

## In this Issue

- **Rabbi Noah Weinberg's Wisdom for Living** by *Rabbi Noah Weinberg*
- **Making It Relevant** by *Katia Bolotin*
- **Rabbi Avraham Twerski's Insights on the Torah** by *Rabbi Dr. Abraham Twerski*
- **Self-Transformation Through Torah** by *Rabbi Avraham Kovel*



## Choosing a Non-Jewish Prophet

"And there was no other prophet who arose **in Israel** like Moshe, whom Hashem knew face to face." (*Devarim* 34:10)

**In Israel** no one arose like Moshe, but among the nations there did arise a prophet like Moshe. Who was that? Bilaam. (*Sifrei, Devarim* 357)

In this week's parashah we meet Bilaam, the non-Jewish prophet, who was hired by Balak to curse the Jewish people. But Hashem thwarted his plan, and despite all his efforts, his curses were transformed into great blessings.

Despite his status as a prophet, Bilaam was no *tzaddik*. The Mishnah casts him as the polar opposite of Avraham Avinu: "Whoever has three particular traits is counted among the students of Avraham, and whoever has three other traits is among the students of Bilaam. He who has a good eye, humility, and contentedness is a student of Avraham, while he who has an evil eye, arrogance, and greed

is a student of Bilaam" (*Avos* 5:22). Bilaam also advised Balak to use the women of Moav and Midian to entice the Jewish people to worship idols (*Sanhedrin* 106a).

Chazal ask: "Why did God bestow His *Shechinah* on such a wicked non-Jew? The answer is so that the nations of the world would not say, 'Had we had prophets we would have repented.' So He assigned them prophets..." (*Bamidbar Rabbah* 20:1). If not for Bilaam, the nations of the world would have had a legitimate complaint. "It's not fair," they would have said. "You sent the Jewish people a prophet like Moshe, who guided them and taught them. If you would have sent us a prophet like Moshe, we would have been just as good!"

Therefore, the Almighty sent them Bilaam, who prophesied on the same level as Moshe. And what happened? Moshe led the Jewish people to God, while Bilaam tried to curse the Jewish people, and in doing so destroyed his own people. This was God's answer to the nations: "See what happens when I give you a prophet! So stop your excuses."

But that wouldn't put an end to the discussion, for the non-Jews could answer back and say, "You sent the Jewish people Moshe Rabbeinu, an incredible *tzaddik* who was a humble yet powerful leader. But for us you selected someone like Bilaam? Is that fair? Hashem, couldn't you have found someone better than the evil Bilaam? Why not someone like Iyov, who, according to some opinions, was a righteous non-Jew?" (*Baba Basra* 15b)

In choosing a prophet for the nations, the Almighty had one crucial condition. Even though this prophet would be given Moshe Rabbeinu's level of prophecy – the ultimate, transcendental clarity of knowing God – he must still choose to remain a non-Jew and not join the ranks of the Jewish people. If he were to convert and become a Jew, that would undermine the entire goal of giving the nations a prophet.

So the Almighty searched high and low and

found Bilaam, a non-Jew who, while having the ultimate knowledge of the awesome, loving Creator of the universe, would still refuse to merge with Him by becoming a Jew. This refusal would eventually cause him to attack the Jewish people and destroy himself.

We can understand why Bilaam couldn't have converted. But why did he have to be so evil? Couldn't he have remained neutral?

## Elixir of Life, Potion of Death

There is no neutral when it comes to Torah. Chazal teach, "If a person is worthy, the Torah is an elixir of life (*sam chaim*), and if not, it is a death potion (*sam hamaves*)" (Yoma 72b). The Almighty's Torah is the path to full clarity, the repository of the deepest wisdom in the universe. If you learn it and apply it, it gives you strength and meaning. If you don't, those same words of Hashem can destroy you.

How do we understand this? Bilaam was given the *sam chaim*, the elixir of life, the ultimate gift of connecting with the Almighty. Despite receiving this gift, he refused to make a covenant with Hashem, deciding not to partner with God and His people. That decision itself was a rebellion, and in order to justify his choice, Bilaam had to denigrate the Jewish people and become an enemy of the good they represented. He had to actively oppose them, even seek to destroy them, in order to remain resolute in his decision to reject God and walk away from the ultimate truth. That is why Bilaam became a *rasha*, an evil person, despite being a prophet.

This type of rebellion is not to be confused with a typical *ba'al teshuvah* who, at the beginning of his process of *teshuvah*, is still committing numerous transgressions while taking on the performance of some mitzvos. The inconsistent, imperfect level of observance of a *ba'a teshuvah* does not signify a Bilaam-style refusal to follow the path of God. The *baal teshuvah* says, "Yes, the Torah is true and I want to observe it, but I'm weak, I'm not ready to give up my Saturdays and lobster. I wish I had the strength to do it all."

The *baal teshuvah* has discovered the *sam chaim*, the gift of life, and is growing step by

step. The Torah was not given to angels; it takes time. He has a long way to go, but over time he will get there. He is not saying, "I cannot accept the reality of Shabbos. I refuse to keep kosher. This is something I do not want to do." He is just struggling with the Torah's sudden demands. Eventually, his Torah learning will give him greater clarity and empower him to change. And the Almighty has an infinite amount of patience for him.

"For the righteous one will fall seven times and arise, but the wicked will stumble into evil" (*Mishlei* 24:16). Good people not only can fall – they *will* fall, but the key is that they strive to get up and keep growing. They are on the path, despite the inevitable setbacks. But the *rasha*, the evil man like Bilaam, is down for the count. He has decided not to get up, but to remain firmly entrenched in his detachment from God.

We are all weak and imperfect, but what differentiates us from Bilaam is that we are working toward success. . The righteous man can fall seven times – he is depressed, he quits, he is frustrated and angry – but he gets up! You want to climb that mountain and reach the pinnacle, without compromising. Be careful not to put up a wall or filter that shields you from any aspect of the truth, like Bilaam, because that will only lead to self-destruction.

Clarity or death. Life is a difficult trip; we have our weaknesses. But as long as we remain honest and strive to grow we will never become an enemy of good, for we will be attached to the *sam chaim*, the elixir of life.



## A Higher Purpose

We live in a world of duality. God created everything with both a spiritual and a physical dimension. The physical is clearly discernible, whereas the spiritual seems obscure and concealed. Since most of us focus on the here and now, we may not notice such abstract dimensions as spirituality. It's challenging to perceive the intrinsic value of what we don't see. Perhaps that is why latent potential is so easily overlooked. But God can utilize all things for an underlying higher purpose.

The Torah's narrative is replete with mysterious chains of events. Take, for example, the background of King David. Until the prophet Shmuel (Samuel) anointed him king, David was deemed lowly and was overlooked. Yet Mashiach (the Messiah), the promised deliverer of the Jewish People, will come from the house of David, ushering in the long-anticipated Messianic era.

David's ancestry is traced back to Lot, who, when intoxicated, had incestuous encounters with his daughters. David's ancestry includes the seemingly illicit relationship between Yehudah and his daughter-in-law, Tamar. This paved the way for the controversial marriage of Boaz to the Moabite convert Rus (Ruth). David Hamelech, Rus's great-grandson, was conceived amidst deceptively veiled circumstances. It's puzzling to comprehend how these "dark relationships," clearly lacking in what would be considered royal pedigree, concealed a higher purpose: the ultimate royalty of Mashiach.

The most improbable circumstances can be stepping stones on which to carry out God's providence. This concept is emphasized in this week's Torah portion, when the heathen prophet Bilam (Balaam) is hired to curse the Jews. Our Sages teach that Bilam was the counterforce of Moshe, representing the side of spiritual impurity. Balak, the king of Moav (Moab)—after whom this Torah portion was

named—asked the heathen sorcerer Bilam to curse the Jewish People. Bilam explained that God would place the words in his mouth; hence he could only say what God allowed.

We can infer from the text that Bilam was displeased about this fact. Rather than curse the Jews, he blessed them. Subsequently, Balak asked Bilam to curse Israel again—and to get it right this time. As previously noted, God can use the seemingly impure to bring about His Divine plan. Accordingly, He undermined Bilam's evil intention and transformed ill-intended words into blessings: "How goodly are your tents, Yaakov, your dwelling places, Israel." This enigmatic sentence appears in the morning prayers in every Jewish prayer book. It teaches us a relevant lesson. A curse can become a blessing. Yet what may be a blessing to one can be a curse to someone else. The Talmud states: "All God does, He does for the good." We aren't always aware of the concealed good in our lives. Sometimes, it can be mistaken for a curse. Eventually, the hidden good will be revealed.

Even Israel's enemies can serve a higher purpose. They may reveal themselves to shed light on our shortcomings. A lack of national unity and/or disregard of Torah observance renders us vulnerable. When dissension is pervasive and divides the Jewish People, ironically, our enemies force us to unite. The escalating threat posed by outside foes can become a catalyst to quell our internal discord. Then, we merge into a cohesive unit with a shared mission to overcome our adversaries.

It's imperative to be ever-mindful of our Divine mission. Together, at Har Sinai, the Jewish People entered into a covenantal relationship with God. We agreed to be God's ambassadors—beacons of light, guideposts of morality and justice—in a world bereft of spiritual illumination. The Jews are to be "a light unto the nations."<sup>195</sup> This is our immutable creed and mission statement.

Oftentimes, when nothing else can, our enemies unite us. Israel's at-tackers peculiarly rouse us into an acute awareness of who we're supposed to be. Divisiveness can sabotage our collective spiritual mission. God uses unexpected means to bring about His desired outcomes. The Torah tells us, repeatedly, to recognize the source of our adversities and to correct it. If the source is within us, then changing our behavior can be the antidote. Our personal flaws can be transformed into positive attributes. The Torah's wisdom is intended to help us navigate through life's challenges and to actualize our better selves.

*Parashas Balak* highlights how unexpected situations can serve a higher purpose. The ordinary and extraordinary coexist in tandem. Balak and Bilam's nefarious plot to curse the Jews has been reenacted in different times and places—to this day. But God can transform a curse into a blessing. So too, we can emulate our Creator by striving to do the same in our own lives.

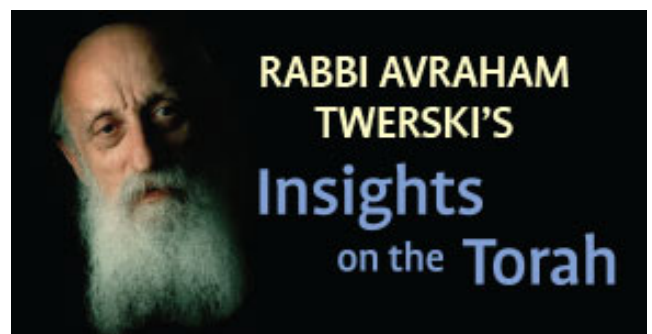
To us, God may seem to run our world counterintuitively. Yet, unlike us, God's vantage point is infinite, spanning all of time. One human lifetime may not be long enough for potential to be fully actualized. It can take generations. We can't negate that which the eyes don't see. This includes our own potential and higher purpose. God works in mysterious ways. Try not to disregard that which, in plain sight, seems to be lowly. Beneath its veneer, something extraordinary may be unfolding and waiting to be seen.

Something very positive can eventually emerge from what seems to be a negative situation, and vice versa. Here's a thought to contemplate: Having a seemingly uneventful day will take on more significance when you think of the variables of what could have gone amiss. While Bilam tried to curse the Jewish People, they weren't aware of what had transpired. We all can be dodging unseen bullets daily. Let's take a moment to be grateful for

our uneventful, ordinary days. Developing a broader spiritual perspective enables us to recognize the possible higher purpose of past events. Accordingly, try to reframe your own narrative to highlight the concealed good that's been revealed.

## Making It Relevant

1. Remember that we can sabotage ourselves by viewing our lives through a negative lens. Sometimes we can't see our blessings and require corrective spiritual lenses through which to view life clearly.
2. Transform your own "inner critic" into one that blesses you with a positive viewpoint of yourself and your life's circumstances. Is your life a curse or blessing? The way in which you think can be the deciding factor.
3. Recall an experience that seemed to be awful at the time, but that taught you valuable lifelong lessons.
4. A "good eye" and positive thoughts can help us find the inner strength to overcome our adversaries, both physical and spiritual. The Lubavitcher Rebbe often said, "*Tracht gut, vet zein gut*—Think good, and it will be good."



## Don't Sweat It

*He perceived no iniquity in Jacob, and saw no perversity in Israel" (Bamidbar, 23:21).*

The Hebrew word *amal*, translated here as “perversity,” has a second meaning, “toil.” It is an expression for work, especially laborious and exhausting work. The Ohr HaChaim uses this translation to give a unique interpretation to Balaam's words: “He saw no exhaustion in Israel.” Balaam perceived that even when Israel devotes itself wholeheartedly to the observance of Torah and mitzvot, it does not exhaust them.

It is a well-known fact that when someone has an overwhelming desire for something, he may be tireless in its pursuit. We have numerous accounts of the indefatigable study of Torah of our great scholars. It was not unusual for them to study Torah for eighteen hours each day.

The prophet says, “You did not call upon Me, Jacob, because you became weary of Me, Israel” (Isaiah 43:22). The Maggid of Dubno explained this verse with a parable:

*A merchant alighted from a ship and hired a porter to deliver his merchandise to his home. When the porter knocked at his door, sweating profusely and breathing heavily, the merchant promptly said, “Those were not my packages that you brought!”*

*The porter asked, “You haven't even seen what I brought. How can you say they're not yours?”*

*“Because,” the merchant said, “I deal in jewelry. My packages are light. They never would have caused you to sweat profusely.”*

*The Maggid said, “This is the thought that the prophet is conveying. God says, ‘How do I know that you are not calling upon Me? Because you become weary and exhausted with your praying. You may be just going through the motions of prayer. Praying to Me*

*would not cause you to be fatigued.’ ”*

Our devotion in prayer, our passion for Torah and our love for mitzvot should be such that we never tire in their performance.



## The Currency of Love is Effort

I stared at my computer screen after an hour-long Zoom date with my future wife. Everything had aligned beautifully, but then the matchmaker dropped the suggestion: “Why don't you visit her in Cleveland?” Eight hours each way for someone I'd just met virtually for one hour. After so many failed suggestions, could I really justify such a massive investment for a question mark?

I decided the potential was worth the risk and set out on a long drive to see if I'd finally met the one. Mid-April brought blue sunny skies as I pulled out of New Haven, but five hours into my drive on I80, blue skies turned to rain, rain turned to sleet, and sleet to a full blizzard. My Subaru, despite its all-wheel drive, slid precariously in six inches of highway snow. Realizing the danger, I pulled off to lower elevations, found a route through Pittsburgh that avoided the worst weather, and what should have been an eight-hour trip became twelve hours of harrowing near-accidents and white-knuckle driving.

I told myself, “This is either the best possible

effort to start this relationship or the stupidest thing I've ever done."

Thank God, it launched the love story of my life.

The greatest rewards often demand our greatest investment of effort—even when the outcome remains uncertain. This principle, it turns out, forms the foundation of one of the Torah's most elegant lessons, delivered by the most unlikely messenger: a talking donkey.

## The Cryptographic Donkey

In this week's Torah portion, Balak, king of Midian, recruits the renowned prophet Bilaam to curse the Jewish Nation and protect his kingdom from their advancing army. As Bilaam journeys to fulfill his commission, an angel blocks his path three times. Each time, his donkey swerves to avoid the celestial being. Each time, Bilaam—blind to the angel's presence—strikes his donkey in fury.

After the third blow, God grants the donkey the power of speech, and she delivers her rebuke: "What have I done to you that you have struck me these three times?" (Numbers 22:28).

Seems like a reasonable response from a talking donkey, but embedded in her words lies an anomaly. Usually, the Hebrew word for "times" is *pa'amim* (פעמים), but the Torah uses *regalim* (רגלים) instead. The word *regalim* typically refers to the three pilgrimage festivals of the Jewish people. Why this unusual word choice?

Rashi answers: "The donkey hinted to him, 'You seek to uproot a nation which celebrates the three pilgrimage festivals (*shalosh regalim*) complaint s'donkey The - רגלים?'" operates on two levels: you've struck me three times, and you're attempting to curse a people whose observance of three festivals makes them curse-proof.

The donkey's cryptic message raises the obvious question: why would festival observance provide such supernatural protection?

## Spiritual Shortcuts

To solve this puzzle, let's examine what follows. Bilaam arrives in Moav, meets Balak, and attempts to curse the Jewish people. After two failed attempts, Bilaam changes strategy: "Bilaam saw that it pleased the Lord to bless Israel; so he did not go in search of omens as he had done, but turned his face toward the desert" (Numbers 24:1).

What was Bilaam seeking in the desert that might turn God's favor against the Jews? The ancient translator Onkelos explains: "He directed his face toward the desert, where the Israelites had made the Golden Calf." For his final attempt, Bilaam turned to the Nation's greatest sin to invoke God's wrath.

Let's put the pieces together: The Golden Calf exposed our greatest weakness. The three pilgrimage festivals offer our ultimate defense. But what connects these two concepts? Why, of all things, do the pilgrimage festivals atone for the sin of the Golden Calf?

As we discussed in [Parshas Ki Sisa](#)<sup>1</sup>, idolatry is a desire to access the power of God without the proper relationship. An appropriate analogy would be the "one-night-stand" of our day and age - all of the pleasure of intimacy with none of the resultant responsibility of building a relationship or raising a child. When the Jewish people worshipped the Golden Calf, they sought access to Godly power, but on their own terms. They wanted all the benefits with none of the responsibility. When it comes to relationships, particularly our relationship with our Creator, there is no greater sin.

So what is the remedy? Putting the other before ourselves, even when it costs us. And that's exactly what the three pilgrimage

festivals accomplished.<sup>2</sup>

## The Ultimate Investment

After the conquest of Israel, God's command of the three pilgrimage festivals became reality: every Jewish male had to travel to the Temple in Jerusalem three times yearly, abandoning home, business, and family for weeks at a time.<sup>3</sup>

For those living at the borders, this journey could demand nearly a month of commitment—two weeks traveling each direction plus a week in Jerusalem. This happened twice yearly at full duration, with Shavuot requiring slightly less time. Men would desert their businesses at crucial agricultural seasons, leave their families vulnerable, and trek across dangerous terrain.

Think about the security implications. With all the men away, women and children remained completely exposed. Hostile neighbors, already resentful of Israel's conquest, would find the perfect opportunity for attack. Yet generation after generation, Jewish families accepted this risk, trusting in divine protection that came precisely through their willingness to abandon human security for spiritual obligation.<sup>4</sup>

Whereas worshipping the Golden Calf represented ultimate spiritual selfishness, the pilgrimage festivals represented ultimate selflessness. The Jews invested extraordinary effort, accepted massive risk, and demonstrated complete faith—all to serve God rather than themselves. This complete reversal—from taking to giving—became their shield against all curses.

## Invest to Connect

This principle scales from the cosmic to the personal. Just as the Jewish nation's effort to connect with God by traveling for his festivals

built their relationship with Him and atoned for past lapses, the same dynamic applies to our personal relationships.

My friend Rami captured this principle perfectly in his pre-wedding speech: "The currency of love is effort." Investment, risk, and sacrifice don't just express love—they create it.

Take a moment to reflect on your most important relationships—both human and divine. Where can you invest more effort in giving to others? The next time a loved one asks you for an inconvenient favor, go the extra mile. When a mitzvah feels like a burden, embrace the added challenge.

These investments of effort will pay dividends of love and divine protection for years to come.

Shabbat Shalom!  
Avraham

1. The Parsha that contains the sin of the Golden Calf
2. The Golden Calf and the three festivals share an extraordinary mathematical connection that reveals the Torah's stunning precision. The verses tell us the Jews worshipped the Golden Calf from dawn until midday when Moses descended from Mount Sinai—exactly 6 hours, or 360 minutes of sin. Now here's the remarkable discovery: the three festivals total exactly 15 days (7 for Passover, 1 for Shavuot, 7 for Sukkot). Calculate it out: 15 days × 24 hours = 360 hours. The symmetry is breathtaking—360 minutes of sin, 360 hours of atonement. The festivals don't just spiritually counter the Golden Calf; they mathematically mirror it with perfect precision.

But the Torah's elegance goes even deeper. Jewish law contains a principle called "*bitul b'shishim*"—a forbidden substance becomes nullified when mixed with exactly 60 times its volume. Since 6 hours equals precisely 1/60th of 360 hours, the 360 hours of pilgrimage festivals don't just commemorate our return to God—they literally nullify the 6 hours of Golden Calf worship according to halachic principles.

This calculation comes from Rabbi Yaakov Yitzchak ben Asher of Pershischa (1766-1813), known as the "Yehudi ha'Kadosh," Appears in an earlier Sefer, Kosnos Or: [כתנות יצחק](#) (page 65 of 86) (hebrewbooks.org), beginning of Parshas Balak.

3. "Three times each year, all your males shall present themselves before God, the Master and Lord of Israel" (Exodus 34:23). (NOTE: Though it was not required and sometimes impossible to achieve, families would often

travel together for these festivals)

4. This commandment of the pilgrimage festivals provides compelling evidence for Torah's divine origin. A human author would never have included such a suicidal practice in his religion—it's completely illogical to mandate national vulnerability without any way to guarantee safety. Even if the author were somehow charismatic enough to get people to sign on, people would have abandoned the religion within the first year after experiencing catastrophic attacks. The fact that Jews observed these pilgrimages for centuries, including during established periods under King Solomon and beyond, proves they actually received the divine protection the Torah promised.