

OHRNET

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PARSHA INSIGHTS

My MIND'S MADE UP - DON'T CONFUSE ME WITH THE FACTS!

"Balak, the son of Tzippor..." (22:2)

It takes one to know one. In Moav, proficiency in the black arts was as common as a cold. Balak was the greatest sorcerer in Moav. In those times, people could predict the future by creating talking birds. They would take gold for its head, silver for its beak, and copper for the wings. The parts had to be assembled at a certain time of day. Finally, they placed in its mouth the tongue of a real bird. Then they put it on the sill of an open window so that by day it faced the sun, and, by night, the moon. Seven days later, the bird's tongue began to make a ringing sound. The sorcerer would then take a golden needle and pierce the bird's tongue. And then the bird would begin to talk. Using the powers of impurity, the bird would reveal the secrets of the future.

No one was more skilled in this form of divination than Balak. For this reason he was called *Balak ben Tzippor*. In Hebrew, the word *tzippor* means "a bird." In other words, the name implied, "Balak, who can foretell the future through a magic bird." Amongst other things that the bird told Balak was that he would at first be victorious over the Jewish People, but finally he would fail.

Once, Balak was preparing a bird to prognosticate the downfall of the Jews. While he was bowing and offering incense to the bird it suddenly took wing and flew out of the window. Balak was very disturbed when the bird did not return.

After some time, Balak saw the bird returning. However, pursuing the bird was a plume of flame. The flame singed the bird's tail. Balak knew that this was a sign that the power of the Divine Presence would eventually conquer the power of the dark side.

In spite of this, Balak still invited Bilam to curse the Jews.

There are a couple of things in this bizarre story that don't quite add up. First, if Balak was the chief sorcerer in Moav, why did he need Bilam? Was he looking for an apprentice? Also, if Balak saw the portent of the plume of flame, what did he hope to achieve by inviting Bilam to curse the Jewish People. Wasn't it obvious to him that he would fail?

The answer is that the obvious is never an impediment to self-interest. Balak didn't want to be confused with the facts. Balak was so intent on the destruction of the Jewish People that he ignored the obvious portent of the bird and surmised that the Jewish People, like all other nations, were subject to the natural forces of the constellations. However, the Jews are above the stars. G-d supervises us with specific Providence.

And to answer our other question, Balak was not in need of a sorcerer's apprentice. Both he and Bilam had expertise in different areas of sorcery. Balak was well versed in the outer facets of magic, the practical day-to-day aspects of cursing and spell-casting. Bilam, on the other hand, had knowledge of the inner workings of the black arts. Balak surmised that together they would make an unbeatable duo, able to overcome clear indications of incipient defeat.

Balak proves the old adage: "My mind's made up. Don't confuse me with the facts!"

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PARSHA OVERVIEW

Balak, king of Moav, is in morbid fear of *Bnei Yisrael*. He summons a renowned sorcerer named Bilaam to curse them. First, G-d speaks to Bilaam and forbids him to go. But, because Bilaam is so insistent, G-d appears to him a second time and permits him to go. While en route, a *malach* (emissary from G-d) blocks Bilaam's donkey's path. Unable to contain his frustration, Bilaam strikes the donkey each time it stops or tries to 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, hoping that Bilaam will succeed in the curse. Three times Bilaam attempts to curse and three times blessings issue instead. Balak, seeing that Bilaam has failed, sends him home in disgrace.

Bnei Yisrael begin sinning with the Moabite women and worshipping the Moabite idols, and they 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 Aharon, grabs a spear and kills both evildoers. This halts the plague, but not before 24,000 have died.

ISRAEL Forever

EXERCISE IN FUTILITY

The Torah's warning to all the enemies who seek a "final solution to the Jewish problem" is that it is an exercise in futility.

Strangely enough this warning came from the mouth of the animal upon which the wicked heathen prophet Bilam was riding on his way to pronounce a curse on our ancestors and thus make them vulnerable to destruction.

"What have I done to you," complained the animal after being repeatedly beaten by its master for refusing to continue the journey upon seeing an angel blocking the

road, "that has caused you to strike me these three times?"

The significance of the phrase "three times", Rashi points out in his commentary on this week's Torah portion, is that it was a Heavenly message to Bilam: "Do you assume you can destroy a people who celebrate sacred festivals three times a year!"

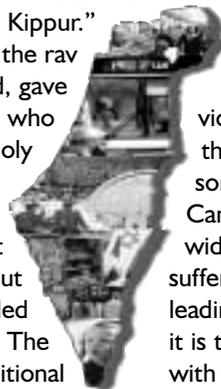
Here is the secret of Jewish survival in spite of all the plots of our enemies. So long as Jews properly celebrate their three festivals they guarantee Israel forever.

LOVE OF THE LAND - THE LEGENDS Selections from classical Torah sources which express the special relationship between the People of Israel and Eretz Yisrael

COMFORT FOR A WIDOW

"Don't look for another *shliach tzibur* to lead the service on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur." These were the instructions which the rav of Yerushalayim, Rabbi Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld, gave to the officers of his synagogue when the Jew who traditionally led the *mussaf* service on these holy days, Reb Nachum Bergman, passed away shortly before Rosh Hashana.

They complied with his wish, assuming that the rav himself intended to lead the services. But when the time for *mussaf* arrived, the rav signaled the son of Reb Nachum to lead the service. The congregation was shocked because it is traditional that one in the year of mourning does not lead services



on Shabbat or a holiday.

At the conclusion of the service the rav explained his action:

The only reason a mourner does not lead the service on these special days is because of the objection of the public since it is not befitting their honor to have someone in such a state of sorrow representing them. Can we imagine, however, the grief of Reb Nachum's widow who just lost her husband and what pain she will suffer as she sits in the ladies' gallery and hears another voice leading the service in place of her husband? I am certain that it is the desire of all the worshippers to provide this widow with the comfort of hearing her son, whose voice is so similar to that of her deceased husband.

PARSHA Q&A ?

1. Why did Moav consult specifically with Midian regarding their strategy against the Jews?
2. What was Balak's status before becoming Moav's king?
3. Why did G-d grant prophecy to the evil Bilaam?
4. Why did Balak think Bilaam's curse would work?
5. When did Bilaam receive his prophecies?
6. G-d asked Bilaam, "Who are these men with you?" What did Bilaam deduce from this question?
7. How do we know Bilaam hated the Jews more than Balak did?
8. What is evidence of Bilaam's arrogance?
9. In what way was the *malach* that opposed Bilaam an angel of mercy?
10. How did Bilaam die?
11. Why did the *malach* kill Bilaam's donkey?
12. Bilaam compared his meeting with an angel to someone else's meeting with an angel. Who was the other person and what was the comparison?
13. Bilaam told Balak to build seven altars. Why specifically seven?
14. Who in Jewish history seemed fit for a curse, but got a blessing instead?
15. Why are the Jewish People compared to lions?
16. On Bilaam's third attempt to curse the Jews, he changed his strategy. What was different?
17. What were Bilaam's three main characteristics?
18. What did Bilaam see that made him decide not to curse the Jews?
19. What phrase in Bilaam's self-description can be translated in two opposite ways, both of which come out meaning the same thing?
20. Bilaam told Balak that the Jews' G-d hates what?

PARSHA Q&A!

Answers to this Week's Questions!

All references are to the verses and Rashi's commentary unless otherwise stated.

1. 22:4 - Since Moshe grew up in Midian, the Moabites thought the Midianites might know wherein lay Moshe's power.
2. 22:4 - He was a prince of Midian.
3. 22:5 - So the other nations couldn't say, "If we had had prophets, we also would have become righteous."
4. 22:6 - Because Bilaam's curse had helped Sichon defeat Moav.
5. 22:8 - Only at night.
6. 22:9 - He mistakenly reasoned that G-d isn't all-knowing.
7. 22:11 - Balak wanted only to drive the Jews from the land. Bilaam sought to exterminate them completely.
8. 22:13 - He implied that G-d wouldn't let him go with the Moabite princes due to their lesser dignity.
9. 22:22 - It mercifully tried to stop Bilaam from sinning and destroying himself.
10. 22:23 - He was killed with a sword.
11. 22:33 - So that people shouldn't see it and say, "Here's the donkey that silenced Bilaam." G-d is concerned with human dignity.
12. 22:34 - Avraham. Bilaam said, "G-d told me to go but later sent an angel to stop me." The same thing happened to Avraham: G-d told Avraham to sacrifice Yitzchak but later canceled the command through an angel.
13. 23:4 - Corresponding to the seven altars built by the Avot. Bilaam said to G-d, "The Jewish People's ancestors built seven altars, but I alone have built altars equal to all of them."
14. 23:8 - Yaakov, when Yitzchak blessed him.
15. 23:24 - They rise each morning and "strengthen" themselves to do *mitzvot*.
16. 24:1 - He began mentioning the Jewish People's sins, hoping thus to be able to curse them.
17. 24:2 - An evil eye, pride and greed.
18. 24:2 - He saw each tribe dwelling without intermingling. He saw the tents arranged so no one could see into his neighbor's tent.
19. 24:3 - "*Shatum ha'ayin*." It means either "the poked-out eye," implying blindness in one eye; or it means the "the open eye," which means vision but implies blindness in the other eye.
20. 24:14 - Promiscuity.

- How many sacrifices for the sin of *shifcha charufa*
- Shabbat violation and other sins involuntarily committed
- A list of the 39 categories of forbidden creative labors and their details
- Taking blood from the *chalozon* for dyeing *techeilet*
- The subjective measure of amount carried which requires atonement
- The amount of human and animal foods and liquids for the same
- Diluting wine and comparing quantities of liquids and solids
- Clearing up the spelling of terms used in the Talmud
- The Divine purpose in every creature
- How Aramaic words combine to define
- The amount of non-edible items carried which constitutes violation
- Paper, parchment and promissory notes

WHEN THE STRONG FEAR THE WEAK

We are accustomed to considering the superior power of man or animal as a guarantee of invincibility in conflict with a weaker opponent. Our Sages, however, pointed to a number of examples of the strong fearing the weak.

The mighty lion hears the very loud roar of a tiny animal called *mafgiya* and flees in fear that a mightier creature threatens. The huge elephant fears the mosquito which may enter its trunk and cause trouble.

These and other examples of the strong fearing the weak, said Rabbi Yehuda in the name of the Sage Rav, find expression in the words of the Prophet Amos (5:9) who warned his people that the Creator can give power to the weak to bring destruction to the strong.

Maharsha explains that the lesson communicated by the Sages is that a person should never rely on his own power because the Creator has many agents which he can send to harm him if he sins. “Do not abandon fear of retribution,” advised the Sage Nitai of Arbel (*Pirkei Avot 1:7*), a lesson reinforced by reflecting on what goes on in the animal world.

WHAT THE Sages SAY

“Whatever the Creator created in His world is not without purpose.”

- Rabbi Yehuda in the name of the Sage Rav - Shabbat 77b

WHAT'S THE RIGHT THING TO DO?

REAL-LIFE QUESTIONS OF SOCIAL AND BUSINESS ETHICS

THE “ALYAH BUSINESS”

Question: In the synagogue which I attend on Shabbat it is the custom to call for *aliyot* to the Torah those who offer the most money to the synagogue fund. This seems rather mercenary to me and I am sometimes tempted to protest against doing business with something so sacred as the Torah. What is the right thing to do?

Answer: The custom of selling *aliyot* is very widespread and is based on two very solid reasons.

First of all, it is impossible in many synagogues to sustain without the income realized from the sale of *aliyot*.

Perhaps you are not aware of the expense involved in paying for utilities, cleaning and salaries of personnel.

Secondly, a Jew demonstrates how precious the Torah is to him by how much he is willing to spend for the privilege of making blessings on the Torah. The halachic authorities point out that this is particularly important during the *Yamim Noraim* (High Holy Days) when we are all being judged by Heaven and need all the merits we can gather.

So don't protest, but do your best to outbid all the rest.

HOLE-Y HEART

From: Alan L.

Dear Rabbi,

I am a 49-year old Jewish man with a very large hole in his heart. I was raised a Jew and still think of myself as a Jew. But I really don't know what it is to be a Jew. I was Bar Mitzvah'd and confirmed. I went to Hebrew school for 15 years.

My entire family has walked the path laid down for us by my deceased father. But for some reason, I am having a lot of trouble accepting faith in our religion. The non-Jews seem to have someplace to turn to when all seems lost or the burden of life becomes too heavy to bear. It seems so simple to turn to a priest and ask for an answer. Why do we turn to a rabbi or other scholar and receive no answers?

Where do I turn when the bottom drops out? Whom do I talk to for answers that will sooth my soul? This seems to be a great failing in our religion. Can you offer suggestions? Are there any prayers that address such a dilemma? Does G-d even listen to such materialistic matters?

Dear Alan,

My heart goes out to you in your pain. You are obviously suffering and I empathize with your dilemma.

However, it seems to me that your spiritual sorrow can actually be a source of inspiration for you. What you describe as a hole in your heart is not necessarily a bad thing.

Remember the story of Akiva and Rachel? At the age of 40, unable to read *alef-bet*, Akiva gave up hope of ever coming close to G-d. One day Rachel led him to a stream and asked him what he saw. He said he saw a waterfall. She asked what he saw under the fall. He replied, "The water has carved a hole in the rock beneath it". She exclaimed, "If something as soft as water can bore a hole in something as hard as rock, surely something as strong as Torah can bore a hole in something as soft as your heart!" Encouraged, he

eventually became the great Rabbi Akiva.

There are so many admonitions in the Torah warning against 'a heart of stone', and so many appeals to 'circumcise the heart', that the hole you feel should be taken as a very good sign that your heart is still soft and sensitive. Thank G-d your heart shows spiritual vital signs! Sometimes G-d brings physical, emotional, mental or even spiritual suffering to very special individuals in order to personally 'circumcise' their hearts and spare them the spiritual callousness of which so many people suffer.

At this point in your life, despite the path that your father of blessed memory laid down for you, and despite your extensive Jewish education, I think you should start from scratch. At the age of 49 with a gaping hole in your heart, you should start over from *alef-bet* and begin filling the gap with the soothing waters of Torah. Read Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzatto's classic work "The Way of G-d" for a re-introduction to the fundamentals of Jewish belief. Also, read with fervor the Psalms of David in which you can vicariously experience his own longing for, search of and discovery of G-d.

Let me conclude with the following thoughts. Sometimes we feel like the 'bottom drops out' as we sink to the dark murky depths. When this happens, one must realize that there are Divine sparks everywhere, and sometimes we are plunged to those depths specifically to redeem those exiled, captive sparks and elevate them as we resurface. This can be compared to pearl divers who plunge to the dark and murky depths of the sea in search of impure oysters, only to resurface and pry out of their grasp lustrous white pearls.

Also, over the years of working with Jews returning to their faith, I have also met many Christians, including students and clergy, who have become interested in Judaism precisely because they felt that their questions were not only not answered, but they were not even tolerated. Don't think that "mass" is greener on the other side of the *shul* fence. There are many exceptional, knowledgeable and sensitive rabbis who can help you. Open your heart, search sincerely and have finding a rabbi in mind as you request in the 11th blessing of the *amida*: "Restore our judges and counselors as at first, remove from us sorrow and despair..."

לע"נ

ר' יצחק אייזיק בן ר' אליעזר בער ז"ל
ומרת שרה חנה בת ר' משה לויב ע"ה

ת.נ.צ.ב.ה.

KEEPING KOSHER IN COSTA RICA

Can you imagine a New York-style kosher deli in faraway Costa Rica? Jeremy Zibell, a 25-year old arrival from Montreal, recently opened one there after a friend who visited this tiny Central American country told him that not much was happening there as far as Jewish deli food was concerned.

Kosher food in general has been available for only about a decade for the 2,500 strong Orthodox Jewish community established in Costa Rica in the 1930s. Two local rabbis, Rabbi Gershon Miletski and Rabbi Hersh Spalter, have established operations for slaughtering and importing meat and poultry.

An Israeli by the name of Gil Aharoni does a big business in kosher foods in his "Little Israel" market and offers an on-line catering service for tourists who observe kashrut rules while visiting the country's jungles and rain forests. A newly opened resort on the Pacific Coast has even set aside a kosher kitchen for its guests.

This is all a far cry from the situation when Rabbi Miletski arrived to become head of the local Israel-Zionist Center: "Ninety percent of the space in the suitcases my wife and I were carrying would be filled with food we were bringing back from our visits to family in Israel."

PUBLIC DOMAIN

Comments, quibbles and reactions concerning previous Ohrnet features

Re: Fireflies in Tsfat (Legends of the Land)

Great story but I've lived in Tsfat for 15 years and have yet to see a firefly. I once saw some little green lights on the side of a hill but we didn't know what they were. Maybe they were the fireflies. But, since then, nothing.

• Rena Cohen

Ohrnet replies:

The source for this great story is "Agadot Eretz Yisrael" by Dr. Zev Vilnai, published by Kiryat Sefer in 1970. We can only suggest that once Jews in Tsfat gained the opportunity to study Torah unhampered by despots there was no longer a need for fireflies who fled to darker pastures.

Re: Far Away Fudge and Hocus Pocus

Regarding the request you received for a "priest" or

rabbi to bless the fudge so that Jewish customers will eat it, you wrote "It is not a matter of a hocus-pocus pronunciation from a priest, but rather a thorough, cooperative study with a rabbi."

Oh no! Don't you know the origin of "hocus-pocus?" It is a distortion of the Latin for "This is the Body." The Catholic priest says this while he performs the 'miracle' of turning the wafer into the body. Hocus-pocus is a term devised to ridicule the central ceremony of the Catholic mass. Oy!

• Yaakov Cohn

Ohrnet replies:

That's exactly the point. I'm glad you got it, although that nuance is only speculation and not mentioned in most dictionaries.

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