FROM AMIDST THE ASHES

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

FRIDAY NIGHT:

Balak the son of Tzipor saw all that Israel did to the Amori. (Bamidbar 22:1)

From the way the story plays itself out, Balak and Bilaam sound like a bunch of older men, people who have been around for some time already. It is surprising to find out that they were only in their thirties when this week's parshah took place and they met their ends. It makes you wonder how men so young could become so evil so fast.

However, a more important message that emerges from this parshah is one that is far more subtle. For, we learn that G-d protects the Jewish people from evil people even when we are not aware of it, but more importantly, he uses their evil plans as a way to bring about good for the Jewish people. Being bent on destroying the Jewish people, the enemies of B'nei Yisroel often lay the groundwork for just the opposite.

For example, in this week's parshah, on the advice of Bilaam, Balak set up three altars and sacrificed fourteen animals to G-d on each, making forty- two sacrifices in all. Says the Talmud:

Rav Yehudah said in the name of Rav: A person should always learn Torah even if not for altruistic reasons, for it will bring him to do so altruistically. Thus, as a reward for the forty-two sacrifices the evil Balak offered, he merited that Rus should descend from him. As Rebi Yosi the son of Chanina said: Rus was the daughter of the son of Eglon, the king of Moav. (Nazir 23b)

Wait a second. Something seems to be missing here. The Talmud began by saying that learning Torah for the wrong reasons leads to learning Torah for the right reasons. However, its proof is the fact that Rus descended from Balak, who offered sacrifices to G-d for his own reason, and in this merit Rus descended from him, the righteous convert and ancestor of Dovid HaMelech and Moshiach.

What does one have to do with the other? Did Balak learn Torah at all, even for the wrong reasons? Did he later learn it for the right reasons? And what does Rus have to do with anything? We were talking about the impact learning Torah has on a person to change his personality traits, not the reward it brings in later generations!

Rather, the Talmud is introducing an interesting idea here, and it is like another concept mentioned by the Arizal in Sha'ar HaGilgulim, concerning the concept of the result of a sin being another sin,

and the reward for a mitzvah being another mitzvah. There he teaches that this concept does not only apply to a single lifetime, but it can occur over many lifetimes, so that a sin in one reincarnation can be the cause for another sin in a later lifetime.

Likewise, the reward for a mitzvah in a current life might be a mitzvah in a future one. Now the Talmud is adding that this is so even if the original mitzvah was not done with the right intentions, and even more so if the original mitzvah was the learning of Torah. True, Balak did the "mitzvah" of sacrificing to G-d with a selfish intention, but it resulted, many generations later, in Rus who sacrificed for G-d with the holiest of intentions.

The only problem is that the Talmud also says that the good of the evil is evil for the good. In other words, when an evil person does a favor for a righteous person, it really results in evil for the righteous individual. The fact that it came from such an impure source in and of itself makes it an impure good, so to speak, and unacceptable to the righteous and pure individual.

If so, it is hard to call Balak's sacrifice a mitzvah. On the contrary, he was using his animal offerings as a way to convince G-d to let Bilaam curse the Jewish people _ a clear sin. If anything at all, it should not have resulted in any kind of reward down the road, but in some form of punishment; Rus could have been born to someone else far more righteous. So what does the Talmud really mean?

SHABBOS DAY:

Balak slaughtered cattle and sheep, and sent some to Bilaam and the officers with him. (Bamidbar 22:40)

It is reminiscent of the following Midrash:

The tribes were involved with the sale of Yosef; Yosef was immersed in mournful thoughts about his separation from his father; Reuvain was involved with mourning over his sin; Ya'akov was mourning for Yosef; Yehudah was busy taking a wife for himself (Tamar). And The Holy One, Blessed is He, was busy creating the light of Moshiach. (Bereishis Rabbah 85:2)

The tribes were involved with the sale of Yosef _ not a good thing. Yosef was mourning the separation from his father _ not a happy time. Ya'akov and Reuvain hadn't been doing much better, and Yehudah, well, let's just say that things weren't going in the direction they should have been going for someone of his holy stature (to say the least). And yet, all of it was playing into the creation of one of the most important characters in the history of man: Moshiach.

It wasn't like G-d took a bunch of talented musicians and taught them how to play together as a well-tuned orchestra. No, it was more as if He took a group of untalented musicians and made them play beautifully together in spite of themselves. Indeed, the Midrash is implying that out of the sin came the good, a very dangerous thought.

That is why only G-d can arrange this. At the end of history on the great Day of Judgment, a person

will stand before the Heavenly Tribunal and say, "Hey, look at all the great things that resulted from my sin! Who would ever have thought it! I thought I would be punished for them, but now I can expect to be rewarded instead, no?"

No. Instead the Heavenly Tribunal will answer: "Reward, are you kidding? Try Gihennom instead. You intended to sin. It was G-d Who knew how to use your sin for the good of Creation, not you."

In fact, Balak probably kicked himself but good when Rus emerged into the world and became the righteous convert and the ancestor of Moshiach. In Olam HaEmet he can only see the truth, and how he lived a lie and inadvertently became the source of such a holy Jewish spark. So, though he was the ancestor of Jewish royalty, he received no reward for it, just punishment since his intention was wholly unholy.

It's like someone who walks over to the remains of what was a destructive forest fire and takes an ember in which to build a life-supporting fire. Somewhere in the midst of all the sacrifices Balak offered, and forty-two is a holy number equal to one of G-d's Names, was a holy a spark that eventually created a Rus who could serve G-d with all that she had. Everything, and I mean EVERYTHING, is really for the good when G-d is involved, and He is always involved.

Now, if this is what could happen with people who had no intention to perform a mitzvah, imagine what it is like for people who intend to perform a mitzvah! How many positive effects are there? How many holy sparks do they release into the world and over how many generations? There is really no way to know, but one might use the following analogy to make the point.

Bill Gates, the founder and principle owner of Microsoft is one very rich man, unusually rich to the tune of billions of dollars. He was the right man with the right idea at the right time with the right business acumen, right? Except that there have been many others in other businesses with the same qualifications as Mr. Gates, but they never came close to the level of success that he has achieved.

On the other hand, the program that I use to write this parshah sheet is Microsoft Word, and I post it to my web site using Microsoft Explorer. Between the two programs, I am able to bring Torah to thousands of people in different parts of the world. And I am but one among thousands, if not tens of thousands of Jews doing the same thing. And most of us have Bill Gates to thank for making all of it possible, right?

Well, not exactly, or at least not completely. For, more than likely the spreading of Torah was not one of the intentions behind Bill's research and development that resulted in this and many other programs that the Torah world is now taking full advantage of. Even if he had been aware of such potential, he was probably more concerned with the financial advantage of providing any and all kinds of opportunities to the entire world. Therefore, he does not get reward for his efforts in the World-to- Come, where only intended mitzvos make a difference.

On the other hand, he deserves something for his indirect involvement, and the eighty billion dollars

may be that reward. And, if such indirect involvement in a mitzvah of Torah learning brings so much earthly reward, imagine what awaits a Jew, who is commanded to perform mitzvos, and who performs them with the proper intention! If you're having difficulty with fathoming what it is like to be an eighty billionaire, then your mind may explode if you try and contemplate the Heavenly reward for a single intended mitzvah!

SEUDOS SHLISHIS:

Pinchas, the son of Elazar, the son of Aharon HaKohen saw and arose from amidst the assembly and took a spear in his hand. (Bamidbar 25:7)

The truth is, you can say the same thing about every historical event, no matter how happy it is, such as the building of the Temple, or how tragic it is, such as the Holocaust. Whatever the event, it must, by definition be part of the making of the light of Moshiach. From our vantage point, it may be impossible to see, and the only emotion we might feel capable of is bitterness. But, from G-d's point of view, even destruction must have its way of translation into something constructive for Jewish history. This is the basis of the concept that all that G-d does is for good. (Brochos 60b)

At the end of the parshah there is an example of this. The Jewish people were in Shittim, right at the border of Eretz Yisroel. As a last ditch attempt to derail the Jewish people from settling in the land, 600,000 men between the ages of 20 and 60, the magic number, and according to the Vilna Gaon that would have brought the Final Redemption right then and there. Instead Balak sent in the daughters of Midian to drive the Jews to sin. The plan met with much success, leading to the capital punishment of 176,000 Jews, and death by plague of 24,000 from the tribe of Shimon, a complete and utter disaster.

However, from the midst of this fiasco emerged a single hero whose act literally transformed him into another very important piece of the redemption puzzle. When Pinchas killed Zimri and Cozbi, he became Eliyahu HaNavi (Ba'al HaTurim, Bamidbar 25:12; Sha'ar HaGilgulim, Ch. 31). True, it was a heavy price to pay for the one who will herald in the Final Redemption, but that is what happened.

Until that moment in time, Pinchas had merely been a relative of Aharon HaKohen, a grandson with no other claim to fame. However, from the midst of the crisis that even Moshe Rabbeinu had failed to respond to, this virtual nobody not only saved the day, but paved the road for an even greater salvation. The crisis had galvanized him, forcing him out of the shadows of his illustrious ancestors:

"Moshe told the judges of Israel . . ." (Bamidbar 25:5); the tribe of Shimon went to Zimri ben Salu and said to him, "They are judging cases of life and death and you sit in silence?" What did he do? He gathered together 24,000 Jews and went to Cozbi (the Midianite princess sent by Balak and Bilaam to tempt Moshe). He said to her, "Heed me!" She answered him, "I am the daughter of a king, and my father told me to heed none other than the greatest among them!" He (another person there) told her, "He [Zimri] is also the prince of a tribe, and not only that, but he is greater than [Moshe], because he (i.e., his ancestor Shimon) was born second [to Leah, his mother], whereas he [i.e., Moshe's

ancestor, Levi] was born third [to Leah]!" Immediately, he grabbed her braid and brought her to Moshe and said to him, "Son of Amram! Is this one forbidden or permitted? And, if you answer forbidden, then who permitted [Tzipporah, your Midianite wife] to you?!" [At that moment,] the law was hidden from [Moshe], and they all (Moshe and the judges with him) began to cry, as it says, "They were crying at the opening of the Appointed Tent" (Bamidbar 25:6). And [then] it says, "Pinchas ben Elazar saw" (Ibid. 7). But what did he see? He saw what was happening and remembered the law, and said to [Moshe], "Brother of the father of my father! Did you not teach us when you descended from Har Sinai that if a Jew is intimate with a gentile, the zealots should kill him?" He answered him, "The one who reads the letter should deliver it." (Sanhedrin 82a)

"They were crying at the opening of the Appointed Tent" (Bamidbar 25:6): their hands became weakened at that moment. To what can this be compared? To the daughter of a king who was adorned in preparation to go to the chupah, and instead is unfaithful with another. Do her father and relatives not become distraught? Likewise, at the end of the 40 years, as the Jewish people camped by the Jordan river ready to cross over into Eretz Yisroel . . . they went ahead and acted promiscuously, weakening Moshe and the righteous people with him. They cried?! Did he [Moshe] not stand up against 600,000 [at the time of the golden calf], as it says, "He took the calf which they had made" (Shemos 32:20), [and yet you say that] his hands were weakened?! Rather, [Moshe was made to forget the law] in order for Pinchas to take that which he deserved (Bamidbar Rabbah 20:24) right into the limelight of Jewish history, and eventually also world history.

It seems as if G-d is always building the future upon the ruins of the past. Is there no better way to do it?

MELAVE MALKAH:

The earth was null and void and there was darkness upon the face of the deep. The spirit of G-d hovered above the water. (Bereishis 1:2)

Building the future upon the ruins of the past is the very same way that G- d made ALL of Creation. Says the Leshem:

This is the sod of "the land was tohu (null)," as it says in Sefer HaBahir . . . " 'the land was' _ what does 'was' mean? That it already was, as it says in the Holy Zohar (Bereishis 16a): 'Literally was, that it was first.' " In other words, the World of Tohu preceded Creation. (Sha'arei Leshem, p. 169)

In other words, though the reality of tohu seems to have come after the Creation process had begun, in actuality, it had preceded Creation. Indeed:

To what is this like? To a king who wants to build his palace. If he does not entrench into the land its foundations, then he cannot begin to build. Likewise, The Holy One, Blessed is He, first destroyed the world and it could not stand, what is referred to as the "death of the kings" (the pre- Creation sefiros) and the World of Tohu. From this, every detail and aspect [of Creation] came out of that

foundation. (Sha'arei Leshem, p. 171)

In short, Creation did not begin from nothing. When the will of G-d determined that Creation should come into being, the Light of Ain Sof went out and created lesser levels of light. Eventually, this resulted in what were pre-Creation sefiros, called "kings" in Kabbalah, and they bore the names of the eight kings of Edom mentioned at the end of Parashas Vayishlach. Their existence was short: they broke and became the basis of the null and void described in the second verse of the Creation story.

It was from this (and the Holy Sparks that had fallen with them) that G-d began to rebuild the sefiros and make Creation. The beginning of this process is really the first posuk, "In the beginning, G-d made the Heaven and the Earth." And even though each subsequent act of creating was a tikun, there still remained the characteristic of tohu in every aspect of Creation, and the potential to rectify it, and to build upon it.

Thus, the idea of building from ashes seems to be built into Creation, and it certainly has been the undercurrent of Jewish history. Sometimes it is referred to as yeridah tzorech aliyah _ descending in order to ascend, unfortunately meaning that oftentimes one has to descend first before he can ascend to even higher levels than before, something that is, from a human point of view, an undesirable way to go about achieving spiritual growth.

And, most certainly, it is not something that one can plan. There is NO permission to say, "Let me sin so I can really appreciate doing a mitzvah." On the contrary, it is our obligation to set out to do the right thing to the best of our ability, and to plan for success. As the Talmud says, "All is in the hands of Heaven except the fear of Heaven" (Brochos 34b), is which left for us to do. But, as far as the results are concerned, we never really have much control over them, if at all.

The difference is very simple. When we try and do themitzvot, we become eligible to bring about the will of G-d through positive means, and we are then rewarded. When we don't do the mitzvot, we become eligible to bring about the will of G-d through negative means, and are punished accordingly. It is, in essence, the difference between being a Pinchas, or a Balak and Bilaam.

However, the bottom line remains the same. Though it may be necessary for a free-will supported world that ashes come to be, it is also true that, by necessity, G-d is always resurrecting the dead, bringing forth life from death, and turning disaster into success. There will always be people who create a crisis for the Jewish people, but as a result they will, unwittingly, create Jewish heroes. It was Balak at the start of the parshah who forced Pinchas to emerge at the end of the parshah.

Have a great Shabbos,
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