

Weekly Parsha

Balak

by Rabbi Berel Wein

Although Bilaam is the major villain of the piece in this week's parsha, we should not overlook Balak's nefarious role in the events described. Balak is the instigator of the whole plot to curse and destroy the Jewish people. He finances Bilaam and is most persistent in pursuing his evil goal. Even when Bilaam apparently despairs of the success of his mission and so informs Balak.

Balak nevertheless insists that he continue, for perhaps he will yet be able to curse the people of Israel. Often in Jewish history we find this scenario repeated, with those behind the scenes persistently encouraging the masses to destroy the Jews while they stay a pious distance behind, causing, but somehow apparently not participating in, the murderous mayhem.

As hate filled as Bilaam is he cannot operate alone. He needs financial and social backing for him to do his worst. Bilaam is eventually killed by the very people he attempted to destroy. But Balak always lives on to try again to accomplish the destruction of the Jewish nation. Balak never makes peace with the idea that the Lord does not allow him his goal. His tenacity for hatred and evil behavior is the true hallmark of his identity.

Centuries later the prophet reminds us of Balak's scheme and advice to Bilaam and warns us somehow not to overlook Balak's role in this story of aggression and unreasoned hatred. Through remembering the original Balak, the prophet informs us that we will be better able to identify and deal with his successors in deceit and hatred throughout the ages.

It is not the suicide bomber – Bilaam – that is the only guilty party in terrorist attacks. It is the Balaks who send them and support them that are certainly equally as guilty. The pious human rights organizations that promote only hatred and violence under the guise of doing good deeds are also responsible for the loss of the precious lives of innocents caused by those whom they nurture and support. The Talmud stated this reality by coining the famous Jewish aphorism: "It is not the mouse alone that is the thief. It is rather the hole in the wall that allows the mouse entry into the house that is the real 'thief.'" It is the persistence of those that are determined to undermine the Jewish people and the State of Israel that places them as direct immoral descendants of Balak.

In the Pesach Hagadah we read that in every generation we face this challenge. No matter how many Bilaams we dispose of, Balak somehow survives to continue to try again. The words of the prophet in this week's haftarah - to remember Balak's role in the story of the Jewish people in the desert of Sinai - are addressed to us and our times as well. We should not be shocked, though our sadness over this fact is understandable, that the malevolence against Jews of the 1930's can repeat itself in our time as well. As Balak still remains a force in the world, the Jewish problem will not go away.

Shabat shalom.

Rabbi Berel Wein

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

Not Reckoned Among the Nations

Balak

The year is 1933. Two Jews are sitting in a Viennese coffee house, reading the news. One is reading the local Jewish paper, the other the notoriously antisemitic publication *Der Stürmer*. "How can you possibly read that revolting rubbish?" says the first. The second smiles. "What does your paper say? Let me guess: 'The Jews are assimilating.' 'The Jews are arguing.' 'The Jews are disappearing.' Now let me tell you what my paper says: 'The Jews control the banks.' 'The Jews control the media.' 'The Jews control Austria.' 'The Jews control the world.' My friend, if you want good news about the Jews, always pay attention to the antisemites."

An old and bitter joke. Yet it has a point and a history, which begins with this week's Parsha. Some of the most beautiful things ever said about the Jewish people were said by Bilaam:

"Who can count the dust of Jacob ... May my final end be like theirs! ... How beautiful are your tents, Jacob, your dwelling places, Israel! ... A star will come out of Jacob; a sceptre will rise out of Israel."

Bilaam was no friend of the Jews. Having failed to curse them, he eventually devised a plan that worked. He advised the Moabite women to seduce Israelite men and then invite them to take part in their idolatrous worship. 24,000 people died in the subsequent plague that struck the people.[1]

Bilaam is numbered by the Rabbis as one of only four non-royals mentioned in the Tanach who are denied a share in the World to Come (*Sanhedrin* 90a). Why then did God choose that Israel be blessed by Bilaam? Surely there is a principle *Megalgelim zechut al yedei zakai*: "Good things come about through good people" (*Tosefta Yoma* 4:12). Why did this good thing come about through a bad man?

The answer lies in another principle, first stated in *Proverbs* (27:2): "Let someone else praise you, and not your own mouth; an outsider, and not your own lips." Tanach is perhaps the least self-congratulatory national literature in history. Jews chose to record for history their faults, not their virtues. Hence it was important that their praise come from an outsider, and one not known to like them. Moses rebuked the people. Bilaam, the outsider, praised them.

That said, however, what is the meaning of one of the most famous descriptions ever given of the people Israel:

"It is a nation dwelling alone, not reckoned among the nations."

Num. 23:9

I have argued against the interpretation that has become popular in modern times, namely that it is Israel's destiny to be isolated, friendless, hated, abandoned and alone, as if antisemitism were somehow written into the script of history.[2] It isn't. None of the Prophets said so. To the contrary, they believed that the nations of the world would eventually recognise Israel's God and come to worship Him in the Temple in Jerusalem. *Zechariah* (8:23) foresees a day when "ten people from all languages and nations will take firm hold of one Jew by the hem of his robe and say, 'Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you.'" There is nothing fated, predestined, about antisemitism.

What then do Bilaam's words mean? "It is a nation dwelling alone, not reckoned among the nations." Ibn Ezra says they mean that unlike all other nations, Jews, even when a minority in a non-Jewish culture, will not assimilate. Ramban says that their culture and creed will remain pure, not a cosmopolitan mix of multiple traditions and nationalities. The *Netziv* gives the sharp interpretation, clearly directed against the Jews of his time, that "If Jews live distinctive and apart from others they will dwell safely, but if they seek to emulate 'the nations' they 'will not be reckoned' as anything special at all."

There is, however, another possibility, hinted at by another noted antisemite, G. K. Chesterton[3], who we have already mentioned in *Beha'alotcha*. Chesterton famously wrote of America that it was "a nation with the soul of a church" and "the only nation in the world founded on a creed." That is, in fact, precisely what made Israel different – and America's political culture, as historian Perry Miller and sociologist Robert Bellah pointed out, is deeply rooted in the idea of biblical Israel and the concept of covenant. Ancient Israel was indeed founded on a creed, and was, as a result, a nation with the soul of a religion.

We discussed in *Beha'alotcha* how Rabbi Soloveitchik broke down the two ways in which people become a group, be it a camp or a congregation. Camps face a common enemy, and so a group of people bands together. If you look at all other nations, ancient and modern, you will see they arose out of historical contingencies. A group of people live in a land, develop a shared culture, form a society, and thus become a nation.

Jews, certainly from the Babylonian exile onward, had none of the conventional attributes of a nation. They did not live in the same land. Some lived in Israel, others in Babylon, yet others in Egypt. Later they would be scattered throughout the world. They did not share a language of everyday speech. There were many Jewish vernaculars, versions of Yiddish, Ladino and other regional Jewish dialects. They did not live under the same political dispensation. They did not share the same cultural environment. Nor did they experience the same fate. Despite all their many differences though, they always saw themselves and were seen by others as one nation: the world's first - and for a long time the world's only - global people.

What then made them a nation? This was the question Rabbi Saadia Gaon asked in the tenth century, to which he gave the famous answer: "Our nation is only a nation in virtue of its laws (torot)." They were the people defined by the Torah, a nation under the sovereignty of God. Having received, uniquely, their laws before they even entered their land, they remained bound by those self-same laws even when they lost the land. Of no other nation has this ever been true.

Uniquely then, in Judaism religion and nationhood coincide. There are nations with many religions: multicultural Britain is one among many. There are religions governing many nations: Christianity and Islam are obvious examples. Only in the case of Judaism is there a one-to-one correlation between religion and nationhood. Without Judaism there would be nothing (except antisemitism) to connect Jews across the world. And without the Jewish nation Judaism would cease to be what it has always been, the faith of a people bound by a bond of collective responsibility to one another and to God. Bilaam was right. The Jewish people really are unique.

Nothing therefore could be more mistaken than to define Jewishness as a mere ethnicity. If ethnicity is a form of culture, then Jews are not one ethnicity but many. In Israel, Jews are a walking lexicon of almost every ethnicity under the sun. If ethnicity is another word for race, then conversion to Judaism would be impossible (you cannot convert to become Caucasian; you cannot change your race at will).

What makes Jews "a nation dwelling alone, not reckoned among the nations," is that their nationhood is not a matter of geography, politics, or ethnicity. It is a matter of religious vocation as God's covenant partners, summoned to be a living example of a nation among the nations, made distinctive by its faith and way of life. Lose that and we lose the one thing that was and remains the source of our singular contribution to the heritage of humankind. When we forget this, sadly, God arranges for people like Bilaam and Chesterton to remind us otherwise. We should not need such reminding.

[1] Numbers chapter 25, and Numbers 31:16.

[2] For more on this debate, read Rabbi Sacks' book *Future Tense*.

[3] That Chesterton was an antisemite is not my judgment but that of the poet W. H. Auden. Chesterton wrote: "I said that a particular kind of Jew tended to be a tyrant and another particular kind of Jew tended to be a traitor. I say it again. Patent facts of this kind are permitted in the criticism of any other nation on the planet: it is not counted illiberal to say that a certain kind of Frenchman tends to be sensual.... I cannot see why the tyrants should not be called 'tyrants' and the traitors 'traitors' merely because they happen to be members of a race persecuted for other reasons and on other occasions." (G.K. Chesterton, *The Uses of Diversity*, London, Methuen & Co., 1920, p. 239). On this Auden wrote, "The disingenuousness of this argument is revealed by the quiet shift from the term 'nation' to the term 'race'."

Parshat Balak: Why They Hate Us, and Who Will Redeem Us?

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"Behold, it is a nation that will dwell in solitude, and will not be reckoned among the nations." (Numbers 23:9)

Is the biblical statement about our solitude within the family of nations a blessing or a curse?

From the biblical context of this prophecy, it is clearly meant to be a blessing, a vision of the remarkable ability of Israel to live in splendid

isolation and ultimately outlast – and ideologically triumph over – the nations of the world. The most classic commentary, Rashi, maintains that our forebears – the patriarchs and matriarchs – have merited us with a unique set of values and a consecrated lifestyle which prevents our degenerative assimilation into the licentious practices of the nations round about (see Ibn Ezra ad loc.); and although every other nation will eventually leave the stage of world history, we alone will emerge victorious.

And so Balak reviled Bileam for this very laudatory vision: "What have you done to me? I hired you to curse my enemies, and behold, you have blessed, yes blessed, them" (Numbers 23:1).

However, when we look upon the last two thousand years of Jewish history, at least the first part of Bileam's words have indeed been fulfilled – but not as a blessing; his prophecy has truly come to pass, but rather as a horrific curse. Until the establishment of the State of Israel we had been hopelessly and helplessly persecuted and exiled from pillar to post by the nations of the world – culminating in the Holocaust, when we truly stood alone in the midst of the Nazis' attempted genocide. And even now post-Medinat Yisrael – when we do have the ability to defend ourselves against the terrorism of Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran – we (and not the allies of Iran and Al Qaeda) have become the whipping boy not only of the Arab bloc, but also of the European Union, the entire United Nations, and even of the president of the United States. Yes, we stand in isolation – but "stinking" isolation rather than splendid isolation. How can we understand this in light of Bileam's prophecy?

Allow me to take a page from Hitler's *Mein Kampf* in order to understand the mentality of our enemies. Hitler – like his present-day heirs, fundamentalist and Jihadist Islam – sought world domination by the sword. But at the same time that he was building up military prowess to destroy the free world, he was also waging a deadly and diabolical campaign – replete with Kristallnacht and death camps – to dehumanize and decimate the Jewish people. Why the stateless and powerless Jews?

You see, Fascist Hitler believed in Aryan supremacy, in "might makes right," in "to the military victor belongs the spoils," and he, Hitler, belonged to the race of "über-menschen" who had conquered Germany today and tomorrow would conquer the world. But there was one fly in the ointment: the Jews. The Jews believed – a principle of faith deriving from their patriarch Abraham four thousand years ago – that "right would conquer might," that "compassionate righteousness and moral justice" would take over the world (Genesis 18:19), that through the Jews the world would be blessed with peace and freedom, divine ideals that would trump the sword and despotic domination.

Now Hitler wanted to believe that the Jews were "selling" a slave morality based upon their own self-serving need for the world's compassion and righteousness if they were to survive. But he could not deny the fact that they – the most powerless of people – had nevertheless survived the persecutions of Egypt, Persia, Greece, Rome, the Ottoman Empire, and the Catholic Church, giving credence to their claim that they were indeed God's witnesses, entrusted with the mission to enthrone the God of the Ten Commandments as the world's only Führer. And so he became obsessed with the Jews, and was hell-bent on destroying the last Jew, on obliterating Judaism – and its message of love, compassion, and morality – from the face of the world. Only then could he be sure that he would triumph, and would not be subject to eternal damnation.

Hitler is dead, having taken his own life in a Berlin bunker; the final expression of his "Jewish" obsession, a Talmudic tractate *Pesachim* (our festival of freedom and redemption) which was curiously found among the few personal effects he brought with him to his suicide sepulcher. The failed Führer probably believed he was burying the last remnant of the Jewish faith, the Talmud; instead, the Talmud buried him. And in his own Germany, a \$10 million Jewish Center – replete with synagogue, Hebrew school for children, and adult education classes – has just been completed in Munich. Jews throughout Germany are coming out of the woodwork and declaring themselves as Jews, hundreds of descendants of Jewish fathers are converting to Judaism, and in Hitler's own country Jewish life is slowly but surely being renewed.

Nevertheless, the world is still not ready to accept our morality, hypocritically siding with those who send out suicide bombers and target innocent civilians, with those who repress the rights of their own citizenry (the women, the Christians, the Kurds, the Jews within their own borders); they would rather revile Israel as an apartheid and terrorist state, Israel which enables enemy Arab voices to be heard in its parliament, Israel which avoids aerial bombing whenever possible even at the risk of her own soldiers to prevent the death of innocents, Israel who alone in the world is standing up to the scourge of terrorism, Israel who had an Arab judge serve as chief justice in the trial of its “esteemed” president.

And so the words of Bileam still remain as an eventual promise – but also as a challenge. At the conclusion of our biblical portion, Bileam understands that no external source can vanquish Israel; we can only vanquish ourselves if we fall sway to the immorality round about. But if indeed we continually check our morality not only against the perverted standards of our enemies but also against the morality of the Ten Commandments, then we are guaranteed that not only will we survive, but we will prevail.

Shabbat Shalom

In commemoration of my Rosh Yeshiva’s *yahrzeit*, which is this Thursday, the 14th of Tamuz:

The Rosh Hayeshiva, Rav Ruderman

By Rabbi Yirmiyohu Kaganoff

For clarity, I included the Rosh Yeshiva’s family name in the title, but, because of the way I always call him and because of my relationship with him, I will refer to him throughout this article simply as “the Rosh Yeshiva.” I cannot bring myself to refer to him any other way.

As a very American high school graduate, raised in a frum, New York family, I arrived in Ner Yisrael planning to stay one year in full-time yeshiva. My life was all planned out. I already had a scholarship to a good college in New York City and was the winner of a New York State Regents Scholarship, which would provide me with extra money while attending college. I planned to combine my daily college attendance with some yeshiva education while I achieved my B.A. degree, probably with a major in psychology, and then I intended to pursue my professional career, either to attend graduate school to become a psychologist or, more likely, to attend a top law school and become an attorney.

I had accepted my high school *menahel*’s suggestion to spend a year in yeshiva full-time before starting college. He suggested that I attend Ner Yisrael for a year, which did not pose any conflict with my long-term plans, either for myself or for my father, because of the yeshiva’s reputation for not being opposed to “college.”

Having arranged that my slot in college and the scholarship wait for a year, I arrived in Ner Yisrael. After one year in yeshiva, I decided to stay for another year and extended my slot in college and my scholarship for another year. After two years, I was told that my New York State’s Regents Scholarship would not be renewed anymore. I decided to spend another year in yeshiva, and then another. Now, decades later, I presume that there is still a place for me in the college I was supposed to attend but never did. Instead, extensive reading supplied my secular education, whereas learning, teaching and spreading Torah to Klal Yisrael became my life’s aspiration and commitment. Clearly, my vision for what I wanted to do with my life changed very significantly, albeit highly gradually.

How did this happen? Certainly not overnight. As a high school senior, I remember questioning the study of Bava Basra, a *mesechta* whose halachic issues discuss whether it is my financial responsibility to provide a neighbor privacy in his yard and whether using a field for three years enforces claiming ownership of the property. Obviously, these reasons would not establish a legal claim in today’s world, so why devote time to arcane, non-practical matters? Shouldn’t we be studying only practical topics like Shabbos or Berachos? This was the perspective of a senior from a frum background in a quality yeshiva high school. Yet, somehow the yeshiva changed my entire life’s priorities without my

ever feeling that I was threatened. To understand how the yeshiva accomplished this, we need to understand the greatness of who the Rosh Yeshiva was.

That the Rosh Yeshiva was one of the greatest *talmidei chachamim* of his era is an undisputed fact, but provides little understanding of his brilliance as an educator. That he had absorbed the wellsprings of the Slabodka approach to mussar and personal development from its original proponent and builder, Rav Nosson Tzvi Finkel, the Alter of Slabodka, is also true, but does not convey to us anything of meaning. Nor does the fact that his head stored the collected knowledge of tens of thousands of *seforim* explain the success of the yeshiva he founded. And noting his regal comportment does not clarify our perception of his pedagogic genius. Instead, I will attempt to show how I, as one young *talmid*, was influenced on a daily basis, without my noticing that it was happening. Others will have different stories but, the results were usually parallel. Parallel, but not identical, because the Rosh Yeshiva developed our latent, individual abilities far greater than I have seen by any master of the literature of contemporary educational theory.

Furthermore, the cultural difference between the Rosh Yeshiva and us American boys should have been overwhelming. The Rosh Yeshiva was the age of our grandfathers (the few of us who had grandfathers), he spoke only Yiddish (which none of us did), had grown up in the poverty of eastern Europe and had been raised from the cradle in a culture in which Torah study was the highest, and perhaps only, goal. We were all baseball playing, typically spoiled, middle-class American kids, interested in eventually developing a comfortable, professional lifestyle. Of course, the most important part of the daily newspaper was the sports section. How did the Rosh Yeshiva bridge this gap to be such a successful educator and role model!

Let me mention some specific observations and anecdotes about the Rosh Yeshiva’s method of teaching and the yeshiva he built. The Rosh Yeshiva, who had a serious case of *phlebitis*, was medically required to go for walks to the extent that he could. As *talmidim*, we would often take the Rosh Yeshiva for walks. (I note that this was done, officially, during the time that, according to the usual yeshiva schedule, we should be in the Beis Medrash studying with our *chavrusos*.) If you did not prepare questions to ask the Rosh Yeshiva, he would ask you where you were up to in the Gemara, and ask you questions that demonstrated your level of absorption of the material. These were usually inquiries that did not have obvious answers. He would ask you what you thought the correct approach was.

It was not until many years later that I realized the humor of the scenario. The Rosh Yeshiva knew thousands of *seforim* by heart. There was nowhere in Torah that we would have any information that he did not know. Yet, rather than bamboozle us with his *chiddushim*, his novel approaches, or his massive Torah knowledge, as many *roshei yeshiva* would do, he asked us, as if he did not know the answer to the question. Was it possible that we might think of an answer that he had not seen or thought of? Highly unlikely. His goal was to build confidence in us to think independently and seek answers to Torah questions from within ourselves.

Over the years, I have been able to write many articles and full-length works on Torah topics. Many have asked me, where did I learn to think so independently? Initially my answer was incredulous. Is there any other way to learn Torah? This is the way I was taught how to analyze Torah sources. And then I realized that in Ner Yisrael we received an education that included how to use our own best resources – that blessed brain that G-d gave us – and lots of sweat – to plumb the original Torah material until we were satisfied with the approach at which we arrived. And that approach would remain with us as the truth of Torah until such time as we realized that we may not have understood the sources correctly. At that moment, our need for absolute intellectual honesty would teach us to review and potentially revise our understanding.

I will include a few anecdotes that I witnessed during the Yom Kippur and Sukkos season of holidays. I note that these stories indicate very different aspects of the Rosh Yeshiva’s greatness: His skill at molding

people to serve Hashem and how to be a mensch, not by force of personality, but by example.

The machzor

There is a famous story, which I personally witnessed, about the Rebbitzen's machzor. One Rosh Hashanah musaf, we saw that the Rosh Yeshiva had davened his quiet shemoneh esrei near the doorway of the Beis Medrash, instead of at his usual place in the center of the front of the Beis Medrash. Why had he davened there?

The Rebbitzen was homebound in those days (her health had been failing; she predeceased the Rosh Yeshiva by several years). When the Rosh Yeshiva was about to begin the musaf shemoneh esrei, he realized that when he had left home (after making Kiddush before the shofar blowing), he had mistakenly taken the Rebbitzen's machzor with him. Realizing that the Rebbitzen would want to use her familiar machzor, the Rosh Yeshiva immediately walked home (not an easy walk for him at his age) to make sure that the Rebbitzen had her machzor, and then returned to yeshiva to join the davening of the quiet shemoneh esrei in progress. This became his uppermost concern prior to the musaf shemoneh esrei of Rosh Hashanah, a prayer that he told us annually was of utmost importance. A lesson in respect for one's wife that you never forget.

Prior to a Yom Tov, the wife of one of the prominent chavrei hakollel had given birth to twins, and they had one other child, about three years old, at the time. Because of the timing, no extended family was available to help out at the house. This young man understood that his responsibility for Yom Tov was to help his wife at home and not to attend davening in shul. Apparently, at the time that kerias haTorah would occur, things at home were quiet, and he came to the Beis Medrash, three-year-old in tow, because, after all, he could daven at home, but he could not hear kerias haTorah at home. Immediately, the Rosh Yeshiva called him over and sent him home. Your mitzvah for this Yom Tov is to take care of your wife and children, not to hear kerias haTorah or come to the Beis Medrash. A lesson in family responsibility that you never forget.

On the longer winter Friday nights, I would often visit the Rosh Yeshiva and his rebbitzen at their house on the yeshiva campus. The conversations were always about what life was like in Eastern Europe, in the town of Slabodka and similar matters. The rebbitzen participated in the conversations very freely, and the Rosh Yeshiva was very forthcoming with information, stories, insights and observations. It was completely natural and informal. I had no sense in the slightest that I was wasting his time or preoccupying him with matters when he would rather be studying Torah. He was too great for that. This is a lesson that I have thought about, although I admit to falling far short of his abilities in this area also.

One insight of mine is that the Rosh Yeshiva would answer any question that I asked him about any matter – with one major exception. When I asked him about the greatness of the Alter of Slabodka and his abilities to create so many gedolei Yisrael from his disciples, the Rosh Yeshiva would not answer. All he would do was allude to the incredible greatness of who the Alter was. Anything more than that was sacred territory on which the Rosh Yeshiva would not tread.

Perhaps I should follow his lead and refrain from discussing the greatness of the Rosh Yeshiva. But I feel this would deprive future generations of an appreciation of who he was, and, perhaps by some extension, a sense of the greatness of his rebbe, the Alter.

[CS – I'm adding 3 divrei torah that came out after Allen's parsha sheet. https://www.torahweb.org/torah/2025/parsha/rhab_chukas.html

Rabbi Yakov Haber

Total Victory, Partial Victory, Ultimate Victory

I Our parsha records the miraculous victories of Bnei Yisrael over Sichon, the king of the Emori, and Og, the king of Bashan, in battles led by Moshe Rabbeinu himself (Bemidbar 21:21-35 and Rashi to v. 35). The victories over their enemies were absolute; there were no survivors, and their land was conquered and later settled by some of the tribes

(ibid. v. 24-25, 35, Devarim 3:34). In direct contrast to these triumphs, stands the battle against Amaleik recorded in parshas Beshalach (Shemos 17:8-12). There, Yehoshua was sent by Moshe to fight Amaleik, and the outcome, although in the Jewish people's favor removing the immediate danger, was not absolutely decisive. "וַיִּחְלוֹשׁ – יהושע את עמלק לפי חרב" (ibid. v. 13). Since Hashem is the true Ish Milchama and it is He alone who determined the outcomes of these respective battles, why were there such pronounced differences? Why did Moshe lead the battles against Sichon and Og himself, whereas against Amaleik he sent Yehoshua?

Both Malbim and Ha'ameik Davar (to Shemos ibid. v. 9) postulate that the latter battles against Sichon and Og were guided by supernatural Divine Providence (hanhaga nisiyis) whereas the former one against Amaleik was fought within the confines of the natural order although also guided by Hashem (hanhaga tiv'iyis).[1] Moshe was the agent of the former type of Divine Providence; Yehoshua, as would be the case when he led the Jewish people in conquering the Land of Israel, was the agent of the latter form. Since the Jewish people had sinned soon after the Exodus from Egypt, questioning Divine Providence over them in the desert (ibid. v. 7), they did not merit a supernatural victory over Amaleik. Indeed, the very coming of Amaleik to war against them was a punishment for this spiritual lapse (see Rashi to v. 8). Knowing this, Moshe Rabbeinu sent Yehoshua, the appropriate individual to lead the Jewish people in a "natural" battle against Amaleik. Consequently, the results, although leading to a Jewish victory, were not complete; Amaleik was weakened but not destroyed.

Perhaps we can add some additional reasons for the difference in outcomes between these battles. Ha'ameik Davar (ibid. v. 4) notes[2] that although all the nations above were deemed evil by Hashem Yisbarach, Sichon and Og fought to defend against the threat of invasion of Bnei Yisrael and the conquest of their lands. Amaleik, by contrast, did not feel threatened by imminent conquest of their land. Their primary motives were 1) hatred of the Jewish people inherited from their ancestor, Esav and 2) hatred of G-d Himself and the concept of Divine Providence representing the relationship between the infinite Creator and His creations which His chosen people, Bnei Yisrael, were charged to bring to the world. Amaleik sought to impose the worldview of everything operating solely based on the rules of nature – to allow man to actualize only his animal nature, not his Divine one – not through Divine Providence calibrated to bring man to his ultimate spiritual destiny. Consequently, Amaleik attempted, and his spiritual descendants continue to attempt, to eradicate the nation representing elevated Divine ideals and relationship. The total victory over Amaleik and, even more fundamentally, the concepts he represents, will only occur in the long-awaited Messianic era when "ביום ההוא יהיה השם אחד" – on that day G-d will be One and His name will be One" (Zecharya 14:9). While Amaleik exists, "אין השם שלם ואין הכסא שלם" (Rashi Shemos 17:16). Consequently, victory over Amaleik can only be partial, can only reach "וַיִּחְלוֹשׁ" – to weaken but not to eradicate totally – until that great day when "כל הרשעה כל השרץ כולה כעשן תכלה כי תעביר ממשלת זדון מן הארץ".

Furthermore, in the Jewish people's sacred mission to eradicate evil from the world both on a spiritual and a physical plane, there is a real and present danger that if their enemies are defeated totally, they will attribute the victory to their own military prowess and cease to recognize Hashem as the true overseer of Jewish and world history. As a result, perhaps we can suggest that Hashem only allows evil nations and regimes to be partially defeated leading to a more heightened need to recognize that Hashem alone determines total victory over the enemies of Israel and the concepts they represent. The more loyal the Jewish people are to their exalted mission, the closer they will be to total victory over their enemies.

II

The historic Divine salvation from the genocidal designs of the evil Iranian regime is still very fresh. Although tragically tens of Jews were killed, thousands were wounded, and thousands had their homes destroyed and still remain homeless, the enormous salvation on the

homefront was apparent to all the residents of Israel. The deadly missiles and drones had the potential to cause thousands of deaths and many more injuries. Many stories of near misses and last-minute evacuations abound. On the offensive front, the IDF's achievements are nothing short of extraordinary. The achievement of effective fly-over freedom through the destruction of Iranian anti-aircraft systems both from the air and from the ground in Iran by Mossad agents and the bombing of hundreds of missile batteries and sensitive nuclear sites were absolutely amazing. These recent last 12 days of battle come after two additional Iranian attempts at causing enormous Israeli casualties in the past year; practically all of the hundreds of missiles and drones were shot down in these Iranian attempts of wreaking havoc, and, in reprisal, the IAF destroyed most of Iranian air defenses before this last war even began. The immediate danger of Iran attempting to produce more than 8,000 missiles and the quite apparent rush to produce nuclear weapons was seemingly set back at least several years. The decision of the President of the United States to greatly assist by utilizing American advanced weaponry to destroy three Iranian nuclear facilities was unparalleled in US-Israel relations. The Prime Minister of Israel, not a religious man, stated that these accomplishments were clearly "b'siyata dishmaya" and offered prayers of thanksgiving at the Kotel Hama'aravi, something I do not recall his ever having done in the past. Clearly, the Divine hand in history was again openly manifest for all those who would open their eyes to see, but it was still all under the mask of the natural order: Iron Dome anti-missile batteries, F-15s, smart bombs, hundreds of covert Mossad missions and explosives, and intelligence gathering all contributed to the remarkable offensive successes and defensive protection. We did not yet merit hanhaga nisyis, but G---d still directed enormous salvation even within hanhaga tiv'iyis.

Many (including myself) found themselves disappointed over the fact that through United States' pressure, the war was stopped (including a last minute IAF massive retaliatory bombing canceled by Trump's direct order) with the evil Iranian regime still in power and with a lot of uncertainty of how long it would take Iran to restore its march toward manufacturing nuclear weapons and its deadly missiles. I took solace in the concepts presented in the first section. Until the final redemption, evil as expressed by those who have taken up Amaleik's mission to destroy the nation representing Hashem's true Will in the world will only be weakened, not totally defeated. We always must rely on Hakadosh Baruch Hu and must constantly strive to increase our efforts toward actualizing our unique mission to bring the world to a place where *עול מלכותך* by increasing our tefilos, our Torah study, our *dikduk b'mitzvos* and our care for others. Over Shabbos, I heard from R. Reuven Jacobson, that the Chasam Sofer, after Napoleon mysteriously ended the battle of Pressburg, told his community that far from just collectively breathing a sigh of relief, they must view this as a *mechayeiv* to strive ever more in Divine service as a result of the Divine salvation they benefited from. The same applies in our situation. Whether living in Eretz Yisrael during personally experienced the frequent rushes to fortified rooms during sirens and seeing or hearing bursts of explosions in the air or living in Chutz La'aretz but hearing about and seeing from a distance the momentous salvation, I trust that Jews worldwide will internalize the magnitude of the deliverance that has occurred and will react accordingly as the Chasam Sofer taught. May we speedily witness the ultimate downfall of the *memsheles zadan* and the day when the whole world will recognize Hashem's unity and the uniqueness of his beloved people, and when Hashem's manifest Presence will return to the world in the *Beis Hamikdash*!

[1] The concept of these two distinct types of Divine Providence is an oft-appearing theme in the writings of these two commentaries. Also see *Harcheiv Davar* (to v. 10) for additional contrasts between the battles reflecting this fundamental difference. Also see *Ha'ameik Davar* on our parsha (20:8) who similarly explains based on the two types of Divine Providence why Moshe was told to speak to (or pray at) the rock rather than hit it with the *matei haElokim*.

[2] Also see *Malbim* to v. 8.]

[2nd

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3000 Years Ago, One Man Got It Right

Essay by Rabbi YY Jacobson

3000 Years Ago, One Man Got It Right Why This Insane Obsession with Jews and Israel? On the Ultimate Meaning of Jewish Existence

Jerusalem

Balaam's Prose

It is fascinating that some of the most splendid prose in the Hebrew Bible emerges from the mouth of Balaam, a brilliant poet, a prophet, and an archenemy of the Jewish people, who, summoned by the Moabite king to curse Israel, ends up delivering the most poignant poetry ever uttered about the history and destiny of the Jewish people (1).

"From the top of mountains I see him from the hills I behold him; It is a people that dwells alone, And is not reckoned among the nations..."

"How beautiful are your tents, O Jacob; Your dwellings, O Israel! As winding brooks, as gardens by the river's side; like aloes which G-d has planted, like cedars beside the waters..."

"They crouch, they lie down like a lion and a lioness; who dare rouse them? Blessed is he that blesses you, And cursed is he that curses you..."

Even more interesting is the fact that the most explicit reference in the five books of Moses to Moshiach, the Jewish leader who will bring about the full and ultimate redemption, when heaven and earth will kiss and humanity will become one, is to be found in Balaam's prose: "I see it, but not now; I behold it, but it is not near. A star shall come forth from Jacob, and a scepter shall rise up from Israel..."

This is strange. The identity, nature, and calling of the Jewish people are naturally discussed throughout the Torah. Yet the most acute, potent, and finely tuned appreciation of Jewish identity is communicated through the mouth of a non-Jewish prophet who loathes Israel and attempts to destroy it. Why?

Clarity of Vision

The message, I believe, is quite clear. The Torah is teaching us that if you wish to understand who the Jew is, you must at times seek the perspective of the non-Jew. The non-Jewish individual, who is unbiased and unaffected by the "Jewish complex" and its inclination toward self-depreciation, sometimes possesses a keener appreciation of the Jew than many Jews themselves.

The non-Jewish world does not fall prey to the popular Jewish claim that we are a "normal secular people," a "cultural ethnic group" that enjoys love, money, food, and leisure as much as any good goy (gentile) in the world.

It makes us uncomfortable, but consciously or subconsciously, the gentile senses that something very profound and authentic sets the Jew apart from the other nations. Although he or she may not be able to put his or her finger on what exactly that otherness is, the non-Jew feels that Israel "is a people that dwells alone, and is not reckoned among the nations."

A Peculiar People

Eric Hoffer, an American social philosopher, author of the classic "The True Believer" and recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom, expressed Balaam's sentiments in a Los Angeles Times article decades ago.

It is tragically clear that almost nothing changed since Mr. Hoffer wrote these words in May of 1968.

"The Jews are a peculiar people: things permitted to other nations are forbidden to the Jews. Other nations drive out thousands, even millions of people and there is no refugee problem. Russia did it, Poland and Czechoslovakia did it, Turkey threw out a million Greeks, and Algeria a million Frenchmen. Indonesia threw out heaven knows how many Chinese — and no one says a word about refugees. But in the case of Israel, the displaced Arabs have become eternal refugees. Everyone insists that Israel must take back every single Arab. Arnold Toynbee called the displacement of the Arabs an atrocity greater than any committed by the Nazis."

"Other nations when victorious on the battlefield dictate peace terms. But when Israel is victorious it must sue for peace. Everyone expects the Jews to be the only real Christians in this world."

"Other nations when they are defeated survive and recover but should Israel be defeated it would be destroyed. Had Nasser triumphed last June he would have wiped Israel off the map, and no one would have lifted a finger to save the Jews."

"No commitment to the Jews by any government, including our own, is worth the paper it is written on. There is a cry of outrage all over the world when people die in Vietnam or when two Negroes are executed in Rhodesia. But when Hitler slaughtered Jews no one remonstrated with him. The Swedes, who are ready to break off diplomatic relations with America because of what we do in Vietnam, did not let out a peep when Hitler was slaughtering Jews. They sent Hitler choice iron ore, and ball bearings, and serviced his troop trains to Norway."

"The Jews are alone in the world. If Israel survives, it will be solely because of Jewish efforts."

"Yet at this moment Israel is our only reliable and unconditional ally. We can rely more on Israel than Israel can rely on us. And one has only to imagine what would have happened last summer had the Arabs and their Russian backers won the war to realize how vital the survival of Israel is to America and the West in general."

"I have a premonition that will not leave me; as it goes with Israel so will it go with all of us. Should Israel perish the holocaust will be upon us."

Three Non-Jewish Perspectives

In his book "The Meaning of History," Nikolai Berdyaev wrote the following about the meaning of Jewish history:

"I remember how the materialist interpretation of history, when I attempted in my youth to verify it by applying it to the destinies of peoples, broke down in the case of the Jews, where destiny seemed absolutely inexplicable from the materialistic standpoint. And, indeed, according to the materialistic and positivistic criterion, this people ought long ago to have perished."

Here are the splendid words of the great Russian novelist, Leo Nikolaevitch Tolstoy, who wrote this in 1908 about the Jewish people:

"The Jew is that sacred being who has brought down from heaven the everlasting fire, and has illuminated with it the entire world. He is the religious source, spring, and fountain out of which all the rest of the peoples have drawn their beliefs and their religions. The Jew is the emblem of eternity. He, who neither slaughter nor torture of thousands of years could destroy, he who neither fire, nor sword, nor Inquisition was able to wipe off the face of the earth. He, who was the first to produce the Oracles of God. He, who has been for so long the Guardian of Prophecy and has transmitted it to the rest of the world. Such a nation cannot be destroyed. The Jew is as everlasting as Eternity itself."

And here is a passage by contemporary historian Paul Johnson:

"All the great conceptual discoveries of the intellect seem obvious and inescapable once they have been revealed, but it requires a special genius to formulate them for the first time. The Jew has this gift. To them, we owe the idea of equality before the law, both divine and human; of the sanctity of life and the dignity of the human person; of the individual conscience and so of personal redemption; of the collective conscience and so of social responsibility; of peace as an abstract ideal and love as the foundation of justice, and many other items which constitute the basic moral furniture of the human mind. Without the Jews, it might have been a much emptier place."

And, of course, the immortal words of Nineteenth-century American president John Adams:

"I will insist that the Hebrews have done more to civilize man than any other nation. If I were an atheist who believed or pretended to believe that all is ordered by chance, I should believe that chance has ordered the Jews to preserve and propagate to all mankind the doctrine of a supreme, intelligent, wise, almighty sovereign of the universe, which I believe to be the great essential principle of all morality, and consequently of all civilization."

Another Non-Jewish philosopher, Peter Kreeft, wrote these words: "The prophetic spirit of the Jew finds a meaning and a purpose in history, thereby transforming mankind's understanding of history. Their genius for finding meaning everywhere -- for example in science and in the world of nature -- can be explained in only two ways: either they were simply smarter than anyone else, or it was G-d's doing, not theirs. The notion of the chosen people is really the humblest possible interpretation of their history."

A Confession

Some years ago, in his Rosh Hashanah sermon at Temple Israel in Natick, Mass., best-selling author the late Rabbi Harold Kushner made this candid confession:

"This past year [of terrorism and anti-Semitism] has compelled me to come to conclusions I didn't want to come to. For all of my years as a rabbi, I have believed and I have taught that Jews were no different from other people, that Judaism was different from Christianity and Islam, but Jews had the same feelings, the same strengths, and weaknesses, the same fears, and dreams that Christians and Muslims have. I took issue with the Chabad rabbis who argued that Jewish souls are essentially different than gentile souls."

"I opposed and discouraged interfaith marriage, not because I believed that Jews were better than non-Jews but because a family with two religions was likely to raise children with no religion to avoid arguments."

"But this year has persuaded me that Jews are in fact different. I find myself compelled to face the fact that the Jew plays the role for the world that the canary used to play for the coal miners. You've read about how the miners would take canaries with them into the mines because the canaries were extremely sensitive to dangerous gases. They responded to danger before the humans did. So if the miners saw the canaries get sick and pass out, they knew that the air was bad and they would escape as fast as they could."

"That's what we Jews do for the world. We are the world's early warning system. Where there is evil, where there is hatred, it affects us first. If there is hatred anywhere in the world, it will find us. If there is evil somewhere in the world, we

will become its target. People overflowing with hatred for whatever reason, including self-hatred, make us the objects of their hatred.

"This is the role we play in the world, not by choice but imposed on us by others, to be the miner's canary, to smoke out the bigots, the haters, the people who will be a menace to their communities if someone doesn't stop them, and we identify them early on by their hatred of us."

"Hitler attacked Jews before he attacked Western civilization, and that should have alerted the world to what kind of person he was, but the world misread the signal. Muslim fanatics practiced their terrorist skills on Israelis before turning those skills on the rest of the world, but the world never understood the warning."

"Our job is to live as Jews were summoned to live, because we can't escape the fate of being a Jew. Generations before us have tried and failed. We can claim the destiny of being a Jew, because when we do that, we discover how satisfying a truly human life can be."

He said this before October 7th, and the explosion of global Jewish hatred that followed. Imagine what he would say today!

How can any rational Jew explain the fact that in our elite universities, intelligent professors and students sided with Hamas against the Jewish people? Millions were murdered in countries around the world, from Syria to Darfur, from the Congo to Ethiopia, and yet we did not hear of one demonstration. Israel is trying to avoid another Holocaust, Heaven forbid, and it is demonized?

For me, this is the great proof that the Jewish people dwell alone at the epicenter of humanity, chosen by the Creator to be ambassadors of truth, morality, love, light, and hope. So nobody can be indifferent to Jews. Either you admire them, or you loathe them.

G-d's Witnesses

But why are the Jews the canaries of the world? What exactly placed the Jewish people in this position? This was well articulated by Professor Eliezer Berkovits in his book *Faith After the Holocaust*:

"The fear that so many different civilizations have of the Jew, the suspicion with which he is met, is utterly irrational, yet it has its justification. It is utterly irrational because it has no basis in the behavior of the Jew or in his character. It is a form of international madness when it is founded on a belief in Jewish power and Jewish intention to hurt, to harm, or to rule."

"Yet it has its justification as a metaphysical fear of the staying power of Jewish powerlessness. The very existence of the Jewish people is suggestive of another dimension of reality and meaning in which the main preoccupation of the man of 'power history' is adjudged futile and futureless in the long run... As long as the Jew is around, he is a witness that G-d is around. He is the witness, whether he knows it or not, whether he consciously testifies or refuses to testify."

"His very existence, his survival, his impact, testifies to G-d's existence. That he is here, that he is present, bears witness to G-d's presence in history. There lies the origin of the satanic idea of the Final Solution. If the witness were destroyed, G-d Himself would be dead."

Embracing Ourselves

Many of our beloved brothers and sisters, young and old, progressive and open-minded Jews, raised in the spirit of egalitarianism and equality, have for a long time attempted to suppress this historical truth. We have tried hard to convince ourselves and our children that we were equals with the nations of the earth; that we were seen as part of the collective family of the human race. Anti-Semitism, we told ourselves, was a relic of the past, existing in backward countries not permeated with the spirit of liberty. And if it did exist today, it is because Israel has sinned badly.

Yet the virulent anti-Semitism resurrected during the past decades across the world and the absolutely irrational obsession to demonize Israel, especially in the last two years (tens of thousands of rockets were sent into Israel with the attempt to murder as many Jews as possible; Hamas performed a mini-Holocaust, and yet Israel is blamed!), is beginning to open many of our eyes.

If you open almost any news website in the world or watch any television news station internationally, you can hear the message articulated 3,300 years ago by a sophisticated and spiritual non-Jew: "It is a people that dwells alone, And is not reckoned among the nations."

This is not a curse. It is a privilege, and it is a reality. We are the Divine ambassadors of love, light, hope, and truth. If we wish to thrive we must embrace this truth, acknowledged long ago by our fellow non-Jews. The world is embarrassed by Jews who are embarrassed with themselves; the world respects Jews who respect themselves. The world is ashamed of an Israel that is apologetic about its 4,000-year faith and tradition that the Holy Land is G-d's gift to the Jews.

Only when we acknowledge our "aloneness" will we become a true source of blessing to all of humanity.

1) This week's Torah portion -- Numbers chapter 24.]

[3rd

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Parshas Balak

Was Hashem Bilaam's Agent? Doing it for 'The Cause' vs. for the Money

Rav Yissocher Frand

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 153, Matrilineal vs. Patrilineal Descent In Determining Jewish Identity. Good Shabbos!

Was Hashem Bilaam's Agent? Doing it for 'The Cause' vs. for the Money

Parshas Balak contains the well-known story of Balak the King of Moav worrying about the imminent approach of the Jewish people. Moav correctly surmised that, given the fate of the other kings and nations that had challenged Bnei Yisrael with conventional military tactics, Moav would not stand a chance confronting Bnei Yisrael in traditional battle.

Therefore, Balak devised a "secret weapon" – the chemical weapon of his day. "And he sent messengers to Bilaam son of Beor..." (Bamidbar 22:5) Bilaam had the ability to curse. When he did so, the curse would in fact take effect on its intended victim. So Balak requested that Bilaam curse the "nation that has gone out from Egypt and covered the face of the land."

Bilaam asked the messengers to stay overnight so that he could answer Balak's request the next morning, based upon what Hashem would tell him. Hashem told Bilaam, "Do not go with them; do not curse the people, for they are Blessed" (22:12). Bilaam relayed that message to Balak's messengers.

When Balak heard that Bilaam would not come, he assumed that the reason was because the proposed compensation was inadequate – that he had tried to get away too cheap. Therefore, Balak sent a more prestigious delegation, promising Bilaam a great reward and granting his every request.

Bilaam, not being anyone's fool, casually mentioned to the messengers, "Even if Balak will give me his entire treasury filled with silver and gold, my hands are tied. I can only do that which the Ribono Shel Olam permits me to do." Again, they proceeded through the whole process of waiting overnight.

This time, the Ribono Shel Olam told Bilaam, "If these people are coming likra lecha (the calling is for you), then go with them – just only speak that which I tell you" (22:20). If we can even use such terminology, it appears as if Hashem changed his mind! The first time that Bilaam asked for permission, Hashem said "No. You cannot go!" Then, Hashem appeared to suddenly change His mind. What changed?

Rashi explains the words "Im likra lecha," that if these people are coming for your benefit – to give you payment, go with them. In other words, if you stand to make profit out of this venture, then I have no objection to your going.

That was the difference! The first time, when they asked Bilaam to come, they did not offer him anything – neither money nor honor. In that situation, Hashem told Bilaam, "Do not go." The second time, Balak offered Bilaam wealth and honor. In that situation, Hashem told him, "If you stand to gain from this, then you can go."

Is Hashem worried about Bilaam's livelihood? Is the Ribono Shel Olam acting as Bilaam's agent? Pro bono, you cannot go. If you charge by the hour, then you can go?

I heard a fantastic insight regarding this concept from Rav Shimon Schwab (1908–1995). The difference, says Rav Schwab, is that one of the most potent forces in the universe is doing something "lishma" – for its own sake, without ulterior motives. Doing something altruistically, for the sake of what you believe to be right, is a force beyond belief. However, something that is done in order to make a dollar, rather than for the sake of a cause, loses its potency.

Rav Schwab related this insight in the context of explaining the rise and fall of the Communist system during the previous century. Communism was a very successful movement. Until recently, there were more than a

billion and a half people who lived under Communist domination – and yet in recent times, we have seen Communism disintegrate.

What made Communism so successful? Rav Schwab argued that Communism became so successful because there were "lishma-niks." People like Lenin and Trotsky and Marx wanted to give the world a better order. They wanted to give the world a new system to replace the "bankruptcy of capitalism," in which some people are fantastically wealthy and some beg on the street. In a sense, Communism was based on very noble ideals. These were people who were – for lack of a better word – l'shem "shamayim" (for the sake of Heaven)! They did it for the sake of Communism. They were lishma!

Rav Schwab related that he remembered a Communists parade in his city in Germany in the 1920s. There was a Jewish boy who had rebelled against his parents and marched in the front line of this parade. He was despised. He was the outcast of the entire community. But this did not faze him, because he did it lishma. He believed in what he was doing, like so many of our Jewish brethren, who unfortunately believed in it.

When people are willing to give up their lives and souls for the sake of a cause, it creates a very potent force. We can look back now, over seventy years later, and try to discover what happened to the movement that caused it to collapse. We can suggest that to a large extent, the system failed because it lost this element of lishma. When people saw that the leaders of the various "Iron Curtain" countries had stashed away Swiss bank accounts, and when people saw all the corruption and graft, they quickly recognized that the lishma had been abandoned. Once they lost the element of lishma, the potency of the force was gone.

This is what the Ribono Shel Olam was telling Bilaam: When Balak came and said "Curse the Jews" without offering honor or money, the reason why Bilaam was going was because he hated Jews. "We need to curse Jews! I want to eradicate Jews." This is a philosophy. It is a cause. In that case, "Watch Out! You may not go." Hashem knows that a sincere cause is a lethal and potent force.

However, when Balak said, "I will give you honor and money," then Hashem told Bilaam: If this is for your own benefit – if you are doing it for the money, then go. That is a different story. If you are "in it" for the money and honor, rather than lishma – then your ability will not be nearly as potent.

Transcribed by David Twersky; Seattle, Washington. Edited by Dovid Hoffman; Baltimore, Maryland.

This week's write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tapes on the weekly Torah portion (#153). The corresponding halachic portion for this tape is: Matrilineal vs. Patrilineal Descent In Determining Jewish Identity. ... A complete catalogue can be ordered from the Yad Yechiel Institute, PO Box 511, Owings Mills MD 21117-0511. Call (410) 358-0416 or e-mail tapes@yadyechiel.org or visit <http://www.yadyechiel.org/> for further information.

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from: Ira Zlotowitz <Iraz@klalgovoah.org> date: Jul 10, 2025, 11:56 PM subject: Tidbits • Parashas Balak 5785 In memory of Rav Meir Zlotowitz ZTL

The fast of Shiva Asar B'Tamuz is this Sunday, July 13th. Five tragedies occurred on Shiva Asar B'Tamuz: 1) The first Luchos were broken. 2) In the waning days of the First Bais Hamikdash, the daily tamid offering ceased to be brought. 3) In the waning days of the Second Bais Hamikdash, the walls of Yerushalayim were breached, ultimately leading to its destruction. 4) Apostomos burned a Sefer Torah. 5) An avodah zarah was placed in the Bais Hamikdash.

During chazaras hashatz of Shacharis, the sheliach tzibbur adds Aneinu as a stand-alone berachah (between Go'el Yisrael and Refa'einu). Selichos, Avinu Malkeinu, Tachanun, and Kerias haTorah follow chazaras hashatz. Tefillas Minchah includes Kerias haTorah with the haftarah of Dirshu Hashem. Those fasting add Aneinu (as part of Shema Koleinu). Bircas Kohanim is recited in chazaras hashatz. Sim Shalom

replaces Shalom Rav (Nusach Ashkenaz). Chazaras hashatz is followed by Avinu Malkeinu.

The Three Weeks

The Y'mei Bein Hametzarim, the Three Weeks, begin at shekiya (sunset) on Motzaei Shabbos, July 12th. This period between the 17th of Tamuz and the 9th of Av is a national period of mourning over the Churban of both Batei Mikdash. One should give focus to the churban and galus during this period. Some halachic practices during this time period differ for sefardim. Activities restricted during this period include: Music and Dancing: Children of chinuch age are included. Many poskim are lenient when the music is secondary in nature (e.g. background music on a story recording) or when the listening is not purely for enjoyment (e.g. to help one stay awake while driving). Many poskim are stringent regarding a cappella "sefirah music". Playing and practicing music are permitted for the purpose of earning a livelihood (e.g. a professional musician). Playing music to develop one's skill is a matter of dispute amongst the poskim. Haircuts and Shaving: Men, women and children are included in the prohibition. In cases of discomfort, many permit women to tweeze and remove hair from areas other than the head. One should consult a Rav in regards to a father, sandek and mohel at a bris, and in regard to an avel who finishes the sheloshim mourning period during this time. Weddings: Weddings are not held during this period. An engagement may be celebrated, although without dancing or music. A Sheva Berachos may be held without music, although dancing (and singing) is permitted. Shehecheyanu: We avoid situations that would necessitate reciting the berachah of Shehecheyanu (e.g., eating new fruits, etc.). Miscellaneous: One should consult a Rav regarding signing a contract on a new home, moving into a new home, house decorating and elective surgery.

Summary BALAK: Balak sends messengers to Bilaam • Bilaam refuses to come • Balak sends more distinguished messengers, Bilaam again refuses • Hashem appears to Bilaam and 'permits' him to go • An angel impedes Bilaam's donkey three times • After striking his donkey, the donkey speaks and Bilaam is forced to admit that he wronged her • Bilaam tells Balak that he will speak only that which Hashem will put in his mouth • Balak prepares sacrifices three times • Bilaam blesses the Bnei Yisrael three times • An angry Balak sends Bilaam on his way • Bilaam predicts future events • Bnei Yisrael sin with the daughters of Moav • 24,000 perish in a plague • The plague ceases when Pinchas kills Zimri and Kozbi. Haftarah: The haftarah of Parashas Balak is leined. Michah (5:6-6:8) encourages Klal Yisrael to remember Hashem's many great chasadim, among them that He prevented Bilaam from cursing them.

(במדבר כג:י) "מי מונה עפר יעקב" "Who has counted the dust of Yaakov"

רש"י brings a מדרש that explains בלעם's words to mean: "Who can count the number of מצוות that ישראל כלל fulfills with earth," such as not plowing with a שור וחמור together, planting a mix of different seeds, and the earth mixed in the כוסה's drink. But what's so special about "doing מצוות with earth"?

The Halachah is that a Jew can bring an עולה or שלמים as a קרבן, but גוי can bring only an עולה. R' Yaakov Kamenetzky זצ"ל explains this is because a גוי cannot understand that earthly enjoyment could be uplifted into קדושה and רוחניות. The goy only understands the 100% sanctity of the קרבן עולה, which is completely burned on the מזבח. But a Yid brings even a קרבן שלמים, of which only a small part is burned on the מזבח; the majority of the קרבן is eaten by the owners and כהנים. This is because a Yid understands that גשמיות enjoyment can become קדושה.

This explains בלעם's 'amazement' here: 'Who can count the many מצוות that ישראל כלל do with earth' — the most גשמיות object in the world! It's incredible how קדושה כלל ישראל attaches even to the most basic גשמיות found around them!]

The Pulpit Must Not be a Political Podium....Most of the Time By Rabbi Efreim Goldberg

The IRS announced it will break with a long-standing rule and now allow houses of worship to endorse candidates for political office

without losing their tax-exempt status. Since 1954, a provision in the tax code called the Johnson Amendment mandates that nonprofit organizations could lose their tax-exempt status if they participate in or intervene in "any political campaign on behalf of or in opposition to any candidate for public office."

The rule was violated regularly in some houses of worship, but the IRS rarely enforced it. In explaining the change, the agency advised that when a house of worship, "in good faith speaks to its congregation, through its customary channels of communication on matters of faith in connection with religious services, concerning electoral politics viewed through the lens of religious faith," it neither participates nor intervenes in a political campaign.

This means rabbis can now legally endorse candidate from the pulpit.

But should they?

I don't believe so. In many or even most elections, reasonable people can come to a reasonable conclusion in either direction. Sure, it is fair, maybe even constructive at times, to try to persuade others to see things as you do, but if you can't, the best practice is to acknowledge that not only is the other person entitled to his or her perspective, but their opinion is reasonable, legitimate, and fair. The fact that they arrived at a different conclusion, even one you are convinced is wrong, doesn't mean they have corrupt character, less patriotism, compromised commitment to Israel, or less devotion to Torah.

Rabbis and shuls should be spaces where people with diverse opinions can congregate, connect, learn together, daven together and work together on the issues that unite us. If rabbis begin to offer public endorsements, especially from the pulpit, will those who disagree with his conclusion still feel comfortable being part of that shul? What will the impact be on public discourse and debate within the community if the rabbi publicly weighs in endorsing one side, particularly invoking his Torah authority in doing so?

Will those who disagree with the rabbi's endorsement and choice continue to turn to him for direction, guidance, and support? Will they ask him their halachic questions, want him to officiate at their simchas and lifecycle events, trust him to advise on sensitive matters?

If the answers to these questions is no, even if it is a small percentage of the shul/community who will feel alienated, is the endorsement worth it? Rabbonim are shepherds, charged with loving and caring for their flock. If some will be driven from the herd or who walk away feeling unwanted, the shepherd has failed in his mission.

Ultimately, as Shlomo HaMelech taught (Mishlei 21:1) "פִּלְגֵי־מַיִם לְבִגְדֶ֫ךָ – בְּיַד־ה' עֲלֵי־כְלִיאֶשֶׁר יִחְפֹּץ יִטְעֶנּוּ – The heart of a king is like a stream of water in the hand of God, wherever He wishes, He will direct it." We say every single day in our prayers, "Al tivtechu b'neivim, don't place your faith and trust in princes and diplomats."

As God-fearing Jews, we recognize that it is the Master of the Universe who orchestrates domestic, foreign, and of course all policies and their consequences. To be a student of Torah and of Jewish history is to recognize the Almighty's guiding hand. His hand guided our history and ultimately, it is His hand that is guiding our destiny.

I said above that in most elections reasonable people can come to a reasonable conclusion in either direction, but like almost every rule, there are exceptions and we are living through one.

One group of clergy didn't wait for the IRS to change its rule before making a public endorsement. In an article titled, "We are NYC rabbis who support Zohran Mamdani – Here's why," they write:

My co-authors (listed below) and I are among many New York City rabbis who voted for and proudly support Zohran Mamdani in the race for New York City mayor. Our religious tradition calls us to pursue justice and invokes our responsibility to bring it into the world. For many of us, the campaigns of Mamdani and mensch co-endorser Brad Lander marked the first time in a long while that we witnessed the Jewish call for justice clearly reflected in the platforms and character of mayoral candidates. We are confident that Zohran will carry those values forward – we hope, all the way to Gracie Mansion.

Supporting Zohran and Brad was, for us, an explicitly Jewish act, and we're kvelling over our contribution as Jewish New Yorkers to Mamdani's historic victory...

We believe that rent is too high, buses are too slow, and New York should be a welcoming, safe home for everyone – no matter where we came from or how long we've been here. Like Mamdani, we believe...that the Israeli government's treatment of Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank is horrific and cannot be ignored. These convictions reflect a shared political ethic – not identical political beliefs – and they are strong enough to support both real coalition and real community.

The blatant smear tactics we see used against Mamdani are frequently deployed against Muslim elected officials and leaders of color who dare to criticize Israel. These accusations are not about protecting Jews. They are about shutting down necessary reckoning with our city and country's complicity in Israel's occupation...

We believe that Jewish safety will not be secured by demanding unconditional support for Israel or imposing litmus tests on public officials around language. It will be secured through effective policy, education, solidarity, and shared struggle. That is what Mamdani offers...

Absurd, dangerous, and deeply disturbing articles like this one make this New York mayoral election an exception in which reasonable people should not be able come to certain conclusions and rabbis should be vocally opposing this article and this candidate. But let's be clear about the parameters. Mamdani's socialist views, calls to defund the police and dishonesty on his college application don't, in my opinion, justify rabbis issuing an endorsement for his opponents. We should, however, call out and voice opposition to a candidate who is openly against Israel in the clearest possible terms and who proudly stands with antisemites.

I recognize that people will disagree about where to draw the line and when to make the exception, but I hope that reasonable people can agree that stopping the election of a candidate who is undeniably and objectively anti-Israel and by extension antisemitic is not a violation of a rabbi's responsibilities but the fulfillment of it.

Mamdani has refused multiple times to recognize Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state, and he has supported the BDS movement against Israel. While he hasn't himself used the phrase, "Globalize the Intifada," he has refused to condemn those who do and defends their right to use the expression. As the intifada is actually being globalized with Jews suffering attacks around the world in growing numbers, in no place more than New York City, defending the expression is egregious and incites violence against Jews. The founder of the Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) at his alma mater, Mamdani has accused Israel of "genocide" and "apartheid," and has vowed that as mayor he would arrest Benjamin Netanyahu.

Despite the IRS's rule change, don't expect to see political endorsements from the BRS pulpit. But stopping Mamdani isn't a question of politics, it is about self-preservation and the safety and security of the Jewish community.

Drasha

By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

Parshas Balak

Partial View

You have to approach something from the right view. At least that's what Balak, the king of Moab, tried to convince his prime sorcerer who futilely tried to curse the Jewish nation. Though Bilaam had a notorious reputation, with for curses that never failed and the ability to cast spells upon whomever he desired, this time it didn't work. He tried, for a large fee, to curse the Jewish nation, who were camped opposite of Moab; but each time he opened his mouth blessings and not curses were emitted. "How can I curse when G-d is not angry," he exclaimed (Numbers 23:8).

Each time the mission failed, Balak flew into a rage. Bilaam attempted to subvert G-d's intentions and appease Him with sacrifices — all to no avail.

Balak tried another strategy. "Come with me to a different place from there you will see them; however, you will see its edge and not all of it — and you will curse it for me from there" (Numbers 23:13). It didn't work either.

I had a difficult time understanding the new strategy. What's the difference if Bilaam were to see all of Israel or he would stand in a place that only offers a partial view? Is the G-d of Israel not ever-present, protecting them in part as well as in whole? Why would a curse work when Bilaam only viewed Israel from a partial perspective?

A pious and very talented Jewish scholar was placed on trial in a small Polish town outside of Lvov. The charges, brought by a local miscreant, were based on some trumped-up complaint. The young scholar was beloved to his townsfolk as he served in the capacity of the town's shochet (ritual slaughterer), chazzan (cantor), and cheder rebbe. Thus, many people in town were worried as he appeared before a notoriously anti-Semitic judge.

As he presented the charges, the judge mockingly referred to him as Mr. Butcher. In fact all through the preliminary portion of the kangaroo court, the judge kept referring to the beloved teacher and cantor as a butcher, meat vendor or slaughterer. Finally, the young scholar asked permission to speak. "Your honor," he began, "before I begin my defense, I'd like to clarify one point. I serve in many capacities in this shtetl. The people at the synagogue know me as the cantor. The children at the school and all of their parents know me as the teacher. It is only the animals that know me as the butcher!"

The commentaries explain that Bilaam knew that the power of his curses would only take effect by finding a small breach in the beauty of Israel — a breach that he could expand with the power of his evil eye. He looked at all of Israel and could not find any flaw to amplify and use as a curse.

Balak advised him to use another ploy. He made a suggestion that would be followed for generations by all the detractors of Jews. "Only look at them," he said, "from a partial perspective. Go up to the edge of the mountain; you shall see their edge and not all of them — and you will curse them for me from there" (Numbers 23:13).

Balak told Bilaam to concentrate on some poor aspects of the people. It is always possible to find a few exceptions to a most ethical and moral nation. There are those who stand on the edge of the mountain and take a partial view. They talk about Jews who may be accused of crimes or improprieties. They dissect individuals and embellish what they perceive as character flaws or personal faults. They point to those flaws as if they represent the entire person, as others point to harmful Jews as if they were the entire nation. And then they shout their curses. But Bilaam could not find the breach that he was looking for. Because Israel as a nation, as well as each individual Jew, cannot be judged by anything less than a total picture – for we are all one. Good Shabbos

Dedicated in loving memory of our grandmother, Betty Blum of blessed memory.

By Mark & Jolene Bolender & their children Elchanan, Miriam, & Lana Mordechai Kamenetzky – Yeshiva of South Shore
Good Shabbos

Parashat Balak

by Rabbi Nachman Kahana

Taking Time Out to Think

PART ONE

It is now Wednesday morning, the 13th of Tamuz (July 9th) and our Prime Minister, Binyamin Netanyahu is in Washington meeting with the United States President Donald Trump, for the purpose of carving out new realities in the Middle East and elsewhere.

It's too early to know the outcome; nevertheless, the scenario is somewhat similar to what we will be reading from the Torah this coming Shabbat, parashat Balak.

The Parasha's story line is as follows:

The king of nation #1 invites B, a well-known wizard, to condemn and malign nation #2.

B arrives with full intentions to cause irreparable harm to nation #2.

But the fortunes of nation #2 turned out to be far, far better, and the wizard had no choice but to accept the reality and say AMEN and go home.

In our scenario, President Trump invited our PM to Washington for talks regarding the Iranians, Hamas of Gaza, Hezbollah of Lebanon, and Yemen. The PM came with the intention to underscore the evils inherent in those people and to seek extreme sanctions against them.

However, as matters proceeded, the President initiated a different set of plans: to make deals with all these enemies of morality and goodness in the world, to last for at least another three years.

And our PM would have to sign on and say AMEN and go home.

And the Nobel Prize committee, sitting in October, will award the Nobel Peace Prize to the President for presenting these enemies of good the oxygen to stay alive, to regroup their armies and develop the means of mass destruction, without interference.

But HaShem turns bad into good, and good into better and best, and we will all cry out AMEN as our fathers and mothers have done in the past in the face of danger when HaShem performed miracles for His chosen people.

PART TWO

A: Introduction

Tehillim (105,8)

זכר לעולם בריתו דבר צוה לאלף דור

He hath remembered His covenant forever, the word which He commanded to a thousand generations.

The Gemara (Chagiga 13b) explains this pasuk. HaShem recalls (is forever aware of) the bond He made with Avraham to reveal the Torah to his descendants (through Yitzchak and Ya'akov) at the 1000th generation of the world's existence. However, HaShem knew that the world could not exist that long without Torah, so He kept the Torah 974 generations in abeyance before creating the world, and with the 26th generation left to the number 1000 created the world with Adam and Chava and at the 26th generation, at Mount Sinai presented the Torah to Am Yisrael.

B: Time Out to Think

Because of the ongoing political-military-religious fireworks our concentration becomes distorted, and we are often oblivious to that factor which is closest to us, namely – ourselves.

1- Who are we, each and every individual Jew? And what is our role as vital parts of HaShem's collective chosen nation?

2- What are we supposed to do in the fleeting seconds within infinite time that HaShem has allotted to each of us in this transient world?

I suggest:

When studying our sources and learning from prestigious rabbis, it is obvious that Judaism points in one direction: that every Jew and Jewess is an MMM – a Mitzva Making Machine and in Ivrit מכונה מייצרת מצוות.

To be sure, not your ordinary machine, but a perpetual motion machine that man cannot produce due to the limitations imposed by the basic laws that control nature, specifically the laws of thermodynamics.

These laws dictate that energy cannot be created or destroyed (but only transferred. For example, electricity to create heat and light; whereas a perpetual motion machine, by definition, would need to produce more energy than it consumes, which violates this principle. In addition, all systems experience energy losses due to friction, heat, and other factors, leading to a decrease in usable energy over time. A perpetual motion machine would need to reverse these phenomena, which is not possible. Nevertheless, the Creator of all that exists, who designated the guidelines of natural law, is not subject to these laws. And indeed, HaShem has created a perpetual motion machine; it is called Am Yisrael – the Jewish nation.

What does this mean?

The Zohar (parashat Teruma) states:

קודש בריך הוא אסתכל באורייתא וברא עלמא

The holy one, blessed be He, after bringing forth the Torah, used it as a blueprint for all creation. From one of the largest objects in infinite space designated as UY Scuti, a red hypergiant star, with a radius about 1,700 times that of our sun and so immense that nearly 5 billion of our

suns could fit inside of it, down to the smallest sub-atomic particle or wave.

And the Midrash states that HaShem imposed a condition with created matter, that if the Jewish nation at Sinai agrees to accept the role of chosen nation, with all its implications, then there will be a spiritual justification for creation; however, if the nation refuses to accept the yoke of the holy Torah, there would be no reason to create matter and all will revert back to nothingness.

In short: The descendants of Avraham, Yitzchak and Ya'akov were chosen to actualize the potential that HaShem placed in His Torah in a world far away from spirituality. While the other races and nations were brought on the scene to create a living, breathing world of billions of individuals to create the background upon which the Jewish nation will keep HaShem's Torah.

Now what about the Jewish perpetual motion machine?

Pirkei Avot (chap. 4) states:

מצוה גוררת מצוה

A mitzvah begets a mitzvah

A single mitzva engenders another mitzva – even one which requires a greater degree of physical and spiritual energy; hence a Jewish perpetual motion machine that creates new and more powerful energy.

C: The Great Lesson of a Hospital

Several years ago, I spent a few days in Sha'arei Tzedek hospital. On the second day, a distinguished looking gentleman entered the room and introduced himself as Prof. Marin, Director of the hospital, and asked if I was Rabbi Kahana. We began talking and I told the Professor that during my stay I was learning what a hospital is all about. Obviously, it is to restore wellness to the sick. But that's only half the story. The great lesson of a hospital is, in my eyes as a rabbi, to educate people to value the importance of an ordinary so called mundane day in one's life, for two reasons. For the secular person, because the alternative of one more dull day could be a stay in the hospital; and for the Torah observant Jew there are no boring days in life; for every moment one can, and is expected, to be involved in performing mitzvot.

We parted, both more enriched for the half hour that we talked.

I recall often walking along Jaffa Road towards the Old City, consciously seeking opportunities to offer assistance to a passerby. Inevitably, I would come home richer in mitzvot than when I had left.

In Eretz Yisrael we are especially gifted in that we are living in an atmosphere of one big mitzvah – to be present in HaShem's holy acre even when sitting and daydreaming.

Shabbat Shalom,

Nachman Kahana

Ohr Somayach

Insights into Halacha

For the week ending 26 June 2021 / 16 Tammuz 5781

When Do 'The Three Weeks' Start?

by Rabbi Yehuda Spitz

Several years ago, a certain Talmid Chacham could not find an available wedding hall to marry off his daughter. The only open date was the night of Shiva Assar B'Tamuz. To the astonishment of many, he booked it! Although he made sure that the Chuppah was indeed before nightfall, he was heard to have commented that many people do not realize when the Three Weeks actually start...

Bein HaMetzarim

We are currently entering the period of mourning that the Midrash refers of "Bein HaMetzarim,[1] or Between the Confines (Straits)." This period of Three Weeks commemorates the heralding of the beginning of the tragedies that took place prior to the destruction of both Batei Hamikdash, from the breaching of the walls of ancient Jerusalem on the 17th of Tamuz, until the actual destruction of the Beis HaMikdash on the Ninth of Av. As detailed in the Mishnah and Gemara Taanis, both of these days have since become communal Fast Days, in remembrance of the tragedies that happened on these days.[2]

In order to properly commemorate and feel the devastation, halacha dictates various restrictions on us during these "Three Weeks,"[3] getting progressively stringent up until Tisha B'Av itself.[4] These "Three Weeks" restrictions include not getting married, not getting haircuts unless extenuating need,[5] refraining from public music and dancing, not putting oneself in an overly dangerous situation, and not making the shehechyanu blessing on a new item (meaning to

refrain from purchasing a new item which would require one to make said blessing).

Ashkenazic or Sefardic Halacha?

This timeline of restrictions follows Ashkenazic practice as instituted by many Rishonim and later codified by Ashkenazic authorities. Although there are several Sefardic authorities who maintain that Sefardim should at least follow the Ashkenazic minhag of starting the Nine Days restrictions from Rosh Chodesh Av,[6] nevertheless, most Sefardim are only noheg many of these restrictions from the actual week of Tisha B'Av (a.k.a 'Shavua Shechal Bo') as per the ruling of the Shulchan Aruch.[7]

In 5781, Tisha B'Av falls out on a Sunday. This means that accordingly, without an actual 'Shavua Shechal Bo Tisha B'Av,' generally speaking, this year Sefardim will not undertake any Three Weeks or Nine Days restrictions, save for the proscription of partaking of meat and wine from after Rosh Chodesh Av.[8] Hence, this year, Sefardim may shower, shave, and do their laundry all the way up until Shabbos Chazon – which is Erev Tisha B'Av this year. On the other hand, Ashkenazim do not share this dispensation, and would still need to keep all the Three Weeks and Nine Days' restrictions.[9]

Evening Commencement?

There is some debate in recent Rabbinic literature as to when the prohibitions of the 'Three Weeks' start. This author is seemingly annually asked some form of this sheilah quite a few times during the week prior to the 17th of Tamuz alone:

"Rabbi, I know tonight the Three Weeks technically start, as in Judaism the start of a halachic new day is the preceding evening, but since the Fast of the 17th of Tamuz only starts in the morning, can I still get a haircut and/or shave this evening?"

Wedding Permit

The Gadol Hador, Rav Moshe Feinstein, addressed a similar question over sixty years ago: whether one may get married on the night of the 17th of Tamuz.[10] He noted that there is some debate in the early authorities whether the restrictions depend on the fast day itself. Meaning, that if the 'Three Week' restrictions are dependant on the Fast of the 17th of Tamuz, then they would only start at the same time the fast does - on the morning of the 17th. But if they are considered independent of each other, then the restrictions would start on the preceding evening, even though the fast itself would only start the next morning.

Rav Moshe maintained that since this matter is not clear-cut in the Rishonim, and the whole issue of the restrictions of the 'Three Weeks' is essentially a minhag to show communal mourning - which is only recognizable in the morning when everyone is fasting, and especially as a wedding is considered l'tzorech, a considerable need, he ruled that one may be lenient and get married on the eve of the 17th of Tamuz.

The actual case Rav Moshe was referring to was a year with a similar calenderical makeup as ours – 5781 / 2021 – with Shiva Assur B'Tamuz falling out on a Sunday. Hence, with no other dates available, he permitted the chasuna to commence on Motzai Shabbos, before the onset of the actual fast.

However, it is important to note that this does not mean that in a regular year, if one can plan a wedding on the 16th of Tamuz with the Chuppah before shkiya that they should wait around until after nightfall to start the wedding. Obviously, Rav Moshe would only permit such a chasuna if one was stuck (l'tzorech) and would optimally prefer the wedding to at least commence while still the 16th of Tamuz (meaning before shkiya).[11]

Haircuts [not] Included

Several poskim, including the Rivevos Efraim and the She'arim Metzuyanim B'Halacha,[12] extrapolated that Rav Moshe would have ruled similarly for a haircut, that if there is great need, then one may be lenient as well, on the eve of the 17th of Tamuz.[13]

However, Rav Shmuel Halevi Wosner disagreed with this theory and maintains that for a wedding (especially on Motzai Shabbos, which actually was the original question asked to Rav Moshe) there is more halachic rationale to rely upon than for a simple haircut. Furthermore, he concludes, haircuts are generally not considered a great need. Therefore, he ruled that certainly one may not be lenient regarding a haircut.[14]

Interestingly, years later, Rav Moshe revisited the topic and actually addressed this issue directly. Rav Moshe maintained that in his opinion the same leniency as weddings does indeed apply to haircuts, and accordingly one may therefore take a haircut on the evening of the 17th of Tamuz in times of great need, and not as Rav Wosner understood his opinion.[15]

Contemporary Consensus [In Israel]

Nevertheless, many contemporary halachic decisors, especially those living in Eretz Yisrael, including Rav Wosner himself, as well as the Steipler Gaon, Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, Rav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv, Rav Yisrael Yaakov Fischer, the Tzitz Eliezer, Rav Chaim Kanievsky, Rav Moshe Halberstam, Rav Moshe Sternbuch, Rav Nissim Karelitz, and mv'r Rav Yaakov Blau,[16] maintain that the issue is essentially a moot point, and rule that even for a wedding, let alone a haircut, one should not exercise leniency, as the evening of

the 17th is already considered part and parcel of the "Three Weeks," and thus is included in the restrictions.[17]

So, even if one feels he needs a haircut desperately (perhaps someone suffering from lycanthropy[18]) on the 16th of Tamuz,[19] it is definitely preferable to get a haircut right away and not wait until evening and thereby subject oneself to a halachic dispute.

Nidcheh Nafka Minah

However, there is a practical difference as to when the fast of Shiva Assur B'Tamuz is observed. As mentioned previously, this year the 17th of Tamuz actually falls out on Sunday. Yet, in years when Shiva Assur B'Tamuz falls out on Shabbos, and thereby the fast being pushed off a day and observed on Sunday (such as last occurred in 5779/ 2019), this entire annual debate becomes academic.

This is because in such a year, Motzai Shabbos / Shiva Assur B'Tamuz is really Shemoneh Assur B'Tamuz, the 18th of Tamuz. As Rav Moshe concluded in his original responsum,[20] in such a case, everyone would agree that even in extenuating circumstances one may not celebrate a wedding, as certainly by that point the halachos of Bein HaMetzarim have already taken effect.

All the same, it's important for us not to lose the forest for the trees. Instead of exclusively debating the finer points of whether a haircut is permitted or forbidden, it is important for us all to remember that these restrictions were instituted by our Rabbanim as a public show of mourning during the most devastating time period on the timeline of the Jewish year. As the Mishnah Berurah (quoting the Rambam)[21] explicitly notes, the focus of these days of sorrow serve to remind us of the national tragedies that befell our people, and the events that led to them. Our goal should then be to utilize these restrictions to focus inward, at our own personal challenges in our relationship with G-d, and rectify that negativity which led to these tragic events in our history.

Postscript:

Recently, this author received a related interesting halachic query: "Someone was about to get married on the 16th of Tammuz, i.e. the night of the wedding would be the 17th of Tamuz. To avoid problems he made sure that everything was ready, in order that the Chuppah would be before sundown to ensure that the wedding would be permissible according to all opinions. Well, as you might expect, not everything went as planned and there was a hold up – due to the fault of the hall owner. The Chuppah could not actually start until after nightfall and the baal simchah – holding as the more stringent poskim - refused to "march the aisle." The hall owner, on the other hand, refused to reimburse them, claiming that running late is standard at weddings. Additionally, there are poskim who rule that there is room to be lenient on the night of the 17th, and therefore it is the baal simchah's own fault if he doesn't want to rely on them. Therefore, he feels that he is still entitled to his payment. Now what?"

This author replied that this is a painful question, but the monetary issues should depend on what the nature of the exact contract is. If they expressly made up that if this happens due to the hall owner's negligence they should get reimbursed, then they certainly should. If not, and they really held that it is a chiyuv to be machmir not to get married on the night of the 17th of Tamuz, then they shouldn't have taken the hall in the first place, as delays are quite a common occurrence at weddings.

Either way, once they were there and the chassan and kallah were ready to actually get married, it would be an extreme bizayon (embarrassment) not to let them get married. The baalei simcha would be at fault in that case, as this would become a prime example of a chumrah which leads to extreme kula! Halacha has many dispensations for chassan and kallah and one sticking to his shitta and ruining their wedding in the name of "halacha" is just plain wrong, especially as there is no specific mekor in Gemara for the Three Week restrictions and was actually established by later poskim (Rishonim).

To gain further clarity, this author raised this question with Rav Chaim Yosef Blau shlit"l, son of mv'r Rav Yaakov Blau zt"l and Moreh Tzedek of the Badat"z Eida Hachareidis in Yerushalayim, and he answered similarly to what I responded previously, that even according to the machmirim (which he was as well), if the chasuna is ready to start and it is already the night of the 17th of Tamuz, nevertheless, they should still get married.

Rav Blau proceeded to cite an excellent proof to his ruling from the Rema in Hilchos Shabbos.[22] The Rema ruled that even though we hold that one may not get married on Shabbos, still, in a case when it was not previously possible, and only now when it is already Shabbos the wedding was ready to take place, they should still get married right then! This is due to Kavod HaBriyos of the chassan and kallah, and has the status of shaas hadchak, extenuating circumstance.

He added that the Rema was not just being hypothetical in his ruling; it was based on an actual Maaseh Shehaya (case) detailed in his response, Shu"t HaRema.[23] If so, Rav Blau concluded, then certainly in this case, they should have the wedding on the spot, especially as the whole restriction not to get married during the Three Weeks is at most Derabbanan, and the Gemara teaches us that "Gadol Kavod HaBriyos Shedocheh Lo Sa'aseh SheBaTorah", which is referring to

Issurei Derabbanan.[24] This refers to the rule that basic human dignity can at times trump Rabbinic consideration, this case included.

A fascinating insight indeed!

This article was written L'Ily Nishmas R' Chaim Baruch Yehuda ben Dovid Tzvi and l'zechus Shira Yaffa bas Rochel Miriam v'chol yotzei chalatzeha for a yeshua sheleimah teikeif umiyad!

For any questions, comments or for the full Mareh Mekomos / sources, please email the author: yspitz@ohr.edu.

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A book review is available here: <https://www.theyeshivaworld.com/news/headlines-breaking-stories/1951391/seforim-in-review-food-a-halachic-analysis.html>

[1] This three-week season is referred to as such by the Midrash Rabbah (cited by Rashi in his commentary to Eicha Ch. 1, verse 3).

[2] See Mishnah in Maseches Taanis 26b and accompanying Gemara. According to Rav Saadia Gaon, as cited by the Shibolei Leket (263, Ha'arugah HaTishbi, Seder Taanis, Din Arbah Tzomos, pg. 252), these three weeks are the same three weeks that Daniel fasted, and therefore maintains that we should not eat meat nor drink wine the entire "Three Weeks". Additionally, the Kol Bo (62) adds that since on Shiva Assar B'Tamuz the Korban Tamid and its Nusuch HaYayin were batul, there are those who are nahug not to eat meat or drink wine already starting from then. However, it must be noted that others, including the Shibolei Leket himself, are of the opinion that Daniel fasted during Chodesh Nissan; and that although several authorities cite such an opinion (see for example Tur & Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chaim 551, 9), Chayei Adam (vol. 2, 133, 8) and Ben Ish Chai (Year 1, Parshas Devarim 15); not that they actually rule that way), nevertheless, abstaining from meat and wine the entire "Three Weeks" is not the normative halacha.

[3] This is following general Ashkenazic minhag; many Sefardim only start most restrictions on beginning of the week that Tisha B'Av falls out on. Although there is no mention of such in the Gemara, these "Three Week" restrictions follow Ashkenazic practice as instituted by many Rishonim, including the Ramban (Toras Ha'Adam pg. 81, 4th column), Rashba (Shu"t vol. 1:306), Rokeach (310 s.v. mihu), Orchos Chaim (Hilchos Tisha B'Av 10), Ohr Zarua (vol. 2:414), Machzor Vitry (263), Tur (O.C. 551; citing the Yerushalmi), Kol Bo (62), and Abudraham (pg. 69b; citing Rav Hai Gaon), and later codified by Ashkenazic authorities including the Rema (Darchei Moshe - Orach Chaim 551, 5 and Hagahah ad loc. 2 and 4), the Derech Hachaim (ad loc. 1), the Shevus Yaakov (Shu"t vol. 2, 35), the Chayei Adam (vol. 2, 133, 8), the Kitzur Shulchan Aruch (122, 1), the Aruch Hashulchan (Orach Chaim 551, 8), and the Mishnah Berurah (ad loc. 18). Although there are several Sefardic authorities who maintain that Sefardim should at least follow the Ashkenazic minhag of starting the "Nine Days" restrictions from Rosh Chodesh Av, nevertheless, most Sefardim are only noheg most of these restrictions from the actual week of Tisha B'Av as per the ruling of the Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chaim 551, 10).

[4] See Shulchan Aruch, Rema and their commentaries to Orach Chaim 551.

5 However, it is important to note that there are certain specific situations where many poskim do give dispensation for haircuts during the Three Weeks (and in certain extreme situations even during the Nine Days). See Bach (Orach Chaim 551, 7), Taz (ad loc. 14), Elya Rabba (ad loc. 27), Ba'er Heitiv (ad loc. 18), Shaarei Teshuva (ad loc. 18), Bais Meir (beg. Orach Chaim 551), Shu"t Sheilas Yaavetz (vol. 1, 77), Shu"t Chasam Sofer (Orach Chaim 158 and Yoreh Deah 348 s.v. v'ee gelayach), Shu"t Noda B'Yehuda (Kamma, Orach Chaim 28 and Dagul Mervavah - Orach Chaim 551, 4), Shu"t Maharam Shick (Yoreh Deah 371), Mishna Berura (551, 87 and Shaarei Tziyun ad loc. 93), Kaf Hachaim (ad loc. 82), Shu"t Igros Moshe (Choshen Mishpat vol. 1, 93 and Orach Chaim vol. 4, 102 and vol. 5, 24, 9), Shaarim Metzuyanin B'Halacha (120, Kuntress Acharon 8 and 122, 5), and Maadanei Shalom (on Moadim, Bein HaMetzarim pg. 53 and 54). For more on this topic, see R' Zvi Ryzman's recent excellent Ratz KaTzvi on Maagalei HaShana (vol. 2, Sefiras HaOmer, 14) at length.

[6] See Knesses Hagedolah (O.C. 551, Hagahos on the Tur 5), Ben Ish Chai (Year 1, Parashas Devarim 12), and Kaf Hachaim (O.C. 551:44, 77, 78, and 80).

[7] Shulchan Aruch (O.C. 551, 4), based on the Rambam (Hilchos Taanios Ch. 5:7). See Magen Avraham (ad loc. 17 and end 35), Pri Megadim (ad loc. E.A. 17 and 36), Mishnah Berurah (ad loc. 38 and Shaar Hatziyun ad loc. 40), Ben Ish Chai (ibid.), and Kaf Hachaim (ibid. 77 and 78). For more on this topic, see Shu"t Yabea Omer (vol. 6, O.C.46 and vol. 9, O.C. 50:1), Shu"t Yechaveh Daas (vol. 1:41 and vol. 4:36), Rav Mordechai Eliyahu's Darchei Halacha glosses to the Kitzur Shulchan Aruch (122:19), Rav Yaakov Hillel's Ahavat Shalom Luach (Dinei Shavua Shechal Bo Tisha B'Av), and Yalkut Yosef (Kitzur Shulchan Aruch, O.C. 551:1).

[8] Although generally speaking, even these restrictions most Sefardim do not observe on Rosh Chodesh Av itself. See Shu"t Ohr L'Tzion (vol. 3, Ch. 26:3), Shu"t Yechaveh Daas (vol. 1:41), Rav Mordechai Eliyahu's Darchei Halacha glosses to the Kitzur Shulchan Aruch (122:12), Ahavat Shalom Luach (ibid.), and Yalkut Yosef (ibid.). This was addressed in a previous article titled "Meat on Rosh Chodesh Av?"

[9] This does not mean there aren't any dispensations available for Ashkenazim. For example, more people are permitted to be invited to a fleishig Seudas Mitzva (see Rema O.C. 551:10, and Mishnah Berurah ad loc. 77; citing the Derech Hachaim 201:12). Also more permissibility regarding cutting one's nails (see Mishnah Berurah ad loc. 20) and washing children's clothing (Mishnah Berurah ad loc. 77; citing the Chayei Adam, vol. 2:133:18). Perhaps if one has a specific hetter to go swimming for his health "until Shavua Shechal Bo," he would also be able to benefit from Tisha B'Av being on Sunday this year, etc.

[10] Shu"t Igros Moshe (Orach Chaim vol. 1, 168).

[11] See Shu"t Rivevos Efraim (vol. 1, 375), as well as Shu"t Videbata Bam (vol. 1, 152 s.v. v'shamati and v'laasos), and Rabbi Yitzchok Frankel's Kuntress Yad Dodi (pg. 132, Hilchos Bein HaMetzarim, Question 1 a-c; who cite Rav Dovid Feinstein explaining his father, Rav Moshe's, position). This author has heard that Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky as well ruled akin to Rav Moshe and permitted a wedding on the eve of the 17th of Tamuz when there were no other alternatives except to wait until after Tisha B'Av.

[12] Shu"t Rivevos Efraim (ibid.) and She'arim Metzuyanin B'Halacha (122, Kuntress Acharon 1).

13 However, the Rivevos Efraim makes an important point. He stresses that in light of the fact that the Kaf Hachaim (Orach Chaim 551, 207) mentions many machmirim that the prohibitions start from the night of Shiva Assar B'Tamuz (see footnotes 16 and 17) and not the following morning, therefore one may only rely on this to take a haircut only "l'tzorech gadol - great need." Indeed, when Rav Moshe later revisited this topic (Shu"t Igros Moshe - Orach Chaim vol. 3, end 100, s.v. u'vadavar and Orach Chaim vol. 4, 112, 2) he stressed that his hetter is only "l'tzorech gadol." This understanding was also stressed by Rav Dovid Feinstein as cited in Shu"t Videbata Bam (vol. 1, 152 s.v. v'shamati). See also Shu"t Shraga HaMeir (vol. 2, 13) who ruled similarly, that one may exclusively be lenient if it is "shayach nivul gadol."

[14] Shu"t Shevet HaLevi (vol. 10, 81, 2).

[15] Shu"t Igros Moshe (Orach Chaim vol. 3, end 100, s.v. u'vadavar and Orach Chaim vol. 4, 112, 2).

[16] See Shu"t Shevet Halevi (ibid. and vol. 8, 168, 7), Orchos Rabbeinu (vol. 2, pg. 127, 6), Halichos Shlomo (Moadim vol. 2, Ch. 13, footnote 1; quoting Rav Avigdor Nebenzahl), Doleh U'Mashkeh (pg. 207 - 208 and footnote 507; citing Rav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv and Rav Chaim Kanievsky; however Rav Elyashiv is quoted as maintaining that one only needs to be stringent from Tzeis HaKochavim, and not shkiyah),

Halichos Even Yisrael (Moadim vol. 1, Yemei Bein HaMetzarim, pg. 326, 1), Shu"t Tzitz Eliezer (vol. 10, 26), Shu"t Divrei Moshe (33), Moadim U'Zmanim (vol. 8, 338), Chut Shani (Hilchos Shabbos vol. 2 pg. 325), and Shu"t Shraga HaMeir (vol. 2, 13). This author has heard Rav Blau zt"l's shitta from his son Rav Chaim Yosef, Moreh Tzedek of the Badatz Eida Hachareidis aChraidis Hof Yerushalayim and Rav of Shechunas Pag"i. A similar assessment is given by Rav Efraim Padwa of London in his recent Shu"t Minchas Efraim (1).

17 This consensus follows the opinion of the Chida (Shu"t Chaim Sha'al vol. 1, 34) who maintains that even though the walls of Yerushalayim were breached in the daytime of Shiva Assar B'Tamuz, nevertheless, the preceding night was also time of war and the puranios already started from that evening. Accordingly, Chazal were more lenient merely regarding eating and drinking. The Butchatcher Rav (Eshel Avraham, Orach Chaim 551, 2) was extremely stringent about this as well, and even starting from Bein Hashmashos. However, it is known that Rav Elyashiv held (cited in Doleh U'Mashkeh ibid.) that one needs to be stringent only from Tzeis Hakochavim, and not shkiyah. (Parenthetically, in all practicality, Rav Elyashiv's "Tzeis Hakochavim" might actually have been an earlier zman than the Butchatcher Rav's "Bein Hashmashos"). Additionally, as mentioned previously, the Kaf Hachaim (ibid.) cites many authorities who were makpid with the restrictions starting from nightfall.chaim

[18] For more on this topic, see Rabbeinu Efraim al HaTorah (Parshas Vayechi s.v. Binyomin ze'ev yitraf).

[19] This author has heard from Rav Efraim Greenblatt zt"l, the noted Rivevos Efraim, that "l'tzorech gadol" for a haircut would include meeting the president or an important dignitary, which attending while not properly groomed would be looked upon askance.

[20] Shu"t Igros Moshe (Orach Chaim vol. 1, 168 s.v. aval). See also the recently published Mesores Moshe (vol. 2, 258, pg. 132).

[21] Mishnah Berurah (549, 1), based on the Rambam (Hilchos Taanios Ch. 5, 1). See Rav Yosef Eliyahu Henkin's essential Ezras Torah Luach (5776; pg. 125 - 126) who exhorts us to the importance of this, especially in our times, to specifically rectify the Aveiros that caused the destructions of the Batei HaMikdash. He adds that it is a 'Mitzvah Gadol' to set a time daily to learn sefer Chofetz Chaim for this purpose. Other Gedolim, such as Rav Yisrael Yaakov Fischer (cited in Halichos Even Yisrael, Moadim vol. 1, Yemei Bein HaMetzarim, pg. 326, 2), would make sure to perform a special daytime Tikkun Chatzos (see Mishnah Berurah 551, 103, citing the Arizal) to this end.

[22] Rema (Orach Chaim 339, 4).

[23] Shu"t HaRema (125; see also Aruch Hashulchan, Orach Chaim 339, 14).

[24] Gemara Brachos (19b). This rule is invoked in many other cases regarding the importance of human dignity. See previous article titled "The Tattoo Taboo and Permanent Makeup Too". Disclaimer: This is not a comprehensive guide, rather a brief summary to raise awareness of the issues. In any real case one should ask a competent Halachic authority.

L'iluy Nishmas the Rosh HaYeshiva - Rav Chonoh Menachem Mendel ben R' Yechezkel Shraga, Rav Yaakov Yeshaya ben R' Boruch Yehuda.

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Rabbi Yochanan Zweig

This week's Insights is dedicated in loving memory of Yitzchak ben Avraham, Erwin Andisman. "May his Neshama have an Aliya!"

Master Manipulator

Balak the son of Zippor saw all that Yisroel had done to the Emori. Moav was very frightened of the people because they were many, and Moav was disgusted in the face of Bnei Yisroel (22:2-3).

This week's parsha opens with a remarkable statement: Balak took notice of what Bnei Yisroel had done to the great kings of the time – Sichon and Og. This seems peculiar as Sichon and Og were the two great world power leaders of that time; their defeat at the hands of this upstart nation had to have attracted worldwide notice. What was it that Balak "saw" that had escaped everyone else's attention?

Even more perplexing, if the nation of Moav was frightened by the death and destruction that Bnei Yisroel had wrought upon the Emori, logically Moav should be frightened of their incredible power – so why does the Torah say that they were frightened by the numbers of the Jewish nation? Additionally, what does the statement "Moav was disgusted in the face of Bnei Yisroel" add to the narrative?

What Balak saw was an opportunity for him to create a leadership role for himself. In reality, there was really no reason for Moav to be afraid. After all, Bnei Yisroel had purposefully avoided conflict with the nation of Edom because they were cousins (descendants of Eisav – Yaakov's brother). Both Moav and Midian were cousins as well; Moavites were descendants of Lot (Sarah's brother) and those of Midian were the children of Avraham (by second wife Keturah). Thus, Bnei Yisroel had no interest in a war with them.

But Balak's genius was in the creation of a fabricated animosity. He pointed out that the Jewish nation was exceedingly great in number and would undoubtedly want to settle in the vicinity. He may have even known that the great multitude of Erev Rav wouldn't have a portion in the land of Israel or that some of the tribes wished to settle on Moav's side of the Jordan.

Balak singlehandedly created the first immigrant and refugee crisis. This was the disgust that Moav felt; they were disgusted with the prospect of having to live and share land with a nation that would totally devour all the natural resources. This is why Bnei Yisroel are described as "this

nation will chew up our entire surroundings as an ox chews up grass of the field” (22:4).

Balak also highlighted the futility of trying to defeat Bnei Yisroel through a conventional war. In this manner, he created a desperate situation that seemingly had no solution. But of course Balak had a plan all along. After scaring Moav into looking to their perennial enemy (Midian – home country of Moshe Rabbeinu) for advice, Midian responded that the only solution was to find someone who had the power to get Hashem to act.

Balaam was the equivalent of Moshe Rabbeinu in prophecy. As Rashi notes (22:5), Balak and Balaam were from the same place and had known each other years earlier (Balaam had, in fact, prophesied that Balak would become a king someday). Balak, therefore, held the power to bring this solution into a reality. In effect, Balak created the mirage of a problem and then positioned himself to be the only path to a solution. That is why the Torah says “Balak son of Zippor was king of Moav at that time” (22:4) – Rashi points out that he was appointed king to deal with this emergency situation. What Balak saw that no one else saw was an opportunity for him to become appointed as king.

For the Love of Money

Balaam answered and said to the servants of Balak, “If Balak gives me his house full of silver and gold, I cannot transgress the word of Hashem, my God, to do anything small or great” (Bamidbar 22:18).

Rashi comments that this possuk reflects negatively on Balaam’s character, indicating that he was plagued by a desire for other people’s money. By speaking of the possibility that Balak would give him so much wealth, Balaam indicated that he coveted Balak’s assets, which the Torah views as a fundamental character flaw.

This desire for wealth is generally treated as a negative desire. Yet we find similar statements made by great figures in Jewish history, and their expression of this sentiment is actually to their credit. Dovid Hamelech, for instance, declares in Sefer Tehillim, “The Torah of Your Mouth is better for me than thousands of gold and silver” (119:72). If desiring thousands of gold and silver was an abominable character trait he wouldn’t be saying much about the value of the Torah. Similarly, the Tanna Rabbi Yosi ben Kisma relates in Pirkei Avos (6:9) that he told someone, “Even if you give me all the gold, silver, precious stones, and pearls in the world, I would live only in a place of Torah.”

The statements of these great men are certainly not viewed as indicative of a shameful lust for wealth; on the contrary, both Dovid Hamelech and Rabbi Yosi ben Kisma appreciated the value of money, but they considered Torah far more important and precious. That being the case, why is Balaam’s statement viewed as painting a negative picture of his personality?

There is one significant difference between the words of Balaam and the statements of Dovid Hamelech and Rabbi Yosi ben Kisma: Rashi notes specifically that Balaam desired the money of others while both Dovid Hamelech and Rabbi Yosi ben Kisma speak of its value in general terms. Balaam’s character flaw is his desire for other people’s money; not his appreciation of money’s inherent value.

It is not a shortcoming for a person to understand and appreciate the value of money. Many wonderful things can be accomplished with money; when used properly it is a vehicle for accomplishing much of what Hashem desires for our world – it is certainly needed to open Torah institutions and chesed organizations throughout the world.

Thus, Dovid Hamelech and Rabbi Yosi ben Kisma are applauded for their statements. Balaam’s flaw, meanwhile, lay in his desire for other

people’s wealth. If we just read his words literally we can see that he didn’t just want wealth; he wanted Balak’s house full of silver and gold.

The tenth of the Aseres Hadibros is the prohibition of coveting another person’s belongings, which many Rishonim view as the most severe of the Ten Commandments. There is nothing wrong with having a desire for a beautiful home or for other assets, for if these things are used properly, they can make a positive impact. However, it is terribly improper to harbor a desire to take things for oneself that belong to someone else. Coveting another person’s belongings is where the sin begins, and that is the terrible character trait that Balaam exhibited.

And Loyalty Above All...

The officers of Moav came to Balak and reported that “Balaam refuses to return with us.” Balak continued (to try and recruit Balaam) by sending more officers of a higher rank than those previously. They came to Balaam and said “so said Balak – do not refrain from coming to me for I will honor you very much [...]” Balaam answered and said to the servants of Balak [...] (22:14-18).

Rashi (22:13) points out that Balaam had given Balak’s first emissaries the message that they were not important enough to request his presence at Balak’s behest. Balak, who was very keen on having Balaam come and curse Bnei Yisroel, therefore sent messengers that were of higher ranking than the first group.

Many Rishonim (Rosh, Rabbeinu Bachaye) question the Torah’s description of the higher ranking officers as “the servants of Balak.” Calling these high ranking officers “servants” seems to imply that they were of a very lowly stature. How does this fit in with the narrative that Balak actually sent higher ranking officers?

Balak, as we have seen, was a very astute political leader who certainly understood the tenets of building an effective hierarchy of command. Obviously, in order to be promoted to a position of responsibility one must be capable; but among those who are capable of doing the job how does a leader decide who is of a higher and who is of a lesser rank?

The answer is loyalty. Those who are most trusted and loyal are the ones who are brought closest to the king. The term “eved – servant” doesn’t always refer to one of lowly stature; often it implies the relationship between the master and the servant. The Gemara has the maxim “the hand of the servant is as the hand of the master.” In other words, the servant is an extension of the master. In such a situation, only the closest and most trusted confidant is placed into that position.

This was the position of both Moshe who is called “eved Hashem,” and Eliezer who is called “eved Avraham.” In both of those instances the term eved doesn’t mean a lowly servant. Quite the opposite – both of them acted in lieu of their master, in modern parlance it would be akin to a “power of attorney.”

By calling the second group “the servants of Balak,” Balaam was actually recognizing their unique position as trusted confidantes of Balak, and worthy of his consideration to mull Balak’s offer to come and curse the Jewish people.

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