

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

“**A**nd G-d's anger raged [against Bilam] because he went" (Bamidbar 22:22). One of the more glaring questions discussed in Parshas Balak is how G-d could have gotten angry at Bilam for going after having given him permission to do so (22:20). There are more than a dozen different approaches given by the commentators to answer this, and although I am not really worthy, keday lehagdil Torah uleha'adira, please permit me to suggest another possibility.

Aside from G-d telling Bilam that he can go and then getting upset when he did, other questions and apparent inconsistencies can be raised as well. For one thing, when G-d tells Bilam that he can go, He says, "if the men have come to call you (i.e. for purposes other than cursing the Children of Israel), [then] get up and go with them" (22:20), as if G-d is unsure about what their intention really is. Obviously G-d knows that they came specifically to get Bilam to curse the nation that came out of Egypt, so how can He make it seem as if (a) He doesn't know, and (b) that there's a possibility that Balak's intentions are anything but getting Bilam to curse Israel?

[Even though Rashi says that G-d's asking Bilam "who are these men with you" (22:9) was a means of tricking him into thinking that He doesn't know everything, it would be difficult to say that G-d was pretending He didn't know what Balak's intentions really were in order to further the impression that He is not omniscient. As most of the commentators on Rashi point out, G-d would never say anything specifically to trick anyone; rather, it is always appropriate to open conversation in a normal manner. (There are numerous examples of this in Tanach; aside from the four Rashi brings in Beraishis 3:9, see Beraishis 16:8, where the conversation with Hagar begins by asking where she was coming from, even though it was obvious that she had just run away from Sarah.) With Bilam, starting the conversation in the normal manner would be misunderstood to mean that G-d doesn't know everything; nevertheless He began the conversation the way it should be started and allowed Bilam to make the mistake. This, the commentators say, is not the same as purposely saying something specifically in a way that will be misunderstood. Pretending He doesn't know what Balak wanted Bilam for would only be done if G-d

specifically wanted to trick Bilam, which the commentators say He wouldn't do. Which is why G-d's phrasing it as if He doesn't know Balak's intentions are needs to be explained.]

Additionally, initially G-d had told Bilam that he couldn't go at all (Bamidbar 22:12). How could He change His mind, telling him (after the 2nd group came) that he can go? Alternatively, if G-d was okay with Bilam going as long as it wasn't to curse the Children of Israel, why didn't He say so when the first group came? Why say "no" the first time, only to clarify it as a conditional "no" when the second group comes- just spell it out from the get go: "you can go with them, as long as it's not to curse Israel?"

The Chizkuni (22:19) says that when G-d told Bilam that he can't go, it actually gave him more incentive to try and go. After all, if his curse wouldn't have an effect, why wouldn't G-d let him go? If Bilam uttering some mumbo-jumbo was meaningless, why prevent him from going? What Bilam didn't realize is that even if his curse would have no effect, others would think that it did. The Chizkuni (22:12) and the Ibn Ezra (22:9) say that any future problems the Children of Israel would encounter (such as the plague after sinning at Baal Pe'or) would be attributed to Bilam's curse rather than to it being punishment for sinning. The Abarbanel says that had Bilam been able to utter his curse it would have emboldened the nations that Israel would be waging war with, giving them confidence that they would win. Even though G-d would make sure that Israel was victorious, the battle would have been harder, and harsher, than it was without the curse.

There were other things that Bilam could do besides placing a curse on Israel. He was known for being able to put an "evil eye" on those he wanted to harm, and had been an advisor to kings (e.g. Pharaoh). When G-d told him he couldn't go, he may have thought that G-d was afraid he would cause damage to His holy nation if he were allowed to help Balak. But all G-d wanted to prevent was the perceived affects of his curse. Therefore, when Bilam asked the second time, He wanted Bilam to know that He's not afraid of his going to Moav to help Balak - he's only preventing him from placing the curse. But Balak still only wanted him for the curse, so G-d clarified it to Bilam; "If he had wanted you to come for any other reason, or if, in the future, he asks you to come to help him in any other way, I'm not preventing you from going - you can go

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with them, as long as you do as I say," i.e. don't curse My people.

G-d knew that Balak only wanted Bilam for his curse, but also knew that after He had initially told Bilam that he can't go, Bilam became confident that G-d was afraid of what might happen if he went. To counter this, the second time He told him that he has no problem with him going, if and when it's clear that he won't be uttering any curses.

Bilam, in his desire to go and curse Israel, took G-d's conditional "you can go if and when" as permission to go now - and he immediately packed up and went. However, because G-d hadn't actually given him permission to go, as Balak still only wanted Bilam for his ability to curse, He became angry with Bilam for going. © 2005 Rabbi D. Kramer

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

Virtual Beit Medrash

STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA
HARAV AHARON LICHTENSTEIN SHLIT"A

Adapted by Dov Karoll

“Israel stayed in Shittim, and the people began to commit harlotry with the daughters of Moab. They called the people to the sacrifices of their G-ds; and the people ate, and bowed down to their G-ds. Israel attached himself to Baal-Peor; and the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel.

"The Lord said to Moshe, Take all the chiefs of the people, and hang them up before the Lord in the sun, that the fierce anger of the Lord may be turned away from Israel.

"Moshe said to the judges of Israel, Slay you every one his men who were attached to Baal-Peor.

"And, behold, one of the people of Israel came and brought to his brothers a Midianite woman in the sight of Moshe, and in the sight of all the congregation of the people of Israel, who were weeping before the door of the Tent of Meeting." (Bemidbar 25:1-6)

It is understandable why Moshe and the elders were crying. Before their eyes was harlotry, both in the literal sense and in the figurative sense- the unfaithfulness of idolatry. The Torah explicitly connects idolatry and promiscuity in the aftermath of the sin of the golden calf (Shemot 34:15-16).

The severity of this episode is incomparable to the sin of the golden calf. Of course, that too was very severe. The Gemara (Gittin 36b) compares the sin of the golden calf, which took place at the feet of Mount Sinai, to a bride who was unfaithful under the bridal canopy. But at least it was understandable, for the generation that left Egypt had grown up in the idolatrous Egyptian culture.

This generation, forty years later, had grown up at the feet of Moshe Rabbeinu. Thus, with all his frustration at the new generation's regression to idolatry and harlotry, it is understandable why Moshe Rabbeinu cried instead of responding.

Nevertheless, our sages speak very harshly of this weeping. The Midrash (Bemidbar Rabba 20:24) asks, "Why were they crying? Because they faltered, they became weak.

"To what is it comparable? To a princess who was prepared to be led to the canopy [to get married] and she was found to have been unfaithful, at which point her father and relatives will falter [out of humiliation].

"So, too, after forty years, Israel camped at the edge of the Jordan River, poised to enter the land of Israel... and they turned to promiscuity. [Therefore,] Moshe and the other righteous people became weak. But Moshe had [previously] stood up against all 600,000, and here he went weak?"

The Midrash's response does not fully answer the question. The Midrash explains that this weakness was "in order to allow Pinchas to rise to the occasion and take what he deserved." This explains Pinchas's behavior, but it still does not explain Moshe's behavior.

The Midrash ends off on a very harsh note:

"Since he was nit'atzel, lazy (we will return to this word), [he was punished by the fact that] 'No man knows the place of his burial' (Devarim 34:6)... This shows that G-d is strict with the righteous even to a hair's breadth."

We normally understand the fact that Moshe's burial place is not known as coming to prevent worship of such a place. But the Midrash here takes it instead as a punishment. As a punishment for what action? The Midrash uses a harsh word, that we must not, Heaven forefend, take literally. The word the Midrash uses is "nit'atzel," which literally would mean that he was lazy.

This does not mean lazy in the sense that you and I are lazy. It means that he did not take the initiative in this case, that he was unable to gird his loins, to rise to the occasion, as he should have done. To a certain degree, this very high standard of conduct is expected specifically of Moshe Rabbeinu, as G-d is strict with the righteous even to a hair's breadth.

The Gemara (Bava Kama 50a) cites two sources for this concept of the exacting standard applied to the righteous. Rabbi Acha cites the verse (Tehillim 50:3), "And his surroundings are very tumultuous" [the word for tumultuous, nis'ara, puns with

the word for hair], as teaching this principle. Rabbi Nechunya learns it from the verse, "G-d is greatly feared in the assembly of the holy ones, and held in reverence by all those who are around Him" (Tehillim 89:8). This is also one interpretation of the verse in the Torah, "I shall be sanctified by those near to Me" (Vayikra 10:3, as per Rashi s.v. hu).

Based on this principle, one can also understand the punishment Moshe and Aharon received for their misdeed at Mei Meriva (Bemidbar 20:2-13), especially in light of the verse in Parashat Ha'azinu. The latter source comes at the end of his Moshe's life, when he is explaining why he and Aharon were unable to enter the land of Israel:

"Because you trespassed against Me among the people of Israel at the waters of Meriva-Kadesh, in the wilderness of Tzin; because you sanctified Me not in the midst of the people of Israel." (Devarim 32:51)

Moshe does not say that he is being punished for some particular negative action, but rather for the fact that he failed to sanctify G-d's name at Mei Meriva. Moshe and Aharon had an opportunity for sanctification of G-d's name (kiddush ha-Shem), and they did not maximize it. They created a kiddush ha-Shem of a smaller scale, which, by the standard applied to them, is considered a lack of kiddush ha-Shem. The same is true here: Moshe is punished for not stepping up in difficult circumstances to solve the problem.

However, we will see in a line that we skipped earlier in the Midrash, that this is not entirely the case. The Midrash, after explaining that Moshe was punished for not stepping up, continues as follows:

"This teaches you that a person needs to be bold as a leopard, swift as an eagle, fleet as a hart and strong as a lion to do the will of His Creator."

Of course, G-d judges each person in accordance with his or her abilities and capabilities; but each person, on their part, needs to try to maximize his or her potential. The Midrash's description is based on the Mishna (Avot 5:20) where Rabbi Yehuda ben Tema says that a person needs to show these same character traits "to do the will of your Father in Heaven." This Midrash adds that not only is one supposed to act this way, but that failing to do so is considered to be a wrongdoing.

One might think that not taking advantage of religious opportunities is only a failure in the realm of "Do good" (Tehillim 34:15), that one has not advanced himself, has not acted out of righteousness, but one has not done anything wrong. We see from here that such an approach is also a deficiency with regard to "Turn away from evil" (ibid.), and that one who fails to act is, in fact, considered to be acting wrongly.

One could cite many examples for this relating to the study of Torah, but instead I will cite a few cases relating to the interpersonal realm. One is the Gemara in Berachot 12b, which teaches that one who could ask for mercy on behalf of his fellow, but fails to do so, is

considered a sinner. The Gemara does not say that he has not helped his friend, or that he has failed to take advantage of an opportunity; rather, it calls him a sinner.

The Gemara in Yevamot 63b has very harsh words for one who does not engage in procreation. R. Eliezer says, "Anyone who [intentionally] does not involve himself in procreation is considered as if he has spilt blood." This is a comparison not only to a wrongdoing, but to a very specific and severe one.

We need to strive in our service of G-d to maximize those opportunities that are presented to us, and not to be lazy and let them pass us by. We need to strive for the best in all areas of the service of G-d, whether in the study of Torah, in prayer or in our interpersonal relations. And we must recognize that failing to do so is not merely a lack of righteousness, but rather is a shortcoming in our service of G-d, one that we need to correct. That which is possible for us to fulfill is binding upon us. [*This sicha was delivered at se'uda shelishit, Parashat Balak, 5762 (2002).*]

MACHON ZOMET

Shabbat B'Shabbato

by Rabbi Amnon Bazak

Three times Balak asks Bilam to curse Yisrael, and each time he is disappointed. However, Bilam's first three declarations are not simple repetitions but rather are aimed at three different segments of the population. And this explains the differences among Bilam's statements.

Bilam's first speech in essence centers on himself (Bamidbar 23:7-10). It describes Bilam and his actions—"I have been brought... How can I curse... How can I be angry... I will see them... My soul... After I die..." The main message is Bilam's wonder about the very idea of cursing Bnei Yisrael. "How can I curse, if G-d has not cursed, how can I be angry, if G-d is not angry?" [23:8]. At this point, Bilam does not explicitly intend to bless Yisrael—in fact, his two references to Yisrael are connected to Bilam himself. First, he describes the nation: "I see it from the tops of the mountains, and I look at it from the hills. They are a nation which dwells alone and does not pay attention to other nations. Who can count the dust of Yaacov or the multitudes of Yisrael?" [23:9-10]. The purpose of this description is to increase the amazement at how he could even consider cursing Yisrael, a great nation that dwells alone (see Rashbam). The blessing at the end of this first speech is also centered on Bilam and on his desire to come to the same end as Yisrael does. "Let me die a death of the righteous, and let what is left after me be like him" [23:10].

The next declaration is centered on Balak (23:18-24). "Rise, Balak, and listen, hear to me, son of Tzipor" [23:18]. It includes a reprimand of Balak for not understanding that the will of G-d cannot be changed.

"G-d is not a man who will be untrue or a human being who will change his mind" [23:19]. He again explains why it is impossible to curse Yisrael, this time telling Balak. "There is no sorcery in Yaacov and no magic in Yisrael" [23:23]. He ends with a veiled threat. "This is a nation that will rise as a lion cub and will lift itself up as a lion. It will not lie down until it eats prey and drinks the blood of its victims." [23:24].

Before his third speech (24:3-9), Bilam changes his tactics. "Bilam saw that it was good in G-d's eyes to bless Yisrael, so he did not try as he had before with sorcery. And he turned towards the desert." [24:1]. Then he turned to Yisrael. "How good are your tents, Yaacov, your dwelling places, Yisrael" [24:5]. He gives them a direct blessing. "Water will drip from its pail and it will plant in an abundance of water, and it will rise over the king of Agag and take over his kingdom" [24:6-7]. He once again brings up a comparison to a young and an elderly lion, this time not as a threat to the other nations, a lion ready for battle, but rather as a blessing for Yisrael, resting securely after the end of a battle. "It has kneeled like a lion, who can make a lion cub rise?" [24:9]. "Yisrael will conquer the land of Caanan, and then the land will be peaceful" [Ibn Ezra].

Only now, after Balak hears an explicit blessing of Yisrael, does he come to the correct conclusion. "And Balak became angry with Bilam, and he clapped his hands. And Balak said to Bilam, I called on you to curse my enemies, but behold you have blessed them three times. Now flee to your place." [24:10-11].

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

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. © 2005 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

Maimonides insists that several incidents in the Torah which seem out of the ordinary, are in fact allegorical-they really didn't occur. Among these incidents are: the episode when the three angels visit Avraham (Abraham), (Genesis 18) the wrestling between Yaacov (Jacob) and the mysterious man, (Genesis 32) as well as the talking of Bilaam's donkey in this week's portion. (Numbers 22) All of these episodes were visions seen by Avraham, Yaacov and Bilaam.

Nachmanides disagrees. He maintains that each of these events actually did take place. In a strong critique of Maimonides, Nachmanides wonders-if the wrestling of Yaacov (Jacob) and the mysterious man was allegorical, why then did Yaacov leave the fray physically injured and limping? (Nachmanides, Genesis 18:1)

Interestingly, Abarbanel of the fifteenth century argued that in effect, Yaacov's limping was psychosomatic. So engrossed was he in the vision of the fight, that it affected his psyche. He, therefore, exited, injured in the thigh.

Even if one maintains that these events were allegorical, there are deep messages that they intend to teach. In Avraham's case, the incident with the angels teaches the importance of visiting the sick and welcoming strangers. In Yaacov's case, the importance of standing strong despite one's adversaries is learned. But what is the message of Bilaam's talking donkey?

Bilaam was a profoundly gifted man, having been endowed with a great ability to speak. Commenting on the words, "there has arisen no prophet in Israel like Moshe" (Moses-Deuteronomy 34:10) the Sifrei states "but in the gentile world, there has arisen. And who? Bilaam."

Tragically, Bilaam corrupted that ability. In the words of Professor Urbach as quoted by Nechama Leibowitz "Bilaam represents the type of man who has been given the opportunity to scale the loftiest spiritual heights, but fails to stand the test and forfeits his status."

This may be the meaning of the talking donkey story. As Bilaam was traveling to curse the Jews, his donkey reminds him that his [Bilaam's] power of elevated speech, was a gift from G-d. If abused,

Bilaam's speech turns into nothing more than the words of an ass-a donkey-an aton.

The Targum understands G-d's breathing a breath of life into Adam as being the breath of the power of speech. Rabbi Yehuda Halevi, the medieval poet and philosopher describes the human being as superior to the lower animals because of the power of speech (medader). The allegory of Bilaam's talking donkey reminds us that speech can lift the human being above the animals. But if abused, it can become nothing more noteworthy than the speech of the aton-the words of an ordinary donkey. © 2005 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The rabbis of the Talmud compared Bilaam to Moshe. On the surface at least this is a very strange comparison. Bilaam was certainly a master of prose and poetry, as was Moshe. But I do not believe that the rabbis were judging literary abilities in making that statement. Rather I believe they were talking about the potential to teach and influence masses of people, as well as generations yet unborn. Moshe uses that gift granted to him by G-d to transmit the values of Torah and morality to the Jewish people and through them unto the world. Bilaam uses his gift for unprincipled personal gain and the destruction of others. Bilaam in effect becomes a professional hired gun, willing to curse and destroy innocents because of his own personal wants, hatreds and agenda. Because of this startlingly different treatment of their seemingly similar gift of teaching masses and influencing others, we find Moshe raising himself to becoming the most humble of all human beings, while Bilaam on the other hand, sinks into the morass of self-congratulatory hubris and arrogance. Moshe says; "Compared to the holiness of my mission and message, I am personally insignificant in the scheme of G-d's world." Bilaam says: "Because of my message of negativity that I can control and inflict on anyone, I am the most important person in the world!" Moshe is a savior of mankind. Bilaam is a tyrant and murderer of humans.

The rabbis of the Talmud, in discussing the phenomenon of almost permanent anti-Semitism, stated; " He who attempts to harm Jews/Israel becomes a rosh - a head or a leader." The simple explanation of this cryptic statement is that being anti-Jewish is a shortcut to rising to leadership in the non-Jewish world. This does not mean that every world leader or national ruler is anti-Semitic. It does however point out the reality that from Haman to Sadaam Hussein, being against the Jews automatically gains one an audience and a platform if not, eventually, actual power. There are plenty of people around today in the world who prove the accuracy of this assessment of the rabbis. However, I would venture to offer an additional insight into this

statement of the Talmud. Hatred of Jews (and I believe that unreasoning hatred of anyone) automatically makes one a rosh - a person with a swelled head and a view of one's self that is filled with hubris and arrogance. Bilaam is the paradigm model for this disease of the soul and personality. Bilaam is so confident of his greatness that he convinces himself that he can fool G-d, so to speak, into allowing him to curse Israel. The man of arrogance, by misusing the divine gifts granted to him, becomes a malevolent and evil person. Using one's gifts for persuasion and not demagoguery, for blessings and not curses, for enhancing G-d's standing, so to speak, in the world and not debasing it, means following in the steps of Moshe. Doing otherwise, dooms one to becoming a follower and disciple of Bilaam. © 2005 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.

RABBI NOSSON CHAYIM LEFF

Sfas Emes

Bil'am is recorded as saying (23: 9) "Hein ahm levadad yishkon". (ArtScroll: "Behold! It is a nation that will dwell in solitude"). Solitude-i.e., living our lives apart from the rest of the world-has been a key feature of our experience for some 3000 years. What will the Sfas Emes say about this prophecy and its realization in Jewish history? Read on.

The Sfas Emes begins his discourse with a quote from Rashi on that pasuk. Rashi tells us what the Torah has in mind when it speaks of our "dwelling in solitude". Rashi explains that our "solitude" is evident most clearly in the context of joy. When we are joyous ("semeichim") -- e.g., at a siyum or a chasseneh, or on a YomTov-other nations take no part in that joy. So we are in solitude on that score. And when the other nations have an occasion for joy, we do take part. Surprisingly, that participation leads to further isolation. Why? Perhaps because they resent our "double dipping"-i.e., our staying home from work on public holidays AND on the "Jewish Holidays".

The Sfas Emes proceeds to discuss the reasons for our isolation. He tells us that what HaShem wants from us is bitul (subordination) to Him. Such subordination is the *raison d'etre*-the reason for the existence- of the Jewish people. Reaching such a condition of subordination would enable us to attain a state of *menucha* (repose; contemplation) That attitude is best expressed on Shabbos. By abstaining from all work on Shabbos, we demonstrate that all our activities-labor, *parnasa* (seeking a livelihood), maintaining our health-are unimportant in themselves. They have value and meaning only for enabling us to reach the state of *menucha vis-a-vis* HaShem. So singleminded a focus is alien to other nations. Hence, we "dwell in solitude".

Note, in passing, that the Sfas Emes has just given us a new theory of Shabbos observance. He has told us that Shabbos is a time for showing that life's activities lack inherent significance, What is of value is subordinating ourselves to HaShem, in what amounts to a life of contemplation.

You may find some of the thoughts presented in the preceding two paragraphs highly uncharacteristic for the Sfas Emes. In particular, his deprecation here of life's everyday activities jars with the positive views on this subject that we have heard the Sfas Emes utter many times. How can we deal with this problem-the Sfas Emes's apparent inconsistency on a key issue in life?

As in many other contexts, the most efficacious way to handle such a problem is to continue learning Torah. Sure enough, if we keep on learning, we find that in the very next year (5644), the Sfas Emes returned to the pasuk "Hein ahm levadad yishkon". That year, too, he cites the same Rashi on the pasuk; but now he heads in a wholly new direction. This time, there is no mention of bitul (subordination) The Sfas Emes says: "Ve'nishtalchu [Bnai Yisroel] la'olam rak le'sakein hakohl". That is, the special mission of Bnai Yisroel is to effect a "tikun" (a repair; a correction) of the whole world.

This statement may seem to complicate the puzzle even more. For, one can ask: which is our prime duty, subordination to HaShem or bringing about a tikun? I suggest the answer is: both! For, in practice, bitul to HaShem may be necessary for effecting a tikun. This connection may seem artificial or forced. But note: we find such a linkage in a classical text, a prayer which is said with awe on Rosh Hashana and with speed the rest of the year. I refer to our tefila "Ahleinu". There, too, we find subordination to HaShem ("Ve'anachnu kor'im, u'mishtachavim, u'modim lifnei Melech Malchai Hamelachim... ") coming together with making a tikun ("Le'sakein olam... ").

This may have been rough going, so we conclude with an easier text. Toward the end of his ma'amar of 5643, the Sfas Emes works with the pasuk with which we started. That pasuk begins: "Hein ahm...". These words call up in the Sfas Emes's mind (and thence, to our minds) another pasuk (23: 24): "Hein ahm kelavi yakum". (Art Scroll: "Behold! the people will arise like a lion cub... ").

Chazal apply this text as a metaphor for how are supposed to get up in the morning-full of vim and vigor to serve HaShem. Further, the Sfas Emes quotes a Medrash which tells us that in Greek, the word "hein" means one. The Sfas Emes brings these two thoughts together; and points out an implication. We can view each day as a separate unit, in each of which we rise to serve HaShem with hischadshus (as new people). And just as we accept HaShem's Kingship anew each day, so too is His love for Klal Yisroel renewed each day. Thus, the text of the beracha is: "Ha'bocher be'amo

Yisroel be'ahava." That is: "He chooses His people-Yisroel-lovingly each day". Note the verb "Ha'bocher"- "chooses"- is in the present tense; i.e., He does so every day. May we merit being chosen by HaShem as His people every day. © 2005 Rabbi N.C. Leff & torah.org

DR. AVIGDOR BONCHEK

What's Bothering Rashi

Perceiving apparent inconsistencies in Rashi leads to a deeper understanding. "And G-d came to Bilam and He said 'Who are these men with you?'" (Numbers 22:9)

"Who are these men with you?"-RASHI: "He (G-d) gave him the opportunity for error. He (Bilam) said: At times not everything is revealed to Him, He is not omniscient. So I shall anticipate a time when I can curse without His understanding."

The fact that G-d needed to ask Bilam who these men were, indicated to Bilam that G-d may not know everything. This encouraged Bilam to go ahead with his plan to curse Israel, because he had a basis to assume that he could successfully slip by G-d's watchful eye.

This comment, itself, does not present difficulties. However when we compare this comment with two Rashi comments in Bereishis we can see a difficulty.

In Genesis 3:9 when G-d asked Adam, as he hid in the Garden of Eden, "ayeka" "Where are you?" Rashi comments: "Where are you?"-Rashi: "He (G-d) knew where he was; rather, He wanted to engage him (Adam) in conversation so that he would not be too bewildered to repent."

And again in Genesis 4:9 when, after Cain murdered his brother, G-d asked him: "Where is Abel, your brother?" Rashi comments: "Where is Abel your brother"-Rashi: "For the purpose of engaging him in calm conversation so that he may repent and say 'I killed him and have sinned to You.'"

Comparing these comments with the Rashi-comment on our verse we see that here Rashi gave a different, even sinister, reason for G-d's question to Bilam. He says G-d's question was intended to cause him to err while in Bereishis he gives more benign reasons to explain G-d's apparent lack of knowledge. Can you explain these different explanations so there won't be a contradiction?

A Possible Answer: In the examples cited about Adam and Cain, Rashi explains that G-d did not want to surprise the person with whom He was communicating. (A voice from G-d can be shocking and quite unsettling.) G-d, therefore, thoughtfully posed an innocuous and unnecessary question (unnecessary, since He already knew the answer). In the cases of Adam and Cain, where they had already transgressed the Divine word, this was G-d's way of not shocking them so that they would not be defensive and thus be

psychologically free to admit their guilt. In our case, however, Bilam had not yet done anything wrong. He was just considering what he would do. (See Gur Aryeh.)

We can nevertheless ask, why would G-d feign ignorance and thereby allow Bilam to err? We would answer that in this way G-d would be balancing the scales in Bilam's mind. Up to this point G-d had actively interfered with Bilam's plans by asking him not to curse the people. Nothing could be clearer. Bilam confronted with such divine intervention didn't have much freedom of choice. So, perhaps, in order to balance his freedom, G-d introduced this opportunity to err. We find a similar idea in the case of G-d's hardening of Pharaoh's heart, after he had witnessed the plagues. Hardening his heart would seem to take away Pharaoh's free will. To answer this question, Rambam explains that this was done in order to balance Pharaoh's choice. He had witnessed such startling miracles that he was left with no free choice. Thus his hardened heart was meant to offset the personally overwhelming experience of witnessing the Ten Plagues. Likewise here, Bilam's free choice was assaulted by seeing the angel of G-d standing in front of him, thus G-d's feigned ignorance was intended to offset this and make his choice more balanced.

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THE SALANT FOUNDATION

Parsha Insights

by Rabbi Zvi Miller

The Mishneh (Avos 5:22) teaches that Balaam's character was defined by three corrupt traits: an evil eye, an arrogant spirit, and a greedy soul. Regardless of these gross flaws Balaam falsely perceived himself to be on a straight course. For instance, touting his own self-righteousness, he said (Bamidbar 22: 18), "If Balak will give me his house full of silver and gold, I cannot transgress the word of HaShem." If, despite his deficiencies, he so endeavored to fulfill the Divine Will, what inner fault provoked him to ultimately violate HaShem's explicit command not to curse Klal Yisrael?

The Midrash recounts the following conversation that Balaam had with Balak, "We are both ingrates because we attempt to harm Klal Yisrael. Indeed, I would not exist if not for Avraham. For I am descended from Lot-who was spared on the merit of Avraham when Sodom was destroyed. Likewise you [i.e., Balak] would not exist if not for Yaacov. For you descended from Lavan- and Lavan only was blessed with sons on the merit of Yaacov."

Hence, Balaam was caught in a moral dilemma. On one hand, he realized that it is appropriate for him to appreciate Klal Yisrael and therefore, not show them any ill will. On the other hand, he feared that Klal Yisrael was a threat to his country. Nevertheless, a sense of appreciation is so primary and indispensable to Avodas

HaShem that it outweighs all other considerations. In light of this, Balaam's debt of appreciation should have taken precedence over his plan to destroy Klal Yisrael. In conclusion, Balaam himself realized that his ingratitude was immoral, but lacked the moral strength to stand up for the truth of his convictions.

More than anything else, spirituality rests on the appreciation of what Hashem and others have done for us. A sense of gratitude is fostered through consistent reflection and must remain immutable. Essentially, it is the very awareness of the good that has been bestowed upon us-that frees our soul to grow and desire to joyfully serve Hashem.

Implement: Deepen your appreciation for someone who has helped you. [Based on the Ohr HaZafon of the Alter from Slobadka]

RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER

Weekly Dvar

Parshat Balak tells of the interesting story of Balak wanting to defeat the Jewish nation, and he tries to do this by getting Bilam to curse them. What's even more interesting is the unique powers of Bilam. The Midrash explains that for one moment a day G-d becomes angry, and would curse anyone he's instigated to curse at that time. Bilam's talent was that he knew when that moment was, and that's how he was able to accomplish what he wanted. The other fact we have to know is that Bilam was the "counter-Moshe". That is, G-d gave the non-Jews Bilam so that no one could complain about the Jews having Moshe on THEIR side. Isn't it odd that Bilam had to wait for that one second per day? If he was to have similar abilities to Moshe's, shouldn't he be able to use them all the time, just like Moshe? Also... the story ends where Bilam tries to curse the Jews unsuccessfully, and ends up being forced to bless them. How is this a parallel to Moshe? AND the Rabbis many years later almost included his blessing in our everyday prayers! What a strange twist! Or is it?

It could be that Bilam's power was that he could focus on the negative, and exploit it. If so, then the Torah is telling us that there's only one way to reach greatness, and that's by focusing. For Moshe it was focusing on the positive, and for Bilam it was focusing on the negative. Both are extremely powerful. The point is that a negative side does exist within us, that it can be equal to all of the positive within us, and that we need to minimize it as much as possible. It's our choice to either focus on it - thus magnifying it, or to use it constructively. That negative-turning-positive is why Bilam's blessing of the Jews was so powerful, because it used all the negative power that existed and turned them into positive. Keeping this lesson in mind during "negative times" in our lives will help us use those minor setbacks, and turn them into major steps forward.

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