

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

One of the most profound and influential comments ever made about Jewish destiny was made by the pagan prophet Bilaam in this week's sedra: "As I see them from the mountain tops, / Gaze on them from the heights, / Behold it is a people that dwells alone, / Not reckoned among the nations." (Num. 23:9)

To many -- Jews and non-Jews, admirers and critics alike -- that has seemed to epitomise the Jewish situation: a people that stands outside history and the normal laws governing the fate of nations. For Jews it was a source of pride. For non-Jews, it was all too often a source of resentment and hate. For centuries, Jews in Christian Europe were treated, in Max Weber's phrase, as a "pariah people." All agreed, though, that Jews were different. The question is: how and why? The biblical answer is surprising and profound.

It is not that Jews alone knew God. That is manifestly not the case. Bilaam -- the very prophet who uttered these words -- was not an Israelite. Nor were Abimelekh or Laban, to whom God appears in the book of Genesis. Abraham's contemporary, Malkizedek, king of Shalem (the city that later became Jerusalem) is described as a priest of the most high God. Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, was a Midianite high priest, yet the sedra that contains the supreme moment of Jewish history -- the revelation at Mount Sinai -- bears his name. Even the Pharaoh who ruled Egypt in the days of Joseph said of him, "Can we find anyone like this man, one in whom is the spirit of God?"

God does not appear only to Jews, members of the covenantal nation. Nor does He answer only Jewish prayers. At the dedication of the Temple, King Solomon made the following request: "As for the foreigner who does not belong to Your people Israel but has come from a distant land because of Your name -- for men will hear of Your great name and Your mighty hand and Your outstretched arm-when he comes and prays toward this temple, then hear from heaven, Your dwelling place, and do whatever the foreigner asks of You, so that all the peoples of the earth may know Your name and fear You, as do your own people Israel, and may know that this house I have built bears Your Name."

The sages continued this great tradition when they said that "the righteous of the nations of the world

have a share in the world to come." Yad Vashem, the Holocaust museum in Jerusalem, contains the names of more than 20,000 righteous gentiles who saved lives during the Holocaust years.

Nor is it that God's covenant with the children of Israel means that they are more righteous than others. Malachi, last of the prophets, has striking words to say on the subject: "From where the sun rises to where it sets, My name is honoured among the nations, and everywhere incense and pure oblation are offered to My name, for My name is honoured among the nations, says the Lord of hosts. But you profane it..." (Malachi 1:11-12)

Nor did any of the major strands in Jewish thought ever see Jewish chosen-ness as a privilege. It was, and is, a responsibility. The key verse here is the famous prophecy of Amos: "You alone have I singled out / Of all the families of the earth -- / That is why I will call you to account / For all your iniquities. (Amos 3:2)

Where then did Jewish singularity lie? The clue lies in the precise wording of Bilaam's blessing: "Behold it is a people that dwells alone." For it was as a people that God chose the descendants of Abraham; as a people that He made a covenant with them at Mount Sinai; as a people that He rescued them from Egypt, gave them laws, and entered into their history. "You will be to Me," He said at Sinai, "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." Judaism is the only religion to place God at the centre of its self-definition as a nation. Jews are the only nation whose very identity is defined in religious terms.

There were many nations in the ancient world who had national gods. There were other religions -- Judaism's two daughter faiths, Christianity and Islam -- that believed in a universal God and a universal religion. Only Judaism believed, and still believes, in a universal God accessible to all, yet peculiarly manifest in the way of life, fate and destiny of a single and singular people: "You are my witnesses, declares the Lord, and my servant whom I have chosen... / You are my witnesses, declares the Lord, that I am God."



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(Isaiah 43:10-12)

Israel, in its history and laws, would be God's witness. It would testify to something larger than itself. So it proved to be. The historian Barbara Tuchman wrote: "The history of the Jews is... intensely peculiar in the fact of having given the Western world its concept of origins and monotheism, its ethical traditions, and the founder of its prevailing religion, yet suffering dispersion, statelessness and ceaseless persecution, and finally in our times nearly successful genocide, dramatically followed by fulfilment of the never-relinquished dream of return to their homeland. Viewing this strange and singular history one cannot escape the impression that it must contain some special significance for the history of mankind, that in some way, whether one believes in divine purpose or inscrutable circumstance, the Jews have been singled out to carry the tale of human fate."

Why, if God is the God of the universe, accessible to every human being, should He choose one nation to bear witness to His presence in the human arena? This is a profound question. There is no short answer. But at least part of the answer, I believe, is this. God is wholly Other. Therefore He chose a people who would be humanity's 'other'. That is what Jews were -- outsiders, different, distinctive, a people who swam against the tide and challenged the idols of the age. Judaism is the counter-voice in the conversation of mankind.

During two thousand years of dispersion, Jews were the only people who, as a group, refused to assimilate to the dominant culture or convert to the dominant faith. They suffered as a result -- but what they taught was not for themselves alone. They showed that a nation does not need to be powerful or large to win God's favour. They showed that a nation can lose everything else -- land, power, rights, a home -- and yet still not lose hope. They showed that God is not necessarily on the side of great empires or big battalions. They showed that a nation can be hated, persecuted, reviled, and yet still be loved by God. They showed that to every law of history there is an exception and what the majority believes at any given moment is not necessarily true. Judaism is God's question-mark against the conventional wisdom of the

age.

It is neither an easy nor a comfortable fate to be "a people that dwells alone", but it is a challenging and inspirational one. *Covenant and Conversation 5777 is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl z"l* © 2017 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"My nation, remember what Balak the king of Moab advised and what Bil'am the son of Be'or...answered him in order that you may know the compassionate righteousness of the Lord" [Micah 6:5] Who, or what, defines Israel, and why does it matter? If deeply concerning trends continue in the United States, research and ample anecdotal evidence indicate that those succeeding in affecting views toward Israel are the very people who attack it as a racist, discriminatory occupier lacking any moral or political legitimacy. Noble attempts to brand Israel as a high-tech haven ("start-up nation") notwithstanding, Israel is increasingly being effectively defined by foes, not friends. What, if anything, can be done to reverse these deeply troubling developments?

In our weekly Biblical portion, Balak, we read that efforts by enemies to define the Jewish People have ancient antecedents. King Balak of Moab, frightened by the "Biblical Israelis," vastly overestimates their global designs as well as their military might: "This multitude will lick up all that is round about us as the ox licks up the grass of the field" (Num. 22:4). He therefore turns to Bil'am, a magician and a soothsayer, an accomplished poet and master of the spoken word, to curse the Israelis in order to vanquish them (ibid., v.6).

Bil'am represents the giant media corporations and social media platforms that play a dominant role in shaping public opinion. Is it not true that these manipulators of minds have the power to destroy a world with a word? And indeed, Bil'am sets out to curse the Israelites.

Nevertheless, the Torah goes on to say that the prophet ultimately blesses the Israelites. At first he is struck by his donkey's refusal to take him where he wanted to go. Apparently even a donkey can be amazed by the miraculous events that contributed to the preservation and preeminence of Israel from abject slaves to recipients of God's Presence at Sinai, despite their smallness in number and scarcity of power.

And then Bil'am sees for himself—to the extent that at least he attempted to record the truth as he composes his tweets and Facebook posts. He may have come to curse, but he stays to praise. He evokes Jewish destiny in glowing terms, extolling the uniqueness of Israel (ibid., 23:9) and evoking our ultimate Messianic victory (ibid., 24:17–19). He affirms unmistakably that "no black magic can be effective

against Jacob and no occult powers against Israel" (ibid., 23:23) – evil words spoken by evil people are impotent before the modesty and integrity expressed by the Israelites in their daily lives.

Ultimately, however, it is not the speaking donkey that will succeed in changing the minds of the many Bil'ams around us; rather, it is the deeds of the Jewish People itself that will evoke change: "Your deeds will bring you close, your deeds will distance you" [Mishna, Eduyot 5:7].

First of all, Bil'am takes note of the military success of this fledgling nation against every one of her enemies—Israel had just emerged from a great military victory against the terrorizing Amorites. And, more importantly, the chaste and sanctified lifestyle of the Israelites and their commitment to their traditions and ideals made an even greater impact on Bil'am.

"How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your Sanctuaries, O Israel" [Num. 24:5]. Bil'am was amazed as to how the Israelite encampment (ohel) was constructed to respect everyone's privacy, so that no one could see into his neighbor's home. He was moved by the sensitivity toward interpersonal relationships, the love and respect displayed toward one another by family members and the harmony with which neighbors lived together.

And when Bil'am saw the commitment the Israelites had to their study halls and synagogues (mishkan)—their fealty to traditional values and teachings and their faith in Divine providence—he understood, and proclaimed the invincibility of this Divinely-elected people.

Alas, what a person might—and words could not—do to the Israelites, the Israelites managed to do to themselves. Bil'am and Balak returned to their homes to leave Israel in peace—but the Israelites themselves self-destructed. They chased after the hedonistic blandishments of the pagan societies of Bil'am and Balak. The very next chapter opened with "And the people began to commit harlotry with the daughters of Moab...and Israel joined himself to the [idolatry of] Ba'al Peor [Bil'am ben Beor]" (ibid., 25:1–3).

We failed in the desert not because of what our enemies did or said, but rather because of our own moral weakness and rejection of the birthright that had initially formed our nation's definition and mission. Indeed, we are "a people who dwells alone, not subject to the machinations of other nations" (ibid., 23:9).

In this generation, in which detractors and haters attacking the Jewish People and Israel are on the ascent in capturing public opinion, we must remember to ignore the noise, and to focus on our national mission. To rephrase Ben Gurion, indeed it is not what the nations say that matters, but rather it is what we do or what we do not do, especially in the spheres of ethics and morality, which is of supreme significance. ©2017 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S.

Riskin

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

Old adversaries return to plague the Jewish people. Bilaam, according to midrash, was one of the advisors to the Egyptian Pharaoh. He was the one that advocated the enslavement and eventual destruction of the Jews in Egypt. His plan was thwarted by the intervention of Heaven. Nevertheless, a substantial number of Jews were destroyed in the centuries of Egyptian bondage and slavery.

One would have thought that Bilaam would have taken the hint and relented in his efforts to destroy Israel. But as this week's Torah reading amply illustrates, he once again intensifies his hatred against the Jewish nation. But now he intends to kill them with kindness. He showers them with compliments and noble rhetoric. He wishes to lull them into believing that he is really their friend and admirer. And by so doing, he will corrupt them with the sexual immorality for which he himself is so justly famous.

The Jewish people, like all people, are moved by flattery and compliments. Everyone wants to hear others say nice things about them. In Yiddish there is a famous folk-saying that no one ever received a slap for flattering someone else. Therefore, it is no wonder that the flattering words of Bilaam are remembered and treasured by the Jewish people even until today.

We have ignored the sinister hateful message that lay behind these words and merely bask in the nice things that he said about us. But the truth is that thousands of Jews died in the desert because of him and the advice that he rendered to Balak, the Moabites and Midianites. Bilaam was truly a bitter enemy.

What I have always found difficult to understand is the motivation behind the hatred of Bilaam for the Jewish people. After all, he is a man of great intelligence and gifted with prophetic qualities. The rabbis of the Talmud even allowed him to be equated with our great teacher Moshe in certain of his qualities. He is a man of academia and of the cloth. He has wealth and honor, position and power. So why squander all of this on an irrational hatred of the people that have done him no harm and have not threatened him in any way?

This question is not restricted to the ancient Bilaam found in the Torah reading of this week. It is just as valid a question in our time, as to the attitude of certain members of academia and religious leadership. Their preoccupation with demonizing the State of Israel particularly and the Jewish people generally is baffling to any thoughtful observer of current events.

The only conclusion that can be drawn is that such hatred is beyond logical explanation and rationale argument. Bilaam serves as a prototype for much of what we see and experience in our own time. On the

surface, most of our enemies decry anti-Semitism and claim to be only friendly critics, with our welfare and benefit in mind. They are full of unsolicited advice and remain almost willfully blind to the realities of the situation in which we find ourselves and must operate within. Again, Bilaam is our most insidious and consistent enemy. ©2017 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 God commands Avraham (Abraham) to sacrifice his son Yitzhak (Isaac), the Torah states, that Avraham "saddled his donkey, veyahavosh 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 God, so committed to following God'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 God that there could be a counterbalance to this hatred – his love and the love of others.

Thank God 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. ©2017 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 HERSEL SCHACHTER

TorahWeb

Bilam ha'rasha was a novi, but at the same time he is always referred to as Bilam ha'rasha -- the evil one. One may wonder -- was his external appearance that of a novi or that of a rasha?

The mishna in Pirkei Avos (5:19) describes the contrast between the talmidim of Avrohom Avinu and the talmidim of Bilam ha'rasha. The pesukim that indicate the difference are pesukim spoken by Bilam, not by his talmidim. Why doesn't the mishnah draw a contrast between Avrohom Avinu and Bilam himself?

Some of the commentaries point out that when one would look at Bilam you could be fooled to believe that he himself is the same type of person as Avrohom Avinu. Because he was a novi he dressed the part, acted the part, and spoke the part. You could only tell the difference between the two when you look at their talmidim.

According to the haftorah of Parshas Vayishlach the stranger who mugged Yaakov Avinu in the middle of the night was an angel. The midrash explains that he was soro shel Eisav -- Eisav's angel. The gemorah (Chullin 91a) has a discussion regarding what this angel looked like. One opinion is that his appearance was similar to that of a talmid chachom. Looks are often deceiving -- soro shel Eisav can dress up like a talmid chacham. It is known that the Chofetz Chaim used to dress like a plain ba'al ha'bayis. In fact there were those that referred to him as the "ba'al ha'bayis". But we know from the influence that he had on so many of his followers that he was so much more than a plain ba'al ha'bayis. Unfortunately there are many rabbonim who dress the part, act the part, and speak the part, but when we look at their followers we realize that in their inner core there is something seriously lacking.

In a famous teshuva written by the Maharshal he complains about the fact that in his generation there were many honest-to-goodness talmidei chachomim who did not have the minhag to wear a yarmulke all day long and the public would frown upon them. But any Torah scholar who would wear a yarmulke would be honored and respected even if his Torah knowledge and yiras shomayim were not up to par. Looks are often deceiving. The mishna (Pirkei Avos 4:20) warns us, "al tistakel b'kankan eleh b'mah sh'yesh bo -- one should not judge a person merely based on externalities." When one is deciding whom to follow as his rebbe, in fulfillment of the instructions in the mishna (Pirkei Avos 1:6), "asei l'cho rav", one must judge whether the rabbi in question is the right person in his inner core based on the rabbi's talmidim. ©2017 Rabbi B. Yudin and TorahWeb.org

DR. ARNOLD LUSTIGER

Vort from the Rav

Bamidbar 23:9: "it is a nation that will dwell alone, and will not be reckoned among the nations." Unity in Israel is a basic principle in Judaism. We have formulated this principle in one sentence: You are one, Your name is one, and who is like Your people Israel, a unique nation on earth? (Minchah of Shabbos).

The principle of unity expresses itself in two ways. First, the unity of Jews as members of a spiritual community, as a congregation which was established through the conclusion of the covenant at Mount Sinai: And you shall be unto me a kingdom of princes and a holy nation (Ex. 19:6). The unity of the Jewish people as a community is based upon the uniqueness of the Jewish way of life--a Torah existence. What ties the Yemenite water carrier in the streets of Tel Aviv to the Jews of Boston? A uniform Orach Chaim, the Shema Yisrael, Shabbos, Kol Nidrei night, the Seder night, kashrus, tefillin, the characteristic trait of kindness, the hope and yearning for redemption. The Hebrew word edah, congregation, is the same as ed, witness, and edus, testimony; thus a spiritual-religious entity is tied through a transcendental-ethical consciousness to a vast memory of a people about a divine law with a common past and a collective future. A collective testimony united us all into a Jewish community. The Jew who erases from his memory this great testimony, destroying the unique collective tradition, breaks the tie which joins him with the Jewish community as part of a congregation, as part of a spiritual Torah entity.

Unity also manifests itself in our unique political-historical lot as a nation. We are unique not only in our way of life, but also in our historical transmigrations and in our paradoxical fate. Our history would not fit into a different historical framework, and our fate is incomprehensible. The enigma of our existence is primarily revealed through our loneliness and our affliction in all times, the current era included. It

is a nation that will dwell alone, and will not be reckoned among the nations. The State of Israel did not avoid this unique fate; quite the contrary, it has given expression to it in a more concrete fashion. No Jew can renounce his part of the unity, which emerges from the fate of loneliness of the Jewish people as a nation. This political-historical unity is based upon the conclusion of the covenant in Egypt, which occurred even prior to the giving of the Torah at Sinai: And I shall take you to Me as a people, and I will be a God to you (Ex. 6:7). This covenant forced upon us all one uniform historical fate. The Hebrew word am, nation, is identical to the Hebrew word im, with. Our fate of unity manifests itself through a historical indispensable union.

When we are faced with a problem for Jews and Jewish interests regarding the defense of Jewish rights in the non-Jewish world, then all groups and movements must be united. In this area, there may not be any division, because any friction in the Jewish camp may be disastrous for the entire people. In this realm, we must consider the ideal of unity as a political-historical nation, which includes everyone from Mendes-France to the "old-fashioned" Jew of Meah She'arim--without exception. In the crematoria, the ashes of the chasidim and pious Jews were put together with the ashes of the radicals and the atheists. And we all must fight the enemy, who does not differentiate between those who believe in God and those who reject Him.

With regard to our problems within [the Jewish community], however--our spiritual-religious interests such as Jewish education, synagogues, councils of rabbis--whereby unity is expressed through spiritual-ideological collectivism as a Torah community, it is my opinion that Orthodoxy cannot and should not unite with such groups which deny the fundamentals of our Weltanschauung. (Community, Covenant and Commitment, pp. 143-144) ©2017 Dr. A. Lustiger & torah.org

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 KALMAN PACKOUZ

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

The Torah states: "And the Almighty said to Bilaam, do not go with them. Do not curse the nation for they are blessed" (Numbers 22:12).

Bilaam tells the messengers from Balak, "God 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* ©2017 Rabbi K. Packouz & aish.com

HARAV SHLOMO WOLBE ZT"L

Bais Hamussar

Although Bilam was brought to Midyan to curse Bnei Yisrael, he ended up blessing them and singing their praises. While lauding their virtues Bilam exclaimed, "He perceived no iniquity in Yaakov and saw no 'amal' (lit. labor) in Yisrael" (Bamidbar 23:21). Rashi explains that "amal" refers to sin because it is laborious in Hashem's eyes.

Elsewhere the Torah uses terms of exhaustion to describe sin. When Eisav came in from the field and

asked Yaakov for some of the lentil soup, he stated "For I am exhausted" (Bereishis 25:30). Chazal explain this exhaustion to be referring to his murderous behavior. In a similar vein, when Bnei Yisrael left Mitzrayim they were attacked by the nation of Amalak. In Devarim (25:17, 18) the Torah describes this encounter: "Amalak happened upon you on the way and he struck those in the rear, when you were faint and exhausted." Here too, Chazal tell us that the "exhausted" refers to the transgressors whom the clouds of glory ejected.

Rav Wolbe comments that people seem to relate to sin in a different manner. When it comes to learning or performing certain mitzvos, many people feel lethargic and it almost seems that they have to be dragged with metal chains to perform the mitzvos. In contrast, aveiros seem to take no effort at all. In Hashem's eyes the opposite is true. Aveiros are arduous and exhausting.

Deep down, we all know that every mitzvah is worth more than diamonds. The difficulty we have when it comes to learning, davening or any other mitzvah is a result of subconsciously ignoring what we know to be true. Show Hashem that you appreciate the extraordinary value of each mitzvah and run to take advantage of the next mitzvah opportunity that knocks. Such alacrity, in addition to it acting as an external display of the worth of a mitzvah, ultimately it changes a person internally. Before he knows it, he will be jumping for mitzvos without thinking twice! ©2017 Rav S. Wolbe z"l and The AishDas Society

RABBI YISSOCHER FRAND

RavFrاند

Transcribed by David Twersky

Technical Assistance by Dovid Hoffman

Parshas Balak contains the well-known story of Balak the King of Moav worrying about the imminent approach of the Jewish people. Moav correctly surmised that, given the fate of the other kings and nations that had challenged Bnei Yisrael [the Children of Israel] with conventional military tactics, Moav would not stand a chance confronting them in traditional battle.

Therefore, Balak devised a "secret weapon" -- the chemical weapon of his day. "And he sent messengers to Bilaam son of Beor..." [Bamidbar 22:5] Bilaam had the ability to curse someone. When he did so, the curse would in fact take effect on its intended victim. Therefore, Balak requested that Bilaam curse the "nation that has gone out from Egypt and covered the face of the land."

Bilaam asked the messengers to stay overnight, so that he could answer Balak's request the next morning based upon what G-d would tell him. G-d told Bilaam, "Do not go with them; do not curse the people, for they are Blessed" [22:12]. Bilaam relayed

that message to Balak's messengers.

When Balak heard that Bilaam would not come, he assumed that the reason was because the proposed compensation was inadequate -- that he had tried to get away too cheap. Therefore, Balak sent a more prestigious delegation promising Bilaam a great reward and granting his every request.

Bilaam, not being anyone's fool, casually mentioned to the messengers, "Even if Balak will give me his entire treasury filled with silver and gold, my hands are tied -- I can only do that which G-d permits me to do." Again, they proceeded through the whole process of waiting overnight.

This time, G-d told Bilaam, "If these people are coming for your advantage (likra lecha), then go with them -- just only speak that which I tell you" [22:20]. If we can even use such terminology, it appears as if G-d changed his mind! The first time that Bilaam asked for permission, G-d said "No. You cannot go!" Then, G-d suddenly appeared to change His mind. What changed?

Rash"i comments on the words "Im Likra Lecha," that if these people are coming for your benefit -- to give you payment, go with them. In other words, if you stand to make profit out of this venture, then I have no objection to your going.

That was the difference! The first time, when they asked Bilaam to come, they did not offer him anything -- neither money nor honor. In that situation, G-d told Bilaam, "Do not go." The second time, Balak offered Bilaam wealth and honor. In that situation, G-d told him, "If you stand to gain from this, then you can go."

Is G-d worried about Bilaam's livelihood? Is He acting as Bilaam's agent? Pro bono, you cannot go. If you charge by the hour -- then you can go. Why?

I heard a fantastic insight regarding this concept from Rav Shimon Schwab (1908-1995). The difference, says Rav Schwab, is that one of the most potent forces in the universe is doing something "Lishma" -- for its own sake, without ulterior motives. Doing something altruistically, for the sake of what one believes to be right, is extremely powerful. However, when people do things because they stand to make a dollar, rather than for the sake of a cause, it loses its potency.

Rav Schwab related this insight in the context of explaining the rise and fall of the Communist system during the previous century. Communism was a very successful movement. Until very recently, over a billion and a half people lived under Communist domination -- and yet in recent times we have seen Communism disintegrate.

What made Communism so successful? Rav Schwab argued that Communism became so successful because there were "Lishma-niks." People like Lenin and Trotsky and Marx were people who

wanted to give the world a better order. They wanted to give the world a new system to replace the "bankruptcy of capitalism," in which some are fantastically wealthy and some beg on the street. In a sense, Communism was based on very noble ideals. These people were -- for lack of a better word -- L'shem Shamayim [for the sake of Heaven]! They did it for the sake of Communism. They were Lishma!

Rav Schwab related that he remembered a Communists parade in his city in Germany in the 1920s. A Jewish boy who had rebelled against his parents marched in the front line of this parade. The boy was despised. He was an outcast of the entire community. Nevertheless, this did not faze him, because he did it Lishma. He believed in what he was doing, like so many others, who unfortunately believed in it.

When people are willing to give up their lives and souls for the sake of a cause, that is a very potent force. We can look back now, over 70 years later, and try to discover what happened to the movement that caused it to collapse. We can suggest that to a large extent, the system failed because it lost this element of 'Lishma'. When we saw that all the leaders of the various "Iron Curtain" countries had stashed away Swiss bank accounts and when we saw all the corruption and graft, we quickly recognized that they had abandoned the Lishma. Once they lost the element of Lishma, the potency of the force was gone.

This is what G-d was telling Bilaam: When Balak came and said, "Curse the Jews," without offering honor or money, the reason why Bilaam was going was because he hated Jews. "We need to curse Jews! I want to eradicate Jews." This is a philosophy. It is a CAUSE. In that case, "Watch Out! You may not go." G-d knows that a sincere CAUSE is a lethal and potent force.

However, when Balak said, "I will give you Honor and Money," then G-d told Bilaam: If this is for your own benefit -- if you are doing it for the money, then go. That is a different story. If you are "in it" for the money and honor, rather than Lishma -- then your ability will not be nearly as potent. ©2017 Rabbi Y. Frand & torah.org

RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY

A Never Ending Story

With Divine intervention ensuring that Balak the King of Moav would be governed by Murphy's Law, everything that could go wrong for him went wrong. Balak, the King of Moav saw that the Jewish nation was camped near his land and he became frightened. He employed the greatest sorcerer of the generation, Bilaam, to curse the Children of Israel, but alas, Hashem ensured that all potential curses were turned into blessings. In one of the early attempts to curse the Jews, Bilaam erected seven

altars with sacrifices. He set out to accomplish his mission but he failed. Instead of cursing the Jews, Bilaam blessed them and longed for their eternal fortune.

"He declaimed his parable and said 'From Aram, Balak, king of Moab, led me, from the mountains of the east, 'Come curse Jacob for me, come bring anger upon Israel.' How can I curse? G-d has not cursed. How can I anger? G-d is not angry. For from its origins, I see it rock-like, and from hills do I see it. Behold! It is a nation that will dwell in solitude and not be reckoned among the nations. Who has counted the dust of Jacob or numbered a quarter of Israel? May my soul die the death of the upright, and may my end be like his!" (Numbers 23:6-10)

Though I am no expert in sorcerer's spells or Bilaamic blessings, the juxtaposition is difficult to comprehend. Why did Bilaam suddenly ask to die the death of the upright after extolling the uniqueness of his adversaries, the Israelites? If he gave them blessings, why didn't he ask to live in the bounty of their goodness?

Last year my son was in fourth grade and had to do a report on President Abraham Lincoln. He did a fine job recounting his log-cabin childhood, his early career as an attorney, and his tumultuous presidency. He detailed the difficult period of the Civil War and Lincoln's bold stance in signing the Emancipation Proclamation. I looked over his report and frankly, I was quite impressed — until I reached the last sentence. It read: "Abraham Lincoln died on Friday morning, April 15, 1865, and was buried in Oak Ridge Cemetery, outside Springfield, Illinois."

"Zvi," I exclaimed, "Abraham Lincoln died on Friday morning?" I rhetorically reiterated, stressing the passivity of the underreported, yet most traumatic event. "Died?" I repeated. "He was shot to death! In fact, Lincoln was assassinated! In fact," I added, "he was the first President to be assassinated! How can you ignore that significant part of his life in your report?"

Zvi looked at me quizzically. "My report was on 'the Life of Abraham Lincoln. Who cares how he died? He died!"

Bilaam understood that death, too, is an integral part of life. Our attitude toward death is part of our larger attitude toward life. And the way we leave this world is part of a greater outlook of how we aspire to live our lives.

A neighbor of mine was a former Yeshiva boy back in the early 1920's in one of America's first yeshivas. Time and circumstances eroded both his practice and belief. He had joined the army and rose to the rank of a General. He and his wife often ate in our sukkah and we became quite friendly. When he was diagnosed with a fatal illness, he asked me to perform his funeral service in the right time. I agreed only if he would be buried in accordance with the halacha. And

though in his life he disregarded the daily practices of an observant Jew, in death, he forewent burial in his his army uniform and instead chose traditional tachrichim (shrouds) and a talis.

When one sees the ultimate spiritual eternity of the Jew, he realizes that death is just a portal to a greater world, Olam HaBah. Bilaam declared that we are a nation that dwells in solitude, and that our ways in life are not compatible with those nations who outnumber us. It is after he comprehended our eternity that he beseeched the Almighty with the haunting bequest, "May my soul die the death of the upright, and may my end be like his!" The Chofetz Chaim, however, added a very cogent caveat: In asking for the death of the righteous, Bilaam understood that there is more to the legacy of life than life itself. And so, Bilaam wanted to live his perverted life as a hedonistic heretic, yet he wanted to die the death of the righteous. "Truth be told," says the Chofetz Chaim, "our mission is not only to die the death of the upright, but to live the life of the upright as well."

Because if you want to sleep the sleep, you first have to walk the walk. ©2002 Rabbi M. Kamenetzky 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 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. If we introduce the Torah in our own controlled-environment homes, it will not only help ourselves and our communities, but will also lead to the many blessings that follow! ©2008 Rabbi S. Ressler & LeLamed, Inc.

