

BS"D



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INTERNET PARSHA SHEET ON BALAK - 5764

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SALT!! ("Surf A Little Torah")

RABBI DAVID SILVERBERG

Motzaei Shabbat, June 26, 2004

The Gemara in Masekhet Bava Batra (14b) goes through each book of the Tanakh and identifies its author. While this list is generally straightforward, one sentence requires clarification: "Moshe wrote his book [the five books of the Torah] and the parasha of Bilam..." The Gemara here singles out Parashat Balak, the story of Balak and Bilam's attempt to curse Benei Yisrael, and appears to consider it separate from the rest of Chumash. What does the Gemara mean? If we are already told that Moshe wrote the entire Chumash, why does the Gemara add that he also wrote "the parasha of Bilam"?

The Ritva, in his commentary to Bava Batra, approvingly cites an explanation claiming that the Gemara here does not refer to the narrative of Parashat Balak. "Parashat Bilam" means not this parasha, but rather some other text. As Rav David Mandelbaum suggests in his *Pardes Yosef He-chadash*, the Ritva here probably refers to a theory that appears in a later work – the *Sefer Tziyoni* (by Rav Menachem Ben Meir Tziyoni). This theory claims that Moshe composed a lengthy work describing the entire episode of Balak and Bilam in greater detail, but this work was lost. Interestingly, Rav Mandelbaum notes that in the Munich edition of the Talmud, the text of the aforementioned Gemara reads, "sefer Bilam" rather than "parashat Bilam," perhaps implying that the Gemara refers to a book, rather than a section in the Chumash. This would certainly lend support to this theory cited by the Ritva. Furthermore, the Gemara in Masekhet Sanhedrin (106b) records that a certain heretic read in "the pinkas [ledger, booklet] of Bilam" a description of the events surrounding Bilam's death. Rav Mandelbaum speculates that this, too, might refer to the lost book composed by Moshe telling of the incident of Bilam and Balak. (However, in the commentary to Masekhet Avot attributed to Rashi (5:19), a different text of this Gemara appears, according to which the heretic read this information not in a book, but on Bilam's tombstone.)

A different approach is cited in the name of Rav Chayim of Brisk. The Sifrei in Parashat Vezot Heberakha, commenting on the verse, "There never again arose a prophet like Moshe" (Devarim 34:10), writes that only among Am Yisrael was there never a prophet of equal stature with Moshe. Among the gentiles, however, there indeed lived such a prophet – Bilam. Many writers have endeavored to explain this comparison between two seemingly incomparable men – Moshe and Bilam, and tomorrow we will *iy"H* present two such explanations. Rav Chayim, however, suggests that Chazal here compare not the two men, but the nature of their prophecies. Moshe's prophecy was unique in that it attained the formal status of "Torah," a status with its own, distinct

properties that set it apart from standard prophecy. (Rav Soloveitchik elaborated on this fundamental difference between Moshe's prophecies and those of other prophets in his famous eulogy for his uncle, Rav Yitzchak Zev; see "Divrei Hagot Ve-ha'arakha," pp. 65-68.) Similarly, Bilam's prophecies were incorporated into the Chumash with this same status. They did not remain mere prophecies; they became part of the actual body of Torah. Why was this the case? Why did Bilam earn this privilege of having his prophetic blessings to Am Yisrael become part of their Torah? Rashi, in his commentary to this parasha (22:5), cites from a Midrash that G-d granted prophecy to a gentile so that the other nations could not claim, "If we had prophets, we would have returned to proper conduct." G-d granted prophecy to a gentile to demonstrate that this would not improve the conduct of the pagan nations. Bilam's attempt to use his prophetic powers to bring about death and destruction showed that the pagans were undeserving of this gift. Rav Chayim claimed that in order to dispel this argument, G-d had to grant a gentile the same level of prophecy as Moshe; therefore, Bilam was given the opportunity to prophesy and have his prophecies included as part of Torah.

This, Rav Chayim suggests, explains why the Gemara singled out "parashat Bilam." The rest of Torah was written by Moshe, who thereby endowed it with the formal status of "Torah." Bilam's prophecies, however, possessed this quality and status even before Moshe wrote them down. Thus, his writing of "parashat Bilam" differs fundamentally from that of the rest of the Torah, and the Gemara therefore speaks of them separately.

Sunday – 8 Tammuz 5764 – June 27, 2004

Yesterday, we mentioned and briefly discussed the famous "comparison" drawn by the Sifrei between Moshe, the greatest of the prophets, and Bilam, the corrupt sorcerer who attempted to place a curse on Benei Yisrael, as recorded in Parashat Balak. Commenting on the Torah's assertion that "There never again arose a prophet like Moshe" (Devarim 34:10), the Sifrei writes, "Among Yisrael there never arose, but among the gentile nations there did arise – Bilam." Meaning, although the Jewish people would never produce a prophet like Moshe, the pagan nations did – Bilam. In what way is Bilam comparable to Moshe? How could Chazal speak of Bilam as Moshe's equal? Yesterday we looked at one explanation; today we will present two others.

Rav Moshe Leib Shachor, in his "Avnei Shoham," suggests an approach based on a careful reading of the Rambam's discussion of prophecy in his *Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* (chapter 7). The Rambam begins by outlining the various preconditions for receiving prophecy, which include wisdom, a stellar personality and complete control over physical drives. Prophecy thus requires immense preparation; to reach the level of prophet, a person must work to elevate himself spiritually to the point where he is worthy of beholding a prophetic vision. After outlining the basic requirements and properties of prophecy in the first five halakhot of this chapter, the Rambam then writes in halakha 7, "Everything we have said refers to the manner of prophecy of all the prophets, both the early and late prophets, with the exception of Moshe Rabbenu, the master of all the prophets." The Rambam then proceeds to delineate the differences between Moshe's prophecy and that of other prophets. The Avnei Shoham suggests that although the Rambam does not say so explicitly, Moshe and other prophets differed also with respect to the prerequisite preparation. Moshe's singular level of prophecy was not something that could be earned. No human being, including Moshe himself, could rise to the spiritual level rendering him worthy of such an intense, direct experience of prophecy. Although Moshe may have exceeded the other prophets in terms of spiritual perfection, the unique quality of his prophecy came to him as a gift, rather than as something he earned.

Herein, suggests the Avnei Shoham, lies the point of resemblance between Moshe and Bilam. Bilam did not earn prophecy; G-d granted

him this power, as we saw yesterday, to prove that even if the pagans had a prophet in their midst their conduct would not have been improved (see Rashi, in his commentary to this parasha – 22:5). In this respect, of an undeserved prophetic experience, Moshe and Bilam are comparable.

The Chatam Sofer, in his "Torat Moshe" to Parashat Vezot Habrakha, suggests a particularly novel approach to Chazal's comparison between Moshe and Bilam. In Parashat Vezot Habrakha, after testifying that there would never again be a prophet like Moshe, the Torah writes, "for the various signs and portents that the Lord sent him to display in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his courtiers and his whole country" (34:11). The Chatam Sofer suggests that only in this respect did Bilam equal Moshe – in the ability to bring destruction and ruin upon a nation, as Moshe did to Egypt. Chazal tell that Bilam had placed a curse upon Moav, which allowed the otherwise inferior nation of Emori to conquer half its territory (see Rashi, 22:6, based on the Midrash Tanchuma). Now, had it not been for G-d's intervention, he would have placed a similar curse upon Benei Yisrael to enable Moav to destroy them. Indeed, Bilam was endowed with extraordinary prophetic powers, but only for a single purpose: to wreak havoc and destruction. These powers indeed equaled Moshe's powers of destruction, as manifest in Egypt, but it goes without saying that for purposes of spirituality, G-dliness and sanctity, Bilam not only did not rival Moshe, but was situated at the opposite end of the spectrum.

The basic idea expressed here by the Chatam Sofer, that Bilam's capacity was limited to cursing and destroying, appears already in Seforno's commentary to this parasha (22:6). Seforno claims that although Balak tells Bilam, "For I know that he whom you bless is blessed indeed, and he whom you curse is cursed," in truth, Bilam had no power to bless. Balak makes this remark in an attempt at adulation, but he knew that Bilam was capable only of cursing, not bestowing blessing. For this reason, Seforno writes, Balak hired Bilam specifically to place a curse upon Benei Yisrael, rather than to bestow a blessing upon Moav. Since Bilam's powers were limited to destruction, Balak could not ask him to bless Moav with protection and military might, but only to wish death and destruction upon Am Yisrael.



From: RABBI YISSOCHER FRAND
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"RavFrاند" List - Rabbi Frand on Parshas Balak

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher

Bilaam Lost His Shock Value

Our Sages tell us an astounding fact: that Bilaam had prophetic powers on par with Moshe Rabbeinu. The verse says, "There arose not in Israel another prophet equal to Moshe" [Devarim 34:10]. The Rabbis explain that there did not arise another such prophet specifically in Israel -- but in the nations of the world there did arise another such prophet. Who was he? Bilaam the son of Be'or. [Sifrei]

We are therefore dealing with an individual who had a relationship with G-d that we can only dream about. And yet we see that he had an attitude that is hard to fathom. When G-d asked Bilaam, "Who are these people with you?," Rashi explains that Bilaam answers G-d arrogantly: "Even though I am not important in your Eyes, I am important in the eyes of Kings."

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

How do we explain the paradoxical personality of Bilaam? Rav Schwab offers an interesting insight. G-d gave us with certain senses. Most of us

are blessed with the senses of sight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell. There is a sixth sense. That is the sense of being able to be impressed. G-d gave most human beings the ability to be impressed by certain phenomenon in this world.

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

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

Rav Schwab suggests that a person can lose his sense of being impressed through gluttonous indulgence in every passion and lust in the world. If a person is obsessed with enjoying, taking, eating, consuming, and all he ever thinks about is indulging in the most obscene and gluttonous fashion, then after awhile, nothing impresses him any more. He is so consumed with just enjoying himself that nothing gets him excited anymore.

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

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

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

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

The "Trouble" Of Reciting Parshas Bilaam Daily

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

Rav Ekyakim Schlessinger asks (in his sefer, Beis Av): if, in fact, Bilaam's power was limited to knowing the moment of G-d's anger, that would seem to be a far cry from the Torah's testimony that he was a Yodeah daas Elyon -- he knew the mind of his Creator. The Beis Av therefore cites a Rabbinic teaching regarding the Creation of the world.

G-d's "initial plan" was to create the world only using His Attribute of Justice (Middas haDin). In such a world, if someone would sin, the punishment would be delivered immediately. But when G-d saw that human beings would not be able to exist in such a world, He partnered the Attribute of Mercy (Middas haRachamim) with the Middas haDin in His Creation of the world. This does not mean that if someone sins, G-d will forget about it. It simply means that G-d extends a grace period. G-d gives the sinner some slack, so to speak, giving him the ability to ultimately repent. This combination of Din [judgment] and Rachamim [mercy] is the way the world operates.

Bilaam knew "Daas Elyon". That means that he was aware of G-d's original plan. He knew that G-d originally wanted to create the world with only the Middas haDin. He knew that every single day of every single year there is one moment when G-d returns to his "Grand Plan" and looks at the world with the Middas HaDin. This is the intent of the Gemara which says that during one moment of the day G-d gets angry. At that moment, Heaven forbid, anything can happen. The Middas haDin has free reign at that moment. This knowledge was Bilaam's great strength.

Bilaam's power was to always look at the world askance. The Mishneh [Avos 5:22] teaches that Bilaam had an 'Evil Eye'. This means that he looked at the world in a non-generous fashion, rather than with an eye toward the Middas haRachamim. He would always look with an eye toward invoking the Middas HaDin.

This explains why Bilaam always refers to himself as the "one eyed man". Who would ever describe himself as delivering "the speech of a one-eyed man?" Is being blind in one eye something to brag about and be proud of?

Man was given two eyes: One to look at things with the Middas haDin and one to look at things with the Middas haRachamim. We should examine things and be able to see in them the positive aspects as well as the negative aspects. Bilaam bragged that he was a person who always looks only with an 'evil eye'. "My claim to fame is that I can invoke Judgment against the Jewish people because I know when G-d utilizes only his Attribute of Judgment."

Our great salvation was that "He perceived no iniquity in Jacob" (lo hitbit aven b'Yakov) [Bamidbar 23:21]. In all the days that Bilaam tried to invoke the Attribute of Judgment, G-d in His Mercy abstained from Anger and never looked at us with Middas HaDin.

Finally, homiletically, the Beis Av suggests that this is the intention of the Gemara in Brochos which states that "Would it not cause great trouble for the congregation (Torach Tzibbur), the Rabbis would have instituted the recital of the section of Balak in the middle of the daily recitation of Shma." The standard interpretation of this Gemara is that we would have included the reading of Balak within - in addition to -- the reading of Krias Shma. However, the Beis Av cites an opinion from the Satmar Rebbe that the Gemara is making an even stronger statement: We would have REPLACED the reading of Krias Shma with that of Parshas Balak. If that's the case how what that be "troubling the congregation"?

We can understand the term "Torach Tzibbur" if the option was to read both the three section of Krias Shma AND Parshas Balak. The inclusion of an additional paragraph in Shma would create a burden for the congregation. If, however, the alternative was to replace Krias Shma with Balak -- there would have been no net increase, so how would it trouble the congregation?

The answer is that we would be shattered if twice every day we were to hear that "Kel Zoem b'Chol Yom" -- that G-d is angry every day and that every day the Middas HaDin is given free reign, at least momentarily. We would not be able to handle the thought. A smile would not appear on our faces the entire day. This thought would be too chilling to contemplate on a daily basis. That is the "Torach Tzibbur" to which the Gemara is referring.

Whether we recite it daily or not, this fact remains the truth. Heaven forbid, when we see tragedies in our midst -- tragedies that should not have happened and do not make any sense -- we ponder and ask ourselves 'Why'? Sometimes, they can be the result of the severe Middas HaDin that can affect anyone at any time. This is why a person has to constantly examine his actions on a daily basis. Teshuva is not something that should only be relegated to the Ten Days of Repentance. The antidote to Middas HaDin is the Middas HaRachamim which we will be granted if we show G-d that we are constantly introspecting and that we are willing to improve.

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RABBI BENJAMIN YUDIN - PARADISE FOUND!

The mishna (Avos 5:22) contrasts the character traits of Avraham Avinu and Bilaam Ha-rasha. Interestingly, the Tiferes Yisroel notes that Avraham's very name is an acronym for "av ha-mon goyim - father of a multitude of nations", as he taught monotheism and ethical character to all of humanity. Thus, by emulating his traits, even a non-Jew can become a disciple of Avraham. The three traits of Avraham: a good eye, one who is not jealous of the next one's success; a humble spirit, possessing humility and modesty; and an undemanding soul - one who exercises restraint and self-control. In contrast, those who possess an evil eye, an arrogant spirit and a greedy soul, are classified as followers of the wicked Bilaam.

The mishna then continues with a rhetorical question: how are the students of our forefather Avraham different from the students of the wicked Bilaam? The disciples of Avraham enjoy (the fruit of their good deeds) in this world and inherit the world to come. The disciples of the wicked Bilaam inherit Gehinom (purgatory) and descend into the well of destruction (the mishna cites verses to substantiate the above).

At first glance, we might have understood sentence of Gehinom for the wicked to refer to olam ha-bah, their due punishment in the world to come. However, the Meiri in his commentary notes, in contrast to the righteous who reap reward in this world, the wicked experience Hell already on Earth. Those who suffer from greed, arrogance, and lust cannot and do not enjoy even this world! They cannot and do not enjoy what they have, if others have what appears to them to be more and better.

We are taught in the Talmud (Kiddushin 39b) "the reward for mitzvos is not in this world." In addition, in Avos (1:3) Antignos taught, "be not as servants who serve the Master for the sake of receiving a reward." Yet, our mishna teaches that the very observance of Torah and living its middos (character traits) does provide the highest form of reward (i.e. personal contentment) even in this world.

Shir Hashirim (5:16) states, "His palate is sweet, and he is altogether desirable." Rashi explains that His decrees of the Torah are sweet, as Hashem commands in Vayikra (19:28) "you shall not make a wound in your flesh for one who has died ... I am the Lord." Is there a palate sweeter than this? Do not wound yourself, and for this Hashem promises a reward! The reward is thus not only in the world to come, but here and now He protects and guards our physical bodies, and through the positive noble character traits of Avraham, He enhances and protects our psychological well-being as well. Reb Yeruchum zt"l, mashgiach of the Mirer Yeshiva, noted that it's not only the example cited above by Rashi that enhances our life, but indeed all of Torah is a formula for "ashrecha baolam hazeh", your well-being in this world.

The above is encapsulated in the insightful teaching of the Vilan Gaon - in his Aderes Eliyahu on Vayikra (18:5), "you shall observe My decrees and My laws, which man shall carry out and v'chai b'hem - by which he shall live - I am Hashem." The Gr"a understands v'chai b'hem literally. The observance of mitzvos yields goodness and quality to our lives.

Thus, he understands the end of the verse to mean I am Hashem, who is instructing you to observe these mitzvos because I commanded them, rather than observe them because they are good for you and provide meaning and quality to your life.

Shabbos is the yom m'nucha and kedusha. In addition, it binds and bonds the family. Without a proper halachik observance of Shabbos, one not only loses out on the rituals of Torah, but also on the social benefits as well.

The expression of "sweet revenge" is antithetical to a Torah personality. To the contrary, the Talmud (Chulin 89a) teaches that the world exists only on account of the one who restrains himself in strife.

Finally, the Rama concludes his commentary to Orach Chaim by citing the verse "tov lev mishta tamid", which the Gr"a understands to mean a person with a generous heart and disposition enjoys a state of being of contentment and happiness, always.

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From: MICHAEL HOENIG
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Parshas Balak: Ancient Tale; Modern Message;
Torah's Chius
Michael Hoenig

Some persons, even perhaps initiates in Torah learning, view the story of Balak and Balaam as a kind of whimsically quaint vignette from an ancient time, a curious tale rooted in the mists of antiquity when superstition reigned over the fates of man. Thus, Balak Ben Tzipor, a Midianite noble who became King of Moav when Sichon (King of the Emori) died, is terrified by the sensational victory of B'nai Yisrael over the Emorites. Sichon had earlier annexed the northern half of Moav so the stunning defeat of Moav's mighty conqueror by the Israelites revealed how weak and defenseless Moav was.

Balak, the greatest magician of his time, is advised by Midianite elders that Moses (a former inhabitant of Midian well known to them) has prodigious power in his words so the way to confront B'nai Yisrael also lay in the use of words. They recommended that Balak hire the famous Gentile Prophet, Balaam, even though he lived far away. Balaam was a fierce and long-time enemy of the Israelites, as Midrashic sources abundantly explain, a master of the black arts and the mysteries of the occult which he had learned from the notorious Lavan in Aram. Balak is persuaded he now has the right champion in sight and attempts to hire Balaam to curse B'nai Yisrael. Eventually, Balaam accepts the assignment but, knowing from revelations that Hashem doesn't wish him to curse the Israelites, he disclaims to Balak that he can only state what Hashem puts in his mouth to speak.

The story unfolds with much grandeur, elaborate detail and dialogue ending, not with a curse, but with Balaam's majestic blessing of B'nai Yisrael - a sublime statement of extraordinary national character and a prophecy of future success so powerful that whole verses are incorporated into our daily prayers. A nice story to be sure! But readers should not be misled. It is not just a "story" from long ago. It is not merely a footnote to some ancient happening in a land far away. It is not just a tale of royal intrigue steeped in the superstitious jargon of the times.

Torah is not a mere history book. Its terse narrative teaches lessons for all time. Here Torah elaborates punctilious detail at length. Obviously, there are lessons to be learned, many of them. The reader has to focus and dig and scratch at the text, the Midrash and the Meforshim. One should not be content with surveying the mere contours or outline of a story that ends well. Torah has a Chius to it, a currency, a vivid

liveliness, a vitality, a freshness, not only for our time, but for the future as well. Let us illustrate the Chius, the beautiful currency and timeliness of many lessons to be learned, by focusing on just one tiny sliver of the Parsha's treasure of text, suggestion and inference.

The first four Psukim of Parshas Balak set the stage as Balak, the desperate King of Moav, accepts the advice to seek Balaam's help. Then, in the fifth verse, Balak resolutely springs into action. Torah tells us [Balak; 22:5]: "He sent messengers to Balaam son of Beor ..." [Vayishlach Malochim El Bilam Ben Beor ...] What were these messengers (Malochim) bidden to do? "To summon Balaam, saying, 'Behold a people has come out of Egypt, and behold it has covered the face of the earth and it sits opposite me. So now - come and curse this people for me; perhaps I will be able to strike it and drive it away from the land. For I know that whomever you bless will be blessed and whomever you curse will be accursed.'" [Balak; 22:5-6: Hinei Am Yatza MiMitza'im, Hinei Kisa Es Ein Haaretz Vehu Yoshev Mimuli; VeAtoch Lecha Na Ara Li Es Haam Hazeh Ki Atzum Hu Mimeni; Ulai Uchal Lakeh Bo VeAgorashenu Min Haaretz, Ki Yadati Es Asher Tevorech Mevorach Veasher Taor Yuar.]

The foregoing is a mean-spirited message of evil intent, to importune the retention of a high-priced, professional, sharp shooting gunslinger whose deadly weapons are his words, prophetic prowess and expertise in the mysteries of the occult. Balak means to deal a spiritual death blow to a spiritual people, to shock them into a dispirited state, so that he can follow through with a dramatic physical attack that administers a fatal blow. The words, "Vayishlach Malochim El Bilam ..." seem almost innocuous in the utter gravity of the overall message. Not so, however! Torah verse is not superfluous. Each expression, each word, has meaning.

We can contrast Balak's nefarious, destructive behavior with yet another Torah reference using the words, "Vayishlach Malochim." In Sefer Bereishis, Parshas Vayishlach, the Patriarch Yaakov has returned from a vexatious sojourn with the evil Lavan. Yaakov's return was sparked by a Divine message a Parsha earlier, "Now arise, go out from this land, and return to the land of your kindred." [31:13]

Under these promising circumstances and after the passage of many years, Yaakov is optimistic that Eisav's hatred has abated. He dispatches messengers [Vayishlach Yaakov Malochim] (Rashi says they were angels - "Malochim Mamash") to his brother in Seir/Edom. He commands the messengers to address Eisav respectfully as "my lord" (Adoni) and to say: "I have sojourned with Lavan ..." (Im Lavan Garti ...) [32:4]. Rashi points out that an alternative explanation of this phrase is a coded message to Eisav BiGematria. By numerological coding, Yaakov thereby tells Eisav: "Though I have sojourned with Lavan the wicked, I have observed the 613 Divine Commandments" (Taryag Mitzvos; "Taryag" or "613" BiGematria being equivalent to "Garti") [Rashi, 32:4]. Eisav doesn't respond verbally but, instead, the returning messengers relate that Eisav is marching upon Yaakov leading a force of 400 men, the Princes of Edom. Eisav's response triggers morbid dread in the Patriarch. By formulating a complex responsive strategy, however, Yaakov successfully survives the ensuing encounter with his dangerous brother.

Balak's "Vayishlach Malochim" is a message of malevolent, murderous intent. The aim is to maim an entire people in their most precious, lofty quality, their spirituality, and to unravel their strong belief in a divine power that guides their destiny. Yaakov's "Vayishlach Malochim," however, is a message of peace, an olive branch offered to a dangerous adversary. It is a message essentially saying, I am not a threat to you. "Im Lavan Garti," I observed the Taryag Mitzvos; I am an ethical, spiritual person. I withstood becoming another Lavan. Yaakov's message of peace, however, instigates a warlike response from Eisav/Edom. Eventually, Hashem turns aside both threats to B'nai Yisrael. Edom is assuaged for the moment by Yaakov's clever strategy

and powerful prayer. And Balak's deadly, verbal gunslinger of prophecy is compelled to bless the Israelites, not curse them. In each case Hashem shows the absolute futility of human attempts to thwart the Divine plans concerning B'nai Yisrael.

In modern times, indeed at the current time, the Balaks and Balaams of the world are many, rather than few. Perhaps individually less powerful than their ancestral biblical analogues, today's Balaks and Balaams cumulatively pose a formidable threat. They, too, seek to use words, to verbally maim the spiritual quality and ethic of an entire people, to curse a nation and religion. They curse B'nai Yisrael in private and in public, orally and in writing, in diplomatic circles, in the United Nations, in the media. Wherever hurtful, mean-spirited, malevolent, destructive words have listeners, they attempt to mimic the strategy employed by the ancient execrators of our Parsha. The message for today's reader is clear. Hashem eventually deflects these futile attempts to thwart the Divine plan, as well.

King David, in Tehillim, Psalm 120, recognized the hurtful, destructive character of the verbal threat posed by ancestors of modern enemies. The first half of the Psalm describes the painful arrows that false words can and do become. Then the Psalm soberly reminds, in effect: "Woe to me for I have lived a long time among the Tents of Kedar, with these haters of peace. I am for peace but when I speak of peace, they gird for war," [Oyah Li Ki Garti Meshech; Shachanti Im Ahalei Kedar; Rabas Shachna La Nafshi Im Sonei Shalom. Ani Shalom, Vechi Adaber, Hema LaMilchama]. Torah has an undeniable, irrepressible Chius to it, a vitality and freshness for our day. It did not just recount a story that unfolded thousands of years earlier on the Plains of Moav. It memorializes a message for all times as history, lamentably, repeats itself.



From: covenant.conversation@CHIEFRABBI.ORG Sent: June 30, 2004
To: COVENANTANDCONVERSATION@LISTSERV.CHIEFRABBI.ORG
Subject: Covenant & Conversation - Balak
3rd July 2004 14th Tammuz 5764 Balak The Hardest Word To Hear
[<http://www.chiefrabbi.org/>
Covenant & Conversation

Thoughts on the Weekly Parsha from

RABBI DR. JONATHAN SACKS

Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Commonwealth]

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: [Pharaoh] said to his people: "Here, The children of Israel is more numerous [rav] and powerful than we . . ." and [the Egyptians] felt a disgust at the children of Israel. Moab: And Moab was very fearful because of the people because it was numerous [rav], 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 G-d to Abraham:

G-d 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 G-d who blessed. In the case of Bilaam, the power was thought to reside in Bilaam himself. In fact the earlier statement of G-d 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 a temple at 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 G-d 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 G-d. G-d's answer is unequivocal:

But G-d 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 G-d." 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 G-d may change His mind. But this is impossible. That is not what G-d does. Yet to our surprise, that is what G-d seems to do:

That night G-d 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 G-d 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 G-d was very angry when he went, and the angel of the LORD stood in the road to oppose him. G-d says, "Go." Bilaam goes. Then G-d is very angry. Does G-d 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 G-d 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 G-d's first and second reply. According to Nachmanides, G-d'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." G-d 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 G-d 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. G-d 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 G-d, having opened Bilaam's eyes, finally tells Bilaam, "Go with [im] the men." According to Malbim and Mecklenberg, this is precisely what G-d 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 G-d once. G-d 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 G-d did not want him to go. Yet he invited the second set of messengers to wait overnight in case G-d had changed his mind.

G-d does not change His mind. Therefore Bilaam's delay said something not about G-d 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 G-d wanted him to go, but because G-d speaks once, and if we refuse to accept what He says, G-d 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 G-d'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." G-d did not change His mind at any point in the proceedings. In scenes 1, 2 and 3, G-d 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 G-d 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 G-d 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. G-d 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. G-d humbles the self-important, just as He gives importance to the humble. When human beings think they can dictate what G-d will say, G-d 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 G-d's patience with us. However many times we fail and have to begin again, G-d does not lose faith in us, and that gives us strength. Here were people doing G-d'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 G-d.

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From: Daily Halacha
[info@dailyhalacha.com]
Sent: June 30, 2004
To: members@dailyhalacha.com

a.com

Subject: Are Ladies Required To Say Musaf

Halacha of the Day (6/30/2004)

BY RABBI ELI MANSOUR

Description: ARE LADIES REQUIRED TO SAY MUSAF

The question was asked if ladies are obligated in praying Tefilat Musaf? For example, can ladies on Shabbat or Rosh Chodesh pray Musaf with the congregation in the synagogue? Are they obligated in this, or is it voluntary?

So there is a great Machloket on this between Chacham Ben Tzion Abba Shaul and Chacham Ovadia Yoseph.

Chacham Ben Tzion is of the opinion that ladies are in deed obligated to pray Musaf on Shabbat. Even though there is famous Teshuva from Rabbi Akiva Eger, who said that the ladies are exempt because they do not have a part in the Korban Musaf. He says that since we do not accept Shekalim from ladies, so therefore they are not part of the Korban Musaf which is brought on Shabbat. So since they didn't have part of the Korban, so Rabbi Eger says they would not be obligated to say Musaf. Chacham Ben Tzion questions that logic, and says that if we were to follow this reasoning, so then minors under the age of 20 would also be excluded from saying Musaf, since Shekalim were not accepted until after someone reached the age of 20 years old. So based on that logic, Chacham Ben Tzion says that ladies are obligated in Musaf, because it is known and accepted that people under the age of 20, do in fact pray Musaf. So in his opinion, the ladies would say Musaf even though they do not give the Shekalim, just like minors under the age of 20 who likewise do not give Shekalim.

Chacham Ovadia does not accept that argument from Chacham Ben Tzion, because he in deed proves that people less than 20 did give Shekalim. They just didn't give Shekalim to the construction of the Bet Hamikdash. But from the age of Bar Mitzvah, Shekalim were collected for the Korbanot. So therefore, Chacham Ovadia wants to say like Rav Akiva Eger, that since ladies are exempt from Shekalim, therefore they are exempt from Musaf and they do not have to pray.

Halacha Lema'ase, Chacham Ovadia writes, if a lady wants to pray voluntarily, it would not be considered a Beracha Levatala (wasteful prayer). So ladies have an option. They can voluntarily choose to say Musaf because there are opinions that say they can, and because Musaf is Birchot Shevach (prayers of praise.) But from the law, ladies do not have to pray Tefilat Musaf, not on Shabbat and not on Rosh Chodesh.

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From: RABBI BEREL WEIN [rbwein@torah.org]
Subject: Rabbi Wein - Balak
Our Achilles' Heel

Bilaam's advice to Balak that the way to defeat Israel was through weakening its moral fiber and not necessarily by war and public curses was shrewd and telling and effective. The enemies of Israel in the desert - the Canaanites, Amalek, Sichon and the Emorites, and Og the king of Bashan - all tried war against the Jewish nation and were ultimately defeated. Balak tries to destroy Israel through Bilaam's mouth - a public relations, media blitz to demonize the Jews. G-d foils this plan and Bilaam's mouth spouts blessings and compliments upon Israel. There seems no way to really overcome the members of the Jewish people. They are great warriors and the Lord is on their side. But they have an achilles heel that G-d will not come to protect. They are capable of self-destruction in a major way. And that weakness lies in the temptations of foreign cultures, of a sophisticated idolatry, in a way of sexually immoral lifestyle and illicit behavior. The women of Moav and Midian seduce many of the Jews - especially the tribe of Shimon - into accepting their culture and their

mores as a quid pro quo for their bodies. The tribe of Shimon is decimated by a plague that befalls them shortly thereafter. The tribe of Shimon is permanently crippled in Jewish history by this failure of moral will. And, at least temporarily, Bilaam and Balak smirk over their consequences of Jewish self-destruction.

In our time the Jewish people have survived, Holocaust, war, terror, persecution and unending hatred and bigotry. We have been subjected to a withering and unrepentant badly biased and skewed media portrayal of ourselves and of the State of Israel particularly. Everyone loves to curse us - the EU, the UN, CNN, BBC and the rest of the world's sanctimoniously hypocritical "good guys." But the Lord apparently does not read the editorial page of the New York Times and therefore even this unending bombardment of negativity has in reality had little effect upon us and our situation. However, the seduction of Western culture, of the modern licentiousness of body and spirit, of assimilation and marrying the daughters of Midian and Moav, has weakened us. It has made us smaller in number and weaker in resolve and spirit. Adopting universalistic values that change constantly over basic Jewish values and traditions has crippled us in our struggle to survive and prosper. This behavior and attitude, fostered by secular Jewry, and to a great extent, non-Orthodox Jewish leaders as well, has destroyed our self-identity and self-worth. We are no longer unique and special, with a G-dly mission to fulfill but we are like everyone else. And that is our weakness that if not recognized and corrected can lead to disaster and sadness.

Shabat Shalom. Rabbi Berel Wein RabbiWein, Copyright © 2004 by Rabbi Berel Wein and Torah.org.

From: Shema Yisrael Torah Network [shemalist@shemayisrael.com]
Sent: Thursday, July 01, 2004 6:59 AM To: Peninim Parsha Subject: PENINIM ON THE TORAH
BY RABBI A. LEIB SCHEINBAUM - Parshas Balak

Balak ben Tzipor saw. (22:2) The Midrash relates that Hashem foresaw that the gentile nations might claim that they adopted their lifestyle because they were lacking leadership. He, therefore, provided them with leadership that was both powerful and brilliant. When he established Shlomo Hamelech as monarch, he provided the pagans with Nevuchadnezer. Shlomo built the Bais Hamikdash, while his counterpart destroyed it. He gave great wealth to David Hamelech, who used it to build the Bais Hamikdash. Hashem also provided Haman with great wealth, which he used in an attempt to destroy the Jewish nation. Hashem provided the Jewish People with a great navi, prophet, Moshe Rabbeinu. The pagans were also afforded a distinguished prophet, Bilaam, who did everything possible to catalyze the downfall of Klal Yisrael. This all demonstrates that, despite what Hashem did for the nations, they were not able to sustain it. In fact, they extirpated whatever opportunities Hashem granted them. Yet, when we consider the situation, they still have a legitimate reason to gripe about their circumstances. They could postulate that while Hashem provided the Jewish nation with righteous and noble leadership, He supplied the other nations with leadership that was wicked, evil and immoral. How could the pagans be expected to repent under the leadership of a man with the character of Bilaam, who redefined hedonism and took evil to a new low?

Otzros HaTorah cites the Lev Aharon who explains that prior to giving the Torah to Klal Yisrael, Hashem first went to every other nation and offered it to them. They flatly refused to accept it for various reasons, basically that the values of Torah were not consistent with their weltanschauung, world perspective, and national character. Nonetheless, they still demanded a prophet of the calibre of Moshe. They received what they had requested - a prophet without Torah. Bilaam probably had some incredible qualities, but, without Torah, they were meaningless.

Hashem's response to the nations of the world is simple, "You want to repent and change your ways without the Torah? Impossible!" No prophet or any leader can create a lasting spiritual metamorphosis unless it is preceded by Torah.

He (Bilaam) said to them, "Spend the night here and I will give you a response, as Hashem will speak to me." (22:8)

Bilaam, the consummate liar, presents himself as a saint. He will do nothing without the express permission of G-d. Typical of his sinful demeanor, he continues reiterating his total deference to the Almighty. Indeed, his bogus personality, his ersatz character, is his greatest mark of evil. It is one thing to carry out evil, but to dress it up as an act of piety and virtuosity is the nadir of shamelessness. At least Bilaam was following in the legacy bestowed upon him by his ancestor Lavan HoArami, the virtuosic swindler who transformed evil into an art. Bilaam had no qualms about cursing Klal Yisrael. His hatred for Hashem's People burned with an intensity within him. Yet, he would never go against Hashem. He had to find a way to demonstrate his iniquity while preserving his sense of righteousness. It was necessary for him to find a heter, dispensation, to destroy our nation.

Bilaam thought that he could get away with his swindling. In the end, however, whom did he really succeed in fooling? Only one person - himself. When one lies enough, he begins to believe his own lies. When one attempts to fool those around him, by presenting himself as a righteous person, when, in reality, he is nothing more than a chameleon, he fools himself. He begins to believe that he is righteous! Bilaam asked to die as a righteous and just person. That is hypocrisy at its lowest point! He actually believed that he was worthy of sainthood.

Horav Avigdor Halevi Nebentzhal, Shlita, posits that the reason the Torah relates the episode about Bilaam is that a little bit of Bilaam lurks within the recesses of each one of us. Each of us has to contend with his own hypocritical nature and inconsistencies. The "Bilaam factor" is alive and well within all of us. The only question is: How much? We fool ourselves - for what purpose? It is related that an Admor, chassidic Rebbe, once asked one of his chassidim who had sinned and attempted to gloss over his iniquity, "Whom do you think you are fooling? You cannot fool Hashem. You also cannot fool all of the people around you. Apparently the only person whom you might succeed in fooling is yourself. What do you gain by fooling a fool?" This idea is regrettably true concerning each one of us.

The people of Sodom exemplified this form of evil. Chazal tell us that the Sodomites were very clever. They invited poor people to their community. They even gave freely of their money to the poor, making sure to mark each one of the coins that they gave to the poor. There was one clause in their charity policy: No one was allowed to sell food to a poor man. Consequently, when the man perished from starvation, they would retrieve their coins. Then there is the story of the bed that was set aside for guests. If the traveler was too tall for the bed, his legs were shortened. If he was too short, they would stretch him. Rav Nebentzhal contends that some of us use the Sodom bed as an analogy to the Torah. The Torah has to fit into our lifestyle. When its mitzvos are too much, we shorten the Torah. We make it fit into our purvue, consistent with our needs and values. In the end, we are only fooling ourselves.

Behold! The people will rise like a lion cub and raise itself like a lion; it will not lie down until it consumes prey. (23:24)

The Holocaust transformed the proud Jewish nation into homeless wanderers. Throughout his powerful homilies, The Piazsesner Rebbe, zl, attempts to console and sustain his broken-hearted chassidim with the ideas that their present circumstance was already foreshadowed in the very manner that the Torah was given; and that the opportunity to serve Hashem is available anywhere, even in the ghetto. Inclusive in his derashos, homilies, are a number of themes to strengthen the inner

resources of his people. He focuses on the nobility which the Jewish heritage confers on us. Our pedigree must remind us that we are princes and, even when the Nazi dogs beat and attempt to degrade us, we are still nobility and should act in a consistent manner. He writes that not only is the Jewish spirit holy, even the very body of a Jew is unique in its sanctity.

In his derashah to Parashas Balak, he posits that - unlike the rest of creation, which was created by the Divine word - Klal Yisrael was created directly by the hands of Hashem. Therefore, a Jew's holiness extends to all levels of his existence, even the physical. Actually, in his commentary to Bereishis 1:27, "And G-d created man in His image," Rashi says, "Everything else was created by the Divine word, but man was created by the Divine hands." What does this mean? One would think that being created by Divine speech is a higher level than being created by the physical action of hands. How is it then that man who stands at the pinnacle of creation was created by hand, while the rest of creation was created by Divine speech?

The Piazsesner explains that for all other creatures, the holiness did not extend from Above all the way to their very essence; it remained in the realm of words. For the Jew, however, holiness extended into his lowest level, the level of physicality and action. He was created by the Divine hands, so that he is entirely holy.

This is also why Klal Yisrael is considered to be the eternal people. Everything was created by Divine speech, by means of a word that remains above and beyond them, which shines upon them only from afar. The light is not permanently available within them; it flashes like lightning, giving temporary illumination. Klal Yisrael however, was created with the Divine hands, so that the Divine sanctity penetrates to their level of physical action and to whatever place they may be found. Hence, as a nation, we are eternal and even the individual physical body of the Jew is eternal. When he expends his energies for Torah study and mitzvah observance, that physical energy becomes integrated with the Torah and Divine source. Thus, his body rises to the world of eternity and remains eternal. Only the foods which the individual ate throughout his life - and which are added onto his body - are subject to decomposition and decay.

Thus, the Jew is able to strengthen himself during periods of travail, so that even when he lies down, he is not fallen. Even in his low state, he is still able to vanquish his enemies. He was created with the Divine hands which causes his holiness to extend to his Jewish essence. This is the underlying meaning of Bilaam's blessing. The Jew rises and strengthens himself like a lion. He does not fall down completely; he just crouches. Even in this position, he can triumph over his enemies. He rises like a lion, even during the most difficult troubles; under the most compelling duress, he leaps up like the king of beasts.

At a time when the Jew's body was both attacked and maligned, the Rebbe emphasizes the solid affirmation of the corporeal holiness of the Jew. In both his physical and spiritual essence, the Jew is holy and eternal; he represents the Divine light hidden in all reality. It is specifically for this reason that he is despised, such that attempts are constantly made to destroy him. It is precisely for this same reason, however, that the Jew's dignity is inviolable, his nobility is sacrosanct, and his survival and ultimate triumph is assured: *Mi k'amcha Yisrael. "Who is like Your Nation - Yisrael?"*

Jewish resilience is a character trait endemic to Klal Yisrael. The ability to pick oneself up, shake off the dirt and go on, is something inherently Jewish. In Moed Katan 9b the Talmud cites the following story. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai told his son to approach two of his disciples and ask them for a blessing. His son was puzzled with the blessings he received. They began with what seemed to be an ambiguous blessing, such as, "May you plant and not harvest," which, after explanation was interpreted as, "May you have children, and may they not die." In the Sefer HaChaim, the brother of the Maharal m'Prague wonders why these

wise men gave a blessing which sounded like a curse. Why did they not give an unambiguous blessing? He explains that this world is the world of hardship and yissurim, anguish. It is normal for every individual to experience vicissitude in life. When the wise men said, "May it be the will," they were not referring to Hashem's will, but rather, "May this be your will," namely, that you should desire these problems and prepare yourself for any eventuality that may arise, because that is the way of the world.

Horav Gedalya Eiseman, Shlita, comments that most of the damage caused by hardship results from a lack of anticipating it. If people would prepare themselves for possible hardship, accepting the fact that life is tough and that trials and tribulations are to be expected as part of normal living, and realizing that everyone suffers in one way or another, they would have an easier time coping with adversity.

Intellectual awareness of the truth is not enough. It is necessary that one live his life feeling this awareness in his psyche. This requires self-discipline and practice. Indeed, the Alter, zl, m'Kelm listed among his goals for character perfection the resolution to train himself not to expect everything to go his way.

Water will flow from their wells. (24:7)

In the Talmud Nedarim 81a, Chazal say, "Take heed with the sons of the poor, for from them Torah will go forth, as it is stated, "Water shall flow midalyo, 'from his wells,' which can alternatively be read mi dalav, 'from his poor.' The pasuk thus means: Torah, which is compared to water, shall flow from Klal Yisrael's poor. Horav Eliezer M. Shach, zl, would relate the story concerning a very wealthy and powerful man from a town near Kovno who sought a husband for his daughter. He was prepared to offer complete support, so that the young man could become a posek, halachic arbitrator, of such a calibre that he ascend to a distinguished pulpit.

He was presented with two young men, both brilliant and erudite, but from diverse backgrounds. One was descended from an illustrious lineage of famous rabbinic scholars. The other young scholar came from a simple home, simple pedigree and simple surroundings. Not knowing what to do, he went to the preeminent Torah scholar and rav of Kovno, Horav Yitzchak Elchanan Spektor, asking for guidance in this dilemma. He described both young men, adding that his personal choice was the one whose background was most impressive, despite the fact that this young man's parents insisted on receiving a very hefty dowry.

Rav Yitzchak Elchanan told him, "If you ask my opinion, I suggest that you select the young man who hails from a simple background. Why? Because the young man who descends from Torah elite grew up in a home where Torah reigned paramount and its study and erudition was a way of life. His parents devoted their lives to raising him from day one to grow in Torah. It is no wonder that he is a Torah scholar. He simply followed in the manner of his breeding. If he were to be torn away from his parents' influence and would have to assume the yoke of family support on his own shoulders, would he be able to withstand the pressure? I do not know. The other young man, however, had to fight his entire life to overcome one obstacle after another, triumphing over life's challenges, in order to study Torah with proficiency and diligence. Such a young man is assured of a position.

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OVERVIEW Balak, king of Moav, is in morbid fear of Bnei Yisrael. He summons a renowned sorcerer named Bilaam to curse them. First, G-d speaks to Bilaam and forbids him to go. But, because Bilaam is so insistent, G-d appears to him a second time and permits him to go. While en route, a malach (emissary from G-d) blocks Bilaam's donkey's path. Unable to contain his frustration, Bilaam strikes the donkey each time it stops or tries to detour. Miraculously, the donkey speaks, asking Bilaam why he is hitting her. The malach instructs Bilaam regarding what he is permitted to say and what he is forbidden to say regarding the Jewish People. When Bilaam arrives, King Balak makes elaborate preparations, hoping that Bilaam will succeed in the curse. Three times Bilaam attempts to curse and three times blessings issue instead. Balak, seeing that Bilaam has failed, sends him home in disgrace.

Bnei Yisrael begin sinning with the Moabite women and worshipping the Moabite idols, and they are punished with a plague. One of the Jewish leaders brazenly brings a Midianite princess into his tent, in full view of Moshe and the people. Pinchas, a grandson of Aharon, grabs a spear and kills both evildoers. This halts the plague, but not before 24,000 have died.

INSIGHTS

- Safe From A Hostile World

"For from its origins, I see it rock-like, and from the hills do I see it. Behold! It is a nation that will dwell in solitude and not be reckoned among the nations." (23:9)

Two people went into the forest to chop down trees. The less bright of the two started to lop of branches one at a time - a long and tedious job that did not address the root of the objective. The other reasoned thus: "If we can find the roots of the tree and sever them, then with one fell swoop we take care not only the tree but all its branches too."

Thus reasoned Bilaam in this week's Torah portion: "Rather than curse each of the Tribes of Israel separately, I will attack their roots. If I can find an impurity in their origin, with one curse, I can damage the entire people."

"For from its origins, I see it rock-like..." However, Bilaam saw that the Jewish People were the descendents of holy forefathers, "rocks", and holy mothers, "hills". Like their physical counterparts, the rocks and the hills that are the foundations of this world, so too are Avraham, Yitzchak, Yaakov, Sarah, Rivka, Rachel and Leah the spiritual foundations of the world.

Bilaam realized that since the origin of the Jewish People was in holiness so their souls would always aspire to holiness. They might become misdirected and stray to the Far Eastern cult of asceticism or the Far Western cult of materialism, but they would never assimilate totally.

However "...it is a nation that will dwell in solitude and not be reckoned among the nations." As long as the Jewish People maintain their distinctive lifestyle and beliefs, they live in safety. When they try to assimilate, however, they will not be accepted by the other nations. The reaction will then be anti-Semitism. And the virulence of that anti-Semitism will be in direct proportion to the attempt to assimilate.

When the Jewish People "dwell alone," when they do not intermarry, nor adopt the beliefs and cultural mores of their host culture; they will be protected by G-d.

The letters of the Hebrew alphabet contain many hidden secrets in the understanding of the Torah. We find a case in point in this very verse: The word Hain! meaning "Behold!" is ostensibly superfluous. Hain consists of two letters - Heh, and Nun. The gematria of Heh is 5. The gematria of Nun is 50. What do 5 and 50 share in common?

In the mystical sources, the decimal numbers symbolize the completion of an entire stage or level. To make the decimal number of ten, you could take 1 and 9, or 2 and 8, or 3 and 7 or 4 and 6. However there is only one number which when added to itself will make 10. That number is 5. Similarly, the only number which added to itself will make the decimal number of 100 is 50. - Hain.

Hain symbolizes the Jewish People.

When the Jewish People find completion by connecting only with their own kind, they are safe from a hostile world.

- Sources: Midrash Rabba, Hemek Davar

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