**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT BALAK**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

Parashat Balak tells the story of Balak’s commissioning Bilam to place a curse upon *Benei Yisrael*, whom he perceived as a direct threat to his kingdom, Moav. When Bilam arrived in Moav, Balak took him to a place from which he was able to see “*ketzei ha-am*” – “the edge of the nation” (22:41). Later, too, when Balak and Bilam made their second attempt to curse *Benei Yisrael*, Balak emphasized to Bilam that he was taking him to a place from where he would see only the “edge” of *Benei Yisrael* (23:13).

The term “*ketzei ha-am*” brings to mind a similar term mentioned earlier in Sefer Bamidbar, in the brief account of the punishment brought against *Benei Yisrael* in response to their complaints after leaving Mount Sinai. The Torah tells that God sent a fire that consumed “*bi-ktzei ha-machaneh*” – those on the “edge of the camp” (11:1). Rashi, based on the *Sifrei*, explains that this refers to the riffraff, the lower elements of the nation. If the word “*ketzei*” in the context of the people’s complaints during travel denotes the lowliest members of the nation, then perhaps the *Sifrei* would interpret this word here in Parashat Balak along similar lines. That is to say, the *Sifrei* might explain that Balak specifically showed Bilam the lowest elements of *Benei Yisrael*. Indeed, the *Midrash Ha-gadol* interprets “*ketzei ha-am*” to mean that Balak showed Bilam the sinful members of the nation. This is also likely the intent of *Targum Yonatan ben Uziel*, which explains that Balak showed Bilam the tribe of Dan, which, as we know from an earlier verse in Sefer Bamidbar (10:25), traveled last, and which presumably encamped at the edge of the camp, as well. Now the Midrash (*Pesikta Rabbati* 12) comments that the tribe of Dan worshipped idols even during this period, when *Benei Yisrael* journeyed in the wilderness. And thus if, indeed, “*ketzei ha-am*” refers to the tribe of Dan, the choice to show Bilam this tribe was likely made due to it lowly stature, as it was guilty of idol worship.

As Balak’s goal was to facilitate Bilam’s placement of a curse upon *Benei Yisrael*, it is understandable that he would direct his attention to the least impressive and least likeable elements of *Benei Yisrael*. He wanted Bilam to arouse divine anger upon *Benei Yisrael*, and the best way to accomplish this, in his mind, was to show Bilam the riffraff, the segments of the nation which could be easily criticized, condemned and disliked. It’s easy to point to a problematic subgroup and judge the entire group on that basis. If we want to find fault in any group of people, we can, in most cases, find one member or a handful of members who can legitimately be criticized. Bilam’s approach was to cast the failings of one segment as a reflection and representation of the entire nation, as an accurate portrait of *Benei Yisrael*’s overall nature and essence. We, who are bidden to follow the example of Avraham Avinu, the antithesis of Bilam (Avot 5:19), must avoid judging the whole on the basis of an impious minority. We are instructed to look at people with the “*ayin tova*” of Avraham Avinu, focusing and highlighting all that is admirable and praiseworthy, rather than looking to criticize and find fault.

Sunday

The Torah in Parashat Balak tells the amusing story of Bilam’s journey from his homeland to Moav, where he was summoned for the purpose of placing a curse upon *Benei Yisrael*. Three times during the journey, his donkey either veered from the path or stopped because he saw an obstruction that was invisible to Bilam, and on all three occasions, Bilam struck the donkey. After the third beating, God made the donkey speak, and it berated Bilam for his violence.

A famous Mishna in Avot (5:6) lists the mouth of Bilam’s donkey as one of the ten things that “were created on Friday, at twilight.” Meaning, in the closing moments of the six days of creation, just before God set the natural order into motion, He introduced these ten exceptions, foreseeing the time when the natural order will need to be temporarily suspended. These included phenomena such as the ground’s opening to devour the leaders of Korach’s revolt, and the miraculous stone in the desert which produced water for *Benei Yisrael*. These phenomena were “built in,” as it were, to the natural order, as these exceptions to the laws of nature were foreseen already at the time of creation, when God prearranged that they should occur.

We might adopt a symbolic approach to explain the significance of the exception of Bilam’s donkey’s faculty of speech. Normally, we receive instructions and guidance from those more intelligent than us, from people with more knowledge, insight, wisdom or life experience. The standard, natural way the world operates is that knowledgeable people like Bilam, who prided himself over knowing “God’s mind” (“*yodei’a da’at elyon*” – 24:16), who was world renowned for his prophetic powers, instruct and impart knowledge to the “donkey” – to the ignorant. However, although this is the standard direction in which knowledge and wisdom is transmitted, God created the world in such a way that allows for exceptional circumstances where the “donkey” instructs and reprimands the “wise.” He made it possible for those with little knowledge, understanding or experience to have what to teach the brilliant, accomplished scholars. Although this is not the standard arrangement, it can and does happen, as a sort of built-in exception to the general rule.

If this symbolic reading is correct, then the Mishna here bids us to be open to learn and gain from all people, including those who strike us as having nothing to teach. There are times when even the “donkey” can teach the “prophet,” when an exceedingly wise individual is able to learn and gain insight from a far less knowledgeable person. We must therefore remain open and attentive to lessons we can learn from anybody with whom we come in contact, recognizing the potential that every person has to teach us something valuable and enhance our knowledge and understanding.

Monday

At the end of his first blessing to *Benei Yisrael*, Bilam proclaimed, “May my soul die the death of [their] upright ones, and may my end be like theirs!” (23:10) – wishing that he would die the way the righteous among *Benei Yisrael* die. The Ramban explains that Bilam saw how the righteous earn a share in *Gan Eden* after death, whereas the wicked are condemned, and so he expressed his wish that he die in a state of piety like the righteous among *Benei Yisrael*. Seforno explains in a slightly different vein, suggesting that Bilam expressed his willingness to die right there and then if he could then earn a share in the afterlife enjoyed by the righteous.

*Or Ha-chayim* offers a variety of different interpretations of this verse, one of which is that it speaks of Bilam’s wish to repent just before his death. Recognizing the enormous gulf separating between his sinful life and the sacred lifestyle of *Benei Yisrael*, Bilam felt incapable of even aspiring to such an exalted level. The best he felt he could hope for was to experience a change of heart in old age, as he lay frail seeing his end rapidly approaching. Only then, he felt, could he perhaps change and begin to resemble the “upright ones” of *Benei Yisrael*.

Bilam’s feeling of despair, as depicted by *Or Ha-chayim*, is a feeling we often experience when encountering greatness. When we meet, observe or hear of somebody who excels in a certain area far beyond anything we see ourselves being capable of, we instinctively despair, as Bilam did, figuring that we stand no chance of ever reaching that level of excellence. Encountering outstanding scholars or exceptionally pious individuals can often have a discouraging effect, leaving us feeling helplessly small and unaccomplished. However, Bilam’s reaction to the sight of *Benei Yisrael* is not a model for us to follow. Whereas Bilam – as described by *Or Ha-chayim* – reacted with despair, figuring that he could aspire only to repent in his final days of life, we should react to an exposure to greatness by sincerely resolving to inch closer to greatness. Even if we truly believe that we will never actually reach that level, we should commit ourselves to advancing. Encountering greatness should not discourage us from trying, but rather inspire us to move forward. At those moments in life when we feel small and unaccomplished, our conclusion should be that we should try harder to improve, not that we are forever stuck in our current condition.

The opening verses of Parashat Balak tell of the fear that gripped the nation of Moav upon the conquest of their neighboring territory by *Benei Yisrael*. The Torah relates that Moav was terrified, adding, “*va-yakatz Moav mipenei Benei Yisrael*” (22:3). Rashi does not interpret this phrase, but rather comments, “*katzu be-chayeihem*,” subtly referencing Rivka’s remark to Yitzchak in Sefer Bereishit (27:46) insisting that Yaakov not marry a Chittite woman: “*Katzti be-chayai mipenei benot Cheit*” – “I am repulsed by the women of Cheit.” If so, then the phrase “*va-yakatz Moav*” refers not to fear, but to disgust. The question then arises as to the relevance of Moav’s contempt for *Benei Yisrael* in this context. Moav’s fear of *Benei Yisrael* is described as the introduction to the story of Balak’s attempt to have Bilam place a curse on *Benei Yisrael* to protect Moav from the threat *Benei Yisrael* allegedly posed. Why is it important for us to know also that Moav despised – and not just feared – *Benei Yisrael*?

This question is likely what led some commentators to explain the expression “*va-yakatz Moav*” differently. Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch understood this phrase to mean that “everything had become distasteful to them.” Due to their intense fear and anxiety, the people of Moav could not find enjoyment in anything. An entirely different approach is taken by Ibn Ezra, who suggests reading the word “*va-yakatz*” as “*va-yitzok*” – referring to distress. According to this reading, the verse describes the Moavites as experiencing anguish over their fears of what might happen in the wake of *Benei Yisrael*’s remarkable conquest of the neighboring Emorite Empire.

A more compelling explanation, perhaps, is that of Malbim, who writes that the Torah tells us of Moav’s “disgust” for *Benei Yisrael* to explain why Balak resorted to placing a curse, instead of initiating a pact or truce with *Benei Yisrael*. Ordinarily, when a nation suddenly established itself as a formidable power, neighboring countries who felt incapable of confronting that nation militarily would propose some sort of formal treaty or alliance with the new regional power. The Torah explains to us that this approach was not an option for Balak because his people loathed *Benei Yisrael* and would not accept any formal treaty with the despised nation.

If so, then this phrase perhaps points to the unfortunate phenomenon of resolvable conflicts that remain unresolved due to senseless feelings of contempt. Very often, when people or groups of people quarrel, a reasonable, mutually acceptable compromise or solution is possible, but irrational hatred make it impossible for one or both of the sides to agree to a peaceful arrangement. Just as Balak had no option of peacemaking due to his people’s disdain for *Benei Yisrael*, similarly, we occasionally find ourselves entangled in conflict due to persistent feelings of resentment, which lead us to refuse any sort of workable compromise. Contrary to Moav’s model of irrational hatred, we are to overcome negative feelings for the sake of fostering peaceful, harmonious relations with the people around us.

Tuesday

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Wednesday

In one of Rashi’s more famous comments to Parashat Balak, he draws a curious association between the story of Bilam and his donkey, and the *mitzva* of *aliya le-regel* – the obligatory pilgrimage to the *Beit Ha-mikdash* on Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot. After three occasions when Bilam violently struck his donkey because it either veered from the path or stopped, the donkey miraculously spoke, and it turned to Bilam and scolded, “What have I done to you, that you struck me three times?!” (22:28). Citing the *Midrash Tanchuma*, Rashi notes that the donkey used the word “*regalim*” for “times” (instead of the more standard “*pe’amim*”). The Midrash explained the donkey’s use of the word “*regalim*” as an allusion to the three pilgrimage festivals, to which the Torah refers as the three “*regalim*” (Shemot 23:14). The donkey was saying to Bilam, in Rashi’s words, “You seek to eliminate a nation which celebrates three *regalim* each year.” Many writers have raised the question of why the Midrash would draw this connection between Bilam’s journey to Moav, for the purpose of placing a curse upon *Benei Yisrael*, and the celebration of the *shalosh regalim*.

The Rebbe of Kotzk cleverly explained that the Midrash draws a contrast between Bilam’s angry outburst at his donkey, and *Benei Yisrael*’s peaceful gathering in Jerusalem on the *shalosh regalim*. All males among *Benei Yisrael* were required to assemble in Jerusalem on these festivals, and yet, despite the difficult, crowded conditions, the Mishna (Avot 5:5) teaches that nobody complained. Bilam, meanwhile, could not tolerate the inconvenience of his donkey veering from the path or refusing to proceed, and became unhinged, resorting to violence.

The Kotzker Rebbe here teaches us of the need for patience and maturity when we encounter the inevitable “bumps” along the journey to the “*Mikdash*,” to the performance of *mitzvot* and attainment of lofty goals. The impatient “Bilams” of the world grumble and protest at every obstacle they chance upon, whenever their journey to the realization of their goals is impeded or slowed. We, however, in our lifelong pursuit of sanctity and achievement, are to remain composed when we confront obstacles, when the journey does not proceed as smoothly as we would like. Oftentimes, the road to the “*Mikdash*” is fraught with complications and uncomfortable situations, and we must remember that the result is worth this price. And so as opposed to Bilam, who became unnerved the moment his journey did not proceed as planned, we must accept the occasional bump and detour as part and parcel of the beautiful – though oftentimes challenging – journey through life in the devoted service of God.

Thursday

In Bilam’s second failed attempt to curse *Benei Yisrael*, he proclaimed to Balak, “*Hinei vareikh lakachti, u-veireikh ve-lo ashivena*” (23:20), which Ibn Ezra translates to mean, “Behold, I have received a blessing; He has blessed, and I shall not revoke it.” Bilam told Balak that God has given him a blessing to pronounce upon *Benei Yisrael*, and so he is compelled to do so.

Rashi explains in a slightly different fashion, interpreting the first phrase of this verse to mean, “Behold I have received [an instruction] to bless.” According to Rashi, the word “*vareikh*” must be understood as a verb, rather than a noun. Thus, when Bilam speaks here of having “received” something, it must mean that he has received God’s instruction to bless *Benei Yisrael*, in spite of Balak’s having commissioned him to curse them. This is also the approach taken by Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, who notes that the word “*lekach*” often means “teaching” or “instruction,” as in the famous verse in Mishlei (4:2), “*Ki lekach tov natati lakhem*” (“For I have given you sound instruction”). The word “*lakachti*” used here by Bilam, then, refers to a mission that Bilam was instructed to fulfill. He was charged with the mission of blessing *Benei Yisrael*, and he was therefore dutybound to deny Balak’s wishes and bless the nation he was commissioned to curse.

Bilam’s pronouncement in this verse may perhaps be viewed as expressing the charge that each and every one of us has received. We, too, are given the “mission” to “bless” our fellowman, to look upon people kindly and positively, and to sincerely wish for their good fortune. Very often, we hear the voice of “Balak,” either in our own minds or from other people, summoning us to “curse” – to dislike, to suspect, to condemn and to resent. That voice convinces us, as Balak convinced Bilam, that we need to hate somebody because he or she poses a threat that must be protected against through hostility. And we, like Bilam, are all too eager to comply. There is a certain thrill and satisfaction we receive by “cursing,” by casting somebody as a dangerous threat and rushing to condemn, malign and despise that individual. But as Balak told Bilam, “For I will bestow upon you great honor” (22:17). The origin and source of this passionate longing to “curse” is our own ego, the desire to feel important and superior. Perceiving a person or group of people as a dangerous threat that we need to protect against allows us to perceive ourselves as heroes, as great defenders. It gives us a holy mission to fulfill, thus giving us a false sense of satisfaction and self-importance.

But if we stop for a moment, pausing to reflect upon the word of God, as Bilam was forced to do, we will realize that our mission is to do just the opposite. We will realize that “*hinei vareikh lakachti*,” that our mission, in all but rare, exceptional cases, is not to condemn, but to compliment. We are to bless, not curse. We should be identifying what is admirable and praiseworthy about other people, not what is lacking and deficient about them. Sure, it feels better to “curse” than to “bless”; to criticize and find fault, than to compliment and admire. But our “mission” is precisely to find and respect all that is good about others, not to find and dislike the bad. We must respond very cautiously to the calls from the various “Balaks” to dislike and oppose other people. While there are, of course, individuals and movements that indeed pose a danger that demands action, very often, the perceived threat is not real. In most instances, our “mission” is to admire and respect, to find what is praiseworthy about our fellow and learn from his or her positive qualities.

Friday

The Mishna in Masekhet Avot (5:19) famously casts the characters of Bilam and Avraham as polar opposites, listing three qualities that characterize Avraham, followed by the reverse qualities that characterize Bilam. One of these pairs of qualities is humility and arrogance. Avraham is described as having a “*ru’ach nemukha*” – “lowly spirit” – in contrast to Bilam’s “*ru’ach gevoha*” – “arrogant spirit.”

It has been suggested that Bilam’s “arrogance” noted by the Mishna was expressed in his tactic to move to a new location after each unsuccessful attempt to curse *Benei Yisrael*. After his first failure, Balak told Bilam to try placing a curse in a different place (23:13), and then, after the second failure, he said, “Come, I will take you somewhere else; perhaps God will see fit that you shall curse them from there” (23:27). The underlying assumption of this tactic is that Bilam fundamentally was capable of placing a curse upon *Benei Yisrael*, and it was only an external factor – the location – which stood in the way of success. If only he would try in a different setting, he figured, he would be successful and achieve his goal.

Avraham took the precise opposite approach when he met with failure. The Torah tells that on the morning when the city of Sedom was destroyed, “Avraham arose in the morning [and went to] the place where he had stood in the presence of the Lord” (19:26) – presumably referring to the place where Avraham had unsuccessfully pleaded with God to spare the city. The Gemara in Masekhet Berakhot (26b) famously interprets this verse as a reference to prayer – indicating that despite his prayer of the previous day not having yielded the desired results, Avraham returned to the precise same spot to pray again. Avraham did not attribute his prayer’s rejection to his surroundings. He returned to the same spot, assured that the location of his prayer had nothing to do with its failure to achieve its desired goal. If there was a failure with his prayer, Avraham thought, it must lie with him, and not with any external factor. This was the nature of Avraham’s humility and its contrast with Bilam’s arrogance. Whereas Bilam attributed his mistakes to external circumstances, Avraham took responsibility, without casting the blame elsewhere. (This insight is mentioned by Rav Elimelech Biderman in [*Be’er Ha-parasha*, Balak](http://beinenu.com/sites/default/files/alonim/177_40_77.pdf), note 15.)

It’s very convenient and tempting to point to our “location,” to external circumstances, as the source of our problems, our disappointments, our shortcomings and our failures. However, the Mishna teaches that blaming external factors is a sign of arrogance and conceit, of one’s inability to hold himself or herself accountable and acknowledge guilt and accept fault. We are to follow the example of humility set by Avraham, who instead of trying to blame his lack of success on his surroundings, went ahead and continued trying. The proper response to failure is to acknowledge our mistakes and try to correct them in the future, a response that will help ensure that we will only get better and achieve more as we proceed through life.

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