



Partners In Torah
San Diego-Los Angeles-Ventura
Take home Dvar Torah

5785 Parshat Balak
July 8, 2025

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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.**

תשפ"ה Balak

It is customary, when travelling by plane, to acknowledge your seatmate when taking your seat, and maybe even to say a word or two as you deplane. Conversation between seatmates during flight is uncommon, perhaps, because people have come to enjoy a little time alone without phone calls and other people to intrude. I am always sure to have a sefer – Torah book-- with me on the plane that I try to learn, to maximize the time.

On a recent flight, my seatmate, who was clearly not Jewish, noticed what I was learning and, towards the end of the flight, inquired, “That doesn’t look like light reading, what is it?”

I answered, “A scholarly book about the Torah,” and, trying to put it in terms that he could understand, I added, “the Bible.”

Thinking that I must be learned, he then said to me, “I was always curious to know what the Jewish people think about Jesus. What *do* you guys think of him?”

I answered, “We think he was a human being like any other and nothing more. He was not the messiah, a god, or the son of G-d. We worship the amazing, brilliant, ingenious Creator of the entire universe and its contents. Jesus could certainly not have created the world, since he was born long after it was created. If you can worship such an amazing G-d, who needs a middleman?”

To this he said, “So you don’t believe in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost?”

I said, “No we don’t. G-d is only one.”

I then proceeded to tell him about the Seven Laws of Noach, and that if he kept them because Hashem the Creator of the Universe has commanded him to, he will merit a place in the World to Come. I

explained that there is no need for Jesus and that one can achieve his place in the World to Come without anyone's help, by just doing the seven laws of Noach because Hashem, the Creator, has commanded them.

The ability for a gentile to earn a place in the World to Come underscores that Judaism is the only true religion.

The true G-d would have to be the Creator of the world and all the people in it. What possible reason could an all-powerful, perfect G-d have for creating a world? What benefit could He possibly derive from it? Indeed, if He needed something from the world, it would be a contradiction to His perfection. How can you add to perfection? If something is perfect, any addition would be superfluous and only detract. If the addition doesn't detract, then it wasn't really perfect to begin with, since it only became perfect through the addition.

Our Sages teach us that Hashem created the world to share His goodness with other intelligent beings that would appreciate His kindness to them. But before the world was created, there was nothing other than Hashem. This posed no problem For Hashem, for all He needed to do was create them. And create them He did, along with an entire universe filled with all the accoutrements necessary for them to live a meaningful and fulfilling life. He created each person unique, and with a specific mission, and promised him reward in the World to Come for completing that mission. After a life full of meeting the challenges to complete that mission, Hashem will share His goodness with that person by rewarding him for overcoming the challenges and persevering to complete his mission. The reward will be very sweet since it comes through his own hard work, and not as a present.

Understanding that Hashem created man to bestow His goodness upon him, it would make sense that every person Hashem created have

the opportunity to receive that goodness. What would be the purpose of creating 7 billion people if only a small number of them could earn a place in the World to Come?

According to all the other religions, the only way to acquire a place in the World to Come is by believing in their god. All others are going to hell (or related locations), no matter how good they were, and no matter how virtuous a life they led. What kind of god would create a world where most of the people in it will to go to hell?

One Xmas eve, outside the Ohr Sameach Yeshiva in Yerushalayim, a group of carolers gathered to sing Xmas carols. Needless to say, the boys were annoyed by them, and asked them, "Can't you find somewhere else to sing your carols? Do you have to sing them right here in front of our holy Yeshiva?"

The carolers responded, "We chose this place deliberately! We are here to save your souls! If you don't believe in Jesus, you are all going straight to hell!"

"Really? If I don't believe in Jesus, I am going to hell no matter how virtuous a life I have led?" asked one of the boys. "That's right!" came the reply.

"And if I do believe in Jesus, I will go to heaven no matter how evil a life I have lived?" asked the boy. "That's right!" came the reply.

"So let me ask you a question." The boy responded. "They say that Hitler accepted Jesus before he died. Do you mean to tell me he is going to heaven?" "That's right!"

"And the million and a half children that Hitler murdered, are going to hell because they didn't accept Jesus?" asked the boy. "That's right!"

"You know, quite frankly, I would rather be in hell with the million and a half children than in heaven with Hitler."

Many people, including a former pastor that I met, have left Christianity on the basis of this absurdity alone.

This week's portion, Balak, introduces us to בלעם - *Bilaam*, history's only legitimate non-Jewish prophet. Although many other religions began via a "prophecy" to its leader (hence, so many religions in the world), they are all impostors. Why? Because, after Bilam misused his gift of prophecy, Hashem promised that He would never again give prophecy to a gentile.

Indeed, the Sages go to great lengths to explain how it was that Bilam, a scoundrel, became a prophet to begin with. One must be a very holy person before Hashem will speak with him.

Maimonides writes (Foundations of the Torah 7:1):

מיסודי הדת לידיע שהאל מנבא את בני האדם ואין הנבואה חלה על חכם גדול בחכמה גבור במדותיו ולא יהא יצרו מתגבר עליו בדבר בעולם אלא הוא מתגבר בדעתו על יצרו תמיד והוא בעל דעה רחבה נכונה עד מאד אדם שהוא ממולא בכל המדות האלו שלם בגופו כשיכנס לפרדס וימשך באותן הענינים הגדולים הרחוקים ותהיה לו דעה נכונה להבין ולהשיג והוא מתקדש והולך ופורש מדרכי כלל העם ההולכים במחשכי הזמן והולך ומזרז עצמו ומלמד נפשו שלא תהיה לו מחשבה כלל באחד מדברים בטלים ולא מהבלי הזמן ותחבולותיו אלא דעתו פנויה תמיד למעלה קשורה תחת הכסא להבין באותן הצורות הקדושות הטהורות ומסתכל בחכמתו של הקב"ה כולה מצורה ראשונה עד טבור הארץ ויודע מהן גדלו מיד רוח הקודש שורה עליו ובעת שתנוח עליו הרוח תתערב נפשו במעלת המלאכים הנקראים אישים ויהפך לאיש אחר ויבין בדעתו שאינו כמות שהיה אלא שנתעלה על מעלת שאר בני אדם החכמים כמו שנאמר בשאול והתנבית עמם ונהפכת לאיש אחר

A foundation of our religion is to know that Hashem speaks to people. A prophecy will only come to a wise person, one who is in complete control of his personal desires, never succumbing to them, ... when he enters the Kabbalistic realms and is steeped in those great, distant, lofty matters, understanding them clearly, such that through

them he continuously sanctifies himself, remaining separate from worldly matters, and he rigorously trains himself to think only holy thoughts, never allowing a mundane thought to enter his mind, rather, his mind is always attached to Hashem's Chair of Glory, gaining understanding of those holy and pure images, and he plumbs the depths of Hashem's wisdom from the beginning of creation to the center of the earth, then, Hashem will bestow His Holy spirit upon him.

Bilaam did not possess a single good quality. In describing him to us, the Mishna in Pirkei Avot says (5:19):

יט) כָּל מִי שֵׁיִשׁ בְּיָדוֹ שְׁלֹשָׁה דְּבָרִים הִלְלוּ, מִתְלַמְּדֵיּוֹ שֶׁל אַבְרָהָם אָבִינוּ.
וְשִׁלְשָׁה דְּבָרִים אַחֲרָיִם, מִתְלַמְּדֵיּוֹ שֶׁל בְּלָעָם הָרָשָׁע. עַיִן טוֹבָה, וְרוּחַ נְמוּכָה, וְנַפְשׁ
שֶׁפָּלָה, מִתְלַמְּדֵיּוֹ שֶׁל אַבְרָהָם אָבִינוּ. עַיִן רָעָה, וְרוּחַ גְּבוּהָה, וְנַפְשׁ רְחֹבָה, מִתְלַמְּדֵיּוֹ
שֶׁל בְּלָעָם הָרָשָׁע

19) Whoever has the following three traits is among the disciples of our Forefather Avraham; and whoever has three different traits is among the disciples of the wicked Bilam. Those who have a good eye, a humble spirit and a modest soul are among the disciples of our Forefather Avraham. Those who have an evil eye, an arrogant spirit, and a greedy soul are among the disciples of the wicked Bilaam.

Bilaam had an evil eye and saw only the bad in everyone and everything. He was haughty and had an insatiable appetite for money. He certainly does not fit Maimonides's description of a candidate for prophesy. His prophesy was therefore an exception. One explanation as to why he became a prophet is that Hashem wanted the gentiles to have a prophet so they could not claim that had Hashem given them a prophet like Moshe, they also would have been righteous like the Jewish people. Therefore, Hashem gave them a prophet like Moshe, yet all he did was use his prophetic abilities for evil.

Our Sages further teach us that prophecy stopped even for holy Jews who satisfied all of the Rambam's criteria. One thousand years after the Torah was given, in the year 3348, the last prophet, Malachi, died. After that, even the holiest Jew who claimed to have had a prophesy would have been rejected out of hand. Such a thing was no longer possible.

Based on all of this, we can conclude that any person, especially a gentile who has no qualifications at all for prophesy, who comes with the claim that Hashem, the real Creator, spoke to him and taught him his religion, is deluding himself. Or, more probably, he is an outright liar. This undercuts all other religions because they all 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, all other religions can have no basis and are false.

The following analysis is based on a lecture ("*A Rational Approach to the Divine Origin of the Torah*") by Rabbi Leib Kelemen. I recommend that you listen to it, as it is informative and entertaining. It can be found at: <https://www.simpletoremember.com/media/a/oral-tradition-video/>.

Rabbi Kelemen, who studied many religions in college, identified a pattern common to all religions and subsequently developed an algorithm through which he was able to unravel the asserted truth of any religion in about a minute and a half. Here is his algorithm.

When someone approaches you and asks you to join his religion, your initial reaction is to ask him, "Why should I? What do I have to gain from joining your religion?"

Your interlocutor will then list for you his religion's various benefits: *You will achieve internal peace, a oneness with the universe, a front-row*

seat in the world to come, a better professional life, a better personal life, etc.

You then ask, “Is it possible to achieve these benefits from any religious system *other than yours?*” The answer will invariably be, “No! To receive these benefits, you must belong to *our* religion. If you don’t belong to *our* religion, you are doomed to failure, if not perdition.”

At this point, you respond, “Since these benefits can be achieved only in your religion, you must be privy to secret information. How did you come upon this secret information that no one else knows?”

To answer this question, your interlocutor will share with you his religion’s “Revelation Narrative.” The revelation narrative is the story of how the leader who started the particular religion came to possess the secret information that one needs to know to achieve their benefits.

Note that ***all*** revelation narratives follow the same pattern. They begin with one person who supposedly received a prophetic revelation with the tenets and benefits of that particular religion, who then taught and convinced others of its validity. From an academic standpoint, there is no reason to believe the encounter. With so much to gain, he surely made it up! As the leader of a religion, he would enjoy fame, honor and power and so many other “perks” that come with being the head of a *religion*. He surely made it up!

All of the world’s major religions started this way. For example.

Christianity started when Paul, then Shaul, a Jew, was on the road to Damascus, when Jesus, who had been dead for 30 years, appeared to him, told him his whole life story, and started the Christian religion. Paul converted on the spot and came back to teach the world about the new religion that he had discovered.

Islam starts when Mohammed falls to the ground in what looks like an epileptic seizure, gets up, and explains that he had just experienced a prophesy, and this is what G-d has just told him. Over many years Mohammed had many of these “prophesies” and, after each one, he “wrote down” the messages that he found in his head. That information became the Koran, a collection of his revelations.

Mormon begins when Joseph C. Smith, a 17-year-old boy, claimed that an angel Moroni appeared to him. Moroni revealed that Smith had been selected to translate the Book of Mormon, a sacred text that was written around the 4th century, and named after Moroni’s father, Mormon. According to Moroni, this spiritual book contained information about the ancient people who inhabited the Americas. He revealed that the book was inscribed on golden plates near Palmyra, NY, which was close to where Smith lived at the time. He translated them and published the Book of Mormon in 1830. (Those gold plates, of course, were somehow “lost,” rendering verification quite impossible.)

Rabbi Kelemen thus debunked every religion, since they all began with one charismatic person who convinced many others to join his religion, which snowballed into a major religion, as more and more people believed the lie. Because the first person was an imposter, the whole religion has no basis.

The only exception to this is the Jewish religion, which is based on Hashem having spoken personally *and publicly* to roughly 3 million (!) people at the foot of Mt. Sinai when Hashem Himself gave the first two commandments to the Jewish people. The Talmud reports that so intense was the spiritual experience that their souls actually left their bodies upon hearing Hashem’s voice. Every person deeply experienced Hashem’s communication with him so much so that Hashem had to revive them after both commandments. From that point on, the people requested that Moshe deliver the remaining eight.

The Torah records this entire account of the Mount Sinai event. This Torah is the very same Torah that resides in Holy Arks in thousands of Shuls around the world. Our Torah scrolls are copies of Torah scrolls that are copies of the original 12 Torah Scrolls written by Moshe on the last day of his life and given to each of the tribes. The same people who experienced the Sinai event later saw in print Hashem's narrative of that event. If it was off by even the smallest detail, would the entire Jewish nation have accepted it? They personally experienced it firsthand and knew what happened. There would be no way to fool them with false information!

If I were a very convincing person, I *might* be able to convince you that I had lunch with President Trump in the White House last week. To make it sound realistic, I would add details about the meeting, what we discussed, and what I said. I would also add clear descriptions of the White House and much other information to try to convince you that I really had lunch with the President. If I did a really good job, you may come away from our conversation thinking, "Maybe he really did have lunch with President Trump! What do I know?"

But is there any way in the world that I would be able to convince you that ***you were there with me at the White House with the President?*** Of course that would be impossible! So how could Moshe have convinced the people that they experienced events that they hadn't really experienced?

The Torah recounts in detail the lengthy process of the redemption from slavery and the miraculous exodus from Egypt. This process that took almost a year, starting with the Egyptians tossing Jewish baby boys into the Nile, through the ten plagues, and culminating with the grand finale - the splitting of the Reed Sea and the drowning of the Egyptian army. The people who later read the narrative of these events, as told by Hashem to Moshe, verified every detail. There were no discrepancies

between what they personally experienced and what they found written in the Torah.

This Torah was intensely studied and passed down from generation to generation without interruption until today. It is the very same Torah we read in shul every Shabbat, with no changes.

This is why we are commanded to remember the Exodus from Egypt twice every day. We must always bear in mind that our belief in Hashem is not predicated on the claim of one man who successfully created a movement and a following for his personal story. Our belief in Hashem is predicated on the first-hand personal experience of millions of people, documented in the Torah, and passed from generation to generation without interruption.

The celebration of the Festival of Pesach - celebrating the exodus, Sukkot - celebrating the miraculous clouds that surrounded the Jewish camp in the wilderness, and Shavuot - celebrating the Sinai event, which continue until today, are further evidence that these events happened. How else could Jews *all over the world* keep the same holidays commemorating the same ancient events on the same days of the calendar year? The only possible answer is that they celebrated these holidays with their parents, who celebrated them with their parents, all the way back to the very first time the holidays were celebrated in the wilderness after the exodus from Egypt by the people who experienced the events.

In the Torah we find repeatedly that Hashem reminds the people, "You saw these events with your own eyes." (Deuteronomy 4:15, 29:1.)

Each of the new religions referenced above also came with a "bible," a collection of writings that comprise the religion's stories and laws. The Christians have the New Testament, Islam the Koran, and the

Mormons, the Book of Mormon. A look at their bibles should show us something about their religion.

They are simplistic books with contradictions and mistakes. There is no depth to them and no scholarship associated with them.

On the other hand, the scholarship on the Torah is unfathomable. The Torah has been studied for millennia, by the greatest and most brilliant minds, and has never been exhausted. These sublime, intellectual minds have spent their every waking moment studying the Torah from all of its aspects. Yes, there are seeming contradictions but no mistakes. Every contradiction or nuance of writing is deliberately planted to elicit a lesson or law. The wisdom of the Torah is infinite, as is its author, Hashem.

A young man was considering converting to Christianity. His rabbi could not talk him out of it, but, in a last-ditch effort, told the boy, "Before you convert, please complete the following assignment. Go to any church, and ask the Pastor to show you, his library. Then go to any Rabbi or any shul and look at the library there and tell me what you find."

The boy was blown away. In any church he went to, he found maybe one bookcase with books, and most of them were just extra copies of their bible. Any shul he went to, had an extensive library of holy books taking up walls of space.

Also note, that any true nugget of wisdom found in any other bible was taken from our Torah.

A friend of mine was looking to purchase the house of a Reverend. On the Reverend's desk was a blue ArtScroll Chumash, the very same one that is in all our shuls. He asked the Reverend, "What's that for?" The Reverend answered, "Oh, my best sermons come from that book."

Rabbi Dr. Sholom Srebrenik, a renowned *Arachim* lecturer, once recounted in a lecture that the Koran says numerous times, “The Koran is true as you can see from this text,” implying that there is something in the text of the Koran that indicates its truth. He studied the entire text and could not find any especially intelligent information revealing its truth. He asked a Koran scholar, “What is meant by this? I did not find anything profound in the Koran.” He responded, “Well, Mohammed was illiterate, and the Koran is written in an intelligent way. So, it must be divine or else how would it be written down?” The answer is that he dictated it to his Jewish servant who was literate and helped him with the content, too.

How fortunate we should feel to know that our Torah is true. It was given to Moshe, taught to the Jewish people, and studied diligently since then for thousands of years. We can avail ourselves of that Torah and see for ourselves that it is truly full of wisdom that we can feast our minds on.

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

מה טובו אהליך יַעֲקֹב מִשְׁכְּנֹתֶיךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל

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

The Seforno explains that the **tents** refer to the *בתי מדרשות* the Torah study halls, and **your dwelling places** refers to the Shuls in which the Jewish people pray. These institutions are what keep the Jewish people alive - Torah and Tefillah (prayer).

When one is privileged to study the Torah as all of you at Partners are, one sees very clearly that the Torah could have only been written by Hashem the most brilliant author possible. Through this most powerful

medium we are able to recognize the Divinity of the Torah and its Divine Giver. We should avail ourselves of the opportunity to study the Torah as frequently and as much as possible, for it will connect us ever so much more to our amazing Creator, Hashem.