

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l

Covenant & Conversation

And Balak slaughtered cattle and sheep, and sent it to Bilam and the officers who were with him" (Bamidbar 22:40). This verse seems superfluous to the narrative of Balak hiring Bilam to curse Israel. Is it really that important for us to know that Balak fed Bilam and the officers? Would we have otherwise thought that that they were fasting? Would it have made any difference if they were?

Rashi tells us that the "cattle and sheep" constituted a minimal amount. [How this is understood from the verse is the subject of much discussion in the commentaries, and beyond the scope of this piece. The explanation I appreciated most (so far) is that of Rebbi Sh'muel Al-Moshnainu (an early commentary on Rashi), who points out that if there were more than a couple of animals slaughtered, they wouldn't have been slaughtered and then sent to Bilam (et al), but sent while still alive and slaughtered there. After all, it is much easier to transport livestock while they are able to transport themselves than having to carry the carcasses. For other explanations, see Mizrachi, Malbim, Bartenura, Matnos Kehuna, and others.] It would seem, then that at least one of the reasons the Torah included this information is to point out that Balak only sent Bilam a small amount of food. The question becomes why it was important for us to know this.

The Midrashim that Rashi is likely based on (Tanchuma 11/15, Bamidbar Rabbah 20:17) use Balak's stinginess to contrast Balak with Avraham, and the wicked (in general) with the righteous. Whereas Avraham promised only a little (Beraishis 18:5), he provided a lot (18:7). Balak, on the other hand, promised Bilam a lot (Bamidbar 22:17), but only gave him a small amount. It can therefore be suggested that the point of this verse is to teach us this very lesson, that we should be like Avraham and let our actions speak louder than our words, rather than being like Balak who talked a good game but never followed through. (This is how several of the commentaries understand Rashi.) However, Rashi is not bashful about teaching us lessons based on the Torah's narrative, especially when the lesson is taught by Chazal. Rashi not sharing this lesson with us indicates that he didn't think it was the (only) reason the Torah told us that Balak sent Bilam just a small amount of food.

There's another issue that needs to be addressed as well. Balak was trying to get Bilam to curse his enemies, and had promised a great reward for doing so. Why would Balak undermine his own goals by sending Bilam such a small amount of food? Bilam hadn't yet attempted to curse Israel; showing Bilam how cheap he was was counterproductive, sending the message that the "great reward" might not be so great after all. If anything, we would expect Balak to overwhelm Bilam with an extravagant meal, to entice him to complete the mission and receive much more. Was Balak so cheap that he was oblivious to the ramifications of letting Bilam know ahead of time that he shouldn't expect a big payoff even if he was successful at cursing Israel?

B'er BaSadeh, in order to answer this question, says that Balak sent a small meal because he didn't want Bilam to spend too much time eating, thereby delaying his cursing Israel. As long as this was communicated to Bilam, it is possible that Balak thought Bilam would believe it was true. However, the Midrashim that teach us the lesson of promising little but doing a lot (based on Balak's stinginess) end off by saying that Bilam retaliated by making Balak pay for 42 additional animals for offerings. Unless Balak was so blinded by his cheapness and desire to have Israel cursed, it is hard to understand why he would risk upsetting Bilam, or let him know ahead of time how cheap he really was, and possibly dissuade him from completing the mission.

Rabbi Shimon Sofer (Shir Me'on) suggests that Balak was afraid that Bilam would think a large meal was the "great reward" that had been promised. In order to avoid this misunderstanding, Balak purposely sent a meal so small that there was no way Bilam could think it was the reward. Unless the Torah wanted us to know (through the Midrashim) that Balak's plan had backfired (because Bilam was insulted rather than being more motivated), there would seem to be little reason to tell us about this meal. Besides, if the whole point of sending a small meal was to avoid any misunderstanding, Balak could have easily sent a message along with the meal that this was not the reward that had been promised. If anything, sending a big meal with such a message would accomplish much more ("just you wait to see what you'll really get" than sending a small meal without (or even with) clarification.

After initially refusing to let Bilam go to Moav with Balak's officers (Bamidbar 22:14), God gave permission

to go "if they are calling for you" (22:20). Rashi explains that "for you" means "for your benefit," i.e. getting paid for going (see Rashi on 22:5 as well). Bilam was not allowed to curse Israel, nor be hired to curse Israel; he was only allowed to go if they would be honored enough by his presence to pay him for just going (an appearance fee). Upon arriving in Moav (22:37), Balak asked Bilam why he didn't come right away; "am I not able to honor you?" Included in Balak's question was a similar expression to the one used by God in stating the condition under which Bilam could go; "behold I sent for you, to call for you." It would seem, then, that the condition that God had set was fulfilled-Balak verified that the reason he sent for Bilam was "for him," i.e. for his benefit, which Rashi had told us meant getting paid whether he curses Israel or not. Bilam, ever mindful of disobeying God after his run-in with the angel on his way to Moav, makes it clear to Balak that his coming-and getting paid for coming-was not contingent on his ability to curse Israel; "behold I have come to you" (22:38), and fulfilled your request. As far as cursing Israel, though, "am I at all able to speak anything [other than the words] which God puts in my mouth?"

Balak couldn't have been too happy to hear these words. Did Bilam really expect to be given a great reward even if he didn't curse Israel? In order to send the message to Bilam, without having to explicitly speak it out, that any honor/reward will only be forthcoming if he curses Israel, Balak snubs him. Usually, the king invites special guests to a festive meal in his palace (see B'er Yitzchok). Instead, Balak sends food to Bilam (without joining him for the meal). And instead of sending a meal worthy of someone special, Balak sends a small meal, one that is just enough for Bilam (and the officers with him) not to go hungry. The message is clear; there will be no honor or reward unless Bilam is successful at cursing the enemy. Bilam resents the snub, but due to his own hatred of Israel, tries to curse Israel anyway.

All of Bilam's words sound very "frum" (religious). From the very beginning (22:8), and throughout the narrative (22:18, 22:38, 23:12, 23:26, 24:13), he insists that he will only say/do what God tells him. After the angel stands in his way, Bilam offers to turn around and go back home (22:34). His actions, however, tell us just the opposite. Despite God telling Bilam that he can't go (22:12), he asks a second time (22:19). Despite God telling him not to curse Israel (22:12), he repeatedly tries to, even approaching things in different ways in order to accomplish this (24:1). Included in the actions that speak louder than his words is Bilam continuing to go along with Balak's request, even after knowing that the reward he was promised was not just for showing up (as God had insisted before Bilam went to Moav), but only if he was able to successfully curse Israel. *Covenant and Conversation is kindly sponsored by the Schimmel Family in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel zt"l ©2024 The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust rabbisacks.org*

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

“**G**od opened the mouth of the she-ass and she said unto Bileam...” (Numbers 22:28) Does God still speak to us today, and – if He does – where must we look in order to discover His message? The answer to this question lies in a fascinating Hasidic interpretation to one of the most amazing events recorded in the Bible, that of Bileam's talking she-ass.

Bileam, the central figure in the portion of Balak, is generally regarded as a wicked person, possessing “an evil eye, an arrogant spirit, and a greedy soul” (Mishna Avot 5:22), a summation easily backed up by the events described in our portion. After all, for the right price and sufficient power, Bileam was willing to sell his soul and curse the Israelites.

And yet another view of Bileam, seemingly contradictory to the Mishna, is found in Sifrei where it's stated (Parashat Vezot HaBerakha) that in Israel no prophet ever arose like Moses, “but amongst the nations of the world there was such a prophet, and he is Bileam.” How does the Midrash place the venal and grasping Bileam on the level of Moses, redeemer of Israel, transmitter of the message of the divine from the foot of Mount Sinai to all generations and all worlds? What can these two figures possibly share in common?

Perhaps by isolating the most unique element of the Bileam narrative, we can perceive what it is that the Midrash wants to tell us. Undoubtedly the magical and mystical moment in our portion is the encounter between Bileam and his she-ass. Bileam set out with Balak, king of Moab, to curse the nation of Israel, but his formerly trustworthy she-ass refused to allow him to continue his journey. The gentile prophet angrily beat his animal, and suddenly: “God opened the mouth of the ass and she said unto Bileam” (Numbers 22:28). The she-ass had seen an angel of the Lord standing in the way with drawn sword, chastising Bileam lest he plan to revile the nation most blessed by God. The gentile prophet's one-word response, “I have sinned” (Numbers 22:34), marks the turning point, and from then on Bileam – to the chagrin of his “sponsors” – rose to poetic heights regarding his praise of Israel which echo Moses' magnificent paean in the book of Deuteronomy. Most significant of all, however, is that Bileam the prophet was brought to a divine vision by the message of a she-ass!

Indeed, the miracle of the she-ass speaking is so profound that the Mishna lists the pi ha'aton (mouth of the she-ass) among the ten things created at dusk immediately preceding the first primordial Sabbath of the initial seven days of creation (Avot 5:8). We are being taught not to see this event merely as a fable, or a dream, but rather as a miracle built into the very blueprint of creation – an ass's mouth whose voice would be heard not only by Bileam, but would reverberate throughout the generations in the form of Bileam's praise of Israel. The

most crucial message of this miraculous mouth is that no gentile leader will ever be allowed to curse and destroy Israel, that those who come to scoff will remain to praise.

But why did the Almighty choose such an unseemly messenger – a she-ass – to convey His message to Bileam? Clearly the mouth of this she-ass – emanating from the very dawn of creation – demonstrates how

God's message may emerge from the most unexpected sources. And what is important is not only that a she-ass can communicate the divine will; the most significant message of this tale may be that the individual must strive to develop the ability to hear, to discern from the harsh guttural hee-haws the message that is being sent to him. In effect, God's words may be found in the most unlikely of places – as long as we have the necessary spiritual antennae to receive them.

This principle may be the source of Rashi's explanation of the verse immediately following the Ten Commandments in Deuteronomy.

"These words God spoke unto all your assembly out of the midst of the fire, of the clouds, and of the thick darkness, with a great voice, and it did not cease [velo yasaf; Targum ad loc: velo pasak]" (Deut. 5:19). Rashi explains: "and since God did not pause, He did not have to resume, for His voice is strong and goes on continuously." How does God's voice go on continuously? The lesson seems to be that the sound waves released at Sinai are continually and eternally present in the world; we must simply attune our ears to be sensitive receptors.

In his Torah commentary, the Pri Tzaddik stresses this idea by citing a tale of the Hasidic master, Reb Zusha who, during one of his journeys, came upon a peasant whose wagon had turned over. Asked to help, Reb Zusha, no longer young and feeling himself too weak to struggle with an overburdened wagon, demurred, saying: "I'm sorry, I can't help you." "You can," said the peasant to Reb Zusha, "You certainly can. You just don't want to." The peasant's words sank into the very core of Reb Zusha's being, resonating with a message from above, as if the Shekhina herself was admonishing Reb Zusha for saying "I can't." "You can," he heard the Shekhina saying, "you just don't want to." Reb Zusha was able to accept the truth of the peasant's words on more than one level. How often do we say we "can't" when what we really mean is we "won't" or "we do not wish to"? And here, in this world, our Temple is destroyed, the Divine Presence has fallen, and we don't lift her (the Shekhina) up. And although it's because we say we cannot, the real reason is because we don't want to! Did the she-ass actually speak? The truth is that that is an irrelevant issue. What is important is what Bileam learned from his donkey, the divine message he perceived from the animal's stubborn refusal to continue the journey, the fact that he, visited with the gift of prophecy, dared not speak out words which were

antithetical to the divine will. The she-ass knew not to continue such a sacrilegious journey; Bileam understood that he had better learn from the she-ass!

Herein lies the essence of the teaching set forth in Avot (4:1): "Ben Zoma says, who is wise? He who learns from every person." If Reb Zusha can learn a major principle regarding our relationship to the divine from the simple words of a gentile peasant, if Bileam could learn from the she-ass, we must always be on guard to sensitize our ears and our hearts to receive a direct divine message from whoever, and wherever!

The Pri Tzaddik reminds us of the Talmud's dilemma regarding R. Meir, who continued to receive Torah from the rabbi-turned-apostate, Elisha b. Avuya (known as Acher, or "the other one"). After all, does not the prophet Malakhi teach: "The lips of the priest shall preserve wisdom, Torah shall be sought from his mouth, because he is an angel of the Lord of hosts" (2:7), interpreted by our sages to mean that only if a Torah sage is comparable to an angel on high may we study from his mouth? If so, how can R. Meir continue to study from a heretic? The answer in the Talmud is that a truly great individual has the ability and sensitivity to hear God's words even from the lowliest of places (CHagiga 15b). Hence R. Meir heard it from Acher, Reb Zusha heard it from a gentile peasant, Bileam heard it from a she-ass, and Moses heard it from the depths of a lowly, prickly thornbush.

In his Guide for the Perplexed, Maimonides points out that on Mount Sinai every Jew heard the divine sound, but each person heard only what he was capable of hearing, depending on his spiritual level and human sensitivity. God-waves continue from Sinai and are consistently prepared to deliver the divine word – even from the most unseemly messenger. The question is: are we prepared to receive them? ©2024 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

There is an eternal debate amongst philosophers and criminologists as to whether the mob boss or the actual hit man is most culpable in the murder of a rival gang leader. Though both are certainly morally guilty, the question as to which one bears the legal onus for the crime, absent statutory law on the matter, is an issue of discussion and differing opinions.

In Judaism there is a concept "that there is no excuse of agency present when a sin or crime is being committed." This means that the hit man who pulled the trigger or planted the explosive is certainly the more guilty party, in such a scenario of an ordered murder. In the words of the Talmud "regarding the instructions from the Master and contrary instructions from the student – who should one listen to?!"

Thus in this week's parsha, even though it is the malevolent Balak who engages Bilaam in the nefarious

scheme to curse the Jewish people, it is Bilaam who actually intends and agrees to do the cursing. He and not Balak emerges as the ultimate villain of the event. There is much discussion in the Talmud and in rabbinic sources as to whether any of the laws of agency, and this law in particular, exists outside of Jewish society generally.

If there is no agency outside of Jewish society, it appears that, generally speaking, there would be liability on both the instigator and the agent as well in such circumstances. In any event, it certainly is inherently wrong to engage an agent to perform an illegal or sinful (they are no longer the same today) act whether in Jewish or general society, whatever the technical legal liabilities may be.

The instigator of a crime is deemed in today's society to be as guilty as the criminal who perpetrated the crime. Osama bin Laden was the guilty party in the World Trade Center assassinations as much as were the murderous suicide-pilots he sent forth to do the deed. Balak is responsible for Bilaam's curses. Heaven, in its exquisite way, administers justice to all concerned in as it pleases and in its own time frame.

Balak will pay the penalty for his unwarranted hatred and enmity of Israel just as Bilaam does. The rabbis of the Talmud even extended the penalties for wrongful and criminal acts committed to include those who remained silent when they should have spoken out against evil and cruelty. Bilaam's donkey is commended while his associates are undoubtedly condemned and eventually punished – hence the plethora of laws in our world and statutes about conspiracy to commit crimes and criminal negligence.

In fact, the actual perpetrator oftentimes attempts to hide behind the façade that one was only following orders. Judaism does not recognize that excuse and yet the one who issued the orders is also deemed guilty of the crime. ©2024 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

There is a clear parallel 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 says 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 prophecies, he speaks of "God, Who took them [the Jews] out of Egypt" (23:22, 24:8). Invoking the Exodus underscores the connection between the narratives.

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

Bearing this chronology 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 while 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.).

Every generation faces challenges reminiscent, and yet different, from prior generations. 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. ©2024 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 JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"Balak slaughtered ox and lamb and sent to Bilaam and the princes who were with him." (Bamidbar 22:40) Balak sent for Bilaam, asking him to come curse the Jewish People. He promised much honor and wealth for this, and when Hashem declined to let Bilaam go, he was very upset. He kept asking Hashem to let him go until Hashem relented and said, "Go along with the men sent for you, but you can only say what I allow you to."

Upon his arrival, Bilaam was not met with great fanfare. In fact, Balak didn't welcome him into his home. Instead, he sent meat to Bilaam for a meal. How much did he send? Rashi tells us, "It was a small amount."

Though the terms, "cattle and sheep" often convey large quantities, various commentaries explain that he literally slaughtered ONE ox and when that wasn't enough for Bilaam and the officers, Balak added a ONE sheep. In addition, he specified that it was to be shared by Bilaam with the officers, as Balak figured Bilaam would want to keep it all for himself.

Bilaam was not going to be insulted like that, and when he came to curse the Jews, he told Balak he needed to build seven altars and slaughter an ox and a sheep on each of them! This slight was going to cost him.

More than this, unlike Yisro who offered sacrifices to Hashem, and then invited Aharon and the elders to eat with him, Balak's primary concern was feeding the people and offering to Hashem was barely an afterthought. We see the stingy nature of Balak in how he promised much and produced little; wanting so much for himself and yet unwilling to offer it. Only when Bilaam presented it as the only option did Balak go ahead with it. The truth is, they were two of a kind, each one only concerned with himself.

Despite this, Chazal tell us that in the merit of the numerous sacrifices he offered, Balak's descendant Shlomo HaMelech (descended from Balak's granddaughter Ruth) would offer a thousand sacrifices to Hashem when he built the Bais HaMikdash. How does this work?

Despite his inherent stinginess, Balak showed that when he was very motivated, he could spend his money. For him, his selfish desires were his motivation. His granddaughter Ruth, though, turned this around. As we see from her interaction with her mother-in-law Naomi, Ruth's focus was on others. "Where you go, shall I go" and so on, making Naomi the focus.

As King, Shlomo HaMelech was also focused on others, namely his subjects, the Jewish People. A Jew is happiest when he makes others happy. Therefore, when it came to offering korbanos to Hashem, Shlomo was easily generous, for his greatest motivation was to serve Hashem and Klal Yisrael.

Imagine a box full of gold and diamonds. Inside this box there is also some straw and scraps of paper. If you were to ask someone what's in the box and he said "straw and scraps of paper" and you opened it to see for yourself, what would you say about this person? Probably that he is off the wall! How can he say that the box has junk in it when it is full of priceless items? A normal person would not even relate to the junk but rather say it is a precious box of valuables, even if the junk is the overwhelming majority and only a few valuables are buried inside.

Similarly says R' Yeruchom, the Mirrer Mashgiach, the gemara says (Eirubin 19a) that every Jew, even the worst sinners, are full of Mitzvos like a pomegranate is full of seeds. If so when talking or even thinking about another Jew, what fool can think of the bad in him? Are we completely blind to the priceless

good deeds that he has done. In the face of those mitzvos, how ridiculous is it to even pay any attention the so-called atrocities that he has committed? No matter what, he is still precious and we should look at him in wise manner and stop being fools! © 2024 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr

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 DAVID LEVIN

Mitzvot and Blessings, Not Curses

From last week's parasha, when the B'nei Yisrael had fought and conquered the Amorites and their cities after they were attacked, other nations in their path took notice of them. Our parasha begins with one such reaction to the multitudes of the B'nei Yisrael and the imagined threat that they presented. The Torah tells us, "Balak ben Tzipor saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites. Moav became very frightened of the people, because (it) was numerous, and Moav was disgusted in the face of the B'nei Yisrael. Moav said to the elders of Midian, 'Now the congregation will lick up our entire

surroundings, as an ox licks up the greenery of the field.' Balak ben Tzipor was king of Moav at that time. He sent messengers to Bilaam ben Beor to Pethor, which is by the river of the land of the members of his people, to summon him, saying, 'Behold, a people has come out of Egypt, behold, it has covered the face of the land, and it sits opposite me. So now – please come and curse this people for me, for it is too powerful for me; perhaps I will be able to strike it and drive it away from the land. For I know that whomever you bless is blessed and whomever you curse is cursed.'"

Rashi explains the fear that Balak had: "He said to Moav, 'These two kings (Sichon and Og), in whom we had confidence, did not stand up before (the B'nei Yisrael). How much more so that we, who are weaker, cannot stand up before them.'" HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch explains that the first verse of our section does not say that Balak was the King of Moav, so that here, where we see that Moav was frightened, it referred to all of the people, not just Balak. The Midrash also gives us an insight into why it was not mentioned that Balak was the king until the fourth sentence. Balak was not ever meant to be the king, and only was raised to that position upon the death of Og. Balak was actually from Midian and was one of their princes, and Midian was a nation that mutually hated Moav. The Ramban suggests that Midian at one time had kings, but when Sichon, the Amorite, conquered them, he became the head of Midian, also. It was suggested that Moav and Midian paid Sichon and Og for protection from their enemies. Upon the death of these two great kings of Canaan, Sichon and Og, Balak, who was not yet king, was the only one who recognized the extent of the threat posed by the B'nei Yisrael. The Midianites did not understand this threat until they were alerted to it by Balak. That insight was what caused the people to appoint Balak as the new king.

The Or HaChaim asks why it was only Moav and not Midian that is mentioned as becoming frightened. This is especially relevant when one understands that Midian and not Moav was destroyed in the end. He states that even though Balak was a prince of Midian, out of fear of the B'nei Yisrael, Moav appointed him as their king. One reason given for Midian's lack of fear is that they were much larger in number than Moav. This also accounted for Moav's fear. Midian had been a nation for many years, whereas Moav were descendants from the incestuous relationship between Lot and his older daughter after the destruction of Sodom, only a few generations before. Even though Moav was very fertile and had many offspring, they could not match the numbers of Midian who had many generations of offspring. Moav ended their conflict with Midian by speaking to the elders of Midian to devise a plan to save them both.

HaAmek Davar discusses the words, "Now the congregation will lick up our entire surroundings, as an

ox licks up the greenery of the field." He explains that Balak could not really know what was in the hearts of the B'nei Yisrael. But Balak was jealous of the B'nei Yisrael's greatness and importance, so he made the claim that the B'nei Yisrael would devour all the lands around Moav and Midian. HaRav Hirsch explains that the metaphor of an ox licking up the grass of the land had to do with the ease by which it devours the entire land with just its tongue. HaRav Hirsch points out that Balak does not refer to the B'nei Yisrael as a nation, but instead as a congregation. This is because, at that time, the B'nei Yisrael had no land to call their own. The B'nei Yisrael had not yet conquered the land of Israel. Without land, a people cannot be fully called a nation.

HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin suggests another reason why the B'nei Yisrael were never referred to by their name, but always called either congregation or people by Balak and Bilaam. Both knew that Yisrael was beloved by Hashem, that the people were chosen as His favorite among nations, that they alone were willing and able to accept His commandments. Bilaam knew that he would be unable to curse Yisrael by name, even at the moment in each day when Hashem allowed Himself to be angry. As we learn in the Midrash, there was only one time in the day when Hashem allowed this anger, and Bilaam had been able to calculate that time. But Bilaam understood that calling the people by their name would arouse Hashem's special love for His nation, and that would have defeated Bilaam's intentions to curse them.

The Torah continues with Balak's plea for assistance from Bilaam, "Behold, a people has come out of Egypt, behold, it has covered the face of the land, and it sits opposite me. So now – please come and curse this people for me, for it is too powerful for me; perhaps I will be able to strike it and drive it away from the land. For I know that whomever you bless is blessed and whomever you curse is cursed." This argument must sound familiar, as it is the same general idea expressed by Par'oh in Egypt and Haman years later in Persia. Egypt's solution was to enslave the nation, while Haman's solution was to annihilate it. With Balak, Moav, and Midian, the solution was to curse the nation. The contrast between the nations of the world and Israel could not be clearer. When difficulties occur for someone among the B'nei Yisrael, he seeks out a prominent Rabbi and asks for a blessing. This is a blessing from Hashem, granted through the worthiness of the Rabbi. This also involves the repentance of the seeker. For the other nations, when troubles arise, they seek out someone to curse their enemies. The sorcerer, Bilaam, understood that the words he spoke, either as a blessing or a curse, were the words of Hashem. Bilaam was under no illusion that he could curse or bless the people without Hashem's consent.

Like Bilaam, we understand that Hashem blesses us or allows others to curse us depending on our

observance of the mitzvot. But we may not understand that these blessings and curses affect our entire nation based on our nation's observance of mitzvot. It is incumbent on each of us to help our brothers understand the beauty of a life with mitzvot, a life that has meaning and purpose, but also, then, a life which helps our entire nation to receive the blessings of Hashem. © 2024 Rabbi D. Levin

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Jewish Geography

Parashas Balak takes place while the Children of Israel were camped at Arvos Moav. As a matter of fact, they were in Arvos Moav from the last verse in last week's Parasha (Bamidbar 22:1) through the end of Sefer Devarim. Arvos Moav (the Plains of Moav) is located just north of the Dead Sea, on the eastern side of the Jordan River. Nothing controversial there; I don't think anyone disagrees. What isn't so clear is why the nation camped there specifically before entering the Promised Land. After all, in order to get there they had to go around Edom, past Moav, and through the land Sichon had conquered from Moav. Why didn't they just enter Eretz Yisroel from the south, the way the scouts did, rather than traveling so far out of the way to enter from the east?

(1) The Exodus from Egypt concluded with the miraculous splitting of the sea, and the entry into the Promised Land started with the Jordan River miraculously splitting. This symmetry may have been reason enough to enter from "the other side of the Jordan," with Arvos Moav being the southern-most part of "the other side of the Jordan," and therefore the closest. The miraculous conquest of Yericho – which is opposite Arvos Moav (just across the river) – may have been a factor too, although a similarly miraculous conquest could have occurred no matter where they entered from.

(2) When the Children of Israel left Egypt, G-d didn't take them the most direct way (Shemos 13:17), which would have been along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea towards the southwestern part of the Promised Land (where the Pelishtim were). There are numerous suggestions as to why this route wasn't taken; Shemos Rabbah (20:14), starts one of them with this parable: "A king had 12 sons, but only 10 pieces of property. He said if I give them [the property] now, I will cause them to fight over it! Instead, I'll wait until I acquire two more pieces of property, and then I'll divide the [12 pieces of property] between them. Similarly, the Holy One, blessed is He, said if I bring them into [the Promised Land] now, there won't be a portion for all 12 Tribes. Instead, I'll keep them in the desert until they take over [the land on] the other side of the Jordan [River], and the sons of Reuvain and the sons of Gad and half of the Tribe of Menashe will take that part, and then I'll bring [the nation] into the [Promised] Land."

There are several important ideas to glean from this Midrash (one of which I hope to discuss next week, iy"H), but the reason why G-d didn't take them into the Promised Land via the shortest route (along the coastline) applies to anywhere along the south; they had to enter from the east so that the land on the other side of the Jordan River could be conquered first. [Bear in mind that Sichon and Og were being paid by those who lived in Canaan to prevent the Children of Israel from entering their land (Bamidbar Rabbah 19:29). Had the nation entered from the south, Sichon and Og might not have felt the need to go all out, as their war with Israel would have occurred after Canaan had already been conquered (so preventing the Children of Israel from getting into Canaan no longer applied). This would have made conquering the land on the eastern side of the Jordan River a more prolonged, arduous process. Because the Children of Israel entered from the east, Sichon and Og attacked with their entire army in order to prevent them from entering Canaan, leading to a quick defeat.]

(3) Before Moshe died, he taught the nation the Torah again, and renewed their covenant with the Creator. This renewal was connected to the renewal of the covenant that occurred on Mt. Grizim and Mt. Eival with Yehoshua, on the western side of the Jordan River. Although Moshe couldn't be there when they renewed the covenant inside the Promised Land, having it occur in close proximity to where Moshe had renewed it – just across the River – allowed for Moshe's presence to still be felt. Additionally, renewing it with Moshe after having begun the conquest of their own land put this renewal in a very different perspective, one that could not be matched had it occurred in the barren desert south of the Promised Land, before they tasted land ownership. By the time they got to Arvos Moav, life had changed; renewing the covenant there gave it more relevance to the life they would have after crossing the Jordan.

(4) Although there is no controversy about where Arvos Moav is, there is some controversy regarding what else may have occurred there. As I wrote for Parashas Vayeira (<https://tinyurl.com/yc7wts8e>), because there is archeological evidence of a Sedom-like destruction at a location within visual distance of Beis El (where Avraham and Lot were when Lot chose to move elsewhere), סדום (Sedom, or Sodom) was likely just north of the Dead Sea, on the eastern side of the Jordan River – i.e. Arvos Moav. Besides that location being uninhabited because of its tragic history (so there weren't any locals who considered the Children of Israel to be in "their" city when they camped in Arvos Moav), there were other advantages to being in the exact spot where סדום was destroyed.

As I've previously discussed, the "curses" in Parashas Ki Savo – the consequences for not keeping the covenant Moshe laid out at Arvos Moav – are an integral part of the covenant itself. Just imagine how

much more powerfully these consequences resonated, being delivered precisely where another divine punishment – of literally biblical proportions – had occurred.

דטו is explicitly referenced in the consequences (Devarim 29:22, see also 32:32), and even though there's no indication that Moshe mentioned that the nation was currently on the actual site of דטו's destruction, it was likely more impactful for the history of the location to be discussed amongst themselves, initiated by them ("hey, do you know where we are? OMG!") rather than being hit over the head with it by Moshe.

When Moav became distressed by the presence of the Children of Israel, they didn't physically attack them, hiring Bilam to curse them instead. Aside from being afraid to start a war after being defeated by Sichon, who was then soundly defeated by the Children of Israel, the fact that the G-d of Israel had destroyed דטו – with His people currently on the very site of that destruction – may have contributed to Moav realizing that trying to overpower the G-d of Israel was futile. They therefore brought in Bilam, who (they thought) would work with G-d rather than against Him, cursing the Children of Israel and thereby causing Him to become angry with them. We know it didn't work, but because the Children of Israel were camped in Arvos Moav, where G-d had destroyed דטו centuries earlier, waging war against Israel wasn't Moav's first course of action. ©2024 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI YISSOCHER FRAND

RavFrاند

Transcribed by David Twersky

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Apparently, Bilaam had a relationship with Hashem that we can only dream about. And yet we see that he had an attitude that is hard to fathom. When Hashem asked Bilaam, "Who are these people with you?" Rashi explains that Bilaam answers Hashem arrogantly: "Even though I am not important in your eyes, I am important in the eyes of kings."

Later, in one of the most mind-boggling incidents in the Torah, Bilaam does not appear to be at all phased by the fact that his donkey starts talking to him. He just answers back and begins a dialogue with his donkey as if it was an everyday occurrence.

How do we explain the paradoxical personality of Bilaam? Rav Schwab offers an interesting insight. Hashem gave us certain senses. Most of us are blessed with the senses of sight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell. But there is also a sixth sense. That is the sense of being able to be nispael (impressed). Hashem gave most human beings the ability to be impressed by certain phenomenon in this world.

This sense of being nispael is necessary for our avodas (service of) Hashem. The Rambam speaks of a

person becoming impressed and overwhelmed with the awe of creation, and of the wisdom and beauty of nature. This is a sense that we need to develop within ourselves -- emotions of love and reverence towards the Creator.

However, just like the other senses can be deadened and destroyed if they are abused, the same is true with the sixth sense. If a person listens to loud music for long enough, he can lose his sense of hearing. If a person continuously eats very spicy foods, he can damage his sense of taste. Likewise, a person can lose his sense of being nispael. How does that happen? What costs a person his sense of being impressed?

Rav Schwab suggests that a person can lose his sense of being nispael through gluttonous indulgence in every passion and lust in the world. If a person is obsessed with enjoying, taking, eating, consuming, and all he ever thinks about is indulging in the most obscene and gluttonous fashion, then after a while, nothing impresses him anymore. He is so consumed with just enjoying himself that nothing gets him excited anymore.

If it seems hard to relate to this concept, all we need to do is to open our eyes and look at what has happened in the western world. Nothing makes an impression anymore. Movies have become more and more violent and explicit. Music has become more and more outrageous. The way people talk and the words we hear have become more and more astounding, because nothing makes an impression anymore. As a society, we have lost our sense of wonder. We have become coarsened.

To quote a recent piece in the Op-Ed page of the Baltimore Sun, "America has lost its 'shock value.' Nothing shocks anymore."

That is what happened to Bilaam. Nothing shocked him. His animal spoke to him and he took it in stride.

Everyone recognizes the seriousness of losing a sense of sight or hearing, chas v'shalom (Heaven forbid). We need to recognize that losing the sense of being nispael is a similarly serious by-product of the gluttonous and indulgent life that Bilaam lived. ©2024 Rabbi Y. Frand and torah.org

