**SALT – PARASHAT BALAK**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

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Dedicated in memory of Yitele bat Nathan Hacohen z”l   
whose yahrtzeit is 11 Tammuz   
By Family Rueff

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Motzaei Shabbat

We read in Parashat Balak of Bilam’s unusual experiences as he journeyed to Moav, the kingdom that hired him to place a curse upon *Benei Yisrael*. God sent an angel to obstruct Bilam’s path on three occasions, and each time, the donkey Bilam rode either veered to the side (once crushing Bilam’s leg against the barrier on the side of the road) or crouched and remained in place. Bilam responded on each occasion by striking the donkey. After the third time, God “opened the donkey’s mouth” (22:28) and it spoke to Bilam, angrily protesting Bilam’s violence. Bilam responded by saying that he would have killed the donkey if he had a sword, because of its disobedience. At this point, God enabled Bilam to see the angel that stood in front of him, and the angel explained that the donkey’s path had been obstructed, whereupon Bilam admitted he had acted wrongly.

The question naturally arises as to the meaning behind this peculiar incident. Why did the angel obstruct Bilam’s path, without allowing Bilam to see it, and what are we to learn from this unusual episode?

One of the characteristics ascribed to Bilam (Avot 5:19) is “*ayin ra’a*” – an “evil eye,” viewing others critically and wishing for their failure and downfall. Bilam identified the flaws in everyone whom he encountered, and focused exclusively on the person’s negative qualities. Indeed, Seforno (22:6) writes that Bilam had the power to curse, but not to bless; his “strength” was the ability to highlight people’s faults while ignoring their virtues. This is expressed also by the Gemara’s famous comment (Berakhot 7a) that Bilam had the ability to identify the brief moment every day when God becomes angry. There is evil in the world, but God’s anger over this evil is aroused only briefly; overall, He is pleased with mankind. Bilam, however, insisted on downplaying the world’s goodness and underscoring the evil.

Often, when we are overly critical, this results from our inability to see what the other person sees; the obstacles that hinder him or her are hidden from our view. We see a clear path ahead, only because of our limited perception, and so we criticize and look down upon our fellow for not following what appears to us as the self-evidently best course of action. Like Bilam, we get angry and frustrated when we see people who do not act the way we think we should, when in truth, they have valid reasons which are invisible to us.

Of course, we should live with firm beliefs and convictions, and passionately committed to our beliefs, values and principles. But when we see people who steer from what we perceive as the obvious path, we must hesitate before levelling criticism. We must humbly acknowledge our limited view, that there is so much that other people see and understand which we cannot. If we live with this kind of humility, then we will avoid the quality of “*ayin ra’a*” which characterized Bilam, and will instead view people with an “*ayin tova*,” judging them favorably, following the legacy bequeathed to us by Avraham Avinu.

Sunday

The Torah in Parashat Balak tells of the unusual miracle of Bilam’s donkey, which spoke to Bilam to protest his violent conduct (22:28). As Bilam rode his donkey on the way to Moav, an angel which remained invisible to Bilam blocked the road, causing the donkey to twice veer to the side, and then, on a third occasion, to crouch on the ground. All three times, Bilam violently beat the animal, and God then allowed the donkey to speak and reprimand Bilam for his violent reaction. The angel then appeared to Bilam and explained to him that the donkey’s path was obstructed.

The Mishna in *Pirkei Avot* (5:6) lists this donkey’s mouth as one of the supernatural phenomena which God created “on the eve of the Sabbath, at twilight.” At the conclusion of the six days of creation, just before God set the natural order into motion, He introduced a number of “exceptions” into the system, preparing ahead of time for the overturning of nature when future circumstances would necessitate a miracle. One such exception was the mouth of Bilam’s donkey, which spoke to Bilam to censure him for his cruelty.

Rav Pinchas Menachem Yustman of Piltz, in *Siftei Tzadik*, notes the significance of the fact that Bilam’s donkey is regarded as a distinct creation, an exceptional phenomenon which God made a point of bringing into existence already at the beginning of time. The purpose of this miracle, quite simply, was to put Bilam in his place. Bilam is depicted as an exceedingly arrogant man, who felt overly confident in his power and his knowledge. Bilam prided himself for “knowing the mind of the Supreme One” (24:16), and the Gemara (Berakhot 7a) comments, “He did not even know his animal’s mind – he knew the mind of the Supreme One?!” God especially created a talking donkey for the purpose of attempting to humble Bilam so he would repent. And although this attempt did not appear to exceed, the *Siftei Tzadik* writes that Bilam did experience a moment of shame and humility – and for this alone it was worth introducing a special creation just before the natural order was complete, so that Bilam would experience a brief period of remorse and humble introspection.

The *Siftei Tzadik* writes that the fact that God especially created this animal serves as a source of encouragement for remorseful sinners and all those who have made grave mistakes of which they are ashamed. Nobody should ever despair of the possibility of repentance, the *Siftei Tzadik* writes, because, as the creation of Bilam’s donkey shows, God desires the repentance of even evil people such as Bilam, and is even prepared to produce new creations for the sake of a minimal experience of *teshuva*. No matter what we have done, how far we have fallen, each and every sincere moment of repentance is precious and eagerly accepted. If God went so far as to create a special animal so that a wicked man like Bilam would be temporarily humbled, He certainly invites all of us to take whatever small, modest steps we can to grow and improve, regardless of the mistakes we have made in the past, and regardless of how minimal these steps might at first seem.

Monday

We read in Parashat Balak that when Bilam arrived in Moav, the kingdom that had hired him to place a curse on *Benei Yisrael*, Balak – Moav’s king – brought him to an elevation from where Bilam saw “*ketzei ha-am*” – “the edge of the nation” (22:41), meaning, a small portion of *Benei Yisrael*.

A number of commentators raised the question of how Bilam was able to see even part of *Benei Yisrael*, according to the tradition that *Benei Yisrael* were surrounded by God’s protective “*ananei ha-kavod*” (“clouds of glory”) during their sojourn through the wilderness. The *Midrash Tanchuma* (Beshalach, 3) tells that these clouds encircled *Benei Yisrael* in all four directions, and also protected them from above and from below. Seemingly, then, the people could not be seen, thus giving rise to the question of how Bilam could be said to have viewed part of the nation.

The Tosafists, in *Moshav Zekeinim*, answer this question based on another tradition – that the sinners among the people were expelled from the camp, and found themselves outside the protective clouds. Rashi (Devarim 25:18), citing the *Midrash Tanchuma*, writes that when Amalek attacked *Benei Yisrael* in Refidim, they assaulted specifically the sinners who had been expelled outside the camp and were thus left unprotected. Accordingly, the Tosafists suggest, when the Torah speaks of Bilam viewing part of the nation, it means that he saw the sinners, those who were not concealed under the protective covering of the “*ananei ha-kavod*.” This is why the Torah says that Bilam saw “*ketzei ha-am*” – he saw the “edge,” the outliers, those who had been sent away due to their misdeeds.

This theory may perhaps shed new light on the nature of Bilam’s attempt to curse *Benei Yisrael*. He focused his attention on the fringe element, on the small minority who appeared unworthy of God’s blessing, and in this manner, he hoped to curse the entire nation. When setting out to “curse” or malign a group of people, the strategy is often to identify “*ketzei ha-am*,” the proverbial “rotten apples,” those on the margins, and judge the entire group based on this dishonorable minority. Bilam’s “skill” lay in his ability to cynically find the worst elements in every group, those “outside the cloud,” and proceed to condemn the entire group on account of those elements.

The Mishna in *Pirkei Avot* (5:19) famously exhorts us not to follow Bilam’s example of viewing people with an “*ayin ra’a*” (“evil eye”), and to instead follow Avraham Avinu’s example of “*ayin tova*” – viewing others favorably. This includes avoiding Bilam’s tendency to judge groups based on their extreme elements, recognizing the difference between those situated “outside the cloud” and those in the mainstream, and refraining from making sweeping generalizations based on the exceptional, rogue figures.

(It should be noted that later, Bilam is described as having observed *Benei Yisrael* “*shokhein li-shvatav*” – “residing according to its tribes” (24:2). Here, too, the question arises as to how Bilam was able to view *Benei Yisrael* if they were concealed by the *ananei ha-kavod*. One answer given is that in the previous verse, the Torah tells that Bilam “saw that it is good in the Lord’s eyes to bless Israel,” and the Rashbam explains that Bilam at this point despaired of the possibility of cursing *Benei Yisrael*, and made the decision to wholeheartedly bless them. As such, God enabled him to see *Benei Yisrael* so that he could bestow his blessing upon them.)

Tuesday

Bilam began his third blessing to *Benei Yisrael* with the famous pronouncement, “*Ma tovu ohalekha, Yaakov, mishkenotekha, Yisrael*” – “How good are your tents, O Yaakov; your dwelling places, O Israel!” (24:5). The simple meaning of this proclamation is that Bilam praised *Benei Yisrael*’s homes, the way they conducted their private affairs. Indeed, the Gemara in Masekhet Bava Batra (60a) explains that Bilam made this pronouncement upon seeing how *Benei Yisrael* arranged their tents in such a way that nobody could peer into his fellow’s residence, in order to avoid immodesty. Rashi, however, cites a different interpretation from the Midrash, explaining that this verse refers to the *Mishkan* and the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, the sites of sacrificial worship.

Yet a third understanding appears in the Gemara, in Masekhet Sanhedrin (105b), which explains that the “tents” and “dwelling places” mentioned by Bilam refer to the people’s synagogues and study halls. The Gemara comments that Bilam’s blessings to *Benei Yisrael* give us an idea of how he had intended to curse the nation. He sought to curse them that they should never have the benefit of religious institutions, but God transformed his curse into a blessing – one which has been fulfilled to this day, that our nation will always have flourishing institutions of prayer and study.

In the next verse, Bilam likened *Benei Yisrael*’s “tents” and “residences” to streams of water: “*ki-nchalim nitayu*” – “they extend like streams” (24:6). The Midrash (*Yalamedeinu*; *Yalkut Shimoni* 771) comments that Bilam wanted to bless *Benei Yisrael* that they should flourish only like a “stream” – which flows in the winter, but dries up in the summertime. However, God forced him to proclaim, “*ki-nchalim* ***nitayu***” – a term which connotes a river which constantly flows, even in the summer (as implied by a verse in Yeshayahu (66:12), which uses the root *n.t.h.* in reference to a river – “*Hineni* ***noteh*** *eileh ke-nahar shalom*”). Bilam wanted to compare *Benei Yisrael*’s success to the inconsistent flow of a stream, but God had him compare their prosperity to the incessant current of a raging river.

[Rav Dr. Norman Lamm](https://archives.yu.edu/gsdl/collect/lammserm/index/assoc/HASH0184.dir/doc.pdf) suggested explaining the significance of the Midrash’s comment in light of the understanding of the previous verse – “*Ma tovu ohalekha Yaakov*” – as a reference to the nation’s religious institutions. Bilam was blessing *Benei Yisrael* that the spiritual nourishment provided by our synagogues and study halls should resemble the constant current of a river, which continues flowing even in the dry, arid summers. In Rav Lamm’s words: “This is what the Torah must mean to us: a year-round activity, not reserved only for the synagogue ‘season.’ Both in summer and winter, day and night, for old and for young, the study of Torah must be the source and fountain of our life.” Whereas Bilam had hoped that *Am Yisrael*’s spiritual devotion would remain confined to the “winter,” to the period of spiritual “rainfall,” the time spent inside the synagogues and study halls, God had him bless us that our spiritual achievement would continue even in the “summer,” after we leave our institutions and involve ourselves in mundane affairs. At all times, no matter what activities we are engaged in, our spirituality must continue to “flow” incessantly, by allocating time for Torah and *mitzvot*, and conducting our affairs in accordance with Torah law and values.

Rav Lamm notes in this context the prayer which Rabbi Nechunya ben Ha-kaneh would recite upon leaving the study hall (Berakhot 28b), thanking God for the privilege of being “*mi-yoshevei beit ha-midrash*” – “from among those who dwell in the study hall.” A figure of the *Mussar* movement, Rav Lamm writes, found it significant that specifically as Rabbi Nechunya took leave of the study hall, he identified himself as a “dweller of the study hall.” Although he was leaving, Rabbi Nechunya defined himself as a permanent “resident,” so-to-speak, of his academy. This reflects the notion of “*ki-nchalim nitayu*,” that our religious commitment and focus must flow constantly like a river, even when we take leave of our places of worship and study. Even under “summer” conditions, when we are not actively engaged in Torah and *mitzvot*, our devotion must remain strong and passionate like the current of a river.

Wednesday

Yesterday, we noted Bilam’s third blessing to *Benei Yisrael*, comparing them to streams of water: “*ki-nchalim nitayu*” – “they extend like streams.” The *Midrash Yelamedeinu*, as we saw, relates that Bilam wanted to limit his blessing, and compare *Benei Yisrael* to a small brook which flows only in the rainy season, but dries up in the summer months. God, however, forced Bilam to compare *Benei Yisrael* to large rivers which constantly flow, all year round. He therefore had Bilam add the word “*nitayu*,” which connotes a river, as opposed to a small stream (as in the verse in Yeshayahu (66:12) – “*Hineni* ***noteh*** *eileh ke-nahar shalom*”).

The *Midrash Yelamedeinu* also brings a slightly different version of this account, according to which Bilam “sought to make a comparison between Israel and this stream which people fill [their pitchers] from and fight over. Each one says, ‘I will fill first,’ because they know that [the waters] stop [flowing], and so they shove their pitchers.” Bilam wanted to compare *Benei Yisrael*’s prosperity to a brook which provides a limited amount of water so that the people would fight with one another. But God forced Bilam to compare *Benei Yisrael*’s material success to a river, because, as the Midrash explains, “just as everyone fills [their pitchers] from a river with peace and serenity, because they know it never stops [flowing], similarly, there is peace among My children.”

The Midrash here teaches that in order to truly experience blessing, we must avoid competition, and care for our fellow just as we care for ourselves. As long as we each insist, “I will fill first,” we will not enjoy blessing. If we feel the need to fight and struggle against one another, then even those who succeed in “filling first” are not blessed, because their success came at the high price of fighting and strife. We are truly blessed only when we make space for other people’s success, which we are able to do when we trust in God’s ability to provide for us all. The Midrash here assures us that God’s blessing is an endlessly flowing river, offering plentiful “water” for us and for our would-be competitors. There is no need to “shove our pitchers,” to struggle and compete, because God cares for us all – thus allowing us to enjoy the greatest blessing, the blessing of peaceful, harmonious relationships with everyone around us.

Thursday

Parashat Balak begins with the message sent by Balak, the king of Moav, to Bilam, asking that he come to Moav and place a curse upon *Benei Yisrael*. Bilam had the messengers spend the night in his home, explaining that he must first receive God’s authorization. That night, God spoke to Bilam and instructed, “Do not go with them; do not curse the nation, for it is blessed” (22:12). Later, Balak sent additional messengers, and this time, God allowed Bilam to go to Moav, on the condition that He obey His instructions.

Rashi, commenting on God’s initial instruction to Bilam – “do not curse the nation, for it is blessed” – cites the *Midrash Tanchuma* as explaining that God did not want Bilam even to bless *Benei Yisrael*. After God commanded, “Do not curse the nation,” Bilam turned to God and asked if he should bless them, instead, to which God responded, “*ki barukh hu*” – “for it is blessed.” The Midrash understands this to mean that as *Benei Yisrael* were already blessed, they had no need for Bilam’s blessing. In the Midrash’s words, “They say to a bee: [We want] neither your honey nor your sting.” God told Bilam that He wanted neither his curses nor his blessings.

The question arises as to why God would not want Bilam to bless *Benei Yisrael*. If Bilam was prepared to grant his blessings, why would God reject this offer? And, if God at this point refused to allow Bilam to bless the people, why did He later have him bless them, when he went to Moav and sought to place a curse upon the nation?

One answer that has been given is that a person’s blessings often reflect his own priorities and preferences. People who bless others naturally wish for them that which they themselves desire. Bilam is described in *Pirkei Avot* (5:19) as a man with “*ru’ach gevoha*” – arrogance – and “*nefesh rechava*” – greed. He relished fame and material luxury. Quite reasonably, then, this was the kind of blessing he would bestow upon *Benei Yisrael* – the blessing of vain pleasures such as honor and wealth. This is the “honey” that God said *Benei Yisrael* had no need for. While we of course both need and want material blessing, this is not our priority; our most important concern is spiritual success. Therefore, God did not allow Bilam to give *Benei Yisrael* his own blessing. He permitted him only to confer the blessings which God dictated to him, because Bilam would have given *Benei Yisrael* not the blessings they needed, but rather the blessings which Bilam wanted for himself.

A true “blessing” requires wishing for others what is right for them, which might not necessarily be what is right for us. In order to help people, we need to put own preferences and wishes to the side, and try to understand what our fellow actually needs for his own success and self-actualization. When we decide we want to offer somebody “honey,” we need to carefully consider whether this “honey” is indeed what that person wants and needs, or whether we are projecting onto him or her our own wishes and priorities. Even when we sincerely wish to “bless” others, we must ensure to objectively determine what they need, and only then proceed to help them obtain it.

Friday

We read in Parashat Balak of the angel which God sent to obstruct Bilam’s path as he journeyed to Moav to place a curse upon *Benei Yisrael*. On one occasion, the Torah tells, the angel stood in front of Bilam as he rode his donkey along a path that had walls on both sides – “*gader mi-zeh ve-gader mi-zeh*” (22:24). In order to circumvent the angel, the donkey moved to the side, crushing Bilam’s leg against the wall.

The Midrash (*Bamidbar Rabba* 20:14) draws a curious association between this episode and the *luchot* – the stone tablets upon which God engraved the Ten Commandments. The Torah in Sefer Shemot (32:15) describes the tablets as having been engraved with text on both sides – “*mi-zeh u-mi-zeh heim ketuvim*,” and the Midrash links this description with the description of the path traveled by Bilam – “*gader* ***mi-zeh*** *ve-gader* ***mi-zeh***.” The Midrash comments that God was telling Bilam, “You cannot control them, because they have in their possession tablets written on both sides.” Somehow, the Midrash viewed the *luchot*, which were engraved on both sides, as a great source of merit and protection for *Benei Yisrael*.

Rav Shmuel Borenstein of Sochatchov, in *Sheim Mi-Shmuel*, offers an explanation for the particular significance of the *luchot*, viewing them as symbolic of *Am Yisrael*’s commitment to Torah. Just as God engraved the commandments upon the stone, so is the Torah “engraved” upon the heart of each and every one of us. The text was engraved through the entire width of the stone, such that it was visible on either side, symbolizing the Torah’s penetration into our entire beings. The Torah is not to be something external with which we engage, but rather part of our very essence. Practically speaking, as the *Sheim Mi-Shmuel* explains, this means that the Torah must inform all our conduct, even our ordinary, mundane affairs. The Torah must penetrate our beings such that we act, speak and carry ourselves at all times in accordance with its precepts and value system. Living a Torah life does not mean that we occasionally bring the “text” of God’s commands into our lives, but rather that the totality of our lives reflects the Torah’s timeless principles.

The *Sheim Mi-Shmuel* suggests that Balak and Bilam were troubled by this particular quality of *Benei Yisrael*. They could accept a special nation encamped in the desert within God’s “clouds of glory,” living an entirely spiritual existence, receiving miraculous food and water, without any engagement in worldly affairs. They felt threatened once *Benei Yisrael* left the “cloud,” successfully waged war against two powerful armies, and prepared to enter the Land of Israel, where they would engage in agriculture and develop a country. Bilam’s hope was to consign *Benei Yisrael* to an “otherworldly” existence, without bringing their faith and values into the realm of the mundane. The response to Bilam is the symbolic message of the *luchot*, which express the all-encompassing nature of Torah commitment, how *Am Yisrael* not only observes the Torah, but imbibes its values and laws, such that they profoundly impact the way we go about all our daily affairs.