

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS**

### Covenant & Conversation

**T**he command of the parah adumah, the Red Heifer, with which our parsha begins, is known as the hardest of the mitzvot to understand. The opening words, zot chukat ha-Torah, are taken to mean, this is the supreme example of a chok in the Torah, that is, a law whose logic is obscure, perhaps unfathomable.

It was a ritual for the purification of those who had been in contact with, or in, certain forms of proximity to a dead body. A dead body is the primary source of impurity, and the defilement it caused to the living meant that the person so affected could not enter the precincts of the Tabernacle or Temple until cleansed, in a process that lasted seven days.

A key element of the purification process involved a Priest sprinkling the person so affected, on the third and seventh day, with a specially prepared liquid known as "the water of cleansing." First a Red Heifer had to be found, without a blemish, and which had never been used to perform work: a yoke had never been placed on it. This was ritually killed and burned outside the camp. Cedar wood, hyssop, and scarlet wool were added to the fire, and the ashes placed in a vessel containing "living" i.e. fresh water. It was this that was sprinkled on those who had become impure by contact with death. One of the more paradoxical features of the rite is that though it cleansed the impure, it rendered impure those who were involved with the preparation of the water of cleansing.

Though the ritual has not been practised since the days of the Temple, it nonetheless remains significant, in itself and for an understanding of what a chok, usually translated as "statute," actually is. Other instances include the prohibition against eating meat and milk together, wearing clothes of mixed wool and linen (shatnez) and sowing a field with two kinds of grain (kilayim). There have been several very different explanations of chukim.

The most famous is that a chok is a law whose logic we cannot understand. It makes sense to God, but it makes no sense to us. We cannot aspire to the kind of cosmic wisdom that would allow us to see its point and purpose. Or perhaps, as Rav Saadia Gaon put it, it is a command issued for no other reason than to reward us for obeying it. (Beliefs and Opinions, Book

III)

The Sages recognised that whereas Gentiles might understand Jewish laws based on social justice (mishpatim) or historical memory (edot), commands such as the prohibition of eating meat and milk together seemed irrational and superstitious. The chukim were laws of which "Satan and the nations of the world made fun." (Yoma 67b)

Maimonides had a quite different view. He believed that no Divine command was irrational. To suppose otherwise was to think God inferior to human beings. The chukim only appear to be inexplicable because we have forgotten the original context in which they were ordained. Each of them was a rejection of, and education against, some idolatrous practice. For the most part, however, such practises have died out, which is why we now find the commands hard to understand. (The Guide for the Perplexed, III:31)

A third view, adopted by Nahmanides in the thirteenth century (Commentary to Leviticus 19:19) and further articulated by Samson Raphael Hirsch in the nineteenth, is that the chukim were laws designed to teach the integrity of nature. Nature has its own laws, domains and boundaries, to cross which is to dishonour the divinely created order, and to threaten nature itself. So we do not combine animal (wool) and vegetable (linen) textiles, or mix animal life (milk) and animal death (meat). As for the Red Heifer, Hirsch says that the ritual is to cleanse humans from depression brought about by reminders of human mortality.

My own view is that chukim are commands deliberately intended to bypass the rational brain, the pre-frontal cortex. The root from which the word chok comes is h-k-k, meaning, "to engrave." Writing is on the surface; engraving cuts much deeper than the surface. Rituals go deep below the surface of the mind, and for an important reason. We are not fully rational animals, and we can make momentous mistakes if we think we are. We have a limbic system, an emotional brain. We also have an extremely powerful set of reactions to potential danger, located in the amygdala, that lead us to flee, freeze or fight. A moral system, to be adequate to the human condition, must recognise the nature of the human condition. It must speak to our fears.

The most profound fear most of us have is of death. As La Rochefoucauld said, "Neither the sun nor death can be looked on with a steady eye." Few have explored death and the tragic shadow it casts over life

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more profoundly than the author of Kohelet (Ecclesiastes): "The fate of man is the fate of cattle; the same fate awaits them both, the death of one is like the death of the other, their spirits are the same, and the pre-eminence of man over beast is nothing, for it is all shallow breath. All end in the same place; all emerge from dust and all go back to dust" (Eccl. 3:19-20).

The knowledge that he will die robs Kohelet of any sense of the meaningfulness of life. We have no idea what will happen, after our death, to what we have achieved in life. Death makes mockery of virtue: the hero may die young while the coward lives to old age. And bereavement is tragic in a different way. To lose those we love is to have the fabric of our life torn, perhaps irreparably. Death defiles in the simplest, starkest sense: mortality opens an abyss between us and God's eternity.

It is this fear, existential and elemental, to which the rite of the Heifer is addressed. The animal itself is the starkest symbol of pure, animal life, untamed, undomesticated. The red, like the scarlet of the wool, is the colour of blood, the essence of life. The cedar, tallest of trees, represents vegetative life. The hyssop symbolises purity. All these were reduced to ash in the fire, a powerful drama of mortality. The ash itself was then dissolved in water, symbolising continuity, the flow of life, and the potential of rebirth. The body dies but the spirit flows on. A generation dies but another is born. Lives may end but life does not. Those who live after us continue what we began, and we live on in them. Life is a never-ending stream, and a trace of us is carried onward to the future.

The person in modern times who most deeply experienced and expressed what Kohelet felt was Tolstoy, who told the story in his essay, *A Confession*. (*A Confession and Other Religious Writings*, Penguin Classics, 1987) By the time he wrote it, in his early fifties, he had already published two of the greatest novels ever written, *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*. His literary legacy was secure. His greatness was universally recognised. He was married, with children. He had a large estate. His health was good. Yet he was overcome with a sense of the meaninglessness of life in the face of the knowledge that we will all die. He quoted Kohelet at length. He contemplated suicide. The question that haunted him was: "Is there any meaning in my life that will not be

annihilated by the inevitability of death which awaits me?" (Ibid. pg. 35)

He searched for an answer in science, but all it told him was that "in the infinity of space and the infinity of time infinitely small particles mutate with infinite complexity." Science deals in causes and effects, not purpose and meaning. In the end, he concluded that only religious faith rescues life from meaninglessness. "Rational knowledge, as presented by the learned and wise, negates the meaning of life." (Ibid. pg. 50) What is needed is something other than rational knowledge. "Faith is the force of life. If a man lives, then he must believe in something... If he does understand the illusion of the finite, he is bound to believe in the infinite. Without faith it is impossible to live." (Ibid. pg. 54)

That is why, to defeat the defilement of contact with death, there must be a ritual that bypasses rational knowledge. Hence the rite of the Red Heifer, in which death is dissolved in the waters of life, and those on whom it is sprinkled are made pure again so that they can enter the precincts of the Shechinah and re-establish contact with eternity.

We no longer have the Red Heifer and its seven-day purification ritual, but we do have the shiva, the seven days of mourning during which we are comforted by others and thus reconnected with life. Our grief is gradually dissolved by the contact with friends and family, as the ashes of the Heifer were dissolved in the "living water." We emerge, still bereaved, but in some measure cleansed, purified, able again to face life.

I believe that we can emerge from the shadow of death if we allow ourselves to be healed by the God of life. To do so, though, we need the help of others. "A prisoner cannot release himself from prison," says the Talmud. (Brachot 5b) It took a Kohen to sprinkle the waters of cleansing. It takes comforters to lift our grief. But faith -- faith from the world of chok, deeper than the rational mind -- can help cure our deepest fears. *Covenant and Conversation 5780 is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl z"l ©2020 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org*

**RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN**

**Shabbat Shalom**

"The entire House of Israel wept over Aaron" (Numbers 20:29) Why was Moses, the greatest prophet who ever lived and who sacrificed a princedom in Egypt to take the Hebrews out of Egypt, denied entry into the land of Israel? Was it because he struck the rock with his staff rather than having spoken to it? But it was God, after all, who commanded him to "take the staff, gather together the witness-congregation, and speak to the rock" (Num. 20:8)! And previously, shortly after the splitting of the Reed Sea, but before the Revelation at Sinai, God had

commanded him to strike the rock with his staff to bring forth water for the nation (Ex. 17:5). Apparently, striking the rock could not have been such a heinous crime.

I believe that the key to our understanding of the incident of the rock lies in a curious contrast between Moses and Aaron hinted at in our Biblical text, which highlights the profound tragedy – as well as the exalted majesty – within the unique persona of Moshe Rabbeinu, Moses our teacher.

Our Biblical portion of Hukat also records the death of Aaron the High Priest: “And Aaron died there at the top of the mountain... and the entire house of Israel wept over Aaron for thirty days” (Num. 20:28-29). At the conclusion of the Pentateuch and amidst great praise, the text teaches regarding Moses’ passing: “and the children of Israel wept over Moses at the plains of Moab for thirty days” (Deut. 34:8), – with Rashi commenting (ad loc) “the children of Israel refers to the males, but regarding Aaron it was written ‘the entire house of Israel wept, which includes the females; this was because Aaron pursued peace between neighbors and between husbands and wives.’” Apparently, Aaron was a more popular religious leader than was Moses.

The Bible also hints at the reason for this. You will remember that in the beginning of the Book of Exodus, after the occurrence of the burning bush, whenever God proposes that Moses assume leadership over Israel, the prophet is reluctant to do so. “I am not a man of words..., I am heavy of mouth and heavy of tongue” (Ex 4:10 – Kevad Peh, Kevad Lashon), he demurs, usually understood to mean that he stutters and stammers. Indeed, a bit later on the Bible reports that the people do not listen to Moses “because of impatience and hard work” (ibid. 6:9) – usually interpreted to mean that the enslaved and persecuted Hebrews were so embroiled in their toil and suffering that they lacked the patience and vision to hear Moses’ goal, to even dream of freedom and independence.

Rav Levi ben Gershon, philosopher and Biblical commentary (Languedoc, France 1288-1344), takes the text differently: the Hebrews do not listen to Moses because of his impatience and hard work (avodah, Divine service). Moses was a prophet, a master in jurisprudence, a philosopher-theologian; he had spent sixty years in Midian – ‘far from the madding crowds’ – attempting to come close to God, and he was continually developing his intellectual and spiritual powers so that his “active intellect” (seikhel ha’po’el) could “kiss” God’s active intellect, so that he could divine God’s will and communicate God’s Torah to the Israelites. (Maimonides, Guide to the Perplexed 2: 32, 45).

Moses recognized his own prophetic potential in the realm of the intellectual and spiritual; he craved and gloried in his fellowship with the Divine. But he also

realized that to be a leader of the people you must be a superb shepherd of your flock, you must get into the details of their daily lives, and you must be involved in the often petty arguments between neighbors—picayune problems between husbands and wives. This requires the patience of “small-talk” and human camaraderie, whereas Moses could reach the level of communicating God’s Torah only because his soul constantly yearned for “heavy-talk”, God-talk. Moses knew he would not have the patience to “win over the nation” to his side by drinking le’haim with them and dancing at their weddings.

Hence God suggests to Moses that Aaron “be his spokesman to the people, that (Aaron) be his mouthpiece” (for small talk) – Ex. 4:15). Hence Moses succeeded in communicating a Divine Torah for the generations, but failed in convincing the Hebrews to conquer Israel in his generation.

For, you see, the contrast between Moses the man of God and the necessity for a person of the people become only greater with every passing year in the desert. After all, in the beginning everyone felt only gratitude to the individual who removed their pain of enslavement. But unfortunately, such gratitude barely survives the first dearth of water. And so when Korah rebels, not one Hebrew stands up for Moses, and when the prophet asks to meet “in his office’ with Datan and Aviram, they refuse to come!

So when the Hebrews again kvetch for water, God tells Moses to take his staff of leadership not to strike in punishment the hard, stiff-necked rock which symbolized ungrateful Israel, but rather to speak to the Hebrews with words of love and empowerment, with words of the leniency and softness of the Oral Law which will and must emerge from them as they continue to mature, as they partner with God in completing both His Torah and His World (Rabbenu Tzadok).

But alas, the ungrateful nation has worn Moses down; he can only strike them (the rock) in frustration and refer to them as rebels. And since Moses can no longer love and empower Israel with loving words of the Oral Law, Moses’ leadership must end in the desert. ©2020 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

#### **RABBI BEREL WEIN**

### **Wein Online**

**T**he prophet Bilaam experiences a conversation from Heaven. The conversation, as the Torah records for us, begins with Heaven asking Bilaam who were the people who came to visit? Isn’t that a strange question? First, if Heaven knows that people came to visit him, it is also aware who those people were. And why should Heaven even bother to ask? Is this germane to the central issue as to whether Bilaam should be allowed to proceed to curse the Jewish people? Thus, the commentaries, as can be expected, offer different outlooks on this issue.

The simple explanation is that Heaven is not, if anything, courteous. When you begin a conversation with someone, you do not jump to the main issue immediately, but there is always a prelude. There is something that opens the conversation in a friendly manner. Therefore, Heaven asked Bilaam if he had a busy day at the office? What happened? Who were the people he saw? And that would engage Bilaam to respond. And from that response, Heaven would be able to discern whether it would be a smart idea to proceed.

That is one approach. Another approach, which I feel is valid, is that Heaven is asking Bilaam a basic question. Heaven knows what people want. Heaven knows that Bilaam wants to curse the Jewish people. So, the Lord places in front of Bilaam, a kind of barrier, something to think about. "Who were the people that came to visit today?" Were they Holy people or other people? Were they interested in your welfare or people with only self-interests? Were they people of substance, or just simply messengers of government and Kings who have no independent judgment of their own, and were only carrying out the orders that were assigned to them? Therefore, Heaven asks Bilaam a cogent question about these people?

If you could answer who these people were, I think you could have a much better view of what your response should be. Bilaam did not take the hint because he had preconceived ideas. He wanted to go no matter what. And even when Heaven told him not to go, he was still determined. The Talmud tells us that an individual is led in the path that he wishes to go. That is how Heaven guides him. So Bilaam is doomed by his own preconditioned, predetermined will. He wants to curse the Jewish people, but he does not hear the nuance in the question that was asked of him.

In Judaism, it is important to know not only what and why, but also who as well. Who is telling us what is going on? Is it a reliable source? Does that source itself have self-interest in what is involved? Is it somehow biased? Is the source concerned with its own welfare and profit? This is so true in our world today, where there is a plethora of experts who are always telling us what is good for us. It is imperative to examine who these people are. It is important to ascertain not only what their background and professional credits are, but also who they are personally. What do they represent? How do they behave? Are they moral figures? Are they worthy of our attention? All of this is necessary to assess the information or advice that is being offered. Unfortunately, it is easy to be led astray. The great British historian Paul Johnson, wrote a book called 'Intellectuals.' In that book, he detailed many of the great intellectuals of the 18th and 19th centuries. He showed how dissolute, false, and cruel they were in their own personal lives. People like that are not people

from whom to accept advice. People like that have moral defects and should not be regarded seriously.

When the Torah tells us that Heaven asked Bilaam, "Who are these people that came to visit you today," we should realize that the Torah is asking a very deep and important question. It is not only a matter of courteous conversation. Courteous conversation alone does not merit eternity in the writings of the Torah. It is rather a deep and probing question, which should affect all of us. We should always ask it of ourselves. When we hear advice, when we hear information, when we hear opinion, ask yourselves; 'Who are these people that have come to visit today?' ©2020 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](http://www.rabbiwein.com). For more information on these and other products visit [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com)

#### **RABBI AVI WEISS**

### **Shabbat Forshpeis**

**A**fter the Jews were bitten by snakes, God tells Moshe to set a fiery serpent "upon a pole; and it shall come to pass that everyone that is bitten, when he sees it, shall live." (Numbers 21: 8) Our parsha also includes a song reminding us of Miriam's well that miraculously travelled through the desert, providing water for Am Yisrael. (Numbers 21:17-20)

The pattern continues in this week's second portion, where we encounter the surreal narrative of the donkey that verbally reprimands Bil'am – as he journeys to curse Am Yisrael – for smiting him three times. (Numbers 22:28)

Indeed, in virtually every one of Bil'am's oracles, he evokes the memory of the Exodus from Egypt, which, for readers, recalls the miraculous splitting of the sea. (Numbers 23:22; 24:8)

There are faith communities whose faith revolves around belief in supernatural miracles. In contrast, Judaism, de-emphasizes the supernatural, attempting to give these events, a more natural framework.

The serpent, insists the rabbis, did not have supernatural powers. Rather, when eyes were drawn to look at that phenomenon, hearts were lifted upward in prayer to God. (Rosh Hashanah 29a)

Miriam's well, say the rabbis, was created in the Genesis story at the end of the sixth day, just as the first Sabbath was beginning. In other words, the well did not operate outside of the natural order, but was created for its purpose from the very beginning. (Avot 5:6)

The talking donkey, too, is understood by Maimonides as a vision that in reality did not occur.

Even the splitting of the sea is understood by Rashbam as being the result of a strong east wind. (Exodus 14:21) As Rashbam argues, "God brought about the marvelous event in a natural way. He caused

a strong east wind to blow, which dried up and congealed the waters.”

While giving the supernatural a natural base, Judaism sees the natural in and of itself as being supernatural. In other words, within the every day, there is always the hand of God.

This is expressed eloquently in the morning service which focuses on the theme of renewal, hichadshut. Awakening in the morning is not seen as a mere extension of the night before. Rather, every morning is a time to celebrate rebirth – it is as if we are being miraculously re-created.

We therefore open with two words that we often forget to say to those who are closest – “thank you” – modeh ani. We continue with blessings to God for our ability to think, see, stand straight, expel waste, soulfully empathize....

The Hebrew word for miracle – nes – says it all. Nes literally means a banner. A banner is symbolic of something beyond itself. The power of the nes is looking at the natural phenomena of life and seeing within it and beyond it, the supernatural hand of God. ©2020 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 DAVID LEVIN

## Balak and Bila'am

**T**he two central characters of our parasha are Balak and Bila'am. Balak is perhaps the most disrespected king in the Torah. When he was first introduced in this parasha, his title of king was not mentioned; he was called simply Balak ben Tzipor. Some argue that at the beginning of the parasha he was not yet king and only rose to this position when Og was defeated. Og Melech haBashan was the protector of all the Canaanite groups, but upon his defeat, even enemies such as Moav and Midian joined forces to repel the B'nei Yisrael. Even after Balak was appointed king he was not given the true title. He is referred to as Melech l'Moav, king for Moav, not Melech Moav, king of Moav. This title is further clarified with the words, “ba'et hahi, at this time”, which implies that at other times he was not considered the king. Even when the Torah tells us that the Moabites consulted the elders of Midian, it does not say that this was Balak's plan of action. “And Moav said to the elders of Midian.” It does not say “And the king of Moav said,” but instead it appears that the leaders of Moav consulted the elders of Midian without involving their king. The first person to refer to Balak as Melech Moav was Bila'am when he described the importance of his mission before Hashem. This title was only to convince Hashem of the necessity of his accepting the offer from the messengers.

Bila'am was a resident of Aram Nahara'im by

the Euphrates River. This was the same place from which Avraham went up to the land of Israel and from where Yitzchak and Yaakov would find brides. This was not a land that was concerned for its safety from the B'nei Yisrael. Bila'am was not called upon by his own people to stem the tide against the Jews. His willingness to be a part of cursing the Jews was strictly self-serving. Much like Amalek who traveled great distances to attack the B'nei Yisrael in the desert, Bila'am was eager to curse the Jews in order to build on his new reputation as a prophet and problem solver.

Bila'am began his “career” as an interpreter of dreams. The Torah tells us, “And he sent messengers to Bila'am ben B'or to Petor.” The simplest explanation is that Petor was the name of a city. But the Rabbis have interpreted the word to mean more. Rashi explains that Bila'am would “poteir, solve” the problems of the world so everyone would seek his advice. HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin explains this to mean that he was a poteir chalomot, an interpreter of dreams. Bila'am rose to the next level of greatness by becoming a master magician. Aram was one of the most famous capitals of magic in the world at that time, second only to Egypt. But Aram also mixed magic with a fundamental belief in monotheism. This allowed Bila'am to communicate with Hashem, which led to his becoming a prophet.

The Gemara asks an important question concerning Bila'am's prophecy. How is it that a person of such low character and one who did not even observe the seven Noahite Laws, which were required of all mankind, merit to become a prophet? Bila'am was a magician, a profession which is looked upon by the Torah as an abomination. In describing Moshe, we are told “there was no other prophet like Moshe in Israel.” We are told that this could mean that there was no prophet like Moshe in Israel, but among the other nations of the world there was a prophet like Moshe and that was Bila'am.

Why would Hashem raise Bila'am to this level? HaRav Sorotzkin explains that the nations of the world could have a complaint against Hashem. You desire that we should be observant of the mitzvot, but You have not given us a prophet like Moshe. Had we had such a prophet, we would have been righteous too. Still, why give prophecy to Bila'am who is a magician? When Moshe was speaking with Hashem at the Burning Bush, he said to Hashem, “and behold they (the children of Israel) will not believe me.” But Hashem answered Moshe that B'nei Yisrael were “believers who are the sons of believers.” Here, however, we are talking about the nations of the world, people who do not believe in Hashem. If Hashem had chosen a normal non-Jew, the people would have scorned him and not had faith in his words. Therefore, Hashem chose a man who was respected by all kings; a man who received questions from everyone looking

for an answer; a man who the people of the world would accept as their leader.

Hashem brought Bila'am and Balak together for another reason also. Bila'am was a magician, but magicians in his time were different than what we think of as magicians today. These magicians were men who thought that they had the power to manipulate nature and use it for their own desires. Bila'am thought that he knew the exact moment in the day at which to curse the Jews. All of his sacrifices and planning were geared to manipulate Nature at that moment and control it for his own purposes. Balak also thought that he could control Nature by cursing the Jews at a particular place. These two men were both smart and well-versed in their respective areas, but neither understood Hashem and His ways. They believed that Man could somehow control Hashem and get Him to do his bidding. Hashem allowed them to join forces in order to show the whole world that this was an improper perception.

Both Balak and Bila'am failed to heed the message that Hashem gave to Avraham before leading him to the land which Hashem had chosen for his descendants. "I will bless those who bless you, and those who curse you, I will curse, and all the nations of the world will be blessed through you." This is Hashem's eternal promise to the nations of the world, a promise which has continually been dismissed with the subsequent consequences that have followed. We see again a sharp rise in lies and hatred directed towards the children of Avraham. We see great nations self-destructing through their hatred of our people. These nations have failed to learn the lesson of Balak and Bila'am, and they will suffer their own defeat until that lesson is internalized. May we swiftly see a return to sanity in this world, so that the world may continue to be blessed and not cursed through its relationship with the Jewish People. © 2020 Rabbi D. Levin

#### ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

## Their Doors Are Not Facing Each Other

*Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss*

**W**hen Bilaam noticed that the openings of the Jews' tents did not face each other, he said, "These people deserve to have the Divine Presence rest upon them." This is the basis of the *halacha* which prohibits a person from installing a window that faces his neighbor's window. Even if the neighbor waived the right to object, and gave him permission to install it, that willingness is irrelevant since the result is immodest. Alternatively, some explain that the reason the neighbor's willingness is not good enough is because at a later date the neighbor may say, "At first I thought I could live with it, but now I realize that I cannot."

This restriction even applies to a person installing a window that overlooks a jointly-owned courtyard. True, he could argue that it should not matter to anyone if he puts in a window there, since in any case he can go into the courtyard and see what is going on there. Nevertheless, the neighbors may object, "If you are with us in the courtyard, we can hide from you; however, if you are watching us through the window, we are not aware of it (and cannot protect ourselves)."

Based on this reasoning, neighbors can object to someone installing a window which faces the courtyard, maintaining that they do not want to be tempted to peek into his window. Also for this reason, a person may not install a window which faces the public domain, even if he says he has nothing to hide and is not worried about people looking into his home. © 2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and Encyclopedia Talmudit

#### RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

## Migdal Ohr

**"A**nd Bilaam arose and went and returned to his place; and Balak, too, went on his way." (Bamidbar 25:25) When these two personalities parted ways, the way they did so is described differently. The Torah says that Balak went on his way, but for Bilaam it says he went, and returned, to his place. The meforshim discuss the difference between the two. It could have said that Bilaam went to his place. What is the purpose of saying, "and he returned"?

Chazal tell us that he returned to his previous practice of using charms, spells, and incantations to achieve his goals. Partly this is because he only received Divine inspiration for a short time, out of respect for the glory of Klal Yisrael, and partly this is to show that despite his knowledge of future events and the good that would happen to the Jewish People, he returned to his wicked ways and did not change.

Balak, though, who also remained evil, was said to have "gone on his way." Why was he not described as having "returned" like Bilaam?

There was a fundamental difference between the two. Bilaam knew what he knew and was comfortable with it. When he got extra insight, he used it, but when it was taken away, he reverted back to his old tricks. He was satisfied with what he knew and didn't look to grow.

Balak, though, approached Bilaam and asked for his help. Whatever Bilaam told him, such as offering sacrifices, Balak did. He kept looking to Bilaam for guidance and direction. Therefore, even though he was evil, he was described as one who is on a journey, and has hope of getting someplace. In fact, his descendant Shlomo HaMelech would turn those 7 sacrifices for evil into 1,000 for good in the Bais HaMikdash.

We find a similar set of phrases in Beraishis

(32:1-2) where it says that Lavan "went and returned to his place," while Yaakov "went on his way." Despite having seen the miracles of the spotted sheep and Yaakov's Divine protection, Lavan didn't change. He went back to being the same Lavan he always was.

Did I mention the Midrash that Bilaam was a reincarnation of Lavan? That their souls were joined and possibly even their bodies (as Bilaam may have been a child or grandchild of Lavan)? Thus, it is no surprise that they both remained set in their ways, confident that they were in the right. The people around them, though, were willing to learn and change.

When we look at Bilaam and call him a Rasha, a wicked man, we must realize that what made him so bad was not just the things he did, but the fact that nothing could cause him to rethink his values. By choosing to remain as he was, he wickedly rejected the opportunity to find truth and right in the world and become a righteous follower of Hashem.

*R' Chatzkel Abramsky, z"l, was once riding in an Israeli cab and the driver told him a story.*

*"After our IDF military service was over," said the cabbie, "some friends and I went on a hiking and camping trip. In the middle of the night, we heard shouts and awoke to find a large snake wrapped around one of my friends. It was squeezing him so hard he could not breathe."*

*"We didn't know what to do, as it slowly killed him, and one of my friends said, 'You're going to die, say 'Shema Yisrael!'" As he did, the snake uncoiled and slithered away. He was so moved that he became a baal Teshuva, studied Torah, and is completely religious today."*

*R' Chatzkel asked him, "And what about you? Did you become more religious too?"*

*"Me?" replied the taxi driver quizzically, "Why should I have become more religious? The snake wasn't wrapped around me!" ©2020 Rabbi J. Gewirtz and Migdal Ohr*

### **RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY**

## **Partial View**

**Y**ou have to approach something from the right view. At least that's what Balak, the king of Moab, tried to convince his prime sorcerer who futilely tried to curse the Jewish nation. Though Bilaam had a notorious reputation, with for curses that never failed and the ability to cast spells upon whomever he desired, this time it didn't work. He tried, for a large fee, to curse the Jewish nation, who were camped opposite of Moab; but each time he opened his mouth blessings and not curses were emitted. "How can I curse when G-d is not angry," he exclaimed (Numbers 23:8).

Each time the mission failed, Balak flew into a rage. Bilaam attempted to subvert G-d's intentions and appease Him with sacrifices -- all to no avail.

Balak tried another strategy. "Come with me to

a different place from there you will see them; however, you will see its edge and not all of it -- and you will curse it for me from there" (Numbers 23:13). It didn't work either.

I had a difficult time understanding the new strategy. What's the difference if Bilaam were to see all of Israel or he would stand in a place that only offers a partial view? Is the G-d of Israel not ever-present, protecting them in part as well as in whole? Why would a curse work when Bilaam only viewed Israel from a partial perspective?

A pious and very talented Jewish scholar was placed on trial in a small Polish town outside of Lvov. The charges, brought by a local miscreant, were based on some trumped-up complaint. The young scholar was beloved to his townsfolk as he served in the capacity of the town's shochet (ritual slaughterer), chazzan (cantor), and cheder rebbe. Thus, many people in town were worried as he appeared before a notoriously anti-Semitic judge.

As he presented the charges, the judge mockingly referred to him as Mr. Butcher. In fact all through the preliminary portion of the kangaroo court, the judge kept referring to the beloved teacher and cantor as a butcher, meat vendor or slaughterer. Finally, the young scholar asked permission to speak. "Your honor," he began, "before I begin my defense, I'd like to clarify one point. I serve in many capacities in this shtetl. The people at the synagogue know me as the cantor. The children at the school and all of their parents know me as the teacher. It is only the animals that know me as the butcher!"

The commentaries explain that Bilaam knew that the power of his curses would only take effect by finding a small breach in the beauty of Israel -- a breach that he could expand with the power of his evil eye. He looked at all of Israel and could not find any flaw to amplify and use as a curse.

Balak advised him to use another ploy. He made a suggestion that would be followed for generations by all the detractors of Jews. "Only look at them," he said, "from a partial perspective. Go up to the edge of the mountain; you shall see their edge and not all of them -- and you will curse them for me from there" (Numbers 23:13).

Balak told Bilaam to concentrate on some poor aspects of the people. It is always possible to find a few exceptions to a most ethical and moral nation. There are those who stand on the edge of the mountain and take a partial view. They talk about Jews who may be accused of crimes or improprieties. They dissect individuals and embellish what they perceive as character flaws or personal faults. They point to those flaws as if they represent the entire person, as others point to harmful Jews as if they were the entire nation. And then they shout their curses. But Bilaam could not find the breach that he was looking for. Because Israel

as a nation, as well as each individual Jew, cannot be judged by anything less than a total picture -- for we are all one. © 2020 Rabbi M. Kamenetzky & torah.org

### RABBI NAFTALI REICH

## Legacy

If at first you don't succeed, try, try again. This was apparently the philosophy of Balak, King of Moab, when he was faced with the vast multitude of the Jewish people approaching his lands. Terrorstricken, he sent messengers to summon Bilam, the famous sorcerer, to come to Moab and curse the Jewish people.

Balak led Bilam to a high promontory from which they saw the entire Jewish encampment. Balak gleefully rubbed his hands together in anticipation of Bilam's potent curses, but to his astonishment, blessings rather than curses poured forth from Bilam's mouth.

Frustrated, Balak took Bilam to a different vantage point from which he could only see the edge of the encampment. Once again, Balak implored Bilam to curse the Jewish people, and once again, he could only speak blessing rather than curses.

Finally, Bilam turned to face the Wilderness and managed to utter some vague, ineffectual curses.

The commentators are puzzled. Why did Bilam repeatedly narrow his focus on the Jewish people after each failure to curse them?

A quick look into this week's Torah portion brings Bilam's character into sharp relief. His most striking features were his bloated ego and his insatiable hunger for flattery. People seeking constant selfaggrandizement generally tend to disparage and humiliate others. Whether consciously or subconsciously, they feel superior only when they diminish other people. By putting others down, their own egos are by contrast inflated. They view life like a seesaw, with themselves on one side and the world on the other. If the other side goes down, they go up.

Balak understood this aspect of Bilam's character, and he played on it. At first, he brought Bilam to a point where he could see the entire people. If Bilam could curse and disparage an entire people, what a surge his ego would enjoy. But he was unsuccessful. Conceding failure, he narrowed his focus to only part of the people, concentrating on individuals in the hope that their shortcomings would be more glaring. Once again he was unsuccessful, and therefore, he narrowed his focus even more by cursing the people even though he was unable to highlight any particular fault. But even these curses were ineffectual, because Hashem protects the righteous.

Two businessmen were once sitting in a bar, discussing the state of the world.

"You know," said the first man, "if you really think about it, there are really only two classes of

people in the world -- our countrymen and foreigners. And we both know that all foreigners are totally worthless."

"Of course," said the second man. "But even among our countrymen there is clear division into two classes. The city dwellers and the peasants."

"Exactly," said the first man. "And we both know that peasants are worse than useless. Only city dwellers are worth anything at all. But even among city dwellers, there are two classes -- intellectuals and businessmen."

"I totally agree," said the second man. "Intellectuals are pointyheaded fools. Totally useless. Only businessmen have any worth."

"But not all businessmen are worthy," said the first man. "Plenty of them are nothing more than bumbling fools."

"I agree," said the second man. "In fact, if you really think about it. You can probably rule out just about every businessman on one count or another. I guess, that just leaves us with me and you, my friend."

"Exactly," said the first man, "and just between you and me, we both know perfectly well that you're nothing but a windbag."

In our own lives, we may sometimes find ourselves bring inadvertently critical of other people or even entire ethnic or racial groups. Perhaps we would do well to look into ourselves to find the source of these sentiments. Why in the world should we be flirting with meanspiritedness and bigotry? Why should we be so eager to highlight other people's flaws? More likely than not, these are sign of latent insecurities which mistakenly lead us to think we can secure ourselves better by undermining others. In actuality, however, tearing other people down only diminishes and demeans us, while looking at them in a positive light enhances our spirits and brings us the serenity and satisfaction of recognizing our own true worth. © 2020 Rabbi N. Reich & torah.org

