

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

(Portion of Chukat-Balak)

There is a story in the Talmud about Rabbi Shimon ben Shetach who lived during the second Temple period and was the President of the Sanhedrin, the Rabbinic high court.

It seems he bought a donkey from a non-Jewish fellow and was riding back to Jerusalem when one of his students found a rare and valuable gem in one of the saddlebags. Halfway to Jerusalem, Rabbi Shimon, without thinking twice, immediately turned the donkey around and headed back to find the original owner of the donkey.

"But you bought the donkey with the saddlebags!" exclaimed one of his students. "Isn't anything found in them rightfully yours?" "I paid for a donkey", replied Rabbi Shimon, "I did not pay for such a valuable gem."

After journeying back to their point of origin and restoring the priceless gem to its original owner, the non-Jew, clearly overcome by Rabbi Shimon's integrity, exclaimed: "Blessed is the G-d of Rabbi Shimon ben Shetach!"

The first time I came across this story, I couldn't help but be saddened by the fact that, despite the obvious ethical excellence of Rabbi Shimon, his student, someone who was blessed to be studying Torah with no less than the great Rabbi Shimon ben Shetach, still wanted to keep the gem, assuming it so naturally that he was actually surprised that Rabbi Shimon wanted to return it.

I remember, as a boy, hearing my Rebbe, Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, relate one of the questions he used to ask when interviewing prospective rebbe'im (rabbinic teachers) for his yeshiva high school.

At a certain point in the interview, amidst a flurry of questions designed to test their knowledge of halachah (Jewish law) and Talmud, he would ask them what they would do (and what the halachic requirement would be), if after sending away for an electric shaver, the company accidentally sent back two shavers in the mail. He was amazed to see how many young rabbis would actually respond by delving into the question of whether, once the company sent the extra shaver, they were giving it to you, and whether the laws of theft applied equally to non-Jews.

Needless to say, he was only interested in hiring the minority of teachers who responded without thinking, that they would send it back!

Where is the balance between spiritual development and our quest to develop a deeper relationship with G-d on the one hand, and the importance of ethical excellence on the other? How can we ensure, not only in ourselves, but in our children and students and those we love, that spiritual growth does not come at the expense of simple 'mentschlichkeit': the value of being a good person?

This second part of this week's double portion, *Balak*, gives us some valuable insight regarding this question, from a most unlikely source.

Open up any *siddur* and you will find, right at the beginning, a beautiful poem, which reads as a love sonnet to the Jewish people. Known as the '*Ma Tovv*', which is traditionally recited as one enters the synagogue.

"Ma tovu' O'halecha Yaakov, Mishke'no'techa Yisrael...."

"How goodly are your tents, oh Yaakov; and your dwelling places, oh Israel...." .

Ask any Jewish four-year-old child in any Hebrew school, and he or she will most likely be able to sing the opening words of the first stanza. Indeed, who has not heard of the '*Ma tovu*'? And yet, most people don't realize the source of these beautiful verses. Three thousand years ago, these words were recited by a non-Jewish prophet, bent on cursing the Jewish people and seeing their destruction, who G-d caused to bless and praise them instead.

Fresh from its successes on the battlefield against the armies of *Og* and the Amorites (in the first portion of this week's double portion, *Chukat*), the Jewish people are about to encounter a new and perhaps even more sinister challenge.

Balak, the king of Moab, realizes he can never defeat the Jewish people on the battlefield; their G-d is just too strong. But he has one card up his sleeve, and he approaches Bilaam, a non-Jewish prophet, who, after a series of conversations and initial hesitation, finally agrees to climb the mountain overlooking the Jewish camp and curse the Jewish people in the name of their own G-d. After all, reasons Balak, if this people, blessed by G-d, becomes cursed by G-d, then all their seemingly magical powers will disappear, and the Moabite armies will make short work of them.

The whole idea seems ludicrous, and yet the Torah seems to take this very seriously. At first, G-d does not want to let Bilaam go, but after some persistence on the part of Bilaam and Balak, G-d lets Bilaam go, on the condition that he will only say what G-d tells him to.

So Bilaam travels to the mountain range of Emor and climbs to the mountaintop ready to curse the Jewish people. Sacrifices are offered to G-d, the big moment arrives, and it seems that the fate of the Jewish people hangs in the balance; if somehow, we are cursed by Bilaam, that will spell doom, and the end of the great vision of a Jewish people as a light unto the nations and an ethical role model for the whole world.

Putting aside for the moment how this could possibly be, G-d performs a miracle and, in the end, as Bilaam opens his mouth to curse the Jews, beautiful words of blessing and praise pour forth, and the Jewish people's destiny as a blessed nation is sealed forever.

Interestingly, **Rashi** quotes the Midrash (and many other commentaries echo this idea) that there was something G-d caused Bilaam to see that caused him to bless the Jewish people. In other words, it wasn't that G-d just spoke through Bilaam's vocal chords, because then it wouldn't have been Bilaam blessing the Jewish people, it would have been G-d. Rather, Bilaam saw something that actually caused him to want to bless the Jewish people all on his own.

And what was this incredible sight that caused even an evil prophet like Bilaam motivated by bribery (Balak was willing to pay a huge sum of money for this curse) to *want* to bless the Jews? What about the encampment of the Jewish people was so beautiful, so magnificent, that the sight of it filled you with such awe and appreciation that you could not help but sing out blessings and praises?

Rashi relates that Bilaam noticed that amongst all the Jewish tents, there was not one single tent opening that faced another tent opening. In other words, no-one's tent opening looked into anyone else's.

Now, don't get me wrong; this is a wonderful thing. I remember studying for the rabbinate and living in a tiny apartment in a very small student housing apartment building, appreciating the fact that no one else's window (often just a few feet away) looked right into ours. Modesty and valuing someone else's privacy is important, to be sure, but is this what caused Bilaam to bless us? And is this so important that it becomes the theme of the beginning of our prayers every day?

At first glance this seems like a fairly simple thing: to notice that not one tent opening faced anyone else's, but in considering this, it is worth noting that the Torah tells us there were approximately 600,000 men between the ages of twenty and sixty (the census for the army) who left Egypt, and, depending on the average size of the Jewish family at the time, and adding all the people who were younger or older than this (military) age, that means there were probably *millions* of tents!

This leaves us wondering how Bilaam could possibly look at every tent, and be able to say that there was not a single tent that faced another's opening? At 3,600 seconds in an hour, and 86,400 seconds in a day, and approximately two million six hundred thousand seconds in a month, by the time Bilaam would have gotten around to blessing (or cursing) them, the Jews would have already entered Israel!

Unless of course you think again: what is the easiest way to ensure that there is not one tent- opening facing another? (A circle would do it, but it would have been a circle hundreds of miles in circumference....) The answer: just have them all facing the same way. In other words, what Bilaam saw from that mountaintop were simply rows and rows of tents all facing the same direction, in rows that must have stretched on for miles. Which means they had to have a system when they encamped. And I suppose this must have been a new phenomenon, to have so impressed Bilaam.

I remember, one of the first times we ever set up our pup tents in an encampment in the army. The entire company (about 150 two-man pup tents) was making camp for the night, and we received the order, at last, to fall out and set up our tents.

We were still raw recruits in basic infantry training, so setting up the tents, pushing the stakes into the soft sands of the dunes we were in, and tying the ropes so the tents would stand straight was a comedy of errors, especially as it was two o' clock in the morning and freezing cold to boot.

We finally got our tent to stand so that it wouldn't fall on top of us (the stakes kept coming out of the sand), after which came the challenge of trying to get out of uniform and into a sleeping bag. These tents were the length of a sleeping bag, and the width of about two sleeping bags. You couldn't sit up straight and there was barely enough room for one person to get undressed, let alone two guys, but if you were caught sleeping in your uniform, (which would have been the easiest route, especially as we only had about four hours to sleep) you could get in a lot of trouble.

Looking back, I am sure he saw the mess we were making of it all, but must have wanted us to learn a lesson, so he waited; about ten minutes after I had finally gotten comfortable, (a term that must be used loosely under the circumstances!) our company commander came to inspect the tents and found them arrayed in complete chaos, facing every which way, with not even a semblance of discipline or order. (At two o' clock in the morning who thinks about which direction your tent is facing?).

And wouldn't you know it? As we scrambled out into the freezing open air, with our pants and boots hurriedly thrown on, amidst all the shouting, and tents falling over, it started to rain....

So it must have been a new phenomenon that an army, indeed an entire nation took the time to set up their tents facing a particular direction, to such an extent that it was visible to the naked eye from a distant mountaintop.

And perhaps this is why we recite these verses when we enter our synagogues, because three thousand years ago, a people entered the scene with a different set of priorities. And whenever they laid camp, they actually had a system designed to ensure that no one person's privacy was compromised at the expense of another. It must have taken some thought, to set this up; millions of tents all facing the same direction (most probably by tribes, three on each side of a large square....). Maybe they set flags up when they encamped, and everybody faced the flags, but whatever the specifics, they had a system that took every individual's feelings and respect into account, and this came before anything else.

It is easy, when entering *shul* (synagogue) to become so focused on the awesome challenge of developing our relationship with G-d, that we forget the person sitting right next to us. And it is equally understandable, with all the prayers in our hearts for ourselves and our loved ones, to forget what it is really all about. But a careful look at the beginning of the Jewish prayer book will make abundantly clear Judaism's focus on our relationships with our fellow human beings.

The Talmud tells us that the second Temple (the Beit HaMikdash) was destroyed through blind, wanton hatred, or *sinat chinam*. It is difficult to understand how any hatred can ever be *chinam*, which seems to mean 'for no reason at all'.

The **Netziv** (Rav Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin, the Rosh yeshiva of *Volozhin* in the nineteenth century in Lithuania) suggests that this wanton hatred refers to disliking or even detesting someone because their views are different from yours, even if you know (or believe you know) that their viewpoint is wrong. This becomes critical because **Rav Kook** suggests that if the Temple was destroyed through *sinat chinam* then it will only be rebuilt through *ahavat chinam*, or wanton, baseless love. And this may mean that the secret to a better world and all that we dream of is simply learning to see the common ground and the beauty in someone else's viewpoint and perspective, however different it may be from our own.

And so it is Bilaam, the most unlikely of sources, a non-Jew who seems to detest all that we stand for, who is given the opportunity to see things in an entirely different way.

And maybe this is why we do not traditionally recite the *Ma Tovu*, at home in private prayer, but rather when we enter the synagogue and join the community.

The Torah does not really tell us where we can find G-d, but it does tell us that every human being is created in the image of G-d. Allegorically, there is a little piece of G-d inside every human being, Jew or Muslim, Christian or Buddhist, even friend or foe. And if we cannot see the little piece of G-d inside the person standing next to us, we will have a hard time finding G-d anywhere at all.

Shabbat Shalom,

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