**S.A.L.T. PARASHAT BALAK**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

In his third blessing to *Benei Yisrael*, Bilam compares the nation to “*ganot alei nahar*” – gardens planted along a river (24:6). Gardens planted near rivers are especially lush because of the constant supply of water. According to the plain meaning of the verse, then, Bilam compares the beauty and grandeur of *Am Yisrael* to that of a magnificent garden.

The Midrash, however, in *Tanna De-bei Eliyahu* *Rabba* (21:7), explains this verse differently:

What is meant by “like gardens by the river”? This refers to the schoolteachers among Israel, who produce wisdom, understanding, knowledge and intelligence from their hearts and teach the students to perform the will of their Father in heaven.

The image of a river’s fresh water producing beautiful greenery and lush vegetation is understood here as a metaphor for the teachers of Torah, who communicate to their students the beauty and magnificence of Torah life and Torah values. The Tolna Rebbe explained that the Midrash refers here to the need to expose children and students to the beauty and joy of Torah life. It is not enough to teach; parents and educators must allow their charges to experience the gratification of Torah, that it can be enjoyed like the sight of a magnificent garden. And thus the Midrash compared the Torah taught by effective teachers to the breathtaking, exhilarating sight of a lush garden sustained by a healthy supply of water.

The Tolna Rebbe explained that for this reason, *Tanna De-bei Eliyahu* here applauds the efforts of the teachers who produce the desired results “from their hearts.” Teaching and educating in a manner that evokes joy and enthusiasm requires emotional investment. It necessitates not only the skills to clearly and effectively communicate the information, but also a genuine display of love and concern for the child or student. The joy of Torah alluded to in this verse can be evoked only when we teach and tend to our charges “from our hearts,” which sincere and selfless devotion, appreciating their potential and eagerly awaiting its full realization.

Sunday

The Torah in Parashat Balak tells the famous story of Bilam’s journey to Moav, during which the donkey which he rode began speaking to him. God sent an angel to block Bilam’s route, and on three occasions, the donkey saw the angel – which remained invisible to Bilam – and was forced to either veer from the road or to stop moving altogether. Each time, Bilam reacted by violently striking the donkey, until finally, after the third time, God empowered the donkey to speak, and it asked Bilam, “What have I done to you, that you have beaten me on three occasions?" (22:28).

The *Midrash Tanchuma*, cited by Rashi, notes the significance of the word “*regalim*” used by the donkey in reference to the three occasions in which it was beaten. This word, the Midrash claims, was intended as a subtle allusion to the *shalosh regalim* – the three pilgrimage festivals (Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot) when all *Benei Yisrael* would assemble in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. The donkey was essentially telling Bilam, in the Midrash’s words, “You are seeking to annihilate a nation that celebrates three *regalim* each year!” Many writers and *darshanim* have tried to identify the point of connection between Bilam’s violence towards the donkey and the three pilgrimage festivals.

One explanation that has been offered draws upon the contrast between Bilam’s impatience, as displayed in this episode, and the festival celebrations in Jerusalem. The obligation of *shalosh regalim* required *Benei Yisrael* to travel far from home and take a significant amount of time off from their regular occupations and affairs. As each festival approached, the entire nation had to put their lives on hold so they could prepare to journey to the *Beit Ha-mikdash* and spend time there to celebrate with God. Bilam, by contrast, lost his temper and his composure when his donkey veered off the road or crouched for just a few moments. He did not have the patience for even these relatively minor setbacks along his journey to Moav. *Chazal* thus seek to draw our attention to one of the important messages of the *regalim*, the need to occasionally break for our day-to-day routines and the frenzy of daily life to devote ourselves to lofty matters. As opposed to Bilam, who was unable to tolerate even a brief detour, we must be prepared to occasionally steer from our routine without getting flustered. The festivals are thus invoked in this context to take note of Bilam’s impatience when he encountered a few “bumps along the road,” and to urge us not to follow this example.

(Based on Rav Moshe Deutsch’s [*Derushei Ve-chiddushei Ha-Rambad*](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=38042&st=&pgnum=106&hilite=))

Monday

The Mishna in *Pirkei Avot* (5:13) famously lists three qualities that make a person “among the students of our patriarch Avraham” – namely, “a good eye, a lowly spirit, and a humble soul.” If one possesses the three opposite qualities, the Mishna says – meaning, he has “a negative eye, a haughty spirit, and an arrogant soul” – then he is “among the students of the evil Bilam.”

The question arises, are these truly the only points of distinction between Avraham and Bilam? *Chazal* portray Bilam as a cruel, greedy, immoral villain. Can we really identify only three differences between him and Avraham?

The Tolna Rebbe answers this question by noting Avraham and Bilam’s respective beginnings. Avraham, of course, was raised in a pagan home, and the Rambam (Hilkhot Avodat Kokhavim 1:3) emphasizes that Avraham had nobody at all teaching him about monotheistic faith. With Avraham’s background and upbringing, he would normally have become just another pagan. Yet, as a result of his intensive process of contemplation, as the Rambam there describes, Avraham emerged as one of the greatest human beings that ever lived. By contrast, *Avot De-Rabbi Natan* (2:5) says that Bilam was born circumcised, indicating that he was born with exceptional talents and spiritual potential. This is also likely the meaning of *Chazal*’s famous comment (*Bamidbar Rabba* 14:20) that Bilam had prophetic capabilities equal to those of Moshe Rabbenu. Bilam was a man of great potential, but he misused his talents and became an evil man.

In light of this, the Tolna Rebbe suggests that the Mishna in Avot seeks not to note the distinctions between Avraham and Bilam – of which they are, undoubtedly, too many to enumerate – but rather to identify why it is that Avraham rose to great heights while Bilam sank to the lowest depths. Why did Avraham emerge from such humble beginnings to the stature of greatness he attained, while Bilam, who was endowed with outstanding talents, grew to become such an evil man? The Mishna answers by noting the qualities of “a good eye, a lowly spirit, and a humble soul.” Avraham became great by seeing the goodness in others without demanding honor for himself. The key to growth is humility, honestly recognizing one’s own faults and deficiencies, and acknowledging that he still has a great deal to learn and achieve. Conversely, Bilam’s downfall was caused by his arrogance, his overconfidence, his belief that he knew all he had to know, and his preoccupation with the vain pursuit of prestige and recognition. Arrogance has the effect of preventing growth and sending one on a downward, self-destructive spiral of sin, and so despite Bilam’s potential for greatness, he led a wicked, sinful life as a result of his arrogance.

Thus, the Mishna refers not to the “final products” of Avraham and Bilam, but rather to the spiritual processes that turned them into the kind of men they were. It instructs that regardless of our background, upbringing, and natural talents, we can become great like Avraham Avinu or wicked like Bilam, depending on our outlook on ourselves and on others. If we look at others with a “good eye” and ourselves with a “lowly spirit” and “humble soul,” we will then focus our attention on building ourselves and growing, rather than satisfying our need for self-fulfillment by finding fault in other people and looking upon them with arrogant condescension.

Tuesday

Before Bilam made his final attempt to place a curse upon *Benei Yisrael*, he looked out onto the nation and saw them “residing according to their tribes” (“*shokhein li-shvatav*”), whereupon “the spirit of God” rested upon him, inspiring him to bless them (24:2). Bilam then proceeded to proclaim the most famous of his blessings: “*Ma tovu ohalekha Yaakov, mishkenotekha Yisrael*” – “How good are your tents, of Yaakov; your residences, O Israel!”

The Gemara, in a famous passage in Masekhet Bava Batra (60a) cited by Rashi, comments that Bilam was impressed when he noticed “*she-ein pitcheihen mekhuvanin zeh ke-neged zeh*" – the entrances to *Benei Yisrael*’s tents were not positioned opposite each other. The plain meaning of this remark is that the people were sensitive to the importance of privacy, and thus they arranged their tents in a manner that would ensure that families would be unable to see one another’s personal affairs.

Rav Asher of Ropshitz (cited in [*Eser Tzachtzachot*, p. 103](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=43372&st=&pgnum=103&hilite=)) suggested a deeper explanation of the Gemara’s remark. He explained that all righteous people have their own individual “entrance” through which they seek to develop their relationship with God. While we all follow the same Torah and are bound by the same laws, the Torah allows room for diverse areas of focus and approaches. Rav Asher thus suggested that the Gemara speaks here of the fact that *Benei Yisrael*’s “entrances” to *avodat Hashem* were not all identical. They pitched their “tents” together, yet there was a degree of diversity in their approaches. And thus Bilam was inspired to praise the variety of “tents” and “residences” of *Am Yisrael*.

This novel, Chassidic reading of the text is not necessarily at odds with the plain meaning. *Chazal* describe how *Benei Yisrael* lived with their eyes focused primarily on their own “tents,” on their own affairs, without peering into the lives of others. When we live properly, we direct our eyes towards ourselves and our families, trying to fulfill God’s will to the best of our abilities, without focusing our attention on other people’s affairs. Of course, our responsibilities include offering assistance and guidance to others when the need arises, but our attention should be directed mainly to our “own” tents, rather than to the lives of others. And this includes charting a path in *avodat Hashem* that suits our individual personalities, skills and talents, rather than trying to mimic others. Certainly, we can and must gain inspiration and guidance from worthy role models whose qualities should be emulated, but only as part of our effort to maximize our own individual potential and to utilize our unique, God-given skills for the right purposes. Even as we occasionally glance at other people’s “tents” to learn from their example, ultimately, we need to ensure to enter through our own individual “entrance,” and follow the path that is most suitable for the unique role that God has assigned each and every one of us.

Wednesday

The Torah in Parashat Balak tells of Bilam’s unusual experiences as he made his way to Moav in response to Balak’s request that he come and place a curse upon *Benei Yisrael*. On three occasions as Bilam journeyed, an angel obstructed his path, but made itself visible only to Bilam’s donkey, and not to Bilam himself. The second time this happened, the Torah says, Bilam was traveling along a road passing through a vineyard, and it was surrounded on either side by a fence – “*gader mi-zeh ve-gader mi-zeh*” (22:24). When the donkey saw the angel blocking the road, it veered to the side to go around the angel, crushing Bilam’s leg against the fence in the process.

The Midrash (*Bamidbar Rabba* 20), interestingly, detects a parallel between the Torah’s description of the fence and a verse earlier, in Sefer Shemot (32:15), which tells that the stone tablets given to Moshe at Mount Sinai were inscribed “*mi-zeh u-mi’zeh*” – “on either side.” The meaning of this parallel, the Midrash explains, is that God was subtly warning Bilam, “You are unable to overpower them, as they have in their possession tablets inscribed from either side…”

What is the special significance of the fact that the script of the *luchot* (tablets) was visible on both sides, and why did *Chazal* associate this detail with the fenced road that Bilam traveled?

The two-sided lettering on the *luchot* likely symbolizes the unconditional relevance and applicability of the Torah. The writing was visible regardless of the direction from which it was viewed, to indicate to us that the Torah’s laws are binding no matter where we are, regardless of our circumstances, and irrespective of the historical period in which we live. Although one generation’s circumstances differ drastically from those of another generation, the laws written on the tablets are equally visible to them both, and equally binding upon them both. *Chazal* perhaps seek to illustrate this point by associating the writing on the *luchot* with the image of a path closed on either side by a sturdy fence. We are incapable of “escaping” from Torah, of finding a situation or set of circumstances that absolves us of our obligations. We are privileged to live our lives within two “fences,” within the boundaries and guidelines set for us by the Torah, which ensure that we follow the proper path set for us by God.

Bilam, the Gemara (Berakhot 7a) comments, knew the time when God becomes angry each day, and sought to capitalize on this knowledge by cursing the nation at that precise moment. We might explain this to mean that Bilam tried to find the one area of life in which *Benei Yisrael* excused themselves from their Torah obligations, a time period or situation when they veered beyond the “fence” and released themselves from the yoke of divine kingship. As there was no such moment in the day, Bilam was compelled to bless the people. *Benei Yisrael* truly felt bound to God’s dictates at all times and under all circumstances, and so Bilam could not find a time when God was angry and when the people were thus susceptible to his curse.

His “solution” was to advise Balak to lure *Benei Yisrael* to sin through sexual temptation, by dispatching attractive women to entice the people to worship idols and embrace the decadent lifestyle of Moav. Bilam cleverly understood the power of this particular human weakness to cause people to break through the “fences” of discipline and morality. This was Balak’s only chance of luring *Benei Yisrael* off the “fenced road” which they faithfully followed, so that God’s anger would be aroused against His nation. And so Bilam orchestrated the plot of *Ba’al Pe’or*, which, as we read in Parashat Pinchas (25:11), would have succeeded in bringing about the annihilation of *Benei Yisrael*, if not for Pinchas’ act of zealotry which caused *Benei Yisrael* to withdraw from the Moavites and thus ended the plague that God had unleashed against them.

Thursday

The Gemara, in a startling passage in Masekhet Berakhot (12b), tells that *Chazal* considered instituting the daily recitation of Parashat Balak as part of the daily *keri’at Shema*. Like the portion which they ultimately chose as the third paragraph of *Shema* (“*va-yomer*”), Parashat Balak makes mention of the Exodus from Egypt (24:80, and thus this portion could, in principle, be read to fulfill the daily obligation of recalling the Exodus. This portion is especially appropriate for the daily *Shema* recitation, the Gemara explains, because it includes Bilam’s metaphoric description of *Benei Yisrael* as a lion lying peacefully and securely (24:9), referring to God’s protection of His people when we sleep and when we arise (see Rashi’s commentary to the Gemara). The reason why *Chazal* decided against the daily recitation of this parasha, the Gemara explains, is *tircha de-tzibura* – its length would unduly inconvenience worshippers.

Numerous writers and *darshanim* explored possible approaches to understanding the deeper significance of the Gemara’s comment. What factors may have prompted *Chazal* to consider requiring the daily recitation of this parasha? How might this parasha be especially relevant to the daily *Shema* recitation?

Rav Yitzchak Orlinsky (of Yeshivat Nevarduk in Poland), in an article reproduced in [*Ha-pardes* (69:1)](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=12724&st=&pgnum=29&hilite=), explained that the character of Bilam conveys a vitally important message that bears particular relevance to the experience of the *Shema* recitation, when we accept upon ourselves the yoke of divine kingship (*kabbalat ol malkhut Shamayim*). Throughout the story told in Parashat Balak, Bilam displays absolute obedience to God’s commands. He deviates not one iota from God’s instructions, refusing to accept Balak’s invitation until God grants permission, and repeatedly emphasizing to Balak that he is capable of doing only that which God allows. However, *Chazal* find numerous clues in the verses of Bilam’s greed, arrogance, selfishness, cruelty and depravity. He was a corrupt person who knew how to exercise his corruption while “playing by the rules.” He excelled in presenting the image of a moral and righteous man, and flouting his wisdom and prophetic insight, while in truth being debased and immoral.

As we accept upon ourselves the *ol malkhut Shamayim* each morning and evening, we must remember that committing ourselves to divine authority means more than strict, technical obedience. It means molding our characters, our value systems, our goals and aspirations, our mindset and our overall outlook on life in accordance with the divine will. *Kabbalat ol malkhut Shamayim* includes overcoming natural human vices such as greed, overindulgence and conceit. The idea to include Parashat Balak in the daily reading of *Shema* was to remind us that our acceptance of God’s kingship and authority must affect every fiber of our characters and inform every decision we make, every word speak, and every goal we choose to pursue. Bilam’s mistake was thinking that he can be a loyal servant of God without refining his character, while living a life pursuing material wealth and physical gratification, a life bereft of moral responsibility and ethical sensitivity. *Chazal* sought to ensure that we avoid this mistake by including Parashat Balak in our daily *Shema*. And although this idea was deemed practically unfeasible, we must continually reinforce the message that there cannot be *kabbalat ol malkhut Shamayim* without a commitment to the lifelong process of *tikkun ha-middot* (character refinement), to continually working and striving to perfect our characters and follow the very highest moral and spiritual standards.

Friday

In Bilam’s second blessing to *Benei Yisrael*, he compares the nation to lion that rises from its sleep (“*Hein am ke-lavi yakum ve-kha’ari yitnasa*” – 23:24). Rashi explains this analogy as a reference to the *mitzvot* we perform each morning: “When they arise from their sleep in the morning, they are mighty like a lion…to grab the *mitzvot* – to wear a *tallit*, to read *Shema*, and to lay *tefillin*.”

Several writers noted that Rashi here lists the morning *mitzvot* in the wrong sequence, mentioning the recitation of *Shema* before wearing *tefillin*. The Gemara (Berakhot 14b) states explicitly that one should not recite *Shema* without wearing *tefillin*, as by doing so, he “falsely testifies about himself.” As the text of *Shema* includes references to the *mitzva* of *tefillin*, one who recites *Shema* without wearing *tefillin* gives the impression that he speaks falsely and does not truly believe the text he recites. Yet, Rashi reverses the sequence, mentioning *Shema* before *tefillin*.

In truth, some editions of Rashi’s commentary feature a different text, listing *tefillin* before *Shema*. This is also the sequence that appears in the *Midrash Tanchuma*, the source of Rashi’s comment.

A fascinating explanation for the sequence that appears in the common editions of Rashi is offered by Rav Yitzchak Shmelkes, in his [*Beit Yitzchak* (O.C. 17)](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=626&st=&pgnum=72). The context of his discussion is the custom which many Jews apparently followed in his time, to recite all three paragraphs of *Shema* immediately upon awakening in the morning, before putting on *tefillin*. To justify this custom, Rav Shmelkes suggests that *Halakha* perhaps does not accept the ruling cited by the Gemara that *Shema* should be recited only after one puts on his *tefillin*. He cites the ruling of the *Nimukei Yosef*, brought by the *Beit Yosef* (O.C. 25), that one must put on *tzitzit* before *tefillin*, because of the famous rule of “*tadir ve-she’eino tadir, tadir kodem*” – more frequent *mitzvot* are performed before less frequent *mitzvot*. As the *mitzva* of *tefillin* does not apply on Shabbat and Yom Tov, it is less frequent than *tzitzit*, and therefore, one should perform the *mitzva* of *tzitzit* before performing the *mitzva* of *tefillin*. According to this rationale, Rav Shmelkes writes, we should also fulfill the *mitzva* of *Shema* before the *mitzva* of *tefillin*, as *Shema* is recited even on Shabbat and Yom Tov, whereas the *mitzva* of *tefillin* does not apply on Shabbat and Yom Tov. Rav Shmelkes explains that when the Gemara in Masekhet Berakhot required putting on *tefillin* before reciting *Shema*, it was following the view cited in Masekhet Eruvin (95b) that the *mitzva* of *tefillin* is applicable even on Shabbat and holidays. According to this view, the obligation of *Shema* does not apply more frequently than *tefillin*, and thus the view cited by the Gemara in Berakhot felt that *tefillin* should be put on before *Shema*, so that they will be worn at the time when one mentions the *tefillin* obligation while reciting *Shema*. *Halakha*, however, does not accept this view, and we do not wear *tefillin* on Shabbat and Yom Tov. According to the accepted practice, then, *Shema* applies more frequently than *tefillin*, and this is the reason underlying the custom to recite *Shema* right when one awakens, before putting on *tefillin*. Rav Shmelkes suggests that this might be the reason why Rashi in Parashat Balak mentions *Shema* before *tefillin*, as *Shema* applies more frequently and thus should, according to this analysis, be recited before one puts on his *tefillin*.

**THE FIRST DECADE OF SALT ARCHIVES CAN BE FOUND AT:**

[**www.etzion.org.il/en/salt-archives.html**](http://etzion.org.il/en/salt-surf-little-torah-archives)

**MORE RECENT INSTALLMENTS OF SALT DIVREI TORAH CAN BE FOUND AT:**

[www.etzion.org.il/en/topics/salt-surf-little-torah-weekly-files](http://www.etzion.org.il/en/topics/salt-surf-little-torah-weekly-files)