

# SHABBAT SHALOM FROM CYBERSPACE

## SHABBAT BALAK

Haftarah: Shoftim 11:1-33 – Ashkenazim read Michah 5:6 - 6:8

JUNE 22-23, 2013

14 TAMUZ 5773

**The fast of the Seventeenth of Tamuz will be on Tuesday, June 25. The period of the Three Weeks begins on this day. During this time our custom has been to not have weddings nor parties with music.**

**DEDICATIONS: Happy 99<sup>th</sup> Birthday to Mr Sam Zalta. Sam Abal 120 happy, healthy years.**

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### Editors Notes

You would think that everyone knows about UJA. You would think we recognize what UJA stands for and what UJA does. We all can recall the annual UJA appeal in our synagogues during the High Holidays. And the letters U.J.A. were a part of our lives growing up. But the truth is that most people don't have a clue as to the role UJA plays in our world. I am just as guilty or perhaps more so, as a community activist, a rabbi and a guy with an office down the block from UJA for the past 20 years.

Those were my thoughts as I began looking into this week's portion of Balak on Sunday. I had been invited to again speak at UJA. The last time I spoke, it was to their directors and this time I was to speak with UJA staff.

In this week's portion of Balak, the forty years in the desert are coming to an end. Balak, the king of Moab fears the approaching Israelites who have just conquered the giants Sihon and Og and their armies. Understanding that the power of Benai Yisrael is of the mouth, he hires Billam the prophet to curse them.

Looking down from the surrounding mountains, three attempts are made by Billam to curse the nation and three times his words come out as blessings. His words are quite beautiful and contain "Mah tovu ohaleicha Yaakov, mishkanotecha Yisrael." "How good are your tents O Jacob, your dwelling places O Israel," and have become a part of part of our liturgy. His is perhaps the only explicit "end of days" prophecy found in the Torah.

Throughout the story neither Balak the king nor Billam the prophet have any real interaction with the Jewish nation or with Moses. So we ask how this story is included in Moses' description of their years in the desert? The Talmud teaches "Moses wrote the Torah, and the Book of Billam." We learn from here that the Jewish people were unaware of Balak and Billam's plot to curse them.

But more so, even when we are unaware that we are in danger, G-d is there protecting us, looking out for us and making sure we'll be ok. ( See Rabbi Mansour - The Miracles We Don't See).

One often can't appreciate how important it is to have someone who looks out for you. To have someone there to back you up in your time of need. Someone who secretly opens doors granting access to places you might never get to. That person is typically a parent who remains a parent forever, and I am deeply grateful for being blessed with such special parents, may Hashem grant each 120 years of health, happiness, peace and prosperity.

At the same time though, wouldn't it be nice if each of us had some fairy godmother just like in the children's tales?

And this brings me back to UJA. In the last year, going through the flood, I've come to realize that in fact for many of the Jewish people, that fairy godmother exists and that fairy godmother has a name and her name is the UJA.

Following Sandy, we had an immediate need for food, water and shelter. We needed help cleaning up, to simply assess the damage, and we needed money. And in those first days, we really didn't have an inkling as to what we were up against. It took weeks for us to begin to understand what we were truly facing.

With no experience whatsoever and no plan, we simply reacted. During the first days, we took out cash from the Manhattan banks to distribute to people who had no access. A contact in the National Guard offered to help with food, blankets and whatever else he could, and I started a new career. I

became a professional beggar going through Manhattan from congregation to congregation, from friend to friend and pleading for help.

Not yet realizing that insurance would hardly cover costs, our next priority was getting people back to work. Deliver fishing poles, rather than fish, my dad always taught me. We matched up a donation from a friend in Manhattan with an electrical mechanic, allowing him to buy new tools. We matched a donor with a delivery man, allowing the purchase of a new van. An animal lover put up money towards the cost of repairing the vet's office, and we got a few guys to contribute towards getting a gardener's business back up and running. And there were countless more stories matching specific donors to specific recipients, but we needed help and advice. We were in over our heads.

And through a personal friend, Mindy Jerome, we were connected with UJA.

But we didn't realize that UJA was already there. UJA was already with us. UJA was already taking care of us.

One of our congregants, Lisa Gaon worked for Met Council. She stepped up as a super hero with food to feed everyone and anything else they needed. I didn't know that UJA funded Met Council.

And the other rabbis in town received checks almost immediately of \$5000 each from UJA to assist. UJA was there.

Avi Chai was offering tuition assistance. I didn't know that Avi Chai was UJA.

And the volunteers from different organizations were coming by the busload to help us clean up and start to rebuild. Those too were often subsidiaries of UJA.

UJA provided communal meals and volunteers to come cheer us up while serving us.

UJA wrote us some checks. The first for \$5,000 and then for 23,000 or so in direct assistance.

Then Ewa Maniawski from Synergy Long Island – again a UJA funded effort - heard about what I was doing matching donors to individuals, and knew a donor who wanted to fund five families with \$15,000 each. I was told to look for the neediest families in Long Beach, and with the help of the other rabbis and leaders in town, we identified many more than five. We also realized we needed to coordinate efforts. Some people were double or triple dipping by coming

to each of us separately while others were too embarrassed to ask for help.

So after meeting with Adina Frydman, Gayle Bloom, Ewa and Mindy of UJA along with Yisroel Shulman of NYLAG, we received tremendous advice and help in organizing JCAP – The Jewish Community Assistance Program of Long Beach, and beginning with \$75,000 slated for five families, JCAP as of last month distributed more than 1.3 million dollars in direct assistance in Long Beach. None of it would have been possible without the help of Michael Landau and COJO of Manhattan, Rabbi Abraham Kahn and COJO of Brooklyn, Ahi Ezer, the Robin Hood Foundation, the efforts among too many to name of Steven Grill - Managing Director of Deutsche Bank Securities, Hinda Mizrahi of The Sephardic Congregation, Rabbi Chaim Wakslak of the Young Israel and Rabbi Dovid N. Rothschild of the Mesivta of Long Beach.

UJA was instrumental and offered help all along the way. Employees of UJA made themselves available and even made direct donations to our efforts. I saw how they went into the Haredi synagogues of Seagate in Brooklyn, and I was privileged to hear the letters of thanks that were sent back from people who thought they had no connection to UJA.

It was important for me to show Hakarat HaTov – appreciation to each and every one of the UJA staff. If one saves a life, they save a world. Through their efforts many people who thought their lives were over, who were wallowing in uncertainty and depression, had their lives restored.

A few moments before I left the office to walk down the block to UJA, I was speaking with Mr. Albert Dweck and he told me that it's a shame that people don't realize how important UJA has been for the community, and how supportive they've been of the center and other projects.

And during Passover when I sat with Mr. Morris Bailey and was discussing the Sandy cleanup efforts, he wanted me to make sure that UJA was there for us. I assured him they were.

I didn't realize what UJA was all about. Seven months after Sandy, I have a better idea. And that's why when Irwin Gershon of UJA in Long Island called me last week for a donation with matching funds behind it, I gave him the donation. I could have told him that I'd given much more than my 10% this year, that I had borrowed money in order to help people for Sandy. I gave him a pledge and wrote him a check,

because I know there is much more that needs to be done.

At the meeting, I heard from John Ruskey about the self-sacrifice shown by UJA's staff. It's not a job; it's a commitment requiring passion. I turned to Bonni Shevins and asked her what the secret was in creating such a bonded team effort. I was humbled and in awe. These were amazing people. Not only do they dedicate their lives to helping people, I witnessed them that afternoon giving from their own pockets as well.

Many in the Orthodox communities assume that UJA has little or nothing to do with us. We are very wrong. There is no question that UJA needs to do more to get the information out, but each of us should take the time to learn more.

The message of this portion is that G-d is always looking out for us. He's protecting us even when we are unaware of danger. He prepares the cure before the illness. One of those cures is UJA and we should all be very grateful.

Shabbat Shalom

David Bibi

### Summary of The Weekly Torah Reading:

1st Aliya: Parshas Balak begins with King Balak's offer to Bilam the Prophet to curse the Jewish people and G-d's refusal to allow him to accept.

2nd Aliya: Balak sent a second negotiating team and Bilam was given permission to go. However, G-d stipulated that Bilam could only speak the word of G-d.

3rd Aliya: Along the way the incident with the talking donkey occurred, emphasizing G-d's instructions to that Bilam only deliver the word of G-d.

4th Aliya: Bilam attempted his first curse and was unable to do so. Instead, the words he spoke were a blessing for the Jewish people.

5th Aliya: Bilam made his second attempt at cursing the Jews and was again unable to do so. Instead, he issued his second blessing.

6th & 7th Aliya: Bilam attempted his final curse but again blessed the Jews. As he left in disgrace, Bilam told the assembled coalition of kings of their eventual destruction by the Jews. As a parting shot against the Jews, he advised them to seduce the Jewish men

with Midianite women and bring G-d's wrath down upon the nation. The Parsha concludes with the incident of Baal-Peor and Pinchas's heroism.

### EXCERPTS FROM THE JERSEY SHORE TORAH BULLETIN

**"Behold! A people who arises like an awesome lion." (Bamidbar 23:24)** Bilam compares the Jewish people to an awesome lion in the morning. Rashi explains, "When they get up from their sleep in the morning, they exert themselves like an awesome lion to grab misvot, to wear a talet, to read Shema, and to put on tefillin." Rabbi Shimon Pincus explains that one of the most important pathways to successful service of Hashem is to be careful that the beginning of the day should be especially dedicated to Hashem. Like the misvah of Bikurim, we see that the main thing is to give Hashem the first fruits, because the nature of the world is that the first is the best and the most cherished. A great beginning sets the stage for all that follows.

What is the most precious to a person? It is life itself. Therefore, it behooves us that the morning, the beginning of life that day, should be dedicated to Hashem. Nature is that when we wake up we get energy and we see that the world is renewed and happy. Therefore, this time, the morning, has the greatest potential for success.

When we wake up, we are hungry after a long night's sleep. We are also hungry to chat a little and find out what's new in the world. However, if we channel these feelings and we give over to Hashem this most beautiful time of day, it's like bringing a beautiful sacrifice to Hashem in the Bet Hamikdash. It's a well-known fact that a sacrifice opens up the gateways of Heaven to shower down upon us the successes of that day.

If we come to shul and pray together with a minyan, it's like icing on the cake. In addition to this one can only imagine the greatness of sitting down after prayers and eating the first time, making Berachot together, and hearing words of Torah. Lucky is the person who starts his day in this manner. Shabbat Shalom. Rabbi Reuven Semah

**As we read the story of Bil'am** and how he wanted to curse the Jewish people, we can't help but be amazed at his determination. He first asked Hashem whether he could go with Balak's messengers, and Hashem told him no. Then he asked again, and although this time he was given permission, still his donkey stopped three times until the angel revealed himself that he was sent to

prevent Bil'am from going. He still proceeded to try to curse the Jews, and every time he attempted it, it came out as a blessing but he still didn't give up.

From here we see the rule that if a person has a real will to do something, he will ultimately reach his goal. Bil'am persevered and would have succeeded had Hashem not turned his curses into blessings. Nothing stands in the way of a strong will. The reason we are not accomplishing what we want is that we don't want them strongly enough. This applies to business, to doing certain projects, and most certainly to spiritual endeavors. It is up to us to intensify our wills to accomplish. The stronger the will, the more we will succeed. Let's work on developing a strong desire for spiritual growth and we'll be amazed at the positive changes we will experience! Shabbat Shalom. Rabbi Shmuel Choueka

#### **RABBI ELI MANSOUR**

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[MishnaBerura.com](http://MishnaBerura.com), [LearnTorah.com](http://LearnTorah.com)  
The Miracles We Don't See**

The story told in Parashat Balak is truly extraordinary. Balak, the king of Moab, teamed up with the gentile prophet Bilam to try to annihilate the Jewish people by way of a curse. Bilam knew the precise moment when G-d is angry, and he sought to capitalize on this knowledge by cursing Beneh Yisrael just at that moment, which would have the effect of utter annihilation. G-d, however, in His infinite mercy, altered the usual mechanisms of the spiritual world during that time in order to foil Bilam's efforts.

What makes this story extraordinary is not the fact that the existence of the Jewish people was in danger. This has happened on numerous occasions throughout our history, and in every case, as in the times of Balak and Bilam, G-d has stepped in to rescue us. But what is unique about the story of Balak is the fact that not one member of Beneh Yisrael knew about the danger that loomed. The entire story takes place in Moab, where Balak and Bilam went to different locations overlooking the Israelite camp in an attempt to place the curse. Throughout this period, Beneh Yisrael went about their usual business, eating the manna, praying, studying Torah from Moshe, and so on. Nobody had any idea that the nation's very survival was in question. When Amalek attacked Beneh Yisrael, the people were there on the battlefield fighting. When different nations threatened the Jewish people in Eretz Yisrael, they were keenly aware of the situation. But here, the threat was initiated and ended far from the people's view, and they knew nothing

about it until G-d had Moshe record the story in the Torah.

Why, then, is this episode told in the Torah? Why does it matter to do us that far away there were two evil men who plotted against us and were unsuccessful?

The answer is provided by the prophet Micha, in the section chosen as the Haftara for Shabbat Parashat Balak. The prophet admonishes the people to remember Balak's scheme and how Hashem stepped in to foil it, "Lema'an Da'at Sidkot Hashem" – "In order that you know the kindnesses of Hashem." We need to know this story so that we can at least begin to understand the extent of G-d's love and care for us. We need to know that Hashem protects us from dangers of which we never become aware. There are many times in our lives when we can see how Hashem stepped in to help us and take care of us, but we must also recognize that for every such instance, there are countless other times when Hashem protects or helps us without our ever knowing it. We cannot even begin to imagine the number of bacteria and viruses present in the air from which G-d protects us. We have no idea of the criminals and anti-Semites who unsuccessfully conspire against us, without even getting far enough to have the incident reported in the news. And we have no idea of how many terrorists in Israel and throughout the world have their efforts thwarted without anybody knowing.

The Pasuk in Tehillim describes Hashem as "Oseh Nifla'ot Gedolot Le'bado" – "He performs great wonders by Himself." Clearly, we do not need a verse in the Tanach to tell us that G-d makes miracles "by Himself," without anybody's help. This is self-evident. What this verse is saying, as the Hatam Sofer (Rabbi Moshe Sofer of Pressburg, 1762-1839) explains, is that G-d often performs miracles alone, without anyone else ever knowing about it. The story of Balak and Bilam was revealed in order for us to recognize that so often miracles occur on our behalf far away, unbeknownst to us, "Le'bado" – when He is "all alone," as it were.

This Parasha thus serves to remind us of "Sidkot Hashem," that Hashem's kindness towards us extends far beyond what we can ever see or know. We do not even know all the kindnesses He performs for us, or the extent of the protection He provides for us. And recognizing the limits of this knowledge should lead us to greater appreciation of Hashem's kindness and a renewed sense of commitment to obey His will.

**Rabbi Wein**

## **THE MESSENGER AND THE MESSAGE**

It is a well-known and almost instinctive response to attack the messenger when one feels that the message being delivered is incorrect, unwanted or unfair. The poor messenger usually finds one's self in a hapless and hopeless predicament. It then becomes a contest of personalities and not of ideas, a shouting match instead of a reasoned debate.

A seasoned American political leader once sagely observed, "All politics are local." Well in our current world, especially here in Israel, all politics and social issues are unfortunately very personal. And because of this most disturbing tendency to personalize everything, a healthy and constructive debate about the issue involved, about objective facts and possible solutions to difficult problems, never occurs.

Shooting the messenger and disregarding the message is the norm here but it is a dangerous and very self-defeating norm. For people are very impermanent in the political world – literally here today and gone tomorrow – while social and existential problems seldom are solved by themselves but always remain to be dealt with by succeeding generations and societies.

Attacking the messenger may prove to be psychologically satisfying but it does nothing to deal with the realities of the problem under discussion. In fact, dealing with the messenger is a tempting but an ultimately foolish procrastination from dealing with the message involved. One needs not like or admire the messenger in order to act sensibly regarding the message that was delivered. The messenger is completely peripheral to the veracity and acuteness of the message itself.

The current debate about Charedi society's participation in the general obligations and tenor of Israeli life is a case in point. Most of the Charedi media and its political representatives and spokesmen have expended their efforts in personally attacking those individuals who have proposed legislative and social changes that will undoubtedly affect Charedi life here in Israel.

Politics in this country is a rough game and religious politics is an even rougher game. The Charedi defense to the message being sent to them – that the rest of Israeli society is unwilling to condone their lack of participation in the defense of the country and in their abstention from the workforce – is to accuse the bearers of this message as being "haters" and "blasphemers."

Yair Lapid, Naftali Bennett, Dov Lipman may be the messengers and they bear the brunt of the personal attacks being leveled against them by the Charedi world's spokesmen. But let us ignore who the messengers are and listen to the message. The current social and economic situation of the Charedi society in Israel is no longer tenable. There is a limit as to how many generations can consecutively be raised in poverty without there being a breakdown in that society.

I am quite certain that there are thousands in the Charedi world who secretly desire that this cycle of poverty, unemployment and dependency be broken. I personally know many Charedim who have expressed this to me. It is time to deal with the message and ignore the messengers completely and finally. The current public controversies regarding the forthcoming election to choose the new Chief Rabbis of Israel also fall into this messenger-message category. The entire discussion, much of it quite vitriolic and personal, revolves about the persona of one of the announced candidates for the position of Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi. The discussion should center, in my opinion, about the institution of the Chief Rabbinate itself.

The message that is being delivered by the Israeli public is that the institution has degenerated into an anachronistic and almost irrelevant bureaucracy. To survive and perform the noble purposes that its founders had in mind ninety years ago, requires a change of mindset and a clear articulation of purpose and policy.

It requires an obvious redirection of strategies and tactics no matter who the new Chief Rabbis will be. Instead of besmirching candidates for the positions, those who are involved in its defense and seek its survival would be wise to clearly define the goals and limitations of the office and make the case for the necessity of its continuance and communal support.

Rabbi Yisrael Lipkin of Salant interpreted the verse in Psalms "that when others rise against me I should listen (and be forewarned)," meaning that "I should have the wisdom to listen and hear what they – my opponents - have to say, so that I can improve and create."

But as long as we are more concerned with the messenger than we are with the message, with the person and not with the real issue, we have ignored Rabbi Lipkin's wise teaching. History teaches us that the message must eventually be addressed no matter who the messenger may be.

**Sir Jonathan Sacks**  
**Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations**  
**of the Commonwealth**

**The Hardest Word To Hear**

The story of Bilaam, the pagan prophet, begins with a bewildering set of non-sequiturs - a sequence of events that seems to have no logic.

First, the background. The Israelites are approaching the end of their forty years in the wilderness. Already they have fought and won wars against Sihon king of the Amorites and Og king of Bashan. They have arrived at the plains of Moab - today, southern Jordan at the point where it touches the Dead Sea. Balak king of Moab is concerned, and he shares his distress with the elders of Midian. The language the Torah uses at this point is precisely reminiscent of the reaction of the Egyptians at the beginning of the book of Exodus.

Egypt: said to his people: "Here, The children of Israel is more numerous and powerful than we . . ."

and felt a disgust at the children of Israel.  
 Moab: And Moab was very fearful because of the people because it was numerous , and Moab felt a disgust at the children of Israel.

The strategy Balak adopts is to seek the help of the well known seer and diviner Bilaam. Again there is a literary evocation, this time of the words of God to Abraham:

God to Abraham: I will bless those who bless you, and those who curse you I will curse.  
 Balak to Bilaam: "I know that whoever you bless is blessed and whoever you curse is cursed."

This time the parallel is ironic (indeed the Bilaam story is full of irony). In the case of Abraham, it was God who blessed. In the case of Bilaam, the power was thought to reside in Bilaam himself. In fact the earlier statement of God to Abraham already prefigures the fate of Moab - one who tries to curse Israel will himself be cursed.

The historical background to the Bilaam narrative is well-attested. Several Egyptian pottery fragments dating from the 2nd millennium BCE have been found containing execration texts - curses - directed against Canaanite cities. It was the custom among pre-Islamic Arabs to hire poets thought to be under Divine influence to compose curses against their enemies. As for Bilaam himself, a significant discovery was made in 1967. A plaster inscription on the wall of a temple at Deir Alla in Jordan was found

to make reference to the night vision of a seer called Bilaam - the earliest reference in archaeological sources to a named individual in the Torah. Thus, though the story itself contains elements of parable, it belongs to a definite context in time and place.

The character of Bilaam remains ambiguous, both in the Torah and subsequent Jewish tradition. Was he a diviner (reading omens and signs) or a sorcerer (practising occult arts)? Was he a genuine prophet or a fraud? Did he assent to the divine blessings placed in his mouth, or did he wish to curse Israel? According to some midrashic interpretations he was a great prophet, equal in stature to Moses. According to others, he was a pseudo-prophet with an "evil eye" who sought Israel's downfall. What I want to examine here is neither Bilaam nor his blessings, but the preamble to the story, for it is here that one of the deepest problems arises, namely: what did God want Bilaam to do? It is a drama in three scenes.

In the first, emissaries arrive from Moab and Midian. They state their mission. They want Bilaam to curse the Israelites. Bilaam's answer is a model of propriety: Stay the night, he says, while I consult with God. God's answer is unequivocal:

But God said to Bilaam, "Do not go with them. You must not put a curse on those people, because they are blessed."

Obediently, Bilaam refuses. Balak redoubles his efforts. Perhaps more distinguished messengers and the promise of significant reward will persuade Bilaam to change his mind. He sends a second set of emissaries. Bilaam's reply is exemplary:

"Even if Balak gave me his palace filled with silver and gold, I could not do anything great or small to go beyond the command of the Lord my God."

However, he adds a fateful rider:

"Now stay here tonight as the others did, and I will find out what else the Lord will tell me."

The implication is clear. Bilaam is suggesting that God may change His mind. But this is impossible. That is not what God does. Yet to our surprise, that is what God seems to do:

That night God came to Bilaam and said, "Since these men have come to summon you, go with them, but do only what I tell you."

Problem 1: first God had said, "Do not go." Now He says, "Go." Problem 2 appears immediately:

Bilaam got up in the morning, saddled his donkey and went with the princes of Moab. But God was very angry when he went, and the angel of the Lord stood in the road to oppose him.

God says, "Go." Bilaam goes. Then God is very angry. Does God change His mind - not once but twice in the course of a single narrative? The mind reels. What is going on here? What is Bilaam supposed to do? What does God want? There is no explanation. Instead the narrative shifts to the famous scene of Bilaam's donkey - itself a mystery in need of interpretation:

Bilaam was riding on his donkey, and his two servants were with him. When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road with a drawn sword in his hand, it turned off the road into a field. Bilaam beat it to get it back on the road.

Then the angel of the Lord stood in a narrow path between two vineyards, with walls on both sides. When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord, it pressed close to the wall, crushing Bilaam's foot against it. So he beat it again.

Then the angel of the Lord moved on ahead and stood in a narrow place where there was no room to turn, either to the right or to the left. When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord, it lay down under Bilaam, and he was angry and beat it with his staff. Then the Lord opened the donkey's mouth, and it said to Bilaam, "What have I done to you to make you beat me these three times?"

Bilaam answered the donkey, "You have made a fool of me! If I had a sword in my hand, I would kill you right now."

The donkey said to Bilaam, "Am I not your own donkey, which you have always ridden, to this day? Have I been in the habit of doing this to you?" "No," he said.

Then the Lord opened Bilaam's eyes, and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road with his sword drawn. So he bowed low and fell facedown.

The commentators offer various ways of resolving the apparent contradictions between God's first and second reply. According to Nachmanides, God's first statement, "Don't go with them" meant, "Don't curse the Israelites." His second - "Go with them" - meant, "Go but make it clear that you will only say the words I will put in your mouth, even if they are words of blessing." God was angry with Bilaam, not because he went but because he did not tell them of the proviso.

In the nineteenth century, Malbim and R. Zvi Hirsch Mecklenberg suggested a different answer based on

close textual analysis. The Hebrew text uses two different words for "with them" in the first and second Divine replies. When God says, "Don't go with them" the Hebrew is imahem. When He later says "Go with them" the corresponding word is itam. The two prepositions have subtly different meanings. Imahem means "with them mentally as well as physically," going along with their plans. Itam means "with them physically but not mentally," in other words Bilaam could accompany them but not share their purpose or intention. God is angry when Bilaam goes, because the text states that he went im them - in other words he identified with their mission. This is an ingenious solution. The only difficulty is verse 35, in which the angel of God, having opened Bilaam's eyes, finally tells Bilaam, "Go with the men." According to Malbim and Mecklenberg, this is precisely what God did not want Bilaam to do.

The deepest answer is also the simplest. The hardest word to hear in any language is the word No. Bilaam had asked God once. God had said No. That should have sufficed. Yet Bilaam asked a second time. In that act lay his fateful weakness of character. He knew that God did not want him to go. Yet he invited the second set of messengers to wait overnight in case God had changed his mind.

God does not change His mind. Therefore Bilaam's delay said something not about God but about himself. He had not accepted the Divine refusal. He wanted to hear the answer Yes - and that is indeed what he heard. Not because God wanted him to go, but because God speaks once, and if we refuse to accept what He says, God does not force His will upon us. As the sages of the midrash put it: "Man is led down the path he chooses to tread."

The true meaning of God's second reply, "Go with them," is, "If you insist, then I cannot stop you going - but I am angry that you should have asked a second time." God did not change His mind at any point in the proceedings. In scenes 1, 2 and 3, God did not want Bilaam to go. His "Yes" in scene 2 meant "No" - but it was a No Bilaam could not hear, was not prepared to hear. When God speaks and we do not listen, He does not intervene to save us from our choices. "Man is led down the path he chooses to tread." But God was not prepared to let Bilaam proceed as if he had Divine consent. Instead he arranged the most elegant possible demonstration of the difference between true and false prophecy. The false prophet speaks. The true prophet listens. The false prophet tells people what they want to hear. The true prophet tells them what they need to hear. The false prophet believes in his own powers. The true prophet knows that he has no power. The false

prophet speaks in his own voice. The true prophet speaks in a voice not his ("I am not a man of words," says Moses; "I cannot speak for I am a child" says Jeremiah).

The episode of Bilaam and talking donkey is pure humour - and, as I have pointed out before, only one thing provokes Divine laughter, namely human pretension. Bilaam had won renown as the greatest prophet of his day. His fame had spread to Moab and Midian. He was known as the man who held the secrets of blessing and curse. God now proceeds to show Bilaam that when He so chooses, even his donkey is a greater prophet than he. The donkey sees what Bilaam cannot see: the angel standing in the path, barring their way. God humbles the self-important, just as He gives importance to the humble. When human beings think they can dictate what God will say, God laughs. And, on this occasion, so do we.

Some years ago I was making a television programme for the BBC. The problem I faced was this. I wanted to make a documentary about teshuvah, repentance, but I had to do so in a way that would be intelligible to non-Jews as well as Jews, indeed to those who had no religious belief at all. What example could I choose that would illustrate the point?

I decided that one way of doing so was to look at drug addicts. They had developed behaviour that they knew was self-destructive, but it was also addictive. To break the habit would involve immense reserves of will. They had to acknowledge that the life they led was harming them and they had to change. That seemed to me a secular equivalent of teshuvah.

I spent a day in a rehabilitation centre, and it was heartbreaking. The young people there - they were aged between 16 and 18 - all came from broken families. Many of them had suffered abuse. Other than the workers at the centre, they had no networks of support. The staff were exceptional people. Their task was mind-numbingly difficult. They would succeed in getting the addicts to break the habit for days, weeks at a time, and then they would relapse and the whole process would have to begin again. I began to realize that their patience was little less than a human counterpart of God's patience with us. However many times we fail and have to begin again, God does not lose faith in us, and that gives us strength. Here were people doing God's work.

I asked the head of the centre, a social worker, what it was that she gave the young people that made a difference to their lives and gave them the chance to

change. I will never forget her answer, because it was one of the most beautiful I ever heard. "We are probably the first people they have met who care for them unconditionally. And we are the first people in their lives who cared enough to say No."

"No" is the hardest word to hear, but it is also often the most important - and the sign that someone cares. That is what Bilaam, humbled, eventually learned and what we too must discover if we are to be open to the voice of God.

#### AS HEARD FROM RABBI AVIGDOR MILLER Z'TL

"The speech of him that hears the words of G-d and knows the knowledge of the Most High" (24:16)

The expression "Most High" (Elyon) means that Bileam was sent to reveal that which other prophets did not reveal, and even Moshe was unwilling to reveal. The extraordinary virtue of the holy people was not preached by the prophets who desired to urge Israel to return to their perfection which they had attained at Sinai, when Hashem had said "Would that they should have such a heart as this, always to fear me" (Devarim 5:26).

Although their reproof was beneficial, yet there was still a higher truth which Hashem does not so lavishly reveal. This higher truth was now inserted in the Torah by means of Bileam, who revealed his knowledge of the 'Most High'.

The truest friends of Israel, in the days of old, refrained from praising the people and instead constantly rebuked them. But the Torah needed some revelation of Israel's superb nature, and for this higher truth Bileam was sent.

Thus, when the status of Song of Songs (Shir Hashirim) was under discussion, Rabbi Akiba spoke up with emotion and he declared: "All of the (holy) Books are holy, but Shir Hashirim is the holy of holies" (Yadayim 3:5). It is not the Book itself, but the theme of this Book which is devoted to Hashem's love of Israel, which is the holiest of themes.

Not Bileam himself, but this theme of Hashem's love of Israel, is the highest truth of Knowledge of Hashem.

Quoted from "Journey Into Greatness" by Rabbi Avigdor Miller ZTL