

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**RABBI DOV KRAMER**

### Taking a Closer Look

“**A**nd Balak slaughtered cattle and sheep, and sent it to Bilam and the officers who were with him” (Bamidbar 22:40). This verse seems superfluous to the narrative of Balak hiring Bilam to curse Israel. Is it really that important for us to know that Balak fed Bilam and the officers? Would we have otherwise thought that that they were fasting? Would it have made any difference if they were?

Rashi tells us that the "cattle and sheep" constituted a minimal amount. [How this is understood from the verse is the subject of much discussion in the commentaries, and beyond the scope of this piece. The explanation I appreciated most (so far) is that of Rabbi Sh'muel Al-Moshnainu (an early commentary on Rashi), who points out that if there were more than a couple of animals slaughtered, they wouldn't have been slaughtered and then sent to Bilam (et al), but sent while still alive and slaughtered there. After all, it is much easier to transport livestock while they are able to transport themselves than having to carry the carcasses. For other explanations, see Mizrachi, Malbim, Bartenura, Matnos Kehuna, and others.] It would seem, then that at least one of the reasons the Torah included this information is to point out that Balak only sent Bilam a small amount of food. The question becomes why it was important for us to know this.

The Midrashim that Rashi is likely based on (Tanchuma 11/15, Bamidbar Rabbah 20:17) use Balak's stinginess to contrast Balak with Avraham, and the wicked (in general) with the righteous. Whereas Avraham promised only a little (Beraishis 18:5), he provided a lot (18:7). Balak, on the other hand, promised Bilam a lot (Bamidbar 22:17), but only gave him a small amount. It can therefore be suggested that the point of this verse is to teach us this very lesson, that we should be like Avraham and let our actions speak louder than our words, rather than being like Balak who talked a good game but never followed through. (This is how several of the commentaries understand Rashi.) However, Rashi is not bashful about teaching us lessons based on the Torah's narrative,

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especially when the lesson is taught by Chazal. Rashi not sharing this lesson with us indicates that he didn't think it was the (only) reason the Torah told us that Balak sent Bilam just a small amount of food.

There's another issue that needs to be addressed as well. Balak was trying to get Bilam to curse his enemies, and had promised a great reward for doing so. Why would Balak undermine his own goals by sending Bilam such a small amount of food? Bilam hadn't yet attempted to curse Israel; showing Bilam how cheap he was was counterproductive, sending the message that the "great reward" might not be so great after all. If anything, we would expect Balak to overwhelm Bilam with an extravagant meal, to entice him to complete the mission and receive much more. Was Balak so cheap that he was oblivious to the ramifications of letting Bilam know ahead of time that he shouldn't expect a big payoff even if he was successful at cursing Israel?

B'er BaSadeh, in order to answer this question, says that Balak sent a small meal because he didn't want Bilam to spend too much time eating, thereby delaying his cursing Israel. As long as this was communicated to Bilam, it is possible that Balak thought Bilam would believe it was true. However, the Midrashim that teach us the lesson of promising little but doing a lot (based on Balak's stinginess) end off by saying that Bilam retaliated by making Balak pay for 42 additional animals for offerings. Unless Balak was so blinded by his cheapness and desire to have Israel cursed, it is hard to understand why he would risk upsetting Bilam, or let him know ahead of time how cheap he really was, and possibly dissuade him from completing the mission.

Rabbi Shimon Sofer (Shir Me'on) suggests that Balak was afraid that Bilam would think a large meal was the "great reward" that had been promised. In order to avoid this misunderstanding, Balak purposely sent a meal so small that there was no way Bilam could think it was the reward. Unless the Torah wanted us to know (through the Midrashim) that Balak's plan had backfired (because Bilam was insulted rather than being more motivated), there would seem to be little reason to tell us about this meal. Besides, if the whole point of sending a small meal was to avoid any misunderstanding, Balak could have easily sent a message along with the meal that this was not the reward that had been promised. If anything, sending a big meal with such a message would accomplish much

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more ("just you wait to see what you'll really get" than sending a small meal without (or even with) clarification.

After initially refusing to let Bilam go to Moav with Balak's officers (Bamidbar 22:14), G-d gave permission to go "if they are calling for you" (22:20). Rashi explains that "for you" means "for your benefit," i.e. getting paid for going (see Rashi on 22:5 as well). Bilam was not allowed to curse Israel, nor be hired to curse Israel; he was only allowed to go if they would be honored enough by his presence to pay him for just going (an appearance fee). Upon arriving in Moav (22:37), Balak asked Bilam why he didn't come right away; "am I not able to honor you?" Included in Balak's question was a similar expression to the one used by G-d in stating the condition under which Bilam could go; "behold I sent for you, to call for you." It would seem, then, that the condition that G-d had set was fulfilled-Balak verified that the reason he sent for Bilam was "for him," i.e. for his benefit, which Rashi had told us meant getting paid whether he curses Israel or not. Bilam, ever mindful of disobeying G-d after his run-in with the angel on his way to Moav, makes it clear to Balak that his coming-and getting paid for coming-was not contingent on his ability to curse Israel; "behold I have come to you" (22:38), and fulfilled your request. As far as cursing Israel, though, "am I at all able to speak anything [other than the words] which G-d puts in my mouth?"

Balak couldn't have been too happy to hear these words. Did Bilam really expect to be given a great reward even if he didn't curse Israel? In order to send the message to Bilam, without having to explicitly speak it out, that any honor/reward will only be forthcoming if he curses Israel, Balak snubs him. Usually, the king invites special guests to a festive meal in his palace (see B'er Yitzchok). Instead, Balak sends food to Bilam (without joining him for the meal). And instead of sending a meal worthy of someone special, Balak sends a small meal, one that is just enough for Bilam (and the officers with him) not to go hungry. The message is clear; there will be no honor or reward unless Bilam is successful at cursing the enemy. Bilam resents the snub, but due to his own hatred of Israel, tries to curse Israel anyway.

All of Bilam's words sound very "frum" (religious). From the very beginning (22:8), and throughout the narrative (22:18, 22:38, 23:12, 23:26, 24:13), he insists that he will only say/do what G-d tells

him. After the angel stands in his way, Bilam offers to turn around and go back home (22:34). His actions, however, tell us just the opposite. Despite G-d telling Bilam that he can't go (22:12), he asks a second time (22:19). Despite G-d telling him not to curse Israel (22:12), he repeatedly tries to, even approaching things in different ways in order to accomplish this (24:1). Included in the actions that speak louder than his words is Bilam continuing to go along with Balak's request, even after knowing that the reward he was promised was not just for showing up (as G-d had insisted before Bilam went to Moav), but only if he was able to successfully curse Israel. © 2011 Rabbi D. Kramer

**RABBI AVI WEISS**

## Shabbat Forshpeis

In this week's portion, Balak King of Moab hires Bilaam to curse 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 Sodom and decides to separate from Abraham. (Genesis 13:10-12)

As Sodom is destroyed, an angel of G-d tells Lot run to the mountain, 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 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 insists that she will never leave 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, she becomes the example par excellence of the person who renews that relationship. Not coincidentally when the Book of Ruth describes Ruth remaining with Naomi it uses the very word that describes Lot remaining apart from Abraham - the word *avka* (Ruth 1: 14)

Here we have come full circle. Ruth of the people 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 that 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, perhaps not in their generation but in future generations. © 2011 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and President of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School - the Modern and Open Orthodox Rabbinical School. He is Senior Rabbi at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale, a Modern and Open Orthodox congregation of 850 families. He is also National President of AMCHA - the Coalition for Jewish Concerns.

#### RABBI BEREL WEIN

### Wein Online

**A**lthough Bilaam is the major villain of the piece in this week's parsha, we should not overlook Balak's nefarious role in the events described therein. Balak is the instigator of the whole plot to curse and destroy the Jewish people. He finances Bilaam and is most persistent in pursuing his evil goal. Even when Bilaam apparently despairs of the success of his mission and so informs Balak,

Balak nevertheless insists that he continue, for perhaps he will yet be able to curse the people of Israel. Often in Jewish history we find this scenario repeated, with those behind the scenes persistently encouraging the masses to destroy the Jews while they stay a pious distance behind, causing, but somehow apparently not participating in, the murderous mayhem.

As hate filled as Bilaam is he cannot operate alone. He needs financial and social backing for him to do his worst. Bilaam is eventually killed by the very people he attempted to destroy. But Balak always lives on to try again to accomplish the destruction of the Jewish nation. Balak never makes peace with the idea

that the Lord does not allow him his goal. His tenacity for hatred and evil behavior is his true hallmark of his identity.

Centuries later the prophet reminds us of Balak's scheme and advice to Bilaam and warns us somehow not to overlook Balak's role in this story of aggression and unreasoned hatred. Through remembering the original Balak, the prophet informs us that we will be better able to identify and deal with his successors in deceit and hatred throughout the ages.

It is not the suicide bomber - Bilaam - that is the only guilty party in terrorist attacks. It is the Balaks who send them and support them that are certainly equally as guilty. The pious human rights organizations that promote only hatred and violence under the guise of doing good deeds are also responsible for the loss of the precious lives of innocents caused by those whom they so nurture and support.

The Talmud stated this reality by coining the famous Jewish aphorism: "It is not the mouse alone that is the thief. It is rather the hole in the wall that allows the mouse entry into the house that is the real thief." It is the persistence of those that are determined to undermine the Jewish people and the State of Israel that places them as direct immoral descendants of Balak.

In the Pesach Hagadah we read that in every generation we face this challenge. No matter how many Bilaams we are able to dispose of, Balak somehow survives to continue to try again. The words of the prophet in this week's haftorah - to remember Balak's role in the story of the Jewish people in the desert of Sinai - are addressed to us and our times as well.

We should not be shocked, though our sadness over this fact is understandable, that the malevolence against Jews of the 1930's can repeat itself in 2011. As long as Balak still remains a force in the world the Jewish problem will not go away. © 2011 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](http://www.rabbiwein.com)

#### RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

### Shabbat Shalom

**“B**ehold, it is a nation that will dwell in solitude, and will not be reckoned among the nations" (Numbers 23:9)

From its context, this prophecy is clearly meant to be a blessing, a vision of Israel in splendid isolation and ideological triumph. Rashi (1040-1105), maintains that the patriarchs and matriarchs bequeathed us a unique set of values and a consecrated lifestyle which prevents assimilation into the venal and licentious practices of the surrounding nations. While every other nation eventually leaves the stage of world history, we alone will emerge victorious.

Balak reviles Balaam for this laudatory vision: "What have you done to me? I hired you to curse my enemies, and behold, you have blessed, yes blessed, them" (Numbers 23:11).

However, when we look upon the past 2,000 years of Jewish history, the first part of Balaam's prophecy has indeed been fulfilled - but not as a blessing. Until the establishment of the State of Israel, we were helplessly hounded from pillar to post by the nations of the world - until we truly stood alone in the midst of the Nazis' attempted genocide. Even now, with the establishment of the state - when we do have the ability to defend ourselves - we (and not the allies of Iran and al-Qaida) have again become the whipping boy not only of the Arab bloc, but also of the European Union, the United Nations and even of the American president.

Yes, we stand in isolation - but "stinking" isolation rather than splendid isolation. How can we understand this?

Hitler - like his present-day jihadist heirs - sought world domination by the sword. But at the same time he was building military prowess to destroy the free world, he was also waging a diabolical campaign to dehumanize and decimate the Jewish people. Why the Jews?

You see, fascist Hitler believed in Aryan supremacy, in "might makes right," in "to the victor belong the spoils." And he belonged to the race of "ubermenschen" who had conquered Germany and would conquer the world. But there was one fly in his ointment: the Jews. The Jews believed in a principle deriving from their patriarch Abraham 4,000 years ago that "compassionate righteousness and moral justice" would take over the world (Genesis 18:19); that through them, the world would be blessed with peace and freedom.

Hitler wanted to believe that the Jews were "selling" a slave morality based on their own need for the world's compassion. But he could not deny the fact that they - the most powerless of people - had nevertheless survived the persecutions of Egypt, Persia, Greece, Rome, the Ottoman Empire and the Catholic Church. This gave credence to their claim that they were indeed G-d's witnesses, entrusted with the mission of enthroning the G-d of the Ten Commandments as the world's only "Leader." And so he became obsessed with the Jews, and was hell-bent on obliterating Judaism - and its message of love, compassion and morality.

The Talmudic tractate Pesachim (our festival of freedom and redemption) was among the few personal effects Hitler brought with him into the bunker where he committed suicide. It was given to Rabbi Isaac Halevi Herzog, then Chief Rabbi of Israel. The failed Fuehrer probably believed he was burying the Talmud; instead, the Talmud buried him.

But the world is still not ready to accept our morality, hypocritically siding with those who send out suicide bombers and target innocent civilians, with those who repress the rights of their own citizens (women, Christians, Kurds and Jews). They would rather revile Israel as an apartheid and terrorist state. Yet Israel enables enemy Arab voices to be heard in its parliament; Israel avoids aerial bombing to prevent the death of innocents whenever possible, even at the risk of its own soldiers. Israel alone in the world is standing up to the scourge of terrorism.

And so the words of Balaam remain as a promise and a challenge. At the conclusion of this portion, Balaam understands that no external force can vanquish Israel; we can only vanquish ourselves if we fall sway to the surrounding immorality.

But if indeed we continually measure our morality not only against the perverted standards of our enemies but also against the majesty of the Ten Commandments, we are guaranteed that not only will we survive but we will prevail. ©2011 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

**RABBI ZVI SOBOLOFSKY**

## TorahWeb

**“M**ah tovu ohalecha Yaakov" (Bamidbar 24:5). The tents of Yaakov have always been the source of strength of the Jewish People. Chazal teach us that the content of Bilam's blessings to the Jewish People were the opposite of his original intention. Bilam understood that the only way to destroy the Jewish People was by attacking the tents of Yaakov. What are these tents of Yaakov and how can we strengthen them thereby protecting our nation?

In Parshas Toldos we read about Yaakov as the yoshev ohalim-the dweller of tents. Chazal interpret this to be referring to the tents of Torah, particularly the beis medrash of Shem and Ever. It is these tents of Torah that serve to protect his descendants throughout the generations. When Yitzchok blesses Yaakov, he declares, "hakol kol Yaakov v'hayodayim yedei Esav-the voice is of Yaakov yet the hands belong to Esav." Chazal saw in these words a prophecy that it is only through the voice of Yaakov in the beis medrash that we overcome the threat of the "hands of Esav"-those who wish to annihilate Yaakov.

"K'nechalim nitayu-like streams spread out" (Bamidbar 24:6). Bilam continues to describe these tents as being compared to streams of water. Chazal elaborate upon this comparison by explaining that just as a stream can purify, so too can these tents of Torah purify. Furthermore, the laws of immersion in a stream, i.e. a mikva, serve as a model to how we should approach Torah study. One who does not immerse oneself entirely in a mikva remains impure; if even one hair remains outside the mikva, the entire tevila is invalid. Similarly, Torah study requires a total

commitment that our entire being be immersed in our learning when we enter the tents of Yaakov. A person who immerses in a mikva yet is still holding onto the very same item that made him impure (tovel v'sheretz b'yado) has accomplished nothing. So too one who immerses in Torah and yet refuses to cast off those influences that are antithetical to Torah study will not be able to attain the purity of the tents of Yaakov.

"Ki mal'a ha'aretz da'as es Hashem kamayim layam mechasim-for the Earth will be filled of knowledge of Hashem as the waters cover the sea."

Yeshayahu Hanavi speaks of a time when the world will be filled with the knowledge of Hashem as the waters fill the ocean. What is the significance of the comparison of Torah specifically to the ocean waters?

"Kol hanechalim holchim el hayam-all the streams lead to the ocean" (Koheles 1:7). Water collects in areas where the ground level is lower, and the great depths of the ocean are able to receive all the water that flows into them. So too, the knowledge of Hashem can only collect within those who make themselves into a "low area", i.e. are humble. One who is constantly focusing on oneself has no receptacle for the Torah knowledge to collect in. Chazal saw this concept alluded to by the Torah's description, "lo bashomayim hi-the Torah is not in heaven" (Devarim 30:12). The Torah cannot be found within those who think too highly of themselves. It was not coincidental that Moshe Rabbeinu who was the greatest talmid Chacham ever was also the most humble man who ever lived. Yeshayahu Hanavi speaks of a time in which man will humble himself, thus enabling the knowledge of Hashem to permeate the world as the water fills the ocean.

The tents of Torah which are compared to streams of water are the eternal source of strength for the Jewish People. These tents must be entered wholeheartedly, leaving behind the influences that have no place within them, and they must be entered with a spirit of humility. Only in this way can they continue to be a source of strength for our people. © 2011 Rabbi Z. Sobolofsky and The TorahWeb Foundation

**CHIEF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS**

## Covenant & Conversation

**T**he dictionary defines epiphany as "a sudden manifestation of the essence or meaning of something; a comprehension or perception of reality by means of a sudden intuitive realization." This is the story of an epiphany I experienced one day in May, 2001, and it changed my perception of the Jewish fate.

It was Shavuot, and we were in Jerusalem. We had gone for lunch to a former lay leader of a major Diaspora community. Also present at the table was an Israeli diplomat, together with one of the leaders of the Canadian Jewish Community.

The conversation turned to the then forthcoming-now notorious-United Nations' Conference against Racism at Durban. Though the conference would not take place until August, we already knew that it and the parallel gathering of NGOs would turn into a diatribe against Israel, marking a new phase in the assault against its legitimacy.

The diplomat, noting that the conversation had taken a pessimistic turn, and being a religious man, sought to comfort us. "It was ever thus," he said, and then quoted a famous phrase: "We are am levadad yishkon, the people that dwells alone."

It comes from this week's parsha. Bilam, hired to curse the Jewish people, instead repeatedly blesses them. In his first utterance he says to Balak king of Moab: "How shall I curse, whom G-d hath not cursed? or how shall I defy, whom the Lord has not defied? From the top of the rocks I see him, and from the hills I behold him: lo, it is a people that dwells alone, not reckoned among the nations." (Num. 23:8-9)

Hearing these words in that context I experienced an explosion of light in the brain. I suddenly saw how dangerous this phrase is, and how close it runs the risk of being a self-fulfilling prophecy. If you define yourself as the people that dwells alone, you are likely to find yourself alone. That is not a safe place to be.

"Are you sure," I said to the diplomat, "that this was a blessing, not a curse? Remember who said it. It was Bilam, and he is not known as a friend of the Jews." Bilaam is one of the people mentioned in the Mishna (Sanhedrin 10:2) as having no share in the world to come. Having failed to curse the Israelites, he eventually did them great harm (Numbers 31:16).

"Remember," I continued, "what the Talmud says in Sanhedrin (105b), that all the blessings with which Bilam blessed the Jewish people turned into curses with the sole exception of the phrase, 'How goodly are your tents O Jacob, your dwelling places O Israel.'" The rabbis suggest that Bilam was deliberately ambiguous in what he said, so that his words could be understood as blessings, but also had another and darker meaning.

"Nor," I said, "is badad, being alone, a good place to be according to the Torah. The first time the words 'not good' appear in the Torah are in the phrase Lo tov heyot ha'adam levado, 'It is not good for man to be alone' (Gen. 2:18). About a leper the Torah says, badad yeshev michutz lamachaneh moshavo, 'He shall dwell alone, outside the camp' (Lev. 13:46). When the book of Lamentations seeks to describe the tragedy that has overtaken the Jewish people it says Echah yashva vadad ha-ir rabati am, 'How alone is the city once filled with people' (Lam. 1:1). Except in connection with G-d, being alone is rarely a blessing."

What I suddenly saw when I heard the diplomat seeking to give us comfort was how dangerous this Jewish self-definition had become. It seemed to sum up

the Jewish condition in the light of anti-Semitism and the Holocaust. But that is not how the commentators understood the phrase. Rashi says it means that Jews are indestructible. Ibn Ezra says it means that they don't assimilate. Ramban says it means that they maintain their own integrity. It does not mean that they are destined to be isolated, without allies or friends. That is not a blessing but a curse. That is not a destiny; still less is it an identity.

To be a Jew is to be loved by G-d; it is not to be hated by Gentiles. Our ancestors were called on to be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." The word *kadosh*, "holy," means set apart. But there is a profound difference between being apart and being alone.

Leaders are set apart, but they are not alone. If they really were alone, they could not be leaders. Athletes, actors, singers, pianists live apart when they are preparing for a major performance, but they are not alone. Their apartness is purposeful. It allows them to focus their energies, hone and refine their skills. It is not an existential condition, a chosen and willed isolation.

There is no suggestion in the Torah that Jews will live alone. G-d says to Abraham, "Through you all the families of the earth will be blessed." Abraham was different from his neighbours, but he fought for them and prayed for them. He was apart but not alone.

Two features have characterised the state of Israel in recent years: first, a deep and dangerous isolation in the international arena; second, a notorious and astonishing failure to make its case, to explain convincingly to the world why it does what it does.

This long puzzled me until, at that lunch on Shavuot 5761/2001, I understood. If you believe it is your destiny to be alone, that you are fated to be hated, you will not seek friends. You will not try to make your case since you are convinced in advance that the effort will fail. You will then blame this failure on other people's anti-Semitism instead of on your own failure to explain why you do what you do.

The word used in this context-*hasbara*-is wrong. It suggests that what is at stake is mere public relations. That is not so. What is at stake is the biblical command, *veheyitem neki'im*, "you shall be innocent" (Num. 32:22), understood by the rabbis to mean: you shall be above suspicion (Pesachim 13a).

The Talmud says that "One who is wrongly suspected must make the facts known to the person who suspects them" (Berakhot 31b). It learns this from the case of Hannah, who was praying with such deep emotion that Eli the priest thought she was drunk. She explained that she was not drunk; she was praying in anguish and sorrow (1 Samuel 1:15-16).

Why did she bother to explain? Her prayer concerned G-d, not Eli the priest. But she took the trouble to clear her name. Jewish law has two principles, *mipnei chashad* and *mar'it ha-ayin*, which forbid certain behaviour precisely because it may be misunderstood and lead to wrongful suspicion.

Whatever position we take on the policies of the government and state of Israel, there is an obligation to explain why a nation chooses to do what it does. If what it does is morally justifiable then it can be defended. If it is not morally justifiable then it should not be done at all. This is not a matter of public relations. It is about truth and justice and the duty to educate the public. It is about "the crown of a good name."

The failure of Israel to take this seriously-using spokespeople who can't speak the language of their interviewers, appointing as ambassadors people without diplomatic qualifications, defying the media instead of working with it, and so on-is a standing danger to Israel and Diaspora Jewry alike. It is also a sign that Israel has entirely failed to understand the strategy of its enemies, who realise that delegitimation is a more effective form of war than one fought on a battlefield, and that isolating Israel weakens it more than missiles or terror can do.

However, if you believe in advance that you will fail to win friends and allies whatever you do, since it is your destiny to be a people that dwells alone, you will not make a serious effort. You will then find yourself alone, more convinced than ever that the world is against you. Aloneness will have become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Different, distinctive, apart-yes: these are part of the Jewish condition. But alone? No. That is not a blessing but a curse. © 2011 Chief Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and torah.org

#### **RABBI YISSOCHER FRAND**

### **RavFrand**

*Transcribed by David Twersky;*

*Technical Assistance by Dovid Hoffman*

In this week's parsha, Bilaam makes the statement "Even if Balak will give me his house full of gold and silver I would not be able to transgress the Word of the Almighty." [Bamidbar 22:18] Rashi comments that we see from here that Bilaam was greedy and he coveted the property of others.

Many commentaries ask on this Rashi from a Mishneh, which relates the story of Rabbi Yosi ben Kisma: "Once I was walking on the road when a certain man met me. He greeted me and I returned his greeting. He said to me, 'Rabbi, from what place are you?' I said to him, 'I am from a great city of scholars and sages.' He said to me, 'Rabbi, would you be willing to live with us in our place? I would give you thousands upon thousands of golden dinars, precious stones and pearls.' I replied, 'Even if you were to give me all the silver and gold, precious stones and pearls in the world, I would dwell nowhere but in a place of Torah.'" [Avot 6:9]

The question is, why is Rabbi Yosi ben Kisma any different than Bilaam? If Rashi says that Bilaam's suggestion and rejection of the possibility that he

receives an exorbitant salary shows that he is a greedy person, why don't we say the same thing about the apparently similar statement by Rabbi Yosi ben Kisma?

The Torah Temima raises this question and explains that in the case of Rabbi Yosi ben Kisma, someone already brought up the subject of an exorbitant salary. In that case, it was proper for the rabbi to answer as he did. Once someone broached the subject of money, then the appropriate response is "even if you can give me all the money in the world, I will only live in a place of Torah!" The officers of Balak, on the other hand, only offered to give Bilaam "honor". Bilaam raised the issue of money and said, "even if you give me a million dollars, I am not going to transgress G-d's Word." This, Rashi says, proves he had his eye on the money the whole time.

The Chidah, in his Sefer Roshei Avos, writes a different answer to this question. Bilaam's words are "I am unable to transgress the Word of my G-d." This implies "between you and me, I would love to do it, but my hands are tied-I am not able to violate Hashem's command." Rabbi Yosi ben Kisma made a blanket statement of principle: "I will only live in a place of Torah." That statement represented his personal inner desire, rather than a coerced course of action.

I also saw a third distinction. Bilaam's problem was that he wanted OTHER people's money. He does not state "If Balak will give me a house full of money..." He states "If Balak will give me HIS house full of money..." This indicates that beyond just wanting the money, he really wanted that someone else should NOT HAVE the money. He is like the person who is not really bothered by the fact that he has to drive a 10-year-old car. However, he is bothered that his neighbor has a new car. Rav Yosi ben Kisma merely refers to "all the money in the world." He does not hint that he wants other people's money.

I am sure that this does not exhaust the possibility of answers. Feel free to discuss this further and suggest other answers at your Shabbos table.

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### 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 in tact. 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. © 2011 Rabbi D. Siegel & torah.org

#### SHLOMO KATZ

### HaMa'ayan

**“B**alak slaughtered cattle and sheep and sent to Bil'am and to the officers who were with him." (22:40) Who were these "officers"? The Torah mentions only that Bil'am traveled with two lads, not with officers!

R' Chaim Tirer z"l (better known as R' Chaim of Czernowitz; died 1817) explains: The midrash relates that Bil'am was insulted that Balak sent only one bull and one sheep for his dinner. Why? Aren't one bull and one sheep more than enough for three people (Bil'am and his two attendants)?

R' Chaim answers that the officers were other people whom Balak sent to eat with Bil'am. That was an insult to Bil'am, for proper hachnassat orchim / hosting guests requires either that the host eat the first meal with the guest or that the host personally attend to the guest. [R' Chaim adds parenthetically that this is the meaning of the verse (Bereishit 18:8), "He (Avraham) stood over them beneath the tree and they ate." Because Avraham "stood over them" and served them, it is as if they all ate together.] By sending animals to Bil'am to eat with Balak's officers-but without Balak himself-Balak insulted Bil'am. Why did Balak do this? Because, when Bil'am said (Bemidbar 22:38), "Whatever word G-d puts into my mouth, that shall I speak!" Balak knew that Bil'am would be of no help to him. (Be'er Mayim Chaim)

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