

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

Balak and Bilam conspire to harm the Children of Israel on behalf of the nations of Moav and Midyan. Being that we have been the target of others since before we even became a nation (think Nimrod trying to kill Avraham when he was still an infant), there doesn't seem to be anything groundbreaking here. Yet the bulk of our Parasha (the whole Parasha if you count the sins that occurred at the end based on Bilam's advice) revolves around Balak's attempt to get Bilam to curse us. What is so significant about this attempt that warrants so much attention?

Not only that, but generations later, when G-d complains about our behavior and how we repaid His kindness with long-term indifference (Micha 6:2-5), the kindnesses He refers to aren't the powerful plagues brought upon the Egyptians, or the splitting of the sea (or of the river), or that He fed us with miraculous food and drink and protected us with His clouds of glory. Instead, He asks us to "remember what Balak the king of Moav advised, and what Bilam ben Be'or answered him." What was so significant about G-d foiling their plan that places it so high on the long list of things that G-d has done for us?

The Talmud (Berachos 12b) goes so far as saying that Chazal wanted to include the Balak episode in our twice-daily recitation of Shema. Only because it is so long, and having to say it would place too much of a burden on us, was it not added. What is so primary about Bilam's attempted curse, and his inability to give it, that it is worthy of being included in the Shema?

The Ishay HaTanach quotes a Zohar Chadash (54b) that explains why the Torah (Bamidbar 22:5) first calls the men sent by Balak to get Bilam "malachim"(messengers) but then calls them "elders of Moav and Midyan" (22:7). Balak thought that the Children of Israel were, like the rest of the nations, under the supervision of G-d's ministering angels ("malachim"), and could therefore be affected by sorcery and curses. Since Balak himself was a master sorcerer (see Rashi on 23:14), he provided Bilam with the names of the ministering angels that could be manipulated to harm them. These are the "malachim" that Balak sent. Using this information, we can try to explain how the story unfolds.

Balak tries to convince Bilam to curse Israel, but Bilam responds (22:13) by saying that he can't, i.e. they are under G-d's direct supervision, and G-d refuses to let him go. Balak tries again, and this time G-d provides an opening to let Bilam go. He may have informed Balak that because Israel is not under any ministering angels (G-d's intermediaries), but is directly under G-d, sorcery or any other means of manipulating the forces of nature won't work on them, and then shared his alternate plan of cursing them during G-d's moment of anger (see Berachos 7a). Nevertheless, Balak is still hopeful that his original plan of manipulating the forces of nature will work.

After the first attempt to curse Israel, Bilam (using the words G-d put in his mouth) makes it clear that Balak's approach won't work ("how can I curse [them] if G-d doesn't curse [them]") and that his plan failed too ("how can I [take advantage of G-d's] anger if G-d is not angry"). Referring again to Balak's plan, Bilam adds that Israel is "a nation that lives by itself, and is not included with other nations" (23:9), i.e. they are supervised directly by G-d. Balak is apparently not convinced, and gets upset with Bilam for blessing them instead of cursing them (23:11).

The second attempt is no more successful, as G-d "sees no sin in Yaakov" so is not angry with them (23:21), and is their G-d (ibid), so they are not affected by sorcery and the like (23:23). Balak is starting to get the message, so before the third attempt hopes that G-d himself will acquiesce to their request to curse them (23:27). However, he uses the name of G-d that refers to His being in charge of the ministering angels ("elokim"), apparently still hoping to affect Israel through natural means. After this attempt fails, Balak realizes that it is futile, and sends Bilam home, telling him (24:11) that G-d (using the four-letter name that refers to His being above nature) has prevented Bilam's success.

What does this episode prove? It shows us that we are not like the other nations, but under G-d's direct supervision, as otherwise Balak would have likely succeeded. Therefore, when G-d complained (through Micha) about our lack of devotion to Him, it is precisely the special relationship we have with him that is highlighted. Sure, miracles are nice, but being that we are His people, as proven by Balak's failure (what he tried to do and the responses Bilam gave him), how could we have abandoned Him?

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Bilam's failure also shows that when we are fulfilling G-d's will we cannot be harmed. The Talmud, when it discusses the connection between this episode and the Shema, points to the parts of Bilam's blessings that mention "lying down and getting up," which refer to saying the Shema in the evening before going to bed and in the morning upon arising. As Rashi (23:24) says, "when they get up from their sleep in the morning they become strong like a lion to grab mitzvos; putting on tzitzis, saying the Shema and putting on tefillin." Also, they "don't sleep" (quoting the verse) "at night in their beds until they say the Shema give their soul over to G-d for safekeeping."

What could be more appropriate to include in the Shema, which focuses on G-d and our devotion to G-d and His commandments, than to repeat the episode that proves that we are His people and not given over to ministering angels, and that by keeping His commandments we will be protected? © 2007 Rabbi D. Kramer

AISHDAS SOCIETY

Aspaqlaria

by Rabbi Micha Berger

Many comment on a pasuk from this week's haphtorah: "He tells you man, what is good, and what does HaShem expect of you? Only do justice, to love kindness, and to walk modestly with your G-d." (Michah 6:8)

In modern times, much of this attention is because of how grossly this pasuk was misappropriated by the Reform movement as a basis for their abandonment of the mitzvos.

In contrast, the Gemarah understands the three things named in this pasuk to include all 613 mitzvos.

"R. Simla'i expounded: 613 mitzvos were told to Moshe, 365 prohibitions, like the number of the days of the solar [year], and 248 [required] actions, corresponding to the limbs of a person...

"Came Michah, and established them on three principles, as it says "He tells you man..." "Do justice"—that is the law. "Love kindness"—that is gemilas chessed [supporting kindness], "Walk modestly"—this is taking out of the dead, and welcoming the bride.

"This is a kal vachomer [a fortiori]. If things that are not normally done in private [that is, taking care of

the dead, and making happiness with the bride] the Torah obligates us to do modestly; things which *are* normally done in private, how much more so!" (Makos 24a)

The gemara's words require some explanation. On the one hand, it indicates that the all 613 mitzvos, can be found in this pasuk. On the other hand, it also explains the pasuk to refer to the law, chessed, taking care of the dead, and throwing weddings for brides. How does this list represent the entire Torah?

The Marshah (ad. loc.) explains the kal vachomer to mean that the Gemarah includes all mitzvos in its explanation of "walking modestly with G-d", that all mitzvos—even these two, must be performed lishmah, for their own sake, with no hope of glory, no ulterior motive. Only in this way do we take the "justice" and "kindness" and instill them into the core of our beings.

Traditionally, the mitzvos are divided into two categories, Bein Adam Lamakom—between man and the Omnipresent, and Bein Adam Lachaveiro—between man and his fellow man. To the two categories of mitzvos, the Ba'alei Mussar [Masters of Ethics] add a third: Bein Adam Li'atzmo—between man and himself. However, R. Yisroel Salanter describes this third category not so much as a type of mitzvah, but rather as a description of how the mitzvah is done: was it willingly or grudgingly, was it for public recognition or because it is was mitzvah.

The Maharal uses a similar concept to explain the second mishnah of Pirkei Avos. The mishnah reads: "Shimon the Righteous was of the survivors of the Great Assembly. He often said, 'Upon three things the world stands: on the Torah, on avodah—the service [of G-d], and on gemillus chassadim—acts of loving-kindness.'"

The Maharal explains that "you must understand, that all creations depend on man. For they are created for man, and if men do not live up to what they ought to be, behold all is nullified." The universe stands on these three principles because man does.

"Therefore, the divine Tanna writes that one pillar that the universe stands upon is the Torah, for the pillar completes man so that he can be a finished creation with respect to himself.

"After that he says 'on avodah'.... for from this man can be thought complete and good toward He Who created him—by serving Him.... With regard to the third, it is necessary for man to be complete and good with others, and that is through gemillus chasadim.

"You also must understand that these three pillars parallel three things in each man: the mind, the living soul, and the body. None of them have existence without G-d. The existence of the soul is when it comes close to HaShem by serving Him.... From the perspective of the mind, the man gets his existence

through Torah, for it is through the Torah that man attaches himself to G-d. To the body, man gets his existence through gemillus chassadim for the body has no closeness or attachment to HaShem, just that HaShem is kind to all. When man performs kindness G-d is kind to him, and so gives him existence."

These three pillars are tied to the concepts we developed in our studies of parshiyos Sh'lach and Chukas. We saw that halachah views man as composed of three parts, each with its own drives: the body, the mind, and the soul. This model helped us understand a number of the mitzvos.

Spiritual man lives in the upper world where it can relate to G-d. Physical man lives in the physical world where it can sense the needs of other people, and shower kindness upon them. The mind lives by itself, however it is equipped with intelligence so that it can learn Torah for perfection of that self.

The pillars also describe the three types of mitzvah. "Torah" is the means for using to "complete himself", it is the archetype of man relating to himself. "Avodah" includes all mitzvos between spiritual man and G-d, just as "Gemillus Chassadim" includes all mitzvos between physical man and fellow man.

This means that the parts of the human condition, the three pillars described in the mishnah, and the three types of mitzvah, are all parts of the same phenomenon.

Perhaps in this light we can better understand the Maharshah's comments on the pasuk in Michah. This pasuk also gives a three-part description of the entire Torah. What does G-d demand of us? "Do justice"—"Avodah", serve G-d.

"Love chessed", use your physical senses to serve your fellow man. Justice and kindness, as the Maharal tells us, are tools for serving G-d and man, respectively, for properly utilizing body and soul.

But these two pillars can not stand on their own. You must also tend to those mitzvos that are between man and himself. You must not only do the mitzvos, but do them correctly. Do the mitzvos with modesty, not as part of a pursuit of glory. © 1994 Rabbi M. Berger and The AishDas Society

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

What makes the Jewish people unique? Is it not amazing that a description of our uniqueness uttered nearly 4000 years ago by the Gentile prophet Balaam has survived as one of the most eloquent and succinct portraits of the Jewish people.

"How shall I curse, whom G-d has not cursed? And how shall I denounce whom G-d has not denounced? For from the top of the rocks I see him, and from the heights I behold him: it is a people that shall dwell alone, and shall not be reckoned among the nations..." [Numbers 23:8-9] Balaam, who certainly

never heard of Alexandria or Venice, Prague, Warsaw, Monsey, or even Tel Aviv, managed to say in a few words what would describe the Jewish people throughout every age, in every culture. Was there ever a nation more alone? How is possible that back in the land of Canaan, Balaam saw all the way into the 20th century?

The Ibn Ezra [1080-1164] traces Balaam's wisdom as emerging from the fact that he looks upon this nation from a great distance, from the vantage point of perspective, and glimpsing the nation from mountain tops he can see what is unique about the Israelites. Whereas other nations merge into one another, assimilate, blend in and melt, this nation shall dwell alone...it shall not assimilate, it shall not disappear.

Interpreting Balaam's words, Rashi writes that his vision of the Israelites stems not so much from distance as from depth; the rocks and heights are metaphors for the great origins of this nation, going back in time to the patriarchs and matriarchs. He then continues to gentile nations having pointed out the source of our strength.

But having taken us back to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Rashi has opened an additional door for exploring the meaning of Balaam's vision of Israel's uniqueness. If we look more closely at the words describing this 'nation' which dwells alone, but shall not be reckoned among the 'nations,' we notice that when 'nation' is used the first time, the verse relies on the singular—"amm," but the second time, we read 'goyim'—nations, the plural. I believe understanding the difference between the singular and the plural will direct us toward another insight into the Jewish people's uniqueness. But this requires that we take a look at a parallel structure of singular and plural in Genesis.

When Jacob is blessed at Bet El shortly after his name has changed to Israel, G-d declares, "I am G-d Almighty, be fruitful and multiply, a nation and a congregation of nations will be from you." [Gen. 35:11] What are we to make of the phrase 'a congregation of nations?' In the past, when G-d promised Abraham that he'd father of a multitude of nations, that blessing was seen as referring to the Messianic vision of the nations of the world learning from Israel and joining our ranks. But G-d's blessing to Jacob required the events of the past forty years and especially these last months and weeks to highlight its true meaning. After all, when Jews from all over the world, Moroccans and Kurds and Yemenites and Germans and Poles began ingathering and congregating in Israel to escape persecution and pogrom, it revealed that the Jewish people are one people who dwell alone, but at the same time, a congregation of many different nations resulting from an exile to all four corners of the world. Just look around the myriad of faces on a busy Israeli street

corner as you wait for the light to turn green. Listen to the languages.

Even Anglo-Saxon Efrat cannot make do with less than seven 'congregations,' and four different styles of prayer, including Jews from Yemen, Syria, and Egypt living together with Jews from the West Side of Manhattan, Capetown and Melbourne. And perhaps no time has it been more obvious than during the last few weeks when two such different aliyot have dramatized how many nations there are among the Jewish people. Think of the profound, and almost simplistic piety of the Ethiopians contrasted to the almost ingrained anti-religious training of the Russians. The one nation is small, black, dwelling in small villages with thatched roofs, baking matzah on ancient ovens handed down to them from their ancestors, reflecting the dominant culture as they walk through their towns barefoot, wearing white robes and speaking Amharic; the other is light skinned, big boned, PhD's from Leningrad and Moscow, engineers and linguists more comfortable watching the Bolshoi Ballet or a Chekhov play than sitting down to a Passover Seder, totally torn from their roots even though not long ago Vilna was considered the Jerusalem of Lithuania. Could two people nations be more different? The Russians, with their mastery of science and culture, at the center of geopolitics, and the Ethiopians, speaking a language no one knows, for so long virtually forgotten even amongst other Jews. And we experience this contrast daily.

In Efrat, for example, two recent events illustrate this, a Russian couple, the woman in her ninth month, wanted a traditional Jewish wedding since the civil marriage they'd already experienced didn't fulfill their present spiritual needs. A meeting to go through a few basic points was arranged, and I figured it would last thirty minutes. Three hours later we were still talking. They wanted to know everything: the meaning of the words of the ketuba, the nature of the seven blessings, the detailed differences of language and ritual - there was no stone they left unturned. Afterwards, I couldn't help thinking to myself that in their souls this couple had retained the Lithuanian, legalistic, exacting, precise, and probing nature of their ancestors. They were from Kovno, and like their forbears, burned with the fire of the mind seeking the truth in a passage of Talmud. They took nothing for granted.

In contrast, an Ethiopian who works in Efrat didn't show up for work for several days and hadn't called in sick. Only afterwards did it emerge that shortly before Operation Solomon he had been called by the Jewish Agency to come to Addis Ababa. They told him to go, and he went without asking questions because the Agency had always been kind to him. Although there were many Israelis at the airport, he didn't ask why. He had been asked to help, and he helped, hardly getting any sleep or moving from his post. What

needed to be done, he did. And only when the operation was drawing to a close, did it dawn on him what he had been part of. Perhaps it was their simple faith which allowed the Ethiopians to leave everything behind and reach their destined point in only 40 hours, 15,000 Jews in forty plane trips. How long would it have taken to transport Russian Jews in the same situation? Or sabras?

Yet despite our differences in color, educational status, language, psychology, we are still one nation. What else explains the overwhelming sense of commitment, sacrifice and courage to ransom this tribe with millions of dollars and engineer a modern day version of walking through the Red Sea with the armies of Pharaoh right behind them. Borne to safety, there was still so much to do, and as word of the operation spread, hundreds and hundreds of people started pouring in to help, a spontaneous effort, bringing food, clothing, faces of joy. Volunteers ran the show. Young people came to do the dirty work, cook, peel potatoes, clean up, serve food. It was an amazing mix of people. And when the Jews from Ethiopia, helped by Israelis and Anglo Saxons and even recently arrived Russian immigrants, greeted their second Shabbat in Israel in the Diplomat Hotel by kindling the Sabbath lights, it became only too evident how singular and united a nation we really are, despite all external differences. Many nations, but one nation.

And so now we see again Balaam's prophetic vision of this nation which has become many nations but retains its united Jewish soul. © 1991 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY

Curses! Foiled Again!

Jews walk into synagogue each morning open their Siddurim (prayer books), and begin to pray. They begin with a prayer entitled "Mah Tovu—"How beautiful are your tents, Jacob; your dwellings, Israel." Those words may sound beautiful and eloquent, but their source is quite repulsive. Let us explore their origins.

This week, Balak, the king of Moav, hires the world's greatest sorcerer, Bilaam, renowned for his cursing and spell casting abilities. His objective was to curse the Israelites, who were camping in sight of Moav. Bilaam attempted to cast some very insidious spells upon the Jews, but all that left his mouth were words of praise and blessing. The words "Mah Tovu—How beautiful are your tents" emanated from Bilaam in one of his futile rants. I don't understand. There are so many other beautiful songs and psalms, authors and composers, which the sages could have chosen to open the daily service. Why did the Rabbis choose the curse that was transformed to a blessing, as Bilaam observed the Jewish encampment?

They wanted to teach us a lesson—first thing in the morning—every day.

Let's analyze what happened. Bilaam, accompanied by his employer, set out to get a good vantage point to view and curse the Jews. They were thinking about the horrid character of these people as they aroused their spirits for the curse of all time. And then they look. What they saw startled them. The Tents of Israel were strategically placed to conform to the highest standards of morality. Not one tent opening faced another. Those tents epitomized modesty, chastity, and self-esteem. Bilaam, a very spiritual being, was dumbfounded. His curse had nothing to grab on to. Pure evil can never latch on to pure holiness. Bilaam couldn't berate the Jews. The only spiritual verbiage that he could utter were words of praise for the very nation he set out to destroy. The sight (and of course G-d's intervention) left him not a detractor, but rather a praiser of Israel.

John Lawson¹ was a disabled, decorated Vietnam veteran. The war, however, left him shell-shocked, in need of psychological rehabilitation. He was distraught and searching. As part of his fully compensated rehabilitation, he was sent to a V.A. hospital in Central Jersey. Somehow he found his way to the Lakewood Yeshiva, where he was befriended by the students. John, a Mormon, felt warmth and direction. He ultimately began to love the tenets of Judaism, became Jewish, and began to study Torah—day and night. The army, which was funding his rehabilitation, felt this was too much. Any occupation would be considered by the Veterans Administration as suitable for full disability pay, but learning—in a Yeshiva—was unacceptable! He argued that until he finished his studies, and receive ordination, he would not be able to function in society.

His case was presented to a military panel. Upon hearing his case, one of the judges, a former naval officer, got up and announced. "I know exactly what this man wants—and I'm going to let him have it!" All eyes focused on the former navy commander. "During the Korean War, we were at sea off the China coast for three straight months. My crew was stir crazy. I'm embarrassed to say the things they talked about and did while waiting out those months in the China Sea. When we docked in Japan, the crew was even wilder. All except two men. They were observant Jews. Every day, during the entire stay aboard the vessel they would sit in serious discussion over a big tome they called the Talmud. They were calm, clear, and directed.. One day I asked one of them what they were doing. He answered, 'Officer, I'm studying the Talmud. By the time this war is over, we're going to be Talmid

¹I heard this story from a friend of John's. I also observed this now -- "veteran" Talmid Chochom, --whose true name has been changed, learning Torah with extreme diligence in the Lakewood Yeshiva.

Kockems.' [He meant Talmid Chochom, a term meaning Jewish Scholar, but was unable to pronounce the guttural "ch".] I was darn impressed by those fellows. If John here wants to finish his studies and become a Talmid Kockem, I say we ought continue funding that education!"

Every day as we enter the shul, we open our prayer books and say special words. "How beautiful are your tents, Jacob." We remind ourselves that, as we leave the synagogue, all eyes are upon us. What we say, and what we do are observed. We are not only on this earth to see—we are here to be seen. The day begins with a vivid testimony that our actions in this world can influence the way our people, and our Torah, are perceived. We can transform the curses of our detractors, and have them sing the praises of Jacob's tents and the Talmid Kockems who dwell in them. © 1995 Rabbi M. Kamenetzky

RABBI FRANCIS NATAF

A Most Unusual Prophet

Rashi starts off this week's parsha with the million-dollar question (22:5). As is pointed out by the Siftei Chachamim supercommentary on Rashi, the master pedagogue is out of character here, since he does not appear to be addressing any particular textual point. Rather, Rashi seems to have felt a need to immediately allay that which should be bothering the thoughtful student. The question is: "Why would G-d reveal himself to such an evil gentile?" The question is really twofold: 1) Prophecy seems to be reserved for, and deserved by, morally outstanding individuals, and 2) The intuitive moral demands placed upon non-Jews (i.e. the Noahide code) do not require prophecy. The answer given by Rashi leads us to more questions still. Rashi tells us that Bilaam was granted prophecy so that non-Jews could not claim to be at a disadvantage: They could not say that if they also had prophets, they would have uplifted themselves morally. Instead, Rashi continues, their prophet brought them to new levels of moral depravity, by suggesting that Moav and Midian turn to promiscuity in order to ensnare the Jews.

The most immediate question on Rashi is: Didn't the non-Jews get a bad deal? If Bilaam was as evil as Rashi justifiably posits in the original question, then no intelligent gentile would give up his claim of Divine duplicity in the realm of prophecy. Instead of asking why they didn't get any prophets, the non-Jews will now claim that they were given a dud: "The Jews were given Moshe and all we get is a man who was outsmarted and outrefined by his donkey?"

This question is addressed by the rabbis in the Sifri on Devarim 34:10. The verse there says that there never rose another prophet among the Jews like Moshe. The rabbis saw a reason that the Torah would limit this statement only to the Jews. The midrash says that a similar (really greater is implied) prophet was

given to the non-Jews and his name was Bilaam. While this may answer the non-Jews, it leads the reader to another question: How can the midrash make such a wild claim about a man so clearly depraved?

Rambam in the Guide to the Perplexed (II:36) and in the Hilchot Yesodei haTorah (7:1) speaks about the prerequisites for prophecy. Not surprisingly, moral attributes are listed that include an absence (or total control) of physical desire and complete focus on matters of the spirit, as opposed to material gain or domination. This is indeed a description of Moshe Rabbenu but quite clearly not one of Bilaam. Rambam is aware of this and writes (II:44) that there are levels of divine inspiration that fall short of prophecy. One of them is ruach hakodesh and for this, one does not require the levels of spiritual refinement mentioned above. We are told that this is the level of Bilaam's relationship with G-d and even this was only available when he was good. While we could reconcile this with the text, it leads us back to our difficulty with Rashi's answer and in understanding the midrash in Devarim.

Perhaps the midrash is telling us that Bilaam had the same or greater potential than Moshe. Bilaam might have started with the same intellectual capabilities as Moshe, as well as heightened appreciation of the spiritual and moral realms. In theory, with his potential he could have reached the level that Moshe reached. There was just one hitch - he was not of the descendants of Avraham.

Inculcated in the Jewish people is the astounding potential for selflessness reached by Avraham. (This is what kept Avraham quiet when his own son was involved as opposed to his famous pleas for others with which there was no immediate self-interest.) This potential is passed down in the Jewish people so that the Mishna points out that lovingkindness is one of the three hallmark traits of the Jew. Without this, prophecy just becomes another basis for self-aggrandizement and, ultimately, corruption. It is quite clear from Bilaam's interactions with Balak in this week's parsha, that Bilaam is quite ready to use his talents for personal gain, thereby defiling his prophecy. Such prophecy is worse than no prophecy at all. Once prophecy loses its holiness and becomes marketable, it comes as no surprise that Bilaam sees everything as devoid of holiness and pragmatically expendable as indicated by Rashi.

Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, Shlita, once pointed out that Albert Schweitzer was truly a great gentile. He gave up the prestige and comfort of the European intellectual milieu in order to help take care of the souls and bodies of native African people. Rabbi Wolbe pointedly asked, however, why did Schweitzer have to write about it. In other words, even among the most selfless and kind gentiles, there is some trace of selfishness. While this trace can be, and often is, present among Jews as well (and sometimes it's more

than a trace!), our genealogy and guidance from the Torah give us the potential selflessness needed for an effective prophet. This was the message of Rashi: A non-Jewish prophet is a contradiction in terms. Giving prophecy to someone with a trace of selfishness is counterproductive. No matter how great the individual, a selfish prophet will become corrupt.

Bilaam's slogan might be: It's hard to be humble when you're great. This may well be true, and if Bilaam was as great as indicated by the aforementioned midrash, we can appreciate his lack of humility. The Jewish response, however, is to say: It's impossible to be boastful when you're truly great.

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RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

Could it be that Bilaam, the gentile prophet, saddled his own animal when he set forth to curse the Jews? (Numbers 22:21)

Ibn Ezra, the arch literalist, here offers a non-literal interpretation. "Va-yahavosh et ahtano" does not mean that Bilaam saddled his ass, rather he instructed his servants to do so.

It was left to Rashi to insist that Bilaam did it on his own. Quoting the Midrash, Rashi writes: "From here we learn that hatred defies the rule (sinah mekalkelet ha-shurah), for he (Bilaam) saddled it by himself." In other words, the emotion of hate is so powerful it can cause one to do things that would otherwise be out of the purview of one's normal behavior.

Events during the Holocaust proved this point. When Germany was attacked by the allies from the West and the Russians from the East, it would have made sense that the Third Reich use every means at its disposal, every military weapon, every soldier, to resist. But it was not so. Hitler's hatred of the Jews was so great, that he insisted the extermination of Jews continue, thereby using precious manpower and resources that could have helped defend "the motherland."

But, the Midrash notes, that just as hatred defies the rule, so, too, does love defy the rule (ahavah mekalkelet ha-shurah). As a matter of fact, the Midrash states, the hatred of the wicked is counterbalanced by the love of the righteous. Hence, when complying with G-d's command to sacrifice his son Yitzhak (Isaac), the Torah states, that Avraham (Abraham) "saddled his ass, ve-yahavosh et ahtano." (Genesis 22:3)

In the words of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai: "Let the saddling done by Avraham counteract the saddling done by Bilaam." (Genesis Rabbah 55:8) Shimon Bar Yohai who lived during the reign of the Roman Empire knew of its hatred toward Jews. But he understood through his own life of commitment to G-d that his love and the love of others would counteract their hatred.

Thank G-d for the good people. Their passion to do the right thing neutralizes and ultimately overpowers even the passion of the wicked. © 1997 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 YISSOCHER FRAND

Rav Frand

I heard from Rav Schwab a fantastic insight—a fantastic truth in what this means. The difference, says Rav Schwab, is that one of the most potent forces in the universe is the doing of something "Lishma," for its own sake. Doing something altruistically, for the sake of what one believes to be right, is a force beyond belief. However, when people do things not for the sake of a cause, but because they stand to make a dollar, that is a much weaker force.

Rav Schwab said this in the context of explaining the rise and fall, during this century, of the Communist system. Communism was a very successful movement. Until very recently, there were more than a billion and a half people who lived under Communist domination - and yet in recent times we have seen Communism disintegrate.

What made Communism so successful? Rav Schwab argued that what made Communism so successful was that there were "Lishma-niks." People like Lenin and Trotsky and Marx and all the other Jews, "nebech," (the Politburo in the 1930s was mostly Jewish until Stalin purged them) were people who wanted to give the world a better order. They wanted to give the world a new system to replace the bankruptcy of capitalism, in which some are fantastically wealthy and some beg on the street. It was a very noble movement. These were people who were—for lack of a better word—L'shem Shamayim (for the sake of Heaven)! They did it for the sake of Communism. They were Lishma!

Rav Schwab relates that he remembers in his city in Germany there was a parade by the Communists in the 1920s and there was a Jewish kid who had rebelled against his parents and marched in the front line of this parade. He was despised amongst the Jews, the outcast of the entire community; but this did not faze him, because he did it Lishma. He believed in what he was doing, like so many of our Jewish brethren who believed in it.

When we have people who are willing to give up their lives and souls for the sake of a cause, that is a very potent force. We look back now, 70 years later and try to discover what happened to the movement to cause it to collapse. We can say that to a large extent it is due to the fact that it lost this 'Lishma' element. When we see how all the leaders of the various "Iron Curtain" countries had stashed away Swiss bank accounts and

we discover all the corruption and the graft we quickly recognize that the Lishma had been abandoned. And once they lost that, the potency of the force was gone.

This is what G-d said to Bilaam: When Balak comes and says "Curse the Jews" without offering honor or money, then the reason why Bilaam is going is because he hates Jews. "We have to curse Jews!" I want to eradicate Jews. This is a philosophy. It is a CAUSE. In that case, "Watch Out! Don't go."

G-d knows that a sincere CAUSE is a lethal and potent force. However, when Balak says, "I'll give you Honor. I'll give you Money..." then G-d tells Bilaam: If this is for your own benefit, if you are doing it for the money, then go. This is a different story. If you are in it for the money, for the honor, and not Lishma—this is nothing to worry about, it is not the same force. © 1997 Rabbi Y. Frand & torah.org

RABBI SHLOMO KATZ

Hama'ayan

The Torah writes that when Bilam was traveling to curse Bnei Yisrael, an angel confronted him three times. The first time, the Torah says, Bilam's donkey easily left the road. The second time, the donkey pressed against the wall. The third time, the donkey could not maneuver at all. Rashi writes, without explanation, that this alludes to the Patriarchs.

How so? Siftei Chachamim explains as follows: The angel was hinting to Bilam, "If you wish to curse the descendants of Avraham, there is room to maneuver. Avraham had a son before Yitzchak and had sons after Yitzchak, and you may curse them. If you wish to curse the descendants of Yitzchak, there is room on one side, i.e., Esav. However, there is no possibility of cursing the descendants of Yaakov."

Rav Yisrael Isserlin zt"l (author of the responsa Terumat Hadeshen) explains in his Torah commentary that the donkey's behavior (as manipulated by the angel) alluded to the different names that each of the Patriarchs gave to the future Temple (see Pesachim 88a). Avraham called it a "mountain"—the first time that the donkey bolted it left the high road. Yitzchak called the Temple a "field"—the donkey pressed Bilam's leg against the walls of the fields. Finally, Yaakov called the Temple a "house"—just as a house is confining, the donkey became confined between two walls.

What does this signify? Rav Isserlin explains that each of the Patriarchs saw G-d in a more focused manner. The merit of the Patriarchs' accomplishments protected Bnei Yisrael from Bilam.

The gemara (Bava Batra 14b) states that Moshe wrote the Torah and the parashah of Bilam. What does this mean? Isn't the "parashah of Bilam" part of the Torah?

Rav Yaakov Lorberbaum of Lissa zt"l explains in Nachalat Yaakov that Bilam did not speak the

Hebrew words which the Torah records. Even if we assume that Bilam spoke Hebrew (which would not be surprising), certainly Balak did not understand it, and certainly not in the poetic form of Bilam's curses. The wonder of Moshe's prophecy was that he could record Bilam's prophecy in a different language, yet with all the nuances and double meanings (i.e., curses hidden within blessings) which Bilam intended. This is what the gemara means.

Based on this, writes Rav Eliezer Waldenberg shlita, we can understand why a translation of Tanach (even a translation of the Aramaic portions of the books of Daniel and Ezra into Hebrew) loses some of its holiness. When G-d speaks to a prophet in one language (whether in Hebrew or Aramaic), His words contain nuances and allusions which are inevitably lost in translation. Only another prophet could make the translation successfully. (Tzitz Eliezer Vol. 14 No. 1)

RABBI PINCHAS WINSTON

Perceptions

G-d came to Bilaam and said to him, "Who are these men with you?" (Bamidbar 22:9)

He [G-d] intended to cause him to err. He [Bilaam] said, "It seems there are times when everything is not manifest to Him. His knowledge is not always alike, so I will choose a time when I can curse [them] and He will not know it." (Rashi)

There were, basically, two approaches to G-d's question about the visitors to Bilaam. The first, and perhaps least risky one was not the one that Bilaam chose. It was to assume that G-d is omniscient, and that His knowledge is perfect and consistent. Why did G-d ask about the visitors? Who knows? But, though you can fool some of the people some of the time, you can't fool G-d any of the time, and it is safer to be straight and up front with the Master of the Universe than to hide the truth from Him.

Bilaam chose to assume the opposite, and staked his life on that very, very faulty assumption. It is amazing just how much Bilaam was willing to risk based upon the assumption that G-d doesn't know everything. The only question is, why did G-d place such a stumbling block in the path of Bilaam in the first place, when the Talmud states that G-d doesn't play games with His creations (Avodah Zara 3a)?

The answer comes from the same section in the Talmud, which discusses a scene from the End-of-Days when G-d will judge the worthiness of all the nations. Then, they will complain about how they had under-achieved only because G-d had not given them mitzvos like He did the Jewish people. G-d will tell them that their claim is nonsense, but will humor them just the same to prove His point. He will tell them: "I will give you a light mitzvah, and it is called succah."

The Talmud says that they will then construct their temporary dwellings, just as the Jewish people

had throughout the years. After entering them to fulfill the mitzvah of Succah, G-d will radiates down onto them a terribly hot sun, which will make staying in the succah unbearable. Forced to vacate their succos, the nations will kick it in frustration on the way out!

Asks the Talmud: But G-d doesn't play games with His creations? Besides, what did that little experiment prove? Even the Jewish people would have been allowed to leave their succos under such circumstances! Answers the Talmud: Perhaps, but they would not have kicked the succah on the way out!

In other words, G-d's message to the nations went beyond the four temporary walls of the succah. What will have made the Jewish people unique in history will not have only been compliance to the mitzvos, but also the attitude they had with regard to the mitzvos. Torah is not about ritual; it is about using the physical world as a vehicle to build a relationship to G-d, during the good times and the bad times. Hence, in the end, the test had only been G-d's method to reveal to the nations what previously had been known only on the inside, but will come out through their reactions to the heat of the sun in the End-of-Days.

The same was true in Bilaam's case. Bilaam fashioned himself as a "Man of G-d," one who knew "Da'as Elyon" (a name for G-d's holy knowledge), and who was imbued with special powers. It is well-known that "righteous people will and G-d fulfills"; Bilaam liked to think of himself as one of those people too.

However, it was all a masquerade. In truth, Bilaam was a terribly impure human being who knew how to use the "evil" forces in creation to manipulate reality to suit his corrupted will. Nevertheless, before this parsha, this information had been private to Bilaam, and G-d of course; that is, until G-d saw fit to expose the true Bilaam.

In the end, it is true: G-d does not play games with His creation. However, He does create scenarios and tests that can lead to a revelation of the faulty assumptions of people, to help them correct those assumptions when it is possible, or to allow them to be the person's own undoing when teshuvah is not a real possibility (as in the case of Bilaam).

Everyday of our lives we make assumptions. Indeed, our lives are based upon countless assumptions, most of which we have probably lost touch with long ago. However, before G-d takes it upon Himself to "educate" us about those faulty assumptions in a less-than-pleasant-manner, it is worthwhile to use Torah as a "mirror" to reveal those faulty assumptions, in order to change them while they still remain between only us G-d and us. © 1998 Rabbi P. Winston & Project Genesis, Inc.

