

# MOSHE'S BOOK AND BILAM'S BOOK

*by Shlomo Katz*

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Today's Learning:

Kelim 13:4-5

O.C. 53:14-16

Daf Yomi (Bavli): Zevachim 33

Daf Yomi (Yerushalmi): Ta'anit 13

The Gemara (Bava Batra 14b) teaches: "Moshe wrote his book - i.e., the Torah - and the parashah of Bilam." Commentaries ask the obvious question: Isn't the parashah of Bilam part of the Torah? Why is it singled out?

R' Chaim Zimmerman z"l (Rosh Yeshiva in Chicago; died approx. 1996) explains: The parashah of Bilam and the rest of the Torah serve different purposes. The entire Torah, other than this section, is G-d's word to His nation. The parashah of Bilam, however, is G-d's word about his nation. More than

that, it is directed not only to the Jewish People, but to the world at large. Indeed, that is why it was said originally by a non- Jewish prophet.

What does this parashah teach about Klal Yisrael / the Jewish Nation? It teaches that Klal Yisrael is a unit. Individual Jews may be righteous or wicked, but the Jewish People as a whole is always righteous in G-d's eyes. By way of analogy, R' Zimmerman observes, the laws of physics that describe the movement of atoms in general do not predict the movements of a specific atom. Similarly, every individual Jew has bechirah / free will to do good or bad. Independently of those choices; however, every Jew has a right to exist because he is part of Klal Yisrael as a whole.

Where do we see this in this week's parashah? When Bilam failed in his first attempt to curse Bnei Yisrael, Balak said to him (23:13), "Go now with me to a different place from which you will see them; however, you will see its edge but not see all of it." The Jewish Nation as a whole, Balak realized, could never be cursed. (Torah L'Yisrael p.50)

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## **Chukat**

*"This is the Torah regarding a man who would die in a tent..." (19:14)*

Our Sages interpret this verse homiletically: "In whom is Torah found? In one who kills himself over its study!"

R' Ephraim Zalman Margulies (Galicia, Poland; died 1828) was a successful businessman, and was also the author of several widely- accepted halachic works and other Torah volumes. When he would study Torah, he would lock himself in a room with instructions that he not be disturbed for any business matters. One day, while he was studying, his wife hesitantly knocked on the door and informed him that a wealthy merchant was waiting to see him regarding an important business enterprise.

R' Margulies answered: "One's obligation while studying Torah is to act like he is dead with regard to all mundane matters." Just as the dead do not have a care in the world, so should someone be while studying Torah. So saying, he returned to his studies. When he later learned how much money he had sacrificed, he said: "Thank G-d I had the opportunity to pay so much for a page of the Gemara." (Quoted in Insights: A Talmudic Treasury p.23)

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*"Then Yisrael sang this song: 'Come up, O well, announce it!'" (21:17)*

The midrash compares this verse to the verse (Shmot 15:1), "Then Moshe and Bnei Yisrael sang this song to Hashem . . ."

Why, asks the midrash, is Moshe not mentioned in our verse? Because, says the midrash, earlier in

the parashah his death was decreed as a result of the well, and one does not sing the praise of his hangman. Why is Hashem not mentioned in our verse? This may be compared to a king who is invited to a feast and responds, "If my loved ones will not be there, I will not come."

R' Eliyahu Dessler z"l (1892-1953; head of the Gateshead Kollel and mashgiach of the Ponovezh Yeshiva in Bnei Brak) explains this midrash as follows: Chazal say that even the maidservants who were present at the splitting of the Yam Suf experienced a greater level of prophecy than the revelations seen by the prophet Yechezkel. How was this possible? asks R' Dessler. It was possible because Bnei Yisrael's teacher Moshe recognized Hashem's awesome wonders at that time, and he elevated Bnei Yisrael with him.

In contrast, Moshe himself did not experience the same level of revelation following the miracle of the well. After all, the well had caused Moshe's demise. And, since Moshe himself was not elevated at that time, his disciples, Bnei Yisrael, also could not attain a level of prophecy where they could sing properly in praise of Hashem.

R' Dessler observes: When one is dependent upon his teacher to show him Hashem's wonders, he will be unable to recognize any wonders that his master has not pointed out to him. However, this need not be the case; one can have many teachers, and even one's life experiences can be his teachers. One who so desires can recognize Hashem's hand in every object and in every event that occurs. (Michtav M'Eliyahu, Vol. II, p. 251)

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## **Balak**

*"Even now it is said to Yaakov and Yisrael, 'What has G-d wrought?' Behold! The People will arise like a lion cub..." (23:23-24)*

In the days of Czar Alexander III (died 1894), the Russian banker Baron Horace Guenzburg z"l (1833-1909) arranged for several leading rabbis to meet with the Interior Minister to plead for the annulment of various anti-Semitic decrees.

However, the Minister invited one of his most anti-Semitic advisors to attend, and the latter succeeded in undoing any positive impression that the rabbis made. He said, "I understand the purpose of every single creature that G-d created, from the inanimate to the human. However, I fail to see what benefit the Jewish People bring to the world. They are like a leprosy on our holy land, Russia," and so on.

The rabbis left downcast, but then they noticed that one of their number, R' Yitzchak Elchanan Spektor z"l (1816-1896; rabbi of Kovno), was laughing. In response to their inquiry, he explained that he now understood the verses quoted above as never before. "A day will come when the world will say, 'Why did G-d create the Jewish people? What has G-d wrought?' And when that happens, it will be a sign that better days are coming for the Jewish People; 'The People will arise like a lion cub'."

And, indeed, it was in the days of Alexander III that the chain of events began which lead to the fall of the czars. (Otzar Tzaddikei U'geonei Ha'dorot)

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*"Reishit goyim Amalek" / "Amalek is the first among nations" (24:20)*

Amalek was the first nation to attack Bnei Yisrael and thus represents the epitome of evil. Appropriately, R' Shlomo David Yehoshua Weinberg z"l hy"d (the "Slonimer Rebbe"; killed in the Holocaust) taught that the above phrase alludes to a common trait which is one of the foremost tools of the evil inclination.

The initial letters of the phrase "Reishit goyim Amalek" spell "rega" / "one moment." When a person knows that it is time to repent, the yetzer hara tells him, "One moment! There will time to repent later." (Zichron Kadosh)

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*"Yisrael settled in the Shittim and the people began to commit harlotry with the daughters of Moav." (25:1)*

The gemara (Sanhedrin 106b) relates that after Bilam failed in his attempts to curse Bnei Yisrael, he advised Balak: "The G-d of this nation hates immorality." Therefore, Bilam recommended that Balak place Moabite girls along the road and cause Bnei Yisrael to sin, leading Hashem to (G-d forbid) destroy Bnei Yisrael.

This would accomplish indirectly what Bilam was unable to achieve through his curses.

R' Shimshon David Pinkus z"l (rabbi of Ofakim, Israel; died 2001) writes: There is an awe-inspiring lesson here - that no person and no force in the world can harm a Jew. Only the Jewish people can cause their own downfall through their own actions .

There is a second lesson here, as well, writes R' Pinkus - sins are caused by outside influences. The Jewish soul is pure and it does not sin unless it first allows itself to be exposed to harmful influences. (Tiferet Torah)

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### **R' Aharon Bakst z"l hy"d ("Reb Archik")**

Reb Archik was born in 1869 in a suburb of Vilna. At age 14, he joined the yeshiva in Volozhin, and later he studied in Rav Yitzchak Blazer's yeshiva in Slobodka. However, the person that Reb Archik considered to be his true mentor was Rav Simcha Zissel, the "Alter mi-Kelm." This teacher held Reb Archik in equally high esteem, saying that Reb Archik was the most suited of his students to carry the mussar movement to another generation.

The essence of mussar (character improvement), according to Reb Archik (as reported by his son), is to not be a hypocrite.

Mussar also teaches us how to understand Chazal's teachings, as opposed to "finding" our own ideas in Chazal's words. Along these lines, Reb Archik objected to those who invent new approaches to mussar, saying that these were products of the ego, not genuine mussar.

After his marriage, Reb Archik briefly engaged in business (at his father-in-law's insistence), but he knew that his real calling was the Torah. His first rabbinic position was in a small, but difficult, town. His opponents there, actually opponents of the mussar movement, even took to the newspapers to vilify him.

In 1895, Reb Archik was invited to serve as rabbi of a distant Russian town. When he asked how they knew of him, they cited the newspaper articles mentioned above. Reb Archik later served as rabbi and rosh yeshiva in other towns, including Shadova, Suvalk, and Lomza. His last position was in Shavli, where he served until he was murdered by the Nazis.

Only a small portion of Reb Archik's written legacy survives. He turned down a chance to send his writings to London at the outset of World War II because he felt that they required additional editing. A halachic work, *Torat Aharon*, has been published, as has *Lev Aharon*, a volume containing mussar discourses. Reb Archik was killed on 15 Tammuz 5701 /1941.

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