

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**CHIEF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS**

### Covenant & Conversation

The year is 1933. Two Jews are sitting in a Viennese coffee house, reading the news. One is reading the local Jewish paper, the other the notoriously antisemitic publication *Der Stürmer*. "How can you possibly read that revolting rubbish?" says the first. The second smiles. "What does your paper say? Let me tell you. The Jews are assimilating. The Jews are arguing. The Jews are disappearing. Now let me tell you what my paper says. The Jews control the banks. The Jews control the media. The Jews control Austria. The Jews control the world. My friend, if you want good news about the Jews, always read the antisemites."

An old and bitter joke. Yet it has a point and a history and it begins with this week's parsha. Some of the most beautiful things ever said about the Jewish people were said by Bilaam: "Who can count the dust of Jacob ... May my final end be like theirs! ... How beautiful are your tents, Jacob, your dwelling places, Israel! ... I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a sceptre will rise out of Israel."

Bilaam was no friend of the Jews. Having failed to curse them, he eventually devised a plan that worked. He suggested that Moabite women seduce Israelite men and then invite them to take part in their idolatrous worship. 24,000 people died in the subsequent plague that struck the people (Num. 25, 31: 16). Bilaam is numbered by the rabbis as one of only four commoners denied a share in the world to come (Sanhedrin 90a).

Why then did G-d choose that Israel be blessed blessings by Bilaam? Surely there is a principle *Megalgelim zekhut al yedei zakkai*: "Good things come about through good people" (Tosefta Yoma 4: 12). Why did this good thing come about through a bad man? The answer lies in the principle stated in Proverbs (27: 2): "Let someone else praise you, and not your own mouth; an outsider, and not your own lips." Tanakh is

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perhaps the least self-congratulatory national literature in history. Jews chose to record for history their faults, not their virtues. Hence it was important that their praise come from an outsider, and one not known to like them. Moses rebuked the people. Bilaam, the outsider, praised them.

That said, however, what is the meaning of one of the most famous descriptions ever given of the people Israel: "It is a nation dwelling alone, not reckoned among the nations." (Num. 23: 9)? I have argued (in *Future Tense*) against the interpretation that has become popular in modern times, namely that it is Israel's destiny to be isolated, friendless, hated, abandoned and alone, as if anti-semitism were somehow written into the script of history. It isn't. None of the prophets said so. To the contrary, they believed that the nations of the world would eventually recognise Israel's G-d and come to worship Him in the Temple in Jerusalem. Zechariah (8: 23) foresees a day when "ten people from all languages and nations will take firm hold of one Jew by the hem of his robe and say, 'Let us go with you, because we have heard that G-d is with you.'" There is nothing fated, predestined, about antisemitism.

What then do Bilaam's words mean? Ibn Ezra says they mean that unlike all other nations, Jews, even when a minority in a non-Jewish culture, will not assimilate. Ramban says that their culture and creed will remain pure, not a cosmopolitan mix of multiple traditions and nationalities. Netziv gives the sharp interpretation, clearly directed against the Jews of his time, that "If Jews live distinctive and apart from others they will dwell safely, but if they seek to emulate 'the nations' they 'will not be reckoned' as anything special at all."

There is, however, another possibility, hinted at by another antisemite, G. K. Chesterton (that Chesterton was an antisemite is not my judgment but that of the poet W. H. Auden).<sup>1</sup> Chesterton famously

<sup>1</sup> Chesterton wrote: "I said that a particular kind of Jew tended to be a tyrant and another particular kind of Jew tended to be a traitor. I say it again. Patent facts of this kind are permitted in the criticism of any other nation on the planet: it is not counted illiberal to say that a certain kind of Frenchman tends to be sensual.... I cannot see why the tyrants should not be called tyrants and the traitors traitors merely because they happen to be members of a race persecuted for other reasons and on other occasions." (G.K. Chesterton, *The Uses of Diversity*, London, Methuen & Co., 1920, p. 239). On this Auden wrote, "The disingenuousness of this argument is

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wrote of America that it was "a nation with the soul of a church" and "the only nation in the world founded on a creed." That is precisely what made Israel different - and America's political culture, as historian Perry Miller and sociologist Robert Bellah pointed out, is deeply rooted in the idea of biblical Israel and the concept of covenant. Ancient Israel was indeed founded on a creed, and was, as a result, a nation with the soul of a religion.

All other nations, ancient and modern, have arisen out of historical contingencies. A group of people live in a land, develop a shared culture, form a society, and thus become a nation. Jews, certainly from the Babylonian exile onward, had none of the conventional attributes of a nation. They did not live in the same land. Some lived in Israel, others in Babylon, yet others in Egypt. Later they would be scattered throughout the world. They did not share a language of everyday speech. Rashi spoke French, Maimonides Arabic. There were many Jewish vernaculars, versions of Yiddish, Ladino and other regional Jewish dialects. They did not live under the same political dispensation. They did not share the same cultural environment. Nor did they experience the same fate. When the Jews of Spain were enjoying their golden age, the Jews of Northern Europe were being massacred in the Crusades. When the Jews of Spain were being persecuted and expelled, the Jews of Poland were enjoying a rare summer of tolerance. Yet they saw themselves and were seen by others as one nation: the world's first, and for long the world's only, global people.

What then made them a nation? This was the question R. Saadia Gaon asked in the tenth century, to which he gave the famous answer: "Our nation is only a nation in virtue of its laws (torot)." They were the people defined by the Torah, a nation under the sovereignty of G-d. Having received, uniquely, their laws before they even entered their land, they remained bound by those selfsame laws even when they lost the land. Of no other nation has this ever been true.

Uniquely then, in Judaism religion and nationhood coincide. There are nations with many religions: multicultural Britain is one among many. There are religions governing many nations: Christianity

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revealed by the quiet shift from the term nation to the term race."

and Islam are obvious examples. Only in the case of Judaism is there a one-to-one correlation between religion and nationhood. Without Judaism there would be nothing (except antisemitism) to connect Jews across the world. And without the Jewish nation Judaism would cease to be what it has always been, the faith of a people bound by a bond of collective responsibility to one another and to G-d. Bilaam was right. The Jewish people really are unique.

Nothing therefore could be more mistaken than to define Jewishness as a mere ethnicity. If ethnicity is a form of culture, then Jews are not one ethnicity but many. In Israel, Jews are a walking lexicon of almost every ethnicity under the sun. If ethnicity is another word for race, then conversion to Judaism would be impossible (you cannot convert to become Caucasian; you cannot change your race at will).

What makes Jews "a nation dwelling alone, not reckoned among the nations," is that their nationhood is not a matter of geography, politics or ethnicity. It is a matter of religious vocation as G-d's covenant partners, summoned to be a living example of a nation among the nations made distinctive by its faith and way of life. Lose that and we lose the one thing that was and remains the source of our singular contribution to the heritage of humankind. When we forget this, sadly, G-d arranges for people like Bilaam and Chesterton to remind us otherwise. We should not need such reminding. © 2012 Chief Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and torah.org

**RABBI BEREL WEIN**

## Wein Online

**T**he Torah records for us in this week's parsha the appearance of an old enemy in a new guise.

According to Midrash, which reflects traditional rabbinic thinking on the subject matter being discussed, Bilaam had advised Pharaoh decades earlier to exterminate the Jewish people. Pharaoh, for various reasons and circumstances beyond his control, was unable to finish the job though vast numbers of Jews were consumed in his slave house and crocodile infested rivers.

Now Bilaam returns to the scene, this time as an ostensible agent of Balak but in reality as an independent agent of his own hatred of the Jews, determined to enforce his own nefarious plans to destroy the Jewish people. He is prevented from so doing by G-d's restraint placed upon him. Nevertheless thousands of Jews will die because of his advice and behavior.

Bilaam is the first Human Rights Organization of history. He speaks beautifully. Some of the finest Hebrew poetry spills from his tongue and mind. He has many complimentary things to say about Israel but as the rabbis put it: "From his words of blessing one can easily deduce what curses he really meant to utter against the Jewish people."

One need merely look behind the sanctimonious facade that defines Bilaam in order to glimpse the enemy that leers with hatred against the Jewish people, its Torah and its faith. Bilaam is the father of all hypocrisy and pious sounding criticism leveled against the Jewish people throughout the ages and currently against its lonely embattled great little state. Bilaam states, "How goodly are your tents, Jacob" and yet he compares us to a raging lion and a destroyer of other nations. Subtly, his compliments and blessings are clearly his curses.

In the last century much of the world attempted and abetted the murder of millions of Jews. Again, for various reasons the "Final Solution" to the "Jewish Problem" was not completed. So, like Bilaam, much of the world has withdrawn from outright advocacy of the genocidal destruction of Jews and has resorted to "blessing" the Jewish people and the State of Israel with pious NGO's, human rights organizations, UN commissions-all of which are dedicated to saving Israel from itself.

Unfortunately, but not surprisingly, there are many Jews overwhelmingly ignorant of their own faith and traditions, naive in believing the facade of Bilaam as being genuine, that have joined the chorus of Bilaam's hypocrisy and hatred.

Jews love Bilaam, his words, his lofty ideas, and his flattery. They find it hard to believe the worst about him and therefore the Jewish people and the State of Israel continually suffer grievous injury from his subtle attempts to harm and destroy. Bilaam builds altars to G-d and proclaims his righteousness and presents his credentials as prophet, wise man and noble human being.

He not only knows what is best for Israel, if they would only listen to his counsel and wisdom, but boasts that he knows the details of G-d's will as well. He possesses eternal truths and no facts or realities should be allowed to contradict his set ideas. He will kill us with kindness, with Rose Garden ceremonies and Nobel Prizes. But kill us he will, if he only can. So once again the Lord will have to stop him, as He undoubtedly will.

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#### **RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN**

### **Shabbat Shalom**

“**A** star shall shoot forth from Jacob...” (Numbers 24:17) What is the meaning of our faith in a Messiah and why is the Messianic vision prophesied by a Gentile prophet, Balaam?

At the conclusion of the morning prayers most, if not all Orthodox prayer books list the "Thirteen Principles of Faith" formulated by Maimonides including the declaration:

"I believe with complete faith in the coming of the Messiah; and even though he may tarry, nevertheless, I anxiously await him, every day, that he may come."

Despite our history of exiles and persecutions, belief in the Messiah remains one of the deepest sources of our national strength and resilience. The Sages of the Midrash express this in a most accurate and poetic fashion:

"The Messiah was born on Tisha B'Av (the ninth day of the Hebrew month Av, the annual fast day of mourning for the destruction of both Holy Temples) and Comforter (Menahem) is his name."

Our Sages are underscoring the truism that unfortunately, we only really appreciate what we have after we lose it; hence, our deep yearning for the Messiah and the national renaissance (Jewish sovereignty over the Land of Israel, the Holy Temple restored in Jerusalem) only became central pillars of Jewish prayer and expectation with the destruction of our Temple.

Moreover, it was specifically our belief in the ultimate vindication of our nationhood, and our mission to illuminate the world with compassionate righteousness, morality and peace that prevented us from being crushed on the rocks of despair.

The optimism of our faith in a perfected humanity at the end of the days, lies in stark contrast to the Greco-Roman pessimism which informs the myth of Sisyphus, much of Christianity and Freudian psychology. Our optimism is one of the greatest gifts Judaism has bequeathed to the world.

Fascinatingly, the explicit Pentateuch sources for Messianism are only to be found in three places: G-d's election of Abraham, Jacob's final blessings to his sons, and perhaps most specifically, in the words of the Gentile prophet Balaam.

G-d initially promises Abraham; "I will make you a great nation... He will bless those who bless you, those who curse you shall be cursed, and all the families of the earth shall be blessed through you". (Gen 12:1-3). The descendants of Abraham will form a great nation which will ultimately disseminate Abraham's ethical monotheism, compassionate righteousness and moral justice throughout the world. (Gen 18:18, 19),

At the conclusion of the Book of Genesis, Jacob gathers his sons around his death-bed to tell them what will befall them "at the end of the days" (Gen 49:1). Judah, the anointed leader (the Hebrew word Messiah refers to the King anointed with sacred oil) over his brothers, will eternally wield the "scepter" of rulership, into the period of Shiloh (Messiahship or Peace) when all the nations will surround him (See Gen 49:8-11).

But the most explicit reference is in our Biblical portion of Balak, which strikingly builds upon our previous sources. The Gentile prophet, Balaam, was hired by King Balak of Moab to curse the newly freed,

"invincible" Israelites, but Balaam cannot curse those blessed of G-d, "whose "blessers will be blessed and whose cursers will be cursed". (Numbers 24:9) Balaam then declares to Balak what Israel will do to Moab "at the end of the days,...when a star shall shoot forth from Jacob and the Judean scepter (shevet) from Israel, who shall crush the nobles of Moab . . . Israel will emerge victorious.... Amalek's end shall be eternal destruction". (Numbers 24:17-20)

What is especially noteworthy about Balaam's prophecy is that it is preceded by his assessment of the encampment of Israel: "How goodly (tov, morally and ethically excellent) are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling houses, Israel" (Numbers 24:5,6). He clearly sees their cleanliness, their modesty and their sanctity. As long as they are worthy, they must be blessed by G-d; this is Balaam's unmistakable message to Balak, as well as to subsequent Jewish and world history.

He also does not see the star "Messiah" as arriving immediately, "Messiah now". Much the opposite, "I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near- a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel; it shall crush the borderlands of Moab, and the territory of all the Shethites. Edom will become a possession, Seir a possession of its enemies, while Israel does valiantly". (Numbers 24: 17-20) The essence of our faith in the Messiah is our "anxious anticipation of his coming", preparing for him by making ourselves more worthy. This is the significance of the Maimonidean formulation with which we opened this commentary; this was the importance of the various "campaigns" of the peerless Rav Menachem Mendel Schneerson ztz"l (unfortunately, the Messianists miss the point!).

I heard it said in the name of the Chief Rabbi of England, my distinguished friend, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, that the Captain of the Ship is guided by the star even though he knows he will never quite reach it. One thing is certain: we cannot hope to be a Kingdom of priest-teachers to the nations of the world until we first become a holy nation ourselves.

Why then is the Messianic vision of the Pentateuch most explicitly expressed by a Gentile prophet? Perhaps because it is only when the Gentiles can truly say "How goodly are your tents, O Jacob" that they will want to learn from us; and only then will we be close to the striking distance of the star, destined to shoot forth from Jacob and bring blessings to all the families of the earth. © 2012 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

**RABBI DOV KRAMER**

## Taking a Closer Look

“**A**nd G-d's anger raged because he (Bilam) was going" (Bamidbar 22:22). The commentators are puzzled by this verse, as G-d had just given Bilam permission to go with Balak's men (22:20);

why was He now angry with Bilam for going if He had just told him that he could? Numerous answers are given, primarily revolving around the notion that G-d's permission was conditional ("if the men came to call on you, arise and go with them"). Bilam was not given permission to go to curse the Children of Israel; he could only go if there was a different reason to do so—such as getting paid even if he doesn't curse anyone (Rashi), whether by being a consultant (S'fornu), by getting an appearance fee as a visiting dignitary (Abarbanel), or by taking his "sorcery business" on the road where he can get new clients. Since Bilam went because he wanted to curse G-d's chosen nation (not any of those other reasons), G-d was angry with him.

Bilam's trip to Moav has generated much discussion as well, as his donkey saw G-d's angel well before Bilam did, and asked Bilam why he treated her so badly. Although the overwhelming majority of commentators (including Chazal) seem to take this story literally, Rambam (Moreh N'vuchim 2:42) says that any biblical narrative that involves an angel of G-d must have been either a dream or a vision, mentioning Bilam's trip with his donkey as one of the examples. Rambam's approach has been dissected by many, especially since several of the biblical narratives that include an angel (or more than one angel) are very difficult to explain as only being part of a prophetic dream or vision. Ramban discusses this at length in his commentary on Avraham's three angelic visitors (B'raishis 18:1), and Abarbanel tries to answer Ramban's questions on Rambam in his (Abarbanel's) commentary on Moreh N'vuchim. Some of Abarbanel's attempts to defend Rambam's position seem tenuous (at best), but that doesn't mean there aren't better approaches to address the questions Ramban (and others) pose. Nor does it mean that there are satisfactory answers to all of the questions that can be asked on Rambam's position.

Rabbeinu Bachye's approach to Avraham's visitors, that angels had taken over the bodies of real people (see <http://www.aishdas.org/ta/5766/vayeira.pdf>), seems to answer all of the issues that led Rambam to his position. Ralbag's approach to many of these biblical narratives, that it wasn't an "angel" but a prophet (both can be referred to as "Malachim"), also has its strengths and weaknesses. Nevertheless, regarding the Bilam narrative, Ralbag follows Rambam's approach, saying it only happened in Bilam's mind as part of a vision. It is therefore clear that even if we do not accept Rambam's position that every biblical narrative involving an angel must have been a dream or vision, we can still consider the possibility that some of them are. The biggest difficulty this position may have is that according to Rambam there is no need to introduce such narratives as being a dream or a vision; since they all are, it is self-evident. If, however, some are "real" and others are visions, we would expect some kind of introduction informing us that the following was a vision

or a dream. It just so happens that our narrative does have something that may qualify as such an introduction.

The first time that Balak's messengers approached him (Bamidbar 22:7), Bilam told them to stay overnight (22:8) so that he can find out what G-d wants him to do. When G-d "comes to him" (22:9), there is no need to tell us that it was at night, as this is obvious from the context of the previous verse. The second time, Bilam again tells Balak's messengers to stay the night (22:19) so that he can get further instructions from G-d. Yet, when G-d "comes to him" this time, we are told that it was "at night" (22:20). Why would the Torah need to tell us that G-d came to him at night? Isn't it obvious, since he just told Balak's messengers to wait there overnight so that he can see if G-d has anything to add? Why are we told it was "at night" the second time and not the first? If the narrative that follows was only a vision, something that happened in Bilam's dream ("at night") rather than something that happened in "real life," we can understand why we are told, as an introduction, that this happened "at night," i.e. in a prophetic, or pseudo-prophetic, vision.

Before dismissing the possibility that the narrative of Bilam's trip was a vision, Abarbanel references two approaches within that possibility; the "vision" could have occurred while Bilam was still in Aram, before he started the trip, or it could have happened after he had left, at some point along the way. If it was the latter, the extra "night" reference couldn't be telling us that the trip narrative was a vision, as the vision didn't occur on that night. Ralbag says that Bilam had this vision that same night, before he left Aram; he was so excited that G-d had given him permission to go that he dreamt he had already started his trip, and within that dream he had the "donkey vision" that concluded with the angel's warning. Even according to this approach, it would be difficult to say that the extra "night" reference is meant as a marker indicating that the narrative that follows was really a vision, as there is an interruption (G-d's message that Bilam can go as long as he follows His instructions) between the "marker" and the narrative it is supposed to "mark." I would like to suggest another option.

The "take-away" message from Bilam's encounter with the angel who had blocked his donkey's path was "go with the men, but only speak that which I tell you to speak" (22:35). As Rabbi Moshe Shamah ("Recalling the Covenant") points out (although he rejects both a literal understanding of the narrative and the notion that it was a dream or vision), this "bottom line" is remarkably similar to the message G-d gave Bilam that second night, right before his trip; "go with them, but only do that which I tell you." I would therefore suggest that they are one and the same; G-d "came" to Bilam by causing him to have this vision ("at night"), a vision whose take-away message was that even though He is allowing Bilam to go to Moav, it is only on the

condition that he follows G-d's instructions there. After giving us this "bottom line," the Torah relates how G-d communicated this message to Bilam, describing the vision through which this message was sent. Then, after telling us how Bilam was given this message, the Torah resumes its "real-life" narrative, with Bilam going with Balak's officers (22:35).

If the "donkey vision" was the means through which G-d gave Bilam permission to go to Moav, permission that was only granted at the end of that vision (22:35), we can understand why G-d was upset with him (22:22). Despite having been told (22:12) that he can't go, Bilam was so interested in cursing the Children of Israel that he started dreaming of leaving even before G-d told him that he is allowed to go (22:21). Rather than the sequence of events being: (1) G-d tells Bilam he can't go to Moav to curse His blessed nation; (2) Bilam asks again; (3) G-d says okay, you can go, as long as you don't curse His nation; (4) even though He had given Bilam permission to go, G-d gets upset that he went, --the sequence is: (1) G-d says no; (2) Bilam asks again and leaves before getting an answer; (3) G-d gets upset that he went despite having been told that he shouldn't; (4) Bilam offers to turn around and go back, at which point he is told he can go, as long as He doesn't curse G-d's chosen nation. Although the entire sequence occurred in his dream/vision, the bottom line is that Bilam left for Moav before he was told he can go, causing G-d to become angry with him. © 2012 Rabbi D. Kramer

#### MACHON ZOMET

## Shabbat B'Shabbato

by Rabbi Mordechai Greenberg

Rosh Yeshiva, Kerem B'Yavne

**B**ilam's advice about how to harm Bnei Yisrael was to make them fail in the matters of idol worship and illicit sex. "And the people began to have immoral encounters with the daughters of Moav" [Bamidbar 25:1]. "And Yisrael clung to Baal Pe'or" [25:3]. While the harsh punishment was because of the idol worship, Pinchas reacted to the contact with the daughters of Moav. And this was in spite of the fact that having sexual relations with a woman from Aram is not even an explicit prohibition in the Torah. However, lust is the root of all sin, as can be seen from the actions of Adam and Chava: "And the woman saw that the tree was good to eat and it was a delight for the eyes" [Bereishit 3:6].

The Marahal went into depth in analyzing the three main elements of a human being-intellect, soul, and body-which are related to three main organs- the brain, the heart, and the liver. The physical position of these organs shows the spiritual and idealistic relationship of the parts of man. The mind, at the top, controls all the limbs below it. The liver, which is responsible for the physiological operation of the body,

is below the brain and is under its control. And that is why a man stands upright, as opposed to the animals, with their heads down below, indicating that their only objective is the search for food. That is why the Rambam wrote (in the Eight Chapters, the introduction to Pirkei Avot) that one who follows his lust and is not guided by his intellect "is the same for me as an animal." The added value of a person is that he or she is guided by intellect, while an animal is dragged along by its emotions.

The acronym for the three organs-brain, heart, and liver [moach, lev, kaved] -- is "melech"-a king. A person who is guided by his intellect is described in Hebrew as one who is "nimlach"-following the mind. But when lust is in control, the proper order is reversed, and the brain is controlled by the liver, which represents lust.

"We have been taught by the sages: G-d is angry one time every day... And no creature can catch the specific moment of anger except for Bilam, the evil one, about whom it is written that 'he knows the opinion of the Holy One' [24:16]... The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to them, look how kind I was to you that I did not become angry during all those days... And that is what Bilam meant by saying, 'How can I curse when G-d did not curse, how can I be angry when G-d was not angry?' [23:8]." [Berachot 7a].

Tosafot explain that Bilam wanted to "plant" a very short curse at the moment of anger, namely, the single word "Kalem"-destroy them. But the Holy One, Blessed be He, rearranged the letters into "melech"-as is written, "He is the friend of a king" [Bamidbar 23:21].

The Chassidic approach notes that the word that Bilam wanted to use is a reversal of the proper sequence: liver, heart, and then brain. That is the essence of Bilam, who rode on his donkey. The sages taught us that the donkey said, "I let you ride on me during the day and treat me as a woman at night." Bilam, who was controlled by lust, wanted to reverse the natural sequence (and he succeeded in the end) and to cause Bnei Yisrael to fail because of their lust, which is the root of the sin of idol worship.

"One who desires will be set apart" [Mishlei 18:1]. When lust is in control a person becomes selfish and the result is that he is separated from other people. When a person is able to free himself from this ugly trait, he will merit the trait of royalty, as is written in the Zohar of Pekudai: "Melech- an acronym for 'One who has nothing of his own.'" © 2012 Rabbi A. Bazak and Machon Zomet

### **RABBI YISSOCHER FRAND**

## **RavFrاند**

*Transcribed by David Twersky; Seattle, WA  
Technical Assistance by Dovid Hoffman*

**T**his week's parsha contains the remarkable story involving Bilaam and his donkey "The donkey saw the angel of Hashem standing on the road with his

sword drawn in his hand, so the donkey turned away from the road and went into the field; then Bilaam struck the donkey to turn her back onto the road. The angel of Hashem stood in the footpath of the vineyards, a fence on this side and a fence on that side." [Bamidbar 22:23-24]

The Medrash writes in Bamidbar Rabbah that this scenario of "the fence on this side and a fence on this side" was a message to Bilaam: You will never be able to have any effect on these people, for these people are protected by the Two Tablets of Stone (Luchos) written by the "Finger of G-d" about which it is said that they are "written from this side and from this side". Obviously, this is a play on words. However, there must be something deeper here as well. There must be something about the Luchos concerning which it is written "m'zeh u'm'zeh hem kesuvim" that is the antithesis and the antidote for all that Bilaam stands for. What is the interpretation of this Medrash?

I saw an interesting explanation from the Tolner Rebbe [Rav Yitzchak Menachem Weinberg (Jerusalem)], shlit"a, in his Sefer Heimah Yenachamuni. Chaza"l say on the pasuk "There never again arose in Israel one like Moshe" [Devarim 34:10] that in Israel there never arose one like Moshe, but amongst the nations of the world there was such an individual. Who was that? It was Bilaam, the son of Beor. The Almighty anticipated the argument from the nations of the world "if we had for ourselves a prophet of the stature of Moses we would have turned out better." He did not want the nations to argue "It was not fair. It was not a level playing field." Therefore, the Almighty made Bilaam-the prophet of the nations-equal to Moshe in prophecy.

The problem is that Bilaam is one of the most despicable characters in all of Tanach. He is the paradigm of the person who has rotten Midos. Tractate Avos catalogs his evil character traits. He was arrogant, he was lustful, he was jealous, and he was greedy. Name a bad trait-he had it! In addition to having all these bad traits, he was an immoral person. The Gemara infers [Sanhedrin 105] that the donkey he rode on by day was also the creature that serviced him at night as well.

How could it be that a person who was gifted with such prophecy and with such understanding of the Almighty could remain the most despicable amoral and immoral person there is? The answer is because it was a gift on the part of the Ribono shel Olam that he should have this prophecy. Prophecy under normal circumstances is earned and achieved after years and years of work and self-improvement. Prophecy received "for free" is of a different nature.

The Mesilas Yesharim [Pathways of the Just] goes through the various human traits (based on the Beraisa regarding Rav Pinchas ben Yair) that are necessary to acquire in order to ultimately reach the top of the spiritual pyramid - Ruach HaKodesh [Divine

inspiration]. A person must work his way through all the other attributes in Mesilas Yesharim in order to reach Divine Inspiration, let alone prophecy. A Jew who takes the life-long process spelled out by the Ramcha"l in Mesilas Yesharim reaches the ultimate destiny of Ruach HaKodesh and then Nevuah (prophecy).

Bilaam, on the other hand, received it all one day as a gift. There was no self-improvement. There was no working on himself. The Master of the Universe gave it to him "for free" for the reason we mentioned-so that the nations would not have a "complaint" against Him. But Bilaam remained the same horrible person he had always been, who had just received the gift of prophecy without working for it. Therefore there was no contradiction.

We can understand this dichotomy by considering the following scenario. One person works hard at his business, putting in long hard hours and effort to build it up from scratch. Little by little, he is successful. The business expands, and then later it expands even further following additional successes. Finally, it becomes a public corporation and the entrepreneur winds up becoming a multi-millionaire. That kind of person can usually handle wealth because he knows what it was to be poor and he knows how hard it is to make a dollar. He knows it is not "easy come; easy go".

However, another person, who only has an 8th grade education, suddenly wins the Power Ball lottery and now comes into 250 million dollars. Often, such people do not know how to handle their wealth. There are stories galore of these types of people who had such wealth ruin their lives because they do not know how to handle money. They are taking all this money into a "vessel" that is not worthy of that money.

This was the scenario with Bilaam. "You Bilaam will never have an effect on the Jewish people because the Jewish people have the Luchos that are written on this side and this side, engraved on the tablets". When a person wants to describe something as being permanent, the expression used is "carved in stone". The allusion the Medrash is making by saying that Klal Yisrael have the Luchos which are written "from this side and from this side" is saying that what the Jewish people have achieved they have achieved through hard work, such that it becomes a permanent part of their being, etched in stone, as it were. Bilaam, however, you are just a flash in the pan. What you have been given in prophecy is not part of your essence. You will never be able to have an effect on them. © 2012 Rabbi Y. Frand and torah.org

#### **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 YISROEL CINER

## Parsha Insights

Unable to successfully curse Bnei Yisroel, Bilaam advises Balak to cause them to sin. This would accomplish his objective of distancing them from Hashem. This leads to our parsha's conclusion of Bnei Yisroel's strong attachment to the idol worship of Baal P'or.

Baal P'or had quite a strange form of worship. One would relieve themselves in front of, or on to, the idol. The gemara (Sanhedrin 64.) tells of a person who wanted to show the idiocy of this worship. He relieved himself and then used the nose of the idol itself to wipe himself. "Never before has anyone served the idol in such a meaningful way!", gushed the priest.

What was the meaning behind this form of worship? How could a generation that had experienced all of the miracles throughout the wilderness, that had tasted the sweetness of a true relationship with Hashem, be drawn to such a sick form of worship?!

The Ruach HaChaim (Avos 3:3) gives us an insight into Baal P'or. The sin of Adam Harishon caused the world to be changed in a very fundamental way. Just as he internalized evil and now had an internal drive to sin, so too, the world became a mixture of tov and ra, good and evil. Man's task was to sift through, rejecting and removing the ra and attaching to and strengthening the tov.

This is the process of our dealing with the food that grows from the 'accursed' earth. Our body pulls from the food the 'tov', the parts needed by the body, and eliminates the rest. In the 'asher yatzar' blessing recited after tending to bodily needs, the final words are that Hashem is 'maflee la'asos'- wondrous in His doing. This wonder is referring to the body's ability to choose what it needs and to reject the waste.

When Bnei Yisroel consumed manna, food from heaven, there was no bodily waste elimination! The manna, coming from heaven, never affected by the sin and subsequent curse, was totally tov! There was no ra for the body to eliminate!

Once this world has gone through this transformation of everything being a mixture of tov and ra, deviantly and defiantly serving pure ra, the forces of evil, is quite a challenge. Where can one find service to pure unadulterated ra? Baal P'or! All tov aspects have been removed by the body. All that remains is the stench of 100% ra!

Baal P'or was openly declared war against Hashem. Fighting against Him. Seeking to strengthen and increase the presence of ra. Bnei Yisroel, who felt forced into serving Hashem, looked to go all the way to the other extreme. They connected to Baal P'or.

Rav Chaim Shmuelovitz's explanation shows that this avodah zarah is really a lot 'closer to home' than we realize. We live in a society where anything goes. Any degenerate behavior is labeled an alternative lifestyle. Nothing is sacred. Let it all hang out. Or, as the Beatles sang, "Why Don't we do it in the Road?"!

What are the few areas where the line is usually drawn? "Hey, don't involve my mother!", is one, and religion, G-d, is another. When almost nothing is scared, a bit of reverence is usually left for G-d.

If one wants to really let it all hang out, to show that nothing is sacred, what does he do? Baal P'or. The whole service was to debase anything of value. To take your god and relieve yourself on him! Once I do that, I can do anything! Absolutely nothing is sacred. Wiping yourself with the nose of the statue takes this concept to an even higher madregah (level). Once one does that, can you expect him to give his seat on the bus to a senior citizen?! To not pick his nose in public? I'm free!!! I can do anything I want!

Bnei Yisroel who were so close to Hashem, who felt His constant watch and supervision, felt restricted. To them, Baal P'or, the epitome of 'freedom', had a tremendous attraction.

May we realize that the only true freedom comes from being in control of ourselves, adhering to the 'Toras Chaim', the instructions for life, given to us by the Source of all Life. © 2012 Rabbi Y. Ciner and torah.org

