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PARSHA INSIGHTS

My MIND'S MADE UP – DON'T CONFUSE ME WITH THE FACTS!

“Balak, the son of Tzippor” (22:2)

It takes one to know one. In Moav, proficiency in the black arts was as common as a cold. Balak was the greatest sorcerer in Moav. In those times, people could predict the future by creating talking birds. They would take gold for its head, silver for its beak, and copper for the wings. The parts had to be assembled at a certain time of day. Finally, they placed in its mouth the tongue of a real bird. Then they put it on the sill of an open window so that by day it faced the sun, and, by night, the moon. Seven days later, the bird's tongue began to make a ringing sound. The sorcerer would then take a golden needle and pierce the bird's tongue. And then the bird would begin to talk.

Using the powers of impurity, the bird would reveal the secrets of the future.

No one was more skilled in this form of divination than Balak. For this reason he was called *Balak ben Tzippor*. In Hebrew, the word *tzippor* means “a bird.” In other words, the name implied, “Balak, who can foretell the future through a magic bird.” Among other things that the bird told Balak was that he would at first be victorious over the Jewish People, but finally he would fail.

Once, Balak was preparing a bird to prognosticate the downfall of the Jews. While he was bowing and offering incense to the bird it suddenly took wing and flew out of the window. Balak was very disturbed when the bird did not return.

After some time, Balak saw the bird returning. However, pursuing the bird was a plume of flame. The flame singed the bird's tail. Balak knew that this was a sign

that the power of the Divine Presence would eventually conquer the power of the dark side.

In spite of this, Balak still invited Bilaam to curse the Jews.

There are a couple of things in this bizarre story that don't quite add up. First, if Balak was the chief sorcerer in Moav, why did he need Bilaam? Was he looking for an apprentice? Also, if Balak saw the portent of the plume of flame, what did he hope to achieve by inviting Bilaam to curse the Jewish People. Wasn't it obvious to him that he would fail?

The answer is that the obvious is never an impediment to self-interest. Balak didn't want to be confused with the facts. Balak was so intent on the destruction of the Jewish People that he ignored the obvious portent of the bird and surmised that the Jewish People, like all other nations, were subject to the natural forces of the constellations. However, the Jews are above the stars. G-d supervises us with specific Providence.

And to answer our other question, Balak was not in need of a sorcerer's apprentice. Both he and Bilaam had expertise in different areas of sorcery. Balak was well versed in the outer facets of magic, the practical day-to-day aspects of cursing and spell-casting. Bilaam, on the other hand, had knowledge of the inner workings of the black arts. Balak surmised that together they would make an unbeatable duo, able to overcome clear indications of incipient defeat.

Balak proves the old adage: “My minds made up. Don't confuse me with the facts!”

PARSHA OVERVIEW

Balak, king of Moav, is in morbid fear of *Bnei Yisrael*. He summons a renowned sorcerer named Bilam to curse them. First, G-d speaks to Bilam and forbids him to go. But, because Bilam 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 Bilam's donkey's path. Unable to contain his frustration, Bilam strikes the donkey each time it stops or tries to detour. Miraculously, the donkey speaks, asking Bilam why he is hitting her. The *malach* instructs Bilam regarding what he is permitted to say and what he is forbidden to say regarding the Jewish People. When Bilam arrives, King

Balak makes elaborate preparations, hoping that Bilam will succeed in the curse. Three times Bilam attempts to curse and three times blessings issue instead. Balak, seeing that Bilam 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 SHIELD OF FAITH

At a time when so many harsh words are heard throughout the world in condemnation of Israel, there is an important lesson for Jews to learn from this week's Torah portion.

The heathen prophet Bilaam, on his way to curse the children of Israel, had his path blocked three times by a Heavenly angel. Rashi cites the midrash which states that this alludes to the three pilgrimages made by Jews every

year to the *Beit Hamikdash* for celebration of the Festivals. This was a subtle message to the potential curser that a people with such faith in G-d that they were capable of leaving their homes and fields without protection in order to serve their Creator would not be vulnerable to his malediction.

May our cursers of today also realize that our faith in G-d will protect us from them and secure Israel forever.

WHAT'S THE RIGHT THING TO DO?

REAL-LIFE QUESTIONS OF SOCIAL AND BUSINESS ETHICS

WHO COMES FIRST

Question: I am aware that it is my duty to save another person from suffering any loss. If by so doing I myself will suffer a loss, am I still obligated to put his interest first? What is the right thing to do?

Answer: On the basis of a passage in the Torah indicating that one should avoid inflicting poverty on himself, our Sages ruled that if one has the ability of either retrieving an object which he has lost or one lost by another, his own takes

precedence.

This would seem to free you of any obligation to suffer a loss in order to save another from loss. Nevertheless, our Sages cautioned a person to avoid using this privilege unless there is a serious loss to you at stake. If one should always stick to the letter of the law he is in danger of becoming totally selfish and may end up being punished with dependence on others.

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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 Bilam?
4. Why did Balak think Bilam's curse would work?
5. When did Bilam receive his prophecies?
6. G-d asked Bilam, "Who are these men with you?" What did Bilam deduce from this question?
7. How do we know Bilam hated the Jews more than Balak did?
8. What is evidence of Bilam's arrogance?
9. In what way was the *malach* that opposed Bilam an angel of mercy?
10. How did Bilam die?
11. Why did the *malach* kill Bilam's donkey?
12. Bilam 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. Bilam 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 Bilam's third attempt to curse the Jews, he changed his strategy. What was different?
17. What were Bilam's three main characteristics?
18. What did Bilam see that made him decide not to curse the Jews?
19. What phrase in Bilam's self-description can be translated in two opposite ways, both of which come out meaning the same thing?
20. Bilam 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 Bilam'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. Bilam 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 Bilam 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 Bilam." G-d is concerned with human dignity.
12. 22:34 - Avraham. Bilam 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. Bilam 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.

LOVE OF THE LAND - THE PLACES

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

ALOT HANESHEK – THE ANCIENT ARMORY

In his description of the rebuilding of Yerushalayim, Nechemia mentions a place called "Alot Haneshek". (Nechemiah 3:19) Rashi explains that this refers to an armory near the wall of the city where the soldiers



stored their weapons.

The location for this armory, suggests one commentator, was based on the policy of keeping weapons out of the "City of Peace".

- Common denominator of oath violations and other Torah laws
- Explanation of sequence and numbers
- Sacrificial atonement and lashes for oath violation
- Exemptions from punishment by lashes
- Forgetting that one is impure or forgetting that he has entered the Sanctuary
- Interpreting the Torah on basis of general rule preceding or following a detail
- The meaning of *vene'elam* in regard to entering Sanctuary
- The categories of colors in determining *tzara'at* leprosy
- Sacrificial atonement for entering the Sanctuary or eating sacrificial flesh in impure state
- The three sins also characterized as *tumah* but requiring a different atonement
- Atonement provided by the Yom Kippur sacrifices

EXEMPT FROM LASHES

Mesechta *Shavuot*, which we begin this week, follows *Mesechta Makkot*, and the reason given in the *gemara* for the sequence is based on a certain similarity between the last *mishna* of the former and the first of the latter.

There is a topic in the opening pages of this *mesechta* that recalls the subject of the punishment of lashes so elaborately discussed in its predecessor. Although the general rule is that one who violates a prohibition of the Torah is punished by lashes, there are exceptions. One of them is the case of someone who took an oath to eat a loaf of bread today and failed to do so. Despite the fact that he is guilty of transgressing the command to avoid false oaths, he is not liable for lashes. Two different approaches are offered by the Sages for this exemption.

Rabbi Yochanan's position is that lashes are due only for an active violation and since failure to eat the bread is a passive

one it is not punished by lashes.

Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish (Reish Lakish) sees this exemption as the result of an impossibility to definitively warn the transgressor, an absolute requirement for any punishment administered by the court. Since the witnesses issuing a warning that he must eat the bread or be guilty of violating his oath cannot be certain at that moment that he will not eat sometime during the day, such a warning cannot make him liable for lashes.

These two explanations also apply to the case of one who transgresses the prohibition against leaving any of the flesh of the *Korban Pesach* overnight. In this case, however, we find a third reason for exemption from lashes. Rabbi Yehuda states that since the Torah commanded one who did leave such flesh overnight to burn it, we consider this as the Torah's way of saying that such burning is the atonement and no other atonement is necessary.

• *Shavuot 3b*

What the SAGES Say

"The possibility of a Jew being totally unaware of the Torah laws of impurity exists in the case of one who was taken captive by non-Jews as a baby and grew up among them."

• *The Sage Abaye - Shavuot 5a*

THE HUMAN SIDE OF THE STORY

THE GRANDFATHER'S RETURN

The problem that came before the eminent halachic authority Rabbi Yosef Shalom Eliyashiv was one that sometimes occurs in this era of return to the roots.

When a son was born to him, the *ba'al teshuva* was asked by his non-observant father to grant him the privilege of being the *sandek* at the *brit mila*. The son hesitated because of the ruling in *Shulchan Aruch* that one should give such an

honor to a very righteous Jew. Upon hearing his son's hesitation the father vowed that if he could serve as *sandek* he would begin observing Shabbat.

Rabbi Eliyashiv ruled that the father should be given this honor because there could be no greater merit for the child than having his grandfather become observant because of him.

HERETICAL HOPE

From: Barbara

Dear Rabbi,

An older relative of mine converted from Judaism to Christianity many years ago. I don't think she did so out of theological reasons, but rather (without going into details) out of convenience. Now that she is getting on in years, I'm wondering what will be with her? Is there any point in discussing it with her? Is there any hope?

Dear Barbara,

While Judaism does not require non-Jews to convert to Judaism and righteous gentiles are rewarded in the World-to-Come, Judaism does prohibit Jews from repudiating Judaism by 'converting' to other religions. This is viewed as a grave transgression with the most serious of consequences.

However, circumstances and intentions are certainly taken into consideration by G-d, who discerns one's innermost thoughts and motivations precisely. Therefore, converting for reasons of convenience, which on some level involves a degree of 'coercion' (as opposed to theological repudiation), is viewed less severely, albeit also very seriously.

Whether and how you should discuss this with her depends on your relationship with her and on her personality. But certainly, if there is any way you can encourage her return to Judaism you should do so.

Is there any hope?

In the times of Rabbi Yehuda HaChasid, there was a particular Jew who converted to Christianity in order to gain the rights and privileges denied to him as a Jew. After many years of alienation from Judaism, he appeared before the rabbi asking forgiveness and whether there was any chance his repentance would be accepted. The rabbi flatly rejected him and told him that after all he had done, there was no hope.

After some time, the rabbi was given a miraculous indication that the man's repentance was in fact accepted by Heaven. He called the man to him, asking if he had done any truly great deed over the years. The man recalled that one year before Passover, he witnessed a mob gathering to initiate a blood libel against the Jews. The mob was stayed only by the local governor who prevented the mob from causing any harm to the Jews unless they could bring proof that the Jews use Christian

blood for their Passover *matzot*.

The group immediately turned to this alienated Jew who could surely be "relied" upon to affirm their accusations against the Jews. On the one hand, sure to lose his 'hard-earned' rights as a Christian, he preferred to side with the mob. On the other hand, he loathed being the direct cause of the deaths of innocent Jews.

Amidst this chaos from without and turmoil from within, the Jew addressed the governor: "Your Honor, the Jews do not use blood in their *matzot*. They make great effort to remove all blood from meat through slaughter and salting. They won't even eat an egg with the tiniest spot of blood in it. To use human blood for the *matzot* is absolutely unthinkable to the Jews."

In the merit of having saved Jews as a non-Jew, he was saved from having become a non-Jew and was rather accepted back as a Jew.

I recently heard another story related to your question:

A young man who learned in Ohr Somayach for several years eventually married, moved back to the States, and works in the health field. One day, an elderly patient he was treating suddenly volunteered to this obviously Orthodox Jewish practitioner, "You know, I'm Catholic". "That's nice", he said, thinking her admission a bit odd. Then, recalling her Jewish sounding name, he remarked, "That's interesting; your name sounds Jewish". She said, "I know, I converted". Contemplating his next move, he decided that since she was being upfront, he would allow himself to be straightforward as well: "You know, according to Judaism, a Jew can't convert out, so you'll always be Jewish". Again, she frankly replied, "I know".

So he said, "Since you know so much about Judaism, why did you convert?" She explained, "When I was a kid, things were different than now. The only way I could go to school is if I converted. So I did. I've been Catholic ever since." This catalyzed a whole discussion about her relationship with Judaism which eventually led to the two of them saying "Shema" together – he said a word and she repeated. By the end of this declaration of her Jewishness, he was in tears and could no longer continue. But this elderly Jewish woman, disaffected from Judaism for so many years, proudly completed by herself toward the end of her life what she was taught in her youth: "Hear O Israel, the Lord our G-d is One....I have redeemed you from the land of Egypt to be your G-d. I am the Lord your G-d".

It's never too late.

A TIME TO SPEAK

BY RABBI MENDEL WEINBACH

*“The time has come, the walrus said, to talk of many things;
of shoes and ships and sealing wax, of cabbages and kings.”*

- Through the Looking Glass

How right was the author of “Alice in Wonderland” for this is certainly a time when the awesome walrus of world public opinion demands that we speak of these very things.

Shoes and Ships, Cabbages and Kings

I would not like to be in the shoes of the spokesman of Israel in explaining to the cabbages and kings who rule foreign countries and brazenly interfere in the affairs of a sovereign state defending itself against ships that threaten its security.

But is there anything really new in this current wave of Jew-bashing? Is this not merely a cheap re-run of the accusations about blood of gentile children for matza baking or the poisoning of wells? Is there a difference between the fictionalizing of elders of Zion plotting a world takeover and the character assassination of Israel’s leaders as perpetrators of a “massacre”?

Sealing Wax

While the world clamors for an objective investigation of the Israeli action, and even Israelis wonder why there was a lack of intelligence regarding the danger facing the commando force boarding the ship, it is a time to speak of the sealing wax which binds Israel’s problems in international relations with its own domestic behavior.

There is an old Yiddish saying about the tendency of Jews to imitate the ways of their gentile neighbors. While this conveyed the sad message that Jewish behavior reflects that of non-Jews, we suggest that the opposite is true as well. The way Jews relate to one another is the way non-Jews relate to us all!

The current wave of the Israeli media disparaging the Orthodox sector of Jewry and its politicians catering to the anti-religious electorate is now boomeranging against

its perpetrators who are forced to use their communication skills to defend their country.

We might even extend this “sealing wax” connection to the wave of anti-Semitic acts of vandals and governments throughout the world. Is there not a relationship between the desecration of Jewish cemeteries in Europe and the manner in which graves are uprooted in Israel for archeological or construction purposes? Is the banning of *shechita* in Scandinavian countries and New Zealand a mirror of the local authorities’ ruthless interference in the educational policies of the Orthodox public?

At the conclusion of Psalm 62 in Tehillim King David praises G-d for the kindness of His retribution “to every man according to his deeds.” In his commentary Rabbi David Kimchi (RADAK) explains that the reason why Divine retribution is the poetic justice of exact measure for measure is so that man can learn from his punishment that it is not the result of coincidence or natural causes but rather a Heavenly message to do some soul-searching and improvement.

What happened off the shores of Gaza was not a coincidence and cannot be traced only to terrorist subterfuge. Like everything else that happens this must be viewed from the perspective so eloquently expressed by Rambam (Laws of Fasting 1:2), who echoes the Torah warning that if we react to every tragedy as being the way of the world and merely a coincidence, we are cruelly causing ourselves to persist in our evil ways and invite further setbacks.

May the current crisis serve to awaken all of us to our responsibilities so that no further shocks will be needed and Jews in Israel and throughout the world can live in peace and security.