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**Rabbi Yissocher Frand** <ryfrand@torah.org> to ravfrand  
Dedicated in memory of William Mazel by Mark Mazel, David Mazel, and Joel Mazel.

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#### The Sin of "Not Getting It"

The beginning of this week's parsha contains the strange, almost comical, episode of Bilaam's difficulty with his donkey [Bamidbar 22:21-34]. Unbeknownst to Bilaam, an angel of Hashem with a drawn sword was blocking his donkey's forward movement. In the presence of the officer's of Moab, Bilaam beat his animal, to no avail. The animal had no choice but to move sideways rather than forward, crushing Bilaam's leg against the wall, by the side of the road.

After this scene repeated itself a couple of times, Hashem opened up the mouth of the donkey and she said to her master: "What have I done to you that you have struck me these three times?" Bilaam responded: "Because you have mocked me! If there were a sword in my hand I would have killed you by now!"

Ultimately, Hashem uncovered Balaam's eyes and he saw the angel of Hashem standing on the road with his drawn sword. The angel chastised Bilaam for having unfairly beaten his donkey three times. Bilaam responded: "I have sinned, for I did not know that you were standing opposite me on the road."

Was this the right answer on Bilaam's part? Bilaam should have said to the angel "Sorry, I didn't see you! I thought my donkey got lazy." What was the sin here? If one doesn't see, it's not his fault. He simply didn't see!

The Malbim raises this question and explains that Bilaam's sin was that he should have realized that there was an angel there. In other words, he confessed that had he thought about it, he SHOULD have come to the conclusion that an angel was present. Under those circumstances, failing to understand that an angel was present was itself a sin. It is not sufficient to apologize and say "I didn't get it. I didn't understand." That itself may have been your shortcoming. Perhaps you should have understood!

Rav Mordechai Kamenetsky relates an incident that took place during the capture of the Western Wall during the Six Day War. By June 1967, it had been more than 19 years since any Jew had been allowed to approach the Kosel haMa'aravi. It was now under Jewish control for the first time in 1,900 years. It was a most emotional moment. The religious soldiers in the unit that liberated the Kosel began crying.

There was one soldier in the unit from a totally secular background who also started crying. One of his fellow soldiers, who had over the years engaged in many debates about G-d, Torah and Judaism with this secular Israeli turned to him and said: "I can understand why I am crying — but

why are you crying?" The other soldier responded: "I am crying because I am not crying." In other words, he was crying because he saw through the reaction of his religious comrades how meaningful this momentous event should be to him, and he did not feel any special emotion. He was crying because "he didn't get it" and he realized that "not getting it" was something to cry about.

This is the same idea behind the "I have sinned" confession of Bilaam to the angel. "Not perceiving that there is an angel here is something for which I am to be blamed."

#### His Plan Will Become Established

The end of the Parsha contains the incident in which Zimri, the Prince of the Tribe of Shimon, had relations with a Moabite woman in the presence of Moshe and in the presence of the entire assembly of the Children of Israel. What was the reaction of those who observed this blasphemous act? "They were crying at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting." [Bamidbar 25:6]

Rashi comments on Moshe's passivity and the people's reaction: "The applicable law was concealed from Moshe." He forgot that one who publicly cohabits with a non-Jewish woman may be slain on the spot by zealots. The people were weeping because in contrast to the incident with the Golden Calf, where Moshe stood up against 600,000 people, this time his hands became weak.

It is indeed amazing. Moshe Rabbeinu was not a person who was faint of heart. He has been confronting these types of challenges for the last 40 years. He stood up to Pharaoh. He stood up to the Jewish people time and again. The reason that G-d made Moshe forget this law, explains Rashi, is "so that Pinchas might arise and take that which was fit for him."

Pinchas became a Kohen because of this act of heroism and zealotry. Rav Simche Zissel Broide, the Rosh Yeshiva of the Chevron Yeshiva, says that this incident is a moral lesson for us all. When the Almighty wants to give someone a position, a job, an opportunity, He will pull the strings and make it happen.

Logically, by the natural turn of events, Pinchas would never have become a Priest. But G-d had a plan to ensure that Pinchas would become a Priest. He made a miracle, that the great Moshe forgot a law known to any Yeshiva student!

Rav Simcha Zissel notes how comical and pathetic it is, how people trouble themselves so much to maneuver and scheme and worry to achieve a certain outcome, or to try getting to where they think they need to get. The Almighty provides the sustenance and the appropriate position for each and every person. When He wants it to happen, it will happen. He may have to make miracles, but in the final analysis "the plan of Hashem will become established." [Mishlei 19:21]

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## Covenant & Conversation

Thoughts on the Weekly Parsha from

**Sir Jonathan Sacks**

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

[From 2 years ago - currently 5765]

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Balak

One of the most profound and influential comments ever made about Jewish destiny was made by the pagan prophet Bilaam in this week's sedra:

As I see them from the mountain tops, Gaze on them from the heights, Behold it is a people that dwells alone, Not reckoned among the nations. (Num. 23: 9) To many - Jews and non-Jews, admirers and critics alike - that has seemed to epitomise the Jewish situation: a people that stands outside history and the normal laws governing the fate of nations. For Jews it was a source of pride. For non-Jews, it was all too often a source of resentment and hate. For centuries, Jews in Christian Europe were treated, in Max Weber's phrase, as a "pariah people." All agreed, though, that Jews were different. The question is: how and why? The biblical answer is surprising and profound.

It is not that Jews alone knew G-d. That is manifestly not the case. Bilaam - the very prophet who uttered these words - was not an Israelite. Nor were Abimelekh or Laban, to whom G-d appears in the book of Genesis. Abraham's contemporary, Malkizedek, king of Shalem (the city that later became Jerusalem) is described as a priest of the most high G-d. Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, was a Midianite high priest, yet the sedra that contains the supreme moment of Jewish history - the revelation at Mount Sinai - bears his name. Even the Pharaoh who ruled Egypt in the days of Joseph said of him, "Can we find anyone like this man, one in whom is the spirit of G-d?"

G-d does not appear only to Jews, members of the covenantal nation. Nor does He answer only Jewish prayers. At the dedication of the Temple, King Solomon made the following request:

As for the foreigner who does not belong to Your people Israel but has come from a distant land because of Your name -- for men will hear of Your great name and Your mighty hand and Your outstretched arm-when he comes and prays toward this temple, then hear from heaven, Your dwelling place, and do whatever the foreigner asks of You, so that all the peoples of the earth may know Your name and fear You, as do your own people Israel, and may know that this house I have built bears Your Name.

The sages continued this great tradition when they said that "the righteous of the nations of the world have a share in the world to come." Yad Vashem, the Holocaust museum in Jerusalem, contains the names of more than 20,000 righteous gentiles who saved lives during the Holocaust years.

Nor is it that G-d's covenant with the children of Israel means that they are more righteous than others. Malachi, last of the prophets, has striking words to say on the subject:

From where the sun rises to where it sets, My name is honoured among the nations, and everywhere incense and pure oblation are offered to My name, for My name is honoured among the nations, says the Lord of hosts. But you profane it . . . (Malachi 1: 11-12)

Nor did any of the major strands in Jewish thought ever see Jewish chosen-ness as a privilege. It was, and is, a responsibility. The key verse here is the famous prophecy of Amos:

You alone have I singled out Of all the families of the earth - That is why I will call you to account For all your iniquities. (Amos 3: 2) Where then did Jewish singularity lie? The clue lies in the precise wording of Bilaam's blessing: "Behold it is a people that dwells alone." For it was as a people that G-d chose the descendants of Abraham; as a people that He made a covenant with them at Mount Sinai; as a people that He rescued them from Egypt, gave them laws, and entered into their history. "You will be to Me," He said at Sinai, "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." Judaism is the

only religion to place G-d at the centre of its self-definition as a nation. Jews are the only nation whose very identity is defined in religious terms.

There were many nations in the ancient world who had national gods. There were other religions - Judaism's two daughter faiths, Christianity and Islam - that believed in a universal G-d and a universal religion. Only Judaism believed, and still believes, in a universal G-d accessible to all, yet peculiarly manifest in the way of life, fate and destiny of a single and singular people:

You are my witnesses, declares the Lord, and my servant whom I have chosen . . . You are my witnesses, declares the Lord, that I am God. (Isaiah 43: 10-12)

Israel, in its history and laws, would be G-d's witness. It would testify to something larger than itself. So it proved to be. The historian Barbara Tuchman wrote:

The history of the Jews is . . . intensely peculiar in the fact of having given the Western world its concept of origins and monotheism, its ethical traditions, and the founder of its prevailing religion, yet suffering dispersion, statelessness and ceaseless persecution, and finally in our times nearly successful genocide, dramatically followed by fulfilment of the never-relinquished dream of return to their homeland. Viewing this strange and singular history one cannot escape the impression that it must contain some special significance for the history of mankind, that in some way, whether one believes in divine purpose or inscrutable circumstance, the Jews have been singled out to carry the tale of human fate.

Why, if G-d is the G-d of the universe, accessible to every human being, should He choose one nation to bear witness to His presence in the human arena? This is a profound question. There is no short answer. But at least part of the answer, I believe, is this. G-d is wholly Other. Therefore He chose a people who would be humanity's 'other'. That is what Jews were - outsiders, different, distinctive, a people who swam against the tide and challenged the idols of the age. Judaism is the counter-voice in the conversation of mankind.

During two thousand years of dispersion, Jews were the only people who, as a group, refused to assimilate to the dominant culture or convert to the dominant faith. They suffered as a result - but what they taught was not for themselves alone. They showed that a nation does not need to be powerful or large to win G-d's favour. They showed that a nation can lose everything else - land, power, rights, a home - and yet still not lose hope. They showed that G-d is not necessarily on the side of great empires or big battalions. They showed that a nation can be hated, persecuted, reviled, and yet still be loved by G-d. They showed that to every law of history there is an exception and what the majority believes at any given moment is not necessarily true. Judaism is G-d's question-mark against the conventional wisdom of the age.

It is neither an easy nor a comfortable fate to be "a people that dwells alone", but it is a challenging and inspirational one.

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### **Rabbi Meir Goldwicht**

#### **Parashat Balak**

The end of Parashat Balak deals with the sin of B'nei Yisrael with the women of Moav. The Torah tells us that Pinchas took a spear in his hand and impaled Zimri ben Salu, the nassi of shevet Shimon, together with the Midianite woman with whom he was committing his sin. It is noteworthy that Zimri is not identified by name in Parashat Balak, but rather as an anonymous "ish Yisrael." He is named only in Parashat Pinchas. Why does the Torah leave Zimri anonymous during its telling of the actual incident, identifying him only in the next parasha?

Chazal say (Midrash Tanchuma) that B'nei Yisrael sinned in Shittim (the name of the place they committed the sin with the women of Moav; see BaMidbar 25:1), were punished in Shittim ("Vayih'yu hameitim bamageifah arba'ah v'esrim elef, And 24,000 died in the plague" (25:9)), and were healed with shittim ? the Mishkan, which was made from "atzei shittim omdim, acacia-wood, standing up" (Shemot 26:15). What is the meaning behind this ma'amar Chazal?

In order to answer these two questions, we must begin as follows: In lashon kodesh there are many instances of one shresh being used to indicate a word as well as its opposite. For example, mi'kad (????) means a census, to count how many people are with you. Nifkad (????) means an absentee, or how many people are missing. In our parasha, we find shittah (????), in the sense of the derech a person goes, as well as shtut (????), the very opposite of shittah, because veering from the proper derech is shtut. This is why Chazal say "Ein adam chotei el aim kein nichnesah bo ruach shtut. A person doesn't sin unless a spirit of folly has entered him."

Balak told Bilaam that Am Yisrael is an abnormal nation, functioning within a different system from the rest of the nations, and therefore he could not harm them in the normal fashion. The strength of this nation is in its mouth, through the ruchaniyut of the Torah in its mouth, so you must curse them, since a curse effects a spiritual injury. A spiritual nation can only be harmed by spiritual damage. For this reason, explains R' Hirsch, Balak first tries to attack them economically, bringing Bilaam to the kiryat chutzot, the markets, to curse B'nei Yisrael there. When this doesn't work, Balak brings Bilaam to sdeh tzofim, which represents leadership (Hashem tells Yechezkel, "Tzofeh n'taticha l'Veit Yisrael, I have made you a scout for the House of Israel" (33:7)). After Bilaam tries to curse B'nei Yisrael's leaders unsuccessfully, he tries to curse them with avodah zarah in Pe'or, again unsuccessfully. Finally, Bilaam shows Balak the way to injure B'nei Yisrael ? by seducing them to commit z'nut, because "Elokeihem shel eilu sonei zimah hu, The G-d of these people hates sexual immorality." This is ultimately how Bilaam managed to harm B'nei Yisrael.

This is the meaning of Michah 6:5: "Ami, zechor na mah ya'atz Balak melech Moav umeh anah oto Bilaam ben Be'or, My nation, remember now what Balak, king of Moav, devised, and what Bilaam ben Be'or answered him." We must remember that Balak's attempts to bring us down failed, while Bilaam's plan ultimately worked. As long as the nation worshipped avodah zarah and ate ma'achalei akum, HaKadosh Baruch Hu didn't punish them. Only when they committed acts of z'nut did He punish them.

Chazal point out that the sin at Shittim was more egregious than that of the eigel, since regarding the eigel it says, "Vayitparku kol ha'am, The nation broke off" (Shemot 32:3), indicating hefkerut, while by Ba'al Pe'or and the sin involving the women of Moav, the Torah says, "Vayitzamed Yisrael l'Va'al Pe'or, Israel joined itself to Ba'al Pe'or" (BaMidbar 25:3). For this reason, at Ba'al Pe'or eight times more people were killed than by the cheit ha'eigel (24,000 vs. 3000). In fact, so joined were B'nei Yisrael to Ba'al Pe'or and the women of Moav that even the nassi of shevet Shimon was completely nullified to Midianite princess, completely losing his unique identity. Only afterwards does the Torah identify him by name, in order to emphasize the degree to which B'nei Yisrael were attached to Ba'al Pe'or .

Every time we sin it is shtut, veering off the shittah. There are such instances of shtut for which it is impossible to return to the shittah; this shtut perverts all straightness. This shtut is z'nut, the z'nut of Shittim. Only the atzei shittim of the Mishkan could return B'nei Yisrael from shtut to the shittah. Atzei shittim don't produce fruit; their tafkid is simply to show us how to grow straight. Therefore Chazal say in Midrash Tanchuma that shittim (????) is roshei teivot of shalom, tovah, yeshuah, mechilah. In the world to come, Yoel haNavi tells us, HaKadosh Baruch Hu will bring forth a fountain from the Beit HaMikdash, which will water the valley of Shittim (Yoel 4:18). In the world to come, may it come speedily, the truth, the proper shittah, will be revealed. When this happens, we will merit the fulfillment of, "Mitzrayim lishmamah tih'yeh v'Edom l'midbar shemamah tih'yeh?asher shafchu dam naki b'artzam, Egypt will be a desolation and

Edom will be a desolate wilderness?because they shed innocent blood in their land" (Yoel 4:19). And then, "Yehudah l'olam teishev v'Yerushalayim l'dor vador, Judah will be inhabited forever, and Jerusalem from generation to generation" (Yoel 4:20).

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**Rabbi Yakov Haber**

**Divine Communication: Two Different Types**

After initially refusing Bil'am permission to go with the representatives of Balak and curse the Jewish people, Hashem does consent for him to go but only say what G-d tells him to say. Surprisingly, when Bil'am begins to travel to Balak: "And Hashem's wrath was kindled against Bil'am for he was going" (Balak 22:22). Solving the apparent inconsistency between the Divine consent and the apparent revocation of the permission, the commentaries offer different variations of the same resolution. G-d makes it clear that Bil'am may not curse the Jews; therefore, going with the emissaries of Balak for this purported mission would be futile. Hence, He initially refuses Bil'am permission to go entirely. When Bil'am requests again to go, Hashem grants limited permission to go to bless the Jews (Rashi, Ramban) or to spiritually advise the Moabites (S'forno). Seeing in Bilam's heart that his designs remained evil, Hashem immediately expresses his anger by dispatching an angel to frighten Bilam's donkey. (See Gra and Malbim for a fascinating textual proof to this idea.)

After the donkey reacts three times by refusing to travel further out of fear of the angel, Hashem miraculously causes the donkey to speak, following which Bil'am is allowed to see the angel who informs him that Bilam's plan to curse the Jews aroused Divine wrath and almost caused Bilam's immediate death. Bil'am apparently gets the message and offers to return. Chazal teach us though that he still continuously attempts to curse the Jewish people, and his mouth is forced into blessing them (see Sanhedrin 105b). If, in the end, Bil'am is told directly by the angel that his path was contrary to Hashem's will, why was there a need initially for the donkey to go astray and speak to Bil'am? The principle of Hashem not performing miracles for no purpose would seemingly indicate that the appearance of the angel frightening the donkey and the donkey's talking were crucial parts of the Divine message even though G-d would eventually inform Bil'am of his misguided plan directly.

G-d communicates to man in two separate, complementary ways. The first is directly through prophecy, and by extension through His revealed Word, the Torah, as originally revealed to the prophet Moshe. The second is through intervention in the person's life and environment - hashgacha p'ratis, Divine Providence. Rav Schwab (in Rav Schwab on Prayer, Artscroll/Mesorah) explains that these two methods are referenced in the last blessing of the Sh'ma. There we recite "ashrei ha'am sheyishma l'mitzvo'secha v'toras'cha ud'var'cha yasim 'al libo" - "praiseworthy is the nation who hearkens unto your commandments and places your Torah and your Word on its heart". "Your Torah" and "Your Word" seem to be redundantly synonymous. Rav Schwab explains that "Your Word" refers to the messages Hashem sends to us indirectly through intervention in our lives. He quotes the interpretation of Ramban on the words of consolation Moshe offers to his brother Aharon after he suffers the loss of his two sons, Nadav and Avihu: "hu 'asher dibeir Hashem, B'krovay ekadeish'..." -

"this is what Hashem has spoken: 'With those close to Me, I shall become sanctified'" (Sh'mini 10:3). The commentaries grapple with the fact that we have no prior record of such a Divine statement. Unlike Rashi who seeks at least an indirect Biblical passage approximately matching this quote, Ramban suggests that no direct statement is being referenced here. The message of Nadav's and Avihu's death is "with those close to Me, I shall be sanctified." The meaning of the above-quoted passage in the blessing is that fortunate is the one who perceives and follows both types of Divine communication, the actual, revealed Word of G-d, and the hidden Word of G-d as expressed in events of the person's life.

It would appear from the unfolding of the rebuke of Bil'am that of the two methods, direct prophecy and intervention in the person's life, the preferred form of Divine communication is the latter. Even when G-d is willing to directly communicate as was the case with Bil'am, this seems to be a method of last resort when the individual does not perceive the intended message. Perhaps the reason is as follows. The fundamental principle of Man's ability to connect to his Creator is his Divinely-instilled ability of free will, b'chira chofshis. One can choose to view events occurring to him or in his environment as random acts of nature. Or one can choose a different perspective. His Creator and Guider constantly calls from above within the mask of nature and history. (See also [http://www.torahweb.org/torah/2007/parsha/rhab\\_terumah.html](http://www.torahweb.org/torah/2007/parsha/rhab_terumah.html) - The Divine Presence: The Hidden and the Revealed and [http://www.torahweb.org/torah/2002/parsha/rhab\\_metsora.html](http://www.torahweb.org/torah/2002/parsha/rhab_metsora.html) - A Call from the Infinite.) One can deeply analyze these messages through a Torah perspective and with the guidance of Torah sages to attempt to understand the Divine message inherent within. When one does so, one not only receives the message but also grows in his connection to G-d by stripping away one additional layer of the mask of nature. One also chooses the correct path rather than being immediately informed of what that path is. If G-d directly communicates to the individual through prophecy, this ability to grow spiritually does not take place. Consequently, only after Bil'am refuses to "get the message" of the donkey's refusal to travel and its speaking - which informed Bil'am that speech is totally controlled by G-d - does G-d reveal His word directly to Him through the angel. (See S'forno that notwithstanding all of Bil'am's wickedness, he had enormous potential and G-d did not want him destroyed.)

A similar chain of events occurs with as great a personality as Ya'akov Avinu. Ya'akov had pledged to G-d before he left Eretz Yisrael to find a wife in Aram that he would donate a tenth of his acquired wealth to G-d and would build an altar in Beit 'El, the place of the prophetic dream of the ladder. When he returns and delays his fulfillment of this pledge, Hashem causes various troubles to befall him to remind him without directly telling Him. First, Eisav confronts him to whom he is forced to give a gift of appeasement, a reminder that his assets will be lost if he does not fulfill his pledge (see Gemara Bava Basra 9a). Then, his beloved wife Rachel dies. Then, Dina is attacked by Sh'chem. Apparently still not getting the message, Ya'akov is then directly addressed by HaKadosh Baruch Hu: "kum 'alei Beis 'El ... va'asei sham mizbei'ach la'Keil hanir'eh eilecha b'vorchacha mip'nei Eisav achicha" - "Get up and go to Beit 'El .. and make an altar there to G-d who revealed Himself to you when you fled from Eisav, your brother". (See Midrash Tanchuma VaYishlach 8 (briefly quoted by Rashi to 35:1) which analyzes this series of events as presented above.) Why didn't Hashem just reveal Himself immediately to Ya'akov upon his return to Eretz Yisrael so that he should not have to undergo so much suffering? Perhaps the explanation is as we have presented above. Hashem wanted Ya'akov Avinu to grow by correctly understanding the Divine message. Only when he did not, did He reveal Himself directly. In the dramatic words of the Midrash: "Said the Holy One: 'Until when will this tzaddik suffer and not understand for what sin he is suffering!'"

Of course, ordinary people do not have the option of Hashem directly revealing himself to them. This makes understanding indirect Divine messages in our lives all the more crucial. However, as developed above, it

is this method that is the preferred approach as it leads to enormous spiritual growth. Countless statements of Chazal stress the importance of analyzing events both positive and negative which occur to an individual (e.g. B'rachot 5a: "One who sees suffering befalling him, should analyze his deeds"). This is true not only on the individual level but also on the national level: "Suffering only comes to the World [to serve as an alarm to] the Jewish people" (Y'vamot 63a, see also Rambam beginning of Hilchot Ta'anuyot). In the words of the prophet Tz'phania (3:7) explaining Divinely-orchestrated disasters in the world: "I said that they will fear and take chastisement". This past decade has been one in which both natural (i.e. directly Divinely-orchestrated) disasters and Man-orchestrated disasters have stricken hundreds of thousands of people. Analyzing the precise Divine messages inherent within these events is a difficult task. Too often some are quick to attribute events to a specific cause (oftentimes pointing the finger of blame at others) without knowing with certainty. However, the opposite extreme, ignoring the events totally since we cannot know their cause for certain - absent a prophetic message - is equally dangerous and is clearly not the Divine Will. All events in one's life and in our collective lives must spur reaction, change, repentance and increased devotion to Hashem's Torah and adherence to His commandments both bein adam laMakom and bein adam la'chaveiro. As mentioned above, seeking counsel from Torah sages is crucial to appreciate these Divine messages, even in our era lacking prophecy (see Bava Basra 12a). The difficulty in understanding Divine messages certainly does not exempt us from pursuing this important task. The period of the Bein HaM'tzarim we are about to enter is a time-period specifically geared for such soul-searching and repentance. May Hashem grant us the wisdom to comprehend all of His messages to us and speedily bring us to the day of the return of His full revealed Presence in the world!

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**by Rabbi A. Leib Scheinbaum**  
Parshas Balak mailed-by shemayisrael.com

Balak ben Tzipor saw all that Yisrael had done to the Emori. Moav became very frightened of the people. (22:2,3) Balak saw, and Yisro heard. When Yisro heard all that had occurred during the Egyptian exodus, with the consequences that the Egyptian People sustained, he was inspired to leave his home and come to the wilderness to join the Jewish People. He wanted to be a part of their religious experience. Balak saw what Yisro saw, but with a contrasting effect. Why? How did their perspectives differ?

It is not what they saw with regard to the Jewish victory over their enemies. Rather, it is Who orchestrated this victory. Yisro heard everything that Hashem had done to Pharaoh and his henchmen. He recognized and acknowledged the "Hashem factor" in this victory. He saw the miracles and Divine Providence at every step of the way.

Balak also saw the miracles, but he ignored them. He acknowledged only what Yisrael had done to the Emori. He disregarded the fact that Hashem was guiding the Jewish victory. He only saw all of the Jews who were brutally killing the Emori. He did not see what the Emori had done to the Jews. His perspective was limited to the Jewish response - but he did not recognize it as a response, but, rather, as an unwarranted offensive.

History repeats itself. The world sees every Jewish victory as something the Jews have initiated on their own. They never see what prompted their reaction, what provoked their military response. It is only what we do to them, not what they have done to us. The astute observer sees Hashem's guiding hand in everything that involves His people. Yisro was such a person.

Balak ben Tzipor saw all that Yisrael had done to the Emori. Moav became very frightened of the people, because it was numerous. (22:2,3)

The Torah begins by stating that "Balak saw." It goes on to say that the people of Moav feared the Jews. Why did it not simply write: "Balak and the people of Moav saw, and they were afraid of the nation (of Yisrael)"? Why is the "seeing" of Balak distinguished from the "fear" of the people of Moav? Is it not one and the same? Horav Nosson Ordman, zl, explains that the Torah is teaching us that there was a huge contrast between what Balak saw and what the people of Moav saw, and, consequently, their fear was also different. Balak feared the Jews because of what they had done to the Emori. The people of Moav were concerned, however, with the size of the Jewish Army. Balak saw all of the miracles that Hashem wrought against the Emori. He was no fool. He understood that the Jewish victory was not a result of their firepower or their skilled army. It was a miraculous victory which only Hashem could have orchestrated. His people were simple pagans who understood what appeared to them. They saw a large army vanquish the Emori. That was it. The Jews were simply stronger and bigger. They did not perceive the war with the same depth of vision that Balak was able to perceive. It was this unique perspective that indicated to Balak that victory over the Jews was not to be had through the medium of conventional warfare. He would have to battle them on a spiritual plane. Thus, he called on Bilaam, the pagan's answer to Moshe Rabbeinu. Bilaam would find a way to achieve victory over the Jews.

We should address another question. Throughout the parshah, we find Hashem maintaining a dialogue with Bilaam, making it seem that Bilaam is the primary enemy of the Jews. He is the one that seeks to curse them, and, ultimately, he counseled Balak how to destroy the Jews spiritually by using the young women to enchant the Jewish men and manipulate them into immoral behavior. When we think about it, however, Bilaam was only acting at Balak's behest. Balak initiated the entire debacle against the Jews. Bilaam was his hireling. In the end, we find that Hashem punished Bilaam for his evil intentions and actions. Balak seems to have left the scene unscathed. Indeed, Chazal teach us that in the merit of Balak's forty-two sacrifices, he was privileged to be the progenitor of Rus, who was the mother of royalty. Why did Hashem ignore Balak in terms of punishment? He surely was no saint.

Rav Ordman distinguishes between Balak's motivations and the basis of Bilaam's actions. Balak saw what the Jews had done to the Emori, and he feared for himself and his nation. As their king, their security was his responsibility. He did not take his role as their leader lightly. Therefore, he sought a way to limit the success of the Jews, to prevent them from overrunning his country. He certainly was no saint, but the fact that his actions were motivated by fear mitigates the evil that he sought to bring against the Jews.

Bilaam was a totally different story. He hated the Jews because of what they represented. He had two objectives: money; and honor. Balak was prepared to give him both if he could help him solve the Jewish problem. Bilaam was prepared to accommodate him for no other reason than for his prejudicial hatred of the Jewish people. If he could personally benefit, he could not refuse Balak's offer.

This gives us a new perspective on hatred. Balak hated, and Bilaam hated. Balak was in a state of fear: for himself; his land; his people. Bilaam hated simply because he was an evil person. Very often, we find individuals who are plagued by a deep malevolence towards others that garner support for their "cause" by arousing fear and discord. This fear often serves as a form of justification for some of the most heinous acts of destruction. Espousing hate is difficult. Sowing fear is much easier and generally more successful.

You shall not go with them. Arise, go with them. (22:12,20)

First, Hashem told Bilaam not to go with Balak's agents. Afterwards, Hashem told him to go with them. What happened? In the Talmud Makkos 10b, Chazal explain that b'derech she'adam rotzeh leilach, molichin oso, "In

the way that a person wishes to go, they lead him." In other words, Hashem did not want Bilaam to go, but, after seeing that Bilaam wanted so much to join them, He said, "Arise, go with them."

Let us try to understand what happened. Bilaam was an individual whose proficiency in the area of esoteric wisdom was prolific. He had reached unprecedented heights in his conception of the workings of the spiritual world. Well versed in Maaseh Bereishis, Creation, and Maaseh Merkavah, Holy Chariot, he achieved a level that had never before been attained by a non-Jew. He did not speak just to Eliyahu HaNavi; he conversed with the Almighty! In fact, he did not make a move without first consulting with Hashem. This is yiraas Shomayim, fear of Heaven, at its apex. What more could he do?

We see from here, explains Horav Reuven Grozovsky, zl, that everything is dependent upon one's ratzon, will. An individual can possess abundant wisdom and incredible depth of knowledge, but, if it stands in contrast to his ratzon, the wisdom will be of no avail. Ratzon is determined by one's middos, character traits. If his character is in consonance with his wisdom, he will grow in a positive manner. Otherwise, all the wisdom and knowledge in the world will be of no avail to him, because he is a slave to his base character. He is no different than a donkey carrying volumes of Torah novellae. He remains the same donkey. Yiraas Shomayim is of no avail to such a person, because the moment that his fear of Heaven challenges his ratzon - his ratzon prevails.

This idea precludes the notion that many have to legitimize their lack of observance. "If I would know more, I would be more observant" is a common rejoinder. Bilaam demonstrates for us that one's level of observance has nothing to do with knowledge or wisdom. It is intrinsically connected to desire and will. One acts according to his will. Bilaam had no shortage of wisdom, but, regrettably, his desire for good was at a premium. His negative ratzon overwhelmed his exceptional wisdom and brought him to his well-deserved and miserable end.

Ratzon can also work the other way. It has a flipside that can transform a person and motivate him to achieve the ultimate in spiritual success. There is certainly no dearth of stories that relate the extent of an individual's achievements when he has the will. I recently came across a collection of stories, published by Shuvu Chazon Avraham, the organization for reaching out and educating Russian immigrant children in Eretz Yisrael, which was founded by Horav Avraham Pam, zl. Among the many moving stories of return and faith, I take the liberty of sharing the following episode:

A teenager who had finally decided to give it a try and "check out" a Shuvu High School was asked to attend classes for one day in order to get a firsthand knowledge of the school. It was not an easy decision, and many hurdles and challenges had to be surmounted before this decision became a reality. The principal of the school was kind enough to accompany the young man on a tour of the school.

He dressed up for the momentous occasion, and, with a heart filled with pride and anticipation, he entered the halls of learning. Vibrant, enthusiastic sounds of Torah study greeted him as he walked into the bais hamedrash. Each classroom he visited was filled with students involved in serious Torah study, eager to learn and continue the heritage of our People. It was for this reason that he was almost totally stunned when he entered the last classroom where the rebbe was delivering a shiur to a classroom of students in which all but one were engrossed in his words. All but one, because one sixteen-year-old student with long hair sat with closed eyes, his head on his desk. He was out cold! How dare he do this in this hallowed makom Torah, place where Torah is studied? Where was his respect? If he was not interested, then he should have remained home. How dare he come to school and sit there with such insolence, ignoring the rebbe, the class, the Torah! Every student enrolled in the school had a story of triumph over adversity. This boy was undermining their achievements.

After a few minutes of silent observation which slowly led to seething anger, the prospective student turned to the principal, and, without concealing his anger, asked, "Why is he here?"

The principal's reply teaches us a lesson in how far ratzon can go, and, incidentally, how to always judge people in a positive light. A loving smile crept across the principal's face as he said, "Oh, do not be misled by that boy's closed eyes. You see, he underwent his Bris Milah today. In fact, just three hours ago, he was under sedation for the procedure. I encouraged him to go home and rest, but he refused. He did not want to miss a day of Torah study, even if it meant dozing during class. He insisted that I permit him to stay - and I did.

This young man had closed eyes, but his heart was wide open. He wanted to be a part of the Torah study going on in his classroom. He had waited so long for it, he would not forfeit even one moment. That is ratzon. Nothing stands in the way of such positive desire.

Behold! The people will arise like a lion cub and raise itself like a lion. (23:24)

Horav David Moshe Rosenbaum, zl, the Admor m'Kretznif, once remarked, "He who arises early in the morning to study Torah has arichas yamim, longevity." He explained that by arising early, he adds those extra hours to his day, making his day longer than he whose day begins later. This is much more than an anecdote. When we think about it, the time that we spend sleeping, reading and whatever else we might do in our past time is the time that Hashem allots to us - to live, to do, to achieve. When we use this time in a positive manner, we lengthen our days. When we waste it, we are wasting the most precious gift that Hashem has granted us.

Arising early in the morning is not "senior citizen" behavior, as some might suggest. Chassidic literature devotes a special place to this endeavor. Indeed, the Bais Yisrael, zl, would encourage his talmidim, students, to make use of the early morning hours to study Torah and prepare for Tefillas Shacharis, Morning Prayer service. He would often invite them to his home to join him in a cup of tea and words of Torah. Today, throughout the world, thousands of Jews have a morning seder, study session, prior to Tefillas Shacharis. Certainly, this preface to the morning prayers transforms their character and ultimately affects their development.

This unique Jewish quality did not escape Bilaam. When he was enumerating Klal Yisrael's enviable virtues, he made a point to praise their efforts in arising early in the morning with great alacrity and enthusiasm to greet the Almighty with their daily prayer. "They arise like a lion to grab mitzvos, to don the Tallis, recite the Krias Shema and to put on their Tefillin" (Rashi ibid 23:24). The Maharasha writes (Berachos 12b) that this pasuk is the source from which we derive the significance of arising early in the morning, taking great care not to be late in reciting Krias Shema.

How does one ensure that he arises "like a lion"? Many of us go to sleep with good intentions, but, in the morning when a warm bed is beckoning, it is difficult to leave. Horav Meir, zl, m'Premishlan, cites the Rema in the beginning of the Shulchan Aruch, who writes: "He should gather the strength to overcome and arise in the morning to serve his Creator." The Rema then adds a statement that is enigmatic: "When he retires, he should be aware before Whom he lies." We are discussing getting up in the morning - not going to sleep at night. Why does the Rema add how one should lie down?

Rav Meir explains that Rema was explaining how a person can arise in the morning like "a lion." It all depends on how and with what attitude one goes to sleep. One who goes to bed like a horse will not get up like a lion! If one retires like a lion, however, knowing full well before Whom he lies and what his goals are, he will be able to arise the next morning with alacrity and enthusiasm to serve the Almighty. How one wakes up depends on how he goes to sleep.

The idea of lying down to sleep in the presence of the Almighty Whose Presence fills the entire world is a point of discussion in the chassidic sefarim. The Rizhiner Rebbe, zl, cites the Arizal who changes the tefillah of Hashkiveinu, "Lay us down," in Maariv, from Hashkiveinu Hashem Elokeinu, l'shalom, "Lay us down Hashem, our G-d, to peace" to, Hashkiveinu Avinu, our Father, l'shalom. He feels this is due to the

enormous trepidation one should have in "lying down" in front of the King of Kings. When we view Hashem as our loving Father Who cares for us as His children, there is room for a dispensation to lie down. After all is said and done, however, the best advice for waking up in a timely fashion with the proper attitude is to prepare oneself for this moment when he goes to bed.

And behold! A man of Bnei Yisrael came and brought the Midyanite woman near to his brothers before the eyes of Moshe and before the eyes of the entire assembly of Bnei Yisrael. and Pinchas saw. and he stood up from amid the assembly. and he pierced them both. (25:6,7,8)

Why were they crying? Chazal explain that when Zimri brought Kosbi to Moshe Rabbeinu, he asked, "Moshe, is this woman forbidden or permitted? If you say she is forbidden, then who permitted Yisro's daughter to you?" Moshe did not respond because nisalmah mimenu halachah, "The law which applied to this travesty was concealed from him." The people cried as a reaction to what appeared as a weakness on the part of the great leader. They did not understand that Hashem had concealed the law from Moshe, so that Pinchas would come and take that which is fit for him. We must endeavor to understand the meaning of "the law being concealed from Moshe." Once Pinchas came to ask Moshe, "Rebbe, did you not teach us that one who has relations with a non-Jewish woman, zealots may kill him?" Moshe replied, "The one who reads the letter in public, let him be the messenger to carry out its contents." In other words, Moshe Rabbeinu deferred to Pinchas and allowed him to perform the act of kanaus, zealotry. Why? Now that the halachah was no longer concealed from him, he should have carried it out. Why did Moshe allow Pinchas to take over what rightfully was Moshe's function as leader of the Jewish nation?

Horav Chaim Mordechai Katz, zl, explains that the halachah of kanaim pogiin bo, zealots may kill him, is different from other halachos. All halachos are directed towards any Jew that possesses a modicum of intelligence. The commandment concerning zealotry applies only to he who is filled with righteous indignation, whose heart burns with emotion, whose passion has reached a frenzy seething with anger and hurt over the great desecration of Hashem's Name. Only such an individual may take the mantle of zealotry upon himself and act accordingly. He must sense within himself a drive to avenge Hashem's Name. Otherwise, he is not a kanai, zealot. Pinchas felt the pain and humiliation this act of debauchery engendered. One who feels the pain may carry out the punishment. To Moshe, however, it was now a halachah - not a passion. Since originally the halachah was purposefully concealed from him, it was now a halachah which had lost its fervor for him. He could not carry the mantle of kanaus, because he was not a kanai. Pinchas was the man of the hour. He saw; he questioned; he reacted. That is kanaus.

Sponsored by Moshe Shimon and Tibor Rosenberg in memory of their father Pinchas ben Shimon z"l Rosenberg niftar 18 Tammuz 5719

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from Shlomo Katz <skatz@torah.org> hide details Jun 28 (13 hours ago) reply-to skatz@torah.org, genesis@torah.org to hamaayan@torah.org date Jun 28, 2007 11:05 AM subject HaMaayan / The Torah Spring - Parashat Balak mailed-by torah.org  
**Hamaayan / The Torah Spring**  
**Edited by Shlomo Katz**

The most famous verse in our parashah is undoubtedly Bemidbar 24:5, "Ma tovu" / "How good are your tents, O Yaakov, your dwelling places, O Israel." The midrash state that the "dwelling places" referred to are the batei knaisiyot / shuls and batei midrashot / study halls where Torah is studied.

Accordingly, writes R' Yitzchak Elchanan Spektor z"l (1816-1896; rabbi of Kovno, Lithuania), we can interpret our verse as follows: In what merit

will our tents be good, i.e., in what merit will we dwell in G-d's "tent" in Olam Haba forever? In the merit of our dwelling places, i.e., in the merit of the Torah we study in this world.

R' Spektor continues: Those who give financial support to Torah study can reach the highest levels in the World-to-Come. This is alluded to in Kohelet (7:12), "To sit in the shelter of wisdom is to sit in the shelter of money." They are one and the same.

The next verse in our parashah states: "Stretching out like brooks, like gardens alongside a river, like aloes planted Hashem, like cedars near water." This refers to the ability of a Torah scholar's words to spread quickly throughout the world like flowing water or like the scent of aloes. Fortunate are the ones who study Torah and those who facilitate that Torah study and the spread of Torah through their financial means, observes R' Spektor. (Ma'amar Al HaTorah reprinted in Ma'ayan Yitzchak p.122)

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From the Parashah . . .

"Teruat / the trumpet blast of the King is bo / in him." (Bemidbar 23:21)

R' Nachman of Breslov z"l (1772-1811; great-grandson of the Ba'al Shem Tov and an influential chassidic rebbe in his own right) taught: The word "teruat" / "trumpet blast" also can mean "breaking," as in the verse (Tehilim 2:9), "Tero'em / break them with an iron rod." Read this way, our verse is teaching that when we break all the lies that cause us to deny G-d's existence, we find that "the King is bo / in it." Within our disbelief itself, G-d can be found.

R' Yaakov Meir Shechter shlita (rosh yeshiva of Yeshivat Sha'ar Ha'shamayim in Yerushalayim) explains: Every person experiences downturns in his life. For some people, these events cause a loss of faith or hope. Others are able to accept these events as part of life and go on.

In reality, it is not enough to accept these events. Rather, we must see these downturns as opportunities for growth. This is why Hashem initially spoke to Moshe Rabbeinu from a burning thornbush. It taught Moshe that there is no place devoid of G-d's presence.

When a person sins, he obscures the truth. Then, his "keshet" / bond with G-d, becomes a "sheker" / lie, and "pe'er" / beauty becomes "epher" / ashes. But when he repents, he can reverse this process. Out of his very downfall comes growth. The Talmud relates that Rabbi Akiva was an am ha'aretz / ignoramus until he was 40 years old. He said about himself, "Had I gotten my hands on a Torah scholar when I was an am ha'aretz, I would have bitten him like a donkey." Many years later, it was the same Rabbi Akiva who interpreted a seemingly superfluous word in a pasuk (Devarim 6:13) as teaching that the obligation to be in awe of G-d includes the obligation to be in awe of Torah scholars. This was a unique contribution by Rabbi Akiva. Before he came along, other sages had been unable to explain the seemingly extra word.

This demonstrates, writes R' Shechter, that Rabbi Akiva not only learned Torah, he corrected the specific blemish that he had possessed before. Within the very weakness that he possessed - his immense hatred for Torah scholars - was concealed his future greatness - his unique ability to recognize the honor due Torah scholars. (In All Your Ways pp.4-8)

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From the Haftarah . . .

"He has told you, O man, what is good, and what Hashem seeks from you -- only the performance of justice, the love of kindness, and walking humbly with your G-d." (Michah 6:8)

The Gemara (Pesachim 50b) teaches: "A person should always study Torah she'lo lishmah / not for the proper reason, for through study she'lo lishmah, one will come to study lishmah / for the proper reason."

R' Chaim of Volozhin z"l (founder of the yeshiva movement; died 1821) asks: How can the Gemara say that a person should always study Torah she'lo lishmah? Clearly it would be preferable to study lishmah!

Rather, the Gemara means that a person should stick to his scheduled Torah study sessions consistently even though on some days he does not

feel like learning and will only be doing so she'lo lishmah, with ulterior motives. Our Sages understood that it is nearly impossible for a person to maintain the same level of fervor all of the time. Sometimes a person is even feeling down and has difficulty concentrating. Therefore our Sages taught that it is important to maintain a consistent schedule of Torah learning - to learn "always" - even if on some days it is done in a less than ideal manner.

This is alluded to in our verse, writes R' Chaim. The Gemara (Sukkah 49b) questions the meaning of the verse in Mishlei (31:26), "The Torah of kindness is on her lips." Is there "Torah of kindness" and "Torah which is not of kindness"? Says the Gemara, Torah which is studied lishmah is called "Torah of kindness." Torah which is studied she'lo lishmah is called "Torah which is not of kindness." Why?

Our verse speaks of "the performance of justice, the love of kindness." "Justice" is that which adheres to the letter of the law, while "kindness" means going beyond the letter of the law. A person who is not in the mood to learn Torah must do so nevertheless to adhere to the letter of the law. However, his Torah study is not "Torah of kindness." Studying Torah lishmah on the other hand is beyond the letter of the law. That is "Torah of kindness." (Ruach Chaim 2:1)

R' David Kimchi z"l (Radak; major Tanach commentator; Narbonne, France; 1160-1235) interprets our verse as follows:

"The performance of justice" refers to laws between man and his fellow man, for example, monetary laws.

"The love of kindness" refers to doing acts of kindness.

"Walking humbly (literally `discreetly') with your G-d" refers to G-d's Oneness and to loving Him with all one's heart and all one's soul. Because this is concealed in man's heart, it is referred to as "walking discreetly."

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R' David Lifschitz z"l

R' Lifschitz, known as the "Suvalker Rav," was an important figure in American Jewish life for nearly five decades, as a rosh yeshiva and as president of the Ezras Torah welfare organization from 1976 until his passing. He was born in Minsk in 1906, but moved to Grodno as a child, where he later studied in Yeshivat Shaar Hatorah of R' Shimon Shkop z"l. From there he transferred to the Mir yeshiva where he studied under R' Eliezer Yehuda Finkel z"l and Rav Yerucham Levovitz z"l.

At age 24, R' Lifschitz married Zipporah Chava Yoselewitz, daughter of the rabbi of Suvalk. Two years later, in 1935, R' Lifschitz succeeded his father-in-law as rabbi of Suvalk, a title he carried for the rest of his life.

R' Lifschitz suffered tremendous persecution at the hands of the Gestapo before the Jews were expelled from Suvalk. One-half of Suvalk's 6,000 Jews (including the Lifshitz family) escaped to Lithuania. In June 1941, R' Lifschitz arrived in San Francisco on a boat that carried several other leading sages. R' Lifschitz's first position was in Chicago, but he soon moved to Yeshivat Rabbeinu Yitzchak Elchanan (the rabbinical school of what later became Yeshiva University), where he remained for the rest of his life. R' Lifschitz passed away on 9 Tammuz 5753 / 1993.

A small number of R' Lifschitz's shmuessen / ethical lectures were printed posthumously under the title Tehilah LeDavid. Several of these relate to the subject of "shalom," such as one from Yom Kippur 1974 when he said:

When we say "Shalom aleichem," we are not merely greeting someone; we are blessing him. "Shalom" is a name of G-d, meaning "completeness." "Shalom" / "Peace" means that the whole cosmos has achieved a state of completion through uniting to serve G-d. Whereas man was created lacking, it is his job to complete himself . . .

Israel today [one year after the Yom Kippur War] is in a state of truce. There are agreements, but is that peace? Is a cease-fire peace? Real shalom can exist only when Hashem's awe is over all His handiwork, united to do His will (paraphrasing the Yom Kippur prayers). Shalom cannot be just the absence of war, because peace is completeness, a name of G-d.

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The editors hope these brief 'snippets' will engender further study and discussion of Torah topics ("lehagdil Torah u'leha'adirah"), and your letters are appreciated. Web archives are available starting with Rosh HaShanah 5758 (1997) at

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