

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS Z"L

Covenant & Conversation

Rabbi Sacks zt"l had prepared a full year of Covenant & Conversation for 5781, based on his book Lessons in Leadership. The Office of Rabbi Sacks will continue to distribute these weekly essays, so that people all around the world can keep on learning and finding inspiration in his Torah.

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 person be a good leader, or will their badness compromise their 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 archaeological 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, spellbinder 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 God 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. God's anger burns against them. Several chapters later (Num. 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 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 he used them with 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. God Himself says of him, "He is [supremely] loyal in all My house" (Numbers 12:7). However disappointed Moses was with the Israelites, he never ceased to argue their cause before God. When his initial intervention on their behalf with

¹ Sifre Devarim, 357.

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

³ Mishnah Sanhedrin 10:2.

⁴ Sanhedrin 105a

Pharaoh worsened their condition, he said to God, 'O Lord, why do You mistreat Your people? Why did You send me? (Exodus 5:22).

When the Israelites made the Golden Calf and God 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 God'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 God 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 God on her behalf, "Please God, 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 God 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 God 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. *Covenant and Conversation 5781 is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory*

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RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The Talmud incisively comments that it is not the mouse that is a thief, but, rather, it is the hole in the wall that allows the mouse entry into the house that is the culprit. There is no question that the villain in this week's Torah reading is Bilaam. His hatred of the Jewish people is long-standing. He was one of the advisors to the Pharaoh of Egypt who encouraged that tyrant to enslave the people of Israel. Even though it is obvious, even for him, that the will of heaven is that he should not accept the invitation of Balak to embark on the mission of cursing the Jewish people, he forces the issue, and accepts the mission willingly and enthusiastically.

Even a talking donkey cannot sway him from pursuing his evil path and destination. Yet, it is Balak who initiates the entire scenario. He is, so to speak, the hole that allows the thieving mouse Bilaam to enter a situation that will enable him to curse the Jewish people. Balak is the king of Moav and was guaranteed by heavenly decree that his land would not be invaded or annexed by the people of Israel, as his ancestors were descended from Lot, the nephew of Abraham.

Because Lot kept faith with Abraham when they were in Egypt and did not inform against Abraham and Sarah, he was afforded almost continual protection and a guarantee that his descendants would not be harmed by the descendants of Abraham. According to the Midrash, even though Balak is aware of all of this, he is still determined to destroy the Jewish people by whatever means are required. And the curses of Bilaam are one part of the plan.

We are taught that hatred is unreasoning, illogical, destructive, and devoid of any rational behavior. All human history shows us the truth of this Talmudic observation. Hatred leads not only to the destruction of those hated but is equally destructive to the hater as well.

Even after the failure of the mission of Bilaam and the clear realization that the Lord is protecting the Jewish people, Balak searches for other means to annihilate the Jews. He makes a covenant with ostensibly the mightiest king in that area and of that time, Sichon, the head of the tribe of the Emorites. And Sichon will dutifully set out to attack and destroy the Jewish people. He is defeated by the Jewish nation, and because Balak and Moav entrusted their sovereignty and independence to Sichon, with his defeat, the lands of Moav also fall under Jewish sovereignty.

This is illustrative of the power of hatred. People will surrender their own rights and property in the mistaken belief that their hatred will somehow

translate into the annihilation of their enemy. The whole exercise of the hatred by Balak of the Jewish people transforms itself into his own defeat and demise. Hatred blinds the eyes of even the most previously wise and powerful. ©2021 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 SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"My nation, remember what Balak the king of Moab advised and what Bil'am the son of Be'or...answered him in order that you may know the compassionate righteousness of the Lord" [Micha. 6:5]. Who, or what, defines Israel, and why does it matter? If deeply concerning trends continue in the United States, research and ample anecdotal evidence indicate that those succeeding in affecting views toward Israel are the very people who attack it as a racist, discriminatory occupier lacking any moral or political legitimacy. Noble attempts to brand Israel as a high-tech haven ("start-up nation") notwithstanding, Israel is increasingly being effectively defined by foes, not friends. What, if anything, can be done to reverse these deeply troubling developments?

In our weekly Biblical portion, Balak, we read that efforts by enemies to define the Jewish People have ancient antecedents. King Balak of Moab, frightened by the "Biblical Israelis," vastly overestimates their global designs as well as their military might: "This multitude will lick up all that is round about us as the ox licks up the grass of the field" (Num. 22:4). He therefore turns to Bil'am, a magician and a soothsayer, an accomplished poet and master of the spoken word, to curse the Israelis in order to vanquish them (ibid., v.6).

Bil'am represents the giant media corporations and social media platforms that play a dominant role in shaping public opinion. Is it not true that these manipulators of minds have the power to destroy a world with a word? And indeed, Bil'am sets out to curse the Israelites.

Nevertheless, the Torah goes on to say that the prophet ultimately blesses the Israelites. At first he is struck by his donkey's refusal to take him where he wanted to go. Apparently even a donkey can be amazed by the miraculous events that contributed to the preservation and preeminence of Israel from abject slaves to recipients of God's Presence at Sinai, despite their smallness in number and scarcity of power.

And then Bil'am sees for himself—to the extent that at least he attempted to record the truth as he composes his tweets and Facebook posts. He may have come to curse, but he stays to praise. He evokes Jewish destiny in glowing terms, extolling the uniqueness of Israel (ibid., 23:9) and evoking our

ultimate Messianic victory (ibid., 24:17–19). He affirms unmistakably that "no black magic can be effective against Jacob and no occult powers against Israel" (ibid., 23:23) – evil words spoken by evil people are impotent before the modesty and integrity expressed by the Israelites in their daily lives.

Ultimately, however, it is not the speaking donkey that will succeed in changing the minds of the many Bil'ams around us; rather, it is the deeds of the Jewish People itself that will evoke change: "Your deeds will bring you close, your deeds will distance you" [Mishna, Eduyot 5:7].

First of all, Bil'am takes note of the military success of this fledgling nation against every one of her enemies—Israel had just emerged from a great military victory against the terrorizing Amorites. And, more importantly, the chaste and sanctified lifestyle of the Israelites and their commitment to their traditions and ideals made an even greater impact on Bil'am.

"How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your Sanctuaries, O Israel" [Num. 24:5]. Bil'am was amazed as to how the Israelite encampment (ohel) was constructed to respect everyone's privacy, so that no one could see into his neighbor's home. He was moved by the sensitivity toward interpersonal relationships, the love and respect displayed toward one another by family members and the harmony with which neighbors lived together.

And when Bil'am saw the commitment the Israelites had to their study halls and synagogues (mishkan)—their fealty to traditional values and teachings and their faith in Divine providence—he understood, and proclaimed the invincibility of this Divinely-elected people.

Alas, what a person might—and words could not—do to the Israelites, the Israelites managed to do to themselves. Bil'am and Balak returned to their homes to leave Israel in peace—but the Israelites themselves self-destructed. They chased after the hedonistic blandishments of the pagan societies of Bil'am and Balak. The very next chapter opened with "And the people began to commit harlotry with the daughters of Moab...and Israel joined himself to the [idolatry of] Ba'al Peor [Bil'am ben Beor]" (ibid., 25:1–3).

We failed in the desert not because of what our enemies did or said, but rather because of our own moral weakness and rejection of the birthright that had initially formed our nation's definition and mission. Indeed, we are "a people who dwells alone, not subject to the machinations of other nations" (ibid., 23:9).

In this generation, in which detractors and haters attacking the Jewish People and Israel are on the ascent in capturing public opinion, we must remember to ignore the noise, and to focus on our national mission. To rephrase Ben Gurion, indeed it is not what the nations say that matters, but rather it is what we do or what we do not do, especially in the

spheres of ethics and morality, which is of supreme significance. ©2021 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

There is a clear parallelism between Balak and events in the Book of Exodus. In both narratives, kings (Pharaoh of Egypt and Balak of Moab), alarmed about the success of the Jewish People, conspire to destroy them.

Robert Alter notes that the language of the narratives intersects. In describing Pharaoh's fears, the Torah says he "came to dread [va'yakutz] the children of Israel" (Exodus 1:12). So too, Moab, the nation Balak led, "dreaded [va'yakatz] the children of Israel" (Numbers 22:3).

The similarities continue, as Pharaoh said to his nation, "Behold, the nation of the children of Israel is much too numerous and mighty for us [rav v'atzum mi'menu]." (Exodus 1:9) Similarly, Balak says, "Behold, the nation that came out of Egypt...are too mighty for me [atzum hu mi'meni]" (Numbers 22:5-6).

In addition, both leaders rely on sorcerers – in the case of Pharaoh, the *chartumim* (magicians); in the case of Balak, the heathen prophet Balaam – to achieve their horrific goal.

And in Balaam's prophesies, he speaks of "God, Who took them [the Jews] out of Egypt" (23:22, 24:8). Invoking the Exodus points to the connection between the narratives.

Now, of course, the Exodus story is that of the first generation that left Egypt. The Balak story takes place after that generation had died in the desert. It involves the second generation, as they prepare to enter the land of Israel.

Bearing this in mind, Rabbi Nathaniel Helfgot writes that "for the new generation to be able to enter the land they must first go through parallel experiences of the forefathers, picking up the thread and completing the mission, not allowing the plan to go off kilter as had happened 38 years before" (*Mikra and Meaning*).

Indeed, there is one great difference between these narratives. Pharaoh enslaves the Jewish People; Balak does not succeed in his mission. As the Sefat Emet, quoted by Rabbi Helfgot, writes, "Just as there is a mitzva to remember/mention the Exodus every day, so, too, one is bidden to remember/mention the kindness that God did for us in thwarting the plot of Bil'am the wicked" (*ibid.*).

From time immemorial, Jews have been threatened by anti-Semitism. The convergence and divergence of the Balak and Egypt stories indicate that even as the threats are similar, they are not all identical – and the outcomes sometimes differ. ©2021 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 AVROHOM LEVENTHAL

Bilaam's Handle on the Jewish Door

Bilaam was charged with cursing the Jewish people. He was chosen by Balak due to his unique ability to perceive the exact times when HaShem was displeased with His nation.

Bilaam's several tries proved unsuccessful. In fact his "curses" turned out to be blessings. The most famous blessing of Bilaam is: *מה טוב אהליך יעקב* - How Good are Your Tents, Yaakov, Your Dwelling Places Yisrael.

This bracha has been incorporated into our daily prayers, and is said upon entering the Beit Knesset in the morning.

There are many commentaries with regard to the meaning behind these words. Some say that it refers to the Mishkan (Tabernacle) in the desert and the 2 Batei Mikdash (Holy Temples). Others say that it refers to the status of the Children of Israel before entering Eretz Yisrael (אֶרֶץ) and after settling the land (משכנות).

Rashi explains that Bilaam uttered these words after seeing that the openings of the tents of the Jews weren't situated directly across from one another. This was a testament to their degree of modesty. One couldn't easily see what was happening in the home of another.

I have always wondered what is so special about this. Even in the desert, tents were constructed with doors. If so, one could have his tent opening facing his neighbor and simply close the door. With the myriad dwellings in the encampment, designing homes this way could be quite burdensome. Why go through the trouble when you could just close the door?

Perhaps the answer lies within the inherent Jewish concern for others, originating with Avraham Avinu. His tent in the desert was open on all four sides. A true oasis in the wilderness.

Rashi doesn't say that Bilaam noticed that the "doors" weren't situated opposite each other. He specifically uses the term *פתח* (opening). Their homes were open without being obtrusive. They were ready to help but not to meddle.

The home (and heart) of a Jew should always be open to others in need, whatever that need might be. It is this fundamental trait of *chesed* (kindness) with which we are imbued.

Openness, however, comes with boundaries for the giver and the receiver. *Chesed* should be performed with modesty and consideration for the feelings of the recipient. While we should always be concerned for the welfare of others, we must similarly

recognize their right to privacy and dignity.

Our “doors” can be open without staring into the face of others.

There are numerous Torah commandments to help those in need. In parallel, there are many about speaking Loshon Hara (evil speech) or hurting others with our words. Often, in our zeal to assist another in crisis, we may be less sensitive to their feelings.

Bilaam’s blessing comes to remind us that the hallmark of the Jewish people is chesed. It is crucial, however, that it comes in tandem with modesty and respect, another fundamental characteristic of our nation.

This is why מה טוב is the first prayer upon entering the shul. The optimal way to start our day is with a commitment to be there for others without compromising their respect and dignity. ©2021 Rabbi A. Leventhal, noted educator and speaker, is the Executive Director at Lema’an Achai lemaanachai.org

ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

Notice! Their Doors Are Not Facing Each Other!

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

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

This restriction even applies to a person installing a window that overlooks a jointly-owned courtyard. True, he could argue that it should not matter to anyone if he puts in a window there, since in any case he can go into the courtyard and see what is



going on there. Nevertheless, the neighbors may object, “If you are with us in the courtyard, we can hide from you; however, if you are watching us through the window, we are not aware of it (and cannot protect ourselves).”

Based on this reasoning, neighbors can object to someone

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

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"Now this congregation will lick clean all that is around us as an ox licks the grass of the field...” (Bamidbar 22:4) What an unusual phrase! The Midrash tells us that just as whatever an ox licks has no blessing (presumably it uses its tongue to uproot the grass instead of biting it off, so nothing remains to grow in the future,) so, too, no nation that fights the Jews has blessing.

This was part of a larger conversation. Balak went to the elders of Midian to find out about Moshe, since he hailed from there. He wanted to know what made Moshe tick, so he could know how best to fight him. The elders said, “His whole power is in his mouth.” Therefore, Balak sought out Bilaam, who could also damage with his mouth, to counteract Moshe.

In describing Moshe, they said, “just as an ox’s power is in its mouth, so is Moshe’s power in his mouth.” This led to the depiction of an ox decimating a field. We know that when Moshe killed the Egyptian when he first went to see the situation of the Jews there, he did it using a name of Hashem, i.e. he used his mouth as a weapon. This seems to be the source for their appraisal of him. Therefore, the king of Moav approached Bilaam who seemed to be an equal to Moshe in that regard.

However, what they missed was that the power of Moshe’s mouth was not merely to destroy like an ox. Rather, Moshe’s power of prayer saved the Jews on numerous occasions. His logical arguments to Hashem of the Chillul Hashem that would come from the Jews’ destruction caused Him to change the decree. Moshe’s power lay in his mouth but not merely as a weapon.

When Balak went to Bilaam, he said, “I know that who you bless is blessed and who you curse is cursed.” The Sipurno says this was merely a nicety. It wasn’t true, but even Bilaam would not have wanted to be categorized as only doing bad. As Jews, our power lies in our mouths, and that is the power to use them properly. As powerful as the devastation we can wreak with our words is the tremendous amount of good we can do with them.

When Bilaam praised us with the words we begin davening with each day, “Mah Tovv Ohalecha Yaakov, How lovely are your tents, O Jacob,” Rashi comments, “He saw that the openings [of the tents] were not directly opposite each other.” The Gemara in Bava Basra (60a) learns from here that for privacy

purposes one cannot build a window opposite his neighbor's window. While the Gemara there says that "the openings of their tents did not face each other," Rashi here says, "their openings did not oppose each other."

Perhaps he is alluding to the fact that their mouths also were not used against each other, as we say, "Hinei Mah Tov... sheves achim gam yachad," How good it is when brothers dwell together. When we are careful not to use our mouths to hurt people but instead speak words of praise, encouragement, and love, then we are deserving of all Hashem's brachos and no nation can harm us - because we refuse to harm each other.

An impudent youth once told R' Meir Shapiro that the Talmud was racist. The Gemara says, on the posuk, "And you My sheep, the sheep of My pasture, are man..." (Yechezkel 34:31) that Yisroel is "man" but not the Gentiles. "How racist this is!" he said. "To say the goyim are not people?! Perhaps they are not spiritual or holy, but not called menschen?!"

"You misunderstand," said R' Meir. "The Torah is teaching that all of us together are called "a man." When one of us has pain, we feel it as if it were our own body. The Gentiles have no such connection. While they are definitely men, only Klal Yisroel is "a man," unified and caring about the suffering of every other Jew." © 2021 Rabbi J. Gewirtz and Migdal Ohr

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

Temptation

Parashat Balak is almost entirely concerned with the attempt by Balak to curse the B'nei Yisrael with the guidance of Bilaam, a noted sorcerer. Balak tried to entice Bilaam to curse the Jews to prevent them from conquering his land. Bilaam was hindered in this task by the fact that he could not speak anything that Hashem did not say to him. Bilaam attempted to curse the B'nei Yisrael yet instead blessed them with words so beautiful that they are recited by every Jew when he enters the synagogue, "Mah tovu ohalecha Ya'akov mish'k'notecha Yisrael, how goodly are you tents, Ya'akov, your dwelling places, Yisrael."

Bilaam understood that the B'nei Yisrael could not be destroyed from an outside source. The only way for Hashem to withdraw His protection of Yisrael was for the people to turn away from the laws which He had given them. Once the B'nei Yisrael began destroying themselves they would become prey to outsiders. The Torah records the beginning of this destruction. The Torah tells us, "Yisrael settled in the Shittim and the people began to act promiscuously with the daughters of Moav. They (the daughters of Moav) invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, the people ate and bowed to their gods. Yisrael became attached to Baal P'or and the wrath of Hashem flared up against Yisrael. And Hashem said to Moshe take all the heads

of the people and hang them before Hashem opposite the sun, and the flaring wrath of Hashem will withdraw from Yisrael. And Moshe said to the judges of Yisrael, let each man kill his men who were attached to Ba'al P'or. And behold a man of the B'nei Yisrael came and brought the Midianite woman near to his brothers before the eyes of Moshe and before the eyes of the entire assembly of the B'nei Yisrael, and they were weeping at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting. And Pinchas the son of Elazar the son of Aharon the Kohein saw, and he stood from among the assembly and he took a spear in his hand. And he went after the Yisrael man into the tent and he pierced them both, the Yisraelite man and the woman into her stomach and the plague was halted from upon the B'nei Yisrael. And those who died in the plague were twenty-four thousand."

Rashi and the Ramban quote the Gemara chapter Cheilik that deals with this story. They explain that the idea behind the promiscuous behavior was not instigated by the Moabite daughters but through the advice of their elders. The Ramban suggests that Bilaam was behind this advice for he understood that promiscuity would lead to avodah zara, the worship of pagan gods. Harav Zalman Sorotzkin explains how the people could be enticed even though Bilaam could find no fault in the B'nei Yisrael. Man's evil inclination tells him that it is natural to do business with the stranger and engage him in conversation. The Moabites traded in linen and this was especially dear to the B'nei Yisrael. Those who sold the linen were elderly and so there was little temptation to engage them socially. This commerce in itself was not harmful if done for business only. Business, however, leads to friendships which leads to more family social gatherings. It was here that the younger women of the family were more noticeable. This social activity involved invitations to eat together and join each other in celebration of festivals and joyous times. Some of these activities may have been strictly social, but they lead to sharing in each other's rituals and worship since there is also a meal with drinks involved as part of the festival. In this way, the B'nei Yisrael were drawn into the worship of a pagan god.

As these women began to entice the men, several of the B'nei Yisrael began worshipping Ba'al P'or. The Or HaChaim explains that there are many different types of avodah zara, idol worship, and many do not include the same kinds of serving that we find in the Torah laws of serving Hashem. The worship of Ba'al P'or did not involve any sacrifices. Some of the B'nei Yisrael believed that they could perform these forms of worship without violating the Torah. Avodah zara inevitably included promiscuous behavior to honor that god. Many of the men who were involved in that avodah zara "became attached" to Ba'al P'or. Moshe then instructed the leaders of the B'nei Yisrael to kill

these men by stoning. The Ramban was concerned that this implied that each judge would have had to kill two people leading to the deaths of over one hundred seventy thousand people. He concludes that the instruction in the Torah meant that each set of elders would be responsible to judge which members of their own tribe were sinners and could be punished by trial. Hashem sent a plague to punish those who could not be punished by the courts for lack of witnesses.

The various ideas given for the sin of the people at this time can be summarized as their mingling with a foreign society and culture. Each is an argument for isolationism. We are aware that many religious people are not interested in being among any foreign society or culture. Unfortunately, the outside culture has also invaded the Jewish community so that there are now Jewish cultures and foreign cultures which are part of the overall Jewish society today. The arguments made by our commentators are also made within the Jewish people where those who are involved in chinuch, Jewish education, and kiruv, working with non-religious Jews, are given the same cautions as those who work with non-Jews. The same temptations which are prevalent in the general society can be found in those Jews who have not experienced a life of Torah values. Those Jews who choose to work with non-experienced Jews and live among them are at risk of putting themselves and their families in a position of temptation.

I personally spent a large part of my life working in chinuch and kiruv. In each community where we lived there was an active part of that community that had Torah values and ideals even though, in some cities, this group of friends was rather small. But the investment was worth all the risk and this risk must be taken by those who can. The warning given to the B'nei Yisrael that was learned from this incident with foreign societies does not fully apply when it involves kiruv with our fellow Jews. Each Jew is responsible for his fellow Jew, and in any way that he can influence others by his own devotion to Torah values, he is helping to unify the Jewish people. May our own actions and our own love of Torah values help to unify the Jewish people. © 2021 Rabbi D. Levin

RABBI DOVID SIEGEL

Haftora Commentary

This week's haftora 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 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 intact. 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. ©2021 Rabbi D. Siegel & torah.org

RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER

Lelamed Weekly Dvar

When Bilam is commissioned to curse the Jewish people, he gets up the next morning to saddle his donkey and begin his task. Rashi points out that Bilam wakes up early to convey his commitment and enthusiasm for his mission, noting the parallel when Avraham did the exact same thing many years prior when he traveled to sacrifice his son Yitzchak. Why is it relevant that Bima's tactic had been previously used?

Rav Moshe Feinstein (Darash Moshe) suggests that Bilam's evil ploy didn't work precisely because Avraham had used that tactic for a good cause many years prior. Had Avraham not done so, Bilam's enthusiasm might have given him an advantage in our episode. This mention is meant to highlight the importance of countering evil with positivity. When we see someone fighting for an evil cause, we can learn to mimic the passion and transpose a sinister cause with a positive one. If we extract something from the good and the bad, we'll be twice as likely to succeed in life. ©2021 Rabbi S. Ressler & Lelamed, Inc.

