

The Narrow Bridge

גשר צר מאוד

PARSHA PERSPECTIVES

Short Divrei Torah on Parshas Balak

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רפואה שלמה פעסל בת גאלדא / לזכות חילינו

COMMUNICATION IS KEY

Rabbi Shlomo Ressler

“Balak, son of Tzippor, saw all that Yisrael had done to the Amorite. And Moav became terrified because the people were so numerous...” (22:2-3)

The Torah relates the story of Balak, the king of Moav, who sees the Jews conquering his neighbors and tries to get Bilam to curse them before his nation is invaded and falls victim. However, the first mention of Balak does not specify his job (22:2), and in the following pesukim, the people share their fears with the elders rather than with their King Balak (22:3-4).

What seems to be happening between Balak and his people?

Rav Hirsch posits that King Balak and his people experienced a lack of communication, as his people acted independently from their supposed leader. This back and forth continued almost comically, and to Balak’s dismay, Bilam repeatedly told Balak that he could only say what G-d instructed him to say and then proceeded to bless, rather than curse, the Jews three times.

Balak’s episode highlights an important aspect of relationships: communication. If we learn to express ourselves properly when life is going smoothly, we’ll be better equipped to continue paying close attention and listen to each other when tensions arise.

FOSTERING CONFIDENCE

Lubavitcher Rebbe

“And Moav became terrified because the people were so numerous...” (22:3)

(Balak, the king of Moav, heard how the Jewish people miraculously overcame the Amorite kings Sichon and Og. Even though it was common knowledge that G-d had not promised the Jews the territory of Moav, Balak feared that these victories would embolden them to exact revenge from the Moabites for not having allowed them to pass through their country.)

Balak had no reason to make the Moabites afraid of the Jewish people. He did not ask them to do anything to counter the supposed threat posed by the Jews. But he could not contain himself, and needlessly spread fear among his people.

In contrast, although Moshe was afraid of King Og, he did not disclose his fear to the Jewish people. Moshe realized that he must refrain from doing anything that would weaken the people’s morale, and instead bolstered his own inner morale. Because of his positive attitude and steadfast trust in G-d, he successfully preserved the Jewish people’s self-image and pride in their Divine mission. Moshe knew that we earn G-d’s helpful intervention in our lives by trusting Him to provide it. Moshe set the standard of fearless behavior for all Jewish leaders who would succeed him.

We are all leaders, to one degree or another, whether in the context of our jobs, our families, or our circle of friends. We should therefore learn from Moshe’s example, taking care to foster others optimism and confidence in their Divine mission, rather than the opposite, as did Balak. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 8, pp. 148-149) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

IN IT FOR THE MONEY

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

“He [Balak] sent messengers to Bilam, the son of Beor; to Pesor which is by the river.” (22:5)

Rashi details two interpretations of the word “Pesorah”: According to the simple meaning, it is the name of the place where Bilam lived. A second understanding is based on the Aramaic word “Pesorah” which means “money launderer.” Just like a money launderer is a person to whom everyone brings their money, so too, did everyone send letters and petitions to Bilam for assistance.

The Unsdorfer Rav, Rabbi Shmuel Rosenberg zt’l (Be’er Shmuel), draws a remarkable contrast between a righteous tzaddik, a prophet of truth, and a wicked prophet as Bilam.

When a person comes to a tzaddik for a berachah, assistance or for any reason, he may bring a letter or petition (*kvittel*) together with some money which he presents to the tzaddik. It is not a payment for a service rendered, but rather a way to express honor and respect to the righteous man. The tzaddik does not request the money and is willing to assist anyone who comes to him with an equal and open heart.

Bilam was quite different, however. Although he craved honor and lavish praise from kings, ministers and all members of society, he still was - after all is said and done - a mercenary of the highest order who would only act in lieu of payment. The letters and petitions that he received from all over the world asking for his help would not be given a second glance if not for the future promise of remuneration and monetary payment. In this manner, he was very much akin to a "money launderer" - a person who was always involved in taking money from others. Bilam himself knew that he would be unable to curse Bnei Yisrael - but business was business!

COVERED IN DIVINITY

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"He sent messengers to Bilam son of Beor... saying, 'A people has come out of Egypt, and behold, they have covered the view of the land, and they are stationed opposite me.'" (22:5)

The consistent laws of nature obscure G-d's presence in the world. Nature thus "covers" Divinity, and it is our Divine mission to reveal the Divinity behind nature's façade.

As we gradually spread Divine consciousness, we are, so to speak, substituting one cover for another, "covering" the world with Divine consciousness instead of letting nature cover over G-d's presence. Allegorically, this is what the evil King Balak was afraid of: the Jewish people were "covering the land" with Divine consciousness, threatening the power of evil.

What enabled the Jewish people to do this was the fact that they "came out of Egypt," meaning that the tribulations of exile had prepared them for their unique spiritual destiny. Similarly, the spiritual consciousness that we attain by overcoming the challenges of our present exile enables us to reveal G-d's presence in the world today, preparing us for when "the world will be filled with knowledge of G-d as water covers the seabed" (Yeshayahu 11:9). (Hitva'aduyot 5742, vol. 4, pp. 1790-1794) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

SUMMONING DIVINE STRENGTH

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"He [Balak] sent messengers to Bilam..." (22:5)

Two enemies opposed us on our journey from Egypt to the Land of Israel: Amalek and Bilam.

What emboldened these two personalities to oppose G-d's plan was their common ancestry with the Jewish people: Amalek was a grandson of Yaakov's brother Esav (Bereishis 36:12) and Bilam was another name for Yaakov's father-in-law Lavan (Sanhedrin 105a). This common ancestry made them think that they had a say in the Jewish people's destiny.

Similarly, the evils represented by Amalek and Bilam oppose our journey from spiritual slavery to spiritual freedom. Their common denominator is their haughty claim that they should have a say regarding what should be the proper Jewish attitude toward life.

We can resist their claims by asserting that the sole arbiter of Jewish life is the Torah. By cultivating humility - the opposite of the haughtiness demonstrated by Amalek and Bilam - we can summon the Divine strength to ensure that our attitudes remain holy and positive, free from unholy, negative influences. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 3, pp. 338-340) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

NOT YOUR HONEY NOR YOUR STING

Divrei Sha'arei Chaim

"G-d said to Bilam, 'Do not go with them. You shall not curse the people, for they are blessed.'" (22:12)

(Bilam) said to Him (G-d): "If so, I will bless them." (G-d) replied to him: "They do not need your blessing, for they are already blessed." A parable: People say to a hornet: "I want neither your honey nor your sting." (Rashi)

There are two ways in which the world's nations seek to destroy the Jews. Some want to do it by humiliating and oppressing them, others intend to achieve the same end by showing them too much friendship, thereby leading them into assimilation and conversion.

The evil Bilam first tried to curse the Jews. When he saw that it was to no avail, because G-d always saves the Jews from their oppressors ("in every generation there are those who rise up against us to annihilate us, but the Holy One, blessed be He, always saves us from their hands" - Passover Haggadah), he decided to employ the other method, to lavish blessings and kind words on them so that they would eventually assimilate.

For this reason, G-d, blessed be His Name, said to him: "Keep your favors and your blessings; as I do not want your sting, so, too, I do not want your honey."

DEFYING LOGIC

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"[Balak said to Bilam,] 'Please come and curse this people for me.'" (22:17)

Bilam knew through prophecy that G-d had forbidden the Israelites to attack Moav, and that therefore Balak had nothing to fear. Nonetheless, Bilam did not reveal this fact to Balak, because Bilam hated the Israelites fanatically

and relished the opportunity to curse them. But G-d not only prevented Bilam from cursing the Jews; He forced him to bless them by transforming Bilam's curses into blessings.

Just as Bilam's anti-Semitism and the curses inspired by it exceeded the bounds of logic, G-d's love for the Jews and the blessings inspired by it exceed the bounds of logic.

It is therefore no surprise that the chief reference to the Messianic Redemption is found in Bilam's curses-turned-blessings. The essence of the Redemption will be the revelation of the inner dimension of our Divine soul, which connects us with G-d in a manner that goes beyond the boundaries of logic.

Accordingly, the surest way to hasten the advent of the Redemption is by demonstrating our devotion to the Torah's principles of goodness and holiness even when - and especially when - doing so defies logic. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 38, p. 89) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

THE NATURE OF EVIL

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"Even if Balak would give me silver and gold to fill his house, I cannot transgress the word of Hashem, my G-d, to do anything small or great." (22:18)

(Balak sent for the sorcerer Bilam, proposing that he curse the Jews. Bilam agreed, but informed Balak's messengers that he would only be able to curse the Jews if he could convince G-d to agree.)

Evil possesses no autonomy; it is nothing more than a tool that G-d uses to hide Himself from the world, thereby enabling us to choose freely between good and evil. The Zohar, the classic work of Jewish mysticism, likens evil to a prostitute hired by a king to entice the prince. Although she makes full use of all her seductive powers to ensnare the prince, she really hopes - as does the king - that the prince will be strong enough to withstand her advances. Similarly, evil tries to confuse us and entice us into misbehaving, but it is in fact only doing its job and would rather we not pay attention to it.

When we are aware of the true nature of evil, it is much easier for us to resist it. (Hitva'aduyot 5743, vol. 4, p. 1763) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

POWER TO RESIST

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"Even if Balak would give me silver and gold to fill his house, I cannot transgress the word of Hashem, my G-d, to do anything small or great." (22:18)

G-d created all of us, and the natural consciousness that He placed within us is aware of our intrinsic bond with Him. Our inborn nature is thus to be loyal to Him, never doing anything that He would not approve of and always seeking to align our lives with what He expects of us.

This applies equally to Jews (who naturally seek to fulfill all 613 commandments) and non-Jews (who naturally seek to fulfill the seven categories of commandments incumbent on them).

However, in order to give us free choice, G-d also created temptations and made us susceptible to them. This is why even those of us who - like Bilam - are aware of our obligations toward G-d can sometimes choose to go against G-d's directives. Nonetheless, we all possess the power to resist these temptations, thereby fulfilling our spiritual potential and responding to G-d's challenge to lead fulfilled, meaningful lives.

SIMPLY UNSTOPPABLE

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

"Even if Balak would give me silver and gold to fill his house, I cannot transgress the word of Hashem, my G-d, to do anything small or great." (22:18)

Mashal: At an emergency gathering to discuss attempts by the government to change traditional yeshivos and chadarim, a non-religious Jew speaking on behalf of the Czar said, "In truth, we could shut you down entirely. But we respect the rabbis and wish to work with you instead."

At that, the Beis HaLevi, Rav Yosef Dov HaLevi Soloveitchik zt'l, jumped to his feet and said, "You think you can shut us down, but you cannot!" In an agitated state, he continued, "Imagine if I told you that if you slapped the Czar across the face, I would give you a treasure chest full of gold and silver. Would you do it? No, of course not! You would tell me, 'Even if you gave me all the gold in the world, I would never do such a thing!' Do you believe that you could physically do such a thing? Yes. But would you do it? Never!"

The man nodded his agreement. "But if I were to tell you," continued the Beis HaLevi, "to pick up a mountain and carry it on your shoulder, this is not something you can possibly do. Correct?"

Again, the man nodded. "You think you have the power to shut us down? Trust me, it is not like choosing not to slap the Czar in the face, even for all the money in the world. Rather, it's like carrying a mountain. It's impossible. You cannot stop Torah. No matter how hard you try, it cannot be done!"

Nimshal: When the servants of Balak approached Bilam, he told them, "Even if you were to give me all the gold and silver in your storehouse, I still would not be able to do what you ask." On the surface, Bilam sounds like a tzaddik for refusing to go against the word of Hashem. However, if one digs a bit deeper, he will realize that Bilam was not a tzaddik. Far from it! In essence he was saying that if he wanted, he could contravene the word of G-d, but even for all the money in the world, he was choosing not to do it. What greater words of heresy can there be? The wicked Bilam revealed his true arrogance by believing he had power on par with Hashem and the choice to use that power.

WE CHOOSE, HASHEM GUIDES

Vilna Gaon

“And G-d came to Bilam at night, and said to him, ‘If the men have come to call you, rise up, go with them...’ Bilam arose in the morning...and went with the princes of Moav. And G-d’s anger flared because he was going...” (22:20-22)

If G-d really gave Bilam permission to go with them, why would He have become angry with Bilam?

When G-d told Bilam to go “with them,” He used the Hebrew word “*itam*” for “with them.” “*Itam*” implies going with someone on one path, but not with the same intent or to the same destination. In other words, what G-d really wanted Bilam to do was to go with them on their way but not to “go along” with their intentions. He was explicitly commanded: “You shall not curse the people.”

But in pasuk 21, where we are told that Bilam went with the princes of Moav, the term used for “with” is “*im*,” which, as opposed to “*itam*,” implies going together toward one and the same destination, with one and the same intention.

In other words, we are told that Bilam’s intentions corresponded to those of the Moabite princes; namely, that he and they both intended to curse the Jews. It was for this reason that G-d was angry with him.

Subsequently, of course (in pasuk 35), we find even the angel using the expression “*im*” in telling Bilam to go with the men. To this, Rashi comments: “G-d will lead a man in whatever path he wants to go.”

PREPARATIONS AND ALACRITY

Rabbi Moshe Kormornick

“And Bilam arose in the morning, and saddled his donkey, and went with the officers of Moav.” (22:21)

The Medrash writes that when Hashem saw Bilam arising early to harm the Jewish People, He said, “Wicked one! Their forefather Avraham already preceded you, as it says, ‘Avraham arose early in the morning to saddle his donkey [when he was told to sacrifice his son, Yitzchak]’” (Bamidbar Rabbah 20:12 quoted by Rashi).

We can glean two tremendous lessons from the Medrash’s words. First, the fact that Hashem gave credence to Bilam’s alacrity is astonishing. Why should Bilam’s early awakening even require a previous act from Avraham to counter it?

We see from here that when someone does something with zeal and excitement, it adds tremendous power to their act, whatever the act is - even an evil one! If this is the case for Bilam who was going to curse the Jewish People, how much more so when we perform mitzvos with enthusiasm, or when we wake up early to learn Torah?! (Yoma 76a; Rashi describes the power of good being 500 times more than the power of evil.)

We also see from the Medrash another remarkable lesson: A person’s preparation for a mitzvah is incredibly valuable. For, as we saw above, Bilam’s passion to curse the Jewish People - which led him to rising early - added tremendous power to his attempted curse. Yet, this power was countered by Avraham’s early-rise over 400 years earlier, because of which the Jewish People were safeguarded. It is amazing to consider that Avraham’s seemingly small act of rising early to fulfill Hashem’s command ended up saving the entire Jewish People!

We see from here that although we may not consider getting up early to perform a mitzvah or running to help someone instead of walking to have such a dramatic effect in the world, Hashem certainly does!

This message does not only apply to “big mitzvos,” as Rav Bentzion Abba Shaul once said. “If you need to get a book, walk with a sense of urgency. And when you are just going on your way, go with determination and zeal. The best way someone can view his comings and goings is as if he is heading for a flight abroad; how careful is he on that day to be aware of the time to make sure he doesn’t miss the plane? However, we should realize that even this isn’t enough, because someone who misses a flight can always get another one, but someone who misses time can never get that back!”

If we take this message to heart, we can add tremendous power to all our actions and certainly our mitzvos. And who knows what this will achieve for us and the entire Jewish People?

COUNTERING EVIL

Rabbi Shlomo Ressler

“And Bilam arose in the morning, and saddled his donkey, and went with the officers of Moav.” (22:21)

When Bilam is commissioned to curse the Jewish people, he gets up the next morning to saddle his donkey and begins his task.

Rashi points out that Bilam wakes up early to convey his commitment and enthusiasm for his mission, specifically noting the parallel with Avraham’s journey to sacrifice his son Yitzchak many years prior. Why is it relevant that Bilam’s tactic had been used before?

Rav Moshe Feinstein (Darash Moshe) suggests that Bilam’s evil ploy didn’t work precisely because Avraham had previously used that tactic for a good cause.

Had Avraham not done so, Bilam’s enthusiasm may have given him an advantage in our episode. This mention is meant to highlight the importance of countering evil with positivity.

When we see someone fighting for an evil cause, we can learn to mimic their passion and transform a sinister cause into a positive one. If we extract something from the good and the bad, we’ll be twice as likely to succeed in life.

TRANSFORMATION THROUGH LOVE

Lubavitcher Rebbe

“And [Bilam] saddled his donkey...” (22:21)

Bilam loathed G-d and His emissaries, the Jewish people, with a passion. By rising early to set out on his mission of evil, he hoped to “remind” G-d how quick the Jews had been to rebel against Him. But G-d informed Bilam that his quickness had been preempted by that of the patriarch Avraham. Avraham had risen early in the morning in order to lovingly and devotedly fulfill G-d’s command to sacrifice his son Yitzchak. The merit of Avraham’s love of G-d counterbalanced Bilam’s hatred. Avraham’s love had been inherited by the Jewish people; their rebellions in the desert had merely been temporary lapses in their inherent, undying devotion to G-d.

Similarly, whenever we find ourselves having to repair the damage we might have caused by having deliberately disregarded G-d’s will, the surest way to make amends for such misdeeds is to bolster our love for Him. This love will in turn transform past misdeeds into the motivation for doing good deeds. Just as G-d transformed Bilam’s curses into a blessing, we too can always transform “curses” into blessings. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 28, pp. 163-164) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniefsky

FUTILE ATTEMPT

Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk

“And [Bilam] saddled his donkey...” (22:21)

The Holy One, blessed be He, said: “You wicked man, their ancestor Avraham has already anticipated you in this, as it is written (Bereishis 22:3): Avraham rose early in the morning and saddled his donkey (to sacrifice Yitzchak).” (Rashi)

What does this parallel between Bilam and Avraham mean? G-d said to Bilam: Avraham also arose early in the morning and saddled his donkey; however, unlike yourself, he did it in preparation for a journey to give Me pleasure and to do My will. Yet nothing came of it. I did not allow him to sacrifice his son Yitzchak to Me because Yitzchak was to be the ancestor of the Jewish people. So when you, O wicked Bilam, rise up early in the morning and saddle your donkey, and do it for the purpose of doing evil to the Jewish people against My will, all the more so will I surely keep you from carrying out your plan.

MATERIALITY FOR SPIRITUALITY

Lubavitcher Rebbe

“And [Bilam] saddled his donkey...” (22:21)

The word for “donkey” (*chamor*) is phonetically related to the word for “materiality” (*chomer*). Thus, when the Torah informs us that both Avraham and Bilam saddled their donkeys, it is allegorically telling us how they related to the materiality of this world.

The Torah portrays Bilam saddling his donkey in a negative light, for Bilam used his donkey for forbidden purposes and harnessed it in order to rebel against G-d’s will. Therefore, we learn from him that we should not attempt to make use of what is forbidden to us.

In contrast, the Torah portrays Avraham saddling his donkey in a positive light, for Avraham used his donkey to fulfill G-d’s will. Thus, from Avraham we learn that we should harness materiality for the service of G-d, and that we should do so enthusiastically. (Hitva’aduyot 5742, vol. 4, pp. 1807-1808) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniefsky

THE SWORD OF MERCY

Rabbi Moshe Kormornick

“G-d’s anger flared because he [Bilam] was going, and He placed an Angel of G-d on the road to prevent him.” (22:22)

Rashi explains that the angel who approached Bilam was actually an angel of mercy. If so, notes Rav Pam (as related by Rabbi Yissachar Frand), it is strange that we find this angel wielding a sword in a proceeding verse (22:31). What is an angel of mercy doing with a sword? Surely a sword would be a more suitable for an angel of destruction! (In fact, Rav Shteinman notes from the Gemara (Kesuvos 77b) that the Angel of Death carries a sword.)

Rav Pam answers that the angel of mercy’s role is to manifest Hashem’s mercy in the world, and as such, he can come in many guises and forms. He is not limited to looking sweet and cheerful and offering good tidings, because his role is to bring about the ultimate good. His job is to stop people making mistakes and help them lead their lives in the right direction. As such, he may even be wielding a sword - as long as the end result is for the person’s greater good. In fact, we may not realize at the time that the situation we are facing is a manifestation of a merciful angel. And sometimes, what looks like a source of devastation is really a display of abundant mercy.

To demonstrate this concept, Rav Yissachar Frand related that Rav Yaakov Kamenetzky applied for a certain rabbinical position in Europe. Confident that he was most suited for the job, Rav Yaakov was very disappointed when he was rejected from the position. Ultimately, he felt that he had no choice but to head to America to find a livelihood. After several positions around America and Canada, he was eventually appointed Rosh Yeshiva of the great Yeshivas Torah V’Daas, and soon became one of the *gedolim* of America.

So we see, said Rav Frand, that his rejection, even though he didn’t see it at the time, was actually for Rav Yaakov’s greater good; for had he stayed in Europe, not only would he likely have not have become the great Rosh Yeshiva and leader of a generation that he became, but he would also have not likely survived the Nazi onslaught that totally wiped out the entire city where he wanted to serve as the community Rav.

So, when an opportunity passes us by, we should not be too disheartened. We should have confidence that Hashem, Who only wants the best for us, is setting us up for a greater opportunity, and when the time comes, we should be ready to take it with tremendous gratitude because all of our previous “failures” lead us to this point!

WHERE HE WENT WRONG

Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev

“G-d’s anger flared because he [Bilam] was going, and He placed an Angel of G-d on the road to prevent him.” (22:22)

See the commentary of the Ramban, who asks why G-d was so angry. Had not G-d given Bilam permission to go? As it says (Bamidbar 22:20), “If these men have come to call for you, rise and go with them.”

It appears that we can answer this question based on that which Rashi writes on this verse. In saying, “If these men have come to call for you,” G-d meant, “If going with them is for your enjoyment and makes you feel good, then go with them.”

As such, G-d’s permission was contingent on there being enjoyment and good feeling for Bilam in going with them. But if he would not enjoy going with them, G-d implied that he should not go.

Now, had Bilam been G-d-fearing, not only would he not have enjoyed going - on the contrary, he would have been distressed to go with them to go curse the Jewish people.

G-d’s real intention was based on the assumption that Bilam would not enjoy going on such a perverse mission and that Bilam would certainly not go. His permission was contingent on the journey appealing to him.

The evil Bilam, however, displayed the depths of his wickedness when he decided to go. He thereby demonstrated that he had pleasure and joy from going to curse the Jewish people. This is why G-d was angered; it was due to such wickedness as Bilam evinced - to desire to go curse the Jewish people.

NO BETTER THAN A DONKEY

Kli Yakar

“And Hashem opened the mouth of the donkey...” (22:28)

This was to bring it forcibly home to Bilam that he had no reason to consider himself exceptional because he had been endowed with prophetic vision.

Why, even the donkey, which certainly would not be considered fit to look upon an angel or to speak, was enabled to do both because it was for the good of the Jews.

Bilam was no more fit to be a prophet than the donkey, and was given the gift of prophecy only so that the Jews could thereby benefit.

UNDENIABLE PROOF

Meshech Chochmah

“[And Bilam said to the donkey], ‘Because you have mocked me!’” (22:29)

G-d wanted Bilam to go out and bless the Jews instead of cursing them, for He knew that if the world nations were to hear Bilam - their own prophet praise the greatness and the virtues of the Jewish people, they would be overcome with fear and keep away from the Jews.

However, the world nations knew that Bilam loved money, and hence they could have believed that he was only blessing and praising the Jews because the Jews had bribed him to do so. It was in order to demonstrate to the nations that this was indeed a Divine plan and that Bilam spoke as he did, not because he was bribed to do so, but because he had been commanded by Heaven to say it, that G-d performed a miracle and “opened the mouth of the donkey.”

TAKING THE CUES

Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev

“The angel of G-d said to him, ‘Why have you beaten your donkey?’” (22:32)

Why was the angel so upset that Bilam struck his donkey? Since Bilam had not seen the angel that caused the donkey to veer off the road, it was fitting that he beat his donkey, in order make it walk straight.

It appears that the angel’s anger was prompted by the following: Since G-d had commanded Bilam (Bamidbar 22:20), “Go with the men, but only on condition that you do whatever I tell you,” G-d made it clear that Bilam should be careful to follow all of His commands. Now, one who performs the will of his Maker and sees something astonishing, will see in it an instruction from G-d as to how to act. If a person is following a certain path, engaged in a certain act, and suddenly something astonishing and novel happens, he will realize that it is clearly the will of G-d that he not do this act. This being the case, when Bilam saw something surprising, i.e., that his donkey had acted defiantly - something that it had never done beforehand, as the Torah says that the donkey said to Bilam, “Have I been accustomed to act disobediently like this to you?” (Bamidbar 22:30) - Bilam should have contemplated the significance of what had happened, realizing that G-d wanted him to return and not to proceed.

Although G-d had originally told him to go, it was with the stipulation, as G-d said, “that you do whatever I tell you,” meaning that he should act according to what he would perceive in his mind’s eye as being G-d’s will. If so, he should have considered the significance of what was happening with his donkey, and not have beaten it. By hitting the donkey, Bilam revealed the depth of his depravity: although G-d did not want him to go, he was going nonetheless.

So he beat his donkey furiously, since it was impeding his journey. This is why the angel was angry with Bilam and said to him, "Why have you beaten your donkey...?"

THE PATH HE CHOSE

Reb Noson of Breslov

"Go with the men,' G-d's angel said to Bilam. 'But you must speak only the words that G-d will tell you.' So Bilam went with Balak's princes." (22:35)

On the path upon which a person wishes to embark, they [Heaven] will lead him. (Makkos 10b; Rashi)

Bilam desired to curse the Jews. At first G-d told him not to go, but when Bilam kept insisting, he was eventually given permission. At each stage, however, G-d tried to stop him from carrying out his vile intentions. He continually put obstacles in Bilam's path, trying to stop him from doing evil. But because Bilam insisted on pursuing his evil path, it eventually led to his eternal destruction. He insisted on following a path of destruction, rather than choosing life.

DIVINE PROVIDENCE

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"Bilam said to Balak, 'Behold, I have come to you, but do I have any power to say anything? The word that G-d puts into my mouth - that is what I will speak.'" (22:38)

Bilam had already told Balak's messengers that he cannot do anything that G-d does not want him to, and that he must do whatever G-d explicitly tells him to (Bamidbar 22:11). Here, however, he said much more, namely, that he cannot do anything unless it is G-d's will that he do it.

Yes, G-d gives everyone free choice. But paradoxically, free choice does not contradict Divine providence.

Thus, although G-d allows people to choose to go against His will for what they perceive to be their own benefit, He does not allow the actions of these people to interfere with the plans of those people who choose to follow His will. When we are dedicated to our Divine mission and purpose, G-d ensures that our efforts be crowned with success. (Hitva'aduyot 5745, vol. 4, pp. 2470-2472) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

HURT PEOPLE HURT PEOPLE

Reb Noson of Breslov

"Stand by your burnt-offering while I go,' Bilam said to Balak. 'Perhaps G-d will happen upon me and show me something that I can tell you.' He went off by himself." (23:3)

Bilam had a need to curse others. He was deeply impure and guilty of immorality, which leads to a curse and negates blessing. He blemished his vessels and could not receive blessing. Therefore, he craved to curse others.

INHERITED STRENGTH

Baal HaTanya

"For from their beginning, I see them as mountain peaks, and I behold them as [sturdy] hills. Behold a people that will dwell alone, not reckoned among the nations." (23:9)

The "sturdiness" referred to here is our unwavering, selfless devotion to G-d, including our willingness to lay down our lives, if necessary, rather than betray this devotion.

We inherit this quality from the patriarchs and matriarchs, who internalized their devotion to G-d so intensely that it became part of their very being, enabling them to pass it on to us.

This intensity of devotion is an expression of our Divine soul, for the natural soul is not capable of sacrificing its own existence for a higher purpose that contradicts its own, material interests. The persistence of this trait in the Jewish people is a further expression of our Divine soul, for nature dictates that cultural ideals get weaker as the generations progress.

Our innate willingness to lay down our lives for G-d is a gift that we can access at any time, using it as a tool to keep us focused on our goals in life, particularly our Divine mission to refine and elevate the world. (Tanya, Ch. 25) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

MOLDING THE FAMILY

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"For from their beginning, I see them as mountain peaks, and I behold them as hills. Behold a people that will dwell alone, not reckoned among the nations." (23:9)

Allegorically, the "mountain peaks" refer to the patriarchs, while the "hills" refer to the matriarchs.

The contributions of both parents are essential in creating the ideal home and in raising healthy children, but the wife and mother's contributions are more determinative.

Women innately possess far greater power to influence their families' orientation in life and mold their families' behavior than do men. In fact, when necessary, women can (and should) influence their husbands' desires and mold their behavior, realigning them with G-d's will if they become distracted from it.

This is why the Torah describes the patriarchs as "mountain peaks," which are further removed from ground level, and the matriarchs as "hills," which are closer to ground level, i.e., more influential on the home.

G-d therefore wants women to be both aware of their innate power and inspired to make proper use of it. This will enable us to become "a people that will dwell alone," uninfluenced by the empty values of materialism but, instead, loyal to G-d and energized by our mission to make the world into His home. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 4, pp. 1067-1070) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

UNITED PEOPLE

Rabbi Shlomo Ressler

“For from their beginning, I see them as mountain peaks, and I behold them as [sturdy] hills. Behold a people that will dwell alone, not reckoned among the nations.” (23:9)

Among the several attempts by Bilam to curse the Jews, he distinctively commented, “I see them [the Jewish people] as mountain peaks, and I behold them as hills; it is a singular nation that will not be counted among the [other] nations” (23:9). In what way are we different from other nations?

Rav Elchanan Wasserman (Lekach Tov) explains that there is a difference between a nation (*goy*) and a people (*am*). A nation relies on common land to unite its people, while a people unite and grow wherever they establish a foundation. The Jews, despite not having a land of their own, built a cohesive people, making them singular, unique, and comparable to proud mountain tops.

What defines us is more than where we’re from or where we live; Judaism drives us to be the best versions of ourselves wherever we may be.

UNITED BLESSINGS

Reb Menachem Mendel of Rimanov

“For from their beginning, I see them as mountain peaks, and I behold them as hills. Behold a people that will dwell alone, not reckoned among the nations.” (23:9)

Bilam’s curse was that each Jew should be isolated and that there would be no connection, one with the other. It is our task to turn that curse into a blessing and become a thoroughly united people to the extent that there will be no division whatsoever.

HIDDEN TREASURE

Lubavitcher Rebbe

“Who can count the dust of Yaakov?” (23:10)

(Bilam arrived in Moav. Balak proceeded to take Bilam to a place he thought would be conducive to cursing the Jews. But G-d forced Bilam to praise and bless the Jews rather than curse them.)

The Jewish people are here compared (positively) to dust. Just as there are hidden treasures buried in the earth, so are there treasures of pure faith in G-d and deep love and fear of Him hidden in every Jew.

These treasures may at times be hard to uncover, just as the treasures buried in the earth are often buried deep below the surface. But they are there, nonetheless, and with sufficient effort they can be revealed. (Keter Shem Tov (ed. Kehot, 2004), addendum 57; addendum 44 in previous editions) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniewsky

INCALCULABLE PRIDE

Reb Noson of Breslov

“Who can count the dust of Yaakov or numbered a quarter of Yisrael?” (23:10)

Who can calculate or conceive of the greatness of each and every step that a Jew takes when doing a mitzvah, such as going to the synagogue, greeting his rabbi, or practicing *hitbodedut*? Each step creates great joy Above. (Likutey Halakhot I, p. 145a)

UNCOVERING OUR TREASURES

Baal Shem Tov

“Who can count the dust of Yaakov or numbered a quarter of Yisrael?” (23:10)

This verse teaches us that the Jews are compared to soil. Similarly, G-d declared, “You shall be for Me a desirable land” (Malachi 3:12).

The earth contains the greatest treasures: metals, water, etc. The full extent of its treasures lies undiscovered and will be discovered with time. This is especially true of the ability that G-d gave the earth to produce and thereby sustain all creatures.

We all tread on the earth, but we all need its products of food and water. However, we must dig deep to uncover its treasures, and we must plow and plant to reap its produce.

By nature, Jews are treasure houses of inborn faith and love for G-d. We contain the greatest treasures of morals and wisdom. In comparison to all other nations, we produce wisdom and scientific discoveries, disproportionately to our small numbers.

Just as all trample the earth but need it during their lifetimes and after their deaths, so does humanity trample the Jews - but they all need us.

Each Jew, old or young, man or woman, religious or otherwise, harbors the treasures of faith, love, and awe for our beloved G-d. Serious effort must be invested in uncovering these treasures, similar to the effort required to reach untapped treasures beneath thick layers of soil.

PURITY IN UNITY

Kotzker Rebbe

“Balak said to him, ‘Go now with me to another place from which you can see them - you will see only a portion of them; you will not see all of them - and damn them for me from there.’” (23:13)

When one looks at a Jew, one may find fault - however, only at “its edge.” If one looks at the nation as a whole, “all of it,” there are not faults to be seen because the Jews are a good people.

COLLECTIVE PROTECTION

Rabbi Shlomo Ressler

“Balak said to him, ‘Go now with me to another place from which you can see them - you will see only a portion of them; you will not see all of them - and damn them for me from there.’” (23:13)

Balak moves Bilam to another location, where not all the Jews are visible, in order to attempt to curse them (23:13). Why would Balak suggest going to an obscure location if seeing whom you are cursing is seemingly essential?

Be'er Mayim Chaim suggests that Balak's tactic was to target just some Jews rather than the Jewish people collectively. Balak hoped to curse only the stragglers on the outskirts of the camp that may not merit as much protection as the collective nation. G-d's response is “there is no harm for [the children of] Yaakov, no woe in view for Israel; G-d is with them” (23:21).

G-d protects each of us individuals as part of a collective nation. As long as we identify as part of a nation, we are protected as a nation, secured by an ancient promise that forever endures.

MASTER OF THE FIELD

Rebbe Nachman

“He took him to the field of lookouts, to the top of the summit.” (23:14)

Sedei tzofim (field of lookouts) may also be translated as “field of seers.”

Jewish souls can be compared to grasses growing in a field of Torah. The Master of the Field - the tzaddik - oversees them, looking into each soul and seeing where rectification is needed.

When these souls serve G-d, the eyes of the Master of the Field shine and he can see further into them - examining each one's speech to see where it is lacking perfection - and bring them to their ultimate goal.

ANNULLING DECREES

Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev

“Arise, Balak, and hear...” (23:18)

It appears that we can explain this verse based on what our Sages say (Bereishis Rabbah 82:9) on the verse “G-d stands to plea, and He stands to curse the peoples” (Yeshayahu 3:13). Our Sages say that when G-d judges the Jewish people, He judges them while He stands. But when G-d judges the nations, He judges them while He sits. Apparently, our Sages were alluding here to the same idea conveyed by their remarks on the verse (Iyov 22:28), “You will make a decision, and it will be accomplished for you” - that “the Almighty issues a decree, but the righteous annul it” (Moed Kattan 16b), as we will now explain.

Now, to be regarded as properly sitting, a person has to be supported, as our Sages say (Kesubos 111b), “Standing is better for one's health than is sitting when one's back is not supported.” By contrast, standing does not require that a person be supported.

So this, then, is what our Sages alluded to when they said that the nations are judged while G-d is seated - implying that the judgment decreed upon them is supported and will not be overturned, for they have no one who can nullify the decree. By contrast, when judgment is issued against the Jewish people, it has no “support,” for the righteous among them can annul it.

This, then, is the idea alluded to in the phrase “Arise, Balak,” alluding to standing, for, being a non-Jew, Balak has no support to bolster Bilam's curse, since the righteous among the Jewish people could annul it and change it into a blessing. This is why Bilam told him, “Arise, Balak!”

ATTAINING TRUTH

Rebbe Nachman

“G-d is not a man that He should be false, nor a human that He should change His mind.” (23:19)

G-d's words are not like those of a human being. Whereas humans speak falsely and fail to keep their word, G-d is faithful and carries out His every utterance. (Targum Onkelos)

G-d's Holy Name “E-I” (All-Powerful One) is associated with truth. Truth is also associated with Yaakov, as in “Vayikra lo E-I Elokei Yisrael - He called it, ‘G-d is the Lord of Israel’” (Bereishis 33:20), which can also be read as “The Lord of Israel called him [i.e., Yaakov] ‘E-I’” (Megillah 18a). Furthermore, truth is connected to the World to Come and to livelihood. For when a person has a livelihood and is not dependent on other human beings, he is capable of praying to G-d honestly. Fortunate is he who is not dependent on others and can thus attain truth. (See Likutey Moharan I, 66:3)

NON-RETRACTABLE BLESSINGS

Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev

“Behold! It is a blessing that I have received, and such a blessing I cannot reverse.” (23:20)

This means, “Since I have received the blessings, I cannot retract them, for ‘G-d is not a man that He should lie.’”

The opposite of blessings, however, can be retracted, since the righteous can overturn a harmful edict, and make a different permutation - i.e., change the word for “tribulation” (צרה) into the word for “desirable” (רצה) by changing the order of the letters in the first word to spell the second.

But whatever leaves the mouth of G-d for the good cannot be withdrawn, as is known (Berachos 7a).

PERFECTING OUR VESSELS

Rebbe Nachman

“Behold! It is a blessing that I have received, and such a blessing I cannot reverse.” (23:20)

The word “blessing” appears twice in this verse. In the first instance, it is pronounced *Bareich*, and in the second instance, it is pronounced *Beireich*. The first vowel in *Bareich* is a *kamatz*, while the first vowel in *Beireich* is a *tzeirei*.

Kamatz literally means “closed” or “sealed,” and *tzeirei* (צירי) alludes to *le’hitztayeir* (להצטייר, to take shape).

G-d’s light descends to us in an undifferentiated and unformed - i.e., sealed - fashion. It is up to man to create a vessel with which to receive that light. If a person’s vessel is faulty, then although the light comes to him, he cannot shape it into blessing. Thus, “It is a blessing that I have taken” - it is up to each individual to perfect his vessels so that he may take G-d’s blessing. (See Likutey Moharan I, 36:6)

LIGHT LOAD

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

“Hashem perceived no wrongdoing in Yaakov and saw nothing perverse in Yisrael. Hashem, his G-d, is with him, and the friendship of the King is in him.” (23:21)

Mashal: A traveler arrived from out of town and pulled up in front of his hotel. Immediately, a bellhop offered to bring his bags up to his room. The man checked in and went straight upstairs, while the bellhop collected his belongings.

Huffing and puffing from the strain, the bellhop reached the upstairs room. Sweating profusely, he set down the big heavy suitcases and then waited for his tip. However, the man took one look at the sweating bellhop and refused to give him any money.

“These are not my bags,” he said firmly.

The bellhop was distraught. “How do you know they are not yours?” he cried. “You didn’t even bother to look at them.”

The traveler replied, “When I saw you sweating I knew they weren’t mine. You see, all I have in my luggage is a few small bags filled with diamonds. You wouldn’t need to sweat for that.”

Nimshal: When a righteous person learns Torah and performs mitzvos with proper intent, says the Dubner Maggid, Reb Yaakov Krantz zt’l, he feels no strain or bother. On the contrary, he tastes the sweetness of his learning and his enjoyment is boundless.

Rather than feeling as if he is carrying a heavy yoke, the Torah is like a bag of diamonds and precious stones. (The Kotzker Rebbe zt’l said that this *mashal* was no doubt said with *ruach hakodesh*.)

SPARK OF DIVINITY

Lubavitcher Rebbe

[Bilam said,] “Hashem perceived no wrongdoing in Yaakov... Hashem, his G-d, is with him...” (23:21)

(Balak then took Bilam to a second location, thinking that perhaps it would be easier for Bilam to curse the Jewish people from there. But once again, G-d forced Bilam to bless the Jews rather than curse them.)

The reason G-d does not see any evil in us is because He views us as having already fulfilled our potential to reorient our animalistic sides toward Divinity, i.e., to harness our inner animal’s raw power in the pursuit of higher, Divine consciousness. What enables us to perform this transformation is our Divine soul. The spark of Divine consciousness within each of us possesses a spark of G-d’s irresistible power, and can therefore overcome our inner animal.

Thus, Bilam said, “He does not look at the evil in Yaakov” - i.e., G-d sees that we can conquer our inner animal, because “G-d is with him” - i.e., within him, referring to the Divine soul, which enables us to transform our inner animal. (Hitva’aduyot 5743, vol. 4, p. 1777) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

EVEN WHILE SINNING

Nesivos Shalom

“Hashem perceived no wrongdoing in Yaakov and saw nothing perverse in Yisrael.” (23:21)

If a person sins because he cannot overcome his yetzer hara, but at the same time that he commits the sin he is broken within because he dreads the thought of transgressing Hashem’s will, Hashem will overlook his sins. This is the meaning of the pasuk: He perceived no iniquity in Yaakov and saw no perversity in Yisrael. When? “When Hashem, his G-d, is with him” - at the time that he sins.

HASHEM’S FRIENDSHIP

Rebbe Nachman

“Hashem perceived no wrongdoing in Yaakov and saw nothing perverse in Yisrael. Hashem, his G-d, is with him, and the friendship of the King is in him.” (23:21)

G-d always looks for the good in the Jews and ignores what is not good. How much more should we refrain from looking negatively at others or searching out their shortcomings! (See Likutey Moharan II, 17:3)

“They have the king’s friendship” - This means that the Divine Presence is with the Jewish people. (Rashi)

Teruah (friendship) also connotes Divine Favor and prophecy. The Jews will attain these because G-d’s Presence is with them. (See Likutey Moharan II, 8:11)

FOCUSED ON THE GOOD

Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev

"Hashem perceived no wrongdoing in Yaakov and saw nothing perverse in Yisrael. Hashem, his G-d, is with him, and the friendship of the King is in him." (23:21)

This verse means that when G-d judges the Jewish people, He does not call to mind the evil deeds that they do.

But as for the good that the Jewish people do - which is alluded to by the phrase "Hashem, his G-d," for "G-d" is called "his G-d" when he accepts G-d's Kingship upon himself and performs good deeds - this is engraved permanently in G-d's consciousness.

(The verse is thus to be understood, "He does not look at evil in Yaakov, and He has seen no perversity in Yisrael. [By contrast, when] Hashem is his G-d, [i.e., when the Jew follows G-d's laws,] He is with him [i.e., G-d is focused on his good deeds].")

The verse continues, "And he has the King's friendship." This phrase may be read, "the teruah of the King is with Him," implying that it is specifically how the Jewish people crown G-d as their King, as they do by blowing the shofar on Rosh HaShanah (or by fulfilling His will at any time), that is "with Him," i.e., engraved in His consciousness.

By contrast, He pays no attention to the evil they have done.

HASHEM IS WITH HIM

Rabbi Moshe Schochet

"Hashem perceived no wrongdoing in Yaakov and saw nothing perverse in Yisrael. Hashem, his G-d, is with him, and the friendship of the King is in him." (23:21)

The Degel Machaneh Efraim sees in these powerful words of Bilam's brachah the attitude that one must have when interacting with other people.

He quotes the Zohar in saying that Hashem, the Torah and Klal Yisrael are one. Based on the Zohar, the Baal Shem Tov interprets the pasuk as follows:

Lo hibit aven b'Yaakov - A person should not look for the weaknesses in his fellow Jew, *v'lo raah amel b'Yisrael* - and should not see the blemishes in other members of Bnei Yisrael, *Hashem Elokav imo* - because Hashem will always be with each member of the Jewish people.

This insight of the Baal Shem Tov can help put us in the right frame of mind as we approach the Three Weeks.

We must never push another Jew aside. Instead, we must reach out to and welcome each and every Jew that we encounter and bring them close.

If we follow this approach, then as the Torah guarantees, *Hashem Elokav imo* - Hashem will not only be with the person who may choose to return, but He will be with us as well, so that we merit the rebuilding of the Beis HaMikdash speedily in our days!

FRIEND OF THE KING

Sanzer Rebbe

"Hashem perceived no wrongdoing in Yaakov and saw nothing perverse in Yisrael. Hashem, his G-d, is with him, and the friendship of the King is in him." (23:21)

The one who does not see any "iniquity in Yaakov" and "no perversity in Israel" and judges the Jews favorably is considered a tzaddik, and "Hashem is with him and the friendship of the King is in him."

AROUSAL FROM ABOVE

Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev

"Since G-d took them out of Egypt, they are like the highest expression of His strength." (23:22)

See Rashi, who explains that when Bilam, this evildoer, said, "Behold, a people is coming out of Egypt," he was insinuating that Jewish people left Egypt by themselves. Consequently, this verse affirms that "G-d brought them out of Egypt."

The underlying principle here is as follows: There are two kinds of arousals, an arousal from below and an arousal from Above. Any human being, by initiating an arousal from below, can evoke Divine compassion upon himself by improving his deeds and imploring G-d to be merciful on him. But an arousal from Above, predicated upon the merits of the Avos, Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov, is a dynamic that is available only to the Jewish people and not to any other nation.

This is why this wicked person said (Bamidbar 22:5), "Behold, a people has come out of Egypt," implying that the Jewish people left Egypt on their own initiative, i.e., via an arousal from below - by improving their deeds. But regarding their behavior in the desert, our Sages (Avos 5:4) say, "With ten trials the Jewish people tested G-d..." Bilam was thereby suggesting that, G-d forbid, G-d would not have compassion on the Jewish people, since in the desert they were not perfecting their behavior, and therefore could not, as an arousal from below, evoke G-d's compassion upon them.

But in reality, Divine arousal is showered upon the Jewish people from Above in the merit of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov, and this arousal from Above is continuous. This is what the Torah alludes to when it says, "G-d has brought them out of Egypt" - through an arousal of G-d's Divine kindness (Zohar 3:65b), which occurs constantly, even if, Heaven forbid, the Jewish people do not improve their behavior.

(The Name of G-d used in this verse [י-ו-ה] signifies G-d's kindness. Thus, inasmuch as the Exodus from Egypt was not the result of the Jewish people's arousal from below but of G-d's arousal from Above, there was no reason why this Divine favor should wane now that the Jewish people were in the desert. Hence, Bilam's argument was refuted.) Only the Jewish people enjoy such a relationship with G-d.

EVEN WITH OUR FAULTS

Reb Noson of Breslov

“Since G-d took them out of Egypt, they are like the highest expression of His strength.” (23:22)

You, Balak, think that the Jews left Egypt on their own. This is not so. G-d took them out! (Rashi)

Balak and Bilam wanted to find blemishes in the Jewish people so Bilam’s curse could take hold. Balak suggested that although G-d had taken the Jews out of Egypt, they had been unworthy. But Bilam understood that G-d had caused His light to illumine the Jews with goodness, so that despite their unworthiness, He could still bring about the Exodus. (Likutey Halakhot I, p. 142a)

LEVELS OF SERVICE

Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev

“Behold the people will rise up like a lioness, and like a lion raise itself up. It does not lie down until it eats its prey and drinks the blood of the slain.” (23:24)

The deeper meaning of this verse is based on the following principle: Every person has to advance spiritually one step at a time. First, one serves G-d in order to receive a reward, since not every person merits immediately to reach the level of serving G-d altruistically. Afterward, when one draws somewhat closer to G-d, one merits to serve G-d without the motive of receiving reward.

Our Sages (Pesachim 50b) express it like this: “A person should always study Torah, even not for its own sake, for by studying not for its own sake, one will come to study for its own sake.” Eventually one will merit to reach the level described by our Sages (Avos 1:3): “Do not be like servants who serve their master in order to receive reward, but like servants who serve their master with no thought of reward.” Finally, one achieves an even higher level, where not only does one serve in order not to receive reward, but even merits to elevate other fallen sparks, restoring them to their Divine source - as elucidated by the Arizal (Pri Eitz Chaim, Shaar HaTefillah 7).

A person who serves G-d with the intention of receiving recompense is acting in the feminine mode, since he desires to *receive* a reward. When he later serves G-d not prompted by thoughts of reward, he is acting in the masculine mode, for then, on the contrary, one is *giving* G-d pleasure through one’s service. As our Sages (Zohar 3:7b), of blessed memory, taught, “Yisrael sustains their Father in Heaven.”

This, then, is the idea expressed by this verse, “A people that rises like a lion.” Its allegorical meaning is that in the beginning, when a person “rises” to begin his Divine service, he is like a lioness. The word used here for “lion” [לביא] also has a feminine form (Yechezkel 19:2), and thus represents the lioness, as is found in Rashi’s commentary on the Talmud (Shabbos 67a).

For in the beginning, one serves G-d in order to receive reward, and is thus acting in the feminine mode, as explained above.

The verse then continues, “And raises itself like a lion,” using the synonym for “lion” that has only a masculine form [ארי]. Even the seemingly feminine form of this word [אריה] is masculine.

This means that afterward, when one raises oneself to attain a higher spiritual level, one is like a male lion, referred to by this synonym for “lion,” which is specifically masculine, as is also found in Rashi’s commentary on the Talmud (Shabbos 67a), since one serves G-d not for the purpose of receiving a reward. One is then like a male in that he confers, as explained above.

The verse continues, “It does not lie down until it eats its prey,” meaning, next, the person advances further, so that he is able even to elevate others. This is the deeper meaning of “it eats its prey,” alluding to the souls and fallen sparks that until now were in captivity.

The gematria of the word for “prey” [טרף], 289, is the same as the number of fallen sparks (288) plus the kollel.

This is the meaning of the next phrase in the verse, “and drinks the blood of the slain.” The fallen sparks are metaphorically referred to as “the slain” in esoteric terms. After they are raised, however, they are referred to as being “alive.” (The gematria of the word for “slain” [חלל] sixty-eight, is the same as the gematria of the word for “life” [חיים].)

FROM LIONESS TO LION

Maggid of Mezeritch

“Behold the people will rise up like a lioness, and like a lion raise itself up...” (23:24)

A lion is stronger than a lioness. When Jews first rise in order to serve the Most High they are only like lionesses, but then G-d will help them (“G-d will help him who comes to be cleansed”) and they will rise up strong as a lion.

CHANGING THE APPROACH

Rabbi Shlomo Ressler

“Then Balak said to Bilam, ‘Come now, I will take you to another place. Perhaps G-d will deem it right that you damn them for me there.’” (23:27)

When Balak’s first attempt to have Bilam curse the Jews failed, he suggested trying again from a different location (23:13). When that failed as well, he suggested moving to yet another location (23:27). Why would he think that moving locations would help?

Rav Meir Tzvi Bergman explains that Balak arrogantly thought that the curses depended on his or Bilam’s location rather than on the content of the request or situation.

In contrast, after waking up, Avraham davened from the exact location but changed his approach (Bereishis 28:10). Avraham realized that if his prayer wasn't answered the first time, he needed to either improve himself or the request.

Blaming others or external factors will only lead to failure, as we learned from Balak. Avraham's more reflective approach is ultimately what's needed to achieve success.

IMPAIRED VISION

Rabbi Mordechai ben Dov of Nishkiz

"...and the words of the man whose eye is opened." (24:3)

The Sages explain that Bilam was blind in one eye. They point out that every person needs two eyes: one to perceive the Creator's greatness and the other to behold his or her own humbleness and insignificance.

Bilam knew of G-d's greatness ("and he knows the knowledge of the Most High"; 24:16), but he could not see his own insignificance and thus was arrogant. It was therefore clear to the Sages that Bilam must have been blind in one eye.

TENTS OF UNITY

Reb Noson of Breslov

"How goodly are your tents Yaakov, your dwelling places Yisrael..." (24:5)

"Tents" - this refers to *batei kneset* (synagogues). (Sanhedrin 105b)

Batei Kneset (בתי כנסת, synagogues) comes from the word *Kanes* (כנס, assemble). Synagogues, which rely on unity among people, are associated with Yaakov, whose children were united.

Therefore, it is written (Bereishis 46:27), "All the soul of the house of Yaakov." Though they were seventy souls in total, they were called one *nefesh* (soul), indicating that they were united. (Likutey Halakhot I, p. 462)

Bilam saw that the entrances of the Jewish tents were positioned so the entrances didn't face each other. Another explanation: How goodly are the "tents" of Shiloh and the Temple, where the Jews offer sacrifices to atone for their sins. (Rashi)

Because the Jews took care in the way they placed their tents (i.e., they did not look at their neighbors with jealousy, but with a beneficent eye), they merited to build the Tabernacle and the Temple.

The *Mishkan* (משכן, Tabernacle) is built by good *Shekheinim* (שכנים, neighbors) who form a cohesive community. Because they are united, their prayers have great value, and they can join together to build G-d's House, the House of Prayer. (Likutey Halakhot VII, p. 156a, 318)

MODEST CONCEALMENT

Rabbi Moshe Kormornick

"How goodly are your tents Yaakov, your dwelling places Yisrael..." (24:5)

In his third and final attempt to curse the Jewish People, Bilam sought to place *ayin hara*, an evil eye on them (Rashi, Bamidbar 24:2). However, after looking at the nation from a nearby mountain, he saw that the entrances of each of their tents faced a different direction so that no one could gaze into the tent of his neighbor (Bava Basra 60a). Because of this level of modesty among the Jewish People, Bilam received Divine inspiration to bless the Jewish People instead of cursing them.

On this, we can ask two simple questions: Why did Bilam specifically attempt to place *ayin hara* on the Jewish People now, and how did the modesty of the Jewish People prevent him from succeeding?

The Taz answers that until the Jewish People sinned with the Golden Calf, no nation was able to see them because they were completely covered by the Clouds of Glory as they travelled through the desert. However, following their sin, the Clouds of Glory were removed from them, and for the first time, the Jewish People were exposed to the eyes of the other nations (Rashi, Bamidbar 20:29).

Therefore, since Bilam saw that they were no longer concealed, he decided that the time was right to place an *ayin hara* on them; which specifically rests on things which are not hidden (Berachos 20a).

However, the reason why his *ayin hara* did not work on the Jewish People was because of their modesty, which by its very nature involves keeping something concealed. So, when Bilam saw that the Jewish People, despite losing the Clouds of Glory, were still very much "concealed" - due to their extreme modesty, he was unable to cast upon them any *ayin hara*.

SON AND SERVANT

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"How goodly are your tents Yaakov, your dwelling places Yisrael..." (24:5)

"Yaakov" refers to us in our role as G-d's faithful servants, while "Yisrael" refers to us in our role as G-d's loving children. We all play both roles - sometimes one at a time, sometimes simultaneously while emphasizing one or the other.

When we serve G-d as "Yaakov" - as His disciplined, faithful servants - we make protective "tents" that shield the spiritual lives that we have built for ourselves from the intrusion of negative, materialistic consciousness. When we serve G-d as "Yisrael" - as His loving, devoted children - we make our lives into a "sanctuary" for G-d, enhancing our Divine consciousness and identifying with G-d's values and dreams for His world. (Sefer HaMa'amarim Yiddish, p. 122) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniefsky

MAKE YOURSELF AT HOME

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

“How goodly are your tents Yaakov, your dwelling places Yisrael...” (24:5)

On occasion, Rav Dovid Tzvi Shlomo Biderman zt'l, the Lelover Rebbe, would travel to the graves of the Avos, both in Chevron and Beis Lechem, to pray and pour out his heart on behalf of his people. His intense tefillos were unparalleled and many people would give him their petitions so that he might pray for them as well. On one of his trips, he undertook the arduous, almost day-long trek by donkey to the gravesite of Rochel Imeinu, just outside Yerushalayim in Beis Lechem.

Rav Dovid set out early in the morning, right after the conclusion of the sunrise minyan. The entire way he contemplated and planned the prayers he would recite there. He wanted to be sure not to forget anything, since it was only infrequently that he had the opportunity to make the journey to Kever Rochel.

When he finally arrived, he saw that he was not alone. A woman with a number of small children was there and was making herself at home in the monument's domed chamber. She had already spread out a blanket and laid the youngest of her children down to sleep and was busy preparing the evening meal.

The rebbe was incredulous. Did she have no regard for the sanctity of the site? Did this woman not realize where she was? Why was she not immersing herself in prayer? How could she busy herself with such mundane matters in such a holy place? He approached the woman, and demanded an explanation.

The weary woman looked up at him from her seat on the floor and replied softly, “Rebbe, I would think that our Mama Rochel would be pleased that we are eating, resting, and making ourselves at home here.”

The Lelover suddenly felt uneasy. He realized that he had been making the journey to Kever Rochel for decades and had not even begun to understand what it represented. Here was a simple, unlearned woman who possessed a profound grasp of the true holiness of the Matriarch Rochel and her tomb. What had he been doing here all these years?

He now understood that Rochel is the mother who weeps and prays for her children. Her desire is only that we, her children, should have some relief, some comfort in life, some peace of mind in order to better serve the Holy One. And if people traveling to her gravesite could make themselves at home there and in that way find some relief for themselves well, wouldn't that bring our Mama Rochel tremendous happiness? From that day on, whenever Rav Dovid traveled to Kever Rochel, he would make extra preparations, including bringing with him a meal which he would share with others who came to entreat Mama Rochel to intercede for them and bring their prayers on High, remembering the words of the simple woman who knew what would please Rochel Imeinu.

FOCUS ON THE ETERNAL

Rabbi Moshe Schochet

“How goodly are your tents Yaakov, your dwelling places Yisrael...” (24:5)

Rashi comments that Bilam complimented Klal Yisrael on their modesty, as no tent entrance was directly opposite another tent's opening in order to ensure privacy.

Rav Moshe Shternbuch (Taam V'daas) offers an alternative explanation. He suggests that Bilam praised Bnei Yisrael for approaching their lives in a manner that is symbolic of tents. A tent represents that which is temporary and not permanent. The Jewish people understood that this world is simply a corridor to the next world, as the Mishna in Pirkei Avos states. They understood that one should focus on that which is eternal and not that which is fleeting. It was this approach to life that Bilam was praising Klal Yisrael for.

We live in a world today where it is easy to lose perspective of what is important in life and what our priorities should be. Rav Shternbuch's explanation serves as an important reminder that we need to take a step back at times and go “back to the basics.” We need to re-align and re-adjust what we are focusing on so that we too can merit to be included in the praise of *Mah tovu ohalecha Yaakov mishkinosecha Yisrael*.

IT'S IN THE DETAILS

Lubavitcher Rebbe

“How goodly are your tents Yaakov, your dwelling places Yisrael...” (24:5)

(Balak then took Bilam to a third location, thinking that perhaps it would be easier for Bilam to curse the Jewish people from there. Balam was about to curse them, but then he saw how the Jewish people were camped. First, they were organized by tribes, which was possible only because they had been faithful in their marriages. Second, they set up camp in such a way that no one could accidentally look into another family's tent. The Jewish people's attention to detail in their modest conduct so impressed Bilam that he decided on his own to bless them rather than curse them.)

The lesson for us here is that we must never think that it is important to be concerned only about the “larger” issues of modesty and intimacy, but that we can be lax about the “smaller,” “innocent” details. Even the smaller details are important - important enough to be able to transform a curse into a blessing (or an accursed situation into a blessed one).

Lest we think that this alertness to the details of modesty is only required in our day-to-day behavior but not in temporary situations (such as when we are on vacation), we see here that the tremendous power of even the minor details of modest conduct was demonstrated when our forefathers lived in tents, their temporary homes in the desert. - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniewsky

HOLY DWELLINGS

Toldos Yaakov Yosef

"How goodly are your tents Yaakov, your dwelling places Yisrael..." (24:5)

When can we truly merit the fulfillment of *"Mah tov u'ohalecha Yaakov - How good are your tents Yaakov"*? Only when these tents, shuls and *batei midrashim* (synagogues and study houses), become *"mishkenosecha Yisrael"* - places where Jews actually come and dwell.

CONSUMING GOODNESS

Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev

"He shall consume the nations that are his adversaries, crush their bones, and smash their arrows..." (24:8)

This means that since it is the non-Jewish nations who oppress the Jewish people, the fact that G-d saves the Jewish people, conferring upon them material goodness, is done for the sake of His Name, i.e., His reputation, i.e., in order that the other nations not be able to taunt the Jewish people by saying (Tehillim 115:2), "Where, then, is their G-d?" Since they hate the Jewish people, they take pleasure in the Jewish people's distress and taunt them, saying, "Where, then, is their G-d?"

[Were G-d to allow the Jewish people to suffer, the non-Jewish nations would have reason to assume that G-d has forsaken them, since they measure success by material wealth. Thus, the hatred of the non-Jewish nations toward the Jewish people indirectly causes the Jewish people to be provided with material wealth.]

It follows that because of this (i.e., because the non-Jewish nations oppress them), the Jewish people are blessed by G-d to consume (i.e., enjoy) the good things of this world.

This is the allegorical meaning of the phrase "He shall consume the nations that are His adversaries," i.e., because "the nations are His adversaries," the Jewish people consume the good things of this world.

Thus, allegorically, the verse is to be interpreted as follows: "[The Jewish people] will consume [the goodness of this world on account of] the nations who are His adversaries."

G-d, in turn, does not subtract from their merits the goodness He gives them because of this, since the salvation that He bestows upon them is only for the sake of His great Name, for "the nations are His adversaries."

BARRIER OF ISOLATION

Kotzker Rebbe

"And now, as I go back to my people, let me inform you of what this people will do to your people in days to come." (24:14)

Bilam looked toward the future and saw that as long as the Jews remained strong in their beliefs, refused to become assimilated, and practiced "they are an isolated people," then no one who wished to destroy them would be able to undo their existence. On the contrary, the more they are pursued the stronger they become.

Therefore, Bilam said that the way to break the foundation of the Jews is to destroy the barrier between them and other nations, to try to assimilate them into another way of life, for once they become part of another people they can be subdued. Make the Jews "what this people do to your people," by encouraging the Jews to imitate what your people are doing.

MISPLACED CONFIDENCE

Rabbi Shlomo Ressler

"Let me inform you of what this people will do to your people in days to come." (24:14)

Bilam ends up blessing the people, to the dismay of Balak. As a parting gift, Bilam offers Balak some advice on how to defeat the Jewish people, suggesting that Balak entice them with improper relationships with Midianite women. In the very next perek, we see that his plan immediately works, causing the death of 24,000 people (25:1-9). How did Bilam know his plan would work, and why did it work?

Rabbi Dov Weinberger submits that Bilam's plan worked because his blessings for the Jewish people were sinister and intended to engender a false sense of security and confidence among the people. This complacency let the people's guard down such that they thought they were immune to temptations and thus faltered. While it's important to feel pride and satisfaction with our moral achievements, it's equally vital that we protect ourselves from outside influences and internal complacency. If morality makes us virtuous, our moral integrity will keep us that way.

STANDING IN PRAYER

Rebbe Nachman

"A star will step forth out of Yaakov and a tribe will arise from Israel..." (24:17)

There is not a blade of grass below that does not have a star and an angel Above, which strike it and tell it, "Grow!" (Bereishis Rabbah 10:7). *Ve'kam* (will arise) may also be translated as "will stand." This refers to prayer, since the name for the most important Jewish prayer is the *Amidah* (Standing Prayer). (Berachos 6b)

When a "tribe of Israel" stands up to pray, it thereby arouses a star, and the star steps forward and strikes things to make them grow, as the Midrash explains. All is dependent on prayer, because prayer alone reaches to G-d, Who creates and governs everything. Through prayer, it is possible to prevail upon G-d to act on our behalf - i.e., to perform miracles for us.

UNCONSTRICTED LIGHT

Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev

"That will crush the princes of Moav..." (24:17)

It is known what the Arizal writes (Eitz Chaim 1:2) that G-d is Infinite, and therefore, in order for the Jewish people to receive His love, He contracted His light so the Jewish people could receive His radiance. The more spiritually exalted the Jewish people are, the more they can receive G-d's radiance, and the contraction of the light is correspondingly less, since less contraction is needed.

Contraction implies that there is a border indicating that a person can approach only up until the point where contraction becomes necessary, in order to receive G-d's radiance without requiring it to be contracted.

This, then, is the mystical meaning of the phrase "He will crush the borders of Moav" - that in the future, the borders, which refer to the contraction, will be eliminated. "Moav" [מוֹאָב], as we said, alludes to G-d, since its last two letters spell "father" [אב], and G-d is the Father of all the Jewish people (Rus Rabbah 2:1). This means that although He needed to contract His radiance until now, He will not have to contract His radiance in the future, since we will be able to receive His brilliant light.

FORWARD LOOKING

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"A ruler will come out of [the descendants of] Yaakov and destroy the remnant of the city." (24:19)

(Having blessed the Jewish people three times, Bilam prophesied the fate of Balak's people, as well as that of other nations, in the future. In these prophecies, he also mentioned how the Jewish people's future king - the Messiah - would bring all humanity to serve G-d.)

One might ask: "Once we know what G-d requires of us in the here and now, why do we need to know about our ultimate goal and reward? Why not trust G-d to provide the reward when the time comes instead of being concerned now about what and when?"

The answer is that having a clear vision of what it is we are working toward makes all the difference in the quality of our work and the effort we invest in it. G-d wants us to serve Him in an inspired way; He wants our vision to be His vision, our goals to be His goals. Of course, our relationship to G-d must be based on the absolute, unconditional devotion every creature owes its Creator, but that is only the basis, the beginning. Ideally, G-d wants us to dream about what He dreams about; this is why He shares with us His dream for the Messianic future.

It is therefore vital to study the prophecies and statements of our sages about the Messiah and the imminent Redemption. This will enable us to form a clear picture in our mind of what the world is really meant to be and how we can make this dream a reality. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 21, p. 18) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniewsky

FROM CURSES TO BLESSINGS

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"A ruler will come out of [the descendants of] Yaakov and destroy the remnant of the city." (24:19)

One of the defining characteristics of the Messianic Era, as described by the prophet Isaiah, is that "[foreign] kings will tutor your children, and their princesses will be your wet nurses" (Yeshayahu 49:23).

The members of a royal family are normally the national figures most steeped in the cultural values of their society - and who most proudly and loyally identify with it, as well. As such, it would seem that these would be the last people to whom we should entrust the care and education of our tiny, impressionable children! But in the Messianic Era, the nations of the world will be awakened to the values of the Torah and thereby transformed from its adversaries into its supporters.

Bilam himself presages this transformation, inasmuch as G-d transformed his attempted curses into great blessings and praise.

Certainly, then, working to transform our adversaries into friends and advocates will help hasten the advent of the final Redemption. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 23, p. 171) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniewsky

A HAUGHTY MISTAKE

Reb Noson of Breslov

"Behold! A man from the Israelites came with a Midianite woman and brought her near his brothers, in full sight of Moshe and the entire Israelite community. They were weeping at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting. (25:6)

Zimri took Kozbi and approached Moshe, asking him if she was permitted or forbidden. "Forbidden," Moshe replied. Zimri then asked, "Who permitted you to marry Yisro's daughter [who was also a Midianite woman]?" (Rashi)

Bilam's advice to send Midianite women to seduce the Jews (see Sanhedrin 106a) resulted in widespread immorality and Zimri, leader of the Tribe of Shimon, succumbed. To defend himself, Zimri tried to turn his sin into a mitzvah, twisting the prohibition against marrying a non-Jewish woman into a legal argument, as if he were speaking on behalf of all Jews. This is a favorite tactic of the evil inclination, which constantly attempts to "turn a sin into a good deed." (Likutey Halakhot IV, p. 326)

Zimri was the leader of the Tribe of Shimon. How could he suddenly fall to such depths of depravity and indecency, and even stir up a rebellion against Moshe?

No one sinks to such lows overnight. It happens gradually, over a period of time, because his study of Torah is *shelo lishmah* (not for its own sake). Instead, each time he studies, he snatches a little more of the Torah's power for himself. However, this Torah is impure and congeals his spiritual sensitivity.

HAFTORAH

Had Zimri accepted Moshe as his leader to teach him to study properly - to show him how to strive for studying Torah *lishmah* (for its own sake) - he might have overcome his inner rot. But he was arrogant; after all, he was a leader among the Jews. So his rot festered until he could no longer contain it. Then he succumbed to the lowest levels of immorality that he knew were forbidden, and he also used his Torah to challenge Moshe: "Who permitted you to marry a Midianite woman?" (Likutey Halakhot V, p. 273a)

HOPE AT ALL TIMES

Rabbi Elimelech Biderman

"...they were weeping at the entrance of the Ohel Moed..."
(25:6)

One cannot fathom how much Hashem values and cherishes one's effort to strengthen himself after falling spiritually.

When telling the story of how the Jewish people and notable Zimri sinned with the daughters of Midyan, the Torah says (Bamidbar 25:6), "They were weeping at the entrance of the Ohel Moed." Targum Yonason elaborates: They were crying and reciting *shema*.

Despite their desecration of Hashem's name, spiritual fall, and their feeling of lowliness, they still didn't let go of their desire to connect to Hashem. They said *shema* to reaccept their commitment to being Hashem's servants.

It was because of this that Pinchas was able to go forth to do what he did and merited to become Eliyahu HaNavi who will announce the redemption, may it be speedily in our days.

HUMBLE SAVIOR

Reb Noson of Breslov

"When Pinchas, the son of Elazar, the son of Aharon the Kohen, saw this, he rose up from the midst of the assembly and took a spear in his hand." (25:7)

Why is Pinchas' genealogy traced back to Aharon? Pinchas is the Prophet Eliyahu (Targum Yonatan on Shemos 6:18), who will be the catalyst for the Resurrection. The Resurrection can come about only through humility. Aharon demonstrated great humility when he accepted Moshe as his leader. Thus, Pinchas ability (as Eliyahu) to be the harbinger of the Resurrection stems from Aharon. (Likutey Halakhot I, p. 85a)

DURING THE HIGHS AND LOWS

Kochav MiYaakov

"And what does G-d require of you: Only to do justice, and to love goodness, and to walk humbly with your G-d..."
(Michah 6:8)

This refers to giving dowries to brides and escorting the dead. (Makkos 24)

In order to perceive a person's true inner character, one must witness their behavior at times of immense joy or grief when they are thrown off balance and unable to disguise their real nature.

Baseness and vulgarity readily come to light during intense rejoicing, when drink loosens tongues. Spiritual stamina and inner strength are best revealed during the hour of grief, when lesser people's faith and integrity may crumble.

Whether a person truly "walks humbly with one's G-d" can be judged only when he "gives a bride a dowry" or when he "escorts the dead" - at moments of intense joy or at the time of deep sorrow. By remaining pure and honest in joy, and strong and steadfast in sorrow, one proves that one "walks humbly with one's G-d" at all times.

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