

THE FOURTH PATRIARCH

by Rabbi Yisroel Ciner

This Shabbos we read the parsha of Balak with the Three Week mourning period leading up to Tisha B'Av (the ninth of Av) beginning on Sunday.

"Balak the son of Tzipur (the king of Moav) saw what Yisroel had done to the Emori. [22:2]" The Bnei Yisroel (Children of Israel) had decisively routed the Emori causing Balak and his nation to be extremely frightened. Seeing that the strength of Bnei Yisroel was not in their physical and military prowess but rather in their mouths--in their ability to connect to Hashem through prophecy and prayer--he enlisted the services of Bilaam, the greatest prophet amongst the nations, to curse Bnei Yisroel.

Bilaam knew that cursing Bnei Yisroel was against the will of Hashem but he nevertheless tried to find the moment when a curse would be accepted. His attempts were stymied time and time again due to the fact that Hashem wasn't getting angry even for a moment. He finally realized that he couldn't curse Bnei Yisroel and instead began to praise and bless them. He ended off with a heartfelt plea: "Let my soul die the death of yesharim (a term describing the righteous which literally means 'straight'). [23:10]"

Though unwilling to live his life in a righteous manner, Bilaam aspired to repent on the day of his death in order to gain the afterlife that awaits the righteous. Any point earlier would have cramped his style, but he was willing to devote one day toward his eternity.

The Talmud [Avodah Zarah 25A] teaches the extent of Bilaam's chutzpah. The 'yesharim' refer to Avrohom, Yitzchak and Yaakov--the Avos [Forefather's] of Bnei Yisroel! Bilaam wanted his death to be no less than that of the founders of the Jewish nation.

Why did he refer to the Avos as 'yesharim (straight)' as opposed to referring to them as 'tzaddikim (righteous)'?

The N'tziv (Rav Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin zt"l--leader of the Volozhin Yeshiva), in his introduction to Sefer Breishis, explains based on a passuk (verse) at the end of Devarim. "(Hashem is) a G-d of faithfulness, without iniquity, Tzaddik (righteous) and Yashar (straight) is He. [Devarim 32:4]"

The N'tziv writes that this pronouncement of Hashem's judgment as righteous is actually prophetically referring to the period of the destruction of the Second Temple. The generation of the Second Temple was righteous and was seriously involved in Torah. However, they weren't straight in

their attitudes and dealings with others. Their baseless hatred led them to label anyone who was different than them as heretics, ultimately bringing on the destruction of the Temple.

The passuk attests to Hashem's righteousness in bringing on the destruction, as their path was one of destruction and strife that ran contrary to yishuv ha'olam--the world being settled.

The antithesis of this, he writes, was the path of the Avos. Besides being tzaddikim and loving Hashem to the utmost, they were straight... Their interactions with the nations, even those that worshipped idols, were filled with love and concern.

Avrohom begged and pleaded with Hashem to save the metropolis of Sodom. He hated their idolatry and evil but nevertheless wanted them to continue to exist. He wanted Hashem's world to be settled and full. As such, his name was changed from Avrom to Avrohom, meaning the father of all nations. A father wants the best for all of his children, even those that are not behaving properly. As such, Avrohom was called a yashar.

Yitzchak, when approached by Avimelech, was immediately appeased and made peace with him. His dealings with the nations were yashar.

Yaakov was wrongly pursued by Lavan who wanted to destroy him and all he had. He nevertheless spoke to him softly and made a pact with him. He too was called a yashar.

In fact, the entire Sefer of Breishis is called by the name Sefer HaYashar (the Book of the Straight) based on the way the Avos dealt with the world at large--not seeking their destruction but rather the improvement of their ways.

Bilaam understood and accepted the fact that he wasn't a tzaddik like the Avos. However, his lament was that even his concern for others and for the world to be properly settled didn't compare to that of the Avos. While they were making peace and speaking out on behalf of others, he was trying to curse and destroy an entire nation.

With that he cried out in anguish: Let me at least die the death of yesharim! Let me be amongst those that have added to the peace, stability and continuity of Hashem's world.

That which he wasn't willing to practice in his lifetime he longed to have upon his death. As we know, this world is called the 'olam ha'asayah'--the world of action. Our lifetime is the limited opportunity that we are granted to actually do. The stage that follows, the time designated for eternal reward, doesn't afford the opportunity to change that which we have done already.

Our hope and plea must be for a life of yesharim...

Good Shabbos,
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