

WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

FRIDAY NIGHT:

Balak, the son of Tzipor saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites. (Bamidbar 22:2)

This is a relatively simple posuk to understand. It doesn't have to be that Balak was actually at the battlefield and saw the whole war; "seeing" in this context can also mean that he read about it in the newspapers or overheard a conversation at some café. Either way, "seeing" is a figurative way of saying that he knew about and comprehended what the Jewish people did to the intended defense shield of the nations of Canaan.

However, the Zohar takes it further:

Rebi Shimon said, "[It says that 'he] saw' - what did he see? He literally saw, but it was a spiritual vision through the 'window' of the external wisdom. He also had a physical vision through the bird. He saw through the 'window' of the external wisdom, like it says, 'Avimelech, king of the Philistines, saw through the window. . . ' (Bereishit 26:8) . . . (Zohar, Chukat 184b)

This is a very important point. Anyone who reads the posuk about how Avimelech saw Yitzchak and Rivkah from his window "acting" like husband and wife, after being told that she was only Yitzchak's sister, has to wonder, how? How could two of the most modest people in the history of mankind act so immodestly, so that a stranger could be privy to their private affairs?

The answer is that they didn't act immodestly, because the window that Avimelech looked through was not a physical window in the side of some building. Rather, it was a level of spiritual vision that allows one to perceive things through the mind's eye that the physical eyes cannot see, like looking through a spiritual window. The Zohar goes on to explain that this is how Sisera's mother was also able to see what had happened to her son, even though she had been far away from the battlefield. Thus, the "seeing" of Balak was the same as that of Avimelech and Sisera's mother, which basically is an aspect of avoda zora (as in witchcraft).

As for the bird, the Zohar explains, Balak used certain types of spells to send the bird out on missions to see what was going on, and he had methods for magically extracting answers from the bird upon its return. That is why he was called "the son of Tzipor " (which means, bird): because he knew the magic on how to use birds to do his bidding better than anyone else. However, when the bird attempted to spy on the Jewish people, its wings were burned, indicating to Balak that no force

would be able to stand up to the approaching Jewish nation. That is why, explains the Ramak, that it was reported how the people of Moav were very agitated.

The amazing thing is the way how someone as impure as Balak could access what appears to be a gift, but in fact, is really ruach hatumah, as was also true of Avimelech and Sisera's mother. Then again, Bilaam was a prophet who unlike our own prophets was also able to envision the End-of-Days:

"I will return now to my people. Come and I will tell you what these people will do to your people at the end of days." (Bamidbar 24:14)

Which he did, describing the vision of his mind's eye regarding all that was going to happen to all the nations of the world at the end of days, which we must be awfully close to if not already in them right now. Thus, Bilaam referred to himself as:

The one who heard the sayings of G-d, and who saw the vision of G-d testified, falling, but had his eyes uncovered . . . (Bamidbar 24:4)

It's interesting, but actually, it is really disconcerting. The Jewish people were miraculously saved from Egyptian slavery with indisputably awesome miracles, and yet, when it came to throw their lot in with G-d and leave that place of slavery, four-fifths of the Jewish people chose to stay behind, and they died in the Plague of Darkness instead. What a lack of vision!

And, even though G-d saved the day by splitting the sea to free the Jewish people once again and drown the pursuing Egyptian army, the Jewish people still found a reason to complain shortly after. Hey, they even allowed the golden calf to be built right at the base of Mt. Sinai where, only 40 days earlier, G-d had personally addressed them and spoke out loud the first two of the Ten Commandments! What had they been thinking? Where was their vision then?

SHABBOS DAY:

They [the Spies] brought back to the Children of Israel an evil report of the land which they had searched, saying, "The land which we investigated is a land that eats up its inhabitants." (Bamidbar 13:32)

We are in exile to this very day because of our lack of vision, as the Talmud states:

Rava said in the name of Rebi Yochanan: Why does the Peh precede the Ayin [in Eichah 2:16]? Because the Spies said with their mouths what their eyes did not see. (Sanhedrin 104b)

The amazing thing is that, even though G-d personally did not originally send the Spies out on their mission, He tried to help them nevertheless:

They [the Spies] brought back to the Children of Israel an evil report of the land which they had searched, saying, "The land which we investigated is a land that eats up its inhabitants." (Bamidbar

13:32)

[The spies reported that] "In every place we passed we found them burying their dead!" However, the truth was that, The Holy One, Blessed is He, did this for their good, to involve them [the inhabitants of Canaan] in mourning to distract them from paying attention to the Spies." (Rashi)

G-d was saving their skins. And what they SAW was a land that ate its inhabitants. G-d did this so that they could taste the wonderful Divine Providence of Eretz Yisroel. Instead, they came back with a bitter taste in their mouths and loshon hara to speak. Moshe instructed them to see past the obvious and use their mind's eye to appreciate how Eretz Yisroel was a Divine gift, but instead they only used their physical eyes and saw it only as a Divine trap, and rejected the land completely!

No wonder we need techelet on our tzitzit to enhance our strength of vision:

Why does the Torah use the same word with respect to the spies at the beginning of the parshah, "See the land (uritem) - what is it?" (Bamidbar 13:18), and the mitzvah of tzitzit at the end of the parshah: "It shall be tzitzit for you, and you shall see (uritem) it (the techelet string) and remember them (mitzvot) and do them" (Ibid 15:39)? To make the point that the failure of the Spies was what the mitzvah of tzitzit helps to rectify. The Talmud teaches: Rebi Meir used to say, "What is unique about blue (techelet) from all other colors? Blue is like the sea, and the sea is like the sky, and the sky is like the Throne of Glory, as it says, "And under His feet was the likeness of sapphire, brickwork, and it was like the essence of heaven in purity" (Shemot 24:10), and it says, "The appearance of sapphire stone in the likeness of a throne" (Yechezkel 1:26). (Menachot 43b), (Ramban, Bamidbar 15:39)

In other words, explains the Ramban, a Jew is supposed to be able to look at a single strand of blue thread which he CAN see, and from that build a connection to the Throne of Glory which he CANNOT see, and as a result, remember all of the mitzvot. As we remind ourselves each Chanukah, that we are a people who believe and survive because we know that nothing in this world is really what it seems to be on the surface, and therefore, it requires investigation.

Thus, from this we learn than the Spies were supposed to have looked at Eretz Yisroel, and not just on the surface, but past the physical aspects of the land into its awesomely holy nature. This approach to viewing Eretz Yisroel would have immediately resulted in a love of the land, and in place of being in exile today, we would be in Gan Aiden today. Instead, we are seeing on the level that people like Balak, Bilaam, Avimelech, and Sisera's mother should be seeing, and they, for some bizarre reason, are seeing on our level. Weird! No, make that disastrous.

SEUDAT SHLISHIT:

He said, "Please don't leave us, for you know where we will camp in the desert, and you can be our eyes." (Bamidbar 10:31)

This was Moshe Rabbeinu's plea to his father-in-law, Yitro, who had decided to return back to Midian rather than to continue on with his family to Eretz Yisroel. On a Pshat-level, it would seem that

Moshe Rabbeinu was asking Yitro to be their guide in the desert, implied by the seemingly figurative use of the term "our eyes." However, given the track record of the Jewish people and what was coming up, it seems that "our eyes" may have been literal.

It's that vision thing again. It was then, and it still is now.

It's amazing how many gentiles see the existence of Eretz Yisroel today as nothing short of a great miracle, completely the product of Divine Providence. They see us Jews as living in a lion's den, and even with our heads inside the mouth of a hungry beast, and barely getting nipped. And they ask, "Why doesn't the Jewish nation see this, and run back to Israel to be with their G-d? Why are they so enamored with the material trappings of the Western world to the point that they reject G-d's gift to the Jewish people?"

Or, more recently, they ask, "How can the Jews give away land, uprooting entire communities (and then abandoning them) especially when the governing party over the Palestinians is hostile to the Jewish nation?"

"What choice do we have?" the Jews answer back.

"Well, what have you gained by giving in?" the gentiles ask.

"But we are caught between a rock and a hard wall," we Jews whine.

"We know," the gentile world responds. "But isn't that when you Jews are supposed to turn to G-d and appease Him, rather than to the nations of the world? And while we're at it," they continue, "how can you let the holiest city in the world be host to that which is the farthest from being holy?"

"What can we do? It is the politically-correct thing to do these days . . ."

"According to whom? As the guardians of Jerusalem, aren't you supposed to stand up for her holy rights? They did in Moscow, the capital of "Edom," and it is far from being a holy city. How's G-d going to take that one?"

Recently I saw an article from a White Supremacist group that spent about six pages showing how a Jew is at the helm of just about every major source of news and entertainment media in the United States. It is awesome, and both the White Supremacists and I are concerned. In their bigoted point of view, it is the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion" all over again. From my point of view, it means that a Jew is in one way or another, behind all the latest crazes and changing mores that have America on a slippery path to moral, and therefore, physical self-destruction.

That is a great reason for concern. This is not the vision that G-d had in mind for us.

MELAVE MALKAH:

The wise man's eyes are in his head, and the fool walks in darkness. (Koheles 2:14)

The eyes are but one of the five senses, yet their role in history and Tikun Olam is way out of proportion to that of the rest of the senses. It didn't begin here, but it really surfaced into our portion of history when:

The Snake told the woman, "You will not die! G-d knows that once you eat from it, your EYES WILL BE OPENED, and you will be like G-d, knowing good and evil. The woman SAW that the tree was good for food, APPEALING TO THE EYES, and an attractive means for gaining understanding. She took some of its fruit, and ate. She also gave some to her husband, and he ate. (Bereishis 3:4-6)

This is when it first surfaced in the Chumash, and also where it first surfaced in our history:

Thus, the Seichel and the Da'at are also referred to in terms of eating and hence, the warning [to Adam HaRishon] also included: Do not contemplate or GLANCE at anything with which evil is associated. It is crucial to not look at the strength of the Chitzonim or to investigate them to learn how powerful they are, so that you will not be drawn in after them. For, it is the nature of a person to be drawn in after that which he contemplates, for the Seichel, the thinker, and that which he contemplates become one. Therefore, there is great danger in looking at and contemplating anything to which evil is attached, and how much more so at the Chitzonim themselves; it is very precarious to follow after them, [and one who does is] like a sheep going to the slaughter. This is what it says: "For, the lips of a forbidden woman drip honey, and her palate is smoother than oil" (Mishlei 5:3). The Torah testifies to this when it says: "For, the tree was desirable to the eyes, and the tree was pleasing to understand" (Bereishis 3:6) . . . This was the essence of the prohibition and sin of the Tree of Knowledge, against which The Holy One, Blessed is He, warned Adam HaRishon. And, it was in this that he [first] stumbled and sinned, and though in the beginning it was only accidental, in the end it was pure negligence. (Sha'arei Leshem, p. 341)

Hence, Tikun Olam is really the rectification of the eyes. In fact, there are three covenants, Brit Milah, Brit HaLoshon (Covenant of the Tongue), and Brit Krut L'Ainayim (Covenant of the Eyes). It is not difficult to see how they correspond to the three levels on which we are to serve G-d: with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our possessions.

Circumcision, as the Torah tells us, is really a matter of the heart, both reflecting our loyalty to G-d and acting as a way for us to break away from the forces of impurity:

G-d, your G-d, will circumcise your heart, and the heart of your descendants, so you may love G-d . . . (Devarim 30:6)

Indeed, as the Rabbis point out, in the Shema, "heart" is written in the plural, referring to both the yetzer tov of a person and the yetzer hara of a person. Circumcising one's heart is another way of saying that one must align all of his drives into the service of G-d.

We also know from the Torah that speech was the essential result of receiving our soul:

G-d formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils a living soul, and the man

became a living spirit. (Bereishis 2:7)

A living spirit: A speaking spirit. (Targum Onkeles)

Thus, one of the main ways that we serve G-d with all of our soul is by using our ability to speak in a holy and productive manner. Speech is far from being cheap, and the Zohar says that for every word we speak beyond what is necessary we'll have to pay for on our day of judgment. How much more so for the inappropriate words that, pass through our lips riding on the back of our holy breath.

That leaves "possessions" to correspond to the "Covenant of the Eyes," and indeed the Torah alludes to this as well:

Don't spy after your heart and your eyes. (Bamidbar 15:39)

The heart and the eyes are the spies of the body; that is, they lead a person to transgress: the eyes see, the heart covets, and the body transgresses. (Rashi)

Not only this, but it is no coincidence that it is material possessions that pose the greatest challenge to Jews today; as we have said before, the three phrases of the Shema correspond to the three periods of 2,000 years of history: 2,000 Years of Spiritual Desolation, 2,000 Years of Torah, and 2,000 Years of Moshiach. Before Avraham taught the world "Torah," the main task of man was to avoid idol worship, a matter of loyalty to G-d, and therefore of the heart. Once the Torah was given, it became more of a matter than just loyalty; it was a matter of willingness to serve G-d even with one's soul.

However, in the last 2,000 year period of history, and so far from Mt. Sinai and distant from the likes of the great Rabbi Akiva and his colleagues, it is a matter of staying spiritual as the world becomes more involved with materialistically advancements. The greatest test of all is in our generation, when materialism is so available and so affordable, not to mention SO MUCH FUN! Jewish history began with Brit Milah, the middle of history involved Brit HaLoshon during which time our great rabbis of the past could even survive torture and end their lives SAYING the Shema, and history's end is a matter of vision.

According to Kabbalah, this is not just the final test of history, it is the culmination of all the challenges that involves a tikun that goes way back prior to Creation. Therefore, for a Jew, vision is not a given, but something that must be created, built, and maintained. For Balak and Bilaam, and Avimelech and Sisera's mother, it was G-d given to suit some ultimate purpose involving the Jewish people, and therefore it did not have to be earned.

However, for the Jewish people, using vision is what we are here to accomplish, and therefore not using it is what we can fail at as well.

Darkness and confusion is our window of opportunity. Too many people just close up and stay inside, prolonging the exile longer than it has to be.

Have a great Shabbos,

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