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BALAK

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LA VOIE
A SUIVRE

WHAT DID BALAK THE KING OF MOAB FEAR? (BY RABBI DAVID PINTO SHLITA)

It is written, “Balak son of Zippor saw all that Israel had done to the Amorite. Moab became very frightened of the people, for it was numerous, and Moab was disgusted in the face of the Children of Israel” (Bamidbar 22:2-3).

We need to understand why Balak was so afraid of the Children of Israel, so much so that he and his entire people were disgusted with life because of their fear. We also need to understand what the parsha states a few verses later: “For I know that whoever you bless is blessed” (v.6). The Sages have said that Balak told Bilam that he knew this because Bilam had helped Sihon to defeat Moab (Tanchuma, Balak 4; Bamidbar Rabba 20:7). This is difficult to understand, for what proves that since Bilam helped Sihon in his victory over Moab, he could also help Balak to defeat the Children of Israel? As we know, the Children of Israel went through more difficult wars than this (e.g. the war against Amalek), yet emerged victorious from them all.

We may explain this by saying that the wicked Bilam knew the secret of the Children of Israel’s success, namely that unity reigned among them. As we noted, “Moab became very frightened of the people, for it was numerous” (Bamidbar 22:3), meaning that the Children of Israel performed numerous mitzvot in unity. That is, what one person didn’t perform, another person did perform, resulting in the performance of all 613 mitzvot. This is what Balak was so afraid of. Therefore even before laying out his request to Bilam, Balak explained to him that the entire reason for the Children of Israel’s success lay precisely in the unity that reigned among them, as testified by the verse: “Behold, a people has come out of Egypt” (v.5). Here the expression “has come out” is in the singular, meaning that the people acted as a single person with a single heart. Furthermore, “Behold, it has covered the face of the earth” (ibid.), means that it rules on earth and defeated Sihon and Og, who had protected them, for Israel possessed great strength due to its unity. The people dwelled in the tents of Torah and the service of G-d, all in love and unity.

Hence Balak told Bilam that what he wanted from him was to “come and curse this people for me” (v.6). In other words: Give me some advice that will lead to infighting, something that will create dissension and hatred among them, thereby damaging their unity. In that case, “Perhaps I will be able nakeh [to strike] it” – the word nakeh implying menakeh, to deduct (Tanchuma, Balak 4; Bamidbar Rabba 20:7). If Balak could sow division among them – even leading some of them to hate one another – he would be able to chase them from the land. When their unity would be shattered, Balak could conquer them without difficulty, since even the Holy One, blessed be He, punishes them when they are not united. Balak’s logic was sound, for the Sages tell us that Jerusalem was destroyed because of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza. Balak knew just how greatly Hashem detests discord and dissension, for even the Torah was not given to the Children of Israel until they were united, as it is written: “Israel encamped opposite the mountain” (Shemot 19:2). Here the term “encamped” is in the singular, which led the Sages to say that they encamped “like a single person with a single heart” (Mechilta, ad loc.).

Therefore Balak’s wicked plan was to sow division among the Children of Israel, as the passage states: “My people, hear now what Balak, the king of Moab, planned” (Micah 6:5). The Holy One, blessed be He, is asking Israel to always remember Balak’s destructive plans, for all his attempts to destroy Israel rested on an idea, not on force, an idea that sought to separate and divide the Children of Israel in order to strike them. Since Balak knew that the Children of Israel’s entire success lay in unity, he decided to adopt the same strategy for his own people as well. He even decided to make peace with the Midianites, as we read in the verse: “Moab said to the elders of Midian” (Bamidbar 22:4). Here the Sages note that the Midianites and Moabites had always been enemies, as the verse states: “...who defeated Midian in the field of Moab” (Bereshith 36:35). Therefore how could they suddenly make peace now? Here we learn

that Balak the king of Moab realized the power of unity, which he learned from Israel. Hence Balak and his people decided to make peace with the Midianites, using the power of their unity against the Children of Israel in order to defeat them.

We have thus resolved the two difficulties that we presented at the outset. Balak and his people were so afraid of Israel that they were disgusted with life, for they understood the power of unity. This is why they feared the Children of Israel, since they were solidly united. This also resolves our second difficulty, which was why Balak asked Bilam to provoke dissension and division among the Children of Israel. Their aim was to cause Israel to lose the power of unity so that Balak could defeat them. However in His great compassion, Hashem thwarted the plans of the wicked, for after Balak adorned Bilam with honor, gold, and silver to convince him of joining with him – yet he saw that Bilam was not doing what was expected of him – Balak sent him back, as the verse states: “Now, flee to your place” (Bamidbar 24:11). Their alliance therefore crumbled, and they were unable to defeat Israel.

From all that has been said, we learn just how great the power of unity is. Furthermore, the Sages tell us that when the Children of Israel are united, even if they worship idols, the attribute of justice cannot strike them (Tanchuma, Shoftim 18). This is not just some platitude, but a sure and proven thing. The generation of Ahab demonstrates this, for although they worshipped idols, they were always victorious in war. In fact they never even lost a single soldier (Yerushalmi, Peah 1:1)! Why did they merit this? It was because none of them disparaged people, stirred up hatred, or provoked strife.

All this can serve as a great motivation for us. Let us also adopt these ways, infuse them into our hearts, and conduct ourselves toward every Jew with love and fraternity. Let us be united like a single person with a single heart, for in so doing we will be assured of defeating our enemies, and no nation will have power over us.

MUSSAR FROM THE PARSHA

No Weariness for the Righteous

It is written, “He perceived no iniquity in Jacob, and saw no perversity in Israel” (Bamidbar 23:21).

The Ohr HaChaim HaKodesh states that Bilam understood the greatness of the Children of Israel, who despite the difficulty of Torah study, feared neither anguish nor fatigue. He says that the righteous, even when they perform mitzvot and occupy themselves solely with Torah, do not feel that it is a heavy burden. On the contrary, they think that they have made a good investment, and they experience great pleasure on account of their tremendous love for Torah. Concerning this subject, we know the marvelous parable of the Maggid of Dubno on the verse, “You did not call out to Me, O Jacob, for you grew weary of Me, O Israel” (Isaiah 43:22). The Maggid says that it can be compared to a merchant who returned from a distant land. When he arrived in port, he asked one of the porters to go aboard ship and carry his bags home for him. When the porter arrived at the merchant’s home, he was still breathing heavily as he asked for his wages. The merchant said to him, “The bags you brought aren’t mine.” The porter replied, “How do you know? You haven’t even looked at what I brought!” The merchant said to him, “My bags are small, for they contain diamonds. If you had brought them, you wouldn’t be breathing heavily or sweating. When I saw just how tired you were, I knew right away that the bags you brought weren’t mine.”

This is what the Holy One, blessed be He, is saying in the statement, “You did not call out to Me, O Jacob,” adding, “for you grew weary of Me, O Israel.” In other words: How do I know that you have not called out to Me? Because I saw that you grew weary and exhausted. When the righteous study and perform mitzvot, they sense no weariness. On the contrary, they have a taste for mitzvot and a desire to perform them. This is one of the three parables of the Maggid of Dubno that the Rebbe of Kotzk said was inspired by Ruach Hakodesh.

The “Honesty” of Balak

It is written, “Balak son of Zippor saw” (Bamidbar 22:2).

There are five people in the Torah who merited a parsha bearing their name. Noah was an upright and righteous man, and the same applies to Jethro and Pinchas. It even applies to Korach, for although he eventually sinned, he was still among those who carried the Ark and possessed Ruach Hakodesh. Hence he also merited a parsha bearing his name. As for Balak, however, who was a sworn enemy of Israel – a man who went so far as to hire Bilam to curse the Jewish people – how could he merit a parsha bearing his name?

The holy Rebbe of Premishlan explains that Esau is known to hate Israel. However Gentiles hide their hatred by covering it up with tender words, to the point that we are not vigilant enough with them. As for Balak, at least he was an “honest” Gentile, a man who openly demonstrated his hatred for Israel before the entire world. Hence such an “honest” Gentile merited a parsha bearing his name.

Bilam’s Trickery

It is written, “For I know that whoever you bless was blessed, and whoever you curse will be cursed” (Bamidbar 22:6).

We need to understand why Balak tells Bilam “whoever you bless was blessed,” using the past tense, whereas “whoever you curse will be cursed” uses the future tense.

The answer is that the wicked Bilam knew what Hashem wanted,

and he saw the mazal of every person. When he saw the mazal of a person and realized that he was blessed, Bilam would come to him with a blessing. The person would then think that Bilam’s blessing had a real effect, and he would be grateful to Bilam and cleave to him, not realizing that the blessing he received was due to his own mazal, not to Bilam.

Yet Balak, who understood the sorcery and trickery of Bilam, openly reprimanded him by saying: “For I know that whoever you blessed was blessed” – past tense – meaning that you have no reason to boast about your blessings, since the people you blessed were already blessed in their mazal, and it wasn’t your blessings that changed things. However I know that “whoever you curse will be cursed” – future tense – meaning that all your great powers act only in cursing people, which is why I want you to come and curse Israel.

– From the Kli Yakar

Rabbi Yossi ben Kisma and Bilam

It is written, “Bilam answered and said to the servants of Balak: ‘If Balak will give me his house full of silver and gold, I cannot transgress the word of Hashem’ ” (Bamidbar 22:18).

Rashi states, “This shows us that he was greedy and coveted other people’s money.” We need to understand this, for we find a similar expression in the Mishnah with regards to Rabbi Yossi ben Kisma. He was walking on the road when a certain man met him and said, “Rabbi, if you would dwell with us in our place, I will give you a million gold denarii, precious stones, and pearls.” Rabbi Yossi ben Kisma replied, “Even if you were to give me all the silver and gold, precious stones, and pearls in the world, I would dwell nowhere but in a place of Torah” (Pirkei Avot 6:9). That being the case, what difference is there between the words of Rabbi Yossi ben Kisma and the wicked Bilam?

The difference is simple. With Rabbi Yossi ben Kisma, the silver and gold were a means for establishing places of Torah study and for mitzvot. For Bilam, the silver and gold were a means for doing evil and cursing Israel. Furthermore, Yossi ben Kisma wasn’t the one who brought up the subject of silver or gold, for he was approached and they were offered to him. The opposite happened with Bilam, for Balak never mentioned anything other than bestowing great honor upon him, and Bilam was the one who raised the issue of silver and gold, which had not been mentioned until then. This is why Rashi states that he was greedy and coveted other people’s money.

Just How Greedy Can a Person Get?

It is written, “Bilam answered and said to the servants of Balak: ‘If Balak will give me his house full of silver and gold, I cannot transgress the word of Hashem’ ” (Bamidbar 22:18).

It seems that Bilam could have simply said, “If Balak will give me silver and gold...” Why did he want “his house full of silver and gold” as well? The answer lies in the fact that Bilam had a great desire for glory and honor, and therefore silver and gold alone were not enough for him. Instead he wanted all the silver and gold that Balak possessed. This would result not only in great wealth for Bilam, but in Bilam’s lack thereof. People would then speak of Bilam’s great wealth, to which nobody, not even Balak the king of Moab, could compare. By depriving Balak of all his silver and gold, Bilam could therefore reach the pinnacle of glory.

ESHET HAYIL

The Power of Modesty

It is written, "Bilam raised his eyes and saw Israel dwelling according to its tribes, and the spirit of G-d rested upon him" (Bamidbar 24:2).

Rashi cites our Sages in saying: "If you ask, 'Why did G-d bestow His Shechinah on a wicked Gentile?' So the nations should not have an excuse to say, 'Had we had prophets, we would have repented.' He therefore assigned them prophets, but they breached the [morally] accepted barrier, for at first they had refrained from immorality, but he [Bilam] advised them to offer themselves freely for promiscuity" (Rashi on Bamidbar 22:5).

We need to examine why Bilam merited the gift of prophecy at the exact moment that he raised his eyes and saw Israel encamping according to its tribes.

We find an answer to this in Rashi's commentary on the expression "dwelling according to its tribes." He states: "He saw each tribe dwelling by itself, not intermingling [with other tribes], and he saw that the openings of their tents did not face each other, so that they should not peer into each other's tents." Rashi's remarkable words answer our question, for when the wicked Bilam raised his eyes, he was astounded to see how the Children of Israel were vigilant regarding their sanctity and purity. He was amazed to see how they set barriers for themselves in terms of modesty, to the point that even the entrances to their tents did not face one another. This incredible sight left such a profound impression in Bilam's heart that even he was influenced by it. Hashem therefore chose that very moment to grant him His spirit, at which point Bilam began to bestow his "blessings."

We should be amazed to see such an impure Gentile as Bilam marveling at the power of Israel's holiness and being influenced by it, since all he ever saw was that the entrances of their tents did not face one another! In fact he was so moved by this incredible sight that the Shechinah rested upon him. This teaches us just how great the power of modesty is, as well as what effect it can have. Every Jewish woman can draw a logical inference here, learning just how much holiness and purity she can bring to her husband, children, and the entire Jewish community by conducting her household according to the laws of modesty and purity.

GUARD YOUR TONGUE

Tilting the Balance

The Sages learn the gravity of the prohibition against Lashon Harah from Moshe, as it is written: "Moshe feared, and he said, 'Surely the matter is known'" (Shemot 2:14). Rashi explains that Moshe was surprised by the fact that the Children of Israel were punished more than the other peoples. Before he reached the height of his spiritual greatness – in fact while still in Pharaoh's palace – Moshe could not understand why Israel was punished more than the other peoples of the world. Yet when he said, "Surely the matter is known," he was speaking about the sin of Lashon Harah and slander, which was rampant among the people. It was the primary cause of their tremendous suffering.

The Sages raise an objection here, noting that the Children of Israel had committed even graver sins, including idolatry and the breeching of 49 gates of impurity. Therefore how could they be punished so severely for Lashon Harah?

The answer is that Lashon Harah was added to their other sins, and it is what tilted the balance against them. Moshe therefore acknowledged the justice of their punishment by saying, "Surely the matter is known."

– Sama DeChayei

REASONS FOR THE MITZVOT JEALOUSLY

Although jealousy is a terrible character flaw, there are some cases in which it becomes a mitzvah, such as when people emulate the conduct of Torah scholars, or when people become jealous for the sake of Heaven. We see an example of this in the brave action of Pinchas, for on account of his jealous feelings for Hashem's honor, he saved Israel from a plague. This teaches us that there are ways in which jealousy is a mitzvah, as King David said: "Do I not hate them, O Hashem, who hate You? Do I not strive with those who rise up against You? I hate them with the utmost hatred; I count them my enemies" (Tehillim 139:21-22).

Jealously has another aspect to it, however, for although it may be positive at times (as was the case with Pinchas), the Sages have stated that it is a Halachah that is not taught.

The reason, explains the Chiddushei HaRim, is that this entire Halachah is based on the assumption that a person is so aroused by jealousy – so affected by an affront to Hashem's honor – that he feels compelled to take action against the wicked, in which case all is well. Yet if the person experiencing this jealousy takes the time to ask a question regarding it, he thereby demonstrates that his jealousy for Hashem's honor is not so ardent, which is why he is not taught the Halachah.

A TRUE STORY

The Power of Tzeddakah

In the yeshiva of Rabbi Haim Pinto Zatzal, there was a rule that when the Rav was studying, it was forbidden to bother him for any reason, and nobody was to enter the "Kodesh."

One day some yeshiva students were shocked to see the Rav getting up in the middle of his learning and, without notice, leaving the Beit HaMidrash. His faithful servant followed him, and he saw the Rav standing by the side of the road waiting for someone. Moments later a wealthy man, a resident of the area, came by. The Rav greeted him with a smile, speaking to the man and asking him to give tzeddakah for the poor in town. Since the man was stingy, however, he refused and went on his way. Seeing that the man had no intention of giving tzeddakah, the Rav ordered his servant: "Follow him, for he might die without reciting Shema." When he arrived at the man's home, the man collapsed and died, and the servant immediately recited Shema for him.

Upon returning to the Beit HaMidrash, the servant saw the Rav sitting with his students. The Rav summoned him and explained that he had seen a severe decree over the head of the wealthy man, and therefore he had tried to save him through the mitzvah of tzeddakah. However the man's stinginess cost him his life.

From that moment on, the residents in town strengthened their faith in the immense power of tzeddakah.

YOUR EYES SHALL BEHOLD YOUR TEACHER

RABBI HAIM BEN ATTAR – OHR HAHAIM HAKADOSH

The city of Sale, located on the Atlantic Ocean coast at the far end of Morocco, is not large in terms of cities. The Jewish community there, although small in number, has nevertheless left its imprint on Israel's history because of our revered teacher, Rabbi Haim Ben Attar. Born and raised in Sale, he grew up in the city until he felt the need to leave for the Holy Land and Jerusalem, where he now lies buried.

He was born in 5456 (1696) into the Ben Attar family (originally from Muslim Spain, "Attar" means "perfume" or "perfume merchant") and studied Torah with his grandfather, after whom he was named. As he relates in the introduction to his book Hefetz Hashem, "I studied Torah with my teacher and grandfather, Rav Haim Ben Attar of holy and blessed memory. He was a great Rav, well known, pious and humble, who in his time I drank living waters from. From my birth, I grew up on his knees and took in all his wondrous sayings. He was so pious that I would say that he almost never slept even half a night. He even spent the nights of Tammuz reciting lamentations over the destruction of the House of G-d, crying profusely, like a widow. He finished the night by studying with myself and others who, like myself, were his descendants." In Sale, Rabbi Haim Ben Attar gained a living through his work, which tradition says was in making clothes, especially clothes made of luxury materials woven with gold or silver thread.

Staying with his father-in-law from his youth, our teacher did not cease elevating himself in Torah. He finished by founding a yeshiva in his home, where he taught Torah publicly without receiving any salary for it, for from his youth he had undertaken to study and teach. In 5492 (1732), while still living in Sale, his book Hefetz Hashem (a commentary on the Gemara) was printed in Amsterdam. However persecutions forced him to leave the city of his birth, and he left for Meknes, then to Fez, where he studied for several years with certain students and friends. His home was wide open to everyone, and how much more to Bnei Torah. Every week he would purchase a calf for Shabbat, slaughter it, and distribute the meat to Talmidei Chachamim so that they could have something to eat in honor of Shabbat.

The story goes that one week, an epidemic erupted among the livestock of Sale, and all the animals that were slaughtered in honor of Shabbat turned out to be treif, with exception to the calf slaughtered by our teacher. One of the inhabitants of the city, a very wealthy and honored man who greatly regretted not being able to eat meat for Shabbat, went to see our teacher to ask him to give him some, regardless of the price. Our teacher refused, explaining that all the meat was devoted to the needs of the Talmidei Chachamim who came to receive their portion in honor of Shabbat. While they were yet speaking, one of the poor Torah scholars that had regularly helped him came by, and our teacher gave him his portion. The wealthy man was greatly hurt by the fact that he had no meat for himself, whereas this poor man dressed in tatters received a generous portion. In his rage he heaped words of scorn on the poor man, who was a great Talmid Chacham. Our teacher did not wish to talk with the rich man, and so he left without having obtained what he wanted.

That night, our teacher dreamed that he was condemned into exile for an entire year because he did not defend the honor of the Talmid Chacham in lieu of the rich man's insults. He accepted the decree. The following week, he left his place and undertook a year of veritable exile. He didn't sleep more than one night in the same place, leaving the next morning to pursue his exile. He was often assailed by hunger, yet accepted this trial because of the insult suffered by a Talmid Chacham.

Noticing that he was overwhelmed with troubles, our teacher decided that the moment had come to ascend towards the holy city. As our teacher wrote, "Hashem cleared my mind, and I understood that this trial was only meant to encourage me to leave for the place that I had dreamed of, the place of the Shechinah, the exalted city that is precious to the Master of the world, Sovereign in the world above and in the world below. I armed myself with all my courage and faced great dangers by traveling in deserted regions, all this to arrive at the country that I had yearned for, that pure spot on earth, Eretz Israel. As for all the countries of the peoples of the world, their land – even the air that they breathe there – is impure."

On Rosh Chodesh Av in the year 5501 (1741), he left from Livorno, Italy with a group of students, 30 in all, for Alexandria in Egypt. From there he was to travel to Jaffa, and then on to Jerusalem. One of his students, Rav Avraham Ishmael Hai Sanguinetti, described in a letter to his father (who lived in Modena, Italy) the entire trip from Livorno until the city of Akko. The boat that they had taken stopped in Alexandria, from where the group was to

travel to Jaffa and then on to Jerusalem, but the captain instead took them to Akko, where they arrived at the end of Elul 5501 (1741).

In fact, this was really a favor that G-d had done for them, for there was an epidemic that had broken out in Jaffa and Jerusalem. This is why the Rav established a yeshiva in Akko and stayed there for nearly a year, until the middle of 5502 (1742). In Eretz Israel, he was accustomed to pray at the graves of the Tzaddikim. He would go with his students, whether it be in Jerusalem, or in Sefat and Tiberias in the Galilee.

He was warmly greeted when he arrived in Sefat, and even the Beit Midrash of our revered teacher Rabbi Yossef Caro (the author of the Shulchan Aruch) was put at his disposal. There, according to tradition, the holy Arizal had prayed. From time to time, our teacher and his students left for ziarot (pilgrimages) to the graves of the Tzaddikim, Tannaim, and Amoraim buried in the villages of the Galilee. They approached the tomb of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai in Meron with particular emotion, and even though they traveled there by riding donkeys, when they saw from afar the tomb of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai on the mountain summit of Meron, our teacher descended from his donkey and began to climb on all fours, uttering with a bitter voice, "How can I – who am nothing – how can I enter into that place of fire, wherein dwells the flame of the Holy One, blessed be He, and His Shechinah, while all the heavenly guides and all the souls of the Tzaddikim are here!"

When he visited the holy places of Tiberias, Rav Haim Aboulafia would insistently beg him to settle in Tiberias and to take charge of the new Jewish community of that city. In the end, our teacher decided to establish his yeshiva in Jerusalem, and near the end of the year 5502 (1742) he settled in the holy city with his students. His emotions in arriving in the holy city were expressed in a letter in which he enthusiastically described his first Yom Kippur in Jerusalem: "I saw a great light at the time of Kol Nidre ... and when I opened the heichal, it was truly for me like opening the doors to the Garden of Eden. There was such radiance in the synagogue that everyone was overflowing in supplications and cried abundantly in their desire to see the construction of the Temple. Even the Falachim did the same. [Editor's Note: Apparently these were the Jewish peasants that lived in the villages neighboring Jerusalem (such as Nevi Shmuel) and who came to the city on the night of Yom Kippur to pray with the community]. Believe me, in my entire life I have never seen such a thing."

Among his students was the Chida, who was 18 years old when he joined himself to our teacher's group as the latter ascended to Jerusalem. Even though our teacher lived only 11 months in Jerusalem, the Chida had the time to serve and learn Torah from him. In his book Shem HaGedolim, he speaks with great praise of his grandeur: "And myself the youngster, I had the merit to be part of his yeshiva. My eyes saw the greatness of his Torah, his extreme gentleness, and his extraordinary holiness. For our generation, the Rav had impressive strength in study; he was like a source of living waters. One perceives his wisdom in his books, yet this represents but only a fraction of his insight, the greatness of his heart, and his exceptionally sharp mind. All day long there hovered over him a spirit of holiness and detachment from the world, as well as exceptional spiritual strength."

Our teacher did not live long in the holy city, and before a year had passed from the time of his arrival, he departed from this world and joined the Celestial Assembly: "Because of the sins of the generation, he fell ill and died at the age of 87, in the year 5503 [1743]."

Our teacher died on a Saturday evening, at the beginning of the night. At that moment, the Baal Shem Tov had just finished washing his hands for the third Shabbat meal (there, the sun had not yet set), and he said, "The light of the Orient has extinguished," meaning that our teacher, the saintly Ohr HaHaim, had died. At the moment he died, his friend Rav Haim Aboulafia fainted in Tiberias in the middle of prayer and remained unconscious for almost half an hour. In regaining consciousness, he said that he had accompanied our teacher up to the doors of the Garden of Eden. The Sages of Jerusalem speak of his death in their letter of recommendation for the book Rishon Letzion, which appeared in 5503 (1743). They stated, "That day, the entire country began to weep, the leaders of Zion sat in the dust, lamentations responding to tears, and everywhere we gathered together to eulogize him."

Rabbi Haim Ben Attar's tomb on the slope of the Mount of Olives is among the holy places where many people come to pray during the entire year. In particular, there are many who journey there on the day of his Hilloula, Tammuz 15.