

Perfectly Pure: Parshat Balak

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Mrs. Shira Smiles
Summary by Channie Koplowitz Stein

In Parshat Balak we read how every time Bilaam tried to curse *Bnei Yisroel*, words of praise and blessing came out instead. In the second of these attempts, Bilaam proclaims, "Behold! To bless have I received - He [Hashem] has blessed and I will not contradict Him. He perceived no iniquity in Jacob and saw no perversity in Israel. Hashem His God is with him and the friendship of the King is in him."

Bilaam himself, writes Onkelos, tried to find some sin and iniquity in Israel to form a basis for his curses, but he found none. More puzzling, however, is Rashi's interpretation that Hashem pays no attention to the sins and iniquities of *Bnei Yisroel*. Yet we know that He is actually quite exacting with them. Rabbi Z. Epstein points out that although *Bnei Yisroel* do indeed sin, the sin remains external and does not become part of their inner essence. Intrinsically we remain unsullied and connected to Hashem. A Jew in the innermost essence of his being wants to fulfill the will of Hashem.

Therefore, writes the Netivot Shalom, a Jew cannot sin of his own accord. Only when the *yetzer horo* imbues him with a spirit of foolishness. When we sin, it is because we are ignorant and don't understand the consequences. This is analogous to a simple country bumpkin who enters the palace of a king and sees a magnificent chandelier suspended from the ceiling by a strong rope. The man sees the value of the strong rope but cannot comprehend the value of the chandelier. He cuts the rope and the chandelier crashes to the ground. The king realizes that the poor man was ignorant of the consequences of his actions, so while he punishes him for the seemingly inconsequential pilfering of the rope, he does not punish him for the loss of the chandelier and the ensuing darkness. Similarly, continues the Netivot Shalom, we do not understand the consequences of our actions or we would never consciously sin. It is this foolishness that Hashem considers. He punishes us for the immediate action and not for the ensuing consequences.

Our relationship with Hashem is never so broken that it is severed completely, says the Tiv HaTorah. We always remain children of Hashem. Even when we have sinned and developed a foul smelling odor, adds Rabbi Brazil, we still remain part of the total community of *Bnei Yisroel* and, like the foul smelling *chelbonah* which, when included in the *ketoret* offering, adds to the sweet scent of the *ketoret*, so even the sinner becomes part of the sweet smelling whole of the nation. The sinner can still reconnect, as the acronym for *chelbonah* alludes to: "**Chayav [adam] Leimor, Bishvili Nivra Haolam**, One is obligated to say, 'For me was the world was created.'" I am still part of the community of *Bnei Yisroel*; Hashem still loves me.

Both Yaakov Avinu and Moshe bless *Bnei Yisroel* before their deaths but they include rebukes in their blessings. Why does only Bilaam proclaim that Hashem sees no sin nor iniquity in *Bnei Yisroel*? Rabbi Wolbe z"l explains that both Yaakov and Moshe, as leaders of the nation, were focused on the responsibility of the nation in their service to Hashem. In that arena, there is always room for improvement. Bilaam, on the other hand, was focused on the relationship of Hashem toward the nation. That relationship can never be severed. Both of these relationships, are expressed in our morning prayers. First, we say, "Hashem girds us with strength [to be in His service]." That is followed by the blessing, "He crowns *Bnei Yisroel* with splendor." Despite our faults, even within the punishment, there is much love.

Parshat Balak is always read in the month of Tammuz, writes Rabbi Schorr. On the seventeenth of Tammuz in the desert we sinned with the golden calf. But the declaration was, "**Chag la'Hashem mochor**, Tomorrow we will celebrate a holiday." Although it is currently a fast day, it will be transformed into a holiday through repentance. Tammuz corresponds to the tribe of Reuven who modeled *teshuvah* with his heartbroken cry, "**Ana ani bo**, what will now become of me, where can I now go?" Our inner essence remains the same and free of sin, as did Reuven who retained his status as

one of the tribes. Although we may appear dark on the outside, as King Solomon writes in Shir Hashirim, we always retain our inner beauty.

Rabbi E. Lopian explains that when we sin accidentally, *chatanu*, we can hope for forgiveness from our Father, but when our sin is deliberate, *pashanu*, the King must satisfy the laws of the court as well. We ourselves are often the source of the accusatory force when we speak ill of another. Since I have already brought the oversight or misconduct out in the open, Hashem can no longer turn a blind eye and "make believe" He doesn't see. As proof, Rabbi Lopian z"l notes that the evil King Achav was successful in battle because the *Bnei Yisroel* did not tattle on one another. Although many must have known where the Prophet Ovadiah was hiding 100 prophets, they did not denounce him. In contrast, the saintly King Saul who ruled over the nation dedicated to serving Hashem failed in battle because the people disclosed the whereabouts of the fleeing David to him. Thus, does negative speech entrap us as a fish with a hook in his mouth, who thinks he's free because his body is still flapping around. The accusatory force can come from outside, from the Satan, or from ourselves. Therefore, we must always stop and think before we speak, lest we put ourselves in a trap of our own making.

The Sifsei Daas, quoting the Sefas Emes, notes that while individuals sometimes sin, the purity of the whole remains uncontaminated. Therefore, Hashem is more likely to punish the individual than the entire nation. Bilaam sees the entire nation as a whole, and on this level, Hashem sees no iniquity within them. The community serves as a protective shield for the individual. It is for this reason that it is important that we remain connected to the community.

This is the principle we must keep in mind when we ask and pray to Hashem to help us both as individuals for ourselves and for individuals we know. When we pray for a sick family member, for example, we add that he should be healed along with the other sick

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members of our nation, writes Rabbi C. Shmulevitz z"l. Therefore, search out ways you can serve the community and become integral to it. Can you cook for the sick or offer rides? Can you offer *Torah* lectures or skills classes to others? Find an area through which you can contribute.

Rabbi Kofman z"l notes that if we work on our character when we are young, in the Yaakov stage of our lives, Hashem will not find negativity in us when we are older, in the *Yisroel* stage of our lives. When Hashem sees us working to keep ourselves spiritually and morally strong, He will be lenient in His

judgment of us. If we are to grow, writes Rebbetzin Feldbrand, we must toil to refine our character with integrity, for man's entire purpose is to grow in his *avodat Hashem*.

Levels of Chassidut Part 2

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Rabbi Yitzchak Cohen

Chazal tell us that the early *chassidim* would spend an hour before prayer and an hour after prayer in contemplation. We learn that a person shouldn't rush into shul and begin davening right away. One should think a moment what one is about to say. So too, when one finishes davening one shouldn't rush out. One should stop and contemplate, how was the davening, was it proper, was my concentration right? If it wasn't, one should think of ways to improve it.

The first level in *Chassidut* is *yirah* (awe), to be aware that one is standing in front of Hashem. The next level is to think about the greatness of Hashem. Whatever a person can imagine is perfect, Hashem is above that. And if one had an invitation to speak to the king, how careful one would be. How much more so should one think before approaching the King of kings. The third level is to contemplate how puny a person is in comparison to Hashem. Man is merely flesh and blood. How can he not be overcome with fear and trembling while standing in front of Hashem.

In Tehilim it says, "*Ydud et Hashem b'yirah v'gilu birada*," Serve Hashem with awe and rejoice in trembling. How can joy and fear coexist at the same time? Rashi explains one can tremble in front of Hashem and at the same time rejoice at the honor of being able to speak with Him. When a person fulfills *mitzvot* out of love for Hashem, his action evoke *simcha* and *yirah*.

Eicha

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Mrs. Shoshie Nissenbaum

Megilat Eicha is not a historical account of the destruction. It is the raw memories of Hashem, Yerushalayim, and the Jewish nation. *Megilat Eicha* is the book of questions and if we read it carefully we can find within it many answers. *Megilat Eicha* contains the questions of the individual struggling with his pain and the questions of the community struggling with their pain. *Megilat Eicha* is a conglomerate of voices eager to be heard and understood. *Megilat Eicha* guides us in our reaction on a both a national and personal level. When we really listen to the verses, when we study the *Midrashim* and commentaries, we will hear our own voice recounting, engaging, and struggling. We will hear echoes of that which we were confused about and traverse the desert of isolation and despair to hear the true message of the *Megilah* - a

message of comfort, clarity and hope. *Megilat Eicha* is the revelation of *eicha* - Where is Hashem? Where am I going? Who am I?

Megilat Eicha was authored by Yirmiyahu who begged and pleaded with *Klal Yisrael* to repent to prevent the impending destruction. Not only didn't the people listen, they attacked and tormented him. He authored two books, Yirmiyahu, his quest to get the Jews to repent and *Melachim*, the reaction of the people to the prophets.

The Gemara classifies three different prophets, those who demand the respect of the father-Hashem, those who demand the respect of the son, *Klal Yisrael*, and those who are balanced, demanding honor for the father and the son. The prophet who demanded the honor of the father was Eliyahu Hanavi. The

prophet who demanded the honor of the son, the representative advocate of *Klal Yisrael* was Yonah who was willing to risk Hashem's wrath not to incriminate *Klal Yisrael*. The balanced prophet is Yirmiyahu. This is very revealing and tells us about the prophet's mission and *Megilat Eicha*. It gives us a lens in which to analyze the verses and try to discern the real message. In fact in many verses within *Eicha* we don't even know who is speaking. It could be Yerushalayim, Yirmiyahu, *Am Yisrael*, and Hashem and on many levels All of them speak because the perspective that Yirmiyahu gives us in *Eicha* is all encompassing, how Hashem, Yirmiyahu, and *Klal Yisrael* view the destruction and how Yirmiyahu tries to bridge all of these emotions into a single unified vision of consolation.