

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

In examining this week's parsha one is struck by the inexplicability of all of the subject matter in the parsha. From the most famous chok - a rule without rational explanation to it - that of the red heifer, the parah adumah, which serves as the beginning of the parsha, to the shortcomings of Moshe in smiting the rock to bring forth water and his punishment of not being able to enter the Land of Israel, one is troubled by the mystery of it all. Why? If the Torah is meant to be studied and intellectually analyzed by the Jewish people, if it is somehow within the reach of humans to understand the Torah's laws and values, then why this onslaught of laws and events that defy any human logic?

It is obvious that the Torah is teaching us a very basic lesson. Not everything in life is logical, understandable, rational or given to any sort of human understanding. The Torah intends to teach us that its system of values and behavior is oftentimes beyond human comprehension. The ability to accept this difficult and oftentimes humbling assessment is a test of faith and belief. And the Torah and Judaism generally rest upon this basic foundation, if necessary even a form of blind faith and belief. Understanding and studying Torah is a mitzvah - an obligation upon all Jews. However, following and believing Torah even when we do not understand and know its rationale is no less of a mitzvah.

The truth is that life itself in all of its manifestations is beyond our rational abilities to understand or predict. We are regularly blindsided by events that are unexpected and sometimes devastating. There is a capricious nature to life and its events that forecloses any rational explanations or logical theories. The very nature of life itself is purely a chok - a type of commandment and/or occurrence that leaves us baffled and without answers or explanations. On a small personal scale these events may be viewed as fortuitous or tragic but they are all unexpected and

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לעילוי נשמת

דוב מתתיהו בן צבי הירש ז"ל

May the Torah learning in **Dov's** memory
bring comfort to his family.

irrational. On a larger scale events such as the Holocaust are prime historical examples of a chok in its ultimate form.

We do not understand the severity of Moshe's punishment as recorded in this week's parsha. We also do not understand the reasons that led to six million innocent Jews being destroyed. When such things occur, both on a personal and national level, we are left bereft and perplexed. The Torah records that Aharon's response to the death of his two sons in the Mishkan was silence. Silence translates itself into the realization that G-d's ways are beyond human comprehension.

We can only accept but never will we understand them. And that is why the prophet stated that the basic tenet of Judaism is "The righteous live by faith alone." Chukat is the parsha of faith alone. This is why this parsha is so important for us to appreciate and absorb. Faith is somehow the only effective weapon against the mysteries of life that befall us. © 2006 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 AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

In this week's portion Moses is told that he would not enter Israel because he hit the rock instead of speaking to it. Immediately afterwards, Moses sends a delegation to Edom asking that the Jewish people be allowed to go through his territory on their way to Israel. (Numbers 20:14)

Commenting on this juxtaposition the Midrash states: In the usual way, when a man is slighted by his business partner he wishes to have nothing to do with him; whereas Moses though he was punished on account of Israel did not rid himself of their burden, but sent messengers. (Bamidbar Rabbah 19:7)

Nehama Leibowitz reinforces this idea by noting that the text states that Moses sent the delegation to Edom from Kadesh. This fact is unnecessary. In the words of Leibowitz: Wherever no change of locale is recorded in the text it is presumed that the event described took place at the last mentioned place. Obviously, Nehama concludes, Kadesh is mentioned again to emphasize Moses' adherence to his mission of bringing the people to the

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land even after his rebuff in spite of the fact that he had been explicitly excluded from it.

An important lesson may be learned here. Leaders must be careful to subdue their ego. The cause is larger than the personal concerns of any one person. Although Moses is condemned to die in the desert he continues to help the Jews enter Israel by sending messengers to Edom.

Compare this to the haftorah, the prophetic portion read this week. Yiftah promises G-d that if he is victorious in war whatever he sees first upon his return will be offered to G-d. Alas, he returns victorious and sees his daughter.

Here the Midrash notes that Yiftah could have gone to Pinchas the High Priest to annul the vow. But Yiftah said, Should I, the head of tribes of Israel stoop to go to that civilian? Pinchas also did not go out of his way to go to Yiftah, proclaiming, Should I a High Priest lower myself and go to that boor. (Tanchuma)

Unlike Moses who was without ego, Yiftah and Pinchas were filled with it and it cost the life of that child.

A story is told of a Hasidic rabbi who carried two notes in his pocket. One stated the world was created for me. The second declared I am like the dust of the earth. The first statement does not resonate unless balanced by the latter. Indeed if ego is not kept tightly in check it can overwhelm or subtly subvert the endeavor to which one is dedicated. © 2006 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale.

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

One of the great mysteries of history and sociology is the persistence of the nation of Israel despite persecution, pogrom, and close to 2,000 years of exile. I was even invited to lecture at the other end of the world- before the universities of Beijing and Kaifeng, China-on the mysterious and miraculous survival of Israel, and the universities provided me with the topic! Even Balaam, the Gentile Biblical Prophet of the nations of the world recognized this unique character of Israel-and attempted to define its source.

"How can I curse the nation which is not cursed by G-d, and how can I express anger against the nation not angered at by G-d? It is because I see them from the head of the mountains and I look upon them from the valleys" (Numbers 23:8, 9)

Our classical commentary Rashi interprets Balaam's incite: "(In order to understand the mystery of Jewish existence) I must look upon Israel's heads (beginnings, forefathers) and the origin of their roots. I see them established and strengthened like these mountains and valleys by their Patriarch's and Matriarch's" (Rashi, ad loc). And it is precisely because our nation continues to derive its nourishment from the ideals and teachings of its Biblical forebears that Israel has a unique message, quality and power, so that "Behold it is a nation that can dwell alone, without taking account of or being accounted as worthy by the Gentile nations." (ibid 23:9) In other words, we have an independent, self-starting and self-continuing ideology which enables us to go strong despite world anti-semitism. (Perhaps apocryphal) Incident is recorded that in the first year of the Jewish State President De Gaulle of France came to Israel as the guest of Prime Minister David Ben Gurion. The "lion of Judea" remembering the tree lined Champs Elyses of Paris, hurriedly instructed the police force to chop down trees from the Galilee and to set the trees up along Dizengoff Street where the Prime Minister of Israel would ride together with the President of France in special cavalcade. Unfortunately although the streets were aligned with cheering Israelis the high winds caused tree after tree to fall to the ground, causing not a little cynicism and a good deal of laughter. An amused De Gaulle turned to his host and said, "Apparently your trees are not yet rooted in your soil" responded Ben Gurion, "that may be so but our nation has been rooted in our soil for the past 4,000 years." And the fact that Ben Gurion regularly hosted a Bible class in the Prime Minister's office and a Talmud class in his own home only confirmed the truth of his comment...

This significant idea-indeed the very secret of our national eternity- is magnificently expressed in a mishnah in the second chapter of the Ethics of the Fathers. The Mishnah records that Rabban Yohanan ben Zakai sent out his five best disciples to discover the single most important character trait. R. Eliezer said a good eye, R. Yehoshua said a good friend, R. Yose said a good neighbor, R. Elazar said a good heart and R. Shimon said one who sees what will be born. (Hebrew nolad) He then sent the same five out to discover the worst character trait from which individuals must distance themselves. Each gave the opposite of what he had said before (with R. Eliezer saying an evil eye and R. Yehoshua saying an evil friend etc.) and R. Shimon saying, one who borrows and does not pay back.

Clearly, R. Shimon does not seem to be in sync with his colleagues. How come in the second instance he does not say that the worst characteristic is one who does not see what will be born, one who does not recognize in advance the results of his actions?

Allow me to give an alternate explanation of the Hebrew phrase "Ro'eh et hanolad" (as first suggested to me by Rabbi Shalom Gold). Perhaps it does not mean "one who sees what will be born" but rather "one who sees from whom he is born", one who realizes that he did not emerge from a vacuum but rather from glorious ancestors who gave gifts of universal morality and optimistic faith in the ultimate perfection of society as their legacy for the future. We believe that it is precisely our Jewish adherence to the ideals of our past which has enabled us to continue to live in a way in which we can still envision an even more significant future. And if G-d forbid we forget our moorings, if we forsake the very roots of our existence and the teachings of our classical texts, then we shall have cut ourselves off from the very soil which nourished us until now and enabled us to live until this point in history. If we become guilty of national Alzheimer's, we will truly be like those who have borrowed from others and not paid them back; in such a case, we shall have been responsible for the end of Jewish history and the cessation of Jewish eternity.

It is to be hoped that this is not the case, and that we understand that the Tomb of our Matriarchs and Patriarchs in Hebron, Mother Rachel's gravesite and the burial place of Joseph are much more than pieces of real estate which can be overlooked and traded away. It is no accident that the Hebrew word for grave is also used in rabbinic literature to mean womb: continued Jewish future will only be possible if it is rooted in Jewish past. © 2006 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI ZVI SOBOLOFSKY

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At face value, Bilam appears to follow precisely the word of Hashem. When he is instructed not to curse the Jewish people he complies. It is only after Hashem grants him permission to accompany the servants of Balak does he embark on his mission. Despite the granting of permission, Hashem is immediately angry with Bilam for going. If Bilam is following the directions he received, why is Hashem angry? Why should someone who listens to Hashem be recorded in history as Bilam harasha?

Rav Elchanan Wasserman in his Kuntres Divrei Sofrim develops an approach to understand the source of the cheit of Bilam. The fundamental obligation of each human being is to do the will of Hashem. This will is revealed to us in two different ways. Sometimes Hashem tells us explicitly what He expects of us. Other times He lets us try to determine on our own what He

wants of us. The demands of the explicit revelation are straightforward. Whatever is told to us though a navi is the expressed will of Hashem. The second class of imperatives, however, is not as clear. We must determine based upon our understanding of the explicit commands of Hashem what He wants us to do when He doesn't expressly reveal His will. Obviously one who has a better understanding of the explicit will of Hashem will be able to apply that knowledge towards a clearer understanding of how to act in the absence of a stated message.

Bilam as a prophet had previously been given the word of Hashem explicitly. He knew about Hashem, as his self-description testifies, "yodea da'as elyon- one who knows the wisdom of the Almighty." He undoubtedly knew of the special relationship Hashem has with His people. The entire world was aware of the events of yetzias Mitzrayim. How much more so did a prophet of Hashem understand that He showered the Jewish people with His love. He knew that Hashem did not approve of his going with the servants of Balak. When Hashem "granted him permission" it clearly was not a change in His will. Bilam was merely being told that he will no longer receive an explicit command to not go. The obligation of following the unspoken will of Hashem required of Bilam to refuse to continue. Yet, Bilam justified his actions to proceed because he wasn't told explicitly to the contrary. Bilam is the model of listening to the explicit word of Hashem while simultaneously missing the complete message. As one who should have personified "yodea da'as elyon" he incurred the wrath of Hashem for ignoring His unspoken wishes.

Bilam the prophet had no excuse for not reaching the proper conclusion regarding what Hashem truly wanted. But how do we, who are not neviim, determine what the message of Hashem is when that message is not explicit? The secret can be found in the words that describe Bilam-"yodea da'as elyon". Hashem has given each of us access to the highest prophecy ever attained-the Torah, which is the prophecy of Moshe Rabbeinu, the adon hanevi'im. The greater one's understanding of the Torah, the more he becomes a "yodea da'as elyon". One can only know how to read in between the lines if he knows intimately what appears on the lines.

Dinim d'rabbanan (laws of rabbinic origin) are the "in between the lines" of the Torah laws. Hashem gave us six hundred and thirteen biblical commandments. He also instructed us to safeguard these mitzvos and to follow the spirit of the law and even to sometimes institute mitzvos d'rabbanan when the occasion arises. This area of Halacha is much more difficult than the six hundred and thirteen mitzvos. After all, if Hashem doesn't tell us explicitly how to enact the proper safeguard around His mitzvos, how do we know we are fulfilling His will with the safeguards that we put

into place? Who are we to say what the spirit of any given mitzvah is all about? How can we be certain that we are responding appropriately to events such as those leading up to the celebration of Purim and Chanukah?

It is only those who have reached the thorough understanding of the explicit word of Hashem who can apprehend what His unspoken will is. Chazal and the chachamei haTorah in each generation are given the responsibility as the "yodei da'as elyon" to search and understand what is on the lines themselves to determine properly what is in between the lines. In contrast to Bilam who refused to submit himself to the unspoken will of Hashem, we are committed to fulfill the ratzon Hashem in its entirety, and look to the "yodei da'as elyon" with whom Hashem has blessed us to guide us in fulfilling His will. © 2006 Rabbi Z. Sobolofsky & TorahWeb Foundation

RABBI LEVI COOPER

Broadminded Activism

What did you do on your wedding day? Rushing around, last minute preparations, hairdresser, make-up. A quick moment for personal prayer, perhaps. Then to the hall for family photos, and the guests begin to arrive.

The Talmud describes the remarkable wedding day conduct of Rabbi Elazar (B. Berachot 16a). Two of the groom's junior colleagues - Rabbis Ami and Assi - were fastening the canopy for their friend's wedding. With preparations for the big night underway, the groom turned to his busy peers and said: "In the meantime, I will go and hear something in the study hall, and I will come back and relate it to you."

With that, Rabbi Elazar made his way to the beit midrash (study hall) where the head of the academy was teaching. When he reached the beit midrash, a reciter was standing before the famed Rabbi Yohanan, transmitting an earlier source verbatim, perhaps without fully understanding its meaning and import (Rashi, Sotah 22a).

The lesson was about mistakes during the Shema prayer, and four scenarios were discussed: First, if one erred by forgetting a word or sentence in Shema, but did not know precisely where the mistake occurred - the reader must return to the very beginning of Shema.

Second, if the reader knows in which of the Shema passages the mistake occurred - he need only return to the beginning of that passage.

Third, if the reader knew that he was in-between paragraphs, but could not recall whether it was in between the first and second or whether he had in fact completed the second paragraph and needed to begin the third - he must assume that the blunder was in the first break and hence continue from the second paragraph (Rashi, cf. Rambam).

The fourth case refers to the verse containing the commandment to write mezuzot to be placed on doorposts. This instruction appears with identical wording in the first and second paragraphs of Shema (Deuteronomy 6:9 and 11:20). If a reader, having intoned this verse, could not recall whether he was in the first or second paragraph - he should return to the verse's first occurrence and continue from there.

Hearing this account of the law, Rabbi Yohanan responded, qualifying the last scenario: The fourth case applies where the reader had not begun the verse that follows the mezuzah commandment in the second paragraph. Had the reader continued with this verse, we may assume that he continued in his habit of reciting Shema without getting muddled, and any uncertainties are dismissed. In this case, we assume the reader has completed the second paragraph and he is permitted to continue reading (Rashba, 13th century, Barcelona, cf. Rashi). Having heard this lecture, Rabbi Elazar returned to the wedding hall.

Rabbi Elazar's unique character is immediately apparent: On his own wedding day, amid the panic and excitement, Rabbi Elazar had the strength of conviction to put all aside and journey to the beit midrash. The material discussed in the beit midrash provides us with a stark comparison and perhaps a hidden critique: a reader who is unable to focus and errs while reciting Shema, while a sage applies his faculties of concentration on his very own wedding day, the eve of a time when a groom is released from his obligation to recite Shema (M. Berachot 2:5).

It is no wonder that commentators laud this behavior, seeing Rabbi Elazar's conduct as paradigmatic. Never again can a person proffer an excuse for not learning. Whether it be troublesome times or joyful occasions, there is no justification for losing even one moment of Torah study, for indeed each learning session holds some inestimable nuance (Rabbi Yehuda Aryeh da Modena, 16th-17th centuries, Venice).

Commenting on this passage, the first chief rabbi of the Land of Israel, Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak HaKohen Kook (1865-1935), highlights a second dimension of the groom's behavior. Indeed, Rabbi Elazar demonstrated the value of Torah even when otherwise occupied. Yet a greater lesson can be learned: The trip to the beit midrash did not reap key laws or wondrous tales. Rules about mishaps when reading Shema were recounted and clarified; not the most stimulating material. Rabbi Elazar, nevertheless, saw value in his sojourn, and returning to his two colleagues he excitedly recounted what he had learned. Thus, at this hectic moment, Rabbi Elazar was so rapt with what he had gleaned that he wished to share his experience with his friends.

Rabbi Kook adds a third dimension to this story. Turning from the groom, Rabbi Kook focuses on

Rabbis Ami and Assi, who were industriously erecting the wedding canopy when their colleague left. When Rabbi Elazar returned, he relayed what he had just learned during his short excursion to the beit midrash.

Rabbi Ami and Rabbi Assi exclaimed: "If we had only come to hear this matter, it would have sufficed us!" Despite the fact that these two sages were occupied with the grand mitzva of doing kindness for another, and its particular application in taking part in wedding preparations, they nonetheless responded with genuine excitement at the laws to which they were now party. It takes broadmindedness to be able to acknowledge and appreciate a valuable cause, even while you are diligently involved in a different worthy enterprise.

Rabbi Kook describes such a person as having an expansive heart that is filled with love of G-d and His Torah. Small-minded people cannot see beyond the cause they have adopted. Activists should be lauded for their committed work; alas, dedication and devotion to one worthwhile cause should not preclude recognition of other commendable endeavors. It is a sorry state when a person claims: 'I support this charity and therefore need not recognize other causes.'

Though one need not champion every valid venture, donning blinkers and waving the flag of a sole mission, oblivious and uncaring about any other issue, reflects an insular approach that may be more concerned with self-fulfillment than with the betterment of society. Though we may not undertake every project, we strive for broadmindedness as we validate multiple causes. © 2006 Rabbi L Cooper. Rabbi Levi Cooper is Director of Advanced Programs at Pardes. His column appears weekly in the Jerusalem Post "Upfront" Magazine. Each column analyses a passage from the first tractate, of the Talmud, Brachot, citing classic commentators and adding an innovative perspective to these timeless texts.

MACHON ZOMET

Shabbat B'Shabbato

by Rabbi Amnon Bazak

In Bilam's first two attempts to fulfill Balak's request, he asks Balak to prepare seven altars and then stand "beside your Olah sacrifice" [Bamidbar 23:3; 23:16]. What is the point of this demand?

It seems that the concept of standing (the Hebrew root "nun-tzadik-bet") is a key word in this week's Torah portion, especially in the way it appears both in the story of the donkey and in the actions of Barak and Bilam. In each case, the word appears four times. With respect to the donkey, it is written: "And an angel of G-d stood on the road to interfere with him... And the donkey saw the angel of G-d standing in the way, with his sword drawn in his hand... And G-d uncovered Bilam's eyes, and he saw the angel of G-d standing in the road, with his sword drawn in his hand... And Bilam said to the angel of G-d I have sinned, for I

did not know that you were standing opposite me" [22:22-34]. In the attempts to curse Yisrael, it is written:

"And Bilam said to Balak, stand here beside your Olah... And he returned to him, and behold he was standing near his Olah... And he said to Balak, Stand here beside your Olah... And he came to him, and behold he was standing beside his Olah, together with the ministers of Moav" [23:3-17].

The similar wording implies that Bilam understood that he was opposed by a significant force: an angel of G-d with a sword drawn in his hand. He tried to counter this force with an opposing one: the King of Moav offering sacrifices and standing nearby. To counter the stand of the angel, Balak stands near his sacrifice, and Bilam stands and wonders if his actions will succeed: "Perhaps G-d will happen to appear before me, and He will show me something" [23:3].

Both times Bilam attempted to use this tactic, he emphasized to Balak that he must stand next to the sacrifice, and that Bilam was acting only as a messenger to bring the word of G-d to Balak. In each case, it is written, "Return to Balak and say the following." [23:5; 23:16]. The fact that Balak stood near the sacrifice indeed gave him the privilege of receiving the word of G-d, although the reply was the opposite of what he wanted. Thus, in the end, the angel won the "battle" over the contents of G-d's message, and Balak's sacrifices did not succeed.

This is not the only time that we have been taught that a man who is not from Bnei Yisrael receives the word of G-d by offering sacrifices. After Noach left the Ark, he also built an altar dedicated to G-d and offered Olah sacrifices, which resulted in a revelation by G-d and in his being blessed (Bereishit 8:20). In addition, Iyov's friends sacrificed seven bulls and seven rams as an Olah in order to be able to hear G-d's words (Iyov 42:8). However, the case of Bilam was the only time that the one who made the request of G-d specifically wanted to harm Yisrael, and therefore his efforts failed.

By his third attempt, Bilam learned his lesson and, "he did not go as before to attempt the use of spells" [Bamidbar 24:1], but instead looked directly at Yisrael and blessed them. After the first two times Bilam therefore saw no reason to ask Balak to stand near any sacrifices.

YESHIVAT BEIT OROT

Orot Haparsha

From the teachings of Rav Dani Isaac, Rosh Hayeshiva

Am Yisrael nears the Jordan River and approaches Edom. Moshe sends messengers: "So says your brother Israel: You know all the trouble that has happened to us, that are fathers went down to Egypt, and we lived in Egypt for a long time, and the Egyptians dealt badly with us and with our fathers" (Bemidbar xx,

14-15). Moshe asks: "Let us please pass through your land. We shall not pass through field or vineyard, nor shall we drink well water. We shall go along the king's highway; we shall not swerve right or left until we have passed your border" (17). Yet the king or Edom refuses: "But Edom said to him: You shall not pass through, lest I come out to greet you with the sword" (18). Our parsha does not state the reason why Israel left him alone, rather than fight them as they did to Sichon and Og. In Devarim, however, Moshe explains: "Do not contend with them, for I will not give you of their land, not even so much as the sole of your foot to tread on, for I have given Mount Se'ir as an inheritance to Eisav" (Devarim ii, 5). Rashi (ibid) explains that Eisav inherited Mount Se'ir from Avraham Aveinu. Our first meeting with the gentile nations during the conquest of the land involved Edom. We proved through this encounter that we are not a conquering, imperialistic nation that covets the nations' lands. We honor the nations' rights to their inheritance; all our wars concern the conquest of the Land that Hashem promised us. This war is a moral and just one. We do not corrupt our souls through a war such as this; on the contrary, we fulfill the important mitzvah of conquering the Land. And the fulfillment of mitzvot of course raises and sanctifies life rather than corrupts it, G-d forbid (Many think that "conquest" corrupts. Yet when we understand the holiness of the Land, and the internal compatibility between the nation and its Land, and go off to war with this in mind, the soul suffers no damage or deterioration but rather expresses the Israelite life in its holiness).

Moshe describes to Edom all the troubles that Israel has undergone. Rashi explains: "You have no place to appeal against the inheritance of Eretz Yisrael, as you did not pay the debt." Edom could have claimed that the Land should be theirs as they descend from Avraham. If we do not know how to answer this claim both to ourselves and others, the morality of our fight for the Land will be impaired. Therefore Moshe emphasizes that only those who have undergone the sufferings of Egypt deserves to inherit Eretz Yisrael, as Chazal say: "Hakadosh Baruch Hu gave Israel three wonderful gifts, and all three were granted only through suffering: Torah, Eretz Yisrael, and the life of the World to Come" (Shemot Rabbah, 1:1). In order to merit Eretz Yisrael, the Divine Land, we must raise ourselves, elevate ourselves beyond the external, material outlook on life. Suffering purifies matter, and hence does not enslave man. Only in this manner can we see Eretz Yisrael as a Divine Land, rather than merely another chunk of real estate. Therefore Moshe emphasizes that Eisav is unworthy of receiving Eretz Yisrael despite his status as a descendant of Avraham. Only we are worthy of, and capable of inheriting the Land.

After this we encounter the war with Amalek: "And the Canaanite, the king of Arad, who lived in the South, heard that Israel had come by the way of Atarim,

and he fought against Israel, and took some of them captive" (Numbers, xxi, 1). Rashi explains: "He 'who lived in the south' is Amalek, as it states, 'Amalek lives in the land of the south.'" The Amalekim heard "that Aharon had died and that the Clouds of Glory had left" (Rashi), and believed that this presented an opportunity to take advantage of Israel's weakness. They believed that Israel's strength was entirely due to the external, visible presence of the Clouds of Glory. They did not believe in the internal Divinely-inspired qualities of the nation, whereas it is in actual fact these very qualities, despite their concealed nature, that serve as the basis of Israel's resilience and success. By the sin of the spies the people feared to enter Eretz Yisrael in case its giant and powerful inhabitants should defeat them. Now, with the disappearance of the Clouds of Glory, the people must fight for themselves. Will they withstand the test or would they fail once again through lack of faith and fear? Amalek was sure that it would be able to defeat Israel. Yet Israel understood that while they must fight with their own strength, they must at the same time attach themselves to Hakadosh Baruch Hu. "And Israel vowed a vow to Hashem, and said: If You will surely deliver this people into my hand, I will consecrate [cherem] their cities" (2). Am Yisrael vows that all their spoil will be sanctified to the Most High. "And Hashem listened to the voice of Israel, and He delivered the Canaanites [into their hands], and they consecrated them and their cities, and he [Israel] called the name of the place Chormah" (3). Hakadosh Baruch Hu helps and assists Israel's own efforts, and they are able to defeat Amalek. Israel fulfills its vow and consecrates their cities to the Most High.

By consecrating their spoil, Israel reveals an additional aspect of the morality of war. It does not involve greed. Israel's war is supposed to be a moral one, rather than a campaign of piracy and plunder. In other wars Israel indeed collects spoil, yet in the first war we must demonstrate to ourselves and to the world that this is not our purpose. Our purpose is to save Israel from the hand of an oppressor, or the conquest of Eretz Yisrael, the Land that Hakadosh Baruch Hu has given us as an internal inheritance.

We find similar conduct upon our entry into Eretz Yisrael through the leadership of Yehoshua. Yehoshua's first war involved the conquest of Jericho. Yehoshua commands: "And the city shall be consecrated, it and all that is in it, to Hashem" (Yehoshua vi, 17). Yehoshua wishes to emphasize that the war is in essence waged over the conquest of the Land, rather than for incidental reasons. When Achan sinned and took from the consecrated items we suffered a reversal in the war of Ai. We learn from this the high moral standard that we are demanded to live up to as a nation. Even if only a single Israelite sins, something is lacking in the complete appearance of the name of Hashem, and hence we lost the war of Ai.

At the conclusion of the parsha we encounter additional wars, those of Sichon and Og. Sichon gathers his people and comes out to meet Israel in war. "And Israel smote him by the sword, and inherited his land, from Arnon until Yabok, up to the children of Ammon, for the border of the children of Ammon was strong" (xxi, 24). Conversely, when they arrive along the path of Bashan, "and Og king of Bashan came out towards them, he and all his people, for war in Edrei," this time Moshe is afraid. Therefore Hakadosh Baruch Hu responds to him. "And Hashem said to Moshe: Do not fear him, for I have delivered into your hand, him and all his people and his land, to do to him as you did to Sichon king of Emori, who lives in Cheshbon" (34). Why does Moshe fear Og more than Sichon? Rashi explains: "'Do not fear him' אַל " as Moshe was scared to fight, for he [Og] might benefit from the merit of Avraham, as it says, 'And the one who remained came' אַל " this is Og who remained from the Refai'im." Og was the escaped person who informs Avraham of Lot's capture. Rashi in Beraishit adds: "Og's intention was that Avraham should be killed so he could take Sarah." This means that Og's intention was a malicious one, yet Moshe was nonetheless wary of Og's merits. Moshe Rabbeinu knows that war must be moral and just. We must not take over an inheritance that we do not deserve (=Edom), and we must not be greedy and plunder (=Amalek). Thus if Og possesses merits (even though his intentions were not honorable), something is missing in the justification for fighting him. Thus Hakadosh Baruch Hu informs him that Og possesses no more merits, and therefore, "do not fear him."

Our war over Eretz Yisrael is a war over the revelation of the name of Hashem in the world. It is a war that with our victory, and the nations' agreement and understanding that this is our land, will lead to the cessation of wars. Hence the greatest members of the nations led the conquest of the Land, starting with Moshe, followed by Yehoshua, and finally David.

Today we find ourselves in a battle over the conquest and settlement of the Land. The war is against our enemies from without, but we must also struggle with our own brothers. We must be moral in this war. But we must also understand the absolute nature of the connection between Israel and its Land, and then we will certainly merit to complete and strengthen our hold over all parts of Eretz Yisrael, and the light of Hashem will spread over the entire world, to all nations. © 2006 Yeshivat Beit Orot

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

“**M**y people, please remember what Balak the king of Moav advised, and what Bilam the son of Be'or answered him, from Shittim to Gilgal, in order that you should know the righteousness of G-d" (Michah 6:5). Parashas Balak deals with his

unsuccessful attempt to have Bilam curse us, which the above verse indicates should leave us with a feeling of gratitude towards G-d for thwarting it. It would seem, then, that had G-d not protected us and allowed Bilam to place a curse on us, it would have had a detrimental effect. But how could this wicked person's curse have affected us? Shouldn't what happens to us be dictated by our actions (and therefore what we deserve), and, by extension, the possible affects of not being attached to G-d? What would have changed from before the curse to after it that would have made any practical difference?

The commentaries explain the perception (of Balak and others) of Bilam's ability to "bless" and "curse" others (Bamidbar 22:6) to be based on his ability to figure out, through astrology and the like, what was going to happen anyway (regardless of any blessing or curse he would make). If he saw that someone was going to be successful, he would "bless" him, making it appear as if it was the result of his blessing. Similarly, if he saw that someone's "mazel" was on the downside, he would "curse" him, leaving the impression that the downfall was because of the curse. When Bilam "saw" that Balak would eventually become a king, he "blessed" him that he should become one, and "cursed" Moav when he "saw" that Sichon would conquer their territory. However, while this explains why Balak might have wanted Bilam to curse us, it doesn't explain why, if the curse wouldn't have changed anything anyway, G-d had to prevent him from doing so.

The Talmud (Berachos 7a) says that every day there is a moment of divine anger, and Bilam was able to figure out exactly what moment that was. Therefore, had he cursed us when G-d was already angry, it would have worked. Because G-d didn't have any of those moments of anger during the period of time that Bilam tried to curse us, the plot was foiled. Which leads to several questions.

For one thing, why does G-d get angry every day? If it's because of our sins, the timing of the anger should coincide with the sinning, and not be a separate "moment of anger." And it would be difficult to say that for the entire period of time that Bilam was trying to curse us nobody sinned, as this would mean that G-d not getting angry was only a function of there being no sin; it being a favor to us that He didn't get angry sounds like He otherwise would have. So why would G-d have a special "moment of anger" that is not tied to sin (or at least the timing of the sin)? Additionally, why is it specifically Bilam that can figure out exactly when this special "moment of anger" occurs?

"At first [G-d] considered creating the world with the attribute of strict justice ("midas ha-din"), [but] He saw that the world cannot exist [under those conditions], so he put the attribute of mercy ("midas ha-rachamim") first, and partnered it with the attribute of

strict justice" (Rashi on Beraishis 1:1). We couldn't survive if G-d measured our actions using strictly "midas ha-din," as the consequences of even the slightest slip-up would be too great. He therefore uses primarily "midas ha-rachamim," allowing us the time to become attached to Him, and, when we make a mistake, correct it. Nevertheless, there are times that "midas ha-din" is used. We are judged (on Rosh Hashanah) based on what we could (and should) have been (and could and should have done), and ask for mercy so that we are not held up to the level of our potential. Being in a dangerous situation can create a situation where we are subject to "din," where only being attached to G-d can protect us from the consequences. It is possible that just as there is a yearly "judgment" when "din" is used as the measuring stick, there is a daily dose of "reality," when G-d reasserts the world's potential, suspending "rachamim" for a moment of "din." This moment, when G-d compares the facts on the ground to what could have been, could be the "moment of anger" that only Bilam was able to sense. It wasn't caused by a specific sin, so was not based on when sin occurred. But it was the result of sin, the result of the difference between our potential and the reality.

Who was Bilam? The Talmud (Sanhedrin 105a) tells us that he was Lavan's son, Yaakov's first cousin and brother-in-law. As a matter of fact, the Midrash Aggadah (Bamidbar 22:21) tells us that Bilam's donkey was a gift from Yaakov so that he wouldn't advise Paro (Pharaoh) to make harsh decrees against Yaakov's descendants. Bilam saw first hand the holiness of Yaakov and his sons, but instead of choosing a path of spiritual growth to get close to G-d, chose to use the dark side. He was a master sorcerer (Sanhedrin 106a) as well as being the world's greatest philosopher (Beraishis Rabbah 65:20). He had the potential to surpass even Moshe (see Midrash Aggadah 24:17), but used black magic instead. He did morally reprehensible things (Avodah Zarah 5b), even going beyond the levels of immorality that the rest of the world had set (using single girls to entice the Children of Israel).

There was probably no single individual that epitomizes the divide between potential and reality more than Bilam. Not just in who he could have been and how he ended up, but in his knowledge of who he should be and who he was. He was a "yodaya da'as elyon" (Bamidbar 24:16), knew what G-d really wanted from him, what heights he could have reached, but chose the low road instead. His "ayin ra" (Avos 5:19) could be understood as being a "critical eye," that no matter how good something was, he compared it to what it could have been, and pointed out the shortfall from its full potential.

The disconnect between Bilam's knowledge of where he should be and where he was gave him a

special sensitivity for when G-d had His "moment of anger," comparing the world's potential with the reality. Bilam's "curse" would be based on the difference between the recipient's potential and where they actually were. Based on "din" there should be harsh consequences; consequences not realized because of G-d's "rachamim." If this curse were to be made during G-d's "moment of anger," it would cause there to be a judgment based on "din," a judgment no one can withstand. This may have been what was thwarted by G-d not having any "moments of anger" while Bilam attempted to curse us. © 2006 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER

Weekly Dvar

After a whole ordeal trying to curse the Jews, Bilam finally ends up blessing the Jews instead. So what does a person whose power lies in his word utter, after so much suspense? He says "How good are your tents, O Yaakov, your dwelling places, Israel" (24:5). Is it Yaakov or Israel? Is it the tents or the dwelling places (assuming they're different) that are good? It's a pretty ambiguous for someone presumably articulate.

To understand this, we need to analyze the context of the three blessings he imparted in the following Pessukim (verses): 1) You should stay near water (reference to Torah), 2) G-d will help you crush your oppressors, and 3) Those that bless you will be blessed, and those that curse you will be cursed. It seems that there is a natural progression throughout these blessings: If we 1) stay close to the Torah, 2) G-d will help us defeat our enemies, and 3) we will be blessed upon blessings. That's why the blessings start with the statement that it's all because of our homes (tents), that leads to our communities (dwellings), from Yaakov as an individual to Israel as a nation. If we introduce the Torah in our own controlled-environment homes, it will not only help ourselves and our communities, but will also lead to the many blessings that follow! © 2006 Rabbi S. Ressler & LeLamed, Inc.



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