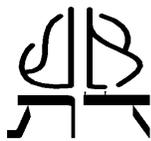


Toras



Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

“**A**nd Balak the son of Tzipor was the king of Moav at that time” (Bamidbar 22:4). Why “at that time” (implying but not at other times)? “He was not worthy of being king. He was [really] one of the Midyanite noblemen/leaders; since Sichon had died, they appointed him to rule over them because of a temporary need” (Rashi, *ibid*). While this explains why the Torah says that Balak was only their king “at that time,” it also raises several other issues.

For one thing, why should the downfall of Sichon have caused a member of the Midyanite nobility/royalty to take over Moav? Sichon had previously taken over some of Moav's land, and although (as Rashi points out) both Midyan and Moav were now afraid of Israel, why would this fear lead to having a foreign ruler? Besides, Rashi tells us (22:5) that Balak was really from Bilam's hometown of Aram—so why is Balak described as being a leader in Midyan (who transferred to Moav)? Finally, if the new king of Moav was originally a member of the leadership of Midyan, it should come as no surprise that—when faced with a major problem—he would consult with his old friends/comrades in Midyan. Why, then, does Rashi (22:4) have to tell us that it was only their hatred of Israel that caused these two bitter enemies (Moav and Midyan) to work together? The proof-text of their enmity toward each other is from generations earlier. Why reference old hostilities to prove that their common hatred brought them together when it would seem likely that Balak's political connections with Midyan explains their cooperation?

The source of this Rashi (Tanchuma 4) quotes a verse from Yehoshua (13:21) to prove that Balak was originally a member of non-Moavite royalty. When describing the land that Moshe gave to the Tribe of Reuvain, we are told that it included “all of the kingdom of Sichon the king of the Emori, and the leaders of Midyan—Evi and Rekem and Tzur and Chur and Reva—the nobility of Sichon, who (plural) lived in the land.” Our sages knew that Balak's real name was “Tzur” (as in the father of the Midyanite woman that Pinchas kills at the end of our Parsha), so we see from this verse that Tzur—nee Balak—was really a leader in Midyan before taking over in Moav.

The truth is, though, that we needn't go to Sefer Yehoshua to prove that Tzur was a member of Midyanite royalty. When Israel took revenge for Midyan's trying to undermine them (31:13), these same five are listed as the Midyanite kings that were killed. The midrash chose the verse in Yehoshua because it not only proves that Tzur was a leader in Midyan, but that his leadership there began under the auspices of Sichon. As the Radak (in Yehoshua) and the Ramban (in Balak) explain, until Sichon was defeated, Midyan was subservient to his kingdom, and these five were his representatives there. Even after Sichon was defeated they stayed in power (as evidenced by the verse later in Bamidbar), although they were now autonomous.

We now have a better picture of who Balak really was—an opportunist from Aram who was appointed by Sichon to rule over Midyan and eventually took over Moav. And it was while part of Sichon's inner circle that he saw the power of Bilam's curse: “For Sichon was [initially] unable to conquer [Cheshbon] (from Moav), so he went and hired Bilam to curse it. And this is what Balak meant when he said to him, ‘for I know that that which you bless shall be blessed and that which you curse shall be cursed’” (Rashi on 21:27). But there's still one more piece to this puzzle.

Coming from Aram was not the only thing that Bilam and Balak shared. They were also both masters of sorcery/black magic. Rashi tells us (23:14) that Balak was an even better sorcerer than Bilam, which is why he picked places to try to curse Israel from that Bilam didn't realize would be ideal. The Midrash Tanchuma (Buber 15), upon which this Rashi is likely based, compares the two sorcerers to two people, one of whom has a knife but doesn't know where to cut, and the other knows where to cut but has no knife. Each had something the other didn't, but needed. Earlier (6) the Tanchuma had said that Balak was even more of a sorcerer than Bilam, only he wasn't as accurate.

When Rashi explained (22:4) why Moav was asking Midyan for advice (as opposed to the two fearful nations consulting each other), he said that since Israel's leader (Moshe) grew up in Midyan (i.e. lived there with his father-in-law Yisro before taking the Children of Israel out of Egypt), they were asking the leaders of Midyan to tell them about him, i.e. his strengths and weaknesses. Their answer was that his strength is only by his mouth (i.e. prayer to G-d and teaching G-d's Torah). Based on this, the Moavites responded by saying, “we too will come onto them with

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a person whose strength is by his mouth." This is commonly understood to mean Bilam, who would try to curse Israel. However, it is possible that, being that both Bilam and Balak shared the same interest in black magic (and, in at least some respects, Balak was more accomplished at it), the reference is to Balak (and not Bilam), i.e. that they asked Balak to become their leader in order to defeat Israel. It was Balak who, realizing that his sorcery wasn't enough, brought in Bilam to compliment him.

The verses now flow very nicely: Balak is mentioned in the first verse, but not as king of Moav—as he was still "only" a leader in Midyan. Because Moav and Midyan are both afraid of Israel (now that Sichon was defeated), they put aside their long-standing feud, allowing Moav to ask Midyan how to proceed against the Midyan-raised leader of Israel. Upon hearing that his real strength is with words, not might, they ask that the sorcerer Balak (temporarily) lead them to fight Israel, and Balak brings in Bilam to give him the best chance of cursing them. After failing, Balak returns to Midyan, where he is killed with the other Midyanites—as is Bilam, who had traveled to Midyan to collect his money knowing that this was where Balak had returned.

Our original questions are now answered as well. It was only after Sichon fell that there was a need for a "mouth-to-mouth" confrontation with Israel, which is what brought the opportunistic Balak to Moav in the first place. And it was only the shared hatred of Israel that allowed Moav to ask Midyan how to proceed, and if they could "borrow" their sorcerer/leader.

"My people, remember now what Balak the king of Moav advised, and what Bilam ben Be'or answered him, from Shittim to Gilgal, in order that you should know the righteousness of G-d." (Michah 6:5) © 2004 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

In this week's portion, Balak, King of Moab, hires Bilaam to curse the nation of Israel. (Numbers 22:5,6) A review of the history of Moab's relationship with Israel reveals a terrible decline that, in this portion, reaches one of its lowest points.

Moab is a descendant of Lot. Lot is the nephew of our father Abraham. We first meet Lot in the Torah after the death of his father Haran (Abraham's brother). In a certain sense, Abraham adopted Lot. Indeed when Abraham goes to Canaan, Lot is mentioned in the text as a full-fledged member of his family. (Genesis 12:5)

After arriving in Canaan, famine drives Abraham and Lot to Egypt. Upon returning, the Torah states that Abraham went up from Egypt, he with his wife and Lot with him. (Genesis 13:1) Nechama Leibowitz points out that the expression, "Lot with him", indicates that Lot was no longer a central figure in Abraham's family, he was a kind of tag-along. Apparently the wealth that both Abraham and Lot attained in Egypt had transformed Lot into a new person who felt separate from Abraham. In fact, the shepherds of Abraham and Lot quarrel when the land could not provide for both of them. Abraham tells Lot that he does not want to argue. Wherever you wish to go I will go elsewhere, Abraham says. (Genesis 13:8,9)

One would imagine that since Abraham had raised Lot, Lot would tell his uncle that even though there was not much room he could never ever leave him. Still, Lot looks at the plains of Sdom and decides to separate from Abraham. (Genesis 13:10-12)

As Sdom is destroyed, an angel of God tells Lot to run to the mountain. This is commonly understood to be a reference to Israel. (Genesis 19:17) Lot refuses, insisting that were he to return, evil would consume (tidbakani) him. (Genesis 19:19)

Which brings us to this week's portion. Here, Lot's descendant, Balak, king of Moab, wishes to curse the nation of Israel, the descendants of Abraham.

So alienated had Moab become from Israel that the Torah in Deuteronomy states that the Moabites may never become part of the community of Israel. After all, Balak had hired Bilaam to curse Israel and thereby obviate their covenantal relationship with God. (Deuteronomy 23:5)

One wonders if Moab ever returns? Is the breach between Moab and Israel ever narrowed? Interestingly in the Book of Ruth, Ruth, as opposed to her Moabite ancestor, insists that she will never leave the side of her stepmother Naomi. Ruth the Moabite tells Naomi that she will return with her to Israel. Unlike Balak who wished to destroy Israel's covenantal relationship with God, Ruth becomes the example par excellence of the person who renews that relationship. Not coincidentally when the Book of Ruth describes

Ruth remaining with Naomi it uses the very word that describes Lot remaining apart from Abraham—the word *avka* (Ruth 1: 14)

Here we have come full circle. Ruth, the descendant of Moab, takes heroic strides to embrace Abraham's family. The Talmud acknowledges her actions by stating that the prohibition of Moabites coming into the community of Israel relates only to males and not to females.

The Torah seems to be teaching an important lesson which the Torah also alludes to in the Book of Devarim: children should not be punished for the mistakes of parents. As Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach would always say: you never know. You never know when people will return. It may not happen in this generation or even the next, but the book should never be closed to the possibility of *teshuva*, returning to one another and returning to God. © 2004 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA

RABBI ARON TENDLER

Rabbi's Notebook

Hashem promised through the words of Yirmiyahu that the Bnai Yisroel would exist as long as there was a universe.

(31:34-35) "So said G-d Who establishes the sun? the law stars? and Who stirs the sea into roaring waves? Only if the I shall the offspring of Israel cease to be a nation before Me for all time."

To date, G-d has kept His promise. Above and beyond the expectations of history the Jews are alive and well.

The fourth of the Ten Commandments forbids making promises and validating them by associating them with the name of G-d. "An oath in the Name of G-d implies that we seek to prove the veracity of our word and the honesty of our actions by subordinating our entire future to G-d's power of deciding over our fate." (Hirsch Shemos 20:7)

The story of Bilam's hatred for the Jewish people began centuries before they reached the Plains of Moav in the year 2488 from creation. Bilam was one of Lavan's sons and a brother to Rachel and Leah. Basically, he was our uncle!

Forced to flee from the danger of Eisav's hatred, Rivkah instructed Yakov to go to the home of her brother Lavan. However, before reaching Charan, Yakov spent 14 years in the Yeshiva (academy) of Shem and Ever furthering the 63 years he had already invested studying with his father Yitzchak. In past issues of the Rabbi's Notebook I explained that Yakov detoured to study with his great Grandfathers because he needed to prepare himself to deal with Lavan. First and foremost he had to strengthen himself spiritually and intellectually to survive Lavan's innate insidiousness. Secondly, he needed to be trained how to best influence the non-Jewish pagan society into which he would be immersed.

Shem and Ever had lived hundreds of years teaching the truths of G-d to anyone interested in knowing. They were the greatest living experts on how to be "a light onto the nations." As the grandson of Avraham, Yakov knew that he and his children were destined to become G-d's kingdom of priests and holy nation. It would be their responsibility to awaken the other nations to the reality of G-d's power and majesty. However, knowing and teaching is not the same thing. Sixty-three years of study in the tent of Yitzchak made Yakov into an extraordinary scholar and Eved Hashem (servant of G-d); however, translating and integrating that knowledge into social truths and values required special training. Yakov entered the academy of Shem and Ever to be trained. Yakov went to learn how to teach.

Upon arriving in Charan the Torah described Yakov's confrontation with the three shepherds who were seemingly lazing around. Rather than mind his own business and avoid conflict Yakov chastised them for "stealing" from their masters. Clearly, the Torah recorded the absurdity of the encounter and its non-confrontational outcome to highlight Yakov's first real interaction with the non-Jewish world into which he would be immersed for 20 years. Presenting himself as a paradigm of honesty and integrity, Yakov proclaimed to one and all that he personified the *Midah* (characteristic) of *Emes* (truth) in all its facets. As such, whatever he would do and say would have the imprimatur of G-d's own approval. Whether it would be managing Lavan's flocks or teaching G-d's reality, Yakov could be trusted to speak only the truth.

Among those attracted to Yakov's scholarship was Bilam, son of Lavan. Bilam was a brilliant and creative student who greedily absorbed every word of Yakov's teachings. However, Bilam suffered from the fatal flaw of being miserly, self-centered, and egotistical. Whereas Moshe Rabbeinu was the most humble man to ever live, Bilam was the most egotistical.

Lacking humility and beset by the inability to subjugate himself to any other person or to G-d, Bilam, along with his father Lavan, plotted Yakov's demise. So long as Yakov and his progeny lived they would be proof of humanities ability to attain greatness through diminution. The less a person focuses on himself the greater his significance. The more a person focuses on himself the less his true significance. Therefore, Lavan, Bilam, and all those like them throughout history have plotted the utter destruction of our nation. Their egos are such that diminution is an anathema to them. Half measures would never be enough; only total annihilation and genocide would satisfy their egotistical needs of doing away with the Jewish people. As we say in the Hagadah, "Go out and learn what Lavan the Aramean attempted to do to our father Yakov... Lavan attempted to uproot everything. An Aramean sought to destroy my father After 20 years suffering the evil machinations of Lavan and Bilam, Yakov fled with his four wives and twelve children. The Torah in Bereshis

recorded Lavan's pursuit of Yakov and their final confrontation at Har Gilead. Forewarned by G-d that he better not harm Yakov, Lavan presented himself to Yakov as the self-righteously injured father / grandfather whose sole wish for saying goodbye to his daughters and grandchildren had been denied to him by an insensitive, uncaring, and ungrateful son-in-law. The confrontation ended with Yakov and Lavan establishing a truce and covenant.

(Bereshis 31:44-52) "(Lavan said) 'So now, let us make a covenant and He (G-d) shall be a witness between me and you' Yakov said, 'Gad took stones and made a mound. Lavan called the mound Yigar sehadusa stones in Aramaic) and Yakov called it Galaid (mound of stones in Hebrew). Lavan declared, 'This mound is a witness between you and me thou among us to see... G-d is a witness between me and you that I and you cross over this mound to do evil to each other.'"

This week's Parsha relates how Balak the king of Moav hired Bilam the son of Beor to travel from Pethor in Aram Naharaim (see Areyeh Kaplan) (homeland of Avraham and Lavan) to the Jewish encampment and curse them (approx. 300 miles). Chazal tell us that Beor was Lavan and that Bilam was his son.

At first G-d refused to let Bilam go with Balak's emissaries; however, in the end G-d allowed Bilam to go. Along the way the incident with Bilam' talking donkey (the original Mr. Ed) took place. G-d sent an angel to block Bilam's path but did not allow Bilam to see the angel. Instead, the donkey saw the angel with his drawn sword and fearful for its life fled into the vineyards bordering the road. The angel repositioned himself in the narrow pathway between the vineyards that was bordered by stone walls. Frightened for its life but unable to flee due to the narrowness of the path, the donkey smashed Bilam's leg against the stone wall causing permanent damage. Bilam began striking the donkey to regain control at which point the donkey opened its mouth and began to speak. In the end G-d allowed Bilam to see the angel and he understood that it was the angel that had frightened the donkey.

The entire episode of the talking donkey demands greater elucidation which the many Mipharshim (commentaries) offer; however, I would like to share with you the insights of the Daas Zikaynim Baalei Tosofos that I learned from my older brother Rabbi Dr. Yakov Tendler.

Bilam as Lavan's son was bound by his father's oath to Yakov at Galaid. At that time Lavan agreed that he and his family would respect Yakov's autonomy and never cross over the borders of Charan to attack Yakov or his family. The covenant was agreed to by both parties and at Lavan's insistence witnessed by G-d Himself. (See Rav Hirsch the beginning of the essay.)

When Bilam agreed to undertake the contract with Balak for cursing the Jews, he effectively broke the covenant between Lavan and Yakov. (By the way,

according to Chazal (the rabbis), Lavan was still living at the time.)

The Daas Zikaynim says the following. (Bereshis 31:52) "Lavan proclaimed that the mound should be witness to the covenant between himself and Yakov. They then stuck a sword in the top of the mound to complete the covenant. Therefore, when Bilam broke the covenant with the children of Yakov he was punished by both the mound of stones and the sword. The mound punished Bilam when it states that his leg was smashed against the stone wall. Know that the stone wall against which Bilam's leg was smashed was the very same mound that Lavan and Yakov had erected! Later, in the war against Midian Bilam was killed by the sword..."

The ways of G-d are timeless. Oaths made centuries before are as bearing and demanding as the moment they were first agreed to. Lavan and Bilam never intended to keep their side of the deal. Instead, they hoped that history would take care of their problem for them. However, that wasn't the case. Time after time the Jews were saved by the grace of G-d's benevolence.

It seems that "there is nothing new beneath the sun." Covenants made and sealed are meaningless except as so much fodder for the political and PR craving. Dovid Hamelech (King David) wrote, (Tehilim 146) "Do not rely on nobles, nor on a human being, for he holds no salvation. Praiseworthy is one whose help is in G-d..." © 2004 Rabbi A. Tendler & torah.org

RABBI DOVID SIEGEL

Haftorah

This week's haftorah reveals to us Hashem's incredible love for His people. The prophet Micha opens by comparing the Jewish nation to a lion amongst the beasts. This refers to the Jewish nation's ultimate status in the Messianic era wherein there will be no need to turn to other nations for assistance. They will finally place their full trust in Hashem and recognize that salvation comes solely from Him. Micha continues the Messianic theme by describing Hashem's cleansing process whereby all idolatry and idolatrous cities will be destroyed.

The prophet suddenly shifts gears and summons the Jewish people to a serious trial. Micha says, "Come and debate before the mountains and project your voice to the hills. Because Hashem is quarreling with His people and challenging Israel." Hashem begins the debate and demands, "My nation, what have I done to you and how have I drained you?" (6:1-3) The prophet then lists a host of Hashem's favors to His people. He sent them three great leaders;

Moshe, Aharon and Miriam and even spared the Jewish people from Balak and Bilaam's fiendish plot. The tone of the debate seems to focus on the Jewish nation's unfairness to Hashem. Hashem has been so kind to them and, in return, consider their

response. Yet, we find no concluding demand and criticism and instead we discover soft encouraging words. Micha says, "Man, haven't you been told what is good and what Hashem expects of you? Engage yourself in acts of justice, loving kindness and walk modestly with Him." (6:8) Where is all the fire and brimstone? Why doesn't Hashem denounce His people for all their wrongdoing? Wasn't this the trial's original intent?

Chazal (see Yalkut Shimoni 554) raise these questions and share with us an enlightening perspective. Rav Shmuel cites three incidents where Hashem called His people to trial. Each time the nations got wind of the trial and eagerly awaited its outcome. They envisioned that their long awaited moment finally arrived and Hashem would undoubtedly destroy His nation. "After all", they reasoned, "who could possibly stand up to Hashem's accusations and wrath?" Rav Shmuel continues that when Hashem sees this response, He immediately converts His powerful accusation into soft and kind words of blessing. (Yalkut Shimoni 554) This insight reveals a unique dimension of Hashem's relationship with His people. Although, in truth Hashem seriously faults His people this information remains between Hashem and His people. Hashem's love for them does not permit them to be faulted by others. As far as the nations concerned, Hashem cherishes His people and rarely finds fault in them. If the nations are ever privy to Hashem's feelings towards His people they will only discover favor and grace.

This insight is very helpful in appreciating the full message of this trial. Alongside Hashem's all encompassing favor of the Jewish exodus, the picture is completed with one isolated incident. Micha proclaims, "My nation, remember what Balak the king of Moav advised and how Bilaam responded. From Shitim to Gilgal (Hashem's kindness continued) in order that you should know Hashem's righteousness." (6:5) Why is this favor isolated and regarded the paradigm of Hashem's kindness towards His people?

In light of the above insight Micha's message becomes crystal clear. First, let us search for the hidden lesson of our parsha. Parshas Balak revolves around Balak and Bilaam's futile attempts to shower curses at the Jewish nation. Bilaam, the sorcerer persistently directed words of degradation towards the Jewish people which were miraculously transformed into praise and blessing. To the untrained eye the scene appears to be somewhat comical. A wicked man insists on harming the Jewish people and refuses to accept that Hashem will simply not allow it. However, we can learn a deeper lesson from this entire experience.

As we carefully examine Bilaam's words we discover their heavy concentration on the Jewish nation's faults. Each curse reflects a serious attempt to arouse Hashem's wrath against His people. Bilaam had contact with the inner dimensions of the world and

possessed an accurate understanding of the Jewish nation's shortcomings. He focused on these shameful acts and awaited Hashem's harsh response to this indecent behavior. (see Targum to Bamidbar 24:1 and Kli Yakar 23:1, 14, 24:1) Yet, Hashem was not persuaded in the least bit and responded to His people instead with warm words of blessing. In fact, Bilaam himself admitted this disheartening phenomena and profoundly expressed it in his classical way. He proclaimed to the world, "Hashem does not gaze at Yaakov's iniquity and does not see Israel's sinful practices." (23:21) His message was quite clear. Bilaam discovered the hard way that Hashem was not interested in faulting His people. Although, their relationship with Him may be full of imperfection it remains, in the eyes of the world absolutely perfect. Hashem would never think of trading in His people for anything in the world.

This same dimension is blatantly seen in Hashem's response to Bilaam's final plot. After his total failure in cursing the Jewish people, Bilaam notoriously advised Balak to engage the Midianite women in seducing Jewish men. This sinful scheme met with much success and tens of thousands of innocent Jewish men were lured into atrocious immoral conduct. Hashem responded harshly to this sinful movement and sent a severe plague killing over twenty thousand men. Yet, the totality and identity of the nation remained intact. Even after a sin of such magnitude, Hashem's love for His people was not diminished in the slightest way. These very same people continued to merit Hashem's favor and entered Eretz Yisroel with open revelations. Radak explains that although the entire nation deserved to be destroyed Hashem did not permit it. (see comment to 6:5) In light of the above we can relate to this message. Bilaam's fiendish plan could never interfere in Hashem's relationship with His people. The nations of the world could never be at the root of such developments. Although the Midianites witnessed the Jewish nation's momentary deviation even this atrocious behavior could not yield severe results. Bilaam and his followers could never be the cause of Hashem's full wrath against His people. Therefore, after Pinchos effectively silenced the sinful movement Hashem continued His relationship with His people in full.

We now understand why Micha isolated this incident between Bilaam and the Jewish people when demonstrating Hashem's ultimate love for His people. In truth, Hashem's response to this serious plunge reflects the full tone of the debate. Hashem's unequivocal message to His people is that the nations can never get between Hashem and His people. Even when Hashem has serious complaints against His people such information is not for public knowledge. Hashem's incredible love for His people demands that world perspective of this be one of perfect love and appreciation. In truth, a father always remains a father

during the most trying times and his love for his child is never tainted. Although he may punish his child this too is an expression of love and concern and should never be viewed in any other way. No one should ever forget that the Jewish people are Hashem's children and His boundless love and concern for them will always be there for them. © 2004 RabbiD. Siegel & torah.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

Balaam was one of the foremost prophets amongst the nations of the world, an impressive and poetic personage who demonstrates the universalistic ideal that the Almighty communicates with Gentiles as well as with Israelites. But aside from the exalted lyrical cadences? of his pronouncements - which are very much in the literary style of Moses' song of Haazinu and of Isaiah's visions of redemption - there are two fundamental ways in which Balaam parts company from his Israelite counterparts; these differences teach volumes about the unique message of Israelite prophesies!

First of all, while the Israelite prophets chastised their people, Balaam has only the best things to say about the descendants of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob, Leah and Rachel. The sweet psalmist shouts forth, "For forty years I argued (against you) in the desert, and I said, 'they are a nation whose heart led them astray, they do not know (or love) My paths' (Psalms 95:10); Isaiah thunders: "My soul detests your New Moons and Festival. when you extend your hands in prayer, I hide My eyes from you. Your hands are replete with blood" (Isaiah1:14,15).

Balaam, however, expresses fulsome praises: "This is a nation that rises like the king of beasts and lifts itself like a lion. (Numbers 23:24). How goodly are your tents, oh Jacob, your dwelling places, oh Israel (ibid 24:5)."

On one level, this difference may be explained as a logical and necessary outgrowth of the persona who is doing the prophesying. In the words of the Midrash (Numbers Rabbah 1):"It would have more fitting had the chastisements emanated from the mouth of Balaam and the blessings from the mouth of Moses, but then the Israelites would have said that their enemy is cursing them. and the Gentiles would have said that their beloved leader is praising them. The Holy One Blessed be He therefore decreed, "Let Moses chastise them, because he loves them, and let Balaam bless them, because he hates them. Then Israel will know that both the blessings and the curses are honest and true."

I believe, however, that there is an even more important reason for this difference. The Israelite prophets chastised their people because they wished to instruct them, to improve them, to refine them. As King Solomon teaches, "Those whom one loves, one

chastises." The prophet-shepherds cared deeply about their people-flocks and were hurt to the quick if they thought they were backsliding. Balaam, on the other hand, sought the demise of Israel, wanted the destruction of Israel. He importunes the Almighty to allow him to act as sorcerer for the wicked Balak and goes from place to place hoping to find a possible location from which to curse the seed of Abraham. Balaam's belief, upon discovering that G-d will not allow His chosen and exemplary nation to be reviled, is to fill them with the kind of false pride and conceited hubris which will take them off-guard and render them easy prey for the Satanic Evil Instinct. Then they will become worthy of G-d's curses; then they will self-destruct!

The Talmud suggests that Balaam gave devastating and insidious advice to the Moabite and Midianite enemies of Israel. Since the Israelites are desirous of fine garments, he suggests that they set up clothing stalls, with old and wasted Gentile women outside and nubile, lascivious women inside. When the unsuspecting Israelite men will enter the stalls to make their purchase, they will be seduced by the maidens within. (B.T. Sanhedrin 106a).

Where is there a hint of such dangerous advice from Balaam in the Biblical text? Chapter 24 concludes the Gentile prophets' songs of praise to Israel with the words, "And Balaam rose up and returned home; Balak also went on his way." The very next verse, opening Chapter 25, reads, "Israel was staying in Shittim (a name of a place, literally linked to the Hebrew word for licentious foolishness, shtut), when the (Israelite) nation began to fornicate with the daughters of Moab." The passage goes on to describe how an "important person (ish) from the Children of Israel" brought a Midianite woman before his brethren, and in front "of the eyes of Moses and of the entire congregation of Israel" fornicated with her. Pinhas, son of Elazar and grandson of Aaron the High Priest, drove a spear through the exposed genitals of the indecent pair, arresting a plague which had threatened to destroy the Israelite encampment. (Numbers 25: 1-9).

This entire incident concludes the portion of Balak, immediately following Balaam's last prophecy and departure. Then starts the next portion of Pinhas, which praises the assassin of these public offenders and identifies the names of the immoral couple: Zimri son of Salou the Prince of the tribe of Shimon and Kozbi daughter of Tzur, aristocrat of Midian. Did not the entire incident belong in the portion of Pinhas? Why break up the story, telling the lurid details in Balak and identifying the culprits in Pinhas? Apparently, conjecture the Talmudic Sages, this entire tragedy was the outgrowth of a Gentile prophet who hoped to bury the Israelites with fulsome praise to his audience and salacious advice to their enemies.

The second distinction between the Israelite prophets and Balaam lies in their ultimate vision. Balaam understands Israel's messianic role, and even

foretells the eventual destruction of her enemies. "A star shall go forth from Jacob and a staff shall arise in Israel, crushing all of Moab's princes. Edom shall be demolished, his enemy Seir destroyed, but Israel shall emerge triumphant" (Numbers 24: 17-19). But Balaam does not see an ultimate world of peace and redemption for all nations, a time when "nation will not lift up sword against nation, and humanity will not learn war anymore."

Indeed it is only the Israelite prophets, - Isaiah, Micah, Zechariah - who understand the true mission of Israel, the perfection of the world under the Kingship of G-d, when "the Torah will come from Zion and the word of G-d from Jerusalem" to all peoples, when "the lamb will lie down with the lion, each individual will sit unafraid under his vineyard and fig-tree, and the Knowledge of a G-d of justice and morality will fill the world as the waters cover the seas." © 2004 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

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

In our time the Jewish people have survived, Holocaust, war, terror, persecution and unending hatred and bigotry. We have been subjected to a withering and unrepentant badly biased and skewed media portrayal of ourselves and of the State of Israel particularly. Everyone loves to curse us - the EU, the UN, CNN, BBC and the rest of the world's sanctimoniously hypocritical "good guys." But the Lord apparently does not read the editorial page of the New York Times and

therefore even this unending bombardment of negativity has in reality had little effect upon us and our situation. However, the seduction of Western culture, of the modern licentiousness of body and spirit, of assimilation and marrying the daughters of Midian and Moav, has weakened us. It has made us smaller in number and weaker in resolve and spirit. Adopting universalistic values that change constantly over basic Jewish values and traditions has crippled us in our struggle to survive and prosper. This behavior and attitude, fostered by secular Jewry, and to a great extent, non-Orthodox Jewish leaders as well, has destroyed our self-identity and self-worth. We are no longer unique and special, with a Godly mission to fulfill but we are like everyone else. And that is our weakness that if not recognized and corrected can lead to disaster and sadness. © 2004 Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com/jewishhistory.

MACHON ZOMET

Shabbat B'Shabbato

by Rabbi Amnon Bazak

In the beginning of this week's Torah portion, we read about a joint effort of Balak, King of Moav, and the elders of Midyan. "And Moav said to the elders of Midyan, now the community will lick up the whole surroundings, as an ox licks the greenery in the fields" [Bamidbar 22:4]. At first, Balak's proposal to turn to Bilam was indeed accepted by both sides. "So the elders of Moav and the elders of Midyan went, with charms in their hands. They came to Bilam and repeated to him Balak's words" [22:7]. However, as the events developed, the two nations reacted differently. Bilam rejected the offer, advising the messengers, "Go back to your lands, for G-d refuses to let me go with you" [22:13]. Evidently, the leaders of Midyan accepted Bilam's approach and returned home, as can be seen from the next verse: "And the leaders of Moav rose and went to Balak" [22:14]. In the rest of the Torah portion, we do not hear any more about the elders of Midyan but only about "the leaders of Moav" (22:21; 23:6,17).

As the portion continues, it becomes clear that the elders of Midyan judged the situation correctly, and that the use of magic would not give them an opportunity to harm Bnei Yisrael. The Torah explains in detail why this approach failed. Last week, we noted that the affair of the deadly serpents was a turning point for the nation, in that for the first time Bnei Yisrael admitted their sin, and from then on they did not make any complaints. Bnei Yisrael said to Moshe, "We have sinned by speaking against G-d and against you, pray to G-d and let Him remove the serpent from us" [21:7]. By saying this, they were not only rescued from the physical danger in the desert but also from the dangers of magic and spells ("nachash"— this word means both

a serpent and a magical incantation). Bnei Yisrael had matured and no longer complained about the Almighty, and they therefore did not deserve to be punished. This is also a lesson that Bilam learned, ever so slowly. At first he said, "There are no spells in Yaacov, and no magic in Yisrael" [23:23]. Later on he understood that "it is good in G-d's eyes to bless Yisrael," and therefore "he did not go as before to cast spells" [24:1]. Balak Ben Tzipor, who had hoped for an effect of the spells cast by Bilam, returned to his home deeply disappointed.

It turns out that the elders of Midyan took a different approach. They maintained their contact with Bilam and received from him a suggestion for a method to cause Bnei Yisrael to falter that was more effective from their point of view. They could make use of their daughters. "They were the ones who joined Bnei Yisrael on the advice of Bilam, causing them to revolt against G-d with respect to the matter of Peor" [31:16]. Their approach was that in order to cause harm to Bnei Yisrael they would have to "create" new sins within the nation, sins such as idol worship and illicit sex. This clearly means that the actions of Midyan, who were the main participants in this sin, were much more serious than those of Moav. That is why Moshe was instructed to take revenge on Midyan. "Harass the Midyanites and strike them, for they harassed you with their tricks, which they performed against you in the affair of Peor." [25:17-18]. Only after the end of the war with Midyan, when Bnei Yisrael had completed their repentance for this sin too ("And we brought the sacrifice of G-d; everybody who found golden vessels... to atone for our souls before the Almighty" [31:50]), could Moshe's mission be considered finished. "Take the vengeance of Bnei Yisrael against the Midyanites, and then you will be gathered into your nation" [31:1].

"A Nation Like a Lion Cub"

by Chayuta Deutch, Editor of the Literature and Jewish Thought Section, Hatzofeh

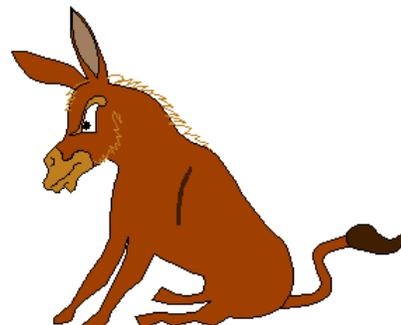
When the elders of Midyan wanted to emphasize the seriousness of the disaster they faced with the arrival of Bnei Yisrael, they compared the nation to an ox. "And Moav said to the elders of Midyan, now the community will lick up the whole surroundings, as an ox licks up the greenery in the fields" [Bamidbar 22:4]. Bilam, on the other hand, twice compared the nation to a lion. "They are a nation that will rise like a lion cub, and will lift itself up like a lion. It will not lie down until it eats its prey and drinks the blood of its victims" [Bamidbar 23:24]. "It crouched and lay down like a lion, and like a lion cub, who can make it rise? Those who bless you will be blessed, and those who curse you will be cursed" [24:9].

The transformation of the image from a trampling ox to that of a lion in essence tells the whole story. The elders of Midyan despise Yisrael and see

it as causing damage, mostly in economic terms, leading to a comparison with an animal whose main task is related to the food supply ("An ox knows his owner, and a donkey knows the feed given to him by his master" [Yeshayahu 1:3]). Bilam discerns a more meaningful picture. He sees in the nation the power of a lion, with two main characteristics: rising up and taking charge. This is the nobility of the king of the animals, together with the threat of its being a dangerous predator. "It will not lie down until it eats its prey and drinks the blood of its victims." According to this viewpoint, what is remarkable about the nation is both its high status and its danger. This is not a simple economic threat to the roots of livelihood, but rather a much greater and more significant threat.

Lions often appear in the Tanach. From the different instances it is clear that this animal has a dual potential, for good or evil. On one hand, it is a predator, but on the other hand it has the power of royalty. The sages hinted at this duality with the following story (Bava Kama 117a). When Rabbi Kahaneh came from Babylon and arrived at Rabbi Yochanan's yeshiva, Rish Lakish announced, A lion has arrived from Babylon. Clearly, he was referring to Rabbi Kahaneh's strength and greatness in Torah. However, based on the background of Rabbi Kahaneh's arrival, the comparison to a lion can also be viewed from another aspect: Rabbi Kahaneh broke the neck of a man who had the audacity to contradict his rabbi by declaring that he would give money to a Gentile friend. This event is also hinted in the image of the lion, which uses the same method against its prey: "Like a lion, it will break all my bones" [Yeshayahu 38:13]. Thus, the comparison accurately reflects the dual attitude with which Rabbi Kahaneh is viewed in the Talmud.

The same "double meaning" is implied when Bilam compares Bnei Yisrael to a lion—both greatness and a defect at the same time. And Bilam is correct in his estimation. He tells Balak that he is involved with a lion, not with a "mild" ox. In order to defeat a lion it is necessary to use different tools than what Balak had anticipated. It is not possible to strike him and expel him from the land, not even based on the curses of Bilam. The only technique is to lay a trap for him, causing the people to commit a sin and thus lose their remarkable strength.



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