

OHRNET

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PARSHA INSIGHTS

A CLEAR SHOT

“How goodly are your tents, O Yaakov!” (24:5)

What was so ‘goodly’ about the tents of Yaakov? Bilaam noted that not one of Israel’s tent entrances was aligned opposite the other. Every tent was angled so that its entrance looked out only onto the side of the tent of its neighbor.

But what was so special about that? True, it showed discretion and a respect for privacy, but why specifically should it be this non-alignment of the tent-openings that caused Bilaam to proclaim Jewish People deserving of the Divine Presence to dwell among them?

In fact, Bilaam’s whole intention was to find some universal flaw in the Jewish People which would allow him to bring them down - to curse them by accusing them of some endemic sin.

However, he could find no such common flaw. For, even

though one Jew might stumble in one area, his neighbor would, as it were, step into the breach and excel in that same area, compensating for him.

And so on throughout the entire people. Bilaam could not find one ubiquitous vice that ran throughout the body politic of the Jewish People, try as he might.

That’s the hidden meaning of his words here, “How goodly are your tents, Yaakov!” None of your entrances (to sin) are aligned corresponding to the entrance of your neighbor. None of your sins are aligned opposite the sins of your neighbor. And so, I can’t get a ‘clear shot’ through to the middle! I can’t wound you by lobbing a shot clear into your midst, into your heart. For each one of you steps into the breach, the weakness of one is the strength of the other and leaves no opening to the sin that crouches at the door.

ANIMAL CRACKERS?

“What have I done that you have struck me these three times?” (22:28)

Bilaam’s donkey was no slouch. When the donkey said “these three times” he was alluding to the three festivals of Pesach, Shavuot and Succot.

The donkey was asking Bilaam how he could have imagined that he would uproot the Jewish People who make the three pilgrimage festivals. But what is so special about the three festivals that they are singled out as such a protective force for the Jewish People?

The Jewish People are above time. Since they can estab-

lish the day on which the month begins, they are essentially ‘partners in time’ with the Creator, and not totally subject to time’s constraints.

Bilaam, however, could only receive prophecy at night. His prophecy was time-dependent. Thus the donkey was reminding Bilaam that he was ‘yoked’ to time and how could he possibly imagine that he would be able to dominate a people who were *above* time? A smart donkey.

YOU LOSE - I WIN!

“So now, please come and curse this people for me, for it is too powerful for me.” (22:6)

What does a Jew do when he finds himself in trouble? He goes to a big *tzaddik* and asks him to give him a *beracha*. He *davens* to the Creator of the world to save him. But how do other nations react to trouble?

When Balak ben Tzipor, the king of Moav, was frightened of the Jews, he went to Bilaam and asked him to do some-

thing. He didn’t ask him to bless *him*, but rather to *curse* the Jews!

This is the way of the wicked, explains the Chafetz Chaim. Rather than seek a blessing for themselves, they would prefer a curse for someone else!

PARSHA OVERVIEW

Balak, 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 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.

LOVE OF THE LAND

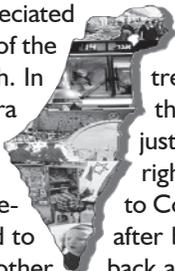
Selections from classical Torah sources which express the special relationship between the People of Israel and Eretz Yisrael

DATE – HONEY-FILLED SYMBOL OF THE RIGHTEOUS

When King David compares the righteous man to the blossoming date tree (*Tehillim* 92:13), the full meaning of this metaphor can only be appreciated by contrasting it to an earlier comparison (*ibid.* 92:8) of the enemies of G-d to the grass sprouting from the earth. In his commentary on this psalm, Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra notes that the enemies to which the psalmist refers are the enemies of the righteous man who are likewise considered enemies of G-d. Although these enemies proliferate like blades of grass they are doomed to soon wither like the grass. The righteous, on the other

hand, are comparatively few in number like the date tree but are blessed with the durability of that tree.

Elsewhere our Sages comment on the psalmist's comparison of the righteous man to both the date tree and the cedar. Their explanation (*Bava Batra* 80b) is that the comparison to the date tree is to convey that just as that tree yields fruit, so do the good deeds of a righteous man yield fruits of reward for him in the World to Come. And just as the cedar has the ability to grow back after being cut, so the righteous have the ability to bounce back after every setback.



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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 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 open eye," which means vision but implies blindness in the other eye.
20. 24:14 - Promiscuity.

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Love of the Land, What's the Right Thing to Do?, The Human Side of the Story written by Rav Mendel Weinbach, zt"l

Parsha Insights written by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair • General Editor and *Talmud Tips*: Rabbi Moshe Newman • Design: Rabbi Eliezer Shapiro

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PESACHIM 2 - 8

The first *mishna* of our new *mesechta* states that the time for the mitzvah to check for *chametz* before Pesach is “ohr” of the 14th of Nissan. What does “ohr” mean in this context?

Usually it means “light”, which would seem to imply that the mitzvah is to check on the morning of the 14th, the morning before the Seder. However, our *gemara* explains that according to all opinions — Rav Yehuda and Rav Huna — it means the night that begins the 14th of Nissan, a full 24 hours before the Seder.

The *gemara* explains that the Tana of our *mishna* said “ohr” as a euphemism to express “night”. The commentaries explain that calling “night” as “light” is not a falsehood, G-d forbid, but teaches that the mitzvah of checking for *chametz* should be done at the very beginning of the night, at the transition between the last rays of light into darkness.

• Pesachim 3a

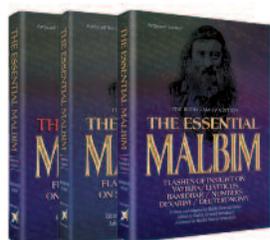
“Rav Yehuda said that Rav said in the name of Rabbi Meir that a person should always teach his student in a concise manner.”

• Pesachim 3b

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BEDECKED IN BLACK

From: Zalman

Dear Rabbi,

When I went home after learning in yeshiva, my parents got really upset by the more religious way I dress. I think this is really hypocritical since they are the ones who are supposedly liberal and who believe in equality and tolerance. If everybody can do whatever they want, why can't I wear black? Also, even though my Hebrew name (that THEY gave me) is Zalman, they insist on calling me Steve. How can I get them to understand?

Dear Zalman,

The Torah's ways are "ways of pleasantness and all its paths are peace." If your actions do not bring peace, it may be that you are not following the ways of the Torah.

Rabbi Moshe Feinstein ruled that, although it's better to use a Hebrew name, there's no prohibition in using a non-Hebrew one. According to this, if your parents address you by your non-Hebrew name you should respond, and you should not correct them.

Regarding dress, Rabbi Feinstein maintained that there is no halachic obligation to wear any particular style that has become traditional for Jewish communities in various places and times. He also rules that there is no prohibition of "following the ways of the pagans" in adopting fashions of the gentile world. This is all providing that the clothing has no

pagan religious significance and does not violate to the prohibitions against sha'atnez, immodesty, and cross-dressing.

I'm not advising you to wear ripped jeans and a Grateful Dead T-shirt. In Orthodox communities, as in all societies, specific styles of clothing are the norm. Integrating into these groups without dressing "frum" would be difficult. Therefore you are correct in viewing your dress as an intrinsic part of your development, and not necessarily acceding to your parents' tastes.

However, you should still take their feelings into account. If your dress causes them distress, a compromise might be to wear "civilian clothing" at home, or to tone down religious clothing styles.

Respecting parents will demonstrate that Judaism does not seek to alienate children from their families, and is concerned with the preservation of family ties even when not every member of the family observes Jewish law.

Respecting parents requires proper communication, as the following incident illustrates:

A mother told her daughter, "There are two words which you use constantly, and I'd appreciate it if you'd eliminate them from your vocabulary ... One is "nauseating" and the other is "disgusting."

"O.K., Mom," said the daughter, "Tell me what the words are and I'll stop saying them."

Sources:

- *Mishlei 3:17.*
- *Iggrot Moshe, Orach Chayim 4:66, Yoreh De'ah 1:81.*
- *After the Return – Rabbi Mordechai Becher & Rabbi Moshe Newman, 2:1, Feldheim Publishers 1995.*

@ OHR Profiles of Ohr Somayach Alumni and Students

written by Shimon O'Heron

Rabbi Yosef Lipson Brandeis University – Philosophy Shoresh Program

Rabbi Lipson is from Madrid, Montreal, Maryland, Venezuela, Connecticut... let's just say he was born in Boro Park. He was in the very first class of Ohr Somayach in 1974 and studied here for two years before going to Scranton Yeshiva for 11 years. Today, he is a highly respected and talented high school Rabbi, who thanks Rabbi Weinbach, *atzal*, Rabbi



Schiller and Rabbi Aaron Feldman for giving him the spiritual DNA of his entire life. But, before all this, he was a thoughtful Philosophy major at Brandeis, postulating that only something eternal can have value, because all else fades away eventually. He needed to find an objective eternality or everything was ultimately meaningless. This drive brought him to the Bostoner Rebbe, the study of The Kuzari and the works of the Rambam — and to study in Jerusalem at Ohr Somayach. As they say, the rest is Eternity.

CAN'T THROW THEM AWAY

Question:

I have a batch of clothes and toys that my children have outgrown, but I have a sentimental attachment to them and cannot just throw them away. However I sorely need the space they are occupying. What is the right thing to do?

Answer:

Almost every family faces the problem of what to do with used clothes, toys, utensils and other household items. You and others in your situation have a wonderful opportunity to help families who cannot afford to purchase these items new. Sometimes you may be aware of a needy recipient, but there is a much more efficient and sensitive way of disposing of your used things for the benefit of others.

In many religious communities in Eretz Yisrael and other

countries *Gemach* centers have been established. These centers receive the items you wish to be rid of and sell them to needy customers for a token sum. Collections made in communities where there are no clients for used things invariably send them to Eretz Yisrael where the need is great.

This system achieves three goals:

It allows the needy customers to receive these items in a dignified fashion without feeling they are charity cases.

The funds received from the sale of these items are applied to helping needy families with cash.

It helps people like you avoid the emotional trauma of throwing away used items you feel attached to.

So go ahead and find out where such a *Gemach* exists, or create one yourself.

THE HUMAN SIDE OF THE STORY

A BLESSING BY AN ACTOR

“*Shehakol niheya bidvaro.*” A resounding “Amen” came from the audience as Ira from Toronto completed that blessing over a glass of water as his opening gesture. He then went on to inform his listeners that only two weeks ago he wasn’t even aware that such a blessing existed.

Ira was one of the seventy young men from North America and England who recently spent two and a half weeks in Israel learning and touring as part of the Jewish Learning Experience (JLE) Program of Yeshivat Ohr Somayach. The JLE brings hundreds of such Jewish youngsters each year during the summer and winter college breaks. Those who participated in the last two programs were given that special treat of studying with businessmen and professionals from North America who came on a Mentors’ Mission to teach and interact with these newcomers to Torah life.

What seemed like a dramatic trick by Ira at the reception given by the JLE and the Ohr Somayach staff for these mentors came naturally to this professional man of theater who incidentally bumped into a fellow Torontonion who was a famous juvenile actor and is now a family man studying in Ohr Somayach.

Ira brought along his photographic equipment and asked permission from the Rosh Hayeshiva to film one of the classes he gave. He later explained to one of the JLE staff members that, while he greatly enjoyed the content of the class, he was most interested in recording for himself the almost theatrical methodology of the rabbi in organizing and delivering his lecture. Watching Ira with his glass of water, his blessing and his ensuing story of how he found his way to Ohr Somayach in Jerusalem made the Rosh Hayeshiva feel that he too had learned something about how to reach people.

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“To Err is Arrogant”

BY RABBI YOSEF LIPSON

The Talmud states that Bilaam was one “who knows the mind of the Most High” due to his unique ability to discern the exact moment of G-d’s anger (*Berachot 7a*). In addition, when the elders of Midian and Moav came to visit him, G-d asked him, “Who are these men with you?” Since G-d appeared to be soliciting information from him, Bilaam extrapolated, “There are times when not all is revealed to Him. I shall see if there is a time when I can give a curse and He will not be aware” (*Rashi, Bamidbar 22:9*). Due to these two factors he thought he would succeed in cursing the Jewish People at a calculated time.

However, Bilaam’s thinking was obviously flawed. How could he possibly think that G-d was not aware of everything and that Bilaam could “pull a fast one” and get away with something without G-d knowing? Was he that ignorant? No, teach Chazal. Although he was unquestionably an evil man, he was also apparently a brilliant person, and was even a prophet. Rashi explains that kings would come to him to solicit his interpretations of their letters. He also correctly prophesied that Balak would become king of Moav (*Rashi, Bamidbar 22:5*). In addition, we are taught that G-d caused His Divine Presence to rest on Bilaam (*ibid.*). Bilaam must have possessed a sophisticated level of understanding of the ways of G-d. If so, how in the world could Bilaam have made such a foolish error?

To try to understand this let us turn to the teachings of the Maharal (*Netivot Olam*). It is written, he says, “The sacrificial offerings of evil people are an abomination, the prayers of the righteous are pleasing” (*Mishlei 21*). What is the lesson here? The Maharal explains that one might mistakenly think that G-d benefits in some way from the service performed to Him. If that would be the case, then the sacrificial offering of an evildoer could also provide that benefit. However, this is not the case. G-d derives no benefit from our service to Him. The benefit is actually to the one performing the ser-

vice. Therefore, states the Maharal, the service of an evil person can be classified as an abomination.

The Maharal cites Bilaam as an example of one who misunderstood the nature of sacrificial offerings to G-d. There are several examples in the Parsha. One is in the first of the prophetic encounters. Bilaam addresses G-d, “I have set up the three altars”. Why are the altars referred to by the definite article, “the”? Rashi, citing the Midrash Tanchuma, explains that Bilaam wished to equate himself with great figures from the past who also set up altars to G-d: Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov. Their combined total of altars was seven, whereas Bilaam alone constructed seven (*Rashi, Bamidbar 23:7*). Even though Bilaam was a sinner he thought he could please G-d with his service in a way that surpassed even the service of people vastly more righteous than him. The basis for this error is that he thought that G-d in some way “needs” our service to Him.

What is the source of this mistake to think that G-d could somehow require the service to Him? “If you sin how will you impact Him? If you behave righteously what will you give to Him?” (*Iyov 35:6-7*). Nothing a human being can do has a power to affect G-d. Certainly He does not need our sacrificial offerings, or anything else. This seems quite obvious. Yet this appears to have been Bilaam’s mistake with his offerings, and it seems to parallel the other mistake cited earlier from Rashi, that Bilaam thought there was a limitation of G-d’s knowledge.

The Torah leaves no room for doubt about the fact that G-d created the universe. It would be irrational to think that He is in any way dependent upon the universe that He created from nothing. He was perfect before He created the universe, and certainly does not require anything from the universe He created.

Perhaps the basis for Bilaam’s error is in an arrogant approach to the nature of G-d’s interaction with the cre-

“To Err is Arrogant” *continued from page seven*

ation. G-d created the laws that govern our universe, both spiritual and physical laws. “*Olam k’minhago noheg*” — the world functions according to its established laws (*Avoda Zara 54b*).

Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzatto explains that there are two main dimensions in G-d’s interaction with creation. One is that of “response” to our choices with reward and punishment. When humanity fulfills G-d’s will, He responds by bestowing blessing and goodness upon the world. When humanity rebels, however, G-d brings punishment to the world, which may seem contrary to His ultimate will to give goodness to the creation — the very purpose for which it was created.

Rabbi Luzatto teaches further that there is another dimension to G-d’s interaction with creation that might seem to contradict the first dimension. This second dimension of interaction is totally independent of humanity’s merits. As our Sages teach, “I will show favor to whom I shall show favor - even though he may be undeserving” (*Berachot 7a*). The Ramchal calls this the “Absolute Rulership” dimension. This dimension prevents humans from destroying the world and makes the ultimate perfection of humanity inevitable, regardless of merit.

The first dimension, however — “Reward and Punishment” — seems to teach us the opposite. We are treated according to our deeds and in reaction to our merits. In a certain sense it seems that G-d has “subjugated” His reaction to fit our behavior

Understanding the co-existence of these two dimensions is where Bilaam erred.

Bilaam refused to accept that the dimension of “Absolute

Rulership” always transcends that of “Reward and Punishment”. There is nothing that occurs in our world that does not have some role to play in the larger context of the fulfillment of the world’s destiny. Many sources demonstrate this. One example is, “I am G-d, I have never deviated” (*Malachi 3:6*). The meaning is that G-d never deviates from His ultimate goal (*Da’at Tevunos p. 41*). This is the meaning of the statement made in the Talmud, “Everything G-d does is for the good” (*Berachot 60b*).

In one of his prophecies, Bilaam says, “G-d does not look at the foolishness of Yaakov, and He does not see sins in Yisrael.” Rashi explains this to mean that G-d does not look at the foolishness that is in Yaakov when they transgress His words. He does not scrutinize their foolishness when they transgress His law. Even when they cause anger and rebel before Him, He does not depart from their midst (*Bamidbar 23, 21*). This prophecy, along with the others that Bilaam received, is a direct refutation of Bilaam’s mistake. Through G-d’s unconditional commitment to the Jewish People we see the dimension of His absolute rulership. G-d’s relationship with the Jewish nation is unconditional, because the Jewish People are the instrument through whom humanity will ultimately be perfected. To destroy them, even when they sin, would subvert this goal. Bilaam learns from this that he cannot destroy the Jewish People with his curses. He learns that G-d is always aware. This is a lesson that we too may learn from Bilaam’s mistake.

Editor’s note: For more about the author please see this week’s @OHR column on page five.

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