

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

There is an old saying that what makes G-d laugh is seeing our plans for the future. (The John Lennon version is: "Life is what happens while you are making other plans.") However, if Tanakh is our guide, what makes G-d laugh is human delusions of grandeur. From the vantage point of heaven, the ultimate absurdity is when humans start thinking of themselves as godlike.

There are several pointed examples in the Torah. One whose full import has only recently become clear occurs in the story of the Tower of Babel. Men gather together in the plain of Shinar and decide to build a city and a tower "that will reach to heaven." As it happens, we have archeological confirmation of this fact. Several Mesopotamian ziggurats, including the temple of Marduk in Babylon, have been found with inscriptions saying that they reach heaven.

(The tower of Babel is referred to in the Enuma Elish as "Esagila," which means "the house of the lifting up of the head." Nabopolassar and Nebuchadnezzar both repaired this building, inscriptions to which say that they "raised high the head" of the tower "to rival the heavens." Nahum Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, 73)

The idea was that tall buildings -- man-made mountains -- allowed humans to climb to the dwelling place of the gods and thus communicate with them. The Mesopotamian city states were among the first places of civilisation, itself one of the turning points in the history of human life on earth. Before the birth of agriculture, the ancients lived in fear of nature: of predators, of other tribes and bands, and of the vicissitudes of heat and cold, drought and flood. Their fate depended on matters beyond their control.

Only with the spread of domesticated animals and agriculture did people gather in towns, then cities, then empires. A tipping point occurred in the balance of power between nature and culture. For the first time humans were not confined to adapting to their environment. They could adapt their environment to suit them. At this point they -- especially the rulers -- began to see themselves as gods, demigods, or people with the power to influence the gods.

The most conspicuous symbol of this was buildings on a monumental scale: the ziggurats of Babylon and other Mesopotamian cities, and the

pyramids of Egypt. Built on the flat land of the Tigris-Euphrates valley and the Nile delta, they towered over their surroundings. The great pyramid of Giza, built even before the birth of Abraham, was so monumental that it remained the tallest man-made structure on earth for four thousand years.

The fact that these were artificial mountains built by human hands suggested to their builders that humans had acquired godlike powers. They had constructed a stairway to heaven. Hence the significance of the phrase in the Torah's account of the tower, "And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built." This is G-d laughing. On earth, humans thought they had reached the sky, but to G-d the building was so infinitesimal, so microscopic that he had to come down even to see it. Only with the invention of flight do we now know how small the tallest building looks when you are looking down from a mere 30,000 feet.

To end their hubris G-d simply "confused their language". They no longer understood one another. The entire project was turned into French farce. We can visualise the scene. A foreman calls for a brick and is handed a hammer. He tells a worker to go right and he turns left. The project foundered in a welter of incomprehension. Men thought they could climb to heaven but in the end they could not even understand what the person next to them was saying. The unfinished tower became a symbol of the inevitable failure of vaunting ambition. The builders achieved what they sought but not in the way they intended. They wanted to "make a name for themselves" and they succeeded, but instead of becoming a byword for man's ability to reach the sky, Babel became babble, an emblem of confusion. Hubris became nemesis.

The second example was Egypt during the early plagues. Moses and Aaron turned the water of the Nile into blood, and filled Egypt with frogs. We then read that the Egyptian magicians did likewise to show that they had the same power. So concerned were they to show that they could do what the Hebrews could do,



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that they entirely failed to realise that they were making things worse, not better. The real skill would have been to turn blood back into water, and make frogs not appear but disappear.

We hear the Divine laughter especially in the third plague: lice. For the first time, the magicians tried and failed to replicate the effect. Defeated, they turned to Pharaoh and said, "It is the finger of G-d." The humour comes when we remember that for the Egyptians the symbol of power was monumental architecture: pyramids, temples, palaces and statues on a massive scale. G-d showed them His power by way of the tiniest of insects, painful yet almost invisible to the eye. Again hubris became nemesis. When people think they are big, G-d shows them they are small -- and vice versa. It is those who think themselves small -- supremely so Moses, the humblest of men -- who are truly great.

This explains the otherwise curious episode of Bilam's talking donkey. This is not a fanciful tale, nor simply a miracle. It arose because of the way the people of Moab and Midian thought of Bilam -- and perhaps, by extension, the way he thought of himself. Balak the Moabite king, together with the leaders of the Midianites, sent a delegation to Bilam asking him to curse the Israelites: "Come now, curse this people for me, since they are too mighty for me... for I know that whom you bless is blessed, and whom you curse is cursed."

This is a pagan understanding of the holy man: the shaman, the magus, the wonder-worker, the person with access to supernatural powers. The Torah's view is precisely the opposite. It is G-d who blesses and curses, not human beings. "I will bless those who bless you and those who curse you I will curse," G-d said to Abraham. "They shall place my name on the children of Israel and I will bless them," he said about the priests. The idea that you can hire a holy man to curse someone essentially presupposes that G-d can be bribed.

The narrative is admittedly obscure. G-d tells Bilam not to go. Balak sends a second delegation with a more tempting offer. This time G-d tells Bilam to go with them but say only what he instructs him to say. The next morning Bilam sets out to go with the Moabites, but the text now states that G-d was "angry"

with him for going. That is when the episode of the donkey takes place.

The donkey sees an angel barring the way. It turns aside into a field but Bilam hits it and forces it back to the path. The angel is still barring the way and the donkey veers into a wall, crushing Bilam's foot. Bilam hits it again, but finally it lies down and refuses to move. That is when the donkey begins to speak. Bilam then looks up and sees the angel, who had been hitherto invisible to him.

Why did G-d first tell Bilam not to go, then that he should go, and then was angry when he went? Evidently G-d could read his mind and knew that Bilam did really want to curse the Israelites. We know this because later, after the attempt to curse the Israelites failed, Bilam succeeded in causing them harm, advising the Midianites to get their women to seduce the Israelite men, thus provoking the anger of G-d (Num. 31:16). Bilam was no friend of the Israelites.

But the story of the talking donkey is another instance of Divine laughter. Here was a man reputed to be a maestro of supernatural forces. People thought he had the power to bless or curse whomever he chose. G-d, the Torah tells us, is not like that at all. He had two messages, one for the Moabites and Midianites, another for Bilam himself.

He showed the Moabites and Midianites that Israel is not cursed but blessed. The more you attempt to curse them the more they will be blessed and you yourself will be cursed. That is as true today as it was then. There are movements throughout the world to curse the state and people of Israel. The greater the malice of Israel's enemies, the stronger Israel becomes, and the more disasters its enemies bring upon their own people.

G-d had a different message for Bilam himself, and it was very blunt. If you think you can control G-d, then, says G-d, I will show you that I can turn a donkey into a prophet and a prophet into a donkey. Your animal will see angels to which you yourself are blind. Bilam was forced to admit: How can I curse those whom G-d has not cursed? How can I denounce those whom the Lord has not denounced?

Hubris always eventually becomes nemesis. In a world in which rulers engaged in endless projects of self-aggrandisement, Israel alone produced a literature in which they attributed their successes to G-d and their failures to themselves. Far from making them weak, this made them extraordinarily strong.

So it is with us as individuals. I have mentioned before a beloved friend, no longer alive, about whom it was said that "he took G-d so seriously that he didn't need to take himself seriously at all." Pagan prophets like Bilam had not yet learned the lesson we must all one day learn: that what matters is not that G-d does what we want, but that we do what He wants. G-d laughs at those who think they have godlike powers.

The opposite is true. The smaller we see ourselves, the greater we become. ©2016 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"G-d said to Balaam, 'You shall not go with them; you shall not curse this nation because it is blessed'" (Numbers 22:12) The Balaam/Balak episode in this week's portion naturally leads us to a discussion of the relationship between G-d's will and our own. We have free will, but what happens when our choices fly in the face of the will of G-d? Are we truly given the freedom to go against His will or is freedom of choice only a delusion?

Balak, King of Moab, is terrified by the strength of the Israelites. Not only has the Jewish nation been freed from Egypt, but as they proceed towards the Promised Land, they seem to vanquish every army that attacks them. For some reason, Balak deems the very survival of the Israelites to be a threat to his nation's survival, and therefore he sets about 'acquiring' his weapon of choice; Balaam, the master curser of his generation. Balak sends a high-ranking delegation to this famous soothsayer, a wonder-working Gentile prophet, urging him to curse the Israelites, so that Balak will be able to overcome and banish them from the vicinity of his land.

Inviting the delegation to spend the night, Balaam, the prophet-soothsayer awaits a directive from G-d. The Divine response is unequivocal: "Do not go with them! You shall not curse the people, for it is blessed" (Numbers 22:12). Balaam then sends the delegation back to Balak.

Undaunted – because Balaam's expression of refusal actually leave the door open for a second conversation – Balak then dispatches a new, higher ranking delegation to Balaam. They are to give a blank check to Balaam, the sky's the limit and he can have whatever his heart desires, so long as he curses Israel.

Again Balaam refuses. "Even were Balak to give me his entire house full of gold and silver, I would not be able to transgress the word of the Lord my G-d... And now, you too remain here now for this purpose, you too, for tonight, and I will find out what more the Lord has to say to me". [22:18]

Hidden between the lines of this second invitation to spend the night, our Sages hear a subtle message: "I cannot transgress G-d's word even if I receive Balak's house of gold and silver, – but if I also receive his storage house of gold and silver, maybe we have something to talk about! Moreover", says Balaam, "stay the night for this purpose": let me attempt to convince or at least "wear G-d down".

That night, the Almighty visits Balaam. "If the men come to summon you, you may go with them, but only whatever words I tell you, may you do" [22:20].

The very next verse declares, "And Balaam arose in the morning, saddled his she-donkey and went with the officers of Moab" [22:21]. Balaam did not report G-d's caveat; he merely took the Divine words as a *carte blanche* to do Balak's bidding. Despite the permission that Balaam received to go if they 'summoned' him, (22:20) the text reports, "G-d's wrath flared" because Balaam went (Numbers 22: 22). But if G-d had just allowed him to go, why was He angry? Is there free will or not?

Several Biblical commentaries see these verses as expressing the fundamental freedom of choice granted to every individual, even a prophet of the Divine who presumably knows the will of G-d and cannot defy that will.

The Ibn Ezra suggests that G-d never prevents an individual from doing what he really wants to do, even if it goes against the Divine will. We see this at the time of the spies when G-d clearly tells the Israelites to go up and conquer the Promised Land (Deut 1:21). Nevertheless, when they demur and insist upon sending out a reconnaissance commission (ibid 22), G-d tells Moses to send out such a group of spies (Numbers 13:1). G-d may not desire such a commission, but He will always acquiesce to the will of the people.

Here in our portion, G-d acquiesces to the evil and venal will of Balaam. The Midrash Rabbah succinctly expresses the great principle of human freedom with the words: "From this text, we learn that ultimately G-d leads an individual to walk on the path that he wishes to travel". In other words, G-d lets people decide which way they want to go, even if He disagrees! (Bamidbar Rabbah 20:12; see Ramban ad loc for a slightly different interpretation).

However, the dynamics of human will vs. Divine will don't end here, neither in the case of Balaam nor in terms of Rabbinic theology. The Midrash (Bereishit Rabbah 85), in an obvious reference to Balaam, makes the following pronouncement:

"Shmuel bar Nahman opened [quoting the prophet Jeremiah]:

'For thus said the Lord, Master of Legions, G-d of Israel: Do not let your prophets who are in your midst and your magicians delude you, do not listen to your dreamers whom you appoint to dream. It is falsehood that they prophesy to you in My Name... For thus said the Lord: I will remember and appoint you and I will establish for you My good word to restore you to this place. For I know the thoughts, which I think about you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give to you a future and a hope (Jeremiah 29:8-11).

The Midrash elaborates: The tribes were engaged in the sale of Joseph. Joseph was engaged in his sackcloth and fasting, and Judah was engaged in taking a wife. And the Holy One Blessed be He was engaged in creating the light of the Messiah".

This fascinating Midrash teaches us that we must look at life and history through two perspectives: the earthly dimension, predicated upon human choice, and the Divine dimension, in which G-d ensures that whatever mistakes we may make, the final result will be messianic redemption and a world of peace.

Hence, although Balaam may have desired to curse and destroy Israel, and offers practical expression to this at the end of our portion when he advises Moabite and Midianite women to entice the Israelite men into idolatry and assimilation, G-d will turn all of these disasters into ultimate redemption.

Our Rabbis teach that Balaam's donkey was the same animal as that which Abraham rode to Mount Moriah to sacrifice his son Isaac and that this is the donkey that will eventually carry the Messiah. They explain that the sexual immorality that we read of in the Bible, between Lot and his daughters, between Yehudah and Tamar, between Mahlon son of Elimelech and Ruth the Moabite, will ultimately be manipulated by G-d to lead to the marriage between Ruth, and Boaz, which will bring forth David, progenitor of the Messiah. G-d will see to it that His designs will ultimately prevail, turning the bitter into the sweet, sadness into joy, and curses into blessings, immorality into Messianism.

Our daily prayers open with Balaam's words, 'How goodly are your tents O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel' (Numbers 24:5), a subtle reminder that no matter how strongly individuals may want us cursed, G-d's blessings will prevail. ©2016 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

There are people in the world who are simply too meddlesome for their own good. As King Solomon points out in Proverbs, they provoke passing dogs and engage in quarrels and controversies that really do not affect them directly. That is the main transgression of Balak as described in this week's Torah reading. The Jewish people are not threatening him or his nation. They just happened to be around in the neighborhood and he exploits their presence for his own personal ambition and prejudices.

There is a terrible tendency in human affairs to cloak being a busybody with the aura of altruism and justice. The Talmud decries those who stir up controversies, especially when they are not personally involved or affected by the issue in question. Balak never liked the Jewish people and always looked to eliminate them from living in his neighborhood.

He is aware that currently he is in no danger from them and though they are bypassing his borders, they have no intention of conquering his land. Nevertheless, he picks a fight with the Jewish people, and so to speak, with G-d Himself and poses as a champion of all of the nations that are threatened by

the mere existence of the Jewish people and their right to inherit the land promised to them through their forefathers.

He, with his willing partner Bilaam, devises a scheme to curse the Jewish people and thereby weaken and eventually eliminate them from the scene. But he conceals his animus towards the Jewish people with high-sounding principles and justifiable motives. But in the end, he is simply meddling in matters that do not directly concern him.

We witness this phenomenon in the world today regarding the State of Israel, and by inference, the Jewish people generally. All of the world is concerned with the situation regarding the Israelis and the Palestinians. No one seems to be willing to let the parties to this dispute settle the matter by themselves and with themselves. Everyone has plans, roadmaps, and advice as to how to pressure Israel to somehow give in to the unreasonable demands of the Palestinians.

This dispute does not really concern any of the college professors or the do-gooders that lead the BDS movement or any of the other myriad NGOs that badger us constantly. They do not live in this neighborhood of the world nor are they subject to the constant dangers that surround Israeli society day in and day out.

They glorify their meddling in others' affairs by their smug self-righteousness and the: "I know what is good for you, better than you do" that often identifies those who call themselves progressives and liberals.

There are many Balaks and Bilaams in today's world who are concerned about us and basically mean to do us no harm. As are all of the human characters we meet in the Bible, Balak and Bilaam are prototypes of later human beings who exist in all generations and circumstances. Be careful of their benevolence and blessings. ©2016 *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*

ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

Door I'Door

*Translated for the Encyclopedia Talmudit
by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss*

In this week's Torah portion, when Bilaam noticed that the openings of the tents of Israel were not facing each other he said "these people are worthy that the holy "Shichina"(G-d's presence) should rest upon them". This is the basis of the law that one is not permitted to open their window opposite their neighbor's. Even if the neighbor allowed him to do so and forgave him for any future infraction, it is still forbidden, for the law is based on modesty, and forgiveness or permission is not accepted in such a

case. Some sages explain the reason that forgiveness for any future infraction does not help, because at a later date the person could say that "though at the outset I thought I could live with it, now I realize that I can't".

This restriction even applies to a person opening a window facing a courtyard where people live, even though he may say that "what is the difference if I see what is transpiring from my window of my house or whether I stand in the courtyard and see everything". However the neighbors could respond that "while you are standing in the courtyard we can hide from you, however, when peering through one's window, one can see out but no one is aware if anyone is looking".

As well, the neighbors can also say that they do not want to be able to look into their neighbor's windows, lest they transgress this law. This law would also apply to a person who opens his window bordering on a public domain, in which he says that he is not bothered by the possibility that one would peer into his home for he has nothing to hide. ©2016 Rabbi M. Weiss and *Encyclopedia Talmudit*

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. ©2016 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 Torah states: Bilaam tells the messengers from Balak, "G-d refuses to let me go with you" implying that he could only accompany representatives of a higher social status. How is it possible that Bilaam misunderstood the Almighty's message to refer to the honor due someone of his own "distinguished" status, rather than the plain meaning of the words?

From here we see the power of bias to blind a person. Bilaam's own arrogance led him to fool himself

about what he thought were the Almighty's intentions. It is clear to any unbiased person that the Almighty did not want Bilaam to curse the Jewish people. However, a person usually hears just what he wants to hear.

Each of us must realize that we too have biases and selective hearing. By being aware of our biases, hopefully we can avoid making embarrassing and costly mistakes. By discussing with a friend, we can further protect ourselves from our biases. *Dvar Torah based on Growth Through Torah by Rabbi Zelig Pliskin © 2016 Rabbi K. Packouz and aish.com*

HARAV SHLOMO WOLBE ZT"L

Bais Hamussar

There are four basic elements that make up all matter: fire, water, wind and dirt. Rav Chaim Vital writes (Sha'arei Kedusha) that, so too, all middos are rooted in these very same four elements. After clarifying for ourselves what our main middos are, we should try to classify the middos into these four categories. Doing so will point the direction that we should follow when trying to rectify our middos.

The element of fire symbolizes the drive to advance and conquer. It manifests itself in the negative middos of arrogance, and in turn anger when things don't go as wished. Additionally, it propels a person to pursue honor and it breeds feelings of hatred when others stand in his way. The flip side of these middos is the virtue of anivus -- humbleness which prevents anger and breeds love.

The element of water symbolizes food, and the love and pursuit of pleasures. Included in this category is jealousy and the obsession with money or other desires. The positive side is using all pleasures for their specific purpose and not for partaking of pleasures for the sake of the pleasure itself.

The element of wind manifests itself with "shooting the breeze" i.e. speaking for no purposeful reason. Included are lying, flattery, speaking lashon hara and self glorification. The opposite is opening one's mouth only when doing so is commendable or needed.

Dirt, the final and lowliest element, is the cause for feelings of depression, laziness and despair. The parallel positive middos are the cognizance that everything Hashem does is for the best and the ability to serve Hashem with happiness.

Rav Wolbe urges us to study the first two chapters in Rav Chaim Vital's Sha'arei Kedusha which discuss the four elements and the importance of having good middos. Therein he writes that there are 248 limbs and 365 sinews in a human body. There are also 248 positive commandments and 365 negative commandments which parallel each of these parts of the body. The fulfillment of the mitzvos is what gives "life" to the parts of the body, and it was with this intention that we were commanded to perform the

mitzvos and fulfill the dictums of the Torah.

Although Chazal relate to various negative middos in the most severe terms, interestingly enough, the middos are, for the most part, not included in the 613 commandments of the Torah. Rav Chaim Vital explains that good middos are crucial for the proper performance of the mitzvos. Accordingly, the acquisition of good middos precedes the performance of mitzvos and therefore middos are not discussed in the Torah. Moreover, someone who has already acquired good middos will be able to perform all the mitzvos with much ease!

Good middos are not only the essential ingredients for good relationships, they are also the essential ingredients for the performance of the mitzvos. So invest some time into avodas ha'middos and reap the priceless dividends! © 2016 Rabbi S. Wolbe zt"l and the AishDas Society

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

"Behold, a nation came out of Egypt. Behold they have covered the visible part of the land.

And they are dwelling opposite me. And now, please go curse this nation for me, for they are stronger than I am, perhaps I will be able to smite them and [then] I can drive them from the land." These verses (Bamidbar 22:56) were part of the message Balak sent to Bilam, requesting that he curse Israel. When Bilam relayed this request to G-d (22:11), he said "Behold the nation that has come out of Egypt, that have covered the visible parts of the land, go now curse it for me, perhaps I will be able to wage war with them, and [then] I can drive them out." There are numerous difference between what Balak actually said to Bilam, and what Bilam told G-d Balak had said to him. Last year (<http://tinyurl.com/hj948z8>) I discussed the different words for "curse" used, and explained how Rashi could say Bilam used a harsher term for curse because he hated Israel more than Balak did if Balak subsequently used the same harsher term. This year I'd like to discuss the other differences between what Balak said and what Bilam said Balak had said.

The first difference is that Balak referred to them as "a nation," whereas Bilam referred to them as "the nation." The second difference is the repetition of the word "behold" by Balak, which was not included by Bilam. Next, Bilam does not mention that this nation is dwelling opposite Balak/Moav, nor does he mention Balak saying "please," Balak's admission that they are stronger than him, or Balak's calling them a nation a second time (rather than a pronoun). Whereas Balak wanted to be able to "smite" them, Bilam said he wanted to be able to "wage war with them." Finally, whereas Balak specified that he wanted to drive this nation "from the land," Bilam just mentioned "driving them out" without specifying from where.

It should be noted that not every difference has to make a difference. For example, it's possible that Bilam thought it was self evident that if Balak would be able to "drive the nation out" it would be "from the land," so didn't use words he thought were unnecessary. Nevertheless, Rashi does say that this difference is another indication of (and therefore a result of) Bilam hating Israel more than Balak did, as Balak only wanted to "drive them from the land" so that they would no longer be a threat to them, as well as being able to retake the land taken from them by Sichon, from whom Israel conquered it (when Sichon attacked them), whereas Bilam wanted to "drive them" off the face of the earth. (I will leave any possible implication that claiming to only want Israel off the land is only a pretext for not wanting us to exist at all for those pulpit rabbis who like using the Parasha as a hook for their political sermons.) Another example of different wording not necessarily having a different meaning is "smiting" and "waging war," which is translated exactly the same way by Unkolos (who understands "smiting" to mean the act of fighting in an attempt to smite rather than successfully smiting). Targum Yonasan does translate them differently, though, and what lies behind any possible difference is what I am trying to discover.

Or Hachayim attributes the differences to Bilam not wanting G-d to know how much he and Balak hated Israel, since G-d really loved them. Therefore, rather than tipping their hand, Bilam worded it as if they only wanted to get Israel off the land that had belonged to Moav (at least for "now"), and rather than "smiting" them, he said they only wanted to force them off the land (by waging war against them). He tries to position the other changes in this context as well (such as leaving off "from the land," which Balak meant as all of Canaan, so that it could be understood as only driving them off the land that Sichon conquered from Moav), with some working better than others.

Malbim says that Balak wanted to accomplish two things; he wanted to weaken Israel with Bilam's curse, and he wanted to restore the courage of his own nation, who knew of all the great things that happened for Israel and had therefore given up hope of standing up to them. By publicly cursing Israel, Moav would think it worked even if it didn't, it did, and have the courage to fight them. But Balak didn't want Bilam to know about the second part, so worded his request as if all he wanted was to weaken Israel, without mentioning how special they were, which was what caused everyone to fear them so. Therefore, he didn't refer to them as "the nation," which would mean the nation known to be special, but as "a nation." Bilam knew what was really going on, so reworded Balak's request to reflect what Balak really want to accomplish. They were "the nation," and Balak was trying to find a way to get his people to have enough courage "to fight" them, let alone be victorious by "smiting them."

Alshich has a similar approach, but instead of Bilam rewording his request because he knew what Balak really wanted, Bilam changed the wording so that G-d wouldn't get upset with Balak for minimizing Israel's importance.

Putting aside whether this approach addresses all the differences, most understand Balak as specifically referring to the miraculous things that occurred to Israel, so he could not have been trying to hide this from Bilam. Midrash Lekach Tov says Balak related to Bilam the amazing things G-d did for them in Egypt, by the sea, against Amalek and against Sichone and Oge. Israel "covered the eyes of the land" by destroying its "watchmen," Sichone and Oge (Tanchuma 4/5, see Rashi). They "are opposite me," but I can't see them because they are hidden by the "clouds of glory" (Midrash HaGadol). Hardly the way one would refer to a nation whose significance he was trying to downplay. (Although Malbim is not beholden to these Midrashim, at the very least we should try to find an explanation that works with them as well.)

Rashi attributes two of the differences in the wording to Bilam hating Israel more than Balak, and the Vilna Gaon applies this to several other differences. Nevertheless, rather than framing it as Bilam purposely changing the wording because of his stronger hatred towards Israel, I would frame it as being based on how Bilam perceived Balak's words because his hatred of Israel was stronger.

We can be confident that the message Balak sent Bilam was not in Biblical Hebrew. [Most likely, since they were both Aramenians (see Rashi on 22:5), it was in Aramaic.] Rather, the Torah uses the Biblical Hebrew words that most accurately reflect the intent of the original words, both the words of the message Balak sent Bilam and the words Bilam used when relaying this message to G-d. And these words were different because Bilam's hatred towards Israel was so strong that he didn't really take into account the practical fear (and disgust) that Balak, and Moav, had of Israel, understanding their desire to curse Israel to be based on the same hatred he had.

When Balak said "behold, a nation came out of Egypt" he was referring to the very fact that anyone, let alone an entire nation, was able to escape from Egypt, an accomplishment that justified Moav's fear in its own right. He then added a totally separate thought, another reason to be afraid of Israel, that "behold they covered the visible parts of the land." Whether it refers to conquering Sichone and Oge, or that rather than withering away despite having spent 40 years wandering in the desert they were so numerous that they literally covered the land, the word "behold" is used a second time because it was a second, separate thought. Bilam, however, understood it as one thought, referring to "the" specific nation he (and he thought they) hated, the one that came out of Egypt and now

covered the land.

Since Balak was concerned about how Israel impacted his nation (as they were on land that they considered theirs and were afraid Israel might attack them directly, or at least terrorize them further), he mentioned that "they are dwelling opposite me" and "are stronger than me." However, these are secondary (at best) when it comes to hating them (Israel wasn't dwelling near Bilam and he wasn't afraid of being attacked or terrorized by them, yet his hatred of them was strong), so didn't make an impression on Bilam, and he (unknowingly) didn't include them when he repeated what he thought was Balak's message to G-d. Similarly, Bilam paid no attention to the niceties of speech that Balak used, such as the word "please" and showing some respect by referring to them as a nation multiple times, and didn't even realize he was omitting words and complete thoughts when relaying the message to G-d.

As I mentioned earlier, Unkoles translates "perhaps I will be able to smite them" and "perhaps I will be able to wage war against them" exactly the same way (see Netziv for an explanation as to why they might mean the same thing), so it isn't necessary to explain this non-difference. Nevertheless, they are different words, so it seems more likely that Bilam also understood these words differently than Balak meant them. Since Balak's goal was to get Israel to leave the land they had conquered from Sichone, being able to "wage war" wasn't the point, but doing damage to them ("smiting them"), so that they would either be forced to leave that land, or decide it was not worth staying there and having Moav constantly attacking and damaging them. Bilam, on the other hand, wanted to prevent them from fulfilling their divine mission, so the need to "inflict damage" didn't resonate with him. He therefore understood Balak's request as wanting to "wage war to drive them out" from everything (see Rashi), whereas Balak only wanted to "drive them from the land" they were currently occupying, um, I mean living on. ©2016 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI YAAKOV NEUBERGER

The Eloquence of Silence

The enormity of the pain of losing a child, the added hurt of the abruptness of his murder and the questions that surround it, should signal to all of us the eloquent restraint of Aharon Hakohen when he suffered the sudden double death of Nodov and Avhiu. Indeed there are times when words are at best meaningless.

The forceful counterbalance to that silence for us is the fear that without words, the "powerful stream of life" that Prime Minister Netanyahu referred to in his eulogy yesterday could move us on and return us to routine, without moving us inside and without forging a singular memory within.

This fear threads its way throughout the story of Bilam as we will read this Shabbos. "And Hashem became angry because [Bilam] went, and Hahsem's angel stood on the road to be against him. And Bilam rides on his donkey and his two servants were with him" (22:22.) The hanging redundancy that closes the pasuk -- "and bilam rides his donkey" -- begs comment.

I believe the Torah wants us to appreciate that life was screaming out to Bilam, Hashem was distanced and close all at the same time, an angel was literally in front of his nose, Bilam was en route to the event that ultimately would bring about his failure and death, "and Bilaam rides on his donkey" in total obliviousness. To him it's another day, another mission, another stroll on his donkey.

Rav Schwab z"tl points out (Mayan Bais Hashoeva p. 355) that Bilam had become entirely unimpressionable. Nothing, not even his talking donkey, could cause him a moment's pause. How does a person remain saddled, maintain total composure, and simply respond to his talking donkey without missing a beat and without any question or curiosity? How does a person see with his own eyes the people who miraculously thrived in the desert with the manna and the well and all the while remain unmoved, totally unimpacted, and ready to deliver the very same curses he had prepared earlier? "And Bilam rides on his donkey."

Bilaam's folly charges us with the mandate to maintain open, sensitive and responsive hearts. This week we are reminded of that, in the face of the ongoing drumbeat of disappointments, fears and tragedies that could so easily numb all feelings and stymie any empathetic outreach.

Indeed this week's breathtaking outpouring of concern, sympathy, and generosity of heart and soul that knew no geographical or philosophical distance should undoubtedly find its way into the fiber of every Jew.

Consoling? Hard to imagine. An instructive memory? To be sure. ©2014 Rabbi Y. Neuberger and The TorahWeb Foundation

