



The Marcos and Adina Katz YUTORAH IN PRINT

Balak 5782

What Hath God Wrought

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm z"l (Originally delivered June 21, 1975)

Three words, three interpretations.

The three words are: מה פעל א-ל, "What hath God wrought." They are not, strictly speaking, a question, but a statement; not interrogatory, but exclamatory. They are part of a verse in which Balaam prophesies that Israel will be the subject of great admiration, expressed as the adoration of God (Nu. 23:23).

The first interpretation of when this sentiment is applicable, is the worship and praise of God as we marvel over the wonders of nature, and consider them a revelation of divine חכמה (wisdom). The glory of the cosmos, the intricacies of natural phenomena, move us to a spirit of wonder, and thereby to worship. Thus, the spirit of מה פעל א-ל as a response to חכמה is evident in the verse we recite every day as part of the blessing over Nature which precedes the Shema: מזה רבו מעשיך ה' כלם בחכמה עשית, "How manifold are Thy works, O Lord, all of them hast Thou made in wisdom."

However, this sense of wonder should not be restricted to natural phenomena. Unfortunately, secular man often sees human genius in competition with God's work. According to this conception, religion is meaningful only where science has no answers, as if faith in God is a function of human ignorance. This theory has been bandied about since the great "Secular City debate," and still seems to be with us. Thus, science and technology are seen as progressively displacing religion. In a less sophisticated manner, we often hear an echo of this concept when people say, "How can you believe in God, or perform those rituals, in a Space Age?"

The answer, of course, is that there is no contradiction. On the contrary, a truly religious person sees God's wisdom in man's wisdom, for God and man, in Judaism, are recognized as partners in creation. If indeed man

is the "image of God," then, to continue the metaphor, man's achievements (whether in science or the arts) are a reflection of divine wisdom. It is no wonder that when we behold a particularly wise man, whether Jewish or non-Jewish, we are bidden to recite a blessing which praises God who gives of His wisdom, or shares it, with flesh and blood.

Indeed, Samuel B. Morse in Washington on May 24th, 1844, tapped over his newly invented electric telegraph the very first message which ushered in the age of telegraphy: "What hath God wrought!" He understood, as many of us unfortunately do not, that not only nature but also human creativity should elicit in us the reaction, "What hath God wrought," for the wisdom of God is refracted through human brains.

The second area where this kind of reaction is appropriate is that of divine power or גבורה. The word א-ל itself means not only God, but power. For instance, in the Biblical Hebrew idiom if one wants to say, "I have the power to do it," he says: יש לא-ל ידי.

Natural outbursts are considered a manifestation of God's power. Thus, when we hear thunder, for instance, we recite a blessing in which we speak of God שכוהו וגבורתו מלא עולם, Whose power and might fill the world. Normally, however, we tend to see divine power as revealed only in the face of human weakness, only in the presence of human vulnerability, such as earthquakes or tornadoes or any explosions of nature in which man is helpless and people are victimized.

This is reflected in the modern insurance industry, where an unusual disaster — such as a flash-flood in Manhattan! -- is referred to as "an act of God." But this is unfortunate and incomplete, because it implies that only calamities are "acts of God," such that they deserve and inspire the reaction, "What hath God wrought." This leads

to absurdities. Someone once told me about a devout insurance broker who was explaining a policy to a client, and said, "Now, if God forbid there should occur an "act of God"..."

Religiously it makes more sense to see divine גבורה in happy as well as unhappy events, in life as well as in death. In the Amidah, we refer God's power to His life-giving propensities: אתה גבור לעולם ה' מחיה מתים אתה, God's power is revealed in His resurrection of the dead. Similarly, Judaism sees divine power in rain that fructifies and enriches the earth, as well as in rain that comes in destructive torrents. The words משיב הרוח ומוריד הגשם, that God "causes the wind to change and the wind to descend," is part of the ברכת גבורה, the blessing over divine power.

Many people tend to attribute their defeats to God, and their triumphs to themselves; their ill fortune to God's power, their good fortune to their own prowess. This is revealed not only in words but functionally, in actions I often meet people who inform me that a certain year was economically bad, and therefore they are cutting their budgets -- and the first place to cut, of course, is charity. This is a roundabout way of saying: my bad luck is an "act of God," and since God is responsible, He must suffer the first consequence. Curiously, the same people, when they have a year of great economic advancement, do not that casually attribute the happy news to God and therefore increase their charitable contributions...

A genuine religious person will say מה פעל א-ל at all occasions, and see in his felicity and fortune, as well as his suffering and deprivations, "acts of God."

The third area, in addition to חכמה and גבורה, is אהבה, love. The Rabbis interpreted the full verse: כעת ייאמר ליעקב ולישראל מה פעל א-ל, as: Israel will prosper (כעת refers to the future), so that even the very angels will ask Israel, in an interrogatory fashion, "What hath God wrought?" Israel will be so rich in spiritual insight, the result of love and closeness to God, that Israel will be privy to divine knowledge. Even as human lovers share secrets, so God and Israel share secrets too. How shall we attain such secrets? The Rabbis answer (partially quoted by Rashi) that Israel will sit before the Lord as students before their teacher and study Torah, asking over each section, "What hath God wrought?," as if to say, what does this and that mean?

In the folk imagination, this spiritual attainment is usually a sign of Messianic days, when Israel will prosper.

But that is not, strictly speaking, correct. The love between God and Israel, as between humans, requires

בטחון, faith. Hence, if there is true love, then Israel must be confident that even when things are apparently not going well, that they ultimately will, that soon even the very angels will ask us, "What hath God wrought?" Thus, the חזקוני interprets our verse that כעת, soon, a year from now, ייאמר ליעקב ולישראל, it will be said by the pagan nations concerning Israel, מה פעל א-ל, what hath God wrought, as they, the non-Jewish nations, witness the redemption of Israel.

We ought to recall that principle of faith in the divine love during these tense and uncertain days which are now upon us. These are days when we open up the newspaper every morning expecting the worst, and often find it. Even those days when there is little news of the Middle East or Israel, we go through a one-two reaction: at first relief, and then a nagging suspicion that something foul must be cooking up in the chancelleries of the world which holds no good for us. But we must know that we will emerge stronger from all this turmoil, and that in the final analysis, Israel, both State and people, will be such as to elicit from the world the admiring statement, "What hath God wrought?"

In the days of the Czar Aleksander III, terrible anti-Semitic promulgations were about to be decreed. The author of these was the confidant and advisor to the Czar, Constantine Probydonostsev, the infamous anti-Semite who in 1881 proposed a classic solution to the "Jewish question," namely: one third of the Jews to emigrate, one third to be baptized, and one third to be starved to death. At this time, Baron Ginsberg thought that a delegation of distinguished Rabbis ought to meet with the Minister of the Interior in order to mollify the Czar and modify the decrees. The Minister also invited Probydonostsev to join him during the discussions. After the Rabbis spoke, the anti-Semite turned to the Minister of the Interior and said: I believe that everything in the world has a purpose, a use, a function. I can understand what reason there is for God having created mosquitoes, horses, cockroaches. There is one thing, however, which I do not understand: why did He create Jews? They are a people who are of no use, they are parasites, a blight, a disease upon the face of the world. The Minister, who was already an anti-Semite, said that he was convinced by the powerful argument of Probydonostsev.

As the Rabbis left, they were sorely depressed and in deep gloom. Only one of them was smiling: the famous Rabbi Yitzhak Elchanan Spector of Kovno. His colleagues

Therefore, on Friday afternoon of Creation Week, just as God was about to put the natural order into place, He provided for the appearance of various divergences from this order at certain intervals in history, in order to demonstrate His continual providence. In light of this expansion of the explanation of the Mishnah in Avos, we need to understand why God changed the natural order of things to communicate with Bilaam through the 'ason.' What dimension was gained by giving Bilaam's she-donkey the power of speech that led God to superimpose this deviation onto the natural course of events?

On one level, we can simply say that God was giving Bilaam, through the 'ason,' a message similar to the one he gave Moshe when he initially refused his mission to the Jewish nation in Egypt, but in the opposite direction. When Moshe said that he was not a man of words, God responded, "Who gave man a mouth, or who makes one mute or deaf, or sighted or blind? Is it not I, God" (Shemos 4:11). Whereas Moshe was saying that he did not have the power of speech necessary for his mission, Bilaam was going on his mission with the attitude that he did, indeed, have the power to say whatever he wanted to. God, by enabling the 'ason' to speak, was telling Bilaam that any ability he had was actually in God's hands, and subject to His control.

A further explanation of the message conveyed by the opening of the 'ason's' mouth may be that God was thereby informing Bilaam of the importance of good character traits as a foundation for a connection with Him. When Bilaam struck his 'ason' in reaction to her deviations from the path and her crouching on him, she told him, "Am I not your 'ason' that you have ridden upon from your inception until this day? Have I been accustomed to do such a thing to you?" (Bamidbar 22:30). The 'ason' was thus basically telling Bilaam that he was lacking the basic character trait of gratitude, a trait which even animals exhibit, as the prophet Yeshaya noted, "The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's trough" (Yeshaya 1:3). This lack of gratitude can, in turn, be taken as emblematic of Bilaam's general lack of character development, as witnessed by his readiness to curse an entire nation for monetary gain. The Mishnah in Avos (5:22), in fact, contrasts the bad character traits of the students of Bilaam - reflecting the character of their master - with the good character traits of the students of Avrohom, reflecting the character of their master. Thus, the miracle of the opening of the mouth of the 'ason' conveyed the message

that Bilaam, by intending to curse the Jewish nation, was lacking basic character development, and was, in this way, on a lower level than his 'ason.'

Bilaam's lack of good character traits reflects, in turn, on the level of his prophecy, as well. Rav Avrohom Yitzchok HaKohen Kook writes in his *Oros HaKodesh* that there are two levels of mussar, or moral development - mussar enoshi, or human morality, which consists of basic morality that every person knows from his very essence, and mussar Eloki, or religious morality. Rav Kook writes that mussar enoshi is the basic foundation of morality, and any aspect of mussar Eloki that contradicts mussar enoshi is suspect. Rav Yehudah Amital, in his recent work, '*VeHaAretz Nasan Livnei Adam*,' develops this approach of Rav Kook to morality and applies it to today's society and its problems. In light of our remarks, perhaps we can say that Bilaam's lack of character development constituted a lack of mussar enoshi. In turn, this shortcoming indicated that there was something lacking in the level of Bilaam's prophecy, as well. This is also reflected in God's message to him that whatever he said was subject to God's manipulation. Put differently, the message that Bilaam delivered did not reflect the activity of a prophet who has developed his moral and intellectual traits to their full extent, and has been taken a step beyond through the grant of prophecy, as described by the Rambam in his *Eight Chapters*. Rather, it was an artificial exercise, the mere placement of words in his mouth. My teacher, Rav Aharon Soloveichik, zt"l, characterized Bilaam's prophecy as the actions of a tape recorder, merely reproducing the message imprinted upon it, but not constituting a fully developed man of God, as was the case with Moshe. In this sense, when the rabbis tell us that while among the Jewish people no prophet equivalent to Moshe ever arose, among the nations of the world such a prophet did arise, namely, Bilaam, they were only speaking in terms of the actual prophetic message that he delivered, but not in terms of the man himself. (A further elaboration of the nature of Bilaam's prophecy, in contrast to that of Moshe, can be found in the writings of the great rabbi of Brisk and later of Yerushalayim, Rav Yehoshua Leib Diskin, as presented by Rav Gedalia Schorr in his *Ohr Gedalyohu* to parshas Balak). It was this important message that was imparted by the miracle of the 'ason' being given the gift of speech, and that justified the deviation from the natural order of things that it constituted.

Seeing the Good in the Jews

Rabbi Assaf Bednarsh (Transcribed and adapted by a talmid from the YUTorah shiur given at the Gruss Kollel in Yerushalayim on June 29, 2018)

The interesting part about this week's Parsha, Parshas Balak, is that in contrast to all the Parshios in the Torah since Yetzias Mitzrayim, its main story of Bilam and Balak takes place far away from Bnei Yisroel. They didn't even know about it. It was just a couple of gentiles talking among themselves and going on a fascinating adventure in a very different frame of reference. A nice Mussar comes out from this perspective if you look at the whole Sefer Bamidbar. How are the Jewish people described? We hear about the *Misonenim*, the *Meraglim*, *shimu na ha-morim*, the *Mislonenim*, etc., etc. They grumble about the man and the lack of water. They groan about the choosing of Aharon and the tircha of the road. They gripe about Eretz Yisroel, etc. If you look at the Jewish people, you see they mess up everywhere. You might (mistakenly) conclude that they are all just a bunch of *reshoim*. From our insider perspective, it's very easy to take for granted all the basics and then see only the things we mess up. Sometimes we need an outsider's perspective. Bilam and Balak are a bunch of ancient Middle Eastern pagans. They look at the Jewish people and say, *Mah tovu oholecha Yaakov, mishkenosecha Yisroel!* They say: Look at their tznus—their tent openings don't face each other. They say *Am ke-lavi yakum, ve-ke-ari yisnasa*—they don't retire to sleep until they say Krias Shema at night. They look at the Jewish people and see tremendous *midos*, *Avodas Hashem*, and *Kedusha*. Compared to where they are coming from, they see that Am Yisroel is truly unique. You look all over at the rest of the world and start to appreciate how unique and special we are, even though Klal Yisroel isn't so perfect. And how many tremendous *midos tovos* and *madreigos* in *Avodas Hashem* our nation displays. And

sometimes, we need an outside perspective—a heathen—to remind us not to take all the good things for granted. We expect all Am Yisroel to keep all 613 mitzvos properly, and when they fail, we start criticizing them. Sometimes we need a pagan to come from the outside and point out: Look there! Don't take anything for granted. By us, they don't do any of these *tarya*"g mitzvos. Where I live, I know plenty of *mushchasim le-gamrei*. And over here, I see how many mitzvos and how much *mesiras nefesh* the Jewish people have for Torah and *Avodas Hashem*! And in this unique nation, I *mamash* see *Mah tovu oholecha Yaakov, mishkenosecha Yisrael*. I really perceive the *shevach* of the Jewish people. Ok. We don't necessarily have to ask the goyim what they think. But occasionally, we should step out of our narrow perspective—the negative that we naturally focus on, while forgetting to appreciate the positive. We must step back and see the Klal Yisroel, our *ba'alei batim*, our *talmidim*, our family, etc., and instead of focusing on what they do wrong, take a step back and say: There are a lot of people out there who are on a much lower *madreiga* than this. There are tremendous mitzvos that Jews do, even if they are not *makpid* on everything. But they are *moser nefesh* to get their kids a Jewish education, so they grow up and continue the *mesorah*. A Jew may not go to a *minyán* every day, but every morning he gets up and puts on *tefillin*, says *Krias Shema*, and he *davens*. Instead of looking at the negative, go back and say: What a tremendous Am we have here! And appreciate the fact that *Hashem bochar banu mi-kol ha-amim*. Realize that *Torah u-mitzvos*, even when Bnei Yisroel are not perfect, is a tremendous achievement, and we should appreciate that *kedusha*. *Shabbat Shalom*.

Donkeygate

Rabbi Moshe Taragin

A lot was at stake. We were perched to enter the promised land, launch Jewish history, and assemble the kingdom of God. Only two men stood in our way: a renowned but eccentric wizard and a frightened but determined king, colluded to cancel our date with destiny. The Bilam saga is an epic tale of

Jewish history, human prophecy and divine providence. Everything is at stake in this crucial and suspenseful faceoff between sorcery and faith. This is all a very serious issue.

Except, of course, for one absurdly hilarious conversation between a distinguished prophet and his chatty donkey. This slapstick exchange between man and

mule certainly breaks the ice and provides some comic relief. Additionally, this dialogue between Bilam and the beast is satiric: a presumptuous prophet who “observes the future”, could not even match the sight of his own donkey. Bilam, an eloquent orator is silenced by a moral lecture from his smooth-tongued donkey. All of Bilam’s preconceptions come crashing down. Humiliated, he realizes that his prophetic powers and his rhetorical skills are each divinely delivered. The great and famous Bilam will only see what Hashem allows him to, and can only speak the word of God.

Yet there is an additional message, beyond the obvious. The donkey episode doesn’t just mock Bilam it also instructs him. The talking donkey is a warning flare, signaling that his scheme will fail. Bilam walks away from donkey-gate with humility, but he should also have recognized his own futility in confronting the Jewish nation.

The Bilam gamble

Bilam was a wise historian who scrutinized the past and examined the future. How was he so easily duped into this folly? Hadn’t Hashem performed countless miracles for us during our departure from Egypt, and throughout our desert journey? How did Bilam believe he could defeat a people who had proven invulnerable to tyrants and immune to the harsh desert? What was he thinking?

Bilam wasn’t mad. He conceded that Hashem had selected the Jewish people and had paved a supernatural path of miracles through the desert. However, those dusty miracles occurred over thirty-eight years earlier, to a different generation and at a very different stage of history. A lot of desert sand separated those heady days of joy from the current struggles of a new generation looking for doorway to enter the land of Israel. Bilam wagered that the Jews were no longer chosen. After maddening betrayals and infuriating mutinies, Hashem had discarded us, condemning us to nomadic wandering and to silent death. Currently, the Jews were just like “any other nation, and could be defeated. Bilam was the first Christian, the first to declare Hashem’s abandonment of the Jews. Maybe, the chosen people had become un-chosen and were now susceptible to his supernatural spell.

Searching for divine displeasure

Bilam was desperate to detect even a hint of divine fury. He searched for any “daylight” between Hashem and His people, to verify his assumptions and launch his attack.

Any slight decline in the love between Hashem and His people would have corroborated his audacious belief that Hashem no longer chose our nation. Despite Bilam’s best efforts, he could not detect any dissonance: “He did not discern iniquity in Ya’akov nor did He detect perversion in Yisrael”. Recognizing the eternal divine love, which was immune to human failure, Bilam capitulated: how shall I curse, whom God has not cursed?”. Once he realized that Hashem hadn’t abandoned His chosen people, Bilam surrenders.

Loyalty

Had he only listened to his knowledgeable donkey, Bilam might have saved himself time and heartache. His hapless donkey was having an off day. It had wandered off course, crushed Bilam’s leg and, finally, collapsed from exhaustion. This four-legged “professor” then tutored Bilam about the trait of loyalty. After years of loyal service, a trusted donkey deserved compassion and forbearance, not rage and violence.

Loyalty bonds men to men, men to their animals, and, of course, Hashem to His chosen people. We ourselves, had a few bad “days” in the desert, but Hashem wasn’t going anywhere. We ourselves, may have wandered off our course but Hashem didn’t abandon us. We ourselves, may have occasionally collapsed into a state of panicked indifference, but Hashem remained loyal to His covenant. The bonds of loyalty welded us to Hashem, and we remained invincible. Bilam’s gamble failed.

Had Bilam only listened to his donkey and appreciated the value of loyalty, he would have suspended his plans to attack us earlier. He didn’t fully appreciate the bonds of loyalty between us and Hashem.

A Crisis of loyalty

Loyalty sits at the core of any long-term relationship. Every relationship has high points and low points, moments of harmony and moments of frustration and even betrayal. Loyalty reinforces our relationships, allowing them to outlast disappointment and frustration. Without allegiance and trust, relationships are brittle. Relationships of loyalty are always built to last.

We live in a dizzying world of rapid change and constant movement. We ricochet from “situation to situation” too quickly to establish bonds of loyalty. Students often seek my professional guidance. Recently I have declined, because any professional advice I offer is obsolete. The job market of 2022 has completely shifted from where it

was twenty years ago. In the past, employment choices were major life decisions. Today the average span of employment is only four years. People hardly meet their co-workers and employers before they move on. Zoom isn't helping matters.

The average length of a marriage is only slightly longer, lasting eight years. Friendships have shifted from personal interactions to virtual reality, making them less adhesive. It is much easier to unfriend someone on Facebook or ghost them on whatsapp, than it is to discontinue an actual friendship. Without long-term marriage, long-term employment, and actual live friendships, loyalty fades.

As actual loyalty begins to wither, modern culture offers artificial replacements. Corporations convert financial transactions into "emotional experiences" to generate customer loyalty and insure greater profit. Airlines incentivize our travel with extra perks to assure flyer's

To Know the Thoughts of G-d

Mrs. Michal Horowitz

In this week's parsha (chutz la'aretz), Parshas Balak, we meet Balak the king of Moav who wishes to bring ruination upon Klal Yisrael. Seeing the success of the Bnei Yisrael with his neighboring countries, Balak is afraid of an attack by the nation of Israel. Hence, he sends messengers of varying, and increasing, degrees of importance to hire Bilaam the sorcerer (and ultimately Bilaam the prophet) to come curse the Bnei Yisrael.

After some intense negotiations, promises of riches of houses filled with gold and silver, and against the wishes of G-d, Bilaam and his donkey travel with the officers of Moav back to King Balak, where Bilaam will offer sacrifices in preparation for cursing the Jewish nation.

Along the way, being escorted back by great dignitaries of the king, Bilaam must overcome an embarrassing obstacle, when his trusty she-donkey opens her mouth and speaks! As they are traveling, Bilaam is oblivious to the threat on the road, but the she-donkey sees an angel of G-d - with a sword in its hand - blocking the road in front of them. She stops traveling and turns off the road into the field. She then pushes the leg of Bilaam into this wall and that wall, and she crouches down low, in her refusal to go further. When Bilaam hits her for disobedience, suddenly, this lowly animal - a she-donkey! - opens her mouth and talks back to Bilaam! How important was this donkey and

loyalty. We invest our loyalties in sports teams, celebrities and clothing brands. All of these hollow loyalties target either objects or faceless organizations, rather than actual people. None of them teach us about real relationships or about devotion to others.

Loyalty is also the scaffolding which braces religious experience. Ideally, religious experience is driven by passion, emotion and spirituality. However, humans are unpredictable and erratic, and any religious experience based solely upon an emotional state will be very wobbly. Loyalty to Hashem stabilizes our relationship with Him, steadying our commitment to Him even when religious passions run weak. In a world of diminishing loyalty, religious commitment is also tottering.

The donkey speaks to us all. He calls us to greater loyalty.

her speech? The Sages teach that her mouth was one of the special things Hashem created on that first erev Shabbos (of Creation) as day gave way to eve (Avos 5:6).

וַיִּפְתַּח ה' אֶת פִּי הָאֲתוֹן וַתֹּאמֶר לְבִלְעָם מַה עָשִׂיתִי לָךְ כִּי הִפְתִּינִי זֶה שֶׁלֹּשׁ רְגָלִים.

And Hashem opened the mouth of the donkey, and she said to Bilaam: What have I done to you, that you hit me these three times!?

And Bilaam answered the she-donkey and said: for you have made a mockery of me! Would that I have a sword in my hand, I now would have killed you! And the donkey answered back: Am I not your trusty donkey that you have ridden upon all along, until this day? Have I been in the habit of doing this (disobeying) to you? And Bilaam said: No (Bamidbar 22:23-30). And Hashem opened the eyes of Bilaam and he saw the angel of G-d standing on the path and his sword drawn in his hand (v.31).

The end of the narrative is well known: Bilaam attempts to curse the Jewish people, but instead, Hashem puts words of beautiful blessings in his mouth.

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm z'l powerfully and timelessly teaches, "Soon after one of his truly eloquent prophecies, Bilaam begins by referring to himself with typical modesty as יָדַע דַּעַת עֲלֵינוּ - *he who knows the thoughts of the Almighty*' (Bamidbar 24:16). Upon which the Rabbis

(Sanhedrin 105b) declare, in awe-struck astonishment at this empty brag, 'A man who cannot know the thoughts of a mere animal (*da'at behemto*) can know the thoughts of the Almighty!?' A man who has not the vision of a four-legged beast can boast of divine knowledge? Much more importantly: A man who can so mistreat and so cruelly abuse an innocent ass that the animal turns to him plaintively and says, 'Am I not your loyal beast of burden upon whom you have ridden all your life to this day, did I deserve this of you?' (22:30) - can a man of such meanness and pettiness and cruelty dare boast of knowing the innermost thoughts of the Almighty G-d?

"That is more than a question. It is a devastating condemnation, not only of Bilaam but of the type he represents - a type so common, so tragically abundant, that it has colored world history and colors the lives of so many of us. This is the Bilaam-type, the kind who 'talks with G-d' as the Yiddish idiom goes, the kind who is 'yodei'a da'at Elyon', who professes great faith and great morals and great ethics, who speaks eloquently of his honor and lavishly of his integrity and sincerity, but confines all this to the realm of abstract principles and lets the ethics and morals and faith suffocate into the thin atmosphere of the upper heavens, while in practice he doesn't even know the thoughts of his own animal. He violates the most elementary principles, he practices every conceivable form of treachery and sin.

"This is the gulf between theory and practice, between talking and doing, the vast abyss which separates professing and performing. This is the root of perverted genius and of the perversion of normal human intelligence and pretense. This is the tragedy of great vision and detestable living, of

How the Wise Become Fools

Rabbi Efreim Goldberg

When Balak's men arrived at Bilam's home with the invitation to come and place a curse upon Benei Yisrael, Bilam told them to spend the night in his home while he waits to hear whether God approved of this mission. Sure enough, God appeared to Bilam in a dream during the night, and asked, *מי האנשים* - "Who are these people who are with you?" (22:9).

Bilam replied, *בלק בן צפור מלך מואב שלח אלי*, - that these men had been sent to him by Balak, king of Moav (22:10).

high principles and low deeds, of prophesying like Moses and practicing the morals of an animal... That is why we Jews are so careful about too much high talk and too few high deeds" (*Derashot Ledorot Numbers*, p.164-166).

As the Sages teach us (Avos 1:16): *עֲשֵׂה תוֹרָתְךָ קָבֵעַ. אֲמַר מְעַט וַעֲשֵׂה הַרְבֵּה, וְהָיוּ מִקְבֵּל אֶת כָּל הָאָדָם בְּסֶבֶר פְּנִים יְפוֹת* - *Shammai says: make your Torah learning permanent. Say little and do much, and accept every person with a pleasant countenance.*

The Torah way is one who speaks little (another Mishnah in Avos teaches us: *כל המרבה דברים מביא חטא* - *all who increase words, who speak in excess, bring sin*), but does much. One who empathizes with fellow man, obeys the will of G-d, strives to sanctify the Divine Name in all his ways, is the Torah way of life.

Bilam was one who haughtily professed to know the mind of G-d (*keviyachol!*) but did not even know his own animal. With his grandiose speeches, lust for wealth and fame, and demands for more and more kavod, Bilaam reminds us of the dangers we often see in society at large today. There are oh-too-many who profess and proclaim that they know G-d - nay, they are god! - but in reality, are no better than the she-donkey upon which they proverbially ride.

R' Dr. Lamm ends by noting, "We who are descended from Moses and not Bilaam must live up to the traditions of *nevi'ei ha'emet*, the prophets of truth... The greatest eloquence is in righteous living; the finest poetry is a good deed; the highest philosophy the performance of a mitzva; and the most precious knowledge of G-d - the sympathy we extend to fellow man" (*Derashot Ledorot Numbers*, p.167).

Rashi notes that Bilam emphasized Balak's title - *מלך מואב*, finding it necessary to mention in his response that he was summoned by the king of Moav. Rashi explains that Bilam was telling Hashem: *אני חשוב בעיניך, חשוב* - "Although I am not important in Your eyes, I am important in the eyes of kings."

If we think about it for a minute, we will realize just how foolish this remark is. Did Bilam really think that the way the kings viewed him mattered more than how the Creator of the universe viewed him? Imagine somebody going over

to his fellow and saying, “I don’t care what you think about me; my dog loves me, and that’s enough.” Really? Being loved and respected by a dog means more than being loved and respected by another human being? The difference between God and Balak is much vaster than the difference between a human being and a dog. Why would Bilam have thought that his esteem in Balak’s eyes compensated for Hashem’s lack of respect for him?

Let us remember that Bilam was no fool. Chazal teach that he was a prophet on the level of Moshe Rabbeinu, whom Hashem gave to the gentile nations so they could not claim that they would have achieved Am Yisrael’s level if they had a prophet like Moshe. Bilam was, without doubt, exceedingly bright. How could he have said something so foolish?

Rav Eliezer Lopian explains, very simply, that this is the power of מידות רעות – negative character traits. No

The Sin of Striking the Donkey

Rabbi Jonathan Ziring

God opened the mouth of the donkey, and she said to Bilaam: “What have I done to you, that you have hit me these three times?... The angel of God said to him: “Why did you hit your donkey these three times? Behold, I came out to obstruct you, because your way is contrary to me.” (Bamidbar 22:2832, modified from Metsudah tr.) After the fantastic scene of Bilaam’s donkey speaking and upbraiding Bilaam for how he treated her, the angel repeats this critique.

What did Bilaam do wrong?

The latter half of the rebuke focuses on the problematic nature of Bilaam’s quest. Some commentaries assume that the former half depends on the latter; Bilaam is in trouble because of his goal of cursing the Jews. For example, Rabbi Ovadia Seforno writes that the angel criticizes Bilaam for not realizing that the donkey’s recalcitrance indicates that the journey is contrary to God’s will. However, others believe that hitting the donkey was itself the reason for the rebuke.

For example, Rambam (Guide for the Perplexed 3:17) sees this story as the source for the prohibition against causing tzaar baalei chayim, painning animals. (Shabbat 128b, Bava Metzia 32b) The purpose of this law is to help people develop proper character traits. “The object of this rule is to make us perfect; that we should not assume

matter how brilliant somebody is, no matter how sharp his intellect, negative character traits can cloud his judgment and misguide him. A person with sinful drives is biased, he cannot think objectively, and he ends up speaking and acting irrationally.

This is, to a large extent, the story of Bilam. He was brilliant, but he acted like a fool because of his evil nature.

Examples of this phenomenon abound in the form of famous personalities and celebrities who ruined their careers, and their lives, through sheer foolishness. So many talented world leaders and other accomplished men and women ended up sabotaging their own success through foolish decisions that resulted from their lust for vanity or honor. Without proper מידות, qualities such as humility, courteousness, self-discipline and integrity, even the most intelligent people can end up acting like fools.

cruel habits: and that we should not uselessly cause pain to others: that, on the contrary, we should be prepared to show pity and mercy to all living creatures, except when necessity demands the contrary.” (ibid, Friedlander translation)

Rabbi Yehudah heChasid’s view

Rabbi Yehudah heChasid seems to agree with Rambam’s view in certain passages in Sefer Chasidim (see, for example Margoliot ed. #666, Parma ed. #138) However, in his introduction he argues that Bilaam did not violate tzaar baalei chayim at all. He writes that one only violates this prohibition if he hits the animal while it struggles under a load. Rabbi Avraham Price (Mishnat Avraham v. 1, p. 5) explains that one only violates tzaar baalei chayim when one unnecessarily hurts an animal. However, in this case, Bilaam’s donkey refused to move. He further explains that this is why the Talmud does not use Bilaam’s story as the source of the prohibition, contrary to the implications of the Rambam.

In a third place (Sefer Chasidim Parma #140), Rabbi Yehudah heChasid clarifies his view. The first time that Bilaam struck the animal, he did not sin. However, when his normally faithful animal stopped walking, even after being struck, Bilaam should have realized that something was wrong. Instead of thinking, however, he struck the

animal twice more. For that thoughtless cruelty, as well as ingratitude to his faithful animal, he was punished.

In each of the relevant passages, Sefer Chasidim continues to say that the lessons of kindness and gratitude apply to human beings even more, and the fact that they apply even to an animal highlights their importance.

Taken together, these sources underscore the ways in which the stories of the Torah teach us lessons. While the primary story of Bilaam is one of rebellion against God and an attack on the Jewish people, the Torah includes the interactions between Bilaam and his donkey to instruct about how carefully we must think so as to cause nothing,

Bilaam and Prophecy

Rabbi Immanuel Bernstein

When learning through the Torah's account of Bilaam's repeated failure in his attempt to curse the Jewish people, we are moved to ask the simple question: How could he possibly have thought that he would succeed? Bilaam may have been a vain, wicked and depraved person, but he was no fool. He knows full well that he cannot contravene a direct command from Hashem, and states so openly and repeatedly throughout the parsha. As such, having been told by Hashem in no uncertain terms that he was forbidden to curse the Jewish people, with what exactly in mind did he nonetheless proceed, believing that he would be able to do just that?

In the Midrash: A Confounding Comparison

Before attempting to answer this question, there is a certain statement of the sages regarding Bilaam that we need to consider; one which practically defies understanding. The verse toward the end of the Torah informs us:

וְלֹא קָם נְבִיא עוֹד בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל כְּמֹשֶׁה. (דברים לד:)

Never did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moshe.

Commenting on this verse, the Midrash says:

אבל באומות קם ואיזה? זה בלעם בן בעור. (ספרי וזאת הברכה טז)

But among the nations [one such prophet] did arise. And who was that? Bilaam the son of Be'or.

The basis of this statement is the implication in the verse that specifically among Israel none ever arose like Moshe, but among the nations there was a prophet of equal stature, and that was Bilaam.

Needless to say, this comment is somewhat perplexing, if not completely baffling! Granted, for purposes of blessing the Jewish people, Bilaam had to receive some

not even an animal, unjustified pain. For Sefer Chasidim, even when one is justified in hurting an animal, failure to minimize the pain and ensure that it is justified is considered sinful. How much more must pause to consider how we treat other people!

Rav Asher Weiss (Minchat Asher Parshat Balak) uses this example to show that the Torah expresses *ratzon haTorah*, the will of the Torah/God, which obligates to higher standards than the laws alone do. Exploring the spirit of the laws, as well as the narratives of the Torah, is critical to develop a full worldview where we seek to live as God desires, not just as He commands.

level of prophecy, but why did he have to receive prophecy on the ultimate level of Moshe?

The Prophetic Process

R' Yehoshua Leib Diskin¹ explains that in order to understand how Bilaam thought he could succeed in cursing the Jewish people, we need to understand how prophecy works. When Hashem chooses to communicate with prophet, He does not speak to him in words. Rather, He projects the message on to the prophet's soul, who then receives it, interprets it and formulate it into words. It is for this reason, the prophet needs to be of sterling character, not only wise but also humble, in order to ensure that he will translate the message faithfully.²

Bearing this idea in mind, we can begin to understand how Bilaam thought he could succeed in cursing the Jewish people, even though he had been explicitly told by Hashem that he could only bless them. With his understanding of how the prophetic process works, Bilaam reasoned that even if Hashem projected a message of blessing on to his soul, his depraved character, coupled with his pathological

1 *Maamar le'siyum HaTorah*, cited in the end of the sefer *Maharil Diskin Al HaTorah*

2 This approach can also be found in the Introduction of the Abarbanel to Sefer Yirmiyahu. This will help us explain the statement of the Gemara (Sanhedrin 89a) that "No two prophets prophesy in exactly the same manner," since each prophet formulates the prophecy in accordance with his soul's unique perception (for which reason, we can assume, Hashem chose that particular prophet to receive that specific prophecy). The Malbim (*ibid.*) and Netziv (Commentary to the Sifrei, beginning of Parshas Matos) however, understand that the prophets receive the actual words of the prophecy from Hashem. See also R' Yaakov Kamenetzky, *Emes le'Yaakov Bamidbar* 30:2.

hatred for the Jewish people would combine to ensure that the message that would emerge would be only that of a curse. Ultimately, his belief in Hashem's instructions was exceeded only by his belief in the corruption of his own soul, which could turn any blessing into curse.

Scripted Prophecy

Having understood Bilaam's thinking, we now ask: Where, then, did it all go wrong for him? Why was he unable to bring his evil personality to bear on the blessings he received?

The answer is in the words of the verse which introduce Bilaam's first prophecy:

וַיִּשֶׂם ה' דְּבַר בְּפִי בִלְעָם. (במדבר כג:ה)

Hashem put words into Bilaam's mouth.

The verse informs us that, on this occasion, Hashem did not communicate with Bilaam through the normal manner in which prophecy is conveyed – sending him a message for him to interpret and formulate in his words. Rather, Hashem put the words of the message themselves directly into Bilaam's mouth! Being unable to send the message through Bilaam's system without it becoming as corrupt as Bilaam himself was, Hashem circumvented that system, effectively handing Bilaam a script and saying, "Read the following!" With this, Bilaam's great plan for turning blessing into curse was frustrated, and he found himself left with no choice but to shower praise and blessing on the Jewish people.

Back to the Midrash: When Opposites Met

The uniqueness of Moshe's level of prophecy is that he was not only able to perceive with total clarity the message Hashem was communicating to him, but also to apprehend with absolute precision the exact words with which Hashem wanted him to express it. This ultimate level of clarity is referred to in the Gemara's statement in Yevamos 49b that Moshe prophesied through an illuminated lens, אֶסְפְּקִלְיָא הַמְאִירָה.

We can now return to the mystifying comment of the Midrash that while no prophet among Israel ever achieved the level of prophecy enjoyed by Moshe, among the nations of the world, this was attained by Bilaam. How could Bilaam be in the same level as Moshe, surpassing all the great prophets of Israel throughout the generations? We now understand that this level of receiving words from Hashem was granted to Bilaam specifically because a prophetic message could not be allowed to go through his system. Thus, the level that Moshe achieved by perfecting

his personality was, ironically, only ever replicated for Bilaam who had entirely ruined his.

Postscript: Writing Bilaam's Parsha

The Gemara in Bava Basra 14b discusses the individuals who committed the various books of Tanach to writing. Regarding Moshe Rabbeinu, it states:

מֹשֶׁה כָּתַב סֵפֶרוֹ, וּפְרָשָׁתוֹ בִלְעָם וּסְפָר אִיּוֹב

Moshe wrote his sefer [the Chumash], the section of Bilaam and the book of Iyov.

Naturally, the commentators are puzzled by the separate mention of "the section of Bilaam" as something written by Moshe. Is that section not also part of the Torah? Would not the absence of even one letter from that section render an entire Torah scroll invalid?

Rav Diskin explains. The reason why the Torah is referred to as "Moshe's sefer" is not merely because he wrote it down. Rather, it is because the contents of the Torah were perceived by Moshe on his unique level of prophecy – the illuminated lens. This means that even though many of the sections in the Torah were originally said to people who were themselves prophets, such as Hashem's communication with the patriarchs, nevertheless, these communications took place on their level of prophecy. Therefore, when these sections were revealed to Moshe, it was on a higher level of prophecy than when they were originally communicated. As such, Moshe's imprint was felt on the entire Torah – having received it from Hashem on his unique level – and hence, it is referred to as "Moshe's sefer."

But there was one exception to this rule. As we have seen, for reasons due to his personality, Bilaam could not be entrusted with a prophetic message in the normal manner, but rather, was given a script with the exact words to say – a level otherwise reserved only for Moshe Rabbeinu. As such, when Moshe subsequently received the section of Bilaam for purposes of writing it in the Torah, he did not add anything to the prophecy already received by Bilaam. All he did was transcribe it in the Torah. In this way, with no prophetic contribution from Moshe that would allow it to be called "Moshe's", Bilaam's parsha retains its distinct identity as a section within the Torah known as "Moshe's sefer!"³

³ Seemingly, according to this approach, the term "*Bilaam's parsha*" would not include the verses which were said about him, or even by him to people such as Balak etc. but rather, specifically to the prophecies that he received from Hashem which contained blessings for the Jewish people.

How Goodly Are Your Tents O' Jacob

Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald

In this week's parasha, parashat Balak, we read the dramatic story of the non-Jewish prophet, Balaam, who is determined to curse the Jewish people, but winds up blessing them.

Perhaps the most famous line of Bilaam's prophecy is the verse that opens the daily prayers of all the Jewish people (Numbers 24:5): מַה טֹבֵי אֹהֲלֶיךָ יַעֲקֹב, מִשְׁכְּנֵיךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל. *How goodly are your tents, O' Jacob, your dwelling places, O' Israel.*

Rashi notes that Balaam was moved to say these beautiful words because he saw that the entrances of the Jewish people's tents were arrayed in such a manner that no one could look into their neighbor's tent.

As we have previously noted, the Torah's descriptions of ancient Jewish life underscore the fact that Jewish family life was highly structured. Every Jew knew his/her relationship within the family, and everyone had a particular role to play. It is this familial and communal structure that shields and guards the Jewish people from those who wish to curse and harm them.

Interestingly, the Targum Yonatan on Numbers 24:5, offers an alternative interpretation. He asks: What did Balaam see that caused him to say: "How goodly are your tents O Jacob...?" The Targum Yonatan suggests: He saw their schools.

Today, aside from the sanctity of family life, the most critical and compelling aspect concerning the question of Jewish survival in America is the challenge of providing quality Jewish education for the next generation. It is now absolutely indisputable, that aside from Yeshiva and intensive Day School education, every other form of Jewish training for young Jews in America has proven to be an unmitigated disaster. I have often stated, only half in jest, that if the Jews for Jesus were smart, they would pay to send every Jewish child to an afternoon Hebrew School because, with rare exception, it has proven to be most effective means of turning off Jewish kids to Jewish life! I guess someone was listening, because there are hardly any active Hebrew schools operating today, which is very sad.

But, before we pat ourselves too smugly on our backs, let us take stock of where our Yeshivot and Day Schools stand, and critically evaluate how well we are doing. Frankly, to my mind the great miracle of Yeshiva and Day School education is that they produce frum (religiously

committed) students at all, considering the enormous handicaps under which they operate. Those of us who have made it through the system and still remained faithful, readily admit that the experience can be, in many instances, a veritable minefield.

Remember, it often takes only a single incompetent teacher to destroy a child's enthusiasm for Torah for life. And no matter how many other outstanding instructors a student may have before and after, the wound rarely heals. Unfortunately, too many schools have their share of destructive personalities in the classroom.

We must also bear in mind that virtually all schools experience cycles of good and bad times with respect to the quality of their school's education. I recall my own disbelief when I was told by a young Satmar dropout, who had spent time in the cults, how many Yeshiva boys and girls were involved in his Yoga Ashram. Refusing to accept his testimony, I asked to be shown personally. Students of every single major Yeshiva in America were present when I visited the Ashram of Swami Satchidananda in Greenwich Village!

Later, through my work at Lincoln Square Synagogue, I was to learn that, at that time, on the West Side of Manhattan there existed one of the largest networks of Yeshiva dropouts, of all persuasions, from Y.U. to Satmar, some even with Smicha, some Rebbeshe Einiklach, (direct descendants of Chassidic leaders), some living with, or married to, mates of all religions, races and creeds.

Of course, not all of this can be attributed to the failure of our schools. Family and friends often play the critical role. But we cannot, dare not, sweep under the carpet, the basic failure of the Jewish community in general (and the Orthodox community as well, and not only the Modern Orthodox, but the so-called Haredi community as well) who have failed to ensure superior quality Jewish education for our children.

The truth is that not a few wealthy Baalebatim (lay people) cry poverty when it comes to paying tuition, sapping our institutions of resources they desperately need. The truth is that Rebbeim (master teachers) in the system, especially in large cities, even after ten and fifteen years of service, are often paid much less than a living wage, and often receive no pension, life insurance and limited or

no medical coverage. Even when these special coverages are available, it is likely due only to the vision and unprecedented generosity of the late Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Gruss or the Avi Chai Foundation of the late Baal Teshuva, Zalman Chaim Bernstein.

The truth is that women teachers in many Yeshivos are often seriously exploited, receiving 1/3 or 1/2 of the already low salary for full-time teaching responsibilities. The truth is that it is not uncommon to find our most effective educators and Talmidei Chachamim (scholars) forced to take on two or three supplemental jobs in order to make ends “barely” meet. It is often these outstanding young people who are burning out the ovens, and standing over the boiling kashering pots, or staying up entire nights supervising the kashering of a luxury hotel kitchen, enabling the frum (religiously committed) community to spend eight or nine stress-free days of sheer delight on Pesach, for which they gratefully pay \$1,500-\$5,000 per person. The truth is that I once calculated, back in the late 1970s, that, at that time, over \$50 million was spent by Orthodox New Yorkers each year on Pesach vacations alone, a figure that represented at that time fully 1/4 of the overall annual budget of all Yeshivot and Day Schools in the New York metropolitan area. (Today, it is well over \$350-\$400 million).

The truth is also, that, for the most part, Federation claims of support for Jewish education are often misleading. With all the vaunted hype of special funds, and blockbuster grants--the bottom line is that of the \$12,000-35,000 it takes to educate a Yeshiva student today—in most instances, Federation subsidies amounts to a mere pittance per child, per year.

In stark contrast, during the boom years of Catholic education, the organized Catholic community of greater New York in the early 1980s subsidized their students to the tune of over \$2,500 per child, through Archdiocesan and parish contributions, and through the use of church personnel as teachers and administrators. The Jewish Community never came close to that level of support.

Some of you may recall the famous 1990 Council of Jewish Federations’ report documenting the staggering assimilation taking place in the American Jewish Community. But few of you are probably aware of an equally frightening CJF analysis, documenting that Federation contributions to Jewish education as a percentage of their overall budgets, for the years 1987-94, actually declined! Perhaps out of embarrassment, they

stopped issuing these public reports in 1989.

The truth is, that the majority of our best and brightest young people, no longer consider Jewish education as a viable career option. Many who do take the plunge, find it difficult to deal with the problem of low professional esteem, or discover in short order that they are unable to feed their rapidly expanding families. Several years ago, five long-time New York area principals, left Jewish education for business--all in a single year. Furthermore, almost all certified teacher training programs in the country have closed, and many of our finest Yeshivos Gedolos, that have become the source of many of our future teachers and leaders, have found that there are many fewer young scholars willing to live lives of privation in order to devote themselves to the noble cause of Jewish Education. An interesting side note is that Lakewood NJ, which once ranked among the lowest per-capita income living areas in New Jersey, is now among the highest per-capita income communities in America. In fact, a significant number of Torah scholars, who used to devote all their waking hours to study, now have lucrative side jobs, allowing them to appreciably raise their standard of living. These recent socio-economic changes make it extremely difficult or impossible to find the devoted educators and rabbis that are so desperately needed.

The Midrash Rabbah in Parashat Toledot relates:

The leaders of idolatry gathered about Avnomos HaGardi (non Jewish philosopher, contemporary and friend of R. Meir) and said to him: “Advise us, How can we defeat this (Jewish) nation?” He said: “Go inspect all their synagogues and houses of study. If you find children chirping (studying Torah), you can never defeat them, for this is what their father (Isaac) said to them: ‘The voice is the voice of Jacob’--as long as the voice of Jacob (Torah) is found in their synagogues, the hands of Esau cannot prevail; but if not, ‘The hands are the hands of Esau.’”

If we are to survive and flourish, we must resolve to reorder our priorities. What Balaam recognized 3,300 years ago, we need to recognize today. We must resolve to support Jewish education to its fullest. We must resolve to make personal sacrifices so that our educators can live, not lives of luxury, but lives of less privation. We must resolve to demand from the general Jewish community, the wealthiest cultural group in the U.S., to be forthcoming with serious funding for Jewish education. It is absolutely criminal that, in this country, the wealthiest Jewish community in all Jewish history, there is still no collective Jewish communal fund to guarantee a Jewish education

for every Jewish child in America. (There's a JNF to plant trees. There must be a mega Jewish Educational Fund to plant Jewish lives!) The few local Federations that have broken the pattern and contribute significantly to local Jewish education (Hooray for Toronto, Chicago and the Samis Foundation in Seattle!) and the 5% initiative of George Hanus is a start, but certainly not enough!) We must resolve to educate our own children and grandchildren to see Jewish Education, as a foremost calling of our people, and to encourage them to choose a career in Jewish education, and eradicate the sense of stigma and opprobrium which is often associated with a career in Jewish education.

Finally, we must resolve to make our first priority reaching out to the already committed, which in some instances means ourselves, to insure that "casual" religious Jews, become "passionate" religious Jews. That passion must not be relegated to the Rabbis and the educators, but that the excitement and thrill involved in the perpetuation of our heritage thoroughly permeate our homes, our schools and our lives.

May we merit to see as a result of our uncompromising commitment to excellence in education, that soon there shall be heard in the hills of Judea and the streets of Jerusalem the sounds of the Bride and Groom, and the heralding of the Messiah soon in our days.