

PARSHAS BALAK

by Shlomo Katz

Parshas Balak

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Martin and Michelle Swartz in memory of Martin's grandfather John Hofmann a"h

The most famous verse in our parashah is undoubtedly Bemidbar 24:5, "How good are your tents, Yaakov, your dwelling places, Yisrael." The midrash states that the "dwelling places" referred to are the batei kneset / shuls and batei midrash / study halls where Torah is studied. Accordingly, writes R' Yitzchak Elchanan Spektor z"l (1816-1896; rabbi of Kovno, Lithuania), we can interpret our verse as follows: In what merit will our tents be good, i.e., in what merit will we dwell in G-d's "tent" in Olam Ha'ba forever? In the merit of our dwelling places, i.e., in the merit of the Torah we study in this world.

R' Spektor continues: Those who give financial support to Torah study can reach the highest levels in the World-to-Come. This is alluded to in Kohelet (7:12), "To sit in the shelter of wisdom is to sit in the shelter of money." They are one and the same.

The next verse in our parashah states: "Stretching out like brooks, like gardens alongside a river, like aloes Hashem planted, like cedars near water." This refers to the ability of a Torah scholar's words to spread quickly throughout the world like flowing water or like the scent of aloes. Fortunate are the ones who study Torah and those who facilitate that Torah study and the spread of Torah through their financial means, observes R' Spektor. (Ma'amar Al Ha'Torah reprinted in Ma'ayan Yitzchak p.122)

"The angel of Hashem said to him, 'Why did you strike your donkey these three times? Behold! I went out to impede [you], for you hastened on a road to oppose me . . .' Bil'am said to the angel of Hashem, 'I have sinned, for I did not know that you were standing opposite me on the road. And now, if it is evil in your eyes, I shall return'." (22:32, 34)

R' Yehuda He'chassid z"l (Germany; died 1217) asks: Why didn't Bil'am answer, "I struck the donkey because it pressed my leg against the wall"? And, why did Bil'am say, "I have sinned, for I did not know that you were standing opposite me on the road"? To the contrary, if he didn't know the angel was there then he did not sin!

He explains: The Torah teaches that one is held responsible for what he should have known, even if it was never explicitly commanded. We read, for example (Bemidbar 31:14-15), "Moshe was angry with the commanders of the army . . . Moshe said to them, 'Did you let every female [of Midian] live? Behold! -- they caused Bnei Yisrael, by the word of Bil'am, to commit a betrayal against Hashem regarding the matter of Peor; and the plague occurred in the assembly of Hashem.'" Moshe had never told the commanders that they should take the women as prisoners, but he was angry with them because they should have known.

Similarly, Bil'am should have known that G-d did not want him to go to Moav. Thus, when Bil'am said, "I have sinned, for I did not know that you were standing opposite me on the road," he really meant, "for I did not make it my business to know . . ." That is also why he did not make excuses to the angel for hitting his (Bil'am's) donkey; Bil'am knew that he was in the wrong.

R' Yehuda He'chassid writes further: Our Sages instruct that a person should be "arom b'yirah" (literally, "cunning in his fear [of Heaven]"). This refers to using one's intelligence to figure out G-d's Will even without being explicitly commanded. (Sefer Chassidim No.153)

*"Balak slaughtered cattle and sheep and sent to Bil'am and to the officers who were with him."
(22:40)*

Who were these "officers"? The Torah mentions only that Bil'am traveled with two lads, not with officers!

R' Chaim Tirer z"l (better known as R' Chaim of Czernowitz; died 1817) explains: The midrash relates that Bil'am was insulted that Balak sent only one bull and one sheep for his dinner. Why? Aren't one bull and one sheep more than enough for three people (Bil'am and his two attendants)?

R' Chaim answers that the officers were other people whom Balak sent to eat with Bil'am. That was an insult to Bil'am, for proper hachnassat orchim / hosting guests requires either that the host eat the first meal with the guest or that the host personally attend to the guest. [R' Chaim adds parenthetically that this is the meaning of the verse (Bereishit 18:8), "He (Avraham) stood over them beneath the tree and they ate." Because Avraham "stood over them" and served them, it is as if they all ate together.] By sending animals to Bil'am to eat with Balak's officers--but without Balak himself--Balak insulted Bil'am. Why did Balak do this? Because, when Bil'am said (Bemidbar 22:38), "Whatever word G-d puts into my mouth, that shall I speak!" Balak knew that Bil'am would be of no

help to him. (Be'er Mayim Chaim)

"Bil'am raised his eyes and saw Yisrael dwelling according to its tribes, and the spirit of G-d was upon him. He declaimed his parable and said, '... How good are your tents, Yaakov, your dwelling places, Yisrael.'" (24:2, 5)

Rashi z"l comments: "Dwelling according to its tribes"--He saw each tribe dwelling by itself, not intermingled one with another, and he saw that the entrances of their tents were not exactly facing each other so that one could not peer into the other's tent. "And the spirit of G-d was upon him"--Then he made up his mind not to curse them.

R' David ben Shmuel Halevi z"l (1586-1667; known as the "Taz," the acronym of his Shulchan Aruch commentary, Turei Zahav) writes: The Gemara (Bava Batra 60a) states, "One should not place his doorway facing his neighbor's doorway, for when Bil'am saw that Bnei Yisrael's doorways did not face each other, he declared that they were worthy of having the spirit of G-d rest upon them." The Tosafot explain that this is learned from our verse, "The spirit of G-d was upon him."

This requires explanation, the Taz writes, for our verse says only that the Shechinah rested on Bil'am. Where does it say that Bil'am declared that Bnei Yisrael were worthy?

He explains: How could Bil'am see Bnei Yisrael's tents; weren't they hidden by the Ananei Ha'kavod / Clouds of Glory? The answer is that the Ananei Ha'kavod had existed in Aharon's merit and they disappeared when he died [although they later returned in Moshe's merit]. Bil'am's words in our verse were, in fact, a blessing to Bnei Yisrael or a prayer on their behalf, as Rashi writes, "He made up his mind not to curse them." Bil'am prayed, "Although the Ananei Ha'kavod have departed from them, let the Shechinah not depart from them." How do we know that he prayed thus? Because our verse says that the Shechinah rested upon Bil'am. Surely Bil'am himself was unworthy of having the Shechinah rest upon him! However, our Sages teach: "If one prays for his friend's needs, and he has the same needs, he will be answered first." Bil'am and Bnei Yisrael had the same need, i.e., that the Shechinah should not depart from them, and Bil'am prayed that the Shechinah should not depart from Bnei Yisrael; therefore, he was answered first, "and the spirit of G-d was upon him." [The fact that Bil'am's prayer was deemed a meaningful one demonstrates that Bnei Yisrael were in fact worthy of having the Shechinah rest upon them. Why? Because their doors did not face each other.] (Divrei David)

Pirkei Avot

"Whoever has these three traits is from the disciples of our forefather Avraham; and whoever has three different traits is from the disciples of the wicked Bil'am. Those who have a good eye, a humble spirit, and a meek soul are disciples of our forefather Avraham. Those who have an evil eye, an arrogant spirit, and a greedy soul are disciples of the wicked Bil'am." (5:22)

At first glance, observes R' Shlomo Kluger z"l (1784-1869; rabbi of Brody, Galicia), this mishnah appears to contain unnecessary repetition, as the first sentence does not appear to add to the message of the mishnah. In fact, however, there is a difference between the first sentence of the mishnah and the second. Indeed, the mishnah is referring not to two groups of people, as would appear at first, but to four groups.

First the mishnah addresses those for whom good or bad traits are inborn. Such individuals are "from the disciples" of Avraham and Bil'am, respectively. While they clearly are descendants of those who went in the ways of either Avraham or Bil'am, they cannot themselves be called disciples themselves.

Next, the mishnah refers to the actual disciples of Avraham and Bil'am, respectively. The former are those who have toiled to acquire the traits of "a good eye, a humble spirit, and a meek soul." Likewise, the latter are those who, through their own choices, have acquired the traits of "an evil eye, an arrogant spirit, and a greedy soul."

R' Kluger adds: Some versions of the mishnah actually state "from the disciples" in both the first and second sentences. According to that version, we can explain the seeming redundancy by stating that the first sentence actually sums up the previous three mishnayot. Those mishnayot extol the virtues of one who loves others selflessly, one who does not engage in disputes, and one who toils for the benefit of the many. Such a person, says the first sentence of our mishnah, is among the disciples of Avraham (and the opposite type of person is among the disciples of Bil'am). Then the mishnah lists three more traits which determine whether a person can be counted among the disciples of Avraham (or Bil'am). (Magen Avot)

The editors hope these brief 'snippets' will engender further study and discussion of Torah topics ('lehagdil Torah u'leha'adirah'), and your letters are appreciated. Web archives at **Torah.org** start with 5758 (1997) and may be retrieved from the [Hamaayan](#) page.

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