

DVAR TORAH THE DOWNSIDE OF PRIVACY

“Mah tovu ohalecha Yaakov” – “How good are your tents, Yaakov” is a celebration and praise of Jewish modesty and privacy. As Rashi comments, Bilam saw that the openings of the Jews’ tents were not directly opposite each other. Israel’s tents were set up to avoid the residents of one tent looking into any other tent. This facilitated modesty and privacy, such central Jewish values. The Syrio-Greeks, led by Antiochus, realized how crucial this was and decreed (according to some traditions) that Jews must remove the doors of their houses (some say that is why Chanukah candles are to be lit at the openings of our homes).

Staggering the tent openings also diminished opportunities for jealousy, as Hagaon Rav Mordechai Eliahu, zt”l, emphasized (in the opening shiur, in 5757-1997 of his “Kol Tzofayich” series, broadcast by satellite to synagogues worldwide). Because it was difficult to look into another tent you were less likely to be jealous of their possessions.

However, pointed out Rav Mordechai Eliahu, there can be a downside to excessive privacy. It is important to help out others in need, and in order to do that you need to know what they need. But in order to know their needs you must know something about their lives. In our zeal to preserve privacy and avoid jealousy we must not become detached from each other, unconcerned, cut off, and alienated.

He reminisced about what life was like during his youth in Jerusalem’s less affluent neighborhoods. It used to be, said the Rav, that a number of families lived in one house and shared a communal kitchen. If a woman didn’t show up one day at the kitchen, her neighbors noticed. Out of concern they visited her to see if everything was ok, to check if she was ill or needed help with her children. In the present set-up (city life in the 1990s), every family lives behind a bolted metal door and one can easily pass by without knowing that, God forbid, someone within is sick or needy.

Privacy should not come at the expense of connectedness. We shouldn’t look into our neighbors’ tents, but we should know if they need us and knock at their door and offer our help.

**Hagaon Rav Mordechai Eliyahu**

Also in this week’s Daf Kesher: · [Did Bilam Have a Change of Heart?](#) · [Rav Lerner: Why Wear a Shtreimel?](#)

THE THIRD BLESSING: DID BILAM HAVE A CHANGE OF HEART?

Bilam was hired by King Balak to curse the People of Israel, and made two unsuccessful attempts. In the Torah's introduction to the third attempt it emphasizes that it was different than the first two. Through the following sources we'll ask two questions:

- How was this third attempt different than the first two?
- Did Bilam have a change of heart? Did Bilam finally break down and realize that God loves His people, wants to bless them, and instead of making fruitless attempts at cursing, he should just try to bless them? Was Bilam a *chozer beteshuvah* – did he repent?

The simplest reading of the verse certainly sounds like this:

<p>Bamidbar 24:1 Bilam saw that it was good in God's eyes to bless Israel and he didn't go, like in the first two times, towards sorcery, and turned his face towards the desert.</p>	<p>במדבר כד: א וַיֵּרָא בְלָעָם כִּי טוֹב בְּעֵינֵי ה' לְבָרֵךְ אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלֹא הִלֵּךְ כְּפַעַם כְּפַעַם לְקַרְאֵת נְחָשִׁים וַיֵּשֶׁת אֶל הַמִּדְבָּר פָּנָיו:</p>
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The Rashbam's Approach – Change of Heart

This seems to be the approach of the Rashbam (though, as we'll see, most commentators interpret this verse differently):

<p>Rashbam 24:1 Towards sorcery – to attempt moving from one place to another in the hope that he might be able to curse them. Rather, now he intended to bless them wholeheartedly. Because of that it says here (in the next verse) “The spirit of God was upon him”, that the spirit of the Divine Presence rested upon him out of love, in an endearing way.</p>	<p>רשב"ם במדבר כד: א לקראת נחשים - לנסות ממקום למקום אולי יוכל לקללם. אלא מעתה נתכוין לברכם בלב שלים ומתוך כך כתיב כאן ותהי עליו רוח אלהים שרוח שכינה שרתה עליו מאהבה דרך חיבה:</p>
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However, even according to the Rashbam, Bilam only had a momentary change of heart; he did not repent and become a great lover of the Jewish people. See the Rashbam's comments about Bilam's advice to Balak in Bamidbar 24:14.

- See the Ramban's comments on 23:23 (before he quotes Rashi and the Targum). Does he agree with the Rashbam?

The Targum – Remembering the Golden Calf

However, most understand that Bilam did not have a change of **heart** but a change in **strategy**. For instance, see the Targum on the end of this verse (Apparently some versions of Targum Unkelos included this. It only appears in our editions as Targum Yerushalmi.):

<p>Ramban Bamidbar 23:23, quoting the Targum He turned his face to the desert where the Children of Israel served the golden calf.</p>	<p>רמב"ן על במדבר כג: כג מביא התרגום ושוי למדברא דעבדו ביה בני ישראל עגלא אנפוהי.</p>
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- What difficulty in the verse does the Targum solve?
- How do you think the Rashbam will solve the same difficulty (see also the Ramban quoted above)?
- What, according to the Targum, was Bilam's new strategy?
- What is Rashi's approach? Does he consistently follow the Targum?

Rabbeinu Bechayei – Tapping into the Spirit of the Desert

Rabbeinu Bechayei goes a step further. Not only did Bilam not have a change of heart, and not only does he try to evoke the memory of Israel's sins, but he descends to the forces of negativity. After mentioning other approaches he suggests the following:

Rabbeinu Bechayei Bamidbar 23:23

It is possible that this is referring to using the spirit of impurity. For at first he intended to go the path of belief, and when he wanted the word to come to him from God he first mentioned his sacrifices, and Balak and Bilam (together) offered an ox and a ram. And he wanted Balak to assist him so (in their joint effort) Bilam would slaughter to evoke the attribute of mercy, and Balak would evoke the attribute of judgment. But afterwards he veered from the path of faith and directed his thoughts toward the spirit of impurity that rests in the desert. This is what is meant by "He turned his face towards the desert." Therefore it says that he offered an ox and a ram but there is no mention of Balak. For now he did not want Balak helping him so he should not mar his thoughts.

רבינו בחיי על במדבר כג:כג

אפשר לומר שמכוון כאן לרוח הטומאה, לפי שמתחלה היה מכוין לדרך האמונה, וכשרצה שיבא לו הדבור מאת ה' הזכיר בתחלת קרבנותיו ויעל בלק ובלעם פר ואיל, ורצה שייסיענו בלק כדי שיהא בלעם שוחט למדת רחמים ובלק זורק למדת הדין, אבל אחר כך נטה מדרך האמונה וכיון לרוח הטומאה השורה במדבר, זהו וישת אל המדבר פניו, ולכך הזכיר בכאן ויעל פר ואיל ולא הזכיר בלק כי לא רצה עתה בסיועו כדי שלא יפגל מחשבתו:.

· What two details in the story does Rabbeinu Bechayei cite to support his approach that Bilam's new strategy was to use the forces of impurity to curse the Jewish people?

The Or Hachaim Hakadosh explains our verse in a number of ways. One of them is similar to Rabbeinu Bechayei's:

Or Hachaim Bamidbar 24:1

Another possibility is that this is based on our Sages' words in the Zohar (Part II page 157a), that the desert is the dwelling place of the evil negative force referred to as **ס"מ** (the angel associated with the Satan, death, and the evil inclination). He intended to arouse his powers. That is what is meant by "He turned his face towards the desert," for there is the head of the "klipah" (literally, husk - a term often associated with negativity) of **ס"מ** and his armies, that hate the nation of the children of Israel. It mentioned his face, because he thought to perhaps arouse the negative forces through anger, similar to the way holiness is aroused through joy and good-heartedness, for everything is aroused through its own manner. The word *panav*, face, is associated with anger, as in the verse, "My face will pass by" (Shemot 33:14).

אור החיים במדבר כד:א

עוד ירצה על פי דבריהם ז"ל שאמרו (זוה"ק ח"ב קנז.) כי המדבר הוא מקום חנות ס"מ הרשע, ונתכוון לעורר כוחותיו, והוא אומר וישת אל המדבר פניו, ששם הוא ראש הקליפה ס"מ וחיילותיו שונאי עם בני ישראל: ודקדק לומר פניו אולי שתתעורר הקליפה באמצעות הכעס, כדרך שתתעורר הקדושה בשמחה ובלב טוב, כי כל אחד יתעורר למינו, והוא אומר פניו לשון כעס, על דרך אומר (שמות לג יד) פני ילכו שהוא לשון כעס:

Note the anger-negativity connection the Or Hachaim suggests that Bilam tried to use.

Further Learning - Other Commentators

- See the Sforno (Bamidbar 24:1) for another approach to Bilam's new strategy. What is his support from Chazal?
- The Netziv, in Haamek Davar (Bamidbar 24:1) suggests that Bilam here attempted an extremely creative way of keeping the Jews out of the land of Israel.
- The Or Hachaim Hakadosh (Bamidbar 24:1) brings a number of other approaches, including one that seems to be exactly the opposite of the one quoted above.

TORAH FROM OUR FACULTY

WHY WEAR A SHTREIMEL? BY RABBI YITZCHAK LERNER

The Klausenberger Rebbe zt"l, I once heard, would tell the following story to explain the origin of the *shtreimel*, the fur hats many Chassidim wear on Shabbos, holidays, and other festive occasions. It is true that the Polish nobility of those days also wore fur hats, but they didn't wear shtreimels. In order to humiliate the Jews, Polish nobles forbade them from using the best part of the animal for their hats. Instead, Jews had to make their own hats out of fox tails, leaving the best fur for the nobility.



Rabbi Yitzchak Lerner

Anti-Semitic noblemen mocked the Jews walking with "fox tail"s on their heads. But the Jewish reaction was to turn this attempt at humiliation on its head. "If anything," they said, "This now separates us from you and sets us apart. These fox tail hats will be our splendor; they will be part of our Shabbos and Yom Tov garb. They will become holy because they show that the Jew is unique and separate." So they fashioned the fox tails into beautiful hats, and until today the shtreimel retains this same purpose.

In this week's Parshah, Bilam calls the Jewish people an "עם לבדד ישכון" – "a nation that dwells alone" (Bamidbar 23:9). Rashi refers to this as a merit we received from our ancestors. It is striking that he calls this a merit. This runs contrary to an assimilationist approach that strives for acceptance by all the nations, avoids sticking out as Jews, and encourages mimicking gentile dress and talk. This week's Parshah tells us the opposite - we are proud to be a nation that dwells alone.

The Klausenberger Rebbe would add that when he was in the concentration camps and the Nazis gave the Jews their striped prison uniforms to humiliate them, he took his own uniform and said, "This is my splendor. This uniform shows me that I am not like you. You think that you can put me down by making me different, but I welcome the reminder that we are a nation that dwells alone."

There is a famous saying attributed to Rav Yisroel Salanter z"l: "If a Jew doesn't make Kiddush then the gentile will make Havdalah for them." If a Jew doesn't sanctify himself, doesn't distinguish himself through his actions, beliefs, morals, and ethics – the nations of the world will do it for him through, God forbid, persecution. God wants us to be a nation that dwells alone.

Only if we dwell alone, only if we retain our spiritual independence, will we be able to be a light unto the nations. Then, just as light travels to all places so will the light of the Jew shine to all corners of the world.

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