

'BALAK' MAGIC

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

Balak, the son of Tzipur, saw all that Israel did to the Amorites ...(Bamidbar 22:2)

Literally, Balak ben Tzipur means, "Balak, son of a bird," and the Midrash explains why he had this name. Apparently, in Biblical times when magic was real and not merely sleight-of-hand, Balak was an expert at a particular magic that consisted of constructing an artificial bird and inserting the tongue of a real bird in its mouth. Eventually, this bird could talk, and through it Balak would divine the future and discover secrets no one else knew.

Because of this "expertise," Balak was able to tell Bilaam the most advantageous places from which to curse the Jewish people, as we see later in the parshah. Bilaam, on the other hand, says the Talmud, knew how to figure out the most propitious time to curse the Jewish people. Together, they made a formidable and lethal spiritual weapon. This is why, according to the Zohar (on this week's parshah), if you combine the names Balak and Bilaam, you arrive at two words: "Amalek," the nemesis of the Jewish people, and "Bavel," the first exile the Jewish people experienced.

However, in the end, what good was Balak's and Bilaam's sorcery? We see later in the parshah, that not only did G-d neutralize the gruesome twosome, but even turned them into unwitting sources of blessing for the Jewish people. To this very day, we enter our study halls and synagogues with Bilaam's famous words, "How goodly are your tents, O Jacob ..." So, in the end, is there really something called real "Black Magic."

The answer is (as you suspected), yes, and no. The real answer, according to the Nefesh HaChaim is: it depends upon what you believe in your heart-of-hearts, as the following story portrays:

The story is of Rebi Chanina ben Dosa, and very often, stories that involve Rebi Chanina ben Dosa involve miracles. In this particular account, a certain "witch" had tried to cast a "spell" on him, one that had worked on others before (Sanhedrin 66b). How did Rebi Chanina neutralize this evil woman? With three words: *ain ode milvado*-which means, "there is none beside Him."

What Rebi Chanina was saying to the witch, explains Rashi, is, "I don't believe you have independent power. If G-d favors me, you will be useless against me; if G-d is angry at me, then you will merely be an instrument for Divine justice! Only His will can be fulfilled."

The truth is, Rebi Chanina was not the originator of these words. They actually come from the Torah:

You have been shown to know that Hashem, He is G-d; there is none besides Him (ain ode milvado)!"
(Devarim 4:35)

The Nefesh HaChaim, working with the same theme explains how even "Black Magic" is G-d's doing, in order to test us. It is a test because it forces us to ignore our eyes and to rely upon our minds. Our eyes see evil people, and how powerful they are. Our eyes tell us that we ought to be afraid of such people; after all, " ... Look at how they do this ... and look at how they get away with this ... and how they enjoy themselves in spite of the fact that they are so evil ... " If one didn't know better, one could easily assume (and many do), that evil has power that G-d does not, or at least, is independent of G-d. After all, could they be so successful at what they did if G-d could stop them?"

Ain ode milvado says yes, if it suits the mandate of creation and the purpose of free-will. However, sometimes, for the sake of free-will, G-d plays the ultimate "puppeteer," wearing a good character on one hand, and a bad character on the other hand, and lets them battle it out when He could just as easily dispose of the bad puppet Himself. He lets witches perform tricks that should be reserved for Kabbalists, and Bilaams pronounce curses that are as effective as blessings.

Hence, this week's parshah and its somewhat comic Balak-and-Bilaam show is really a serious lesson about the sum total of all that is supposed to remain in the inner heart of every Jew: ain ode milvado. We see and hear this loud-and-clear because G-d, in controlling Balak and Bilaam, proves the point. However, history is not always so obvious, and as we see at the end of the parshah, Bilaam was not a complete failure. Therefore, ain ode milvado can often be a matter of faith more than visible reality.

But it must always remain the Jewish catch-phrase and source of light and salvation-especially in history's darker moments, when the demands of creation require that G-d do "His thing" from "behind the scenes." It is only when we forget these words and their crucial meaning that we become vulnerable to the Balaks and Bilaams of history, and the Amalekian and Babylonian attitude they permeate.

Shabbos Day:

G-d opened the mouth of the donkey, and she said to Bilaam, "What have I done to you that you have hit me three times?" (Bamidbar 22:28)

"Ten things were created erev Shabbos at twilight. They are: the mouth of the earth, the mouth of the well, and the mouth of the donkey ..." (Pirkei Avos 5:8)

From the Torah, it seems, at first, that the mouth of the earth (Korach), the mouth of the well

(Chukas), and the mouth of the donkey in this week's parshah were all new creations. However, just as we stated back in Parashas Korach that the mouth of the earth was in fact created long before Korach even walked the face of the earth, so, too, do we find out from Pirkei Avos that the mouth of the donkey was a reality long before there was even a Jewish people for Bilaam to curse!

What is interesting to note is that the first three items of the mishnah's list follow these three parshios in historical order, but that the entire list of ten does not (after these three follows the rainbow of Noach's time, the manna from Heaven, etc.). The question is, is there a reason for this?

We say in Kabbalos Shabbos (almost) every Friday afternoon (to welcome in the Shabbos), "Last in action, first in thought." This, of course, is referring to Shabbos itself, which was the last idea to achieve fruition during the six days of creation. However, it was Shabbos, the "crowning achievement of creation," that was in fact that which gave meaning to all that occurred during the previous six days.

Likewise, anything created so close to Shabbos, during a period of time within which the holiness of Shabbos could already be felt, itself was intricately bound up with the concept of Shabbos, and was an extension of the concept. Somehow, these ten items are statements about what creation is all about, about G-d's original intention when making all of existence.

In fact, if you look at the entire list, they seem to follow another kind of order, starting from that which is closest to the earth and moving in the direction of Heaven:

1. **Mouth of the earth:** earth
2. **Mouth of the well:** stone on top of the earth
3. **Mouth of the donkey:** an animal
4. **Rainbow:** sky and promise of Divine mercy
5. **Manna:** food from Heaven
6. **Shamir worm:** "other-worldly" worm used to cut stones of Temple
7. **Script:** form of Hebrew Aleph Bais
8. **Tablets:** carved and inscribed by G-d
9. **Moshe's grave:** G-d Himself buried him, and no one can find site!
10. **Ram:** replaced Yitzchak at the Akeidah and reason for shofar

As one would expect, the closer to Shabbos the creation, the holier an element of creation it must be, and the greater an expression of Divine intention it is. Each element demands a few paragraphs on its own, but for our purposes, and the scope of this sheet, it will have to suffice to state the overall theme and connection (see "Redemption to Redemption" for a more thorough explanation).

From the first item until the last item, each one involves the use of the/a mouth. As we have said on many occasions, what comes out of a person's mouth is the best measure of his godliness, and the

extent to which a person is in touch with his soul (Zohar). Speech represents the ultimate example of the soul using the body to perform the will of G-d; it was the ability to speak that Adam gained when G-d blew a soul into him (Onkeles).

The Akeidah is the paradigm of this because it was about Avraham's not questioning G-d's commandment to sacrifice Yitzchak, after He had already promised that Yitzchak would father generations. The same "air" that might have been used to vocalize complaint and express rebellion against G-d, was instead channeled and used to sound the shofar.

Just as the generation of the Tower of Babel used their power of speech and potential godliness to rebel against G-d, so too was Bilaam about to use that very same power to curse the holiest nation on earth. At least, that is what he thought. What he found out instead was that his diabolical scheme ran in the face of the primal purpose of creation, something he had to find out from a donkey's mouth. In fact, Shabbos is called "Malchus Peh," the "Kingdom of the Mouth," (which is why some people will only speak in Hebrew on Shabbos).

As mankind searches for and implements a single language to increase our ability to communicate with one another all around the world at lightning speed, we should be careful to use that knowledge and ability to bring ourselves closer to G-d, and to perform His will. For, should we make the mistake of using our mastery of speech to move away from G-d, we may find ourselves looking down the mouths of our own donkeys, and not quite enjoying what we are forced to listen to.

SEUDAH SHLISHI:

Israel camped in Shittim. The people acted immorally with the daughters of Moav, who lured the people to sacrifice to their gods. The people ate, and prostrated themselves to their gods. Israel got involved with Ba'al Peor, and G-d became very angry with Israel. G-d told Moshe, "Take all the leaders of the people, and have them impale [the idolaters] in broad daylight before G-d. This will appease the anger of G-d toward Israel." (Bamidbar 25:1-4)

We have made this point before, but it is worth making again, because every year adds a new perspective to the matter, and as redemption comes closer, it becomes increasingly important to be real with this concept.

We are talking about the "invisible shield" of Israel.

The invisible shield is this extra bit of Divine Providence that seems to accompany Jews wherever they go, and whatever they go through. It is G-d's willingness to fight our battles on our behalf, as we see in this week's parshah, even when we are barely aware of the war raging around us, or, worse, we have become oblivious to it.

It always amazes me how Jews merrily come to Israel to learn in yeshivos (or for whatever the

reason) each year, and I tell them this. I ask my students, "How come your parents let you come to this tiny little country that is surrounded by over 100,000,000 people who are not terribly concerned about your welfare, to say the very least?" They often think about it for a moment, then a slight look of concern usually crosses their faces, as if to say, "Hey, yea. What are we doing here?" And then they shrug their shoulders and say, "It's great here. I feel pretty safe here."

I'm not sure whether they actually mean that, or, hope it. In any case, we then discuss the incredible invisible shield that surrounds and protects the tiny country of Israel. After citing all the miracles of the past 50 years of Israel's existence, they can't help but agree that something very supernatural is at work here, keeping the enemies at bay.

We also discuss this week's parshah, that has Balak and Bilaam running around in the hills above trying desperately to penetrate that invisible shield, while the Jewish people below simply relax and enjoy life according to the Torah. We usually conclude the discussion with reference to the Talmud that says Jews can be above mazel (Shabbos 156a), or destiny, as some render it.

The key words here are "can be."

Because, it is not an absolute that the invisible shield work completely on our behalf, or always, as we see in this week's parshah. What happened at the end of this week's parshah (and the loss of sections of Eretz Yisroel in our time), reveals a weakening of "positive" Divine Providence, and therefore, a weakening of the shield. In the end, Bilaam may not have been able to pierce the shield from outside--but he was able to attack its power source, and thereby, weaken the shield itself.

"Their G-d hates immorality," Bilaam assured Balak, and in they sent the daughters of Midian, a nation that represented burning desire, to ensnare the Jewish males.

Bilaam was right then, and Bilaam is right today. Our closeness to G-d and Torah is what determines the strength of the invisible, miraculous shield that surrounds and protects the Jewish people in any given period of history. Anti-Torah behavior cuts the "power" to the shield, and makes the Jewish people more vulnerable. In the words of one rabbi who was speaking to a secular Jew,

"I don't need you to be religious for my sake; I need you to take Torah seriously for our sake."

Because, it is our collective Torah-behavior, the Talmud tells us, that determines the strength of the shield for all of us. In the words of another (a religious "politician), he said,

"If you think about it, you will ask, what do the Arabs need with a small, insignificant land like ours (Israel)? They have more land than they will ever need for all the Arabs--and then some. They have more money than we'll ever see in This World, and the resources to live good materialistic lives. (They already do.) And experience has shown us time-and-again that they spell 'peace' differently than we do: p-i-e-c-e, and they usually pluralize it. So I repeat, why do they need Israel? It is not logical, nor has their failure to succeed been logical either. Chalk it up to another example of miraculous Jewish survival."

Chalk it up to another example of direct Divine Providence, and the invisible shield.

However, as Bilaam understood and the Torah warns us:

"Do not defile yourself with any of these things, because these things defiled the nations which I am sending out before you. The land is defiled, and therefore I visited her sin upon her and the land spit out its inhabitants. Be careful with My statutes and My judgments and do not do any of these revolting things, neither the native nor the stranger that lives among you. All of these abominations the men of the land before you did, and the land is defiled; that the land not spit you out also from your defiling it, as it spit the nations out before you ..." (Vayikrah 18:24)

--and:

"I have separated you from the peoples that you should be Mine ..." (Vayikrah 20:26)

"If you hold yourselves apart from them, then you will be mine, but if not, you will become subject to Nebuchadnetzar and others like him ..." (Rashi)

There you have it: the source of power of our invisible shield. It is a spiritual source, and though it may not be a new idea, it is a crucial idea that must not be forgotten, as it was in Bilaam's time, and it is in our time as well. It is the understanding of this idea that jettisons our nation above mazel, so that we can retain control of our own destiny, and live in peace spelled the proper way.

Melave Malkah:

Israel camped in Shittim. The people acted immorally with the daughters of Moav, who lured the people to sacrifice to their gods. The people ate, and prostrated themselves to their gods. Israel got involved with Ba'al Peor, and G-d became very angry with Israel. (Bamidbar 25:1-3)

This fiasco at Shittim was one of those spiritual dive-bombings of Jewish history. Bilaam had just finished praising Jewish modesty and no sooner had he finished than the tribe of Shimon plummeted from the heights of spiritual grandeur to the depths of Ba'al Peor--one of the most grotesque forms of idol worship there has ever been (Sanhedrin 64a).

How could they do it? How could they turn from the reality of G-d to the falsehood of gods, and Ba'al Peor of all idols? The Talmud answers:

Rav Yehudah said in the name of Rav: Israel knows that there is nothing to idol worship; they only worshipped it to permit forbidden relationships in public. (Sanhedrin 63b)

What a telling point, one that is applicable in every generation. Why? Because, every generation possesses Jews who want to dispute the reality of G-d and the personal and social obligations that come with believing in G-d and Torah for Sinai. However, very few are bold enough to come right

out and "trample" over Torah and its lifestyle, at least for the sake of a more "hedonistic" lifestyle. Very few, indeed.

On the other hand, there are many who would do so in "search of truth," or for the sake of a more "logical" and "natural" lifestyle. Then, all of a sudden, Torah-bashing becomes a "humanitarian" act, an act of self-righteousness--the ultimate have-your-cake-and-eat-it-too scenario: you can turn your back on mitzvos, and feel good about yourself for doing so!

The Talmud and this week's parshah is saying, "Well, not so fast." And, they are asking, "Which came first, the chicken or the egg? That is, what led to what: a desire for a more permissible lifestyle created the need for moral justification, or, a drive for morality resulted in a more permissible lifestyle?" You need not answer, says the Talmud; just read the end of this week's parshah, where the burning desire for the daughters of Midian created a burning desire for Ba'al Peor, as a vehicle to acquire the former.

There are very few truth-seekers in the world today, though there are many that might apply that appellation to themselves, or to others they may know. We are easily fooled, by ourselves, and by others. It's one of those "heart-of-heart" things again, where you have to be able to figure out the intentions behind your intentions.

A general rule: If you find yourself ridiculing a Torah concept, even just a little bit, check yourself out. Ask, "What do I have to lose if this idea is true, and stand to gain if the idea is false." If the answer is, "Who really cares. I just want to know the truth!" then you may be altruistic after all, and that is very rewarding to find out.

However, if you find that your style will become somewhat cramped and your life will become somewhat less "comfortable" because of the validity of Torah and its mandate, then it is time to start doing some serious soul-searching. Our lives in This World and the World-to-Come depend upon it.

Have a great Shabbos,
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