

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

The year is 1933. Two Jews are sitting in a Viennese coffee house, reading the news. One is reading the local Jewish paper, the other the notoriously antisemitic publication *Der Strmer*. "How can you possibly read that revolting rubbish?" says the first. The second smiles. "What does your paper say? Let me tell you: 'The Jews are assimilating.' 'The Jews are arguing.' 'The Jews are disappearing.' Now let me tell you what my paper says: 'The Jews control the banks.' 'The Jews control the media.' 'The Jews control Austria.' 'The Jews control the world.' My friend, if you want good news about the Jews, always read the antisemites."

An old and bitter joke. Yet it has a point and a history and it begins with this week's parsha. Some of the most beautiful things ever said about the Jewish people were said by Bilaam: "Who can count the dust of Jacob... May my final end be like theirs!... How beautiful are your tents, Jacob, your dwelling places, Israel!... A star will come out of Jacob; a sceptre will rise out of Israel."

Bilaam was no friend of the Jews. Having failed to curse them, he eventually devised a plan that worked. He suggested that Moabite women seduce Israelite men and then invite them to take part in their idolatrous worship. 24,000 people died in the subsequent plague that struck the people (Num. 25, 31:16). Bilaam is numbered by the rabbis as one of only four non-royals mentioned in the Tanach who are denied a share in the World to Come (Sanhedrin 90a).

Why then did God choose that Israel be blessed by Bilaam? Surely there is a principle *Megalgelim zechut al yedei zakai*: "Good things come about through good people" (Tosefta Yoma 4:12). Why did this good thing come about through a bad man? The answer lies in the principle stated in Proverbs (27:2): "Let someone else praise you, and not your own mouth; an outsider, and not your own lips." Tanach is perhaps the least self-congratulatory national literature in history. Jews chose to record for history their faults, not their virtues. Hence it was important that their praise come from an outsider, and one not known to like them. Moses rebuked the people. Bilaam, the outsider, praised them.

That said, however, what is the meaning of one

of the most famous descriptions ever given of the people Israel: "It is a nation dwelling alone, not reckoned among the nations." (Num. 23:9)? I have argued (in my book, *Future Tense*) against the interpretation that has become popular in modern times, namely that it is Israel's destiny to be isolated, friendless, hated, abandoned and alone, as if antisemitism were somehow written into the script of history. It isn't. None of the prophets said so. To the contrary, they believed that the nations of the world would eventually recognise Israel's God and come to worship Him in the Temple in Jerusalem. Zechariah (8:23) foresees a day when "ten people from all languages and nations will take firm hold of one Jew by the hem of his robe and say, 'Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you.'" There is nothing fated, predestined, about antisemitism.

What then do Bilaam's words mean? "It is a nation dwelling alone, not reckoned among the nations." Ibn Ezra says they mean that unlike all other nations, Jews, even when a minority in a non-Jewish culture, will not assimilate. Ramban says that their culture and creed will remain pure, not a cosmopolitan mix of multiple traditions and nationalities. The Netziv gives the sharp interpretation, clearly directed against the Jews of his time, that "If Jews live distinctive and apart from others they will dwell safely, but if they seek to emulate 'the nations' they 'will not be reckoned' as anything special at all."

There is, however, another possibility, hinted at by another noted antisemite, G. K. Chesterton, who we have already mentioned in *Beha'alotecha*. Chesterton famously wrote of America that it was "a nation with the soul of a church" and "the only nation in the world founded on a creed." That is, in fact, precisely what made Israel different -- and America's political culture, as historian Perry Miller and sociologist Robert Bellah pointed out, is deeply rooted in the idea of biblical Israel and the concept of covenant. Ancient Israel was indeed founded on a creed, and was, as a result, a nation with the soul of a religion.

We discussed in *Beha'alotecha* how Rabbi Soloveitchik broke down the two ways in which people become a group, be it a camp or a congregation. Camps face a common enemy, and so a group of people bands together. If you look at all other nations, ancient and modern, you will see they arose out of historical contingencies. A group of people live in a

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land, develop a shared culture, form a society, and thus become a nation.

Jews, certainly from the Babylonian exile onward, had none of the conventional attributes of a nation. They did not live in the same land. Some lived in Israel, others in Babylon, yet others in Egypt. Later they would be scattered throughout the world. They did not share a language of everyday speech. There were many Jewish vernaculars, versions of Yiddish, Ladino and other regional Jewish dialects. They did not live under the same political dispensation. They did not share the same cultural environment. Nor did they experience the same fate. Despite all their many differences though, they always saw themselves and were seen by others as one nation: the world's first, and for long the world's only, global people.

What then made them a nation? This was the question R. Saadia Gaon asked in the tenth century, to which he gave the famous answer: "Our nation is only a nation in virtue of its laws (torot)." They were the people defined by the Torah, a nation under the sovereignty of God. Having received, uniquely, their laws before they even entered their land, they remained bound by those selfsame laws even when they lost the land. Of no other nation has this ever been true.

Uniquely then, in Judaism religion and nationhood coincide. There are nations with many religions: multicultural Britain is one among many. There are religions governing many nations: Christianity and Islam are obvious examples. Only in the case of Judaism is there a one-to-one correlation between religion and nationhood. Without Judaism there would be nothing (except antisemitism) to connect Jews across the world. And without the Jewish nation Judaism would cease to be what it has always been, the faith of a people bound by a bond of collective responsibility to one another and to God. Bileam was right. The Jewish people really are unique.

Nothing therefore could be more mistaken than to define Jewishness as a mere ethnicity. If ethnicity is a form of culture, then Jews are not one ethnicity but many. In Israel, Jews are a walking lexicon of almost every ethnicity under the sun. If ethnicity is another word for race, then conversion to Judaism would be impossible (you cannot convert to become Caucasian;

you cannot change your race at will).

What makes Jews "a nation dwelling alone, not reckoned among the nations," is that their nationhood is not a matter of geography, politics or ethnicity. It is a matter of religious vocation as God's covenant partners, summoned to be a living example of a nation among the nations made distinctive by its faith and way of life. Lose that and we lose the one thing that was and remains the source of our singular contribution to the heritage of humankind. When we forget this, sadly, God arranges for people like Bilaam and Chesterton to remind us otherwise. We should not need such reminding. *Covenant and Conversation 5779 is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl z"l* ©2019 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"**T**here is no sorcery for Jacob, there is no magic for Israel." (Numbers 23:23) What is the true message of an entire Torah portion dedicated to the hiring of a gentile soothsayer to curse the Israelite nation – but who instead becomes inspired to bless Israel and portray the ultimate messianic destiny of Israel in the most exalted and majestic of poetic metaphors? Are there indeed individuals with true power to foretell future events – and ought we seek out such individuals to help us tackle difficult moments in our lives which threaten to overwhelm us? And if indeed Bileam is a superior human being with profound prophetic insights emanating from a divine source, why does the Torah triumphantly record the fact that "Bileam ben Beor the magician" was killed by Israel with the sword amongst the corpses of our Midianite enemies during the conquest of Israel (Joshua 13:22)? And why does our biblical text juxtapose the sublime poetry of Bileam with the seemingly ridiculous tale of the talking donkey?

I believe that from a certain perspective, the entire portion of Bileam is a study in contrasts between the legitimately earned prophecy of Moses and the venally inspired sorcery of Bileam. The Torah understands that individuals may exist who appear to have been born with special powers: superior physical strength, a phenomenal photographic memory, sharp vision which can penetrate the thickest of partitions, intense concentration that can cause physical objects to explode, and perhaps even the ability to bring messages from the dead.

There is even a difference of opinion amongst our sages as to whether such phenomena reflect actual occurrences or are merely sleight-of-hand trickery. When the Bible records King Saul's last-ditch attempt to discover his destiny by asking the witch of Endor to seek the counsel of the dead Samuel – and she indeed provides the true message that "the Almighty will tear

the kingdom from your hands and give it over to your friend David” – the commentaries are divided as to the factual truth of the account: Rabbenu Sa’adia Gaon accepts the biblical story as it is written, and Rabbi Shmuel ben Hafni Gaon insists that the witch of Endor deceived King Saul (I Samuel 28 and its Geonic commentaries; see Radak, the end of chapter 28).

In a later generation, the arch-rationalist Maimonides calls all pronouncements emanating from supernatural communications and insights – including the writing and wearing of mystical amulets (kmeot) – “false and vain,” bordering on idolatry (Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Avoda Zara 1:16 and Guide for the Perplexed, I:61). On this basis, Rabbi Yosef Karo similarly dismisses all magical incantations as “not availing in the least,” but merely exercising positive psychological influence upon individuals in distress (Shulhan Arukh, Yoreh De’ah 179:6). The Gaon of Vilna, on the other hand, suggests that Maimonides’ philosophical study “misled or corrupted him,” insisting that there are amulets and incantations, and perhaps even communications from the beyond, which are rooted in the sacred and the divine” (ibid., paragraph 13). Perhaps the most important and representative view on the issue is presented by Rabbi Shlomo ben Aderet (Rashba, Responsa 548), when he had to judge the credibility of a Rabbi Nissim who claimed to have received messages from an angel; the great Talmudic scholar Rashba insists that divine communication akin to prophecy can only rest on one who is truly wise and pious, strong and courageous, and sufficiently wealthy as to not be in need of monetary contributions from those seeking his advice. Claims, and even what seem to be empirical facts, of supernatural abilities by individuals who are not outstanding in Torah scholarship and piety dare not be taken seriously – at the risk of flirting with idolatrous and even demonic blandishments.

The truth is that the Bible is indubitably clear when it warns us against seeking after any manner of magic or sorcery and exhorts us to be whole-hearted and pure in our service of the divine (Deut. 18:9–14). Our prophets did not major in futuristic prophecies but rather in inciting more ethical and genuine behavior; they certainly did not take remuneration for their words. Any individual devoid of the proper – and difficult to acquire – intellectual and spiritual prophetic attainments who makes pronouncements which even may appear to be vindicated by future discoveries is no better than the “talking donkey” in our Torah portion; a prophet of God must first and foremost be a model of Torah scholarship and piety.

Hence, the “talking donkey” may serve as a metaphor for all soothsayers devoid of proper qualifications of piety and intellect. Moses was a prophet of God, Bileam was a soothsayer. Moses sought divine truth while Bileam yearned for gold and

silver.

Bileam’s conclusion is most succinct and specific: “There is no sorcery for Jacob nor magic for Israel.... Behold the people shall rise up as a lioness, and lift up himself as a lion, he shall not lie down until he eats of the prey, and makes corpses of the wicked.” (Numbers 23:23–24)

Rashi explains this verse metaphorically: When individuals rise early for their Torah study, they triumph like the lion cub, grabbing onto the commandments, wearing the ritual fringes, reciting the Shema, and putting on the phylacteries. They do not eat before reciting the Evening Prayer. And they destroy the wicked as when they killed Bileam the soothsayer.

Numbers 23:24, as interpreted by Rashi through the eyes of our sages; see, too, Joshua 13:22.

We must search for God by performing the commandments as sincerely and punctiliously as possible; going after wonder-workers or soothsayers is at best a waste of time and at worst flirting with idolatry!
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RABBI BEREL WEIN

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We are all sufficiently sophisticated and experienced in our time to realize that wars are conducted on many different levels and not necessarily always on the battlefield or with massive armies. The Torah reading of this week introduces us to perhaps the first recorded use of psychological warfare and propaganda in human history. The magician, soothsayer and prophet of the non-Jewish world, Bilaam, is engaged by the King of Moab, Balak, to curse the Jewish people and to psychologically weaken them so that they would be unable to resist the army that Balak will eventually send forth to destroy Israel.

Apparently, everyone involved, both the Jews and the non-Jews, believed that this type of psychological warfare -- cursing the people -- would be effective. And apparently, all concerned agreed that if the Lord had not taken control of the mouth of Bilaam so that blessings and not curses came forth from his tongue, the Jewish people would have been materially harmed by his words.

All the commentators wonder why God had to change the words of Bilaam into words of blessing instead of curses. He, so to speak, could have just ignored what Bilaam had to say and arranged it so that those words would have had no effect on the Jewish people. The commentators concluded that heaven recognized that spoken words always have an effect and cannot be completely ignored. The hateful words that Bilaam intended to curse the Jewish people with should never be allowed to have been uttered for they would undoubtedly have had some effect and that effect would have been negative in all respects.

Jewish tradition teaches that all words have

importance and consequences. Words define us for good or for better and even though they are intangible, they leave lasting effects on those who say them and those who hear them. Judaism always places a heavy emphasis on correct speech and on meaningful and holy words. Bilaam achieved fame and fortune in his generation because of his words. But the fact that those words were used to destabilize and curse others, branded him an evil person no matter how great his talents and ability may have been.

At the end of this week's Torah reading, he again uses words to advise the enemies of Israel how to overcome the Jews spiritually and to eventually destroy them physically. He comes to give advice but by so doing he unleashes a weapon as lethal as any sword or spear, bomb or rocket. It proves again the adage of the rabbis that life and death are in the hands of the tongue. Even the blessings and the good words that he spoke about the Jewish people, because of the coercion of Heaven, in the end proved hollow and insincere. As the rabbis put it, from the blessings that he said, we can well deduce what the curses are that he meant to inflict upon Israel. Speech can kill and it can heal. The choice is always ours. ©2019 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

In this week's portion, Balak King of Moab hires Bilaam to curse 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 Sodom and decides to separate from Abraham. (Genesis 13:10-12)

As Sodom is destroyed, an angel of God tells Lot run to the mountain, 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 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 God. (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 insists that she will never leave 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 God, she 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 of the people 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 that 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, perhaps not in their generation but in future generations. ©2019 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

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 DAVID LEVINE

Ya'akov & Yisrael

There is an interesting dichotomy in the description of the Jewish People as seen by Balak and Bilaam. Balak was the King of the Moabites and he called on Bilaam, a sorcerer, to curse the nation. Balak continually refers to the people as ha'am, the nation or peoples. Balak was focused on the multitude of the people who swept across the land "like an ox licks and devours the grass of the field." Bilaam understands that it is not proper to think of the B'nei Yisrael as a multitude alone. He refers to the people by two names, Ya'akov and Yisrael. It is this distinction that is the key to an understanding of the nation.

In the first of the attempts by Balak and Bilaam to curse the B'nei Yisrael, Bilaam looks out on the people and comments, "who then counts the dust of Ya'akov and the number of a quarter of Yisrael, may my soul die the death of the upright and may my end be like his." Balak had instructed Bilaam to look upon the People to discover their weakness, and through that weakness to curse them. Bilaam not only looked upon the people but delved into their history. In doing so he discovered a fundamental flaw in Balak's assessment of the people based only on their numbers.

HaRav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch explains that Balak saw only the multitudes of the people and believed that if he could reduce the number of its fighters, he would be able to conquer it. He believed

that if he could count Ya'akov then he could reduce the physical number of Yisrael. But this reduction of physical numbers could not work with this people. Hirsch continues, "The prestige of other nations may rest on the number of the 'bodies' of the population, their increase may form a threat to be feared by other nations, their decrease give rise to hopes. Not so is it with Ya'akov-Yisrael. Whether they are small in numbers as 'Ya'akov' or growing numerous as 'Yisrael', it is not that which is "afar (dust)" and which increases or diminishes itself just by animal-like breeding in which its importance, its happiness or unhappiness consists. Not even death have they to fear, bodily death cannot reach their true selves. Their dying is more blissful than our living, because they ... correspond to the calling for which on the whole men are 'men' and strive for this purpose in 'a straight line' without turning aside."

Bilaam noticed a basic difference between the B'nei Yisrael and the other nations of the world. He saw how the B'nei Yisrael lived and what occupied their time. "How goodly are your tents Ya'akov, your 'dwelling places' Yisrael." Rashi quotes the Gemara in Baba Batra (60a) that Bilaam noticed that the openings of the tents were not facing each other so that privacy was maintained at all times. Rashi and others explain that the tents also refer to the tents of Ya'akov when he learned in the "tents, the yeshivot, of Shem and Eiver." Ya'akov was devoted to the study of Torah. The 'dwelling places' were taken to mean the Temple in the desert and the Temple that would later be in Yerushalayim. This was an indication that the people were devoted to the service of Hashem. Bilaam also saw that their diet consisted mainly of the man (manna) which Hashem sent from Heaven daily. The B'nei Yisrael were a people who were independent of the "realities" that bound the bodies of other mortal men. Their lives were spiritual and their existence was spiritual so the physical world of numbers and power did not apply to them.

From this observation, Bilaam understood that the only way to "curse" the people was to draw their attention away from the spiritual devotion to Hashem. HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin indicated that Bilaam realized that the tents were not facing each other because the people were guarding against seeing into their neighbors' tents which might lead to promiscuous behavior. Bilaam understood that he could encourage promiscuous behavior between the men and the daughters of Midyan. The daughters would first entice the men with their bodies and later introduce them to their idol worship. This was the only way to attack the people's connection to Hashem.

When our spiritual connection with Hashem is broken the close bond that Jews have for one another is also affected. In the desert, our tents as well as our lives were centered around the Mishkan, the Temple. When the Jews eventually built the permanent Temple

in Jerusalem, all eyes focused on that Temple in our prayers. Even today when the Temple has been destroyed, we still face Jerusalem and the Temple during our prayers. That focus on Hashem continues to draw us together. It is the source of our unity and our strength.

When we are united, then we fulfill another of Bilaam's observations. "Lo hibit aven b'Ya'akov v'lo ra'ah amal b'Yisrael, Hashem Elokav imo u'tru'at Melech bo, He perceived no iniquity in Ya'akov and saw no perversity in Yisrael, Hashem, his Elokim is with him, and the friendship of the King is in him." When we are united, Hashem is together with us and does not notice our flaws. HaRav Avigdor Nebenzhal wrote that the only way to destroy and harm the Jewish people is when we turn away from Hashem and cause Him to depart from among us. When we are united, that can never happen because we keep Hashem with us to enjoy seeing that unity.

Several lessons can be learned from this section. Israel must strive for unity but that unity can only come about through our striving for spirituality. Unity without a strong moral foundation and a connection with Hashem will never be a successful endeavor. That is not to say that our approaches to that spirituality must be uniform. Each of the twelve tribes approached Hashem in its unique way, but they all sought Hashem and His mitzvot. Today we must also actively seek Hashem and His mitzvot, even if our approach may not conform to that of other Jews. If we each learn and apply Hashem's Torah, we will again become a unified B'nei Yisrael. ©2019 Rabbi D. Levine

RABBI MORDECHAI WILLIG

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Bilam prophesied, "I see it, but not now. I view it, but it is not near. A star shot forth from Yaakov, and a tribe has risen from Yisrael, and he will strike down the extremities of Moav and undermine all the children of Sheis" (Bamidbar 24:17)

The Or Hachaim notes the seemingly repetitive phraseology, and associates it with the two different scenarios of mashiach described in the Gemara (Sanhedrin 98a). The phrase (Yeshayahu 60:22) "I, Hashem, in its time I will hasten it" is self-contradictory. Will the ultimate redemption occur at a preordained time, or will Hashem hasten it?

The Gemara answers: If they [Am Yisrael] merit it [zachu] I will hasten it. If not [lo zachu], it will come in its time. "I will see it but not now" implies not now but any time, even soon, just beyond my sight. This, says the Or Hachaim, is the scenario of zachu, I will hasten it. "I view it but it is not near" means it is far beyond one's view, not even close, describing the scenario of lo zachu, in its time.

The Gemara raises an additional contradiction, not about the time of the messianic redemption but

about its nature. Daniel (7:13) saw a vision of mashiach coming with the cloud of Heaven, i.e. of a swift, miraculous nature. However, Zecharya (9:9) describes him as humble and riding on a donkey, i.e. slowly and gradually, not miraculously.

Once again, the Gemara answers: If they merit it, zachu, it will be with the cloud of Heaven, swiftly and miraculously. This, says the Or Hachaim, is the shooting star from Heaven in Bilam's prophecy, a supernatural redemption. If not, lo zachu, it will be as a humble man riding on a donkey, slowly and gradually, not miraculously. This refers to a tribe from Yisrael arising as others in the world, naturally [b'derech hateva], as it says (Daniel 4:14) "Hashem will appoint the lowest of men over the kingdom". This tribe will reign and do what the pasuk states, namely be militarily victorious over its neighbors.

The Rambam (Hilchos Melachim 12:2) describes the messianic era based on the words of the prophets. He concludes: No one knows what will happen until it will happen. There are disputes among the Sages. Neither the order nor the details are fundamentals of religion. Lengthy discussions of these matters lead neither to love or fear of Hashem. Rather one should wait and believe, in general terms, in Mashiach.

Attitudes towards, and developments in, Eretz Yisrael in the last one hundred and forty years have engendered protracted and bitter controversies in Am Yisrael. The seventy years of the Zionist movement featured widespread support of, and fiery opposition to, the establishment of a Jewish state. Since 1948 the wars, policies and leaders of the State of Israel are a constant source of controversy extending well beyond its changing borders. In the religious community, it is viewed positively as proto-messianic, neutrally as a necessary development, or negatively as Satanic.

While, as the Rambam taught, the details are, and will remain, unknown, the words of the Or Hachaim may be a prescient description of our time. The slow and gradual process of redemption may refer to the Zionist movement, self-described as non-religious. Its achievements included the agricultural renewal of Eretz Yisrael after 1800 years of near desolation. The Gemara (ibid.) states: There is no clearer indication of the End, i.e. the signs of Mashiach, than this, as it says (Yechezkel 36:8), "Mountains of Yisrael you shall give your branches and bear your fruit for my nation Yisrael".

The State of Israel, led primarily by non-observant Jews, including some atheists and anti-religious ones, has, as the Or Hachaim predicted, done what the pasuk says. With divine assistance, recognized even by some otherwise non-believers, the Israel Defense Force has prevailed against overwhelming odds, and has been consistently victorious over its neighbors. Taken together, these

developments may indeed be a partial fulfillment of Bilam's prophecy of the slow and gradual process described in the Gemara and the Or Hachaim.

The Rambam describes speculation about the details of the messianic era as essentially futile, as they will remain unknown until Mashiach comes. Argumentation over these matters, which often descends into vitriolic and even violent controversies, is counterproductive. It leads to baseless hatred, *sinas chinam*, which caused the destruction of the Beis Hamikdash. Every generation in which the Mikdash is not built, it is as if it was destroyed in its days (Yerushalmi Yoma 1:1). This means that the underlying cause, namely *sinas chinam*, still exists in that generation, preventing the messianic era, about which people and communities argue to the point of hatred, from arriving. These arguments, like the speculation described in the Rambam, will be resolved only by the Mashiach himself.

This Shabbos, Parshas Balak, is Shiva Asar B'tamuz, the beginning of the three weeks of mourning over the churban, which culminate with Tisha B'av, its anniversary. We must recall the cause of the churban, and studiously avoid repeating *sinas chinam* and, thereby, extending the churban.

Differing opinions about the theological approaches to eschatology are unavoidable, as the Rambam taught. Political arguments about the practical approaches to the intractable problems facing the Jewish people in Eretz Yisrael and throughout the world are, likewise, unresolvable. Yet every Jew, by exhibiting the humility attributed by Zecharya to the Mashiach himself, can hasten his arrival by avoiding the acrimony and the hatred which result from absolute assuredness of the correctness of one's opinion and approach.

The application of the Or Hachaim's interpretation of Bilam's prophecy to our time does not predict the future. The details of the timing and nature of the messianic era will, as the Rambam wrote, remain unknown until they actually transpire. With appropriate humility and uncertainty, we can foster greater mutual love among Jews of different opinions and communities, which can actually hasten the redemption we all crave and pray for daily.

As the Rambam ruled, we must wait and believe, in general terms, in Mashiach. As the famous formulation of the Rambam's twelfth fundamental of faith says, "I believe with complete faith in the coming of Mashiach, and even though he may tarry, nevertheless I wait for him every day that he will come".

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RABBI YISROEL CINER

Parsha Insights

"Va'yar Balak ben Tzipur es kol asher asah Yisroel la'Emori" {Balak the son of Tzipur (who was the king of Moav) saw what Yisroel had

done to the Emori}. The Bnei Yisroel {Children of Israel} had decisively routed the Emori causing Balak and his nation to be extremely frightened. Seeing that the strength of Bnei Yisroel was not in their physical and military prowess but rather in their mouths--in their ability to connect to Hashem through prophecy and prayer--he tried to enlist the services of Bilaam to curse Bnei Yisroel.

Bilaam was the super-prophet of the gentiles. The morning prayers state that there will not arise among Yisroel a prophet like Moshe. The implication of which being that there will arise amongst the gentiles a prophet like Moshe--that prophet was Bilaam.

One often mistakenly thinks that if only Hashem would speak to me, reveal Himself clearly, then observance of the commandments would be so much more realistic. The story of Bilaam clearly refutes that.

The Talmud [Makkos 10B] teaches that along the path that a person wants to go, he is led. This is learned from Bilaam. When the elders of Midyan and Moav approached Bilaam to come curse Bnei Yisroel, Hashem told him: "Don't go with them, don't curse the nation because they are blessed.[22:12]" In the end, when Bilaam pursued it, Hashem told him that he could go with them [22:20]. Every person has their free will. They choose the path and then they are led along that path.

Avrohom Avinu was tested ten times and Bilaam was tested ten times. Avrohom overcame the ten tests while Bilaam ignored them. Hashem sent obstacles and incredible difficulties in the way of Avrohom fulfilling His commandments.

Avrohom never questioned or faltered--with stoic resolve and love he overcame every challenge.

Bilaam, Rav Isaac Sher shows, was tested in a very different way. He was sent ten obstacles in order to stop him from going against the will of Hashem. Wake up calls to make him realize that the path he was going on was contrary to the will of Hashem. He too 'overcame' these obstacles and with stoic resolve and hatred destroyed himself for eternity.

Twice Hashem spoke to him. He was told not to curse--they are blessed. In the end he was allowed to go but only to bless, not to curse them. He "overcame" the obstacle, going and hoping to somehow find a way to curse them.

An angel, unseen by him but seen by his donkey, was sent to block the way, causing it to veer off the path three times. He overcame. Ignoring the clear message being sent to him about the advisability of the path he was going on, he simply beat his donkey.

Then, talk about a wake up call, the donkey decided to discuss the situation with him. "Hey, you there with the stick, why are you hitting me?![~22:28]"

Again, with superhuman ability to ignore a 'subtlety', he simply enters a discussion with his donkey, explaining the decision making process which

led to his hitting him.

At the risk of missing out on any future gems resulting from this intellectual exchange, the angel interrupts this conversation and reveals himself to Bilaam, explaining that it was he who had been blocking his debating partner's progress. With astounding 'perception' Bilaam exclaims, "If it is bad in your eyes then I'll return." Naw, c'mon Bilaam, what makes you think that it might be bad in his eyes? You're being too hard on yourself! You're overreacting--being too sensitive... He overcame.

The angel sees the path that Bilaam wants to follow and he allows/leads him. "Go, but you must say whatever you're told to say." Bilaam goes, still hoping to harm Bnei Yisroel in whatever way possible. Even the angel's appearance couldn't overcome his resolve. He again overcame the obstacle.

Bilaam arrives and is brought to a point overlooking Bnei Yisroel. Three times a prophecy is sent through his lips, each time replete with overflowing blessings for Bnei Yisroel. Each time he overcomes the clear obstacles to his defying Hashem's will. He still continues to try to find a way to harm His children.

What was he thinking?! Here is a prophet (on the level of Moshe!) who knows what his Master wants and couldn't care less! How could a person be shown so clearly that his path is going against the will of Hashem and yet continue?

Ethics of the Fathers [2:1] instructs us to calculate s'char mitzvah {what is gained from a mitzvah} compared to what one loses by doing it and to calculate hefseid avairah {what one loses from sinning} compared to what is gained. We understand on a simple level. A mitzvah gives eternal, spiritual reward and a sin offers momentary, physical pleasure. The same way that our understanding of the gains of a mitzvah, the eternal, spiritual reward, is simplistic and limited, so too our understanding of the gains of the sin are also limited.

Let's look at the s'char avairah {gains of the sin} of a Bilaam. He was in his heyday! As a result of his sin of going to curse Bnei Yisroel he was treated to quite a show. Look how important I am. Look at all this personal attention I'm getting. Hashem speaks to me, my donkey starts to talk, an angel appears to me and then I spout these lofty prophecies. What a trip! Reminiscent of a child who misbehaves in order to get whatever attention he can, Bilaam's s'char avairah was Hashem seemingly focusing all of His attention on him. His s'char avairah was an intense spiritual encounter.

Now let's look at the hefseid mitzvah {what is lost by doing a mitzvah} of an Avrohom Avinu. He was commanded to bring his son, Yitzchok, up as a sacrifice. The G-d-serving nation that Hashem had promised would come from him would be lost, slaughtered upon the altar. Those who had joined him, accepting his anti-pagan teachings that Hashem

doesn't want human sacrifices, would be disillusioned and lost.

Even at much earlier point, Hashem was speaking to Avrohom when three angels, appearing as idol-worshipping travelers came to his tent. Calculating the reward of the mitzvah of hachnosos orchim {hospitality to guests} as compared to what would be lost (breaking his encounter with Hashem) Avrohom asked Hashem to please wait and ran to the guests! For Avrohom, the hefseid mitzvah {what's lost by performing a mitzvah} was spirituality. Yet, he correctly calculated that the spirituality gained would be that much greater.

That is the comparison between a Bilaam and an Avrohom. Each had their encounters with Hashem, knowing with absolute certainty that He exists and yet, each still had their tests. Each made their calculation and each chose their path. Along the path that a person wants to go, that person is led. The ball's in our court. © 2019 Rabbi Y. Ciner & torah.org

RABBI KALMAN PACKOUZ

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

The Torah states: "Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my end be like his" (Numbers 23:10). What did Bilaam mean when he said this?

We see from this statement of Bilaam that he realized the truth that one should lead a righteous life. Why then did he himself not live righteously and only wished that he could die and be rewarded as the righteous?

Rabbi Simcha Zissel of Kelm explained that although Bilaam had an intellectual awareness of the proper way to live, in his own life he found this too difficult. Because he had faulty character traits, he was not able to live according to the ideas and principles he knew were true. (Chochma Umussar, vol. 1, p. 78)

We see from here the importance of correcting one's character traits. Without an awareness of what is proper and what is improper one cannot live righteously. However, even after one has studied and knows what is good and what is evil, he must be able to follow through in his daily behavior. A person needs to be in control of his impulses. Having this mastery over one's natural tendencies will enable a person to live according to his ideals. Lacking this, one will do all kinds of improper actions.

The problem is not one of knowledge, but of self-discipline. For this reason we must work on improving our character traits for only then will we be able to act righteous. The only way to die as a righteous person is to live as one, and to do this takes much self-discipline. Dvar Torah based on Growth Through Torah by Rabbi Zelig Pliskin ©2019 Rabbi K. Packouz & aish.com

