

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l

Covenant & Conversation

In the course of blessing the Jewish people Bilaam uttered words that have come to seem to many¹ to encapsulate Jewish history:

How can I curse whom G-d has not cursed?
 How can I doom whom G-d has not doomed?
 I see them from mountain tops,
 Gaze on them from the heights.
 Look: a people that dwells alone,
 Not reckoned among the nations. (Num.23:8-9)

That is how it seemed during the persecutions and pogroms in Europe. It is how it seemed during the Holocaust. It is how it sometimes seems to Israel and its defenders today. We find ourselves alone. How should we understand this fact? How should we interpret this verse?

In my book *Future Tense* I describe the moment when I first became aware of how dangerous a self-definition this can be. We were having lunch in Jerusalem, on Shavuot 5761/2001. Present was one of the world's great fighters against antisemitism, Irwin Cotler, soon to become Canada's Minister of Justice, together with a distinguished Israeli diplomat. We were talking about the forthcoming United Nations Conference against Racism at Durban in 2001.

We all had reasons to know that it was going to be a disaster for Israel. It was there in the parallel sessions of the NGOs that Israel was accused of the five cardinal sins against human rights: racism, apartheid, crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing, and attempted genocide. The conference became, in effect, the launch-pad of a new and vicious antisemitism. In the Middle Ages, Jews were hated because of their religion. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century they were hated because of their race. In the twenty-first century they are hated because of their nation state. As we were speaking of the likely outcome, the diplomat heaved a sigh and said, "Twas ever thus. Am levadad yishkon: we are the nation fated to be alone."

¹ A People that Dwells Alone was the title given to the collection of essays by the late Jacob Herzog. It was also the theme of the autobiography of Israeli diplomat, and brother of Israel's former Chief Rabbi Israel Meir Lau, the late Naftali Lau-Lavie.

The man who said those words had the best of intentions. He had spent his professional life defending Israel, and he was seeking to comfort us. His intentions were the best, and it was meant no more than as a polite remark. But I suddenly saw how dangerous such an attitude is. If you believe your fate is to be alone, that is almost certainly what will happen. It is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Why bother to make friends and allies if you know in advance that you will fail? How then are we to understand Bilaam's words?

First, it should be clear that this is a very ambiguous blessing. Being alone, from a Torah perspective, is not a good thing. The first time the words "not good" appear in the Torah is in the verse, "It is not good for man to be alone" (Gen. 2: 18). The second time is when Moses' father-in-law Jethro sees him leading alone and says, "What you are doing is not good" (Ex. 18: 17). We cannot live alone. We cannot lead alone. It is not good to be alone.

The word *badad* appears in two other profoundly negative contexts. First is the case of the leper: "He shall dwell alone; his place shall be outside the camp" (Lev. 13: 46). The second is the opening line of the book of Lamentations: "How alone is the city once thronged with people" (Lam. 1: 1). The only context in which *badad* has a positive sense is when it is applied to G-d (Deut. 32: 12), for obvious theological reasons.

Second, Bilaam who said those words was not a lover of Israel. Hired to curse them and prevented from doing so by G-d, he nonetheless tried a second time, this time successfully, persuading the Moabite and Midianite women to seduce the Israelite men, as a result of which 24,000 died (Num. 25, 31: 16). It was this second strategy of Bilaam – after he had already said, "How can I curse whom G-d has not cursed? How can I doom whom G-d has not doomed?" – that marks him out as a man profoundly hostile to the Israelites. The Talmud (Sanhedrin 105b) states that all the blessings that Balaam bestowed on the Israelites eventually turned into curses, with the sole exception of the blessing "How goodly are your tents, Jacob, your dwelling places, Israel." So in the rabbis' view, "a people that dwells alone" eventually became not a blessing but a curse.

Third, nowhere in Tanakh are we told that it will be the fate of Israel or Jews to be hated. To the contrary, the prophets foresaw that there would come a

time when the nations would turn to Israel for inspiration. Isaiah envisaged a day on which "Many peoples will come and say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the temple of the G-d of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths.' The law will go out from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem" (Is. 2:3). Zechariah foresaw that "In those days 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 G-d is with you.'" (Zech. 8: 23). These are sufficient to cast doubt on the idea that antisemitism is eternal, incurable, woven into Jewish history and destiny.

Only in rabbinic literature do we find statements that seem to suggest that Israel is hated. Most famous is the statement of Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai "Halakhah: it is well known that Esau hates Jacob."² Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai was known for his distrust of the Romans, whom the rabbis identified with Esau/Edom. It was for this reason, says the Talmud, that he had to go into hiding for thirteen years.³ His view was not shared by his contemporaries.

Those who quote this passage do so only partially and selectively. It refers to the moment at which Jacob and Esau met after their long estrangement. Jacob feared that Esau would try to kill him. After taking elaborate precautions and wrestling with an angel, the next morning he sees Esau. The verse then says: "Esau ran to meet them. He hugged [Jacob], and throwing himself on his shoulders, kissed him. They [both] wept" (Gen. 33: 4). Over the letters of the word "kissed" as it appears in a Sefer Torah, there are dots, signaling some special meaning. It was in this context that Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai said: "Even though it is well known that Esau hates Jacob, at that moment he was overcome with compassion and kissed him with a full heart."⁴ In other words, precisely the text cited to show that antisemitism is inevitable, proves the opposite: that at the crucial encounter, Esau did not feel hate toward Jacob. They met, embraced and went their separate ways without ill-will.

There is, in short, nothing in Judaism to suggest that it is the fate of Jews to be hated. It is neither written into the texture of the universe nor encoded in the human genome. It is not the will of G-d. Only in moments of deep despair have Jews believed this, most notably Leo Pinsker in his 1882 tract *Auto-emancipation*, in which he said of Judeophobia, "As a psychic aberration, it is hereditary; as a disease transmitted for two thousand years, it is incurable."

Antisemitism is not mysterious, unfathomable

² Sifre, Behaalotecha, 89; Rashi to Gen. 33: 4; see Kreti to Yoreh Deah ch. 88 for the halakhic implications of this statement.

³ Shabbat 33b.

⁴ See Rashi ad loc.

or inexorable. It is a complex phenomenon that has mutated over time, and it has identifiable causes, social, economic, political, cultural and theological. It can be fought; it can be defeated. But it will not be fought or defeated if people think that it is Jacob's fate to be hated by "Esau" or to be "the people that dwells alone," a pariah among peoples, a leper among nations, an outcast in the international arena.

What then does the phrase "a people that dwells alone" mean? It means a people prepared to stand alone if need be, living by its own moral code, having the courage to be different and to take the road less travelled.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch offered a fine insight by focusing on the nuance between "people" (am) and "nation" (goi) – or as we might say nowadays, "society" and "state." Israel uniquely became a society before it was a state. It had laws before it had a land. It was a people – a group bound together by a common code and culture – before it was a nation, that is, a political entity. As I noted in *Future Tense*, the word peoplehood first appeared in 1992, and its early uses were almost entirely in reference to Jews. What makes Jews different, according to Hirsch's reading of Bilaam, is that Jews are a distinctive people, that is, a group defined by shared memories and collective responsibilities, "not reckoned among the nations" since they are capable of surviving even without nationhood, even in exile and dispersion. Israel's strength lies not in nationalism but in building a society based on justice and human dignity.

The battle against antisemitism can be won, but it will not be if Jews believe that we are destined to be alone. That is Bilaam's curse, not G-d's blessing. *Covenant and Conversation is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl zt"l* ©2015 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks z"l and rabbisacks.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

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

Balak, King of Moab, is terrified by the strength of the Israelites. Not only has the Jewish nation been freed from Egypt, but as they proceed towards the Promised Land, they seem to vanquish every army that attacks them. For some reason, Balak deems the very survival of the Israelites to be a threat to his nation's survival, and therefore he sets about 'acquiring' his

weapon of choice; Balaam, the master curser of his generation. Balak sends a high-ranking delegation to this famous soothsayer, a wonder-working Gentile prophet, urging him to curse the Israelites, so that Balak will be able to overcome and banish them from the vicinity of his land.

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

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

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

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

That night, the Almighty visits Balaam. "If the men come to summon you, you may go with them, but only whatever words I tell you, may you do" (Numbers 22:20). The very next verse declares, "And Balaam arose in the morning, saddled his she-donkey and went with the officers of Moab" (Numbers 22:21). Balaam did not report God's caveat; he merely took the Divine words as a *carte blanche* to do Balak's bidding. Despite the permission that Balaam received to go if they 'summoned' him (Numbers 22:20), the text reports, "God's wrath flared" because Balaam went (Numbers 22: 22).

But if God had just allowed him to go, why was He angry? Is there free will or not?

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

The Ibn Ezra suggests that God never prevents an individual from doing what he really wants to do, even if it goes against the Divine will. We see this at the time of the spies when God clearly tells the Israelites to go up and conquer the Promised Land (Deuteronomy 1:21). Nevertheless, when they demur and insist upon

sending out a reconnaissance commission (ibid 22), God tells Moses to send out such a group of spies (Numbers 13:1). God may not desire such a commission, but He will always acquiesce to the will of the people.

Here in our portion, God acquiesces to the evil and venal will of Balaam. The Midrash Rabbah succinctly expresses the great principle of human freedom with the words: "From this text, we learn that ultimately God leads an individual to walk on the path that he wishes to travel".

In other words, God lets people decide which way they want to go, even if He disagrees! (Bamidbar Rabbah 20:12; see Ramban ad loc for a slightly different interpretation).

However, the dynamics of human will vs. Divine will don't end here; neither in the case of Balaam nor in terms of Rabbinic theology. The Midrash (Bereishit Rabbah 85), in an obvious reference to Balaam, makes the following pronouncement: "Shmuel bar Nahman opened [quoting the prophet Jeremiah]: 'For thus said the Lord, Master of Legions, God of Israel: Do not let your prophets who are in your midst and your magicians delude you, do not listen to your dreamers whom you appoint to dream. It is falsehood that they prophesy to you in My Name... For thus said the Lord: I will remember and appoint you and I will establish for you My good word to restore you to this place. For I know the thoughts, which I think about you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give to you a future and a hope'" (Jeremiah 29:8-11).

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

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

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

Our Rabbis teach that Balaam's donkey was the same animal as that which Abraham rode to Mount Moriah to sacrifice his son Isaac and that this is the donkey that will eventually carry the Messiah. They explain that the sexual immorality that we read of in the Bible, between Lot and his daughters, between Yehudah and Tamar, between Mahlon son of Elimelech and Ruth the Moabite, will ultimately be manipulated by God to lead to the marriage between Ruth and Boaz,

which will bring forth David, progenitor of the Messiah. God will see to it that His designs will ultimately prevail, turning the bitter into the sweet, sadness into joy, and curses into blessings, immorality into Messianism.

Our daily prayers open with Balaam's words, "How goodly are your tents O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel" (Numbers 24:5), a subtle reminder that no matter how strongly individuals may want us cursed, God's blessings will prevail. ©2022 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

We are taught in the book of Mishlei-Proverbs by King Solomon that it is better to hear criticism from a friend than compliments from someone who is truly one's enemy. This week's Torah reading abounds in compliments given to the Jewish people by the leading prophet of the non-Jewish world, Bilaam. From all of the compliments showered upon us by this person of evil, we are able learn the true intentions of the one blessing us. Our sages remark that the criticism leveled by our father Jacob against Shimon are to be counted amongst the blessings that he bestowed individually on each of his children.

The words of review and correction serve to save these tribes from extinction and wrongdoing. It is not only the superficial words of blessing that are important but, perhaps, much more importantly, it is the intent and goal of the one who is blessing that determines whether these seemingly beautiful words contain within them the poison of hatred and curses.

The Talmud teaches us that from the words of blessing that escaped the mouth of Bilaam, we can determine what his true intent was. The rabbis read his blessings as being delivered with a voice of sarcasm and criticism. Words and inflections can have many meanings, and since we did not actually hear the tone of voice used by Bilaam, we may be tempted to accept his words at face value and become flattered and seduced by the compliments he granted to us. The Talmud, however, judged his words more deeply, and realized that unless the Jewish people were careful in their observance of the Torah's commandments, the words of blessing of Bilaam would only serve to mock them in later generations.

It is difficult in the extreme to resist the temptation of actually believing that flattering words could have an inglorious deception. A thousand years later, the prophets would warn us to remember the true intent of both Balak and Bilaam. Over our long history, and especially during the millennia of exile, we have suffered much persecution and negative hatred directed towards us. We also, paradoxically, have had to withstand the blandishments and false compliments paid to Judaism by those who only wish to destroy our faith and our future.

There is no question that one would rather be liked in this life. The true intent has to be judged correctly, and factored into the acceptance of compliments, seemingly bestowed by our former or current enemies and critics. The compliments given by Bilaam caused the death of thousands of Jews. That is the reason that the Jews felt justified in avenging themselves upon Bilaam.

Poison is often injected into candies and other sweet objects that are pleasant to the pallet but are destructive to the existence of the human being. This is one of the overriding messages contained in this week's reading. ©2022 *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

Given that Balaam, the heathen prophet, received permission from God to go with Balak, king of Moab, to the Jewish People, why was the "anger of the Lord kindled" against Balaam (Numbers 22:20-22)?

A review of the text reveals that, at first, God refused Balaam permission (22:12). Only after Balaam again asked to go did God consent.

From here, the Midrash says, we can learn "that a person is led down the path he chooses to go. For in the beginning, he [Balaam] was told, 'Thou shalt not go.' [But when Balaam stubbornly asked to go a second time, God agreed. Nonetheless, as soon as he went,] 'The anger of the lord was kindled.' Said the Holy One, blessed be He, to him [Balaam]: 'Villain! I desire not the destruction of the wicked. But since you are bent on going to your own destruction, rise up and go'" (Bamidbar Rabbah 20:12).

This Midrash may be predicated on three ideas, flowing from one to the other:

- While no one can impose limitations upon God, God can impose limitations upon Himself.
- An example of a self-imposed limitation is God's stepping back and allowing people the freedom to choose.
- Not every choice a human being makes pleases God. To wit, God was angry with Balaam for choosing to go to the Jewish People with the intent of cursing them.

Note that when confronted by an angel of God who intended to stop Balaam, Balaam hypocritically declares, "If it be pleasing to you, I shall go back." Here, the angel of God responds, "Go along with the men" (Numbers 22:34, 35). In other words, since Balaam's inner desire was to go, even God would not stop him from traveling the path he had chosen.

This response accords with the teaching that

one who comes to do good is helped by God. In contrast, one who comes to sin is permitted by God to take that course (Shabbat 104a). In other words, God is more actively involved when we seek to follow the righteous path.

Evil displeases the Almighty. But if God always intervened and prevented evil from occurring, human beings would cease being human, as they would lose their freedom of choice. When creating humankind, God's will was to allow people to act out their own desires, even if those actions run contrary to God's wishes.

This, of course, does not mean that God is uninvolved. God cares deeply about everything that happens such that, every day, God cries for the destruction of the Temple, even as, no doubt, God cries for a "human temple" that suffers (Berachot 3a).

Hence, all at once, God allows Balaam to go even as He "sheds tears" over his decision. ©2022 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

Seven Altars and Seven Sacrifices

When Balak saw the masses of Israel going through his land, he dismissed the idea that the B'nei Yisrael were not a significant danger to him and his nation. The people of Moav were descendants of Lot, Avraham's nephew, and were exempt from conquest by Hashem's instructions. Still, Balak feared them and hired Bilaam to curse the people. Bilaam was bound by Hashem to utter only those words which Hashem presented through him, yet Bilaam was arrogant enough to believe that he was so close to Hashem that he would be allowed to curse the Jews. Bilaam devised a scheme to manipulate Hashem to accept his curses.

The Torah tells us, "Bilaam said to Balak, 'Build for me here seven altars and prepare for me here seven bulls and seven rams.' Balak did as Bilaam had spoken, and Balak and Bilaam brought up a bull and a ram on each altar. Bilaam said to Balak, 'Stand by your burnt-offering while I go; perhaps Hashem will happen toward me and show me something that I can tell you.' He went alone."

HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch draws our attention to the number seven, shiv'ah. Looking back in the Torah to Avraham (Gen. 21:28) who set aside seven ewes for Avimelech as an oath, sh'vu'ah, of their contract with each other of peace, he notes that the word for seven and the word for oath have the same root. When Bilaam had Balak set aside seven bulls and seven rams, he believed that the number seven

also had some mystical power that would draw Hashem to this offering. "The monotheistic conception of Hashem was not foreign to Balak and Bilaam, ... but the thought was muddled by heathen ideas, and they believed they could impose a spell-like influence on Hashem by their offerings.

We find a slightly different approach from Rashi. Rashi compared the seven altars to the seven altars built by our Forefathers that were recorded in the Torah: Avraham built four (Eilon Moreh, HaAi, Eilonei Mamrei, Har HaMoriah), Yitzchak one (Beersheva), and Ya'akov two (Shechem and Beit Eil). Ibn Ezra drew from the mystical quality of seven that was reflected within the Laws of Hashem: the days (Hashem rested on the seventh day of Creation giving us our day of rest, Shabbat), the weeks (Counting the seven weeks of the Omer between Pesach and Shavuot), the months (The seventh month of the year is the time of judgment), and the years (The seventh year was the Shmittah year, a time when the fields were left fallow), as well as the seven lambs of the olah offering and the command to Job to bring seven oxen and seven rams to bring peace to his suffering.

HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin explains that Bilaam specifically chose to sacrifice oxen and rams because this was the same type of korban that the B'nei Yisrael sacrificed. HaRav Sorotzkin questions why Bilaam did not also sacrifice lambs, as this was also one of the animals that constituted the sacrifices. Bilaam wished to remember Avraham and Yitzchak; by Avraham it says, "and to the cattle ran Avraham," and by Yitzchak we find, "and he took the ram and sacrificed it in place of Yitzchak." The lamb is associated with Ya'akov as it says, "and Ya'akov separated the lambs." Bilaam only wanted to draw attention to Avraham and Yitzchak, as each had a son who began a nation who fought against Torah ideals (Yishmael and Eisav). (Bilaam also associated with two nations that came from these two leaders, Moav from Avraham's nephew, Lot, Midyan from Yishmael and Edom from Eisav. Ya'akov was the forefather whose children were all together, all righteous men, and all part of one nation. Bilaam did not wish for Hashem to dwell on their unity, since his desire was to cause strife from within.

The Or HaChaim tells us that Bilaam did not want Balak to offer the animals as a sacrifice, but only to prepare them for Bilaam to offer. The Or HaChaim presents the argument as to who commanded Bilaam to bring the sacrifices on an altar. While many argue that the altars were by the command of the King (Balak), the Or HaChaim shows that the phrase, "you will do this" implies that the command came from Hashem. In either case, it is clear that Balak took the lead in building the altars and offering the sacrifices, as his name was mentioned first: "and Balak and Bilaam brought up a bull and a ram on each altar." Balak later complained that Hashem did not accept his offerings,

but that may have been because he offered the sacrifices together with Bilaam. Bilaam had a special relationship with Hashem, as we see that he spoke directly with Hashem, yet that relationship was endangered by accepting this challenge to curse the B'nei Yisrael. Balak was an evil King, and even were he not evil, his sacrifices were for the sole purpose of harming a Holy People.

It is unusual that Hashem appeared to Bilaam during the daytime, as He usually appeared at night or in a dark trance, much as we had seen by Avraham at the Covenant Between the Parts (Brit Bein HaBitarim). Rashi explains that the term "vayikar, and He happened (to him)," indicates a number of negative qualities. "This is an expression of impermanence, an expression of shame, an expression of the impurity of seminal discharge, as if to say Hashem appeared to him with hesitancy and with disdain, and He would not have appeared to him by day but He did, in fact, appear to Bilaam only in order to show the dearness of Yisrael."

This is the true failure of Bilaam. Here was a man who had been granted one of the most important responsibilities that a human can receive, that of speaking directly to Hashem as a prophet. As a prophet, he could have risen to a high level of spirituality, where his service to Hashem could have had influence on many. Instead, he chose a life where he used his ability to speak to Hashem for his own personal gains. He did not seek ways to serve Hashem, but ways for Hashem to serve him. His use of the sacrifices here indicates this failure of character.

We are on Earth to serve Hashem, and in doing so, also serve all of Mankind. May we each begin to understand the importance of this lesson. ©2022 Rabbi D. Levin

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Notice! Their Doors Are Not Facing Each Other!

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

When 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

"Balak said to him, "Please come with me to another place... and you shall only see part [of the nation] and all of it shall you not see..." (Bamidbar 23:13) Intent on cursing the Jewish People so he could defend his territory against them, Balak followed Bilaam's instructions and built seven altars upon which he offered seven sacrifices. Nevertheless, Hashem did not allow Bilaam to curse the Jews.

Undeterred, Balak took Bilaam to three different places in an attempt to be able to curse us. It didn't work, but if we understand Balak's motivation, we can gain valuable insight and a powerful tool for accomplishing things.

Balak, as the commentaries explain, felt that perhaps Hashem did not want to curse the entire Jewish nation, but if he could get a portion of them to die, that would weaken the entire nation and he'd be able to deflect their advances. He therefore took Bilaam to another place where he would only see part of the people. When that didn't work, Balak assumed that perhaps in the group he'd seen, there were some tzaddikim who didn't deserve to be cursed, so he tried another place. Alas, for Balak, we are all united and a blessed nation, and the curse was not meant to be.

The initial lesson is that your perspective changes your reality. By moving to a different vantage point, Balak though Bilaam would be able to change his effectiveness. This is a very powerful tool, indeed, and when one looks at a problem or situation from a different perspective, he often is able to find the opportunity in it. But it gets better.

Balak said: "You'll only see part of the nation, not all of it." The Malbim makes a fascinating comment on this. In truth, he says, the place where Balak led Bilaam was one from where the entire nation could be



viewed. However, Balak instructed him to only look at a part of the people, and curse them.

What Balak understood, and what we can take away from this, is that changing your perspective is as easy as putting your mind to it. Certainly, we know that once a person has made up his mind about something it is very difficult to persuade him otherwise, regardless of what evidence is provided. If one chooses what he wishes to see in each situation, that is what he will see.

If he sees an insurmountable challenge, he will not be able to overcome it. If he sees something that needs creativity to overcome, he can seek new ways to look at the circumstances, and through that come to his desired outcome. Our minds are very powerful things and they often determine our success or failure, even before we've made any attempts to accomplish something.

Harry Houdini is best known for being an escape artist, able to get out of shackles and strait jackets. In his time, though, he was a fierce opponent of "spiritualists," mediums who performed séances to "contact" the dead relatives of those who paid them. They were often tied up to show they could not move, as bells rang, tables floated, and other "paranormal activity" took place. Houdini would show up to reveal them as charlatans.

Once, a spiritualist was placed in a box from which only her head and hands protruded. Nevertheless, things happened across the room. Afterwards, Houdini opened the box and pulled out a folding six-foot ruler, holding it high for all to see and indicating that the medium likely used it to reach objects at a distance. She vehemently denied it.

Years later, one of Houdini's assistants revealed he had put the ruler in the box earlier, on Houdini's orders. As it turned out, Houdini's great truth was just as false as the mediums'. ©2022 Rabbi J. Gewirtz and Migdal Ohr

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

Virtual Beit Medrash

STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA
SICHA OF HARAV MOSHEH LICHTENSTEIN

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Translated by Kaeren Fish

Parashat Balak can be read in two different ways: as a spiritual struggle against Am Yisrael, or as a political and military challenge. I shall adopt the first option here, as does the haftara from Mikha. Mention is made of the episode recorded in our parasha in a few different places in the books of the Prophets; let us compare the mentions in Sefer Shoftim and Sefer Mikha.

In Shoftim, the judge Yiftach challenges the king of the children of Ammon: "Are you now any better than Balak, son of Tzippor, king of Moav? Did he ever strive against Israel, or did he ever fight against them?"

(Shoftim 11:25). Yiftach makes no mention of Bil'am, since he makes his declaration in a political, military context. Our haftara, in contrast, focuses on a completely different aspect: "O my people, remember now what Balak, king of Moav, devised, and what Bil'am, son of Be'or, answered him: from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the righteous acts of the Lord. With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before the high God? Shall I come before Him with burnt offerings, with calves of a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, or with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has told you, O man, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you, but to act justly, and to love true loyalty, and to walk humbly with your God." (Mikha 6:5-8)

Let us consider this excerpt from the perspective of the parasha. The Gemara deliberates concerning Bil'am's true essence: "And Bil'am, son of Be'or, the sorcerer' -- a sorcerer? [Was he not] a prophet! R. Yochanan said: At first he was a prophet; in the end he was a sorcerer" (Sanhedrin 106a). What is the relationship between a prophet and a sorcerer?

A sorcerer makes use of the tools available in the world in order to "influence" God. A similar situation of a king using sorcery as part of his struggle against Bnei Yisrael is to be found in the case of Pharaoh. Nevertheless, there is a clear distinction between the two instances. Pharaoh conducts two separate battles, as reflected explicitly in the text: "I know not the Lord, nor will I let Israel go" (Shemot 5:2). Pharaoh could have let Bnei Yisrael go without recognizing God, or he could have recognized God while still refusing to let Bnei Yisrael go. The sorcerers play a theological/philosophical role in Pharaoh's court; when he needs political advice, on the other hand, he turns to "Pharaoh's servants."

In contrast to Pharaoh's sorcerers, who do not accept God's sovereignty at all, Bil'am is aware of God's presence, and he 'exploits' it, as it were. Balak seeks to use sorcery as part of his political assault on Bnei Yisrael -- as Yiftach testifies later on -- and so he calls upon Bil'am to direct his powers towards cursing Israel.

The parasha presents an array of magical devices and procedures that Bil'am employs as a prophet: he offers seven bullocks and seven rams, he takes up a vantage point at the very edge of the camp, etc. He tries to "manipulate" God so that He will accede to his wishes.

A contrast to Bil'am's attitude towards God is the attitude of the prophets. Elsewhere in Sanhedrin we find: "A Tanna recited before R. Chisda: "One who suppresses his prophecy receives lashes." He said to him, "[It would be equally absurd to state that] one who eats dates out of a sieve receives lashes, for [since his

act is carried out in private,] who could have warned him?" Abaye said: "His fellow prophets [warn him]." But how could they know? Abaye answered: "For it is written, 'Surely the Lord will do nothing without revealing His secret [to His servants, the prophets]' (Amos 3:7)." (Sanhedrin 89b)

God reveals His secrets to the prophets; this is part of the relationship that exists between them. Concerning Avraham Avinu, we are likewise told: "And the Lord said: Shall I hide from Avraham the thing which I intend to do, seeing that Avraham will surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment, that the Lord may bring upon Avraham that which He has spoken of him." (Bereishit 18:17-19)

Within the framework of the close and intimate relationship between God and Avraham, it is clear that God cannot hide from Avraham that which He intends to do, although He knows that all of Avraham's prayers and efforts will not succeed in saving Sedom.

Where this sort of relationship exists between the prophet and God, there is a very high level of trust and the prophet is able to request certain things of God. Bil'am, as noted, does not maintain a relationship with God; rather, he tries to "use" and manipulate God.

The difference between them goes deeper. What Bil'am ultimately wants is his own will, and he employs the powers with which he is blessed to achieve that aim. Bil'am chooses not to go with the princes of Moav not because he appreciates the severity of such a move as an act of disloyalty towards God, but simply because "God refuses to allow me to go with you."

The prophets, in contrast, seek to perform the will of God. They stand ready to serve God and direct their actions towards His will. They identify with God's will and do not see it as an external force that coerces them to act (or refrain from acting) in a certain way. When the prophet tries to align his actions with God's will, God similarly aligns His will, as it were, with the will of the prophet, and reveals His secret to them.

Chazal are conscious of the problematic use that Bil'am makes of his powers, and they are highly critical of him: "'And knowing the mind of the most High' -- now, seeing that he did not even understand the mind of his own donkey, is it possible that he could know the mind of the most High?!" (Sanhedrin 105a)

Moreover, the story of Bil'am and his donkey is one of the most ironic units in the Torah. The text uses irony over and over to express the extent to which Bil'am himself actually understands nothing, and through his relationship with his donkey the Torah demonstrates how Bil'am exploits those who are close to him.

Although Bil'am's curse turns into a blessing, the Gemara states that Bil'am's intention was negative, and that this is evident in his 'blessing': "R. Yochanan said: He wished to say that [Am Yisrael] should have no synagogues or study halls, [so he said:] 'How good are your tents, O Yaakov.' [He wished to say] that the Divine Presence should not rest upon them, [so he said] 'and your Tabernacles, O Israel.' That their kingdom should not endure -- 'like winding brooks'; that they should not have olive orchards and vineyards -- 'as gardens by the side of the river'; that their fragrance should not be dispersed -- 'like aloes which the Lord has planted'; that they should not have kings of stature -- 'like cedars beside the water'; that they should not have a royal dynasty -- 'He shall pour the water out of his buckets'; that their kingdom should not rule over other nations -- 'and his seed be in many waters'; that their kingdom should not be strong -- 'and his king shall be higher than Agag'; that their kingdom should not be awe-inspiring -- 'and his kingdom shall be exalted.'" (Sanhedrin 105b)

However, there is one element of the blessing which Chazal view as emerging from a different psychic position: "R. Abba bar Kahana said: All of [Bil'am's blessings] reverted to a curse, except for [the matter of] synagogues and study halls, as it is written, 'And the Lord your God turned the curse into a blessing for you, for the Lord your God loved you.' The verse says 'the curse,' but not 'the curses.'"

What is so special about the blessing, "How good are your tents, O Yaakov"? It would seem that Bil'am is motivated by something different when he utters this blessing: "And when Bil'am saw that it pleased the Lord to bless Israel, he did not go, as at other times, to seek enchantments, but he set his face toward the wilderness. And Bil'am lifted his eyes and he saw Israel dwelling by their tribes, and the spirit of God came upon him." (Bamidbar 24:1-2)

At this moment, Bil'am is not trying to have his own will fulfilled, but rather is paying attention to the will of God. He is not trying to find magical ways of 'forcing' God to act in a certain way; he is not 'seeking enchantments,' but rather receives 'the spirit of God' and becomes a channel for God's will. It may be that here R. Yochanan would say that Bil'am reverts to being a prophet, and for this fleeting moment he maintains a relationship with God. (*This sicha was delivered on leil Shabbat parashat Balak 5774 [2014].*)

