

PRAY FOR THE 'RIGHT' PERSON

by Shlomo Katz

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Balak

Today's Learning Taharot 4:12-13 Kitzur 168:1-5 Eruvin 68 Yerushalmi Shabbat 90

As Bilam makes his way to meet the Moabite king Balak, an angel blocks Bilam's path and Bilam's donkey refuses to move on. Rashi writes that the angel was an angel of mercy; he was not placed there to harm Bilam but rather to save him from sinning and thus to save his life. Bilam, however, did not realize this. As far as he was concerned, the angel was simply interfering with his well laid plans.

In an address to young men who were in the process of seeking their spouses, R' Avraham Yaakov Pam shlita (rosh yeshiva of Torah Vodaath) observed that it is common for people to be angry when a seemingly perfect match does not work out. In reality, however, Hashem knows what is for the best. Indeed, the gemara states that it is blasphemous to pray that one be able to marry a specific

person. One should only pray that he be able to marry the "right" person. (Atarah La'melech, p.32)

The same concept applies to other aspects of life as well. For example, a person who is job hunting should not pray that he get a specific job, only that he get the job which is best for him. (Heard from R' Kalman Winter shlita)

"And Hashem came to Bilam that night and said to him, 'If the men came to summon you, arise and go with them; but only the thing that I shall speak to you - that shall you do.'" (22:20)

R' Moshe Feinstein z"l asks: If Hashem did not intend to let Bilam curse Bnei Yisrael, why did He let Bilam go? He answers: The story of Bilam demonstrates the power of the yetzer hara/evil inclination. Although Bilam was a prophet and he knew that Hashem did not want Bnei Yisrael to be cursed, he nevertheless went to great lengths and made many preparations to try to circumvent Hashem's will.

The lesson that we must derive from this, says R' Feinstein, is that one should not rely on his intellect, piety, Torah study and belief in Hashem to protect him from his evil inclination. Unless a person is constantly vigilant, it is all too easy to become ensnared and ultimately to sin. (Darash Moshe II, p.203)

"You will see the edge of it, but you will not see all of it." (23:13)

After Bilam failed in his attempt to curse Bnei Yisrael, Balak suggested that Bilam might be more successful if he could see only part of Bnei Yisrael, but not all of it. Why? Also, Bilam is described (24:3) as being blind in one eye. Why is this significant to the story?

R' Zev Leff shlita explains: Man was given two eyes to give him perspective. Using one eye alone robs a person of the ability to assess a situation properly and to see both the positive and negative aspects of the situation. Thus, for example, Bilam was ready to kill his donkey because of the one time that she refused to serve him (at the beginning of this parashah). He forgot or ignored the loyal service she had provided for many years.

In contrast, the Torah commands that our sheep that are killed by wild animals should be fed to our dogs. One could argue that the sheep's death was the dog's fault, for the dog was supposed to be guarding the flock. Why then should the dog be rewarded? The answer, says R' Leff, is that the Torah is teaching us to look at the bigger picture and reward our dogs for their past service. (Outlooks and Insights, p.193)

"How good are your tents, Yaakov, your mishkenot/tabernacles, Yisrael." (24:5)

R' Hillel Lichtenstein z"l (1814-1891) writes: There were three benefits that the Jewish people enjoyed when the mishkan/tabernacle or bet hamikdash stood: (1) the nations of the world recognized that Hashem was close to Bnei Yisrael; (2) Hashem blessed each of the four different types of creations - inanimate objects, plants, animals, and humans - because samples of each were offered on the altar [for example: water; flour and wine; goats, sheep and oxen; and the toil of the kohanim]; and (3) through the service which was performed in the mishkan and the bet hamikdash, the enemies of Bnei Yisrael were weakened.

How can we achieve these benefits now that the bet hamikdash is not standing? Chazal say that Hashem's new home is within the four cubits of Torah study. Indeed, several verses state that Torah study brings rain and protects us from our enemies.

In this light, and after we know one additional fact, the above verse can be understood in a new way. The name "Yisrael" describes the Jewish people on an advanced spiritual level while the name "Yaakov" describes them in their "lower" periods. Thus the verse says, "How good are your tents of Torah study, when you are 'Yaakov' - just like your mishkan when you were 'Yisrael'." The mishkan (actually, the bet hamikdash) was destroyed because the Jewish people have sinned and were no longer deserving of the title Yisrael. However, the tents of Torah study bring the Jewish people the same benefits as the mishkan had brought before it was destroyed

In Devarim (23:6) we read: "And Hashem, your G-d, did not wish to listen to Bilam and He turned the curse into a blessing." This verse is internally contradictory; first it suggests that Hashem did not listen to Bilam at all, then it implies that only one of Bilam's curses was converted into a blessing! R' Lichtenstein explains that as long as one of Bilam's curses is overturned, i.e., as long as Hashem recognizes the beauty of the tents of Torah study, all of Bilam's curses are effectively neutralized. (Maskil El Dal, Vol. I, Part III, No. 1)

"Reishit goyim Amalek/Amalek is foremost among the nations." (24:20)

R' Aharon Roth ("Reb Ahrele") z"l writes: The initials of the above phrase spell "rega"/"a moment," as in the verse (Tehilim 30:6), "Ki rega be'apo"/"His anger lasts but a moment." Thus, this verse teaches that anger (alluded to by Amalek, foremost among the nations) is foremost among bad character traits.

The verse continues, "And its end will be eternal destruction." If one can delay his anger (i.e., push it off until the "end"), he will succeed in destroying it entirely. (Shulchan Hatahor quoted in Imrei Aharon)

An Astonishing Midrash

Bilam said to Balak, "How can I curse them? After all, they wear Shabbat clothes and they sit before the rabbi when he delivers his lecture!"

This can be understood in light of another question, i.e., how is it possible to hurt someone by cursing him? If he deserves to be harmed, he should be harmed without being cursed. If he is not deserving, the curse should have no effect.

The Ohr Hachaim Hakadosh explains that there are two ways that a curse can have an effect. If a person is deserving of punishment but Hashem has decided, for whatever reason, to delay the punishment, another person's curse may hasten the arrival of the punishment. Also, Hashem has ordered the world such that one person can stop His blessings from descending from Heaven to the lower spheres.

In this light we can understand Bilam's words: Regarding the first effect of a curse, Chazal say that all of a person's sins are forgiven when he sits through the rabbi's lecture. Regarding the second, man is elevated to a higher level when he observes Shabbat, and Hashem's blessings do not need to descend to a low level where a curse can "reach" them. Thus, Bilam's curses were useless against Bnei Yisrael. (Binat Nevonim)

R' Chaim (Eliezer) Or Zarua z"l 14th century

R' Chaim Or Zarua - the name Eliezer was added during an illness - was the son of R' Yitzchak of Vienna, author of the important halachic work, Or Zarua. R' Chaim composed an abridged version of his father's work, part of which is printed in the standard Talmud edition after the tractate Yevamot.

R' Chaim also composed original works. His halachic work on the holidays is entitled Derashot and is cited by the 15th century sage Maharil. His responsa are cited extensively, in particular by the Galician posek/halachic authority, Maharsham (died 1910). Another work, sometimes called Derashot and sometimes Piskei R' Chaim Or Zarua, consists of halachic rulings related to each parashah.

R' Chaim was a student of R' Meir ("Maharam") of Rotheburg, and served as rabbi of Wiener Neustadt, Vienna and Cologne. (Sources: The Artscroll Rishonim p.145)

R' Chaim Or Zarua z"l writes: "I was wondering whether it would be prohibited to place a drink within reach of a person who is fasting just as one may not place wine in front of a nazir. (One who does so violates the prohibition on placing a stumbling block in front of a blind person.)

"My grandson answered that the two cases are not comparable because a nazir is in the habit of eating and drinking and thus might drink the wine, but a fasting person is not eating at all and

therefore is unlikely to drink from the cup that is placed before him. Indeed, it was the custom of Maharam to recite kiddush for his family on the second day of Rosh Hashanah even though he himself was fasting." (She'eilot Uteshuvot R' Chaim Or Zarua No. 49)

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