

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI DOVID SIEGEL

Haftorah

This week's haftorah reveals to us Hashem's incredible love for His people. The prophet Micha opens by comparing the Jewish nation to a lion amongst the beasts. This refers to the Jewish nation's ultimate status in the Messianic era wherein there will be no need to turn to other nations for assistance. They will finally place their full trust in Hashem and recognize that salvation comes solely from Him. Micha continues the Messianic theme by describing Hashem's cleansing process whereby all idolatry and idolatrous cities will be destroyed.

The prophet suddenly shifts gears and summons the Jewish people to a serious trial. Micha says, "Come and debate before the mountains and project your voice to the hills. Because Hashem is quarreling with His people and challenging Israel." Hashem begins the debate and demands, "My nation, what have I done to you and how have I drained you?" (6:1-3) The prophet then lists a host of Hashem's favors to His people. He sent them three great leaders;

Moshe, Aharon and Miriam and even spared the Jewish people from Balak and Bilaam's fiendish plot. The tone of the debate seems to focus on the Jewish nation's unfairness to Hashem. Hashem has been so kind to them and, in return, consider their response. Yet, we find no concluding demand and criticism and instead we discover soft encouraging words. Micha says, "Man, haven't you been told what is good and what Hashem expects of you? Engage yourself in acts of justice, loving kindness and walk modestly with Him." (6:8) Where is all the fire and brimstone? Why doesn't Hashem denounce His people for all their wrongdoing? Wasn't this the trial's original intent?

Chazal (see Yalkut Shimoni 554) raise these questions and share with us an enlightening perspective. Rav Shmuel cites three incidents where Hashem called His people to trial. Each time the nations got wind of the trial and eagerly awaited its outcome. They envisioned that their long awaited moment finally arrived and Hashem would undoubtedly destroy His nation. "After all", they reasoned, "who could possibly stand up to Hashem's accusations and wrath?" Rav Shmuel continues that when Hashem sees this response, He immediately converts His powerful

accusation into soft and kind words of blessing. (Yalkut Shimoni 554) This insight reveals a unique dimension of Hashem's relationship with His people. Although, in truth Hashem seriously faults His people this information remains between Hashem and His people. Hashem's love for them does not permit them to be faulted by others. As far as the nations concerned, Hashem cherishes His people and rarely finds fault in them. If the nations are ever privy to Hashem's feelings towards His people they will only discover favor and grace.

This insight is very helpful in appreciating the full message of this trial. Alongside Hashem's all encompassing favor of the Jewish exodus, the picture is completed with one isolated incident. Micha proclaims, "My nation, remember what Balak the king of Moav advised and how Bilaam responded. From Shitim to Gilgal (Hashem 's kindness continued) in order that you should know Hashem's righteousness." (6:5) Why is this favor isolated and regarded the paradigm of Hashem's kindness towards His people?

In light of the above insight Micha's message becomes crystal clear. First, let us search for the hidden lesson of our parsha. Parshas Balak revolves around Balak and Bilaam's futile attempts to shower curses at the Jewish nation. Bilaam, the sorcerer persistently directed words of degradation towards the Jewish people which were miraculously transformed into praise and blessing. To the untrained eye the scene appears to be somewhat comical. A wicked man insists on harming the Jewish people and refuses to accept that Hashem will simply not allow it. However, we can learn a deeper lesson from this entire experience.

As we carefully examine Bilaam's words we discover their heavy concentration on the Jewish nation's faults. Each curse reflects a serious attempt to arouse Hashem's wrath against His people. Bilaam had contact with the inner dimensions of the world and possessed an accurate understanding of the Jewish nation's shortcomings. He focused on these shameful acts and awaited Hashem's harsh response to this indecent behavior. (see Targum to Bamidbar 24:1 and Kli Yakar 23:1, 14, 24:1) Yet, Hashem was not persuaded in the least bit and responded to His people instead with warm words of blessing. In fact, Bilaam himself admitted this disheartening phenomena and profoundly expressed it in his classical way. He proclaimed to the world, "Hashem does not gaze at Yaakov's iniquity and does not see Israel's sinful

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practices." (23:21) His message was quite clear. Bilaam discovered the hard way that Hashem was not interested in faulting His people. Although, their relationship with Him may be full of imperfection it remains, in the eyes of the world absolutely perfect. Hashem would never think of trading in His people for anything in the world.

This same dimension is blatantly seen in Hashem's response to Bilaam's final plot. After his total failure in cursing the Jewish people, Bilaam notoriously advised Balak to engage the Midianite women in seducing Jewish men. This sinful scheme met with much success and tens of thousands of innocent Jewish men were lured into atrocious immoral conduct. Hashem responded harshly to this sinful movement and sent a severe plague killing over twenty thousand men. Yet, the totality and identity of the nation remained in tact. Even after a sin of such magnitude, Hashem's love for His people was not diminished in the slightest way. These very same people continued to merit Hashem's favor and entered Eretz Yisroel with open revelations. Radak explains that although the entire nation deserved to be destroyed Hashem did not permit it. (see comment to 6:5) In light of the above we can relate to this message. Bilaam's fiendish plan could never interfere in Hashem's relationship with His people. The nations of the world could never be at the root of such developments. Although the Midianites witnessed the Jewish nation's momentary deviation even this atrocious behavior could not yield severe results. Bilaam and his followers could never be the cause of Hashem's full wrath against His people. Therefore, after Pinchos effectively silenced the sinful movement Hashem continued His relationship with His people in full.

We now understand why Micha isolated this incident between Bilaam and the Jewish people when demonstrating Hashem's ultimate love for His people. In truth, Hashem's response to this serious plunge reflects the full tone of the debate. Hashem's unequivocal message to His people is that the nations can never get between Hashem and His people. Even when Hashem has serious complaints against His people such information is not for public knowledge. Hashem's incredible love for His people demands that world perspective of this be one of perfect love and appreciation. In truth, a father always remains a father

during the most trying times and his love for his child is never tainted. Although he may punish his child this too is an expression of love and concern and should never be viewed in any other way. No one should ever forget that the Jewish people are Hashem's children and His boundless love and concern for them will always be there for them. © 2010 Rabbi D. Siegel and torah.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

“G-d 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 G-d's will and our own. We have free will, but what happens when our choices fly in the face of the will of G-d? 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 G-d. 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 leave 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 G-d... 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" (22:18).

Hidden between the lines of this second invitation to spend the night, our Sages hear a subtle message: "I cannot transgress G-d'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" - that is, let me attempt to convince or at least "wear G-d 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" (22:20). The very next verse declares, "And Balaam arose in the morning, saddled his she-donkey and went with the officers of Moab" (22:21). Balaam did not report G-d'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, (22:20) the text reports, "G-d's wrath flared" because Balaam went (22:22). But if G-d 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 G-d and cannot defy that will.

The Ibn Ezra suggests that G-d 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 G-d clearly tells the Israelites to go up and conquer the Promised Land (Deut. 1:21). Nevertheless, when they demur and insist upon sending out a reconnaissance commission (ibid 22), G-d tells Moses to send out such a group of spies (Numbers 13:1). G-d may not desire such a commission, but He will always acquiesce to the will of the people.

Here, in our portion, G-d 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 G-d leads an individual to walk on the path that he wishes to travel." In other words, G-d 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 Baalam 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, G-d 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 G-d 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, G-d 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 G-d to lead to the marriage between Ruth and Boaz which will bring forth David, progenitor of the Messiah. G-d will see to it that His designs will ultimately prevail, turning the bitter into the sweet, sadness into joy, 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, G-d's blessings will prevail. © 2010 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

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The Torah has great relevance to all current vents. It is not a book of history but it is rather a book about humankind-its greatness and evil, wisdom and creativity and its pettiness and foolishness. This week's parsha allows itself to be read in the context of our current world and perhaps, most acutely, in the relationship of the Jewish people and the State of Israel to their adversaries and to the world generally.

The Jewish people under the leadership of Moshe have fought a number of wars against enemies-Amalek, The Emorites, the Canaanites, the king of Bashan, etc.-and emerged victorious in all of these physical encounters. The king of Moab, Balak, afraid to confront Israel directly again in open battle, devises a new strategy to destroy the Jewish nation. He hires a media expert, Bilaam, to conduct a public relations campaign against the right of the Jewish people to exist. He reasons that though they may not be defeated in war, they can be cursed in the eyes of the world.

To put Bilaam into our terms and times, he is the UN, rights commissions, the European Union,

blockade breakers, NGO's, human rights activists and the literary and academic world. Balak is happy to fund Bilaam's efforts-the New Balak Fund. Bilaam's prose and poetry are unmatched for beauty in the Torah. He is the hero of the intellectual set, the advisor to kings and rulers, a recognized expert, while, in reality, he is nothing more than an empty suit.

Balak is convinced that if he cannot conquer and destroy the Jewish people by direct aggression he will now be able to do so through guile, falsehoods, demonization and deligitimatization. Bilaam is Balak's default weapon against Moshe and Israel.

The Lord intervenes with Balak's scheme. Bilaam turns out to be completely unreliable as far as Balak is concerned. Bilaam gives advice to Balak regarding how the women of Midian and Moab can seduce the Jews into sinning and thereby bring Heaven's wrath against them. The Jewish nation is damaged by Bilaam but his main objective of destroying Israel is blocked by Divine fiat.

The insults become praise and the malevolence of his thought is somehow transformed into a badge of honor by Moshe and Israel and so recorded in the Torah. Balak's promising plot has failed in its objective and eventually he, his nation and Bilaam bring only death and destruction upon themselves.

The destruction of Judaism and the Jewish people has been an age old object of many Balaks and Bilaams. They still exist today and are still hard at work at their nefarious schemes. Yet, somehow deep in our souls we know that the curses will be transformed into blessings and, eventually, enmity will subside and evaporate. May we be privileged to transform the current words of the Bilaams of today to words of blessing just as occurred to the original Bilaam of long ago. © 2010 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 DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

“**A**nd Moav was very afraid because of the nation, for they were many, and Moav felt disgusted because of the Children of Israel” (Bamidbar 22:3). There are numerous approaches to explain each aspect of this verse, and therefore an even more numerous combination of ways to read the verse in its entirety. The different parts of the verse that need explanation are: (1) Why were they afraid; (2) Why did they feel disgusted; (3) Were they disgusted with (or by) the Children of Israel, or were they disgusted with themselves because of the Children of Israel (or is there a better definition for the word translated as "disgusted"); (4) Why are there two ways of describing the Israelites ("the nation" and "the Children of Israel"); and (5) Why is "nation" used in conjunction with "fear"

and "Children of Israel" used in conjunction with "disgust."

Since the mighty armies of Sichon and Og had just been wiped out by the Israelites, the starting point should be that Moav was afraid that they would be next, and that the Israelites would take over their land too, "licking up all that is around them like an ox licks up the vegetation of the field" (22:4). However, the Israelites had sent a request to Moav to be allowed to pass through their land (Shoftim 11:17), a request that was refused. Rather than going to war with Moav, the Israelites moved on, requesting to pass through Sichon's land instead. When Sichon refused, and sent his army to fight, the Israelites defeated him and took his land (Bamidbar 21:25). The Israelites hadn't gone to war with Moav because G-d specifically prohibited them from doing so (Devarim 2:9); the commentators therefore assume that Moav realized that the Israelites were prohibited from taking their land, and discuss why they were still afraid. The standard approach (Rashi on Devarim 2:9, based, as usual, on Chazal) is that even though the Israelites were prohibited from waging war against Moav, they could still bully them, and even take some of their possessions forcefully (just not their land). Therefore, after being intimidated and perhaps even pillaged, having them as next door neighbors would certainly scare them.

The Ramban understands the "disgust" to be an additional level of "fear," with Moav being afraid because of how many more Israelites there were than Moavites, and even more afraid because of all the amazing things that had been done for them and their ancestors. Based on this, we can easily understand why they are referred to as "the nation" regarding their size, as this "fear" would apply to any "nation" that was large, and why they are referred to by their specific name, the "Children of Israel" regarding the unique things that happened to them. The Ramban then explains what they were afraid of, if they knew that the Israelites wouldn't attack them or take their land; since Israel would become the region's superpower, every other country would have to follow their directives, including paying taxes to them. Even though Moav had been subservient to Sichon until now (see Malbim on 22:4), it can be suggested that being subservient to a nation because they have a strong king (i.e. Sichon) was not as upsetting as being subservient to the holy Nation of Israel; when the strong king dies, his power dies with him and they could hope to attain independence, but a nation whose power comes from their holiness could stay in power for eternity. (This could be another reason why the name "Children of Israel," which refers to their special status, is emphasized.) If this was Moav's fear, the purpose of hiring Bilam to curse the Children of Israel would have been to affect their level of holiness, thus preventing them from becoming, or maintaining, their regional power.

The Chasam Sofer suggests two other approaches, approaches that the Rinas Yitzchok asks several questions on - some of which he leaves unanswered. In both approaches the Chasam Sofer assumes that Moav knew that the Children of Israel would not wage war against them or take their land, and (as many commentators do, both here and elsewhere) understands the term "the nation" to refer to the "Eirev Rav," the mixed multitude of people that left Egypt with the Children of Israel during the exodus (see Shemos 12:38) while "Children of Israel" refers to the descendants of Avraham, Yitzchok and Yaakov/Yisroel. In his first approach, the Chasam Sofer suggests that Moav was afraid that even though the Children of Israel wouldn't wage war against them, the Eirev Rav might, and were also concerned that the Children of Israel might pillage them. In his second approach, he suggests that Moav was afraid that the Eirev Rav would conquer their land, and that afterward the Children of Israel would conquer it from the Eirev Rav, much like they were allowed to conquer what had been Moav's land from Sichon after Sichon took it from them.

The first question the Rinas Yitzchok asks is why Moav should be more afraid of the Eirev Rav than of the rest of the nation, since the prohibition against going to war against Moav (and taking their land) applied to the Eirev Rav as well. However, I'm not sure that Moav knew that the Eirev Rav had the exact same obligations as the "Children of Israel," especially since the Children of Israel were covered and protected by the "Clouds of Glory" while the Eirev Rav was not (see Meshech Chochma on 11:1), which could be easily misunderstood to mean that they were not part of the nation and therefore not subject to the same prohibitions. (See www.aishdas.org/ta/5768/shlach.pdf, where I suggested that the Torah had to reiterate, several times, that the laws applied equally to converts because the Children of Israel didn't think that the Eirev Rav were full converts; if this point had to be made numerous times to the Children of Israel, how could it be assumed that Moav knew that all prohibitions also applied to the Eirev Rav?)

The Rinas Yitzchok suggests that, according to the Chasam Sofer, Moav may have thought that the prohibition against conquering their land only applied to those that would get a share in the Promised Land; since the Eirev Rav wouldn't, they would be allowed to take land from Moav. He then wonders why, if that were the case, the prohibition applied to the Tribe of Levi, since they didn't get a portion in the Land either. However, they got other things instead, such as tithes (see Bamidbar 18:21) and their own cities (see Vayikra 25:32-34), while the Eirev Rav did not, so it does not seem farfetched to suggest that even though the Levi'im were included in the prohibition against conquering land from Moav, the Eirev Rav were not.

The (other) questions on the Chasam Sofer that the Rinas Yitzchok leaves unanswered are how the

Children of Israel could be permitted to conquer the land from the Eirev Rav, and why it would matter to Moav if they did, since either way they wouldn't have their land anymore. However, if Moav didn't think the Eirev Rav was part of the Nation of Israel, we can understand why they would think that the land could be conquered from them, just as it had been conquered from Sichon; as long as it wasn't taken directly from Moav, the prohibition wasn't being violated. And if part of Moav's concern was not being able to reconquer the land from the holy Children of Israel, we can understand why they would be more worried about Israel conquering it from the Eirev Rav than had it remained in the possession of the Eirev Rav.

According to the approach(es) of the Chasam Sofer, aside from trying to affect the level of holiness of the Children of Israel, Balak wanted Bilam to curse the Eirev Rav so that they couldn't conquer Moav's land. The Sifsay Kohain (Bamidbar 14:12-20) says that the Eirev Rav died out in the desert, with none of them making it to the Promised Land. Although the Chasam Sofer understands part of Moav's fear to be based on the vast numbers of the Eirev Rav, according to the Sifsay Kohain the Eirev Rav died out slowly over the 40 years in the desert (see www.aishdas.org/ta/5769/shlach.pdf, page 2). Yalkut Reuveini (Bamidbar 1:21 and 25:24) says that the 24,000 that died in the plague after the sin of Pe'or (Bamidbar 25:9) were the children that had been born to the Eirev Rav. It is fair to speculate that these would have been the last "members" of the Eirev Rav, as within a few months the Children of Israel would enter the Promised Land, and according to the Sifsay Kohain, no one from the Eirev Rav made it there. If so, then Bilam accomplished both of the goals that Balak had set for him, as the sin of Pe'or affected the holiness of the Children of Israel, and the resulting plague wiped out what was left of the Eirev Rav. [I would further speculate that had the Eirev Rav survived, they would have settled in the lands conquered from Sichon and Og, so that the "nation" that Moshe brought out of Egypt (see Rashi on Shemos 32:7) would dwell in the land conquered by Moshe. Only after the Eirev Rav died out did the Tribes of Reuvein and Gad approach Moshe to ask if they could take that land as their inheritance.]

The discussion until now was operating under the assumption that Moav could not be afraid that the Children of Israel would conquer their land, since they weren't attacked after permission to pass through was denied. However, there is an approach in Chazal (Bamidbar Rabbah 20:2 and Midrash Tanchuma, Balak 2) that has Moav afraid that the Children of Israel would attack them directly and take their land, as they didn't realize that it was only because Sichon had conquered it first that the Children of Israel were allowed to take it. The question this raises (which is what the commentators wanted to avoid) is why did Moav think

the Children of Israel didn't just attack them instead of going to war with the more powerful Sichon?

There are additional questions surrounding the request to pass through the land of Moav as well. For one thing, why was this request (and denial) only mentioned in Shoftim, in the conversation between Yiftach and the king of Amon? The Torah told us about the requests made of Edom and Sichon and their refusal; why didn't the Torah also tell us about the request made of Moav and their refusal? Additionally, why did Yiftach mention the request of Moav to the king of Amon? Amon was claiming that the Children of Israel had taken their land, with the crux of Yiftach's answer being that they didn't take it from Amon, but from Sichon. What relevance does Moav's refusal have with conquering land that used to belong to Amon? Although it could be suggested that Yiftach was explaining that they wouldn't have conquered the land that used to belong to Amon had either Edom or Moav allowed them passage, I would like to offer a different suggestion, one that answers all of these questions, as well as explaining the wording of Yiftach's message to Amon.

The assumption most work with is that had Edom allowed the Children of Israel to pass through their land, they would have gone straight into the Promised Land (from the south). However, in both Bamidbar (20:17-19) and Shoftim (11:17), no mention is made of entering the Promised Land after passing through Edom. The request of Sichon, on the other hand, includes passing through "until we cross the Jordan (River) to the land that Hashem our G-d is giving to us" (Devarim 2:29). In Shoftim as well (11:19), the request of Sichon was to "pass through your land until my place." It would seem, then, that the intention was never to enter the Land from the south; the plan had always been to enter across from Yericho, from the Plains of Moav. The problem was having to pass through Edom and Moav to get there, so Moshe asked both countries, at the same time, "while Israel lived at Kadesh" (see Shoftim 11:17), permission to do so. Once Edom refused, Moav's answer was irrelevant, and there was no need to record it (or the request) in the Torah.

At the time of the request, Sichon hadn't yet conquered the land from Moav, which is why permission was needed from Moav to cross from their land. However, their refusal sealed their own fate, as if they wouldn't allow the Children of Israel to cross voluntarily, it would be done against their will. Since the Children of Israel weren't allowed to conquer land from Moav, G-d had to arrange for Sichon to do so, thus paving the way for that land (and specifically the crossing point at the Plains of Moav) to be conquered by Israel. At the time, the descendants of Lot all lived together, as one country (see Malbim, Torah Or, on Devarim 23:4), and were only separated (geographically, if not yet governmentally) when Sichon conquered the large swath of land in the center, with those that descended

from the older daughter of Lot (i.e. Moav) in the south and those from the younger daughter (i.e. Amon) in the north(east). Therefore, when Moshe sent the message to Moav, it was also to "the sons of Amon," and Yiftach was telling the king of the now-separate country that permission had been asked of his country to pass through, but was denied.

If the permission to pass through Moav had only been requested when the Children of Israel were still in Kadesh, and the answer became irrelevant when Edom refused to let them get to Moav, there was no way for Moav to know that G-d had prohibited the Children of Israel from attacking them or conquering their land. Therefore, Moav was afraid of being attacked, and disgusted by the thought of having such holy, powerful neighbors. © 2010 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

Could it be that Bilaam, the gentile prophet, saddled his own animal when he set forth to curse the Jews? (Numbers 22:21) For someone of his stature, a prophet, it certainly seems beneath his dignity.

Ibn Ezra, who is known for his literal readings of the Torah goes against his usual trend and offers a non-literal interpretation. "Va-yahavosh et ahtano" does not mean that Bilaam saddled his own donkey, rather, he instructed his servants to do so.

Rashi, however, sticks to the literal reading and insists that Bilaam did this labor intensive act on his own. Quoting the Midrash, Rashi writes: "From here we learn that hatred defies the rule (sinah mekalkelet ha-shurah), for he (Bilaam, who was so full of hate at that time) saddled it by himself." In other words, the emotion of hate can cause one to do things that would otherwise be out of the purview of one's normal behavior.

Unfortunately, we need look no further than events during the Holocaust to understand this point. When Germany was attacked by the allies from the West and the Russians from the East, it would have made sense that the Third Reich use every means at its disposal, every military weapon, every soldier, to resist. But it was not so. Hitler's hatred of the Jews was so great, that he insisted the extermination of Jews continue. He continued spending precious human power and resources on genocide, rather than helping defend "the motherland."

But, the Midrash points out the other side of the coin as well. Note that when G-d commands Avraham (Abraham) to sacrifice his son Yitzhak (Isaac), the Torah states, that Avraham "saddled his donkey, ve-yahavosh et hamoro." (Genesis 22:3) Here, too, Rashi wonders, is it possible that Avraham, would perform this menial task rather than ask one of his servants to do so. It is possible, says Rashi, as "love defies the rule (ahavah mekalkelet ha-shurah)." Avraham, our father,

was so in love with G-d, so committed to following G-d's command, that he does what he otherwise would not do.

The Midrash makes a final point: the hatred of the wicked is counterbalanced by the love of the righteous. In the words of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai: "Let the saddling done by Avraham counteract the saddling done by Bilaam." (Genesis Rabbah 55:8)

It is important to note that Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai lived during the reign of the Roman Empire. He knew all too well the phenomenon of hatred toward Jews. Yet, he understood through his own life of commitment to G-d that there could be a counterbalance to this hatred--his love and the love of others.

Thank G-d for the good people. Their energy and drive to do the right thing neutralizes the passion of the wicked. During these difficult days, may we all be blessed with love that defies the rule. © 2010 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 YISSOCHER FRAND

RavFrاند

“**B**ilaam got up early, he saddled his donkey and he accompanied the officers of Moav. G-d was angered that he went and He placed an Angel of G-d on the road to prevent him.” [Bamidbar 22:22] Rashi identifies the angel as an angel of mercy. G-d tried to stop Bilaam with an angel of mercy because He wanted to stop Bilaam from doing what he was about to do to himself (engage in an activity that would ultimately lead to his own death).

However, the pasuk later says that the donkey saw the angel and he was holding a drawn sword. Since when would an "angel of mercy" be carrying a drawn sword? What happened to the merciful angel that Hashem sent to save Bilaam from carrying out his ill-conceived mission?

Rav Pam once beautifully observed that the angel of mercy can appear in all different types of guises and costumes. Sometimes he appears as the scariest creature we have ever seen. Its job is to stop us from doing what we are doing-for our own good! He will do whatever it takes him to accomplish that mission. The "merciful" aspect of the angel is not his appearance or his facial expression-it is the fact that he is stopping someone from hurting himself.

Rav Pam mentioned this to his Yeshiva students in the context of disappointments they may encounter along the road to finding their designated life's partner. A young man may meet a young woman and think this is the greatest shidduch that can ever happen. He is so excited and full of anticipation and then something happens to derail it. Suddenly, the

imminent shidduch is called off. Naturally, the boy and his family are very distraught and full of disappointment.

Many times in life-we realize later-that the cause of our momentary disappointment was the greatest thing that ever happened to us. The Ribono shel Olam knows better. He knows that this first one was not the right one. The more appropriate match will yet appear in the future.

When the shidduch broke, it appeared as tragic, as a calamity, as an angel with a drawn sword in his hand. However, the truth of the matter is that it was an angel of mercy. The angel of mercy does not always appear with a halo. He can sometimes appear in a horrible guise. But if that stops a person from doing something harmful to himself then the "mission of mercy" has succeeded.

This does not only apply to matrimonial matches. It applies to a person's whole life. It applies to business deals, to buying homes, and to all kinds of financial moves that a person places much faith in only to see them turn out to be great disappointments. Many times, the short term disappointment which caused him to change his original plans or goals turns out to have been the greatest blessing that could have happened.

Before Rav Yaakov Kaminetsky came to America, he applied for a certain Rabbinical position in Europe. He lost the job to another candidate. Rav Yaakov was disappointed by that turn of events. He needed to earn a livelihood so he had no choice but to travel to America. For a time, he was in Seattle, Washington and for a time he was in Toronto, Canada. He ultimately wound up in Yeshiva Torah Vodaath and became its great Rosh Yeshiva and the rest is history. The Rav whom he lost to in Europe as well as that entire city where he wanted the Rabbinate were totally wiped out by the Nazis.

There are thousands of stories like this. Many times, we think we are halted by the Satan who derails our plans. Often we are mistaken-the angel we think is the Satan is really the Malach haRachamim [Angel of Mercy]. The Master of the World had greater plans in mind for Rav Yaakov Kaminetsky, but at that time it appeared to him like an angel with a sword drawn against him.

We must always bear this in mind. We cannot judge anything by its cover, not even angels. © 2010 Rabbi Y. Frand and Project Genesis, Inc.

RABBI DR. ABRAHAM J. TWERSKI

TorahWeb

Did Bilam really think he could outsmart Hashem? The Talmud cites several "all inclusive" principles. Hillel told the proselyte that the essence of Torah is, "Love your fellow as yourself," and Rabbi Akiva said that this is the all-encompassing principle of Torah. Ben Azai said that the verse "This is the book of the generations of Adam" (Breishis 5:1) is all-

encompassing. The Talmud says, "Which is a small verse upon which all the essentials of the Torah depend? 'Know Him (Hashem) in all your ways' (Mishlei 3:6, Berachos 63a)."

I would like to suggest that there is an all-encompassing verse of mussar, human behavior and psychology: "All the ways of a person are right in one's own eyes" (Mishlei 21:2). Some people may do something wrong even though they know that it is wrong, but the overwhelming number of people believe that what they are doing is right, and are often very resistant to any suggestion that they may be wrong.

Perhaps this is the greatness of the patriarch Abraham in his willingness to sacrifice his son, Isaac. For decades, Abraham vociferously protested the pagan ritual of human sacrifice. "G-d would never desire human sacrifice. This is an abomination!" If he carried out the Divine command to bring Isaac as an offering, he would have to declare, "All my life, I have been in error." Abraham was willing to do so. It is a sign of greatness to admit that one was wrong.

We are often victims of self-deception. When we have a desire to do something, the defense mechanisms in our subconscious minds can develop ingenious reasons why what we wish to do is right and proper. This is termed rationalization. We concoct logical reasons for what we wish to do and we believe them, and if criticized, we vigorously defend our mistakes.

Rabbi Eliahu Dessler in *Michtav M'Eliyahu* (Search for Truth) has a powerful essay on "the Perspective of Truth." He cites the Torah statement that "a bribe will blind the eyes of a judge and distort even the thoughts of the righteous" (Devarim 16:19). We are all bribed by our desires, and we cannot think objectively. We rationalize our behavior. The Talmud says that even the minutest bribe can bring about a distortion of judgment.

The tzaddik of Apt was a judge in a litigation that went on for several days. Abruptly, he withdrew from the case, saying he had lost his objectivity.

On Friday evening, when he put on his Shabbos kaftan, he found an envelope with money that one of the litigants had put into a pocket. "Now I understand why I lost my objectivity. A litigant had tried to bribe me by putting money in my kaftan. Even though I did not discover the bribe until several days later, my thinking had shifted to favoring him. I did not know why this was happening, but I felt that I had lost my objectivity. That is the power of a bribe. It can distort your judgment even if you are unaware of the bribe."

How much more so are we subject to distortion when the "bribe" is within us, and has the power of a strong desire!

A chassid asked Rebbe Yisrael of Rhizin for a guideline to avoid faulty decisions. The rebbe told him that the way a tightrope walker keeps his delicate balance to avoid falling to his death, is that when he

feels a tug to one side, he leans a bit to the other side. "Many of your desires arise from the yetzer hara. When you feel an urge to do something, pause and think of reasons why you should not do it. That may enable you to keep your balance, to do what is right."

Forty years of treating people with alcohol addiction have shown me the validity of Rabbi Dessler's observation. One recovered alcoholic said, "In all my years of drinking, I never took a drink unless I decided it was the right thing to do at the time." The calamitous results of alcohol and drug abuse are totally ignored. The craving for the pleasant effect of the chemical blinds one to its disastrous consequences. One is bribed into rationalization. Rabbi Dessler states that intense learning of mussar and sincere prayer for Divine guidance can protect us from dangerous self-deception.

Bilam was no fool. He was told in no uncertain terms that Hashem would not allow him to curse Israel, and he obviously knew the infinite power of Hashem. Yet, his hatred for Israel distorted his judgment, and he tried to do what he logically knew he could not do.

If we wish to do what is right, we must be on the alert and on the defensive. Our defense mechanisms operate in the subconscious part of our minds which is "cunning, baffling and powerful." We must exercise our conscious mind to the limit with prayer and mussar to avoid self-deception. © 2010 Rabbi Dr. A.J. Twerski and The TorahWeb Foundation

RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER

Weekly Dvar

After a whole ordeal trying to curse the Jews, Bilam finally ends up blessing the Jews instead. So what does a person whose power lies in his word utter, after so much suspense? He says "How good are your tents, O Yaakov, your dwelling places, Israel" (24:5). Is it Yaakov or Israel? Is it the tents or the dwelling places (assuming they're different) that are good? It's a pretty ambiguous for someone presumably articulate.

To understand this, we need to analyze the context of the three blessings he imparted in the following Pessukim (verses): 1) You should stay near water (reference to Torah), 2) G-d will help you crush your oppressors, and 3) Those that bless you will be blessed, and those that curse you will be cursed. It seems that there is a natural progression throughout these blessings:

If we 1) stay close to the Torah, 2) G-d will help us defeat our enemies, and 3) we will be blessed upon blessings. That's why the blessings start with the statement that it's all because of our homes (tents), that leads to our communities (dwellings), from Yaakov as an individual to Israel as a nation. If we introduce the Torah in our own controlled-environment homes, it will not only help ourselves and our communities, and lead to the many blessings that follow! © 2010 Rabbi S. Ressler and LeLamed, Inc.