

The Path To Follow

Balak

499

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The Favors of the Wicked are Bad for the Jewish People

In this week's parsha, the Torah goes into detail regarding all the blessings which the wicked Bilam gave to the Children of Israel, something that requires an explanation. The Sages have said that there is not a single superfluous letter in the entire Torah (Pesikta Zutrata, Pinchas 29:35), and the Gemara states that Rabbi Akiva interpreted the meaning of the crowns on the Torah's letters, deriving numerous laws from them (Menachot 29b). A secret is hidden within each word, and each letter holds meaning. That said, why did the Torah describe all the blessings of the wicked Bilam in detail, since they made no sense whatsoever? After all, he did not bless the Jewish people willingly and sincerely!

To explain this, we shall expand a little on what is written in Parsha Vayishlach, where Jacob moved his children and possessions across the river: "Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn" (Bereshith 32:25). The Sages have said that this "man" was Esau's guardian angel, and that he fought Jacob throughout the night (Chullin 91a; Bereshith Rabba 77:3). The text states, "He saw that he could not prevail against him [Jacob]" (Bereshith 32:26), meaning that when Esau's guardian angel saw that he could not defeat Jacob, "he touched the hollow of his [Jacob's] hip." Jacob began to limp, and the angel said to him: "Send me away, for dawn has arrived" (v.27). Jacob replied, "I will not send you away unless you bless me." Thus "he blessed him there.... Therefore the Children of Israel do not eat the sinew of the hip, which is upon the socket of the hip, to this very day" (vv.30-33).

We need to think about this. Why did Esau's guardian angel strike Jacob precisely on the hip, rather than elsewhere? We also need to explain why Jacob asked him for a blessing, since he did not lack any. Indeed, Jacob had received blessings from his father Isaac (Bereshith 27:28-29), and G-d Himself had blessed Jacob by saying: "Behold, I am with you. I will guard you wherever you go...for I will not forsake you" (ibid. 28:15).

The Sages have explained (Midrash Aggadah) that Jacob told the angel to willingly acknowledge the blessings that had been given to him by his father Isaac, blessings which Esau had contested.

Yet even according to this view, our astonishment still remains, for why would Jacob want Esau's guardian angel to acknowledge these blessings? How would such an acknowledgement change things, since Isaac had blessed him? Even G-d Himself had blessed Jacob and promised to protect him! That said, what would be gained by the approval of Esau's guardian angel? Was this the only way in which Jacob's blessings would be fulfilled, or else be delayed?

The Sages have said, "It is a Halachah – it is known that Esau hates Jacob" (Sifri, Beha'alotcha). This Halachah, namely that Esau hates Jacob and seeks to attack him, is known and there is no need to proclaim it. However Jacob wanted to tell the whole world something else, something in addition to this, which we shall now explain.

When Esau's guardian angel chose to strike Jacob on the hip, we must say that he had a special objective in injuring his leg. This is because we accomplish many mitzvot with our legs, mitzvot that cannot be accomplished otherwise. Indeed, the zealous use their legs to fulfill mitzvot as soon as possible, which is why he struck Jacob's leg, so as to introduce a degree of laziness into his performance of mitzvot and prevent him from promptly fulfilling them. In fact the word tzolea ("limping") evokes the word atzlut ("laziness"), and if Jacob had remained lame, laziness would have remained for all the generations. The Children of Israel would thus have fulfilled mitzvot imperfectly, without preparation, for the deeds of the Patriarchs are a sign for the children.

Hence when the angel asked Jacob to send him away because dawn was approaching, Jacob replied: "I will not send you away unless you bless me" (Bereshith 32:27). In other words, he would not send the angel away unless he first annulled the laziness that he had introduced into Jacob. It was not because Jacob needed this blessing, for it too had not been given willingly and sincerely. Rather, it had been given against the wishes of Esau's guardian angel, whose time had come to sing praises before G-d (Chullin 91b). Jacob also did not receive a blessing from him on this account, as it is hinted at in the verse: "Therefore the Children of Israel do not eat the sinew of the

hip." Rather, he wanted to show and prove to the whole world, as well as to his offspring for all the generations, something incredibly wonderful and special. What was it?

Those who try to strike the Jewish people attempt to accomplish this by infusing them with laziness! When they do not succeed, they claim to only want the good of the Jewish people. However their favors are not good. They have no intention of helping Jews, and are instead seeking their own good. If they do them a favor, it is despite their true intentions, and furthermore they want to receive a reward for it [just as Esau's guardian angel blessed Jacob despite his intentions, for he wanted to ascend to Heaven to sing praises]. In this regard the Sages have said, "All the favors of the wicked are bad for the righteous" (Yebamot 103a).

According to all this, we may say that the Torah discusses all the blessings of the wicked Bilam in detail throughout Parsha Balak in order to teach us just how deep Bilam's hatred for the Jewish people truly was. It is also to teach us how all his blessings were completely worthless, just useless words, because he did not bless the Children of Israel willingly and sincerely. In fact the Torah recounts that Bilam initially wanted to curse them, but the Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: "You shall not curse the people" (Bamidbar 22:12). It was only when Bilam saw that he could not curse them that he went to bless them despite his true intentions, all in order to infuse jealousy and hatred into the heart of the nations towards the Jewish people.

Furthermore, Bilam wanted to receive a reward for doing this, as it is written: "Bilam arose in the morning and saddled his donkey" (v.21), meaning that he acted with tremendous haste, wanting to imitate Abraham and receive a reward for it. However the Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: " 'Evil one, their father Abraham has already preceded you,' as it is said: 'Avraham rose early and saddled his donkey' [Bereshith 22:3]" (Rashi on Bamidbar 22:21). This is why the blessings of the wicked Bilam were worthless, for although he outdid himself – since he blessed them despite his true intentions – he only had his own interests at heart.

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To prove this, we note that Bilam eventually advised Balak on how to defeat the Children of Israel, telling him: “The G-d of these [people] hates lewdness.... Come, and I will advise you [on how to destroy them]” (Sanhedrin 106a). If Bilam had loved Israel and sincerely blessed them, how could he contradict himself by advising Balak on how to wipe them out? This clearly proves that on the inside, Bilam hated them and did not want to bless them.

At the Source

It is written, “Balak son of Tzipor saw” (Bamidbar 22:2).

The tzaddik Rabbi Meir of Premishlan Zatzal is surprised by this, asking: “Why did Balak son of Tzipor, who wanted to destroy the Jewish people, merit having a parsha in our holy Torah carry his name?”

He answers that in fact, all the nations hated Israel, be it little or much, as it is written: “It is known that Esau hates Jacob.” Yet they hide their hatred well, concealing it with beautiful words and nice expressions, such that the Jewish people fail to realize that they must be suspicious of them.

However Balak was a “good goy,” demonstrating his hatred for Israel before the eyes of everyone. Balak told the elders of Midian: “Now, this people will lick up all that is around us, like an ox licks up the grass of the field.” Thus a “good goy” like him deserved for a parsha in the Torah to carry his name.

Words Matter

It is written, “So now, please come and curse me this people” (Bamidbar 22:6).

The book Shnei Luchot HaBrit states that a person must be very careful not to “open the mouth of the Satan,” for even if he speaks unintentionally, he draws whatever he says upon himself. Thus when Balak said “curse me,” his mouth made him stumble, and in the end it was Balak who was cursed.

From a halachic point of view, the author of Magen Avraham notes that it is not good to recite vidui before going to bed, as mentioned in tractate Berachot. We must be careful not to say, “If I die, may my death be an atonement,” for we must not “open the mouth of the Satan.” Hence we must not say anything, but simply examine our deeds.

Small or Great

It is written, “I cannot transgress the word of Hashem my G-d, to do anything small or great” (Bamidbar 22:18).

How could the wicked Bilam evoke two sacred Names, Hashem and El-kim? The saintly Rabbi Shimshon of Ostrova Zatzal explains that the Tetragrammaton is a Name which designates mercy, while El-kim designates justice. Likewise, Y-H is a Name designating “justice of justice,” while “El-kai” is a Name designating mercy.

As a result, Bilam said: “Even if Balak would give me his house full of silver and gold, I cannot transgress the word of Hashem my G-d, to do anything small or great” – a small thing, meaning to reduce the Tetragrammaton to the letters Y-H and to transform it from mercy to justice; or a great thing, meaning to magnify the Name El-kai and transform it into El-kim, which would signify changing it from mercy to justice.

Israel will Triumph

It is written, “Edom shall be a conquest and Seir shall be the conquest of his enemies, while Israel will triumph” (Bamidbar 24:18).

This verse is very nicely explained by the gaon Rabbi Yosef of Trani Zatzal, who states that it was forbidden for Israel to acquire territory from Moab. After Sihon had taken possession of Moab, only then was Israel allowed to take from Sihon his portion of Moab, as it is said in the Psalms: “He gave their land as a heritage, a heritage to His people Israel”

This is why the Torah goes into great detail about all this, teaching us that the same applies to all the wicked. Even if we think that they sometimes want the good of the Jewish people, it is simply not true. They are acting this way despite their true intentions, for they only seek their own benefit. Such “favors” from the wicked are bad for the Jewish people, as the Sages have said: “All the favors of the wicked are bad for the righteous.”

[Tehillim 135:12]. This means that the land of Moab was only given to Israel as a heritage after it was conquered by Sihon.

That said, the verse signifies that since Israel was forbidden to acquire territory from Edom, what was needed was for “Edom [to] be a conquest and Seir [to] be the conquest of his enemies.” It was only once Seir acquired territory from Edom that Israel was permitted to defeat and conquer him.

In the Light of the Parsha

The Torah Protects and Saves

It is written, “It is a people dwelling alone. Among the nations, it shall not be counted” (Bamidbar 23:9).

This verse is said only in regards to the bitter exile preceding the coming of Mashiach. It is almost impossible for a Jew to go out into the street, and every corner is filled with impurity. It is impossible not to look and stumble, so how can a person avoid sinning?

We must realize that it is impossible for a person to be saved from immorality unless he cleaves to the Torah at all times, for it protects and saves. The Gemara states, “It is said that Rabbi Yehudah bar Ilai used to take a myrtle twig and dance before the bride and say: ‘Beautiful and graceful bride.’ Rabbi Shemuel the son of Rabbi Yitzchak danced with three [twigs]. Rabbi Zeira said, ‘The old man is putting us to shame.’ When he died, a pillar of fire came between him and the whole world, and there is a tradition that a pillar of fire has made such a separation only for either one or two [great men] in a generation. ... Rabbi Acha took her on his shoulder and danced. The Rabbis said to him, ‘May we do so?’ He replied, ‘If they are on you like a beam, yes. If not, you cannot’” (Ketubot 17a). Rashi explains: “Like a simple piece of wood to which nobody gives a thought.”

How could these tzaddikim act like this without having even a single misplaced thought? It is because they studied the holy Torah, which protected them from improper thoughts. They saw, but paid no attention and no bad thoughts came to them. The Gemara mentions something similar: “Rabbi Giddal would usually go and sit at the gates of the mikveh. He used to say to the women, ‘Immerse yourself like this’ or ‘immerse yourselves like that.’ The Sages said to him, ‘Is the teacher not afraid that his passions will get the best of him?’ He replied, ‘To me they look like many white geese’” (Berachot 20a).

The Rambam teaches us, “An immoral thought assails only a heart devoid of all wisdom” (Issurei Biah 22:21). This concept is alluded to in the verse, “It is a people dwelling alone.” The term *levadad* (“alone”) has a numerical value of 40, alluding to the Torah, which was given after 40 days. This teaches us that when a man studies Torah, he fulfills the verse: “Among the nations, [he] shall not be counted.”

Thus even if he encounters unsightly things, because he studies Torah he will be able to see them without having improper thoughts, and he will not be counted among the nations. In fact he does not even think of the same things as the other peoples, for his occupation is the Torah.

The Natural Defenses of the Tents of Jacob

It is written, “How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel” (Bamidbar 24:5).

Batei Midrashot have always served as the tents of every Jew. That is where they sit down to study Hashem’s Torah day and night. In times of distress, during difficult hours of combat both internally and externally, a Jew finds a protective wall in the Beit HaMidrash. The pages of the Gemara, which provide shelter and protection, serve as a real support. They have soothed pain and anxiety, replacing them with heartfelt joy, as we read: “The orders of Hashem are upright, rejoicing the heart” (Tehillim 19:9).

In this regard, we have chosen to cite some passages from the book U’Shmuel Bekorei Shemo, which has recently been published, on the life of the gaon Rabbi Shmuel Berenbaum Zatzal, the Rosh Yeshiva of Mir in the United States. In a chapter dealing with a time when the Mir yeshiva moved from Mir, Poland to Japanese-controlled Shanghai, China, it recounts how the yeshiva’s refugees settled in the large Beit Aharon synagogue in Shanghai, which contained a very large study hall, as well as a massive kitchen and eating hall. Rooms were rented in the Hongkou of Shanghai, and two nearby buildings were purchased and transformed into dormitories.

The yeshiva’s 400 students pursued their studies as if nothing existed outside the four cubits of the Beit Aharon synagogue. Far from their homes and their families, cut off from the war-stricken world, where the blood of European Jews flowed, the students of the Mir yeshiva sat in the Beit Aaron synagogue and immersed themselves in Torah learning.

Sweltering Days

The summer days in Shanghai were especially difficult, for the stifling heat made people sweat profusely. In fact it was so hot that it became impossible to touch the metal feet of the shtenders due to the tremendous heat which they absorbed. The students used plastic sheets and cut a rectangular window into them, the width of a line of text. These sheets were placed on the written page to prevent sweat from smudging the ink, and they wrote their commentaries on the page through this window.

Many yeshiva students suffered from nutritional deficiencies that produced cracks on the tongue, a problem diagnosed as resulting from the lack of a certain vitamin. The women of the community strengthened themselves to prepare food made from yeast, which contained a large amount of the missing vitamin.

“Sweltering days” – that is how Rabbi Shmuel Berenbaum would later call this time, the days of Torah in Shanghai. During that time, his chavruta (study partner) was the gaon Rabbi Nachum Pertzovitz Zatzal, and together they completed orders Nashim and Kodashim. They adhered to a regular learning schedule that began with the second seder (study session), and ended at three o’clock in the morning after a slight break for Arvit (the evening prayer).

Rabbi Shmuel Berenbaum described the infernal heat that existed in the Shanghai ghetto, as well as the many cases of fainting that he experienced and the rivers that he sweated. These rivers of sweat, he would later recount, prevented him from writing his Torah commentaries on the page without the writing getting smudged and erased.

He also recounted how the terrible darkness imposed during the night, due to the fear of allied bombing, concretely showed him how it was possible for complete darkness to reign outside – without light and without hope – and yet inside there was a precious light that pierced the pages of the Gemara.

If that wasn’t enough, besides the physical hardships of their stay in Shanghai, there were also the difficulties of politics to deal with. Japan was the ally of Nazi Germany, and as a result the Nazis placed considerable pressure on the Japanese to accept their “enlightened” cultural views regarding the extermination of the Jewish people. There were at least two instances in which the yeshiva’s students were on the verge of being killed, but the Holy One, blessed be He, saved them from their hands.

Miracles

During the winter of 5703, the first plan was drawn up declaring that the entire region would be a military zone, forcing all the Jews to be relocated to a secure island. According to this plan, Jews would be placed on boats, and somewhere in the midst of the ocean they would be drowned by the Japanese military.

Our enemies persecute us in every generation, but the Holy One, blessed be He, saves us from their hands. The Guardian of Israel neither sleeps nor slumbers. One Japanese diplomat in China, tormented by his conscience, secretly revealed this plan to the leaders of the Jewish

community. He stressed the fact that this decree could not be changed, and that it was simply his duty to make them aware of it.

The leaders of the community hurried to gather a half-million dollars to bribe the military, presenting this gift as “aid for the widows and orphans of Japanese war casualties.” When they arrived, however, they were assaulted by the military’s henchmen, who understood what they were doing there and that their heinous plan had been discovered. In the end, the plan was canceled due to the fear that news of it would spread and return to incriminate its authors.

The Second World War was raging on all fronts during the summer of 5705, when a great turning point was reached. The United States gradually began to invade and defeat Germany and Japan. As part of this process, Shanghai became a favorite target of heavy and horrific bombing raids.

Next to the yeshiva building were two targets favored by the Americans, whose aerial bombardments were methodical and precise. One target was a building housing the main offices of the Japanese navy, while the other was a police building that had been disguised as a hospital, but had been uncovered by American intelligence. The bombs did not touch the yeshiva.

Later on, Rabbi Shmuel Berenbaum recounted that he had seen a terrifying sight on his way to the yeshiva: The dying and “living dead” were being piled up into heaps. However he did not change his schedule, nor was his diligent learning affected.

From the yeshiva windows, he would look out every morning and see the terrified faces of Chinese and Japanese citizens flooding the yeshiva courtyard in great numbers at the start of a bombing raid, for word had spread that no bomb had ever caused even a scratch within the confines of the yeshiva.

Numerous bombs fell on Shanghai both day and night, yet nothing fell upon the holy yeshiva. The verse, “A thousand may fall at your side, and ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not approach you” (Tehillim 91:7) was fulfilled in a tangible way. There were thousands of pounds of explosives dropped on Shanghai, with hundreds of bombs swooping in from every direction, from right and left, yet nothing fell on the yeshiva. The Mashgiach Rabbi Yechezkel Levenstein Zatzal described the situation as follows: “During those five years of exile, Rabbi Shmuel Berenbaum sustained the yeshiva for us by the power of his diligence.”

The Dust of Jacob

It is written, "Who has counted the dust of Jacob?" (Bamidbar 23:10). Here Rashi states, "One cannot count the mitzvot which they perform with dust."

What follows is an amazing story from Rabbi David Shmidel Shlita, the president of Atra Kadisha, an organization that safeguards the honor of the dead, protecting Jewish graves in Israel and the Diaspora.

In the Russian town of Grodno, the authorities destroyed the local Jewish cemetery. All skeletal remains which were exposed and scattered on the ground, like some lifeless thing, were collected in crates and stored in a warehouse.

Rav Shmidel strongly protested this action, as was his mandate. He contacted the local Russian authorities, spoke with all the parties involved, and after long and arduous negotiations, the Russians allowed him to bury these remains.

The Rav immediately appointed a Jew from Israel to oversee this matter. He told him to board a flight for Russia and to address the person in charge, who would transfer these cased remains to him so he could bury them properly. Rav Shmidel also asked him to make every possible effort to give these remains a Jewish burial on the same day he received them, thereby fulfilling the mitzvah: "You shall bury him on that day" (Devarim 21:23).

This emissary arrived in Russia, traveled to the town of Grodno, and entered the ministry in charge of cemeteries. As soon as he entered, he addressed the secretary and said: "Hello, I've been sent for the Jewish remains." At first the secretary tried to evade the issue by saying, "The person in charge isn't here."

"Good, I'll wait for him to arrive."

"You don't understand. He won't be returning in a few minutes. He'll only be back in 15 days."

"That's alright," said the emissary, "I've brought enough food. I'll wait here until he arrives."

The Russians realized that they were dealing with a tough nut to crack, and they began to make a few telephone calls. They finally told him, "Fine, go to the warehouse at such-and-such a place, get a truck, and take the remains."

He left and rented the services of a local non-Jew and his truck to help transport the remains, explaining that he had to finish burying these remains before the end of the day. He promised the non-Jew a bonus for helping to make this happen.

The two loaded the remains on the truck and brought them to the cemetery.

"Now," said the Jew, "we have to finish burying them before sunset."

"You're dreaming," said the non-Jew. "It's out of the question!"

"But we agreed!" the emissary insisted.

"Even if I agreed, it's just not possible for us to bury everything on the truck before sunset. Even if I bring two more people, we won't have enough time. I would need five strong and quick workers. Maybe then we'd have enough time to finish. As it is, it's simply impossible to do it ourselves."

The emissary looked at his watch and realized that he was right. It was truly impossible.

What could he do?

He began to pray from the bottom of his heart. "Sovereign of the universe, I've done everything that I could. I traveled from Israel, I stood my ground, I rented the services of this driver and told him beforehand that we needed to bury the remains today. I've done everything that I could, and more than this I cannot do. It's up to You to do the rest!"

He had barely finished praying when he felt someone tapping him on the back. He looked behind and saw a Jew.

The Jew asked him, "Where is the grave of So-and-so?"

"I don't know," he replied. "Who are you?"

"We've come here to pray."

"Who is 'we'?"

The emissary looked him in the eyes and then glanced over to the entrance of the cemetery. What should he see but a bus filled with youngsters!

"How many people are on the bus?" he asked.

"Fifty."

In a few seconds, the emissary found himself on the bus, and asked for permission to address the people. He said to them, "I want to tell you a story. I want to tell you why I'm here." He then told them the whole story, and finished by saying: "I'm not a kabbalist or a miracle worker, but I know one thing very clearly: While I was praying, you arrived. While I was praying! Now, do what you want."

Without saying a word, all the boys took their coats off, rolled up their sleeves, and began to work with tremendous energy.

Before sunset, all the remains had been buried in an appropriate and honorable way!

A few minutes before sunset, the sacred task had been completed.

This is the end of the story, and our man returned to Israel with great satisfaction for having completed his mission in the best possible way.

Upon returning home, he raised his eyes to Heaven and said: "Sovereign of the universe, although You enabled me to merit a tremendously great mitzvah, my joy is not complete because I have two daughters living at home, one who is 30 and the other 35. May it be Your will that they merit to get married and find peace in their own homes." In fact a miracle took place, for within a few months both women were engaged and had established homes in Israel.

Guard Your Tongue

What a Great Favor!

If a person has obtained a loan from someone and tells everyone what a great favor he has done for him, this is liable to push others into asking him for a loan.

It is in regards to such things that it is written, "If one blesses his friend loudly in the morning, it will be considered a curse to him" (Mishlei 27:14).