

Parshas Balak

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1. Appreciating Bilaam's Intense Hatred for the Jewish People

The Mishna in Pirkei Avos (Ethics of our Fathers) states, **“A person who has these three characteristics of *Ayin Raah* (Evil Eye), *Ruach Gevoha* (Inflated Spirit/self-centered), and *Nefesh Rechava* (Insatiable Desire) is considered to be a student of Bilaam the evil one.”** If one is bothered by another's good fortune and is arrogant, haughty, and brazen and has an insatiable appetite for material, he is considered a disciple of Bilaam.

The Torah states, **“Bilaam arose in the morning and saddled his donkey...”** Rashi cites Chazal who state, “From here we see *“sinah mekalkelis es hashura* – hate overrides/disrupts protocol.” Although Bilaam was a self-centered and egotistical person with an insatiable desire for the material, he nevertheless saddled his own donkey. One would think that a person of Bilaam's status – who saw himself worthy of a king's honor - would have had a servant prepare his donkey for riding. However, because he was driven by intense hate to curse the Jewish people, he did this lowly and mundane chore himself. Bilaam's saddling of his own donkey was not a premeditated act. It was simply a reflexive action, which revealed his level of hatred for the Jewish people. At that moment nothing existed other than cursing them to bring about their annihilation. Bilaam's focus was so singular that he did not consider his own interests and needs, despite his self-centered and egotistical personality.

The Torah states regarding the building of the Mishkan (Sanctuary), (Portion of *Vayakhel*) **“Every man whose heart inspired him (*nisaoh libo*) came; and everyone whose spirit motivated (*nadvah rucho*) him brought the portion of Hashem...”** We see that there were two categories of people who provided for the building of the Mishkan – those who were “motivated by their spirit”– *nadvah rucho* and those who gave with an “inspired heart”- *nisaoh libo*.

Ohr HaChaim HaKodesh explains that the difference between these two categories of people is that one who has a generous heart and motivated by his heart will give to the “best of his ability” to support the cause which he values. Giving to the best of one's ability means giving to the point that it does not infringe on one's own needs. In contrast, the “inspired” person gives beyond his means without taking into consideration the infringement on his own needs, because of the degree of his inspiration. To the “inspired” person all that matters is the cause that needs to be supported and all other concerns are not even noticed. He is consumed with the cause. The person who is *nisaoh libo* “inspired heart” is at a more advanced level than the person who is “motivated” by his heart.

Bilaam's intense hatred for the Jewish people mirrored the mind-set of *“nisaoh libo* – one with an inspired heart” in the most negative sense. He was so consumed with bringing about the destruction of the Jewish people that his own self-interest and existence had no relevance at that moment. He was totally negated to bringing about his objective- destroying the Jewish people.

One could think that Bilaam's level of selflessness to bring about the destruction of the Jewish people would cause prosecution to come upon them. Namely, if one can be so solely focused (to the point of negation) for the negative (indicating that it is within the human capacity), then why

are the Jewish people not negated to the same degree for the sake of the service of G'd? G'd responds, "Avraham their Forefather preceded you (Bilaam) in this vein." Avraham demonstrated the same level of self-negation as Bilaam but in the most positive sense. As it is stated, "**Avraham arose in the morning and saddled his donkey...**" Despite the fact that Avraham was a person of renown and a man of great wealth, he selflessly arose early in the morning to saddle his own donkey to carry out the Will of G'd. This was a demonstration of Avraham's unlimited love for G'd. His only focus was to perform the Akeidah (binding of Yitzchak) – despite the fact that he was commanded to slaughter his own beloved son. Avraham had an "inspired heart" in the ultimate sense. The only reason he did not reflect on his own status was because he had the nature of *nisaoh libo*. Had Avraham not been inspired to this degree, he would not have been able to go to the Akeidah to sacrifice his son Yitzchak.

The only time a Jew waivers about doing the Will of G'd is if he is at the level of "*nadvah rucho*" **he is only motivated by his heart**. However if one lives his life totally dedicated to G'd because he is "inspired," then nothing will interfere with his service of G'd.

Rambam in *Hilchos Talmud Torah* (The Laws of studying Torah) explains the manner in which one acquires the "Crown of Torah" (*Kesser Torah*). Rambam states, "The Crown of Torah is lying in the corner. It is available to every Jew who wishes to partake of it," and to "The one who is inspired by his heart to acquire the Crown of Torah..." Rambam cites *Pirkei Avos* (Ethics of Our Fathers), which outlines how one must live his life to acquire Torah. "This is the way of Torah – bread with salt you shall eat, water in measured amounts you shall drink, on the floor you shall sleep, and a life of deprivation you shall live." Rambam chooses the term, "the one who is inspired" by his heart regarding the one who has relevance to acquiring the Kesser Torah and to mean that he is addressing the one who is singularly focused to acquire Torah at that special level. This person, because of his level of inspiration, does not focus on his physical needs. His amenities are only incidental to his objective. All that exists for this person is the Torah itself. According to this understanding, what *Pirkei Avos* prescribes has relevance only to the person who is "inspired" and not to the one who chooses to acquire the Crown of Torah.

2. The Lesson to be Learned from Bilaam's Talking Donkey

The Torah tells us that when Bilaam was en route to curse the Jewish people, G'd sent an angel to abort his mission. At first, only Bilaam's donkey could see the angel and it halted in its tracks and refused to proceed. The Torah states, "**The donkey saw the angel of Hashem and crouched beneath Bilaam. Bilaam's anger flared and he struck the donkey with the staff. Hashem opened the mouth of the donkey and it said to Bilaam, 'What have I done to you...'**"

The Mishna tells us that a number of things came into being on the eve of the Shabbos of Creation – one of them was the mouth of Bilaam's donkey. The mouth of the donkey was specifically created for this moment in time – when the donkey spoke to Bilaam. Why was it important for G'd to create something specifically for this moment? What was the lesson that Bilaam was to draw from this event?

The Midrash Tanchumah tells us that G'd opened the mouth of Bilaam's donkey to inform him that one's mouth and ability to speak are under the complete jurisdiction of G'd. The power of speech is not one's own ability but rather it is an ability that is granted and controlled by G'd. Jus

as G'd gave Bilaam the power to speak, so too He gave the donkey the power of speech. Rashi cites Chazal who explain why the elders of Moav and Midian had chosen Bilaam to be the one to protect them from the Jewish people. They had investigated that the victory of the Jews came about through their leader Moshe, whose power rested in his mouth (through the power of his speech). Thus, they needed to find an individual who would counter Moshe. Bilaam was known to be one whose power rested in his mouth with his ability to curse. By enabling the donkey to speak, G'd communicated to Bilaam that his ability to speak/curse was not his own but rather from Him. Just as G'd gave the ability to a donkey to speak, He could withdraw Bilaam's power of speech.

After Bilaam's donkey spoke to him, the Torah states, **“Then Hashem uncovered Bilaam's eyes and he saw the angel of Hashem standing on the road with his sword drawn in his hand....”** The Midrash explains, “Bilaam was not blind. Nevertheless, G'd opened his eyes to be able to see the angel to demonstrate to him that although he may believe that his ability to see is his own, it is not. All of one's faculties are under the dominion of G'd.” Thus, G'd demonstrated to Bilaam that not only is his power of speech G'd-given and not to be taken for granted – but, so too his ability to see and perceive. None of Bilaam's special, unusual, abilities could be attributed to himself.

Sforno explains that G'd granting the ability of the donkey to speak is the equivalent of King David beseeching G'd with the statement – “G'd open my lips and allow me to utter Your praises.” G'd brought about the miracle of Bilaam's donkey in order to allow a man such as Bilaam – who at that moment was the epitome of evil – to do *teshuvah* (repent). G'd demonstrated to Bilaam that He is able to give the power of speech to a creature that has no relevance to this faculty. Therefore, how much more so does G'd have dominion over the speech of one who has relevance to this ability. The creation of the mouth of the donkey was specifically to give Bilaam the opportunity to do teshuvah. Because of Bilaam's dimension of person, his repentance would have had exceptional value because of his ability to affect existence.

The Mishna in Pirkei Avos (Ethics of our Fathers) tells us that one of Bilaam's negative characteristics was *Ruach Gevoha (Inflated Spirit/self-centered)*. He was uniquely arrogant and attributed all of his abilities and accomplishments to himself. By allowing his donkey to speak and opening his eyes to see the angel, G'd demonstrated to Bilaam that there is no basis for his arrogance. He was not able to pride himself in his special abilities. All of Bilaam's faculties and special abilities were endowed by G'd and thus not attributable to himself in any way. If Bilaam had internalized this lesson, he would have been humbled and repented. However, Bilaam chose to ignore it. If one were to internalize the fact that every aspect of his existence was granted to him by G'd and is not attributable to nature or chance, one would surely be humbled.

The Gemara in Tractate Sanhedrin tells us that one of the Roman emperors had said to one of the great rabbis of the Mishna, “It says in your Torah that the stars of the heavens cannot be counted; however, I know how many stars there are.” Not being able to argue with the Roman Emperor the great rabbi asked him, “How many teeth does the Emperor have in his mouth?” The Emperor immediately inserted his finger into his mouth and began counting his teeth. The rabbi asked the Emperor, “If you are not aware of the number of teeth in your own mouth and you need to count them, how can you possibly know the number of stars in the heavens?” Meaning, one may believe that he has certain abilities and insights, but in reality, he may not even be aware of the reality that is in front of him. Only through this simple lesson of counting one's teeth could one become aware of his own limitation. Realizing one's limitations and lack of awareness of

many things, causes one to be humbled.

Every day we beseech Hashem to provide us with intellect, health, abundant blessing, and faculties that function properly, etc. One could mistakenly think that our physical existence and our natural ability (or one's success in life) is a result of chance – as people say, “I happen to be lucky...” However, this is not the case- everything is endowed by G'd. Therefore, the Men of the High Assembly authored the Amidah – with the blessings that beseech Hashem in all of the areas of our existence in which one could take for granted. This is to make the Jew cognizant that every aspect of his existence is endowed by G'd. Thus, we must beseech G'd to provide and endow us our basic existence. If one truly internalizes this reality, one would be humbled.

3. The Significance of the Number of Blessings in the Amidah

The Midrash explains that G'd endowed Bilaam's donkey with the power of speech and opened his eyes to be able to see the angel in order to teach Bilaam the lesson that all of one's faculties and abilities are endowed by G'd. Therefore, one has no basis to be arrogant or pride himself in his own abilities or faculties because they are not attributable to his own accomplishment; but rather they are a gift from G'd – which is granted or can be retracted according to His prerogative. G'd performed unique miracles for Bilaam in order to give him the opportunity to humble himself and thus allow him to do teshuvah (repent); however, he chose differently.

When the Men of the Great Assembly authored the Amidah (Silent Prayer), they had taken into account every conceivable need that the Jewish people may have (on an individual and communal level). Since everything that one possesses in the physical sense is not something to be taken for granted – but rather an endowment from G'd - one must beseech Him every day to continuously provide His blessing. If one internalizes this reality, he will understand that he is only a beneficiary and not a benefactor.

The Gemara in Tractate Berachos tells us that when the Men of the Great Assembly initially authored the Amidah it contained 18 blessings (this is why it is referred to as the Shmoneh Esrei (eighteen)). In fact, there are 19 blessings in the Amidah. The blessing to obliterate the heretics was added later by the Men of the Great Assembly. What was the basis for them to author a prayer comprised specifically of 18 blessings? How then were they able to add another blessing at a later point in time?

The Gemara explains that the Men of the Great Assembly authored the Amidah with 18 blessings because there are 18 vertebrae in the human spinal column. Every blessing of the Amidah corresponds to one of the vertebrae. What is the correlation between the spinal column of the human being and the number of blessings on the Amidah?

The halacha dictates that when one bows in the Amidah one must bow from the waist to

the point that his vertebrae separate. This is the degree to which one must submit to himself to G'd. It is written "One should bend like a rod and rise like a snake." The Gemara asks, "If there are 18 vertebrae in the spinal column then how could the Men of the Great Assembly add a 19th blessing to the Amidah?" Although it was necessary to add the blessing that beseeches G'd to protect us from our enemies, it nevertheless required a source/allusion by which it could be added. The Gemara answers that there is a 19th bone at the base of the spinal columns, which although it is smaller than the other vertebrae, provides an allusion for the 19th blessing of the Amidah.

Bowing at the waist to the point that one's vertebrae separate is an acknowledgement that one is subservient to G'd to such a degree that everything that one possesses or receives is only a gift from G'd. When one stands in the presence of G'd in the Amidah, the Gemara in Tractate Berachos tells us that it is the equivalent of having an audience with the King Himself. One must understand and internalize the fact that everything is an endowment of G'd. Thus, one must submit every aspect of his existence (both in a physical and spiritual sense) to G'd.

The Torah tells us that in the Bais HaMikdash (Temple) the Jews would prostrate themselves completely. Prostration symbolizes total negation – it is as if to say, "I am like dust in Your Presence." In addition, the Torah tells us that when one brought Bekurim (new fruits) to the Bais HaMikdash one must prostrate himself before G'd after making the declaration of the Bekurim. It is only when one goes through the physical process of prostration that one will truly feel beholden to G'd for every aspect of his existence.

4. The Path that One Chooses to Walk – He will be Led

Bilaam, the prophet of the nations of the world, was commissioned by Balak to curse the Jewish people to bring about their destruction. G'd initially said to him, "**You shall not go with them! You shall not curse the people for they are blessed!**" The Torah then tells us that G'd allowed Bilaam to go with the ministers that were sent by Balak saying, "**If the men came to summon you, arise and go with them, but only the thing that I speak to you – that shall you do.**" G'd permitted Bilaam to go on the condition that he follows His command. The Torah states, "**Bilaam arose in the morning and saddled his donkey and went with the ministers of Moav. G'd's wrath flared because he (Bilaam) was going (with them)...**" The verses cited above seem to be contradictory. Initially G'd said to Bilaam that if he is summoned (by the ministers) he is permitted to go. However, when Bilaam chooses to go with the ministers it ignited G'd's wrath.

Regarding this interchange between G'd and Bilaam the Midrash states, "From this we are able learn the principle 'Whatever path one desires to pursue, he will be led along that path (by G'd).'" If one desires to pursue a path – whether it be positive or negative – G'd will assist that person – even if that path is contrary to the Will of G'd. The Midrash continues, "Initially G'd did not permit Bilaam to follow the emissaries that were sent by Balak to summon him to curse the Jewish people. However because Bilaam was adamant and steadfast in his desire to go with them, G'd allowed him to go. Nevertheless, it was against the Will of G'd. Thus, it ignited the wrath of G'd." The Midrash tells us that it is because "G'd does not want to destroy the *rishaim* (evil). However if Bilaam chose the path that would lead to his own destruction, then G'd allowed it to happen and even assisted him to succeed in that vein."

The Mishna in Pirkei Avos (Ethics of our Fathers) states, “There is no reward (for a mitzvah) in this world.” Since a mitzvah generates reward that has relevance to eternity and the infinite – it is not possible for one to receive the reward of a mitzvah within the limitations of physical existence. Since, there is no one who is totally evil, even the rasha (evil) performs some good deeds in his life (albeit minimal), for which he is deserving of reward. The verse states, **“G’d pays his enemies (in this world) so that they may be destroyed (no claim to the world to come)...”** How is it possible for the rasha (evil) to receive reward in the physical world for something that is as unlimited as a mitzvah? He only receives an infinitesimally small fraction of what the actual reward should be. Seemingly this payment of reward does not conform with posture of G’d that He is “All just and faithful.” However, with the principle stated in the Midrash and the Gemara (in Tractate Makkos) that ‘Whatever path one desires to pursue, he will be led along that path (by G’d).’ we are able to understand why the evil person/rasha is not being denied what is rightfully his.

Because the rasha chooses the path of evil and has no interest in spirituality (or G’dliness), his focus and desire are only to satisfy his material needs. Thus, G’d provides him with the reward that he desires- a reward in this world.

The principle of “Whatever path one desires to pursue, he will be led along that path (by G’d),” not only applies within a negative context but also in a positive one. If one truly desires to be a tzaddik, G’d will assist him to succeed and achieve that goal. It is interesting to note that the ultimate manner to perform a mitzvah is l’smah (for its own sake). Rambam writes in his commentary on the Mishna at the end of Tractate Makkos that one only merits that special place in the world to come when one performs a mitzvah *b’shleimus* (perfectly - for its own sake). Thus, even when one succeeds in the performance of a mitzvah and spiritual development (for the sake of G’d), one could mistakenly think that the basis for his success is his own determination- rather than it being attributed to G’d assisting him along the path that he chose to pursue. The only reason one succeeds and advances in the spiritual realm is that G’d provides him with the necessary assistance.

The rasha makes the mistake of believing that his success (in the negative) is purely attributed to his own ability. In fact he is only meeting success in his pursuit of evil because G’d is assisting him along the path of destruction – which he chose. Identically, one should not pride himself for succeeding along the proper path of spirituality (Torah and mitzvos) – because the only basis for that success is because ‘whatever path one desires to pursue, he will be led along that path (by G’d).’

It is often the case that when one pursues something in the material sense, he does so with a passion- because one truly desires to succeed. If one wonders why he has not succeeded to the degree that he had hoped in his spiritual endeavors, he must ask himself if he truly desires it as much as he would desire something in the material realm. Rabban Gamliel the son of Reb Yehudah HaNassi (Judah the Prince) states in Pirkei Avos, “You should make His will like your will so that He should make your will like His will.” It is only when one truly desires and is driven to accomplish His Will, then G’d surely will assist him along that path.

5. Truth can only be Perceived through Humility

Chazal tell us that Bilaam who was the prophet of the nations of the world, prophesized at the level of Moshe Rabbeinu. Despite the fact that G'd communicated with Bilaam at a similar level as Moshe, Bilaam was nonetheless a person who did not fully comprehend G'd. One would think that a person who prophesizes at such a level would have the clarity to put life into perspective and thus cause him to pursue a life of piety. Despite Bilaam's level of prophecy, he was evil and corrupt.

The Mishna in Pirkei Avos (Ethics of our Fathers) states, **“A person who has the three characteristics: *Ayin Tovah (Good Eye)*, *Ruach Nemucha (Humble Spirit)*, and *Nefesh Shefelah (satisfied with limited amount of physical)* is considered to be a student of Avraham Avinu.”** If a person has *Ayin Tovah*, he is truly happy when he sees his fellow experience good fortune. He is thus not distracted by his fellow's predicament. A person who has *Ruach Nemucha* is humble and not self-absorbed – and thus sees things as they are. A person whose temperament is *Nefesh Shefelah* is one who has no interest in pursuing the physical for its own sake. If one possesses these three characteristics, then he is considered a disciple of Avraham our Patriarch.

On the other hand, as we said earlier, the Mishna continues, **“A person who has the three characteristics of *Ayin Raah (Evil Eye)*, *Ruach Gevoha (Inflated Spirit/arrogant)*, and *Nefesh Rechava (Insatiable Desire)* is considered to be a student of Bilaam the evil one.”** If a person is pained by another's good fortune and is arrogant, haughty, and brazen and has an insatiable need for the material, he is considered a disciple of Bilaam. As the Torah states that Bilaam had said to Balak, **“Even if Balak will give me his houseful of silver and gold...”** Although Bilaam was a commoner, he desired and believed that he was deserving of the wealth of a king.

The Gemara in *Tractate Berachos* tells us that Avraham our Patriarch was the first human being to recognize G'd as the Master of the Universe on his own. As the Torah tells us, that Avraham referred to G'd as, “Adnee (Master).” How was it possible for Avraham to recognize G'd's Omnipotence despite the world's devotion and belief in paganism? The three most humble people that ever lived were – Avraham, Moshe, and Dovid HaMelech (King David). Avraham possessed a unique quality of humility that did not exist. He was not self-absorbed to any degree and his focus was completely outside of himself. The only way one can perceive truth is if his focus is outward rather than inward – to accommodate his own interest and needs. If a person is self-absorbed then his perspective of life revolves around his own interests - to the exclusion of all else.

Although G'd, the Creator and Master of the Universe communicated directly to Bilaam, he was not able to fully comprehend the gravity of G'd's dimension. This was because he was consumed with his own interest and ego. Bilaam could not internalize truth at any level. His arrogance, insolence, and pursuit of hedonism did not allow him to see G'd outside of his own need.

Self-centeredness and ego can cause one to be oblivious to many realities of life. One who is self-absorbed can be exposed and privy to the greatest source of wisdom and spirituality and remain unaffected. A doctor had advised his heart patient not to go beyond a half hour's travel from a hospital facility. Despite the doctor's instruction, the patient insisted on going on a cruise that would take him far from any medical facility. He told the doctor, “I want to go despite your warning and I take full responsibility if I die!” How is it possible for a person to behave so irrationally at the risk of losing his life? How could a cruise that lasts only a few days have greater value than living several more years?

If the “I” and the “Me” are paramount, then nothing matters at that moment other than satisfying one’s own interests and needs.

It was because of Avraham’s humility that he was able to perceive G’d and the truth despite the fact that he lived in a pagan world. Contrastingly, it was because of Bilaam’s all-consuming ego that he could not perceive G’d/truth despite his open communication with Him.