

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

This is an extraordinary moment in Jewish history, for good and not-so-good reasons. For the first time in almost 4,000 years we have simultaneously sovereignty and independence in the land and state of Israel, and freedom and equality in the Diaspora. There have been times -- all too brief -- when Jews had one or the other, but never before, both at the same time. That is the good news.

The less-good news, though, is that Anti-Semitism has returned within living memory of the Holocaust. The State of Israel remains isolated in the international political arena. It is still surrounded by enemies. And it is the only nation among the 193 making up the United Nations whose very right to exist is constantly challenged and always under threat.

Given all this, it seems the right time to re-examine words appearing in this week's parsha, uttered by the pagan prophet Balaam, that have come to seem to many, the most powerful summation of Jewish history and destiny: "From the peaks of rocks I see them, / From the heights I gaze upon them. / This is a people who dwell alone, / Not reckoning themselves one of the nations." (Num. 23:9)

For two leading Israeli diplomats in the twentieth century -- Yaacov Herzog and Naphtali Lau-Lavie -- this verse epitomised their sense of Jewish peoplehood after the Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel. Herzog, son of a Chief Rabbi of Israel and brother of Chaim who became Israel's president, was Director-General of the Prime Minister's office from 1965 to his death in 1972. Naphtali Lavie, a survivor of Auschwitz who became Israel's Consul-General in New York, lived to see his brother, Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau, become Israel's Chief Rabbi. Herzog's collected essays were published under the title, drawn from Balaam's words, *A People that Dwells Alone*. Lavie's were entitled *Balaam's Prophecy* -- again a reference to this verse.

(Yaacov Herzog, *A People that Dwells Alone*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1975. Naphtali Lau-Lavie, *Balaam's Prophecy*, Cornwall Books, 1998. In the Introduction, Amichai Yehuda Lau-Lavie quotes this verse. In Hebrew, however, the work was entitled *Am ke-Lavie*, a reference to the later words of Balaam, "The people rise like a lion; they rouse themselves like

a young lion" (Num. 23:24) -- a play on the Hebrew name Lavie, meaning "lion".)

For both, the verse expressed the uniqueness of the Jewish people -- its isolation on the one hand, its defiance and resilience on the other. Though it has faced opposition and persecution from some of the greatest superpowers the world has ever known, it has outlived them all.

Given, though, the return of Anti-Semitism, it is worth reflecting on one particular interpretation of the verse, given by the Dean of Volozhyn Yeshiva, R. Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin (Netziv, Russia, 1816-1893). Netziv interpreted the verse as follows: for every other nation, when its people went into exile and assimilated into the dominant culture, they found acceptance and respect. With Jews, the opposite was the case. In exile, when they remained true to their faith and way of life, they found themselves able to live at peace with their gentile neighbours. When they tried to assimilate, they found themselves despised and reviled.

The sentence, says Netziv, should therefore be read thus: "If it is a people content to be alone, faithful to its distinctive identity, then it will be able to dwell in peace. But if Jews seek to be like the nations, the nations will not consider them worthy of respect." (*Ha-amek Davar to Num. 23:9*)

This is a highly significant statement, given the time and place in which it was made, namely Russia in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. At that time, many Russian Jews had assimilated, some converting to Christianity. But Anti-Semitism did not diminish. It grew, exploding into violence in the pogroms that happened in more than a hundred towns in 1881. These were followed by the notorious Anti-Semitic May Laws of 1882. Realising that they were in danger if they stayed, between 3 and 5 million Jews fled to the West.

It was at this time that Leon Pinsker, a Jewish physician who had believed that the spread of humanism and enlightenment would put an end to Anti-Semitism, experienced a major change of heart and wrote one of the early texts of secular Zionism, *Auto-*



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Emancipation (1882). In words strikingly similar to those of Netziv, he said, "In seeking to fuse with other peoples [Jews] deliberately renounced to some extent their own nationality. Yet nowhere did they succeed in obtaining from their fellow-citizens recognition as natives of equal status." They tried to be like everyone else, but this only left them more isolated.

Something similar happened in Western Europe also. Far from ending hostility to Jews, Enlightenment and Emancipation merely caused it to mutate, from religious Judeophobia to racial Anti-Semitism. No-one spoke of this more poignantly than Theodore Herzl in *The Jewish State* (1896): We have honestly endeavoured everywhere to merge ourselves in the social life of surrounding communities and to preserve the faith of our fathers. We are not permitted to do so. In vain are we loyal patriots, our loyalty in some places running to extremes; in vain do we make the same sacrifices of life and property as our fellow-citizens; in vain do we strive to increase the fame of our native land in science and art, or her wealth by trade and commerce. In countries where we have lived for centuries we are still cried down as strangers... If we could only be left in peace... But I think we shall not be left in peace.

The more we succeeded in being like everyone else, implied Herzl, the more we were disliked by everyone else. Consciously or otherwise, these nineteenth century voices were echoing a sentiment first articulated 26 centuries ago by the prophet Ezekiel, speaking in the name of God to the would-be assimilationists among the Jewish exiles in Babylon: You say, "We want to be like the nations, like the peoples of the world, who serve wood and stone." But what you have in mind will never happen. (Ez. 20:32)

Anti-Semitism is one of the most complex phenomena in the history of hate, and it is not my intention here to simplify it. But there is something of lasting significance in this convergence of views between Netziv, one of the greatest rabbinic scholars of his day, and the two great secular Zionists, Pinsker and Herzl, though they differed on so much else. Assimilation is no cure for Anti-Semitism. If people do not like you for what you are, they will not like you more for pretending to be what you are not.

Jews cannot cure Anti-Semitism. Only Anti-Semites can do that, together with the society to which they belong. The reason is that Jews are not the cause of Anti-Semitism. They are the objects of it, but that is something different. The cause of Anti-Semitism is a profound malaise in the cultures in which it appears. It happens whenever a society feels that something is badly amiss, when there is a profound cognitive dissonance between the way things are and the way people think they ought to be. People are then faced with two possibilities. They can either ask, "What did we do wrong?" and start to put it right, or they can ask, "Who did this to us?" and search for a scapegoat.

In century after century Jews have been made the scapegoat for events that had nothing to do with them, from medieval plagues to poisoned wells to inner tensions in Christianity to Germany's defeat in the First World War to the underachievement of many Muslim states today. Anti-Semitism is a sickness, and it cannot be cured by Jews. It is also evil, and those who tolerate it when they could have protested are accomplices to evil.

We have nothing to apologise for in our insistence on being different. Judaism began as a protest against empires, symbolised by Babel in Genesis and ancient Egypt in Exodus. These were the first great empires, and they achieved the freedom of the few at the cost of the enslavement of the many.

Jews have always been the irritant of empires because of our insistence on the dignity of the individual and his or her liberty. Anti-Semitism is either the last gasp of a declining culture or the first warning sign of a new totalitarianism. God commanded our ancestors to be different, not because they were better than others -- "It is not because of your righteousness that the Lord your God is giving you this good land" (Deut. 9:6) -- but because by being different we teach the world the dignity of difference. Empires seek to impose unity on a plural world. Jews know that unity exists in heaven; God creates diversity on earth.

There is one fundamental difference between Anti-Semitism today and its precursors in the past. Today we have a State of Israel. We need no longer fear what Jews discovered after the Evian Conference in 1938, when the nations of the world closed their doors and Jews knew that they had not one square inch on earth they could call home in the Robert Frost sense, namely the place where "when you have to go there, they have to let you in." ('The Death of the Hired Man') Today we have a home -- and every assault on Jews and Israel today only serves to make Jews and Israel stronger. That is why Anti-Semitism is not only evil but also self-destructive. Hate destroys the hater. Nothing has ever been gained by making Jews, or anyone else, the scapegoat for your sins.

None of this is to diminish the seriousness with which we must join with others to fight Anti-Semitism

and every other religious or racial hate. But let the words of Netziv stay with us. We should never abandon our distinctiveness. It is what makes us who we are. Nor is there any contradiction between this and the universalism of the prophets. To the contrary -- and this is the life changing idea: In our uniqueness lies our universality. By being what only we are, we contribute to humanity what only we can give.

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RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"I see it but not now; I look at it, but it is not near. A star has stepped forth from Jacob and a scepter-bearer has risen from Israel; [Israel] will pierce and vanquish the nobles of Moab...." [Num. 24:17]. The interaction of Jew and Gentile is a prominent theme in Judaism recurring throughout Jewish history, and, according to our prophets, a feature of the End of Days. What will the Jew-Gentile dynamic be at that time, and what implications does that have for us in present times?

In this week's Biblical reading of Balak, we read of the vision of the gentile prophet, Bilaam, that Israel will eventually trounce its nemesis, the nation of Moab. Indeed, Ruth, a descendant of Moab, will eventually convert to Judaism, settle in Israel, and become the great-grandmother of King David, progenitor of the Messiah!

In the meantime, however, in an effort to short-circuit the Jews' long-term destiny by assimilating them into Moab now, Bilaam advises his Moabite benefactor to send Midianite women to seduce the Israelite men. In this, he partially succeeds, enticing many thousands to sin, including prominent Israelites such as Zimri ben Salou, a prince from the Tribe of Simeon.

I would like to suggest that this sordid incident serves as a foil to the paradigm for Jewish-Gentile relations at the End of Days. In a cryptic comment from Rabbi Avraham Azulay in his "Chesed L'Avraham", we find that "Rabbi Akiba was the repair [tikkun] for Zimri ben Salou." What connection can there possibly be between the major architect of the Oral Law and the Simeonite prince who publicly fornicated with a gentile woman in front of Moses?!

Rashi (Nedarim 50b) records an incident towards the end of the life of Rabbi Akiba involving a Roman personage named Rufus. Rufus would often debate on matters of Torah with Akiba, though Akiba always bested him in argument. The Roman personage became embarrassed, and upon his return home, told his wife of his defeat.

She said to him, "I will tempt Rabbi Akiba and cause him to stumble! [Then you will not have to worry

about him any longer.]" She was a very beautiful woman. She came before Rabbi Akiba and, [when they were alone] she revealed her [naked] thigh before him.

Rabbi Akiba spat, and laughed and wept. She said to him, "Why do you act in such a [strange] manner?" He said to her, "I will explain to you two out of my three activities. "I spat, because you came from a fetid drop [of sperm, of which I had to remind myself, to prevent me from sinning with you]. "I wept, because in the end your beauty will decay beneath the earth."

But why he laughed, he did not wish to tell her. Nevertheless, after she entreated him many times, he explained that it was because she would eventually convert to Judaism and would marry him. Whereupon she said to him, "And is there the possibility of repentance?" He said there was. And after her husband died, she converted, married Rabbi Akiba, and brought him great wealth.

Bilaam was sure that with the proper sexual blandishments, the Israelites could blend into the culture of Moab and Midian. Inter-marriage would create one humanity without Jews. Rabbi Akiba, on the other hand, believed in true messianism. Rabbi Akiba was a moral universalist who taught, "Beloved is the human being, for he was created in God's image" [Avot 3:14].

Rabbi Akiba believed that the cardinal commandment of the Torah is "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" [Lev. 19:18] – because every human being is like you; every human deserves to be free and all humanity are siblings because each emerged from the womb of the Divine Presence (Shekhina). He believed that eventually, every nation will merge with Israel and accept the Torah [Talmud, Berachot 56b; Maimonides, Laws of Kings 12:11].

Rabbi Akiba himself came from a family of proselytes, and died with the universal watchword of our faith in world unity on his lips: "Hear, O Israel, [right now] the Lord is [accepted by us as] our God, [but eventually] He will be [accepted by all nations] as the One [God of unconditional love]."

This was the goal of universalist Akiba-ism, which will usher in the true messianic age, when "everyone will accept the yoke of God's kingship" when "nation will not lift up sword against nation and humanity will not learn war anymore" [Is. 2:4], and everyone will learn Torah and lovingkindness from the people of Israel [ibid.]. ©2018 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

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 BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

After recounting all the inner failings and rebellions of the Jewish people in the desert of Sinai, as recorded for us on the Torah readings of the past few weeks, we are now forced to turn our attention to a great external threat to Jewish survival. Balak and Bilaam represent an unfortunately eternal opposition to Jewish existence and to the rights of the Jewish people as a nation.

Their attack is a two-pronged plan. Balak intends to use force and violence, military means and the strength of arms to eliminate what he perceives to be a Jewish threat to his hegemony in his part of the world. Bilaam, on the other hand, seeks to destroy the Jewish people diplomatically, philosophically and with a public relations scheme. He has cursed the Jewish people, to hold it to be guilty before the bar of world opinion, of all sorts of crimes that are imaginary and illusory, to help bring about its downfall and destruction.

When the world will see the Jewish people through the eyes of Bilaam he is confident that they will no longer be able to exist and function as a people. The Lord thwarts the plans of both Balak and Bilaam. The Jewish people are too strong to be overcome militarily and the Lord will not allow Bilaam to curse them in any meaningful way. In fact, the Lord turns the words of negativity and hatred that Bilaam wishes and intends to

utter into words of praise. These enemies of Israel are apparently checkmated on both of their fronts of attack.

Yet it would be wrong for us to think that the intentions and actions of these evil people did not have an effect. The blandishments and compliments given by Bilaam to the Jewish people somehow weakened the people morally. They are led to believe that the world recognizes and appreciates their greatness and that it is possible and even desirable to become part of that world physically, emotionally and domestically.

One of the weaknesses of the Jewish people throughout the ages has been that it is very susceptible to favorable comments and soothing behavior than it is to harshness and criticism. Everyone wants to be loved, especially those who, deep down in their souls, realize that they are unloved by so many.

Israel can withstand all the unfair and unjust resolutions of the United Nations without it really affecting its sense of self-worth and inner strength. If Israel would constantly be lauded, as it should be by any rational observer of the world scene, it seems that somehow it would be likely to have greater self-doubt and less steadfastness in the face of the problems that confront it.

The Talmud tells us that the Jewish people do better in times of stress and criticism than in times of compliments and fawning blandishments. The strength of the Jewish people has always been its ability to maintain its belief in its own uniqueness and self-worth. This remains the key to Jewish survival in our time as well. ©2018 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 hashurah), 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. ©2018 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

This week's Parsha tells us a story about Balak, who commissioned Bilam to curse the Jews, since he was known to have abilities equal to those of Moshe. The twist in the story is that G-d tells Bilam that he shouldn't travel to curse the Jews, and even if he decides to go, he mustn't curse them, but must instead repeat whatever he's told. On the way to curse the Jews (yes, he decided to proceed anyway), Bilam's donkey was confronted by an angel who was sent to remind him that he shouldn't be going, and that even once he arrived at his destination his words would be limited. Several times the donkey saw the angel and

moved out of the way, only to be hit by Bilam for straying. Finally, the donkey miraculously spoke, rebuking Bilam for hitting him.

In this story there are several glaring difficulties:

1) If Bilam wanted to curse the Jews, why was he asking G-d for permission? Further, once he was told that he shouldn't and couldn't curse, why did he go?

2) Why was it necessary for Bilam's donkey to begin speaking? If G-d had a message to give Bilam, why couldn't He just tell it to him, as He had done in the past?

As the Birchat Peretz helps to explain, the answer lies in the way we interpret things, and our motives behind them. On one hand, Bilam really wanted the power and wealth that would have come with cursing the Jews, so that when G-d gave him permission to travel to the Jews, he was hoping it would grant him permission to curse them too. On the other hand, the donkey which didn't have personal desires influencing him, was able to rebuke Bilam with honest, straightforward arguments, not tainted with personal agendas. Bilam justified what he wanted to do based on things he thought he heard or understood. It's frightening to consider that one of the wisest people in that generation could let his heart dictate what he hears, and confuse what he knows is right.

So the next time we find ourselves trying to justify our position when we know we're probably stretching the truth, all we have to do is ask: Would an honest donkey agree with the way we're thinking? And if we feel a tinge of doubt, consider ourselves rebuked, and think again. ©2018 Rabbi S. Ressler & LeLamed, Inc.

RABBI DAVID S. LEVIN

Who was Bilaam ben B'or?

Bilaam ben B'or is one of the most unusual characters in the entire Torah. He was a prophet, a Navi, a man who spoke with Hashem and was answered by Hashem. He had great powers as a sorcerer who understood how to curse others. Rashi points out that he lived in P'tor which is a reference to one who interprets dreams: "v'ein poteir otam l'Phar'oh, there was no one who interpreted it for Par'oh." Balak, the King of Moav, approached Bilaam not as an interpreter of dreams but instead as a sorcerer who could place a curse on the B'nei Yisrael. The Midianites told Barak, "His (Moshe's) power is in nothing but his mouth.' The Moabites said, 'We, too, will come against the Israelites with a person whose power is in his mouth.'"

The Torah describes the message from Balak: "And he sent messengers to Bilaam the son of B'or to P'tor ... saying, behold a people has come out of Egypt and behold it has covered the eye of the land and it is resting opposite me. And now please go and curse this people because they are more powerful than I, perhaps

I will succeed and we will strike it and I will drive them away from the land for I know that which you bless is blessed and that which you curse is cursed.” Balak was frightened because he witnessed the destruction of the two most powerful nations on his border, Og and Sichon. The Maharzav explains that the term, “eye of the land”, refers to these two nations, Og and Sichon, because it was their responsibility to watch out and guard the land from outside invaders.

HaRav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch comments on the different meanings of the two words which indicate the curse which Balak seeks from Bilaam, arah and kava. Hirsch describes arah as meaning “destroy the germ of the inner life of these people.” The Mei’am Lo’eiz tells us that this term is a form of a k’lalah kalah, a lighter curse. When Bilaam repeats these words to Hashem, he changes the word to kavah, which Hirsch describes as “to wish a person to become quite hollow, without any internal support or content, to make him into an empty husk...” The Mei’am Lo’eiz describes this as a k’lalah chazakah, a serious curse. He explains that the change in wording is an indication that Bilaam hated the B’nei Yisrael more than did Balak. Balak basically wanted the Jewish people weakened so that they could not do battle against him. This is further indicated by the words “and I will drive them away from the land”. Bilaam instead wished to totally destroy the people as is indicated by his omission of the words, “from the land” meaning that he wished to drive them out from the world (see Rashi). Bilaam also changes the word nakeh, strike, to the word l’hilachem, to do battle. Nakeh is clearly a lighter term and did not fit with Bilaam’s desire to destroy the people completely.

We are told in the divrei Chazal, the sayings of the great Rabbis, that there were five Kings and four non-Kings who have no place in the “World-to-Come”. Leading the list of non-Kings is Bilaam. Bilaam was a prophet who was on par with Moshe Rabbeinu in prophecy. Yet the Mei’am Lo’eiz indicates that there is a difference between a Jewish prophet and a non-Jewish prophet. Jewish prophets understood that they needed to be careful about tumah and taharah, the laws of purity, so that they would always remain prepared to speak with Hashem. Moshe even “separated” from his wife so that he would remain spiritually pure at all times and would not have to wait should Hashem choose to converse with him. Bilaam did not separate himself from impure things or impure thoughts and in fact recommended impurity as a means of enticing the Jewish People to sin and drive them away from Hashem. Jewish prophets had rachamim, pity, on both the Jewish nation and on non-Jewish nations. Bilaam actively sought the destruction of another nation, namely the Jewish People.

Bilaam was also a manipulator and even tried to manipulate Hashem. The Kli Yakar explains that when Bilaam told Hashem that Balak requested that he

curse the people he used the harsher term kava as we saw earlier. Bilaam also told Hashem that Balak’s request was to completely destroy the B’nei Yisrael and make them disappear from the world even though Balak only requested making them disappear from his land. Bilaam knew that Hashem would never agree to such harsh terms but then might agree to a compromise which would enable Bilaam to achieve the exact wishes of Balak rather than his falsified harsher terms.

Still we find that Bilaam explains to Balak’s messengers, “even if Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold I would not be able to go beyond the word of Hashem my Elokim to do anything great or small.” It appears that Bilaam was a righteous man who refused to disobey Hashem at any time. HaRav Avigdor Nebezahl explains that again we can see here a sign of Bilaam’s manipulations. Bilaam was only willing to follow the exact stated words of Hashem but not the underlying directions of those words. When Hashem said to Bilaam “you will not curse (arah) the people”, Bilaam understood that only an arah curse may not be said, but he may still curse (karah) the people. Bilaam was constantly looking for a loophole which would allow him the discretion to do as he pleased. This is truly a rasha, an evil person. Bilaam was a great prophet yet squandered this opportunity because of his hatred.

As Jews we have been given both the Torah Shebichtav and the Torah Sheb’al Peh, the written and the oral laws. These enable us to understand both the exact law as stated in the Torah and the underlying nuance of the law as it is passed down to us in the Talmud. Our Rabbis through the ages have helped to clarify further what laws we must follow and the underlying principles behind those laws. We have little doubt what is expected of us and it becomes easier to see when some try to manipulate those ideas to fit their own personal agendas as Bilaam did. May we learn to guide our own actions by both the law and its underlying principles so that we may truly honor Hashem. © 2018 Rabbi D.S. Levin

RABBI DOVID LEWIN

How to See Things Right

Balak "saw". The Zohar tells us that there are three types of seeing: The physical sense of vision - i.e. what our eyes see, ruach ha'kodesh which is a spiritual inspiration (this is expressed by Shlomo Hamelech throughout Koheles when he records his observations about the world as what he has seen), and full prophecy which, while it is achieved through a high level of kedusha, can also be accomplished via a great level of tumah. Balak, says the Zohar, saw in all three ways. He saw what the B'nei Yisroel did to the Emori'im. He understood what was in store and he knew what could cause their downfall. With this vision

in hand, Balak set out to hire Bilaam to curse the Jews and was driven to succeed in causing their downfall.

Balak wasn't the only non-Jew who reacted to B'nei Yisroel's success. When Yisro heard of the Jew's triumph over the Mitzrim, he converted and embraced a Torah lifestyle. That's quite a different reaction. More than this, as R' Zalman Sorotzkin zt"l points out, while Yisro only heard, Balak saw. Seeing is more tangible and easier to accept as fact. Hearing a piece of information always leaves room from doubts. It should follow then, that Balak should have been more impressed and convinced than Yisro was. After all, seeing is believing, and this is without considering the higher dimensions of Balak's vision. Yet, the opposite occurred. While Yisro was inspired by what he heard, Balak opted to fight what he knew to be true. Yisro had a vision of greatness. Balak's ambitions for evil caused him to ignore everything he saw. Clearly, it is approach, not vision, that is key. Indeed, Chazal (Avos) advise us to avoid ayin ha'ra, the negative outlook espoused by Bilaam who became Balak's right hand man.

There is a powerful lesson here. A positive attitude is essential. One can accomplish great spiritual heights, even experience prophecy like Balak, and trade it all for arrogance and promotion of self. Yet one who is motivated to become inspired, can find greatness in everything, even if he only heard a little bit. This is true in many ways. In parshas Shelach, the Jews were punished for slandering Eretz Yisroel, and because their sojourn lasted forty days, they were sentenced to wandering in the desert for a corresponding forty years. On the surface, the mathematics seem simple, but if we think about it, the sin of the meraglim only last a few moments; the length of time it took for them to convey the slanderous report. Rav Chaim Shmulevitz zt"l explains that this is not so, for speaking an ill report is only the culmination of the aveirah of loshon hara. The spies were faulted for their attitude. They approached their mission with negativity and therefore sinned. Had they embarked with a positive attitude in mind they would have succeeded.

We are entering the three week period of mourning destruction. Destruction of the Beis HaMikdash, destruction of a land, and of its people. Chazal tell us that all of this came about because of sinas chinam. This is usually mistranslated as baseless hatred. This is incorrect. Jews don't hate others for no reason at all. We have a tendency however to hate others without sufficient cause. This is free hatred – sinas chinam – and it is our job to eradicate ourselves of this terrible trait. If we learn to focus on maintaining a positive attitude, we can promote love and friendship between Jews, and reverse the damage made in millennia of exile. ©2018 Rabbi D. Lewin. Rabbi Dovid Lewin is the Rosh Kollel of Mosdos Ahavas Yehonoson in Ramat Beit Shemesh. The author of several halacha seforim, Rabbi Lewin studied in the

famous Telshe Yeshiva in Cleveland where he received semicha. He now uses his skills and pedagogic knowledge to train the kollel's young scholars in developing their proficiency in peak halacha. Rabbi Lewin can be reached at rabbi@torahkollel.com.

SHLOMO KATZ

Hama'ayan

"The angel of Hashem said to him, 'Why did you strike your donkey these three times? Behold! I went out to impede [you], for you hastened on a road to oppose me...' Bil'am said to the angel of Hashem, 'I have sinned, for I did not know that you were standing opposite me on the road. And now, if it is evil in your eyes, I shall return'." (22:32, 34)

R' Yehuda He'chassid z"l (Germany; died 1217) asks: Why didn't Bil'am answer, "I struck the donkey because it pressed my leg against the wall"? And, why did Bil'am say, "I have sinned, for I did not know that you were standing opposite me on the road"? To the contrary, if he didn't know the angel was there then he did not sin!

He explains: The Torah teaches that one is held responsible for what he should have known, even if it was never explicitly commanded. We read, for example (Bemidbar 31:14-15), "Moshe was angry with the commanders of the army... Moshe said to them, 'Did you let every female [of Midian] live? Behold! -- they caused Bnei Yisrael, by the word of Bil'am, to commit a betrayal against Hashem regarding the matter of Pe'or; and the plague occurred in the assembly of Hashem.'" Moshe had never told the commanders that they should take the women as prisoners, but he was angry with them because they should have known.

Similarly, Bil'am should have known that G-d did not want him to go to Mo'av. Thus, when Bil'am said, "I have sinned, for I did not know that you were standing opposite me on the road," he really meant, "for I did not make it my business to know..." That is also why he did not make excuses to the angel for hitting his (Bil'am's) donkey; Bil'am knew that he was in the wrong.

R' Yehuda He'chassid writes further: Our Sages instruct that a person should be "arom b'yirah" (literally, "cunning in his fear [of Heaven]"). This refers to using one's intelligence to figure out G-d's Will even without being explicitly commanded. (Sefer Chassidim No.153)

"He perceived no iniquity in Yaakov, and saw no perversity in Yisrael. Hashem his G-d is with him..." (23:21) Can this be true? Don't our Sages teach that one will be punished if he takes the attitude that "G-d overlooks sins"?

R' Noach Shalom Brazovsky z"l (the Slonimer Rebbe in Yerushalayim) explains: When will G-d

overlook sins? If a person sins because he cannot overcome his yetzer ha'ra, but at the same time that he commits the sin, he is broken within because he dreads the thought of transgressing G-d's Will. This is the meaning of the verse: "He perceived no iniquity in Yaakov, and saw no perversity in Yisrael." When? "When Hashem his G-d is with him" at the time he sins. (Quoted in *Otzrotaihem Shel Tzaddikim*) ©2018 S. Katz & 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 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. ©2018 Rabbi M. Kamenetzky & torah.org

