

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**RABBI DOV KRAMER**

### Taking a Closer Look

**E**ven though it seems, at first glance, that Bilam was a very religious fellow- only saying and doing what G-d wanted-we know that he was actually quite wicked. G-d had told Bilam explicitly that He didn't want him to curse the Children of Israel (Bamidbar 22:12), but he tried anyway. Then, after acknowledging that G-d really wants them to be blessed (and not cursed), he tries something different in order to accomplish his goal (24:1). (We also find that Bilam is held responsible for the nation sinning at Pe'or, see 31:16).

Our sages, of blessed memory, fill us in regarding the extent of his wickedness, including his extreme desire to bring down the Jewish nation. When he went "with" Balak's officers (22:21 and 22:35), we are told that he did more than just travel with them; he was "with" them in spirit as well, sharing their desire to curse Israel (see Rashi). The Talmud (Sanhedrin 105b) tells us that Bilam's intent was to curse them at the very moment that G-d became angry, and that the only reason he was unsuccessful was because G-d didn't let Himself get angry during that entire period of time. Obviously, Bilam was willing to defy G-d's command not to curse them, had he had the opportunity to do so. It seems rather odd, then, that Bilam ends up blessing the nation instead, and doing so three times. If he was willing to go against G-d's wishes and curse them, why did he listen to G-d and bless them? Shouldn't this archetypical anti-Semite have wanted to avoid blessing the nation he hated so much at any cost?

The truth is, the verses indicate that G-d put the words of blessing in Bilam's mouth, with the Midrash (see Bamidbar Rabbah 20:20 and Tanchuma 12) explaining that G-d literally forced him to return to Balak and say those things. If Bilam had no physical choice, we can't ask why he did such a thing. Nevertheless, the Talmud (ibid), which also indicates that Bilam's words were chosen for him (although Rashi implies that he was just prevented from cursing Israel, not that words of blessing were forced onto, and then out of, him), says that "from the blessings of that wicked one we can learn what he wanted [to really say]. He wanted to [curse them and] say that they should have no synagogues or houses of study; [instead, he said,] 'how good are your tents.'" (The Talmud then continues

to explain what Bilam really wanted to say, but said instead.) If G-d put the words into Bilam's mouth, we couldn't know what Bilam wanted to say, only what G-d wanted him to say. Unless G-d was making him say exactly the opposite of what he really wanted to say just to torture or punish him (which I think is unlikely), the notion that the words coming out of Bilam's mouth reflected what he had in his heart indicates that they were his own words, not G-d's. Before explaining why someone who hated the Children of Israel so much blessed them, we must first reconcile how the blessings could have been his own words if G-d was forcing him to say them.

Bilam had been warned by G-d (22:20) and by the angel (22:35) to only say the words he will be told to say. When he reaches Balak (22:38), he tells him that he will only be able to speak the words that G-d puts in his mouth. On his first attempt to curse Israel, G-d puts the words in his mouth (23:5), and forces Bilam to say them (as the Midrashim indicate). Balak asks why he blessed his enemies rather than cursing them (23:11), to which Bilam responds by twisting the truth, again. Just as earlier (22:13), when G-d initially forbade him from going, Bilam made it seem as if it was because the messengers sent weren't important enough, not because G-d forbade him from going altogether (see Rashi), here (23:12) Bilam makes it seem as if he is obeying G-d's command by repeating the words he was asked to say, rather than admitting that G-d moved his mouth for him. Bilam and Balak try a second time, and again G-d puts the words in Bilam's mouth (23:16), with Bilam claiming that he was just following G-d's orders (23:26). By the third attempt, Bilam realizes that G-d will not let him curse His nation (see Rashi on 24:1), so he tries a different approach. © 2008 Rabbi D. Kramer

**RABBI BEREL WEIN**

### Wein Online

**P**oor Balak and Bilaam. If they would have lived in our generation they would have undoubtedly received great and favorable media coverage, interviews on CNN and invitations to speak at the Hebrew University to tell their side of the story.

The part about the speaking donkey would certainly have made for great feature articles where it would be pointed out that Bilaam is not to be blamed for beating his animal-rather it is all the fault of that

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conquering, occupying, bullying angel that inserted himself into the picture.

Yet, no matter what the revisionist historians will say, Balak and Bilaam remain the guilty villains in Jewish tradition and minds. There was no justification to demonize and curse an entire people who intended to do you no harm. Bilaam is a non-governmental, allegedly not-for-profit, one man organization, proclaiming great ideals while at the same time condoning enslavement and murder of thousands. And, in spite of his protestations of idealism and even-handedness, he is for hire.

He is the original spin artist, the public relations genius, the amoral unprincipled guru looking always for new clients. He is so good and effective at his task that apparently only the Lord Himself is able to rein him in and make him speak truths and blessings when that was not his original intent.

Bilaam is toppled from his self-importance by the G-d that he claims to represent and have contact with. His ultimate punishment is not so much his death at the hands of the Jews but it is the humiliating experience of being forced to bless when he intended and promised his employer to curse. Poor Bilaam-he should have waited a few millennia to ply his trade.

The Talmud teaches us that Bilaam's antipathy to the Jewish people was already apparent at the beginning of the Jewish sojourn in Egypt. He was the advisor to the Pharaoh who recommended that Pharaoh enslave the Jewish people and kill all of their male children. When G-d, through Moshe, thwarted that evil design and Israel emerged triumphant from Egypt in great numbers Bilaam tried a different tack using Balak in his effort to destroy the Jewish people.

And finally when this scheme is stopped by Divine intervention, he advises the use of lust and sinfulness to destroy Israel. His advice costs the lives of twenty-four thousand Jews. No wonder Jews throughout the ages have characterized Bilaam as "Bilaam harasha"-Bilaam, the evil one. He has no reason or justification for his malevolence and enmity.

It is just there, like much of the anti-Semitism that infects a great deal of the supposedly civilized intellectual world today. It is difficult to deal with such baseless yet intense hatred and venom.

I think it obvious that G-d intervenes to spare us from many of the actions of our enemies and friends. Thus the story of Balak and Bilaam remains relevant and current as the topics and events in our world today. Balak and Bilaam are able to exact a price from us in lives, fortune and social standing. But now, as then, they are unable to defeat us. © 2008 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](http://www.rabbiwein.com). For more information on these and other products visit [www.rabbiwein.com/jewishhistory](http://www.rabbiwein.com/jewishhistory).

**RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN**

## Shabbat Shalom

“Come now therefore I pray thee, curse me this people, for they are too mighty for me...” (Numbers 22:6).

Who among us wouldn't like to think of himself as someone with a good eye, a humble spirit, and a meek soul? According to the Mishnah Avot, the disciples of Abraham possess the above qualities, while the disciples of wicked Balaam, the dubious 'hero' of this week's portion "Balak", possesses the reverse traits, "...an evil eye, an arrogant spirit, and a greedy soul..." (Pirkei Avot 5:22).

Why the Mishnah calls Balaam "wicked" requires study. It might seem that at worst, he was absent-minded and impatient particularly when it came to the incident with his "talking donkey" which he beats for refusing to walk ahead. Ironically, the seer's donkey sees what the seer is blind to—an angel with an outstretched sword obstructing their path. Balaam is Abraham's perfect opposite: they are both prophets who are presumably close to the Almighty G-d, yet one finds G-d even when He is hidden behind the moon and the sun, while the other cannot see G-d even though He is standing in front of him. Balaam's wickedness exists in proportion to his potential. He could have been as great as Abraham, but instead he sells his exalted soul to the highest bidder.

If the power of his poetry is any indication of the power of his prophecy, the Jews would have been in serious trouble when Balak sent his emissaries to hire the famous Balaam to curse the Jews. The text speaks of a frightened King Balak who turns to a powerful Balaam to cast a curse against a vast nation passing through. Unbeknownst to the king, this magician's curses or blessings cannot be put into effect without permission of the Almighty G-d. In contrast, not only doesn't Abraham ever consider cursing anyone, but when G-d confides that He intends to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, the first patrician pleads for the doomed city. "Shall the whole world's judge not act justly?" (Gen. 18:25).

This is what the Mishnah means by Abraham's good eye: he looks for ways to ameliorate the

punishment although the Sodom-ites are drenched in sin. Balaam, on the other hand, seeks to get around G-d's declaration against cursing the Jews. G-d is against Balak's plan, but Balaam's bad eye doesn't allow him to expel Balak's plan forever. The Gentile prophet should have sent Balak's delegation packing but, tempted by wealth, power, and impressive robes, he tells them to stay the night. And when G-d says definitely not, Balaam addresses the delegation: "Go home! G-d refuses to give me leave to go with you ["imachem" in Hebrew]", (Numbers 22:13), leaving a door open so that if a more important delegation were to arrive, who knows...maybe he (Balaam) or He (G-d) could yet be convinced.

The foreign ministry reports back to Balak that Balaam won't come "with us" and so, without wasting a breath, the next verse records that, "Balak sent yet again princes, this time with a larger number of dignitaries" (Num. 2:14).

And so the higher ranking officials arrive, showering more promises of great honor and the readiness to heed any request of Balaam, who answers: "If Balak would give me his house full of gold and silver, I would not be able to do anything great or small that would violate the word of G-d my Lord". (22:18).

Presumably, Balaam's answer sounds noble, but when Balaam speaks of all the gold and silver that could not get him to violate the "word of G-d," he once again leaves open the possibility that if G-d were to change His mind, Balaam's services could still be bought, especially if the monetary offer were more serious.

The greedy side of Balaam's soul is contrasted with Abraham's meekness. His tent always open to a passing stranger, Abraham never asks anything for himself. He adopts Lot, his orphaned nephew, and raises him with all the love a childless couple like Abraham and Sarah can give. Yet, when fighting breaks out between the servants of Lot and the servants of Abraham, Abraham fears a bitter end and suggests separation ... "After all we're brothers. All the land is before you...if you go to the left, I'll go to the right. If you go to the right, I'll go to the left" (Gen. 13:8-9) Lot chooses the Jordan plain, "...like G-d's own garden."

Later, when the entire region breaks out into an all-out war, Abraham enters the battle when his nephew Lot is captured. Gathering 318 men of his household, he divides his forces, attacks, pursues the invaders, and victoriously saves the lives of Lot and his family. And when the King of Sodom turns to Abraham suggesting the spoils go to the victor, Abraham refuses even a shoelace lest it be said that the King of Sodom made Abraham wealthy.

An arrogant spirit believes he can manipulate anything, and Balaam has emerged as the master

manipulator. A humble spirit understands that G-d rules the world according to His vision. Hence when G-d commands Abraham, "Take your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and get thee into the Land of Moriah, and offer him there for a burnt offering..." (Gen. 22:2). Abraham obeys without protest. This is true humility, even though Isaac is the miraculous fulfillment of G-d's promise, the very proof that Abraham's faith in the one G-d is true. Abraham accepts G-d's will, no matter how difficult it may be.

In the case of Balaam, on the other hand, his manipulation continues even in the choice of animals sacrificed on the seven altars Balaam has Balak build. After the account of the talking donkey, G-d's angel instructs Balaam not to say anything other than "the exact words I declare to you" (22:35). We soon read of the construction of the seven altars. Not only does it seem that Balaam has gone against the angel's instructions, having these altars built on his own initiative, but when G-d appears to Balaam, the prophet announces to the Almighty that ... "I have set up seven altars, and I have sacrificed a bull and a ram as a burnt offering on each altar" (23:4).

How are we to understand Balaam's words given that G-d doesn't have to be told who is sacrificing what to whom? The Midrash sees the bull and the ram not only as Balaam's attempt to remind G-d of the sin of the Golden Calf, but also as a manipulative move to ride on the accomplishment of Abraham who successfully sacrificed a ram as a substitute for Isaac. In the most primitive venal sense, Balaam is bribing G-d, offering these two special animals on seven altars. Maybe now he'll be allowed to curse the Jewish people. Balaam doesn't understand the most fundamental message of Abraham: G-d is beyond manipulation. Balaam, the wicked manipulator, retires into penurious ignominy.

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### **RABBI YAKOV HABER**

## **TorahWeb**

“**A**nd a man of the Children of Israel came and he brought the Midianite woman to his brethren before the eyes of Moshe and the eyes of the Children of Israel; and they were crying at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting" (Balak 25:6).

Thus begins the tragic episode of the death of Zimri at the hands of Pinchas after Zimri publicly sins with a Midianite woman. Pinchas' action puts a stop to the plague which took 24,000 lives and ultimately leads to Pinchas' elevation to a position of prominence. Commenting on the source of the "crying", Rashi writes that it was over Moshe's apparent inability to act. He had temporarily forgotten the halacha that one sinning with a non-Jewish woman publicly may be executed by "zealots". The Divine reason for his forgetting, Rashi

explains, was so that Pinchas should receive that which was destined for him.

Much was at stake here. Moshe's silence resulted in danger to the entire Jewish nation's existence (see Pinchas 25:11). Yet the stage was set for Pinchas, not Moshe, to rescue the Jewish people by removing the Divine anger and in so doing cause his own elevation. An important principle emerges from this episode. Every individual has his unique destiny to fulfill. The Master of Providence arranges the person's environment and sometimes even events concerning the entire Jewish people or even world events in order to allow that person to fulfill their destiny. Pinchas could have reasoned, "now Moshe is not acting; who am I to act?" and his destiny would have remained unfulfilled. Rather, upon consultation with his rebbe, he rose to the occasion. From here we learn further, suggests Rabbi M. M. Schneerson zt"l (whose *yahrzeit* was marked this past week), that just because a particular course of action or project was not attempted by even great people of previous or the current generation does not necessarily mean that the action should not be followed. Perhaps that course of action was reserved by Divine Providence for a particular individual to accomplish. However, as Pinchas did, any innovative action should only be done upon consultation with Torah giants.

A similar lesson seems to emerge from an episode occurring in next week's parsha, Pinchas, concerning the daughters of Tzafchad. They claim that they should be entitled to a share of land in Eretz Yisrael since their father died without sons. Moshe, upon presenting their claim to Hashem, indeed confirms their right to such a portion. There too, Rashi (27:55) similarly comments that the reason why that halacha was not originally revealed to Moshe was so that this portion of the Torah should be revealed through the request of these righteous women who desired a portion of the Holy Land. Interestingly, Ramban notes that unlike all the other tribes, whose sons are described in the parsha and not their daughters, Asher's daughter, Serach, is listed together with Asher's sons-as are the daughters of Tzafchad under the tribe of Menashe. Citing Targum Onkelos, who translates "and the name of the daughter of the wife of Asher was Serach", Ramban explains that Serach was the daughter of Asher's wife who had been previously married and that Serach was an only daughter to her father. The purpose of the Torah listing all of the children of the tribes at this point is to indicate to whom the Land of Israel would be divided (Pinchas 26:53). Serach is therefore listed among the other sons of the tribes, as are the daughters of Tzafchad, since she too, having no brothers, would inherit land in Israel just as the daughters of Tzafchad would. If so, why didn't Serach, an extremely pious, wise woman who merited a very long life (see Sota 13a, Koheles

Rabba 9:2 and elsewhere), also request a share of Eretz Yisrael? The answer would appear to be that Serach's unique mission was expressed through her other accomplishments. It was not her destiny to be the cause of the revelation of a new portion of Torah. This was the mission of the daughter's of Tzafchad- just as it was not Moshe's destiny to stop the plague by killing Zimri; this was to be Pinchas's role.

A well-known Midrash states that there are 600,000 letters to the Torah, the original number of the People of Israel. One of the messages of this Midrash is that each member of Klal Yisrael, man or woman, has a unique set of tasks specifically designated for him or her to accomplish. The Talmud states "makom hinichu li avosai l'hisgadier bah-my ancestors have left me room to make my mark!" (Chulin 7a). May we all merit to utilize the tools which Hashem has provided for us to fulfill our unique mission in our lives. (See also *Lo Tachmod: Mazal, Destiny and the Prohibition Against Coveting* <[http://www.torahweb.org/torah/2006/parsha/rhab\\_yisro.html](http://www.torahweb.org/torah/2006/parsha/rhab_yisro.html)> for additional material on the topic presented here.) © 2008 Rabbi Y. Haber

#### **RABBI AVI WEISS**

## **Shabbat Forshpeis**

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

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

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

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

As Sdom is destroyed, an angel of G-d tells Lot to run to the mountain. This is commonly understood to

be a reference to Israel. (Genesis 19:17) Lot refuses, insisting that were he to return, evil would consume (tidbakani) him. (Genesis 19:19)

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

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

One wonders if Moab ever returns? Is the breach between Moab and Israel ever narrowed? Interestingly in the Book of Ruth, Ruth, as opposed to her Moabite ancestor, insists that she will never leave the side of her stepmother Naomi. Ruth the Moabite tells Naomi that she will return with her to Israel. Unlike Balak who wished to destroy Israel's covenantal relationship with G-d, Ruth becomes the example par excellence of the person who renews that relationship. Not coincidentally when the Book of Ruth describes Ruth remaining with Naomi it uses the very word that describes Lot remaining apart from Abraham—the word *davka* (Ruth 1: 14)

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

The Torah seems to be teaching an important lesson which the Torah also alludes to in the Book of Devarim: children should not be punished for the mistakes of parents. As Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach would always say: you never know. You never know when people will return. It may not happen in this generation or even the next, but the book should never be closed to the possibility of teshuva, returning to one another and returning to G-d. © 2008 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 BORUCH LEFF**

### **Kol Yaakov**

**T**he headlines shock us. It seems like every few weeks the newspapers report more and more crime scandals involving famous athletes or Hollywood celebrities. Some of the "heroes" that many of us grew up admiring turn out to be abhorrent criminals. In fact, it appears that involvement with drugs, alcohol, DWI, theft, murder and the like, is far more prevalent proportionally in celebrity circles than in the rest of society. Why do so many of the rich and famous have such a difficulty living moral lives?

The explanation has many facets. But the most significant one is discussed in Parshat Balak. Parshat Balak describes the story of the gentile prophet, Bilaam, and his failed attempt to curse the Jewish people. Rashi (Bamidbar, 22:5) inquires as to G-d's purpose in making the evil Bilaam a prophet in the first place: "Why did the Holy One rest his Divine Presence upon a wicked gentile? So that the nations of the world should not have an excuse (as to why they didn't serve G-d). They would have said, 'If we had prophets, we would have repented.' So G-d established prophets for them."

We are left dissatisfied. Did Rashi answer his question? Can't the nations of the world still claim that G-d didn't play fair? To the Jews, G-d gave the holy and righteous Moshe to lead, but to the gentiles, G-d gave the evil Bilaam! The nations will still say that had G-d given them a holy and righteous prophet, they would have served G-d properly. Instead they had a wicked leader and prophet in Bilaam, so is it any wonder that they didn't serve G-d? What does Rashi mean?

Inescapably, we must understand the following. It is impossible that G-d would give the gentiles a leader who is corrupt, inept and downright evil in Bilaam. If He would do so, He would not be addressing the concern that the gentiles raised, as Rashi mentioned. Therefore, it must be that G-d searched all over the world for the right person to become the prophet of the gentiles. The best person for the position was Bilaam.

This is because the Bilaam that we know of post-prophecy is not at all the same Bilaam pre-prophecy. Before Bilaam became a prophet, he was super-righteous, holy, kind, and G-dly. He would analyze and criticize his own actions and continually work to grow spiritually. As Maimonides says (in his Laws of the Foundations of Torah, Yesodei Torah, Chapter 7):

"Prophecy can only be received by one who is extremely wise and learned, has mastered proper character traits, and battles and defeats his evil inclination constantly."

This would be true for Bilaam as well. Otherwise, he could not have merited prophecy. Bilaam was the best potential leader the gentiles had to offer paralleling Moshe in his supreme righteousness. This is why G-d chose him to be the prophet and leader of the gentiles. But this was all before he became a prophet. Once Bilaam became a prophet, he was spiritually destroyed. He was not able to handle the powerful experience of prophecy and it was at this point that he came to be the wicked Bilaam that we know.

Becoming a prophet corrupted him. At Sinai, G-d chose the Jewish People to be His holy nation and nation of priests, leading humanity to ethics, morals, and proper beliefs. The entire world is expected to fulfill

G-d's will and the Jews have the responsibility to lead the world on this path. This is the idea of the "Chosen People." As such, the Jews received prophets to guide them on their journey and responsibility. But how did they achieve the gift of prophets and prophecy?

Prophets are not created in a vacuum. Prophecy is not an artificial, superficial magic trick. It was only because Abraham was as great as he was, and he passed on his spiritual greatness to Isaac, who transmitted it to Jacob, and so on, that the Jewish people merited great prophets as leaders. Moshe may have been on the highest levels possible and may have received the clearest of prophecies (see Bamidbar 12-6:8), but he owed it all to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who established the roots of the nation that could produce a great prophet like Moshe. Prophecy only comes as a reflection of the entire nation. It will not come to an isolated individual who does not have the spiritual levels and backing of his/her nation.

Great people may individually merit becoming prophets but will not be able to do so if their nation and generation is not holy enough. If we lack prophets in modern times, it is not because individuals do not exist who are worthy, but is due to the nation's and generation's unworthiness. Prophecy cannot be achieved in a vacuum.

Bilaam was unable to handle prophecy because he had no nation backing him that was deserving of receiving it. Only the Jewish nation had a history as rich and as holy as it did, firmly rooted in the Patriarchs and Matriarchs, and only they could receive prophecy.

G-d's answer to the nations, according to Rashi, was: "Alright. I will give you a prophet chosen from your finest and most holy, and that person is Bilaam. But you will see what will happen to Bilaam and how much he will transform from holy to evil, when he becomes a prophet. He will be unable to control and gear his special power of prophecy and it will corrupt him because he is not designed for it. Only the Jewish people can produce prophets that remain responsible and sane as a result of the power of their heritage. This is exactly the lesson that I want to teach. I never sent a viable prophet to the other nations, not because I didn't want to or I was being unfair. Rather, it was impossible to send you such a prophet. If you receive something that is not designed for you, it corrupts you because it is too difficult for you to handle properly."

A power and gift that is given to a person that he cannot handle or maintain will corrupt him, making him into an evil person such as Bilaam.

Now back to our original question. Many celebrities have far too much money, power, and fame than they can handle. In addition, these gifts and blessings come to them so quickly that some of these stars have a tendency to abuse and misuse their money and fame. Instead of investing their millions

wisely, they spend and indulge like there is no tomorrow until they feel empty and bored. Thereafter, any pleasure becomes worth the price even if it means breaking the law, hurting others and even hurting themselves. They are given blessings that they are not adequately prepared for and inevitably, like Bilaam and his prophecy, they become corrupted.

There are many things in life that we wish we had. But if we were to attain these things, would it make us better people or would it corrupt us? How many people do we know who used to be great and kind but as soon as they became wealthy transformed into nasty and selfish beings?

G-d knows what we can handle and He gives us the things we need for our individual, personal service of Him. Let's appreciate what we have been given and not hope for things that may be out of our league. © 2008 Rabbi B. Leff & aish.com

### MACHON ZOMET

## Shabbat B'Shabbato

by Rabbi Amnon Bazak, Yeshivat Har Etzion

**B**alak Ben Tzipor is very afraid of the nation of Yisrael, and he therefore asks for help from the sorcerer Bilam Ben Be'or. There are many points of similarity between Balak's fears and those of Pharaoh in the beginning of the book of Shemot. Both nations fear the size of Yisrael. With respect to Egypt, it is written, "Behold, the nation of Bnei Yisrael is larger and greater than we are" [Shemot 1:9], while in this week's portion it is written, "Behold a nation has come out of Egypt, it has covered the surface of the earth" [Bamidbar 22:5]. In addition, "And Moav was very frightened of the nation because it was so large" [22:3], and "it is stronger than I am" [22:6]. The reaction was similar in both cases. "And they were disgusted by Bnei Yisrael" [Shemot 1:12]. "And Moav was disgusted by Bnei Yisrael" [Bamidbar 22:3]. Pharaoh is afraid, "And if a war comes they will join our enemies and fight us and rise up from the land" [Shemot 1:10], while in this week's portion it is written, "Perhaps we can strike them and expel them from the land" [Bamidbar 22:6].

The two kings tried to fight Bnei Yisrael in different ways. Pharaoh took a path of oppression and murder, while Balak tried magic and sorcery. Both kings failed, as is noted by the sages: "Pharaoh commanded, but G-d did not command, rather 'the more he oppressed them the more they grew larger and multiplied' [Shemot 1:12]... Balak and Bilam tried to curse Yisrael, but G-d did not want to." [Tanchuma Toldot 5]. In any case, it is interesting to note why the Torah described these two figures in a similar way.

Evidently the main point that the Torah is trying to convey in the beginning of this week's Torah portion is related to Balak's basic mistake. Balak's claim with respect to leaving Egypt appears twice in the passage, both when he says to Bilam "Behold a nation has come

out of Egypt" [Bamidbar 22:5] and when Bilam quotes the words of Balak to G-d, "Balak Ben Tzipor, the King of Moav, sent a message to me: Behold the nation which came out of Egypt..." [ 22:10-11]. But Bilam says something else. Bnei Yisrael did not come out of Egypt, they were taken out? by the Almighty. "G-d has taken him out of Egypt, he has the strength of a ram" [23:22; 24:8]. The fact that this statement is repeated proves that it is a central element of Bilam's thought. Balak's entire approach is based on his secular viewpoint of reality, without any understanding that it was G-d who took Bnei Yisrael out of Egypt.

And this explains why the Torah indicates that Balak was similar to Pharaoh, the first king who declared, "Who is G-d, that I should listen to Him?... I do not know G-d, and I will not send Bnei Yisrael away." [Shemot 5:2]. The refusal to recognize G-d is what led to Balak's basic mistake, just like the similar attitude of Pharaoh. If Balak had come to the correct conclusion about the way Yisrael left Egypt, there would not have been any need for him to be humiliated by Bilam.

**RABBI DOVID SIEGEL**

## Haftorah

**T**his 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. © 2008 Rabbi D. Siegel & torah.org

### RABBI SHLOMO KATZ

## HaMa'ayan

In this week's parashah we meet Bilam, the gentile prophet who is called upon by the Moabite king Balak to curse Bnei Yisrael. R' Avigdor Nebenzahl shlita (rabbi of the Old City of Yerushalayim) observes that when one reads the parashah superficially, Bilam appears to be a perfect tzaddik. Throughout the parashah, Bilam asserts repeatedly that he cannot do anything against Hashem's will; he cannot speak a word that G-d has not commanded. Do we acknowledge this?

Yet, Bilam is counted by the Sages (Sanhedrin 90a) as one of the seven people who have no share in the World-to-Come. Indeed, the gemara (ibid. 106b) states that any negative inference that can be drawn from a verse regarding Bilam should be drawn (in contrast to the general rule that one should interpret people's actions favorably, even the actions of other wicked people who have no share in the World-to-Come). How is this consistent with the image of Bilam that our parashah conveys?

R' Nebenzahl explains: Bilam's righteous image was part and parcel of his wickedness. The midrash states that Bilam was the same person as the trickster Lavan. Whether this is meant literally or whether it simply means that Bilam was a disciple of Lavan's ways, it conveys that Bilam was thoroughly deceitful. Bilam's piety was itself an act! After all, did he really have to ask Hashem whether he should curse Bnei Yisrael? Did he think that Hashem performed the ten plagues, split the sea and appeared at Har Sinai just to have Bnei Yisrael die in the desert? Of course not!

What was Bilam's end? The same end that befalls so many dishonest people. Bilam's patron, Balak, soon realized that this "prophet" was a fraud, but Bilam himself believed his own lies. He even had the audacity to pray (23:10), "May my soul die the death of the upright and may my end be like his." We should not wonder that someone whose entire life is a lie convinces himself that he will share eternity in the company of the greatest tzaddikim. (Sichot L'sefer Bemidbar) © 2008 Rabbi S. Katz & Project Genesis

