

FORGOTTEN OATHS

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

Hashem promised through the words of Yirmiyahu that the Bnai Yisroel would exist as long as there was a universe.

"So said G-d Who establishes the sun the law stars and Who stirs the sea into roaring waves. Only if the I shall the offspring of Israel cease to be a nation before Me for all time."(31:34-35)

To date, G-d has kept His promise. Above and beyond the expectations of history the Jews are alive and well.

The third of the Ten Commandments forbids making promises and validating them by associating them with the name of G-d. "An oath in the Name of G-d implies that we seek to prove the veracity of our word and the honesty of our actions by subordinating our entire future to G-d's power of deciding over our fate." (Hirsch Shemos 20:7)

The story of Bilam's hatred for the Jewish people began centuries before they reached the Plains of Moav in the year 2488 from creation. Bilam was one of Lavan's sons and a brother to Rachel and Leah. Basically, he was our uncle!

Forced to flee from the danger of Eisav's hatred, Rivkah instructed Yakov to go to the home of her brother Lavan. However, before reaching Charan, Yakov spent 14 years in the Yeshiva (academy) of Shem and Ever furthering the 63 years he had already invested studying with his father Yitzchak. In past issues of the Rabbi's Notebook I explained that Yakov detoured to study with his great Grandfathers because he needed to prepare himself to deal with Lavan. First and foremost he had to strengthen himself spiritually and intellectually to survive Lavan's innate insidiousness. Secondly, he needed to be trained how to best influence the non-Jewish pagan society into which he would be immersed.

Shem and Ever had lived hundreds of years teaching the truths of G-d to anyone interested in knowing. They were the greatest living experts on how to be "a light onto the nations." As the grandson of Avraham, Yakov knew that he and his children were destined to become G-d's kingdom of priests and holy nation. It would be their responsibility to awaken the other nations to the reality of G-d's power and majesty. However, knowing and teaching is not the same thing. Sixty-three years of study in the tent of Yitzchak made Yakov into an extraordinary scholar and Eved Hashem (servant of G-d); however, translating and integrating that knowledge into social truths and values required special training. Yakov entered the academy of Shem and Ever to be trained. Yakov went to learn

how to teach.

Upon arriving in Charan the Torah described Yakov's confrontation with the three shepherds who were seemingly lazing around. Rather than mind his own business and avoid conflict Yakov chastised them for "stealing" from their masters. Clearly, the Torah recorded the absurdity of the encounter and its non-confrontational outcome to highlight Yakov's first real interaction with the non-Jewish world into which he would be immersed for 20 years. Presenting himself as a paradigm of honesty and integrity, Yakov proclaimed to one and all that he personified the Midah (characteristic) of Emes (truth) in all its facets. As such, whatever he would do and say would have the imprimatur of G-d's own approval. Whether it would be managing Lavan's flocks or teaching G-d's reality, Yakov could be trusted to speak only the truth.

Among those attracted to Yakov's scholarship was Bilam, son of Lavan. Bilam was a brilliant and creative student who greedily absorbed every word of Yakov's teachings. However, Bilam suffered from the fatal flaw of being miserly, self-centered, and egotistical. Whereas Moshe Rabbeinu was the most humble man to ever live, Bilam was the most egotistical.

Lacking humility and beset by the inability to subjugate himself to any other person or to G-d, Bilam, along with his father Lavan, plotted Yakov's demise. So long as Yakov and his progeny lived they would be proof of humanities ability to attain greatness through diminution. The less a person focuses on himself the greater his significance. The more a person focuses on himself the less his true significance. Therefore, Lavan, Bilam, and all those like them throughout history have plotted the utter destruction of our nation. Their egos are such that diminution is an anathema to them. Half measures would never be enough; only total annihilation and genocide would satisfy their egotistical needs of doing away with the Jewish people. As we say in the Hagadah, "Go out and learn what Lavan the Aramean attempted to do to our father Yakov... Lavan attempted to uproot everything. An Aramean sought to destroy my father.

After 20 years suffering the evil machinations of Lavan and Bilam, Yakov fled with his four wives and twelve children. The Torah in Bereshis recorded Lavan's pursuit of Yakov and their final confrontation at Har Gilead. Forewarned by G-d that he better not harm Yakov, Lavan presented himself to Yakov as the self-righteously injured father / grandfather whose sole wish for saying goodbye to his daughters and grandchildren had been denied to him by an insensitive, uncaring, and ungrateful son-in-law. The confrontation ended with Yakov and Lavan establishing a truce and covenant.

(Bereshis 31:44-52) "(Lavan said) "So now, let us make a covenant?and He (G-d) shall be a witness between me and you" Yakov said, "Ga took stones and made a mound? Lavan called the mound Yigar sehadusa stones in Aramaic) and Yakov called it Galaid (mound of stones in Hebrew). Lavan declared, "This mound is a witness between you and me? thoug among us to see... G-d is a witness between me and you?that I and yo cross over this mound to do evil to each other."

This week's Parsha relates how Balak the king of Moav hired Bilam the son of Beor to travel from Pethor in Aram Naharaim (see Areyeh Kaplan) (homeland of Avraham and Lavan) to the Jewish encampment and curse them (approx. 300 miles). Chazal tell us that Beor was Lavan and that Bilam was his son.

At first G-d refused to let Bilam go with Balak's emissaries; however, in the end G-d allowed Bilam to go. Along the way the incident with Bilam's talking donkey (the original Mr. Ed) took place. G-d sent an angel to block Bilam's path but did not allow Bilam to see the angel. Instead, the donkey saw the angel with his drawn sword and fearful for its life fled into the vineyards bordering the road. The angel repositioned himself in the narrow pathway between the vineyards that was bordered by stone walls. Frightened for its life but unable to flee due to the narrowness of the path, the donkey smashed Bilam's leg against the stone wall causing permanent damage. Bilam began striking the donkey to regain control at which point the donkey opened its mouth and began to speak. In the end G-d allowed Bilam to see the angel and he understood that it was the angel that had frightened the donkey.

The entire episode of the talking donkey demands greater elucidation which the many Mipharshim (commentaries) offer; however, I would like to share with you the insights of the Daas Zikaynim Baalei Tosofos that I learned from my older brother Rabbi Dr. Yakov Tendler.

Bilam as Lavan's son was bound by his father's oath to Yakov at Galaid. At that time Lavan agreed that he and his family would respect Yakov's autonomy and never cross over the borders of Charan to attack Yakov or his family. The covenant was agreed to by both parties and at Lavan's insistence witnessed by G-d Himself. (See Rav Hirsch the beginning of the essay.)

When Bilam agreed to undertake the contract with Balak for cursing the Jews, he effectively broke the covenant between Lavan and Yakov. (By the way, according to Chazal (the rabbis), Lavan was still living at the time.)

The Daas Zikaynim says the following. (Bereshis 31:52) "Lavan proclaimed that the mound should be witness to the covenant between himself and Yakov. They then stuck a sword in the top of the mound to complete the covenant. Therefore, when Bilam broke the covenant with the children of Yakov he was punished by both the mound of stones and the sword. The mound punished Bilam when it states that his leg was smashed against the stone wall. Know that the stone wall against which Bilam's leg was smashed was the very same mound that Lavan and Yakov had erected! Later, in the war against Midian Bilam was killed by the sword..."

The ways of G-d are timeless. Oaths made centuries before are as bearing and demanding as the moment they were first agreed to. Lavan and Bilam never intended to keep their side of the deal. Instead, they hoped that history would take care of their problem for them. However, that wasn't the case. Time after time the Jews were saved by the grace of G-d's benevolence.

It seems that "there is nothing new beneath the sun." Covenants made and sealed are meaningless

except as so much fodder for the political and PR craving. Dovid Hamelech (King David) wrote, (Tehilim 146) "Do not rely on nobles, nor on a human being, for he holds no salvation. Praiseworthy is one whose help is in G-d.."

The 3 Weeks & The 17th of Tamuz

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 Batei Mikdash (Temples). Beginning with the 17th of Tamuz and culminating the day after Tisha B'Av 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 Three Weeks

The laws of the 3 Weeks extend from sundown on July 5 ? 1 Tamuz, until mid-day the day after Tisha B'Av, July 28. Men & women are not to shave or take haircuts during this three-week period. Marriages are not performed and it is forbidden to rejoice with music and dance. The custom is to refrain from listening to any music, or to attend any live musical event. Occasions necessitating the Bracha of Shehechyanu, such as buying and wearing new clothes or eating a new fruit should be avoided during the Three Weeks. Purchasing new clothing is also not permitted unless there are extenuating circumstances. Please refer all such concerns to your local rabbi. On the 17th of Tamuz, five tragedies befell the Jewish People. In commemoration of these events Chazal ? the Rabbis 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 Mizbeach (altar) was inaugurated in the desert (2449), offerings were sacrificed every single day for 890 years. During the fall of the first Bais Hamikdash, there were no more sheep to sacrifice due to the hunger, and the daily offerings were stopped.
3. During the fall of the second Bais Hamikdash, the Romans breached the walls of Yerushalayim. At the destruction of the 1st Bais Hamikdash, 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 Channukah, Apustomus, a Syrian governor, publicly burned a Sefer Torah.
5. In 3228, during the 1st Bais Hamikdash, King Menashe placed an idol in the Bais Hamikdash. During the era of the 2nd Bais Hamikdash, Apustomus did the same.

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