



Parshas Balak

For the week ending 14 Tammuz 5757
18 & 19 July 1997

Overview

Balak, the king of Moav, is in morbid fear of the *Bnei Yisrael*.

He summons a renowned sorcerer named *Bilaam* to curse them.

First, Hashem appears to *Bilaam* and forbids him to go. But because *Bilaam* is so insistent, Hashem appears to him a second time and permits him to go. While en route, a *malach* (angel, messenger from Hashem) blocks the path of *Bilaam's* donkey. Unable to contain his frustration, *Bilaam* strikes the donkey each time it stops or wants to make a detour. Miraculously, the donkey speaks, asking *Bilaam* why he is hitting her. The *malach* instructs *Bilaam* regarding what he is permitted to say, and what he is forbidden to say regarding the Jewish People. When *Bilaam* arrives, King *Balak* makes elaborate preparations in the hope that *Bilaam* will succeed in the curse. Three times *Bilaam* attempts to curse, and three times a blessing issues instead. *Balak*, seeing that *Bilaam* has failed, sends him home in disgrace. The *Bnei Yisrael* begin sinning with the Moabite women, and worshipping the Moabite idols, and are punished with a plague.

One of the Jewish leaders brazenly brings a *Midianite* princess into his tent, in full view of Moshe and the people. *Pinchas*, a grandson of Aaron, grabs a spear and kills both evildoers. This halts the plague, but not before 24,000 have died.

Insights

LETTING IT ALL HANG OUT

“...the people began to commit harlotry with the daughters of Moav.” (25:1)

It is axiomatic in our times that nothing is worse than having ‘hang-ups.’

Our role model is unrestrained freedom: Freedom from complexes. Freedom from guilt. The pundits of the media invite us constantly to ‘let it all hang out.’ There is almost nothing of which we should be ashamed. Homosexuality is no more than a matter of personal choice. Casual physical relationships are the norm. Nakedness, we are told, is absolutely no cause for embarrassment. The body is natural and therefore its processes should give us no cause for shame whatsoever.

Interestingly enough, a vestige of modesty still creeps in here and there: We have not reached the stage where all bodily functions are performed openly in public. But really, according to current morality, there seems to be little reason why this should be so.

We might think that ‘letting it all hang out’ is a modern phenomenon. However, there is a striking similarity between our own times and events that happened over three thousand years ago.

After the Jewish People left Egypt, Balak, who was King of Moav at that time, sent word to *Bilaam*, the prophet of the nations, to curse the Jewish People. *Bilaam* was unsuccessful in his direct attacks on Israel. However, he was able to make the Jewish People stumble by other means: His advice was that the Moabite women should lure the Jewish men into immorality. The mission of the Jewish People is to be a holy nation, and thus *Bilaam* knew that licentiousness would provoke Divine wrath.

The Moabite women, however, exacted a price for their services. They refused to have anything to do with the Jewish men until they had worshipped their idol, *baal peor*.

How was *baal peor* worshipped?

A devotee of *baal peor* would eat lentils and beer, and then perform his bodily functions in front of the idol. In fact, the more that one abused the idol, the more devout was one’s worship considered.

How was it possible for the Jews to be drawn after such a disgusting cult? What was its allure?

The essence of the cult of *baal peor* was ‘let it all hang out.’ The underlying intention was to shatter all barriers. Once there are no barriers, anything is permissible. If no physical process causes shame then all morality speedily goes out the door.

Prepared by Ohr Somayach in Jerusalem, Israel

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Written and Compiled by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair

General Editor: Rabbi Moshe Newman

22 Shimon Hatzadik Street, POB 18103, Jerusalem Israel

☎ 972-2-581-0315

fax: 972-2-581-2890

✉ ohr@virtual.co.il

38 East 29th Street 8th floor, New York, NY 10016, USA

☎ 1-212-213-3100

fax: 1-212-213-8717

✉ RZCorlin@aol.com or estern@Aol.com

613 Clark Avenue West, Thornhill, Ontario L4J 5V3, Canada

☎ 1-905-886-5730

fax: 1-905-886-6065

✉ Somayach@MSN.com

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ASININE TALK

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

What does it mean when a donkey starts to speak?

The essential difference between Man and the animals is the power of speech. Man is called “*The Speaker*.” This is the quality that epitomizes his elevation above the animals.

The power of speech is given to Man to elevate the physical world, to inject spirituality into the physical.

Describing the creation of Man, the Torah says that Hashem “blew into his nose a spirit of life.” The Targum Onkelos translates this phrase as “He blew into his nose a *speaking* spirit.”

In the Hebrew language, the word for “thing” — “*davar*” — is connected to the same root as “*dibur*” — “word.” Speech is the interface between the world of things — the physical world — and the spiritual world.

When Man uses his power of speech to add spirituality to the world, he fulfills his true purpose, he epitomizes the ‘*speaking spirit*.’ He elevates both himself and the world with him. But when he degrades the power of speech by using it to curse and to denigrate, then Man becomes no more than a talking donkey.

SWEETER THAN HONEY?

“Do not go with them; do not curse this people, for they are blessed.” (22:12)

“Hashem said to Bilaam ‘You shall not curse the people.’
Bilaam said to Hashem ‘If so, I will bless them.’ Hashem said ‘They do not need your blessing, for they are blessed.’

As the proverb says: “We tell the bee ‘Neither your honey, nor your sting.’” (Rashi)

Which non-kosher animal produces kosher food?

The Bee. Although the bee is a non-kosher animal, honey is itself Kosher. The reason that honey is Kosher is because honey doesn’t actually come from the bee’s body. Rather,

bees manufacture honey from the pollen that they gather. However, the bee’s poisonous sting does come from the bee’s body itself. (*Yoreh Deah 81*)

Bilaam was like the bee. All of his “honey” — his sweet blessings and prophecies about the Jewish People — did not come from him. In no way were they part of his nature. Rather, they were gathered from an outside source. Bilaam’s venomous curses and foul plots, however, emanated from his true poisonous essence.

TUMOR AND TUMAH

“Amalek is the first of nations.” (24:20)

One of the most critical factors in operating on a patient with a pathological disease is the necessity to remove all of the tumor. If any of the diseased tissue is allowed to remain it will grow back and attack the patient with renewed vigor. The physical world mirrors the spiritual. Israel and Amalek stand at opposite ends of the spectrum. Israel’s role is to be a holy nation, to live a life of *kedusha*. Everything that Amalek does is aimed at destroying that life. The Torah refers to both Israel and its arch-enemy Amalek as ‘first.’

That which is first contains everything that needs to be: A seed is a perfect microcosm of the oak that it will be one day. A microscopic cell has the entire genetic code to build a human life. In fact, any part of the human anatomy has the genetic code to build the entire structure.

Israel is called ‘first.’ “*Holy to Hashem is Yisrael, the first of His produce.*” To fulfill the Torah obligation of tithing to the Levites, all it takes is one grain (*Chullin 137*).

Amalek is also called ‘first.’ “*Amalek is the first of nations.*” Similarly, all it takes is one grain of *tumah* (spiritual corruption) to spread throughout the entire body and infect everything.

Thus, the Torah commands us in the strongest terms to eradicate every last vestige of the spiritual pathogen whose name is Amalek. For if even the slightest trace remains, it will grow back with an awesome virulence.

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Haftorah: Micha 5:6-6:8

WALKING HUMBLY

“O Man, what is good and what does Hashem seek from you, only to do justice and love kindness, and walk humbly with your G-d.” (6:8)

“To walk humbly with your G-d” — this refers to the mitzvos of providing for a bride and escorting the dead — (Rashi).

To perceive the true essence of a person, one must see him both in moments of transcendent joy — providing for a bride — and abject sorrow — escorting the dead.

For in these moments of extremity, the inner qualities are revealed in stark relief. Only then can it be seen whether he can be said “to walk humbly with your G-d.”

(Kochav M’Yaakov)

Sources:

Letting It All Hang Out - Rabbi Chaim Shmulevitz

Asinine Talk - Rabbi Nota Schiller

Sweeter than Honey? - She’eris Menachem

Tumor and Tumah - Rabbi Mordechai Y. L. Zakash

Fatherly Advice

tidbits from the Ethics of the Fathers traditionally studied on Summer Sabbaths
Compiled by Rabbi Mendel Weinbach

If I do not achieve on my behalf who will achieve for me?

If I have achieved, what am I?

If not now, then when?

Hillel, Avos 1:14

No one but myself can achieve anything for me in spiritual growth. But even when I have already achieved a measure of growth I must humbly measure this gain against what is expected of me, always bearing in mind that the opportunity I have in my youth may not be available in later life and the chance I have to achieve in this world will certainly not be repeated in the World to Come.

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