

Parshat Balak: Pilgrimage Power

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Mrs. Shira Smiles

When Bilaam set out on his donkey on a mission to curse the Jews, Hashem sent an angel to block the animal's path. Bilaam struck the donkey three times. The Torah then writes that the animal opened its mouth and complained, "What have I done to you that you have beaten me *shalosh regalim*-three times?" The commentators ask, why does the Torah use the peculiar expression *regalim* and not *p'eamim*? The donkey was warning Bilaam, "You will not be successful, as the nation you are trying to destroy celebrates the *shalosh regalim*, and it will be impossible to decimate them."

Rav Yosef Albo writes that our tradition rests on three principal beliefs- the existence of Hashem, the divine origin of the Torah, and reward and punishment. Sukkot is recognizing Hashem's existence and his involvement in our lives, Shavuot is the divinity of the Torah, and Pesach is reward and punishment-i.e. the punishment of the Egyptians and the reward of the Jews. The donkey wasn't referring to practical observance, but the acceptance of the three fundamental principles implicit in these festivals.

If we look deeper we find that these three holidays teach us *emunah* and *bitachon*. The Taam v'daat says that when a Jew would make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem he was not afraid to leave his property unguarded. He

relied on Hashem. *Emunah* is knowledge in theory, *bitachon* is faith in practice. The *shalosh regalim* were not only a manifestation of *emunah* but demonstrated belief in Hashem in a very practical way. Shem Mishmuel says this is the difference between the Jews and non-Jews. While non-Jews may want a relationship with Hashem, they will forgo it in favor of their own pleasures. For Jews, closeness to Hashem is more precious than anything.

The real test of measuring how pure your motivation is when you perform a *mitzva*, is how much *simcha* you have when you do it. The Jewish people went up to Yerushalayim with passion and joy. Bilaam blessed the Jews, "*Hen am k'lavi*"-They are like a lion. Rav Rice explains that the Jewish people pounce upon *mitzvot* like a lion hungry for its prey. Napoleon's war campaign was successful because he made sure that his soldiers were well dressed and fed. But his real secret was that he placed a klezmer band within each unit so that his troops would fight with electric energy. Any war or struggle, even against the evil inclination, can be vanquished through *simcha*. Happiness opens the pathways inside of us to be ourselves. If we work on taking away the sadness, *simcha* will automatically enter.

The second leg is *middot*. The Beer Moshe says Bilaam had three evil traits-a bad eye, a

haughty spirit, and a wide soul. Corresponding to this, the Jewish people have three positive character traits, mercifulness, bashfulness, and kindness. The three *avot*, forefathers, represent these *middot*. Avraham is *chesed*, Yitzchak is bashfulness, and Yaakov is merciful. If you are kind you cannot have a negative eye, if you are bashful, you cannot be desirous, and if you are merciful you cannot be haughty. Sukkot celebrates a time of mercy. Pesach negates desire which leads to bashfulness. Shavuot is *chesed*. When the Jewish people went up to Yerushalayim and left their fortunes behind they were saying, life is not about our material world. When a person has his priorities in order, his negative *middot* fall by the wayside.

The third leg is *kedusha* (holiness). The Shivi'el Pinchas writes that Bilaam lifted his face towards the desert where the Jews had sinned with the Golden Calf. He hoped this gesture would help him destroy them. The influence of *chait ha'egel* is found in every generation, but Hashem in His *chesed* gives us a means of annulment through *batei b'shishim*. The sin took six hours. The moadim total fifteen days, $15 \times 24 = 360$, $60 \times 6 = 360$ hours of *kedusha*. The three festivals of sanctity nullify the six hours of distance. Fifteen days of total connection to Hashem and of living life enveloped in sanctity gave us the invincible strength to overcome Bilaam's evil designs.

Lost Property

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Dayan Shlomo Cohen

What is a Jew's obligation to return lost property? When can you take it for yourself, when do you have to try to find the owner and when can you just leave it. There are six conditions necessary for the obligation of *hashavat aveida* to apply. If any one of the following conditions aren't present, then there's no obligation to return the property. 1. The place where you found the lost property is a place where there's an obligation to return lost property. 2. The property is actually lost and hasn't been left intentionally by the owner planning to return. 3. The property has *simanim*- identifying features by which the owner can prove that he's the real owner. 4. The property is of such a nature that if it was yours, you would retrieve it. If you find

property you wouldn't walk through the streets holding onto, you have no obligation to return it. 5. The property belongs to someone to whom you have an obligation to return lost property 6. The property has a minimum value of a *perutah*- 1/40th of a gram of pure silver, a small amount of money in any currency. Anything that doesn't have this minimum value isn't worth anything and therefore there's no obligation to return it. If any of these six conditions are missing, there's no obligation for *hashavat aveida*.

Let's explain each of these conditions. If you find lost property in a crowded public street, although it may have very strong identifying features which can help identify the owner, you

can't take it for yourself. This is because once an owner realizes he's lost the property in a public place he'll immediately give up hope of getting it back (*yiush*) and then it's considered as if he relinquished ownership of the property and made it *hefker* and anyone who finds it can take it. But this wouldn't apply in every public place. If you find lost property in a shul or yeshiva or in the middle of a religious neighborhood, you wouldn't necessarily be able to say the owner has given up hope because the type of people who would find it would take steps to find the owner. Therefore, the owner wouldn't give up hope of finding the lost property. It follows that one can't say that anything found in a public location is ownerless, it depends on the location.

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It's also going to make a difference what type of property was lost. If you find a wallet with a few hundred dollars on a public bus, you can assume the owner gave up hope of finding it and you wouldn't have to return it. But if you lose your schoolbag with all your books, it isn't worth anything to anyone who finds it and you wouldn't give up hope and the finder would be obligated to track you down.

If you find a wallet with money in Times Square you would have no obligation to return it even if there are identifying features, but nevertheless it's certainly the right thing to do and *lifnim meshurat hadin* you would have to return it. The Gemara tells a story about a group of students who went with their rabbi to the marketplace. The students asked their

rabbi -What would be the halacha if we find a lost wallet here? The rabbi answered that they could take it for themselves. So they asked- What if someone comes and gives identifying information. The rabbi replied- *Beit din* can't force you to give it back, but it's certainly fitting and pious behavior, *lifnim meshurat hadin* to do so.

Parshat Balak

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Rabbi Hanoach Teller

Why did Hashem give the non-Jews a prophet like Bilaam? The commentators explain it was so that they wouldn't have an excuse to say, "If we would have a great prophet like Moshe we would've served Hashem." Yet Bilaam caused the people to be even more immoral than they had been. Amazingly Bilaam defined the essence of the Jewish people even more than the Jewish prophets who were wont to give rebuke. One of the first prayers a Jew says in the morning is *Mah tovu ohelecha*, the blessing Bilam gave the Jewish people.

What did Balak do to deserve that a parsha be named after him? Some opinions say it was the sacrifices that he sincerely offered to Hashem. Others say it was the merit of his illustrious descendants David and Ruth who were descendents of Moav. The elders of Moav advised Balak that Moshe's spiritual powers rested with his mouth. Therefore he planned to fight fire with fire and bring Bilaam to do battle with the Jewish people. While Balak feared the Jews, Bilaam hated them, seeing them as a competition for Hashem's favor.

On the way to curse the Jews, Hashem sent an angel to block Bilaam and his donkey. Rashi says it was an angel of mercy. Hashem

wants only our good. When things go wrong we think Hashem is working against us but in reality it is an angel of mercy that is impeding us and working towards our favor. Hashem opened the mouth of Bilaam's donkey and Bilaam lost the debate to him. The donkey ultimately died. Rashi says we learn from here a great principle of honoring others. Bilaam was a murderer and a criminal. And yet so that he not be shamed, the donkey was killed. How much more so should we go out of our way to be careful never to hurt a fellow Jew.

We can learn many lessons from the incident of Bilaam and his donkey. Many times Hashem sends us messages from heaven and we have to be attuned to it. A donkey talking and misbehaving was a clear sign from Hashem. He was saying, "Bilaam you want to go on this mission, you have the free will to do so. As the Gemara says, '*B'derech sh'adam rotzo leilech molichen oso*,' (In the way a person wants to go, he is led.) but don't forget that whatever I tell you, you will be compelled to say. So too in life there may be times when we only see the donkey and not the angel. We perceive the small things and fail to recognize the greater message. We have to open our eyes and try to ascertain what Hashem is really telling us.

Some commentators explain that the purpose

of the incident was to impress on Bilaam that human speech and that of a donkey are in the hands of Hashem. Bilaam was about to become the spokesman of the Almighty and define the essence of the Jewish people. He was so conceited that he needed a major shot of humility to represent Hashem. To lose a debate to a donkey is a rather humbling experience and Bilaam was meant not to forget that.

Bilam reached a level of prophecy only Moshe attained. He wanted to evoke the sin of the golden calf but he was unsuccessful. He was so impressed by the Jews modesty, how every tent was facing in another direction, that he proceeded to bless them. Hashem wanted the nations of the world to hear from their own prophet the greatness of the Jewish people so that they could learn from it. Bilaam likened the *avot* to rocks and the *imahot* to the hills. Our foundation and roots are our forefathers and the heritage they bequeathed us. Bilaam said, "They will not be reckoned among the nations." Rashi explains that when the final reckoning will be among the nations, Israel will not be included. Our purpose is to remain separate and distinct from the nations and to be a role model for them.