



Partners In Torah

San Diego-Los Angeles-Ventura

Take home Dvar Torah

תשפ"ד Balak

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Hello, Welcome!

Partners In Torah is a community-wide, independent and inclusive adult education program focusing on understanding Jewish relevancy to our lives by studying text most interesting to each participant.

Through one-on-one discussion for 1 hour each week, friendships are forged between mentors and mentees.

Partners in Torah has proven to be effective at reclaiming the rich legacy of wisdom, inspiration, and guidance for many who have, until now, lacked access.

Thank you for joining us!

Please encourage friends to join you in participating so that we may grow together as a community.

This week's portion, Balak, introduces us to בלעם - Bilaam, history's only legitimate non-Jewish prophet. Although many others claim to have had a prophecy (and, hence, so many religions in the world), they are all impostors, for after Bilaam misused his gift of prophecy, Hashem promised that He would never again allow a gentile prophet. That being the case, if Hashem doesn't talk to a gentile "prophet" (the essence of prophecy), any gentile claiming that "God" spoke to him is making it up. This undercuts all the other religions that began when their leaders claimed that they had received a Divine prophecy revealing to them the foundations and tenets of their new religion. Because this is impossible, the other religions have no basis.

Bilaam, however, *was* legitimate. The information that he conveyed via his prophecy was straight from Hashem. As a result, Bilaam's accuracy was 100% and whomever he cursed would quickly disintegrate.

It is moreover remarkable to know that Bilaam's prophecy was the same high-level prophecy as Moshe Rabbeinu's! Moshe's prophecy was of a higher level than all other *Jewish* prophets; hence, no prophet could contradict a law in the Torah given through Moshe. Indeed, in Deuteronomy 34:10, the Torah reveals,

י וְלֹא קָם נְבִיא עוֹד בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל כְּמֹשֶׁה אֲשֶׁר יָדָעוּ יְדוֹד פְּנִים אֶל פְּנִים

10) *No other prophet arose in Israel like Moshe, who Hashem knew face to face.*

Because Hashem spoke to Moshe "*face to face*," i.e., with a crystal-clear message with no veils or vagueness, his prophecy was superior to that of all the others who received their prophecies via a vision or story that they were shown and who then had to correctly decipher the message.

Our Sages ponder the words “*in Israel*,” Why the extra words? They teach us that ***in Israel – the Jewish nation***-- there was no prophet like Moshe; but, outside of Israel, there indeed was; and who was that? Bilaam the wicked, who also saw his prophecy clearly and without distortion.

Because of Bilaam’s effectiveness in cursing and hurting others, *Balak*, the Moabite king, sought him out. Balak, had witnessed how the Jewish nation easily decimated the mightier Emori and Bashan nations, the vanguard of the entire region. So, if they could not stand up to the Jewish nation, Balak knew that he didn’t stand a chance against them. His idea was to have Bilaam curse the Jews and when his curse worked, he would not have to deal with them.

Bilaam was delighted with the prospect. He hated the Jewish people also, and although he knew that Hashem loved the Jewish people and would not allow him to curse them, he felt confident that he could contort Hashem’s message and convert it into a curse. Since it was up to him to interpret the messages sent by Hashem, he would be sure to interpret them in the most negative way. He did not anticipate Hashem’s plan for his prophecies. Hashem delivered to Bilaam crystal clear messages that he could not distort. Because the message was not subject to interpretation, Balaam had no choice but to present the prophesy as given. Thus, instead of cursing the Jewish people, he found himself, against his will, blessing them.

The messages that came straight to Bilaam from Hashem are taken quite seriously. One has even been incorporated into the daily prayers (Numbers 24:2):

מה טובו אהליך יַעֲקֹב מִשְׁכְּנֵיךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל

How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places O Israel.

Rashi explains that Bilaam realized that each Israelite had carefully positioned his tent's opening in a different direction than that of his neighbor so that he should be unable to peek into his neighbor's tent.

רש"י על במדבר פרק כד פסוק ב
שכן לשבטיו - ראה שאין פתחיהם מכוונין זה כנגד זה שלא יציץ לתוך אהל חבירו :

Harav Mattisyahu Solomon זצ"ל makes a remarkable observation. Notice, he says, that it doesn't say, "*they positioned their doorways such that no one else **should peek into their tent.***" It rather informs us, "Each person positioned his doorway in way *that **prevented him from looking into the other person's tent.***" Each person intentionally positioned his own tent to face a different direction than his neighbor's doorway so that he would not even inadvertently look into his neighbor's tent. This is truly an amazing display of consideration that each person showed for the other, a sensitivity worthy of the greatest praise.

The question is how did Bilaam know that this was their reason? Maybe each person did it so that the other person shouldn't look into *his* tent? What tipped off Bilaam to determine that it was out of consideration for his neighbor and not out of concern for his own privacy?

Bilaam realized that the only possible way that such a thing could happen quickly, peaceably, and without argument is if each person had only the best interest of his neighbor in mind. For if each person was interested only in himself, the camp could not possibly have been set up that way.

Imagine. Reuven pitches his tent, and then Shimon comes along and sets his tent up with his door directly facing Reuven's door. Reuven says to Shimon, "My good friend Shimon, would you please change the direction of your door; it is facing my door!" "What's the problem?"

asks Shimon. “Because you can look into my tent and encroach on my privacy!” responds Reuven. “What are you talking about? I would never look into your tent!” “Nevertheless,” Reuven says, “please change the direction of your doorway; it would just make me feel better.” Shimon responds, “Look, if you’re so worried about me looking into your tent, change *your* doorway around!” Or Shimon may respond, “Don’t you see, all the other tents around me have their doors facing my doorway, so, any way that I turn, I will be facing someone’s door, and because you are such a nice guy, I picked you!”

Such an argument, or something like it, would likely happen with every single tent. There would have been hundreds of thousands of interactions (there were approximately 600,000 families), each one a potential altercation between the people. Can you imagine what setting up camp could have looked like? So how did it happen in such a quick and peaceful way?

There is only one possible answer. Rather than thinking about his own selfish needs, everyone was thinking only of the welfare of his fellow. Thus there were no issues at all. As the tents went up, each person simply adjusted his own tent so that it did not face the doorway of a neighboring tent. And if one person had no choice but to have his door face the doorway of a neighboring tent, the opposing tent owner would peacefully change the direction of his tent, and so, too, the next person, all the way to the end of the camp. The system was foolproof and worked every time. Setting up camp took no time at all, and there were never any arguments.

This is the only conclusion to which Bilaam could possibly have come. What an amazing people these Jews are! How could I curse such a beautiful group of people who are so considerate and sensitive to

each other's needs? These are truly the most blessed people in the world.

Bilaam's prophecy contains another noteworthy verse (Numbers 23:9):

(ט) כִּי מֵרֵאשִׁי צָרִים אֶרְאֶנּוּ וּמִגְבְּעוֹת אֲשׁוּרְנוּ הֵן עִם לְבָדָד יִשְׁכֵּן וּבְגוּיִם לֹא יִתְחַשֵּׁב

9) *For from its origins, I see it like a rock and from hill do I see it. Behold! It is a nation that will dwell in solitude and not be mixed among the other nations.*

The Midrash explains the nature of this solitude (Yalkut 768).

”הן עם לבדד ישכון, ” מובדלין הן מן העו”א בכל דבר בלבושיהן ובמאכלן ובגופיהן ובפתחיהן

They dwell in solitude – they are separated from the nations of the world in all matters, in the way they dress, in what they eat, in their bodies, and in their doorways.

We understand what is meant by “their doorways,” referring to how they positioned them in the wilderness. But what are these other distinguishing signs of a Jew that set him apart from the world's other nations?

The way they dress – We experience this every day. In today's world, it is very easy to pick out religious men or women from the crowd, their being dressed very differently than the general public. Even in the summer's heat, their bodies will be covered, as they will be dressed modestly not wanting to draw attention to themselves.

What they eat – Jewish people are careful to eat only kosher food. Their food comes from pure sources like domesticated animals, fruits, and vegetables. The *Code of Jewish Law* also contains laws about *how*

one must eat, which center around eating in a refined way versus acting like an animal when eating.

In their bodies – This refers to the men being circumcised, carrying the stamp of Hashem’s covenant with them in their bodies. In today’s world, Jewish bodies are also different in that they lack tattoos, the Torah prohibiting a Jew from having a tattoo.

These differences are a manifestation of the completely unique and holy lifestyle that the Torah prescribes for every Jew, indications of the completely different focus and purpose in life that Hashem has in mind for His people.

A Jew lives in this world, using it as a steppingstone into the world to come. He is here to use the physical world and all of its pleasures as tools to serve Hashem. And by using this world to serve Hashem, he earns his place in the World to Come. We were created to enjoy the reward that is waiting for us in the World to Come. This is what sets the Jewish nation apart from all the other nations. The Jewish people are not here to experience the world’s pleasures for the sake of pleasure. They enjoy the pleasures of this world according to Hashem’s guidelines in the Torah to earn reward in the World to Come.

In this sense, we Jews are truly “alone.” We do not share a common worldview with the other nations. We alone have the Torah, and we alone are charged with living by its guidelines. To this end, we must remain isolated from the world’s nations so as not to learn from their ways or adopt their values and lifestyle.

On the surface, this attitude sounds quite restricting, unrealistic, and even snobbish. How could a person be expected to ignore the world around him and limit himself strictly to the Torah’s path? The answer is that Hashem created each person to have a unique personal

relationship with Him. To this end, Hashem has engineered the Torah such that within the framework of keeping the Torah's ways, every person can find a path to express his personal aspirations for creativity, advancement, and growth in life. To express one's individuality, a person need not invent a new "brand" of Judaism. Within his special relationship with Hashem, based on his strengths, talents, and unique qualities, a person will find complete fulfillment and purpose. Any substitutes only derail him from his mission in this world and are destined to fade away over time. The Jews who remain loyal to the Torah and its laws lead the most rewarding, meaningful, and fulfilling lives. Their relationship with Hashem, centered around the challenges of keeping the Torah, satisfy their every need.

Unfortunately, in a world where Jews are accepted and treated like (if not worse than) the other nations, remaining isolated and loyal to the Torah confers a great challenge. It is hard not to think that there is something "more" to be had outside of the Torah cocoon. Until a person has experienced it, it seems impossible that the Torah contains everything that a person needs for his happiness. It is also hard not to be curious or desirous of the free lifestyles that abound in our surroundings. People seem to be having so much fun! As the expression goes, "The grass always looks greener on the other side." This problem has plagued our people for millennia.

The Targum (Second century Aramaic translation of the Torah by Onkelos) adds another dimension to Bilaam's statement.

הא עמא בלחודיהון עתידין דיחסנון עלמא ובעממיה לא יתדנון גמירא

They alone are destined to inherit the world, and they will not be destroyed with the other nations.

Because of our connection to Hashem through the Torah, Bilaam predicted that the Jewish people would be an eternal nation. *Bilaam*

revealed the secret? to being eternal: we must remain isolated and alone with ourselves and the Torah lifestyle that Hashem has given us.

The allure of the world around us contradicts the notion of the Jewish people being an eternal nation. How can we be eternal if we assimilate into the melting pot of the world?

The Midrash (Tanchuma Toldot 5) relates a conversation between Adrianos and Rabbi Yehoshua.

אדריאנוס אמר לרבי יהושע גדולה הכבשה העומדת בין שבעים זאבים אמר
ליה גדול הוא הרועה שמצילה ושומרה ושוברן לפנייה

Adrianos said to Rabbi Yehoshua, "How great is the lamb that can stand among 70 wolves!" Rabbi Yehoshua responded, "How much greater is the shepherd who saves it and guards it from the wolves!"

One might ask on this Midrash: Judging by how the Jewish nation has suffered throughout the ages, how has Hashem protected us? So often in our history it seemed like Hashem was nowhere to be found. This is a very daunting question, the answer to which is counterintuitive.

In a way, it is like what we are learning about in this week's portion about Bilaam. Of all people to tell us that we are a unique and isolated nation, it has to be an evil gentile?

The reality is that Bilaam set the template for all future generations. When the Jewish people assimilate to the degree that they are in danger of disappearing, the gentile is the one who reminds them that they are Jews. The outside world totally rejecting them is what prevents them from losing their Jewish identity. This is what we experience today. With the assimilation rate at a minimum of 72%, we are losing Jews left right and center.

Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin (d. 1893) wrote an entire book explaining how anti-Semitism exists *because* the Jewish people no longer dwell alone. He explains how if we remained true to this concept of “a nation that dwells alone” not only would the other nations not hate us, but they would also accord us the greatest respect, understanding that we are Hashem’s holy nation. But because we are diluted among the nations and do not comprise a single unified unit, we are subject to hate.

When I studied in Israel, I frequented a barber who had moved to Israel from Casablanca, Morocco. He told me that in Casablanca, a city of two million people, on Yom Kippur, nary a truck went through the streets, out of respect for the Jewish holiday. On Shabbat, a gentile would not have the audacity to light a cigarette next to a Jew. There, all the Jews kept Shabbat and the holiday, so the gentiles were respectful of them and their holy days.

Although scary, this notion is also empowering; it teaches us that we can indeed combat anti-Semitism; we can become more Jewish and opt in for more Torah and more mitzvot. Anyone who opts to do even one extra mitzvah a day, or put on tefillin, or say one blessing on something that they eat, is actively strengthening the Jewish people and stemming the tide of assimilation, the cause of antisemitism. Indeed, all who come to Partners Detroit to learn Torah, or participate in any of the mitzvah programs is *personally combatting anti-Semitism in the most powerful and impactful way*. We need to spread this message to our friends and involve them in our mission of strengthening the Jewish nation. This is our only hope for a more secure future.

A non-observant Jewish couple came to the rabbi to learn about the Torah with the goal of becoming Torah observant. The rabbi asked

them, “What prompted you to seek to this lifestyle?” They answered, “We were attending a Unitarian Church, one that does not identify with any particular religion, where all people are equal in front of the church. One Sunday, we overheard the two men in front of us talking. One said to the other, ‘Why is it getting so crowded in here lately?’ The other answered, ‘Because all those damn Jews are filling up the pews!’ So, we thought to ourselves, if even when we are in a Unitarian Church we are still the cursed Jews, we might as well be the real thing!”

They went on to become completely Torah observant and raised a beautiful family.