

**...Weekly Parsha BALAK
Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog**

After recounting all the inner failings and rebellions of the Jewish people in the desert of Sinai, as recorded for us on the Torah readings of the past few weeks, we are now forced to turn our attention to a great external threat to Jewish survival. Balak and Bilaam represent an unfortunately eternal opposition to Jewish existence and to the rights of the Jewish people as a nation.

Their attack is a two-pronged plan. Balak intends to use force and violence, military means and the strength of arms to eliminate what he perceives to be a Jewish threat to his hegemony in his part of the world. Bilaam, on the other hand, seeks to destroy the Jewish people diplomatically, philosophically and with a public relations scheme. He has cursed the Jewish people, to hold it to be guilty before the bar of world opinion, of all sorts of crimes that are imaginary and illusory, to help bring about its downfall and destruction.

When the world will see the Jewish people through the eyes of Bilaam he is confident that they will no longer be able to exist and function as a people. The Lord thwarts the plans of both Balak and Bilaam. The Jewish people are too strong to be overcome militarily and the Lord will not allow Bilaam to curse them in any meaningful way. In fact, the Lord turns the words of negativity and hatred that Bilaam wishes and intends to utter into words of praise. These enemies of Israel are apparently checkmated on both of their fronts of attack.

Yet it would be wrong for us to think that the intentions and actions of these evil people did not have an effect. The blandishments and compliments given by Bilaam to the Jewish people somehow weakened the people morally. They are led to believe that the world recognizes and appreciates their greatness and that it is possible and even desirable to become part of that world physically, emotionally and domestically.

One of the weaknesses of the Jewish people throughout the ages has been that it is very susceptible to favorable comments and soothing behavior than it is to harshness and criticism. Everyone wants to be loved, especially those who, deep down in their souls, realize that they are unloved by so many.

Israel can withstand all the unfair and unjust resolutions of the United Nations without it really affecting its sense of self-worth and inner strength. If Israel would constantly be lauded, as it should be by any rational observer of the world scene, it seems that somehow it would be likely to have greater self-doubt and less steadfastness in the face of the problems that confront it.

The Talmud tells us that the Jewish people do better in times of stress and criticism than in times of compliments and fawning blandishments. The strength of the Jewish people has always been its ability to maintain its belief in its own uniqueness and self-worth. This remains the key to Jewish survival in our time as well.

Shabbat shalom
Rabbi Berel Wein

A People that Dwells Alone (Balak 5778)

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

This is an extraordinary moment in Jewish history, for good and not-so-good reasons. For the first time in almost 4,000 years we have simultaneously sovereignty and independence in the land and state of Israel, and freedom and equality in the Diaspora. There have been times – all too brief – when Jews had one or the other, but never before, both at the same time. That is the good news.

The less-good news, though, is that Anti-Semitism has returned within living memory of the Holocaust. The State of Israel remains isolated in the international political arena. It is still surrounded by enemies. And it is the only nation among the 193 making up the United Nations whose very right to exist is constantly challenged and always under threat.

Given all this, it seems the right time to re-examine words appearing in this week's parsha, uttered by the pagan prophet Balaam, that have come to seem to many, the most powerful summation of Jewish history and destiny:

From the peaks of rocks I see them,

From the heights I gaze upon them.

This is a people who dwell alone,

Not reckoning themselves one of the nations. (Num. 23:9)

For two leading Israeli diplomats in the twentieth century – Yaacov Herzog and Naphtali Lau-Lavie – this verse epitomised their sense of Jewish peoplehood after the Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel. Herzog, son of a Chief Rabbi of Israel and brother of Chaim who became Israel's president, was Director-General of the Prime Minister's office from 1965 to his death in 1972. Naphtali Lavie, a survivor of Auschwitz who became Israel's Consul-General in New York, lived to see his brother, Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau, become Israel's Chief Rabbi. Herzog's collected essays were published under the title, drawn from Balaam's words, *A People that Dwells Alone*. Lavie's were entitled *Balaam's Prophecy* – again a reference to this verse.[1]

For both, the verse expressed the uniqueness of the Jewish people – its isolation on the one hand, its defiance and resilience on the other. Though it has faced opposition and persecution from some of the greatest superpowers the world has ever known, it has outlived them all.

Given, though, the return of Anti-Semitism, it is worth reflecting on one particular interpretation of the verse, given by the Dean of Volozhyn Yeshiva, R. Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin (Netziv, Russia, 1816-1893). Netziv interpreted the verse as follows: for every other nation, when its people went into exile and assimilated into the dominant culture, they found acceptance and respect. With Jews, the opposite was the case. In exile, when they remained true to their faith and way of life, they found themselves able to live at peace with their gentile neighbours. When they tried to assimilate, they found themselves despised and reviled.

The sentence, says Netziv, should therefore be read thus: "If it is a people content to be alone, faithful to its distinctive identity, then it will be able to dwell in peace. But if Jews seek to be like the nations, the nations will not consider them worthy of respect." [2]

This is a highly significant statement, given the time and place in which it was made, namely Russia in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. At that time, many Russian Jews had assimilated, some converting to Christianity. But Anti-Semitism did not diminish. It grew, exploding into violence in the pogroms that happened in more than a hundred towns in 1881. These were followed by the notorious Anti-Semitic May Laws of 1882. Realising that they were in danger if they stayed, between 3 and 5 million Jews fled to the West.

It was at this time that Leon Pinsker, a Jewish physician who had believed that the spread of humanism and enlightenment would put an end to Anti-Semitism, experienced a major change of heart and wrote one of the early texts of secular Zionism, *Auto-Emancipation* (1882). In words strikingly similar to those of Netziv, he said, "In seeking to fuse with other peoples [Jews] deliberately renounced to some extent their own nationality. Yet nowhere did they succeed in obtaining from their fellow-citizens recognition as natives of equal status." They tried to be like everyone else, but this only left them more isolated.

Something similar happened in Western Europe also. Far from ending hostility to Jews, Enlightenment and Emancipation merely caused it to mutate, from religious Judeophobia to racial Anti-Semitism. No-one spoke of this more poignantly than Theodore Herzl in *The Jewish State* (1896):

We have honestly endeavoured everywhere to merge ourselves in the social life of surrounding communities and to preserve the faith of our fathers. We are not permitted to do so. In vain are we loyal patriots, our loyalty in some places running to extremes; in vain do we make the same sacrifices of life and property as our fellow-citizens; in vain do we strive to increase the fame of our native land in science and art, or her

wealth by trade and commerce. In countries where we have lived for centuries we are still cried down as strangers ... If we could only be left in peace ... But I think we shall not be left in peace.

The more we succeeded in being like everyone else, implied Herzl, the more we were disliked by everyone else. Consciously or otherwise, these nineteenth century voices were echoing a sentiment first articulated 26 centuries ago by the prophet Ezekiel, speaking in the name of God to the would-be assimilationists among the Jewish exiles in Babylon:

You say, "We want to be like the nations, like the peoples of the world, who serve wood and stone." But what you have in mind will never happen. (Ez. 20:32)

Anti-Semitism is one of the most complex phenomena in the history of hate, and it is not my intention here to simplify it. But there is something of lasting significance in this convergence of views between Netziv, one of the greatest rabbinic scholars of his day, and the two great secular Zionists, Pinsker and Herzl, though they differed on so much else. Assimilation is no cure for Anti-Semitism. If people do not like you for what you are, they will not like you more for pretending to be what you are not.

Jews cannot cure Anti-Semitism. Only Anti-Semites can do that, together with the society to which they belong. The reason is that Jews are not the cause of Anti-Semitism. They are the objects of it, but that is something different. The cause of Anti-Semitism is a profound malaise in the cultures in which it appears. It happens whenever a society feels that something is badly amiss, when there is a profound cognitive dissonance between the way things are and the way people think they ought to be. People are then faced with two possibilities. They can either ask, "What did we do wrong?" and start to put it right, or they can ask, "Who did this to us?" and search for a scapegoat.

In century after century Jews have been made the scapegoat for events that had nothing to do with them, from medieval plagues to poisoned wells to inner tensions in Christianity to Germany's defeat in the First World War to the underachievement of many Muslim states today. Anti-Semitism is a sickness, and it cannot be cured by Jews. It is also evil, and those who tolerate it when they could have protested are accomplices to evil.

We have nothing to apologise for in our insistence on being different. Judaism began as a protest against empires, symbolised by Babel in Genesis and ancient Egypt in Exodus. These were the first great empires, and they achieved the freedom of the few at the cost of the enslavement of the many.

Jews have always been the irritant of empires because of our insistence on the dignity of the individual and his or her liberty. Anti-Semitism is either the last gasp of a declining culture or the first warning sign of a new totalitarianism. God commanded our ancestors to be different, not because they were better than others – "It is not because of your righteousness that the Lord your God is giving you this good land" (Deut. 9:6) – but because by being different we teach the world the dignity of difference. Empires seek to impose unity on a plural world. Jews know that unity exists in heaven; God creates diversity on earth.

There is one fundamental difference between Anti-Semitism today and its precursors in the past. Today we have a State of Israel. We need no longer fear what Jews discovered after the Evian Conference in 1938, when the nations of the world closed their doors and Jews knew that they had not one square inch on earth they could call home in the Robert Frost sense, namely the place where "when you have to go there, they have to let you in." [3] Today we have a home – and every assault on Jews and Israel today only serves to make Jews and Israel stronger. That is why Anti-Semitism is not only evil but also self-destructive. Hate destroys the hater. Nothing has ever been gained by making Jews, or anyone else, the scapegoat for your sins.

None of this is to diminish the seriousness with which we must join with others to fight Anti-Semitism and every other religious or racial hate. But let the words of Netziv stay with us. We should never abandon our distinctiveness. It is what makes us who we are. Nor is there any contradiction between this and the universalism of the prophets. To the

contrary – and this is the life changing idea: In our uniqueness lies our universality. By being what only we are, we contribute to humanity what only we can give.

...
Psalm 97: Light Sown for the Tzaddik
Rav Kook Torah

אור נרע לַצַּדִּיק; וְלַיֹּשֵׁר-לֵב שִׂמְחָה תְהִי־לֵם צְדִיקָא

"Light is sown for the righteous, and joy for the upright in heart."
(Psalm 97:11)

Based on this verse, the Talmud in Ta'anit 15a makes the following conclusion: the tzaddik (the righteous) has light, but the yashar (the upright) is blessed with joy. Why is this?

In general, what is the difference between these two levels of righteousness, the tzaddik and the yashar?

First Light and then Joy

When these two terms are mentioned together, we find that 'light' is mentioned before 'joy.' For example, it says, "The Jews enjoyed light and joy" (Esther 8:16). This order indicates that 'joy' is the goal, while 'light' is a means to that goal.

We may understand the difference between a tzaddik and a yashar through an interesting question that Maimonides raises in Shemonah Perakim (ch. 6). Who is greater: a person who is naturally inclined to do the right thing? Or a person who must work to overcome negative habits to do what is right?

The better person, Maimonides explains, is the individual with ingrained noble traits and good inclinations. People who have purified their hearts and refined their character so that their desires naturally correspond with God's Will - they truly cleave to God and His ways.

Those who must struggle against evil inclinations, however, suffer from internal conflict. Their actions are not in harmony with their desires. It is only the Torah, whose teachings they have not fully internalized, that enlightens their moral darkness and guides them on the proper path. Their lives in this world are a constant battle; they only attain serenity and true happiness in the next world.

The Tzaddik and the Yashar

Now we may understand the verse. Tzaddikim conquer and correct (matzduk) their actions, through the guidance of the Torah. They are guided by light - but it is a "sown" light. Like a seed planted in the soil, it will only sprout and fully reveal itself at a later time.

Since tzaddikim spend their lives laboring to overcome evil inclinations, they are unable to experience the joy of their enlightened path. By fulfilling God's Will through Torah and mitzvot, they acquire this "planted" light, whose benefits they will reap at the time of reward. It is through the Torah's light that they will merit the joy of the future world, enjoying the splendor of the Shechinah in the World to Come. "Light is sown for the righteous."

The yashar, however, is a different story. The phrase yishrei-lev literally means "those whose heart is straight." Their hearts and desires are at one - "in line" - with God's Will. Thus they are able to enjoy the future happiness of the World to Come already in this world. Already now there is "joy for the upright in heart."

(Adapted from Olat Re'iyah vol. II, p. 17)

See also: Balak: Tents and Dwelling Places

Insights Parshas Balak

Yeshiva Beis Moshe Chaim/Talmudic University

Based on the Torah of our Rosh HaYeshiva HaRav Yochanan Zweig, Tammuz 5778

This week's Insights is dedicated

לזכות רפואה שלימה רפאל חיים דוב בן ריסה שושנה.

Master Manipulator

Balak the son of Zippor saw all that Yisroel had done to the Emori. Moav was very frightened of the people because they were many, and Moav was disgusted in the face of B'nei Yisroel (22:2-3).

This week's parsha opens with a remarkable statement: Balak took notice of what B'nei Yisroel had done to the great kings of the time -

Sichon and Og. This seems peculiar as Sichon and Og were the two great world power leaders of that time; their defeat at the hands of this upstart nation had to have attracted worldwide notice. What was it that Balak "saw" that had escaped everyone else's attention?

Even more perplexing, if the nation of Moav was frightened by the death and destruction that B'nei Yisroel had wrought upon the Emori, logically Moav should be frightened of their incredible power - so why does the Torah say that they were frightened by the numbers of the Jewish nation? Additionally, what does the statement "Moav was disgusted in the face of B'nei Yisroel" add to the narrative?

What Balak saw was an opportunity to create a leadership role for himself. In reality, there wasn't any reason for Moav to be afraid. After all, B'nei Yisroel had purposefully avoided conflict with the nation of Edom because they were cousins (descendants of Eisav - Yaakov's brother). Both Moav and Midian were cousins as well; Moavites were descendants of Lot (Sarah's brother) and those of Midian were the children of Avraham (by second wife Keturah). Because of these connections, B'nei Yisroel had no interest in a war with them.

But Balak's genius was in the creation of a fabricated animosity. He pointed out that the Jewish nation was exceedingly great in number and would undoubtedly want to settle in the vicinity. He may have even known that the great multitude of Erev Rav wouldn't have a portion in the land of Israel or that some of the tribes wished to settle on Moav's side of the Jordan.

Thus, Balak singlehandedly created the first immigrant and refugee crisis. This was the disgust that Moav felt; they were disgusted with the prospect of having to live and share land with a nation that would totally devour all the natural resources. This is why Bnei Yisroel are described as "this nation [that] will chew up our entire surroundings as an ox chews up grass of the field" (22:4).

Balak also highlighted the futility of trying to defeat B'nei Yisroel through a conventional war. In this manner, he created a desperate situation that seemingly had no solution. But of course Balak had a plan all along. After scaring Moav into looking to their perennial enemy (Midian - home country of Moshe Rabbeinu) for advice, Midian responded that the only solution was to find someone who had the power to get Hashem to act.

Balaam was the equivalent of Moshe Rabbeinu in prophecy. As Rashi notes (22:5), Balak and Balaam were from the same place and had known each other years earlier (Balaam had, in fact, prophesied that Balak would become a king someday). Therefore, Balak held the power to bring about the solution to this seemingly impossible situation. In effect, he created the mirage of a problem and then positioned himself to be the only path to a solution. That is why the Torah says, "Balak son of Zippor was king of Moav at that time" (22:4) - Rashi points out that he was appointed King to deal with this emergency situation. What Balak saw that no one else saw was an opportunity to get himself appointed as king.

And Loyalty Above All...

The officers of Moav came to Balak and reported that "Balaam refuses to return with us." Balak continued (to try and recruit Balaam) by sending more officers of a higher rank than those previously. They came to Balaam and said "so said Balak - do not refrain from coming to me for I will honor you very much..." Balaam answered and said to the servants of Balak... (22:14-18)

Rashi (22:13) points out that Balaam had given Balak's first emissaries the message that they were not important enough to request his presence at Balak's behest. Balak, who was very keen on having Balaam come and curse B'nei Yisroel, therefore sent messengers that were of higher ranking than the first group.

Many Rishonim (Rosh, Rabbeinu Bachaye) question the Torah's description of the higher ranking officers as "the servants of Balak." Calling these high ranking officers "servants" seems to imply that they were of a very lowly stature. How does this fit in with the narrative that Balak actually sent higher ranking officers?

Balak, as we have seen, was a very astute political leader who certainly understood the tenets of building an effective hierarchy of command.

Obviously, in order to be promoted to a position of responsibility one must be capable; but among those who are capable of doing the job how does a leader decide who is of a higher and who is of a lesser rank?

The answer is loyalty. Those who are most trusted and loyal are the ones who are brought closest to the king. The term "eved - servant" doesn't always refer to one of lowly stature; often it implies the relationship between the master and the servant. The Gemara has the maxim "the hand of the servant is as the hand of the master." In other words, the servant is an extension of the master. In such a situation only the closest and most trusted confidant is placed into that position.

This was the position of both Moshe who is called "eved Hashem," and Eliezer who is called "eved Avraham." In both of those instances, the term eved doesn't mean a lowly servant. Quite the opposite - both of them acted in lieu of their master, in modern parlance it would be akin to a "power of attorney."

By calling the second group "the servants of Balak," Balaam was actually recognizing their unique position as trusted confidantes of Balak, and worthy of his consideration to mull Balak's offer to come and curse the Jewish people.

For the Love of Money

"Balaam answered and said to the servants of Balak, 'If Balak gives me his house full of silver and gold, I cannot transgress the word of Hashem, my G-d, to do anything small or great'" (Bamidbar 22:18).

Rashi comments that this pasuk reflects negatively on Balaam's character, indicating that he was plagued by a desire for other people's money. By speaking of the possibility that Balak would give him so much wealth, Balaam indicated that he coveted Balak's assets, which the Torah views as a fundamental character flaw.

This desire for wealth is generally treated as a negative desire. Yet, we find similar statements made by great figures in Jewish history, and their expression of this sentiment is actually to their credit. Dovid Hamelech, for instance, declares in Sefer Tehillim, "The Torah of Your Mouth is better for me than thousands of gold and silver" (119:72). If desiring thousands of gold and silver was an abominable character trait he wouldn't be saying much about the value of the Torah. Similarly, the Tanna Rabbi Yosi ben Kisma relates in Pirkei Avos (6:9) that he told someone, "Even if you give me all the gold, silver, precious stones, and pearls in the world, I would live only in a place of Torah."

The statements of these great men are certainly not viewed as indicative of a shameful lust for wealth; on the contrary, both Dovid Hamelech and Rabbi Yosi ben Kisma appreciated the value of money, but they considered Torah far more important and precious. That being the case, why is Balaam's statement viewed as painting a negative picture of his personality?

There is one significant difference between the words of Balaam and the statements of Dovid Hamelech and Rabbi Yosi ben Kisma: Rashi notes specifically that Balaam desired the money of others while both Dovid Hamelech and Rabbi Yosi ben Kisma speak of its value in general terms. Balaam's character flaw lay in his desire to take the money of others, not in his appreciation of its inherent value.

It is not a shortcoming for a person to understand and appreciate the value of money. Many wonderful things can be accomplished with money; when used properly it is a vehicle for accomplishing much of what Hashem desires for our world - it is certainly needed to open Torah institutions and chessed organizations throughout the world.

Thus, Dovid Hamelech and Rabbi Yosi ben Kisma are applauded for their statements. Balaam's flaw, meanwhile, lay in his desire for other people's wealth. If we just read his words literally we can see that he didn't just want wealth; he wanted Balak's house full of silver and gold.

The tenth of the Aseres Hadibros is the prohibition against coveting another person's belongings, which many Rishonim view as the most severe of the Ten Commandments. There is nothing wrong with having a desire for a beautiful home or for other assets, for if these things are used properly, they can make a positive impact. However, it is terribly improper to harbor a desire to take things for oneself that belong to someone else. Coveting another person's belongings is where the sin begins, and that is the terrible character trait that Balaam exhibited.

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Hilchos Shabbos

"Walking Outside With Essential Medications On Shabbos"

Some Poskim permit people suffering from chronic medical conditions (e.g. angina, asthma, diabetes, severe allergies, etc.) which require them to carry medications on their person at all times, to go to shul or to a Torah lecture (i.e. mitzvah activities) where there is no eruv, on the condition that the medication is carried in a backhanded, unusual manner (e.g. wrapped in plastic under one's hat, tucked inside a sock, or a pants cuff, wedged between one's undershirt and skin, etc.).

Only the minimum dose necessary should be carried. Because this question involves complex halachic compromises, one must ask a shaila to a competent Rov before using the above described heter in each instance. Shmiras Shabbos Kehilchasa 40:7, Mahrash Engel 3:43, 7:20, Sefer 39 Melochos

Where Should I Pray

By Rabbi Yirmiyohu Kaganoff

Certainly, both Bilaam's desire to destroy the shullen of the Jews, and Pinchas's praying that the plague end (see Tehillim 106:30), makes this a befitting week to discuss:

Question #1: My Shul or my Minyan?

"Is it more important to daven with a minyan or to daven in shul?"

Question #2: Minyan-less

"I work nights, and by the time I am finished in the morning, there is no minyan with which I can daven. There is a shul near my workplace, but no minyan that accommodates my schedule. Should I go there to daven bi'yechidus?"

Question #3: The Shul I Don't Attend

"From a halachic perspective, does it make any difference in which shul I daven?"

Question #4: Davening Privately

"Davening with a minyan disturbs my learning schedule. May I therefore daven bi'yechidus?"

Introduction

As we will soon see, there are many halachos that determine the preferred location for prayer. Among other issues, I will be discussing the following questions:

What constitutes davening with a minyan?

Should one pray in a shul even when there is no minyan?

Is there a preference as to which shul one should attend?

With a minyan

The Gemara and authorities laud the advantages of praying with a minyan:

"The Holy One, blessed is He, said: 'Whoever is involved in Torah and chesed and prays with the tzibur, I treat him as if he redeemed Me and My children from the nations of the earth'" (Brachos 8a).

"The prayers of the community are always listened to. Even when there are sinners among them, the prayers of the community are never viewed by Hashem with disfavor. Therefore, a person should always join with the community, and he should not pray by himself any time that he can pray with the tzibur. A person should always wake up early and go to shul, and should always attend shul in the evening, because prayer is not heard at all times, except when recited in a shul. One who has a shul in his city but does not daven there is called a bad neighbor" (Rambam, Hilchos Tefillah 8:1).

Segulah for longevity

In the merit of praying daily with a minyan, there is a segulah for living a long productive life, as we see from the following passage of Gemara:

They told Rabbi Yochanan: "There are old men in Bavel." He responded with astonishment, noting that the Torah promises longevity only for those who keep the Torah carefully while living in Eretz Yisroel, but not for those who live in chutz la'aretz, including Bavel. When they told Rabbi Yochanan that these older people were wont to come to shul early and to stay late, he understood that they lived long in the merit of this mitzvah (Brachos 8a).

What constitutes tefillah betzibur?

Davening with a minyan means that one begins the shemoneh esrei at the same time that the tzibur does (Mishnah Berurah 90:28). One who arrives in shul late and therefore begins shemoneh esrei later than the minyan does, fulfills the mitzvah of davening in shul, but does not fulfill the mitzvah of davening with a

minyan. If possible, he should attend a later minyan, in order to fulfill the mitzvah of davening with a minyan and in order to make sure that his prayers are heard.

Conflicts with my learning

Someone whose learning will be disturbed by his attending regular minyanim is still required to daven with a minyan (Shu't Igros Moshe, Orach Chayim 2:27; cf., however, Eimek Brocha, page 7). In the above responsum, Rav Moshe Feinstein does recognize one exception to this rule: Someone who learns in a place where there is no minyan davening is not required to interrupt his learning in order to daven at the same time as a minyan. This ruling will be explained shortly.

How far?

How far is someone required to travel in order to be able to daven with a minyan?

This depends on whether he is at home or on the road. If he is at home, he is required to travel at least up to 18-24 minutes in order to be able to daven with a minyan (see Pri Chodosh, Orach Chayim 163:28 and Biur Halachah ad locum s.v. berichuk; however, cf. Pischei Teshuvah, Yoreh Deah 112:6, quoting Shu't Beis Yaakov #35, who rules more leniently.) In his above-referenced responsum, Rav Moshe suggests that one might be required to travel even more than this to join a minyan.

I wrote 18-24 minutes because of a dispute among early halachic authorities. This dispute is dependent on how one understands a passage of Gemara (Pesachim 95), and discussing these details is beyond the scope of our current article.

On the road

If someone is on the road and there is a minyan that is not in the direction that he is going, he is required to travel up to 18-24 minutes out of his way in order to daven with a minyan (see Pesachim 46a, as explained by Rashi and Shulchan Aruch Orach Chayim 90:16). On the other hand, if he is traveling and knows that there is a minyan ahead of him, such that traveling to attend the minyan does not take him out of his way, then the halachah is more stringent. He is required to travel up to 72-96 minutes in order to participate in a minyan.

Davening at the time of the tzibur

If someone cannot daven together with a minyan, there is a halachic preference to daven at the same time that the tzibur davens, even though the individual is not davening in the same place where the tzibur is located. In other words, although his prayer will not qualify as tefillah betzibur, the fact that the tzibur is davening at the same time as this individual assists the acceptance of his tefillah. When someone davens with the tzibur, his prayer is always heard, even when his kavanah is subpar. (Of course, the better his kavanah, the more the tefillah is heard and responded to.) Davening at the same time as the tzibur, but in a different place, is considered to be on a somewhat lower level (Tosafos, Avodah Zarah 4b s.v. keivan; see also Machatzis Hashekel 90:17, quoting Shelah Hakodesh).

Rabbi Yitzchak and Rav Nachman

In this context, we are going to eavesdrop on a conversation that transpired between two great gedolim of the time of the Gemara, the great amora'im, Rabbi Yitzchak and Rav Nachman. (Both of these scholars were so well-known that they are usually referred to by their first names. Rav Nachman's full name was actually Rav Nachman bar Yaakov [Tosafos, Bava Basra 46b s.v. Shalach], and the Rabbi Yitzchak referred to was probably Rabbi Yitzchak bar Pinchas [see Taanis 5a], but it might have been Rabbi Yitzchak bar Acha [see Brachos 27a and Rashi, Pesachim 114a].)

The conversation

Rabbi Yitzchak said to Rav Nachman: "Why did the master not come to shul to pray?" Rav Nachman replied, "I was unable." Rabbi Yitzchak said to him: "Then you should have gathered ten people with whom to daven." Rav Nachman responded that he found this difficult to arrange (tericha li milsa). Rabbi Yitzchak then advised, "The master should have instructed the sheliach tzibur to inform him when the tzibur is davening." To this, Rav Nachman replied, "Is this so important?" Rabbi Yitzchak then quoted Rabbi Yochanan who, in turn, had cited Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai about the importance of davening at the time when the tzibur davens (Brachos 7b-8a).

This passage of Gemara teaches that the highest priority is to daven with a minyan in shul. The second choice, when one cannot daven with a minyan in shul, is to daven with a minyan that is not meeting in shul. Although there are advantages to the minyan in shul (see Mirkeves Hamishneh, Hilchos Tefillah, Chapter 8), davening with a minyan outside of shul is far preferred to davening without a minyan.

The third choice, when one cannot daven with a minyan at all, is to daven at the time that the minyan is davening in shul. The Rema (Orach Chayim 90:9) mentions that those who live in a place where there is no daily minyan should daven at the time that the tzibur davens. This demonstrates that the advantage of davening at the time that the tzibur davens is not limited to a tzibur that is within walking distance. The same rule is true for someone who is traveling – he should try to daven at the time that the tzibur is davening (Magen Avraham ad locum).

Exceptions

The Shelah Hakodesh mentions that there is an exception to this rule, meaning that there is a situation where one must daven bi'yeichidus, and he should not daven at the time that the minyan is davening. If the minyan is davening maariv before it is fully dark, he should not daven at the same time that they are, since they have a heter to daven before it gets dark, but he does not. In this instance, he should wait until tzeis hakochavim, definite nightfall, before he davens (quoted by Magen Avraham).

Other poskim mention another instance in which one is not required to daven at the same time that the tzibur does, but can daven when it is convenient for him. If the tzibur davens shacharis later than he would like to, and he wants to be able to begin learning, he may daven before they do, in order to be able to begin his uninterrupted learning afterwards (Be'er Heiteiv). This ruling teaches that there is a difference between davening with a minyan and davening at the time that the minyan davens. As we mentioned before, the requirement to daven with a minyan supersedes his own desire to daven at a time that accommodates his own learning schedule. However, assuming that one cannot daven with the minyan anyway, but could, in theory, daven at the time that the minyan davens, he is not required to daven at their time, when his learning schedule is better accommodated in a different way.

Arranging a minyan

The Gemara mentioned that Rav Nachman did not arrange his own minyan because tericha milsa, it was difficult to arrange. Had it not been difficult to arrange, he certainly would have arranged a minyan. Thus, the halachah is that if someone cannot make it to the shul's minyan, he is required to arrange his own minyan, unless it is a tircha to do so.

Tircha for whom?

What does it mean that it is a tircha to arrange the minyan? The Machatzis Hashekel cites a dispute among the rishonim whether this means that it is a tircha for the individual who cannot come to shul to make the arrangements that he have a minyan, or that the concern is that it is a tircha for the people to assemble especially for him (Semag). There would be an interesting difference in practical halachah that results from this dispute. According to the first opinion, in the days of Rav Nachman this would have required someone to go door to door or to look in the street for people to form a minyan for him. Today, when one could let one's fingers do the walking, it would presumably not be considered a tircha to arrange a minyan. On the other hand, according to the second opinion, asking people to come especially to your house to form a minyan certainly involves a tircha for them. By the way, the words of our text of the Gemara, tericha li milsa, imply the first way of understanding the topic. Either way, someone who has this question should refer it to his rav or posek.

In shul

Until now, we have discussed davening either with a minyan or at the same time as a minyan davens. Aside from the importance of tefillah betzibur, it is also important to daven in shul, even when there is no minyan there. The Gemara (Brachos 6a) teaches: "Abba Binyamin says 'a person's prayers are answered only in shul, as the verse states, lishmo'a el harinah ve'el hatefillah,' to hear the song and the prayer" (Melachim I 8:28). As Rashi explains, rinah means prayers in shul where the community as a whole recites praises of Hashem with beautiful song.

This statement of the Gemara surfaces another time in mesechta Brachos (8a), in this occasion in the name of Rabbi Yochanan, and it is quoted in the halachic works of the three major early halachic authorities, the Rif, the Rambam and the Rosh and by all later poskim. When the Tur (Orach Chayim 90) quotes this halachah, he states that a person should always daven in a shul with a minyan. However, Rabbeinu Yonah cites, in the name of the Geonim, that even if he needs to daven at a time when there is no minyan, he should still daven in a shul, since it is a place designated for the public to daven (Beis Yosef).

The Shulchan Aruch combines the conclusions of the last two discussions as follows: "A person should always try to daven in shul with a minyan. If an extenuating circumstance prevents his attending shul, then he should daven at the time that the tzibur does. And if this is also not possible and he must daven by himself, he should still daven in a shul." (Orach Chayim 90:9). The Magen Avraham cites illness or weakness as reasons why someone missed the minyan in shul. He also notes that it is preferable to daven with a minyan at home, rather than daven at the time the tzibur is davening, but without a minyan. Again, this is based on the Gemara that we saw above.

Beis midrash versus shul

The Gemara teaches that the great scholars, Rav Ami and Rav Asi, davened in the place where they studied Torah, notwithstanding the fact that there were thirty shullen in their city (Brachos 8a, 30b). Thus, we see that davening in the beis midrash where one usually learns is more valuable than davening in shul. Among the early halachic authorities, we find two interpretations of this practice.

(1) Rabbeinu Yonah explains that someone whose full time occupation is studying Torah (toraso umnaso) should daven in a beis midrash rather than in a shul, even at the expense of not being able to daven with a minyan. Alternatively, since he spends his entire day learning in one place without interruption, he

should not waste potential learning time by leaving his home for shul (Beis Yosef, Orach Chayim, Chapter 90).

(2) The Rambam disagrees and rules that he should daven with a minyan. According to his understanding, it appears that the Gemara is teaching that a Torah scholar should daven in a beis midrash with a minyan, and does not need to attend the shul's minyan. The Rosh follows a similar approach, concluding that the Torah scholar who would not have a minyan where he learns should go to shul to daven for several reasons, including that others will learn from his example and not daven with a minyan (Shu"t HaRosh, cited by Tur Orach Chayim chapter 90).

Choosing between shuls

When one has a choice of shullen in which to daven, does halachah provide a priority as to which one he should choose? Indeed it does, mentioning three rules to follow.

Regular shul

One should preferably have a shul which one attends regularly (Mishnah Berurah 90:28).

Farther shul

Rabbi Yochanan said that he learned from a widow how one should earn reward for mitzvos by walking a greater distance. She would come daily from a different neighborhood to pray in the beis midrash of Rabbi Yochanan (obviously, in the women's section). Rabbi Yochanan asked her, rhetorically, "Is there no shul in your neighborhood?" to which she answered, "Do I not get extra reward for walking to the farther shul?" (Sotah 22a). We find that Rabbi Yochanan reiterated this lesson in a different passage of Gemara, where he ruled that it is not an advantage to live next to a shul, since one thereby loses the merit of walking a greater distance to shul (Bava Metzia 107a). From both passages, we see that one should try to daven at a shul that involves a farther walk, in order to gain extra merit.

Larger minyan

The halachah is recorded that one should daven in the shul where more people are attending davening (Mishnah Berurah 90:28). This is because of the concept called Berov am hadras Melech (Mishlei 14:28): the more people that participate in a mitzvah, the greater is the honor for Hashem.

Conclusion

The power of tefillah is very great. Through tefillah one can save lives, bring people closer to Hashem and overturn harsh decrees. We have to believe in this power. One should not think, "Who am I to daven to Hashem?" Rather, we must continually drive home the concept that Hashem wants our tefillos and He listens to them! Man was created by Hashem as the only creation that has free choice. Therefore, our serving Hashem and our davening is unique in the entire spectrum of creation.

Understanding how much concern Chazal placed in the relatively minor aspects of davening should make us even more aware of the fact that davening is our attempt at building a relationship with Hashem. As the Kuzari notes, every day should have three very high points -- the three times that we daven. Certainly, one should do whatever one can to make sure to pay attention to the meaning of the words of one's Tefillah. We should gain our strength and inspiration for the rest of the day from these three prayers. Let us hope that Hashem will accept our tefillos together with those of Klal Yisrael!

Ohr Somayach :: Torah Weekly :: Parshat Balak

For the week ending 30 June 2018 / 17 Tammuz 5778

Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair - www.seasonsofthemoon.com

Insights

Three Candies

"The she-donkey saw the angel of G-d... with his sword drawn in his hand" (22:23)

A young fellow from a religious family in Bnei Brak decided one day to turn his back on religion. He moved out of his home and into his uncle's apartment in Tel Aviv, a stone's throw from Bnei Brak geographically, but as far as Mars religiously.

Time went on and this young fellow met and fell in love with a non-Jewish girl. He got engaged to her. This was too much for his secular uncle, who became very angry with him. However, despite of all his efforts to get his nephew to cancel the wedding, the nephew was determined to marry his fiancée. The uncle at least was able to convince his nephew to go home and tell his parents face-to-face what he planned to do. The young fellow agreed to go back for Shabbat, provided that his parents agreed to "his conditions." So he spent most of Shabbat night "chilling" on his parents' porch, with a cigarette in his mouth, and Shabbat morning he was out there again, using his iPhone.

In the afternoon his father came over and asked him if he wanted to go with him to the lectures given by Rav Aharon Leib Shteinman. Surprisingly, he agreed to go. After the lecture, his father brought him over to wish the Rav “Shabbat Shalom”. His father told the Rav that his son was no longer Shabbat-observant. Rav Aharon looked at the boy and asked him, “How long is it since you kept Shabbat?” “Two years,” the young fellow replied. “And during that time, did you have thoughts of teshuva?” “Yes. About four times.” And how long did each time last when you had those thoughts?” “About ten minutes,” he replied. Said the Rav, “Ah, so it comes out that in the last two years you had about 40 minutes of “in the place of ba’alei teshuva, completely righteous people cannot stand.” For that, I envy you! Shabbat Shalom.” The young fellow returned to his uncle’s apartment in Tel Aviv, but the Rav’s words would not let him rest. He cancelled the wedding. One thing led to another, until today he has returned completely to Judaism.

People asked what made him want to go to Rav Shteinman’s class. There he was sitting on his parents’ porch playing with his iPhone and puffing cigarettes opposite the windows of the neighbors.

He answered, “When I was in 4th grade in Cheder, my class went in to be tested by Rav Aharon Leib. My class rebbe asked that we should be given easy questions, and so Rav Aharon Leib asked questions that everyone could answer. When each boy answered his question, Rav Aharon Leib gave him a candy. When it was my turn to go in, he asked me an easy question, but I didn’t know the answer. So he asked me an easier question, and I still didn’t know the answer. Then he asked me and even easier question, and I still couldn’t answer!

“While everyone was leaving with their candy in their hand, Rav Aharon Leib gestured to me to come over to him. He said to me, ‘In Torah and Yiddishkeit we receive reward for our efforts, not for results. All the children tried to answer one question, and they received one candy; you tried to answer three questions, so you get three candies.’ And with a smile he dropped three candies into my hand.”

“...with his sword drawn in his hand.”

Rashi explains that this confrontation symbolizes the eternal confrontation between Yaakov and Eisav. The power of the voice — “The voice is the voice of Yaakov” and the sword — “you (Eisav) will live by the sword”. The angel was warning Bilaam that should he try and usurp Yaakov’s power of the voice and try to curse the Jewish People, he would be punished by the sword, the symbol of Eisav.

As parents and teachers, how careful we must be to use our heritage, the voice of Yaakov, only to encourage and inspire and give love, and not to turn it into the sword of criticism.

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OU Torah

Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb ***Only What They Want to Hear***

“We only hear what we want to hear. We only see what we want to see.”

This statement about human nature, pessimistic though it may be, rings true to most of us. It helps explain all sorts of strange human behaviors, ranging from the question of why some of us have difficulties in communication to why the Jews of Eastern Europe failed to see the Holocaust looming on the horizon.

We are all familiar with the experience of listening to a speaker and discovering that we heard a very different message than did our companion, who was sitting right beside us in the audience.

We hear and see what we want to, and fail to hear and see the proverbial “writing on the wall,” perhaps because it is so unpleasant to us that it simply does not register.

It was long ago, while still in college, that I learned that this observation about human nature has ancient roots in the history of philosophy. Of course, philosophers do not generally express themselves in terms that are easily understood. The great eighteenth-century philosopher Immanuel Kant used the term “transcendental idealism” to refer to his contention that “the human mind creates the structure of human

experience.” For him, there is no such thing as a universal perception of the world around us. We each see the world differently, according to our own subjective interests, biases, and prejudices.

In simpler terms, we place our own “constructs” upon everything that we see or hear so that you may hear one message, and I may hear an entirely different one. We may both be standing before the same picture, but you may see it one way, while an entirely different picture appears before me.

Nearly two hundred years after Immanuel Kant wrote his treatise on this subject, a psychologist named George Kelly, considered by many to have been the father of modern clinical, cognitive psychology, used Kant’s notion to formulate an approach to psychotherapy. He argued that we experience the world through the lens of our “constructs,” which we use to interpret or construe new events. He insisted that each person’s system of constructs is unique and that by understanding an individual’s system of constructs, a therapist can help patients modify their constructs to enable them to better cope with their behavioral problems.

Many others have subsequently followed in the footsteps of Kant and Kelly. One of my favorites was a social psychologist named Gustav Ichheiser, a native Austrian who had to flee when the Nazis invaded his country. He spent much of his life in exile, but wrote on the subject of social misunderstandings. He felt that we can better understand social and political conflict if we understand the degree to which we misperceive each other. He famously wrote, “What seems to be often constitutes a more solid psychological reality than what actually is.”

I have a special interest in Ichheiser’s otherwise obscure writings because of his insights into the nature of anti-Semitism. He provides an astute analysis of anti-Semitic behavior, based upon his numerous first-hand experiences with anti-Semites who “saw” clean Jews as “dirty,” poverty-stricken Jews as wealthy, and helpless Jews as all-powerful.

The observations that I have just summarized help us understand the behavior of Balaam, the “anti-hero” of this week’s Torah portion, Balak (Numbers 22:2-25:9).

He defied the Lord. This, despite his prophetic talents (which, we are told, rivaled those of Moses himself), and despite his having heard the Lord’s clear message not even to accompany those who would have him curse the Israelites, much less to actually curse them himself.

In the opening chapter of our parsha, we read of the mission upon which the elders of Moab and Midian set out. They bore the message of their king, Balak: “Put a curse on this people for me... Perhaps I can thus defeat them and drive them out of the land, for I know... that he whom you curse is cursed.”

Balaam does not immediately comply. He tells them that he must first consult the Lord and then, “I shall reply to you as the Lord may instruct me.” But the Almighty clearly and forcefully tells Balaam: “Do not go with them. You must not curse that people, for they are blessed.”

To condense the biblical narrative, we soon discover that Balaam persists in his willingness to accompany the messengers and makes a wholehearted attempt to curse the Israelites. So persistent is he that the Lord begrudgingly grants him a vague permit to “go with them, but whatever I command you, that you shall do.”

Commentators throughout the ages have been puzzled by Balaam’s willful defiance of the Lord’s initial instructions. Balaam, by his own testimony, knows the Almighty’s mind. He receives a clear and unambiguous prophecy. Yet he fails to obey. How are we to understand this?

I propose that we apply the sentences with which I began this essay. “We only hear what we want to hear. We only see what we want to see.” Balaam heard the Lord’s command to desist from accompanying the messengers and to avoid cursing the Israelites. But he didn’t actually hear that command, because he did not want to hear it. He heard it differently from the way we will hear it this Sabbath from the Torah reader in our local synagogue.

We hear a clear “Balaam, don’t you dare!” But he heard a mild refusal, full of loopholes, subject to modification, and perhaps even capable of being withdrawn.

Using the terminology of Kant and Kelly, Balaam placed his own construct upon the words issued by the Divine. He heard those words filtered through the unique constructs which he developed over the course of his life. Those constructs distorted the message so that he did not “hear” it as definite and unambiguous, but rather as subject to negotiation and interpretation.

What were Balaam’s constructs? What aspects of his personality and character influenced his perception so that he could distort and attempt to disobey the Almighty’s clear command?

I propose that an answer to this question can be found in a remarkable passage in Pirkei Avot (Ethics of the Fathers) 5:22. It reads, “A generous eye, a modest demeanor, and a humble soul are the traits of our father Abraham. An evil eye, an arrogant demeanor, and an insatiable soul are attributes of the disciples of the wicked Balaam.”

If our constructs resemble Abraham’s generosity, modesty, and humility, then our perceptions will be unobscured. We will see and hear accurately. We will not distort the sensory impressions which we encounter in life. We will not “see and hear what we want to see and hear,” but we will see what is real and hear what is spoken.

If, on the other hand, our constructs are based upon jealousy, arrogance, and insatiable material desires, those constructs will distort what we “hear and see,” so that they will not interfere with our self-interests. Our “evil eye” will distort what we “see,” and our “arrogant demeanor and insatiable soul” will assure that we “hear what we want to hear.”

There is a lesson here for all of us, and it is an important one. Our inner selves determine how we perceive and how we react to our outer reality. We must model ourselves after Abraham so that generosity, modesty, and humility become the core of our inner selves, enabling us to “see and hear” clearly and correctly.

We must suppress our Balaam-like envy, arrogance, and insatiable desires so that we no longer “hear and see what we want to hear and see” but clearly hear and see the full breadth, depth, and beauty of our wondrous world.

**...Rav Yissocher Frand - Parshas Balak
Bilaam's Blessing - Thanks, But No Thanks**

The Al-mighty Rejects Bilam's Offer to Bless Israel

Balak wants to hire the greatest sorcerer of his time — perhaps the greatest sorcerer of all time — Bilam, to curse Klal Yisrael. As we know, Bilam was a prophet, and G-d appears to him at night and instructs him. “Do not go with them (the agents of Balak); do not curse the nation for they are blessed” [Bamidbar 22:12]. Rashi fills in the details of this conversation. Hashem told Bilam, “Don’t go with them,” and Bilam countered, “If not, let me curse them from here.” Hashem then became explicit with Bilam and told him, “Don’t curse the nation.” To which the Gentile prophet responded, “If I can’t curse them, let me bless them.” Hashem responded “They don’t need your blessings for they are (already) blessed.”

This is a strange Rashi. Chazal say that Bilam was an extremely evil person; he had no love for the Jews. He hated them. So what is this business, “If I can’t curse the Jews, so let me bless them”? What is he thinking?

I once saw someone express the idea that Bilam’s intent here was still of a nefarious and malevolent nature. There are two ways to destroy the Jewish people. It is possible to curse them that they should be afflicted with all types of troubles, disease, poverty and oppression. But there is another way to destroy the Jewish people. That is, if the Jewish people are overwhelmed with affluence and money, that also can provide a terrible challenge to the nation. This is, in fact, what the Torah alludes to at the beginning of Sefer Devarim [1:1] when the pasuk mentions “Dee Zahav” — implying that Klal Yisrael has been spiritually challenged by all the wealth and gold that they were given. As we all know, riches can provide a terrible spiritual challenge. Chazal say that the “test of wealth” is harder to handle than the “test of poverty.”

This was Bilam’s intention. He was not out to bless the Jews. He was out to destroy the Jews. He said to the Al-mighty, “Let me bless them.” What was he going to ask for? It was that they should be rolling in dough. The outcome of that would be that they would not be able to handle this “test of wealth” and would spiritually self-destruct.

This was the meaning of Bilam’s request to Hashem, “Let me bless them.” The Al-mighty responded, “Thanks, but no thanks. They do not need your blessing, for they are blessed.”

We Hear What We Want to Hear

“And Bilam got up in the morning and told the officers of Balak, ‘Go return to your land, for Hashem does not let me go with you’ [Bamidbar 22:13]. Rashi comments that the thrust of Bilam’s message was that Hashem does not let me go with you, implying that I will only be allowed to travel with more distinguished emissaries. This teaches, Rashi says, that Bilam had a haughty spirit.

The truth of the matter is that even though the Ribono shel Olam did make the statement, “Do not go with them,” which by itself can be interpreted as Bilam interpreted, Bilam purposely left out the rest of the Al-mighty’s message which was, “Do not curse the people, for they are blessed.” He conveniently only told half the story to Balak’s original delegation. He was being disingenuous and was not telling the whole truth.

Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz makes an observation here which points out a basic truth in human nature. Bilam was not consciously skipping a critical part of the story. But rather, in terms of what Bilam heard, he only heard, “Don’t go with them.” The well-known principle — you hear what you want to hear — is one of the great truths of life. The Ribono shel Olam, in fact, told Bilam two things: Number one: “Don’t go with them,” which Bilam, because of his haughtiness, interpreted as “it is not worthy of you to go with them.” Number two: “Don’t curse them.” He heard that as well, but he did not interpret it as, “Don’t curse the Jews because I care about them,” but again, because of his haughtiness, “...because I don’t want you to use your great powers to go with such a lowly delegation.”

Since people hear what they want to hear and believe what they want to believe, Bilam interpreted the words of the Ribono shel Olam to mean that the sole reason he is not supposed to go with Balak’s original emissaries is because it would be below his dignity. This is human nature. We hear something, but we hear only what we want to hear.

“You’re Wrong” is No Way to Win an Argument

Bilam is travelling on his trusted donkey. The angel stands there with his sword. The donkey refuses to move. Bilam starts hitting the donkey. Bilam strikes the donkey three times. “And Hashem opened the mouth of the donkey...” In one of the great miracles of the Torah, the donkey started talking. “...and she said to Bilam, ‘What have I done that you have struck me three times?’” Bilam answers his donkey: “Because you have mocked me; if I had a sword in my hand I would kill you on the spot.”

This has to be one of the strangest dialogues in the history of humanity. Picture this — your donkey starts talking to you and rather than falling off the donkey, you get into a dialog with your donkey! It is incredible. Is Bilam so obtuse that he gets into a childish argument with his animal? What is the meaning of this?

We can consider the following analogy: I try to start my car in the morning and it doesn’t start, so I go out and open the hood, do not see any problem, and I slam the hood in anger. Suddenly the car says, “Why are you treating me like that?” Will I start arguing with my car at that point? And yet Bilam does this. How is this to be understood?

My good friend, Rabbi Yakov Luban, once gave me an explanation of this pasuk, which is also a great lesson in human emotions and human dynamics. If you ever get into an argument or a discussion with someone, and you want to convince them of your point of view, the worst thing you can say is, “You are wrong!” Even if he is 100% wrong— dead wrong — once you say the words “You are wrong; you don’t know what you are talking about,” you have damaged his ego. Once you hurt another person’s ego, everything shuts off.

The reason Bilam did not react to what was really happening here — that obviously this must be some kind of message from the Ribono shel Olam — is because “you have mocked me.” Bilam took the donkey’s actions as impugning his dignity, as making fun of him. When your ego is affected, everything ceases to exist. There is no rationale anymore. There is no rational thinking anymore. That is what happened here. The donkey insulted Bilam. Once you insult me, I am not capable of engaging in rational conversation.

The guaranteed worst way to “win” an argument is to say to your opponent, “You are wrong. You don’t know what you are talking about.” Whatever you say after that falls on deaf ears.

How do you engage in an argument? You say, “You know what? I hear what you are saying. It is a valid point, but...” and then you proceed to destroy the argument. This way you may be successful because the other person is open to hear what you have to say. If you say the words “You are wrong,” you have lost him.

The Double Entendre of “Shalosh Regalim”

My final comment is a textual peculiarity of which all the commentaries take note. “Hashem opened the mouth of the donkey and she said to Bilam, ‘What have I done to you that you have struck me these three times (zeh shalosh regalim)?’” [Bamidbar 22:28]. The fact that the Torah here uses the term shalosh regalim rather than the more common shalosh pe’amim provides fertile ground for rabbinic commentary. Shalosh Regalim is usually the term we find to describe the Three Pilgrimage Festivals (Pesach, Shavuot, and Succot).

Rashi here quotes the teaching of Chazal that the angel was hinting here (through the words of the donkey), “You are attempting to destroy a nation that celebrates three times a year.” In other words, “You do not have a chance of success, Bilam, because Klal Yisrael has a merit which will sustain them forever by virtue of the fact that they celebrate the Three Pilgrimage Festivals. Three times a year, they go up to the Beis HaMikdash, the House of the Al-mighty, and thereby maintain an intimacy with Him.

What is the nature of this merit? I saw the following suggestion in the sefer Imrei Baruch: The Gemara says [Chagiga 4a], “One who gathers manure, a coppersmith, and a tanner are excused from the obligation of appearing in the Beis HaMikdash [on the Pilgrimage Festivals].” This is an amazing halacha. Even though generally, men women and children are all obligated to come to the Bais Hamikdash in Jerusalem on the Festivals, yet, individuals in these three professions are excluded. Why? “As it is written ‘All your males’ [Devarim 16:16] — he who can go up together with all your males. This excludes these people who are unable to go up with all the males.”

Please excuse the graphicness here, but the reason people in these three professions cannot go up with everyone else is because they smell! People with such jobs are constantly exposed to malodorous smells, which they can never totally purge from their bodies. If someone sits in shul next to a fellow who is a tanner, he will not be a happy congregant. They just smell awful!

Shalosh Regalim demonstrates the unity and cohesiveness of the Jewish people. Everybody needs to go up together. Everybody prays together in the same Bais Hamikdash courtyard. Everybody brings the same offerings. Despite the divisions that exist within our nation, at least three times a year we are all one big happy family. The Talmud says that in Jerusalem no one ever said, “It is too crowded here.” Everybody enjoyed themselves. It was geshmak! It was uplifting. Everyone joined together in peace and harmony.

The Brisker Rav explains that this fact is explicitly stated in the Mi Sheberach prayer recited on the Shalosh Regalim. At the end of that blessing we say, “And may he merit to go up on the Festival together with all of Israel, his brethren.”

This is the merit that Chazal are referring to (in the above cited Rashi). Bilam, you want to uproot the Jewish people. You will never do it because the merit of the unity that is provided by the Shalosh Regalim is such a powerful force that you will never succeed in cursing Klal Yisrael.

Perhaps we can relate to this teaching an observation that I believe I once read from the Vizhnitzer Rebbe. After Bilam was unsuccessful in his attempt to curse Klal Yisrael, “Balak said to him, ‘Please come with me to another place that you will see them from there, however you will see only part of them — all of them you will not see — and curse them for me from there’” [Bamidbar 23:13].

Why was Balak taking Bilam to a place where he would only be able to see part of Klal Yisrael? Since Balak wanted to get rid of the entire Jewish people, it would make sense that he would take Bilam to a place where he would have visibility of the entire population!

The answer is that Balak now realized that Bilam would never be able to destroy all of Klal Yisrael. However, he was hoping that maybe if he would focus on just part of the people, perhaps he could sow dissension amongst them, and that division would defeat Klal Yisrael. When Klal Yisrael is united, it is a force that can never be destroyed. No curses or other weapons will ever be successful against the nation that celebrates the Three Pilgrimage Festivals in unison.

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Drasha Parshas Balak - A Never Ending Story Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

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

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

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

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

Last year my son was in fourth grade and had to do a report on President Abraham Lincoln. He did a fine job recounting his log-cabin childhood, his early career as an attorney, and his tumultuous presidency. He detailed the difficult period of the Civil War and Lincoln’s bold stance in signing the Emancipation Proclamation.

I looked over his report and frankly, I was quite impressed — until I reached the last sentence. It read: “Abraham Lincoln died on Friday morning, April 15, 1865, and was buried in Oak Ridge Cemetery, outside Springfield, Illinois.”

“Zvi,” I exclaimed, “Abraham Lincoln died on Friday morning?” I rhetorically reiterated, stressing the passivity of the underreported, yet most traumatic event. “Died?” I repeated. “He was shot to death! In fact, Lincoln was assassinated! In fact,” I added, “he was the first President to be assassinated! How can you ignore that significant part of his life in your report?”

Zvi looked at me quizzically. “My report was on ‘the Life of Abraham Lincoln. Who cares how he died? He died!’” Bilaam understood that death, too, is an integral part of life. Our attitude toward death is part of

our larger attitude toward life. And the way we leave this world is part of a greater outlook of how we aspire to live our lives.

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

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

Good Shabbos

Dedicated in memory of Joseph Heller by Beth and Ben Heller and Family L'iluy Nishmas Reb Yoel Nosson ben Reb Chaim HaLevi Heller — 9 Tamuz

The author is the Dean of the Yeshiva of South Shore.

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Rabbi Ahron Lopiansky

The Subversion of the Spiritual

TorahWeb is thrilled to announce that Rav Ahron Lopiansky, Rosh Yeshiva of the Yeshiva of Greater Washington and noted lecturer and author has joined the lineup of TorahWeb authors! His first dvar Torah for TorahWeb is below.

Bilaam's threat to Klal Yisroel registers as unique in many ways. We are enjoined, "My nation remember what Balak schemed against you and what Bilaam responded...in order that you recognize G-d's kindness" (Michah 6.) Similarly, "Hashem turned his curses into blessings, for He loves you" (Devarim 26.)

To the naked eye it seems that Bilaam's threat falls far short of those of Pharaoh, Amalek, and Sichon, all of whom employed physical force against us and actually hurt and oppressed us. Bilaam's curses, by comparison, are just a form of prayer, and if Hashem doesn't want to listen to those prayers, why are they so significant?

Bilaam's own status is also unclear. He is depicted as being a prophet (Sanhedrin 106a), similar to, or in the order of, Moshe (Bamidbar Rabba 14:19.) Was Bilaam good or evil? If he was evil, how could something as "spiritual" as prophecy become subverted for the bad?

Bilaam is described as a "sorcerer." We really have little understanding of what this is since we have no personal experience today with magic, etc. However, we will need to understand what the evil in magic is - at least conceptually - if we are to have any understanding of "parshas Bilaam".

We understand the natural order in our physical universe. It is governed by immutable laws that always are in affect unless Hashem chooses to override them, as in the case of miracles. There is a higher stratum of existence that transcends our physical world, which we call the spiritual world. It is not bound by the constraints of the familiar laws of nature, but it is also not a world devoid of structure and mechanism. The Maharal explains many times (especially in Gevuros Hashem) that there is an order and structure to miracles. This order is why the Talmud has disputes about miraculous events such as the stopping of the sun at

Givon and its duration. Underlying the dispute are different understandings of the particular nature, not physical nature but metaphysical nature, of that miraculous event.

Another area where this type of understanding manifests itself is in the descriptions of the Yom Hadin, and the process of din in general. We are told about the order of who is judged first, what time of the day is most auspicious, etc. Even without plumbing the penetrating to the depths of understanding these details of din, we see that they clearly indicate that the spiritual world has structure, and only in the most extreme cases will Hashem override that order and structure (i.e. *maavir al midosav.*)

Because there are strata of spirituality that have their own inherent structure and whose system of functioning Hashem does not look to override on a regular basis, this structure too can be perverted and misused. This is the realm of magic, which is the tapping into some spiritual level and perverting it. The power may be spiritual, but rather than being used to bind a person to Hashem, it is being used to break away from Hashem.

That is the reason why "magic" is so destructive. Just as a friend who turns against you is so much more dangerous than someone who was always an enemy because he knows all your vulnerabilities, so too a person who has heightened spiritual sensitivity and misuses it is a much more dangerous adversary. Although Hashem can, of course, do as He wishes and prevent a wicked person from leveraging such spiritual resources just as He could prevent the wicked from making use of physical resources, He desired that the world run within a system - be it the physical world or the "supernatural world". Therefore, a person who is part of a more spiritual stratum has the choice and ability to do much good, and commensurately much evil.

Bilaam was the most knowledgeable and spiritually sensitive of Klal Yisroel's enemies, and this is precisely why he was the most dangerous. He could attack Klal Yisroel's deepest spiritual connection to Hashem and tried very hard to do so. Rashi describes Balak's choosing of Bilaam as a desire to utilize Israel's own strength (i.e. prayer) against them. Bilaam was also shrewd enough to realize that seducing Israel to sin would do more to destroy them than a physical assault. Therefore, to protect Klal Yisroel, Hashem suspended the normal mechanisms of the spiritual world. This suspension goes against the deepest wishes of how HKB"H wants the world to generally run, and thus doing so was an expression of the love that He has for Klal Yisroel.

We have a hard time really getting a feel for these lofty concepts and battel grounds because we are removed from the experiences of "magic", etc. But these ideas are helpful if they can provide insight into some relatively contemporary phenomena.

Klal Yisroel has always had members who drifted away because of a desire for physical indulgences. It is sad to see anyone in Klal Yisroel lost, but that type of drifting is not the ultimate tragedy. Let us look at a much deeper tragedy in the annals of Klal Yisroel - the Jewish communists. Here were people far more spiritual than the fellow who wanted to live the good life in Paris and checked out. These communists were people whose deepest feelings of care for the downtrodden moved them. Their sense of injustice in the world fired their soul. They were willing to live a life of total denial and give up their lives for "the cause". Are these not "spiritual" qualities? Yet these "spiritual" qualities were turned against Hashem and they produced some of the most destructive eras in the annals of Klal Yisroel! The relentless persecution of Yiddishkeit, and its almost total obliteration in the Soviet Union, could only have happened because the driving force was "spiritual" rather than material.

This parsha teaches us that spirituality, while by its very nature is closer to the Divine than physicality, is still not automatically good. It all depends on where those strength and abilities are aimed. If it is focused on serving as a bridge to Hashem then it is the "good" itself. But if chas v'shalom it is used to attack Hashem, it is devastating.

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Shema Yisrael Torah Network

הנה עם יצא ממצרים הנה כסה את עין הארץ

Behold a nation left Egypt, and behold they are covering the earth's eye. (22:5)

Earth's eye? Simply, this refers to the surface of the earth. *Rashi* explains that Balak was referring to *Klal Yisrael's* decimation of the two powerful kings –Sichon and Og, who were considered the *shomrim ha'aretz*, guardians of the land. If the two giants who protected the land were quickly dispatched by the Jews, what should Balak say? He realized that he had no chance against the Jewish army.

Horav Elimelech Biderman, Shlita, the *Lelover Rebbe*, defines earth's eye as the way people view matters that occur. They look at it through the earth's eye, as being *teva*, natural. Regardless of the occurrence, to them, "things happen"; it is a part of the natural order of life.

It could be a major earth-shattering catastrophe, a cataclysmic occurrence like no other; nonetheless, it is always considered to be caused by the forces of nature. Heaven never plays a role in their perspective/outlook. It is always earth; they gaze through the eyes of earthiness/nature.

Balak saw that the Jewish People were different. They were a nation who "covered the earth's eyes." They did not share the world view; they viewed things from a different perspective. They saw everything as being *bashert*, pre-ordained, by design, as part of a Divine plan.

Balak saw, but his vision did not penetrate beyond the superficial. He declared, *Hinei am yatza mi'Mitzrayim*, "Behold a nation left Egypt." Hearing this, Bilaam subtly corrected him, saying, *Keil motziam mi'Mitzrayim*, "(It was) G-d (Who) took them out of Egypt." *Rashi* makes the observation, "You, Balak, said, 'Behold a nation left Egypt (on their own)'. It is not true! They did not leave on their own. It was G-d Who took them out!"

Are we prepared to accept this verity? Theoretically, yes, but in real, everyday life – it is a big maybe. As the *Lelover* points out: How do we react when something goes wrong, especially when we are running late for an appointment? What do we do when we have a flat tire, a stalled car? Does anger immediately set in, or do we say, "Well, Hashem decreed this, so I might as well accept it"? Are we then prepared to ask, "Why did this happen? What message is being conveyed to me"? If we look through the *ein ha'aretz*, earthly/physical point of view, it was happenstance. If we follow in the path of what Judaism teaches, we cover the *ein ha'aretz*, and accept that it was destined.

The *Rebbe* relates the incident of a group of people who arrived one minute too late to catch their train. They watched in dismay as the train pulled out of the station. One member of the group said, "We came a minute too late." Another fellow (astutely) said, "We did not come late."

"How can you say that?" the first one asked.

"Well, since we did not make it in time for this train," the second one began, "it is obvious that it was destined for us to travel on the next train, which leaves in two hours. We did not come late – we simply came two hours early – for the next train."

Obviously, when we arrive late, just in time to see our flight leaving the gate, our immediate reaction is not, "Well, at least we are two hours early for the next flight." Nonetheless, if we live our lives (as we should) with the belief that everything that takes place is for a purpose, nothing just happens, it is preordained by Heavenly decree, our first reaction will be acceptance, followed by introspection to discern what Hashem is telling us.

I was reminded of this reality by none other than a seventy-eight year old Jew, incarcerated for the last 24 years for various crimes. I have known him for six years, during which time he has put on *Tefillin* daily (without *davening*, just *Shema Yisrael*) and attended a weekly Torah class and *Shabbos* morning service. Prior to that, he remembers

attending a synagogue with his *bubby*, as a six-year-old – seventy-two years ago! Out of the blue, he remarked today, "You know, Rabbi, had I not gotten in trouble, I would have lived and died as a *goy*. Now, I will at least die as a Jew and be buried in a Jewish cemetery. Hashem has His plan. I guess I was a 'hard case', and I had to go to prison in order to come face to face with my Jewish identity."

Hashem has a plan. We are fortunate to be observant and cognizant from our earliest years that life has purpose, and that we experience no coincidences. Everything is by design. We are members of the nation that "covers the *ein ha'aretz*." Even such contemptible pagans, such as Balak and Bilaam, acknowledged this.

ועתה לכה נא ארה לי את העם הזה

So now please come and curse this people for me. (22:6)

How often does it occur that someone harms us? We are talking about an evil person who, for whatever reason, decides that we are in the way of his progress; or he wants to take revenge on us for something we have done which, in his mind, deserves punishment. While the individual may be totally wrong (or, even if he is totally right), we are not permitted to curse him. First, we do not curse Jews. They are our brothers. The fact that they are not acting like brothers does not change our relationship towards them. So, what does one do when an evil person makes his/her life miserable? He prays to Hashem to bless him. He does not curse his detractor.

A Jew came to the *Chazon Ish*, *zl*, and asked the sage to curse another Jew. The situation had deteriorated, so that he simply could not tolerate "life" because of this fellow. "*Rebbe*, please curse him. Maybe, in this way, he will stop making my life so miserable." The *Chazon Ish* looked at the man (who thought that he was making a legitimate request) and said, "I will not curse him; rather, I will bless you. We do not curse. Instead, we seek blessing for our lives."

The *Chafetz Chaim*, *zl*, once remarked (it was the week of *Parashas Balak*) to someone who visited him, "When a Jew has a *tzarah*, troubling situation, what does he do? He goes to a *tzaddik*, righteous person, and petitions his blessing. Balak, however, had a *tzarah* (he thought that the Jews would overrun his country), and what did he do? He went to Bilaam, the pagan prophet, not for a blessing, but for a curse. He asked Bilaam to curse the Jews."

I think the reason is quite simple. One who is insecure cannot tolerate competition. The mere thought that someone is presenting a challenge to his position means that he must destroy the competition. What about bettering himself, elevating himself to the point that he has no competition? That would require self-confidence, which, for an insecure person, comes at a premium. Rather than strengthening himself, he would rather undermine the competition. Such a person deserves to be challenged.

ויעל בלק ובלעם פר ואיל במזבח

And Balak and Bilaam brought up a bull and a ram on each altar. (23:2)

Horav Sholom Schwadron, *zl*, was a master orator. As a *maggid*, he was able to reach thousands with his powerful, animated oratory. The manner in which he presented his ethical lessons, couched in stories to which his listeners could well relate, captivated his audience, impacting them with his critical message and sage advice. Yet, *Rav Sholom* was not happy. He felt that in order to be worthy of lecturing to the masses, he himself should be more "sincere." There should be no vestige of eminence or haughtiness, no personal interest whatsoever. (This story is related by *Horav Reuven Karlinstein*, *zl*. Obviously, *Rav Sholom's* issue with honor and arrogance is far removed from anything we could imagine. He was a holy person whose entire life was devoted to Torah, *mitzvos* and *Klal Yisrael*. Nonetheless, on his lofty level, he felt insincere.) Perhaps he was missing a drop of *lishmah*, for its own sake (the *mitzvah* of reaching out to fellow Jews). Perhaps he took personal enjoyment from his successful lecturing.

At that time, the *Mashgiach* of *Ponevez* (and *Mir*), *Horav Yechezkel Levenstein*, *zl*, lived in *Yerushalayim*. *Rav Sholom* decided

that he would share his personal misgivings with *Rav Chatzkel* (as he was lovingly and venerably called). He did. The *Mashgiach* listened, ruminated for a moment, and said, "If there is a question of sincerity, it is not simple...Arrogance is a vile character trait."

Rav Sholom left the *Mashgiach's* apartment feeling even more morose. He was broken-hearted. Instead of encouraging words, the *Mashgiach* seemed to be even more demanding of him. As he was returning home, his mind deep in thought, *Rav Sholom* chanced upon a distinguished *chassid* of Gur, indeed, an old friend of his. *Rav Sholom* poured out his heart, sharing with him his tale of woe. (While such feelings of insincerity might not bother most of us, *Rav Sholom* was greatly troubled. This gives the reader a glimpse of his impeccable character and devotion to Hashem.) "I thought the *Mashgiach* would hearten me, encourage me to continue my work and not worry. On the contrary, he added to the weight that is already sitting on my heart," *Rav Sholom* said.

The *chassid* replied, "You are well aware of *Chazal's* statement (*Sanhedrin* 105b), 'A person should always engage in the study of Torah, or the performance of a *mitzvah*, even if not for its own sake (i.e. even for ulterior motives), because from learning Torah and performing a *mitzvah* not for its own sake, he will eventually come to learn Torah or perform a *mitzvah* for its own sake (i.e. out of pure motives).'" This concept is substantiated by the reward received by Balak for the forty-two offerings that he offered up to Hashem. He merited to have Rus (matriarch of the Davidic dynasty) descended from him (Rus was a descendant of Eglon, the grandson of Balak). (Simply, *Chazal* teach us that one should not be discouraged if he finds himself learning Torah or performing *mitzvos* for less than pure motives, such as fame and honor. It is part of climbing the ladder of spirituality. One begins with impure motivation, but as he continues to climb, he will notice a deeper attachment to Torah and *mitzvos*, thus purifying his motives.)

The *chassid* continued, "I once heard this *Chazal* explained by one of the *gedolim*, Torah giants, as, even if you might be acting *she'lo lishmah*, for ulterior motives, but, as a result of your words, you cause another Jew to alter the course of his life, to the point that now he will serve Hashem through Torah and *mitzvah* performance – *lishmah*, purely for the sake of the *mitzvah* – then you should continue your work. Therefore, my dear friend, even if you sense that your work contains even a minuscule measure of impurity, do not worry, because you are inspiring thousands to adhere to Hashem's Torah and *mitzvos*."

When Balak offered his forty-two offerings, his intention was that, through them, Bilaam would be able to curse *Klal Yisrael*. This was ulterior motive at its nadir. Yet, as *Maharal* explains, these sacrifices ultimately led to the Jewish People being blessed. In reward, he merited to have Rus descend from him. Various goals and objectives motivate one to "act publicly," be it speaking, writing, carrying out acts of loving kindness, etc. Veritably, it would be wonderful if we could all act *lishmah*, but, even if our motives are "slightly" self-serving, the barometer for appropriateness should be: do our public acts inspire/help others, or are they only for self-aggrandizement? Somewhere in the equation must be an aspect of *lishmah*, or the success factor of the endeavor will be restricted.

וירא את הקיני וישא משלו ויאמר איתן מושבך ושים בסלע קנך

He saw the Keini and declaimed his parable and said, "Strong is your dwelling, and set in a rock is your nest." (24:21)

After failing to curse *Klal Yisrael* successfully, Bilaam had one last prophecy which foreshadowed what would happen concerning both the surrounding nations and the Jewish People. He mentioned the Keini, who were Yisro's family. *Rashi* says that Bilaam recalled the history that he had with Yisro, heralding back to their both being Pharaoh's top advisors together with Iyov. Three men – Iyov, Yisro and Bilaam. Obviously, to have reached such a pinnacle to serve as advisors to the man who was probably the most powerful monarch in the world was truly an extraordinary achievement. Iyov and Yisro went on to

achieve even greater distinction, while the evil Bilaam went down in infamy. This troubled Bilaam.

He saw Yisro's outstanding success, his position of prominence and royalty as Moshe *Rabbeinu's* father-in-law. "How is it," Bilaam mused, "that I see prophetically that Yisro's descendants will one day occupy seats as members of the *Sanhedrin HaGadol* that sat in the *Lishkas HaGazis* which was within the *Bais Hamikdash*? Yisro's descendants will determine the *halachic* issues involving all of *Klal Yisrael*." What happened? Yisro and he were once on the same level (or so he thought).

To say that Bilaam was envious would be an understatement. Did he have regrets that Yisro made it and he (although being the most distinguished pagan prophet) was nothing more than an abominable person who had no legacy other than evil and turpitude?

Bilaam (like most wicked people) conveniently forgot the evil that he had wrought. He was the one who suggested to Pharaoh that the Jews were a problem that would simply not go away by itself. They would have to "help" it along. Yisro, however, fled to Midyan because he wanted no part of Bilaam's diabolical plan. He gave up power and future because he fought for what was right, while Bilaam could care less about what was right as long as he had power, fame and wealth. Yisro's power and wealth would have to wait a few generations, but it would endure. Bilaam's fleeting fame earned him a place in the annals of evil persecutors.

Horav Avraham Pam, zl (cited by Rabbi Sholom Smith in his book, "Messages from Rav Pam"), quotes the *Shevet Mussar* (25:5) who notes that "the wicked are filled with regrets." Bilaam spent a lifetime immersed in moral profligacy, hedonism and depravity. He thought that he was enjoying life, living it to its fullest, experiencing base pleasure at its nadir. Did Bilaam realize that it was all for naught, that physical pleasure does nothing for the person? Now, as he looked at Yisro's success in life, Bilaam realized that he at least wanted to die as the righteous. The Bilaams of the world do not realize that in order to die righteous, one must live righteous. Rather than being motivated to repentance, Bilaam struggled with -- and was consumed by -- envy. Why did he not do something -- now? As long as one is alive, it is not too late.

Many Jews have led lives on the fringe of Judaism. They never identified with Judaism, opting instead for a life of abandon. Obviously, blame can be laid at the feet of a number of people, but, at the end of the day, these individuals are broken, filled with regret and self-loathing. Yet, they are unable to make that move to religious observance. They know that it is the right thing to do, but, like Bilaam, it is so much easier and convenient to rationalize away their guilt and not repent. For some, it is easier to keep on going the wrong way than alter their course. How sad.

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Avi Herskowitz and family

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prepared and edited by Rabbi L. Scheinbaum

Ohr Somayach :: Insights Into Halacha

When Do "The Three Weeks" Start?

Rabbi Yehuda Spitz

Several years ago, a certain Talmid Chacham could not find an available wedding hall to marry off his daughter. The only open date was the night of Shiva Assar B'Tamuz. To the astonishment of many, he booked it! Although he made sure that the Chuppah was indeed before nightfall, he was heard to have commented that many people do not realize when the Three Weeks actually start...

Bein HaMetzarim

We are currently entering the period of mourning that the Midrash refers of "Bein HaMetzarim[1]", or 'Between the Confines (Straits)'. This period of Three Weeks commemorates the heralding of the beginning of the tragedies that took place prior to the destruction of both Batei Hamikdash, from the breaching of the walls of ancient Jerusalem on the 17th of Tamuz, until the actual destruction of the Beis HaMikdash on the Ninth of Av. As detailed in the Mishna and Gemara

Ta'anis, both of these days have since become communal Fast Days, in remembrance of the tragedies that happened on these days[2].

In order to properly commemorate and feel the devastation, halacha dictates various restrictions on us[3] during these "Three Weeks", getting progressively stringent up until Tisha B'Av itself[4]. These "Three Weeks" restrictions include not getting married, not getting haircuts unless specific need[5], refraining from public music and dancing, not putting oneself in an overly dangerous situation, and not making the shehechyanu blessing on a new item (meaning to refrain from purchasing a new item which would require one to make said blessing on).

These above restrictions follow Ashkenazic practice as instituted by many Rishonim and later codified by Ashkenazic authorities. Although there are several Sefardic authorities who maintain that Sefardim should at least follow the Ashkenazic minhag of starting the Nine Days restrictions from Rosh Chodesh Av, nevertheless, most Sefardim are only noheg these restrictions from the actual week of Tisha B'Av as per the ruling of the Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chaim 551, 10).

Evening Commencement?

There is some debate in recent Rabbinic literature as to when these prohibitions of the "Three Weeks" start. This author is seemingly annually asked this sheilah quite a few times on the week prior to the 17th of Tamuz alone:

"Rabbi, I know tonight the Three Weeks technically start, as in Judaism the start of a halachic new day is the preceding evening, but since the Fast of the 17th of Tamuz only starts in the morning, can I still get a haircut and/or shave this evening?"

Rav Moshe Feinstein (Shu"t Igros Moshe - Orach Chaim vol. 1, 168) addressed a similar question over sixty years ago: whether one may get married on the night of the 17th of Tamuz. He noted that there is some debate in the early authorities whether the restrictions depend on the fast day itself. Meaning that if the "Three Week" restrictions are dependant on the Fast of the 17th of Tamuz, then they would only start at the same time the fast does - on the morning of the 17th. But if they are considered independent of each other, then the restrictions would start on the preceding evening, even though the fast itself would only start the next morning.

Rav Moshe maintained that since that is not clear cut in the Rishonim, and the whole issue of the restrictions of the "Three Weeks" is essentially a minhag to show communal mourning, which is only recognizable in the morning when everyone is fasting, and especially as a wedding is considered l'tzorech, a considerable need, he ruled that one may be lenient and get married on the eve of the 17th of Tamuz[6].

Haircuts [not] Included

Several poskim, including the Rivevos Efraim (Shu"t vol. 1, 375) and the Sha'arim Metzuyanim B'Halacha (122, Kuntress Acharon 1), extrapolated that Rav Moshe would have ruled similarly for a haircut, that if there is great need, then one may be lenient as well, on the eve of the 17th of Tamuz[7].

However, Rav Shmuel HaLevi Vosner (Shu"t Shevet HaLevi vol. 10, 81, 2) disagreed with this theory and maintains that for a wedding (especially on Motzai Shabbos, which actually was the original question asked to Rav Moshe) there is more halachic rationale to rely upon than for a simple haircut. Furthermore, he concludes, haircuts are generally not considered a great need. Therefore, he ruled that certainly one may not be lenient regarding a haircut.

Interestingly, years later, Rav Moshe revisited the topic and addressed this issue directly (Shu"t Igros Moshe - Orach Chaim vol. 3, end 100, s.v. u'vadavar & Orach Chaim vol. 4, 112, 2) and maintained that in his opinion the same leniency does indeed apply to haircuts and one may therefore take a haircut on the evening of the 17th of Tamuz in times of great need, and not as Rav Vosner understood his opinion.

Contemporary Consensus [In Israel]

Nevertheless, many contemporary halachic decisors, especially those living in Eretz Yisrael, including Rav Vosner himself, as well as the Steipler Gaon, Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, Rav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv, Rav Yisrael Yaakov Fischer, the Tzitz Eliezer, Rav Chaim Kanievsky, Rav Moshe Halberstam, Rav Moshe Sternbuch, Rav Nissim Karelitz, and mv'r Rav Yaakov Blau[8], maintain that the issue is a moot point, and rule that even for a wedding, let alone a haircut, one should not exercise leniency, as the evening of the 17th is already considered part and parcel of the "Three Weeks", and thereby is included in the restrictions.[9]

So, even if one feels he needs a haircut desperately (perhaps someone suffering from lycanthropy[10]) on the 16th of Tamuz[11], it is definitely preferable to get a haircut right away and not wait until evening and thereby subject oneself to a halachic dispute.

Nidcheh Nafka Minah

However, this year (5776/ 2016), with Shiva Assur B'Tamuz falling out on Shabbos, and thereby the fast being pushed off a day and observed on Sunday, this entire annual debate becomes academic. This is because this year, Motzai Shabbos / Shiva Assur B'Tamuz is really Shemoneh Assur B'Tamuz, the 18th of Tamuz. As Rav Moshe concluded in his original responsum,[12] in such a case

everyone would agree that even in extenuating circumstances one may not make a wedding, as certainly by that point the halachos of Bein HaMetzarim have already taken effect.

All the same, it's important for us not to lose the trees for the forest. Instead of exclusively debating the finer points of whether a haircut is permitted or forbidden, it is important for us all to remember that these restrictions were instituted by our Rabbanim as a public show of mourning during the most devastating time period on the timeline of the Jewish year. As the Mishna Berura (quoting the Rambam)[13] explicitly notes, the focus of these days of sorrow serve to remind us of the national tragedies that befell our people, and the events that led to them. Our goal should then be to utilize these restrictions to focus inward, at our own personal challenges in our relationship with G-d, and rectify that negativity which led to these tragic events in our history.

Postscript: Recently, this author received a related interesting halachic query: "Someone was about to get married on the 16th of Tammuz, i.e. the night of the wedding would be the 17th of Tamuz. To avoid problems he made sure that everything was ready, in order that the Chuppah would be before sundown to ensure that the wedding would be permissible according to all opinions. Well, as you might expect, not everything went as planned and there was a hold up – due to the fault of the hall owner. The Chuppah could not actually start until after nightfall and the ba'al simcha – holding as the more stringent poskim - refused to "march down the aisle". The hall owner, on the other hand, refused to reimburse them, claiming that running late is standard for weddings. Additionally, there are poskim who rule that there is room to be lenient on the night of the 17th, and therefore it is the ba'al simcha's own fault if he doesn't want to rely on them. Therefore, he feels that he is still entitled to his payment. Now what?"

This author replied that this is a painful question, but the monetary issues should depend on what the nature of the exact contract is. If they expressly made up that if this happens due to the hall owner's negligence they should get reimbursed, then they certainly should. If not, and they really held that it is a chiyuv to be machmir not to get married on the night of the 17th of Tamuz, then they shouldn't have taken the hall in the first place, as delays are quite a common occurrence for weddings. Either way, once they were there and the chassan and kallah were ready to actually get married, it would be an extreme bizayon not to let them get married. The ba'alei simcha would be at fault in that case, as this would become a prime example of a chumrah which leads to extreme kula! Halacha has many dispensations for chassan and kallah and one sticking to his shitta and ruining their wedding in the name of "halacha" is just plain wrong, especially as there is no specific mekor in Gemara for the Three Week restrictions and was actually established by later poskim (Rishonim).

To gain further clarity, this author raised this question with Rav Chaim Yosef Blau shlit'a, son of mv'r Rav Yaakov Blau zt'l and a Moreh Tzedek of the Badat"z Eida Chareidis in Yerushalayim, and he answered similarly to what I answered previously, that even according to the machmirim (which he was as well - see footnote 8), if the chasuna is ready to start and it is already the night of the 17th of Tamuz, nevertheless, they should still get married.

Rav Blau proceeded to cite an excellent proof to his ruling from the Rema in Hilchos Shabbos (Orach Chaim 339, 3). The Rema ruled that even though we hold that one may not get married on Shabbos, still, in a case when it was not previously possible, and only now when it is already Shabbos the wedding was ready to take place, they should still get married right then! This is due to Kavod HaBriyos of the chassan and kallah, and has the status of shaas hadchak, extenuating circumstance.

He added that the Rema was not just being hypothetical in his ruling; it was based on an actual Maaseh Shehaya (case) detailed in Shu"t HaRema (125). If so, Rav Blau concluded, then certainly in this case, they should have the wedding on the spot, especially as the whole restriction not to get married during the Three Weeks is at most derabbanan, and the Gemara states (Brachos 19b) "Gadol Kavod HaBriyos Shedocheh Lo Sa'aseh SheBaTorah", which is referring to Issurei Derabbanan[14]. This refers to the rule that basic human dignity can at times trump Rabbinic consideration, this case included.

A fascinating insight indeed!

[1] This three-week season is referred to as such by the Midrash Rabbah (cited by Rashii in his commentary to Eichah Ch. 1, verse 3).

[2] See Mishna in Maseches Ta'anis 26b and accompanying Gemara. According to Rav Saadiah Gaon, as cited by the Shibolei Leket (263, Ha'arugah HaTishbi, Seder Taanis, Din Arbah Tzomos, pg. 252), these three weeks are the same three weeks that Daniel fasted, and therefore maintains that we should not eat meat nor drink wine the entire "Three Weeks"! Additionally, the Kol Bo (62) adds that since on Shiva Assur B'Tamuz the Korban Tamid and its Nisuch HaYavin were batul, there are those who are nahug not to eat meat or drink wine already starting from then. However, it must be noted that others, including the Shibolei Leket himself, are of the opinion that Daniel fasted during Chodesh Nissan; and that although several authorities cite such an opinion [see for example Tur & Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chaim 551, 9), Chayei Adam (vol. 2, 133, 8) and Ben Ish Chai (Year 1, Parshas Devarim 15); not that they actually rule that way], nevertheless, abstaining from meat and wine the entire "Three Weeks" is not the normative halacha.

[3] This is following general Ashkenazic minhag; many Sefardim only start restrictions on beginning of the week that Tisha B'Av falls out on. Although there is no mention of such in the Gemara, these "Three Week" restrictions follow Ashkenazic practice as instituted by many Rishonim and later codified by Ashkenazic authorities including the Rema (Darchei Moshe - Orach Chaim 551, 5 & Haglah ad loc. 2 & 4), the Derech Hachaim (ad loc. 1), the Shevus Yaakov (Shu"t vol. 2, 35), the Chayei Adam (vol. 2, 133, 8), the Kitzur Shulchan Aruch (122, 1), the Aruch Hashulchan (Orach Chaim 551, 8) and the Mishna Berura (ad loc. 18).

Although there are several Sefardim authorities who maintain that Sefardim should at least follow the Ashkenazic minhag of starting the 'Nine Days' restrictions from Rosh Chodesh Av [including the Kenesses HaGedolah (Orach Chaim 551, Haghos on the Tur 5) the Ben Ish Chai (Year 1, Parshas Devarim 4, 5, & 12), and Kaf Hachaim (Orach Chaim 551, 44, 80, & 142)], nevertheless, most Sefardim are only noheg these restrictions from the actual week of Tisha B'Av as per the ruling of the Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chaim 551, 10). See Shu"t Yabea Omer (vol. 6, Orach Chaim 46), Shu"t Yechaveh Daas (vol. 4, 36) and Yalkut Yosef (Kitzur Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 551, 1).

[4] See Shulchan Aruch, Rema and their commentaries to Orach Chaim 551.

[5] However, it is important to note that there are certain specific situations where many poskim do give dispensation for haircuts during the Three Weeks (and in certain extreme situations even during the Nine Days). See Bach (Orach Chaim 551, 7), Taz (ad loc. 14), Elya Rabba (ad loc. 27), Ba'er Heiviv (ad loc. 18), Shaarei Teshuva (ad loc. 18), Ba'is Meir (beg. Orach Chaim 551), Shu"t Sheilas Yaavetz (vol. 1, 77), Shu"t Chasam Sofer (Orach Chaim 158 and Yoreh Deah 348 s.v. v'ee golyach), Shu"t Noda B'Yehuda (Kamma, Orach Chaim 28 and Dugul Mervavah - Orach Chaim 551, 4), Shu"t Maharam Shick (Yoreh Deah 371), Mishna Berura (551, 87 and Shaarei Tziyun ad loc. 93), Kaf Hachaim (ad loc. 82), Shu"t Igros Moshe (Choshen Mishpat vol. 1, 93 and Orach Chaim vol. 4, 102 and vol. 5, 24, 9), Shaarim Metzayanim B'Halacha (120, Kuntress Acharon 8 and 122, 5), and Maadanei Shlomo (Bein HaMetzarim pg. 53 and 54). For more on this topic, see R' Zvi Ryzman's recent excellent Ratz KaTavi on Maagalei HaShana (vol. 2, Sefiras HaOmer, 14) at length.

[6] The actual case Rav Moshe was referring to was when Shiva Assur B'Tamuz fell out on a Sunday. Hence, with no other dates available, he permitted the chassuna to commence on Motzai Shabbos, before the onset of the actual fast. However, this does not mean that if one can plan a wedding on the 16th of Tamuz with the Chuppah before shkiya that they should wait around until after nightfall to start the wedding. Obviously, Rav Moshe would only permit that if one was stuck (l'tzorech) and would optimally prefer the wedding to at least commence while still the 16th of Tamuz (meaning before shkiya). See Shu"t Rivevos Efraim (vol. 1, 375), as well as Shu"t Videbata Bam (152 s.v. v'shamati and v'laasos), and Rabbi Yitzchok Frankel's Kuntress Yad Dodi (pg. 132, Hilchos Bein HaMetzarim, Question 1 a-c; who cite Rav Dovid Feinstein shlita's explaining his father, Rav Moshe's, shitta). This author has heard that Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky as well ruled akin to Rav Moshe and permitted a wedding on the eve of the 17th of Tamuz when there were no other alternatives except to wait until after Tisha B'Av.

[7] However, the Rivevos Efraim makes an important point. He stresses that in light of the fact that the Kaf Hachaim (Orach Chaim 551, 207) mentions many machmirim that the prohibitions start from the night of Shiva Assur B'Tamuz (see footnote 8) and not the following morning, therefore one may only rely on this to take a haircut only 'l'tzorech gadol'. Indeed, when Rav Moshe later revisited this topic (Shu"t Igros Moshe - Orach Chaim vol. 3, end 100, s.v. u'vadavar & Orach Chaim vol. 4, 112, 2) he stressed that his heter is only 'l'tzorech gadol'. This understanding was also stressed by Rav Dovid Feinstein as cited in Shu"t Videbata Bam (152 s.v. v'shamati). See also Shu"t Shraga HaMeir (vol. 2, 13) who ruled similarly, that one may exclusively be lenient if it is 'shayach nivul gadol'.

[8] See Shu"t Shevet HaLevi (ibid and vol. 8, 168, 7), Orchos Rabbeinu (vol. 2, pg. 127, 6), Halichos Shlomo (Moadim vol. 2, Ch. 13, footnote 1; quoting Rav Avigdor Nebenzahl), Doleh U'Mashkeh (pg. 207 - 208 and footnote 507; however Rav Elyashiv ז"ל held that only need to be stringent from Tzeis HaKochavim, and not shekiyah), Halichos Even Yisrael (Yemei Bein HaMetzarim, pg. 326, 1), Shu"t Tzitz Eliezer (vol. 10, 26), Shu"t Divrei Moshe (33), Moadim U'zmanim (vol. 8, 338), Chut Shani (Hilchos Shabbos vol. 2 pg. 325), and Shu"t Shraga HaMeir (vol. 2, 13). This author has heard Rav Blau ז"ל's shitta from his son Rav Chaim Yosef, Mo"tz of the Bada"tz, Eida HaChareidis aChraidis Hof Yerushalayim and Rav of Shechunus Pag"i.

[9] This consensus follows the opinions of the Chida (Shu"t Chaim Sha'al vol. 1, 34) who maintains that even though the walls of Yerushalayim were breached in the daytime of Shiva Assur B'Tamuz, nevertheless, the preceding night was also time of war, and the paraniyos already started from that evening and Chazal were more lenient merely regarding eating and drinking. The Butchatcher Rav (Eshel Avraham, Orach Chaim 551, 2) was extremely stringent about this as well, and even from Bein Hashmashos. However, it is known that Rav Elyashiv ז"ל held (cited in Doleh U'Mashkeh ibid.) that one needs to be stringent only from Tzeis HaKochavim, and not shekiyah. Additionally, as mentioned previously, the Kaf Hachaim (ibid.) cites many authorities who were makpid with the restrictions starting from nightfall.

[10] For more on this topic, see Rabbeinu Efraim al HaTorah (Parshas Vayechi s.v. Binyomin ze'ev yitraf).

[11] This author has heard from Rav Efraim Greenblatt (shlit"a) [ז"ל], the noted Rivevos Efraim, that "l'tzorech gadol" for a haircut to allow leniency would include meeting the president or an important dignitary, which attending while not properly groomed would be looked upon askance.

[12] Shu"t Igros Moshe (Orach Chaim vol. 1, 168 s.v. aval). See also the recently published Mesores Moshe (vol. 2, 258, pg. 132).

[13] Mishna Berura (549, 1), based on the Rambam (Hilchos Taaniyos Ch. 5, 1). See Rav Yosef Eliyahu Henkin's essential Ezras Torah Luach (5776; pg. 125 - 126) who exhorts us to the importance of this, especially in our times, to specifically rectify the Aveiros that caused the destructions of the Batei HaMikdash. He adds that it is a 'Mitzvah Gadol' to set a time daily to learn sefer Chofetz Chaim to this end. Other Gedolim, such as Rav Yisrael Yaakov Fischer (cited in Halichos Even Yisrael, Yemei Bein HaMetzarim, pg. 326, 2), would make sure to perform a special daytime Tikun Chatzos (see Mishna Berura 551, 103, citing the Arizal) to this end.

[14] As mentioned in aprevius article titled "The Tattoo Taboo and Permanent Makeup Too".

For any questions, comments or for the full Mareh Mekomos / sources, please email the author: yspitz@ohr.edu.

Disclaimer: This is not a comprehensive guide, rather a brief summary to raise awareness of the issues. In any real case one should ask a competent Halachic authority.

L'iluy Nishmas the Rosh HaYeshiva - Rav Chonoh Menachem Mendel ben R' Yechezkel Shraga, Rav Yaakov Yeshaya ben R' Boruch Yehuda, and l'zchus for Shira Yaffa bas Rochel Miriam and her children for a yeshua teikufu'miyad!

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Immigration, Meet Balak

Yitzchok Adlerstein · June 27, 2018

Everything that happens is alluded to in the weekly parshah, right? Sometimes it is just a little more difficult to see how.

Not this week. Immigration policy is front and center. Am I being cute? No, actually. I found it hard to believe as well, but an early 18th century commentary sees Balak as presiding over a migration crisis, with so many seeking asylum, that they threatened to exceed the capacity of the host country to grant them asylum.

You can read the entire piece in my weekly parsha shiur on Torah.org. (I rarely mention these shiurim in Cross-Currents, but was so taken aback myself by this discovery, that I'm making an exception. If you don't have patience for that, here is an excerpt from my weekly adaptation of Melech Machsheves (1663-1711) by R. Moshe Cheifetz, known in the scholarly world as Gentili:

War creates refugees. People flee the battle areas, and the wider area in which safety and security are compromised, and the food supply is disrupted. So it was with the defeat of the Emori. People fled destroyed areas, especially in the face of the take-no-prisoners conduct of that battle. We can assume that substantial numbers migrated to Moav and Midian in search of a stable place to live. The influx of refugees threatened the host food supplies. The feared people here are not the Bnei Yisrael. It was known that they had no plans to attack. It was the refugees who were the "numerous people" who seemed poised to overwhelm Moav and Midian – who would "lick up" their "entire surroundings." They are also called a "congregation," because they came from many parts of Emori territory, and gathered together in a smaller number of places in Moav.

Balak was among those who fled. He had been there. He "saw all that Yisrael had done to the Emori," and resolved to escape to Moav...He did not turn his back on his many countrymen who also fled there, and refused to deport them. ...The people were a different matter. They were not willing to suffer the effects of the influx of aliens....Balak is forced to get involved on their behalf. ...He stood his ground, and refused to harm the refugees. He sought a different way to deal with the problem by inducing them to leave voluntarily.

It is not known if he tried to build a wall to keep out new arrivals.

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לע"נ

שרה משא בת ר' יעקב אליעזר ע"ה