

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

In the course of blessing the Jewish people Bilaam uttered words that have come to seem to many¹ to encapsulate Jewish history:

How can I curse whom G-d has not cursed?
 How can I doom whom G-d has not doomed?
 I see them from mountain tops,
 Gaze on them from the heights.
 Look: a people that dwells alone,
 Not reckoned among the nations. (Num.23:8-9)

That is how it seemed during the persecutions and pogroms in Europe. It is how it seemed during the Holocaust. It is how it sometimes seems to Israel and its defenders today. We find ourselves alone. How should we understand this fact? How should we interpret this verse?

In my book *Future Tense* I describe the moment when I first became aware of how dangerous a self-definition this can be. We were having lunch in Jerusalem, on Shavuot 5761/2001. Present was one of the world's great fighters against antisemitism, Irwin Cotler, soon to become Canada's Minister of Justice, together with a distinguished Israeli diplomat. We were talking about the forthcoming United Nations Conference against Racism at Durban in 2001.

We all had reasons to know that it was going to be a disaster for Israel. It was there in the parallel sessions of the NGOs that Israel was accused of the five cardinal sins against human rights: racism, apartheid, crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing, and attempted genocide. The conference became, in effect, the launch-pad of a new and vicious antisemitism. In the Middle Ages, Jews were hated because of their religion. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century they were hated because of their race. In the twenty-first century they are hated because of their nation state. As we were speaking of the likely outcome, the diplomat heaved a sigh and said, "Twas ever thus. Am levadad yishkon: we are the nation fated to be alone."

¹ A People that Dwells Alone was the title given to the collection of essays by the late Jacob Herzog. It was also the theme of the autobiography of Israeli diplomat, and brother of Israel's former Chief Rabbi Israel Meir Lau, the late Naftali Lau-Lavie.

The man who said those words had the best of intentions. He had spent his professional life defending Israel, and he was seeking to comfort us. His intentions were the best, and it was meant no more than as a polite remark. But I suddenly saw how dangerous such an attitude is. If you believe your fate is to be alone, that is almost certainly what will happen. It is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Why bother to make friends and allies if you know in advance that you will fail? How then are we to understand Bilaam's words?

First, it should be clear that this is a very ambiguous blessing. Being alone, from a Torah perspective, is not a good thing. The first time the words "not good" appear in the Torah is in the verse, "It is not good for man to be alone" (Gen. 2: 18). The second time is when Moses' father-in-law Jethro sees him leading alone and says, "What you are doing is not good" (Ex. 18: 17). We cannot live alone. We cannot lead alone. It is not good to be alone.

The word *badad* appears in two other profoundly negative contexts. First is the case of the leper: "He shall dwell alone; his place shall be outside the camp" (Lev. 13: 46). The second is the opening line of the book of Lamentations: "How alone is the city once thronged with people" (Lam. 1: 1). The only context in which *badad* has a positive sense is when it is applied to G-d (Deut. 32: 12), for obvious theological reasons.

Second, Bilaam who said those words was not a lover of Israel. Hired to curse them and prevented from doing so by G-d, he nonetheless tried a second time, this time successfully, persuading the Moabite and Midianite women to seduce the Israelite men, as a result of which 24,000 died (Num. 25, 31: 16). It was this second strategy of Bilaam – after he had already said, "How can I curse whom G-d has not cursed? How can I doom whom G-d has not doomed?" – that marks him out as a man profoundly hostile to the Israelites. The Talmud (Sanhedrin 105b) states that all the blessings that Balaam bestowed on the Israelites eventually turned into curses, with the sole exception of the blessing "How goodly are your tents, Jacob, your dwelling places, Israel." So in the rabbis' view, "a people that dwells alone" eventually became not a blessing but a curse.

Third, nowhere in Tanakh are we told that it will be the fate of Israel or Jews to be hated. To the contrary, the prophets foresaw that there would come a

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time when the nations would turn to Israel for inspiration. Isaiah envisaged a day on which "Many peoples will come and say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the temple of the G-d of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths.' The law will go out from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem" (Is. 2:3). Zechariah foresaw that "In those days 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.'" (Zech. 8: 23). These are sufficient to cast doubt on the idea that antisemitism is eternal, incurable, woven into Jewish history and destiny.

Only in rabbinic literature do we find statements that seem to suggest that Israel is hated. Most famous is the statement of Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai "Halakhah: it is well known that Esau hates Jacob."² Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai was known for his distrust of the Romans, whom the rabbis identified with Esau/Edom. It was for this reason, says the Talmud, that he had to go into hiding for thirteen years.³ His view was not shared by his contemporaries.

Those who quote this passage do so only partially and selectively. It refers to the moment at which Jacob and Esau met after their long estrangement. Jacob feared that Esau would try to kill him. After taking elaborate precautions and wrestling with an angel, the next morning he sees Esau. The verse then says: "Esau ran to meet them. He hugged [Jacob], and throwing himself on his shoulders, kissed him. They [both] wept" (Gen. 33: 4). Over the letters of the word "kissed" as it appears in a Sefer Torah, there are dots, signaling some special meaning. It was in this context that Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai said: "Even though it is well known that Esau hates Jacob, at that moment he was overcome with compassion and kissed him with a full heart."⁴ In other words, precisely the text cited to show that antisemitism is inevitable, proves the

² Sifre, Behaalotecha, 89; Rashi to Gen. 33: 4; see Kreti to Yoreh Deah ch. 88 for the halakhic implications of this statement.

³ Shabbat 33b.

⁴ See Rashi ad loc.

opposite: that at the crucial encounter, Esau did not feel hate toward Jacob. They met, embraced and went their separate ways without ill-will.

There is, in short, nothing in Judaism to suggest that it is the fate of Jews to be hated. It is neither written into the texture of the universe nor encoded in the human genome. It is not the will of G-d. Only in moments of deep despair have Jews believed this, most notably Leo Pinsker in his 1882 tract *Auto-emancipation*, in which he said of Judeophobia, "As a psychic aberration, it is hereditary; as a disease transmitted for two thousand years, it is incurable."

Antisemitism is not mysterious, unfathomable or inexorable. It is a complex phenomenon that has mutated over time, and it has identifiable causes, social, economic, political, cultural and theological. It can be fought; it can be defeated. But it will not be fought or defeated if people think that it is Jacob's fate to be hated by "Esau" or to be "the people that dwells alone," a pariah among peoples, a leper among nations, an outcast in the international arena.

What then does the phrase "a people that dwells alone" mean? It means a people prepared to stand alone if need be, living by its own moral code, having the courage to be different and to take the road less travelled.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch offered a fine insight by focusing on the nuance between "people" (*am*) and "nation" (*goi*) – or as we might say nowadays, "society" and "state." Israel uniquely became a society before it was a state. It had laws before it had a land. It was a people – a group bound together by a common code and culture – before it was a nation, that is, a political entity. As I noted in *Future Tense*, the word *peoplehood* first appeared in 1992, and its early uses were almost entirely in reference to Jews. What makes Jews different, according to Hirsch's reading of Bilaam, is that Jews are a distinctive people, that is, a group defined by shared memories and collective responsibilities, "not reckoned among the nations" since they are capable of surviving even without nationhood, even in exile and dispersion. Israel's strength lies not in nationalism but in building a society based on justice and human dignity.

The battle against antisemitism can be won, but it will not be if Jews believe that we are destined to be alone. That is Bilaam's curse, not G-d's blessing.

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RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

Balaam is an impressive and poetic personage who demonstrates the universalistic ideal that the Almighty communicates with gentiles as well as with Israelites. But aside from the exalted lyrical cadences of his pronouncements—which are very much in the literary style of Moses' song of Ha'azinu and of

Isaiah's visions of redemption-there are two fundamental ways in which Balaam parts company from his Israelite counterparts.

These differences teach volumes about the unique message of Israelite prophecies.

First, while the Israelite prophets chastised their people, Balaam had only the best things to say about them. The psalmist declares, "For 40 years I argued with you in the desert, and I said, 'They are a nation whose heart led them astray, they do not know My paths' (Ps. 95:10). Isaiah thunders: "My soul detests your new moons and festivals. When you extend your hands in prayer, I hide My eyes from you. Your hands are replete with blood" (Isa. 1:14-15).

Balaam, however, expresses fulsome praises: "This is a nation that rises like the king of beasts and lifts itself like a lion" (Num. 23:24). "How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel" (ibid. 24:5).

On one level, this difference may be explained as a logical outgrowth of the prophet's worldview.

In the words of the Midrash: "It would have been more fitting had the chastisements emanated from the mouth of Balaam and the blessings from the mouth of Moses, but then the Israelites would have said that their enemy is cursing them and the gentiles would have said that their beloved leader is praising them. The Holy One Blessed be He therefore decreed, 'Let Moses chastise them, because he loves them, and let Balaam bless them, because he hates them.' Then Israel will know that both the blessings and the curses are honest and true" (Numbers Raba 1).

I believe, however, that there is an even more important reason for this difference. The Israelite prophets chastised their people because they wished to refine them. As King Solomon teaches, "Those whom one loves, one chastises" (Prov. 3:12). The prophets cared deeply about their people and were hurt if they thought that the people were backsliding. Balaam, on the other hand, sought the destruction of Israel. He importunes the Almighty to allow him to act as sorcerer for the wicked Balak and goes from place to place hoping to find a location from which to curse them. When Balaam discovers that G-d will not allow His nation to be reviled, he attempts to fill them with the kind of conceited hubris which will put them off-guard and render them easy prey to the "evil instinct." Then they will become worthy of G-d's curses; then they will self-destruct.

The Talmud suggests that Balaam gave devastating and insidious advice to the Moabite and Midianite enemies of Israel. Since the Israelites are desirous of fine garments, he suggests their enemies set up clothing stalls, with old and wasted gentile women outside and nubile, lascivious women inside. When the unsuspecting Israelite men enter the stalls to make their purchase, they will be seduced by the

maidens within (Sanhedrin 106a).

Where is there a hint of such dangerous advice from Balaam in the biblical text? The chapter concludes the gentile prophets' songs of praise to Israel with the words "And Balaam rose up and returned home; Balak also went on his way" (Num. 24:25). The very next verse, reads, "Israel was staying in Shittim [a name of a place, linked to the Hebrew word for licentious foolishness, shtut], when the (Israelite) nation began to fornicate with the daughters of Moab." The passage goes on to describe how an "important person from the Children of Israel" brought a Midianite woman before his brethren, and in front "of the eyes of Moses and of the entire congregation of Israel" fornicated with her. Phinehas, son of Eleazar and grandson of Aaron the High Priest, drove a spear through the exposed genitals of the indecent pair, arresting a plague which had threatened to destroy the Israelite encampment (Numbers 25: 1-9).

This incident follows Balaam's last prophecy and departure, then starts the portion of Pinhas, which praises the assassin of these public offenders and identifies the immoral couple. Did the entire incident not belong in the portion of Pinhas? Why break up the story, telling the lurid details in Balak and identifying the culprits in Pinhas? Apparently, this tragedy was the outgrowth of a Gentile prophet who hoped to bury the Israelites with fulsome praise to his audience and salacious advice to their enemies.

The second distinction between the Israelite prophets and Balaam lies in their ultimate vision. Balaam understands Israel's messianic role, and even foretells the eventual destruction of her enemies. "A star shall go forth from Jacob and a staff shall arise in Israel, crushing all of Moab's princes. Edom shall be demolished, his enemy Seir destroyed, but Israel shall emerge triumphant" (Num 24:17-19). But Balaam does not see an ultimate world of peace and redemption for all nations, a time when "nation will not lift up sword against nation, and humanity will not learn war anymore."

It is only the Israelite prophets who understand the true mission of Israel, the perfection of the world under the Kingship of G-d, when "the Torah will come from Zion and the word of G-d from Jerusalem" to all peoples, when "the lamb will lie down with the lion... and the Knowledge of a G-d of justice and morality will fill the world as the waters cover the seas."

The mission of Israel tragically came into bold relief one year ago this week with the brutal murder of three pure souls: Naftali, Eyal and Gil-Ad. It is clear that the world is divided into two camps: those who believe in the inviolability of every moral human being created in G-d's image and those who have turned G-d into Satan, encouraging suicide bombers and attacking innocent and defenseless children. The United States and the

European Union must wake up before it is too late and understand that extremist Islam is the heir of Nazi Germany and must be stopped, not apologized for.

You cannot love and foster goodness unless you hate and destroy evil. ©2015 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

This week's parsha introduces us to the usual suspects who are always present and active in Jewish history and world affairs. Balak and Bilaam are prototypes of the enemies of the Jewish people throughout the ages. They really have no legitimate cause to be our enemies. They impute hostile and aggressive behavior to the Jewish people, when in reality none of this is present.

They are motivated by jealousy, greed, and a terrible misreading of the situation that leads them to unreasoning hatred and the wish to eliminate the Jewish people completely. It is the existence of the Jewish people that truly troubles them. They resent the fact that the Jewish people left Egypt and were rescued from bondage. They also resent the special and unique experience of the Jewish people in receiving the Torah.

Still further, they resent the fact that the Jewish people will have a homeland and national state in the Land of Israel. So they engage in a seemingly nonviolent campaign to destroy the Jewish people. False accusations, curses and hatemongering create the tools of their campaign.

The Talmud pointed out to us that from the so-called blessings of Bilaam we are able to deduce what his real intentions were and what curses he intended to inflict on the Jews. Balak is willing to invest time, a great deal of money and his personal and national prestige in this attempt to discredit and eventually destroy the Jewish people.

He knows that he needs someone who will spearhead this drive and he also knows that such people are always available....for a price. And it is also obvious that when it comes to the opposition to the Jewish people, money is no object. Therefore Balak and Bilaam form the perfect pair, the odd couple that is joined by their common goal of hatred of the Jewish people.

This couple is alive and well in our time. There are countless numbers of people, supported by all sorts of high sounding nongovernmental organizations all dedicated to the cause of delegitimizing Israel, Judaism and the Jewish people generally. And there is no shortage of money, just as in the case of Balak, to finance this project. EU money, Arab money, and private money all flow into this effort to curse Israel and the Jews.

The goal of Balak is not so much to help his own people as it is to destroy others. All of this money,

which currently is directed solely towards destroying Israel could be channeled into helping millions of Moslems rise from poverty, hunger and disease. But that is not the goal of this money.

Balak only wants the destruction of the Jews. And in our time, there is no shortage of spokespeople who wish to advance this nefarious cause. There are always many Bilaams ready and prepared to ride the populist cause of blaming the Jews and the Jewish state for all of the ills and problems of the world.

Bilaam has a serpent's tongue. He speaks in a complimentary tone and in a reassuring voice. But that only serves to mask the enmity that he feels towards the Jewish people, an enmity that has no personal or national basis. Well, he is around today as well and we have to simply recognize that the world will eventually realize that its curses should be transmuted into blessings. ©2015 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

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 mekalkalet 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 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 an ambiguous statement from 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. ©2015 Rabbi S. Ressler & LeLamed, Inc.

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

"Now go curse [the nation] for me; perhaps I will be able to war with them and drive them out" (Bamidbar 22:11; compare with 22:6). When Bilam told G-d what Balak had asked him to do, there are several differences between how he quoted Balak and what Balak is quoted as having told him. One of the differences is the word used for "curse." Whereas Balak had used the word "ara," Bilam used the word "kava," a term that Rashi tells us refers to a harsher curse. Although Rashi points out another change too, and tells us that this change indicates that Bilam hated Israel more than Balak did, he does not tell us this regarding Bilam using a harsher word for curse than Balak did. Some (e.g. Devek Tov) are of the opinion that when Rashi says Bilam hated Israel more than Balak did he was basing it on both differences, while others do not seem to understand Rashi as referring to both, only to the second one.

There is a very good reason why Rashi would not use Bilam's term for "curse" as an indication that he hated Israel more than Balak, as Balak himself used the harsher term several times (22:17, 23:11, 23:13, 23:25, 23:27, 24:10; see Mizrachi). Nevertheless, the Midrash Rashi is based on (Bamidbar Rabbah 20:9, Tanchuma 5/8) does tell us that we know that Bilam hated Israel more than Balak hated them from the harsher term for curse that Bilam used. How can the Midrash say that Bilam hated Israel more based on the term he used if Balak used the exact same term himself?

Maharal (Gur Aryeh) says that even though Balak was fine with the lighter form of a curse (because he didn't hate Israel as much), after G-d told Bilam that he can't curse Israel using the lighter form (22:12), he had no choice but to switch to the harsher form for all future requests. However, since Bilam made it seem as if the reason G-d had refused to let him go was because these officers weren't important enough (see Rashi on 22:13), it is unlikely that Bilam would have shared with them that G-d said he can't curse Israel at all. Besides, if G-d had said that Bilam can't even curse them lightly, surely He wouldn't allow a harsher curse! Why would Balak think G-d would allow a stronger curse if He had told Bilam that he can't even curse them lightly?

Toldos Yitzchok asks several questions on this part of the narrative, with his sixth (of eight) group of questions being why G-d used the weaker word for "curse" in His response if Bilam had used the harsher term, as well as why Balak switched from using the weaker form to using the harsher one. He suggests that for Balak's needs, a lighter curse would have been

enough, so that's all he asked for. Bilam, knowing that G-d loves Israel, was afraid that when he asked to curse Israel, G-d would tell him that he can't. Realizing that if he asked permission to place a lighter curse on them and G-d said "no," he surely wouldn't be allowed to place a stronger curse on them, he therefore asked permission to curse them strongly, leaving wiggle room to be able curse them lightly even if he was denied permission to curse them strongly. G-d saw through his scheme, and answered Bilam by telling him that not only can't he place a strong curse on Israel, but he can't even place a light curse on them. After Balak's initial request was denied, he sent a larger number of officers, and higher-ranking ones, hoping that their status would change G-d's mind. However, fearful that he would again be denied, this time he asked for a stronger curse, leaving room to ask for a weaker one afterwards. [I changed a couple of the details slightly to avoid questions that could be asked on this approach.] Bilam's response to Balak was that this scheme wouldn't work, as he couldn't transgress G-d's word, whether "to do a small thing or a large thing," i.e. a small curse or a large curse.

Putting aside the other issues with this approach (such as how they proceeded if they both knew full well that G-d wouldn't allow any kind of curse, Balak's request still being referred to with the weaker term, see 23:7, and G-d denying the harsher one, see 23:8), since Balak continued using the harsher term for "curse" even after this exchange (23:11, et al), his choice of terms would seem to have nothing to do with trying to leave room for a weaker curse. As far as our issue is concerned, though, if Balak used the harsher form so that a weaker curse could still be placed, doing so would not indicate his having as much hatred towards Israel as Bilam did. Nevertheless, the same can be said for Bilam's use of the harsher term (that he used it to leave wiggle room, not out of intense hatred), and yet the Midrash (which Toldos Yitzchok references in his question) says that the harsher term does indicate a stronger hatred.

Chasam Sofer (Toras Moshe) suggests a similar (if not the exact same) approach, and asks why Balak, if he didn't have the same hatred for Israel as Bilam, continued to use the harsher term for "curse" even after realizing that there was no wiggle room. He suggests that since Balak was an even greater sorcerer than Bilam (see Tanchuma 4/6), he knew that Israel would be punished via the term for a harsher curse (Q-B-H), so, after realizing that trying to curse Israel without referencing this impending punishment wouldn't work, he insisted on using that term. What Balak really "saw" was the sinning with the Moabite women, where the same word is primary (see 25:8). If Bilam used the harsher term because of his hatred of Israel while Balak only used it because he thought it was a necessary part of bringing about any kind of curse, there is no issue

with Balak using the same term as Bilam without equating their level of hatred.

The Rosh is among the commentators who explain Balak asking Bilam to curse Israel "for me" to mean "even though it means I will also be cursed," as whomever curses Avraham's descendants (referring to those who also descend from Yitzchok and Yaakov) will also be cursed (B'reishis 12:3). In other words, despite knowing that he will suffer because of it, Balak was willing to endure personal suffering in order to curse Israel. By limiting his "curse" to a lighter form, he also limited the curse that would boomerang back to him; his hatred of Israel wasn't strong enough to suffer more just so the curse on Israel would be stronger. Bilam, on the other hand, hated Israel so much that he was willing to endure more intense suffering so that he could place a stronger curse on Israel. But this comparison only applies the first time each used a term for "curse." Once Balak heard Bilam use the harsher term (even if was in the context of G-d not allowing him to curse Israel if the request came from such low-level officers), he knew that Bilam hated Israel more than he did (and was willing to endure harsher suffering than he was in order to harm them more). Not to be outdone, Balak started using the same term; not because he hated Israel as much as Bilam did, but because he didn't want to seem as if he was unwilling to make the same personal sacrifice Bilam was.

Similarly, it can be suggested that once Balak heard Bilam use the harsher term, rather than seeming out of place because of his less intense hatred of Israel, Balak decided to use the same term for "curse" that he heard Bilam use. Or, in order to find favor in Bilam's eyes, once he realized how much Bilam hated Israel, he used the same term even though his hatred of Israel was not as strong. Either way, because Balak initially used the lighter term for "curse," we know that his hatred was less than Bilam's, even if he subsequently used the stronger term. © 2015 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI KALMAN PACKOUZ

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

The story is told of Napoleon walking through the streets of Paris one Tisha B'av (the 9th day of the Hebrew month of Av, a day of fasting and mourning for the destruction of the two Temples). As his entourage passed a synagogue he heard wailing and crying coming from within; he sent an aide to inquire as to what had happened. The aide returned and told Napoleon that the Jews were in mourning over the loss of their Temple. Napoleon was indignant! "Why wasn't I informed? When did this happen? Which Temple?" The aide responded, "They lost their Temple in Jerusalem on this date 1700 years ago." Napoleon stood in silence and then said, "Certainly a people which has mourned the loss of their Temple for so long will survive to see it rebuilt!"

If we know our history and understand it, then we can put our life in perspective. We can understand ourselves, our people, our goals, our values. We will know the direction of our lives, what we want to accomplish with our lives and what we are willing to bear in order to fulfill our destiny. Friedrich Nietzsche put it well, "If you have a 'why' to live for, you can bear with any 'how'."

We are now entering the Three Weeks, the time between the 17th of Tamuz (observed Sunday, July 5th) and the 9th of Av (starting Saturday day night, July 25th). This is a period when many tragedies happened to the Jewish people. Why do we mourn the loss of the Temple after so many years? What did and does it mean to us?

The Temple was a central focal point of the Jewish people. Three times a year -- Passover, Shavuot and Sukkot -- the Jews living in the Land of Israel came to worship and celebrate at the Temple. It offered us the ultimate opportunity to come close to the Almighty, to elevate ourselves spiritually. It represented the purpose of the Jewish people in the Land of Israel -- to be a holy people united with the Almighty in our own land... a Jewish state. That is what we seek to regain and that is why we mourn and remember the loss of what we once had.

What can one read to gain knowledge, get perspective, to understand who the Jewish people are and what we are about? Certainly, reading the Five Books of Moses is the place to start. I recommend the Artsroll Stone Edition. Nineteen Letters by Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch will give a tremendous understanding of the Jewish purpose. Nine Questions People Ask About Judaism and Why the Jews -- The Reason for Anti-Semitism by Praeger and Telushkin address central issues of the Jewish people. And then there is Judaism in a Nutshell: G-d by Rabbi Shimon Apisdorf for people who are long on curiosity, but short on time. For more history and understanding of the holidays, read Book of Our Heritage by Eliyahu Kitov. All are available from your local Jewish book store, JudaicaEnterprises.com or 877-758-3242.

In Jewish cosmology, the Three Weeks are considered to be such an inauspicious time period that one is not allowed to get married. From the 1st of Av (July 17th), one is even advised to push off court cases until after the 10th of Av (July 27th). We refrain from hair-cutting, purchasing or wearing new clothing, listening to music and pleasure trips. It is a time for self-reflection and improvement.

On the 17th of Tamuz, five calamitous events occurred in our history: 1) Moshe broke the first Tablets of the Ten Commandments when he descended from Mt. Sinai and saw the worshipping of the Golden Calf 2) The Daily Sacrificial Offerings ceased in the First Temple due to lack of sheep 3) The walls of Jerusalem were breached during the siege of the Second Temple

4) Apustumus-the-Wicked burned a Sefer Torah and 5) An idol was placed in the Sanctuary of the Second Temple.

The 17th of Tamuz is a fast day. The fast begins approximately an hour before sunrise and continuing until about an hour after sunset. The purpose of the fast is to awaken our hearts to repentance through recalling our forefathers' misdeeds which led to tragedies and our repetition of those mistakes. The fasting is a preparation for repentance -- to break the body's dominance over a person's spiritual side. One should engage in self-examination and undertake to correct mistakes in his relationship with G-d, his fellow man and with himself.

It is interesting to note that Saddam Hussein was a student of Jewish history. He named the nuclear reactor (from which he planned to create a bomb to drop on Israel) -- you guessed it, Tamuz 17! (Want the source? Two Minutes Over Baghdad by Amos Perlmutter). I also highly recommend ShabbatShalomAudio.org and aish.com/holidays. There are many excellent articles and insights on our website. ©2015 Rabbi K. Packouz & aish.com

RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY

Is Sincerity at Steak?

This week, we find the gentile world's greatest prophet, Bila'am, challenged by both his conscience, Hashem's will and of course, a formidable foe. Balak, the King of Moav asked him to cast a curse upon the Jewish nation. He sent a delegation of servants to implore him, but Bila'am refused. His hands were tied, or more accurately, his lips were sealed. After beseeching the Almighty for permission to curse the Jewish nation, "Hashem said to Balaam, 'You shall not go with them! You shall not curse the people, for it is blessed!'" (Numbers 22:12)

Despite Bila'am's initial refusal, Balak was determined. He sent another delegation, this time, distinguished officers, "higher ranking than the previous" (ibid v.15) "They came to Balaam and said to him, "So said Balak son of Zippor, 'Do not refrain from going to me. for I shall honor you greatly, and everything that you say to me I shall do; so go now and curse this people for me.' Balaam answered and said to the servants of Balak, "If Balak will give me his houseful of silver and gold, I cannot transgress the word of Hashem, my G-d, to do anything small or great: But Bila'am does not leave it at that. He really wants to be a part of the plot. That night he resubmits his request to Hashem, and this time G-d acquiesces. Hashem came to Balaam at night and said to him, "If the men came to summon you, arise and go with them, but only the thing that I shall speak to you-that shall you do" (ibid v. 20). And so, the Torah tells us, the next day, "Bila'am arose in the morning and personally saddled his she-donkey and went with the officers of Moab." " (ibid v. 21).

The next verse seems strange. Even though just a few p'sukim prior, Bila'am had attained permission, the Torah tells us, "Hashem's wrath flared because he was going, and an angel of Hashem stood on the road to impede him." The question is straightforward. If Bila'am attained permission to accompany them, why was "Hashem's wrath flared"? After all if G-d said yes, what did he expect?

There is an old Jewish story about the shnorrer who goes collecting one Sunday in the prestigious community synagogue, pleading for funds. Though the prestigious synagogue had a "no solicitor" policy, the President of the congregation was somehow convinced of the beggars sincerity.

After the three morning minyanim, depart the man walks out of the synagogue with a smile. A few hours later he parks himself in the town's most elegant restaurant and orders a rib-eye steak. The President of the synagogue walks in and notices the schnorrer, cloth napkin tucked conspicuously under his chin, with a succulent steak resting on his plate nestled comfortably between a portion of fried potatoes and asparagus.

Hands on his hips the flabbergasted president accosted the man. "Is that what you do with the money you collected in our synagogue?" The pauper shrugged his shoulders and shrugged. "I don't understand. When I don't have money I can't eat steak. When I do have money I shouldn't eat steak. So when, may I ask, can I eat steak?"

Billam, at first is refused permission to go with Balak's advisors. He seems to be reluctant to even consider the offer, claiming that even if he is offered a houseful of the gold and silver he can't go. Yet Balak perseveres, Bila'am re-requests and Hashem finally agrees, caveats attached. But instead of Billam using his new-found permission to reluctantly trudge along, he develops a whole new attitude. He is up at the crack of dawn, he passionately saddles his own donkey, a chore normally delegated to his servants, Hashem sees that Billam is not being coerced, nor schlepped, rather, "He is going." Then His ire flares. Hashem's reluctant approval turned into Bila'ams enthusiastic accompaniment.

Life often presents us the opportunities, in which our ingrained convictions are challenged. Sometimes we must bend the rules. Attend a meeting, in an unfamiliar atmosphere; sharing a drink with an unsavory client; spending an evening with a haughty politician. The question is simple; once we have the opportunity to drift, do we attach ourselves to the flotsam and ride the waves with zest. Or is every step of the way met with the original emotions of reluctance and apprehension. Billam's originally refused to go along. He told Balak he just couldn't go. But when he received permission from Hashem, his attitude changed quickly. From a pronounced subservience to G-d's the reluctant prophet became the enthusiastic co-

conspirator saddling his own donkey and excitingly joining the evil plotters. How quickly do his loyalties adjust! When given the opportunity, it is easy for a despondent pauper to turn into an indulging guzzler. Sometimes, it doesn't matter if our conscience is at stake, when a steak intrudes upon our conscience. Good Shabbos! © 2002 Rabbi M. Kamenetzky & torah.org

SHLOMO KATZ

Hama'ayan

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

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

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

"He raised his parable and said: . . ." (23:18, 24:3 and 24:15) What does this mean? Why do we not find any other prophecy described this way?

Rav Yitzchak Yehuda Trunk zt"l quoted Rav Avraham Borenstein of Sochatchov (his wife's grandfather) zt"l as follows: Kabbalists teach that each part of the human body alludes to an attribute of G-d. This is the meaning of the verse, "He made man in G-d's image." Thus, man's body is a parable or a metaphor for G-d.

Each and every prophet and prophetess had purified his body in order to merit Divine revelation. But not so the wicked Bilam. Thus, with each new prophecy he had to "raise his parable," i.e., his body, out of its normal state. (from Shabbat Be'shabbat No. 30) © 1995 S. Katz & torah.org

