**S.A.L.T – PARASHAT BALAK**

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Motzaei Shabbat

The Torah in Parashat Balak tells of the attempts made by Bilam, a gentile seer, to place a curse upon Benei Yisrael at the behest of the Moavite king. God prevented Bilam from placing a curse, and forced Bilam to bless Benei Yisrael, instead.

The Gemara in Masekhet Berakhot (7a) discusses this episode, and in a famous passage, explains how it happened that Bilam failed in his quest to curse our ancestors. Bilam’s power, the Gemara comments, stemmed from his ability to determine the precise moment when God becomes angry each day. The Gemara cites the verse in Tehillim (7:!2), “Ve-Kel zo’eim be-khol yom” – “God is enraged each day,” and explains this to mean that there is a time every day when God becomes angry. Bilam had the prophetic power to determine this moment, and was thus able to place a curse by declaring his “spell” at this precise time. His attempt to curse Benei Yisrael was unsuccessful, the Gemara comments, because throughout this period, God made an exception to His ordinary routine, as it were, and did not become angry.

Amidst this discussion, the Gemara takes note of the fact that this daily moment of “za’am” (“rage”) is infinitesimally small. One view states that it lasts for just 1/58,888th of an hour, whereas according to another view, it lasts for the amount of time needed to say the word “rega” (“moment”).

Like many Aggadic passages in the Talmud, we should assume that there is a deeper layer of meaning underlying the text, and that our Sages here sought to convey to us important lessons through the use of metaphor and allegory.

It has been suggested that the Gemara’s discussion is intended to teach us that the essence of a “curse” is an inordinate focus on the daily moments of “rage” that we experience each day. The concept of “Ve-Kel zo’eim be-khol yom,” that God becomes angry each day, is that each and every one of us experiences some kind of misfortune, whether significant or trivial, each and every day of our lives. No day is perfect, and every day brings with it some challenge, some form of disappointment, frustration, anguish or aggravation. Bilam, who epitomized the quality of “ayin ra’a” – viewing people and the world with an “evil eye,” with negativity (Avot 5:19) – mastered the art of focusing on this moment of angst. A person is “cursed” when his life becomes defined by the daily moments of “za’am,” of failure and disappointment. When we inflate the mishaps we experience and our frustrated ambitions, then we live “cursed” lives, lives of unending misery and despair.

The opposite of this “cursed” mindset is the ability to recognize the infinitesimally small duration of our moments of “za’am.” If we view our lives with an “ayin tova” instead of an “ayin ra’a,” we will be able to put our frustrations and disappointments into proper perspective, and recognize just how insignificantly small they are in relation to the blessings in our lives. The Gemara teaches us that we have the power to reduce the “za’am” of every day to a minuscule proportion of our daily experience. We have the choice to either allow it to define our entire life, or to acknowledge it as just a small portion of an otherwise happy, successful and fulfilled life. While we cannot deny the reality of “Ve-Kel zo’eim be-khol yom,” that every day brings its share of challenges and disappointments, we must ensure not to follow Bilam’s example of focusing on these elements of our lives, and must instead live with an “ayin tova,” and try to put our “za’am” into proper perspective, so we can live truly happy and blessed lives.

Sunday

Yesterday, we noted the Gemara’s enigmatic discussion in Masekhet Berakhot (7a) of Bilam’s failed attempt to place a curse on Benei Yisrael. The Gemara comments that there is a moment each day when God becomes angry, and Bilam had the unique ability to determine that moment, enabling him to successfully place a curse upon his foes. He was unsuccessful in cursing Benei Yisrael, however, because God was not angry at any point during that period.

Chatam Sofer offers a clever explanation of the Gemara’s discussion, suggesting an insight which is laden with profound symbolic meaning. He notes that later, the Gemara cites Rabbi Meir’s comment that God’s daily moment of anger occurs soon after the sun rises, when the kings of the eastern regions, the first to see the sunrise, worship the sun. God is then filled with anger at the entire world, Chatam Sofer explains, because the sun at that moment becomes an object of idolatry, and thus all people on Earth end up being sustained by an article of foreign worship. Since the sun is needed to produce vegetation, all people in the world ingest the effects of the sun’s rays, and so they all become tainted by the stain of idolatry. In the wilderness, however, Benei Yisrael ate the manna, which originated from the highest regions in the heavens, beyond the sun, and did not need the sun for its production. As such, God was not angry at them during this period, and Bilam was thus unable to place his curse. Chatam Sofer explains on this basis the sin of Ba’al Pe’or, which the Torah tells later in the parasha (25:1-9), and which Chazal say was instigated by Moav at the advice of Bilam (Sanhedrin 106a). Chazal describe how Bilam advised Moav to have its women seduce the men of Benei Yisrael, in the process of which they fed them their food and had them worship their deity. Chatam Sofer suggests that the strategy was to have Benei Yisrael partake of food other than manna, whereby they became subject to God’s daily moment of anger over the worship of the sun. At that point, Bilam’s curse took effect.

Underlying Chatam Sofer’s creative approach is the fundamental truism that we are, invariably, affected by the beliefs and practices of the world around us. We share the world with other nations, and are therefore bound to be “tainted” by the “sun,” by foreign influences that clash with our values and principles. For this reason, during the years of travel in the wilderness, when our nation’s religious identity was being forged, Benei Yisrael lived separate and apart from the rest of the world, encircled by Clouds of Glory and sustained by heavenly food. In effect, they lived in the heavens, and not in this world, and were thus able to learn the Torah from Moshe and forge their religious identity without the adulterating influence of foreign cultures.

After this forty-year period, of course, Benei Yisrael came back to Earth, so-to-speak, and were once again sustained by the “sun,” by the ordinary forces of nature. The ideal is not for Am Yisrael to exist in isolation from the rest of the world, as they did in the wilderness, but rather to live as part of the world together with other nations, and thereby uplift them. However, even then, we must ensure to avoid God’s “anger” by remaining steadfastly committed to our unique values and lifestyle, by resisting the influences of foreign cultures that conflict with our ideals, and ensuring that we sustain ourselves with the heavenly “manna” – with the principles of the pure, heavenly Torah.

This message resurfaces later, in Sefer Devarim, where Moshe foresees the time when Benei Yisrael will capture the Land of Israel and take possession of the Canaanites’ large homes, fields and wells, inheriting the developed infrastructure left behind by the vanquished natives (Devarim 10-11). Moshe proceeds to warn Benei Yisrael not to resort to idol worship after taking possession and making use of the Canaanites’ infrastructure. It seems that Moshe feared the spiritual effects of Benei Yisrael’s benefiting from the material goods left behind by the Canaanites, that this might somehow lead to idol-worship. [Rav Elchanan Samet](http://www.etzion.org.il/en/material-wealth-and-its-dangers) explained that Moshe refers here to the challenge of using, participating in and embracing the economic and technological culture of other nations without also embracing their values. Rav Samet writes (translated from the Hebrew):

It is…clear what concern the Torah is voicing here: the inheritance of a material culture (Canaan) by a nation with a relatively inferior material culture (Israel) may turn out to be a Pyrrhic victory. Feelings of inferiority and insignificance may lead the victorious nation to enter the materially richer culture of the defeated nation, adopting it wholeheartedly, including its religious aspects. The defeated nation could then say, “They beat us, but they accepted our philosophy.” Such a process has occurred more than once in human history.

Therefore, the Torah demands of Israel that a distinction be made between the good cities, the houses full of all types of good, and the entire Canaanite infrastructure – all of which are given to Israel out of God's kindness – and the beliefs and philosophies of the Canaanites and their tangible expression

In light of Chatam Sofer’s explanation of the incident of Ba’al Pe’or, we might say that Moshe warns the people of the effects of the “sun” which they would be sharing with other nations once they leave the “heavenly” existence of the wilderness.

Rav Samet concludes his discussion by noting the contemporary relevance of Moshe’s warning:

…we are able to enjoy every cultural achievement from every part of the world; it arrives at our doorstep – or straight into our homes – without any effort on our part. The question posed to us is to what extent we are capable of drawing a distinction between material culture which improves our “quality of life,” and the spiritual values of the creators of that culture.

The ability to draw this distinction in our generation, and the knowledge of where exactly the line is to be drawn, is one of the most complex and difficult tasks that we face. This is because western culture is not a pagan culture as was the Canaanite culture in its time. Some of the spiritual values of western culture fit in with the Torah and are indeed nourished by it. Nevertheless, other values stand in clear contrast to our Torah. We may run away from this task by closing ourselves off from any manifestation of this culture. But someone who seeks to address it, to extract its good while rejecting its negative elements, must pay attention to the Torah's warning…

Monday

The final verses of Parashat Balak tell of the disturbing incident of *Ba’al Pe’or*, where *Benei Yisrael* engaged in relations with the women of Moav and worshipped that nation’s deity, and the tribal leader of Shimon, Zimri, publicly cohabited with a Midyanite woman. God punished the nation by bringing a deadly plague, until Pinchas halted the plague by killing Zimri and the Midyanite woman.

Rashi (25:7), citing the Gemara (Sanhedrin 82a), describes Pinchas’ reaction to the sight of Zimri’s public offense, writing, “*Ra’a ma’aseh ve-nizkar halakha*” – “He saw the act, and was reminded of the law.” This refers to the extraordinary provision of “*kana’in pog’in bo*” which applies in very rare, exceptional cases, authorizing a zealot to kill a violator (though also permitting the violator to kill the zealot in self-defense). When Pinchas saw Zimri’s public breach, he was reminded of this *halakha* and proceeded to act upon it.

We might ask, what exactly does the Gemara seek to add to our understanding of this incident through this comment? God later expresses His emphatic approval of Pinchas’ controversial violent act (25:10-13), clearly indicating that Pinchas’ exceptional zealotry was justified. What do *Chazal* add by telling us that Pinchas saw what Zimri did and then remembered the extraordinary provision authorizing a violent response?

The answer, perhaps, is that the Gemara seeks to emphasize that the validity of a zealous response was not on Pinchas’ mind before witnessing Zimri’s act. The license granted to zealots under these circumstances was something that entered Pinchas’ awareness as a result of the sight he beheld, not something which had always been on his mind. Some people live their lives as “zealots,” actively pursuing a cause, eagerly searching for something to protest and oppose. These people are not “reminded” of the law of “*kana’in pog’in bo*”; this law is at the forefront of their consciousness at all times, and they constantly look around for some impropriety to which they can justify fierce opposition. Pinchas was not looking for something to be zealous about. He saw an outrage and then recalled that zealotry in such a case is legitimate; he was not out searching for an opportunity to act zealously. *Chazal* here teach us that even in the very rare circumstances when fierce opposition is warranted, it loses all legitimacy if a person is looking for such opportunities. These situations call for strong action only if one does not look for them, and needs to be “reminded” of the license to react strongly.

Tuesday

As we discussed earlier this week, the Gemara in Masekhet Berakhot (7a) explains that the secret to Bilam’s success in placing curses upon his foes lay in his ability to determine the precise moment each day when God becomes angry. Bilam used this knowledge to seize the opportunity to place his curse. He was unsuccessful in his attempts to curse *Benei Yisrael*, the Gemara explains, because God did not become angry during this period.

Later, the Gemara cites a seemingly peculiar remark by Abayei identifying the precise moment when God becomes angry. Abayei says that this occurs each morning at the moment when the rooster’s crest turns white. When all the redness in the crest is gone, and it turns completely white, this is the moment when God’s anger is aroused.

To explain this enigmatic passage, Rav Yitzchak Stollman suggests in his *Minchat Yitzchak* that the rooster symbolizes the opportunities presented to us, and to all mankind, each and every morning. The rooster’s crow at the dawn of the new day represents the call to correct the mistakes of the previous day, that we have the opportunity for a new beginning, to change ourselves and the world. As the sun rises and begins a new day, the rooster crows to “awaken” mankind both literally and figuratively, summoning us to seize the opportunities afforded by the new day to make substantive changes. Several hours into the morning, when it becomes clear that the day is unfolding just like any other, that mankind is again squandering the opportunities of the new day, the rooster turns “white” from shame, having failed in its role to spur a process of positive change. And at this moment, God becomes angry. When He sees that we are going about our affairs no differently than on the previous days, without heeding the call for change, the call sounded by the rising sun, by the dawn of a new day, He is disappointed, as it were, in His creations.

In what at first appears as a strange, enigmatic remark, the Gemara in in fact teaching us the importance of seeing and seizing the opportunities presented to us each day for a new beginning. We must firmly believe that yesterday’s mistakes can be corrected, that the failures of the past can be transformed into successes in the present and future. The Gemara here urges us not to get caught in a rut, in a routine of failure, disappointment and mediocrity, but to instead seize each day’s opportunities and trust in our ability to change and improve.

Wednesday

The Torah in Parashat Balak tells the unusual story of Bilam’s journey to Moav, during which an angel blocked his path on three occasions. The angel made itself invisible to Bilam but visible to the angel, and so on all three occasions, when the donkey either veered from the path or simply stopped traveling, Bilam beat the animal. Finally, the Torah tells, “The Lord opened Bilam’s eyes and he saw the angel of the Lord stationed on the road with its sword drawn in its hand” (22:31).

The Midrash (*Lekach Tov*), commenting on this verse, writes: “This teaches that the entire world is presumed blind until the Almighty opens their eyes.” Just as Bilam could not see the angel blocking his path until God opened his eyes, similarly, we are all incapable of seeing without the Almighty granting us vision. The Midrash points also to a second example, namely, the story of Hagar, whose son, Yishmael, was dying of dehydration until “the Lord opened her eyes” and showed her a well from which she drew water to save her son’s life (Bereishit 21:19).

The two stories addressed here by the Midrash represent two different contexts in which we need God’s assistance to “see.” We need His help to see the solutions to our problems, as in the case of Hagar, and we need His help to see and avoid lurking dangers, as in the case of Bilam. The Midrash here urges us to appreciate God’s role in helping us find solutions and avoid danger, his giving us the intelligence and the information we so often need to solve our dilemmas and to take necessary precautions. This might likely be the meaning of the blessing we recite each morning, praising God “*pokei’ch ivrim*” – “who gives sight to the blind.” This likely refers to not only the great gift of eyesight, which we can easily take for granted, but also the “vision” we need so often each day of our lives to find effective solutions to our problems and to avoid the dangers that lurk.

Importantly, however, in both cases noted by the Midrash, the people involved were reprimanded, in one form or another, for their handling the given situation. In Hagar’s case, the Torah writes that God showed her the well in response to Yishmael’s prayers (“*Va-yishma Elokim et kol ha-na’ar*” – Bereishit 21:17), indicating that he was saved only in his own merit, not Hagar’s. Hagar acted improperly by despairing, leaving her son to die while moving away to weep, rather than continuing to search for water, and it was only in response to Yishmael’s prayer that God intervened to rescue his life. And Bilam, of course, was scolded by the angel for beating his donkey rather than understanding that there was something blocking his path (22:32). Although God mercifully opened Hagar and Bilam’s eyes, they were to have worked harder to open their own eyes – to continue looking for a solution (Hagar), and to understand that danger lurked even when this was not evident (Bilam). As much as we must recognize our dependence on God’s help in “opening” our “eyes” and enabling us to see all that we need to see to succeed, we are also to exert our own effort to find solutions and identify potential dangers.

Thursday

Undoubtedly the most famous words of praise spoken by Bilam of *Benei Yisrael* is his proclamation, “*Ma tovu ohalekha Yaakov, mishkenotekha Yisrael*” – “How good are your tents, O Yaakov; your residences, O Israel” (24:5). *Chazal* offer several different interpretations of this verse, one of which appears in a halakhic context. In Masekhet Bava Batra (60a), the Gemara explains that Bilam saw that *Benei Yisrael* arranged the doors to their tents in such a way that families could not see into each other’s homes. His expression of admiration for this practice forms the basis of the *halakha* forbidding neighbors from having their windows or doors facing one another. A second interpretation, which appears in Masekhet Sanhedrin (105b), is that Bilam here prophetically praised *Benei Yisrael* for their synagogues and study halls where they would gather to pray and to learn Torah. (This interpretation forms the basis of the custom followed by many to recite this verse upon entering the synagogue for *Shacharit* each morning.)

Significantly, these two interpretations reflect two opposite, but certainly not contradictory, admirable qualities of *Benei Yisrael*. The first relates to privacy and distinctiveness, how families live private, independent lives without peering into one another’s affairs. The ideal of “*Ma tovu ohalekha*” according to this explanation is one of individualism and separateness, of distinct family units conducting their private affairs in their own way, as suits them, without looking at what other people are doing or worrying about people looking at them. The second, by contrast, speaks of the greatness of the large institutions, the houses of worship and learning where large crowds of different kinds of people come to pray and study together. According to this interpretation, Bilam praises not the people’s separateness, but rather their ability to join together in the devoted service of the Almighty.

It is perhaps the combination of these two interpretations that poses the greatest challenge for us, and which, when achieved, becomes the greatest source of praise. We are to serve the Almighty both individually and collectively, by forging our own independent identities while still bonding together with our fellow Jews for joint prayer and study. Bilam’s blessing to us is that we should succeed in maintaining this delicate and difficult balance between distinctiveness and unity, living separate from one another but also joining together to form cohesive communities and to work as a single nation. The blessing of unity is not achieved by everybody following the precise same lifestyle and doing the precise same things. To the contrary, unity is achieved when people whose tents do not face one another, who live separate and apart from one other and conduct lives that are very different from another, join together in joy and harmony in the devoted service of God. This might be the true meaning of “*Ma tovu ohalekha Yaakov*” – success in maintaining both our individual identities as well as our unity and collective devotion to Torah.

(Based on an [article](http://www.aguda-achat.org.il/articles/magazine/4662/) by Rav Yehoshua Pfeffer)

Friday

We read in Parashat Balak that as Bilam prepared to attempt to curse *Benei Yisrael*, he had Balak build several altars, and the two of them offered sacrifices on the altars. Rashi (23:4), citing from the Midrash, writes that Bilam had these altars built and offered these sacrifices in order to claim religious superiority to *Benei Yisrael*. He told God that *Benei Yisrael*’s founders – Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov – built for the Almighty a total of seven altars among all of them, over the course of their lifetimes, whereas Bilam himself offered that same number.

The Midrash (*Bamidbar Rabba* 23) proceeds to tell that God replied to Bilam by citing the verse in Mishlei (17:1), “Dry bread amid serenity is better than a home filled with feasts of fighting.” God told Bilam that He prefers few and simple sacrifices over those offered by Bilam, “for you seek to introduce a fight between Me and Israel.” The “serene” sacrifices of the patriarchs were far preferable to Bilam’s sacrifices which were offered for the sake of arousing God’s anger upon His beloved nation.

The Midrash here warns against using religious observance as a source of competition and one-upmanship. God does not look kindly upon those who “build altars,” who perform special religious acts, for the sake of “introducing a fight,” to show that they are better than others. Our service of God must be geared towards uplifting and inspiring other people, not making us feel superior to others. “Sacrifices” offered for the sake of experiencing a sense of superiority is not act of service of God, but rather an act of serving oneself by trying to boost one’s ego. *Chazal* here teach us that all our “sacrifices” must be genuine and sincere, and should never be made as cheap attempts to feel we are better than the people around us.

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