

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI DAVID S. LEVIN

Righteous Ones

With the tragic news this week of the murder of three of our youth, Eyal Yifrah, Naftali Fraenkel, and Gilad Sha'ar, my drasha this week for Parashat Balak will take a slightly different tone than my usual drashot. Our Torah is not only a book of laws and a guide to living it is also a source of comfort to us in our time of need. Everyone here in Israel felt connected to these three boys though few of us had ever met or had a connection to any of them. All Israelis as well as all Jews throughout the world stood together in prayer and finally in sadness and shock as the news spread of their murders. Collectively and individually we mourn their deaths and are paralyzed in our grief. But from the words of Hashem may come some comfort to us all.

In the first of the attempts by Balak and Bilaam to curse the B'nei Yisrael, Bilaam looks out on the people and comments, "mi mana afar Ya'akov umispar et rova Yisrael, tamut nafshi mot y'sharim ut'hi achariti kamohu, who then counts the dust of Ya'akov and the number of a quarter of Yisrael, may my soul die the death of the upright and may my end be like his." Balak had instructed Bilaam to curse the people but first to look upon them to discover their weakness and through that weakness to curse them. Bilaam not only looked upon the people but delved into their history. In doing so he discovered a fundamental flaw in Balak's assessment of the people. Balak was focused on the multitude of the people who swept across the land "kilchoch hashor eit yerek hasadeh, like an ox licks and devours the grass of the field." Balak was concerned with the vast multitude of the people but Bilaam understood the B'nei Yisrael differently.

HaRav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch explains that Balak saw only the numbers of the people and believed that if he could reduce the number of its fighters he would be able to conquer it. He believed that if he could count Ya'akov then he could reduce the physical number of Yisrael. But this reduction of physical numbers would not work with this people. Hirsch continues, "The prestige of other nations may rest on the number of the 'bodies' of the population, their increase may form a threat to be feared by other nations, their decrease give rise to hopes. Not so is it with Ya'akov-Yisrael. Whether they are small in

numbers as 'Ya'akov' or growing numerous as 'Yisrael', it is not that which is afar (dust) and which increases or diminishes itself just by animal-like breeding in which its importance, its happiness or unhappiness consists. Not even death have they to fear, bodily death cannot reach their true selves (tamat nafshi, ...). Their dying is more blissful than our living, because they are y'sharim, because they correspond to the calling for which on the whole men are 'men' and strive for this purpose in 'a straight line' without turning aside." Bilaam understood that their life and their death were different than the life and death of Balak and himself because the B'nei Yisrael were y'sharim, righteous ones.

Bilaam noticed a basic simple difference between the B'nei Yisrael and the other nations of the world. Bilaam saw how the B'nei Yisrael lived and what occupied their time. "Mah tovu ohalecha Ya'akov, mishk'notecha Yisrael, how goodly are your tents Ya'akov, your 'dwelling places' Yisrael." Rashi quotes the Gemara in Baba Batra (60a) that explains that Bilaam noticed that the openings of the tents were not facing each other so that privacy was maintained at all times. The Mishk'not were taken to mean the Mishkan in the desert and the Beit HaMikdash that would later be in Yerushalayim. But we can remember a previous Rashi which explained the character of Ya'akov when he was born for a different interpretation. Ya'akov is differentiated from Eisav by describing him as a yoshev ohalim, a dweller in tents. There Rashi interprets the ohalim as the study halls of Sheim and Eiver. Using that interpretation we can understand that Bilaam saw that the B'nei Yisrael focused their attention on two aspects of life, namely the study of Torah, the ohalim, and the service to Hashem, the mishk'not. He saw that their diet consisted mainly of the man which Hashem sent from shamayim daily. This "bread" appeared to be lacking in substance but was the color of purity and holiness itself. The B'nei Yisrael were a people who were independent of the "realities" that bound the bodies of other mortal men. Their lives were spiritual and their existence was spiritual so the physical world of numbers and might did not apply to them. As Hirsch commented, "Hence, they would also be unreachable by all damaging influences to which the welfare of other nations could be made to succumb."

These three young beautiful neshamot who for too short a time were together with us were able to comprehend what Bilaam saw. They spent their time in

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service to Hashem and in learning His Torah. They were murdered late at night because they had been learning in their “study halls” all week and were rushing home to return to their families to spend the holy Shabbat together. How appropriate that in these last few weeks they were able to bring all Jews together regardless of their normal disagreements to pray for their safety and unfortunately to then to bury them side by side. There is no question that we Jews have our faults and we let too many differences interfere with our true unity, but these three neshamot were able to make us realize that we are all brothers.

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

Seeing the families with their strength and courage through this horrible ordeal gives us all strength. But it is the lives of these three precious young men that enable us to continue. The media informed us of the beauty of their lives and the meaning that each one of them placed in their families and in their spirituality. They were an inspiration to those who knew them in their lives and they have become an inspiration to all of us in their passing. They have left us only physically but let us remember the words of HaRav Hirsch, “bodily death cannot reach their true selves.” ©2014 Rabbi D.S. Levin

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

Is leadership a set of skills, the ability to summon and command power? Or does it have an essentially moral dimension also? Can a bad man be a good

leader, or does his badness compromise his leadership? That is the question raised by the key figure in this week’s parsha, the pagan prophet Bilaam.

First, by way of introduction, we have independent evidence that Bilaam actually existed. An archeological discovery in 1967, at Deir ‘Alla at the junction of the Jordan and Jabbok rivers, uncovered an inscription on the wall of a pagan temple, dated to the eighth century BCE, which makes reference to a seer named Bilaam ben Beor, in terms remarkably similar to those of our parsha. Bilaam was a well-known figure in the region.

His skills were clearly impressive. He was a religious virtuoso, a sought-after shaman, magus, spell-binder and miracle worker. Balak says, on the basis of experience or reputation, “I know that whoever you bless is blessed, and whoever you curse is cursed” (Num. 22: 6). The rabbinic literature does not call this into question. On the phrase “no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face” (Deut. 34: 10), the sages went so far as to say: “In Israel there was no other prophet as great as Moses, but among the nations there was. Who was he? Bilaam.”¹

Another midrashic source says that “There was nothing in the world that the Holy One blessed be He did not reveal to Balaam, who surpassed even Moses in the wisdom of sorcery.”² At a technical level, Bilaam had all the skills.

Yet the ultimate verdict on Bilaam is negative. In chapter 25, we read of the ironic sequel to the episode of the curses/blessings. The Israelites, having been saved by G-d from the would-be curses of Moab and Midian, suffered a self-inflicted tragedy by allowing themselves to be enticed by the women of the land. G-d’s anger burns against them. Several chapters later (31: 16) it emerges that it was Bilaam who devised this strategy: “They were the ones who followed Bilaam’s advice and were the means of turning the Israelites away from the Lord in what happened at Peor, so that a plague struck the Lord’s people”. Having failed to curse the Israelites, Bilaam eventually succeeded in doing them great harm.

So the picture that emerges from the Jewish sources is of a man with great gifts, a genuine prophet, a man whom the sages compared with Moses himself – yet at the same time a figure of flawed character that eventually led to his downfall and to his reputation as an evil-doer and one of those mentioned by the Mishnah as having been denied a share in the world to come.³

What was his flaw? There are many speculations, but one suggestion given in the Talmud

¹ Sifre Devarim, 357.

² Tanna devei Eliyahu Rabbah 28; see also Bamidbar Rabbah 14: 20; Berakhot 7a; Avodah Zarah 4a.

³ Mishnah Sanhedrin 10: 2.

infers the answer from his name. What is the meaning of Bilaam? Answers the Talmud: it means, "a man without a people" (belo am).⁴

This is a fine insight. Bilaam is a man without loyalties. Balak sent for him saying: "Now come and put a curse on these people, because they are too powerful for me . . . For I know that those you bless are blessed, and those you curse are cursed." Bilaam was a prophet for hire. He had supernatural powers. He could bless someone and that person would succeed. He could curse and that person would be blighted by misfortune. But there is no hint in any of the reports, biblical or otherwise, that Bilaam was a prophet in the moral sense: that he was concerned with justice, desert, the rights and wrongs of those whose lives he affected. Like a contract killer of a later age, Bilaam was a loner. His services could be bought. He had skills and used them to devastating effect. But he had no commitments, no loyalties, no rootedness in humanity. He was the man belo am, without a people.

Moses was the opposite. G-d Himself says of him, "He is [supremely] loyal in all My house" (Numbers 12: 7). However disappointed he was with the Israelites, he never ceased to argue their cause before G-d. When his initial intervention on their behalf with pharaoh worsened their condition, he said to G-d, 'O Lord, why do You mistreat Your people? Why did You send me? (Exodus 5: 22).

When the Israelites made the golden calf and G-d threatened to destroy the people and begin again with Moses, he said, "Now, if You would, please forgive their sin. If not, then blot me out from the book that You have written" (Exodus 32: 32). When the people, demoralised by the report of the spies, wanted to return to Egypt and G-d's anger burned against them, he said, "With Your great love, forgive the sin of this nation, just as You have forgiven them from [the time they left] Egypt until now" (Numbers 14: 19).

When G-d threatened punishment during the Korach rebellion, Moses prayed, "Will you be angry with the entire assembly when only one man sins?" (Numbers 16: 22). Even when his own sister Miriam spoke badly about him and was punished by leprosy, Moses prayed to G-d on her behalf, "Please G-d, heal her now" (Numbers 12: 13). Moses never ceased to pray for his people, however much they had sinned, however audacious the prayer, however much he was putting his own relationship with G-d at risk. Knowing their faults, he remained utterly loyal to them.

The Hebrew word emunah is usually translated as "faith," and that is what it came to mean in the Middle Ages. But in biblical Hebrew it is better translated as faithfulness, reliability, loyalty. It means not walking away from the other party when times are tough. It is a key covenantal virtue.

There are people with great gifts, intellectual

and sometimes even spiritual, who nonetheless fail to achieve what they might have done. They lack the basic moral qualities of integrity, honesty, humility and above all loyalty. What they do, they do brilliantly. But often they do the wrong things. Conscious of their unusual endowments, they tend to look down on others. They give way to pride, arrogance and a belief that they can somehow get away with great crimes. Bilaam is the classic example, and the fact that he planned to entice the Israelites into sin even after he knew that G-d was on their side, is a measure of how the greatest can sometimes fall to become the lowest of the low.

Those who are loyal to other people find that other people are loyal to them. Those who are disloyal are eventually distrusted and lose whatever authority they might once have had. Leadership without loyalty is not leadership. Skills alone cannot substitute for the moral qualities that make people follow those who demonstrate them. We follow those we trust, because they have acted so as to earn our trust. That was what made Moses the great leader Bilaam might have been but never was. Always be loyal to the people you lead.

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RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

"**A**nd Israel attached itself to Ba'al P'or, and G-d's wrath raged against Israel. And G-d said to Moshe, 'take all the leaders of the people and impale them in the presence of the sun' so that the raging wrath of G-d against Israel will be reversed. And Moshe said to the judges of Israel, 'each man shall kill his men, those who have become attached to Ba'al P'or.'" A simple reading of these verses (Bamidbar 25:3-5) is not so simple.

Although the sin seems clear enough, who was supposed to be impaled, and who should do the impaling, would seem to depend on whether we look at all three verses together, or just the middle verse by itself. On one hand, it was "Israel" who sinned, so they should be the ones who are punished, with the role of the leaders being to carry out the punishment. And Moshe's instructions clearly bear this out (see Ibn Ezra). On the other hand, Moshe is told to "take the leaders and impale them," which, when read without the context of the verses that precede it and follow it, indicates that Moshe should impale the leaders. The command to "impale" is directed at an individual (so would not mean that the leaders should do the impaling), with that individual being Moshe (although it is not uncommon for the Torah to refer to the person in charge rather than to the people who actually carry out the mission). Additionally, the word "them" (referring to the ones being impaled) is plural, and the only ones referred to in these verses in plural form are the leaders (the terms "Israel" and "people" are singular, even if

⁴ Sanhedrin 105a

they refer to multiple individuals). Since the verse doesn't differentiate between those who sinned and the rest of the nation (only mentioning the nation as a whole), the only "them" previously referred to would be the leaders. Which leaves us wondering why the Torah worded it this way; if the sinners are to be impaled by the leaders (as indicated from the context), why phrase the middle verse in a way that makes it seem as if it is the leaders who should be impaled?

The expression "in the presence of the sun" is unclear as well. It has been understood to mean several things, but since they are not mutually exclusive, was likely made unclear purposely so that all of them can be gleaned from the words. What each judge killing "his men" means is also unclear; why are they considered "his" men? Rashi says that each judge was given the task of killing two men; the two he was assigned to execute would therefore be considered "his men." [It should be noted that this comment was not included in the first printing of Rashi's commentary, although the Ramban does respond to it, quoting it as being Rashi's words.] Although these executions doesn't seem to have occurred (as only the 24,000 who died in the plague are mentioned, see Ramban on 25:5), at this point it wasn't known that Pinachas' act would obviate the need to prosecute and then execute the guilty. Nevertheless, on a "p'shat" level, the term "his men" needs an explanation. The Ramban (ibid) explains "his men" to be referring to those under the judges' jurisdiction, i.e. within the Tribe they oversee, etc. However, did they really need to be reminded to only prosecute those they were put in charge of?

In the Midrashic literature (e.g. Tanchuma Balak 19/28, Bamidbar Rabbah 20:23), there is a dispute as to whether it is the leaders who are to be impaled for not trying to prevent the sinning from occurring, or the sinners (via the court system). As previously mentioned, there are issues with both possibilities, as Moshe's instructions to the judges clearly indicates that he understood G-d's command to be to impale the sinners, not the leaders, while the verse itself, when not taken in context, indicates that it is the leaders who are supposed to be impaled. The Talmud (Sanhedrin 35a) seems to recognize that the words indicate that it's the leaders who should be impaled, but says that this can't be so, as they weren't the ones who sinned. Instead, the Talmud says it means to bring the guilty into court to be prosecuted and, after following proper court procedures, executed. The only context the Talmud seems concerned about is the injustice of impaling those who didn't do anything, not whether Moshe had the ability to impale them (could he overpower all the leaders all by himself and execute them? Why wasn't he considered one of the leaders to be executed?) nor his instructions to the judges indicating that they weren't the ones G-d wanted impaled. What about their guilt for not trying to prevent

it? And why are the other contextual clues ignored?

The S'fornu says that the words "in the presence of the sun" mean "in broad daylight," i.e. publicly, so that everyone is aware that the guilty are being brought to court. This way, those who did not actively try to prevent the sinning from occurring can make amends by not trying to stop the prosecution and execution of those who sinned. (This is similar to those who were guilty of not stopping others from worshipping the golden calf being given the chance to atone for it by not trying to stop the Levi'im from executing those who had.) This idea can be extended to the leaders as well.

The Talmud (Shabbos 55a), says that when G-d punishes sinners, if the righteous did not try to stop the others from sinning, they are punished even before the sinners. "Kol Yisrael areivim zeh ba'zeh," everyone is responsible for everyone else, and the responsibility to prevent sin falls on the leadership even more. Therefore, when the nation attached itself to Ba'al P'or, G-d was not only upset at the sinners, but at the leadership for not trying to prevent it. Nevertheless, there was a way to assuage G-d's anger, by having those same leaders take an active part in prosecuting the guilty. G-d therefore told Moshe to take the leaders and have them start to prosecute the guilty (in broad daylight so that laymen can achieve atonement too, by not trying to stop the prosecution). In order to make it clear that the leaders also deserved to be punished, the instructions to impale the guilty was phrased in a way that made it clear that the leaders deserved to be impaled too. Moshe therefore told the leaders to start prosecuting the guilty in order to reverse G-d's wrath. And since the leaders were being held responsible for not trying to prevent others from sinning, and could avoid punishment by prosecuting those sinners, the guilty were called "their men," i.e. the men they were responsible for.

Although the both groups, the ones who actually sinned and the leaders who didn't do enough to prevent the sinning, were included in the command to be impaled, the Midrashic dispute revolves around which meaning was primary, and which was secondary. Did G-d tell Moshe to impale the leaders, with the embedded message being that this can be avoided if they bring the sinners to justice, or did He tell Moshe (based on the context) that the leaders should bring the sinners to justice, because otherwise they deserved to be impaled themselves? The starting point of the Talmudic discussion was that the leaders deserved to be punished, so the verse could/should be referring to them being impaled. However, since the leaders didn't do anything (but were guilty of passively standing by while it happened), the Talmud then says that the guilt of the sinners must be mentioned before the punishment of the leaders can be (as is the way it's described in Shabbos). Therefore, the Talmud sides with the opinion in the Midrashim that the primary

meaning of the verse refers to the sinners (not the leaders), albeit not because of the context, but because the actual sinners must be declared deserving of punishment before those who didn't try to prevent the sinning are.

The bottom line is that the Torah purposely embedded a double meaning into the verses, one based on the context and one based on the wording of the instructions to "impale them," because the "them" could refer to the leaders, if they don't bring the sinners they were responsible for to justice, or it could refer to the sinners, if the leaders reverse G-d's wrath by prosecuting them. ©2014 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"How goodly are your tent-homes, O Jacob" (Numbers 24:5) At the conclusion of the Pentateuch, which is also the conclusion of Moses' physical existence on earth, the Biblical text records that, "Never again did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moses, whom the Lord knew 'face to face'" (Deut. 34:10). Our sages comment, "Never did such a prophet arise among the Israelites, but among the nations of the world such a prophet did arise-Balaam son of Beor" (Yalkut Shimoni 966 ad loc). This stunning statement indicates that Balaam was not only gifted with the Divine prophecy, but that he could even be compared to Moses! And if the task of the prophet is to communicate G-d's words to the people, we must take seriously the words of Balaam the prophet and learn from them.

Indeed, in synagogues throughout the world for thousands of years, daily prayers begin with the words of Balaam, "How goodly are your tent-homes, O Jacob, your Sanctuary - Study Halls, O Israel." Apparently, Balaam himself was inspired when "he saw the Israelites dwelling according to their tribes" (ibid. 24:2); Rashi, our classical commentary, explains that Balaam was especially moved by the modesty of their family lives, "that the doors and windows of the respective homes did not face each other." And the Israelites brought the unique quality of their family life, the sanctity of their homes, into their national institutions: our Temple is a Beit HaMidrash, a home of sanctity, our synagogue a Beit Hakneset, a home of "gathering" for prayer and festival celebrations (national togetherness), our study-hall, a beit hamidrash, a home of academic analysis. What is it about the familial home which makes it so cardinal to Jewish life? What has the familial home to do with our national institutions?

I write these lines at a time when, in Western society, the family as an institution is severely embattled, when many family gatherings feature "his" children, "her" children, and "their" children, when more and more couples are opting to have no children and when more and more individuals are opting not to get

married at all! And I write these lines as an ode to Jewish love and Jewish family, in tribute to my beloved wife.

Why family? It's an institution which limits one's choice in sexual partners, and produces children who require much time, energy and expenditure and often give back heart-ache (as one European professor said, we have a minus zero population growth because we cannot abide anything that makes noise and dirt and we cannot control).

One of G-d's earliest judgment calls, immediately before the creation of Eve is "It is not good for the human being to be alone" (Gen. 2:18). "Alone" means first of all, social loneliness; the human being, endowed with a portion of G-d from on high, has the ability and the fundamental need to reach out beyond himself to "other" in communication and love (Gen. 2:7, Targum ad loc). And "alone" also means existential alone-ness, our being limited to our own circumscribed individual bodies, and our mortal dread of the time when that individual entity which is "me" will cease to be.

And why children? Balaam sees that ultimately Israel will triumph; our compassionate righteousness will triumph over Amalek's cruel grab for power (Num. 24:17-20). Balaam prophesies, "I see from the beginnings of the rocky mountains, and I look from the hilly plains" (ibid. 23:9), which Rashi interprets, "I see your origins and roots firmly entrenched in your matriarchs and patriarchs."

G-d charged Abraham to become a great nation and a blessing to the world (Gen. 12:3); Abraham will command his children and household (historic family) to do compassionate righteousness (ibid. 18:18-19), with each Israelite generation commanding the next until we finally succeed when all the nations accept a G-d of morality and peace (Isa. 2:2-4). We receive our identity and mission from our forbears, and remain optimistic and hopeful because of our progeny.

We are deeply rooted in our past and highly responsible for our future; we are each a golden link in an eternal chain of being; we are each a crucial part of the great Unfinished Symphony which is Israel. All past generations live in us; we live in all future generation. The Yiddish word for grandchild is ein'ikel, a combination of two Hebrew words, ein kul, there is no destruction! We are our grand-children, and our grand-children are us.

In Jewish love and marriage and children, we give ourselves to our life-partners, we give ourselves to our past and to our future, and what we receive is G-d's promise that Israel the nation will never be destroyed, the great merit of participating in the historic mission to perfect the world. Our G-d-given task is to pass on the baton to our children, our students, and to people we may touch along the way. And our synagogues, our

learning academies and even our Holy Temple are passing down those traditions which emanated from the House of Abraham and Israel, which our forbears bequeathed to the children of Israel, and which we know contains the road-map to a future redeemed.
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RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

This week's parsha offers us the opportunity to meet the unofficial founders of the Human Rights Organizations of our time. Here we see the ancestors of Kathleen Ashton, who is the head foreign affairs person of the European Union, the leaders of the Presbyterian Church in the United States, the left-leaning anti-Semitic professors of academia the world over, the neo-communist Putin and the rest of the well-meaning, ever protesting "friends" of the Jewish people and the State of Israel.

Bilaam is engaging in public prophecy concerning the Jewish people, and all for our own good. He, like his diplomatic descendants of our time, is the one person that really knows what policies we should follow in order to guarantee our long-range future survival and success. Therefore, his words are soothing, beautifully phrased and dripping with friendship and compliments.

But in his heart of hearts Bilaam and certainly Balak mean us no good. They protect terrorism, educate generations to hatred and violence and yet hypocritically cluck in amazement when violence, kidnapping and rocket attacks against Jews continue. On the surface one can find almost no fault in the words of Bilaam.

The Jewish people were and are so enamored by his compliments that our prayer services every morning begin with his statement of how goodly are the tents of Jacob. Jews love and treasure every complement, no matter how patently insincere and begrudgingly given, from non-Jewish sources and persons.

King Solomon in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes cautioned us that it is much more beneficial to hear criticism from a friend than complements from those who do not really like us. Nevertheless, we have always been naïve when it comes to Bilaam and his intellectual and diplomatic descendants.

The Torah itself tells us that the Lord reversed the curses of Bilaam and turned them into blessings. What curses are meant in this statement? We do not read in the Torah of any direct curses or even sharp criticisms aimed at the Jewish people uttered by Bilaam. So why does G-d have to interfere, to reverse seemingly nonexistent curses? The answer to this is a relatively simple one. The Lord Who not only hears what we say, but more importantly knows what we mean, sees beyond the beauty of the words of Bilaam.

There is a well-known story that I have often related of two women that constantly fought and cursed each other. The rabbi of the community intervened and on Yom Kippur eve forced a reconciliation and extracted a promise that they would only say nice things to each other hereon in. The women were forced to agree to the rabbi's terms. However, walking home after Yom Kippur services one of the women turned to the other and said: "Blessed may you be, but you know what I mean!"

The Lord fully understood what Bilaam meant with his "blessings" and compliments to Israel. Hence, His intervention and the reversal of the unspoken curses into spoken and eternal blessings and compliments. Not much has changed in the world since the days of Balak and Bilaam. Jews the world over and here live in a hateful and dangerous environment. We would do well to realize that we should be wary not only of those who openly curse us and even of those who claim that they have our best interests in heart when they advise and criticize us. ©2014 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

In this week's portion, Balak King of Moab hires Bilaam to curse Israel. (Numbers 22:5,6) A review of the history of Moab's relationship with Israel reveals a terrible decline that in this portion reaches one of its lowest points.

Moab is a descendant of Lot. Lot is the nephew of our father Abraham. We first meet Lot in the Torah after the death of his father Haran (Abraham's brother). In a certain sense Abraham adopted Lot. Indeed when Abraham goes to Canaan, Lot is mentioned in the text as a full-fledged member of his family. (Genesis 12:5)

After arriving in Canaan, famine drives Abraham and Lot to Egypt. Upon returning, the Torah states that Abraham went up from Egypt, he with his wife and Lot with him. (Genesis 13:1) Nechama Leibowitz points out that the expression, Lot with him, indicates that Lot was no longer a central figure in Abraham's family, he was a kind of tag-along. Apparently the wealth that both Abraham and Lot attained in Egypt had transformed Lot into a new person who felt separate from Abraham.

In fact, the shepherds of Abraham and Lot quarrel when the land could not provide for both of them. Abraham tells Lot that he does not want to argue. Wherever you wish to go I will go elsewhere, Abraham says. (Genesis 13:8,9)

One would imagine that since Abraham had

raised Lot, Lot would tell his uncle that even though there was not much room he could never ever leave him. Still, Lot looks at the plains of Sodom and decides to separate from Abraham. (Genesis 13:10-12)

As Sodom is destroyed, an angel of G-d tells Lot run to the mountain, commonly understood to be a reference to Israel. (Genesis 19:17) Lot refuses, insisting that were he to return, evil would consume (tidbakani) him. (Genesis 19:19)

Which brings us to this week's portion. Here, Lot's descendant Balak, King of Moab wishes to curse Israel, the descendants of Abraham.

So alienated had Moab become from Israel that the Torah in Deuteronomy states that the Moabites may never become part of the community of Israel. After all, Balak had hired Bilaam to curse Israel and thereby obviate their covenantal relationship with G-d. (Deuteronomy 23:5)

One wonders if Moab ever returns? Is the breach between Moab and Israel ever narrowed? Interestingly in the Book of Ruth, Ruth insists that she will never leave her stepmother Naomi. Ruth the Moabite tells Naomi that she will return with her to Israel. Unlike Balak who wished to destroy Israel's covenantal relationship with G-d, she becomes the example par excellence of the person who renews that relationship. Not coincidentally when the Book of Ruth describes Ruth remaining with Naomi it uses the very word that describes Lot remaining apart from Abraham--the word *davka* (Ruth 1: 14)

Here we have come full circle. Ruth of the people of Moab takes heroic strides to embrace Abraham's family. The Talmud acknowledges her actions by stating that the prohibition of Moabites coming into the community of Israel relates only to males and not to females.

The Torah seems to be teaching an important lesson that children should not be punished for the mistakes of parents. As Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach would always say: You never know. You never know when people will return, perhaps not in their generation but in future generations. © 2011 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 YITZCHOK ADLERSTEIN

Be'eros

The she-donkey said to Bilam, 'Am I not your she-donkey that you have ridden all your life until this day? Have I been accustomed to do such a thing to you?' He said, 'No.'

Be'er Yosef: "A midrash (Bereishis Rabbah 93:10) warns us to look closely at this dialogue, because it could spare us much future embarrassment. Told off by his favorite mode of transportation, Bilam is reduced to silence, to a 'guilty as charged' response to

a talking donkey. 'Bilam, the wisest among the nations, still could not stand up to the rebuke of his own donkey...Yosef was the youngest of the brothers [whom he addressed], yet all of them could not answer him when he rebuked them...[Imagine how more intimidating it will be when] Hashem Himself comes to rebuke each and every person, according to what he is."

It is fairly easy to comprehend the connection between Yosef, talking donkeys, and Hashem's scrutinizing our lives at Judgment Day. On the level of simple *pshat*, the midrash warns us that we are going to be shown up on our day of personal reckoning, and that the experience will be devastating. We don't do well when we are shown up, as illustrated by the examples of Bilam and Yosef's brothers. Why, though, does the midrash emphasize that Hashem will rebuke every person "according to what he is?"

Rationalization is a powerful boon to transgression. While we sometimes sin by yielding to temptation, knowing full well that what we are doing is forbidden, more often we rationalize. We convince ourselves that the circumstances are exceptional; that the Torah's restriction was not really meant to apply to the case at hand. Or we tell ourselves that the Torah did not have us in mind when it imposed some law -- that we are privileged to stand outside of it. We find it easier to transgress when we tell ourselves that we do nothing wrong.

The point of the midrash is that Hashem, who knows all of our deeds and thoughts, will destroy our rationalizations by demonstrating that our own behavior at other times was not consistent with the argument of the rationalization. If effect, we are forced by Him to convict ourselves through our own inconsistencies. We will be unmasked as hypocrites. We stand accused "according to what we are," i.e. according to how we behave at other times in a manner that unseats our rationalizations. Being exposed will hurt.

Thus the reference to Yosef and the brothers. Yehudah had just pleaded for mercy, not by insisting on their own innocence. That would have been impossible, after having been discovered pilfering the royal goblet. Instead, Yehudah begged for mercy for his aged father, who would surely not survive the heartbreaking news of the loss of Binyamin.

Yosef's retort demolished the self-assurance of the brothers regarding Yosef's sale, many years before. "I am Yosef. Is my father still alive?" Perhaps you convinced yourself that I was a mortal threat to the rest of you, and you adjudged me to deserve to die. Let's grant that for a moment. But when I cried out to you for mercy from the bottom of the pit -- as you just cried out to me for mercy, invoking the health of our father -- why were you not concerned then about how Father would take the news?

They had no response. The argument they had

just used to argue for clemency was inconsistent with their record of the past. Facing up to that inconsistency was painful.

The dialogue between Bilam and his she-donkey unfolds in the same way. Bilam strikes his animal for apparently veering off the road, and injuring the leg of the rider to boot. In Bilam's mind, this is perfectly appropriate. The donkey is an animal, and he is a human being. Humans are expected to rule over animals, and to compel their compliance with the wishes of their owners. Nothing extraordinary about that; nothing for which to apologize.

But the relationship between Bilam and his she-donkey, according to Chazal, had a darker side to it -- a "romantic" relationship. The animal's speech is a veiled allusion to this. You've been guilty of bestiality. While a human may exercise certain privileges over animals, an animal in human garb may not. And you, Bilam, are nothing more than an animal yourself. As such, you have no business beating me.

Bilam had no effective response. And neither will we, to myriad inconsistencies in our behavior when they are pointed out to us on our day of judgment by Hashem who will judge each of us "according to what he is." (Based on Be'er Yosef, Bamidbar 22:30) ©2014 Rabbi Y. Adlerstein and torah.org

RABBI KALMAN PACKOUZ

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

The Torah states: "The Almighty came to Bilaam at night and said to him: If these people come to call upon you, arise, go with them" (Numbers 22:20).

What lesson can we learn from this?

The Talmud (Makos 10b) takes note that previously in verse twelve the Almighty told Bilaam not to go with Balak's messengers who request that he accompany them to curse the Jewish people. From this above verse the Talmud derives the principle, "In the way a person wishes to go, so is he led."

If a person wants to do evil, he will be able to

do so. However, he will have to pay a heavy price for his successful completion of his evil wishes. Conversely, someone who wishes to study Torah and fulfill the Almighty's commandments will be successful. When you wish to travel along a certain path in life, you will be divinely assisted.

"Nothing stands in the way of a strong will." There are many things that we wish for half-heartedly, but when you strongly set your mind on a particular goal, you will have the strength and abilities necessary to meet that goal. What person truly wants in his life, he will usually obtain. (Alai Shur, pp. 120-1)

Rabbi Avigdor Miller comments (Rejoice O Youth, p. 1) that the Almighty guides the person who seeks wisdom, and the amount of guidance is in proportion to the earnestness of the seeker. Work on developing a strong desire for spiritual growth and you will be amazed at the positive changes you will experience! *Based on Growth Through Torah by Rabbi Zelig Pliskin ©2014 Rabbi K. Packouz & aish.com*

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 statement 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. Conclusion: If we introduce the Torah in our own controlled-environment homes, it will not only help us and our communities, it will also lead to the many blessings that follow.
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