

WELCOME, OH HONORED ME!

by Rabbi Yisroel Ciner

This week we read the parsha of Balak. "Va'yar Balak ben Tzipur eis kol asher asah Yisroel lo'Emori (Balak the son of Tzipur saw all that Yisroel did to Emori) [22:2]."

On the way to Eretz Yisroel (the land of Israel), Bnei Yisroel (the children of Israel) had victoriously battled against two of the most powerful nations -- Sichon and Og. Balak, the king of Moav, had relied on the those two nations to defeat Bnei Yisroel and thwart their advance toward his kingdom. When he saw what Bnei Yisroel had done to those two nations of Emori, he became afraid. He contacted Midyan, his nation's long-standing adversary, and they decided to unite against the common enemy -- Bnei Yisroel.

"Va'yishlach mal'a'chim el Bil'am (and he sent messengers to Bil'am) [22:5]."

Bil'am was the greatest prophet amongst the gentiles. The 'Yigdal' prayer states: "There will not arise in Yisroel a prophet like Moshe". Yisroel will never again have such a prophet, but the gentiles did -- Bil'am! Moav and Midyan recognized that the power of Bnei Yisroel was not physical -- it emanated from their mouths -- their relationship with Hashem. They therefore decided to enlist the services of Bil'am the prophet, with his similar source of power.

"Arah lee es ha'am ha'zeh! (Curse this nation!) [22:6]", the messengers implored Bil'am. Bil'am requested that they remain that night, he would prepare himself for prophecy, and then he'd give them an answer.

"And Hashem said to Bil'am: 'Who are these men?' [22:9]."

When one wants to do good, to purify himself, Hashem guides the individual in that direction. When one wants to do bad, to defile himself, Hashem opens an opportunity for the individual to follow his chosen path. Hashem 'opened' the conversation in a way which opened the opportunity for Bil'am. Bil'am, one of the greatest prophets, entered right into that opening. Once a person believes in G-d, it doesn't take a prophet to realize His Omniscience (infinite awareness, insight, understanding and knowledge). Yet, Bil'am allowed his desire to curse Bnei Yisroel to blur his perception of the obvious. Bil'am deduced from Hashem's question that He is not all-knowing. 'I'll find a time when Hashem will be unaware, and I'll curse His nation', he schemed.

In answer to Hashem's question, Bil'am replied: "Balak the son of Tzipur, the king of Moav, sent (messengers) to me" [22:10].

Why did Bil'am stress the point of Balak being the king of Moav? Rashi explains that Bil'am was 'name-dropping' to Hashem. 'Even if You don't consider me to be too important, the king of Moav sent messengers to me!' Along the lines of: "Bill called last night... he was having some problems with Windows...".

Humility should accompany prophecy. Bil'am allowed his importance get to his head...

This past Shabbos was my first one back home after a trip to the USA. One of my students who was spending the Shabbos with us asked me what had made an impression on me during the course of my trip. I told him that my trip had afforded me the opportunity to get back together with many old friends. That I had been very impressed by an old buddy who had built up a massive business. There was a warehouse larger than a football field filled with material to be cut into patterns. There was another warehouse of equal size filled with racks and boxes of clothing ready to be shipped to major department stores and outlets.

"Rabbi, what did America do to you?", he called out in mock surprise. "That's what impressed you?!"

I explained that it wasn't the prosperous business that had made such an impression on me but rather, the way that my friend had dealt with his success. He had absolutely no airs about him. He begins his day by studying Chumash (Bible) both before and after the 6:30 AM minyan (prayer service) he attends. His office was extremely plain and simple. As he was showing me around the complex there wasn't the slightest tinge of arrogance about the conglomerate he had built up. On the contrary, his admiration was focused outward on the accomplishments of myself and a third friend as he looked to generously channel his resources toward worthwhile endeavors. That, I explained to my student, was by far the most impressive aspect of my trip.

The Mishna in Avos [5:22] contrasts the attributes of Bil'am and his disciples as compared to the attributes of Avrohom Avinu and his disciples. Those who have a good, generous eye, a humble spirit and an undemanding soul are the disciples of Avrohom. An evil, jealous eye, an arrogant spirit and a greedy soul are the attributes of Bil'am's disciples.

At first glance it seemed strange to discuss disciples of Bil'am. It seems as if he taught his students to be jealous, arrogant and greedy. Though there are many who live life in such a way, to actually teach others to live like that seems somewhat farfetched. On second thought, however, how many books has Donald Trump published to date? How many people read those books trying to emulate such success? Few are those who are able to maintain the perspective and balance that I witnessed by my friend, not letting their success and the accolades that others heap on them go to their heads.

In the Mishna in Avos [2:15], Rabi Elazar teaches: "May the honor of your friend be as dear to you as your own". This is usually explained that the same concern that you have for your own honor, you should have for your friend's honor.

An additional meaning is seen from the following story. When Rabbi Shmelke of Nikolsburg was

assuming his rabbinical position, the community planned a reception in a large hall. Before entering the hall, Rav Shmelke requested the use of a side room. There, the congregants overheard him talking to himself, saying: "Welcome, honored Rabbi, it is our pleasure to have such a genius grace our city. Thank you for coming, holy tzadik", and other expressions of self praise. When he emerged, the shocked community leaders asked him to explain his strange behavior. He explained that he knew he would soon be hearing many such praises. "I therefore first said it to myself and heard just how ridiculous it sounded. That way, when I'd later hear it from the welcoming speakers, I wouldn't allow any feelings of honor and pride to enter my heart. I wanted to follow the words of Rabi Elazar who taught that your friend's honor should be as dear to you as your own. Meaning, the honor that your friends give you should be as meaningless to you as the honor that you give yourself."

The Mishna which compares the attributes of Avrohom's and Bil'am's disciples concludes by comparing the quality of life of these two groups. We would think that those who haughtily and greedily grab all that they can will at least enjoy the pleasures offered by this world. The humble and undemanding, always being pushed toward the back, will miss out on those pleasures. "The disciples of Avrohom enjoy this world and inherit the World to Come...", the Mishna teaches. The haughty, greedy spirit is never satisfied. Like drinking salt-water, it only increases the thirst for more. Those with proper perspective and priorities enjoy the full gamut of both this world and the next.

Good Shabbos,

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