**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT BALAK**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

We read in Parashat Balak the unusual events that transpired as Bilam made his way to Moav for the purpose of cursing *Benei Yisrael*, and his donkey began speaking to him. After Bilam struck the donkey three times for veering from the road (and then crouching in place), God “opened the donkey’s mouth” and it protested against Bilam’s violent conduct (22:25).

Seforno, commenting on this expression – “The Lord opened the donkey’s mouth” – explains: “It placed in it the power to speak, similar to ‘Lord, open my lips’.” God’s enabling Bilam’s donkey to speak, in Seforno’s view, resembles David’s famous plea to God with which we introduce every *Amida* prayer several times each day: “Lord, open my lips, so that my mouth shall speak Your praises” (Tehillim 51:17). Just as David asked God to “open his lips” – meaning, to grant him the ability to pray and praise the Almighty – the Torah speaks of God “opening the mouth” of Bilam’s donkey, referring to granting it the ability to speak.

Rav Yerucham Levovitz found it striking that Seforno would draw such a comparison – between God’s enabling an animal to speak, and God’s helping David pray properly. Granting a donkey the power of speech marks a fundamental transformation from a regular beast to a supernatural creature. What David asked for, seemingly, is not nearly as drastic. All he wanted was the ability to speak God’s praises effectively, to properly and accurately express his awe and his appreciation for all that God does. How can these two possibly be compared?

Apparently, Rav Yerucham explained, we are indeed given the opportunity to undergo a fundamental transformation every time we approach God in prayer – a transformation no less significant than that experienced by Bilam’s donkey. Standing in God’s presence and speaking to him brings us into an entirely different realm, and has the power to transform us into better and holier people.

Moreover, as some have noted, Seforno’s comments perhaps show us that even seemingly small improvements are, in fact, very significant. Enhancing our prayer and our connection to God is not a quantitative change, but a qualitative one. The difference between an ordinary prayer and a more focused, impassioned prayer is like the difference between an ordinary donkey and Bilam’s speaking donkey. We should never underestimate the significance of even the small steps we take in improving ourselves, because every small improvement is substantial and precious, and even transformative, turning us into fundamentally greater people and fundamentally greater servants of the Almighty.

Sunday

Parashat Balak begins with the invitation sent by Balak, the king of Moav, to Bilam, asking him to come and place a curse upon *Benei Yisrael*. In his message sent to Bilam, Balak noted *Benei Yisrael*’s military strength, and how they were encamped next to Moav, and he wanted Bilam to curse them “that perhaps I may strike them and drive them from the land” (22:6).

Chizkuni, as well as *Da’at Zekeinim Mi-Ba’alei Ha-Tosafot*, explain that Balak’s objective was to drive *Benei Yisrael* from the territory they had recently captured, which bordered on Moav’s territory. The phrase “*va-agareshenu min ha-aretz*” (“drive them from the land”) refers to Balak’s plan to expel *Benei Yisrael* from their current area of settlement.

The Midrash (*Bamidbar Rabba* 20:7), however, appears to explain differently, writing that Balak “sought only to drive them away so they do not enter the Land.” According to the Midrash, Balak’s concern was only to bar *Benei Yisrael* from crossing the Jordan River into the Land of Israel.

Why would it matter to Moav whether *Benei Yisrael* remained in the Emorite territory they had recently captured, or crossed into the Land of Israel? Either way, they resided in lands bordering Moav, thus posing a threat.

Rav Shmuel Borenstein of Sochatchov, in *Sheim Mi-Shmuel*, suggests that the Midrash points to Balak’s theological objection to *Benei Yisrael*. The *Sheim Mi-Shmuel* explains that Balak had no concerns about *Benei Yisrael* living out in the wilderness, away from civilization, miraculously subsisting on manna and a supernatural well. As long as *Benei Yisrael* did not get involved in the land, bringing the mundane realm into the realm of sanctity, Balak was perfectly at ease. He felt threatened by *Benei Yisrael*’s transitioning from an entirely spiritual, miraculous existence in the desert to a natural mode of existence once they entered *Eretz Yisrael*, and this is what he sought to prevent. The *Sheim Mi-Shmuel* explained on this basis the Midrash’s reading of Bilam’s exclamation, “*Mi mana afar Ya’akov*” (“Who can count the ‘earth’ of Yaakov!” – 23:10). As Rashi cites, the *Midrash Tanchuma* interprets this as Bilam’s marveling at the number of *mitzvot* that *Benei Yisrael* perform with dirt, including the laws governing agriculture. The *Sheim Mi-Shmuel* explains that Balak’s revulsion for *Benei Yisrael* lay precisely in their applying religious values and principles to “earth,” to practical, worldly matters. Balak wanted spirituality confined to the “desert,” to the abstract, theoretical realm, and refused to acknowledge a religious system that affects real-world living. And so when God compelled Bilam to transform his curse to a blessing, Bilam expressed his admiration for “*afar Yaakov*,” for how *Benei Yisrael* bring sanctity to the “earth,” to worldly, mundane matters, by conducting our otherwise ordinary affairs in a refined and sacred manner, in accordance with the Torah’s laws.

The *Sheim Mi-Shmuel* here warns against compartmentalizing our lives, distinguishing our religious identity from the rest of our affairs. The Torah was given to us in the desert – but with the intention that we would carry it with us into the land and apply it even to the “*afar*,” to each and every area of practical life.

Monday

Parashat Balak begins by telling of the fear that gripped the nation of Moav in the aftermath of *Benei Yisrael*’s conquest of two neighboring empires – those of Sichon and Og – which bordered on Moav’s territory. Moav’s dread of *Benei Yisrael* led its king, Balak, to hire the prophet Bilam to place a curse on *Benei Yisrael*.

Rashi (22:2), based on the *Midrash Tanchuma*, writes in explaining the reason for Balak’s fear, “He said: These two kings in whom we trusted were unable to withstand them – certainly we [are unable to withstand them].” According to Rashi, it appears, Balak feared that *Benei Yisrael* would attack and conquer Moav, just as it conquered the territories of Sichon and Og, kingdoms that were far stronger than Moav.

The Ramban (22:4), however, explains differently, noting that the message sent by Moav’s leaders expressing their concern mentioned the threat that “*yelachakhu ha-kahal et kol sevivoteinu*” – *Benei Yisrael* would seize control over the surrounding territory. The fear, apparently, was not that *Benei Yisrael* would wage war against Moav, but rather that they would control the surrounding areas. What concerned Moav, the Ramban writes, was that *Benei Yisrael* would assert themselves as the regional power and levy a tax on the other nations. The Ramban suggests that Moav did not anticipate an attack by *Benei Yisrael* because, as indicated in Sefer Devarim (2:29) and Sefer Shoftim (11:17), *Benei Yisrael* had earlier requested passage rights through Moav, and peacefully turned away when the request was denied. Moav thus had no reason to assume that *Benei Yisrael* would now initiate hostilities. Moreover, the Ramban adds, Moav may have learned of the command *Benei Yisrael* had received from God not to initiate any hostilities against Moav (Devarim 2:9), and for this reason, too, they feared only the possibility of taxation, and not an actual military attack.

Chizkuni, likely in anticipation of this theory, offers a reason why Moav would have nevertheless feared *Benei Yisrael*’s attack. As the Torah tells earlier (21:26), the Emorite lands which *Benei Yisrael* captured had previously been part of the Moavite kingdom. Moav lost this territory in a war against the Emorites, and it was then seized by *Benei Yisrael* after they came under attack by the Emorites. Throughout this time, Moav still regarded this territory as part of its kingdom. And so when *Benei Yisrael* took hold of the land and began settling it, without giving it to Moav, this indicated to Moav that *Benei Yisrael* had no reservations about capturing its territory. Thus, regardless of whatever reasons may have existed for Moav to assume that *Benei Yisrael* would not launch an attack against it, *Benei Yisrael*’s settlement of what Moav considered Moavite territory indicated to Moav that *Benei Yisrael* were prepared to try to seize its land. Chizkuni refers us to the Gemara’s remark in Masekhet Chulin (60b) that once the Emorites seized this territory from Moav, it was no longer considered Moavite property, and so it did not fall under God’s command to *Benei Yisrael* not to wage battle against Moav. Moav, however, assumed that if *Benei Yisrael* settled the territory that Moav had lost to the Emorites, it would have no compunctions about invading the territory that Moav still controlled.

What is clear, however, is that *Benei Yisrael* had no hostile intentions, and Moav’s concerns were unwarranted. Balak’s panicked appeal to Bilam to place a curse on *Benei Yisrael* was entirely unnecessary, as *Benei Yisrael* had no plans of invading or taxing Moav.

Rav Aharon Leib Shteinman pointed to Balak’s drastic measure as an example of how relationships are strained or broken due to wrong assumptions of malicious intent. It is not uncommon for hostility to arise in a relationship due to one party’s incorrect interpretation of the other’s words or actions, assuming malice when there was none. Just as Balak wrongly assumed that *Benei Yisrael* planned to initiate hostilities, and he thus proceeded to try protecting his kingdom against this perceived threat, similarly, people sometimes feel threatened or hurt by somebody who in truth had nothing but innocent intentions. Balak’s unnecessary fear should perhaps teach us to pause and reconsider before assuming another person’s malicious intent, realizing that not all feelings of resentment are truly warranted.

Tuesday

When Bilam made his third unsuccessful attempt to curse *Benei Yisrael*, he saw the nation “*shokhein li-shvatav*” – “dwelling by its tribes” (24:2). The Gemara (Bava Batra 60a), as Rashi cites, famously explains this to mean that Bilam took note of the way *Benei Yisrael*’s tents were arranged – in such a manner that the entrances did not face one another (“*she-ein pitcheihem mekhuvanin zeh ke-negged zeh*”). Upon seeing how *Benei Yisrael* made a point of ensuring that they would not be able to look inside each other’s tents, Bilam was inspired to bless them, instead of curse them.

The Gemara’s comment is commonly understood as a source for the importance of protecting other people’s privacy, both in the narrow, literal sense of not peering into people’s homes, and more generally, avoiding preoccupation with people’s private affairs. We are to conduct our lives in such a manner that we do not “face” other people’s “tents” – that we are not constantly peering or inquiring into others’ personal lives, and instead direct our attention towards our own “tents,” making sure we are living our lives properly.

However, Rav Kalonymus Kalman Epstein, in *Ma’or Va-shemesh*, adds a different explanation, suggesting that *Chazal* speak here of the importance of traveling through one’s own “entrance,” and charting one’s own individual path. What impressed Bilam, the *Ma’or Va-shemesh* explains, was that the people did not look at each other’s conduct as exact models for how they themselves were to act. *Benei Yisrael* recognized that not everybody’s religious life is supposed to be identical to everyone else’s, that within the limits of Torah thought and practice, there is room for different “tents.” If we look at what others do as the precise model that we must follow, then we are betraying our individuality and our individual strengths and potential. We become worthy of blessing when we all encamp together around the *Mishkan*, like *Benei Yisrael* in the desert, devoting our lives to the Torah, with each of us focusing on his or her “tent” – his or her unique approach, rather than assuming that we must all conduct ourselves in precisely the same manner.

Wednesday

The *haftara* for Parashat Balak is a prophecy from Sefer Mikha, in which the prophet makes brief reference to Balak’s attempt to have a curse placed upon *Benei Yisrael*: “My nation, please remember what Balak, king of Moav, plotted…in order that you remember the kindnesses of the Lord” (Mikha 6:5).

We find among the commentators different approaches to explaining the final phrase in this verse – “*lema’an da’at tzidkot Hashem*” (“in order that you know the kindnesses of the Lord”). Several commentators, including Rashi and the Radak, explain this phrase as the prophet’s explanation for why the people must remember this incident. The context of this prophecy is the “*riv*” (“trial”) to which God summons *Benei Yisrael*, seeking to show them that He has dealt kindly with them and asks for very little in return (see Mikha 6:2). And thus God tells the people to remember how He foiled Balak’s plan to have a curse placed in them, so that they recognize His kindness. We might add that this kindness was performed without the people even realizing that there was any sort of danger or threat, thus demonstrating how God is always working “behind the scenes” to protect us and help us in ways that we can never know and of which we are entirely unaware. In response to the people’s complaints that God asks too much of them, God draws their attention to the fact that He is helping us in countless ways without our knowing, and thus His kindness towards us is infinite, even when it might appear otherwise.

*Metzudat David*, however, explains this verse differently, writing, “He did all this goodness for you so that you would know the kindnesses of the Lord…” According to *Metzudat David*, it appears, “*lema’an da’at tzidkot Hashem*” is the reason not why we are bidden to remember this incident, but the reason why this incident happened. *Metzudat David* (a typically terse commentary) does not elaborate, but it seems that he understood this verse as giving the answer to a basic question that arises from the story told in Parashat Balak – the question of why God got involved at all in Balak’s plan. Undoubtedly, Bilam’s curse on *Benei Yisrael*, which Balak so desperately sought, would have been powerless against God’s will. Even if Bilam had been allowed to pronounce his curse, God could have continued protecting and blessing *Benei Yisrael*. Why, then, was all this necessary? What difference would it have made if Bilam had succeeded in placing a curse?

According to *Metzudat David*, Mikha’s answer to this question is “*lema’an da’at tzidkot Hashem*” – so that we realize just how kind God is to *Benei Yisrael*, how much He loves His nation. The period of *Benei Yisrael*’s journey through the wilderness saw numerous moments of great failure, which resulted in harsh punishments. One could have easily been left with the impression that God was repulsed by *Benei Yisrael*, that their repeated mistakes led Him to despise them. And so it was vitally important for God to show us the unconditional “*tzidkot Hashem*,” that when other nations sow hostility against *Am Yisrael*, He comes to our defense; when they malign and ridicule us, He blesses us. The meaning of the story of Balak and Bilam is that notwithstanding God’s high expectations of *Am Yisrael*, and our accountability for our wrongdoing, we must feel confident in “*tzidkot Hashem*,” in His unending love for us and His unconditional commitment to us. Just as a parent continues loving and unreservedly caring for a child even when the child needs to be reprimanded and punished, so do the “*tzidkot Hashem*” continue even when we fail, and the prophet urges us to be mindful of these “*tzidkot Hashem*” and always feel assured of God’s great love for His people.

Thursday

In Bilam’s second blessing to *Benei Yisrael*, he proclaims, “*Lo hibit aven be-Yaakov ve-lo ra’a amal be-Yisrael*” – that God “does not see evildoing” among His nation (23:21). Balak hired Bilam to place a curse on *Benei Yisrael*, but Bilam now says that he is unable to do this, because God sees nothing wrong with His beloved nation.

Of course, as we know from numerous incidents told in the Torah – and particularly in the sections that appear before and after the story of Bilam – God indeed found fault in *Benei Yisrael*’s conduct on several occasions, and punished them severely. What, then, did Bilam mean when he said that God does not see any wrongdoing among *Benei Yisrael*?

Rashi, commenting on this verse, draws our attention to Onkelos’ translation, which interprets this verse as referring specifically to two forms of wrongdoing: idolatry (“*palchei gilulin*”) and falsehood (“*avdei lei’ut shekar*”). According to this reading of the verse, Bilam does not say that *Benei Yisrael* have not committed any wrongdoing, but rather that they do not worship idols or deal dishonestly. They were certainly deserving of harsh punishment for other sins, but since they avoided idol-worship and deceit, they could not be cursed.

Interestingly, Ibn Ezra comments that it was here, in this proclamation, where Bilam indicated to Balak that his kingdom could defeat *Benei Yisrael* by leading them to sin, which Moav later did, sending its women to entice *Benei Yisrael* to worship the idol *Pe’or*. This understanding perhaps follows Onkelos’ translation of the verse, according to which Bilam attributed his inability to curse *Benei Yisrael* to their refraining from idolatry (and dishonesty).

In any event, it emerges from Onkelos’ translation that although God is prepared to forgive our wrongdoing, and to maintain our covenant with Him even when we commit grave sins, the two “deal-breakers” which cannot be tolerated are idol-worship and dishonesty. These two constitute a betrayal of the fundamental basis of our nation’s special relationship with God, and thus they cannot be overlooked. Idolatry, quite obviously, marks the rejection of the most basic tenant of Jewish faith, upon which our entire religion rests, while dishonesty marks the abandonment of the most basic element of Jewish practice, which is aimed at elevating our conduct to a higher plane. Greatness can be achieved only on a foundation of goodness, and so without basic integrity, we cannot lead the kind of sacred life the Torah demands of us.

Not surprisingly, these two sins – idol worship and deceit – are compared by the prophets to a wife’s betrayal of her husband. Several prophecies compare *Benei Yisrael*’s worship of foreign deities to a wife seeking extramarital encounters (see, for example, Yeshayahu 57 and Yechezkel 16). Paying homage to a different “god” is akin to a wife experiencing intimacy with a man other than her husband, as that which is to be reserved for the Almighty is given over instead to another entity, just as in the case of an adulterous relationship. And in the famous first chapter of Yeshayahu (1:21), the prophet laments that Jerusalem, the “faithful city,” had become a “harlot.” Yeshayahu goes on to explain that the city which had in the past been characterized by its pursuit of justice was now awash with corruption, as its residents were using counterfeit money and selling defective merchandise, and its leaders and judges took bribes. When we engage in deceit, corruption and trickery, we betray the most elementary values which we are to uphold and embody, no less than if we would worship foreign deities.

Spouses can – and should – tolerate one another’s mistakes, faults and failings, but infidelity violates the very basis of the marital bond upon which their relationship rests, and thus cannot be tolerated. In our relationship with the Almighty, the basis of this bond is our belief in Him as the only Supreme Being, and our commitment to basic ethics and integrity. Without this foundation, we cannot possibly even begin to build the special relationship that we have been chosen to forge with the Almighty.

Friday

Yesterday, we noted Bilam’s pronouncement in his second blessing to *Benei Yisrael*, “*Lo hibit aven be-Yaakov ve-lo ra’a amal be-Yisrael*” – that God “sees no evildoing in Israel,” and thus, “*Hashem Elokav imo*” –“the Lord its God is with it” at all times (23:21). *Targum Onkelos*, as discussed yesterday, explains this verse to mean that *Benei Yisrael* do not worship idols or engage in dishonest practices, and for this reason they earned God’s unending protection such that Bilam could not curse them as Balak wanted.

Rashi, after referencing Onkelos’ translation of the verse, proceeds to offer a different explanation, writing that when *Benei Yisrael* violate God’s commands, “*eino medakdeik achareihem le-hitbonein be-oniyot shelahem*” – He is not so “precise” with them, and does not rigorously assess their wrongdoing. This appears to mean that while God, on the one hand, certainly holds us accountable for our wrongful conduct, on the other hand, He deals with us compassionately, and is not so exacting, strictly punishing every infraction. God’s high expectations of us is counterbalanced by His understanding of human frailty. And so He holds us accountable but without being “*medakdeik*” – strict and exacting.

In a similar vein, Rav Chaim of Sanz explained this verse to mean that God is not overly strict with His nation because, as the verse continues, “*Hashem Elokav imo*” – “the Lord its God is with it.” Even when *Benei Yisrael* act wrongly, they remain “*imo*,” with God, committed to Him and close to Him. They err, the Rebbe of Sanz said, out of weakness, and not out of betrayal or contempt. For this reason, “*lo hibit aven be-Yaakov*” – God is prepared to forgive and overlook our wrongdoing, recognizing that our true intention and desire is to faithfully obey Him.

This point perhaps becomes especially significant when we consider the character of Bilam, who might be seen as representing the converse of “*Hashem Elokav imo*.” Bilam was perfectly disciplined, careful to avoid crossing the boundaries of permissible conduct. He was careful to do what God told him to do, and repeatedly expressed his firm refusal not to do what God told him not to do. However, while he restrained himself from technical breaches of God’s will, his overall mindset, direction and ambition ran in direct contrast with the values God expects us all to embody and live by. As *Chazal* describe, Bilam was greedy, arrogant, self-centered and indulgent. And it is clear from the text that Bilam very much wanted to carry out the evil mission for which he was summoned – to place a curse upon an innocent nation, condemning them to defeat. He lived an immoral life even while strictly avoiding technical violations of God’s command. Bilam thus embodies the person whose conduct is technically good but fundamentally bad, who obeys the strict letter of the law while being very far from the spirit of the law.

Appropriately, it is Bilam who proclaims, “*Lo hibit aven be-Yaakov…Hashem Elokav imo*…” He tells us that God prefers sincerely committed servants who occasionally fail in their dedicated effort to serve Him, over the “Bilams” who flawlessly obey the “dos” and “don’ts” but follow a fundamentally misguided path. God blesses those who genuinely pursue a close relationship with Him even if they occasionally stumble, and reserves His “curse” for those like Bilam, who pride themselves over their technical obedience without aspiring to live a life of sanctity and nobility.

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