

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

“**N**o black magic can be effective against Jacob, and no occult powers against Israel”(Numbers 23:23) Who controls the fortune and destiny of nations? Does the ebb and flow of history turn nondescript, banal and ordinary individuals into great heroic personalities, or do those extraordinary heroes create for themselves the perfect historic opportunities to demonstrate their courage and heroism? Perhaps it is neither history that creates great leaders nor great leaders who create history, but rather G-d, the Ruler of the Universe, who plans and controls the various moves of His puppet-pawns on the great earthly chess board in order to provide the end-game which has been His purpose from the beginning of time.

Or perhaps it is none of the above; perhaps there are certain soothsayers or magicians who know the secret formulae - or the black magic - to manipulate G-d and change reality to conform to their evil designs. Perhaps history is created by such demonic emissaries from the nether world, forces of darkness and destruction.

Or perhaps nations rise and fall due to the efforts of more benign, but no less dangerous, marketers for financial profit and personal political gain, who seize control of public opinion by painting certain peoples "black" and certain peoples "white," media moguls who understand that the bigger the lie, the greater the credulity.

I believe that these are precisely the issues being dealt with in this week's supernatural, eerie, comical, lyrical and prophetic portion of Balak. This portion follows the Israelite encampment on the plains of Moab and concludes just after the Israelites begin to behave immorally with the Moabite and Midianite women. Its narrative style is very different from most of the verses that precede and follow it; indeed, it could be removed from the Book of Numbers without affecting the storyline whatsoever.

Balaam enters the scene after the Israelites have gone through desert rebellions and reorganizations and finally seem to be succeeding in defeating several of the smaller Canaanite nations and preparing the next generation to enter the Land of Israel. The unasked question throughout the portion is who or what will ultimately be responsible for the

success - or lack thereof - of the Israelite nation in history? Balak, the King of Moab, is in mortal fear of this new "power" on the block, which defeated the mighty Egyptians and seems to be "licking up everything around them." (Numbers 22: 4) As they inch closer and closer to Moab and Midian, he convinces the elders of Midian to join him in hiring a voodoo soothsayer, Balaam, to curse and defeat Israel through his magic powers of the occult. Balaam informs them that he, too, is under the power of G-d, and that even he is not able to curse those who are blessed by G-d. He cannot even travel with them to observe the Israelites. However, he declines the job offer in such a way as to let his "clients" know that he will nevertheless attempt to manipulate G-d into allowing Israel to be cursed - and he does succeed in getting G-d to allow him to accompany the Moabite dignitaries.

At this point in the narrative, our sages declare that "G-d leads individuals in the path they wish to follow" (Makkot 10b) - so that if the evil voodoo man has chosen to curse, Israel shall indeed be cursed. But what follows is both comical and at the same time profound. Balaam saddles his donkey to travel with the Moabite king, but suddenly his donkey refuses to proceed, turning aside from the road and into the field. The donkey sees what the voodoo man has missed: G-d's angel will not allow Balaam to come through; G-d's angel is preventing the donkey from advancing with Balaam and Balak! The donkey then speaks, and, in so doing, demonstrates that speech is a gift from G-d. If G-d wishes a donkey to speak it will speak; and if G-d wishes Israel to be blessed, Israel will be blessed. Speech, whether blessings or curses, can only come from G-d.

The venal, virulent voodoo man still tries to manipulate G-d. He and Balak attempt to bribe G-d with sacrifices to allow for the cursing of the Israelites, but to no avail. Instead, Balaam expresses the most magnificent of blessings: "This is a nation with the ability to dwell alone, which does not have to be counted amongst other nations..." (Numbers 23:9) No black magic can be effective against Israel and no occult powers against Jacob..." (ibid. 23:23) How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your tabernacles, O Israel... (ibid. 24:5) A star shall go forth from Jacob, and a ruling scepter from Israel..." (ibid. 24:17) Israel shall emerge triumphant... in the end, Amalek will be destroyed forever. (ibid. 24:19-20)

**TORAS AISH IS A WEEKLY PARSHA
NEWSLETTER DISTRIBUTED VIA EMAIL
AND THE WEB AT WWW.AISHDAS.ORG/TA.
FOR MORE INFO EMAIL YITZW1@GMAIL.COM**

The material presented in this publication was collected from email subscriptions, computer archives and various websites. It is being presented with the permission of the respective authors. Toras Aish is an independent publication, and does not necessarily reflect the views of any synagogue or organization.

**TO DEDICATE THIS NEWSLETTER PLEASE CALL
(973) 277-9062 OR EMAIL YITZW1@GMAIL.COM**

"With that, Balaam set out and returned home. Balak also went on his way" (ibid. 24:25). But this is not how the portion concludes. As Chapter 25 opens, the Israelites behave immorally with Moabite women, and a prince of the tribe of Simeon publicly fornicates with a Midianite princess. A horrific plague overtakes the Israelites and Israel seems to be vanquished until Phinehas and eventually Moses punishes the wrongdoers, thereby inspiring national repentance.

The message is clear. Israel is to be blessed - but only if we serve G-d (and not idols) and act morally and ethically. Israel's success or lack of success is not dependent on voodoo men, black magic operators, even solely on G-d's will; it is ultimately dependent on our own moral actions. © 2013 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

There is an eternal debate amongst philosophers and criminologists as to whether the mob boss or the actual hit man is most culpable in the murder of a rival gang leader. Though both are certainly morally guilty, the question as to which one bears the legal onus for the crime, absent statutory law on the matter, is an issue of discussion and differing opinions.

In Judaism there is a concept "that there is no excuse of agency present when a sin or crime is being committed." This means that the hit man who pulled the trigger or planted the explosive is certainly the more guilty party, in such a scenario of an ordered murder. In the words of the Talmud "regarding the instructions from the Master and contrary instructions from the student - who should one listen to?!"

Thus in this week's parsha, even though it is the malevolent Balak who engages Bilaam in the nefarious scheme to curse the Jewish people, it is Bilaam who actually intends and agrees to do the cursing. He and not Balak emerges as the ultimate villain of the event. There is much discussion in the Talmud and in rabbinic sources as to whether any of the laws of agency, and this law in particular, exists outside of Jewish society generally.

If there is no agency outside of Jewish society, it appears that, generally speaking, there would be liability on both the instigator and the agent as well in

such circumstances. In any event, it certainly is inherently wrong to engage an agent to perform an illegal or sinful (they are no longer the same today) act whether in Jewish or general society, whatever the technical legal liabilities may be.

The instigator of a crime is deemed in today's society to be as guilty as the criminal who perpetrated the crime. Osama bin Laden was the guilty party in the World Trade Center assassinations as much as were the murderous suicide-pilots he sent forth to do the deed. Balak is responsible for Bilaam's curses. Heaven, in its exquisite way, administers justice to all concerned in as it pleases and in its own time frame.

Balak will pay the penalty for his unwarranted hatred and enmity of Israel just as Bilaam does. The rabbis of the Talmud even extended the penalties for wrongful and criminal acts committed to include those who remained silent when they should have spoken out against evil and cruelty. Bilaam's donkey is commended while his associates are undoubtedly condemned and eventually punished - hence the plethora of laws in our world and statutes about conspiracy to commit crimes and criminal negligence.

In fact, the actual perpetrator oftentimes attempts to hide behind the façade that one was only following orders. Judaism does not recognize that excuse and yet the one who issued the orders is also deemed guilty of the crime. Balak and Bilaam are the forerunners of Hitler and Mengele, Stalin and the NKVD. All are to be condemned not only in Heaven's good time but also by all of us mortals on earth as well. © 2013 *Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com*

CHIEF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

The story of Bilaam, the pagan prophet, begins with a bewildering set of non-sequiturs -- a sequence of events that seems to have no logic. First, the background. The Israelites are approaching the end of their forty years in the wilderness. Already they have fought and won wars against Sihon king of the Amorites and Og king of Bashan. They have arrived at the plains of Moab -- today, southern Jordan at the point where it touches the Dead Sea. Balak king of Moab is concerned, and he shares his distress with the elders of Midian. The language the Torah uses at this point is precisely reminiscent of the reaction of the Egyptians at the beginning of the book of Exodus.

Egypt: said to his people: "Here, The children of Israel is more numerous and powerful than we..." and felt a disgust at the children of Israel.

Moab: And Moab was very fearful because of the people because it was numerous, and Moab felt a disgust at the children of Israel.

The strategy Balak adopts is to seek the help of the well known seer and diviner Bilaam. Again there is a literary evocation, this time of the words of G-d to Abraham: G-d to Abraham: "I will bless those who bless you, and those who curse you I will curse."

Balak to Bilaam: "I know that whoever you bless is blessed and whoever you curse is cursed."

This time the parallel is ironic (indeed the Bilaam story is full of irony). In the case of Abraham, it was G-d who blessed. In the case of Bilaam, the power was thought to reside in Bilaam himself. In fact the earlier statement of G-d to Abraham already prefigures the fate of Moab -- one who tries to curse Israel will himself be cursed.

The historical background to the Bilaam narrative is well-attested. Several Egyptian pottery fragments dating from the 2nd millennium BCE have been found containing execration texts -- curses -- directed against Canaanite cities. It was the custom among pre-Islamic Arabs to hire poets thought to be under Divine influence to compose curses against their enemies. As for Bilaam himself, a significant discovery was made in 1967. A plaster inscription on the wall of a temple at Deir Alla in Jordan was found to make reference to the night vision of a seer called Bilaam -- the earliest reference in archaeological sources to a named individual in the Torah. Thus, though the story itself contains elements of parable, it belongs to a definite context in time and place.

The character of Bilaam remains ambiguous, both in the Torah and subsequent Jewish tradition. Was he a diviner (reading omens and signs) or a sorcerer (practising occult arts)? Was he a genuine prophet or a fraud? Did he assent to the divine blessings placed in his mouth, or did he wish to curse Israel? According to some midrashic interpretations he was a great prophet, equal in stature to Moses. According to others, he was a pseudo-prophet with an "evil eye" who sought Israel's downfall. What I want to examine here is neither Bilaam nor his blessings, but the preamble to the story, for it is here that one of the deepest problems arises, namely: what did G-d want Bilaam to do? It is a drama in three scenes.

In the first, emissaries arrive from Moab and Midian. They state their mission. They want Bilaam to curse the Israelites. Bilaam's answer is a model of propriety: Stay the night, he says, while I consult with G-d. G-d's answer is unequivocal: "But G-d said to Bilaam, 'Do not go with them. You must not put a curse on those people, because they are blessed.'"

Obediently, Bilaam refuses. Balak redoubles his efforts. Perhaps more distinguished messengers and the promise of significant reward will persuade Bilaam to change his mind. He sends a second set of emissaries. Bilaam's reply is exemplary: "Even if Balak gave me his palace filled with silver and gold, I could not do anything great or small to go beyond the command of the Lord my G-d."

However, he adds a fateful rider: "Now stay here tonight as the others did, and I will find out what else the Lord will tell me."

The implication is clear. Bilaam is suggesting that G-d may change His mind. But this is impossible. That is not what G-d does. Yet to our surprise, that is what G-d seems to do: "That night G-d came to Bilaam and said, 'Since these men have come to summon you, go with them, but do only what I tell you.'"

Problem 1: first G-d had said, "Do not go." Now He says, "Go." Problem 2 appears immediately: Bilaam got up in the morning, saddled his donkey and went with the princes of Moab. But G-d was very angry when he went, and the angel of the Lord stood in the road to oppose him.

G-d says, "Go." Bilaam goes. Then G-d is very angry. Does G-d change His mind -- not once but twice in the course of a single narrative? The mind reels. What is going on here? What is Bilaam supposed to do? What does G-d want? There is no explanation. Instead the narrative shifts to the famous scene of Bilaam's donkey -- itself a mystery in need of interpretation:

"Bilaam was riding on his donkey, and his two servants were with him. When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road with a drawn sword in his hand, it turned off the road into a field. Bilaam beat it to get it back on the road.

"Then the angel of the Lord stood in a narrow path between two vineyards, with walls on both sides. When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord, it pressed close to the wall, crushing Bilaam's foot against it. So he beat it again.

"Then the angel of the Lord moved on ahead and stood in a narrow place where there was no room to turn, either to the right or to the left. When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord, it lay down under Bilaam, and he was angry and beat it with his staff. Then the Lord opened the donkey's mouth, and it said to Bilaam, 'What have I done to you to make you beat me these three times?'

Bilaam answered the donkey, 'You have made a fool of me! If I had a sword in my hand, I would kill you right now.'

The donkey said to Bilaam, 'Am I not your own donkey, which you have always ridden, to this day? Have I been in the habit of doing this to you?' 'No,' he said.

"Then the Lord opened Bilaam's eyes, and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road with his sword drawn. So he bowed low and fell facedown."

The commentators offer various ways of resolving the apparent contradictions between G-d's first and second reply. According to Nachmanides, G-d's first statement, "Don't go with them" meant, "Don't curse the Israelites." His second -- "Go with them" -- meant, "Go but make it clear that you will only say the words I will put in your mouth, even if they are words of

blessing." G-d was angry with Bilaam, not because he went but because he did not tell them of the proviso.

In the nineteenth century, Malbim and R. Zvi Hirsch Mecklenberg suggested a different answer based on close textual analysis. The Hebrew text uses two different words for "with them" in the first and second Divine replies. When G-d says, "Don't go with them" the Hebrew is imahem. When He later says "Go with them" the corresponding word is itam. The two prepositions have subtly different meanings. Imahem means "with them mentally as well as physically," going along with their plans. Itam means "with them physically but not mentally," in other words Bilaam could accompany them but not share their purpose or intention. G-d is angry when Bilaam goes, because the text states that he went im them -- in other words he identified with their mission. This is an ingenious solution. The only difficulty is verse 35, in which the angel of G-d, having opened Bilaam's eyes, finally tells Bilaam, "Go with the men." According to Malbim and Mecklenberg, this is precisely what G-d did not want Bilaam to do.

The deepest answer is also the simplest. The hardest word to hear in any language is the word No. Bilaam had asked G-d once. G-d had said No. That should have sufficed. Yet Bilaam asked a second time. In that act lay his fateful weakness of character. He knew that G-d did not want him to go. Yet he invited the second set of messengers to wait overnight in case G-d had changed his mind.

G-d does not change His mind. Therefore Bilaam's delay said something not about G-d but about himself. He had not accepted the Divine refusal. He wanted to hear the answer Yes -- and that is indeed what he heard. Not because G-d wanted him to go, but because G-d speaks once, and if we refuse to accept what He says, G-d does not force His will upon us. As the sages of the midrash put it: "Man is led down the path he chooses to tread."

The true meaning of G-d's second reply, "Go with them," is, "If you insist, then I cannot stop you going -- but I am angry that you should have asked a second time." G-d did not change His mind at any point in the proceedings. In scenes 1, 2 and 3, G-d did not want Bilaam to go. His "Yes" in scene 2 meant "No" -- but it was a No Bilaam could not hear, was not prepared to hear. When G-d speaks and we do not listen, He does not intervene to save us from our choices. "Man is led down the path he chooses to tread." But G-d was not prepared to let Bilaam proceed as if he had Divine consent. Instead he arranged the most elegant possible demonstration of the difference between true and false prophecy. The false prophet speaks. The true prophet listens. The false prophet tells people what they want to hear. The true prophet tells them what they need to hear. The false prophet believes in his own powers. The true prophet knows that he has no power. The false prophet speaks in his own voice. The true prophet

speaks in a voice not his ("I am not a man of words," says Moses; "I cannot speak for I am a child" says Jeremiah).

The episode of Bilaam and talking donkey is pure humour -- and, as I have pointed out before, only one thing provokes Divine laughter, namely human pretension. Bilaam had won renown as the greatest prophet of his day. His fame had spread to Moab and Midian. He was known as the man who held the secrets of blessing and curse. G-d now proceeds to show Bilaam that when He so chooses, even his donkey is a greater prophet than he. The donkey sees what Bilaam cannot see: the angel standing in the path, barring their way. G-d humbles the self-important, just as He gives importance to the humble. When human beings think they can dictate what G-d will say, G-d laughs. And, on this occasion, so do we.

Some years ago I was making a television programme for the BBC. The problem I faced was this. I wanted to make a documentary about teshuvah, repentance, but I had to do so in a way that would be intelligible to non-Jews as well as Jews, indeed to those who had no religious belief at all. What example could I choose that would illustrate the point?

I decided that one way of doing so was to look at drug addicts. They had developed behaviour that they knew was self-destructive, but it was also addictive. To break the habit would involve immense reserves of will. They had to acknowledge that the life they led was harming them and they had to change. That seemed to me a secular equivalent of teshuvah.

I spent a day in a rehabilitation centre, and it was heartbreaking. The young people there -- they were aged between 16 and 18 -- all came from broken families. Many of them had suffered abuse. Other than the workers at the centre, they had no networks of support. The staff were exceptional people. Their task was mind-numbingly difficult. They would succeed in getting the addicts to break the habit for days, weeks at a time, and then they would relapse and the whole process would have to begin again. I began to realize that their patience was little less than a human counterpart of G-d's patience with us. However many times we fail and have to begin again, G-d does not lose faith in us, and that gives us strength. Here were people doing G-d's work.

I asked the head of the centre, a social worker, what it was that she gave the young people that made a difference to their lives and gave them the chance to change. I will never forget her answer, because it was one of the most beautiful I ever heard. "We are probably the first people they have met who care for them unconditionally. And we are the first people in their lives who cared enough to say No."

"No" is the hardest word to hear, but it is also often the most important -- and the sign that someone cares. That is what Bilaam, humbled, eventually learned and what we too must discover if we are to be open to

the voice of G-d. © 2013 Chief Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and torah.org

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

Could it be that Bilaam, the gentile prophet, saddled his own animal when he set forth to curse the Jews? (Numbers 22:21) For someone of his stature, a prophet, it certainly seems beneath his dignity.

Ibn Ezra, who is known for his literal readings of the Torah goes against his usual trend and offers a non-literal interpretation. "Va-yahavosh et ahtano" does not mean that Bilaam saddled his own donkey, rather, he instructed his servants to do so.

Rashi, however, sticks to the literal reading and insists that Bilaam did this labor intensive act on his own. Quoting the Midrash, Rashi writes: "From here we learn that hatred defies the rule (sinah mekalkelet ha-shurah), for he (Bilaam, who was so full of hate at that time) saddled it by himself." In other words, the emotion of hate can cause one to do things that would otherwise be out of the purview of one's normal behavior.

Unfortunately, we need look no further than events during the Holocaust to understand this point. When Germany was attacked by the allies from the West and the Russians from the East, it would have made sense that the Third Reich use every means at its disposal, every military weapon, every soldier, to resist. But it was not so. Hitler's hatred of the Jews was so great, that he insisted the extermination of Jews continue. He continued spending precious human power and resources on genocide, rather than helping defend "the motherland."

But, the Midrash points out the other side of the coin as well. Note that when G-d commands Avraham (Abraham) to sacrifice his son Yitzhak (Isaac), the Torah states, that Avraham "saddled his donkey, ve-yahavosh et hamoro." (Genesis 22:3) Here, too, Rashi wonders, is it possible that Avraham, would perform this menial task rather than ask one of his servants to do so. It is possible, says Rashi, as "love defies the rule (ahavah mekalkelet ha-shurah)." Avraham, our father, was so in love with G-d, so committed to following G-d's command, that he does what he otherwise would not do.

The Midrash makes a final point: the hatred of the wicked is counterbalanced by the love of the righteous. In the words of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai: "Let the saddling done by Avraham counteract the saddling done by Bilaam." (Genesis Rabbah 55:8)

It is important to note that Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai lived during the reign of the Roman Empire. He knew all too well the phenomenon of hatred toward Jews. Yet, he understood through his own life of commitment to G-d that there could be a

counterbalance to this hatred---his love and the love of others.

Thank G-d for the good people. Their energy and drive to do the right thing neutralizes the passion of the wicked. During these difficult days, may we all be blessed with love that defies the rule. © 2007 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 KALMAN PACKOUZ

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

The Talmud gives the characteristics of the disciples of Abraham: a benevolent eye, a humble spirit and a meek soul. The traits of the disciples of Balaam are: an evil eye, an arrogant spirit and a greedy soul. (Pirke Avos, Ethics of the Fathers 5:2).

Why does the Talmud focus on the "the disciples" of Abraham and Balaam? Why not cite the differences between Abraham and Balaam themselves?

The answer is that anyone looking at Abraham and Balaam might not be able to distinguish between the two. After all, did not Balaam subjugate himself totally to G-d? "If Balak will give me his houseful of silver and gold, I cannot transgress the word of G-d" (Numbers 22:18). "Balaam spoke up and said, 'Whatever G-d puts in my mouth, that I must take heed to speak' (Numbers 23:12). Are these not the words of a tzaddik (a righteous person)? Anyone hearing Balaam might conclude that he is a very G-d-fearing person.

Appearances can be deceptive. If you wish to know the true mettle of a person, look at his disciples. The true nature of a person is revealed in those whom he taught -- the group of students as a whole. Their character, their behavior and their belief reflect that of the teacher. *From Twerski on Chumash by Rabbi Abraham J. Twerski, M.D. © 2013 Rabbi Y. Adlerstein & torah.org*

RABBI PINCHAS WINSTON

Perceptions

Parashas Balak is a departure somewhat from the Torah narrative until now. Until this week's parshah, it has included the Jewish people directly, especially Moshe Rabbeinu. Until now, the rest of the world was in the background as the Torah told the story of the Jewish people along their journey to Eretz Yisroel.

All of a sudden, the world, so-to-speak, is the main topic, and the Jewish people are off in the distance, doing their thing while their enemies conspire against them behind the scenes. Hence, this week's parshah is about the part of Jewish history of which we know very little, and yet it counts so much towards our survival as a people. How many times has G-d saved our necks away from our eyes, and in ways we'll never know about unless He chooses to tell us?

We saw an example of this in last week's parshah. One of the reasons the Jewish people sang shirah in Parashas Chukas was because of the miraculous victory over the Amorites that G-d wrought for us at the border of Eretz Canaan, as they lay in wait to surprise attack us. The only reason we found out about it, as Rashi explains, is because G-d worked it that their limbs and blood surfaced in the stream of water than encircled the Jewish camp, proclaiming the miracle.

Likewise, had G-d not told Moshe Rabbeinu about the miracle in this week's parshah, we'd never know about how close we came to destruction as a result of Bilaam's curses. For, as the Talmud reveals, Bilaam did not shoot blindly, but rather, he possessed a special capability to calculate the moment of the day during which G-d expresses anger at mankind for his sinning ways, during which his curse could have and should have worked (Avodah Zarah?).

Why did it not? For the sake of the Jewish people, G-d changed that moment on that day, so that Bilaam's curses would be ineffective. All things being the way they should have been, Bilaam would have correctly calculated the moment of Divine anger and successfully cursed the Jewish people. But, everything wasn't the way it was supposed to have been because G-d changed it for the sake of the Jewish nation.

It's kind of like our own bodies. Someone once asked a doctor why he was unwell. The doctor responded by saying, "Don't ask me why you're sick! As me why you are not sick more often! Do you know how many things can go wrong in your body at any given moment in time, but don't?"

In other words, we are, for the most part, fooled by our good health. We wrongly get the impression that all of our working parts are quite mechanical and naturally function well. Most people live unaware of their own fragility and vulnerability, until that is, they have to face it head on.

When people become ill to the point of death, and recover, they celebrate by praising G-d. However, what we often fail to recall is that every moment G-d is miraculously saving us from death by keeping our body working on a moment-to-moment basis even though, naturally-speaking, it could break down in any number of ways.

When the Reed Sea split to free the fleeing Jewish people from the attacking Egyptian army, it was a great miracle, one of the greatest since Creation itself. It was so wondrous a miracle, in fact, the Jewish people sang shirah to G-d in thanks.

But, imagine if, in the next parshah, as Moshe Rabbeinu is recounting to his father-in-law, Yisro, the many miracles G-d performed on behalf of the Jewish people until that time, Yisro, upon hearing about the splitting sea says, "That's no big deal. It's been splitting like that for thousands of years now. You just happened

to be in the right place at the right time." "Really?" the people would say in disbelief.

"Really," Yisro would answer. "In fact, if you go back next week at the same time, and every week after that as well, you'll see the exact same spectacle each time!"

What would people have said? They probably would have said something like, "Well that changes everything. The sea splitting wasn't such a great miracle after all, if it was a miracle at all."

What should the people have actually said? Something like, "No difference, except, perhaps, that a great miracle we thought happens only once in a while actually happens all the time. It may be a consistent great miracle, but it is a great miracle nonetheless!"

The same thing is true of health. Everything about our bodies and the way they function is purely miraculous, albeit miraculously consistent. And, because it is so miraculously consistent we tend to forget how miraculous it is. This is evident by how few people make a blessing after taking care of their personal needs, or how those who do make the blessing after the bathroom rattle it off mindlessly.

Of course, until something goes wrong and creates discomfort. That is when we recall, once again, how much wisdom goes into making a human being, and how many 'holes' and 'tubes' make up our system that not only allows us to live, but to live productive lives. If G-d didn't constantly have his finger in the dike, so-to-speak, the water would come pouring in, or out, as the case may be. That is only on a personal, physical level. On an international level, the miracle is even more extreme. After all, the rabbis teach that: "It is a rule that Eisav hates Ya'akov." (Sifri, BeHa'alo-secha 69)

They mean, just as water naturally and constantly struggles to break through the dike and drown us, so too does anti-Semitism naturally and constantly try and break through into international politics and go after Jews world-wide. If it isn't succeeding, it is because G-d is keeping it, unnaturally, that is, miraculously, at bay.

He has many ways of doing this, of course. In fact, the current war in Syria might be one example, especially if you recall how, just before their civil war broke out, they were stepping up their demand to have Israel give them the Golan Heights. Thank G-d, we haven't had to deal with that issue for over a year now.

The question is, what happened at the end of the parshah, where Bilaam was successful to ensnare 24,000 from the tribe and Shimon, and cause the death of 176,000 Jews who became guilty of the death penalty because of their involvement with idol worship? Why didn't G-d protect us against all of that?

Whoever is wise, let him understand these things, whoever is prudent, let him know them. For the ways of G-d are straight, and the just walk in them, but transgressors stumble there in them. (Hoshea 14:10)

G-d will protect us against our enemies if and when we are doing what He wants us to do. However, He will only protect us from ourselves if our spiritual negligence is not the result of our own laziness. Otherwise, He will allow us to hang ourselves from nooses that we ourselves have tied by being spiritually negligent, as the Talmud states:

"Rebi Yochanan ben Zakkai wept and said: 'Happy are you Israel! When they do the will of G-d no nation has any power over them. But when they do not do the will of G-d He delivers them into the hands of a low people, and not only in the hands of a low people but into the power of the beasts of a low people.'" (Kesuvos 66b)

That's the scary part right now. For the time being, we have been miraculously protected, especially in Eretz Yisroel. However, there are things happening there these days, especially since the new government was elected, that are not going to bode well for the Jewish people. Power is in the wrong hands, and damage will result that may just open the door to our enemies that, until now, have remained closed.

What will be? What can be done to mitigate the situation? Not too much can be done, for the time being, to change the people who are putting us in harm's way. But, if the rest of us contemplate how much G-d does for us personally, and nationally, before our eyes and behind the scenes, perhaps it will counter-balance the other. It is worth a try. Is there any other option? © 2013 Rabbi P. Winston and torah.org

RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER

Weekly Dvar

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

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

and our communities, it will also lead to the many blessings that follow. © 2013 Rabbi S. Ressler and LeLamed, Inc.

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

“How good are your tents, Yaakov" (Bamidbar 24:5). Why did Bilam praise the "tents" of the Children of Israel? "Because he saw their doorways, which did not face each other" (Rashi, based on Bava Basra 60a). This is hinted at when the Torah introduces Bilam's prophecy by telling us that "he saw Israel dwelling by its Tribes" (24:2, see Rashi). Apparently, either he hadn't noticed this the first two times he attempted to curse Israel, or, since the words Bilam spoke were "put in his mouth by G-d" (23:12), it was only this third time that G-d wanted him to mention it, even though he had taken note of the special way the tents were set up earlier. Why did Bilam not notice this earlier, or, alternatively, why did G-d wait to have him say it until the third time?

Rav Yitzchok Sorotzkin, sh'lita (Rinas Yitzchok I) quotes the Baal HaTurim (on 22:5, also see Midrash Lekach Tov), who says that Balak's initial message to Bilam included the fact that even though the nation that came out of Egypt could see him (and his nation), he couldn't see them because of the Ananim, the "clouds of glory" that covered the Children of Israel from all sides. The topic of the Ananim is a fascinating one; books have been written that are devoted to the topic or that spend a good portion of its pages discussing them. The Talmud (Taanis 9a) tells us that these protective clouds were in the merit of Aharon, left upon his death, and returned in Moshe's merit. It is unclear exactly when they returned (opinions include: after Aharon's shiva, after the 30 days the nation cried for him, and after the incident of the deadly snakes), but it is rather clear that they returned before Bilam attempted to curse the nation they were protecting. [Aside from the above-quoted Baal HaTurim, Midrash HaGadol and Targum Yonasan say that Balak took Bilam to a place where he could see those who had been expelled from the Ananim (22:41), and Rashi tells us (25:4) that they knew who had sinned at P'or because the Ananim "rolled back" and let the sun beat down on the sinners; it is unlikely that the Ananim returned when the nation started sinning just to help the leaders figure out who to prosecute.] If the Children of Israel weren't visible because of the Ananim, how could Bilam have seen the way their tents were set up? (Rav Sorotzkin leaves this question unanswered.)

Yefeh To'ar (on Sh'mos Rabba 25:7, in order to explain the Midrash saying that the other nations could see the Children of Israel "eating the manna and praising G-d for it" even though, as the Midrash itself mentions, they were covered by the Ananim) describes the effect of the covering provided by the Ananim as a

"screen" or "veil," allowing something to be seen, just not with any detail. Putting aside why not seeing them clearly would be so bothersome to Balak (so much so that it was part of his reason for needing Bilam), or how it prevented Bilam from cursing them (necessitating his focusing on those who were expelled from the Ananim), even if the "cloud covering" didn't make the nation invisible, it surely wouldn't have allowed Bilam to see exactly where the doors of each tent were facing.

[Although the Midrash could be explained differently, that the other nations only saw those who were outside the Ananim (who also ate the manna), Bamidbar Rabba 2:4 describes how impressed the other nations were with the "D'galim" (the formation of the Tribes). If the effect of the "cloud covering" was like a screen, the "formation" could have been made out. However, if outsiders couldn't see anything, they shouldn't have been able to see the formation either (unless the shape of the Ananim, which covered each part of the formation, was enough to impress). Additionally, even though Midrash Lekach Tov says explicitly that the Ananim prevented the nation from being seen, it also says (22:41) that Bilam could see the entire nation even during his first attempt to curse them. If they could be somewhat seen, just not clearly, these two statements wouldn't contradict each other. It should be noted that Or HaChayim (Bamidbar 10:31) says that the Ananim prevented other nations from even knowing where they were camped. Nevertheless, being that some (those who sinned, as well as the "Eirev Rav," plus all the animals) were not covered by the Ananim, and there are several places where "tagarim" (traveling merchants) are said to have offered their wares to the nation, I find it hard to accept that it was impossible to see where they were camped. The very fact that Balak knew they were "dwelling opposite me" (22:5) indicates that he could see where they were, even if they were covered by the Ananim.]

Taz (Divray David), discussing why Rashi (24:2) first says that Bilam wanted to affect the nation through an "evil eye" in his third attempt to curse them, suggests that it would have been futile to try to use the "evil eye" earlier, since the nation was covered by the Ananim and the "evil eye" doesn't work on anything that is covered. Now, however, after Bilam invoked the sin of the "golden calf" (see Unkoles on 24:1, referenced by Rashi), the Ananim left (as they had done after the sin actually occurred, returning when the Mishkan project was started), and Bilam therefore thought he could invoke the "evil eye." (Taz says it didn't work because the nation was still considered "covered" because they were careful not to have their doorways facing each other.)

If the Ananim left when Bilam reminded G-d about the "golden calf," it would explain not only why Bilam didn't try to invoke the "evil eye" until now, but also how he could see the orientation of their tents, and why he first noticed them now. Additionally, it would add

another dimension to the Bilam narrative, a narrative which would not be known to us had G-d not told Moshe about it. Not only would the Bilam narrative teach us how much G-d loves us (see Micha 6:5, see also <http://www.aishdas.org/ta/5767/balak.pdf>) and provide a context for the daughters of Midyan and Moav trying to entice us, but it would have also explained why, seemingly out of nowhere, the Ananim disappeared (we surely would have noticed that they were gone for a short while). However, it is highly unlikely that G-d was upset at us and removed His divine protective cover, since He put very positive words in Bilam's mouth at the time. It is also unlikely that Bilam merely "reminding" G-d of our sin would cause the Ananim to leave, especially since Chazal (B'rachos 7a) say that G-d purposely had no moments of anger so that Bilam's plan wouldn't work. As I previously alluded to, the notion that the Ananim left then and returned just in time for the nation to sin at P'or seems rather farfetched as well.

In order to explain how Bilam could see "the edge of the people" (22:41) if they were covered by the Ananim, Or HaChayim suggests that the "covering affect" could be countered with black magic, which Bilam was using. However, as Or Hachayim himself implies (by providing another answer later), this approach does not suffice for Bilam's third attempt, where he didn't use any sorcery (see 24:1). In order to explain the expression "lifting his eyes" and the repetition of his name, Or HaChayim (24:2) says that Bilam could not (without using black magic) have "seen" the nation, which was covered by the Ananim, if he didn't become "raised" to the level of prophecy. If Bilam was only able to "see" the nation through prophecy, the fact that the Ananim prevented anyone from physically seeing the doors of the nation's tents would not have prevented Bilam from seeing them in a prophetic vision (baruch she'kivanti).

Aside from this Or HaChayim explaining how Bilam could see their tents despite the Ananim, as well as why Bilam only noticed this the third time, coupled with an aspect of Taz's approach, an interesting possibility emerges. If despite being able to see through the Ananim (via his prophetic vision) Bilam still couldn't inflict his "evil eye" because their tents were "covered" by the modest way the doorways were set up, since G-d wouldn't have allowed Bilam to have such a vision if it would bring harm to His chosen people, it was the nation's modesty that allowed Bilam to have this prophecy. Obviously, the "Ma Tovv Ohalecha" that is part of our daily prayers was a direct result of our "tents being good." Based on this, though, every aspect of Bilam's prophecy, which was on the level of full prophecy (see Sifre on D'varim 24:10), including his (and/or His) sharing with us a prophetic vision of our glorious future, was only made possible because of the modest way that our forefathers set up their tents. © 2013 Rabbi D. Kramer

