

CONSPIRACIES AND LOST OPPORTUNITIES

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

"Billam's intentional omission was humankind's lost opportunity."

Who were Billam and Balak, and what were their reasons and strategy for wanting to destroy the Bnai Yisroel?

The story of Billam and Balak is a tragic story of lost opportunities for the entire human family and the harm that can result from an evil man's egomania and selfishness.

It is important to understand that the individuals mentioned in the Torah, such as Nimrod, Eisav, Pharaoh, Balak, and Billam, were potentially able to advance the cause of the Bnai Yisroel and the bringing of Mashiach, if they had so desired.

Nimrod could have been Avraham's greatest advocate and ally, adding his own personal charisma and influence to Avraham's mission of teaching monotheism. Had he done so, the era of Mashiach would have begun with Avraham.

Eisav could have been Yakov's partner in advancing the position of the Bnai Yitzchak into the era of Mashiach. Yakov, married to Rachel would have given birth to six of the tribes, and Eisav, married to Leah, would have given birth to the other six tribes. Together, the voice of Yakov supported by the strong hands of Eisav would have made the grandchildren of Avraham invincible in the eyes of the world and would have launched the era of Mashiach.

Pharaoh was entrusted with caring for the family of Yakov. Had he done so with love and strength, rather than fear and malice, Pharaoh and Egypt would have become partners with the Bnai Yisroel. The strength and support of what was then the most powerful kingdom in the world would have helped to usher in the era of Mashiach.

This week's Parsha, the story of Billam and Balak, is another such lost opportunity. If not for Bilam's egomania and evil hatred, Balak, the king of Midian and Moav, would have joined forces with the Bnai Yisroel as they entered the Promised Land and assisted them in forging the kingdom of Mashiach.

Bilam's story began with Yakov and Lavan. The Medresh tells us that the evil prophet Billam was one of Lavan's sons. (Billam was Yakov's brother -in-law, and our Uncle.) In fact, Yakov and Billam enjoyed a close relationship with Billam learning from Yakov all about G-d and the unique mission of Avraham's children.

After Yakov had successfully amassed his own fortune, he overheard the sons of Lavan, including Billam, conspiring against him for having been so successful at Lavan's expense. He conferred with Rachel and Leah and they decide to flee. Lavan chased after Yakov, and in the end, Hashem forced Lavan into a truce with Yakov and his sons. The truce was sealed with a monument constructed from a pile of stones. (The very same "stone wall" against which Bilam's donkey would smash Bilam's leg.) However, in spite of the truce, Lavan continued to hate Yakov poisoning his sons with his hatred and passing on his determination to eventually destroy the Bnai Yisroel. It was Billam who undertook to fulfill Lavan's wishes for Yakov's eventual destruction.

Billam, a gifted student of the occult, attained worldwide renown for his supernatural powers and prophetic ability. He became an advisor to kings and rulers charging exorbitant prices for his services, and amassing great personal wealth. However, unbeknownst to the rest of the world, he was patiently awaiting the opportunity to use his powers against the Bnai Yisroel. His first opportunity came as an advisor to Pharaoh regarding Egypt's "Jewish problem." It was Billam who advised Pharaoh to enslave the Bnai Yisroel with the hope of eventually destroying them.

The Bnai Yisroel successfully survived Egypt and Bilam's second chance at destroying the Jews took place at the end of the forty years in the desert.

The Bnai Yisroel were about to enter the Promised Land. The nations of Midian and Moav feared that their kingdoms would be forfeit along with the seven nations of Canaan. Balak, a direct descendent of Lot, was the acknowledged leader and king. It was his responsibility to devise a strategy that would protect Midian and Moav. Considering that the Bnai Yisroel had already bested the mighty Sichon and Og, a military solution didn't seem advisable. Therefore, Balak needed to come up with an alternative strategy. Balak, who had at one time been Bilam's student and was aware of Bilam's hatred for the Bnai Yisroel, approached his old teacher (Billam was over 300 years old) seeking a non-military solution to his "Jewish problem."

The underlying strategy was simple. Turn the strength of the Bnai Yisroel against themselves. The Bnai Yisroel, as promised to Avraham, were a "blessed" people. That meant that they had the potential, in conjunction with possessing Eretz Yisroel, to influence the world to believe in Hashem and join the Jews in creating the era of Mashiach. Our divine attribute of free will allows for all abilities and strengths to be used for good or for bad. It was Balak's request that Billam affect the Jewish potential as the children of Avraham to influence good in the world and direct that potential into an influence for bad. Balak hoped that Billam would "curse" the nation and remove their right to claim the Promised Land.

Balak, knowing Bilam's love for money and honor, sent an impressive entourage of noblemen and gifts to entice Bilam's participation. Billam deferred to answer till the morning and invited the nobleman to spend the night. During the night Hashem instructed Billam to tell the committee, "... do not go with them, do not curse the nation for they (the Bnai Yisroel) are blessed." (22:12) The next

morning Billam told the noblemen, "...go home, G-d has forbidden me to go with you." (22:13) He conveniently left out the second half of G-d's instructions, do not curse the nation for they (the Bnai Yisroel) are blessed." Bilam's intentional omission was humankind's lost opportunity.

Billam and Balak were two important pieces in the Mashiach puzzle. Balak, as the king of Moav, possessed within him a part of Mashiach. That gene would one day be realized in his great-grand daughter, Ruth. Billam, as a prophet and teacher, was in the position to influence Balak, and the two nations that followed him, to join their destinies with that of the Bnai Yisroel as allies, not enemies. Had he shared G-d's full answer with Balak, he could have advised Balak to support the Jews and their claim on Eretz Yisroel. Balak would have understood that his destiny was to be part of the Bnai Yisroel rather than their enemies. The combined support of Midian and Moav behind the Bnai Yisroel would have modeled for all the other nations how they should relate to the Bnai Yisroel. Balak would have led the military might of the other nations in support of the Bnai Yisroel and Billam would have joined Moshe in teaching the rest of the world about G-d.

The 17th of Tamuz and the Three Weeks

The fasts of Gedalia, the 10th of Teves, the 17th of Tamuz, and Tisha B'Av, were ordained to commemorate the destruction of the 1st and 2nd Temples. Beginning with the 17th of Tamuz (July 12) and culminating on Tisha B'Av (Aug. 2) is a period of mourning. As legislated by the Talmud and amplified by our customs, the degree of mourning becomes more intense as we approach Tisha B'Av.

The laws of the 3 Weeks extend from Saturday night, July 11- the 17th of Tamuz, until after Tisha B'av - Sunday night, Aug. 2. Our custom is that during this three week period men do not shave and both men and woman do not take hair cuts. Marriages aren't performed, (if however the marriage takes place before the 17th of Tamuz, even those days of the Sheva Brachot that fall out during the three weeks are celebrated) and it is forbidden to rejoice with music and dance. The custom is to refrain from listening to any music, or to attend any public entertainment. Occasions necessitating the Bracha of Shehechyanu, such as wearing new clothes or eating a new fruit should be avoided during the Three Weeks. Purchasing new clothing is permitted until Rosh Chodesh Av - Monday, July 24, provided that they are not worn until after Tisha B'Av.

On the 17th of Tamuz, five tragedies befell the Jewish People. In commemoration of these events Chazal ordained a fast day.

1. Moshe returned from Mt. Sinai and witnessed the Golden Calf. Moshe broke the first Luchos.
2. From the day that the Alter was inaugurated in the desert (2449), offerings were sacrificed every single day for 890 years. During the fall of the first Temple, there were no more animals to sacrifice due to the hunger, and the daily offerings stopped.
3. During the fall of the second Temple, the Romans breached the walls of Yerushalayim. At the destruction of the 1st Temple the walls were breached on the 9th of Tamuz. The fast of the

17th commemorates both occasions.

4. The Talmud in Taanis recounts that in 2610, right before the story of Chanukah, Apustomus, a Syrian governor, publicly burned a Sefer Torah.
5. In 3228, during the 1st Temple, King Menashe placed an idol in the Temple. During the era of the 2nd Temple, Apustomus also placed an idol in the Temple on the 17th of Tamuz.

Good Shabbos.

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