

SHABBAT SHALOM FROM CYBERSPACE

BALAK

Haftarah: Michah 5:6-6:8

JULY 5, 2014

7 TAMUZ 5774

DEDICATIONS: Mazal Tov and Berachot to Miriam Yocheved Cohen
Who named her three beautiful triplet boys this morning
Eyal Yosef, Gilad Menachem and Naftali Chaim

SEPHARDIC CONGREGATION OF LONG BEACH

Shaharit on Friday July 4th at 8AM
Candle lighting Friday evening 8:10 p.m. Shir Hashirim 7:15 Mincha at 7:30 SHARP

SHABBAT Class at 8:30, Relevant Daily Halachot based upon the teaching of HaRav Ovadia Yosef
Hashem Melech at 9:00 AM - Please say Shema at home by 8:20AM
We will endeavor to keep it to the 7 aliyot, somech, samuch and maftir each week.

R' David will give the Derasha in the morning

Kiddush: Sponsored by Uri and Tina Lemberger in memory of Uri's brother, Lem,
Yitzchak Ben Aryeh Leb, Much Loved and Much Missed By All
Please sponsor a Kiddush or Seudah Shelishi or breakfast in memory or in honor of a loved one

Anyone wishing to do a Dairy Kiddush with hot food must speak with Rabbi Colish in advance.
We have a special warmer we use for all meat Kiddush meals which can be set and controlled. Historically
most dairy Kiddush meals have been cold. When the dairy Kiddush has hot food, we need to be more
meticulous with the warming method and insure that settings are not changed. If we determine that this is too
difficult, we will need to eliminate hot food at the dairy kiddush.

Shabbat Morning Children's Program 10:30 - 11:30
Ages 0-5 - in the Playroom/ Girls Ages 6-12 - In the Upstairs Library / Treats, Games, Stories, Prayers and Fun!

Children's afternoon program with the Bach at the Bach from 5:30 to 6:30
We are doing this program with the Bach and the program will be held at
The Sephardic Congregation for the latter part of the summer.

Pirkei Avot with Rav Aharon at 6:45
Mincha at 7:30 – Followed by Seudah Shelishi at 8:00
Seudah Shelishi Class with Rav Aharon
Birkat HaMazon at 8:50
Arbit at 8:55 - Shabbat Ends – 9:10

WEEKDAY TEFILLA SCHEDULE

Shaharit Sunday 8:00AM, Mon and Thurs at 6:55, Tues, Weds and Fri at 7:00

WEEKDAY TORAH CLASS SCHEDULE - Men and Women are Invited
Monday Night Class with Rabba Yenai 7:30

Daily class with Rabbi Colish - Weekday 6:30 AM (ADDITIONAL NEW TIME Sunday Mornings 7:30)
Kaballah as a Guide to Spiritual Growth based upon the teachings of Likutei Moharan

Thursday Nights 8:30-9:30 Virtual* Class facilitated by Rabbi Yosef Colish.
Practical Laws of Shabbat for Sephardim

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Editors Notes

Balak - Nekom Nikmat Benei Yisrael.

"The entire nation is bowing its head with unbearable sorrow this evening. Over the past 18 days the nation prayed as one that the fate of our wonderful teenagers would be that they are found alive and well. Now that the bitter news has come, the entire Israeli nation mourns the premature death of our finest youth ... Alongside deep sorrow; we will remain resolute to punish the atrocious terrorists. Our war on terrorism will only intensify and will not waver so that this murderous terrorism won't dare to rear its head." Shimon Peres.

"(The teens) were kidnapped and murdered in cold blood by animals. In the name of the whole of Israel, I ask to tell the dear families - to the mothers, the fathers, the grandmothers and the grandfathers, the brothers and sisters - our hearts are bleeding, the whole nation is crying with them." Benjamin Netanyahu.

It's late Monday night as I write this and with grief in my heart and tears welling in my eyes, the last thing one wants to do is think this evening, let alone put pen to paper. What does one say? What can one do? What should we feel?

It was a few minutes before two this afternoon and I just finished up with the teller at the bank wishing her and her co-workers a great day. As I walked towards the exit, the bank manager stopped me and asked me a question. I pulled out my phone in order to answer her and then saw the report.

I apologized, walked out and then stumbled into the street missing the step at the curb. I rolled over my shoulder, and lay on the ground face down before lifting myself into a sitting position on the asphalt for a few moments as those on the sidewalk and those

passing by stopped to help. Did I twist my ankle or maybe my knee? I lost my equilibrium. "How horrible", I thought. "It can't be." I needed a minute and just sat there. I recounted what I wrote last week and although I hoped that the lack of news meant they were still being hidden and I guess I realized the alternative and simply didn't want to ponder it.

This week we read the portion of Balak. The Midianites and Moabites look for an alternative method to defeat the Nation of Israel who is preparing to enter the land of Canaan after defeating the giants Sichon and Og. They bring in Balaam to curse the nation, but time and again he fails. In departing he gives advice which results in the nation's lecherous behavior combined with the degrading worship of baal peor and the death of 24,000 people along with the prince of the tribe of Shimon. The response to this tragedy will come in a few weeks when we read, "Take revenge for the children of Israel against the Midianites; afterwards you will be gathered to your people."

It was this verse that kept playing over and over in my head. Nekom Nikmat Benei Yisrael - Take revenge for the children of Israel.

My friend Jack emailed me asking me to remind him why Jacob was angry with Shimon and Levi after they destroyed the city of Shechem following the rape of their sister Dinah.

How is one supposed to respond to people who don't act like people? How is one to respond to people who act even lower than animals? How is one to respond to cold blooded murderers who think nothing of murdering children again and again? We are dealing with an enemy who are truly Perek Adam – beasts that resemble men in appearance only. I can hear them singing and dancing in Gaza tonight as they danced and sang on Steinway Street on September 11th.

How do we expect them to behave towards us when they treat each other like animals? Headlines tell us of Iraqi insurgents who executed hundreds of prisoners in just four days in the northern city of Tikrit. They call each other monkeys and worse, should we be shocked at what they call us?

Rabbi Abittan z'sl would tell us that having grown up in their world he could testify that these people understand only one thing and that is deadly force. When Christians turn their slapped cheek to these terrorists, the response will be much worse than a slapping the second time. Give them another chance

and they undoubtedly will use it to attack again and again.

The Prime Minister and his cabinet will speak of striking back, but I imagine they will strike back with devastating attacks directed towards empty homes and buildings giving the cohorts of these murderers plenty of time to flee to safety and plan their next massacre.

I feel for the Prime Minister whose hands are constantly bound by our own state department and president. The true colors of our administration become clearer every day. And they are anything but blue and white. Can't you just hear him saying, "Islam is the religion of Peace"?

President Obama expressed his "deepest condolences" to the families of the murdered teenagers. He added: "I also urge all parties to refrain from steps that could further destabilize the situation." The President has once again called for "restraint" and "stability." In asking this of "both parties", it is as if the perpetrators and their victims are equally to blame for this atrocity committed against the three Israeli teenagers. I guess he expects Israel to "refrain" from defending itself. I heard that Senator Charles Schumer called for the U.S. to cut off aid to the Palestinian Authority if it doesn't break with Hamas. Mr. Schumer is the number three man in the Democratic Party. He talks a big talk when he speaks to us. Now is the time for him to turn that talk into action.

What's so sad is even when the PA aligns itself with Hamas against American orders, (" as if the PA's naming streets after murderers and giving safe havens to terrorists is not enough to demand that we disavow ourselves of any support of them), even after Iranians and Syrians cross lines in the sand, we do nothing as a nation. And our inaction causes America to grow weaker every day in the eyes of the world and in our own eyes as well. With the Middle East crashing all around US interests, can our government be so blind as to who the enemy is and who the ally is?

We can call, we can write, we can protest and speak up. And we must!

But perhaps the best thing we can do is remember. We can remember the last 18 days when we came together as a people, as a nation and as a family. We need to keep that feeling. We feel agony but the mothers, the fathers, the grandparents and siblings feel so much more. We need to convey to them that we are with them in their suffering and pain. We need

to do acts of chesed and communicate that we care and they are not and never will be alone.

At Mekor Chaim where the boys studied, Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, the renowned Talmudist who heads the school, framed the murder as an act of simple anti-Semitism. "These boys, our boys, have died al Kiddush Hashem" — in sanctification of God's name — "simply because they are Jews," Steinsaltz declared. "We cannot just light a candle and say a prayer. It is up to us now to live our lives in Kiddush Hashem, to sanctify God through our deeds and our lives."

Each of us needs to take on something in their memory and let the world know that we will never be the same. Because of these boys and their families we must be better in some small or large way.

We extend our deepest sympathies and heartfelt condolences to the Yifrach, Shaar, and Frenkel families, on the tragic deaths and the loss of their sons; of our sons, of Eyal Yifrach, Gilad Shaar, and Naftali Frenkel. May Hashem avenge them - Nekom Nikmat Benei Yisrael.

Shabbat Shalom
David Bibi

Chabad's Summary of The Weekly Torah Reading:

General Overview: In this week's Torah reading, Balak, King Balak of Moab retains the sorcerer Balaam to curse the Jewish people. Instead of curses, only blessings come out of his mouth—including prophecies concerning the Messianic redemption. Moabite women entice some of the Israelites to sin, resulting in a plague amongst the Jews. Phinehas zealously kills two of the high-ranking offenders, and the plague comes to an end.

First Aliyah: The Israelites have just conquered the Emorites and the Bashanites, the two mighty neighbors of Moab. Balak, king of Moab, worries that his nation would be the Israelites' next victim. He sends messengers to the Land of Midian, to Balaam, a famed non-Jewish prophet and sorcerer, asking him to come and curse the Jews. G-d appeared to Balaam that night and instructed him not to go to Moab. "You shall not curse the people because they are blessed!"

Second Aliyah: Balaam sent word with Balak's messengers that G-d doesn't permit him to go with them. So Balak sent more prestigious messengers to

Balaam, promising him great riches in return for his services. Once again G-d appeared to Balaam. This time G-d allowed Balaam to go -- provided that he only speak the words which G-d dictates to him.

Third Aliyah: Balaam leaves together with the Moabite dignitaries. G-d sends an angel with a drawn sword to block Balaam's path. While Balaam couldn't see the angel, the she-donkey he was riding did, and refused to move onwards, causing Balaam to strike her. The donkey miraculously speaks, admonishing Balaam for striking her. Eventually, G-d "opens Balaam's eyes," and he sees the angel. A conversation between Balaam and the angel ensues, wherein Balaam is chastised for his behavior towards his donkey, and again he is reminded only to say what G-d dictates to him. After this humbling episode, Balaam arrives in Moab where he is greeted by Balak.

Fourth Aliyah: Upon Balaam's instructions, Balak builds seven altars and offers sacrifices to G-d. G-d "chances" upon Balaam, and dictates to him the words he should repeat to Balak and his ministers: "From Aram, Balak the king of Moab has brought me, from the mountains of the east: 'Come, curse Jacob for me and come invoke wrath against Israel.' How can I curse whom G-d has not cursed, and how can I invoke wrath if the L-rd has not been angered?..." Balaam then proceeded to shower the Israelites with beautiful blessings and praises. When Balak responds angrily to the blessings, Balaam reminds him that he can only say that which G-d tells him to say.

Fifth Aliyah: Balak takes Balaam to another location, hoping that this new venue would be more inauspicious for the Jews. They again build altars and offer sacrifices, and again G-d dictates blessing for the Jews which Balaam repeats. "G-d does not look at evil in Jacob, and has seen no perversity in Israel; the L-rd, his G-d, is with [Israel], and he has the King's friendship..."

Sixth Aliyah: The entire process repeats itself once again, Balak takes Balaam to another place, hoping that Balaam can curse the Jews from there. For a third time they build altars and bring offerings, and for a third time, only blessings issue from Balaam's mouth: "How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel! ... G-d, who has brought them out of Egypt with the strength of His loftiness He shall consume the nations which are his adversaries ... Those who bless [them] shall be blessed, and those who curse [them] shall be

cursed." At this point, Balak despairs of accomplishing his goal, and sends Balaam on his way.

Seventh Aliyah: Before leaving, Balaam prophesies about the end of days: "I see it, but not now; I behold it, but not soon. A star has gone forth from Jacob, and a staff will arise from Israel which will crush the princes of Moab and uproot all the sons of Seth..." He also speaks about the eventual destruction of Esau, Amalek and Assyria. Following Balaam's unsuccessful attempt to curse the Jewish nation, Moabite and Midianite women seduce many Jewish men. In the course of their seduction, they also entice the Jewish man to worship the Baal Peor deity. G-d commands Moses to execute the guilty people, and simultaneously a lethal plague erupts amongst the Jews. A Jewish leader, Zimri, publicly displays the Midianite princess with whom he was consorting. Phinehas, Aaron's grandson, kills them both, and the plague is halted.

EXCERPTS FROM THE JERSEY SHORE TORAH BULLETIN

"He sent messengers to Bil'am... Please come and curse this people for me." (Bemidbar 22:5-6)

The Gemara (Baba Batra 14b) states: "Moshe wrote his book (the Torah), the passage of Bil'am, and the book of Iyob." If Moshe wrote the entire Torah, why does the Gemara specify additionally that he recorded the passage of Bil'am?

Rabbi D. Staum explains, in the name of the Hatam Sofer, that every event recorded in the Torah had eyewitnesses who watched it as it occurred. The Ramban notes that Adam witnessed the events that occurred in Gan Eden and related them to Noah. Noah related these events to his son Shem, who subsequently narrated those events, as well as the events of the flood and the Tower of Babel, to Ya'akov Abinu (Ya'akov was fifty when Shem died). The events in Egypt and the desert were witnessed by the entire nation.

The only exception was the Bil'am debacle. No one, not even Moshe, had any way of knowing that Balak had commissioned Bil'am to curse the Jews, or that Hashem miraculously prevented Bil'am from fulfilling his mission.

The Navi Michah (6:5) tells us: "Remember now what Balak, King of Moab, plotted and what Bil'am son of Be'or answered him." Just as one is obligated to believe in the truth of every word of the Torah that was witnessed by others, so must we believe in the truth of the account of Bil'am, of which – aside from the players themselves – only Hashem Himself was aware.

Parashat Balak is always read shortly before the three weeks. Even as we begin to mourn our endless suffering in exile, we must remember that Hashem preserves and protects us in miraculous ways, which more often than not we never know about. The story of Bil'am reminds us of this. Shabbat Shalom. Rabbi Reuven Semah

When we read in the perashah about the talking donkey we can't help but wonder why this miracle had to occur, and to none other than to Bil'am, the prophet of the nations. Indeed, this was one of the phenomenon created at the end of the six days of creation, which makes it even more amazing why such a great event was necessary, and to Bil'am of all people.

The Rabbis tell us that the lesson here is very simple and yet very important. Bil'am, the greatest prophet of all the nations, was intending to curse the Jewish people. He wanted to use his G-d given gift of speech to do harm to our nation. Hashem wanted to show him that the gift of speech is divine and should be used properly. Even a donkey could speak if Hashem wills it so, and therefore Bil'am should not be arrogant about his ability to bless or curse because it is only from G-d that a person can say anything.

We have to appreciate our ability to speak and communicate. We should understand that it was given to us to be able to pray and bless Hashem and bring benefit to ourselves and to our fellow man. Yet when we abuse the power of speech by speaking evil about others or cursing other people, we are misusing one of the greatest gifts to mankind.

One great Rabbi once said that we should have been created with two mouths, one to pray to Hashem and the other to use for everyday talk. Then he reconsidered and said that if we would use both our mouths the wrong way, imagine how terrible it would be. We hear of small children using foul language that they pick up from the street (or from the home!) Could this be why our prayers are not being answered the way we would like them to be, since our mouths are being used to hurt rather than to help? Imagine the benefit to everyone if words of praise, compliments, constructive criticism, consolation and encouragement would be the bulk of what came out of our mouths? After we say something good to others, let's try to pray to Hashem and see what happens. We will be pleasantly surprised! Shabbat Shalom Rabbi Shmuel Choueka

YOU'RE BEING WATCHED

Parashat Balak is unlike any other perashah in the Torah. Except for the last nine pesukim, it relates incidents which have nothing to do with B'nei

Yisrael directly. No one from the camp of the Israelites knew of the king Balak's plans, or of Bil'am's coming to curse them, or of his failure. Yet, the perashah is in the Torah, so let us see what can be learned from it.

There are those who claim that the Torah was not dictated by G-d to Moshe to write down. However, we have just seen that B'nei Yisrael knew nothing of the incidents related in our perashah. If that is the case, how did the story wind up in the Torah? The only One who knew what was going on, other than Balak and Bil'am, was G-d Himself! Thus, this shows that the Torah was indeed dictated directly by G-d to Moshe.

Another thing we can learn is the principle of hashgahah peratit - Divine intervention. The Jews would never have known of the miracles Hashem performed for them here if they were not put into the Torah. They would have continued on through the desert without realizing that Hashem did wonderful things for them in order to save them. This is how we go through our lives. We have no idea what Hashem is doing for us to save us from a particular danger. We don't realize that Hashem is watching out for us at all times and only letting things happen to us which are for our own good. This perashah should serve as a reminder to us of hashgahah peratit.

I NEVER KNEW THAT!

"I have sinned for I did not know." (Bemidbar 22:34)

When Bil'am was confronted by the angel of Hashem, he admitted that he had sinned since he hadn't known that the angel was standing there. The Shelah asks: If Bil'am didn't know that the angel was there in order to prevent him from cursing B'nei Yisrael, then what was his sin? How was he to know that Hashem didn't want him to go?

We can see from here that if a person has the ability to know and understand something, and he chooses not to know, he is still guilty. Since Hashem gave him the capacity to perceive what was wanted from him, he cannot claim ignorance of the law. This is why Bil'am was considered a sinner. He saw that his donkey was constantly veering from the path, something which it had never done before. He should have seen that something was wrong and realized that maybe Hashem was intervening in order to stop him from going to curse His nation. He was therefore held accountable for the knowledge which he had the ability to acquire.

This is something we must always keep in mind. If we have the ability to learn more halachot we must not take the attitude that we are better off not knowing so that we will not transgress. If we have the ability to know what is required of us, we will be held accountable even if we don't take the time to learn the halachah. (Yalkut Hamishai)

TEACHER'S PET

It is not easy for children to accept that another child is rewarded more often than they themselves are. In a classroom situation, noting raises the ire of students more than the teacher's favorite getting the top prize time and time again. The reward may be a special privilege, a plaything, or a candy, but the fact that the same child seems to always receive the award is frustrating to the other students. In their anger, they label the winner "teacher's pet."

As adults, the jealousy syndrome continues in situations where the person in authority – the professor, the manager, the team captain – rewards one person. When one member of the group wins the "bonus," the others cite favoritism.

The Gemara says that an empress asked Rebbe Yose, "Why does Hashem give wisdom to the wise? It is the fool who needs it more." Rebbe Yose answered, "If fools were given wisdom, they would squander it foolishly."

People who have the power to endow or reward others hate to see their gifts wasted by undeserving recipients. When employees perform in a satisfactory manner, the person in charge is prompted to give that successful individual another responsibility, and with it another opportunity for reward and compensation. Success breeds the opportunity for additional success.

In the eyes of others it may seem unfair, and it may also give rise to pangs of envy – but the fact is that favoritism is often justified. When you have a job to complete, do your best to succeed. Don't just do it – do it well. The results will not only be the pay that is due for that job, but the opportunity to once again prove your worth – and even become "teacher's pet." (One Minute With Yourself – Rabbi Raymond Beyda)

Rabbi Wein MODERNITY AND TRADITION

The major challenge to all religions and certainly to Judaism over the past two centuries has been the religious reaction to the problems raised by modernity. Modernity encompasses but is not limited to technological progress, a global economy, ideas of personal and national freedom and a search for a more equitable distribution of wealth and well being amongst all human beings.

This centuries-old struggle of modernity to improve the lot of humans has created a much more literate world, a better educated population, wealth and a leisurely life never before known in the history of civilization and a much more powerful citizenry dealing with government leadership.

Modernity has also brought catastrophic wars of devastation and death of tens of millions of seemingly innocent people. In many cases, its search for equality and fairness has only resulted in dictatorship and stifling cruelty. The expected lifespan of human beings has been greatly, though unequally, lengthened and has now more than doubled over the past century alone. But the modern world is certainly not a happy place.

Psychological dysfunction abounds in all levels of human society. Sexual freedom is destroying any sense of family loyalty and moral behavior. Automobiles kill tens of thousands of people every year. The specter of nuclear annihilation overrides all political and diplomatic as well as military decisions and policies.

The modern world is terribly complicated and its horrors and failures are too well documented to be ignored. Yet none of us would be willing to revert back to life as it was known in pre-modern times. Hence, the unease and frustration that are the hallmarks of our time and society.

In the religious Jewish world, coming to grips with the issues and challenges that modernity poses has proven to be a nettlesome problem. No universal satisfactory, one size fits all, answer to the clash of traditional Jewish life with the new modern world has proven completely effective - and as a result, there is a very wide spectrum of responses to the modern world within the religious Jewish camp.

These range from an attempt – really impossible on a practical level but nevertheless championed as being the panacea to all our problems – to ignore, or at the very least, oppose the introduction of the ideas and tools of modernity into religious Jewish society. Banning television and the Internet – seemingly good ideas in theory - from our homes seems to have accomplished little as far as alleviating the problems and weaknesses that persistently exist within religious Jewish society.

Embracing modernity in all of its aspects and culture has been adopted by other sections of Orthodox society. While these policies that encourage the abandonment of traditional mores and demand more leniency in halachic decision-making bring journalistic approval and noisy notice to those who push this agenda, in truth very little is accomplished for Judaism or Jews on a meaningful personal level.

So most of Orthodoxy finds itself somewhere in the middle. We live in a modern world, but with great

reticence and unease. We are disturbed by the excesses of modernity that we witness daily and yet we realize that we cannot go back to the world of the shtetl and the mellah. And we therefore feel trapped and frustrated, dissatisfied with our religious and general behavior and looking for some sort of panacea that will comfort our angst.

There have been numerous attempts to reconcile Jewish traditional life with the values and even lifestyle that modernity introduced into the world. German Orthodoxy in the nineteenth century led by rabbis Hirsch, Bamberger and Hildesheimer, each in his own way, attempted to square the circle of modern German life and continue Jewish tradition and Torah observance.

Though these great leaders were successful on a local level in their communities their attempts and solutions did not resonate in the rapidly secularizing Eastern European Jewish society and certainly not in the Sephardic world. Rabbi Yisrael Lipkin of Salant attempted to face up to modernity with his Mussar movement. Though again successful on a local level and for a period of time in the Lithuanian yeshivot, it has all but completely disappeared in our time.

The Holocaust and the creation of the State of Israel, both products of modernity and examples of the horrors and wonders that the modern world can create, have only complicated the issue of how to deal with modernity. Banning higher education for women, while at the same time expecting them to be major breadwinners, hardly seems to be a logical or practical policy.

It may very well be that there is no general national or communal answer to this difficult problem and that dealing with the modern world and all of its complications, and yet retaining tradition and Jewish values and observances as the core of our essence, is a personal matter that each and every individual will have to decide for one's self. Sometimes it is most challenging to be Jewish

Chief Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks Leadership and Loyalty

Is leadership a set of skills, the ability to summon and command power? Or does it have an essentially moral dimension also? Can a bad man be a good leader, or does his badness compromise his leadership? That is the question raised by the key figure in this week's parsha, the pagan prophet Bilaam.

First, by way of introduction, we have independent

evidence that Bilaam actually existed. An archeological discovery in 1967, at Deir 'Alla at the junction of the Jordan and Jabbok rivers, uncovered an inscription on the wall of a pagan temple, dated to the eighth century BCE, which makes reference to a seer named Bilaam ben Beor, in terms remarkably similar to those of our parsha. Bilaam was a well-known figure in the region.

His skills were clearly impressive. He was a religious virtuoso, a sought-after shaman, magus, spell-binder and miracle worker. Balak says, on the basis of experience or reputation, "I know that whoever you bless is blessed, and whoever you curse is cursed" (Num. 22: 6). The rabbinic literature does not call this into question. On the phrase "no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face" (Deut. 34: 10), the sages went so far as to say: "In Israel there was no other prophet as great as Moses, but among the nations there was. Who was he? Bilaam." [1]

Another midrashic source says that "There was nothing in the world that the Holy One blessed be He did not reveal to Balaam, who surpassed even Moses in the wisdom of sorcery." [2] At a technical level, Bilaam had all the skills.

Yet the ultimate verdict on Bilaam is negative. In chapter 25, we read of the ironic sequel to the episode of the curses/blessings. The Israelites, having been saved by God from the would-be curses of Moab and Midian, suffered a self-inflicted tragedy by allowing themselves to be enticed by the women of the land. G-d's anger burns against them. Several chapters later (31: 16) it emerges that it was Bilaam who devised this strategy: "They were the ones who followed Bilaam's advice and were the means of turning the Israelites away from the Lord in what happened at Peor, so that a plague struck the Lord's people". Having failed to curse the Israelites, Bilaam eventually succeeded in doing them great harm.

So the picture that emerges from the Jewish sources is of a man with great gifts, a genuine prophet, a man whom the sages compared with Moses himself – yet at the same time a figure of flawed character that eventually led to his downfall and to his reputation as an evil-doer and one of those mentioned by the Mishnah as having been denied a share in the world to come. [3]

What was his flaw? There are many speculations, but one suggestion given in the Talmud infers the answer from his name. What is the meaning of Bilaam? Answers the Talmud: it means, "a man without a people" (belo am). [4]

This is a fine insight. Bilaam is a man without loyalties. Balak sent for him saying: "Now come and put a curse on these people, because they are too powerful for me . . . For I know that those you bless are blessed, and those you curse are cursed." Bilaam was a prophet for hire. He had supernatural powers. He could bless someone and that person would succeed. He could curse and that person would be blighted by misfortune. But there is no hint in any of the reports, biblical or otherwise, that Bilaam was a prophet in the moral sense: that he was concerned with justice, desert, the rights and wrongs of those whose lives he affected. Like a contract killer of a later age, Bilaam was a loner. His services could be bought. He had skills and used them to devastating effect. But he had no commitments, no loyalties, no rootedness in humanity. He was the man *belo am*, without a people.

Moses was the opposite. God Himself says of him, "He is [supremely] loyal in all My house" (Numbers 12: 7). However disappointed he was with the Israelites, he never ceased to argue their cause before God. When his initial intervention on their behalf with pharaoh worsened their condition, he said to God, 'O Lord, why do You mistreat Your people? Why did You send me? (Exodus 5: 22).

When the Israelites made the golden calf and God threatened to destroy the people and begin again with Moses, he said, "Now, if You would, please forgive their sin. If not, then blot me out from the book that You have written" (Exodus 32: 32). When the people, demoralised by the report of the spies, wanted to return to Egypt and God's anger burned against them, he said, "With Your great love, forgive the sin of this nation, just as You have forgiven them from [the time they left] Egypt until now" (Numbers 14: 19).

When God threatened punishment during the Korach rebellion, Moses prayed, "Will you be angry with the entire assembly when only one man sins?" (Numbers 16: 22). Even when his own sister Miriam spoke badly about him and was punished by leprosy, Moses prayed to God on her behalf, "Please God, heal her now" (Numbers 12: 13). Moses never ceased to pray for his people, however much they had sinned, however audacious the prayer, however much he was putting his own relationship with God at risk. Knowing their faults, he remained utterly loyal to them.

The Hebrew word *emunah* is usually translated as "faith," and that is what it came to mean in the Middle Ages. But in biblical Hebrew it is better translated as

faithfulness, reliability, loyalty. It means not walking away from the other party when times are tough. It is a key covenantal virtue.

There are people with great gifts, intellectual and sometimes even spiritual, who nonetheless fail to achieve what they might have done. They lack the basic moral qualities of integrity, honesty, humility and above all loyalty. What they do, they do brilliantly. But often they do the wrong things. Conscious of their unusual endowments, they tend to look down on others. They give way to pride, arrogance and a belief that they can somehow get away with great crimes. Bilaam is the classic example, and the fact that he planned to entice the Israelites into sin even after he knew that God was on their side, is a measure of how the greatest can sometimes fall to become the lowest of the low.

Those who are loyal to other people find that other people are loyal to them. Those who are disloyal are eventually distrusted and lose whatever authority they might once have had. Leadership without loyalty is not leadership. Skills alone cannot substitute for the moral qualities that make people follow those who demonstrate them. We follow those we trust, because they have acted so as to earn our trust. That was what made Moses the great leader Bilaam might have been but never was. Always be loyal to the people you lead.

[1] Sifre Devarim, 357.

[2] Tanna devei Eliyahu Rabbah 28; see also Bamidbar Rabbah 14: 20; Berakhot 7a; Avodah Zarah 4a.

[3] Mishnah Sanhedrin 10: 2.

[4] Sanhedrin 105a

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