

# BALAK (PART I)

## OPPOSITION TO THE JEWS

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A

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### **Bilam's Plan**

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The story of Bilam, the prophet of the nations, is very difficult to understand. Balak hired Bilam to curse the Jewish People. In the end, Hashem ruined their plans and caused wonderful blessings to come out of Bilam's mouth.

Bilam clearly must have had a known power to curse, which is why Balak hired him. Chazal say Bilam knew witchcraft and sorcery and was considered the most famous sorcerer of his time. Kabbala and Chassidus accept these spiritual powers as real. Balak, king of Moav, was himself originally a Midianite. Moav took him because of his valor and success as a warrior, which was a result of a blessing that he received from Bilam. Bilam was known as someone whose blessings and curses came true.

At the same time, it seems that Bilam knew Hashem. According to many of our Sages, Bilam was actually a prophet, not just well-versed with sorcery. He knew the Almighty and even had conversations with Him.

Balak called Bilam to come to Moav to curse the Jewish People so God would abandon them. But Bilam knew God; he even spoke to Him. He knew that God is King of the world and that no power could stand against Him. He knew what happened to

Pharaoh in Mitzrayim. How could Bilam and Balak think that they would be able to stand against the Almighty King, Creator of everything? Witchcraft is also a creation of the Almighty and under His control. The good forces, and even the evil forces, all come from Him. He is the King of everything. He is the Master of the universe. Is there any possibility that someone like Bilam, who knew God directly, could think that there could be any power that could thwart God's will?

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## B

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### **Keep Jews Out of Israel!**

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Balak sent a message to Bilam inviting him to curse Bnei Yisrael. The Shem Mishmuel says that Balak's goal was that Moav would defeat the Jews and drive them away from the land. According to the Midrash, Balak wasn't interested in destroying the Jewish People. He just wanted to keep them away from the Land of Israel.

Why did Balak so desperately want to stop the people from entering the land? The Jewish nation had guaranteed him that they would not attack him because he and his people were descendants of Lot, nephew of Avraham. God promised Lot a piece of land near Israel across the Jordan River due to his loyalty to Avraham. In Devarim (2:29), the Torah even says the Jews and Moabites were doing business with each other when the Jews passed by their land. Why were the elders of Moav so upset that the Jews would pass by their land and go into the Land of Israel?

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## C

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### **Connecting Heaven and Earth**

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The Shem Mishmuel explains Moav's opposition based on a teaching of the Chiddushei Harim. The *pasuk* says, "*Hashamayim*

*shamayim la'Hashem v'ha'aretz nasan livnei adam*. Heaven belongs to God, and He gave earth to people” (Tehillim 115:16). Obviously, the heavens belong to God, and man lives on earth. What is the *pasuk* teaching us? The Chiddushei Harim explains that this *pasuk* describes the state of the world as Hashem originally created it. He made heaven and earth separate. He made heaven for angels and spiritual beings and the earth for people.

However, we must not leave the world this way. Our job is to bring heaven into earth, to connect the two together.

During the six days of creation, Hashem created the whole world. At the end of the description of the first Shabbos, the *pasuk* says that Hashem created man “*la'asos*,” meaning “to do.” Even after Hashem completed His work of creation, there is still much more work to do. We are the ones to do that work. Adam was put in Gan Eden in particular and into this world in general to develop the world. Man must connect heaven and earth, turning this world into a heavenly place.

The Jewish People are the main actors in this process of combining the spiritual with the physical. This is the unique challenge and commitment of the Jewish People. The ideal place for this mission is Eretz Yisrael. It is a special physical place where “God’s eyes are there from the beginning of the year until the end of the year” (Devarim 11:12). It is a land that is more spiritual than any other place in the world.

Our job is to connect the spiritual heavens with the physical world. There is one place in the world that already has a piece of heaven in it: Eretz Yisrael, and within that, Yerushalayim and Har Habayis in particular. Heaven and earth coexist naturally there. It takes effort to split them. We feel spirituality when we get off the plane in Eretz Yisrael and walk on the ground. Especially when we come to Yerushalayim and to the Kotel, the spiritual feelings well up in our hearts. When you stand at the Kotel and close your eyes, you can feel and see the heavenly throne of Hashem in your mind’s eye. His throne is right there in heaven, just above the Temple

Mount. Eretz Yisrael is a place where heaven and earth are particularly connected in a natural way, even without man's efforts.

This is the place where the Jewish People are supposed to go. It is the place most suited for their main mission of bringing heaven and earth together. The Jews are to be a model for the nations of the world, showing them that we can bring spirituality into the physical experience.

The Shem Mishmuel says that if the Jews in Eretz Yisrael live up to this responsibility to connect heaven and earth, to make Eretz Yisrael a truly heavenly, spiritual place, then every other nation in the world will be influenced by the Jewish example. Every nation in the world will learn the lesson of combining the spiritual with the physical.

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### Connecting Spiritual and Mundane

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We live in a world that desperately needs this lesson. A large part of the human race has split the spiritual from the secular, the holiness from the mundane. So many people live mundane, secular lives without any trace of spirituality. They live without any connection to God or spiritual values and experiences. We are witnessing a tragic fall of humanity. However, if the Jewish People in Eretz Yisrael are able to live the spiritual life in that Holy Land, if they can live holy Torah lives, this will affect every other nation in the world.

The *pesukim* in Zecharya (14:16-18) say that, in the messianic era, every nation in the world will come to Yerushalayim to celebrate the holidays together with the Jewish People, especially the holiday of Sukkos. The nations that boycott Israel and do not come will suffer from droughts and other physical calamities. They will have to come to Yerushalayim to learn the lessons of spirituality.

The Shem Mishmuel explains that the original purpose of the

Jewish People when they came to Eretz Yisrael was to create this ideal, holy society and thereby influence the whole world. This could have brought the beginning of the messianic era. This is exactly what Balak and Bilam wanted to avoid.

Balak and Bilam were happy with the mundane, physical, narcissistic, pleasure-oriented, meaningless lives that they lived. They were not interested in the spiritual side of life, which might make them give up their lust, pleasure, and illicit gains—and they did not want to give them up. They knew that Hashem had chosen Am Yisrael. There was no way He would abandon Am Yisrael because of sorcery. But Balak and Bilam thought they could use their occult powers to keep the Jews away from Israel. In the desert, the Jews had been living purely spiritual, holy lives. Coming to Israel would entail a great adjustment for the Jewish People. Instead of bread falling from heaven and water flowing from rocks, they would have to plant, plow, reap, and grind—all before they could even eat their bread. This lifestyle would challenge the Jew to maintain a spiritual life while doing all these physical activities. In the desert, though, all of their needs were taken care of, so it was easy to maintain a spiritual perspective. Balak and Bilam did not want the Jews to succeed in integrating a spiritual quality into a physical lifestyle.

Balak and Bilam didn't want to change. "We are happy with the physical bounty that Hashem has given us. We are happy with no restrictions, with a life of pursuing pleasure. We don't want any restrictions. We don't seek the spiritual and holy. We seek the physical and the here-and-now. Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we will die. We are looking for this life. The Jew has a different agenda. If he brings the spiritual into the physical, he will reduce the physical pleasures. We oppose this."

"We have a great suggestion," said Balak and Bilam. "Why bring the Jews into this land? Why give them this challenge? We know that most of the time, they will fail. Let them stay in the desert, away from the land. Let them be a holy, secluded, monastic

people, isolated from the world. There, they can develop themselves spiritually. Just keep them away from us. They make us feel guilty; they are a conscience that we don't want."

"We are a pleasure-seeking, orgiastic society. We are indulgent and self-centered. Let the Jew, who is interested in spirituality do so in his place, not as our neighbors. We don't want them near our territory."

How many times in our history have we heard this claim?

Hashem rejected this idea. The ultimate goal of the Jew is to be in this world. While the Torah does have some respect for the monastic, isolated life, it does not see this as the highest level of man. Before we came into this world, into our bodies, we were souls in heaven. Why did Hashem take our pure souls from a condition of holy bliss and put us into our bodies? Life here is filled with challenges and crises, almost all of which are related to having a physical body. Our health, wealth, and relationships are all primarily physical concerns. Why did Hashem put us here? He put us in this physical world because He wants us to engage with our physical concerns from a spiritual perspective. He wants us to be doctors, plumbers, and farmers, to be husbands and wives. He wants us to do what is right despite the physical qualities of the place and time.

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## E

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### The Goal of the Torah

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The Torah is filled with *mitzvos*, almost all of which are connected to this real world. Eating kosher food, relations between married couples at the right time, being honest in business, keeping the holy Shabbos and not working, building the *sukka* and eating in it, eating *matza*, shaking the *lulav* and *esrog*, wearing *tefillin* and *tzitzis*, saying blessings, and praying three times a day are all physical activities. We have 613 parts of our body. Every *mitzva*

is related to one of those parts. The Torah wants to sanctify our physical beings and thus sanctify the entire physical world. We are not angels. This is our human *shlichus*, our mission. We are supposed to turn our physical lives into spiritual lives. The purpose of the Torah is to physically perform holy and spiritual deeds. The combination of spirit and physical is the goal of the Torah.

This is why Am Yisrael must be in Eretz Yisrael. It is the place where we can achieve this goal in the best possible way.

Bilam's blessings, says the Shem Mishmuel, are related to this concept. Bilam said, "*Mi mana afar Yaakov*. Who can count the dirt of Yaakov?" Chazal say this refers to the *mitzvos* that the Jews fulfill with the dust and dirt: Do not plow with an ox and a donkey together; *kilayim*, not planting species together; *para aduma*; *mei sota*; *orla*; and all the *mitzvos* of *teruma* and *ma'aser*. Bilam continued, "*U'mispar es rova Yisrael*. God counts the times Jewish married couples are together" (Bamidbar 23:10). Jewish family life involves a physical experience that is imbued and enhanced by spirituality and *mitzvos*.

Balak and Bilam wanted a physical experience without spirituality. The Torah, though, is the combination of the physical and spiritual together.

Starting on Rosh Hashana and throughout the Ten Days of Repentance, we add "*Zachreinu l'chaim melech chafeitz bachaim v'chasveinu b'sefer hachaim l'maancha Elokim chaim*. Remember us for life, King who desires life; write us in the book of life for Your sake, living God." We ask for life in this world, asking God to remember us and write us in the book of life. Why do we ask for life in this world? "For the sake of the living God," for the sake of spirituality in our life. We need physical life and well-being in order to achieve our spiritual purpose.

This idea of the Shem Mishmuel is spelled out at length by the Rambam at the end of Hilchos Teshuva. He writes that the whole purpose of life in this world is the spiritual. Eventually, human beings will go to the next world, which will be very spiritual. In

fact, the Rambam's idea of *olam haba* is purely spiritual. The very goal of the righteous Jew is to get to *olam haba*, which is even above angels in its spirituality. If that is the goal of all the *mitzvos*, then why does the Torah say so many times that if you do *mitzvos*, Hashem will give you a good life in this world? Hashem makes all sorts of assurances in the Torah for the people who do the *mitzvos*. "I will give you rain in the right time." "I will remove all illnesses from you." "Your enemies will not covet your land." Why does the Torah assure us of these physical blessings in this world, if the goal is to achieve spiritual life?

The Rambam answers that the reason is to enable us to do more *mitzvos*. If people are distracted by illness or lack of income, how will they be able to do *mitzvos* and concentrate on Torah? A woman with major health issues will be so distracted by her problems and daily challenges that she cannot focus on being holy. How will a man with all these distractions be spiritual? Instead of problems, God will give us good and comfortable physical circumstances so that we will have the time, focus, and energy to bring the spiritual into our lives. We will then be able to earn a place in *olam haba*, the complete spiritual life that is the goal of the Torah.

May Hashem give us these blessings so that we can fulfill the *mitzvos* of the Torah—to combine the physical with the spiritual and sanctity of all life.



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## REVIEW QUESTIONS

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1. What was the basic opposition of Balak and Bilam to the Jewish People?
2. Why did Hashem put the holy soul into a physical body?

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## EXERCISE

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1. Count how many times a day you combined physicality with spirituality. Do this for a week.



