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Turning Curses into Blessings

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm z"l (Originally delivered July 10, 1954)

The opening verse in the daily order of *T'fillah Be'tzibbur*, public prayer, is the familiar *Mah Tovvu Ohalecha Yaakov, Mishk'nosecha Yisrael*, "How good are thy tents, O Jacob, thy dwelling places, O Israel." It must be quite an important verse to be so strategically and significantly placed, as the very first thing we say as we enter the synagogue. And indeed it is just that. For, as the opening chord in the overture to the Morning Service, *Mah Tovvu* sets the key for the entire day of prayer, the symphony of the Jew's mind and heart and soul rising harmoniously with those of all of Israel to our Father in Heaven.

Just what does this verse mean? Our Sages interpreted "tent" and "dwelling place" to refer to "*batei k'neisivot u'vatei midrashot*," to synagogues and religious schools. How good are thy synagogues and thy halls of study, is the meaning of this blessing. May they increase in influence and grow in beauty and splendor. And this blessing, which is found in today's Sidra, comes from a most surprising source. It was first uttered, our Bible tells us, not by a Jew but by a non-Jew; and an enemy of Israel, at that. It was Bilaam "*Harasha*," the wicked one, who, upon seeing Israel's tribes arrayed in the desert about the Tabernacle, exclaimed *Mah Tovvu*. And there is yet something more surprising in the entire episode, something that makes the choice of this verse for our opening prayer even less understandable. Tradition consistently reports, in all its comments on this episode, that Bilaam fully intended to curse Israel. He had been hired to do so by the Moabite king Balak. Seeing Israel proudly and devoutly arrayed about the Temple, Bilaam arose and wanted to curse Israel, saying, *shelo yiheyu lachem batei kneisivot uvatei midrashot*, may you not have any synagogues and schools, may they diminish in influence and in scope. But instead of a curse there issued forth from his mouth, by Divine command, the blessing of

Mah Tovvu.

Certainly, then, it is difficult to understand this choice of *Mah Tovvu*. Was it not intended as a curse? Was it not uttered by an enemy of our people, by the ancient forerunner of the modern intellectual anti-semitic? Indeed, one of the outstanding Halachic scholars of all generations, the Maharshah (R. Solomon Luria, 16th century), wrote in his Responsa (#64): *Ani Mas'chil Be'rov Chasadecha, Umedaleg Mah Tovvu She'amro Bilam, V'af Hu Amro Li'Klallah*, "I begin with the second verse and skip *Mah Tovvu*, which was first recited by Bilaam, and he intended it as a curse." This is the weighty opinion of a giant of the Halachah.

And yet our people at large did not accept the verdict of the Maharshah. We have accepted the *Mah Tovvu*, we have given it the place of honor, and, as we well know, it has become the "darling" of cantors and liturgical composers. And if all Israel has accepted it and accorded it such honors, then there must be something very special about it that somehow reflects an aspect of the basic personality of the Jew, and a deep, indigenous part of the Jewish religious character.

That unique aspect of our collective character, that singularly Jewish trait which manifests itself in the choice of *Mah Tovvu* under the conditions we mentioned, is the very ability to wring a blessing out of a curse. We say *Mah Tovvu* not despite the fact that it was intended to harm us, but because of that very fact. It is Jewish to find the benediction in the malediction, the good in the evil, the opportunity in the catastrophe. It is Jewish to make the best of the worse, to squeeze holiness out of profanity. From the evil and diabolical intentions of Bilaam *shelo yiheyu lachem batei kneisivot uvatei midrashot*, we moulded a blessing of *Mah Tovvu*, which we recite - just as we enter those very half of worship and study.

Hassidism, in the symbolic language of its philosophy, elevated this idea to one of its guiding principles. We must, Hassidism teaches, find the *Nitzotz* in the *Klipah*, the “spark” in the “shell”; that is, we must always salvage the spark of holiness which resides in the very heart of Evil. There is some good in everything bad. The greatness of man consists of rescuing that good and building upon it. In fact, that is just how the entire movement of Hassidism had its beginning. European Jewry, suffering untold persecutions, was desperately seeking some glimmer of hope. There was a tremendous longing in every Jewish heart for the Messiah. There was restlessness and a thirst for elevation. Two “False Messiahs,” one a psychoneurotic and the other a quack and charlatan, proclaimed themselves Messiahs and led their people astray. All European Jewry was terribly excited about these people. Soon, one led them into Mohammedanism, and the other into Catholicism. The common, simple Jews of Eastern Europe, those who suffered most and who bore the most pain, were completely depressed by this tragedy of seeing their only hopes fizz and die. Now there was nothing to turn to. And here the Baal Shem Tov stepped in, took these yearning and longings and pent-up religious drives and directed them not to falseness and apostasy and tragedy, but channeled them into a new form, into sincere and genuine religious expression which, all historians now admit, literally rescued all of Jewry from certain annihilation. He wrung a blessing from a curse. He found the good in the evil. He saw opportunity in catastrophe. He knew the meaning of *Mah Tov*.

Jewish history is rich in such examples of making the best of the worst, of transforming the *Klallah* into the *Brachah*. The Temple and its sacrificial service was destroyed, so our forefathers exploited the catastrophe and found new avenues for religious expression in prayer, the “sacrifice of the heart.” Jerusalem and its schools were ruined, so they decided that Torah is unprejudiced in its geography, and they built Yavneh, where they accomplished even more than in Jerusalem. Ernest Bevin refused to permit 100,000 Jewish refugees to immigrate into Palestine, so, having no choice, we proclaimed and built a State of Israel for over a million Jews. Remember the mourning and sadness and gloom when Bevin refused us? And remember our joy and thrill and *Simchah* in May of 1948 when the State was declared? *Brachah* from *Klallah*. We have never completely surrendered to *Klallah*. We have always poked around in its wreckage, found the spark we

were looking for, and converted the whole *Klallah* into one great *Brachah*. That is what is implied in reciting *Mah Tov* as the opening chord of our prayers. G-d continues that power within us. Let us make the best of the worst, blessing from curse.

Perhaps one of the most outstanding examples of one human being who was able to transform curse to blessing is the renowned Jewish philosopher, Franz Rosenzweig, who died in 1929. Rosenzweig was a German Jew, an assimilationist, who was profound, scholarly, and sincere in his intellectual pursuits. He is the one who, concluding that he was going to convert to Christianity, decided to follow the historical process, and so attempted to acquaint himself with Judaism as a stepping stone to his new faith. Interestingly, he experienced a great religious feeling during the *Nei'lah* Service on Yom Kippur in some small Orthodox synagogue in Germany, and thereafter became one of the leading Jewish philosophers of our time, a man who attracted many great students and colleagues and, in his criticism of Reform, led people back to our origins. Rosenzweig was an extremely active man. He was a thrilling and popular lecturer. He was a talented speaker, writer, and administrator, as well as thinker. But, at the prime of his life, in 1922, tragedy struck. In the wake of a cerebral hemorrhage came partial then complete paralysis. The widely traveled searcher could not move. The able lecturer could not speak. The writer could not move his hands, could hardly even dictate notes. Surely, this should have killed him. Surely, this should have marked the end of a fruitful and promising career. But no, Rosenzweig had rediscovered Judaism, and with it its inarticulate but very real insights. And so he learned to wring fortune from this misfortune. He dictated numerous letters, scholarly articles, books to his wife, by virtue of a special machine. His wife would turn a dial, with the alphabet, and he would nod ever so slightly, at the letter he wanted. Thus, mind you, were letters, articles, diaries, and books written!

Nor was this only a flurry of panicky activity, something to “make him forget.” No, it was a state of mind, it was the Jewish genius ever seeking the “spark” in the “shell,” the blessing in the curse. Shortly after the onset of illness, he wrote the following, “If I must be ill, I want to enjoy it ... In a sense, these two months have been quite pleasant. For one thing, after a long spell, I got back to reading books.” This from a man who couldn’t move a limb, and who couldn’t pronounce one consonant intelligibly! And listen now to what the same man writes even seven years later,

just before his death, “I read, carry on business... and, all in all, enjoy life... besides, I have something looming in the background for the sake of which I am almost tempted to call this period the richest of my life... it is simply true: dying is even more beautiful than living.” What a conversion of *Klallah* to *Brachah*!

It is so, and should be so, with every individual. Misfortunes, may they never occur, have their redeeming qualities. Death brings an appreciation of Life. Tragedy can bring husband and wife, father and son, brother and sister, closer together and bring out dormant loves and loyalties. Failure can spur one on to newer and greater successes than ever dreamt of. In the inner shells of curse, there lies the spark of blessing.

The aim and goal of prayer, as our Jewish sages have pointed out through the ages, is not to change G-d, but to change ourselves. We come before G-d as humble petitioners, terribly aware of our shortcomings, our inferiorities and our sins. Whoever prays truly knows that somewhere, sometimes, he or she has been caught in the

web of Curse. We feel tainted with evil. And so we pray. We pray and we want G-d to help us change ourselves. What sort of change is it that we want? The change from Evil to Good, from Curse to Blessing. We want to transform ourselves. That is the spirit of the prayerful personality.

And that is the reason for beginning the day of prayer and petition with *Mah Tov*. We enter the House of G-d which stands and survives despite and because of its ancient modern enemies. The synagogue itself is the symbol of that transformation. We begin now to pray, with the object of such transformation in ourselves. Hence, *Mah Tov*.

Mah Tov. How good. Indeed, not only good, but how fortunate is a people who can forever hope and smile, knowing that even if, Heaven forbid, *Klallah* could be its lot, it will wring out of it every drop of *Brachah*. This, indeed, is the greatest *Brachah*.

מה טוב. How good.

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Who Is That Man?

Rabbi Joshua (The Hoffer) Hoffman z"l

In this week's parsha we are introduced to Bilaam, a man who many believed had special powers that enabled him to bless people or curse them, as the need arose. Bilaam is asked by Balak, king of Moav, to curse Israelites, because they are approaching his land and he fears that they will wage war against him and defeat him, just as they defeated Sichon and Og. Bilaam tells Balak that he will do what he can, but ultimately can only say that which God places in his mouth. Although Bilaam does intend to curse the Israelites, God bestows prophecy upon him and converts his curses into blessings. Interestingly, from the time we first meet Bilaam until the time that he leaves Balak and returns to his home, there is no gap in the parsha, meaning that there are no internal breaks - no parshiyos either pesuchos (open) or setumos (closed) - in parshas Balak. This is a very rare occurrence in the Torah. The Chofetz Chaim, noting this peculiarity, explained that it is an indication of Bilaam's character - he did not change from the beginning until the end, despite the fact that God appeared to him in prophetic visions several times. Why didn't he change? Rashi in the beginning of Vayikra writes that the interruptions in the Torah text there, indicated by pesuchos and setumos - empty spaces - represented

time given to Moshe to reflect on the divine teaching he received, before God taught him more. The fact that there is no gap in the narrative regarding Bilaam indicates that Bilaam never stopped to reflect on the message God was giving him, that Israel is blessed and God would not acquiesce to his attempts to curse them.

Rav Nisson Alpert, in his commentary *Limudei Nissan*, although he does not refer to the lack of pesuchos and setumos, also notes that Bilaam remained the same throughout the parsha. He explains this on the basis of the mishnah in *Avos* (5:22), which states that the students of Bilaam, reflecting the character of their role model, have three outstanding traits: a bad eye, a haughty spirit and a desirous soul, in contrast to the students of Avrohom, who have a good eye, a humble spirit and a contented soul. Rabbi Alpert explains that if someone has bad character traits, then he will not be impressed by an experience of spirituality, even if it consists of a prophetic vision. In order to bring God and spirituality into one's life, he needs to work on himself, to purify himself so that he is the kind of person who is ready to receive that inspiration and elevate himself as a result of it. Bilaam retained his bad character traits, and, so, he was not changed by the prophetic visions

which he was granted.

I would like to suggest another explanation of the continuity of parshas Balak, as indicated by the lack of pesuchos and setumos, based on an understanding of who Bilaam was, in reality. The Targum Yonasan, based on a midrash, writes that Bilaam was really Ya'akov's father-in-law, Lavan. As Rabbi Avigdor Nebenzahl writes, it is unclear if this is to be taken literally, or in a figurative sense. What we do know about Lavan is that he tried to prevent Ya'akov from returning to Eretz Yisroel with his family, and that his ultimate goal was to influence Ya'akov and his family to worship idols, just as he did. This is the meaning, according to Rabbi Menachem Mendel Kasher, behind the statement in the Passover Haggadah, that Lavan wished to uproot everything. Rabbi Ya'akov Moshe Charlop, in his opening essay to parshas Balak, in his work *Mei Marom*, writes that it was the intention of Balak and Bilaam to prevent the Israelite nation from entering the Holy Land, because this would be the place where they would be able to fulfill the Torah in a full sense, and thereby influence all the nations of the world to serve God, which was exactly what Balak and Bilaam feared. In this way, Bilaam who tried to use his special powers to prevent Ya'akov from returning to Eretz Yisroel, was a spiritual heir of Lavan. This motive of Balak and Bilaam, according to Rabi Charlop, is implicit in Balak's message to Bilaam, "Behold a people has come out of Egypt. Behold it has covered the eye of the land and it rests opposite me" (Bamidbar 22:5).

How was Ya'akov able to withstand the efforts of Lavan to demoralize him and bring him down to his own level? We mentioned in *Netvort* to parshas Vayeitzei, 5764 (available at Torahheights.com), that there are no gaps of pesucha or setuma in that parsha, as well. According to Rav Shlomo Yosef Zevin, in his *LeTorah U'LaMoadim*, the thought indicated thereby is Ya'akov's uninterrupted concentration on Eretz Yisroel, throughout his stay in Lavan's house, and beyond, until he eventually returned. We also noted that Ya'akov prepared for his years of exile by sleeping on the dust and stones of Eretz Yisroel the night before he left. Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi ends his classic book of Jewish thought, *Kuzari*, by saying that the time for the Jews to return to their land will come when they express their love for it, as King David wrote in *Tehillim* (102:14-15): "You will arise and show Zion mercy, for {there will come} the time to favor her, for the appointed time will have come. For Your servants have cherished

her stones, and favored her dust." The Talmud in *Kesuvos* records that when certain rabbi were about to leave Eretz Yisroel, they would kiss the stones of Akko (Acre) to demonstrate their love for the land, as articulated in these verses. Interestingly, during Rav Kook's eight month stay in America in 1924, he carried stones from Eretz Yisroel around with him and held them in his hand while talking to people, in order to keep maintain his connection to the land while away from it. In a similar way, Ya'akov slept on the stones and dust of Eretz Yisroel before leaving, in order to endear the land to him and remind him of it while he was away.

The Torah tells us that Bilaam rose up in the morning to curse the Israelites, as we read, "Bilaam arose in the morning and saddled his she-donkey and went with the officers of Moav" (Bamidbar 22:21). Rashi writes that we learn from here that hatred causes people to deviate from their usual form of behavior, because here, Bilaam saddled his she donkey himself, rather than having his servant do so. However, continues Rashi, God responded to this action by saying that Avrohom, their forefather, preceded him in that, as it is written, "And Avrohom arose early in the morning and saddled his donkey" (Bereishis 22:3). The idea here, as pointed out by the super-commentators to Rashi, is that in regard to Avrohom, the word 'vayashkeim', meaning that he rose up early, is used, in contrast to Bilaam's merely rising in the morning, but not early in the morning. Thus, Avrohom rose earlier in the morning to carry out God's will than Bilaam rose to counteract God's will. Perhaps this, too, is hinted at in the words placed into Bilaam's mouth by God when he prophesied, "Who has counted the dust of Ya'akov?" (Bamidbar 23:10). Although Rashi, citing the midrash, explains this to refer to the mitzvos that the Jewish nation performs with dust, such as the prohibition of *Kilayim*, which forbids the planting of mixed seeds, dwelling in Eretz Yisroel in and of itself also constitutes a mitzvoh. Moreover, according to Ramban, our forefathers, Avrohom, Yitzchok, and Ya'akov, performed the mitzvos strictly in Eretz Yisroel, and, even today, all of the mitzvos take on greater meaning in Eretz Yisroel (for more on this, see *Netvort* to Vayeitzei, 5764). Thus, although Bilaam, throughout the parsha, had an uninterrupted desire to thwart the nation's efforts to enter Eretz Yisroel, live a life guided by the Torah and influence all nations to follow in God's ways, Ya'akov preceded him by immersing himself in the dust of Eretz Yisroel

before leaving it, and keeping the land in his thoughts uninterrupted, as indicated by the absence of any gap in the Torah, until he returned to the land. Therefore, just as our forefather Avrohom's efforts in serving God

counteracted Bilaam's efforts, so too did our forefather Ya'akov's efforts ensure our entry to Eretz Yisroel, despite Bilaam's efforts to prevent it from happening.

Ayin Tovah—Having Proper Perspective

Rabbi Assaf Bednarsh (Transcribed and adapted from the YUTorah shiur, originally titled "Bilams Blindness in One Eye, Having Proper Perspective," given at the Gruss Kollel in Yerushalayim on Jul 14, 2016)

In Parshas Balak, Chazal have an interesting drasha on the pasuk that reads: Ne'um Bilam beno Be'or u-ne'um ha-gever shesum ha-ayin. They darshen that Bilam was suma be-ayin achas—he was blind in one eye. So, on the one hand, Chazal always like to darshen Bilam le-genai and point out his faults to put him down. But you would think that there is something deeper here. Why would they specifically draw attention to the fact that Bilam was blind in one eye when they were looking for something negative to say about him?

I saw a nice pshat in an excellent drasha Sefer called Min ha-Be'er, authored by Rav Elimelech Bar Shaul, a long-time Rav of Rechovot. He asks—What does it mean that Bilam was blind in one eye? Chazal were not only alluding to his physical eyes. Why do we have two eyes? Because they enable you to see perspective. Two eyes allow you to see two sides of something. He says that the classic kasha on Bilam is that he was a Navi of Hashem. Unlike all the other enemies we had throughout Tanach, who were disbelievers and idolaters, etc., Bilam was a prophet of Hashem—and yet he wanted to curse Klal Yisroel. He craved to wipe Klal Yisroel off the face of the Earth, chas ve-shalom. How could that be if he was a Navi of Hashem, a true, emesdik G-d? How could he want to do such a sheker thing? So, the answer is very pashut. Bilam was a Navi emes, and he wanted to do only something that was pure emes. Chazal say: What was Bilam's yediya? Bilam knew the one moment when Hashem was angry. Bilam knew how to focus on one side of things—the negative. Bilam knew how to look at Klal Yisroel and find all their aveiros, chesronos, and all their flaws—because no one is perfect. And it was all true, of course! None of us is perfect—we all have a good side and a not-so-good side. And Klal Yisroel at that time, in truth, were deserving of the praise of ma tovu ohalecha Yaakov, mishkenosecha Yisroel. But in truth, there are different sides. And Bilam was only looking for Emes. But be-emes, he wanted to look only on the negative side of

Am Yisroel. And that's what Chazal meant that Bilam suma haya—that metaphorically, he was blind in one of his eyes. Which one of his eyes was blind? Chazal tell us in a Mishna in Avos that talmidim of Avraham Avinu are the opposite of talmidim of Bilam ha-Rasha. Talmidim of Avraham Avinu have ayin tovah, while talmidim of Bilam ha-Rasha have ayin ra'ah. Meaning: there is an eye with which you can see good. Avraham—even when arguing in favor of the reshaim of S'dom—looked for tzadikim. He only saw good things even in S'dom. While Bilam, even when looking at Klal Yisroel—the dor of knisah la-aretz—only saw the negative. Bilam was blind in one eye—he had ayin ra'ah, but he blinded his ayin tovah. He didn't know how to look for the good—he only knew how to look at the bad. That's the meaning of suma be-ayin achas. That's why be-emes—va-yar mi-sham k'tzei ha-am—he looked at part of things. He knew how to look at the bad part and focus on that—and he paid no attention to the good. And Avraham Avinu was the opposite. As talmidim of Avraham Avinu, we know how to use our good eye—the ayin tovah. And we don't have to look at the bad. It's not always necessary to look at the bad. It's essential to focus on and look at the good. Hashem, of course, frustrated Bilam's plan—He is not interested in someone who is a suma be-eyno achas. And our job is to strive for more than just being emesdik people. To be an emesdik person is not enough. You could, be-emes, see all kinds of different things. Emes is very complex. You could look at various parts of Emes. Our job is not only to be an emesdik person. And not even to be an emesdik person who sees all sides equally. Our job is to be talmidim of Avraham Avinu. There are enough talmidim of Bilam ha-Rasha floating around the world who could tell us all about the negative. They do not need any help. Our job is to be talmidim of Avraham Avinu, who use our ayin tovah and do not use our ayin ra'ah so much—and focus on the positive. And we should look truthfully, without making up bogus positives. We should not make up good

things about people. Everyone knows that when you are raising kids, you should not praise your kids for the things they have not done and make things up—it will not help them. If you criticize them all the time, it will also not help them. However, if you praise them for the good things that they do, that is *emes*. And if you focus a little more on the positive and potch them a little less for the negative, you will teach them to be good. And it is our job to be the

When a Talking Donkey Isn't Enough

Rabbi Sammy Bergman

The graphic imagery and gripping plot make the story of Bilam's talking donkey relatable and entertaining; in fact, many Hollywood films even feature talking donkeys. Nevertheless, one struggles to understand the Torah's purpose of including this episode at all.

Nothing changes about G-d's message to Bilam regarding his quest to curse the Jewish People through the course of the episode. In Bamidbar 22:20, immediately before the story involving the talking donkey, Hashem tells Bilam, "If [Balak's messengers] only come to invite you, rise, and go with them, but the matter that I will tell you, you must do". Next, on three consecutive occasions, Bilam's donkey sees a sword-bearing angel of G-d obstructing the path. Each time the donkey stops suddenly, and each time Bilam beats the donkey for doing so. (22:23–27) Finally, after the third beating, Hashem miraculously "opens up" the mouth of the donkey, and the donkey asks why it deserved three consecutive thrashings. (22:28) Ultimately, after Hashem reveals the angel to Bilam, Bilam offers to abandon his journey. (22:31–34) Nevertheless, the angel of G-d tells Bilam: "Go with the men, but the matter that I will tell you to do, you must do." (22:35) Yet, after the entire episode, Bilam still continues the same journey with the exact same instructions. The miraculous story seems totally unnecessary.

Rambam (Guide for the Perplexed 2:42) argues that stories in the Torah which feature the appearance or speech of angels take place only in prophetic visions. Therefore, he argues that Bilam's donkey never actually spoke to him, but Bilam merely dreamed about the whole episode. Similarly, Rabbi Yosef Ibn Kaspi explains that haunted by the thought of Hashem's anger, Bilam imagined the scenes

talmidim of Avraham Avinu and use our *ayin tova* to see everything good in the world. We must see the good side of all people, our *kehilos*, and the different kinds of Jews. And if we do that, maybe we will be able to bring out the strengths of their good sides. And that would lead to the fulfillment of those great prophecies that Hashem made Bilam utter (instead of the terrible ones he planned to say)—*be-meheira be-yameinu*.

involving the donkey and the angels during his journey. These approaches solve the problem of unnecessary miracles. Furthermore, a scene involving a donkey fleeing from a sword-bearing angel and chastising its owner certainly sounds like a dream. However, the inclusion of the story in the Torah becomes even more difficult to understand. Why write about the dream at all?

Ramban (22:23, 22:28), and Rabbi Ovadiah Seforno explain that Hashem miraculously endowed the donkey with speech to rebuke Bilam for trying to contravene Hashem's will by cursing the Jewish People. Bilam should have understood that if Hashem can enable an animal to speak, He has the power to withhold a prophet from cursing His people. Nevertheless, the Ramban and Seforno's approaches do not fully justify the necessity for the story of Bilam's donkey. Were the donkey's haltings, the beatings by Bilam, the donkey's speech, and the appearance of the angel solely necessary to tell Bilam he couldn't curse the children of Israel against Hashem's will?

In a beautiful exposition on the parshah, Rabbi Elchanan Samet draws a parallel between the donkey's three unsuccessful attempts to avoid the angel, and Bilam's three failed attempts to curse the Jewish People. (Balak, Parshat Ha'Aton; Bamidbar 22:39–24:13) In both cases, during their third attempts, the donkey and Bilam experience a breakthrough. After the angel obstructs its path for the third time, the donkey simply crouches on the ground under Bilam. (22:27) Similarly, after preparing himself to curse the Children of Israel for the third time, Bilam realizes that Hashem will not allow him to curse them and abdicates his quest. (24:1)

Based on these parallels, Rabbi Samet suggests that Hashem designed the donkey's encounter with the angel to simulate Bilam's future experience at tempting to curse

the Jewish People. Bilam grew frustrated at his formerly faithful donkey's failure to serve his purposes when, unbeknownst to him, it was the angel of G-d who truly controlled the donkey. Similarly, Bilam served as Balak's "donkey", a tool Balak used to achieve his goal of cursing the Jews. Balak grows frustrated with Bilam (23:11, 23:25, 24:10) but fails to realize that in truth, Hashem is utilizing

Bilam to bless the Jewish People.

Hashem sends us messages in many forms. We often struggle to push through obstacles when we truly need to change our direction. May we heed the message that Bilam and Balak failed to understand, and walk on the path Hashem intends for us.

Leaving Mitzrayim

Mrs. Michal Horowitz

In this week's parsha, Parshas Balak, Balak, the king of Moav, hires the prophet Bilaam to curse the Bnei Yisrael. It is year forty of desert travels and the Israelite nation covers the eye of the land. A fearful Moav hopes to bring ruination upon Israel through the powerful and potent curses that would be uttered by wicked Bilaam.

The sad ending of the narrative is well known. When Bilaam is unable to curse Am Yisrael, he gives Balak advice to ensure their downfall through promiscuous and forbidden relations (Num.25 and BT Sanhedrin 106a).

In regard to Balak's sending for Bilaam: When King Balak first sends emissaries to Bilaam to convince him to come curse the Jews, Balak's message opens with the following phrase: הִנֵּה עִם יִצְאָא מִמִּצְרַיִם הִנֵּה כֹסֶה אֶת עֵינֵי הָאָרֶץ וְהוּא יֵשֵׁב מִמְּלִי וְעַתָּה לְכֹה נָא אָרְרָה לִי אֶת הָעָם הַזֶּה כִּי עָצוּם הוּא מִמֶּנִּי אוּלַי אוּכַל נִכְּה בּוֹ וְאֶגְרָשְׁנוּ מִן הָאָרֶץ כִּי יִדְעִתִּי אֶת אֲשֶׁר תִּבְרָךְ מִבְּרַךְ וְאֲשֶׁר תִּאָר יוֹאָר *Behold! A people has come out of Egypt, and behold, they have covered the eye of the land, and they are stationed opposite me, So now, please come and curse this people for me, for they are too powerful for me. Perhaps I will be able to wage war against them and drive them out of the land, for I know that whomever you bless is blessed and whomever you curse is cursed* (Bamidbar 22:5-6).

A few short verses later, when G-d appears to Bilaam and asks him about the men who are with him (v.9), Bilaam responds and says: Balak ben Tzipor, the king of Moav, sent them to me (10), הִנֵּה הָעָם הַיִּצְאָא מִמִּצְרַיִם וַיִּכֶס, אֶת עֵינֵי הָאָרֶץ עַתָּה לְכֹה קְבֹה לִי אֹתוֹ אוּלַי אוּכַל לְהִלָּחֵם בּוֹ וְאֶגְרָשְׁתִּי *Behold the people coming out of Egypt, a nation, has covered the eye of the earth. Come and curse them for me, perhaps I will be able to fight against them and drive them out* (v.11).

Note the change from Balak's message to Bilaam's words to G-d. Balak said to Bilaam: a people has come out of Egypt; while Bilaam said to G-d: the people coming out of Egypt (in the present).

Why does Bilaam change the past tense to the present tense? What message does Bilaam intend to convey by telling G-d that a nation who left Egypt forty years ago is still now 'coming out of Egypt'; as if they are coming out today?

The Kli Yakar (22:5) powerfully explains Bilaam's intentions:

הנה עם יצא ממצרים. יצא לשעבר משמע, ובלעם אמר הנה העם היוצא ממצרים משמע שעכשיו הם יוצאים והולכים, כי בלעם להזכיר עונם בא לומר שדומה כאלו עדיין לא יצאו מכל וכל ממצרים כי תמיד ברע הם ואומרים נתנה ראש ונשובה מצרימה, ובכל תלונה הם מזכירים את מצרים וזה ראייה שתמיד מחשבתם משוטטת במצרים וקשה עליהם הפרידה ממצרים כאילו עכשיו הם יוצאים

Balak referred to the nation leaving Egypt in the past tense, but Bilaam said to Hashem: Behold, the nation is coming out of Egypt, meaning: right now they are coming out and leaving! Why did Bilaam do this? Because he wanted to mention their sins to G-d, and so he said: it's as if they have not entirely left Egypt! Because they are constantly in a bad state, saying: 'let us appoint a leader and return to Egypt' (cf. Num.14:4)! And with every complaint of theirs in the desert, they always mention Egypt, and this is proof that their thoughts are always wandering to Egypt, and the departure from Egypt was so difficult for them, it's as if they are still leaving now (Kli Yakar to Bamidbar 22:5).

Imagine... forty years after the Exodus, and thirty-eight years after the Sin of the Spies, the Children of Israel (the second generation who were about to enter into the Holy Land!), still have not entirely left Egypt behind. Hence, it is considered as if they are right now, 'coming out' of Mitzrayim. One can be psychologically and emotionally shackled to his past, even if he is physically free. It is a mentality we must strive mightily to free ourselves from.

In his Short and Sweet on the Parsha, R' Shlomo

Zalman Bregman explains: “I believe there is a lot of mussar contained in this Kli Yakar. When a person makes spiritual changes in his life and upgrades his Yiddishkeit and mitzvah observance, there may be a tendency to sometimes look back at one’s old life and think of how ‘good’ it was when he wasn’t so frum, or still doing certain aveiros (sins), and the like. One might say, ‘Yeah, I’m at a better place in my life right now, and I definitely would not engage in that behavior again, but that sure was fun while it lasted!’

“The Kli Yakar teaches us that speaking or even thinking this way is a real mistake and not the Torah approach. One must be aware that the root of the word ‘Mitzrayim’ connotes boundaries, restrictions and that which holds a person back. When we leave our personal ‘Mitzrayim’ we are to leave completely. If we fail to do so, we leave the Bilaams of the world and the yetzer harah (evil inclination) with fertile ground to accuse us before Hashem” (Short and Sweet on the Parsha, Feldheim, p.397-398).

We must find the correct path in our service of Hashem,

Looking Around But Not Seeing Anything

Rabbi Dr. David Shabtai

The notion of seeing / ראייה seems to occur over and over throughout the story of Balak and Bil’am. The very first word of the Parshah begins with Balak “seeing” how the Jewish people conquered the Emori nations. Later, on his way to meet Balak, Bil’am’s donkey is able to see an angel standing in their way, whom Bil’am is not privileged to see until Hashem “opens his eyes.” When finally agreeing to curse Bnei Yisrael, Balak takes Bil’am to various mountainous places where he might see different parts of Bnei Yisrael. In his poetic blessings, Bil’am makes frequent mention of what is and is not visible. Somewhat strangely, but certainly in fitting with this pattern of focusing on sight, Bil’am refers to himself as שתום העין — which many commentators assume means blind, or at least blind in one eye.

In a number of contexts, Maharal notes that the Torah often uses the phrase ראה to mean more than merely seeing, but rather, taking note and understanding. Balak didn’t actually see the Jewish people battle the Emori, but after they conquered both Sihon and Og, Balak understood that his nation didn’t stand a military chance against the Jews. Throughout the Parshah, the idea of ‘seeing’ means

and when necessary, we must leave our “Mitzrayims” behind; to dwell in the negatives of our past is a mentality that will take us down. As we strive to move forward and constantly improve, we must look ahead to a hopeful future, and be grateful for the journey that is the life of a Jew.

R’ Chaim of Sanz, the Divrei Chaim (1793-1876) zt”l would tell the following story: A man was lost in the forest for several days, and could not determine which was the correct path. Suddenly he saw another person walking toward him. He rejoiced greatly, thinking, “Now surely I will find the right path!” When the two men met, the first asked, “My brother, please tell me which is the right path; I have been lost for several days.” The other man said to him, “My brother, I do not know, since I too have been lost for several days. But one thing I will tell you: the way that I went you should not go, because that way you will get lost again. Now come, let us search together for a new way” (Tales of the Righteous, Simcha Raz, p.135).

more than a physiological phenomenon, but something more internal and mindful.

In Pirkei Avot, Bil’am is described as one who has an עין רעה — a wicked eye. Tiferet Yisrael explains that it refers to Bil’am as טועה ומטעה — one who made mistakes and caused others to make mistakes. There was something about how Bil’am looked at the world which was deficient and it could not be fixed with corrective lenses.

Hazal tell us that Bil’am was one of the greatest Nevi’im (prophets) that ever lived among the nations of the world (incidentally, the Tanach sometimes refers to a prophet as a רואה — seer). Many explain that he was somebody with tremendous potential to do good in this world, but simply couldn’t ‘see’ how that could happen.

Throughout the story, Bil’am seems to be missing the big picture. When he is initially approached by Balak’s men to curse Bnei Yisrael, it’s pretty clear that Hashem is less than pleased with his going. And yet, Bil’am is shocked to later find this out. Sharpening this idea to the point of absurdity, the Torah describes how Bil’am’s donkey saw an angel standing in their way and preventing them from continuing to travel, while Bil’am — the prophet / sorcerer — was

Jewish People to dust. Even though we don't see it or feel it, except when we sneeze, dust is all around. And, perhaps, that is exactly what Bilaam words intend to convey.

Although, we Jews are small in number, the influence of the Jewish people is profound, way out of proportion to our numbers.

Why is the agenda of the United Nations so obsessed with the tiny State of Israel? It is after all, only one little state among hundreds of countries. Why are the "Jews news?"

Perhaps, the uniqueness of the Jewish people was best captured by Mark Twain in his famous essay Concerning the Jews. Although this essay is well-known, now is as good a time as any, to review it and kvell.

In the March 1898 edition of Harper's Magazine, Twain wrote:

If the statistics are right, the Jews constitute but one percent of the human race. It suggests a nebulous dim puff of star-dust lost in the blaze of the Milky Way. Properly, the Jew ought hardly to be heard of; but he is heard of, has always been heard of. He is as prominent on the planet as any other people, and his commercial importance is extravagantly out of proportion to the smallness of his bulk. His contributions to the world's

list of great names in literature, science, art, music, finance, medicine, and abstruse learning are also way out of proportion to the weakness of his numbers.

He has made a marvelous fight in this world, in all the ages; and has done it with his hands tied behind him. He could be vain of himself, and be excused for it. The Egyptian, the Babylonian, and the Persian rose, filled the planet with sound and splendor, then faded to dream-stuff and passed away; the Greek and the Roman followed, and made a vast noise, and they are gone; other peoples have sprung up and held their torch high for a time, but it burned out, and they sit in twilight now, or have vanished.

The Jew saw them all, beat them all, and is now what he always was, exhibiting no decadence, no infirmities of age, no weakening of his parts, no slowing of his energies, no dulling of his alert and aggressive mind. All things are mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?

And, so, when you review this week's parasha, don't dismiss Bilaam's words. They are insightful—filled with unique observations about the Jewish People. Analyze each phrase, study each word. Because the truths of Bilaam's words are eternal.