

# OHRNET

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## PARSHA INSIGHTS

### THE HOLLOW CROWN

*“He sent messages to Bilam son of Beor to Petor, which is by the river of the land of the members of his people.” (22:5)*

Of all the architects of the twentieth century, Frank Lloyd Wright is probably the most famous. He once wrote: “Early in life I had to choose between honest arrogance and hypocritical humility. I chose honest arrogance and have seen no occasion to change.”

Popular wisdom dictates, ‘If you got it — flaunt it!’ Even when we see the glitterati behaving with seeming self-effacement, it’s usually against the backdrop of a carefully contrived photo-op to catch the ‘he’s-just-one-of-the-people look’ for the media and posterity.

From a Jewish point of view, the more prominent you are, the more you have to humble yourself — and not just while the cameras are rolling.

The Jewish people are extremely lucky. We have a prophet called Moshe who told us what G-d wants from us.

In fact, to forestall any complaint of favoritism or unfair advantage, G-d gave the gentile nations their own prophet, Bilam, who was comparable to Moshe though much inferior.

The obvious question is how does that forestall the claim of unfair advantage. If Bilam was no Moshe, why couldn’t the nations claim, “G-d. You gave us the Jews Moshe, and we got Bilam. Do us a favor! They got the \$20,000 Rolex and we got a \$99 Chinese ‘replica!’”

Why wasn’t that a legitimate claim?

The Torah tells us that G-d loves the Jewish People, not because we are the greatest of the nations, but rather we are the “smallest”. This doesn’t mean we are pygmies. It means that the characteristic of a Jew is to be self-effacing and easily embarrassed.

G-d elevated King David, Avraham and Moshe to positions of ascending greatness in direct proportion to their humility. King David said, “I am a worm, not a man.” A worm, however lowly, is still a creature. Avraham said, “I am

dust and ashes” — not even a creature. And Moshe said “We — what (are we)?” Moshe’s definition of humanity never even rises above the level of a question. Our whole existence is ‘questionable’.

Of Chirom, king of Tzur, on the other hand, it says, “I (G-d) bestowed greatness on Chirom, king of Tzur, and he said ‘I sat in the seat of G-d.’ I granted fame to Nevuchadnetzar and he boasted, saying ‘I will climb on the summit of mountains — I will be similar to the Most High’.” (Talmud Bavli, Chullin 89a)

When a Jew prays the silent standing prayer, he or she bows four times. During that same prayer, the high priest would bow at the beginning and end of every blessing — some 36 times. And the king would begin the prayer in a bowed position and not straighten his body until he completed the entire prayer.

William Shakespeare placed the following words into the mouth of the fallen King Richard II, “for within the hollow crown that rounds the mortal temples of a king keeps Death his court; and there the antic sits, scoffing his state and grinning at his pomp; allowing him a breath, a little scene, to monarchize, be feared, and kill with looks; infusing him with self and vain conceit, as if this flesh which walls about our life were brass impregnable; and humored thus, comes at the last, and with a little pin bores through his castle wall, and farewell king!”

Only with death staring him in the face does a non-Jewish king recognize his own mortality and insignificance.

Whichever prophet G-d would have given to the nations he would have been no better than Bilam. The nations got the prophet they deserved, one truly drawn from among their ranks.

• Sources: Based on Rashi, Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe

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## PARSHA OVERVIEW

**B**alak, king of Moav, is in morbid fear of *Bnei Yisrael*. He summons a renowned sorcerer named Bilaam to curse them. First, G-d speaks to Bilaam and forbids him to go. But, because Bilaam is so insistent, G-d appears to him a second time and permits him to go. While en route, a *malach* (emissary from G-d) blocks Bilaam's donkey's path. Unable to contain his frustration, Bilaam strikes the donkey each time it stops or tries to detour. Miraculously, the donkey speaks, asking Bilaam why he is hitting her. The *malach* instructs Bilaam regarding what he is permitted to say and what he is forbidden to say regarding the Jewish People. When Bilaam

arrives, King Balak makes elaborate preparations, hoping that Bilaam will succeed in the curse. Three times Bilaam attempts to curse and three times blessings issue instead. Balak, seeing that Bilaam has failed, sends him home in disgrace.

*Bnei Yisrael* begin sinning with the Moabite women and worshipping the Moabite idols, and they are punished with a plague. One of the Jewish leaders brazenly brings a Midianite princess into his tent, in full view of Moshe and the people. Pinchas, a grandson of Aharon, grabs a spear and kills both evildoers. This halts the plague, but not before 24,000 have died.

## ISRAEL Forever

### A NATION THAT DWELLS ALONE

**W**hen the Moabites hired Bilam to place a devastating curse on the Jewish people, this evil prophet was compelled by Heaven to bless them and sing their praise.

"A nation that dwells alone" are the words of Bilam we will hear read this Shabbat in our weekly portion. This is both a prophecy and a description.

In his commentary Rashi sees this as a prophecy that

when all other nations disappear, Israel will not share their fate. It may be suggested that this is also a description of the ideal condition of Israel as a nation maintaining its own spiritual identity and resisting the pressures of assimilation.

Description and prophecy thus blend into an historical warning that only by spiritually dwelling apart from the nations will we merit the fulfillment of the prophecy of an Israel forever.

## LOVE OF THE LAND - THE PLACES

Selections from classical Torah sources which express the special relationship between the People of Israel and Eretz Yisrael

### RACHEL'S TOMB AND A GREAT BENEFACTOR

**A**lthough the Torah relates that the Patriarch Yaakov put up a monument to mark the grave of his beloved wife Rachel, the structure that we see in Beit Lechem when visiting this holy site was built in 1841 by Sir Moses Montefiore.



The British benefactor received a building permit from the Turkish sultan and paid the fees for maintaining the site. Before his death at the age of 101 he asked that a small imitation of the dome on Rachel's grave be placed on his grave and that dust from Rachel's tomb be placed in his own grave.

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## LOVE OF THE LAND

VOLUME ONE - THE GLADSTONE EDITION

## PARSHA Q&A ?

1. Why did Moav consult specifically with Midian regarding their strategy against the Jews?
2. What was Balak's status before becoming Moav's king?
3. Why did G-d grant prophecy to the evil Bilaam?
4. Why did Balak think Bilaam's curse would work?
5. When did Bilaam receive his prophecies?
6. G-d asked Bilaam, "Who are these men with you?" What did Bilaam deduce from this question?
7. How do we know Bilaam hated the Jews more than Balak did?
8. What is evidence of Bilaam's arrogance?
9. In what way was the *malach* that opposed Bilaam an angel of mercy?
10. How did Bilaam die?
11. Why did the *malach* kill Bilaam's donkey?
12. Bilaam compared his meeting with an angel to someone else's meeting with an angel. Who was the other person and what was the comparison?
13. Bilaam told Balak to build seven altars. Why specifically seven?
14. Who in Jewish history seemed fit for a curse, but got a blessing instead?
15. Why are the Jewish People compared to lions?
16. On Bilaam's third attempt to curse the Jews, he changed his strategy. What was different?
17. What were Bilaam's three main characteristics?
18. What did Bilaam see that made him decide not to curse the Jews?
19. What phrase in Bilaam's self-description can be translated in two opposite ways, both of which come out meaning the same thing?
20. Bilaam told Balak that the Jews' G-d hates what?

## PARSHA Q&A!

### Answers to this Week's Questions!

All references are to the verses and Rashi's commentary unless otherwise stated.

1. 22:4 - Since Moshe grew up in Midian, the Moabites thought the Midianites might know wherein lay Moshe's power.
2. 22:4 - He was a prince of Midian.
3. 22:5 - So the other nations couldn't say, "If we had had prophets, we also would have become righteous."
4. 22:6 - Because Bilaam's curse had helped Sichon defeat Moav.
5. 22:8 - Only at night.
6. 22:9 - He mistakenly reasoned that G-d isn't all-knowing.
7. 22:11 - Balak wanted only to drive the Jews from the land. Bilaam sought to exterminate them completely.
8. 22:13 - He implied that G-d wouldn't let him go with the Moabite princes due to their lesser dignity.
9. 22:22 - It mercifully tried to stop Bilaam from sinning and destroying himself.
10. 22:23 - He was killed with a sword.
11. 22:33 - So that people shouldn't see it and say, "Here's the donkey that silenced Bilaam." G-d is concerned with human dignity.
12. 22:34 - Avraham. Bilaam said, "G-d told me to go but later sent an angel to stop me." The same thing happened to Avraham: G-d told Avraham to sacrifice Yitzchak but later canceled the command through an angel.
13. 23:4 - Corresponding to the seven altars built by the *Avot*. Bilaam said to G-d, "The Jewish People's ancestors built seven altars, but I alone have built altars equal to all of them."
14. 23:8 - Yaakov, when Yitzchak blessed him.
15. 23:24 - They rise each morning and "strengthen" themselves to do *mitzvot*.
16. 24:1 - He began mentioning the Jewish People's sins, hoping thus to be able to curse them.
17. 24:2 - An evil eye, pride and greed.
18. 24:2 - He saw each tribe dwelling without intermingling. He saw the tents arranged so no one could see into his neighbor's tent.
19. 24:3 - "*Shatum ha'ayin*." It means either "the poked-out eye," implying blindness in one eye; or it means the "the open eye," which means vision but implies blindness in the other eye.
20. 24:14 - Promiscuity.

- The oath taken by the woman suspected of adultery while still an *arussah*
- How the daughter of a *kohen* who is a *yivamah* can lose her right to eat *terumah*
- The *Kohen Gadol's* limitations re marriage partners
- What disqualifies a woman in matters of age or virginity from marrying a *Kohen Gadol*
- The rulings of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai regarding the eligibility of an infant convert to marry a *kohen* and the spiritual contamination of non-Jewish graves
- How Yehoshua ben Gamla became *Kohen Gadol*
- The *Kohen Gadol's* situation in *yibum*
- The varying opinions on what constitutes the *zonah* prohibited as a wife for any *kohen*
- The difference between a *kohen* and others in regard to remaining married to a wife who has been violated
- The mitzvah of producing children and the importance of being married
- Three initiatives of Moshe which received Divine approval
- Whether children born to a man before conversion are considered fulfillment of the mitzvah
- The role played by grandchildren
- Rabbi Akiva's 24,000 disciples and the lessons to be learned from their deaths and from his reaction
- Insights on the importance of marriage with a good wife
- The childless couples in history and in halacha
- Dangerous patterns in regard to marriage and circumcision

## THE LESSONS FROM MOURNING

There is a period of mourning between the Festivals of Pesach and Shavuot when Jews refrain from weddings and haircuts. The source for this is what we learn in our *gemara* that during this period the 24,000 disciples of Rabbi Akiva perished, leaving the world desolate.

Two important lessons are to be learned from relating to this tragic period in Jewish history.

One is the explanation given by our Sages for the tragedy and the other is the reaction of Rabbi Akiva.

They died prematurely because, as great as they were, they failed to show to one another the respect they deserved. Although such severe retribution is an expres-

sion of the rule that "G-d demands near perfection from the very righteous", there is a message here to everyone on every level of the importance of relating to others in respectful fashion.

Although bereaved by this virtual holocaust, Rabbi Akiva did not give up. He sought out five promising Torah scholars in the south of Eretz Yisrael — Rabbis Meir, Yehuda, Yossi, Shimon and Elazar ben Shamua — and through them rebuilt the Torah world in that period.

This was perhaps echoed in our own times that the destruction of the Torah centers in Europe, which wrought a spiritual holocaust in addition to the physical one, was followed by the blossoming of Torah institutions in Israel and throughout the world.

• *Yevamot 62b*

## WHAT THE Sages SAY

"Come and see how good is the good wife. The passage in *Mishlei* (18:21) states that 'One who finds a wife has found good'. If this is a literal reference to the woman we see how good she is that she is thus praised; and even if it is an allegorical reference to the Torah we see how good she is that the Torah is compared to her."

• *The Sage Rava - Yevamot 63b*

## THE COVENANT LAND

**From: Gary in Boston**

*Dear Rabbi,*

*Is there some connection between the covenant to circumcise and the Jewish people's right to the Land of Israel? If so, since the Muslim Arabs also circumcise, do they also have a similar right to the land?*

Dear Gary,

There is definitely a connection between the commandment of circumcision and possession of the Land.

This connection is explicitly stated in the Torah: "And I will establish My covenant [of circumcision] between Me and between you [Abraham] and between your seed after you throughout their generations as an everlasting covenant, to be your G-d and to your seed after you. And I will give you and your seed after you the land of your sojournings, the entire land of Canaan for an everlasting possession, and I will be their G-d" (Gen. 17:7,8).

This mitzvah is comprised of two procedures called in Hebrew, "*milah*" and "*priyah*" where the first refers to the actual cutting of the external layer of skin, and the second refers to the tearing of the finer, inner membrane. This is symbolic of a Jew's responsibility to both cut away extraneous physicality while also tearing the more subtle barriers inhibiting spirituality as well. This is intended to reveal G-dliness into the world.

The connection between the Jews and the Land is similar. When Jews keep the covenant, a potentially solely physical relationship with the Land is peeled away. They are able to penetrate the more sublime, spiritual dimension of the Promised Land, and G-diness is thereby revealed.

As you note, Ishmael, the father of the Arab/Muslim people also has a role in this unique covenant connection. After all, he was a son of Abraham and was circumcised at the age of thirteen, on the very day Abraham was commanded to circumcise: "And Abraham took Ishmael his son and all those born in his house...and he circumcised the flesh of their foreskin on that very day, as G-d had spoken with him.... And Abraham was ninety-nine years old.... And Ishmael his son was thirteen years old... On that very day, Abraham was circumcised, and so was Ishmael his son" (23-26).

However, G-d revealed to Abraham that his true spiritual successor and the rightful inheritor of the covenant to the Land would be Isaac: "And G-d said, Indeed, your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you shall name him Isaac, and I will establish My covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his seed after him. And regarding Ishmael, I have heard you; behold I have blessed him, and I will make him fruitful, and I will multiply him exceedingly.... But My covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you at this time next year" (19-21).

Since Ishmael is nevertheless connected to the covenant,

what is his role in and relationship to the Land?

The Zohar comments on the difference between Isaac's and Ishmael's right to the Land based on the different way each performs the covenant. Unlike Isaac who performs both the external "*milah*" and internal "*priyah*" described above, Ishmael performs only the external "*milah*". This teaches that Ishmael's connection to the covenant is only superficial and secondary — entitling him to custodianship (not ownership) over the Land only during Israel's absence. Furthermore, this secondary claim must give way to the Jewish People's primary and inner bond to the Land of Israel. Thus the Zohar states so long ago, "In the future, the children of Ishmael, whose circumcision is empty and incomplete, will rule over the Land of Israel when it is desolate and uninhabited. And they will hinder the Jews' return to Israel until Ishmael's merit runs out and the Jews will return" (Parshat Va'era 32a).

A story is told regarding the acquisition of the first tracts of land upon which the modern city of Netanya was founded. The Jewish pioneers approached an Arab landowner proposing to buy his stretch of barren, undeveloped coastal sand dunes. The Arab replied, "G-d forbid I should sell you what is rightfully yours by the word of G-d. I do not own this land, but rather my father and my father's fathers were merely custodians over it during your absence. I am entitled to compensation for keeping the land, but I cannot sell you what is already yours."

An amazing facet of the connection between the covenant and the Land was foreseen long ago by the great Chasidic master and scholar Rabbi Chaim of Sanz and is unfolding before our very eyes today. Noting the teaching of the Zohar quoted above, a certain scholar asked the Rebbe, "Even if the covenant of Ishmael is superficial and secondary to that of Isaac, nevertheless Ishmael was circumcised of his own volition at the age of thirteen, while Isaac and his progeny are circumcised as infants with no element of conscious self-sacrifice on their part." The Rebbe replied, "This portends that in the future, when the Jewish People will return to the Land of Israel, there will be Jewish adults who, not circumcised as children, will bravely and proudly enter the covenant of their own free choice. It will be in the merit of these Jews that Ishmael's connection to the Land finally will be severed."

Rabbi Chaim of Sanz lived in a time when it was unthinkable that Jewish children would not be circumcised. However, today we know that tens of thousands of Jews persecuted under the Soviet empire were prohibited from circumcision. Many of these Jews, brutally uprooted from their people, culture and religion, are now returning to the faith of their fathers, and as adults are engraving the covenant upon themselves with courage and pride. May we, the rest of the Jewish people, follow their example by circumcising our hearts, returning to G-d, thereby meriting a complete and full redemption and return to the Land of Israel.

## CUTTING SHORT A LEARNING CAREER

**Question:** I have a son studying in a yeshiva to whom I plan to someday pass on my business. He is adamant, however, in his desire to continue his Torah studies and refuses to come home to be trained for management. I feel that he is never going to be a Torah giant, and that he has learned enough to be a pious businessman. What is the right thing to do?

**Answer:** A similar complaint was once made to the Chafetz Chaim by the well-to-do father of a student in the Radin Yeshiva. In response the Sage asked him if he was the richest man in his community and if he had any expectations of ever

becoming the richest. When the fellow replied that he had no such ambitions, the Chafetz Chaim made his point.

“You admit that you are not one of the richest men around nor have you any hopes of becoming one of them. This doesn’t stop you from conducting your business as usual and you are not bothered by the thought that you have already earned enough to be called a well-to-do businessman. But you expect your son to be satisfied with the spiritual riches he has gained till now just because you think he will never become one of the Torah giants of his generation?”

## THE HUMAN SIDE OF THE STORY \_\_\_\_\_

### THE CABBIE’S SECRET

“Can you name all of the fifteen forbidden women listed in the first *mishnah* of *Mesechet Yevamot*?” This was the challenge hurled at the Torah scholar by a Jerusalem cab driver whose rough appearance seemed to suggest that he would be the last to even know that such a *mishnah* existed.

When the passenger embarrassedly admitted that he could not quite recall all of them from memory, the dri-

ver proceeded to rattle them off without missing a beat. He went on to boast that he often stumped scholarly passengers before showing his stuff.

Asked for the secret to his own mastery of such a complex matter, the cabbie explained that he had a volume of *Mesechet Yevamot* in the cab and would review the *mishnah* every time he waited for a traffic light to turn green.

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THE WASSERMAN

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