

# INSIGHTS

## Into The Weekly Parsha

בס"ד

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This week's Insights is dedicated in loving memory of Moshe Ben Avraham, Murray Turetsky. "May his Neshama have an Aliya!"

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Based on the Torah of our Rosh HaYeshiva HaRav Yochanan Zweig

PARSHAS BALAK

## Be Careful What You Wish For

***Bilaam answered and said, "If Balak were to give me his houseful of silver and gold, I am unable to transgress the word of Hashem, my God, to do anything small or great" (22:18).***

This week's *parsha* opens with Balak, king of Moav, scheming to find some way to defeat Bnei Yisroel as they steadily conquered every nation in their path on the way to Eretz Yisroel. Balak decides to try to hire Bilaam, a master sorcerer and prophet, as well as an avowed hater of the Jewish people, to come and curse Bnei Yisroel so that they become vulnerable and be driven away from Moav by war. But hiring Bilaam proves tougher than Balak thought. Bilaam sends away the first delegation as being insufficient to persuade him.

Balak was no fool; he immediately understood that Bilaam was looking for a larger cash offer than was initially proposed. He then sends an even more prestigious delegation and promises to give him more than his usual asking price (see *Rashi* 22:17).

Eventually, Bilaam relents with the following cryptic remark; "*If Balak were to give me his houseful of silver and gold, I am unable to transgress the word of Hashem, my God, to do anything small or great.*" *Rashi* (ad loc) explains that Bilaam is actually saying that, in reality, "Balak should really agree to give me all of his silver and gold. This is because Balak's only other option would be to hire an army of mercenaries and, even then, there is no guarantee that these mercenaries would be able to defeat Bnei Yisroel. But if Balak hires me I will certainly be victorious."

This is difficult to understand. Bilaam first states that he will absolutely guarantee his own success yet, in the same breath, he

says, "that he cannot go against the word of Hashem, great or small." This sounds like the ranting of a schizophrenic personality. How can he guarantee success yet at the same time have to yield to whatever Hashem desires? Perhaps as confusing: How does Bilaam, an avowed hater of the Jews, change from cursing Bnei Yisroel (which is what he was hired to do) to blessing them?

While it's true that he received a message from Hashem to bless them, Bilaam had transgressed many of Hashem's commandments, why does he start listening now? Bilaam still has free choice. What compels Bilaam to listen to Hashem and bless Bnei Yisroel?

Bilaam was actually brilliant. While it's true that a curse can be very painful as well as extremely difficult to overcome, too many blessings, especially to someone who cannot handle them, can be much, much worse. The best example of this is too much money. Shlomo Hamelech (*Mishlei* 30:9) says that the test of being wealthy is much harder than the test of being poor. A poor person has the test that he may desire to steal, but a rich person has the test that he begins to deny that Hashem exists (i.e. he begins to feel that he is the center of the universe).

Almost everybody desires to become fabulously wealthy, and most would consider that a wonderful blessing. Yet, in a study done on Florida lottery winners, 70% of them had spent every last penny within five years of winning the lottery. In a study done in 2009 by SI, almost 80% of NFL



players were broke within two years of their retirement. In other words, getting money doesn't necessarily mean that they managed to hold onto their blessings. Getting rich did, however, lead to divorces and other family disputes.

Too much money can be very challenging. It can affect one's character and can make one impossible to live with. People can become so self-involved that their children are raised by nannies and maids. This naturally leads to feelings of inadequacy that parents try to ameliorate by plying their children with "things" in place of a real relationship. Hence these children become self-centered and "spoiled," and this often leads to life-long personal and relationship issues.

This holds true by most blessings; a brilliant child is going to be far more challenging than a typical one. If one has more blessings than he can handle, these blessings can actually ruin his life. That is what Bilaam is accomplishing. Of course, it is more enjoyable for him to watch Bnei Yisroel suffer his curses, but he knew that even if Hashem forced him to bless Bnei Yisroel he could still achieve his goal. Giving Bnei Yisroel more than they can handle is almost a guarantee that he will succeed in destroying them: Because being a runaway success is a much bigger challenge to someone than being a failure. In fact, Bilaam was right; the Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 105b) shows that in the end, except for one, all of Bilaam's "blessings" turned to curses.

# Ignoring the Pain

*He sees no iniquity in Yaakov, nor does He see transgressions in Yisrael, Hashem his G-d is with him and the friendship of the king is with them (23:21).*

Rashi (ad loc) explains this to mean that Hashem is not exacting in His judgement of Bnei Yisroel; in His great love for them, he disregards their transgressions even when they sin. This *possuk's* reassuring expression of Hashem's kindness in judgement readily explains why it was chosen to be included in our liturgy on Rosh Hashanah, notwithstanding that the evil Bilaam is the source of this observation.

Yet, this verse doesn't seem to conform to normative Jewish thinking. On the contrary, we are taught that Hashem is extremely critical of the Jewish people; the Talmud (*Bava Kama* 50a) states that Hashem is exacting to a hairbreadth in His judgement of the righteous, and that anyone who says that Hashem disregards sin is forfeiting his life. How can Rashi then say that Hashem simply disregards our sins?

There are two dimensions to every sin. When a person sins, his actions represent a defect in his character, a flaw that must be repaired in order for him to perfect himself. With regard to this aspect of sin, Hashem is infinitely exacting; He allows no imperfection to be ignored, after all, that is why we were created and put on this earth – to perfect ourselves. Hashem, therefore, judges His people with the greatest strictness in order for us to cleanse ourselves of all flaws.

However, there is another dimension to sin, one that Hashem does disregard: The pain and insult that we cause Him, so to speak, by rebelling against Him and ignoring His demands of us. In truth, of course, Hashem is never affected by us, our *mitzvos* do not add to Him and our sins do not detract from Him. But as R' Chaim Volozhin explains

(*Nefesh Hachaim* 1:3); our actions have very real affects in the myriads of worlds that have been created. We add "light and holiness" and sustain these worlds by doing righteous acts. The whole construct of creation is an expression of Hashem's desire to have a relationship with mankind. The nature of this relationship is what is affected by our transgressions.

Thus, when Chazal say that on Rosh Hashanah Hashem ignores our sins, this is referring to the pain and hurt we have inflicted on our relationship with Him. He absolutely disregards the hurt from the pain that we have inflicted on the relationship by flouting His authority and rebelling against Him. He only judges us on the flaws in our character that have led to these transgressions; this is because He desires to see us perfect ourselves.

## Did You Know...

This week's *parsha* includes the story of Bilaam (a famed non-Jewish prophet and sorcerer) and Balak (the king of Moab). Balak feared that the Jews would attack his people and therefore employs Bilaam to curse the them. Hashem forbids Bilaam from doing so and each time he tries he ends up showering the Jews with blessings instead. Here are some more additional facts about this dark sorcerer:

1. One of the better-known facts is that Bilaam was on a very high prophetic level, and there is actually a discussion comparing his prophecy to that of Moshe Rabbeinu's. The reason for this was because Hashem knew that the gentile nations would, in defense of their many sins, claim that it was only because they didn't have someone who was on Moshe's prophetic level to guide them, so he provided them with Bilaam (*Me'em Lo'ez Balak* 1 22:5).
2. Balak knew of Bilaam because they were from the same town, and Bilaam even prophesied that Balak would one day be king. Additionally, he knew that Bilaam was powerful because he had hired him before

in wars and they had been victorious (ibid).

3. At first, they tried performing various acts of sorcery on the Jews, but when those had no effect, they resorted to cursing. In actuality, Balak was a greater sorcerer than Bilaam, and it would have been below him to consult Bilaam, but when he saw that witchcraft was ineffectual, he sent for him.
4. Another fairly well known fact is that the Gemara says that Bilaam knew the precise moment every day when Hashem is angry at the world. This precise moment is known to be in the first three hours of the day, and is debated as whether it is 1/4 of a second, or even as little as 1/16 of a second. This tiny amount of time isn't enough for most curses, obviously, but he actually only needed enough time for the word "*kalem* – annihilate them." Interestingly, Hashem held back his anger at that time, otherwise the Jews would have been destroyed (*Me'em Lo'ez Balak* 1 22:6).
5. According to one source, Bilaam was actually Lavan (Yaakov's father-in-law). According to another source, he was Lavan's son, and yet others say that he was just metaphorically compared to Lavan (*Sanhedrin* 105a).

6. Bilaam has no share in the world to come, and was deformed; he was lame in one of his legs, and was blind in one of his eyes (ibid).
7. As a dirty sorcerer, he performed sorcery with his loins, and by means of certain phallic occult rites, he would call up spirits of the dead and cause them to settle upon it (ibid).
8. Showing an affinity for marketing, Bilaam was the architect of the plan to entice the Jews to sin with the women of Midian. He designed the tent situation in order for the women to lure the men in – old women selling silk outside, and young woman selling inside for less (ibid).
9. Interestingly, all four of the Jewish ways to execute somebody (stoning, burning, beheading, and strangulation) were used on him. They actually hung him over a fire, stoned him hanging there, and then cut his head off so he fell into the fire (*Sanhedrin* 106a).
10. Strangely, according to one opinion, Bilaam was only thirty-three years old when the Jewish people executed him (ibid).



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