



Parsha Perspectives RABBI DOVID BASLAW

ובלק בן צפור מלך למואב בעת ההוא

"Balak son of Tzipor was king of Moab at that time." (Numbers 22:4)

The Torah records Balak with the name of his father, whereas other kings are not listed that way. The Kabbalistic writings of the Zohar point out that not only was Balak a son of Tzipor, who was one of the sons of Yisro (Jethro, Moses' father-in-law), he was also the only member of his family who chose not to join the nation of Israel. Although Balak was not the son of a king, he became the king of Moab because the elders of Moab elected him in order to validate his decision to oppose all the other members of his family. Surely being honored with the royal throne would help Balak justify his difficult decision to remain detached from the others.

Rabbi Yitzchak Elchanan Valdstein (*Toras Yitzchak*) shares a subtle insight about human nature. Being human, we all make mistakes. Often, we unconsciously employ a tactic to rationalize a mistake — we search for the benefits that may have come about as a result of the error. Say a person is overcome with anger and lashes out at everyone around him. Perhaps one of the recipients of his rage actually needed to hear the harsh words, and the strict tone of voice left a positive (or seemingly positive) impact. Thus, he may feel both gratified and justified by the positive outcome that came about as a result of his having done something wrong. For this individual, being aware of the "benefit" will make it difficult for him to regret his inappropriate behavior.

The Midrash in Parshas Vayeshev

explores this concept. After Joseph's brothers threw him into an empty pit, they waited for someone to purchase him as a slave. Meanwhile, they sat down together to eat. The Midrash teaches us that there was a "redeeming" aspect of their outrageously insensitive act. The positive family unity that was felt among them (excluding Joseph, of course) was so strong that in this merit, their entire generation was provided with food. Isn't the Midrash rationalizing their wrongdoing because of the positive outcome? The same Midrash then challenges us to contemplate the possibility that if the brothers' wrongdoing yielded such a positive consequence, we can only imagine what effects their behavior could have brought about if had they acted appropriately!

Good *can* come out of an act which is

inherently wrong. Rather than looking for the positive consequences that may justify our behavior, we can instead challenge ourselves to consider how much more good would come as a result of doing something which is innately correct.

Rabbi Baslaw can be reached at parsha@partnersintorah.org

WORD of the WEEK
אוי

*"And he took up his discourse, and said אוי, — Oy — alas, who shall live when G-d does this!" (Numbers 24:23) The word oy is used twice in the Torah, and many times in the Prophets and Writings, and is an exclamation similar to "woe" or "alas." Rav David Kimchi (*Sefer Hashorashim*) describes it as a transcription of a person's cry of anguish or pain, similar to "oh!" in other languages. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch however, connects it to אוה — *avah* — desire, and understands אוי as an expression of fervent desire (*Etymological Dictionary of Biblical Hebrew* p. 5).*

Table Talk FOR DISCUSSION AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

King Balak of Moab sent messengers to hire Bilaam (Balam), a non-Jewish prophet whose curses always came true, to curse the Jews. Balaam asked G-d for permission to do so. Though initially G-d refused, Bilaam petitioned again and again until G-d gave him permission to go, with the caveat that he was only allowed to say what G-d would tell him to. Bilaam went, and G-d sent an angel to forcefully persuade him not to curse the Jews at all.

נ) After G-d gave Bilaam permission to travel with Balak's agents, why would G-d then impede his journey by sending an angel to block his path? (Darkei Hashleimus)

ב) Bilaam told Balak's messengers that even if Balak offered him all of his gold and silver, he still would do only what G-d instructed him (22:18). The Mishnah (*Ethics of our Fathers* 6:9) relates that Rabbi Yossi bar Kisma was traveling and met a man who asked him to move to his city. Rabbi Yossi responded that even if he was offered all of the gold and silver in the world, he still wouldn't move to a place that lacked Torah scholars. What is the difference between the responses of Balam and Rabbi Yossi? (*Torah Temimah, Darkei Mussar*)

A QUESTION FOR THE RABBIS

We are commanded by the Torah to alleviate pain to an animal (*Bava Metzia* 32b). Are gentiles forbidden to cause animals pain? Maimonides (*Guide for the Perplexed* 3:17) maintains that the prohibition against causing an animal pain is derived from the Torah and also obligates a gentile. His evidence is that when the angel spoke to Bilaam, who was on his way to curse the Jewish people, his first words were, "Why did you hit your donkey?" (Numbers 22:32) This indicates the importance of being sensitive to the suffering of an animal and also proves that gentiles are enjoined to be sensitive to animals, since Bilaam was not Jewish. Similarly the *Sefer Hasidim* (666) cites this verse as evidence that anyone, Jew or gentile, who causes excessive and unnecessary pain to an animal will "have to pay for this in future judgment."

HEY, I NEVER KNEW THAT!

One of the only biblical characters to appear in contemporary sources of the Bible is the evil prophet, Bilaam (Balam). The Deir 'Alla Tablet, currently in the Museum of Archaeology in Amman, Jordan, talks of a "seer (prophet) of the gods" by the name of "Balaam, son of Be'or." The tablet states, "The gods came to him in the night, and he saw a vision like an oracle of El." Rashi (Numbers 22:8) points out that G-d only came to Bilaam at night, the same way he had appeared to Laban. Neither of them merited an open revelation of their prophecy. Rashi points out that this phenomenon was almost as if G-d was trying to hide the fact that they were prophets.



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