

# 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 and Conversation

Rabbi 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. Num. 23:8-9

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 (Sanhedrin 10:2) as having no share in the world to come. Having failed to curse the Israelites, he eventually did them great harm (Num. 31:16).

"Remember," I continued, "what the Talmud says in Sanhedrin (105b), 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'" (Num. 24:5). 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' (Gen. 2:18). About a leper the Torah says, *badad yeshev michutz lamachaneh moshavo*, 'He shall dwell alone, outside the camp' (Lev. 13:46). When the book of Lamentations seeks to describe the tragedy that has overtaken the Jewish people it says *Eichah yashva vadad ha-ir rabati am*, 'How alone is the city once filled with people' (Lam. 1:1). 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,

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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.

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### **Shabbat Shalom: Rabbi Shlomo Riskin**

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#### **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 Bileam...” (Numbers 22:28)

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 Bileam’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” (Mishna Avot 5:22), 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 gentile prophet angrily beat his animal, and suddenly: “God opened the mouth of the ass and she said unto Bileam” (Numbers 22:28). 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 gentile prophet’s one-word response, “I have sinned” (Numbers 22:34), marks the turning point, and from then on Bileam – to the chagrin of his “sponsors” – rose to 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 (Avot 5:8). 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.

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“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]” (Deut. 5:19). 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 (4:1): “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 Malakhi 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”

(2:7), 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 (CHagiga 15b). Hence R. Meir heard it from Acher, Reb Zusha heard it from a gentile peasant, Bilaam heard it from a she-ass, and Moses heard it from the depths of a lowly, prickly thornbush.

In his Guide for the Perplexed, Maimonides points out that on Mount Sinai every Jew heard the divine sound, but each person heard 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. The question is: are we prepared to receive them?

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### **The Person in the Parsha** **Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersch Weinreb**

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#### **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, 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

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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.

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### **Torah.Org: Rabbi Yissocher Frand**

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#### **Bilaam Lost His Shock Value**

Apparently, Bilaam had a relationship with Hashem that we can only dream about. And yet we see that he had an attitude that is hard to fathom. When Hashem asked Bilaam, "Who are these people with you?" Rashi explains that Bilaam answers Hashem arrogantly: "Even though I am not important in your eyes, I am important in the eyes of kings."

Later, in one of the most mind-boggling incidents in the Torah, Bilaam does not appear to be at all phased by the fact that his donkey starts talking to him. He just answers back and begins a dialogue with his donkey as if it was an everyday occurrence.

How do we explain the paradoxical personality of Bilaam? Rav Schwab offers an interesting insight. Hashem gave us certain senses. Most of us are blessed with the senses of sight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell. But there is also a sixth sense. That is the sense of being able to be nispael (impressed). Hashem gave most human beings the ability to be impressed by certain phenomenon in this world.

This sense of being nispael is necessary for our avodas (service of) Hashem. The Rambam speaks of a person becoming impressed and overwhelmed with the awe of creation, and of the wisdom and beauty of nature. This is a sense that we need to develop within ourselves — emotions of love and reverence towards the Creator.

However, just like the other senses can be deadened and destroyed if they are abused, the same is true with the sixth sense. If a person listens to loud music for long enough, he can lose his sense of hearing. If a person continuously eats very spicy foods, he can damage his sense of taste. Likewise, a person can lose his sense of being nispael. How does that happen? What costs a person his sense of being impressed?

Rav Schwab suggests that a person can lose his sense of being nispael through gluttonous indulgence in every passion and lust in the world. If a person is obsessed with enjoying,

taking, eating, consuming, and all he ever thinks about is indulging in the most obscene and gluttonous fashion, then after a while, nothing impresses him anymore. He is so consumed with just enjoying himself that nothing gets him excited anymore.

If it seems hard to relate to this concept, all we need to do is to open our eyes and look at what has happened in the western world. Nothing makes an impression anymore. Movies have become more and more violent and explicit. Music has become more and more outrageous. The way people talk and the words we hear have become more and more astounding, because nothing makes an impression anymore. As a society, we have lost our sense of wonder. We have become coarsened.

To quote a recent piece in the Op-Ed page of the Baltimore Sun, “America has lost its ‘shock value.’ Nothing shocks anymore.”

That is what happened to Bilaam. Nothing shocked him. His animal spoke to him and he took it in stride.

Everyone recognizes the seriousness of losing a sense of sight or hearing, chas v’shalom (Heaven forbid). We need to recognize that losing the sense of being nispael is a similarly serious by-product of the gluttonous and indulgent life that Bilaam lived.

### **The Tircha D’tzibbura Of Reciting Parshas Bilaam Daily**

The Torah testifies that Bilaam was “yodeah daas Elyon” (he knew the thoughts of his Creator). The Talmud (Brochos 7a) explains that this means that he knew how to precisely pinpoint the times that were auspicious for invoking the wrath of Hashem. The Talmud speaks of a certain moment each day when Hashem becomes angry with the world. Bilaam knew how to gauge that moment, and this knowledge was his secret weapon. He intended to synchronize his cursing of the Jewish people with that moment of Hashem’s wrath, and thereby bring Hashem’s wrath down upon the Jewish nation.

Rav Elyakim Schlessinger asks (in his sefer, Beis Av): If, in fact, Bilaam’s power was limited to knowing the moment of Hashem’s anger, that would seem to be a far cry from the Torah’s testimony that he was yodeah daas Elyon — he knew the mind of his Creator. The Beis Av therefore cites a Rabbinic teaching regarding the creation of the world.

Hashem originally intended to create the world using only His middas haddin (attribute of justice). In such a world, if someone would do an aveira, the punishment would be delivered immediately. But when Hashem saw that human beings would not be able to exist in such a world, He partnered the middas harachamim (attribute of mercy) with the middas haddin. This does not mean that if someone does an aveira, Hashem will just

forget about it. It simply means that Hashem extends a grace period. Hashem gives the sinner some slack, so to speak, giving him the ability to ultimately repent. This combination of din (judgment) and rachamim (mercy) is the way the world operates.

Bilaam knew “daas Elyon”. That means that he was aware of Hashem’s original plan. He knew that Hashem originally wanted to create the world with only the middas haddin. Bilaam knew that every single day of every single year there is one moment when Hashem returns to his original plan and looks at the world with the middas haddin. This is what the Gemara means that during one moment of the day, Hashem gets angry. At that moment, chas v’shalom, anything can happen. The middas haddin has free reign at that moment. This knowledge was Bilaam’s great strength.

Bilaam’s power was to always look at the world askance. The Mishna (Avos 5:22) teaches that Bilaam had an ‘evil eye.’ This means that Bilaam looked at the world in a non-generous fashion, rather than with an eye toward the middas harachamim. He would always look with an eye toward invoking the middas haddin.

This explains why Bilaam refers to himself as the “one eyed man.” Who would ever describe himself as delivering “the speech of a one-eyed man?” Is being blind in one eye something to brag about and be proud of? Man was given two eyes: One eye to look at things with the middas haddin and one eye to look at things with the middas harachamim. Bilaam did not see the positive, only the negative. Bilaam bragged that he was a person who always looks only with an ‘evil eye.’ “My claim to fame is that I can invoke judgment against the Jewish people because I know when the Creator utilizes only his attribute of judgment.”

Our great salvation was “lo hibit avven b’Yaakov” (He perceived no iniquity in Jacob) (Bamidbar 23:21). In all the days that Bilaam tried to invoke the attribute of judgment, Hashem in His mercy, abstained from anger and never looked at us with middas haddin.

Finally, homiletically, the Beis Av suggests that this is the intention of the Gemara in Brochos that says that if not for the tircha d’tzibbura (great trouble for the congregation), the chachomim would have instituted the recital of the parsha of Balak in the middle of the daily recitation of Shema. The standard interpretation of this Gemara is that we would have included the reading of Balak within — in addition to — the reading of Krias Shema. However, the Beis Av cites an opinion from the Satmar Rebbe that the Gemara is making an even stronger statement: We would have REPLACED the reading of Krias Shema with that of Parshas Balak. If that is the case, how would that be tircha d’tzibbura? We can understand the tircha d’tzibbura if the option

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was to read both the three sections of Krias Shema AND Parshas Balak. The inclusion of such an additional paragraph in Shema would take more time, creating a burden for the congregation. If, however, the alternative was to replace Krias Shema with Balak, there would not have been a net increase in the amount of time required, so how would it trouble the congregation?

The answer is that the tircha d’tzibbura is from hearing twice daily — “Kel zoem b’chol yom” — that Hashem is angry every day at least momentarily and that at that time the middas haddin is given free reign. We would be demoralized. We would not be able to handle the thought. A smile would not appear on our faces the entire day. The thought is too chilling to contemplate daily. That is the tircha d’tzibbura to which the Gemara is referring.

Whether we recite it daily or not, this fact remains the truth. Chas v’shalom, when we see tragedies in our midst — tragedies that seemingly should not have occurred and do not seem to make any sense — we ponder and ask ourselves, ‘Why?’ Sometimes, such tragedies can be the result of the severe middas haddin that can affect anyone at any time. This is why a person must constantly examine his actions on a daily basis. Teshuva is not something that should only be relegated to the Aseres Yemei Teshuva (Ten Days of Repentance). The antidote to middas haddin is the middas harachamim, which we will be granted if we show Hashem that we are constantly introspecting and that we are willing to improve.

### **Dvar Torah: Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis**

How is it possible that we name one of the key portions of the Torah, after the evil king of the Moabites, Balak?

It is in the Parsha of Balak, that we come across two foes of the Jewish people, Balak and Bilam, but there was a significant difference between the two.

With Bilam what you saw was not what you got. Bilam presented himself as a man of God, a great spiritual giant, a prophet, a person who is there always to do the right thing. A good individual, but deep down he was corrupt and that is what we find out as the story unfolds within the Parsha.

Balak however, was very different.

Balak was upfront, everybody knew he hated the Jewish people, he wanted to wipe us out, that is why he hired the services of Bilam.

With Balak, you knew where you stood with him and that was a tiny redeeming feature of an outrightly evil person.

I’ve always been fascinated by the fact that the archetypal treif food, is swine.

If you want to identify something that is most definitely non-kosher, it is food which comes from a pig.

But it is fascinating because actually, the pig scores 50% in the test of Kashrut, because there are two requirements in the Torah, for an animal to be kosher.

The pig has one of the requirements, it has cloven hooves, however it does not chew the cud.

So you see outwardly, the pig expresses to the world: 'I am kosher, everything's ok about me', but inwardly it is outrageously treif.

That is dangerous. That is hypocrisy, which is totally unacceptable and that is why swine is the worst of all treif foods in our minds.

In Parshat Terumah we're taught that the aron, the ark, which was in the sanctuary and later the Temple, was laden with gold, both on the inside and the outside, in order to teach us the lesson of 'Tocho kebaro', your values internally, need to match the persona you have externally.

So therefore, from the title of the Sedra, we are reminded that unlike Balak, we should be as good as gold, both inside and out.

### **Ohr Torah Stone Dvar Torah**

#### **The Secret of Transforming Curses into Blessings - Dr. Miriam Weitman**

In the fortieth year of its wanderings, as the prolonged period of initiation in the wilderness draws to a close, the people of Israel discover the profound secret of transforming curses into blessings. The journey's end is already in sight. Israel has arrived at its final encampment before entering the Promised Land. They are stationed in the plains of Moav, across the Jordan at Jericho (Bemidbar 22:1), perhaps even glimpsing the Jordan Valley or the slopes of the Judean hills, green in winter and metamorphosing with the change of the seasons. At this critical juncture, on the threshold of the land, Bilam attempts to curse Israel, aiming to destroy the identity, purpose, and faith painstakingly built over forty years, whereby a group of slaves transformed into a nation.

The Torah devotes an entire portion to Bilam's curse and its transformation into a blessing. Beyond this extensive narrative in the Book of Bemidbar, the Bible revisits this event four more times. Moshe recounts Bilam's story in his address in the Book of Devarim (23:6), and Yehoshua echoes it in his farewell speech (Yehoshua 24:9-10). During the First Temple period, the prophet Micha urges his audience to remember this episode (Micha 6:5), and in the era of the Return to Zion, Nechemiah reminds the people of how God turned Bilam's curse into a blessing (Nechemiah 13:2). Few stories, apart from the bondage and exodus from Egypt, are mentioned so frequently in all

the sections of the Bible—Torah, Prophets, and Writings.

The Sages also underscored the unique importance of this episode, even contemplating its inclusion in the daily Shema recitation: "They wished to include the portion of Balak in the recitation of Shema, but they did not include it so as not to deem the prayer too burdensome for the congregation" (Berachot 12a). The Sages also referenced it in the prayer recited after one has dreamt a bad dream (Berachot 55b). Following their lead, the prayer arrangers chose to begin the morning prayers with the verse, "How goodly are your tents, O Yaacov, your dwellings, O Israel" (Bemidbar 24:5), taken from Bilam's blessings.

What is it about this story that compels the Bible, the Sages, and the prayer arrangers to return to it repeatedly? What message does the Torah convey through the narrative of Bilam's curse and its transformation into a blessing?

In Bilam's story, the transformation of the curse into a blessing was performed by God. However, what makes the story truly powerful is that it conveys the message that we too can follow God's example and transform curses into blessings.

On the most basic level, an individual can transform a curse into a blessing by engaging in actions that bring goodness into the world—turning sorrow into joy and darkness into light. This involves helping others, positively influencing reality, and striving to heal the wounds of the world and humanity. This is the key to a life of meaning and purpose, guiding us toward a fuller realization of our potential.

However, there is a deeper dimension. Even when a curse does not transform into a blessing, one can still derive a blessing from it. By leveraging the difficulty itself, one can extract strength and pave the pathways to bringing about blessing. This involves viewing the curse as a challenge for achieving progress and producing good. As the Midrash states: "Even though these curses come upon you, you survive and stand firm" (Tanchuma on Nitzavim 1). Challenges have the power to ultimately make one more grounded and propel them forward.

To understand how to go about deriving blessings from curses, let us revisit two foundational experiences of the Israelites during their formation as a nation—slavery in Egypt and the ensuing Exodus. The Torah seeks to commemorate these formative moments through commandments. Immediately following the Exodus, the people were given commandments to remember their deliverance from Egypt, including the mitzvah to redeem the firstborns, the eating of matzah, and the prohibition to eat leavened bread [during Passover]: "Remember this day, on which you went free from Egypt, the house of

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bondage... no leavened bread shall be eaten" (Shemot 13:3). By observing these commandments, each person internalizes the miracle of the Exodus.

In the fortieth year, however, the Israelites received a new set of commandments, of which the focal point was not remembering the Exodus but recalling the slavery and suffering in Egypt. This, for example, is the central message of the Sabbath commandment in the Book of Devarim: "Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy... so that your male and female slave may rest as you do. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt" (Devarim 5:12-14). Through the memory of slavery, one is called to ensure the rest of those around him and to provide fair working conditions. It is not only one's immediate family that deserves rest, but also the servants, the foreigner residing within your gates, and even the working animals. The Torah emphasizes that the rest of the servant and the maidservant is "like yours," no less, for you were a slave...

A nation that has tasted the bitterness of slavery cannot ignore the memory of suffering. However, the Torah teaches how to process this memory. Instead of dwelling on the pain, we must harness the agony of slavery to cultivate sensitivity towards others, especially the vulnerable in society. Throughout the Book of Devarim, we are repeatedly called to remember the period of slavery and channel it toward compassionate treatment of the slave (15:12-15), the stranger, the orphan, and the widow (16:10-12; 24:10-18; 24:19-22). The period of slavery becomes a lever for creating an exemplary society founded on social justice and concern for the weak. These are the moral values the Torah imparts to Israel on the eve of their entering the land, ensuring that their life in it is based on these principles.

Approximately fifteen hundred years after the Torah taught us how to go about turning curses into blessings, Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai and the Sages of Yavneh demonstrated this principle de facto. The destruction of the Second Temple posed a profound existential threat to the Jewish people. Death, exile, the destruction of the Temple, the ruination of Jerusalem, and the loss of Israel's independence—all these threatened not just the physical survival of the people but also their spiritual endurance. In this seemingly hopeless situation, Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai and the Sages of Yavneh transformed the curse into a blessing, converting the military defeat into a spiritual victory. They established the world of prayer as a substitute for the sacrificial system and deepened Torah study, leading to the compilation of the Mishnah. This Mishnah formed the basis for the Talmud and all subsequent Jewish law. Thus, from the curse arose the enduring treasures of the Jewish people, which have accompanied them ever since.

Similarly, the expulsion from Spain led to a spiritual renaissance in Safed, endowing the Jewish people with profound developments in both Halacha and Kabbalah. Waves of anti-Semitism ignited waves of immigration to Israel, continuing even into modern times. Throughout history, the Jewish people have repeatedly shown that their spirit can transcend adversity, and that it possesses the strength to turn curses into foundational blocks for higher achievements in the people's collective life.

Now, the question remains: what will be our contribution to the process whereby curses are turned into blessings and good is extracted from profound darkness? Can we draw blessings from the tragedies we faced on Simchat Torah 5784? Will we manage to forge new unity in the nation after the severe social crisis that engulfed us before the war? In the early days of the Simchat Torah War, we indeed experienced remarkable unity on both the front lines and the home front. While the blessing of unity cannot replace the curse of that dreadful day and the ensuing war, if we can muster personal and national resilience to maintain this unity, we will indeed be part of the process of turning curses into blessings.

Let us hope and pray that the spirit of togetherness will envelop the entire nation, that a new light will shine upon us from the ruins, and that redemption will come to a land so deeply yearning for complete salvation.

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#### **Dvar Torah: TorahWeb.Org**

##### **Rabbi Benjamin Yudin - Your Choice!**

While there are no mitzvos in Parshas Balak, there are some very important hashkafic ideas that emerge from this parsha. One example is the belief in the coming of the Moshiach as alluded to by the passuk "Darach kochav m'Yaakov" (Bamidbar 24:17). Additionally, the Gemara (Makkos 10b) that teaches us that a person is helped to pursue the path that he desires. When Bilaam is initially invited to come and curse the Jewish people, Hashem appears to him and tells him emphatically not to go, as they are a blessed nation. Yet, when a second group of representatives from the king of Moav come and request again, Bilaam asks to go, clearly indicating his desire to curse the Jewish people despite Hashem's earlier refusal. This teaches us that every individual has the freedom of choice.

At the very end of the Torah we are taught that there never was a prophet in Israel as great as Moshe. The midrash in Bamidbar Rabbah explains that while there was no prophet as great as Moshe in Israel, among the nations of the world there was one: Bilaam. Had the nations of the world not had a prophet, they could have claimed that if they had a prophet like Moshe, they too would have been a wonderful people. Therefore, Hashem gave them Bilaam.

Bilaam, however, was a pervert and a wicked man, and used his prophetic gift negatively.

Similarly, we find that after the death of Shlomo Hamelech, the kingdom was split into two: the tribes of Yehuda and Benjamin under Rechovam, and the other ten tribes under Yeravam. Despite Yeravam being appointed by Hashem, he became a great sinner and caused others to sin. This demonstrates that even those with great potential can fall due to their personal desires, as seen with Yeravam refusing to repent because he couldn't bear that Dovid would precede him in Gan Eden.

Bilaam had the gift of prophecy and could calculate the exact moment of Hashem's anger. However, instead of using his gifts positively, he intended to uproot the Jewish institutions of prayer and study.

We know that there are no extra words or even letters in the Torah. And yet in Bamidbar 22:25 we find two extra letters in the incident of Bilaam's donkey banging into "THE wall". Twice the Torah calls our attention to this special wall by specifying "el HAKir" with the declarative prefix of the letter hei. The Midrash Tanchuma teaches us that this was not just any wall but was the specific stone wall that Lavan and Yaakov set up in Parshas VaYetzei (Bereishis 31) to indicate a separation one from the other. Lavan called it by the Aramaic name Yegar Sa'Hadusa and Yakov called it by the Hebrew name Gal-Ed (these stones should bear witness to our separation). Lavan wanted his grandchildren to be assimilated, but acquiesced to the will of Hashem that Yakov's children go their separate way and this agreement was concretized at this "Stone Wall Bearing Witness". Bilaam, who according to the midrash was a reincarnation of Lavan, tried to undo the wall dividing the Jewish people from other nations, aiming to make them lose their uniqueness and commitment to Torah.

The Talmud (Megillah 14b) further explores the nature of prophecy. While most prophets had visions that required their interpretation, Moshe's prophecy was with perfect clarity ("aspaklaria hameira"). The Maharal explains that Bilaam's prophecy was also with perfect clarity, leaving no room for his personal interpretation, ensuring his negative characteristics did not influence the divine message.

This leads to a crucial lesson: each of us has the choice to use our unique characteristics and talents positively. As the Gemara (Makkos 10b) mentioned above teaches, a person is assisted from Above to pursue his desired path. We can choose to honor Hashem and His people through Torah study, mitzvot, and acts of kindness, or, Heaven forbid, go in the opposite direction. May we all be privileged to make the right decisions and utilize our special individual characteristics in a way that brings honor to Hashem.

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### **Torah.Org Dvar Torah**

**by Rabbi Label Lam**

#### **The Blessedness Continues**

And Elochim said to Bilaam, "Do not go with them, do not curse the nation (Israel) because he is blessed." (Bamidbar 22:12)

Bilaam is cautioned by not other than the HaKadosh Baruch Hu Himself not to curse the people of Israel because they are blessed. Can you have a more- clear warning than that?! Yet, foolishly he went! He is not the only person to ignore explicit instructions and open signals that it is not advisable to curse the Jewish People.

Wherever I go here, now, in your Jerusalem, I'm reminded of a joke that a young man told me recently, "What is the national bird of Israel? Answer: The crane!" There is building and building going on everywhere. And wherever the Jewish people go things tend to improve and grow. Whichever neighborhood, and whichever city, and any country that we have visited in our long history, all the boats in the harbor predictably go up as our blessing travels with us. And so it is that from whichever the place we were chased, our absence is felt.

This is an observable phenomenon. When I was a kid the two states that a presidential candidate needed to secure the electoral college were New York and California. They were the most populous and prosperous states and the also where the majority of American Jews lived. The two super- powers during that Cold War era were Russia and the United States. Those were again the two major centers of Jewish population. Later, when Jews began to exit from Russia it became a weakened and feeble version of its former self. Now, Israel is seen as a super-power and a dominant force militarily and economically in spite of its relative petite size, because a majority of the Jewish people reside here in Israel. Our blessedness is recognizable in location after location, large and small.

Maybe some people remember that during the Yom Kippur war in 1973, there was an oil embargo, oil prices sky-rocketed and bumper stickers began to appear reading, "We don't want Jews! We want oil!". A gentile named William Ikon wrote a letter to the editor of the Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph that was subsequently published in 250 dailies throughout America. He wrote the following:

"Jews go home, G-d forbid that you should think that these remarks made by a few sick people expresses the opinion of all the people of America and you would pack your belongings and go. Jews go home. We do not want Jews. We want oil. But before you leave, could you do us a favor?! Could you leave behind the vaccine formula of Dr. Jonas Salk before you go?! You would not want our children to be paralyzed by polio. Will you leave behind the capability you have shown

government, in politics, your influential prowess, your good literature and your tasty food.

Please have pity on us. Remember it was from you that we learned the secret of how to develop great men as Einstein and Steinmetz and many others who are of great help to us. We owe you a lot for the atomic bomb, research satellites and perhaps we owe you our very existence. Instead of observing from the depths of our graves how Hitler old but glad passes through our streets relaxed in one of our Cadillacs if he would have succeeded to reach the A-bomb and not us.

On your way out Jews, could you do me one more favor? Could you pass by my house and take me with you? I'm not sure I could live a secure life in a land in which you are not found. If at any time you will have to leave, love will leave with you. Democracy will leave with you and essentially everything will leave with you. G-d will leave with you. If you pass by my house, please slow down and honk, because I'm going with you."

Bilaam was not the first to fail to heed to this Divine warning and neither was he the last. We know all too well. To anyone with clear eyes the words delivered to Bilaam resonate even still, as the blessedness continues.

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#### **Mizrachi Dvar Torah**

**Rav Doron Perez**

#### **The Narrative War Against Israel**

There is an incredible insight into the difference in vision between a bat and an eagle which Rabbi Baruch Halevi Epstein heard from Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin. It's the difference between a critical, condemning person as opposed to a person of love, blessing and encouragement.

The eagle does not see well at night but has amazing eyesight during the day, and the bat cannot see during the day, but has amazing eyesight during the night. This is the difference between a person who is a condemning curser and a person who is positive and full of light. One person can only see darkness and the other person, light.

Why did Balak hire Bilaam? Balak knew that he could not defeat Bnei Yisrael through a physical fight seeing how many other nations, failed. He knew that he had to act outside of the realm of military expeditions and rather act with politics and diplomacy. So, he brings Bilaam who was only able to see things in tunnel vision to curse Bnei Yisrael. Bilaam could only see in darkness, weaving a narrative of curses. He was unable to see things with complexity and depth.

Moshe on the other hand had a vision of light and could see the complexity and depth of life with clarity.

Today we are facing such challenges where many of the enemies of the Jewish people have

decided that the way to defeat Israel is not just militarily but also in the courts, and on social media, and academia. It is done from a simple single-minded wizardry and sorcery of hate, deception, critique, seeing with a tunnel vision which allows them to ignore the depth of the situation.

But just like Hashem changed Bilaam's curses into blessings, so too will all the bad-mouthing and cursing today, be turned into blessing, and the justness and love of life of the Jewish cause will be seen.

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#### **Rabbi Dr. Norman J. Lamm's Derashot Ledorot**

The opening verse in the daily order of t'fillah be' t'zibbur, public prayer, is the familiar mah tovu ohalecha Yaakov, mishk'nosecha Yisrael, "How good are thy tents, O Jacob, thy dwelling places, O Israel." It must be quite an important verse to be so strategically and significantly placed, as the very first thing we say as we enter the synagogue. And indeed it is just that. For, as the opening chord in the overture to the Morning Service, mah tovu sets the key for the entire day of prayer, the symphony of the Jew's mind and heart and soul rising harmoniously with those of all of Israel to our Father in Heaven..

Just what does this verse mean? Our Sages interpreted "tent" and "dwelling place" to refer to batei k'neisiot u'vatei midrashot, to synagogues and religious schools. How good are thy synagogues and thy halls of study, is the meaning of this blessing. May they increase in influence and grow in beauty and splendor. And this blessing, which is found in today's Sidra, comes from a most surprising source. It was first uttered, our Bible tells us, not by a Jew but by a non-Jew; and an enemy of Israel, at that. It was Bilaam ha'rasha, the wicked one, who, upon seeing Israel's tribes arrayed in the desert about the Tabernacle, exclaimed mah tovu. And there is yet something more surprising in the entire episode, something that makes the choice of this verse for our opening prayer even less understandable. Tradition consistently reports, in all its comments on this episode, that Bilaam fully intended to curse Israel. He had been hired to do so by the Moabite king Balak. Seeing Israel proudly and devoutly arrayed about the Temple, Bilaam arose and wanted to curse Israel, saying, shelo yiheyu lachem batei k'neisiot u'vatei midrashot, may you not have any synagogues and schools, may they diminish in influence and in scope. But instead of a curse, there issued forth from his mouth, by Divine command, the blessing of mah tovu.

Certainly, then, it is difficult to understand this choice of mah tovu. Was it not intended as a curse? Was it not uttered by an enemy of our people, by the ancient forerunner of the modern intellectual anti-Semite? Indeed, one of the outstanding Halachic scholars of all generations, the Maharshah (R. Solomon Luria, 16th century), wrote in his Responsa (#64): ani mas'chil be'rov chasadecha, umedaleg mah tovu she'amro Bilaam, v'af hu amro li'klallah,

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"I begin with the second verse and skip mah tovu, which was first recited by Bilaam, and he intended it as a curse." This is the weighty opinion of a giant of the Halachah..

And yet our people at large did not accept the verdict of the Maharshah. We have accepted the mah tovu, we have given it the place of honor, and, as we well know, it has become the "darling" of cantors and liturgical composers. And if all Israel has accepted it and accorded it such honors, then there must be something very special about it that somehow reflects an aspect of the basic personality of the Jew, and a deep, indigenous part of the Jewish religious character. That unique aspect of our collective character, that singularly Jewish trait which manifests itself in the choice of mah tovu under the conditions we mentioned, is the very ability to wring a blessing out of a curse. We say mah tovu not despite the fact that it was intended to harm us, but because of that very fact. It is Jewish to find the benediction in the malediction, the good in the evil, the opportunity in the catastrophe. It is Jewish to make the best of the worst, to squeeze holiness out of profanity. From the evil and diabolical intentions of Bilaam, shelo yiheyu lachem batei k'neisiot u'vatei midrashot, we molded a blessing of mah tovu, which we recite just as we enter those very halls of worship and study..

Hasidism, in the symbolic language of its philosophy, elevated this idea to one of its guiding principles. We must, Hasidism teaches, find the nitzotz in the klipah, the "spark" in the "shell"; that is, we must always salvage the spark of holiness which resides in the very heart of evil. There is some good in everything bad. The greatness of man consists of rescuing that good and building upon it. In fact, that is just how the entire movement of Hasidism had its beginning. European Jewry, suffering untold persecutions, was desperately seeking some glimmer of hope. There was a tremendous longing in every Jewish heart for the Messiah. There was restlessness and a thirst for elevation. Two "false messiahs," one a psychoneurotic and the other a quack and charlatan, proclaimed themselves messiahs and led their people astray. All European Jewry was terribly excited about these people. Soon, one led them into Mohammedanism, and the other into Catholicism. The common, simple Jews of Eastern Europe, those who suffered most and who bore the most pain, were completely depressed by this tragedy of seeing their only hopes fizzle and die. Now there was nothing to turn to. And here the Baal Shem Tov stepped in, took these yearnings and longings and pent-up religious drives, and directed them not to falseness and apostasy and tragedy, but channeled them into a new form, into sincere and genuine religious expression which, all historians now admit, literally rescued all of Jewry from certain annihilation. He wrung a blessing from a curse. He found the good in the evil. He saw opportunity in catastrophe. He knew the meaning of mah tovu..

Jewish history is rich in such examples of making the best of the worst, of transforming the k'lallah into the b'rachah. The Temple and its sacrificial service were destroyed, so our forefathers exploited the catastrophe and found new avenues for religious expression in prayer, the "sacrifice of the heart." Jerusalem and its schools were ruined, so they decided that Torah is unprejudiced in its geography, and they built Y avneh, where they accomplished even more than in Jerusalem. Ernest Bevin refused to permit 100,000 Jewish refugees to immigrate into Palestine, so, having no choice, we proclaimed and built a State of Israel for over a million Jews.<sup>2</sup> Remember the mourning and sadness and gloom when Bevin refused us? And remember our joy and thrill and simchah in May of 1948 when the State was declared? B'rachah from k'lallah. We have never completely surrendered to shelo yiheyu lachem batei k'neisivot u'vatei midrashot. We have always poked around in its wreckage, found the spark we were looking for, and converted the whole k'lallah into one great b'rachah. That is what is implied in reciting mah tovu as the opening chord of our prayers. G-d continues that power within us. Let us make the best of the worst, blessing from curse. Perhaps one of the most outstanding examples of one human being who was able to transform curse to blessing is the renowned Jewish philosopher, Franz Rosenzweig, who died in 1929. Rosenzweig was a German Jew, an assimilationist, who was profound, scholarly, and sincere in his intellectual pursuits. He is the one who, concluding that he was going to convert to Christianity, decided to follow the historical process, and so attempted to acquaint himself with Judaism as a stepping stone to his new faith. Interestingly, he experienced a great religious feeling during the Nei'lah Service on Y om Kippur in some small Orthodox synagogue in Germany, and thereafter became one of the leading Jewish philosophers of our time, a man who attracted many great students and colleagues and, in his criticism of Reform, led people back to our origins. Rosenzweig was an extremely active man. He was a thrilling and popular lecturer. He was a talented speaker, writer, and administrator, as well as thinker. But, at the prime of his life, in 1922, tragedy struck. In the wake of a cerebral hemorrhage came partial then complete paralysis. The widely traveled searcher could not move. The able lecturer could not speak. The writer could not move his hands, could hardly even dictate notes. Surely, this should have killed him. Surely, this should have marked the end of a fruitful and promising career. But no, Rosenzweig had rediscovered Judaism, and with it its inarticulate but very real insights. And so he learned to wring fortune from this misfortune. He dictated numerous letters, scholarly articles, and books to his wife, by virtue of a special machine. His wife would turn a dial, with the alphabet, and he would nod ever so slightly, at the letter he wanted. Thus, mind you, were letters, articles, diaries, and books written. Nor was this only a flurry of panicky

activity, something to "make him forget." No, it was a state of mind; it was the Jewish genius ever seeking the "spark" in the "shell," the blessing in the curse. Shortly after the onset of illness, he wrote the following: "If I must be ill, I want to enjoy it... In a sense, these two months have been quite pleasant. For one thing, after a long spell, I got back to reading books." This from a man who couldn't move a limb, and who couldn't pronounce one consonant intelligibly! And listen now to what the same man writes even seven years later, just before his death: "I read, carry on business... and, all in all, enjoy life... besides, I have something looming in the background for the sake of which I am almost tempted to call this period the richest of my life... it is simply true: dying is even more beautiful than living." What a conversion of k'lallah to b'rachah! It is so, and should be so, with every individual. Misfortunes, may they never occur, have their redeeming qualities. Death brings an appreciation of life. Tragedy can bring husband and wife, father and son, brother and sister, closer together and bring out dormant loves and loyalties. Failure can spur one on to newer and greater successes than ever dreamt of. In the inner shells of curse, there lies the spark of blessing. The aim and goal of prayer, as our Jewish sages have pointed out through the ages, is not to change G-d, but to change ourselves. We come before G-d as humble petitioners, terribly aware of our shortcomings, our inferiorities, and our sins. Whoever prays truly knows that somewhere, sometimes, he or she has been caught in the web of curse. We feel tainted with evil. And so we pray. We pray and we want G-d to help us change ourselves. What sort of change is it that we want? The change from evil to good, from curse to blessing. We want to transform ourselves. That is the spirit of the prayerful personality. And that is the reason for beginning the day of prayer and petition with mah tovu. We enter the House of G-d, which stands and survives despite and because of its ancient and modern enemies. The synagogue itself is the symbol of that transformation. We begin now to pray, with the object of such transformation in ourselves. Hence, mah tovu. Mah tovu. How good. Indeed, not only good, but how fortunate is a people who can forever hope and smile, knowing that even if, Heaven forbid, k'lallah could be its lot, it will wring out of it every drop of b'rachah. This, indeed, is the greatest b'rachah. Mah tovu. How good.

1 The reference is to Shabbetai Zevi (1626-1676) and Jacob Frank (1726-1791), false Messiahs who had devastating effects on the Jewish community.

2 Ernest Bevin, the British Foreign Secretary from 1945 to 1951, refused to permit 100,000 Jewish refugees, many Holocaust survivors, to immigrate into Palestine in 1945. This decision, influenced by British geopolitical interests and concerns about Arab reactions, led to significant criticism and exacerbated tensions in Palestine. The refusal is seen by many as a pivotal moment leading to the

eventual establishment of the State of Israel in 1948.'