**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT BALAK**

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Motzaei Shabbat

The Torah in Parashat Balak tells the famous story of Bilam’s failed attempts to place a curse on *Benei Yisrael*. Bilam was hired for this purpose by Balak, the king of Moav, who feared that *Benei Yisrael* might attack his nation and the entire region. Three times Bilam endeavored to place a curse on *Benei Yisrael*, but each time, God compelled Bilam to utter a blessing, instead.

This story is discussed by the Gemara, in a famous passage in Masekhet Berakhot (7a), where the Gemara notes Bilam’s description of himself as “*yodei’a da’at Elyon*” – a man who “knows the mind of the Supreme One” (24:16). The Gemara explains this to mean that Bilam was able to determine the precise moment each day when the Almighty is angry. During that period when Bilam sought to place a curse on *Benei Yisrael*, the Gemara teaches, God did not become angry at all, in order to protect *Benei Yisrael* from harm. The Gemara explains on this basis the verse in Sefer Mikha (6:5), in the prophecy read as the *haftara* for Parashat Balak, imploring us to always remember the story of Bilam, how God foiled his plan and took away his ability to curse us. We are to remember that God made a point of not becoming angry at all during that time, so that Bilam would be unsuccessful in his attempt to place a curse.

The Gemara further emphasizes that the moment each day when God becomes angry is very brief. In fact, the Gemara states, the moment lasts the amount of time it takes to say the two-syllable word “*rega*” – “moment.” The Gemara cites as the basis of this startling teaching the verse in Sefer Tehillim (30:6), “*Ki rega be-apo*” – “His rage is just a ‘*rega*’.”

It is likely that the Gemara here presents us with a fundamental perspective on the way the Almighty views the world. Namely, He is generally happy with and proud of His creatures. We might have assumed that God is disappointed with the world, and in a state of constant anger and rage over the state of mankind, over the many different forms of wrongdoing that occur at every moment. But the Gemara here teaches us that to the contrary, God is generally pleased with the world He created. He created human beings as complex creatures, and placed us in this difficult, complicated world, and He does not expect perfection. Certainly, there is much to be angry at, and indeed, for a brief moment each day, He is angry. But this anger hardly defines His overall outlook on the world and on mankind. To the contrary, God is generally pleased with the word, despite our many flaws and imperfections. It is only the “Bilams” who focus on and magnify mankind’s faults. Evil people like Bilam look for the evil, they look to criticize and to disparage. They search for the isolated “*rega*,” the small negative element, and define the whole on the basis of that element.

We are bidden to follow God’s example, and to minimize our “anger,” our negativity, to a “*rega*.” In our assessment of people, of institutions, of ourselves, and of the world at large, we must not allow the negative element to define our perspective. Of course, we should not and cannot ignore the negative element entirely. We must know when to feel “anger,” how to identify wrongdoing so we can work towards improvement. But we must ensure to reduce our anger and disappointment to but a brief “*rega*,” and learn from the Almighty’s example of how to feel gratified and pleased with imperfect realities.

Sunday

Yesterday, we noted the Gemara’s famous discussion in Masekhet Berakhot (7a) about the story of Bilam’s unsuccessful attempt to place a curse on *Benei Yisrael*. Bilam prided himself over knowing “*da’at Elyon*” – “the mind of the Supreme One,” and the Gemara explains this to mean that Bilam had the unique ability to identify the brief moment of each day when God is angry. His strategy was to place his curse at that very moment, and if he had done so, then his curse would have been effective, and *Benei Yisrael* would have been annihilated. God foiled Bilam’s plan by ensuring not to grow angry at all – even for that split second – during the time Bilam attempted to place his curse.

Rav Nosson Tzvi Finkel remarked that the Gemara here seeks to express to us the power of a single moment. In even just a brief moment, Bilam would have had the power to bring an end to *Am Yisrael*. If not for God’s compassion for *Benei Yisrael*, Bilam would have wrought destruction in but an instant. Rav Finkel noted that just as Bilam had the power to bring ruin and devastation in a brief moment, we have the power to build, produce and achieve in just a single instant. At every moment, we have opportunities to grow and to contribute. If Bilam was able to destroy in an instant, then certainly we have the ability to accomplish in an instant.

Developing this point one step further, the example set by Bilam also shows the importance of timing. Bilam indeed had the ability to destroy – but only because he was able to determine the right time for perpetrating his nefarious scheme. Conversely, then, we can achieve great things in an instant – if our timing is right, if we are wise, patient and disciplined enough to recognize each moment’s unique potential and then maximize it. Just as Bilam needed to identify the “auspicious” moment when his destructive plans could be brought to fruition, we must similarly try to identify the unique opportunity of every given instant, which will, in most cases, be different from the opportunities presented by the preceding and subsequent moments. Although we cannot claim to “know the mind of the Supreme One,” we must try, as best we can, to pinpoint the special opportunities offered by every moment of our lives, and seize those opportunities to their very fullest.

Monday

Parashat Balak concludes with the tragic story of *Ba’al Pe’or*, where the nation of Moav sent its women to lure the men of *Benei Yisrael* into illicit relationships and to worship the Moavite idol, Pe’or. After Moav hired Bilam to place a curse on *Benei Yisrael*, which he proved unable to do, Bilam advised Moav to arouse God’s anger upon His nation by luring them to sin, and this scheme succeeded. God was incensed at *Benei Yisrael*, and 24,000 people died in a plague.

Kabbalistic teaching draws an association between these 24,000 sinners, who succumbed to the lures of Moav, and the 24,000 disciples of Rabbi Akiva who, as the Gemara famously relates (Yevamot 62b), died in a plague “because they did not treat one another with respect.” These 24,000 scholars who perished in a plague are seen as paralleling the 24,000 members of *Benei Yisrael* were killed in a plague for their involvement with the women and religion of Moav. Rav Menachem Azarya de Fano, in his *Asara Ma’amarot* (*Eim Kol Chai*, 3), writes that Rabbi Akiva’s students were the “*gilgulim*” (reincarnated souls) of the 24,000 people who perished during the incident of *Ba’al P’eor.* They were to have rectified the sin of Pe’or, and they would have succeeded if they had not made the mistake of disrespecting each other.

How might we explain this connection between the sin of *Ba’al Pe’or* and Rabbi Akiva’s students?

The sin of *Ba’al Pe’or* marked a grave failure to withstand the pressure of foreign influence. After living generally in isolation over the course of their travels in the wilderness, *Benei Yisrael* conquered the Emorite territory and now resided in the populated region of Trans-Jordan, where they were, for the first time, exposed to other nations. We might also add the Midrashic tradition – cited by Rashi in Parashat Chukat (21:1) – that after Aharon’s passing, the miraculous “clouds of glory” which had encircled *Benei Yisrael* disappeared, leaving them exposed and vulnerable. This might mean that as *Benei Yisrael*’s period of desert travel came to an end, they were no longer shielded and protected from foreign influence. They were now engaged in and involved with other peoples, with the expectation that they would remain firmly loyal to their values and lifestyles despite foreign influence. At *Ba’al Pe’or*, the people failed in this regard, yielding to the cultural and religious influence exerted by their new neighbors, Moav.

Rabbi Akiva lived and worked in the time of fierce Roman oppression, ultimately being executed for insisting on teaching Torah in violation of the edicts issued by Hadrian following the Bar-Kokhba revolt. Rabbi Akiva and his students rectified the sin of *Ba’al Pe’or* by showing courageous, fierce devotion to God and to Torah in the face of intense pressure. Whereas the people in the time of *Ba’al Pe’or* easily fell prey to external lures, the scholars in Rabbi Akiva’s time heroically resisted the pressure exerted by the Roman Empire, committing themselves tirelessly to Torah scholarship despite Rome’s efforts to stop them.

However, despite this heroism, Rabbi Akiva’s students were punished for failing to treat other properly. Torah devotion may never justify arrogance, conceit, or disregard for one’s fellowman. These 24,000 students succeeded in correcting the mistake of *Ba’al Pe’or*, in showing firm commitment to Torah in the face of pressure, but it seems that this lofty objective led them to overlook their basic interpersonal obligations to one another. Their failure reminds us that striving to be great does not excuse our failure to be good, that our pursuit of outstanding achievement must never get in the way of our basic, elementary requirement to be nice, humble, kind and sensitive to other people.

Tuesday

We read in Parashat Balak of the attempt made by Bilam, a gentile prophet, to place a curse on *Benei Yisrael* at the behest of Balak, the king of Moav, who felt threatened by *Benei Yisrael*. Each time Bilam requested from God prophetic powers to curse *Benei Yisrael*, God had him pronounce a blessing, instead.

On each of three occasions when Bilam attempted to place his curse, he had Balak build seven altars and to offer sacrifices on them. And when God appeared to Bilam the first time, Bilam said, “I set up the seven altars, and I offered a bull and a ram on each altar” (23:4). Rashi, citing the Midrash, explains that Bilam here was boasting, saying to God, “These people’s forefathers built [just] seven altars for You, and I set up the same as all of them combined.” This refers to the three patriarchs – Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov – who altogether built a total of seven altars to God. (Rashi proceeds to cite the relevant verses in Sefer Bereishit which make reference to these seven altars.) Bilam prided himself over the fact that he built the same number of altars as *Benei Yisrael*’s three patriarchs combined.

*Chazal* here attribute to Bilam the common phenomenon of belittling other people’s accomplishments. Bilam assuredly knew of *Benei Yisrael*’s glorious past, the great righteous figures who built the foundation of piety, morality and religious devotion which shaped *Benei Yisrael*’s ethos. But as part of his attempt to cast *Benei Yisrael* in a negative light, Bilam downplayed the greatness of the patriarchs. He sought to argue to God that the nation’s founders were not all that great, that their accomplishments did not amount to much. This is something which many people oftentimes do when they feel threatened by someone’s accomplishments – to downplay them, to regard them as not much of a big deal, in order to protect themselves from feelings of insecurity or inferiority. We are to do just the opposite, and respect and appreciate the qualities and achievements of other people. Rather than feel threatened by what other people accomplish, we should feel confident in and comfortable with our own efforts and gain inspiration from the achievements of other people as part of our lifelong effort to grow.

Bilam’s mockery of the patriarchs also points to a different phenomenon – seeking to assert superiority by finding one particular area in which one feels greater than others. The Midrash depicts Bilam as claiming his superiority to Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov on the basis of one minor detail – that he built more altars to God then they did. Even if we were to assume that Bilam built these altars out of sincere devotion to God (which, quite obviously, he didn’t), his claim would still be preposterous, because this one achievement hardly determines the totality of one’s religious persona. We should not be comparing ourselves to others, and we certainly cannot compare ourselves to others based on one particular area in which we feel we excel more. People are not defined by any single achievement (or, for that matter, by any single fault or failure). We should “build” as many “altars” as we feel capable of “building,” without ever feeling that this makes us superior to those who produce fewer “altars.” We are to strive to achieve the most we can, without feeling compelled to compare ourselves to, or compete with, the achievements of others.

Wednesday

Parashat Balak begins by describing the reaction of Balak, the king of Moav, to *Benei Yisrael*’s stunning conquest of the territory of the neighboring kingdoms. Fearful that *Benei Yisrael* might attack his kingdom, Balak summoned Bilam to place a curse on *Benei Yisrael*.

Surprisingly, Balak hired Bilam not to bless Moav with greater military power, but rather to curse *Benei Yisrael*. Rather than try to improve his nation’s capabilities, Balak instead tried to diminish *Benei Yisrael*’s capabilities through Bilam’s curse.

This observation was made by Seforno (22:6), who explains that Bilam only had the power to curse, and not the power to bless. Balak had no choice, according to Seforno, but to try placing a curse on *Benei Yisrael*, because Bilam was able only to place curses. Seforno’s explanation gives us insight into the character of Bilam, whose skill lay in his hostility, in putting people down, and was incapable of empowering people and helping them become greater.

Additionally, however, Balak’s reaction to the situation perhaps points to the all-too-common tendency to react to challenges only by seeking to eliminate them, without trying to overcome them. Balak faced what he perceived to be a difficult and frightening challenge, and he responded by endeavoring to take down the obstacle, rather than working to surmount it. If we are always in the habit of trying to avoid challenges, we will never develop the skills needed to overcome challenges. We end up accustoming ourselves to escape from challenging situations, instead of accustoming ourselves to grow and struggle to achieve even in the face of difficulty. We should not be trying only to “curse” that which we find difficult; we should be trying also to confront hardship, to accept challenges as opportunities for growth and achievement, and to equip ourselves with the skills and strength we need to overcome and gain from adversity.

Thursday

A famous Midrashic passage (*Bamidbar Rabba* 14:34) draws a startling parallel between the greatest prophet who ever lived – Moshe – and the evil gentile seer Bilam. Noting the verse at the very end of the Torah, “And no prophet like Moshe ever arose in Israel” (Devarim 34:10), the Midrash explains, “In Israel there did not arise [such a prophet], but among the gentile nations there did arise [a prophet like Moshe]” – referring to Bilam. The Midrash proceeds to explain that God made a point of providing the other nations with a prophet of Moshe’s stature and abilities in order to deny them the possibility of claiming that they were no less worthy than *Benei Yisrael* of receiving the Torah. The nations might have protested *Benei Yisrael*’s unique relationship with God, arguing that had they been given a prophet like Moshe, they would have been just as deserving of this relationship. God therefore gave them a prophet – Bilam – to see whether he would do what Moshe did – prepare a people to enter into a special covenant with Him. Bilam and the other nations did not properly utilize this great gift of prophecy, thus taking away this claim that the gentile nations might have otherwise made.

Many commentators grappled with the question of how the Midrash could possibly compare Bilam with Moshe. Could Bilam have been anywhere near as great as Moshe?

*Ketav Sofer* (cited and discussed [by Rav Dovid Gottlieb](https://www.yutorah.org/sidebar/lecture.cfm/961331/rabbi-dovid-gottlieb/bilaam-vs-moshe-the-surprising-source-of-moshe-s-superiority/)) offers a creative explanation, suggesting that the Midrash here refers to Moshe’s prophetic stature before *Matan Torah*. After Moshe went through the experience of receiving the Torah from God, he reached a qualitatively different level which no person – certainly not Bilam – could ever possibly approach. The Midrash here teaches that God provided the gentile nations with a prophet who resembled Moshe’s stature before the event of *Matan Torah*, to see if that prophet could achieve what Moshe achieved at that stage – leading a nation to receive the Torah.

In presenting this explanation of the Midrash’s comments, *Ketav Sofer* discusses the reason why Moshe rose to a qualitatively greater stature after the event of *Matan Torah*. He explains that this was achieved in the merit of “*zekhut ha-rabim*” – Moshe’s bringing “merit to the public.” Moshe attained a special level of prophecy due to the fact that he brought the people the greatest gift they could ever receive – God’s law. It was in the merit of this transformative effect upon *Benei Yisrael* that Moshe rose to a unique level.

Intuitively, we might have assumed that devoting time and effort to the public necessarily compromises one own spiritual wellbeing. By taking time away from our own study and growth, we might tend to think, we stunt our progress. *Ketav Sofer* here teaches us that to the contrary, it is specifically through working with and devoting ourselves to others that we maximize our personal potential. Not only does teaching and helping not compromise our growth, but it actually advances us further. The pursuit of excellence requires inward focus, but also a commitment to others and sacrificing our time and our energy on behalf of the people around us, our community, our nation, and the world at large.

Friday

In Bilam’s second blessing to *Benei Yisrael*, he exclaimed, “*Lo hibit aven be-Yaakov*” (23:21), which appears to mean that God does not look at *Benei Yisrael*’s wrongdoing. At first glance, Bilam here announced that God overlooks our sins and does not hold us accountable for them – which, of course, cannot be true. The commentators therefore offered various different explanations of this phrase.

Onkelos translates this to mean not that God ignores *Benei Yisrael*’s wrongdoing, but rather that He examined them and found that they were not guilty of idolatry. Although *Benei Yisrael* certainly committed various sins, they did not worship idols. The verse continues, “*ve-lo ra’a amal be-Yisrael*,” and Onkelos explains this to mean that God found that *Benei Yisrael* did not engage in fraud and deceit. Therefore, as the verse concludes, “the Lord their God is with them” – He protects them and helps them. He is able to forgive their wrongdoing – of course, after they repent – as long as they refrain from idol-worship and unethical behavior.

Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch suggests a different interpretation, based on his understanding of the word “*aven*” used here in reference to sin. According to Rav Hirsch, this word is associated with the word *on*, which denotes strength and power, and thus “*aven*”refers to the particular sin of misusing power. Rav Hirsch explains Bilam’s pronouncement to mean, “God did not foresee in Jacob any misuse of the greatness with which he was to be invested.” God knew that *Benei Yisrael* would use their stature for the sake of devoting themselves to His will, and not for sinful purposes. This is why, as the next verse states, “*Keil motzi’am mi-Mitzrayim*” – God brought *Benei Yisrael* from the depths of slavery in Egypt to the heights of power and prestige. He granted them this special stature because He knew with confidence that it would not be misused, that it would be challenged in the proper direction, towards the fulfillment of His will and the special mission for which *Benei Yisrael* were chosen.

Rav Hirsch’s explanation of this verse reminds us of the importance of carefully deciding how to use the many blessings we have been given in life. All of us enjoy “*on*” of some kind – our material assets, our family members, our social connections, our skills, our talents, and so much more. We are certainly entitled to enjoy all our blessings, but we are also expected to have the wisdom and discipline to utilize them properly, to use them to make our small contribution to the world, each of us in his or her own unique way.

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