

+++++

The Lower East Side
Parshat HaShavua sheet

*A collection of Divrei Torah
from around the Internet*

+++++

=====

Parshat Balak

=====

Latest time for Kriyat Shema – 9:22

A NEVER ENDING STORY

By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

With Divine intervention ensuring that Balak the King of Moav would be governed by Murphy's Law, everything that could go wrong for him went wrong.

Balak, the King of Moav saw that the Jewish nation was camped near his land and he became frightened. He employed the greatest sorcerer of the generation, Bilaam, to curse the Children of Israel, but alas, Hashem ensured that all potential curses were turned into blessings. In one of the early attempts to curse the Jews, Bilaam erected seven altars with sacrifices. He set out to accomplish his mission but he failed. Instead of cursing the Jews, Bilaam blessed them and longed for their eternal fortune.

"He declaimed his parable and said 'From Aram, Balak, king of Moab, led me, from the mountains of the east, 'Come curse Jacob for me, come bring anger upon Israel.' How can I curse? G-d has not cursed. How can I anger? G-d is not angry. For from its origins, I see it rock-like, and from hills do I see it. Behold! It is a nation that will dwell in solitude and not be reckoned among the nations. Who has counted the dust of Jacob or numbered a quarter of Israel? May my soul die the death of the upright, and may my end be like his!" (Numbers 23:6-10)

Though I am no expert in sorcerer's spells or Bilaamic blessings, the juxtaposition is difficult to comprehend. Why did Bilaam suddenly ask to die the death of the upright after extolling the uniqueness of his adversaries, the Israelites? If he gave them blessings, why didn't he ask to live in the bounty of their goodness?

When my son was in fourth grade and had to do a report on President Abraham Lincoln. He did a fine job recounting his log-cabin childhood, his early career as an attorney, and his tumultuous presidency. He detailed the difficult period of the Civil War and Lincoln's bold stance in signing the Emancipation Proclamation. I looked over his report and frankly, I was quite impressed — until I reached the last sentence. It read: "Abraham Lincoln died on Friday morning, April 15, 1865, and was buried in Oak Ridge Cemetery, outside Springfield, Illinois." "Zvi," I exclaimed, "Abraham Lincoln died on Friday morning?" I rhetorically reiterated, stressing the passivity of the underreported, yet most traumatic event. "Died?" I repeated. "He was shot to death! In fact, Lincoln was assassinated! In fact," I added, "he was the first President to be assassinated! How can you ignore that significant part of his life in your report?" Zvi looked at me quizzically. "My report was on 'the Life of Abraham Lincoln. Who cares how he died? He died!"

Bilaam understood that death, too, is an integral part of life. Our attitude toward death is part of our larger attitude toward life. And the way we leave this world is part of a greater outlook of how we aspire to live our lives. A neighbor of mine was a former Yeshiva boy back in the early 1920's in one of America's first yeshivas. Time and circumstances eroded both his practice and belief. He had joined the army and rose to the rank of a General. He and his wife often ate in our sukkah and we became quite friendly. When he was diagnosed with a fatal illness, he asked me to perform his funeral service in the right time. I agreed only if he would be buried in accordance with the halacha. And though in his life he disregarded the daily practices of an observant Jew, in death, he forewent burial in his army uniform and instead chose traditional tachrichim (shrouds) and a talis.

When one sees the ultimate spiritual eternity of the Jew, he realizes that death is just a portal to a greater world, Olam HaBah. Bilaam declared that we are a nation that dwells in solitude, and that our ways in life are not compatible with those nations who outnumber us. It is after he comprehended our eternity that he beseeched the Almighty with the haunting bequest, "May my soul die the death of the upright, and may my end be like his!" The Chofetz Chaim, however, added a very cogent caveat: In asking for the death of the righteous, Bilaam understood that there is more to the legacy of life than life itself. And so, Bilaam wanted to live his perverted life as a hedonistic heretic, yet he wanted to die the death of the righteous. "Truth be told," says the Chofetz Chaim, "our mission is not only to die the death of the upright, but to live the life of the upright as well." Because if you want to sleep the sleep, you first have to walk the walk.

Admitting Weakness

By Adam Liberman

In this week's Torah portion, a king named Balak wanted to curse the Jewish people. He sought out a prophet named Balaam to carry out this wish and sent his officers to summon him. Balaam asked God if he could go, but God immediately told him not to go and curse the Jewish people because they were a people who were "blessed." But when Balaam relayed this answer to the king's officers, Balaam left that part out and only said:

"...God refuses to let me go with you." (Numbers, 22:13)

God had told Balaam two distinct and specific points in response to his request to go and curse the Jewish people. First, God emphatically told Balaam not to go and second, to not curse the Jewish people because they are blessed. But when Balaam relayed this simple and brief response, he left out 50 percent of what God said!

God made it very clear to Balaam that it would be completely futile to even attempt to curse the Jews because they are a blessed nation. But to an arrogant and haughty prophet -- which Balaam certainly was -- he could never bring himself to admit his own powers lacked any limitations. So instead of telling the king's delegates that Balaam was simply the wrong man for the job and would be completely ineffective and incapable of doing the king's bidding, he chose to omit all of this and "pass the buck" to God by only saying that God said he wasn't allowed to go.

It's what Balaam purposely didn't say that can teach us all a valuable lesson in our own lives. To most people, it's clear that God gave each of us certain unique strengths and talents whereby certain things that just seem to "naturally" to us. But it is also equally clear that God *didn't* give us certain skills and strengths. Whether we're not good at math, directions, instruction manuals, drawing, or organization -- we all have weaknesses. While some of these weaknesses are things we might continually work on to become better people, there are some things that we are just plain not good at, and that's just how it is!

But those with low self-esteem have a difficult time ever admitting they lack any skill or ability. They wrongly believe that an acknowledgement of a lack of talent in any area would be a direct reflection on their own self-worth. However, the exact opposite is true. Those who can readily and easily admit that they aren't "good" at something aren't showing weakness or incompetence. Rather, it demonstrates honesty, strength and self-confidence. Others will look at this person and see someone who is comfortable with the strengths and talents that they DO have and need not proclaim to all they meet that they're good at everything.

Balaam was just too proud to admit he couldn't do what someone had requested of him. Let's learn from this the next time you're asked to do something that you're either not that skilled at or are outright incapable of doing. Contrary to what Balaam believed, telling people you're not the right person for the job will actually make you shine in their eyes, because it means you have the confidence to say so. It also sends the message that when you do take on a task, you unquestionably believe that you'll deliver great results.

The Jewish Home

By Rabbi Shaul Rosenblatt

In this week's Torah portion, Balaam's great praise for the Jewish people is found in the famous words that begin our daily prayers and that every Bar/Bat Mitzvah child knows by heart: *Ma tovu ohalecha Yaakov* - "How goodly are your tents, O Jacob" (Numbers 24:5).

The Sages explain that Balaam noticed how the tents of the Jews in the desert were carefully aligned so that no one could see into anyone else's home. Balaam wanted to curse the Jewish people, but because of their modesty, he was unable to do so.

There is an underlying message here. The strength of the Jewish people lies in their homes. Homes, not individuals, are the basic building blocks of a nation. Much more so than individuals create homes, homes nurture individuals. Stable homes, with strong values and focused education, are the most fundamental element in creating a strong nation.

Schools are an important part of an education system, but parents (and governments) who think that schools can be relied on to create individuals of strong moral character will realize their mistake after the horse has already bolted. Even taking into account the element of free will, parents are majorly responsible for who their children turn out to be. They cannot merely blame the school, society or the child's friends. The most fundamental influence is the home.

Yet, as easy as it is to say, it's equally difficult to do. And bringing up children requires an inordinate amount of Divine assistance. But recognition of the reality is a first step in making it happen. Let's rely on no one but ourselves to create the environment in which our children can prosper and develop into the decent and contributing members of society we would like them to be. For as we know from Balaam, because of our homes, he could not curse us.

Money and Honor

by Rabbi Yehonasan Gefen

The character, Bilaam, is considered to be the archetype of a person with bad character traits. The Mishna in Pirkei Avot describes him as having an '*ayin raah*' (he looked upon people in a negative way), a '*ruach gevo'ah*' (he was arrogant), and a '*nefesh rechava*' (he was greedy).

'*Nefesh Rechava*' refers specifically to Bilaam's love for money; the commentaries derive his greediness from his response to the request of Balak's ministers for him to curse the Jewish people. They said, "...So said Balak son of Tzipor, please do not refuse from coming to me. I will greatly honor you and everything that you say I will do, please go and curse this nation for me." Bilaam replied and said to Balak's servants, if Balak will give me his house full of silver and gold, I cannot transgress the word of HaShem, my God, to do small or great." On superficial analysis we learn Bilaam's greediness from the large sum of money that he alluded to in his refusal to go against God's words.

However, the commentaries point out that this cannot be true, because there is another example in the Rabbinical literature where a genuine Torah scholar used a similar expression to that of Bilaam. The Mishna in Pirkei Avot describes the account of the great Rebbe Yosse ben Kisma, who was approached by a wealthy man to leave his place of Torah to dwell in another city that was lacking in Torah scholars. The man offered him an immense amount of money in his attempt to persuade Rebbe Yosse to come to his city. Rebbe Yosse replied, 'if you give me all the silver, gold and precious pearls in the world I will only live in a place of Torah.' Rebbe Yosse mentioned an even greater amount of money than Bilaam and there is no indication at all that he showed any sign of greediness in his reply. What is the difference between Bilaam's response and that of Rebbe Yosse ben Kisma?

On deeper analysis it seems that there is a significant difference between Bilaam and Rebbe Yosse ben Kisma. When the man tried to persuade Rebbe Yosse to stay in his city he promised him a great amount of money, and, in response, Rebbe Yosse replied that no amount of money could make him leave a place of Torah. It was appropriate for Rebbe Yosse to refer to money because the man directly mentioned it himself. In contrast, the ministers of Balak never made any mention of money in their attempts to convince Bilaam to curse the Jewish people. Rather, they said that Balak offered to "greatly honor" him. Bilaam replied by saying the even a great amount of money would not enable him to curse the Jews if God did not allow it. From Bilaam's mention of money we see two things: Firstly that money was something that was so prevalent in his mind that he brought it up even when no one else had made any mention of it. Secondly, on a deeper level, we see that he related to the concept of "honor" as meaning, 'financial benefit' - to Bilaam, honor and money were the same thing. This proves his love for money, because a person who does not love money will not think that it is equivalent to honor.

A difficulty still remains with this explanation. It would have seemed that someone who loves money would not necessarily consider that its main benefit is honor, rather people want money so that they can make materialistic acquisitions. Having money enables a person to satisfy his desires for physical pleasures such as a nice house, a fast car, good food, and lots of vacations. Given this, why did Bilaam equate honor with money? There are two possible motivations behind a person's love of money; one is an attachment to physicality, whereby he wants money to fulfill his physical desires. The second is that having a great deal of money can enable a person to receive honor and respect from others. This means that everyone is looking for some kind of meaning - honor is one of the main ways that a starved soul can try to derive some satisfaction. In western society today, having money is probably the greatest way of receiving honor. When a person wants money in order to receive honor then he will never be satisfied no matter how much money he acquires - for him, money gives him honor, but his soul will instinctively crave more honor as a source of meaning. Consequently he will try to fulfill this desire by acquiring more money, but will constantly feel dissatisfied. It seems that it is this kind of love for money that the Rabbis refer to when they say that when a person gets 100 *maneh* he wants 200 *maneh*, and when he gets 200 *maneh* he wants 400 *maneh*. For this person, money is his means to gaining honor but he will always crave more honor and therefore he will always want more money to satisfy this desire for honor. For Bilaam money was certainly a vehicle for attaining more honor.

From Bilaam's equating money with honor, it is clear that his '*nefesh rechava*' (greed) caused him to have the more pernicious kind of love for money - the kind that emanates from a desire for honor. The Slonimer Rebbe in his seminal work *Netivot Shalom* discusses how damaging this can be to a person - in the aforementioned Mishna in Pirkei Avot the students of Bilaam are compared with those of Abraham. Towards the end of the Mishna it asks what the difference is between the two groups. It explains that "the students of Abraham eat in *Olam Haze*h (this world) and inherit *Olam Haba* (the Next World)... but the students of the evil Bilaam inherit *Gehinnom* and go down to the well of destruction." What is the repetitive language used with regard to Bilaam's students, of '*Gehinnom*' and 'well of destruction'? The *Netivot Shalom* explains that the 'well of destruction' refers to *Olam Haba*, whereas '*Gehinnom*' actually refers to *Olam Haze*h - the students of Bilaam do not only experience great pain in the next world, they also suffer in this world. They are so concerned about gaining more acquisitions and more honor that they can never attain satisfaction in their lives to the extent that they live *Gehinnom* even in *Olam Haze*h!

This explanation teaches an obvious lesson that the relentless drive for money can never provide a person with true satisfaction. A certain amount of money is a necessary means to helping people attain the end of a meaningful life, but it is essential to remain vigilant that it remains as a 'means' and does not become the ultimate goal in itself. Instead, occupying one's time with developing a relationship with God can provide the only source of satisfaction that leaves a person truly satisfied.

“Hashem came to Bilam and said: Who are these men with you?” (22:9)

Hashem asked this question of Bilam in order to provoke him to think about who he was associating with and whether their company would be beneficial. Each of us should also think about this and always assess the kind of people that we surround ourselves with and if this is the sort of company that we wish to keep. We should go out of our way to build relationships with people who will have a positive influence on our lives. Chazal stress the value of companionship with good people and teach us to “acquire a friend” at all costs. Every morning, we daven in Birchos HaShachar to be spared from “an evil companion.” It is important to recognize the impact that friends have on us and make sure that we arrange for that to be a positive impact.

“Bilam arose in the morning and saddled his donkey and went with the officers of Moav” (22:21)

Bilam enthusiastically saddled his own donkey early in the morning so that he could set out to curse the Jewish people. Rashi cites the following Midrash: Hashem said to Bilam, “Wicked one! Their ancestor Avraham has already preceded you, as the posuk (Bereishis 22:3) says: ‘ And Avraham arose in the morning and saddled his donkey.’

”R’ Moshe Feinstein asks in Darash Moshe: What is the connection between Avraham and Bilam such that Avraham “preceded” Bilam? R’ Feinstein writes that Hashem wants a person to devote as much energy and enthusiasm to Torah and mitzvos as he does to his livelihood and other mundane matters. In this vein, the posuk in Mishlei (2:4-5) says: “If you seek it as silver, if you search for it as hidden treasures, then you will understand the fear of Hashem and discover the knowledge of G-d.” Therefore, if Hashem finds a generation that approaches their mundane needs with excessive enthusiasm, He expects them to apply themselves at least as much to Torah and mitzvos. If not, it could be the basis for a condemnation of the Jewish people. For this reason, Bilam got up early and enthusiastically saddled his donkey. He wanted Hashem to see how excited he was to be doing something bad and compare that to the way that Bnei Yisrael did their mitzvos. He hoped that this would reflect poorly on them and cause Hashem to desire their punishment. However, Hashem responded that Avraham Avinu had already done precisely what Bilam did, excitedly following Hashem’s command with much zeal when he saddled his donkey to go sacrifice his only son. This merit stands in their stead while Bilam would be punished for running excitedly to transgress the word of Hashem that the Jewish people could only be blessed. We learn from Hashem’s response that Bilam was indeed correct about making the Jews look bad and would have succeeded if not for the merit of Avraham. We need to appraise the way that we treat Torah and mitzvos to be sure that we approach them with at least equal excitement as we do other aspects of our lives, as this is what Hashem asks of us.

“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.

“Then an Jewish man came and brought the Midianite woman to his brethren, before the eyes of Moshe and before the eyes of the entire congregation of the Children of Israel, while they were weeping at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting” (25:6)

Rabbeinu Bachya points out that the name of the Jewish man who sinned publicly and the Midianite woman with whom he sinned are not mentioned. In truth, they were important people, the leader of the tribe of Shimon and a Midianite princess. Their names are omitted to show that Pinchas did what needed to be done and he was not intimidated by their status. He viewed them the same way as if it would have been an unimportant man or woman who committed such a terrible sin because there are no exceptions for prominent people under the law. This could not have been easy for Pinchas, but he stood up for the honor of Hashem and did not show any concern for the perceived honor of people. In this way, Pinchas serves as a role model for us, who live in a time when the things and people that the world around us considers honorable are far from honorable in the eyes of Hashem and His Torah. We must have the courage of Pinchas to look at the Torah to guide our values even when it conflicts with the values of general society and not to be intimidated against taking proper action. Sometimes people face decisions in life and they talk themselves into doing something even when it is obvious that it is the wrong choice. Look at the difference between Bilam and Pinchas. Bilam knew that he was making the wrong choice, but he was blinded by his greed for money and his hatred of the Jews, so he attempted to curse the Jewish people anyway. That choice completely backfired on him. Pinchas, on the other hand, had every reason to ignore what was happening out of self-preservation, but he ignored those considerations and did what he knew had to be done. As a result, he was rewarded handsomely.

Reading Anti-Semites

by Rabbi Ari Kahn

Parashat Balak begins with a peek into a world that both attracts and repulses us; it is a conversation among anti-Semites regarding the Jewish Problem. This conversation interests us because, on some level, we want to know what others are saying about our people - even to the point of an obsession that enthralls and overwhelms our own self-awareness. On the other hand, we find the stereotypes and animus abhorrent. Anyone who has ever overheard or participated in a conversation regarding the Jews in which the interlocutors are unaware that one of the participants is Jewish, has experienced this strange feeling.

The perceptions of those who hate us are encapsulated in a beautiful but painful joke, which has certainly known many renditions and incarnations. The following is a version set in Nazi Germany:

Rabbi Altmann and his secretary were sitting in a coffeehouse in Berlin in 1935. "Herr Altmann," said his secretary, "I notice you're reading *Der Stürmer*! I can't understand why. A Nazi libel sheet! Are you some kind of masochist, or, God forbid, a self-hating Jew?" "On the contrary, Frau Epstein. When I used to read the Jewish papers, all I learned about were pogroms, riots in Palestine, and assimilation in America. But now that I read *Der Stürmer*, I see so much more: that the Jews control all the banks, that we dominate in the arts, and that we're on the verge of taking over the entire world. You know - it makes me feel a whole lot better!"

This basic idea is not only true, but as old as the Book of Bamidbar. Parashat Balak begins with a description of the overall climate of those times: The Moavites became petrified because the [Israelite] People were so numerous. They were disgusted by the Israelites... ([Bamidbar 22:3](#))

Here are two common elements: There are "so many" Jews, and they are "disgusting." The Moavites' description of the Jews is telling: Moav said to the elders of Midian, 'Now the [Israelite] community will lick up everything around us, just as a bull licks up all the vegetation in the field.' (ibid.)

The first step is, and always has been, the dehumanization of the Jews; they are compared to an animal. But the second step is the particular choice of metaphor. In this case, they are likened to a powerful, destructive animal - a bull. This description is even more striking when we recall that earlier in the Book of Bamidbar, when the scouts returned from their mission to explore the Promised Land, they made a fascinating comment:

While we were there, we saw the titans. They were sons of the giants, descendants of titans. We felt in our own eyes like tiny grasshoppers. And so we were in their eyes. ([Bamidbar 13:33](#))

It is perfectly legitimate to describe one's adversary through the use of images or allegory, especially when the adversary seems particularly unusual and powerful. Similarly, it is perfectly acceptable to describe your own feelings - what it felt like to be in the proximity of this adversary. What is not legitimate is to project your own perception onto others, to decide how your adversary perceives you. The spies contended that they knew how the residents of the land saw them: "We were like grasshoppers in their eyes." Conversely, Moav sees the Jews not as grasshoppers, but "as a powerful bull swallowing up the field." Here, then, is the difference between the assessment of current events found in Jewish newspapers, as opposed to that found in the news outlets of our enemies: We project our own weakness in their eyes, while they see our power.

A second element can be discerned from Bil'am's famous words: How good are your tents Yaakov, the dwelling places of Israel. ([Bamidbar 24:5](#))

Bil'am sees a large camp that is unified. The commentaries on this verse explain that when Bil'am saw the layout of the camp, he saw something remarkable: The doors and windows of the tents did not face one another. He saw that the Israelites had achieved unity, but not at the price of enforced uniformity. He saw a large nation that worked toward achieving its goals as one body politic, yet each individual within the camp retained their right to privacy, personal autonomy and dignity. Even more remarkable is the fact that this is the camp of the Jews. The Torah does not whitewash or omit the many internecine struggles, revolts and transgressions that this camp had already survived. And yet, despite all of our perceived differences, the outsider sees us as a unified nation living in harmony and moving forward in solidarity.

Today, our own newspapers are full of the language of disunity and despair: internecine conflict between different segments of our own nation based on differences between warring communities that are so minute as to be imperceptible to outside observers. Even worse, like the spies in the desert, we continue to project our own insecurities onto others, and fail to see our greatness. We assume that we know how others see us, and fail to see ourselves as we truly are - or as others see us. Sometimes the best medicine for the Jews is to see the newspapers of those who hate us. It is there that we can read about our power as it perceived by others. It is there that we can be bolstered by the unity others ascribe to us. At the very least, by reading those newspapers, we will be reminded that we face common threats, and that the best way to fight these threats is look past our own small differences, and to utilize our power - the power we often forget we possess.

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.