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The Lower East Side
Parshat HaShavua sheet

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from around the Internet*

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Parshat Balak

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SORRY FOR NOTHING

By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

We are all fascinated by inanimate or animal objects that speak. The '60s had TV viewers kvelling over talking horses, even talking cars. And an entire industry was based on the concept of a talking mouse. But this week a talking animal is no joke. The Torah tells us about a talking animal that brought no laughs to its rider and teaches a serious lesson to us all. Bilaam, the greatest prophet that the gentile world had seen, was hired by Balak, King of Moab, for one mission: curse the Jews. Bilaam's feigned reluctance was quickly turned to exuberance when offers of honors and great wealth were added as signing bonus, and first thing in the morning he saddled his trusted donkey and was on his way. He planned to travel to an overlook, where he would cast his spell on the Jewish Nation as they camped innocently beneath the wicked gaze of Balak and his employee, Bilaam, the prophet.

But Hashem had different plans. As Bilaam's donkey ambled toward a narrow passage, it saw a frightening sight. An angel, with a sword thrust forward, blocked its path. The beast turned off the road into a field, and Bilaam struck the animal to get it back on the road. But again the angel stood in the passageway and the poor donkey, in fear, squeezed tightly against a stone wall, pressing Bilaam's leg against the wall. The great prophet, who so haughtily straddled the donkey, did not see the angelic figure and reacted violently. Again he hit his donkey; this time harder. But the angel did not retreat. He began approaching the donkey and its rider. Suddenly the donkey crouched in panic, and Bilaam struck it again. But this time the donkey did not act like a mule. She spoke up. Miraculously, Hashem opened her mouth, and she asked Bilaam, "why did you hit me? Aren't I the same animal that you have ridden your entire life? Should not my strange behavior give cause for concern?" (Numbers 22:28)

When the angel, sword in hand, finally revealed himself, and chided Bilaam for striking the innocent animal, Bilaam was flabbergasted. He was left speechless save for one sentence. "I have sinned, for I did not know that you were standing opposite me on the road. And if you want, I shall return" (Numbers 22:34).

What is disturbing is Bilaam's immediate admission of sin. If he could not see the angel why did he admit guilt? Many riders would hit a donkey that presses their foot against the wall or crouches down amidst a group of a king's officers. Bilaam should have simply stated to the angel, "I did not know you were there and thought my beast was acting in a manner that required discipline." Why the apology? If he truly did not know that the angel was there, why did he admit to sinning?

On one of the final days of the Six Day War the Israeli troops pierced through enemy fortifications and forged their way through the ancient passageways of Jerusalem. As if Divine gravitational force was pulling them, one group of soldiers dodged the Jordanian bullets and proceeded until there was no reason to continue. They had reached the Kotel HaMaravi, the Western Wall. The young men, some of whom had yeshiva education, others who came from traditional backgrounds, stood in awe and began to cry in unison. The Kotel had been liberated! One young soldier, who grew up on a totally secular kibbutz in the northern portion of the state gazed at the sight of his comrades crying like children as they stared up at the ancient stones. Suddenly, he too began to wail. One of the religious soldiers, who had engaged in countless debates with him, put his arm around him and asked, "I don't understand. To us the Kotel means so much. It is our link with the Temple and the holy service. This is the most moving experience of our lives. But why are you crying?" The young soldier looked at his friend, and amidst the tears simply stated, "I am crying because I am not crying."

Bilaam, the greatest of gentile prophets, realized that something must be wrong. A simple donkey saw the revelation of an angel. He did not. He realized that there are experiences he should have been able to grasp and appreciate. If he didn't it was not a donkey's fault. It was not an angel's fault. It was his fault. He realized then and there that it was he who was lacking. How often does G-d cry out to us in newspaper headlines, be it earthquakes, wildfires, or human tragedies? We should stare at the sight and see the divine figure standing with an outstretched sword. We do not. We flip the paper and strike at the donkeys who struck out.

We ought to cry at the tragedies of life, and if we do not realize that they are there, we ought to cry about that. Then one day we will all smile. Forever.

The Golden Rule

By Sheldon Stern

This week's Parsha begins (22:2,3), "Balak ben Tzippor saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites. Moav was very frightened of the people(the Jews) because it was formidable." The question is, "Why was Moav afraid?" The Bnei Yisrael made it clear that they had no designs on their land. The answer is that Moav was anxious for the same reason that Paroah was troubled so many years before.

But you'll ask, "Whoever suggested that Paroah was scared of his Jewish slaves?" Surely his draconian decrees were nothing more than classic anti-Semitism. He sought to win over his people, who recognized Yosef's accomplishments, by playing the xenophobia card. "Those Jews can't be trusted. They'll side with our enemies if we're attacked." We've paid the price for such chauvinism throughout our history. Our ancestors, who have been models citizens in each country of their dispersion, have been charged with disloyalty as a pretext for pogroms, expulsions and in the extreme, the Holocaust. But perhaps we need to take a closer look at the potentate who ignored all that Yosef and his brothers did for him and his country. The Gemara says that every lie must have in it at least a shred of truth and so we'll argue that Paroah was indeed unsure about his Jewish slaves' loyalty. This is indicated by the word Rav. Let's explain this point. To justify his actions, Paroah said that the Bnei Yisroel are stronger than us (Atzum Mimenu.) However he added the seemingly superfluous word Rav. Similarly, our verse uses the word Rav for formidable. When Yaakov tried to win over his older brother with gifts, after being estranged for 20 years, Eisav told him, "Yesh Li Rav." Rav then, may be seen as a code for Eisav. So what did Balak, and for that matter, Paroah mean? Yes, we know all about that goody-goody Yaakov, he's no problem. But Eisav; that's a horse of a different color. So these rulers were concerned that the duplicitous side of Yaakov would emerge. In Paroah's case, when Egypt was attacked, and for Balak, they feared that the Jews would attack them for no reason, i.e. simply out of spite. But why would anyone mix up these two polar opposites? For one thing, we know that Yaakov took on the guise of Eisav when importuned by his mother. But would the goyim know about this? Indubitably. The Gemara in Avodah Zarah notes that there was a Roman festival that was observed every 70 years. Someone would dress up as Eisav and another as his "crippled" brother. Moreover, the ten martyrs about whom we read on Tisha B'av and Yom Kippur represent Yosef's ten brothers. So yes, the gentiles are aware of our traditions and, of course, they distort them to use against us.

But I think there's a more complex, lomdish if you will, way to explain the subject and I'll present it thanks to a wonderful Dvar Torah I heard many years ago from Rabbi Yosef Viener. It was Shabbos Parshas Vayeira and he focused on verse 21:22 which said, "At that time, Avimelech and his general Phichol approached Avraham." As we know they came to forge a treaty with the Patriarch. Rabbi Viener asked what the Posuk meant to teach when it said "at that time?" He explained that the Torah had just completed its account of how Avraham sent away Yishmael and Hagar. This "act of cruelty" gave Avimelech pause. Up until this point, Avraham had been the paragon of Chesed. His home was open to all who wished to partake, but now the locals saw a different side, and they realized that Avraham was kind and generous, not because of his natural inclination, but because he was fulfilling G-d's wishes. It would follow then that if Avraham was "told" to turn on his benefactors(this is how Avimelech and his people viewed themselves) he would have no compunction about doing so. Therefore, Avimelech and Phichol felt that a peace treaty would protect them. They understood that if G-d told Avraham to ignore such a document he would protest as it would create a Chillul Hashem. Avraham spent his entire existence talking G-d up and so he wouldn't think of destroying all his work with such a brutal and treacherous act. So they had every reason to believe that such a document would protect them. This leads us to ask how Avraham, who was the personification of goodness, was capable of turning his back on Yishmael. When Hashem added a "Heh" to his name our forefather became Avraham whose Gematria is 248. This corresponds to the 248 limbs in a human being. Avraham then was in complete control of himself and was able to act in any way that would serve the Creator. Last week we spoke about the greatness of Dovid Hamelech who found no discord between lopping off the heads of Phillistines and writing poetry. It was all in a day's work and as testament to this we have Magen Avraham and Magen David, they each shared this majestic attribute. And let's remember, they worked on themselves to attain that inestimable perch. But here's the problem, "Why is Eisav getting a bum rap?" Why wouldn't Paroah and Balak say that the children of Avraham can't be trusted?

We can offer two answers. First, Avraham never violated the accords he signed with Avimelech and so this reinforced the belief he was trustworthy and what he did with Yishmael was not the norm. But more to the point we come to Parshas Chayeh Sarah. Avraham wanted to make funeral arrangements for his beloved wife Sarah and the natives told him, "Nasi Elokim Bisochainu." You are a prince of G-d in our midst. Avraham, is was and always will be, the most honored person who ever lived, and not just for the Jewish people. Therefore, Paroah and Balak looked for a model of deceit and that would be Yaakov, with a major assist from Eisav. But why allude to Eisav at all? Why wouldn't the Goyim simply refer to Yaakov as a cheat? If they're willing to kill us they should certainly have no qualms about defaming us. So here we introduce another principle of the Torah, "Ain Adam Chotei Ela Lo Lo." A human being doesn't sin unless it benefits him. So the Goyim could understand that Yaakov would purloin his brother's blessings. As Tears for Fears sang, "Everybody Wants to Rule the World." and these blessings gave the third Av such hegemony, at least in the spiritual sense. But when it came to performing such a dastardly act, as to wantonly kill the peoples of Moav and Midian for no purpose that would be the province of Eisav. They believed that some of his wickedness rubbed off on his brother. And they could point to the case of Shimon and Levi's slaughter of Shechem as proof text. And perhaps this explains why Yitzchak favored Eisav. Unlike Avraham, Yaakov was "simply" a man of Torah. This was his gestalt and his father knew this and supported it. And so Yitzchok wanted Eisav to do the "dirty work" while leaving the pristine Torah in his younger son's hands. But of course Hashem had other plans.

But the astute reader, and all my readers are astute and many are also connoisseurs of music, will ask, "How can Dr. Stern posit that the Goyim, would be aware of Torah concepts? A noted Rabbi recently said, "Today, because of the long and bitter exile no Jew can be punished no matter what sin he commits." I'm not referring to a Reform Rabbi. Moreover, many cite the Chazon Ish, who famously said that all Jews today are in the class of Tinok Shenishba. So when we hear such statements we have to spend time to evaluate them. The Chazon Ish was likely referring to the Jews of the Soviet Union who were prevented by the oppressive regime from keeping Mitzvohs. The other comment I've deal with online and so I won't address it here. The incomparable Tanna Hillel is credited with formulating the "Golden Rule." In the secular world it reads, "Do unto others as you would have others do unto you." Hillel's version states, "That which you find unpleasant, don't do to another." To quote Carol Klein(that's King for those who may not know),"People can be so cruel. They'll hurt you and they'll desert you, well they'll break your heart if you let them." Hillel's teaching has profound and universal ramifications. Yes, you need to learn Hilchos Shabbos to properly keep that day's holiness, but you don't need to be a Lamdan to be a functioning member of society. The Declaration of Independence said it beautifully, "We hold these truths to be self-evident." Or if you prefer we have Mr. Bob Dylan, "You don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows."

G-d endowed every human being with an inalienable sense of right and wrong. If we choose the wrong path it's not because we didn't master the three Bava's and so yes, the Torah's principle of reward and punishment is still very much in play. Let's develop this point. I live in a community which boasts a large Russian Jewish population. I've observed two positives. First, most Russian Jews, especially the older ones, are very Eidel. They show me great respect when they see that I'm observant. The second is that the older couples(70 plus) are totally devoted to each other. The Gemara says that when a couple divorces the Mizbeach on High sheds tears. Rabbi Miller said that the word divorce should never even be mentioned, following the principle of Al Tiftach Es Pi Hasatan. Yet we see that divorce is rampant, even within the frum community. So how do we understand this? The institution of marriage is central to natural law. Yes, Stalin was able to curtail Jewish practices, but he didn't touch the family unit and so it remained strong. But in America there has been a major assault on this norm. I listen to WFAN, the sports talk station, for much of the day. Most of the on-air personalities are married and speak about raising their children. But some are single and inevitably we get the comparisons, i.e. who has it better? That's a slippery slope. And when we factor in Heather Has Two Mommies these perversions take their toll. Hashem flooded the world because the people had deviated from the mainstream. To borrow from the Bard, "The fault is in ourselves not in the stars.' and definitely we can't blame Hashem for our failings.

“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.’” (22:30)

The donkey complained to Bilam that she had never led him wrong before and he was wrong for hitting her for her first offense. Instead, said the donkey, Bilam should have been patient with her because perhaps the donkey knew what she was doing this time as well, which was actually true. The words of the donkey teach us an important lesson. When someone has always come through for us in the past but seems to do something to hurt us, we should cut the person some slack and assume that he is doing it for a reason. Bilam immediately assumed the worst even though the donkey had never led him wrong before. Another lesson we can learn from the donkey is that people have the tendency to judge others by what they have done lately. One mistake can overshadow many other good deeds. We must be careful never to let the most recent actions color our perceptions of people. Instead, we should make every effort to look at the big picture and take everything into account. Another interesting point is that Bilam did not bat an eyelash when the donkey spoke to him. He just immediately answered back. He did not display any astonishment whatsoever. Bilam was so determined in his mission to curse the Jews that he was not going to let anything get in his way. He was so dedicated to his task that even a talking donkey did not faze him. He did not even lose a step in the conversation.

“Bilam rose in the morning and said to the officers of Balak: Go to your land for Hashem refuses to allow me to go with you” (22:13)

Rashi explains Bilam’s statement to mean that “Hashem does not permit me to go with you, but only with messengers who are more important and honorable than you.” This distortion of the truth shows us his haughtiness. He did not convey what Hashem actually said because he did not want to admit that he was powerless to go against the word of Hashem. We see how pride prevents a person from being fully honest. He covered his pride by changing the story a little bit and making excuses. A person should be conscious of how pride can get in the way of complete honesty because he may be concerned about how he looks. We should be aware of this so that we can avoid making this mistake. In fact, this evil trait led to Bilam’s downfall. If he had just told the truth instead of distorting it, he would never have gone to Balak and his reputation would not have been destroyed.

“How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your tents, O Israel” (24:5)

Why did Bilam first say Yaakov and then Yisrael? Yaakov is the name that refers to Klal Yisrael in exile while Yisrael is the name used for the Jewish nation when it flourishes in its homeland. Bilam was saying that not only is modesty important to the people when they dwell in tents in the exile of the wilderness, but even when they are Yisrael and they live in permanent dwellings in their own land, they will still emphasize modesty and an important part of life.

“Israel became attached to Baal Peor and the wrath of Hashem flared up against Israel” (25:3)

R' Chaim Shmuelevitz asks: How was it possible for the people to become so attached to a form of idolatry that was so disgraceful? The idea of Baal Peor was the break down moral boundaries. Generally, people act respectfully and in normal ways. The idea of Baal Peor was to make everything free and liberated and to take away all restrictions on human behavior. This idea was attractive because it tempts a person to believe that a life without restrictions is a life of happiness and pleasure. Serving this idol was done in a disgraceful manner, but the ideology that it represented was alluring. Despite the fact that the desire for idolatry no longer exists today, the ideology of this idolatry is still prevalent today. The concept of no limits and unrestrained hedonism is still rather popular. Baal Peor is mentioned in Parshas Va'eschanan in connection with the prohibition against adding or detracting from the mitzvos of the Torah because lesson the people learned for the tragedy with Baal Peor was that boundaries must remain intact. Once a breach is made in the fence of morality, the entire way of Jewish life becomes vulnerable. It is important to maintain appropriate restrictions and to understand that limitations are a part of leading a life of joyful service of Hashem.

By Rabbi Mayer Friedman

When in Doubt, Don't Shout

by Rabbi Eli Scheller

The she-donkey said to Bilaam, "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?" (Num. 22:30)

Imagine you're on the way home from a wedding late at night. You've been traveling many hours and you're wiped out. All you can think of is crawling into bed. You are nearing your house when suddenly you spot your neighbor's car blocking your driveway. You become enraged. "How could he do something like that, he knows I need to park my car!!" You circle the block for 10 minutes until you find parking, while thinking about how to retaliate against your neighbor. You then remember that the Torah says to judge others favorably and give them the benefit of the doubt. But you think, "How is it possible to give him the benefit of the doubt - he knows I need to park my car and nevertheless he blocked the driveway?!"

Bilam was riding his donkey on the way to curse the Jews when the donkey stopped moving, refusing to budge. Bilam struck it. The donkey, suddenly able to speak, asked in bewilderment, "Hey, what was that for?!" Bilam said, "You're lucky I don't have my sword on me, otherwise I would have killed you!"

The donkey replied, "Bilam, have I ever betrayed you? Have I been accustomed to do such a thing to you? Why in the world would you think that I'm trying to hurt you and prevent you from going?!" The donkey was telling Bilam to focus on the one doing the apparent "evil" and not to zoom in on the isolated incident. If the perpetrator is not accustomed to betraying you then it's more rational to assume that some far-out scenario must be taking place. In the case of the donkey, Bilam should have realized that there was something unusual going on. In fact there was an angel blocking the path which prevented the donkey from proceeding.

The same logic applies to your neighbor blocking the driveway. Since this action is not in character with your neighbor, it is more rational to assume that some emergency came up than to assume that he just did not care about you and prevented you from parking your car. By giving people the benefit of the doubt, our lives, relationships and daily interactions will become more positive and successful - making the world a better place.

If It Can Happen To Bilaam, It Can Happen to Any of Us

By Rabbi Yisrocher Frand

Parshas Balak contains an incident which teaches a tremendous ethical lesson. I personally find it to be one of the scariest mussar [ethical] teachings in the Torah.

This incident involves Bilaam, who had a tremendous power of speech. Whoever he blessed was blessed; whoever he cursed was cursed. He was a very powerful man — a person who did not command divisions of armies, but had an almost magical power of speech. Bilaam is asked to employ this power against the Jews. He knows that G-d does not want him to go, but he decides to go nonetheless. While on the way, his donkey stops, refuses to move, and then the donkey suddenly opens up his mouth and starts talking to him. A donkey never talked to a man since the beginning of the history of the world, and such a thing will never happen again.

If a person had any doubts about whether what he was doing was right or wrong, and his car suddenly stopped and told him "Don't Go" (and not just one of those recorded voices saying "Your seatbelt isn't buckled...") — would that not cause the person to at least stop and wonder whether he was doing the right thing?

We may ask this question even about a person who is not perceptive. But Bilaam was a wise person; he was a perceptive person. How would a perceptive person relate to his donkey talking to him? Bilaam should have thought, "My strength is my speech. Who gave me that power? G-d gave me that power. The proof is that the same G-d who gave me the power of speech, just gave my donkey the power of speech! 'Who gives a mouth to man or who makes one dumb...' [Shemos 4:11] Where is my strength from? My speech is no bigger of a miracle than my donkey talking. It is the same strength from G-d."

What should Bilaam have concluded? He should have concluded that he was not using his power of speech correctly, and he should turn back. Is this not as clear as day? Is the message not clear? Should it not that make an impression? Yet it did not have any impact. This is the lesson to be learned: how blind a person can be! When a person has some type of personal motive — whether it is money or power or whatever it is — a person can literally be completely blind. G-d can almost spell it out to him... G-d CAN spell it out to him, but he still will not see it!

That is what is so frightening. Something can be as clear as day to the objective observer, but the person on his way to sin cannot see that which is in front of his own eyes! This is terribly frightening, because if it can happen to Bilaam, it can happen to every one of us! If Bilaam can be blinded, we can be blinded as well. This is the tremendous mussar to be derived from the incident of Bilaam: There are none so blind, as those who will not see.

If Balak and Bilaam Were Here Today...

By Rabbi Berel Wein

Poor Balak and Bilaam. If they would have lived in our generation they would have undoubtedly received great and favorable media coverage, interviews on CNN and invitations to speak at the Hebrew University to tell their side of the story.

The part about the speaking donkey would certainly have made for great feature articles where it would be pointed out that Bilaam is not to be blamed for beating his animal – rather it is all the fault of that conquering, occupying, bullying angel that inserted himself into the picture.

Yet, no matter what the revisionist historians will say, Balak and Bilaam remain the guilty villains in Jewish tradition and minds. There was no justification to demonize and curse an entire people who intended to do you no harm. Bilaam is a non-governmental, allegedly not-for-profit, one man organization, proclaiming great ideals while at the same time condoning enslavement and murder of thousands. And, in spite of his protestations of idealism and even-handedness, he is for hire.

He is the original spin artist, the public relations genius, the amoral unprincipled guru looking always for new clients. He is so good and effective at his task that apparently only the Lord Himself is able to rein him in and make him speak truths and blessings when that was not his original intent.

Bilaam is toppled from his self-importance by the God that he claims to represent and have contact with. His ultimate punishment is not so much his death at the hands of the Jews but it is the humiliating experience of being forced to bless when he intended and promised his employer to curse. Poor Bilaam – he should have waited a few millennia to ply his trade.

The Talmud teaches us that Bilaam's antipathy to the Jewish people was already apparent at the beginning of the Jewish sojourn in Egypt. He was the advisor to the Pharaoh who recommended that Pharaoh enslave the Jewish people and kill all of their male children. When God, through Moshe, thwarted that evil design and Israel emerged triumphant from Egypt in great numbers Bilaam tried a different tack using Balak in his effort to destroy the Jewish people.

And finally when this scheme is stopped by Divine intervention, he advises the use of lust and sinfulness to destroy Israel. His advice costs the lives of twenty-four thousand Jews. No wonder Jews throughout the ages have characterized Bilaam as 'Bilaam harasha' – Bilaam, the evil one. He has no reason or justification for his malevolence and enmity.

It is just there, like much of the anti-Semitism that infects a great deal of the supposedly civilized intellectual world today. It is difficult to deal with such baseless yet intense hatred and venom.

I think it obvious that God intervenes to spare us from many of the actions of our enemies and friends. Thus the story of Balak and Bilaam remains relevant and current as the topics and events in our world today. Balak and Bilaam are able to exact a price from us in lives, fortune and social standing. But now, as then, they are unable to defeat us.