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Ani Ma'amin...The Geula of Moshiach

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In the second of this week's double parshios, Parshas Balak, we learn of King Balak who hired Bilaam, whose last name is rasha (wicked), to curse the Bnei Yisrael.

The Israelites are in year forty of their desert wanderings, the first generation (who sinned in the Sin of the Spies) has died out (see Rashi to Bamidbar 20:1), and this next generation will soon enter into the Holy Land under the leadership of Yehoshua. As the Bnei Yisrael have begun to conquer the lands surrounding Eretz Yisrael (see the end of Parshas Chukas), King Balak fears the might of Am Yisrael.

While Bilaam is hired to curse the Jews, he is unable to do so, and time and again, when he opens his mouth to begin to speak curses, blessings - the word of G-d - come forth. Amongst his most famous blessings are: מה-טבו אהלֵיךָ, יַעֲקֹב; מִשְׁכְּנֵיךָ, יִשְׂרָאֵל, how goodly are your tents O Yaakov, your dwelling place Israel; as well as מִי־מֵרָאשׁ אֲרָאֶנּוּ, וּמִגְבוּעוֹת הַיָּם, אֶשְׂרֹנּוּ: הֵן-עָם לְבָדָד יִשְׁכֹּן, וּבְגוֹיִם לֹא יִתְחַשֵּׁב I see him, and from the hills I behold him, it is a nation that dwells alone, and shall not be reckoned amongst the nations (Bamidbar 24:5 and 23:9, respectively).

Towards the end of his attempts to curse the Israelites, Bilaam prophesies and declares: אֲרָאֶנּוּ וְלֹא עֲתָה, אֶשְׂרֹנּוּ; וְלֹא קְרוֹב; דֶּרֶךְ בּוֹכֵב מִיַּעֲקֹב, וְקָם שֹׁבֵט מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל, וּמִחֵץ פְּאֲתֵי מוֹאָב, וְיִקְרַקֵּר כָּל-בְּנֵי-שֵׁחַ - I see it, but not now; I view it, but it is not near. A star shot forth from Jacob, and a rod has risen from Israel, and he shall strike down the extremities of Moav and undermine all the children of Shes (24:17).

On this verse, Targum Onkelos explains: הַיְזִיתִיָּה וְלֹא כְעַן; סְכִיתִיָּה וְלֹא אִיתוּהִי קְרוֹב; כִּד יְקוּם מַלְכָּא מִיַּעֲקֹב וְיִתְרַבָּא מְשִׁיחָא וְלֹא קְרוֹב; דֶּרֶךְ בּוֹכֵב מִיַּעֲקֹב, וְקָם שֹׁבֵט מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל, וּמִחֵץ פְּאֲתֵי מוֹאָב, וְיִקְרַקֵּר כָּל-בְּנֵי אֲנָשָׁא I see him, but not now; I behold him, but he is not near; when a king shall arise from Jacob, and מְשִׁיחָא מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל, the anointed one from Israel, then he will kill the princes of Moav and rule over all of mankind.

Here we have a prophecy regarding the end of days, which is seen by Bilaam, but not yet close.

Why is the Moshiach, the Anointed One, who will shoot forth from Yaakov, compared to a כּוֹכֵב, a star? The Ramban writes: דֶּרֶךְ כּוֹכֵב מִיַּעֲקֹב בַּעֲבוּר כִּי הַמְשִׁיחַ יִקְבֹּץ נִדְחֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִקְצֵה הַשָּׁמַיִם - A star has shot forth from Yaakov - because the Moshiach will gather in all of the scattered of Israel from the ends of the earth, he is compared to a star, that shoots across the ends of the heavens (Ramban to Bamidbar 24:17).

The belief in the coming of Moshiach - I believe with perfect faith in the coming of Moshiach, and even though he may tarry, with all of this, I will wait for him each day that comes - stems from the nevuah of Bilaam.

As the world today descends further and further into chaos, mayhem, confusion and the unknown, we are reminded that the star of Moshaich will shoot forth, and will gather in the exiles, and redeem our nation, our Land - and this world - from the tohu va'vo'hu which currently reigns.

In a masterful article, published in Mishpacha Magazine, Shavuot edition, R' Aaron Lopiansky shlita writes of Moshiach, and what exactly we are waiting for (based on the Rambam's principles at the end of his Yad HaChazakah).

1. "Moshiach will restore our nationhood by reinstating a central authority. We are no longer/not yet a nation in the full sense... Without Moshiach, we have no head, no authority, no structure, no enforcement. We can have rousing speeches, ringing kol-korehs, an inspirational Siyum Ha'Shas, and stern admonitions, but we do only what we wish to do... Yes, thankfully we have our gedolei Torah, but even that seems to be subjective. From those who point to 'The Moetzes' as 'leadership,' I would ask, do you mean Agudah's Moetzes, Degel's Moetzes, Peleg's Moetzes, or Shas' Moetzes? Is it the Crown Heights Beis Din? And

what about Satmar and others who do not subscribe to any of the above? And Centrist Orthodox and Modern Orthodox? And the many Yidden who do not fit into any of those categories?

2. “Moshiach will restore the wholeness of the Jewish People. While we Torah-observant Jews rightfully take pride in our achievements, the vast, vast majority of Klal Yisrael is evaporating ... If we are missing 90% or even ‘just’ 80%, or even one soul, then we are not Klal Yisrael! ... Klal Yisrael is the sum total of all of us, and we are, therefore, missing 90% of our ‘self.’

3. “Moshiach will restore Torah to Klal Yisrael. At best (in galus) we keep a minority of mitzvos. We do not observe Kodshim, Taharos, much of Zeraim, Sanhedrin, Knasos, and on and on. True, it’s not our fault, but if we genuinely believe that (the performance of) mitzvos perfect a man, we are woefully lacking. Moshiach will restore all of the mitzvos that were performed at the time of the Beis Ha’Mikdash.

4. “Moshiach will restore the Divine Presence... One

Tisha B’Av, I heard this point powerfully presented by R’ Yoshe Ber Soloveitchik. He said, ‘People say to me: We have Eretz Yisrael, Yerushalayim, even the Kosel. Why are we still mourning?’ He said, ‘I reply to them and say: Have you ever seen an estranged son sitting at his father’s table? There is only one foot of distance between their bodies, but a thousand miles between their hearts! This creates an unbearable tension, intensified, not ameliorated, by their physical presence. So too, to be so close (to Hashem in our times), yet so estranged ...’

“When we wish for Moshiach to pay our bills, heal our ailments, or help us with any other of our myriad needs, is that called yearning for Moshiach? ...” (Mishpacha, Issue 812, p.47-51)

וְדַרְךְ כּוֹכַב מִיַּעֲקֹב, וְקָם שֶׁבֶט מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל - While we certainly yearn for his arrival each and every day, let us remember what Moshiach will bring to our nation and to our world, and the glory that will be restored to Am Yisrael, Toras Yisrael and Eretz Yisrael, when the star shoots forth from Yaakov and the rod is established from Israel.

Lessons of Jewish History from Bilam

Rabbi Moshe Taragin

Bilam and Balak’s conspiracy to halt the Jewish advance dominates most of parshat Balak even though the story could easily have been summarized in a few brief verses. Bilam’s prophecies are included, in part, because they provide a template for Jewish history. Bilam’s statements are panoramic and address broader historical issues- particularly the Jewish impact upon human history. This parsha introduces historical patterns which will resurface throughout Jewish history.

1) Outsized Fears of Jews

King Balak has received accounts of Jewish military triumphs and is rightfully concerned about the potential implications for his own kingdom. Indeed, having just recently surrendered large tracts of lands in a furious battle with the triumphant Emori tribe, the Moabite empire could ill afford additional territorial losses. However, Balak’s worries about Jewish encroachment are outsized and disproportionate. He envisions the Jews as a voracious cow consuming all in its path, or as a planetary body eclipsing the eye of the earth. We are the monster of his own imagination symbolizing all his worst fears and

nightmares. In reality, the Jews had solicited peace with both the Emori and Edomite kingdoms – each of whom were natural enemies. Given these pacifist overtures, there is every reason to believe that the Jews would not intimidate their own historical relatives- the Moabites. Halachikally, we are forbidden from launching aggression against Moav and, strategically, we had every reason to pursue a peaceful harmony with our soon-to-be neighbors. Yet something about the Jew elicits the worst fears in humanity and the approach of a nation wearied by a forty-year desert journey is extraordinarily alarming to Balak. Balak panics and Bilam leaps into action because of imagined fears which have no basis in reality. At a psychological level it is always convenient to project your darkest fears upon the stranger or the outsider and Jews have always been that type of ‘lightning rod’. Beyond our role as the ‘other’ we also represent G-d in this world and the challenges of religion we model are alarming and raise anxiety and discomfort.

2) Strange Alliances

Bilam and Balak aren’t natural allies and are only united by one common purpose- their fear and loathing of the Jews.

In fact, our Chazal highlight that Bilam and Balak were lifetime adversaries who banded together to face the Jewish “stampede”. In general, hatred of the other oftentimes creates strange bedfellows and hatred of Jews is no different. Throughout history, the flaring of anti-Semitism has launched some very odd coalitions.

Throughout the first half of the 20th century Germans and Russians agreed upon very little – other than their dislike of the Jews inhabiting their contested territories. In the early part of the century Germans were capitalists while Russians were socialists sharing little but mutual animosity toward Jews. It wasn’t uncommon for Jews to be accused as Capitalists by seething Soviet Communists while simultaneously viewed as Communist revolutionaries by suspicious Germans. During WWII and its aftermath Jews once again found themselves facing hostility from both directions- facing Nazi atrocities from the West and Soviet persecution from the East.

In the contemporary era, hatred toward Jews similarly ‘unites’ vastly different factions and groupings. In the USA the Jews are despised by white supremacists who view us “coastal” big-city liberals, who endorse a globalist, hyper-aggressive platform of multiculturalism which threatens the purity of their “Aryan” country. By contrast, European based anti-Semitism derives from the far left which casts the Jews as racist colonizers advancing a ‘tribal’ and apartheid agenda which displaces the natural rights of victimized and indigenous peoples. These two factions share absolutely nothing in common and actually detest each other. They are only united in hostility toward G-d’s nation. Sadly, across much of the Islamic world we are witness to a similar phenomenon, where Shiites and Sunnis who are locked in a 1400-year old battle, both stand ardently opposed to the State of Israel.

As these ad-hoc alignments are based on common hatred and little else, they barely last. At no particular moment do we sense an authentic bond between Bilam and Balak and this marriage of hatred frays under the pressure of deviant interests and discrepant agendas. Even Bilam’s relationship with his trusted donkey unravels under the pressure of his venomous agenda. This deterioration symbolizes the unfurling of relationships under the toxic influence of malice and hatred.

As this saga concludes, Bilam and Balak are almost in

outright confrontation. Balak’s attempts to banish Bilam and prevent additional damaging statements are futile; to Balak’s chagrin, Bilam provides one final vision of human history foretelling the quick demise of Balak’s kingdom. The parsha begins with an alliance bent on eliminating the Jews and concludes amidst a junkyard of deviant interests and subverted schemes.

Of course, this conspiracy isn’t only torpedoed by disharmony but by self-indulgence and arrogance. Bilam is the linchpin of this plan but he is driven by greed and blinded by his Narcissism. He may be prophetically gifted, and he may possess the power of speech, however he is poisoned by greed, crippled by overconfidence and resentful of a nation whose moral conduct highlights his own putrefying immoral behavior. He doesn’t serve the historical bidding of Balak or any other noble ideal but is immersed in his own glory and dedicated to defending his own narrative as the “knower of Divine truths”. Our enemies are often distracted and deterred by their own corruption, self-interest and egotism. Just ask Haman how his plans were wrecked as he couldn’t get “out of his own way”.

3) Turning Curses into Blessings

Theoretically, Bilam’s barking curses shouldn’t concern us; the Jews should be immune to these verbal assaults launched from distant desert hilltops. Yet the parsha demonstrates how sometimes our curses are actually converted into blessings. In the modern state of Israel, we have repeatedly witnessed the conversion of national limitations or barriers into historical opportunities. Saddled with an arid environment, our state was forced to develop advanced irrigation and water preservation techniques. Israel is now exporting these technologies across the globe and assisting modern man in his struggle to provide ample water supply for an exploding and urbanizing population. Similarly, our military struggles have forced us to develop advanced military capabilities which has serviced a modern world struggling with violence which is no longer limited to conventional battlefields. Additionally, many of these inventions- adopted out of dire need- have created ‘spinoffs’ which have catapulted the state of Israel into a global technological leader. Parshat Balak creates a template for transforming curses into blessings!

Tears for Moav

Rabbi Mordechai Torczyner

This week's version of Moav is both mortal enemy and moral enemy; their king seeks our physical downfall (Bamidbar 22:6), and their women attempt to lure us into immorality and idolatry (ibid. 25:2-3). The animosity persists later in Tanach; early in the period of the Shoftim they dominate us, and during the middle of the period of the first Beit haMikdash they attack us again, as recorded in both Melachim II and the Mesha Stele. Moshe even says of them, "Do not seek their peace or their benefit for all of your days, ever." (Devarim 23:7)

Given the bad blood between us, we might wonder at Yeshayahu's apparent soft spot for them. Several sentences into an extended prophecy of Moav's future destruction, Yeshayahu exclaims, "My heart cries out for Moav!" (Yeshayahu 15:5) Similar sympathy is found in Yeshayahu 16:9 and Yirmiyahu 48:36. Why do our prophets feel anything for Moav?

In truth, medieval commentators Rabbi Avraham ibn Ezra and Rabbi David Kimchi contended that these prophets were only describing Moav's own grief. But Rashi, citing a midrash we will see below, reads the sentence literally. Why do we feel Moav's pain?

Family

Perhaps we recognize Moav as family; after all, their patriarch was Lot, Sarah's brother and Avraham's nephew. [Indeed, our parshah begins with Moav's fear that Jewish cattle would consume their grassland – much as Lot and Avraham found their grassland too limiting in Bereishit 13.]. More, Ruth, ancestress of King David, emerged from Moav.

Yeshayahu supports this read, emphasizing Lot in presenting Moav's fall. He describes Moav fleeing to Tzoar, as Lot once did. (Yeshayahu 15:5, Bereishit 19:22) Per Rashi, Yeshayahu attributes Moav's suffering to their historic ingratitude for Avraham's care for Lot. (Rashi to Yeshayahu 15:7) And Yeshayahu demands that Moav reciprocate Avraham's mercy toward the refugee Lot, by taking in Jewish refugees. (Yeshayahu 16:1-5; see Radak ad loc.) King David, too, makes an appearance in Yeshayahu's prophecy. (ibid. 16:5) So perhaps Yeshayahu cries for the pain of these relatives.

Potential

Rabbi Tzaddok haKohen of Lublin argued that Yeshayahu

and Yirmiyahu would grieve for any nation which was slated for destruction, because of the loss of their potential. [However, it is worth noting that Yeshayahu predicts the downfall of numerous foes in Chapters 13-23, and only Moav receives his tears.]

As Rabbi Tzaddok haKohen expressed it, the tears come not from mercy, but from a calculated practicality. "The prophets wailed at the destruction of the nations... Certainly, they were not concerned about the loss of their bodies, for, 'There is joy at the destruction of the wicked. (Mishlei 11:6)' Rather, it is known that each nation possesses a special ability... And the destruction of a particular nation destroys the reign of that particular ability." (Tzidkat haTzaddik 47)

Mercy

In a third approach, a midrash explained the prophetic tears as an expression of simple mercy for human suffering: "All of the prophets were merciful upon Israel and the idolaters, as Yirmiyahu 48 says, 'My heart moans for Moav, like wind instruments.' And so Yechezkel 27, 'Son of man, raise wailing for Tyre.' This cruel one [Bilam] arose to uproot an entire nation for nothing, for no reason! This is why the portion of Bilam was recorded [in the Torah], to explain why G-d removed Divine inspiration from the idolaters. [Bilam] arose from among them [as a prophet] – and see what he did." (Bamidbar Rabbah 20:1)

Rabbi Zev Wolf Torbavitz commented similarly on the blessing before the haftorah, with its thanks for "good prophets". He wrote, "We bless G-d for choosing them because they were good and merciful shepherds; Moshe and all of the prophets gave themselves for Israel. For the nations, too, Yeshayahu said, 'My heart cries out for Moav,' as our sages said..." (Ziv Mishneh to Hilchot Tefillah 12:15)

We might contemplate these layers when we read about human suffering anywhere in the world. In one breath, our "good prophets" conveyed both Divine condemnation and personal grief. We, who know nothing of the Divine plan, should certainly feel the pain of those who might be our family, and who are certainly people of abilities and people who suffer. May G-d soon bring the day when such suffering ends.

The Language of Animals

Rabbi Dr. Mordechai Schiffman

The human being is the only animal that..." This sentence, Dr. Daniel Gilbert from Harvard University argues, is one which every psychologist at some point in their career attempts to finish based on their own line of research. Most attempts to finish the sentence are challenged by later psychologists looking for their own way to finish the sentence. As one example, many used to argue that "The human being is the only animal that can use language," but were forced to retract when chimpanzees were taught to communicate using hand signs. While research with animals using language has its share of controversy, there seems to be ample evidence that chimps, gorillas, bonobos, dolphins, border collies, and African gray parrots can all acquire the ability to communicate using some form of language.

When Bilaam went with the servants of Moav to go to Balak, G-d, angry that Bilaam went with them, placed an angel on the road to prevent them from passing. While Bilaam was unable to see the sword-wielding angel, his donkey noticed it and veered off the path. Bilaam, frustrated with his animal's behavior, hit it with his stick. The angel repositioned himself in front of the procession and the donkey, trying to avoid the angel again, pressed against a wall, squeezing Bilaam's foot. Bilaam responded by hitting his donkey for the second time. The donkey, still confronted by the angel in front of her and nowhere to veer off to, laid down on the ground with Bilaam on top of her. Bilaam, in his anger, hit the donkey, once again.

At that point, a strange story became even more bizarre. G-d opened the donkey's mouth and a conversation ensued between Bilaam and his donkey. The donkey, hurt after being hit three times, asked for an explanation. Bilaam, unphased by a talking donkey, responded by claiming that the donkey had made a mockery of him, and that if he had a sword, he would have actually killed her. Pleading her case, the donkey asked Bilaam to consider all the years they have been together and whether this was a regular pattern of her behavior. Bilaam acknowledged that it was not, and at that point, G-d uncovered his eyes and revealed the angel to him. The angel rebuked Bilaam for hitting his donkey three times and explained that the donkey actually saved his life by avoiding the angel.

How are we to understand a talking donkey? The most

prevalent explanation is to chalk it up to a Divine miracle. The Mishna in Avot (5:6) lists the talking donkey as one of the ten miracles that G-d embedded into creation during twilight of the first Shabbat. A textual problem with such an explanation is that even though talking donkeys is within the purview of G-d's abilities, it presumably wasn't in the realm of expected for Bilaam and his Moabite escorts. The fact that they seem to just take the talking donkey in stride, presents a problem. Another possibility is to follow the Rambam's view that anytime anybody in Tanach encountered an angel, it perforce happened in the context of a dream state. If so, the whole episode, including the donkey talking, took place in Bilaam's mind.

A third possibility is presented by Rabbi Shmuel David Luzzato (19th century, Italy). Rabbi Luzzato pointed out that if you look carefully within the text, it never writes that the donkey speaks (d-v-r). He argued that in reality the donkey did not express a full, well-articulated statement. Rather, the donkey brayed and bellowed as a response to getting hit, as if to say, "why are you hitting me?" Bilaam responded to the donkey's cries by saying that she humiliated him, the same as any pet owner may converse with his or her pet. Animals may not be able to talk using speech to formulate sentences in the way we do, but they can use forms of language to communicate.

Perhaps, embedded in this strange interaction, is a veiled critique of Bilaam's broader behavior. One of Bilaam's flaws was his inability to hear, understand, and intuit what G-d really wanted from him. He couldn't pick up on the subtle cues and listen to the true essence of what was expected of him. It was a case of motivated listening, hearing what he wanted to hear and interacting accordingly. Bilaam's initial impetuous and violent behavior toward his donkey reflected this inability to attend to the not fully articulated feelings of the other. In contrast, midrashim are abound describing the empathy and care that great Jewish leaders such as Moshe and David exhibited as shepherds towards their flock. How one listens and responds to those who are more vulnerable and unable to fully communicate is a litmus test for their true character. A test that Bilaam failed, and one we can aspire to pass - if we listen carefully.

Bilaam's Worldview

Rabbi Dr. Dvir Ginsberg

Most of the Torah portion of Balak deals with the nefarious plan hatched by Balak and Bilaam to bring about the demise of the Jewish people. Towards the end of the story, Bilaam comes to the realization that his plan of cursing the Jews was not working (Bamidbar 24:1):

"Balaam saw that it pleased the Lord to bless Israel; so he did not go in search of omens as he had done time and time again, but turned his face toward the desert"

Bilaam now turns to the Jewish nation (ibid 2-3):

"Balaam raised his eyes and saw Israel dwelling according to its tribes, and the spirit of God rested upon him. He took up his parable and said, "The word of Balaam the son of (beno) Beor and the word of the man with an open eye (shetum ha'ayin)"

The above introductory verse requires some type of clarification. In steps Rashi, breaking up the verse into two discrete themes. In the first half, he challenges the translation of the word "beno" as meaning "son of":

"His son was Beor. [However, the word 'beno' is used here] as in "to a spring of water" (Ps. 114:8). The Midrash Aggadah expounds: Both were greater than their fathers; Balak, his son was Zippor, for his [Balak's] father was his son, as it were, with regard to royalty. And Balaam was greater than his father in prophecy; he was a maneh [a coin equaling one hundred zuz] the son of a peras [a coin equaling fifty zuz, half the value of a maneh]."

Rashi thus interprets the word "beno" much differently than what is expected. The rationale for such a drastic change is fairly intuitive, as why would it be necessary to discuss Bilaam's lineage? However, the explanation offered by the Midrash is not very clear. Essentially, the Midrash is emphasizing how Bilaam was "better" than his father. Why is this important to know? Furthermore, the Midrash cites both Balak and Bilaam, while the Torah never mentions Balak. Why does the Midrash want us to focus on both?

Rashi then tackles the second part of the verse:

"His eye had been gouged out and its socket appeared open. This term 'shetum' is Mishnaic.... Our Rabbis said, Because he said, 'the number of the seed of Israel', implying that the Holy One, blessed is He, sits and counts the seed that issues from the Israelite sexual unions, waiting for the drop from which a righteous man will be born, he thought, 'The One Who is holy, and Whose ministers are holy should direct His attention to matters such as

these?' On account of this, Balaam's eye was blinded."

This explanation is also difficult to understand. Rashi picks up on the rare usage of the word "shatum", which leads him to paint a grotesque facial profile of Bilaam. Once again, he cites a Midrash, which attempts to explain how Bilaam came to lose his eye. Earlier in the story, Bilaam had received multiple prophecies from God, including one that referred to how God counts the Jewish people (ibid 23:10):

"Who counted the dust of Jacob or the number of the seed of Israel? May my soul die the death of the upright and let my end be like his"

God is then described as involved in a very detailed manner concerning the counting of the Jewish people. Bilaam picks up on this focus, and portrays God as a voyeur, a disturbing conclusion to say the least. He questions how God, the Creator and Judge, could be involved in such an activity. God punishes Bilaam by becoming blind in one eye.

Why did Bilaam come to this conclusion?

The first prophecy received in this final set attempts to set a specific tone. At this stage of the story, Bilaam recognized his plan had failed. The first half of the verse reflects the magnitude of the failure. Both Bilaam and Balak were very accomplished, universally recognized as successful and powerful. God wants to stress the degree of failure by emphasizing how these weren't your average people; rather, these were great men, and they still failed. Rashi cannot completely divorce the translation of the word "beno" as a statement of progeny. It is common to use the contrast of a child to parent in describing success, as it is functions as a standard to "judge" the person (whether this is appropriate or not is a separate issue). God, then, is using the contrast of son-to-father to express the tremendous failure. Why does the Midrash include Balak as well? Balak had risen to become the monarch of Moav, while Bilaam was known worldwide for his prophetic skills. Balak was the pinnacle of success in the material world, a testament to man's ability to dominate within the physical world. Bilaam's success transcended the physical, a "leader" in the arena of prophecy. The failure is better understood in the context of how complete it truly was. Whether one is able to thrive in the physical world, or accomplish much within metaphysics, God can thwart whatever plans man concocts.

The second half of the verse zeroes in on a flaw with Bilaam. It is important to emphasize that the Sages dedicate numerous Midrashim to elaborating and expanding our understanding of Bilaam. Bilaam was evil, but evil should not be viewed as a caricature. He was an insightful thinker and certainly considered wise by his peers. His demise, as presented in many Midrashim, is usually tied to an underlying distortion in his worldview. Understanding Bilaam's perspective becomes important when observing how it is in stark contrast to the approach of Judaism.

What was Bilaam's error? Bilaam had a view of the surrounding world that, at first glance, would not seem to be so distorted. Humans are separated from the animal world primarily due to our minds, our ability to engage in rational thinking and perfect ourselves. The physical world, replete with opportunities for instinctual gratification and indulgence, must remain solely in the domain of humanity. Bilaam (as described elsewhere) engaged in this type of relationship with the physical world. But he believed there could be no metaphysical benefit to anything rooted in that which is purely physical. For God to be involved in

any manner with ignoble activities, such as sexual relations, seemed absurd to Bilaam. There must be a chasm between that which is metaphysical and which is physical.

Judaism does not share this outlook, as there is no intrinsic defect with the physical world. Rather, Judaism sees the physical world as able to serve a higher purpose. Humanity should engage with that which brings pleasure. However, the end cannot be the pleasure itself. We must use the opportunity for a philosophical benefit, and there are many areas of halacha that cater to this concept. In the example cited by Bilaam, the activity should not be viewed exclusively as an opportunity for pleasure. We are commanded by God to perpetuate humanity; therefore, the action results in achieving an important outcome, a following of God's will. While Bilaam viewed the action as pure pleasure, we must see the physical world conjoined at some point with what can carry humans to higher reaches of perfection. On studying these descriptions of Bilaam's state of mind, we gain important insights into the unique view of the world presented by Judaism.

Unreal Realities

Rabbi Avraham Gordimer

The entire episode of Bilaam and Balak is surreal. The Torah suddenly interrupts its narrative of the trek of B'nei Yisroel toward Eretz Yisroel amidst a series of military challenges and conquests and proceeds to present an elaborate story of the antics and follies of a bizarre sorcerer and a gullible king.

While it is true that Hashem manipulated the situation and frustrated the plans of Bilaam and Balak so as to generate berachah for B'nei Yisroel, one wonders why the entire incident of Bilaam and Balak was given so much attention by the Torah. One would think that Bilaam and Balak should best be ignored, like most people trying to stir trouble, and assume that Hashem would have simply disregarded Bilaam's attempts to arouse His anger toward B'nei Yisroel. Why does the Torah place so much focus and devote an entire parshah to the machinations of Bilaam and Balak? Why does the Torah seem to take these two characters so seriously?

Something major and unusual is clearly going on here.

Although we try to look at matters objectively and often take things with a grain of salt, Bilaam and Balak lived

in a wholly different reality – a reality of wizardry and superstition, suspicion and fear. It was a culture in which Bilaam was viewed as a sagacious savior, Moav as nearly indefatigable, and B'nei Yisroel as a distant and obscure oddity and a dangerous nuisance.

When the speech of the great Bilaam was thrice overtaken by Hashem, and Bilaam thereupon was compelled to utter words that affirmed the chosenness and majesty of B'nei Yisroel, Bilaam and Balak were shocked. Their entire reality was shattered and rendered naught. They were shaken out of a cultural mindset that formed their beliefs, values and very identities. Their reality totally dissolved before their eyes.

This is the core and crucial message of Parshas Balak and the reason that the Torah devotes special focus to the capers of Bilaam and Balak. One's reality can be not real, and that which appears to be unreal can be the true reality. Hashem controls all and is the ultimate objective reality, and those who recognize this and connect with Hashem are part of that reality, regardless of the beliefs and attitudes of larger society.

It is interesting that the berachos recited by Bilaam are not in the order that one would expect. In fact, they are quite the opposite, even in content. Whereas one would expect the berachos to commence with various good tidings that would befall B'nei Yisroel and to consist of a series of benefits – such as wealth, prosperity, peace and security, similar to the many berachos bestowed upon B'nei Yisroel elsewhere in the Torah - Bilaam begins the body of his oration with praise of the Avos and Imahos, followed by compliments about the uniqueness and the special spiritual conduct of B'nei Yisroel. Bilaam then addresses Hashem's exceptional relationship with His People and the People's dedication to Him. The berachos conclude with the future growth and prowess of B'nei Yisroel. (See Rashi and Targum Yonasan ben Uziel.)

Why were the berachos structured as such? It all seems so counterintuitive.

The answer is that the berachos established B'nei Yisroel as a reality totally different than the reality to which Bilaam and Balak were accustomed. Rather than promise various good tidings, the emphasis of the berachos is the extraordinary existential quality of B'nei Yisroel, heralding a force and an actuality of which Bilaam and

Balak were heretofore thoroughly unaware. A new reality was presented to them, disabusing them of their former understanding and entire orientation.

The final aliyah of the parshah features the incident at Ba'al Pe'or and the heroic act of Pinchas, through which he ended the pandemonium, halted the plague and restored Hashem's relationship with B'nei Yisroel after the massive sins at Ba'al Pe'or. This narrative complements and concludes the theme of "realities". As discussed in this d'var Torah, B'nei Yisroel had entered a reality of pagan hedonism. They were uncontrollably immersed in it, when suddenly Pinchas' act shocked B'nei Yisroel back into a religious reality and enabled them to reconnect to Hashem.

As glamorous and alluring as the trappings of the materialistically driven world may be, and as overwhelming as the predominant secular culture may feel, the story of Bilaam and Balak tells us that this is not the objective reality. Rather, true reality exists where we find Hashem, unbeknownst to those of alternative realities.

May we study and internalize the lessons of this extremely unusual parshah and be inspired to seek the holy and genuine reality that Bilaam's berachos wondrously affirmed.

Maximizing Moderation

Yonatan Kurz

Why does the opening pasuk of this week's parsha say "וירא בלק בן צפור," and not "וישמע בלק בן צפור"? Seforno explains that Balak saw that Bnei Yisrael won against Sichon and Og in an unconventional manner: they did not use a war trick or a special military scheme to become victorious. He knew that the only way to defeat the nation was to catch them making a mistake with one of their middos. Rav Mordechai Finkelman quotes a Medrash that Bnei Yisrael encountered the Midianite women because they were looking to buy their wives jewelry. Since they were told that these gifts were being sold in the tent, which happened to contain music, perfume, and immodestly dressed women, they immediately headed in that direction to purchase the presents. Balak took advantage of Bnei Yisrael's zeal to give honor to their wives, and used their enthusiasm of spousal honor as a gateway to make them cheat on their wives.

Is there a reason that there were specifically 24,000 casualties in Ba'al Pe'or incident? The Rabbeinu Ephraim is quoted as saying that that it is because in

that incident, Bnei Yisrael served Avodah Zarah, the equivalent the whole Torah, which is comprised of 24 sefarim. It is interesting that there were twenty four thousand recorded fatalities in both the epidemic of Ba'al Pe'or as well as the epidemic that killed Rebbi Akiva's students. Perhaps there is a connection to be made here: the students of Rebbi Akiva died because they did not give enough respect to each other, and the men of Bnei Yisrael in the desert died because they had too much respect for others [their wives]. While the importance of kavod habriyos cannot possibly be understated (after all, מר says that it pushes off a לא תעשה level,) one should nevertheless avoid trying to tip the scales with too much kavod (or any middah for that matter), lest something bad transpire as a result; as is true with most things in life, moderation is key. With the Three Weeks coming up, we should remember the importance of being adam l'chaveiro, and continue to treat each other with a tremendous amount of respect so that we can preserve the incredible אהבה that Klal Yisrael is known for.