

DEVEKUS IS THE ANTIDOTE

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

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The Zohar sees Bilam's plot as posing a security risk without peer. "From the time of creation, never did Klal Yisrael need the intervention of HKBH as much as the day that Bilam sought to curse them."² Does the Zohar really mean to reduce the Exodus from Egypt to a stroll in the park, and the splitting of the Reed Sea to a garden-variety miracle? Surely there were more critical moments in our history than Bilam's attempt to co-opt spirituality for his nefarious purposes!

Perhaps those moments do seem more critical, but only until one understands the ultimate reason that *Bnei Yisrael* were saved so dramatically. In an oft-cited passage in *Moreh Nevuchim*,³ Rambam writes that it is impossible for any mishap to befall a person while he is perfectly attached to Hashem. Such a state is not maintained around the clock by even great people. Thus, even *tzadikim* and *chassidim* sometimes must deal with unhappy circumstances - but only at the times that they do not maintain their *devekus*.

The fortunes of our nation parallel this. We are assured of invincibility when our national attachment to HKBH is intact and strong. Compromising this attachment makes us vulnerable to a host of problems. It removes the impregnable shield between catastrophe and ourselves. In a word, Bilam's hope was to disrupt this connection, and therefore leave us endangered and defenseless.

Chazal point to the role parallel to that of Moshe that Bilam could have played for the nations of the world. On a deeper level, Moshe and Bilam were mirror images of each other. According to the *seforim hakedoshim*, Moshe represents *da'as*. True attachment is part and parcel of *da'as*. (The Torah describes the connection between Adam and Chava before their sin using the verb form of *da'as*.⁴) Bilam represents the negative side of *da'as* - *da'as* of the *kelipah*, the "shells" and barriers that block *kedushah* from shining through.⁵ Possessing this gift put him in a unique position. Balak, no stranger to theurgic manipulation, nonetheless understood that he was powerless to accomplish his goals. He needed Bilam. Bilam's penetrating wisdom of the negative enabled him to find ways to disrupt the *devekus* between *Klal Yisrael* and Hashem.⁶

Bilam's plan - indeed all the details of the *parshah* - follow elegantly from this premise. Wishing to disrupt the *devekus* between *Klal Yisrael* and our Creator, Bilam turned to their greatest failures,

hoping that the mention of damning evidence against them would create a chasm between them and Hashem. Each and every attempt of his was transformed into a *berachah*; reading them, we learn what dark intent first occurred to him.⁷ Thus, "He perceived no iniquity in Yaakov, and saw no perversity in Israel"⁸ was Hashem's unequivocal retort to Bilam's master strategy. Bilam believed that focusing on the spiritual shortcomings of *Klal Yisrael* would strain and damage their special relationship with Him. Hashem responds that He remains eternally close to every Jew; disrupting the relationship is an impossibility.

This waltz between intent and result maintains itself throughout the *parshah*. When Bilam "set his face toward the wilderness"⁹ he wished to underscore (as Onkelos explains) the great failing of Bnei Yisrael in making the Golden Calf there. Again, Hashem not only confounded his plan, but turned Bilam's jaundiced vision into a *berachah*. Observing Bnei Yisrael "dwelling according to its tribes,"¹⁰ he was compelled to exclaim, "How goodly are your tents, O Yaakov, your dwelling places, O Yisrael."¹¹ He saw the peace and tranquility that reigned in their encampment, brought about by the love that Bnei Yisrael felt for each other. Such love leads directly to a love of Hashem. That love is the antidote to all failings, even the sin of the Golden Calf.

Chazal teach¹² that every attempted curse that failed and that morphed into a *berachah*, ultimately reverted back to a curse, with the exception of the *berachah* regarding synagogues and *batei medrash*, which are alluded to in the "tents" and "dwelling places." The *Saba Kadisha taught* that *da'as* (which we earlier saw as responsible for *devekus*) incorporates the *chochmah* of the mind with the *binah* of the heart. The mind and heart are fortresses which safeguard the elements with which we attach ourselves to HKBH. Torah study purifies the mind, or the beliefs, character traits and outlooks of a Jew. Prayer refines the heart, so that it should not yearn for the forbidden, but long only for Hashem. The *beis medrash* and the *shul* are emblematic of these processes, standing for Torah study with the mind, and prayer of the heart. Taken together, they constitute an eternally effective recipe for the acquisition of the *da'as* necessary for *devekus*. They are the guarantee of our uninterrupted connection to Hashem.

When Balak's patience wears beyond the breaking point, he erupts in anger. "To curse my enemies I summoned you, and behold you have continually blessed them these three times!"¹³ Balak's point is that Bilam failed miserably to complete the task for which he was contracted. The number of failed attempts seems irrelevant and gratuitous. Why does the Torah bother? The premise of our approach to this *parshah* suggests an important meaning to enumerating three distinct failures. They correspond to three situations which frequently disturb our sense of to Hashem.

The first is preoccupation with lower desires and passions. Practically speaking, the most common pitfalls for most men are in their appetites for food and for women. Bilam alludes to this in his first

berachah. "Who has counted the dust of Yaakov, or numbered a quarter of Yisrael?"¹⁴ The *pasuk* alludes to food, which grows in the dust of the ground. Their great number alludes to the process of procreation.

On his second attempt, Bilam was forced to exclaim, "He perceived no iniquity in Yaakov, and saw no perversity in Israel."¹⁵ Certainly, thought Bilam, there is no *devekus* possible while a Jew occupies himself in the actual commission of a transgression! Here, too, Hashem shows him to be wrong. A Jew never fully enjoys his *aveirah*! In the midst of the deed, he already feels remorse and guilt, showing that he cannot tear himself away from Hashem.

Bilam's third attempt deals with the Jew who does in fact lose himself in so much transgression, that his detachment from G-d seems complete. Once again, the words Hashem places in Bilam's mouth counter his evil design. "How goodly are your tents, O Yaakov, your dwelling places, O Yisrael."¹⁶ Rashi sees in these an allusion to the different places that served as *mishkan* and *Beis Hamikdosh*. Together, they point to the *korbanos*, which help a Jew's *teshuvah*, allowing him a way to regain the *devekus* that he compromised.

While Bilam's treacherous original plan failed completely, he was more successful with his Plan B, a product of his diabolical *da'as* of the *kelipah*. Bilam understood that there are two essential elements in living as a Jew: *emunah* and *kedushah*. He hatched a plan to entrap *Bnei Yisrael* through the wiles of the daughters of Moav. In one fell swoop, Bilam involved them in both the *avodah zarah* of the Moabites and in licentious carrying on with their women. In one episode, he struck at both Jewish belief, and at Jewish holiness. (Moreover, the two mutually enhance each other. The pure *emunah* of a Jew helps him live according to the dictates of *kedushah*, while the *kedushah* he achieves allows him greater clarity and insight, bolstering his *emunah*.)

It would be a mistake to believe that Bilam has the final word. Far from it. Even when both pillars of Jewishness are toppled, there is a way back. Pinchas saves the day with his *mesiras nefesh*, staying the plague that had already taken the lives of twenty-four thousand. When the *yetzer hora* uses "conventional" weapons, we can resist it with conventional force. When the *yetzer hora* wells up and seems to fully take over, we must respond beyond what we would imagine to be our limits! The *mesiras nefesh* of Pinchas, risking his life and thereby opposing the strongest natural inclination of survival, represents acting beyond our natural capability. This ability, too, is vouchsafed to every Jew.

Bilam failed. Every curse of his became a *berachah*. Perhaps the greatest of those *berachos* is what emerges from seeing the pattern in the *parshah* from beginning to end. Through him, we discover that there is nothing that ever need to disrupt the special relationship we have with HKBH, Who has made ample arrangement to keep our bond firm and forever intact.

¹ Based on Nesivos Shalom, pgs. 129-135

² Zohar sec.3 pg 305A

³ Moreh Nevuchim 3:51

⁴ Bereishis 4:1

⁵ A simple illustration of da'as of the kelipah might be the ability some people have to create doubts concerning emunah in the minds of their listeners through sophisticated arguments. Moshe was gifted in his ability to explain Torah to Klal Yisrael as its master teacher. A person in the reverse role would use his gift of clarity and expression to teach heresy.

⁶ A very similar approach is taken by the Shalah HaKadosh

⁷ Sanhedrin 105B

⁸ Bamidbar 23:21

⁹ Ibid., 24:1

¹⁰ Ibid., 24:2

¹¹ Ibid., 24:5

¹² Sanhedrin 105B

¹³ Bamidbar 24:10

¹⁴ Ibid., 23:10

¹⁵ Ibid., 23:21

¹⁶ Ibid., 24:5