



The Path To Follow

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GUARD YOUR TONGUE!

The Damage Caused by Listening to Lashon Harah

A person does a great deal of damage by listening to disparaging words, even if he does not believe them. By consenting to listen to Lashon Harah, he becomes the reason for the speaker's continued use of it. When the speaker realizes that he has listeners who don't mind hearing his Lashon Harah, he will continue to disparage others in the future. On the other hand, if he encounters resistance from those listening to him, or at least a look of disapproval, he will avoid speaking Lashon Harah in the future. It is extremely important for people to realize and remember that disparaging and demeaning others gives them a bad reputation and brings them shame.

– Netzor LeShoncha 86:7

PRIDE DRIVES A PERSON MAD (BY RABBI DAVID HANANIA PINTO SHLITA)

It is written, "Moab became very frightened of the people, for it was numerous, and Moab was disgusted in the face of the Children of Israel" (Numbers 22:3).

Rashi comments: "They detested their lives, similar to [saying], 'I am disgusted with my life.'"

This requires an explanation. Why were the Moabites afraid of the Children of Israel, given that Moses had been told, "You shall not vex Moab, and you shall not provoke war with them" (Deuteronomy 2:9)? Furthermore, Balak the son of Tzipor, Moab's king, had summoned Bilam with the message: "Behold, a people has come out of Egypt...and it sits opposite me" (Numbers 22:5). This clearly shows that the Children of Israel were simply encamped before Moab and did nothing to them. Therefore why were the Moabites so afraid that they were disgusted with life?

It was not because they were afraid that the Children of Israel would fight against them, for the Moabites knew that they had no intention of going to war with them. There was another reason for their disgust, a completely different reason. They detested life just like a person without Torah detests seeing Jews engaged in Torah study. It is also like parents whose child does teshuvah, for they are detested with their own lives and can no longer tolerate such a situation, since they themselves are so distant from Torah. So too for the Moabites when they saw the Children of Israel encamped before them, when witnessing Jews engaged in Torah study and the performance of mitzvot. They detested their own lives because they could not tolerate such a situation. In fact a Gentile who sees a Jew carefully fulfilling mitzvot feels an obligation to keep at least the seven mitzvot incumbent on him. Thus the Moabites, who viewed these seven mitzvot with disdain, were disturbed when they saw the Children of Israel observing all 613 mitzvot, for it reminded them of their own obligations. This is why they detested life and could no longer tolerate it. Hence the verse tells us, "Moab was disgusted in the face of the Children of Israel."

True, when the wicked Bilam saw the Children of Israel encamped by their tribes and engaged in Torah study and performing mitzvot, he said: "How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, and your dwelling places, O Israel" (Numbers 24:5). What emerges from this, as well as from what Bilam said later on, is that he did not detest life when he saw the Children of Israel at their best. On the contrary, his heart was filled with jealousy at that point, for he wanted to resemble them. It seems, therefore, that a little love for Torah had made its way into him.

With regards to this subject, there are two kinds of people in the world, polar opposites in fact. When seeing observant Jews, one kind cannot even look at them and they detest their own lives. As for the other kind of people, they experience a love for Torah and those who study it, despite the magnitude of their maliciousness. The wicked Bilam was among the latter group, and upon seeing the Children of Israel at their best he said: "How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, and your dwelling places, O Israel" (Numbers 24:5). Nevertheless, since pride was one of Bilam's main character traits (though he recognized the truth and admitted to it), he was simply incapable of choosing the path of truth. Instead of studying Torah directly from Moses, he removed the truth from his heart and from before his eyes. He completely ignored it and clung to his maliciousness. In fact the

Torah can only be acquired by one who yields to it (Ta'anith 7a), something that the proud cannot do.

Reflecting on this, we see that by the mitzvah of the red heifer, Parsha Chukat alludes to the fact that pride ruins and destroys all that is good. Parsha Chukat states that those responsible for the heifer – slaughtering it, burning it, throwing hyssop into the fire, and collecting its ashes – all became impure by doing so. Nevertheless, the product of their work rendered the impure pure (Yalkut Shimoni, Chukat 659).

We all know the great question: How could the red heifer, which purified the impure, also render the pure impure (meaning those who prepared its ashes)?

According to what we have said, we can easily understand this dichotomy. The Children of Israel numbered 600,000 when they received the mitzvah of the red heifer, and included among them were priests and great tzaddikim. When Moses approached Elazar, the son of Aaron, and said that Hashem had ordered him to prepare the red heifer, Elazar no doubt felt that he was worthy of performing this mitzvah, since the heifer would purify the impure. Yet because Elazar had been chosen from among all the priests and tzaddikim, he was liable to be infused with some degree of pride. This would be unconscious on his part, certainly not intentional, for who would dare say that Elazar, who served as High Priest after his father Aaron, was influenced by pride?

The Torah, however, understands the depths of man's character, and it was concerned that Elazar would succumb to pride, both he and all the priests called upon to burn the red heifer throughout the generations. In that case, what purpose would be served by all the preparations made in producing its ashes? This is why the Torah states that the priest who burns it becomes impure, for in this way he will never succumb to pride. That is, because he knows that burning the heifer will render him impure, he will not grow proud. From this we realize that pride ruins and destroys all that is good. We also realize that we have to erect numerous barriers in order to protect ourselves from this vile defect, one that leads to the grave. Bilam, in fact, died on account of his pride, which did not allow him to choose the path of truth once he recognized it. The same goes for Korach, who was swallowed by the earth on account of his pride.

We must therefore be extremely vigilant when it comes to this disastrous character flaw. We must do everything for the sake of Hashem, without even a hint of pride. Even studying Torah with pride becomes a source of impurity, nourishment for the kelipah, a way by which people destroy worlds (see Perkei Avoth 4:13 – "Be cautious in study..."). We must increase our prayers and ask Hashem to save us from pride. We must ask Him to grant us the merit of resembling Abraham, humble in spirit, in order to act with humility both with G-d and with man. Amen, may it be so.

MUSSAR FROM THE PARSHA

The Importance of Consistency

It is written, "How goodly are your tents, O Jacob" (Numbers 24:5).

The Ohr HaChaim HaKodesh explains that this verse alludes to Jews who fix times to study Torah each day. In order to achieve consistency in Torah study, it is important to set a definite time that cannot be modified with pretexts, even if we think we can earn a great deal by changing it. It is not without reason that the Torah is compared to bread, as it is written: "Come, eat of my bread" (Proverbs 9:5). This teaches us that bread nourishes the body, and if a person does not eat for a day or two, he grows weak. Furthermore, the longer this goes on, the more difficult it will be for him to return to his normal state. It is exactly the same with regards to Torah study, for it nourishes the holy soul found within a Jew. If he fails to study it for several days, his soul will grow weak, and weaker still if he neglects it for a week. This is why we have to be very careful not to cancel a regular study session, not even for a single day. Besides the harm that results from canceling it, it is very likely that during that time we will not study in any way. It will then be very difficult to conquer the evil inclination in order to fix a time for learning. Yet even if we do study properly, if we lack day-to-day consistency, such study will not draw much holiness upon itself. Such is not the case if the consistency of our Torah study is permanent, for then a tremendous degree of holiness will reside on each moment we study.

An excellent way of maintaining consistency is to reflect upon a statement from our Sages: "Words of Torah are firmly held by one who kills himself for it" (Berachot 63b). During our regular Torah study sessions, let us view all other concerns as if we were dead to the world. One who preciously guards his study time in this way will have tremendous faith in Hashem for his sustenance, as it is written in the Jerusalem Talmud: "Who are those filled with faith? Buyers shout to them to bring their merchandise to sell, yet they reply: 'I am not going to cancel the time that I set aside to study Torah for financial gain. If I deserve it, Hashem will grant me this gain after I finish studying.'"

A person who protects his time for Torah study merits the love of Hashem, and nothing can describe the greatness of one who is loved by the Creator. It is clear that he will lack nothing, for he is the friend of the king – the King of the universe. By the merit of carefully maintaining consistency in Torah study, whether it be little or much, not only will the gates of blessing be opened for a person, he will also merit sons who will become great Torah scholars, children who will teach the Torah to the community.

– Leshichno Tidreshu

A Pearl From the Rav

It is written, "How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, and your dwelling places, O Israel" (Numbers 24:5).

The Sages have said, "From the blessings of that wicked man [Bilam], you may learn his intentions. Thus he wished to curse them that they should possess no synagogues or houses of study: 'How goodly are your tents, O Jacob.' ... Rabbi Abba bar Kahana said, 'All of them reverted to a curse, except the synagogues and houses of study'" (Sanhedrin 105b).

In his book *Pehad David*, Rabbi David Pinto Shlita asks what the difference is between this blessing and Bilam's other blessings, given that the others reverted to curses. If we explain that those blessings were not fulfilled because they were not uttered wholeheartedly, then the same can be said of this blessing as well!

The Rav Shlita also cites the book *Ilana D'Chayei* in asking: Why are his blessings recorded in the Torah, since they serve no purpose whatsoever?

The answer is that, despite all his malice and the powerful hatred that

he felt for Israel, Bilam marveled at what he saw. His heart broke when he witnessed the Children of Israel encamped around the Sanctuary, the place that connected them to their Father in Heaven, and saw them neglecting the life of this world in order to devote themselves entirely to the goal of life – eternal life – by killing themselves in the tent of Torah. At that point he was so moved that he was not ashamed to declare, "How beautiful are your tents, O Jacob." Hence this blessing was wholeheartedly uttered, and as such it is recorded in the Torah.

Although Bilam saw the tents of Torah from a distance, he was still so moved that his heart melted within him and he blessed the Children of Israel. In fact he himself wanted to emulate them, as he said: "May my soul die the death of the upright, and may my end be like his" (Numbers 23:10). If this was the effect of seeing a place of Torah from a distance, it is certain that had Bilam actually approached the Jewish people and sat among them, his soul would have been deeply affected and he would have become another man. Yet his love for the world prevented him from taking that small step, and so he ruined his life all by himself.

The reason why Bilam's other blessings are recorded in the Torah, which contains no redundancies and whose every letter contains secrets, was in order to keep the gates of repentance open for him. Therefore had he repented, all his blessings would have been fulfilled. From here we learn just how important it is for us to approach a place of Torah and remain there in order to benefit from the light of Torah. This light will eventually make its way into the deepest recess of our beings, and it will soothe our hearts. Especially at the beginning of our journey, when we have just started to walk along the paths of faith, we must take this small step and push ourselves to connect to a place of Torah and light. We must not allow our instincts to fool us, as they did to Bilam, eventually removing him from two worlds. We must always recall the words of King David when he said, "Lead me on the path of Your commandments.... Incline my heart toward Your testimonies" (Psalms 119:35-36).

Neither Your Bite Nor Your Kiss

It is written, "You shall not go with them. You shall not curse the people, for it is blessed" (Numbers 22:12).

Rashi explains: "You shall not go with them. [Bilam] said to Him, 'If so, I will curse them from here.' [Hashem] replied to him, 'You shall not curse the people.' [Bilam] said, 'If so, I will bless them.' [Hashem] replied, 'They do not need your blessing,' for it is blessed. As the saying goes, 'We say to the bee: Neither your honey nor your sting.'"

The nations of the world try to bring about Israel's destruction in two ways. One way is to persecute and enact horrific decrees against them, and the other way is to draw Jews closer to them in order to assimilate them. At first Bilam tried to destroy Israel with curses, "For in every generation they rise against us to destroy us, but the Almighty saves us from their hands" (Passover Haggadah). When Bilam realized that this was not working, however, he decided to use another approach, to use blessings in order to draw Israel closer to him (a tactic employed by missionary groups today) and assimilate them. Therefore Hashem said to him: I can do without your kindness and blessings. I want "neither your honey nor your sting" – neither your bite nor your kiss.

– Divrei Shaarei Chaim

He Couldn't Boast

It is written, "G-d said to Bilam, 'You shall not go with them. ... If the men have come to summon you, arise and go with them'" (Numbers 22:12,20).

Why is Bilam initially prohibited from going with Balak's envoys, yet in the end he is allowed?

If Hashem had strictly forbidden him to go, the wicked Bilam would have

boasted by saying, "Heaven is afraid of my curses!" However if he had initially been allowed to go, he would have also boasted that he was free to do whatever he wanted, claiming that Hashem couldn't stop him. This is why things occurred as recorded in the text: Bilam was initially prohibited from going, so that everyone could see that he was not free to do whatever he wanted. He was then allowed to go, so that everyone could see that his curses were completely ignored.

– Ohr HaChaim HaKodesh

The Signs of the Patriarchs

It is written, "The she-donkey turned aside from the road and went into the field.... The angel of the L-RD stood in the path of the vineyards, a fence on this side and a fence on that side. ... The angel of the L-RD...stood in a narrow place, where there was no room to turn right or left" (Numbers 22: 23-26).

Commenting on verse 26, Rashi states: "There is a Midrash Aggadah in Tanhuma: Why did [the angel] decide to stop in three places? He showed [Bilam] the signs of the Patriarchs." We need to understand the exact nature of these "signs."

The angel began by standing in a field where there was ample room to move right or left. This alludes to the fact that if Bilam wanted to curse the descendants of Abraham, he should curse either to the right or to the left. That is, let him curse the descendants of Ishmael on one hand or those of Keturah on the other. He was not to curse the descendants of Isaac. Next, the angel stood in a path made between two vineyards, a narrow passageway that was tight even for two people. This alludes to the fact that if Bilam came to curse the descendants of Isaac, he would only be able to curse one side, that of Esau. He would not be able to curse the side of Jacob. Finally the angel stood in a very narrow place, where there was no room for movement either to the right or the left. This was an allusion to Jacob's descendants, all of whom were pure. Such were the "signs of the Patriarchs."

– Da'at Zekenim

A Lion or a Lion Cub?

It is written, "The people will arise like a lion cub and lift itself like a lion" (Numbers 23:24).

Given that a lion is stronger than a lion cub, this means that when a Jew arises to serve Hashem, he is like a lion cub. Yet at that point Heaven helps him, for "if he comes to purify himself, he is given help" (Yoma 38b), and he will end up lifting himself like a lion.

– Ma'ayana Shel Torah

Overview of the Parsha

Parsha Balak records the dealings between the Children of Israel and Moab following the latter's decision to contact Bilam, whose utterances are recorded in the parsha. Because Moab was afraid that Israel would do to them what they had done to the Amorites, Balak the king of Moab sent two delegations to summon Bilam. With Hashem's consent (though an angel was sent to block his way), Bilam agreed to go. Upon his arrival, Balak asked him to curse Israel, even selecting three places from which to do so. Hashem nevertheless prevented Bilam from cursing, and instead he blessed Israel from those very same places, even declaring what they would do to the nations in the final days. The parsha then recounts Israel's stay at Shittim and the promiscuity involving the daughters of Moab, who led the Children of Israel into immorality at Baal Peor. This was followed by an epidemic that killed 24,000 people, ended only when Pinchas in his zeal killed an Israelite man and a Moabite woman.

REASONS FOR THE MITZVOT

To Know the Righteousness of Hashem

One of the ten things that we must remember each day is that Balak and Bilam conspired against our ancestors in order to harm them. We remember this so as to understand the righteousness of Hashem. The basis for recalling this event is to examine and understand the kindnesses that the Creator of the universe has done for us, as well as His love for us, by having transformed Bilam's curses into blessings.

It is written, "Praise the L-RD, all you nations. Praise him, all you peoples, for His kindness to us is great" (Psalms 117:1-2). The commentators ask why the nations should praise Hashem because of His kindness to us. They explain that although the nations of the world look for all kinds of ways to wipe us out, the Holy One, blessed be He, saves us even before we discover their plans. Therefore we do not know how to exalt Him. However the nations of the world – who have witnessed Hashem's awesome deeds and who know how He has saved us from their plans even before they could implement them – they should acknowledge our Guardian and praise Him.

Balak and Bilam represent just one example of this. Balak knew that he would never succeed in defeating the Jewish people by force alone. He already saw what they had done, and he knew that none could defeat them. Even Og, the king of Bashan (whom Balak and Bilam had counted on to defeat Israel) was defeated by them. Therefore they had to find another way. This new way, they concluded, was to fight Israel with curses. Although the Children of Israel were completely in the dark, 'the Guardian of Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps' [Psalms 121:4], for the Holy One protected them and foiled all attempts to curse them. Not only that, but Bilam also blessed them! That being the case, we are obligated to acknowledge Him. We must praise Him for all His deeds. This is why we remember how Balak and Bilam conspired against us. By doing so we understand the righteousness of Hashem, even for things that we are unaware of, and especially for miracles that are revealed, which can only be denied by someone who wants to deny them. As the Chafetz Chaim explained, "For the believer there are no questions, and for the non-believer there are no answers." When the fire of faith burns within a person, he knows that he does not have to understand everything. Instead he places his trust in the Creator, Who knows what He is doing. Sometimes a person may even understand that all that has happened to him has only been for the good, and so for him there are no questions. Yet for a person whose faith has been extinguished, even if he were shown the ways in which the world is governed, he would still cloud the issue by attributing it to something else. This is especially true since his obstinacy stems from not wanting to look into the question, for if it were clear to him that a Creator governs the world, he would have no choice but to conduct himself according to His will.

A TRUE STORY

The Czar and Rabbi Yitzchak

The Czar of Russia wanted to expel Jews from the country, and he looked for a way to do this without arousing opposition. He therefore assembled Jewish leaders and addressed them very harshly. The Czar's goal was to intimidate the Jewish leaders so they would no longer oppose him, at which point he could enact his decree. In fact as he was delivering his speech, the Jewish representatives froze with fear, and only Rabbi Yitzchak of Volozhin (the son of Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin, from among the scholars of Lithuania) was smiling. When the Czar noticed this, he almost choked on his anger!

The Czar abruptly stopped his address, turned to Rabbi Yitzchak, and asked him why he was smiling.

Rabbi Yitzchak replied, "You mentioned that you cannot understand why G-d created a people like the Jews. This reminds me of the verse, 'In due time it will be said to Jacob and to Israel, "What has G-d wrought?"' [Numbers 23:23]. Although it's true that we don't know why G-d created a people like the Jews, the very next verse tells us, 'The people will arise like a lion cub and lift itself like a lion.' I was smiling because I remembered this prophecy, which will now be fulfilled." At that point the Czar's address changed, and in the end he was unable to expel Jews from the country. – Aish Dat

EISHET CHAYIL

Merit for the World to Come

It is written, "Deborah was a prophetess, the wife of Lapidot. She judged Israel at that time" (Judges 4:4).

How did Deborah merit becoming a prophetess and judging Israel?

Tanna D'vei Eliyahu states that Deborah's husband was an uneducated man. She said to him, "I will make wicks for you to bring to the Sanctuary. Because of this, you will earn a reward among the most righteous and merit the World to Come."

Thus Deborah made these wicks and her husband brought them to the Sanctuary. He had three names: Barak, Michael, and Lapidot, the last on account of the wicks that his wife made for the lapidot (lamps) in the Sanctuary. In fact she made them thick in order for their light to be even greater than normal. The Holy One, blessed be He, therefore told her: "Because you desired to increase My light, I will increase your light within Judah and Jerusalem before the 12 tribes." On whose account was Lapidot's reward among the most righteous, and why was he able to attain life in the World to Come? It was because of his wife Deborah, of whom it is written: "The wise among women, each builds her house" (Proverbs 14:1).

This is the merit that women earn for the World to Come. As Rabbi Chiya told Rav, women merit the life of the World to Come for two main reasons:

1. They exhaust themselves in bringing their children to school in order to learn Torah from their teachers.

2. They enable their husbands to go out and study Torah, and they wait until evening for them to return from their studies.

That is their portion in the Torah.

– From Yalkut Shimoni and Berachot 17a

IN THE LIGHT OF THE HAFTORAH

Like Dew From Heaven

It is written, "The remnant of Jacob will be in the midst of many peoples like dew from the L-RD, like showers upon grass, which does not hope for any man and does not await the sons of men" (Micah 5:6).

Micah prophesied: "The remnant of Jacob," meaning the Jews remaining when Mashiach will arrive, "will be in the midst of many peoples" – the Jewish people will be confronted by many nations when they march upon Jerusalem with Gog and Magog. "Like dew from the L-RD" signifies that Israel will place no faith in the nations of the world, nor in any man. Since none but Hashem can bring dew and rain, which come exclusively by Heaven, a person who hopes for rain is hoping for the Master of the universe to provide it. Likewise, Israel will place its hope exclusively in Hashem. They will await deliverance from Him – He alone will save them, for there is no savior but Him – especially since they will be a minority among the nations that will gather against them. Who else will be able to save? His deliverance will come upon us like dew upon the earth; it will be "like showers upon grass." Now showers signify rain in abundance, the result of which is bountiful grass. This means that when the Jewish people have faith in Hashem and His deliverance, they will grow. Not only that, but Hashem's kindnesses to Israel will grow as well. The end of the verse repeats the essential message of the passage: "Which does not hope for any man and does not await the sons of men." This signifies that our faith resides in G-d alone, for no one else can save us.

– From Radak and Metzudat David

YOUR EYES SHALL BEHOLD YOUR TEACHER

Rabbi Yosef Trani – Gaon and Kabbalist

Rabbi Yosef Trani Zatzal was born in Sefat to Rabbi Moshe Zatzal, a famous gaon and Kabbalist known as the Mabit. In his youth Rabbi Yosef studied with the gaon Rabbi Shlomo Sagi Zatzal, with whom he was able to greatly elevate himself in Torah and the fear of Heaven. Although his father died when he was only 11 years old, he continued to study with the same diligence as before. Though still young, he knew the entire Talmud by heart. In fact after reviewing it several times, he could account for its every letter. Hence Rabbi Yosef became known as a gaon, one who possessed an extremely sharp mind. He was also a Posek.

The Torah scholars of Sefat chose him to go on a mission abroad. Thus he arrived in Constantinople, where the residents of the community knew of his great reputation. They begged him to stay and take on the role of Rav and Av Beit Din of the city, which he accepted. Rabbi Yosef lived in Constantinople for many years, and there he taught Torah to hundreds, even thousands of students; he also made many disciples. Two wealthy brothers supported Rabbi Yosef financially, enabling him to devote himself to Torah study.

Besides the hundreds of students that regularly attended his classes, Rabbi Yosef Trani had 80 students who were very close to him, and with whom he delved into the secrets of Torah. These special students included Rabbi Haim Benveniste (the author of Knesset HaGedolah), Rabbi Haim Algazi, Rabbi Yehoshua Ospiral, Rabbi Yitzchak Alfanderi, and other great Torah figures. On Tammuz 14, 5399 Rabbi Yosef Trani left this world for the celestial academy.

THE DEEDS OF THE GREAT

What Kind of Blessings Are These?

Rabbi Yochanan ben Asmai and Rabbi Yehuda the son of proselytes were studying tractate Nedarim at the school of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. ... He said to his son, "These are important men. Go along with them so they may bless you." He went and found them...and said, "Father told me, 'Go along with them so they may bless you.' " They said to him, "May it be [Heaven's] pleasure that you sow but do not reap; that what you bring in does not go out; that what goes out you do not bring in; that your house be desolate and your inn be inhabited; that your table be disturbed and that you do not behold a new year." When he came home to his father, he said to him: "Far from blessing me, they upset me!" His father asked him, "What did they say to you?" [Upon recounting their words] his father said, "These are all blessings: 'That you sow but do not reap' – that you beget children and they do not die. 'That what you bring in does not go out' – that you bring home daughters-in-law and that your sons do not die, so their wives will not leave again. 'That what goes out you do not bring in' – that you give your daughters [in marriage] and their husbands do not die, so that your daughters will not come back. 'That your house be desolate and your inn be inhabited' – this world is your inn and the other world is a home, as it is written: 'Kirbam is their house forever' [Psalms 49:12], reading not kirbam [their imagination], but kivram [their grave]. ... 'That your table be disturbed' – by sons and daughters; and 'that you do not behold a new year' – that your wife does not die and you will not have to take a new wife."

– Moed Katan 9a-b