

THE POWER OF LISHMA: DOING IT FOR 'THE CAUSE' VS. FOR THE MONEY

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 153, Matrilineal vs. Patrilineal Descent In Determining Jewish Identity. Good Shabbos!

Parshas Balak contains the well-known story of Balak the King of Moav worrying about the imminent approach of the Jewish people. Moav correctly surmised that, given the fate of the other kings and nations that had challenged Bnei Yisrael [the Children of Israel] with conventional military tactics, Moav would not stand a chance confronting them in traditional battle.

Therefore, Balak devised a "secret weapon" — the chemical weapon of his day. "And he sent messengers to Bilaam son of Beor..." [Bamidbar 22:5] Bilaam had the ability to curse someone. When he did so, the curse would in fact take effect on its intended victim. Therefore, Balak requested that Bilaam curse the "nation that has gone out from Egypt and covered the face of the land."

Bilaam asked the messengers to stay overnight, so that he could answer Balak's request the next morning based upon what G-d would tell him. G-d told Bilaam, "Do not go with them; do not curse the people, for they are Blessed" [22:12]. Bilaam relayed that message to Balak's messengers.

When Balak heard that Bilaam would not come, he assumed that the reason was because the proposed compensation was inadequate — that he had tried to get away too cheap. Therefore, Balak sent a more prestigious delegation promising Bilaam a great reward and granting his every request.

Bilaam, not being anyone's fool, casually mentioned to the messengers, "Even if Balak will give me his entire treasury filled with silver and gold, my hands are tied — I can only do that which G-d permits me to do." Again, they proceeded through the whole process of waiting overnight.

This time, G-d told Bilaam, "If these people are coming for your advantage (likra lecha), then go with them — just only speak that which I tell you" [22:20]. If we can even use such terminology, it appears as if G-d changed his mind! The first time that Bilaam asked for permission, G-d said "No. You cannot go!" Then, G-d suddenly appeared to change His mind. What changed?

Rash"i comments on the words "Im Likra Lecha," that if these people are coming for your benefit —

to give you payment, go with them. In other words, if you stand to make profit out of this venture, then I have no objection to your going.

That was the difference! The first time, when they asked Bilaam to come, they did not offer him anything — neither money nor honor. In that situation, G-d told Bilaam, "Do not go." The second time, Balak offered Bilaam wealth and honor. In that situation, G-d told him, "If you stand to gain from this, then you can go."

Is G-d worried about Bilaam's livelihood? Is He acting as Bilaam's agent? Pro bono, you cannot go. If you charge by the hour — then you can go. Why?

I heard a fantastic insight regarding this concept from Rav Shimon Schwab (1908-1995). The difference, says Rav Schwab, is that one of the most potent forces in the universe is doing something "Lishma" – for its own sake, without ulterior motives. Doing something altruistically, for the sake of what one believes to be right, is extremely powerful. However, when people do things because they stand to make a dollar, rather than for the sake of a cause, it loses its potency.

Rav Schwab related this insight in the context of explaining the rise and fall of the Communist system during the previous century. Communism was a very successful movement. Until very recently, over a billion and a half people lived under Communist domination – and yet in recent times we have seen Communism disintegrate.

What made Communism so successful? Rav Schwab argued that Communism became so successful because there were "Lishma-niks." People like Lenin and Trotsky and Marx were people who wanted to give the world a better order. They wanted to give the world a new system to replace the "bankruptcy of capitalism," in which some are fantastically wealthy and some beg on the street. In a sense, Communism was based on very noble ideals. These people were — for lack of a better word — L'shem Shamayim [for the sake of Heaven]! They did it for the sake of Communism. They were Lishma!

Rav Schwab related that he remembered a Communists parade in his city in Germany in the 1920s. A Jewish boy who had rebelled against his parents marched in the front line of this parade. The boy was despised. He was an outcast of the entire community. Nevertheless, this did not faze him, because he did it Lishma. He believed in what he was doing, like so many others, who unfortunately believed in it.

When people are willing to give up their lives and souls for the sake of a cause, that is a very potent force. We can look back now, over 70 years later, and try to discover what happened to the movement that caused it to collapse. We can suggest that to a large extent, the system failed because it lost this element of 'Lishma'. When we saw that all the leaders of the various "Iron Curtain" countries had stashed away Swiss bank accounts and when we saw all the corruption and graft, we quickly recognized that they had abandoned the Lishma. Once they lost the element of Lishma, the potency of the force was gone.

This is what G-d was telling Bilaam: When Balak came and said, "Curse the Jews," without offering honor or money, the reason why Bilaam was going was because he hated Jews. "We need to curse Jews! I want to eradicate Jews." This is a philosophy. It is a CAUSE. In that case, "Watch Out! You may not go." G-d knows that a sincere CAUSE is a lethal and potent force.

However, when Balak said, "I will give you Honor and Money," then G-d told Bilaam: If this is for your own benefit — if you are doing it for the money, then go. That is a different story. If you are "in it" for the money and honor, rather than Lishma — then your ability will not be nearly as potent.

Transcribed by [David Twersky](#); Seattle, Washington.

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This week's write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissochar Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Series on the weekly Torah portion. A listing of the halachic portions for Parshas Balak is provided below:

- # 018 — Rending Garments on Seeing Yerushalayim
- # 063 — Intermarriage
- # 107 — Rabbonim and Roshei Yeshiva — Do Sons Inherit?
- # 153 — Matrilineal Vs Patrilineal Descent in Determining Identity
- # 200 — Reading Someone's Mail and Other Privacy Issues
- # 335 — Postponing a Funeral
- # 380 — Bishul Akum I
- # 424 — Tircha D'Zibura
- # 468 — Birchah Hamapil
- # 512 — Pinchas and Eliyahu Hanavi
- # 556 — Bishul Akum II
- # 600 — Ayin Hora
- # 644 — Makom Kevuah Revisited
- # 687 — Water, Coffee and Tea
- # 731 — Shkia – 7:02: Mincha 7:00 A Problem?
- # 775 — Wine At a Shul Kiddush
- # 820 — K'rias Shemah Without Teffilin
- # 864 — Davening: How Specific Must You Be?
- # 908 — K'rias HaTorah and Tircha D'tziburah
- # 952 — Beer: Is This Bud For You?
- # 994 — Bilam and His Donkey: A Problem with Tzar Ba'alei #Chaim?
- #1039 — The Maid Who Made The Cholent

- #1083 — K'rias Shema Shea'al HaMitah: Why?
- #1126 — Must You Read K'rias Shema?
- #1168 — Torah and Mitzvos for Ulterior Motives: Is it worth it?
- #1211 — Must You Wait For The Rav to Finish Shmoneh Esrei?

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