

Yad Avraham Institute
WEEKLY TORAH COMMENTARY SERIES
Parshas Balak
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Presented By: Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky, Shlita

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B"H

Parshas Balak

Presented by

Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky, *Shlita*
Dean

1. Forgiveness- A Jewish Characteristic

The Jewish people were sustained in the desert for 40 years by the Manna. It was a food that was absorbed by their inner organs and there was no bodily waste. In the 40th year, the Jewish people complained saying, **“Why did you bring us up from Egypt to die in the Desert, for there is no food and no water, and our soul is disgusted with the insubstantial food (Manna)? G’d sent the fiery serpents against the Jewish people and they bit the people...The people came to Moshe and said, ‘We have sinned, for we have spoken against Hashem and against you! Pray to Hashem that He remove from us the serpent. Moshe prayed for the people.’”** Why does the Torah need to inform us that Moshe did in fact pray for the people? It would seem obvious that Moshe would have responded to their request.

Rashi cites the Midrash that explains, “It is from here that we learn that when an individual asks to be forgiven, one should not be cruel (achzori) and withhold forgiveness.” When Moshe prayed on behalf of the Jewish people, it was an indication that he had forgiven them for speaking against him. Not acquiescing to a sincere request is rooted in one’s insensitivity to the other person’s need – which is cruelty.

Rambam writes in Hilchos Teshuva that if the nature of one’s sin is between man and G’d, then teshuvah (repentance) is sufficient to atone. However if the nature of one’s sin is between man and his fellow, then in addition to teshuvah one must ask his fellow for forgiveness. If he does not acquiesce to his request then not even Yom Kippur will bring about atonement for that person. Rambam states that in order to be forgiven, “One should bring three acquaintances of the one from whom he is asking forgiveness and have them ask their fellow to forgive. If he is unwilling, then one should bring a second and third group of acquaintances to ask for forgiveness again. If they are not successful, then one does not need to be forgiven by that individual. He is fully atoned. The one who did not offer his forgiveness is considered the sinner.

It is forbidden for one to be cruel (achzori) and not be appeased...” If one recognizes the wrong he has done and asks to be forgiven, there is an obligation to forgive. If it is withheld, this is considered cruelty.

Rambam explains that a characteristic of a Jew is to be compassionate. Therefore, withholding forgiveness is antithetical to Jewish behavior. If one has difficulty letting go and forgiving the one who asks for forgiveness, he must recognize that he is failing in the area of compassion. However, if a Jew is willing to forgive, although the sinner does not deserve to be forgiven, it is also considered a flaw in the characteristic of compassion. As Rambam writes in the Laws of Deos that any characteristic, even one that is positive, if left unchecked, is considered flawed.

2. Not Allowing the Moment to Pass

At the beginning of the Portion of Balak, Rashi cites the Midrash that asks, “Why did G’d allow His Divine Presence to come upon a non-Jew (Bilaam) who was evil?” The Gemara in Tractate Nidarim tells us that for one to be qualified to be a prophet he must possess special qualities and characteristics. Bilaam not only did not possess these qualities he was evil. The Midrash continues, “It is so that when the Day of Judgment will come upon the nations of the world they will not be able to complain to G’d that they did not repent because they were not given a prophet like Moshe. Thus, G’d offered them Bilaam.” If G’d would have offered them a prophet such as Moshe, then they may have been impacted differently. However, He gave them Bilaam, who was evil and committed bestiality with his donkey. He was a man who despised and detested spirituality at the most intense level. Although he was a prophet, he believed that he could outwit G’d. Why was Bilaam, a man who represents evil, a valid response to the claim of the nations of the world?

The Gemara in Tractate Zevachim tells us that when G’d was giving the Torah at Sinai to the Jewish people, the earth quaked so violently that the nations of the world believed that the world was coming to an end. They

came to Bilaam, their prophet, with their concern because he had an understanding of all existence. They said to him, "The world is coming to an end." Bilaam responded, "You fools! Do you not realize that the world is not being destroyed because after the Great Flood G'd made a covenant with existence that He would not destroy it." They replied, "G'd only promised not to destroy the world with water. Perhaps it is being destroyed by fire." Bilaam said to them, "Do you not realize that G'd is giving His strength/power to the Jewish people (which is the Torah). It is because of this monumental moment that the world is quaking." To this the nations of the world responded, "G'd blesses His people with Shalom." Despite the fact that Bilaam had given them an understanding of the gravity of the moment, they turned their backs and returned to their idolatrous and evil ways.

One would think that after experiencing such an awesome event such as the quaking of the world, that they would have been impacted to some degree and have a level of appreciation of G'dliness. However, this was not the case. This was the one and only opportunity in the history of existence for the nations of the world to be offered a chance to recognize G'd and minimally become devoted Noahides. Without Bilaam, their prophet, they would not have been able to understand and process the events that were unfolding. They would have been frightened for the moment until the quaking ceased. It was only because of Bilaam that they understood that the earth was quaking because G'd was giving His Torah to the Jewish people. Bilaam's only value in a positive vein was to inform the nations of this fact in order to give them the opportunity to do teshuvah. Nevertheless, the nations of the world did not do teshuvah and change their ways. The moment of opportunity that would have changed their spirituality forever presented itself to them through Bilaam and they chose to pass on it. Beyond this point Bilaam had no value regarding their choice of spirituality.

The Gemara in Tractate Sanhedrin tells us that Achav had killed all the prophets of G'd with the exception of 100 who were hidden in two caves by Ovadia the prophet. Ovadia was a courtier in the court of Achav and had risked his life to conceal the prophets from certain death. Had it not been for Ovadia, prophecy would have ended. Because of his sacrifice, he merited to become a prophet – even though he was an Edomite who converted to become a Jew (a convert does not qualify to be a prophet). The Gemara states, "Greater do we find what is stated regarding Ovadia than what is stated regarding Avraham our Patriarch. Regarding Avraham the verse states, "He feared G'd." Regarding Ovadia, the verse

states, "He feared G'd very much" because of his unusual sacrifice."

Rabbi Yaakov I. Ruderman z'tl (Baltimore Rosh HaYeshivah) had said that Ovadia was presented with a unique opportunity that he needed to take advantage of at that very moment. Had he not done so, prophecy would have ended. One must understand and appreciate that when life presents opportunities, one must act upon them immediately because they may not reoccur. Thus, one must take advantage of every moment. When Bilaam informed the nations of the world that G'd was giving the Torah, it was a unique opportunity that presented itself - never to be repeated again. Bilaam had given them a correct understanding of that moment despite his evil nature. He served his purpose well.

3. One Should Not Trivialize Even the Most Deficient Mitzvah

The Torah tells us that Bilaam, the evil one, wanted to curse the Jewish people. However, despite his desire and efforts G'd did not allow him to do so. Ultimately rather than cursing them, Bilaam blessed them. One of the many attempts that Bilaam had made was that he told Balak to build a number of altars and bring sacrifices to G'd. Bilaam had thought that perhaps in the merit of Balak's offerings, he would be allowed to curse the Jewish people. Balak's intent was not to acknowledge, serve and revere G'd but rather it was a means to bring a curse upon the Jewish people.

The Gemara in Tractate Nazir states, "It is worthwhile to engage in Torah and mitzvos even if it is without a pure intent (*shelo l'shma*). This is because if one engages in a mitzvah *shelo l'shma* it will lead him to perform it with a pure intent (*l'shma*). In the merit of the 42 offerings which were brought by Balak, the evil one, he merited that Ruth the Moabite should be his descendant (although he had done the mitzvah without a pure intent)..." Ruth the Moabite was the grandmother of King David from whom Moshiach will descend.

The Gemara in Tractate Berachos cites a verse which states, "You should bring desolation upon the land..." The Gemara tells us that one should not read the word in the verse as "shamos- desolation" but rather it should be read as "sheimos- names." From here, we learn "shma k'gorim" that the name that one possesses indicates one's potential. The Gemara continues, "The reason Ruth (Rus) was given such a name was because she was

destined to have a grandson who would sate G'd with song and praise (merave HaKadosh Baruchu b'shiros v'tishbachos)." Within the name "Ruth" lies the spiritual potential of King David who would author Tehillim.

It is interesting to note that as a consequence of Balak bringing the 42 offerings, although it was with a sinister intent (shelo l'shema), he merited to be the forbearer of Ruth, who was the forbearer of King David – establishing the Davidic line through which Moshiach will descend. We see that even a mitzvah that is performed at the most deficient level is able to generate merit/blessing that has phenomenal far-reaching ramifications. King David would have come into being regardless of Balak's actions; however, the issue is through whom he will come into existence. The Gemara states a principle that "merit comes to those who are meritorious and tragedy comes through those who are undeserving." Balak is considered meritorious because of the 42 offerings that he had brought.

We are not able to determine to what degree Balak is deserving of reward for being responsible for the chain of events, which evolved because of his actions. As we see in the Mishna in Tractate Bava Metzia. The Mishna tells us that one has the obligation to return a lost article of his own father before returning the lost article of a stranger because one must be beholden to his parent for bringing him into existence. Without the parent fathering the child, not all opportunity that presents itself in the life of the child would have been. The Mishna continues to say that one has the obligation to return the lost article of his spiritual mentor (rabo) before returning that of his father. This is because one must be more beholden to his rebbe/mentor for giving him a share in the world to come, which is eternal.

If such far-reaching merit came upon one who performed a mitzvah with a sinister intent, how much merit will one have when one performs a mitzvah with a pure intent? Consequently, one should not underestimate/minimize the seemingly most trivial mitzvah because its value cannot be appreciated.

4. Seeing is Believing

The Torah tells us that Bilaam arose early in the morning and hitched his own donkey to curse the Jewish people. The Torah states, "**The donkey saw the angel of Hashem standing on the road with his sword drawn...Bilaam's anger flared and he struck the**

donkey with his staff...Then Hashem opened Bilaam's eyes and he saw the angel of Hashem standing on the road..."

The verse states, "**Hashem opened Bilaam's eyes and he saw...**" The Midrash asks, "Was Bilaam blind? He certainly was not. From here, we learn that even the eye that can see will only see that which is allowed by G'd. . Bilaam did not see the angel because G'd did not allow him." One would think that the human eye was created to be able to perceive and notice that which exists in the physical realm. When the prophet experiences a prophetic vision it is visualized by the mind's eye and not his physical eyes. However, the Torah tells us that G'd "opened Bilaam's eyes" indicating that one sees only what G'd wants him to see even regarding perceiving an angel which is a spiritual entity. What one is not meant to see will remain hidden.

Chazal tell us that before Avraham was circumcised he was called "Avram" (without the letter "hey"). The name "Avram" (with the letter "hey" deleted) is numerically equivalent of 243, indicating that before he was circumcised he did not have full control over all 248 parts of his body, which is the totality of man. He did not have full control over five aspects of his physicality- his two eyes, two ears, and his male organ. After his circumcision, G'd added the letter "hey" to his name and he became Avraham (which is numerically 248). His total physicality became sanctified/spiritualized and was thus under his full control. Although he was a spiritual being prior to this transformation, Avraham's eyes had a degree of relevance to the physical. After the circumcision, his eyes only noticed that which had relevance to spirituality.

When Avraham was on the way to the Akeidah (Binding of Yitzchak) with his son Yitzchak, Yishmael and Eliezer, his servant, accompanied them. When Avraham approached the mountain (the location of the Akeidah), he saw a cloud suspended over it from afar. He asked the two lads who accompanied him if they noticed anything above the mountain. Their response was in the negative. When he asked his son Yitzchak the question, he responded that he saw a cloud. This was a clear indication to Avraham that Yishmael and Eliezer were not sufficiently spiritualized to have relevance to that location. Thus, he left them behind.

It is known that the Chofetz Chaim had trained himself in the area of lashon ha'rah (evil speech) to such a degree that if he were to begin hearing something that had any semblance of negativity, his ability to hear would shut

down. One would think that when one hears whatever can be heard, he has no choice but to hear it. However, the Chofetz Chaim was able, through the spiritualization of his senses, to gain control over his physicality.

King David states in Tehillim (Psalms), "(G'd) Open my eyes through Your Torah." One would normally understand the words of King David as an expression that connotes gaining understanding through the Torah. However, the words of King David go beyond this simple understanding. One is exposed to many things but is only able to perceive/experience them within a limited context. The one who is able to see and perceive realities of existence, which others cannot, does so because of the spiritualization that comes through the Torah itself. Through the study of Torah one's grasp and even one's vision assumes another level - thus exposing the individual to what G'd wants him to see or protecting him from that which G'd does not want him to see.

The city of Vilna in the 19th Century was the main hub for the Jewish enlightenment movement, which sought to undermine traditional Torah Judaism. Simultaneously, Vilna was known as the "Jerusalem of Lithuania." The most prestigious Torah institutions and renowned Torah sages were located in Vilna. Depending on one's orientation and mindset, it was possible to experience Vilna on two levels that have no relevance to one another. One could return from his visit to Vilna and speak about the Yiddish theater and the Jewish cultural centers that had overtaken and dispelled any remnant of "primitive" Judaism. Conversely, one could return after experiencing Vilna as a changed person. He could become more spiritualized after being exposed to the world's most spiritual and well-known Torah sages. The eye perceives and sees that which is consistent with the person's level.

The Torah tells us that Hagar and her son Yishmael were driven from the home of Avraham, our Patriarch. They were in the wilderness without food or water. The Torah states, "**G'd heard the beseeching of the lad and G'd opened her eyes (Hagar) and she saw a wellspring.**" The Torah does not tell us that G'd performed a miracle to create a wellspring where there was none. Rather, He only opened her eyes to see and notice something that was already there. She merited having her eyes opened because G'd heard the supplications of Yishmael.

Every day in the morning blessings we recite, "... (G'd) opens the eyes of the blind." The Tur writes that one should recite this blessing upon opening one's eyes in the

morning. We can say, based on the Midrash that this blessing goes beyond acknowledging G'd for giving one the physical ability to see. Rather, He opens our eyes to see that which others cannot.

5. Truth can only be Perceived through Humility

The Torah tells us that Bilaam was the prophet of the nations of the world and his level of prophecy was at the level of Moshe Rabbeinu. Despite the fact that G'd communicated with Bilaam at the same level as Moshe, Bilaam was an evil person who detested and despised spirituality in the most intense manner. One would think that a person who prophesizes at such a level would have the clarity to be a pious and righteous person. How is it possible that Bilaam, despite his understanding of G'd be so evil and corrupted?

The Mishna in Pirkei Avos states, "**A person who has the three characteristics: *Ayin Tovah (Good Eye), Ruach Nemucha (Humble Spirit), and Nefesh Shefelah (Minimal physical needs) is considered to be a student of Avraham Avinu.***" If a person has *Ayin Tovah*, he is truly happy when he sees his fellow human being experience good fortune. A person who has *Ruach Nemucha* is humble and not self-absorbed. And a person who has *Nefesh Shefelah* is satisfied with even the most minimal physical requirements. If one has these three characteristics, then he is considered a disciple of Avraham.

On the other hand, the Mishna continues, "**A person who has the three characteristics of *Ayin Ra (Evil Eye), Ruach Gevoha (Inflated Spirit), 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 he is arrogant, haughty, and brazen and has an insatiable appetite for materialism, he is considered a disciple of Bilaam. For example, the Torah states that Bilaam said to Balak, "**Even if you give me a house filled with gold and silver it would not be enough...**" Although Bilaam was a commoner, he believed that he should have had the wealth of a king.

The Gemara in *Tractate Berachos* tells us that Avraham our Patriarch was the only human being to recognize G'd completely on his own. As the Torah tells us, Avraham referred to G'd as, "Master." How was it possible for Avraham to recognize G'd's Presence in existence despite the world's devotion to paganism? The three most humble people that ever lived were – Avraham,

Moshe, and King David. Avraham had a quality of humility, which could not be found in anyone else in existence. He was not self-absorbed to any degree and his focus was completely out of himself. He never considered “the I” or “the Me.” The only way a person can perceive truth is if he focuses outwardly rather than inwardly on his own needs. If a person is self-absorbed with himself then that person’s only agenda is to satisfy his needs to the exclusion of all else.

G’d, the Creator and Master of the Universe spoke directly to Bilaam; however, because he was so consumed with his own agenda and ego, Bilaam could not internalize truth to any degree. He was arrogant, brazen, and pursued hedonism despite his understanding of G’d because all that mattered was satisfying himself.

Ego can cause one to be oblivious to the realities of life. A person who is self-absorbed can be exposed and privy to the greatest source of wisdom and spirituality and still remain totally unaffected. A doctor once told a story about a heart patient of his who was advised not to travel to a location more than half an hour from a hospital. Despite the concern of the doctor, 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 on this cruise and I take full responsibility if I die on the ship!” How is it possible for a person to behave so irresponsibly 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 important, then nothing matters at that moment other than satisfying one’s own needs.

It was because of Avraham’s humility that he was able to perceive G’d and the truth despite the fact that he existed in a pagan world. Contrastingly, it was because of Bilaam’s insatiable ego that he could not perceive truth despite his open relationship with G’d.