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Balak 5783

What the Eye Can't See

Dr. Erica Brown

As we open our Torah reading for the week, we are introduced to an unusual agreement. King Balak of Moab paid Bilaam, an accomplished soothsayer, to curse the Israelites who would be passing through on their way to the Promised Land. This, Balak believed, would diminish their military might. Bilaam saddled his donkey, set out on the journey but was then obstructed on the way by an angel he could not see. Eventually, Bilaam was forced into blessing the Israelites in an ironic turn of events.

It's an intriguing story. Bilaam's donkey, it turns out, was far more interesting than its rider. The donkey, in contrast to Bilaam, could see the angel blocking the narrow path forward and refused to move. Bilaam, with increasing impatience, jabbed at the donkey's side, prodding him forward: "When the donkey now saw the angel of the Lord, it lay down under Bilaam, and Bilaam was furious and beat the donkey with a stick" (Num. 22:27). This scene of an ill-tempered man beating an animal for non-compliance is painful but not, sadly, unusual, until the story takes another surprising turn. The donkey talked back to its owner: "What have I done to you that you have beaten me these three times?" (Num. 22:28). The donkey did not deserve this treatment and, thus, advocated for himself.

As readers, we might be surprised that Bilaam actually talked back to his magical donkey and explained his actions: "You have made a mockery of me! If I had a sword with me, I'd kill you" (Num. 22:29). Bilaam was humiliated that he was out on a royal mission, and his insignificant donkey did not obey him. But the donkey, whose wisdom no longer astonishes us, pushed back: "'Look, I am the donkey that you have been riding all along until this day! Have I been in the habit of doing thus to you?' And he answered, 'No.'" The angel then posed the same question to Bilaam. Why did you hit your donkey three times?

To understand this week's sedra and its compelling

message about leadership, we need to answer three questions:

1. How is it that this supposed visionary, who is even called a prophet in the Talmud [BT Bava Batra 15b], could not see what was right in front of him?
2. How can it be that a man tasked with controlling the future could not even control his own simple beast?
3. What is the function of this small, strange conversation when so much else of political and spiritual consequence was happening?

The answers to all three questions may be found in Rashi's comment on what the donkey saw: "And the donkey saw: but he [Bilaam] did not since the Holy One, Blessed be He, gave the animal the gift of sight beyond man. Since he possessed this knowledge, he became easily frightened when he witnessed danger." In Rashi's comments and in our story, we find that it is precisely the lack of sophistication of the animal which allowed it to experience reality more acutely and obey the more powerful vision. The donkey served as a foil to Bilaam, both because of its vision and its loyalty. The donkey protested its beatings on the grounds that it had never before behaved like this and should be trusted.

Bilaam was told directly by God not to undertake this journey: "But God said to Bilaam, "Do not go with them. You must not curse that people, for they are blessed" (Num. 22:12). Despite this clear warning, Bilaam undertook Balak's mission. Bilaam had the conflicting messages of a king and the King of Kings before him and made a poor choice of what command to prioritize. Not so his donkey. When the words of his master were contradicted by an appearance of the Divine Presence, he yielded to it, even at the cost of the violence to his body.

As a result of selective hearing, Bilaam suffered selective vision. He saw what he wanted to see and did not see

what was actually there. The donkey, free of all human machinations, saw reality as it was. The donkey protested its beatings; it had done nothing more than face the truth of a situation that escaped the cognition of its master. Bilaam, when finally confronted by the angel, confessed as much, “I erred because I did not know that you were standing in my way” (Num. 22: 34).

The story line changed again when Bilaam’s eyes were literally unveiled, and, as Rashi intimated earlier, Bilaam, like his donkey, was gifted with clear vision. Bilaam’s failing eye-sight had been repaired, and he gained a wholly different perspective: “How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwellings, O Israel! Like palm-groves that stretch out, like gardens beside a river, like aloes planted by God, like cedars beside the water” (Num. 24:5-6). Bilaam described what he saw with the same set of eyes, but with a different set of mind. And what he suddenly saw was a nation worthy of blessing.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, writes of the delicate balance between seeing the world as it is and as it should be: “A leader must have vision, but also realism. He or she must think the impossible but know the possible” (“The Pace of Change,” *Covenant & Conversation*). In her article “Why Leaders Must Have Vision,” Debbie Zmorenski

defines leadership as “a picture in the leader’s imagination that motivates people to action when communicated compellingly, passionately and clearly.” The problem lies in how that vision is communicated when followers cannot see it, and it is not clearly communicated, much the way Bilaam could not see what was obvious to his clear-sighted donkey.

Zmorenski recommends four practical steps that a leader can take to translate vision into a reality for others.

1. Isolate one challenge within an organization upon which to focus.
2. Imagine what success will look like and describe it in detail so it can look real to others.
3. Consider the language you will use and the context you need to make the message compelling. How, where, and how often must this vision be shared?
4. Practice communicating what you have written and make sure it’s sincere because, “If you don’t believe it, no one else will believe it either.”

Vision is the capacity to describe a reality others cannot see so that you can bring others there.

So, as a leader are you better at seeing reality as it is or as you think it should be?

Rise and Shine

Rabbi Joshua (The Hoffer) Hoffman z”l

The Torah tells us that Bilam arose (*va-yakam*) in the morning, saddled his donkey and went with the officers of Moav who were attempting to get him to curse the Jewish nation (Bamidbar 22:22). The Midrash, cited by Rashi, says that hatred disrupts the usual order of things, and that is why Bilam saddled the donkey himself rather than having his attendant do so. God however, said to Bilam that Avrohom already preceded him, as it says in regard to the akeidah that Avrohom arose early in the morning (*va-yashkem*), meaning earlier than Bilam arose, and saddled his own donkey (Bereishis, 22:3). We learn from Avrohom that love also disrupts the usual order of things. Simply understood, all of this means that while Bilam arose in the morning to defy God’s will, Avrohom arose even earlier in the morning to comply with God’s will, thereby providing the Jewish nation with the merit to overcome Bilam’s efforts. I believe, however, that there is a more specific connection between Bilam’s

intentions and Avraham’s actions at the akeidah.

The Talmud (Sanhedrin 105b) tells us that from Bilam’s blessings we can discern what his real intentions were. Case and point, says the Talmud, is the verse “How goodly are your tents Yaakov, your dwelling places Yisroel” (Bamidbar, 24:5). The Gemara in Bava Basra (60a) says that Bilam was praising the Jewish home which was marked by its modesty in that the entrances of the various tents were not aligned opposite each other. The Talmud in Sanhedrin, however, says that what he really intended to say was that the study halls and synagogues of Israel should cease to exist. God, however, transformed his curse into a blessing. How did this blessing regarding the Jewish home reflect his hidden desire to destroy the study halls and synagogues? Rav Moshe Feinstein zt”l explains that Bilam was saying that the Jewish home is so perfect that there is no need for synagogues and study halls. Bilam himself, however, understood that no matter how strong the home is, these institutions are crucial

for the spiritual survival of the Jewish nation and that is why he endeavored to destroy them. With this understanding of Bilam's intentions, we can understand how Avraham's actions at the akeidah combated the intentions of Bilam.

We have mentioned in the past the explanation of the akeidah offered by my teacher Rav Aharon Soloveitchik zt"l (see his book *The Warmth and the Light*, on parshas VaYeira, and the article "Small Sacrifices"). The Midrash notes that on the way to the akeidah, Avrohom was always walking together with Yitzchok, but after the akeidah only Avrohom is mentioned as leaving the scene. Where was Yitzchok? The Midrash says that Avrohom sent him to study Torah in the yeshiva. Even though Yitzchok was at that time already thirty seven years old, Avrohom had not yet sent him away from home to study. Rav Aharon zt"l explained that Yitzchok was the son who Avrohom had yearned for until he was a hundred and he found it very difficult to part with him. Moreover, he probably assumed that the best place for Yitzchok to learn Torah was at home. However, there is no substitute for the total environment of the yeshiva and the intensity of the learning that is done there. The purpose of the akeidah, according to the Ramban, was to bring Avraham's potential, inner strength, into actuality. Rav Aharon explained this to mean that Avrohom needed to convince himself of his own inner

strength. Through the akeidah he realized he was willing to make the ultimate sacrifice of giving his son back to God. He thereby understood that if he could make that ultimate sacrifice he could make the small daily sacrifice of being separated from his son while he learned in yeshiva as well. Thus, Avraham's alacrity at the akeidah moved him to realize that even the strongest of Jewish homes needs the additional influence of the yeshiva. In this way he overcame the efforts of Bilam to destroy the institution of yeshiva as well as destroy the institution of the synagogue.

Interestingly, the Gemara in Sanhedrin concludes by saying that all of Bilam's blessings reverted eventually to curses, with the exception of his intentions to do away with the study halls and synagogues. Rashi explains that these institutions will always exist amongst the Jewish nation. However, I once heard from Rav Irving Grumer, head of the Rabbinical Court of Cleveland, Ohio, an additional explanation. He said that God caused all of the blessings of Bilam to revert to curses, but he left it in our hands to determine whether Bilam's intentions to nullify the study halls and synagogues will be fulfilled. We will always have study halls and synagogues, Rashi says, but we can turn them into curses if we do not attend them for study and prayer. May we continue to use these institutions properly and merit the rebuilding of the Temple speedily in our days.

Are You Qualified?

Rabbi Assaf Bednarsh (Transcribed and adapted from a shiur given at the Gruss Kollel in Yerushalayim given on Jul 2, 2020)

At the end of this week's Parsha, we have the unfortunate incident of Ba'al Peor. It ends with Pinchas saving the day and stopping the mageifa by killing Zimri. And as Rashi quotes regarding Moshe: *nisalma mimenu halachah*. He somehow forgot the halachah that *ha-boel Aramis, kano'im pogim bo*—there is room for a zealot to extrajudicially execute someone like Zimri. Pinchas knew this halachah, and when he came to remind Moshe, Moshe responded with the adage: Whoever arrives with the letter, let him carry out what it says. Since you reminded me about this halachah, you are the perfect person to carry it out. And Pinchas stepped up and earned his place in history by applying the halachah of *kano'im pogim bo*. But why did Moshe tell Pinchas to do it when he brought it up, instead of doing it himself? What was wrong with Moshe here? Rashi asks:

Moshe was able to stand up to help so many people. How come here, he had to step back?

One explanation that Rashi quotes here is that it was all Divinely orchestrated. Of course, Moshe could have taken care of this on his own. However, Hashem has arranged for Pinchas to stand up *kedei she-yavo Pinchas ve-yitol es ha-rauy lo*—He wanted Pinchas to have this special opportunity.

However, I saw a very interesting explanation in a sefer Netzach Yisroel for why Moshe could not do it himself. The Gemora in Sanhedrin relates a whole conversation. Zimri asked Moshe: Is it mutar for me or assur to live with this non-Jewish girl? And if you say it's assur, who allowed you to marry Bas Yisro? Didn't you do the exact same thing? Your wife is also Midianite, so what's the difference? The truth is, we are obviously talking about a personal insult to Moshe Rabbeinu. Here

is Moshe trying to take charge. He says: *hirgu ish anashav ha-nitzmadim le-ba'al pe'or*. And one guy comes *le-einey Moshe u-le-einey kol adas Bnei Yisroel* and is really trying to stick it to Moshe. So that is the meaning of *nisalma mimeno halachah*. Moshe could not do this because it would not be *li-shma*. He was personally insulted by this. We have a rule *le-olam ya'asok adam be-Torah u-be-mitzvos afilu she-lo li-shman, she-mitoch shelo li-shman ba li-shman*. You should bring a korban, daven, shake lulav and eat matzah, even *she-lo li-shma*. But that's only for your regular *shmiras ha-mitzvos* and *avodas Hashem*. When it comes to *kana'im pogim bo*, to be *mekane* for Hashem, to stand up and fight—it must be 100% *li-shma*. That's not regular Torah u'Mitzvos. *Kana'us* is beyond the regular halachic system. And if the *kana'us* is not *li-shma*, then it's dangerous. In virtually every generation, there is so much *Chilul Hashem* caused by people who stand up as if for *kana'us*. Yet, it's their personal agenda, politics, trying to put themselves ahead of the other group, etc. Or they are in it just because someone insulted them—and it's personal. So when it comes to Torah and Mitzvos, even if it's *she-lo li-shma*, it's wonderful because *metoch she-lo*

li-shma ba li-shma. However, when it comes to *kana'us*, you must be incredibly careful. There is enormous potential not only for *Chilul Hashem* but for the destruction of the entire world. And I don't have to go to the news to tell you the stories of destroyed institutions and communities that occurred because of *kana'us*—*ke'ilu* for the cause and for the truth of the Torah—when it really was because of their own personal agenda or pride. Even Moshe Rabbeinu, who was *Anav mi-Kol Adam*, once he saw that it was personal, said: Whoever arrives with the letter, let him carry out what it says. I cannot be a *kanoi* here. But you Pinchas, this has nothing to do with you—no one brought you and your wife into this. No one tried to stick it to you. You can be a *kanoi*. I really think that this is the lesson we need to be reminded of in every *dor*, even though the general rule is *ya'asok adam be-Torah u-mitzvos afilu she-lo li-shma*, when it comes to fighting with others, you must double check and triple check to make sure that, like Pinchas, you are 100% *li-shma*. But if not, don't worry. There are other people in the world. If Hashem wants, He will send someone who is 100% *li-shma*. And you should stick to your Torah u-Mitzvos. Shabbat Shalom.

Opposition to the Jews

Rabbi Hershel Reichman

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?

Keep Jews Out of Israel!

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?

Connecting Heaven and Earth

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.

Connecting Spiritual and Mundane

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.

The Goal of the Torah

The Torah is filled with mitzvot, 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 mitzvot 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 mitzvot 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 mitzvot.

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

The Keini Challenge

Rabbi Moshe Taragin

Bilam was certainly persistent. He desperately tried to jinx the Jewish people with pagan spells. When his attempts were repeatedly thwarted, he finally realized that everything, including human speech, is mandated by Hashem. He returns to his homeland of Midyan in shame, deprived of the riches and rewards he so desperately coveted. This has been a wasted road trip for the legendary prophet from Midyan.

Before he departs though, he delivers a final message, this time a prophecy, rather than a curse. Casting his gaze to the end of time, he maps the Messianic era. After portraying the arrival of Moshiach as a meteoric star which shoots across heavens, Bilam chronicles the fall of Edom, Amalek and Ashur, all of whom will be punished for their historical crimes against Jewish history. Bilam’s Messianic landscape is extremely binary: we are redeemed while our enemies, effectively enemies of Hashem, are vanquished. There is no space for neutrality.

Yet, there is one nation whose fate isn’t predetermined, and they receive historical advice from Bilam. This visionary prophet encourages the tribe of Keini to construct a durable home or a “nest” as strong as a boulder. Who are the Keini tribe and what role do they play within Bilam’s Messianic system?

To better understand the Keini model we must inspect

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.

an interesting contradiction about the role of gentiles in the Messianic era. Two Messianic Models

Our prophets presented two conflicting Messianic fates for the international community. Many prophecies describe gentile nations enjoying universal spiritual and material prosperity. Humanity finally acknowledges the Jews as divine agents, tasked with educating Man about monotheism and morality. By contrast, other Messianic prophecies depict violent apocalyptic wars with mass casualties and major population destructions.

Often the very same navi formulates contradictory narratives. In perek 49 Yeshayahu depicts foreign nations fostering and nurturing Jewish destiny- והיו מלכים אומניך ושרותיהם מניקותיך . Yet, in perek 63, Yeshayahu describes Hashem as figuratively returning from battle with bloodied clothing or חמוץ בגדים .

Evidently, some gentiles survive the Messianic era and others do not. Righteous nations benefit from Messianic prosperity while the wicked do not. None of these prophecies though, list the precise qualifications for survival or annihilation.

Historical Affiliation

Presumably, the most important factor influencing Messianic fate is the historical role of various gentile nations. Nations which were kind or even embracing of

Jews, and certainly those which aided Jewish history, join the Messianic era. By contrast, those who persecuted Jews, and, certainly, those who clashed with Jewish history will be punished and discarded from that era.

It remains unclear how this historical accountability will unfold. After all, should a modern-day Roman be held accountable for the despicable actions of Vespasian? Should an average German citizen be sentenced for the crimes of the Nazi regime? Our moral sensibilities rail against collective punishment, not to mention historical culpability for sins committed centuries ago, but our prophecies do imply intergenerational responsibility. These are difficult questions, which only Moshiach himself will answer, but Bilam informed the world that decisions of nations affect their long-term historical trajectories in the Messianic era.

The Keini

Which brings us to the curious case of the Keini tribe. They originally occupied a tract of land near Israel, which was included in the territory divinely gifted to Avraham. Ultimately, this nomadic people wandered the ancient Middle East, inhabiting areas south of Israel, as well as southern regions of Israel proper.

Living in these precincts, they could have easily associated with our sworn enemies, the Midyanites and Amalek, each of which lived in that general vicinity. Recognizing this scenario, Bilam strongly encouraged them to cast their lot with the Jews and to build a solid nest for their future. Fortunately, for their sake, they obliged and affiliated themselves with Jewish history.

Yitro, a Midyanite priest who hailed from Keini origin, was the first to choose Jewish destiny for his tribe, by marrying his daughter to Moshe Rabeinu. Decades later, Otniel a Keinite half-brother of the righteous spy named Calev, spearheaded the conquest of an Israeli city named Kiryat Sefer, receiving Calev's daughter's hand in marriage as reward. By following Bilam's historical instructions,

Blessing from Curse

Mrs. Michal Horowitz

In the second of this week's parshios (Chukas-Balak in Chutz la'Aretz), we learn of Balak, the king of Moav, who hired Bilaam, the Prophet/Sorcerer, to curse the Jewish nation. As Am Yisrael was camped on the borders of the Promised Land, and as they had begun to conquer

Keini continued to make the right choice,

Of course, the most epic Keini decision occurred when a woman named Yael subdued a Midyanite general named Sisra, clinching our victory in a very tense war. She just happened to be the wife of Chovav, a Keini chieftain who had relocated to the north of Israel. By consistently siding with our people, Keini secured a strong Messianic future.

The Keini Template

This Keinite experience serves as a template for general gentile nations: affiliation with the Jewish nation assures Messianic relevance, whereas hostility to Jews assures historical oblivion.

As history begins to end, and the arc of redemption becomes clearer, we acquire a better sense of which nations have passed the Keini challenge. Our people's return to our homeland would not have been possible without the support of the West. Fresh off their impressive victories in two major 20th century wars, the Western alliance, led by the United States, threw its full diplomatic weight behind the formation of the state of Israel. These nations seem to be Keini successes.

Closer to home, we have benefitted from staunch support of the local Druze population which has valiantly defended our people and our homeland, equal partners in building Israeli society. They are literally walking in the footsteps of the Keini.

By contrast some of the assistance we have received from gentile religions has been perplexing. Evangelical Christians view our return as confirmation of their own Messianic narratives and enthusiastically support our people. This awkward and unprecedented situation causes much ideological discomfort and no clear answers.

When Moshiach finally arrives, we will know the full Keini roster. Until then, we wait patiently, celebrating the renewed gentile support of our people and looking to the day that most of humanity will bask in the knowledge of Hashem.

territory on Ever la'Yarden (the Eastern side of the Jordan River), Balak hoped to decimate the Israelites through incantations and curses. Much to his dismay, Bilaam is unsuccessful in his attempts to curse the Jews. Rather than curse them, G-d puts prophetic utterances into his

mouth, and he blesses the nation with a series of beautiful blessings.

Perhaps the most famous of all of Bilaam's blessings is the one with which we begin our daily tefillos every morning: מִשְׁכְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל; יַעֲקֹב; מֵה-טִבּוֹ אֶהְלִיךְ, יַעֲקֹב; *How goodly are your tents, O Yaakov, your dwelling places, Israel* (Bamidbar 24:5). The Sages teach us that this blessing refers to our batei midrashos and batei k'nesiyos - our yeshivos and our shuls, the bastions of our nation, from where Torah and tefillah emanate (Sanhedrin 105b).

While this is a very beautiful bracha indeed, the reality is that Bilaam wanted to curse, not bless, the nation! Yes, G-d redirected his intentions and gave him words of inspiration to say, but this was not of his own volition. Just like so many of our enemies throughout time, Bilaam was attempting to bring ruination, destruction, and curses upon Israel.

It is perplexing, therefore, that of all the thousands of moving pasukim (verses) found in the twenty-four books of Tanach, it is this very verse with which we begin tefillas Shachris every morning! There are pasukim related to our Avos and Imahos (forefathers and foremothers), many pasukim related to the tenacity of Am Yisrael, and our Biblical heroes and heroines, beautiful and hopeful nevuos (prophecies) related to the geula and end of days. And yet, the verse with which every Jew begins Shachris is from the prophecy of Bilaam ha'Rasha (Bilaam the wicked), *mah tovu ohalech Yaakov...*

What lesson can be derived from this seemingly perplexing choice of words with which we open our daily prayers? Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm z'l teaches (in a drasha penned and presented in 1954), "If all of Israel has accepted it (this verse) 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 tovu' (to open our daily prayers) ... is the very ability to wring a blessing out of a curse. We say 'mah tovu' not despite the fact that was it 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 worst, to squeeze holiness out of profanity. From the evil and diabolical intentions of Bilaam, for what

he intended to say was, 'May you not have any synagogues and schools,' we molded a blessing of 'mah tovu,' which we recite just as we enter those very blessed halls of worship and study.

"... *Mah tovu* teaches, and reminds, us that there is some good in everything bad. The greatness of humanity, the greatness of Judaism, consists of our ability to rescue that good and build upon it ... Jewish history is rich in such examples of making the best of the worst, of transforming the curse into a blessing. The Temple and sacrificial offerings were destroyed, so our forefathers reacted to the destruction with prayer, the 'service of the heart.' Jerusalem and its schools were ruined, so they decided that Torah is not dependent upon geography, and they built Yavneh, where they accomplished even more than in Jerusalem. British Foreign Minister 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 ... The Jewish way is blessing from curse. We have never surrendered to curse. We have always poked around in its wreckage, found the spark we were looking for, and converted the whole curse into one great blessing. That is what is implied in reciting 'mah tovu' as the opening verse of our daily prayers. We pray to G-d: continue that power within us, let us always make the best of the worst - blessing from curse.

"[And if it is so with our nation] it is so, and should be so, with every individual. Misfortunes, should they never occur, have their redeeming qualities ... In the inner shells of curse there lies the spark of blessing. The aim and goal of prayer is not to change G-d, but to change ourselves ... Whoever prays truly knows that somewhere, sometime, he or she has been caught in the web of 'curse.' 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 ability to change evil to good, curse to blessing. We want to transform ourselves. That is the spirit of the prayerful personality ... How good and how fortunate is a people who can forever hope and smile, knowing that even if, Heaven forbid, curse could be its lot, it will wring out of it every drop of blessing. This, indeed, is the greatest blessing. '*Mah tovu*,' how good" (Derashot Ledorot, Numbers, p.133-137).

Perhaps this very deep, insightful and relevant insight is one of the most powerful modern day interpretations of 'mah tovu.' Every morning we beseech G-d for our needs, wants, hopes and desires. We praise, give thanks, laud and

glorify Him. We tell Him how we feel through the ups and downs in life. But with what prayer do we begin our daily communion with G-d? Mah tovu; please G-d, no matter what this day may bring, grant me the strength, courage, foresight, perseverance, equanimity and faith to change and channel every situation in life into one of great blessing.

And so, we do not recite this verse as the first of the day

despite the fact that it was intended as a curse. Rather, we recite this verse as the first of the day specifically because it was intended as a curse; a curse that was changed into a glorious blessing.

It is a lesson and reminder to our nation, and to all of us, as to how we must live our lives as faithful, devoted and believing Jews: מִזֶּה-טָבוֹ אֵהְלִידָהּ, יִעֲקֹב; מִשְׁכַּנְתֶּיהָ, יִשְׂרָאֵל.

Hashem's Love for His People

Rabbi Efreim Goldberg

Parshas Balak tells the famous story of Bilam's unsuccessful attempts to place a curse on Benei Yisrael. Balak, king of Moav, hired Bilam to curse Benei Yisrael, whom Balak saw as a threat to the region, but each time Bilam attempted to prophetically curse them, God had him communicate a beautiful blessing, instead.

One basic question that arises regarding this story is why God felt it was important to prevent Bilam from cursing Benei Yisrael. Quite obviously, God is capable of overriding any curse anyone pronounces about anyone else. Why did He not simply allow Bilam to curse Benei Yisrael, and then ignore it? To the contrary, it would seem that this would have yielded a greater kiddush Hashem, as everyone would have seen that they cannot do anything to inflict harm on God's beloved nation. Why, then, did God decide to prevent Bilam from placing his curse?

Rav Yisroel Meir Druck, in *Eish Tamid*, explains that this was necessary for the future. Many years later, it would become necessary for God to punish the Jewish Nation, and bring upon them harsh calamities. When this would happen, people might come along and attribute the suffering and hardship to Bilam's curse. They might claim that the curse had a delayed effect, and Am Yisrael endured exile and persecution not because of their wrongdoing, but because of Bilam's power, the curse he had placed on them long ago. In order to avoid such claims, Hashem decided to intervene and prevent Bilam from uttering the curses that he sought to place upon Benei Yisrael.

Rav Druck then offers a second explanation. He writes that even though Bilam's curse would have had no effect whatsoever on Benei Yisrael, nevertheless, Hashem did not want such things said about His cherished nation. When we love somebody, we cannot bear to hear harsh words spoken about his or her, not to mention curses placed on that person. The same is true of Hashem's love for the

Jewish Nation. He refused to allow curses spoken about us because of His infinite love for His people. This parsha, then, reminds us of just how much Hashem loves each and every one of us, and desires a close relationship with all His precious children.