idolatry; rather, they subdued its enticement. In the words of the Midrash, they cast the temptation of idolatry into a metal cauldron and sealed it with lead, "so that its call may not be heard." Thus we find that the Talmud (Sanhedrin 102b) records a dream of Rav Ashi, the fifth century Talmudic sage. In his dream, Rav Ashi asked the idolatrous King Menasseh, "Since you are so wise, why did you worship idols?" To which Menasseh replied, "Were you there, you would have lifted up the hems of your garment and sped after me."

The true cure for this perilous attraction, however, is through greatness of Torah. The highest goal of Torah is the appearance of inner light in the human soul, as divine wisdom is applied to all the spheres that the soul is capable of assimilating - be it in thought, emotion, desires, and character traits.

Even nowadays, poverty in Torah knowledge results in a weakness of spirit, similar to the spiritual darkness caused by idolatry. The world awaits redemption through greatness of Torah. Then idolatry will be truly defeated, and not merely subdued in a sealed metal cauldron.

(Gold from the Land of Israel, pp. 271-273. Adapted from Shemonah Kevatzim VIII: 132; IV: 56)

Comments and inquiries may be sent to: <mailto:RavKookList@gmail.com>

May I Dangle the Receiver?

By Rabbi Yirmiyohu Kaganoff

Regarding Parshas Balak and the attempts to discredit the Jewish people, we present:

Or

Hearing is Not Believing, and other Loshon Hora Questions.

Question #1: "Two of my neighbors are in a tiff, and I have a good relationship with both of them. Should I get involved to try to make peace, knowing that both sides will tell me their version of the story?"

Question #2: "Someone told me that one who believes loshon hora (disparaging things about people) does more harm to himself than does the one who spoke the loshon hora! How can this be?"

Question #3: Leora* asked me the following question:

(*All names in this article have been changed.)

"Some of my contacts are not so careful about saying loshon hora. Is it sufficient that I hold the receiver at a distance when they begin to tell me things that I do not want to hear?"

I asked Leora if she could think of other options, and she explained, "It is uncomfortable to tell people that they are violating halacha or to ask them not to gossip. I can create an excuse to end the conversation, such as, 'the baby is crying' or some similar emergency. But I would rather not do this, unless I must."

Leora's method of being careful to avoid hearing loshon hora, as a halachically observant person must be, is indeed accomplishing its purpose. The question is whether she must do more than this, since the speaker thinks that Leora is still listening. Later, I will explain why this may be problematic, and whether it is sufficient for Leora to simply "dangle the receiver."

INTRODUCTION

We all know that telling or receiving disparaging information about members of Klal Yisrael is a Torah violation. "We are commanded not to accept loshon hora as true and not to look negatively upon the person about whom the story was told" (Shaarei Teshuvah 3:213). We should bear in mind that loshon hora is prohibited, even if it is absolutely true.

Exactly what is the prohibition of believing or accepting loshon hora? Before we answer this question, we need to define loshon hora. Two types of derogatory information are included in loshon hora:

I. Loshon hora is information that reflects poorly on someone, creating an unjustified bad impression of him or her. For example, relating that someone once violated certain commandments of committed sins disparages his reputation and constitutes loshon hora (Chofeitz Chayim 4:1).

II. Another category of loshon hora is relating information that might harm someone, even though it is not at all derogatory (Rambam, Hilchos Dei'os 7:5). For example, although it is not offensive to say that someone is in debt, there are many situations where this information could cause harm. Similarly, informing a person that someone has a wayward aunt is loshon hora, if this might result in disqualifying the person for a shidduch as a consequence (see Taz, Even Ha'ezer, 50:8).

DEFINING KABBALAS LOSHON HORA

What should you do if you hear a story that reflects badly on someone?

Before I explain what to do in this situation, we should explain the two types of ill-doing involved when receiving derogatory information.

I. Believing (kabbalas) loshon hora.

II. Hearing loshon hora.

I. BELIEVING LOSHON HORA

The first prohibition against accepting loshon hora is that it results in one's now having a less favorable impression of a fellow Jew. The fact that the information may be true and he may have transgressed does not allow me to think less of him, and therefore, I may not accept the report of his having sinned as fact (Zera Chayim pg 361, in explanation of opinion of Yad Ha'ketanah). For this reason, if I deny that the story is true, I have not accepted loshon hora, and I did not violate kabbalas loshon hora.

HEARING JUICY GOSSIP

What do I do if I hear some juicy chitchat?

If you hear some gossip, just completely disavow your accepting that the story is true. Remember that most stories that one hears are distorted, so it should take no great effort to simply deny the story's accuracy.

If you find it difficult to doubt the story completely, re-interpret it in a way that it casts the person in a favorable light. For example, perhaps he/she thought that the act committed was halachically acceptable, or perhaps the reported event was misunderstood or only partially observed (see Be'er

Mayim Chayim 6:1). For example, if you heard that someone grabbed a child, perhaps he was pulling the child away from danger. If you heard that someone argued with his father, perhaps he was trying to convince him to take needed medication.

REINTERPRETING THE STORY

Here is an example of how to reinterpret a story: Sharon tells you that Michal treated her rudely. You know that Michal is a quiet person; on top of that, perhaps Michal was distracted or under stress and was therefore even less exuberant than usual. Sharon, whom you know is sensitive, may have misinterpreted Michal's lack of cheerfulness as rudeness. This interpretation of events will add no negative understanding to what you already know firsthand about both of them. The result is that the reinterpreted story does not place either person in a bad light and is therefore not *loshon hora*.

In this example, convincing Sharon that Michal was not being rude would be a big *mitzvah*.

By the way, one may listen to each side of a dispute relate his/her negative impressions of the disputant in order to calm down the quarrel (Chofeitz Chayim, 6:4). Here, too, one may not accept either story as accurate, but one should, in one's own mind, reinterpret the events, so that they do not reflect badly on the parties involved.

For example, you are aware of a situation in which siblings are in a dispute concerning how to allocate resources to care for their elderly mother. While resolving this conflict, your goal is to appreciate the merit of each side's approach and convince the other side that, although they might disagree, no one bears any ill will. Even if you cannot convince them of this, you should certainly not accept that either side means any wrong, unless you have solid evidence to the contrary (Shabbos 56a; Hagahos Maimoniyos, Dei'os 7:4).

CALMING A FIGHT

Two of your neighbors are in a big tiff. According to Reuven and Rochel, the upstairs kids are totally undisciplined and boisterous, making a racket that ruins Rochel's life. Levi and Leah upstairs, however, have a different story. Their kids are extremely well disciplined and obedient, but Rochel is excessively sensitive to noise and cannot tolerate even the normal sliding of a chair under the dinner table. Since you have a good relationship with both parties and may be able to resolve the squabble, you may listen to each side's complaints about the other, being careful not to believe them. It may, indeed, be true that Rochel is highly sensitive, and it may also be true that Levi and Leah do not control their kids as much as they should. Your job is to make *shalom* between them, not to accept whichever interpretation of events is true.

One violates the prohibition against accepting *loshon hora* when one's impression of any party is disparaged without adequate evidence. In all the above instances, if one's positive impression of the people involved remains intact, despite all that one heard, one has successfully avoided accepting *loshon hora*. (There are exceptions when one may accept what one heard as true, but these are beyond the scope of this article.)

With this background, we can now answer Question #1 above:

"Two of my neighbors are in a tiff, and I have a good relationship with both of them. Should I get involved to try to make peace, knowing that both sides will tell me their version of the story?" The answer is that you should get involved, but be careful not to accept anyone's account as an accurate portrayal of the misdeeds of his/her neighbor.

LOSHON HORA ABOUT A CHILD

There is an interesting halachic difference between these two categories of *loshon hora*. The first category, relating that someone did something improper, does not apply to the transgressions or faults of a child. Since a minor's immaturity exempts him from responsibility, it is usually not *loshon hora* to discuss his misdeeds or capers. Therefore, it is permitted to mention that a child did something mischievous, since this action does not

reflect negatively on him (see Chofeitz Chayim 8:3 and Be'er Mayim Chayim ad loc.). [Some poskim contend that, if the child would be embarrassed by someone reporting what he did, or his activity was not considered age-appropriate, then repeating this information is prohibited as *loshon hora* (Shevilei Chayim 8:4; Shu't Lechafeitz Bachayim #29). On the other hand, I once read a psak of Rav Chayim Kanievsky shlit'a contending that, as long as the story is not harmful to the child's interests, there is no *loshon hora* about his antics since he is not yet required to observe *mitzvos*.]

However, when the information could ultimately prove harmful to the child, one may not share it (Chofeitz Chayim 8:3). For example, if a school might refuse to accept a child based on his family background, it is *loshon hora* to provide the school with this information. Similarly, people smile when told that a young man drew on the wall when he was three years old, but they might assume that he is psychologically unhealthy if they hear that he had violent fits of rage at age 12½.

II. HEARING LOSHON HORA

Until now, we discussed some basic halachos of accepting *loshon hora*. In addition to the prohibition of believing *loshon hora*, it is also prohibited to hear negative things about someone when there is no need. It is insufficient to simply not believe what one heard; one must avoid hearing it.

WHAT DO I DO IF SOMEONE BEGINS TO GOSSIP?

How far must one go to avoid hearing *loshon hora*?

The Gemara (Kesubos 5b) homiletically interprets a verse as saying, "there should be pegs [i.e., your fingers, which are shaped like pegs] inside your ears," meaning, if you sense that someone is about to tell you something inappropriate, you should place your fingers on your ears to avoid hearing it. In other words, one must not only be careful to avoid *loshon hora* but must even do something unusual if that is the only way to avoid hearing it. Thus if you are among a group of people and one of them begins to say *loshon hora*, you should leave immediately. If you are on the phone, and the other party begins saying *loshon hora*, you should quickly say, "An emergency just came up; I'll have to call you back later," and abruptly hang up the receiver. Of course, in this last case, you told the whole truth: an emergency did indeed come up, since the other party began saying *loshon hora*!

What if one is unable to leave and avoid hearing gossip? The Gemara states that one must even place one's hands over one's ears to shun *loshon hora*! Nevertheless, the Chofeitz Chayim (6:5) notes that, although this is the proper thing to do, many people may find it too embarrassing to sit this way and have people mock them. Under these circumstances, the Chofeitz Chayim rules that one should be careful not to believe the stories being told, and be careful not to want to hear them. It is preferable that one demonstrate his disapproval, at least with his facial expression (Chofeitz Chayim, 6:5).

Rabbeinu Yonah implies that one should demonstrate to the speaker that he does not want to hear the *loshon hora*. Showing a total lack of interest in the conversation discourages the speaker from saying *loshon hora*.

We now understand Leora's original question. She does not want to listen to the gossip she is being told. The question is: to what extent must she demonstrate that she does not want to hear *loshon hora*? Although dangling the receiver prevents Leora from hearing the gossip, it does not demonstrate disapproval to the speaker. Whereas listeners who are visible to the speaker can actually show disinterest, the speaker here may think that she has an avid listener; thus, perhaps Leora should put an active end to the conversation. Even though the speaker is not saying *loshon hora* to anyone, as there is no listener, the speaker nevertheless thinks that he or she is sinning. Someone who thought he was doing something forbidden but ended up doing something permitted needs forgiveness and atonement (Kiddushin 81b; Nazir 23a). The Gemara's example of this is someone who wanted to eat something non-kosher, but inadvertently ate kosher. The unsuccessful intent to violate the halacha is itself a Torah prohibition.

As a result, although by dangling the receiver Leora is not hearing loшон hora, she has not prevented the person from thinking that loшон hora has been spoken, either, a sin for which she will require atonement. Therefore I told Leora that it would be better to terminate the conversation by saying, for example, “something just came up, I’ll call you back later!” This prevents the talker from violating any prohibition.

WHO IS WORSE?

After all we have discussed here, I can now explain the Rambam’s statement (Hilchos Dei’os 7:3) that one who believes loшон hora inflicts more self-harm than the speaker! Why should this be?

The reason is that the basic purpose of forbidding loшон hora is to avoid harming a Jew’s reputation. Who is the greater maligner, one who spreads information that he knows to be true, or one who believes an unsubstantiated story? Certainly, the one who accepts an unsubstantiated report that degrades someone denigrates kedushas Yisrael to a greater degree (see Nesiv Chayim 6:3).

Rav Chayim Pinchas Scheinberg zt”l noted that when people repeat the pasuk, mi ha’ish he’chafeitz chayim ohev yamim lir’os tov, “Who is the man who wants life, loves his days to see only good,” they often pay little attention to the concluding words, liros tov, “to see good,” even though these words are the key to success in this mitzvah. If you view everyone with a good eye, you will be unable to believe derogatory information about them. As Rav Pam once said, “My mother was incapable of saying or accepting loшон hora; not simply because of her yiras shamayim, but because of her appreciation of what Jews are!” May we all reach the level of seeing the good and really appreciating our fellow Jews!

Ohr Somayach :: Talmud Tips :: Parshat Balak :: Pesachim 2 - 8
For the week ending 22 June 2013 / 13 Tammuz 5773
by Rabbi Moshe Newman

The first mishna of our new mesechta states that the mitzvah to check for chametz before Pesach is “ohr” of the 14th of Nissan. What does “ohr” mean in this context?

Usually it means “light”, which would seem to imply that the mitzvah is the check on the morning of the 14th, the morning before the Seder. However, our gemara explains that according to all opinions — Rav Yehuda and Rav Huna — it means the night that begins the 14th of Nissan, a full 24 hours before the Seder.

The gemara explains that Tana of our mishna said “ohr” as a euphemism to express “night”. The commentaries explain that calling “night” as “light” is not a falsehood, G-d forbid, but teaches that the mitzvah of checking for chametz should be done at the very begin beginning of the night, at the transition between the last rays of light into darkness.

Pesachim 3a

“Rav Yehuda said that Rav said in the name of Rabbi Meir that a person should always teach his student in a concise manner.”

Pesachim 3b

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