

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l

Covenant & Conversation

The story of Bilaam, the pagan prophet, begins with a bewildering set of non-sequiturs -- a sequence of events that seems to have no logic. First, the background. The Israelites are approaching the end of their forty years in the wilderness. Already they have fought and won wars against Sihon king of the Amorites and Og king of Bashan. They have arrived at the plains of Moab -- today, southern Jordan at the point where it touches the Dead Sea. Balak king of Moab is concerned, and he shares his distress with the elders of Midian. The language the Torah uses at this point is precisely reminiscent of the reaction of the Egyptians at the beginning of the book of Exodus.

Egypt: said to his people: "Here, The children of Israel is more numerous and powerful than we..." and felt a disgust at the children of Israel.

Moab: And Moab was very fearful because of the people because it was numerous, and Moab felt a disgust at the children of Israel.

The strategy Balak adopts is to seek the help of the well known seer and diviner Bilaam. Again there is a literary evocation, this time of the words of God to Abraham: God to Abraham: "I will bless those who bless you, and those who curse you I will curse."

Balak to Bilaam: "I know that whoever you bless is blessed and whoever you curse is cursed."

This time the parallel is ironic (indeed the Bilaam story is full of irony). In the case of Abraham, it was God who blessed. In the case of Bilaam, the power was thought to reside in Bilaam himself. In fact the earlier statement of God to Abraham already prefigures the fate of Moab -- one who tries to curse Israel will himself be cursed.

The historical background to the Bilaam narrative is well-attested. Several Egyptian pottery fragments dating from the 2nd millennium BCE have been found containing execration texts -- curses -- directed against Canaanite cities. It was the custom among pre-Islamic Arabs to hire poets thought to be under Divine influence to compose curses against their enemies. As for Bilaam himself, a significant discovery was made in 1967. A plaster inscription on the wall of a temple at Deir Alla in Jordan was found to make reference to the night vision of a seer called Bilaam -- the earliest reference in archaeological sources to a named

individual in the Torah. Thus, though the story itself contains elements of parable, it belongs to a definite context in time and place.

The character of Bilaam remains ambiguous, both in the Torah and subsequent Jewish tradition. Was he a diviner (reading omens and signs) or a sorcerer (practising occult arts)? Was he a genuine prophet or a fraud? Did he assent to the divine blessings placed in his mouth, or did he wish to curse Israel? According to some midrashic interpretations he was a great prophet, equal in stature to Moses. According to others, he was a pseudo-prophet with an "evil eye" who sought Israel's downfall. What I want to examine here is neither Bilaam nor his blessings, but the preamble to the story, for it is here that one of the deepest problems arises, namely: what did God want Bilaam to do? It is a drama in three scenes.

In the first, emissaries arrive from Moab and Midian. They state their mission. They want Bilaam to curse the Israelites. Bilaam's answer is a model of propriety: Stay the night, he says, while I consult with God. God's answer is unequivocal: "But God said to Bilaam, 'Do not go with them. You must not put a curse on those people, because they are blessed.'"

Obediently, Bilaam refuses. Balak redoubles his efforts. Perhaps more distinguished messengers and the promise of significant reward will persuade Bilaam to change his mind. He sends a second set of emissaries. Bilaam's reply is exemplary: "Even if Balak gave me his palace filled with silver and gold, I could not do anything great or small to go beyond the command of the Lord my God."

However, he adds a fateful rider: "Now stay here tonight as the others did, and I will find out what else the Lord will tell me."

The implication is clear. Bilaam is suggesting that God may change His mind. But this is impossible. That is not what God does. Yet to our surprise, that is what God seems to do: "That night God came to Bilaam and said, 'Since these men have come to summon you, go with them, but do only what I tell you.'"

Problem 1: first God had said, "Do not go." Now He says, "Go." Problem 2 appears immediately: Bilaam got up in the morning, saddled his donkey and went with the princes of Moab. But God was very angry when he went, and the angel of the Lord stood in the road to oppose him.

God says, "Go." Bilaam goes. Then God is very

angry. Does God change His mind -- not once but twice in the course of a single narrative? The mind reels. What is going on here? What is Bilaam supposed to do? What does God want? There is no explanation. Instead the narrative shifts to the famous scene of Bilaam's donkey -- itself a mystery in need of interpretation:

"Bilaam was riding on his donkey, and his two servants were with him. When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road with a drawn sword in his hand, it turned off the road into a field. Bilaam beat it to get it back on the road.

"Then the angel of the Lord stood in a narrow path between two vineyards, with walls on both sides. When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord, it pressed close to the wall, crushing Bilaam's foot against it. So he beat it again.

"Then the angel of the Lord moved on ahead and stood in a narrow place where there was no room to turn, either to the right or to the left. When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord, it lay down under Bilaam, and he was angry and beat it with his staff. Then the Lord opened the donkey's mouth, and it said to Bilaam, 'What have I done to you to make you beat me these three times?'

Bilaam answered the donkey, 'You have made a fool of me! If I had a sword in my hand, I would kill you right now.'

The donkey said to Bilaam, 'Am I not your own donkey, which you have always ridden, to this day? Have I been in the habit of doing this to you?' 'No,' he said.

"Then the Lord opened Bilaam's eyes, and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road with his sword drawn. So he bowed low and fell facedown."

The commentators offer various ways of resolving the apparent contradictions between God's first and second reply. According to Nachmanides, God's first statement, "Don't go with them" meant, "Don't curse the Israelites." His second -- "Go with them" -- meant, "Go but make it clear that you will only say the words I will put in your mouth, even if they are words of blessing." God was angry with Bilaam, not because he went but because he did not tell them of the proviso.

In the nineteenth century, Malbim and R. Zvi Hirsch Mecklenberg suggested a different answer based on close textual analysis. The Hebrew text uses two different words for "with them" in the first and second Divine replies. When God says, "Don't go with them" the Hebrew is *imahem*. When He later says "Go with them" the corresponding word is *itam*. The two prepositions have subtly different meanings. *imahem* means "with them mentally as well as physically," going along with their plans. *itam* means "with them physically but not mentally," in other words Bilaam could accompany them but not share their purpose or intention. God is angry when Bilaam goes, because the text states that he went *im* them -- in other words he identified with their mission. This is an ingenious solution. The only difficulty is verse

35, in which the angel of God, having opened Bilaam's eyes, finally tells Bilaam, "Go with the men." According to Malbim and Mecklenberg, this is precisely what God did not want Bilaam to do.

The deepest answer is also the simplest. The hardest word to hear in any language is the word No. Bilaam had asked God once. God had said No. That should have sufficed. Yet Bilaam asked a second time. In that act lay his fateful weakness of character. He knew that God did not want him to go. Yet he invited the second set of messengers to wait overnight in case God had changed his mind.

God does not change His mind. Therefore Bilaam's delay said something not about God but about himself. He had not accepted the Divine refusal. He wanted to hear the answer Yes -- and that is indeed what he heard. Not because God wanted him to go, but because God speaks once, and if we refuse to accept what He says, God does not force His will upon us. As the sages of the midrash put it: "Man is led down the path he chooses to tread."

The true meaning of God's second reply, "Go with them," is, "If you insist, then I cannot stop you going -- but I am angry that you should have asked a second time." God did not change His mind at any point in the proceedings. In scenes 1, 2 and 3, God did not want Bilaam to go. His "Yes" in scene 2 meant "No" -- but it was a No Bilaam could not hear, was not prepared to hear. When God speaks and we do not listen, He does not intervene to save us from our choices. "Man is led down the path he chooses to tread." But God was not prepared to let Bilaam proceed as if he had Divine consent. Instead he arranged the most elegant possible demonstration of the difference between true and false prophecy. The false prophet speaks. The true prophet listens. The false prophet tells people what they want to hear. The true prophet tells them what they need to hear. The false prophet believes in his own powers. The true prophet knows that he has no power. The false prophet speaks in his own voice. The true prophet speaks in a voice not his ("I am not a man of words," says Moses; "I cannot speak for I am a child" says Jeremiah).

The episode of Bilaam and talking donkey is pure humour -- and, as I have pointed out before, only one thing provokes Divine laughter, namely human pretension. Bilaam had won renown as the greatest prophet of his day. His fame had spread to Moab and Midian. He was known as the man who held the secrets of blessing and curse. God now proceeds to show Bilaam that when He so chooses, even his donkey is a greater prophet than he. The donkey sees what Bilaam cannot see: the angel standing in the path, barring their way. God humbles the self-important, just as He gives importance to the humble. When human beings think they can dictate what God will say, God laughs. And, on this occasion, so do we.

Some years ago I was making a television

programme for the BBC. The problem I faced was this. I wanted to make a documentary about teshuvah, repentance, but I had to do so in a way that would be intelligible to non-Jews as well as Jews, indeed to those who had no religious belief at all. What example could I choose that would illustrate the point?

I decided that one way of doing so was to look at drug addicts. They had developed behaviour that they knew was self-destructive, but it was also addictive. To break the habit would involve immense reserves of will. They had to acknowledge that the life they led was harming them and they had to change. That seemed to me a secular equivalent of teshuvah.

I spent a day in a rehabilitation centre, and it was heartbreaking. The young people there -- they were aged between 16 and 18 -- all came from broken families. Many of them had suffered abuse. Other than the workers at the centre, they had no networks of support. The staff were exceptional people. Their task was mind-numbingly difficult. They would succeed in getting the addicts to break the habit for days, weeks at a time, and then they would relapse and the whole process would have to begin again. I began to realize that their patience was little less than a human counterpart of God's patience with us. However many times we fail and have to begin again, God does not lose faith in us, and that gives us strength. Here were people doing God's work.

I asked the head of the centre, a social worker, what it was that she gave the young people that made a difference to their lives and gave them the chance to change. I will never forget her answer, because it was one of the most beautiful I ever heard. "We are probably the first people they have met who care for them unconditionally. And we are the first people in their lives who cared enough to say No."

"No" is the hardest word to hear, but it is also often the most important -- and the sign that someone cares. That is what Bilaam, humbled, eventually learned and what we too must discover if we are to be open to the voice of God. *Covenant and Conversation is kindly sponsored by the Schimmel Family in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel zt"l © 2026 The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust 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, Hilkhos 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!

The above article appears in Rabbi Riskin’s book Bemidbar: Trials & Tribulations in Times of Transition, part of his Torah Lights series of commentaries on the weekly parsha, published by Maggid and available for purchase at bit.ly/RiskinBemidbar. © 2026 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI BEREL WEIN ZT”L

Wein Online

This week’s parsha introduces us to the usual suspects who are always present and active in Jewish history and world affairs. Balak and Bilaam

are prototypes of the enemies of the Jewish people throughout the ages. They really have no legitimate cause to be our enemies. They impute hostile and aggressive behavior to the Jewish people, when in reality none of this is present.

They are motivated by jealousy, greed, and a terrible misreading of the situation that leads them to unreasoning hatred and the wish to eliminate the Jewish people completely. It is the existence of the Jewish people that truly troubles them. They resent the fact that the Jewish people left Egypt and were rescued from bondage. They also resent the special and unique experience of the Jewish people in receiving the Torah.

Still further, they resent the fact that the Jewish people will have a homeland and national state in the Land of Israel. So they engage in a seemingly nonviolent campaign to destroy the Jewish people. False accusations, curses and hatemongering create the tools of their campaign.

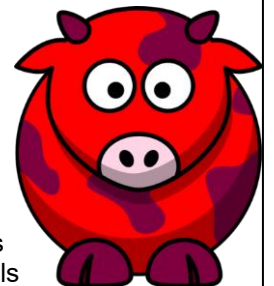
The Talmud pointed out to us that from the so-called blessings of Bilaam we are able to deduce what his real intentions were and what curses he intended to inflict on the Jews. Balak is willing to invest time, a great deal of money and his personal and national prestige in this attempt to discredit and eventually destroy the Jewish people.

He knows that he needs someone who will spearhead this drive and he also knows that such people are always available.....for a price. And it is also obvious that when it comes to the opposition to the Jewish people, money is no object. Therefore Balak and Bilaam form the perfect pair, the odd couple that is joined by their common goal of hatred of the Jewish people.

This couple is alive and well in our time. There are countless numbers of people, supported by all sorts of high sounding nongovernmental organizations, all dedicated to the cause of delegitimizing Israel, Judaism and the Jewish people generally. And there is no shortage of money, just as in the case of Balak, to finance this project. EU money, Arab money, and private money all flow into this effort to curse Israel and the Jews.

The goal of Balak is not so much to help his own people as it is to destroy others. All of this money, which currently is directed solely towards destroying Israel could be channeled into helping millions of Moslems rise from poverty, hunger and disease. But that is not the goal of this money.

Balak only wants the destruction of the Jews. And in our time, there is no shortage of spokespeople who wish to advance this nefarious cause. There are always many Bilaams ready and prepared to ride the populist cause of blaming the Jews and the Jewish state for all of the ills



and problems of the world.

Bilaam has a serpent's tongue. He speaks in a complimentary tone and in a reassuring voice. But that only serves to mask the enmity that he feels towards the Jewish people, an enmity that has no personal or national basis. Well, he is around today as well and we have to simply recognize that the world will eventually realize that its curses should be transmuted into blessings. © 2015 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

ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

MiDoor I'Door

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 DAVID LEVIN

Balak was Weak

Balak ben Tzipor was one of the more unusual people in the Torah. His title is King, but he is often mentioned without his title as if he were not important enough to be called King. HaRav Shmshon Raphael Hirsch explains that Balak "had seen the downfall of Sichon and Og and also perceived the effect these events were having on Moav." Hirsch reports that:

(1) Moav "was seized with such fear that all feeling of security was lost;" and (2) "they saw themselves already as strangers in their own land, the land no longer belonged to them, was already in Israel's hands." Whereas this might eventually be true, they believed that even at this stage, before Israel attacked, that they had already lost possession of the land where they dwelled. Abarbanel explains that since Sichon and Og were more powerful than Balak, Balak too believed that he would be defeated.

The Torah states: "Balak son of Tzipor saw all that Israel had done to the Amorite. Moav was very frightened of the people, because it was formidable; and Moav was disgusted in the face of the Children of Israel. Moav said to the elders of Midian, 'Now the congregation will chew up our entire surroundings, as an ox chews up the greenery of the field.' Balak son of Tzipor was king of Moav at that time." Abarbanel explains that the Moabites saw that the B'nei Yisrael had so many men of fighting age and that Hashem had chosen them to be blessed by Him. This prompted them to seek help from their earlier enemies, the Midianites. The Ramban explains that there were two factors which prompted this request from an enemy: (1) even though Moav knew that it was not in danger because Hashem had told the B'nei Yisrael, "Be not at enmity with Moav," they still feared that Israel would "chew up our entire surroundings," Moav would become uninhabitable, and (2) Moav knew that Moshe had lived in Yitro's house, a priest of Midian, and they sought information about Moshe that they could use against him.

The Kli Yakar asks why Moav appeared to be frightened only after Sichon and Og were defeated when the miracles performed for the B'nei Yisrael in Egypt were much greater. He explains that each king had a Book of Chronicles of his own which told the history of all that he and previous kings of his people had witnessed with their own eyes. In the book owned by Balak, he saw that Ya'akov and his small family had defeated the Amorites in spite of their numbers. When the Torah described that victory it said, "that I took from the hand of the Amorites with my sword and my arrows." Our Rabbis concluded that "with my sword and with my arrows" really meant with my sharp words in prayer. Moav and Balak feared the relationship between Hashem and the B'nei Yisrael because of those prayers.

Balak sent for Bilaam, a Midianite prophet, to curse the B'nei Yisrael. Bilaam sought Hashem's permission to accompany the messengers that Balak had sent, but Hashem refused. When the messengers returned, they told Balak that it was Bilaam who had refused. Even though Balak was seeking a favor from Bilaam, he should have reacted more strongly at this refusal, as his inaction demonstrated his weakness; it demonstrated to all that Bilaam was more powerful than Balak. The Torah states: "Bilaam arose in the morning and said to the officers of Balak, 'Go to your land, for

Hashem has refused to give me [permission] to go with you.' The officers of Moav arose and came to Balak and said, 'Bilaam has refused to go with us.' Balak kept on sending officers – more and higher ranking than these." There is no outrage mentioned here from Balak towards the messengers or towards Bilaam, though a strong King would have had him beheaded.

More important messengers were sent to Bilaam with the request, "So said Balak ben Tzipor, 'Do not refrain from going to me, for I will honor you very much, and everything that you say to me I shall do; so go now and imprecate this people for me.'" According to HaRav Hirsch, "In the tottering position in which he felt towards his people, Bilaam's refusal to come would not be exactly calculated to raise [Balak's] prestige in the opinion of his people were forming as to the value of his kingship." Eventually, Bilaam, with Hashem's limited permission, followed the elders to assist Balak in his endeavor to curse the Jews.

When Bilaam arrived, he immediately set forth to curse the B'nei Yisrael by first appeasing Hashem with seven altars on which seven bulls and seven rams were offered. Bilaam understood that he was limited to the words placed in his mouth by Hashem, and this resulted in praises coming from his mouth instead of curses. Balak complained, "What have you done to me? To imprecate my enemy have I brought you; but behold, you have even blessed." This would have been the opportunity in which Balak could have shown his anger and either punished or dismissed Bilaam had he wished to demonstrate his own strength and control. One could argue that Balak still felt that he needed Bilaam in spite of his failure to curse the B'nei Yisrael. But after several such failures, it is unusual that Balak did not react with power and force rather than continued dependence on Bilaam's future success.

We see more decisive action on the part of the officers of Moav. In one verse, the Torah tells us that "all the officers of Moav" accompanied Bilaam when he went to curse the people. Later, the Torah states that "the officers of Moav" went with him. Rashi points out that this change (leaving out the word all) indicated that, "Since [the officers of Moav] saw that there was no hope in him, part of them went off and only part of them remained." Had Balak been a strong leader, he too would have abandoned Bilaam and refused to pay him for his efforts. Instead, Balak almost appears desperate for not seeking a different approach.

After the third blessing in place of the third curse, Balak finally lost his temper: "Balak said to Bilaam, 'To curse my enemies did I summon you, and behold, you have continually blessed them these three times! Now, flee to your place. I said I would honor you, but behold, Hashem has withheld you from honor.'" Bilaam was not finished with Balak and advised him



how to destroy the people without cursing them. Bilaam understood that the B'nei Yisrael would have to bring about the curse upon themselves. The people were seduced to lewd behavior and idol worship which brought about Hashem's curses.

Balak made a crucial mistake. He chose to curse the people whom Hashem had blessed. Bilaam, in the end, realized that the people were more likely to be enticed to sins which would destroy them from within. We face the same dilemma today by our lack of unity. May we avoid internal conflicts which will kindle Hashem's anger against us. © 2026 Rabbi D. Levin

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"**B**ilaam said to Balak... perhaps Hashem will appear to me and will show me something, and I will tell you; and he went on alone." (Bamidbar 23:3) The Targum renders the word 'shefi' as meaning "alone." Rashi elaborates on this and says that when Bilaam wanted Hashem to appear to him, he wanted to ensure there were no distractions. He didn't want anyone else with him so he would not miss Hashem's appearance.

We know that nevi'im would have to prepare themselves for prophecy, and there were many schools for those who wished to reach this level. It included things like hisbodedus, private meditation, and self-improvement. It seems that Bilaam understood this need for privacy, and therefore did not want Balak to accompany him.

Of course, it's also quite possible that he wanted to be alone so that if Hashem did not appear to him, he could choose to interpret the wind or other sounds he heard as a message to bring back to the king who hired him.

This episode brings to mind the point made by the Rambam, Kuzari, and others, that only to the Jewish People did Hashem appear before a group. Every other religion is founded based on a personal revelation, purported to have happened to a single person. Bilaam went alone, hoping to have an epiphany that would help him destroy the Jews. However, Hashem appeared to him and berated him for wishing to curse them.

In this story of going alone, with no distraction, we recognize something deeper. Some people can only commune with G-d when all the circumstances are perfect. When something is wrong or upsetting, that connection is severed. That's what it was like for Bilaam. But not Moshe Rabbeinu.

Moshe connected to Hashem in every situation; alone, with others, and in the midst of mass chaos. Regardless of what was going on around him, Moshe Rabbeinu was dialed in to Hashem.

There is a great message here for all of us. When things are going well, we often see the hand of Hashem. When they are not, and it seems everything is

going wrong, we are often blindsided and blinded. But that's when we should see His involvement even more.

Don't be like Bilaam who could only hear Hashem when he was alone with no distraction. Be like Moshe who heard Hashem's voice ring out clear above the noise and the turmoil. We can do it, because Hashem is always with us; gently speaking to us, no matter who or what is going on around us.

A king once offered a prize to the artist who would paint the best picture of peace. Many artists tried but the judging came down to two final entries. One picture was of a calm lake, a perfect mirror for peaceful towering mountains all around it. Overhead was a blue sky with fluffy white clouds. All who saw this painting thought it was a perfect picture of peace.

The other submission had mountains, too. But they were rugged and bare. Above was an angry sky, from which rain fell, and in which lightning played. Down the mountain tumbled a foaming waterfall. It not look peaceful at all. However, when the king looked closely, he saw, behind the waterfall, a tiny bush growing in a crack in the rock. In the bush, a mother bird had built her nest. There, amidst of the rush of angry water, sat the bird on her nest - in perfect peace.

The king chose the second picture; "Because," he explained, "peace does not mean to be in a place where there is no noise, trouble, or hard work. Peace means to be in the midst of all those things and still be calm in your heart. That is the true meaning of peace."
© 2026 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr

RABBI AVI SHAFRAN

Reflections

The bizarre image (Bamidbar 21:9) of our ancestors gazing at a graven image -- a copper representation of a snake -- to end a snake-plague born of their complaining about the mon, is contextualized by a Mishneh in Rosh Hashana (29a):

"Did the snake kill, or did the snake preserve life? [No.] Rather, when the Jewish people turned their eyes upward and subjected their hearts to their Father in Heaven, they were healed, but if not, they were necrotized [by the venom]."

Which raises the obvious question: Why not eliminate the middlesnake and just look directly heavenward?

Rabbeinu Bachya calls attention to the word used to introduce the (actual) snakes in the account: hanachashim (Bamidbar 21:6). Not "snakes" but "the snakes." The definite article, he says, refers to the fact that these were the same reptiles that, elsewhere in the Torah (Devarim 8:15), are described as having been ever-present in the desert our ancestors wandered.

Rav Samson Rafael Hirsch expands on that observation, explaining that gazing at the copper snake was meant to sensitize the people to the constancy and ubiquitousness of snakes around them -- and to the

realization that when the snakes hadn't been plaguing them until then it was because of Hashem's protection.

As Abba Binyamin taught (Berachos 6a), "If the eye were given permission to see, no person would be able to withstand [the sight of the multitude of] the demons [that surround him]."

We moderns can easily appreciate the idea that danger as potentially lethal as venomous snakes and yet undetectable by our eyes is ever present all around us. And that every day that we don't succumb to the myriad ever-present infectious dangers, every day that the immune systems Hashem gave us function, we should feel obligated to look heavenward in thanks. © 2026 Rabbi A. Shafran & torah.org

HARAV SHLOMO WOLBE ZT"L

Bais Hamussar

There are four basic elements that make up all matter: fire, water, wind and dirt. Rav Chaim Vital writes (Sha'arei Kedusha) that, so too, all middos are rooted in these very same four elements. After clarifying for ourselves what our main middos are, we should try to classify the middos into these four categories. Doing so will point the direction that we should follow when trying to rectify our middos.

The element of fire symbolizes the drive to advance and conquer. It manifests itself in the negative middos of arrogance, and in turn anger when things don't go as wished. Additionally, it propels a person to pursue honor and it breeds feelings of hatred when others stand in his way. The flip side of these middos is the virtue of anivus -- humbleness which prevents anger and breeds love.

The element of water symbolizes food, and the love and pursuit of pleasures. Included in this category is jealousy and the obsession with money or other desires. The positive side is using all pleasures for their specific purpose and not for partaking of pleasures for the sake of the pleasure itself.

The element of wind manifests itself with "shooting the breeze" i.e. speaking for no purposeful reason. Included are lying, flattery, speaking lashon hara and self glorification. The opposite is opening one's mouth only when doing so is commendable or needed.

Dirt, the final and lowliest element, is the cause for feelings of depression, laziness and despair. The parallel positive middos are the cognizance that everything Hashem does is for the best and the ability to serve Hashem with happiness.

Rav Wolbe urges us to study the first two chapters in Rav Chaim Vital's Sha'arei Kedusha which discuss the four elements and the importance of having good middos. Therein he writes that there are 248 limbs and 365 sinews in a human body. There are also 248 positive commandments and 365 negative commandments which parallel each of these parts of the body. The fulfillment of the mitzvos is what gives "life" to

the parts of the body, and it was with this intention that we were commanded to perform the mitzvos and fulfill the dictums of the Torah.

Although Chazal relate to various negative middos in the most severe terms, interestingly enough, the middos are, for the most part, not included in the 613 commandments of the Torah. Rav Chaim Vital explains that good middos are crucial for the proper performance of the mitzvos. Accordingly, the acquisition of good middos precedes the performance of mitzvos and therefore middos are not discussed in the Torah. Moreover, someone who has already acquired good middos will be able to perform all the mitzvos with much ease!

Good middos are not only the essential ingredients for good relationships, they are also the essential ingredients for the performance of the mitzvos. So invest some time into avodas ha'middos and reap the priceless dividends! © 2016 Rabbi S. Wolbe zt"l and the AishDas Society

RABBI ZVI SOBOLOFSKY

Blessing of the Mon

The Torah states (Breishis 2:3) regarding Shabbos, "Va'yevorech Elokim es yom ha'shvi'i -- Hashem blessed the seventh day", which Chazal (Breishis Rabba 11:2) interpret as referring to the miracle of the mon which fell as a double portion on Friday. When the Jewish People first ate the mon, Moshe was inspired to compose the text of the first bracha of Birchas Hamazon. Notwithstanding the potential of mon to be a source of bracha, in Parshas Chukas the mon is described using derogatory terms by those same people who had experienced the effects of its blessing.

The mon is scorned as something worthless, "Lechem hak'lokeil -- the insignificant bread" (21:5.) Rashi (Parshas Ki Teitzei) comments that the word k'lalah -- curse is related to the word kal -- light and meaningless. To curse something, or someone, is to treat it as something that is devoid of any significance. A blessing is the opposite of a curse; it is an expression of one's appreciation of the importance of that which is being blessed. How could the Jewish People see in the mon something that deserved to be scorned as lechem hak'lokeil? What was the nature of the true blessing of the mon that was not appreciated properly?

Man's toil for bread is the result of the curse inflicted on man and on the ground from which bread comes. After sinning by eating from the etz hada'as all of man's food would have to come through great effort. There was one exception to this need for effort: the bread that fell from heaven was a pure blessing and was not subject to the curse of the ground. The nature of the mon was fundamentally different than bread from the ground; Whereas bread produced in this world is subject to the laws of the physical, natural world, the mon which emanates from the spiritual realm of heaven has no such

bounds. Chazal teach us that the mon wasn't digested in a physical manner and as such there were no waste products associated with eating it.

This blessed food could only be appreciated by those who view the world around them as a place of spiritual opportunities. It is truly a pure gift from Heaven untainted by the effects of the sin of eating from the etz hada'as. To refer to the blessed food in a derogatory way, as something deserving to be cursed, reflects a lack of appreciation of the spiritual world and a total focus on the physical one.

How can we relate to the mon which hasn't fallen for over three thousand years? Every Shabbos we relive the miracle of the mon. When we recite our bracha on our two challahs and eat our Shabbos meal, we are not partaking of merely physical food, but rather we are receiving spiritual sustenance. Chazal teach us that we have an additional soul on Shabbos. Rashi explains that it is this soul that enables us to eat larger portions on Shabbos than we are accustomed to during the week. How does this spiritual addition impact on our physical meal? It is only because on Shabbos our meal is not merely partaking of physical delights, but rather experiencing how Hashem blessed the seventh day. Our food is from Heaven and as such is not subject to physical limitations, similar to the mon. We reenact the miracle of the mon at our Shabbos table.

May we learn the lessons of the mon and enable the bracha the mon represented to enter our homes every Shabbos. We can correct the mistake of calling the mon "lechem hak'lokeil" by celebrating Shabbos in a way that is befits of a day about which the Torah says, "Hashem blessed the seventh day". © 2016 Rabbi Z. Sobolofsky and TorahWeb.org

SHLOMO KATZ

Hama'ayan

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

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

