

Likutei Divrei Torah

Gleanings of Divrei Torah on Parashat Hashavuah
via the Internet

In memory of Blanche Greenberg, a"h (21 Tammuz)

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Shabbat Parashat Balak

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Covenant & Conversation: R. Jonathan Sacks, z"l

A People That Dwells Alone? - The dictionary defines epiphany as "a sudden manifestation of the essence or meaning of something; a comprehension or perception of reality by means of a sudden intuitive realisation." This is the story of an epiphany I experienced one day in May 2001, and it changed my perception of the Jewish fate.

It was Shavuot and we were in Jerusalem. We had gone for lunch to a former lay leader of a major Diaspora community. Also present at the table was an Israeli diplomat, together with one of the leaders of the Canadian Jewish Community.

The conversation turned to the then forthcoming – now notorious – United Nations' Conference against Racism at Durban. Though the conference would not take place until August, we already knew that it, and the parallel gathering of NGOs, would turn into a diatribe against Israel, marking a new phase in the assault against its legitimacy.

The diplomat, noting that the conversation had taken a pessimistic turn, and being a religious man, sought to comfort us. "It was ever thus," he said, and then quoted a famous phrase: "We are 'am levadad yishkon', the people that dwells alone."

It comes from this week's parsha. Bilaam, hired to curse the Jewish people, instead repeatedly blesses them. In his first utterance he says to King Balak King of Moab: How can I curse whom God has not cursed? How can I denounce whom the Lord has not denounced? From the top of the rocks I see them, and from the hills I gaze down: a people that dwells alone; not reckoned among the nations.

Hearing these words in that context I experienced an explosion of light in the brain. I suddenly saw how dangerous this phrase is, and how close it runs the risk of being a self-fulfilling prophecy. If you define yourself as the people that dwells alone, you are likely to find yourself alone. That is not a safe place to be.

"Are you sure," I said to the diplomat, "that this was a blessing, not a curse? Remember who said it. It was Bilaam, and he is not known as a friend of the Jews." Bilaam is one of the people mentioned in the Mishnah as having no share in the world to come. Having failed to curse the Israelites, he eventually did them great harm.

"Remember," I continued, "what the Talmud says in Sanhedrin, that all the blessings with which Bilaam blessed the Jewish people turned into curses with the sole exception of the phrase, 'How good are your tents, Jacob, your homes, O Israel'." The Rabbis suggest that Bilaam was deliberately ambiguous in what he said, so that his words could be understood as blessings but also had another and darker meaning.

"Nor," I said, "is badad, being alone, a good place to be according to the Torah. The first time the words 'not good' appear in the Torah are in the phrase *Lo tov heyot ha'adam levado*, 'It is not good for man to be alone'. About a leper the Torah says, *badad yeshev michutz lamachaneh moshavo*, 'He shall dwell alone, outside the camp'. When the book of Lamentations seeks to describe the tragedy that has overtaken the Jewish people it says *Eichah yashva vadam ha-ir rabati am*, 'How alone is the city once filled with people'. Except in connection with God, being alone is rarely a blessing.

What I suddenly saw, when I heard the diplomat seeking to give us comfort, was how dangerous this

Jewish self-definition had become. It seemed to sum up the Jewish condition in the light of antisemitism and the Holocaust. But that is not how the commentators understood the phrase. Rashi says it means that Jews are indestructible. Ibn Ezra says it means that they don't assimilate. Ramban says it means that they maintain their own integrity. It does not mean that they are destined to be isolated, without allies or friends. That is not a blessing but a curse. That is not a destiny; still less is it an identity.

To be a Jew is to be loved by God; it is not to be hated by Gentiles. Our ancestors were called on to be "a kingdom of Priests and a holy nation." The word *kadosh*, "holy," means set apart. But there is a profound difference between being apart and being alone.

Leaders are set apart, but they are not alone. If they really were alone, they could not be leaders.

Athletes, writers, actors, singers, pianists may live apart when they are preparing for a major performance, but they are not alone. Their apartness is purposeful. It allows them to focus their energies, hone and refine their skills. It is not an existential condition, a chosen and willed isolation.

There is no suggestion in the Torah that Jews will live alone. God says to Abraham, "Through you all the families of the earth will be blessed." Abraham was different from his neighbours, but he fought for them and prayed for them. He was apart but not alone.

For some time now – the Durban conference was one sign of it – Israel and Diaspora Jewry have faced growing isolation. Israel has been the object of a sustained campaign of delegitimisation. Meanwhile, *shechittah* is under attack in Holland, and *brit milah* in San Francisco. Battles we thought we had won for the freedom to live as Jews, individually in the Diaspora, nationally and collectively in the state of Israel, are now having to be fought all over again.

These are important fights, good fights, whose outcome will affect more than Jews. In ancient times, Israel was a small nation surrounded by large empires. In the Middle Ages, Jews were the most conspicuous minority in a Christian Europe. Today the State of Israel is a vulnerable enclave in a predominantly Muslim Middle East.

Jews have long been cast in the role of the 'Other', the one who does not fit into the dominant paradigm, the majority faith, the prevailing culture. One of Judaism's central themes is the dignity of dissent. Jews argue, challenge, question. Sometimes they do so even with God Himself. That is why the fate of Jews in any given time and place is often the best index of freedom in that time and place.

It is no accident that the story of Abraham begins immediately after the biblical account of the Tower of Babel, which opens with the words, "Now the whole world had one language and a common speech." Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin (Netziv) says that this means that there was no dissent. There was an enforced uniformity of opinion. Such a society leaves no room for dialogue, debate, disagreement and difference, the things essential for freedom.

When, therefore, Jews fight for the right to be, whether as a nation in its historic home, or as a religious group in other societies, they fight not for themselves alone but for human freedom as a whole. It was the Catholic writer Paul Johnson who wrote that Jews are "exemplars and epitomisers of the

human condition. They seemed to present all the inescapable dilemmas of man in a heightened and clarified form... It seems to be the role of the Jews to focus and dramatise these common experiences of mankind, and to turn their particular fate into a universal moral."

As we prepare ourselves for the next battle in the long fight for freedom it is vitally important not to believe in advance that we are destined to be alone, to find ourselves without friends and allies, confronting a world that neither understands us nor is willing to grant us a place to live our faith and shape our future in loyalty to our past. If we are convinced we will fail, we probably will. That is why the Rabbis were right to suggest that Bilaam's words were not necessarily well-meant.

To be different is not necessarily to be alone.

Indeed, it is only by being what we uniquely are that we contribute to humankind what we alone can give. Singular, distinctive, countercultural – yes: these are part of the Jewish condition. But alone? No. That is not a blessing but a curse.

Shabbat Shalom: Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

Does God Speak to Us Today? And If So, Can It Be through the Mouth of a She-Ass? - "God opened the mouth of the she-ass and she said unto Bilaam..." Does God still speak to us today, and – if He does – where must we look in order to discover His message? The answer to this question lies in a fascinating Hasidic interpretation to one of the most amazing events recorded in the Bible, that of Bilaam's talking she-ass.

Bileam, the central figure in the portion of Balak, is generally regarded as a wicked person, possessing "an evil eye, an arrogant spirit, and a greedy soul", a summation easily backed up by the events described in our portion. After all, for the right price and sufficient power, Bileam was willing to sell his soul and curse the Israelites.

And yet another view of Bileam, seemingly contradictory to the Mishna, is found in Sifrei where it's stated (Parashat Vezot HaBerakha) that in Israel no prophet ever arose like Moses, "but amongst the nations of the world there was such a prophet, and he is Bileam." How does the Midrash place the venal and grasping Bileam on the level of Moses, redeemer of Israel, transmitter of the message of the divine from the foot of Mount Sinai to all generations and all worlds? What can these two figures possibly share in common?

Perhaps by isolating the most unique element of the Bileam narrative, we can perceive what it is that the Midrash wants to tell us. Undoubtedly the magical and mystical moment in our portion is the encounter between Bileam and his she-ass. Bileam set out with Balak, king of Moab, to curse the nation of Israel, but his formerly trustworthy she-ass refused to allow him to continue his journey. The gentle prophet angrily beat his animal, and suddenly: "God opened the mouth of the ass and she said unto Bileam". The she-ass had seen an angel of the Lord standing in the way with drawn sword, chastising Bileam lest he plan to revile the nation most blessed by God. The gentle prophet's one-word response, "I have sinned", marks the turning point, and from then on Bileam – to the chagrin of his "sponsors" – rose to

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poetic heights regarding his praise of Israel which echo Moses' magnificent paean in the book of Deuteronomy. Most significant of all, however, is that Bileam the prophet was brought to a divine vision by the message of a she-ass!

Indeed, the miracle of the she-ass speaking is so profound that the Mishna lists the pi ha'aton (mouth of the she-ass) among the ten things created at dusk immediately preceding the first primordial Sabbath of the initial seven days of creation. We are being taught not to see this event merely as a fable, or a dream, but rather as a miracle built into the very blueprint of creation – an ass's mouth whose voice would be heard not only by Bileam, but would reverberate throughout the generations in the form of Bileam's praise of Israel. The most crucial message of this miraculous mouth is that no gentile leader will ever be allowed to curse and destroy Israel, that those who come to scoff will remain to praise.

But why did the Almighty choose such an unseemly messenger – a she-ass – to convey His message to Bileam? Clearly the mouth of this she-ass – emanating from the very dawn of creation – demonstrates how

God's message may emerge from the most unexpected sources. And what is important is not only that a she-ass can communicate the divine will; the most significant message of this tale may be that the individual must strive to develop the ability to hear, to discern from the harsh guttural hee-haws the message that is being sent to him. In effect, God's words may be found in the most unlikely of places – as long as we have the necessary spiritual antennae to receive them.

This principle may be the source of Rashi's explanation of the verse immediately following the Ten Commandments in Deuteronomy.

"These words God spoke unto all your assembly out of the midst of the fire, of the clouds, and of the thick darkness, with a great voice, and it did not cease [velo yasaf; Targum ad loc: velo pasak]". Rashi explains: "and since God did not pause, He did not have to resume, for His voice is strong and goes on continuously." How does God's voice go on continuously? The lesson seems to be that the sound waves released at Sinai are continually and eternally present in the world; we must simply attune our ears to be sensitive receptors.

In his Torah commentary, the Pri Tzaddik stresses this idea by citing a tale of the Hasidic master, Reb Zusha who, during one of his journeys, came upon a peasant whose wagon had turned over. Asked to help, Reb Zusha, no longer young and feeling himself too weak to struggle with an overburdened wagon, demurred, saying: "I'm sorry, I can't help you." "You can," said the peasant to Reb Zusha, "You certainly can. You just don't want to." The peasant's words sank into the very core of Reb Zusha's being, resonating with a message from above, as if the Shekhina herself was admonishing Reb Zusha for saying "I can't." "You can," he heard the Shekhina saying, "you just don't want to." Reb Zusha was able to accept the truth of the peasant's words on more than one level. How often do we say we "can't" when what we really mean is we "won't" or "we do not wish to"? And here, in this world, our Temple is destroyed, the Divine Presence has fallen, and we don't lift her (the Shekhina) up. And although it's because we say we cannot, the real reason is because we don't want to! Did the she-ass actually speak? The truth is that that is an irrelevant issue. What is important is what Bileam learned from his donkey, the divine message he perceived from the animal's stubborn refusal to continue the journey, the fact that he, visited with the gift of prophecy, dared not speak out words which were antithetical to the divine will. The she-ass knew not to continue such a sacrilegious journey; Bileam understood that he had better learn from the she-ass!

Herein lies the essence of the teaching set forth in Avot: "Ben Zoma says, who is wise? He who learns from every person." If Reb Zusha can learn a major principle regarding our relationship to the divine from the simple words of a gentile peasant, if Bileam could learn from the she-ass, we must always be on guard to sensitize our ears and our hearts to receive a direct divine message from whoever, and wherever!

The Pri Tzaddik reminds us of the Talmud's dilemma regarding R. Meir, who continued to receive Torah from the rabbi-turned-apostate, Elisha b. Avuya (known as Acher, or "the other one"). After all, does not the prophet Malachi teach: "The lips of the priest shall preserve wisdom, Torah shall be sought from his mouth, because he is an angel of the Lord of hosts", interpreted by our sages to mean that only if a Torah sage is comparable to an angel on high may we study from his mouth? If so, how can R. Meir continue to study from a heretic? The answer in the Talmud is that a truly great individual has the ability and sensitivity to hear God's words even from the lowliest of places. Hence R. Meir heard it from Acher, Reb Zusha heard it from a gentile peasant, Bileam heard it from a she-ass, and Moses heard it from the depths of a lowly, prickly thornbush.

Maimonides notes that on Mount Sinai every Jew heard the divine sound, but only what he was capable of hearing, depending on his spiritual level and human sensitivity. God-waves continue from Sinai and are consistently prepared to deliver the divine word – even from the most unseemly messenger. Are we prepared to receive them?

The Person in the Parsha: R. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb

No to Here and Now - Earlier this week, in an attempt to gain some space in my crowded apartment, I was going through some old records and discarding many of them. Uncertain about whether or not to keep some of them, I found myself guided by my mother-in-law's advice: "When in doubt, throw it out."

And so, although with some hesitation, I tossed into the trash folders containing my children's report cards from thirty or more years ago, letters of congratulations at various family milestones, and letters of condolences that I received while sitting shiva for my dear departed parents.

About an hour after consigning those precious mementos to oblivion, I began to have second thoughts. I realized that I had chosen to eliminate documents of exquisite personal meaning. I had succumbed to the modern temptation to live only in the present and to ignore, nay suppress, the important role of the past in our lives. Luckily, I was able to retrieve these records, and restored them to their rightful place in my personal archives.

These days, we must vigilantly resist this growing and powerful tendency to live only in the moment and for the moment. We dare not forget the importance of the past, and yes, the future, upon our contemporary existence. Today's culture has aptly been called "ahistoric," and the loss of a historical perspective has taken its toll upon our society and upon each of us as individuals.

An excellent example of this anti-historical attitude is expressed in a passage in the writings of Hebrew author Haim Hazaz. I am indebted to Professor Yosef Yerushalmi's book, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, for this splendid illustration. Hazaz puts the following words in the mouth of his character, Yudka: "I want to state that I am opposed to Jewish history. I would simply forbid teaching our children Jewish history. I would just say to them, 'Boys, from the day we were exiled from our land, we've been a people without a history. Class dismissed. Go out and play football.'"

This attitude is personified by the hero, or perhaps better, the anti-hero, of this week's Torah portion,

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Bilaam. He is described as one who "knows the mind of the Almighty." The Talmud wonders about this and suggests that Bilaam is able to determine the one brief instant of each day when the Almighty is angry. As the Psalmist has it, "Regah b'apo chayim birtzono. His anger is for a moment, but his favor is for a lifetime."

In a typically brilliant and provocative insight, Rav Kook suggests that there are two modes in which the Divine operates. There is the constant goodness, peace, light, and life that comprise the mode "netzach, eternity." And then there are the transient moments when God, as it were, displays His fury, permits evil to get the upper hand, and allows strife, pestilence and war. That is the mode of "rega, the moment." Fortunate are those human beings who can connect and draw from God's mode of "netzach." Beware those human beings who relate only to God's "rega" mode. Bilaam is the biblical archetype of the person who isolates present as all-important and denies both the past and the future.

In Rav Kook's terms, this week's Torah episode describes a confrontation between a people rooted in history, conscious of its past and proud of it, aware of its future and inspired by it, versus the villain Bilaam, who would excise past and future and condemn us only to the transience of fleeting time. It is the battle between "netzach yisrael," an eternal people, and a people without tradition and without hope.

Jewish tradition teaches us that our past is very much a part of who we are in the "here and now." Our religion is nothing if not a historical religion. Our personal lives are trivialized to the extent that we do not connect to both our recent past and our millennia-long history.

Permit me to relate these reflections to a contemporary concern, and to express yet one more criticism of former President Barack Obama's 2009 speech to the Muslim world in Cairo. In describing the Jewish people's claim to the land of Israel, he only mentioned the relationship between the horror of the Holocaust and the founding of the State of Israel. He neglected to put our claim to the Holy Land in proper historical perspective. For us, the Holocaust is part of our present moment—its survivors are still alive among us. What legitimizes our claim to the land of Israel is our millennia-long bond with that land, one which goes back to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and which has ancient biblical roots.

There is a lesson here for us as a people and for each of us as struggling mortals. The Jewish people cannot survive in this world if our legitimacy as a nation is limited to the here and now. We are an ancient people and must proudly assert the power of our pasts and not forget the promise of our future.

And as individual human beings coping with the ordinary and extraordinary challenges of daily existence, we are also lost if we limit our temporal perspectives to today. We must be informed and influenced by yesterday, and we must enthusiastically anticipate tomorrow.

Aish.Com: Reality Vs. Perception: Sarah Maddalini

[Excerpt] Balaam, the non-Jewish prophet, saddled his donkey and was on his way to curse the Jews upon King Balak's request. On the way, Balaam's donkey refused to forge ahead. Then Balaam struck the she-donkey. There is such a profound and poignant lesson with the message of the donkey. Unfortunately, often times we go through life with our own blinders of reality on and we only see our limited view. This is especially true when dealing with others. Everyone has their reasons for acting, speaking, and dealing a certain way. We are very quick to make judgements about others for not behaving in a way that is subpar to how we think we would have acted in a similar situation.