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ON **BALAK** - 5772

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from: Aish.com newsletterserver@aish.com via madmimi.com
date: Thu, Jul 5, 2012 at 2:08 AM
subject: Advanced Parsha - Balak
Not Reckoned Among the Nations
by Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sack
Balak(Numbers 22:2-25:9)

Not Reckoned Among the Nations

The year is 1933. Two Jews are sitting in a Viennese coffee house, reading the news. One is reading the local Jewish paper, the other the notoriously anti-Semitic publication Der Sturmer. "How can you possibly read that revolting rubbish?" says the first. The second smiles. "What does your paper say? Let me tell you. The Jews are assimilating. The Jews are arguing. The Jews are disappearing. Now let me tell you what my paper says. The Jews control the banks. The Jews control the media. The Jews control Austria. The Jews control the world. My friend, if you want good news about the Jews, always read the anti-Semites." An old and bitter joke. Yet it has a point and a history and it begins with this week's parsha. Some of the most beautiful things ever said about the Jewish people were said by Bilaam: "Who can count the dust of Jacob ... May my final end be like theirs! ... How beautiful are your tents, Jacob, your dwelling places, Israel! ... I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a sceptre will rise out of Israel." Bilaam was no friend of the Jews. Having failed to curse them, he eventually devised a plan that worked. He suggested that Moabite women seduce Israelite men and then invite them to take part in their

idolatrous worship. 24,000 people died in the subsequent plague that struck the people (Num. 25, 31: 16). Bilaam is numbered by the rabbis as one of only four commoners denied a share in the world to come (Sanhedrin 90a).

Why then did God choose that Israel be blessed blessings by Bilaam? Surely there is a principle Megalgelim zekhut al yedei zakkai: "Good things come about through good people" (Tosefta Yoma 4: 12). Why did this good thing come about through a bad man? The answer lies in the principle stated in Proverbs (27: 2): "Let someone else praise you, and not your own mouth; an outsider, and not your own lips." Tanakh is perhaps the least self-congratulatory national literature in history. Jews chose to record for history their faults, not their virtues. Hence it was important that their praise come from an outsider, and one not known to like them. Moses rebuked the people. Bilaam, the outsider, praised them. That said, however, what is the meaning of one of the most famous descriptions ever given of the people Israel: "It is a nation dwelling alone, not reckoned among the nations." (Num. 23: 9)? I have argued (in Future Tense) against the interpretation that has become popular in modern times, namely that it is Israel's destiny to be isolated, friendless, hated, abandoned and alone, as if anti-Semitism were somehow written into the script of history. It isn't. None of the prophets said so. To the contrary, they believed that the nations of the world would eventually recognise Israel's God and come to worship Him in the Temple in Jerusalem. Zechariah (8: 23) foresees a day when "ten people from all languages and nations will take firm hold of one Jew by the hem of his robe and say, 'Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you.'" There is nothing fated, predestined, about anti-Semitism. What then do Bilaam's words mean? Ibn Ezra says they mean that unlike all other nations, Jews, even when a minority in a non-Jewish culture, will not assimilate. Ramban says that their culture and creed will remain pure, not a cosmopolitan mix of multiple traditions and nationalities. Netziv gives the sharp interpretation, clearly directed against the Jews of his time, that "If Jews live distinctive and apart from others they will dwell safely, but if they seek to emulate 'the nations' they 'will not be reckoned' as anything special at all."

There is, however, another possibility, hinted at by another anti-Semite, G. K. Chesterton (that Chesterton was an anti-Semite is not my judgment but that of the poet W. H. Auden).(1) Chesterton famously wrote of America that it was "a nation with the soul of a church" and "the only nation in the world founded on a creed." That is precisely what made Israel different - and America's political culture, as historian Perry Miller and sociologist Robert Bellah pointed out, is deeply rooted in the idea of biblical Israel and the concept of covenant. Ancient Israel was indeed founded on a creed, and was, as a result, a nation with the soul of a religion.

All other nations, ancient and modern, have arisen out of historical contingencies. A group of people live in a land, develop a shared culture, form a society, and thus become a nation. Jews, certainly from the Babylonian exile onward, had none of the conventional attributes of a nation. They did not live in the same land. Some lived in Israel, others in Babylon, yet others in Egypt. Later they would be scattered throughout the world. They did not share a language of everyday speech. Rashi spoke French, Maimonides Arabic. There were many Jewish vernaculars, versions of Yiddish, Ladino and other regional Jewish dialects. They did not live under the same political dispensation. They did not share the same cultural environment. Nor did they experience the same fate. When the Jews of Spain were enjoying their golden age, the Jews of Northern Europe were being massacred in the Crusades. When the Jews of Spain were being persecuted and expelled, the Jews of Poland were enjoying a rare summer of tolerance. Yet they saw themselves and were seen by others as one nation: the world's first, and for long the world's only, global people.

What then made them a nation? This was the question R. Saadia Gaon asked in the tenth century, to which he gave the famous answer: "Our nation is only a nation in virtue of its laws (torot)." They were the people defined by the Torah, a nation under the sovereignty of God. Having received, uniquely, their laws before they even entered their land, they remained bound by those selfsame laws even when they lost the land. Of no other nation has this ever been true.

Uniquely then, in Judaism religion and nationhood coincide. There are nations with many religions: multicultural Britain is one among many. There are religions governing many nations: Christianity and Islam are obvious examples. Only in the case of Judaism is there a one-to-one correlation between religion and nationhood. Without Judaism there would be nothing (except anti-Semitism) to connect Jews across the world. And without the Jewish nation Judaism would cease to be what it has always been, the faith of a people bound by a bond of collective responsibility to one another and to God. Bilaam was right. The Jewish people really are unique.

Nothing therefore could be more mistaken than to define Jewishness as a mere ethnicity. If ethnicity is a form of culture, then Jews are not one ethnicity but many. In Israel, Jews are a walking lexicon of almost every ethnicity under the sun. If ethnicity is another word for race, then conversion to Judaism would be impossible (you cannot convert to become Caucasian; you cannot change your race at will).

What makes Jews "a nation dwelling alone, not reckoned among the nations," is that their nationhood is not a matter of geography, politics or ethnicity. It is a matter of religious vocation as God's covenant partners, summoned to be a living example of a nation among the nations made distinctive by its faith and way of life. Lose that and we lose the one thing that was and remains the source of our singular contribution to the heritage of humankind. When we forget this, sadly, God arranges for people like Bilaam and Chesterton to remind us otherwise. We should not need such reminding.

NOTE

1. Chesterton wrote: "I said that a particular kind of Jew tended to be a tyrant and another particular kind of Jew tended to be a traitor. I say it again. Patent facts of this kind are permitted in the criticism of any other nation on the planet: it is not counted illiberal to say that a certain kind of Frenchman tends to be sensual.... I cannot see why the tyrants should not be called tyrants and the traitors traitors merely because they happen to be members of a race persecuted for other reasons and on other occasions." (G.K. Chesterton, *The Uses of Diversity*, London, Methuen & Co., 1920, p. 239). On this Auden wrote, "The disingenuousness of this argument is revealed by the quiet shift from the term nation to the term race."

<http://www.rabbiwein.com/Jerusalem-Post/2012/07/712.html>

Jerusalem Post

RABBI BEREL WEIN

INACCURACIES

Monday, July 2, 2012

There is an old rabbinic anecdote that relates that once a rabbi was called upon to deliver a eulogy for someone who had no redeeming social value whatsoever. The rabbi was naturally hard pressed to think of anything positive to say about this evil person. So, when he spoke, he solemnly pronounced: "No matter how evil the deceased truly was he was still a far better person than was his brother!"

The Halacha allows for exaggeration in delivering a eulogy. But when this is liberally and untruthfully applied to past Jewish history it becomes a dangerous threat to normative Jewish life. Part of the great problems that plague religious Jewish life in our times is that a fantasy world – a completely inaccurate picture of European Jewish life before World War II, has been propagated and hallowed.

Because of this distorted picture of the past, a distorted view of present Jewish society has taken hold. And, it is this distorted view that is responsible for much of the current dysfunction in religious Jewish societies the world over.

There have been attempts to somehow correct our hindsight but, in the main, they have failed to do so because of the determined opposition of zealots who perpetuate inaccuracies and constantly create new fantasy stories to buttress their ideologically driven view of past Jewish life. I am not in favor of exposing all faults of European Jewry and I am also willing to accommodate the many exaggerations about the truly positive aspects of that pre-World War II society. But, without a balanced and somewhat accurate portrayal of what that society really looked like, it will be difficult for our society to move forward in a positive and constructive fashion.

There was a time when people believed that pictures never lied and that one picture was worth a thousand words. That unfortunately is no longer true. Computers, airbrushing and other modern means of altering photographs have made pictures from the past suspect.

There is a famous photograph of the sainted Chafetz Chaim sitting outside of his house talking to his eldest son, Rabbi Aharon Leib Poupko. In the original photograph the wife and daughter of the Chafetz Chaim are standing directly behind him. In a new and completely hagiographic biography of the Chafetz Chaim this picture has been reproduced in the book, except that the women in the picture have disappeared completely from the scene.

This premeditated inaccuracy was mandated by the desire to make the past somehow resemble the fantasy-imagined world of the guardians of current political correctness in our religious world of today. Once, many years ago in Monsey, my congregation's sisterhood sponsored the sale and distribution of a generic vegetarian cookbook of exotic recipes. The cookbook contained an illustration of a young boy who was bareheaded. The ladies spent the entire night covering the boy's head with a magic marker yarmulke.

I am also reminded of pictures of famous Eastern European rabbis who were forced to take passport or other official photos in a bareheaded pose, whose photos were later retouched (not very artfully at that) to make them conform to present accepted piety. This probably falls between acceptable exaggeration and unacceptable inaccuracy but it is indicative of the spirit of our times.

The inaccuracies and fantasy portrayals of the Jewish past are but one of the many symptoms of what I feel to be the major underlying malaise within much of religious Jewish society. That underlying problem is the insecurity of the religious Jewish society in facing the new Jewish world that now exists.

This world is one of modernity gone rampant, of communication that is instant and all-inclusive, of a Jewish state with all of the social, political, theological and religious challenges that such a state entails, and of a completely different economic and professional work environment than existed a century ago.

Frightened by these immense challenges, unaccustomed to being a distinct minority in the Jewish world itself, and having been forced to be on the defensive by the attacks of the secularists, the traditional Jewish world has been loath to engage these problems. It prefers to repaint and revisit the past instead of facing the present.

It is frightened and regressive instead of being confident and optimistic. This is truly ironic, for current Jewish society and its demographics have once again proven, seemingly against all odds, the resilience of Torah and tradition in all sections and climes of the Jewish world. As such our education should be geared towards self-pride and optimism, reality and how to cope in our current world. There should be less emphasis on denigrating others and fearing their ideas, and less trepidation of technological advancements.

Shabat shalom

Berel Wein

from: Rabbi Yissocher Frand ryfrand@torah.org
reply-to: ryfrand@torah.org, genesis@torah.org
date: Thu, Jul 5, 2012 at 1:05 PM
subject: Rabbi Frand on Parshas Balak

Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Balak

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape 820 -- K'rias Shemah Without Tefillin. Good Shabbos!

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This week's parsha contains the remarkable story involving Bilaam and his donkey "The donkey saw the angel of Hashem standing on the road with his sword drawn in his hand, so the donkey turned away from the road and went into the field; then Bilaam struck the donkey to turn her back onto the road. The angel of Hashem stood in the footpath of the vineyards, a fence on this side and a fence on that side." [Bamidbar 22:23-24]

The Medrash writes in Bamidbar Rabbah that this scenario of "the fence on this side and a fence on this side" was a message to Bilaam: You will never be able to have any effect on these people, for these people are protected by the Two Tablets of Stone (Luchos) written by the "Finger of G-d" about which it is said that they are "written from this side and from this side". Obviously, this is a play on words. However, there must be something deeper here as well. There must be something about the Luchos concerning which it is written "m'zeh u'm'zeh hem kesuvim" that is the antithesis and the antidote for all that Bilaam stands for. What is the interpretation of this Medrash?

I saw an interesting explanation from the Tolner Rebbe [Rav Yitzchak Menachem Weinberg (Jerusalem)], shlit"a, in his Sefer Heimah Yenachamuni. Chaza"l say on the pasuk "There never again arose in Israel one like Moshe" [Devarim 34:10] that in Israel there never arose one like Moshe, but amongst the nations of the world there was such an individual. Who was that? It was Bilaam, the son of Beor. The Almighty anticipated the argument from the nations of the world "if we had for ourselves a prophet of the stature of Moses we would have turned out better." He did not want the nations to argue "It was not fair. It was not a level playing field." Therefore, the Almighty made Bilaam – the prophet of the nations – equal to Moshe in prophecy.

The problem is that Bilaam is one of the most despicable characters in all of Tanach. He is the paradigm of the person who has rotten Midos.

Tractate Avos catalogs his evil character traits. He was arrogant, he was lustful, he was jealous, and he was greedy. Name a bad trait – he had it! In addition to having all these bad traits, he was an immoral person. The Gemara infers [Sanhedrin 105] that the donkey he rode on by day was also the creature that serviced him at night as well.

How could it be that a person who was gifted with such prophecy and with such understanding of the Almighty could remain the most despicable amoral and immoral person there is? The answer is because it was a gift on the part of the Ribono shel Olam that he should have this prophecy. Prophecy under normal circumstances is earned and achieved after years and years of work and self-improvement. Prophecy received "for free" is of a different nature.

The Mesilas Yesharim [Pathways of the Just] goes through the various human traits (based on the Beraisa regarding Rav Pinchas ben Yair) that are necessary to acquire in order to ultimately reach the top of the spiritual pyramid – Ruach HaKodesh [Divine inspiration]. A person must work his way through all the other attributes in Mesilas Yesharim

in order to reach Divine Inspiration, let alone prophecy. A Jew who takes the life-long process spelled out by the Ramcha "I in Mesilas Yesharim reaches the ultimate destiny of Ruach HaKodesh and then Nevuah (prophecy).

Bilaam, on the other hand, received it all one day as a gift. There was no self-improvement. There was no working on himself. The Master of the Universe gave it to him "for free" for the reason we mentioned – so that the nations would not have a "complaint" against Him. But Bilaam remained the same horrible person he had always been, who had just received the gift of prophecy without working for it. Therefore there was no contradiction.

We can understand this dichotomy by considering the following scenario. One person works hard at his business, putting in long hard hours and effort to build it up from scratch. Little by little, he is successful. The business expands, and then later it expands even further following additional successes. Finally, it becomes a public corporation and the entrepreneur winds up becoming a multi-millionaire. That kind of person can usually handle wealth because he knows what it was to be poor and he knows how hard it is to make a dollar. He knows it is not "easy come; easy go".

However, another person, who only has an 8th grade education, suddenly wins the Power Ball lottery and now comes into 250 million dollars. Often, such people do not know how to handle their wealth. There are stories galore of these types of people who had such wealth ruin their lives because they do not know how to handle money. They are taking all this money into a "vessel" that is not worthy of that money. This was the scenario with Bilaam. "You Bilaam will never have an effect on the Jewish people because the Jewish people have the Luchos that are written on this side and this side, engraved on the tablets". When a person wants to describe something as being permanent, the expression used is "carved in stone". The allusion the Medrash is making by saying that Klal Yisrael have the Luchos which are written "from this side and from this side" is saying that what the Jewish people have achieved they have achieved through hard work, such that it becomes a permanent part of their being, etched in stone, as it were. Bilaam, however, you are just a flash in the pan. What you have been given in prophecy is not part of your essence. You will never be able to have an effect on them. Being an Ingrate is the "Worst of the Worst"

The following insight is from the Alter of Slabodka. According to the Medrash, Bilaam said to Balak: Both of us are ingrates. Were it not for Avraham Avinu, there would never have been a Balak King of Moab in the world. For if not for Avraham's merit, Lot would never have escaped the destruction of Sodom. "How can you – a descendant of Lot – hire me to curse the descendants of Avraham? I, too, am an ingrate", Bilaam told Balak, "because if not for their father Yaakov, I would not be around either. Lavan only merited having sons – from whom I descended – by virtue of the fact that Yaakov lived in his house. How can I curse Yaakov's descendants? I too must be an ingrate."

This is a strange Medrash. It is as if Bilaam the wicked is giving a mussar schmooze [a lecture in personal ethics]. Since when was Bilaam into "midos tovos"? Why is this person, who has all the evil human traits in the world, expressing remorse – as it were – that he was an ingrate? The Alter of Slabodka says we see from here that the worst character trait of all is to be an ingrate. Even a Bilaam, who was the prototype of evil character traits, felt bad about being an ingrate.

Rav Ruderman, the founding Rosh Yeshiva of Ner Israel, was a disciple of the Alter of Slabodka and this idea is very typical of the themes he would frequently speak about. There were basically three topics to which he returned over and over in emphasizing proper behavior to his students: Torah; Kindness (Chessed); and HaKaras HaTov [recognizing a debt of gratitude]. Rav Ruderman felt that if a person did not recognize those who did him favors, it called into question the person's entire

humanity. We all have our failings and our foibles, but to be an ingrate is the worst of the worst.

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Laws of the Three Weeks

by Rabbi Yirmiyahu Ullman - www.rabbiullman.com

Based on "A Summary of Halachos of the Three Weeks" by Rabbi Shimon D. Eider

During the three weeks between the 17th of Tammuz until after Tisha B'Av, the custom is to observe some aspects of mourning over the destruction of the Holy Temple. The observance intensifies as Tisha B'Av approaches.

(The following is according to the Ashkenazic custom, for the Sephardic custom please consult an appropriate rabbi.)

Weddings should not be performed during this period.

Engagements may take place with a meal until the 1st of Av. From the 1st of Av until after Tisha B'Av they may take place with refreshments only.

Dancing and playing or listening to music is prohibited. A musician who earns his living by playing for non-Jews may do so until the 1st of Av.

The custom is to refrain from reciting the blessing "sh'hechyanu" on new garments or fruit, except on Shabbat. Pregnant women or ill people who need the fruit may eat it normally. New garments that don't require this blessing may be purchased and worn until the 1st of Av.

The custom is to refrain from taking a haircut, including the beard. An adult may not even give a haircut to a child.

Trimming the mustache is permitted if it interferes with eating. Combing and brushing the hair is permitted.

A person who usually shaves daily (in a permitted manner) and would suffer business or financial loss by not shaving, may do so until the 1st of Av, or at most until the Friday before Tisha B'Av. In any case, one should consult a competent rabbi.

A married woman may remove hair that protrudes from under her hair covering, and facial or bodily hair that may be unattractive to her husband.

Cutting the nails is permitted until the Friday before Tisha B'Av. Even then it is permitted for a woman before immersion, or for a man as well, in honor of the Shabbat (for example if Tisha B'Av is on Shabbat and postponed to Sunday, or if it is on Sunday itself).

<http://www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/735559>

Halachos of the Three Weeks

Author: Rabbi Aryeh Lebowitz

Article Date: Friday June 26, 2009

Halachos of the Three Weeks

I. Introduction.

Unfortunately, the Jewish calendar provides us with many periods of time where we recall tragic events in our history. The rabbis have instituted the practice to observe certain customs of mourning during the period of seferas ha'omer, the three weeks, the nine days, the week of Tisha B'Av, and, of course, Tisha B'Av itself. Due to the many details and differences in halacha between these time periods, people are often confused about which halachos are observed during each period. In this essay, we will outline the halachos that pertain specifically to the three weeks. The reader should be aware that the halachos change drastically once the nine days begin, and this essay should not be used as a guide for the nine days.

II. Haircutting and Shaving.

A. The basic halacha. The Rama (551) writes that one may not take a haircut from Shiva Assar b'Tamuz until chatzos on the tenth day of Av. This is an Ashkenazic practice. Sefardic practice is to follow the ruling of the Shulchan Aruch not to take haircuts only during the week of Tisha b'Av. Before discussing the details of this halacha, it is important to note that Rav Soloveitchik

developed an idea that leads us to drastically different conclusions than many of the other poskim. Rav Soloveitchik believed that the period of the three weeks mirrors the period of twelve months of mourning one observes after the death of a parent, and our practice is to shave regularly (after initially allowing a few days of growth), one may do the same during the three weeks. The

discussion that follows assumes the approach of the majority of the poskim to be correct, but does not presume to cast any doubt on the halachic validity of Rav Soloveitchik's approach.

There are a number of exceptions to the prohibition to cut one's hair:

1. Mustaches. The Shulchan Aruch rules that if a mustache is growing in a way that it inhibits eating, one may trim it.
2. Women of marriageable age. Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach allowed a woman who is of marriageable age to take a haircut during the three weeks (and even during the nine days) because many poskim rule that a woman may even take a haircut during the period of mourning - so we may certainly rely on these poskim for a rabbinic prohibition such as haircutting during the three weeks (Shalmei Mo'ed Chapter 89)
3. Trimming eyebrows.
 - a. Rav Moshe Feinstein. Rav Moshe Feinstein was of the opinion that one cannot trim eyebrows during shloshim, and therefore may not do so during the three weeks either.
 - b. Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach. Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach maintains that it is permissible to trim eyebrows (and yelashes) during the three weeks. He felt that such hair removal is not considered to fall into the halachic category of "haircutting".
4. Taking a haircut for the purposes of a mitzvah. It is permissible to take a haircut for the purposes of a mitzvah. Therefore, a woman who has the custom to shave her head before going to the mikvah may do so. Also, somebody whose hair has grown to such an extent as to cause a chatzitzah for his tefillin, may take a haircut to allow him to properly fulfill the mitzvah. However, Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach only permitted one to cut the hair in the area that the tefillin will rest on his head, but not the rest of his head, as that is not a true mitzvah necessity (Shalmei Moed). It could be argued, however, that the issue of kavod ha'briyos would permit one to violate the rabbinic prohibition of haircutting during the three weeks, specifically in an instance where it would look ridiculous to cut part of his hair and not all of it.
5. Exceptions specifically for women:

- a. The Mishnah Berura (551:79) rules that if a woman's hair is growing in such a way that it is difficult for her to keep it under her head covering, she may cut the hair during the three weeks.
 - b. Rav Moshe Feinstein allowed women to shave their legs during the three weeks. The logic for this ruling is that the growth of hair on women's legs is not only uncomfortable, but is also something that makes a woman appear unattractive to her husband.
 - c. Women may get their sheitels cut or styled during the three weeks, as this is not considered to be their hair, but their clothing.
6. Brissim. On the day of a baby's bris the Sha'ar Ha'Tziyun (551:4) cites the Chasam Sofer #158 who says that the father, mohel and sandik may all take haircuts. Even if the bris falls on shabbos they may take haircuts on the Friday preceding the bris. The Be'er Hetev, however, derives from the Rama's comment that they may wear nice clean clothing for the bris, that other prohibited activities such as haircutting remain forbidden.

B. Cutting hair for work.

1. In an instance where not getting a haircut is likely to cost somebody money, Rav Moshe Feinstein (Igras Moshe Orach Chaim IV:120) allows one to shave during the three weeks because the prohibition of haircuts during the three weeks is only a minhag. However, during the week of Tisha b'Av, itself, when it is halachically prohibited to cut hair, one would not be permitted to do so even in the event of significant monetary loss.

2. In an instance where one is unlikely to lose any money by not shaving, but one is uncomfortable going into his place of work unshaven for fear that his co-workers may mock him, Rav Moshe Feinstein rules that one may not even shave during the three weeks.

C. Children getting haircuts. The Shulchan Aruch (551:14) rules that adults may not cut children's hair during this time period. The Mishnah Berurah cites two possible reasons for this prohibition: either because of the mitzvah of chinuch or the agmas nefesh caused by seeing the children in this state of mourning is recommended during this period. The Sha'ar Hatziyun points out that the practical halachic difference between these two considerations is whether a child under the age of six can get a haircut. Rav Moshe Feinstein (Igeras Moshe Yoreh Deah I:224) and the Aruch Hashulchan (551:31) allow a child under the age of six to get a haircut.

III. Getting married and participating in a wedding.

A. Weddings. The Shulchan Aruch rules that one may not get married during this period. However, there is a machlokes ha'poskim as to whether one may get married on the night of Shiva Asar b'Tamuz:

1. Rav Moshe Feinstein. Rav Moshe (Igeras Moshe Orach Chaim I:168) rules that it is permissible to get married on the night of Shiva Asar b'Tamuz. He reasons that there is a machlokes between the Ba'al Ha'maor and Ramban whether the fast day really starts at night (and you say Aneinu at ma'ariv). He believes that he has a strong proof from a gemara (Pesachim 2b) that the preceding night is not considered to be part of the fast at all. Considering that the issue of not getting married during the three weeks is only a custom, we may rely on the lenient opinion. Rav Moshe argues that researching the prevalent custom on this issue is useless because it is uncommon for Shiva Asar b'Tamuz to fall on Sunday. It remains unclear, though, why Rav Moshe assumes that this issue is only a question when Shiva Asar b'Tamuz falls on Sunday, as it would seem that the same issue would arise on any other day of the week. It is possible that Rav Moshe would only permit this when Shiva Asar b'Tamuz falls on Sunday, but when it falls on another day he would advise to make sure the v'puj is done before sunset on the previous night. Indeed, Rivevos Ephraim (I:375) cites Rav Moshe who ruled that one should finish the chupah prior to sunset.

2. Rav Yosef Dov Halevi Soloveitchik. The Rav ruled, however, that it is not permissible to get married the night before Shiva Asar b'Tamuz because although the actual obligation to stop eating does not yet apply, the day is still considered to be a day of fasting. He cites as proof to this

position the comment of the Toras Hashelamim Hilchos Niddah that one should not eat meat or drink wine on the night preceding a fast day (Nefesh Harav page 196). Rabbi Eliezer Waldenberg (Tzitz Eliezer X:26) also disagrees with Rav Moshe on this issue. He points out that although one cannot ascertain a custom when it comes to getting married on this night because it is such an uncommon event, one can determine a custom for the other customs of mourning that we observe, such as not reciting a she'hechyanu. The Chida explicitly states that our custom is not to recite a she'hechyanu even on the night of Shiva Asar b'Tamuz, indicating that we begin the customs of mourning already the night before the fast.

B. Engagements. The Shulchan Aruch (551:2) rules that one may betroth a woman even on Tisha b'Av itself, lest somebody else beat him to it, and he loses the opportunity to marry this woman. However, the Shulchan Aruch rules that one should not have a festive meal celebrating the betrothal during the nine days. The Mishnah Berurah rules that one may arrange a Tannaim, during this period as well. It seems obvious that one would also be permitted to get engaged during this period. The Rama comments that our custom is not to get married starting from Shiva Asar b'Tamuz but makes no mention of such a custom relating to festive meals celebrating engagements. The Mishnah Berurah (#26 and Sha'ar Hatziyun 19) rules that one may have a meal to celebrate an engagement during the three weeks.

IV. Listening to music and dancing.

As we have discussed elsewhere (see Listening to Music During Sefira – bknw.org Torah Library), listening to music is forbidden by the Shulchan Aruch all year. While some poskim suggest that if we are lenient throughout the year we may be lenient during sefira as well, there is strong reason to argue that we should never be lenient during the three weeks.

Fundamentally, the days of sefira represent a range of emotions. On the one hand they are a quasi-Chol Hamoed between Pesach and Shavuos. On the other hand, it is the time that we commemorate the deaths of Rabbi Akiva's 24,000 students. However, the three weeks are fundamentally a time of churban. While we may choose to ignore the decrees of chazal meant to commemorate the churban during the time of Sefiras ha'Omer, it is reasonable to demand that we observe these decrees meticulously during the time of year that is aimed at commemorating the churban.

A. Live music versus recorded music. The overwhelming majority of the poskim assume that recorded music has the same status as live music and would therefore be forbidden during this period of mourning. Some even assume that recorded voices have the status of music, as the player is considered an instrument to make pleasant sounds like any other instrument. Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach expresses some reservation about listening to voices singing on a recording (Shalmei Moed page 475). However, most assume that a recorded voice has the status of a voice and is therefore permissible to listen to, while recorded music has the status of music and would therefore be forbidden to listen to.

B. Exceptions. There are a number of exceptions to the halacha that one may not listen to music during sefira:

- 1. Rav Moshe Feinstein has been quoted as saying that background music in a video presentation or the like is not considered music, and is permissible.
- 2. Rav Moshe Feinstein (Igeras Moshe Orach Chaim III:87) rules that a musician or somebody who is studying to become a musician may play music during sefira in order to sharpen his skills. Presumably, Rav Moshe would have allowed a musician to practice during the three weeks as well. If, however, he is playing for his own enjoyment, Rav Moshe cautions, it would be forbidden to play music.

3. Rav Ovadiah Yosef (Yechave Da'at VI:34) rules that one may listen to music and sing along with it at a seudat mitzvah.

V. Reciting she'hechyanu.

The Shulchan Aruch (551:17) recommends that one refrain from reciting a she'hechyanu on new clothing or fruits during this period. The Magen Avraham (42) that since this period is a time of tragedy it is inappropriate to thank Hashem for allowing us to reach this time. The Yad Efraim explains that although a mourner may recite a she'hechyanu, we may not do so during the three

weeks because while a person may be in mourning, there is nothing about the time period that would dictate that one refrain from reciting a she'hechyanu. This underscores the idea that the prohibition to recite a she'hechyanu is not based on a prohibition of simcha, but actually reflects the very nature of the day. During the nine days many other activities may be prohibited as a result of a prohibition to experience simcha.

1. The following is a list of some of the more practical halachos relating to reciting a she'hechyanu during the three weeks:

A. Reciting she'hechyanu on Shabbos. There is a machlokes ha'poskim whether one may recite a she'hechyanu on Shabbos. The Arizal (cited by Magen Avraham) prohibits it, while the Sefer Chasidim and Magen Avraham himself are lenient. The Aruch Hashulchan rules that during the three weeks one may recite a she'hechyanu on Shabbos, but during the nine days one should not recite the she'hechyanu on Shabbos.

B. Buying something new. Since it is prohibited to recite a she'hechyanu one should refrain from any purchases that would require a she'hechyanu (e.g. expensive clothing, cars etc.). Where the custom is to recite the bracha the first time the item is used, rather than at the time of purchase one may purchase the item during the three weeks. When purchasing a house it seems that one has the option of reciting the she'hechyanu either at the time of the closing or the moving day. One of these days should be scheduled for a time outside of the three weeks to avoid an obligation in saying a she'hechyanu during the three weeks. It should be noted though, that there is no prohibition to recite a hatov v'hameitiv during the three weeks, and one may therefore make a purchase that will benefit a group of people (e.g. a family car -Igeros Moshe Orach Chaim III:80). Similarly, Rav Moshe rules that one may buy a new car or truck for business as this would be included in the category of minimizing business transactions, which we are lenient with nowadays.

C. Children. A person should recite a she'hechyanu upon the birth of a baby girl (Nitei Gavriel 17:19) or for the Pidyon Haben of his son (Shulchan Aruch 551:17).

VI. Swimming.

It is widely assumed that one may not go swimming during the three weeks. Rav Moshe Shternbuch, however, points out that there was never a formal decree instituted against swimming during the three weeks, and we no longer have the power to institute any such decree. Therefore, Rav Shternbuch concludes, one may go swimming during the three weeks. It is only prohibited to go swimming during the nine days. However, Rav Shternbuch advises, it is best to refrain from swimming in deep waters because this period of the year is one that has always been a dangerous period for the Jewish people, and refraining from any possibility of danger is recommended (Teshuvos V'Hanhagos II:263).

VII. Conclusion.

As Rav Soloveitchik so eloquently explains, the period of the three weeks is designed to gradually bring the destruction of the Beis Hamikdash into the center of our consciousness. Proper observance of these halachos prepares us to take the next step and begin to experience a true sense of aveilus during the nine days and through Tisha B'Av. It is only through the meticulous observance of the halachos of mourning for the Beis Hamikdash, that we can reasonably hope to merit seeing the rebuilding of the Beis Hamikdash in our lifetime.

<http://www.ou.org/yerushalayim/17betammuz/default.htm>
the 17th of tammuz

The 17th day in the Jewish month of Tammuz, Jews the world over fast and lament to commemorate the many calamities that have befallen our people on this ominous day.

The purpose of such fasts in the Jewish calendar is, according to Rabbi Eliyahu Kitov's Book of Our Heritage, "to awaken hearts towards repentance through recalling our forefathers' misdeeds; misdeeds which led to calamities..."

A HISTORIC DAY OF CALAMITY

Going all the way back to Biblical times, Moses descended Mount Sinai on this day and, upon seeing the Golden Calf broke the first set of Tablets carrying the Ten Commandments (Shemot 32:19, Mishna Taanit 28b).

In the First Temple Era: The priests in the First Temple stopped offering the daily sacrifice on this day (Taanit 28b) due to the shortage of sheep during the siege and the next year 3184 (586 BCE), the walls of Jerusalem were breached after many months of siege by Nebuchadnezzar and his Babylonian forces.

In Melachim II 21:7 we find that King Menashe, one of the worst of the Jewish kings, had an idol placed in the Holy Sanctuary of the Temple, according to tradition on this date. The Talmud, in Masechet Taanit 28b, says that in the time of the Roman persecution, Apostomos, captain of the occupation forces, did the same, and publicly burned the Torah - both acts considered open blasphemy and desecration. These were followed by Titus and Rome breaching the walls of Jerusalem in 3760 (70 CE) and Pope Gregory IX ordering the confiscation of all manuscripts of the Talmud in 4999 (1239).

In later years this day continued to be a dark one for Jews. In 1391, more than 4,000 Jews were killed in Toledo and Jaen, Spain and in 4319 (1559) the Jewish Quarter of Prague was burned and looted.

The Kovno ghetto was liquidated on this day in 5704 (1944) and in 5730 (1970) Libya ordered the confiscation of Jewish property.

Other interesting occurrences on this day include Noach sending out the first dove to see if the Flood waters had receded, (Bereishit 8:8) in 1650 (2100 BCE); Moshe Rabbeinu destroying the golden calf, (Shemot 32:20, Seder Olam 6, Taanit 30b - Rashi) and then ascending back up Har Sinai for the second time where he spent the next forty days pleading for forgiveness for the sin of the golden calf, (Shemot 33:11, Rashi).

The Fast of the Fourth Month

The Mishna in Ta'anit 4:8 associates the 17th of Tammuz as the "Fast of the Fourth Month" mentioned by the prophet Zechariah. According to this Mishna, the 17th of Tammuz will be transformed in the messianic era in a day that "shall be joy to the House of Judah" full of "gladness and cheerful feasts".

Customs

The fast of the 17th of Tammuz is observed from the break of dawn until night (as defined by halacha), one of four Jewish fasts to be observed in this manner - 3 Tishrei, 10 Tevet, 13 Adar and 17 of Tammuz.

Expecting or nursing mothers and those who are ill are expected to observe the fast but with lenience, refraining from meat, luxurious food and hard liquor.

Minors that are old enough to understand, though exempt from fasting, should also be fed only simple foods as a manner of education.

Unlike the two Jewish fast days Yom Kippur and Tisha B'Av, washing and wearing leather are permitted on this day.

Special prayers (vayechal and anenu) are added to the morning and afternoon prayers. Ashkenazim add the latter only in the afternoon service (mincha).

This day is the beginning of the Three Weeks, an annual period of mourning over the destruction of the first and second Temples in Jerusalem.

Aish.org

The Evil Eye

by Rabbi Ari Kahn

Balak (Numbers 22:2-25:9)

The Evil Eye

As the children of Israel are encamped in the plains of Moav, danger looms from outside the camp.

A plot is in formation designed to mortally harm them. The assault is a strange one -- the conspirators will use spiritual powers to attack the Jews.

Balak, the king of Moab who is credited with being a significant diviner in his own right, seeks the assistance of Bil'am, a powerful seer.

What was the origin of Bil'am's destructive power?

Readers of the text have a difficult time understanding how Bil'am possessed such destructive power in the first place. It seems peculiar that God should have to get involved in order to frustrate this nefarious plan and not allow the curse to be uttered.

The traditional explanation is that Bil'am had an "evil eye" 1 and therefore was theoretically able to attack the Jews. This idea may be seen in the verses in the numerous references to "eyes" and "sight":

He sent messengers, therefore, to Bil'am, the son of Beor, to Pethor, which is by the river of the land of the sons of his people, to call him, saying, "Behold, there is a people come out from Egypt; behold, they cover the eye² of the earth, and they are dwelling opposite me. Come now therefore, I pray you, curse this people for me; for they are too mighty for me; perhaps I shall prevail, that we may defeat them, and that I may drive them out of the land; for I know that he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed." (Numbers 22:5-6; see also Numbers 22:10-11,31)

And when Bil'am saw that it pleased the Lord to bless Israel, he went not, as at other times, to seek for enchantments, but he set his face toward the wilderness. And Bil'am lifted up his eyes, and he saw Israel abiding in his tents according to their tribes; and the spirit of God came upon him. And he took up his discourse, and said, "The speech of Bil'am, the son of Beor; the speech of a man whose eyes are open. The speech of him who heard the words of God, who saw the vision of the Almighty, falling down, but having his eyes open." (Numbers 24:1-4; see also Numbers 24:15-16)

The Midrash relates to this quality as characteristic of Bil'am and his teachings: From this you can infer that he possessed three qualities, viz. an evil eye, a haughty spirit, and a greedy soul. How do we know that he had an evil eye? Because it is written, And Bil'am lifted up his eyes, and he saw Israel dwelling tribe by tribe. (Numbers 24:2). (Midrash Rabbah Bamidbar 20:10)

* * *

THE POWER TO BLESS AND CURSE

This destructive quality of Bil'am may explain a separate problem presented by Parshat Balak. If Bil'am senses that his attempts to curse the Jews are being frustrated, then why doesn't he bless Balak and his people? Either cursing the Jews or blessing the Moabites should have the same results: a victory for Moab. This question is predicated on the assumption that Bil'am has the ability to bless and curse with equal competence. This would seem to be the meaning of the verse cited above:

For I know that he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed. (Numbers 22:5,6)

The ability to bless is foreign to Bil'am -- it does not seem to be a part of his make up. Perhaps the potential was there but the ability to bless seems to elude him now. There are some men specially fitted for the transmission of blessings, as, for instance, a man of "good eye." There are others, again, who are specially fitted for the transmission of curses, and curses light wherever they cast their eyes. Such was Bil'am, who was the fitting instrument of evil and not of good, and even when he blessed his blessing was not confirmed, but all his curses were confirmed, because he had an evil eye. (Zohar, Leviticus 63b)

While the subject of "evil eyes" and similar magical phenomenon is vast and beyond the scope of this work, perhaps we can try to penetrate at least a partial understanding of the topic.³

Rabbi Soloveitchik once suggested that there is a difference between a evil eye which is used in some sources to describe a trait, and the destructive "evil eye" which is found in other sources. The latter may be better described as an outlook

more than a trait. One type is internally centered, while the other is aimed at the outside toward others.

* * *

GOOD EYE VS. EVIL EYE

The Mishna in Avot recalls a conversation between Rav Yochanan ben Zakkai and his prized disciples. He asks them to discern a major trait to which a person should cling:

He [Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakkai] said unto them: "Go forth and observe which is the good way unto which a man should cleave?" Rabbi Eliezer said, "A good eye." ... He [further] said unto them: "Go forth and observe which is the evil way from which a man should remove himself far?" Rabbi Eliezer said, "An evil eye." (Avot 2:9.)

Rabbenu Yona in his comments to the Mishna identifies the "good eye" or the "evil eye" in this context as a trait. To feel miserly is a manifestation of this negative trait. To be generous is a manifestation of the positive "good eye."

The best example of the "good eye" is Abraham.

Perhaps the paradigmatic example of the "good eye" would be Abraham. His kindness was ingrained to the core of his being and was not merely an outer directed behavior, lacking inner spiritual consistency. In a later Mishna in Avot we are told a "good eye" is prominently included in the description of traits of "students of Abraham." What is interesting in this context, is how Abraham's students' traits are contrasted with the traits of disciples of Bil'am.

Whoever possesses these three things, he is of the disciples of Abraham, our father; and [whoever possesses] three other things, he is of the disciples of Bil'am, the wicked. The disciples of Abraham, our father, [possess] a good eye, an humble spirit and a lowly soul. The disciples of Bil'am, the wicked, [possess] an evil eye, a haughty spirit and an over-ambitious soul. (Avot 5:19)

The meaning of "evil eye" is not immediately clear in this context. Is it the destructive evil eye, or is it the trait which would serve as a better counter balance to the "good eye" of Abraham and disciples?

Because of the mention of Bil'am one would be tempted to associate the evil eye with Bilaam's destructive power. However, the text is surely easier to understand where the two types of disciples are contrasted. Furthermore, all the items listed in this Mishna sound like traits.

Therefore, we may conclude that Bil'am possessed both types of evil eye, the negative personality trait in addition to the destructive outlook. The classical "evil eye" which mesmerizes and haunts alike, and causes people to automatically say bli ein hara, is somewhat more elusive.

* * *

THE POWER OF JOSEPH

We are told that there are people who were impervious to its nefarious power, namely Joseph and his children or "students."⁴

Joseph is a fruitful vine, a fruitful vine above the eye (Genesis 44:22). This teaches that the evil eye has no power over them. (Midrash Rabbah - Genesis 97)5

Rabbi Yochanan was accustomed of sitting at the gates of the bathing place. He said: "When the daughters of Israel come up from bathing they look at me. and they have children as handsome as I am." Said the rabbis to him: "Is not the Master afraid of the evil eye?" He replied: "I come from the seed of Joseph, over whom the evil eye has no power, as it is written, Joseph is a fruitful vine, a fruitful vine above the eye."

Rabbi Judah son of Rabbi Hanina derived it from this text: And let them multiply like fishes in the midst of the earth. Just as the fishes [dagim] in the sea are covered by water and the evil eye has no power over them, so the evil eye has no power over the seed of Joseph. Or, if you prefer I can say: "The evil eye has no power over the eye which refused to feed itself on what did not belong to it." 6(Berachot 20a, Baba Metzia 84a, Also see Sotah 36b)

Rabbi Soloveitchik explained Joseph's invulnerability in the following manner.

Certain people live their lives based on the comments and perceptions of others.

Joseph knew who he was and had confidence in himself, and did not change

according to the whims of others. Joseph was not "swayed by the crowd."

Therefore, Joseph was not susceptible to the "evil eye."

This is a deeper meaning of the last line in the citation from the Talmud. Joseph did not live based on things which did not belong to him therefore the destructive comments of others had no effect.

* * *

RABBINIC DREAM THEORY

This idea would have a parallel within rabbinic dream theory. On the one hand dreams are seen to have a certain affinity with prophecy. On the other hand dreams can be ignored with no ill effects. However, if a person receives an interpretation for his dream then a power is unleashed. In a word, dreams are in the eye of the beholder.

Rabbi Bana'ah: "There were twenty-four interpreters of dreams in Jerusalem. Once I dreamt a dream and I went round to all of them and they all gave different interpretations, and all were fulfilled, thus confirming that which is said: 'All dreams follow the mouth.'" (Brachot 55a)

This aspect of dreams is closely associated with prophecy itself. Often the prophets would receive images or visions and not specific words. This is known as receiving prophecy through a prism.⁷

Moses was the only prophet to receive exclusively words from God. Therefore, the prophet had a certain amount of leeway in describing, and interpreting his vision.⁸ Theoretically, Bil'am would receive his revelations at night, therefore in the morning he would be able to interpret his vision using his own words and create the negativity with his subjective interpretation. Obviously, if this were the case then the results would be devastating.⁹

* * *

BIL'AM VS. MOSES

This understanding allows us to penetrate the strange statement of the Sages describing the exalted status of Bil'am. The Torah states:

And there has not arisen since in Israel a prophet like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face, Israel. (Deut. 34:10)

The rabbis explain:

And there has not arisen a prophet since in Israel (Deut. 34:10): "In Israel" there had not arisen one like him, but there had arisen one like him among the nations of the world. This was in order that the nations of the world might have no excuse for saying: "Had we possessed a prophet like Moses we should have worshipped the Holy One, blessed be He." What prophet had they that was like Moses? Bil'am the son of Beor. There was a difference, however, between the prophecy of Moses and that of Bil'am.

There were three features possessed by the prophecy of Moses which were absent from that of Bil'am:

When He [God] spoke with Moses the latter stood on his feet; as it says, But as for you, stand you here by Me, and I will speak unto you, etc. (Deut. 5:28). With Bil'am, however, He only spoke while the latter lay prone on the ground; as it says, Fallen down, and his eyes are opened (Numbers 24:4).

With Moses He spoke mouth to mouth; as it says, With him do I speak mouth to mouth (ib. 12:8), while of Bil'am it says, The saying of him who heareth the words of God (ib. 24:4), which teaches that He did not speak with him mouth to mouth.

With Moses He spoke face to face, as it says, And the Lord spoke unto Moses face to face (Exodus 33:11), but with Bil'am He spoke only in parables; as is confirmed by the quotation, And he took up his parable, and said, etc. (Numbers 23:7). (Midrash Rabbah - Numbers 14:20)

Of all prophets only Bil'am is compared favorably to Moses in terms of the quality of his prophecy. Though the Midrash takes pains to differentiate between the two, the very suggestion of a comparison seems obscene.

However because of Bil'am's misanthropic personality, once it was established that he must have the ability to prophesize, it was decreed that he must receive specific words - in order that he have no leeway in terms of interpretation. While other prophets received images and visions, their pure souls produced positive true approximations of the Divine will. The prophetic evil Bil'am could not be given this ability - especially with his "evil eye." He received direct words from God, not because he was on a higher level than all the other Jewish prophets, quite the opposite, because he was on a far lower level.¹⁰

The Zohar stresses the immense difference between the spiritual strata enjoyed by Moses, and the lowly Bil'am:

Said Rabbi Yehuda: "As Moses excelled all prophets in Israel in respect of the superior, holy prophecy, so Bil'am excelled all other pagan prophets and soothsayers in respect of the inferior, unholy prophecy. In any case Moses was above, Bil'am below, and there were numerous stages between them." (Zohar, Exodus Page 22a)

Bil'am would only be able to prophesize when prostrated. The Zohar understands this gesture, as if he were reaching down to grab something from the nether world, or at least something which was once a part of a higher world. In this context the Zohar proceeds and explains the source of Bil'am's power:

What is man that You are mindful of him, and the son of man that You visit him? (Psalms 8:5). Rav Shimon said: "[This] was uttered by those in charge of the world at the time when God expressed His intention of creating man. He called together various companies of heavenly angels and stationed them before Him. He said to them: 'I desire to create man.' They exclaimed, 'Man abides not in honor, etc. (Psalms 49:13).' God thereupon put forth His finger and burnt them. He then set other groups before Him, and said: 'I desire to create man.' They exclaimed, 'What is man that You should remember him? What is the character of this man?'

they asked. He replied: 'Man will be in Our image, and his wisdom will be superior to yours.'

"When He had created man and he (man) sinned and obtained a pardon, Uzza and Azael approached Him and said: 'We can plead justification against You, since the man whom You made has sinned against You.' He said to them: 'Had you been with them you would have sinned equally.' And He cast them down from their high estate in heaven ...

"How are we to explain Bil'am's saying of himself, 'Falling and with eyes open'? For if this was merely an empty boast, how comes a false statement in the Torah? And if it is true, how could that sinner attain to a degree higher than that of all the true prophets, especially as the holiness from above rests only on a spot qualified to receive it? The fact is, however, that after God cast Uzza and Azael down from their holy place, they went astray after the womenfolk and seduced the world also. It may seem strange that being angels they were able to abide upon the earth.

"... Now when God saw that these fallen angels were seducing the world, He bound them in chains of iron to a mountain of darkness. Uzza He bound at the bottom of the mountain and covered his face with darkness because he struggled and resisted, but Azael, who did not resist, He set by the side of the mountain where a little light penetrated. Men who know where they are located seek them out, and they teach them enchantments and sorceries and divinations. These mountains of darkness are called the 'mountains of the East,' and therefore Bil'am said: 'From Aram hath Balak brought me, from the mountains of the East,' because they both learnt their sorceries there.

"Now Uzza and Azael used to tell those men who came to them some of the notable things which they knew in former times when they were on high, and to speak about the holy world in which they used to be. Hence Bil'am said of himself: 'who hears the words of God' not 'the voice of God,' but those things which he was told by those who had been in the assembly of the Holy King."

He went on: "And knows the knowledge of the Most High", meaning that he [Bil'am] knew the hour when punishment impended over the world and could determine it with his enchantments.

"Who sees the vision of the Almighty: this vision consisted of the 'fallen and the open of eyes,' that is Uzza, who is called 'fallen' because he was placed in the darkest depth, since after falling from heaven he fell a second time, and Azael, who is called 'open of eye' because he was not enveloped in complete darkness. Bil'am called both of them 'the vision of the Almighty.' At that time he was the only man left in the world who associated with them, and every day he used to be shut up in those mountains with them." (Zohar, Numbers, Page 208b)

* * *

FALLEN ANGELS

The Zohar understands that the knowledge which Bil'am possessed came from heaven via "fallen angels" 11 who knew the goings on in heaven. The idea of Bil'am having knowledge of heaven is also mentioned in the Talmud:

A God that has indignation every day. And how long does this indignation last? One moment ... And no creature has ever been able to fix precisely this moment except the wicked Bil'am, of whom it is written: He knows the knowledge of the Most High. Now, he did not even know the mind of his animal; how then could he know the mind of the Most High? The meaning is, therefore, only that he knew how to fix precisely this moment in which the Holy One, blessed be He, is angry... Rabbi Eleazar says: "The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Israel: 'See now, how many righteous acts I performed for you in not being angry in the days of the wicked Bil'am. For had I been angry, not one remnant would have been left of the enemies of Israel.' And this too is the meaning of what Bil'am said to Balak: How shall I curse, whom God has not cursed? And how shall I execrate, whom the Lord has not execrated? (Berachot 7b)

In the course of the normal dealing with the world God would allow but a moment of anger. This idea seems obscure. One explanation which I have heard which is attributed to the Hassidic dynasty of Belz, explains this phenomenon.

Chesed, "kindness," is a wonderful attribute. But even kindness must have its limits. We know that chesed taken to an extreme is associated with incest, and illicit sexual relations:

And if a man shall take his sister, his father's daughter, or his mother's daughter, and see her nakedness, and she see his nakedness; it is a chesed. And they shall be cut off in the sight of their people. He has uncovered his sister's nakedness; he shall bear his iniquity. (Leviticus 20:17; see Rashi)

Chesed is wonderful, but too much chesed can be destructive. On a normal basis God holds back one moment a day from chesed, and allows strictness in order to help man avoid this spiritual pitfall. However, on that day while Balak and Bil'am were plotting and trying to harm the Jews there was not even a moment of judgement - only chesed.

* * *

SEDUCTION AND CHESED

Now we can understand the end of Parshat Balak. After Bil'am and Balak give up on cursing the Jews we find that the daughters of Moab have made their way to the camp of the Israelites.

And Israel stayed in Shittim, and the people began to commit harlotry with the daughters of Moab. And they called the people to the sacrifices of their gods; and the people ate, and bowed down to their gods. And Israel attached himself to Baal-Peor; and the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel. (Numbers 25:1-3)
Too much chesed allowed the appearance of illicit relations, perhaps Bil'am learned this idea from his erstwhile heavenly mentors. They too had turned God's gift for chesed and compassion into depraved relations on earth.

The good Jews allowed the wayward women into their camp.

The Jews -- who were truly students of Abraham, and therefore had a "good eye" -- allowed these wayward women into their camp. In this instance a moment of strictness would have been in order. Bil'am saw that the Jewish camp is based on a "good eye" and the spiritual barometer pointed to a forecast of excessive chesed. Bil'am used the Jew's gifts and good traits against them. In this instance the community should have shown restraint, and understood, that as God has a moment of strictness so much the Jewish community.¹²

How ironic -- while the "evil eye" did not harm them, the "good eye" did.

NOTES

See Rashi 24:2. (return to text)

The Hebrew here is "eye" some English translations prefer the term "face of the Earth". However, the Midrash clearly renders the word "eye." (Midrash Rabbah - Numbers 20:7). (return to text)

Zohar, Genesis, Page 68b. (return to text)

It is interesting, that when he was younger Joseph was susceptible to the Evil Eye: Midrash Rabbah - Genesis 89:10. (return to text)

Zohar 2:225a Observe, likewise, that no evil eye had any power over the seed of Joseph. (return to text)

The Zohar has a different explanation for Joseph's imperviousness to the "evil eye": Zohar, Numbers, Page 202b. (return to text)

See Zohar Genesis, Page 183a. (return to text)

Chagiga 13b. (return to text)

Significantly rejecting a bad dream is directly related to God's frustration of Bil'am and his visions. (Berachot 55b)(return to text)

This idea may be found in the Or Gidalya, see the discussion there (Parshat Balak) and the teachings taught in the name of Rav Diskin. (return to text)

See Genesis 6:4 in reference to the Nifilim, and the comments of the Targum Yonatan. (return to text)

Perhaps this is the connection between the death of the 24,000 as a result of the plague (25:9) for displaying too much chesed, and the death of the 24,000 students of Rabbi Akiva (Yevamot 62b) who died because they did not perform enough chesed. (return to text)

Rabbi Yochanan Zweig genesis@torah.org
5:05 AM (18 hours ago)
to rabbizweig

Rabbi Zweig on the Parsha
by Rabbi Yochanan Zweig

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Parshas Balak **Ultimate Greed**

"his houseful of silver and gold..." (22:18)

In this week's parsha, Balak, the King of Moav sends high-ranking officials to commission Balaam to curse the Jewish people. Hashem appears to Balaam and tells him not to go. Balaam's response to Balak's officials is: "If Balak would give me his household of silver and gold, I could not transgress the word of Hashem." Our Sages see in this response the corrupt nature of Balaam's character.[1] Rashi explains that by mentioning a houseful of gold and silver, he reveals his greed (as if to say that if he were able to transgress the word of Hashem, he would, but only for a huge sum of money).[2]

Many of the commentaries attempt to differentiate between the statement of Balaam and that of Rabbi Yossi Ben Kismah in Pirkei Avos. Rabbi Yossi Ben Kismah relates the story of how he was invited to leave the city of his residence, a city renowned for its Torah scholars, in order to join a different city which was

devoid of Torah. His response to the invitation was, "If you give me all the gold and silver and precious gems in the world, I will not leave my city of accomplished Torah scholars." [3]

How is this response different than Balaam's?

which says that it One could, perhaps, say the difference is the following: Balaam was more specific in his request for the net value of Balak's estate, indicating his true desire, while Rabbi Yossi Ben Kismah did not quote a definite amount of money. However, this would create a new difficulty after with a statement made by King David in the Book of Psalms. There, King David affirms his love for the Torah with the verse, "Your Torah is more valuable to me than thousands of gold and silver (pieces)." [4] Clearly, from specifying an amount does not indicate greed. The answer lies in the careful reading of Rashi. Rashi says that from the verse we see the corrupt nature of Balaam's character, for he desired the wealth of others. Rashi explains that Balaam's wickedness is revealed by his focus on the wealth of Balak, rather than the mere mention of money.[5] The desire for greater wealth is intrinsic to human nature. However, it is of wicked nature to specifically desire to possess that which is owned by another.

In Control (17th of Tammuz)

"On the seventeenth of Tammuz the Tablets were broken" (Ta'anis 26a)

Five calamities occurred on the seventeenth of Tammuz. The first of these calamities is recorded in the Torah. Upon descending the mountain after having received the Decalogue, Moshe witnessed Bnei Yisroel celebrating the creation of the golden calf and he shattered the Tablets.[1] The verse describes the Tablets as "charus" - "engraved".[2] The Mishna states that the word "charus" can also be read as "cheirus" - "freedom", for only the study of Torah brings true freedom.[3] Therefore, the breaking of the Tablets reflects a loss of freedom for the Jewish people.[4] What is the difference between the secular definition of freedom and that of the Torah? How do we reconcile the "psht", the straightforward reading of the text as "charus" - "engraved", with the "derush", the homiletic interpretation as "cheirus" - "freedom"?

Freedom is often defined as our right or privilege to act or express ourselves without coercion in whichever manner we desire. The Torah's definition of freedom is cognizant of the fact that very often we behave in a manner which hides under the guise of freedom of expression, yet in reality we are submitting to coercive forces. Whether our actions are influenced by societal pressures or by our physical or emotional desires, these actions cannot be described as completely free from coercion. We ourselves are aware of the destructive nature of our actions but are helpless to overcome the deceptions of societal acceptance and self-gratification. The pursuit of Torah not only empowers the individual with the ability to overcome any coercive forces, but also removes the conflict that exists in the decision making process, synthesizing the individual's visceral sense to behave appropriately with his desires. Being bound by restrictions does not imply a lack of freedom; restrictions are not only ultimately for our benefit, but they prevent us from taking actions which we truly wish to avoid.

The words of the Decalogue symbolize spirituality and the Tablets themselves, that which is physical. Had the Decalogue been described as ink which is scripted upon parchment, this would imply imposition of the words upon the Tablets. Chazal teach us that Hashem miraculously caused the letters of the Decalogue to suspend themselves within the Tablets. The Tablets wrapped themselves around the words, conforming to them.[5] This reflects the complimentary nature of the physical and the spiritual which can coexist without any conflict.

We all have a natural proclivity to behave in an appropriate manner. The Torah removes the impediments that mask our true feelings, breaking through the misconceptions and misguided value system which society creates for us.

1. Taanis 26a
2. Shemos 32:16
3. Avos 6:2
4. Eiruvim 54a
5. Megilla 2b

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Peninim on the Torah by Rabbi A. Leib Scheinbaum - Parshas Balak

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5:27 AM (17 hours ago)

to Peninim

PARSHAS BALAK

If Balak will give me his houseful of silver and gold, I cannot transgress the word of Hashem. (22:18)

Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi describes Bilaam as an individual whose deficiencies in three areas of humanity were the source of his consummate evil. He goes so far as to say that anyone who acts in a manner which reflects the personality of Bilaam is actually a disciple of Bilaam. In contrast stands Avraham Avinu, who exemplified the totally opposite type of personality. In Pirkei Avos 5:19, the Mishnah draws a contrast between the great Patriarch Avraham and the archetype of evil, Bilaam:

"Whoever has the following three qualities is among the disciples of Avraham Avinu: a good eye; a humble spirit; and a meek soul. Those who have an evil eye, an arrogant spirit, and a greedy soul, are the disciples of the wicked Bilaam." We now have an idea of the evil which Bilaam represents.

In Avos 4:21, Rabbi Elazar HaKapor maintains that jealousy, lust and glory remove a man from this world. There is no place in this world for a person who has such flawed character traits. Horav Arye Leib Heyman, zl, observes that these three negative qualities -kinah, taavah and kavod - coincide with Bilaam's character flaws. Kinah, envy, is the result of an evil eye. A person who views everything and everyone through a jaundiced lens naturally becomes jealous. Taavah, lust, is to be found in the individual who has a greedy soul. He has no shame; thus, he does not refrain from carrying out his most deviate thoughts. His greed knows no bounds, and he does everything he can just to satisfy his cravings and lusts. Last, is glory, which is consistent with one who has an arrogant spirit. After all, they are one and the same.

After comparing the two sets of spiritual footprints that comprise the character of Bilaam and his disciples, we wonder why Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi focuses on the origin of Bilaam's evil: his defective eye, his flawed soul, his arrogant spirit; in contrast, Rabbi Elazar HaKapor addresses the character flaws that are manifest as a result of these defective qualities in the human composition.

Rav Heyman explains that it is necessary to emphasize the flawed personality of Bilaam, because superficially his actions did not indicate that he was anything less than a righteous, upright person. In public, Bilaam acted like a Heavenly prophet - albeit a gentile one. The majority of the pagan society in which he lived could not discern that anything about Bilaam was awful. The fact that Bilaam was envious, lustful and a glory seeker was not well-known, because he was able to conceal these failings from the public eye. Indeed, it is only by allusion that the Torah hints to Bilaam's defective character. After all, what does one say concerning a man who declares, "Even if Balak were to give me an entire house filled with gold and silver, I could never transgress the word of G-d"? Does this demonstrate Bilaam's greediness? Certainly not! We can extend this thought further. If the Torah saw fit to include Bilaam's statement in its narrative, then, quite possibly, Bilaam had superficially himself fooled. He believed that he was not money hungry. Bilaam openly preached selflessness, satisfaction with very little, abstinence. Internally, he was motivated by greed, controlled by lust, and oriented towards self-service for his personal glory. Perhaps this is why the Mishnah focuses on the disciples of Bilaam, rather than contrasting Bilaam with Avraham Avinu. To look at Bilaam himself, it was difficult to distinguish him from Avraham. The man put on a good show, so good that even he believed it. It is when we look at Bilaam's disciples without their mentor's cover-up that we see who Bilaam really was.

Despite Bilaam's potential for greatness, he was evil incarnate. Chazal teach this when they tell us the truth about his essential nature. From the bottom of his feet to the top of his head, Bilaam was consummately evil. What lends greater intensity to this evil is the fact that it was covert, expertly concealed by a master chameleon. Bilaam and Moshe Rabbeinu both, at first, refused to yield to the ratzon, will, of Hashem. To the innocent observer, both Bilaam and Moshe were doing the same thing. Wherein lay the difference between the two?

Their ratzon, will, determined their essence. Moshe did not want to impugn his older brother's position as the leader of the Jewish people. He was sensitive to Aharon's feelings. Thus, while he was willing to lead the nation, he was reluctant to agree to Hashem's "proposition" due to Aharon HaKohen. Bilaam, however, had no compunction about cursing the Jews. On the contrary, he looked forward to it. He relished the thought of bringing down the nation. This was his true desire.

Therefore, despite possessing unusual qualities that should have catapulted him to leadership and distinction, he became known as the paradigm of evil. He refused to

subdue his innate desires and lusts. Thus, nothing could protect him from the eventual infamy which he achieved.

What makes Bilaam's actions more egregious is his manipulation of the G-d-given qualities with which he was blessed, using them to execute his evil intentions, rather than availing himself of opportunities for spiritual growth. Some of us are like that. We are blessed with wealth. Do we use it for charitable endeavors, to promote Torah study, to help the poor and needy, or is it all about "me"? Do we use our wealth: to promote ourselves and our agenda; to manipulate others; to use our money as the proverbial carrot to see how high the "rabbits" will jump? We have gifts of acumen, charisma, wealth, etc. for a constructive purpose. Hashem has granted us the opportunity to be His agents for promoting good in the world. To do otherwise places us in the same class as Bilaam - a miscreant who chose to live the life of a rasha, wicked person, but wanted to die like a tzaddik, righteous person. We all want to leave this world righteous. It is the journey that takes us there that presents us with some difficulty.

Hashem's wrath flared because he was going. (22:22)

Bilaam was determined to go to Midyan. After all, Hashem did not clearly prohibit him from going. He simply did not countenance it. This increased Bilaam's desire to go. It made the trip that much more exciting. This in itself defines the despicable person that Bilaam was. He was waiting for a "no", but it did not come. That meant "yes". If Hashem was not happy about him going - that was even better. Bilaam took great satisfaction in acting independently of Hashem's will.

Horav Aharon Leib Shteinman, Shlita, derives an important lesson herein. Hashem judges a person in accordance with his actions. If Hashem has not stated clearly that a given action is prohibited, although He is certainly not in favor of it, one should not carry it out. If he does, he is angering the Almighty. Not every prohibition must be articulated. Some things are designed to be understood by an individual who possesses common sense. This is why Hashem's wrath flared against Bilaam. He should have known better. In fact, Bilaam was waiting for just such an opportunity - when there was no definite "no," but there certainly was no clear "yes."

Rav Shteinman suggests that this "awareness" of what Hashem wants plays a critical role in one's avodas Hashem, service to the Almighty. If one is acutely aware that the ratzon Hashem, will of Hashem, is for an activity to be executed a certain way, and he does not act consistently with the ratzon Hashem, he incurs Hashem's wrath. Thus, one should exert great effort to follow the middas ha'chasedus, most stringent approach toward carrying out mitzvos. While it is not something which is written in the Torah, it is the ratzon of Hashem. How can one knowingly ignore Hashem's will? Indeed, Rav Shteinman cites the Chovas HaLevavos who posits that the concept of reshut, discretion, does not apply to mitzvos; rather, every action is either a mitzvah or an aveirah, sin. If Hashem wants us to do something - that is all there is. Not to conform with the will of G-d is a sin! With this idea in mind, he distinguishes between yiraas Shomayim, fear of Heaven, and yiraas cheit, fear of sin. These two terms are used by Chazal and the commentators, often interchangeably, thus, apparently alluding to their common definition. This is not so. Yiraas cheit refers to fear of sin, its consequent punishment and ensuing blemish on the person's spiritual dimension. In contrast, a yarei Shomayim is one who will not do anything that runs counter to the will of Hashem - even if there is no punishment, no negative exhortation, and no spiritual stain left on him. As long as it is not the ratzon Hashem, it is taboo. To act otherwise bespeaks the same character flaw that was manifest in Bilaam.

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