

Derech Ha-Rif

Excerpts from the Torah discourse delivered by The great Rabbi Yoshiyahu Yosef Pinto Shlita

For the Torah portion BALAK | Volume 73 | 14 TAMUZ



First Shabbat Meal

What have I done to you, such that you hit me these three times? (Bamidbar 28:22)

The Jewish people have the power of the three festivals, which correspond to the three Avot (forefathers).

In our Parashah, Bilam rode upon his donkey to curse the Jewish people. The Mishna (Avot 5:6) informs us that Bilam's donkey was one of a select group of things created during twilight of the first Shabbat eve. The verse states that Bilam's donkey marched until it was blocked by a wall of sorts on three separate occasions. Our Sages teach that this wall was in fact the pile of rocks which Yaakov and Lavan had erected. The pile served as a peace treaty, marking the spot which neither Yaakov nor Lavan would traverse to harm the other. Upon the donkey reaching this pile, its legs became squashed against it, and it came to a halt. Bilam, in his fury, whacked the donkey and demanded to know why it had stopped walking on three occasions. The donkey responded by inquiring, "what did I do to you, such that you smote me these three times (lit: Regalim)?" Rashi, noting the unusual wording, 'Regalim,' homiletically explained the donkey to in fact have asked, 'how can you possibly seek to uproot the nation which observes the three festivals (Shalosh Regalim)?'

Let us ask: Why did the donkey identify these three festivals above all other Mitzvot? The Jewish people observed a plethora of Mitzvot, which could have served to protect them; what was unique about the three festivals?

To answer we must develop the following key tenant: The Jewish people's strength stems from the merit of our forefathers. Indeed, this is why we begin the Shemoneh Esrei, by referring to G-d as the G-d of Avraham, G-d of Yitzchak and G-d of Yaakov. There have existed many nations, far more powerful than us, yet they have fallen by the wayside with the passage of time. The Greeks who epitomised sophistication, wisdom and might, are no longer. Likewise, the Romans, Babylonians and Egyptians were all conquered, and only we, the Jewish people, remain. Our eternal existence is underpinned by the merits of our forefathers.

Bilam understood this special merit and henceforth sought to claim that the other nations of the world were also entitled to it. He claimed that Avraham and Yitzchak were also forefathers of the other nations, and this can be discerned by his choice of sacrifices. He offered up a bull and a ram.

The bull signified Avraham, as per the verse: "And Avraham ran to the herd, and took a bull (Bereishit 18:7)," and the ram symbolised Yitzchak per "and behold a ram was caught in the thicket by its horns (Bereishit 22:13)." In summary, Bilam sought to claim that the other nations also had the merits of the forefathers, and the Jewish people were therefore unable to take the Land of Israel on account of this merit. When responding to Bilam, the donkey said that he was unable to curse the Jewish people for they celebrated the three festivals. The donkey noted that although the other nations were also descended from Avraham and Yitzchak, they were not descended from Yaakov; this triple generational bond was unique to the Jewish people. Although Bilam had offered the bull and the ram, signifying both Avraham and Yitzchak, he had been unable to offer the sheep, from which most of Yaakov's wealth had been derived, which represented Yaakov.

To conclude, the donkey alluded to the idea that Pesach corresponds to Avraham, Shavuot to Yitzchak and Succot to Yaakov. Accordingly, a nation, inextricably linked to all three, via the merit of their ancestors, could not be wiped out from existence. The merit of their three forefathers, and the three festivals they engendered cemented their existence for eternity.



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Soul Of the Rif

During these days in which we enter the Seventeenth of Tammuz, or from Rosh Chodesh Tammuz according to some of the Kabbalists, the air, the spirit and strength of Eisav begins to permeate. This entails sadness and difficulty for the Jewish people, dealing with the toughest things. A person needs to know that this is the source of the challenge they faced, when a strong wind or a storm of tough water or a lump of sadness or despair of the soul comes to them. A person needs to stay strong until this passes them, and not make any decisions or do anything while the test is still current and the world is found in a state of darkness. Once the darkness and the spirit passes and the tough things depart, the decisions a person makes during a stage of despair are rendered nothing, a person is found empty of direction and actively destroying themselves. Therefore, regarding any wave which comes to a person, one must wait till it passes, whether it be of water, strong wind, heat or sadness, it will pass. A person needs to be strong and steadfast, and be "Like a tree planted over brooks of water which produces its fruit in its right times and its leaves do not wither (Tehillim 1:3)." Guard your fruits such that they do not fall, be careful that the achievements which you have made in your life are not lost, and that the leaves of your tree not fall, rather, ensure that they are strong.



2nd Shabbat Meal

"And they were weeping at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting (Bamidbar 25:6)."

Three suggestions to overpower the Yetzer Hara (Evil Inclination)

In life, every person deals with the Yetzer Hara; it comes to a person in various ways in order to lead him to sin and stumble. Every person must battle against the Yetzer Hara, which targets each person in a personalised manner, in the way that he believes he can bring a person down, lead them to stumble and to fall from their level. The Yetzer Hara appears differently to different people. A person needs to be wise and know how to overpower the Yetzer Hara and to subjugate him in battle, both in terms of the communal battle against the Yetzer Hara, as well as one's personal battle.

The Gemara (Berachot 5a) cites Rabbi Levi bar Chamma who quoted the following point from Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish: A Person should always anger the Yetzer Tov against the Yetzer Hara, as it says "Tremble and do not sin, speak in your hearts over your beds, and be totally silent (Tehillim 4:5)." If one overpowers him, then all is well, and if not, one should busy himself with Torah, as it says, "speak in your hearts." If this works, then all is well, and if not, let a person recite Shema, as it says, "over your beds." If this works, then all is well, and if not, a person should remember the day of death, as it says, "and be utterly silent."

The Gemara gives three pieces of advice as to how to overpower the Yetzer Hara. The first is that a person busy themselves with Torah when the Yetzer Hara comes and tries to make a person fall through evil thoughts and bad things. In such a case, if a person sits and learns Torah, or reads the books of Devarim, or Tehillim, this is the first suggestion of how to overpower the Yetzer Hara. If one succeeds in overcoming the Yetzer Hara that way, then all is good. If one does not succeed in overpowering him through this, then one should recite Shema. If, despite this, the Yetzer Hara remains in force, one should remember the day of death and this will strengthen one to be victorious over the Yetzer Hara.

Based on this, we can explain this week's portion. The Yetzer Hara tried to make Bnei Yisrael sin with forbidden relationships, it was a very difficult situation, as they deteriorated with the Yetzer Hara of immorality to the point that the prince of the tribe of Shimon deteriorated and sinned with a gentile woman. Even in this case, we see that Bnei Yisrael acted as the Gemara says, with these three pieces of advice.

The Torah states, "And they were weeping" meaning that they did so to remember the day of death. They stood and cried in order to be saved from the Yetzer Hara. The same verse continues "At the entrance of the Tent of Meeting" - they sat at the entrance to learn Torah to overpower the Yetzer Hara through the study of Torah, as Moshe would stand at the entrance to the tent and share Torah with Bnei Yisrael. Hashem gave the Torah at Har Sinai, but Moshe would then give classes of Torah and teach Bnei Yisrael at the entrance to the tent of meeting. The Targum Yonatan translates the words "and they were weeping" as "and they were weeping and reciting Shema," meaning that they were crying and saying Kriat Shema.

Therefore, we see that in a difficult predicament of the sin with the daughters of Moav in Shittim, Bnei Yisrael followed the three pieces of advice to be saved from the Yetzer Hara: To remember the day of death, to learn Torah and to recite Shema.

This is a critical concept, for any person who is in a difficult situation and sees that the Yetzer Hara is overpowering him, he should learn Torah, recite Shema and remember the day of death. Through these three things, one subjugates and wins over the Yetzer Hara, ascending to new levels to conquer the Yetzer Hara within oneself.



Q & A with the Rif



Question

Dear Rabbi, I notice that the best people in the world are the most patient. Is it the case that someone who has an elevated soul is more patient?

Answer:

A person who has an elevated soul must purify it, and for such a person, for every small mistake they make, Hashem punishes them speedily. For a person with an elevated soul, Hashem is more particular for every small mistake that they make. Let us look at Moshe Rabbeinu, who was the greatest person in the world. Hashem told him to speak to the rock, he hit the rock and for this, he lost the greatest thing, namely entering into the Land of Israel. The greater a person is, the more Hashem is more particular. If you are a great person, Hashem is more exacting with you, so you require great care, for the higher your level, the more closely you are judged.





3rd Shabbat meal

“And Balak, son of Tzippor saw (Bamidbar 22:2)”

The great Segulah of reading Parashat Balak.

Parashat Balak is one of the most important portions of the Torah, it contains Segulot and elevated things. One of the customs of the community of Shuva Yisrael is to read all of Parashat Balak every Tuesday. Our holy Rabbis say that the power of Parashat Balak is that if a person intends to do evil to another or if people are plotting to do something evil to someone, and one reads Parashat Balak, then all the plans and plots which they have devised against a person, even those they do not know about them, will be annulled by Hashem, just like Hashem did for the Jewish people in this Parashah.

Bnei Yisrael did not know what Balak and Bilam were preparing to do to them. They stood facing the Jewish camp like tourists, standing and looking upon Bnei Yisrael who had come out of Egypt. They went from place to place, offering Korbanot (sacrifices), the Jewish people were not aware of this. Balak and Bilam tried to curse them and bring immense destruction upon the Jewish people. But Hashem saved the Jewish people from Balak and Bilam's plot without their knowledge, without them praying or asking for any mercy or salvation.

A person who reads this portion merits that its power annuls all plans and plots which people devise against him. Nothing will remain of all that others plan against a person, there is no reality in which a person will be harmed when they harness the power of the Parashah of Balak. The more one understands this portion deeply, the more they merit Heavenly Assistance. If people think of doing bad things to a person, they will not have the power to damage him in any way. Therefore, a person should fix a time each week to learn Parashat Balak with full concentration and be very careful about doing so. Who knows whether someone at the other end of the world is plotting against one, preparing to strike at one's livelihood, one's freedom, one's good in life or one's family? By reciting Parashat Balak, a person removes all of the plans and evil ideas which others have concocted. Even without a person's knowledge that these miracles are happening to him, Hashem saves him.

“Behold, a people has emerged from Egypt (Bamidbar 22:5)”

The hidden intention of Balak when he summoned Bilam.

In this week's portion, we see Bnei Yisrael come near to Eretz Yisrael, they pass near to Moav and Balak, the king of Moav does not know what to do, so he summoned Bilam, saying “Behold a people has come out of Egypt.” The Ohr Hachaim asks about the meaning of these words, as the entire world heard about this event and became afraid. During the splitting of the Red Sea, all the water in the world split in two, and in every place where there was water, it split into two, everyone knew that this was because the Jewish people had come out of Egypt and Hashem was splitting the sea for them. When Hashem descended on Har Sinai to give the Torah to the Jewish people, there was thunder and lightning. Therefore, when Balak said to Bilam “Behold a people has emerged from Egypt” what was he saying? Bilam already knew that they had come out of Egypt!

The Ohr Hachaim answers with a key concept. When Pharaoh was afraid of the Jews, he gathered his three strongest advisers, Iyov, Bilam and Yitro, with whom he would consult and discuss the most important matters in Egypt. Bilam told Pharaoh not to be afraid of them, because he had the power of curse, and he could curse them to ensure they would be unable to come out of Egypt. With this porimse, Bilam guaranteed Pharaoh that he would curse the Jewish people, and as a result they would remain in Egypt and not be able to escape. On account of this, Pharaoh promoted Bilam and gave him silver and gold. All of the nations who were afraid of the Jews did good things to Bilam and sent him presents, in order that he would curse Bnei Yisrael and damage them. Balak was telling Bilam that of the promises he made to Pharaoh and the various nations, nothing had been fulfilled. The nation had come out of Egypt and had reached this point. The Ohr Hachaim says that all that Balak said to Bilam was in order to disparage him, that he had taken money and riches from everyone, taken honours and in the end, nothing emerged from his grand guarantees.

“And only the matter which I speak to you will you do (Bamidbar 22:20)”

Sometimes, Even if it appears that a person has a blessing, it is a curse for him.

In this week's portion, we see that Bilam tried to curse the Jewish people and Hashem tells him, “You shall not go with them, you shall not curse the people for it is blessed.” Bilam tried to convince Hashem that he wanted to go with them, Hashem told him, “If the men have come to call you, arise and go with them, and only the matter which I speak to you shall you do.” Suddenly, Bilam wanted to bless the Jewish people, which is not an obvious matter at all. How did Bilam transform from one moment to the next, he wanted to curse them and then suddenly wished to bless them?

Our holy Rabbis say that even the blessing which he wanted to give them was in fact a curse. He wanted to bless them by saying, “And Yeshurun became fat and kicked [i.e., rebelled] (Devarim 32:15),” that they would have much good and wealth, as a result of which they would become corrupt and sinful.

Sometimes, when a person sees that all is good for them, this entails wealth kept by its owner but for a bad purpose. Therefore, we often see that a person is successful and the path of wicked people is successful in such cases; we must know that this is a curse and not a blessing. Sometimes, all seems to be good for a person, he is becoming wealthy, but this is a curse and not a blessing, something bad lies hidden in wait for him. Before they are slaughtered, cattle are fattened. People think that the given animal is healthy with much meat, but in truth, this is not good for the given animal, it is a preparation for the slaughter.

Many times, Hashem gives a person prestige but this wealth is bad for them. So too, Bilam blessed the Jews, he wanted them to be blessed with wealth which would be bad for them.

Treasure charms from the Rif



In 'Shuva Yisrael' we strive to recite Parashat Balak every Tuesday, in line with the practice of the great Tzaddikim. The holy Sefarim teach that if individuals conspire to do evil towards someone, that person can foil their plans by reciting Parashat Balak. Just like the Jewish people were protected from Balak's evil plans, so too, all those who recite this Parashah, will merit protection from any antagonistic plans. Hashem will surely confuse their thoughts and cause them unyielding unrest.

With this in mind, all members of our precious community ought to recite Parashat Balak each Tuesday, and through this, have a part in bringing forth great joy and salvation.



Below is a terrifying story involving the Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh, Rabbi Chaim ben Atar.

The Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh was once travelling on a ship. While in the open sea, the ship was met by a tempest and was totally pulverised. The Ohr HaChaim was thrown overboard, but miraculously came across a wooden board. He clasped onto the board and was able to ride out the waves on it, until he was eventually washed up on a seemingly deserted beach. The Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh was completely exhausted, and barely able to even crawl. Yet out of the corner of his eye, he spotted a small wooden cabin with a light on inside. Motivated by the prospect of survival, he gathered his final strength and crawled towards the cabin.

The Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh eventually reached the cabin and knocked, but to no answer. With no alternative, he opened the door and entered. He was met by a set table, laden with food, and an inviting bed already made. Out of dire hunger, he ate some fruit, to save his life, and then lay on the bed, before falling into a deep sleep.

Suddenly, he awoke to the sound of a gang of ruffians surrounding him. The ruffians yelled, screaming that he had broken into their house, stolen their food, and even helped himself to their bed! They continued, saying that their custom was to kill people who had such audacity.

The Ohr HaChaim turned to the head of the gang and calmly explained that he would be willing to return the value of the food and make good on anything he had taken from them. If they were unwilling to accept this, then he would bow to their intentions, and be killed.

The gang convened, loudly discussing their options. However, the head of the gang seemed somewhat withdrawn from the rest, with his gaze remaining firmly on the Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh. The gang head then opened his mouth and announced, "I recognize this man." The Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh explained he was a Rabbi in a certain town. The gang member smiled knowingly and explained that he had indeed lived in that same town twenty years ago. He told the Rabbi his family's name, and indeed the Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh confirmed that he remembered his family.

The Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh then asked how he had come to leave the town, and sink to such depths, becoming a ruffian? The man emotionally explained that he had sought to flee from his parents, and in desperation he had left the town and turned to crime, eventually ascending the ranks to become the head of this criminal gang.

The Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh listened to him and comforted him. The man was touched by the Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh's warmth and was flooded with feelings of Teshuva (repentance). He began to cry and assured the Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh that they wouldn't touch him. He continued to seek counsel from the Rabbi, asking what he could do to be forgiven. He explained that he had killed people, had stolen huge sums, and caused tremendous pain to his family. Bearing this in mind, what could he possibly do to be forgiven?

The Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh said that he could offer the man a way to go about doing Teshuva, via a Tikkun (remedy). The man was delighted and readily accepted to do whatever he had to do. The Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh instructed the man to look for a python born on that day. The man was then to keep the python in a small box, on his back, for seven years. Each day, he was to feed the python, by pushing some seeds through a small hole in the box. Finally, after feeding the python for seven years, he was to open the box, be bitten by the python and die. This, explained the Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh, was to be this man's way to do Teshuva, it was his Tikkun.

The man listened patiently and despite the challenge proposed, he gratefully accepted the challenge. He located a python born on that day, put it in a box on his back and fed it every day for seven years. Once the seven years elapsed, he opened the box, was bitten by the python and met his fate.

A few days after the man passed away, the Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh had a dream. The man appeared in the Rabbi's dream and assured him that on account of the Tikkun with the python, he had ascended to the greatest heights in heaven.

Commenting on this story, the rabbis explained the parallel between the man's conduct and his Tikkun. They explained that the man had lived with his parents until the age of seven. During this time, he had been cared for by his parents, having been given food and drink. However, at age seven, he had felt independent enough to strike out on his own, and he had left home and begun his criminal activities. His choice to forsake his parents had harmed them tremendously and denied the good which they had bestowed upon him. He had, as it were, bitten his parents, following their seven years of devotion to him. The Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh said that in Tefilla (prayer) we say: 'Do not remember for us sins of the past.' What is the meaning of 'do not remember for us sins of the past?'

The idea behind this is that man's first Aveirah serves as a foundation for the rest of his life. If the initial Aveirah is upheld, then it will serve as a basis for more Aveirot in the future. Therefore, if the initial Aveirah is forgotten, then all subsequent Aveirot will fall away. For this reason, explained the Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh, we say: 'Do not remember for us sins of the past.' In this prayer we recognize that our challenges proliferate from our first sins. The first time one steals paves the way for all future thefts; the first time one speaks Lashon Hara sets the tone for all future Lashon Hara. Therefore, we pray that our first sin be forgotten, and thereby prevent future sins.

Returning to the man in question. The man's problems began with a lapse in Kibud Av v'Em (honouring parents). His parents clothed and fed him for seven years, yet he abandoned them, throwing their love back in their faces.

The Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh understood that the man's Tikkun lay in this original sin. He therefore instructed him to raise and care for the snake from the day of its birth. He did so lovingly for seven years, and once it was freed, it killed him and returned his soul to Hashem. At this point, the man appeared to the Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh in a dream and informed him that the Tikkun had fully absolved him of his sins, and he had been forgiven.

The above story illustrates the importance of being especially vigilant with regard to the first things. Kibbud Av v'Em is incorporated in the Aseret HaDibrot (Ten Commandments), which mark the fundamental tenets of Judaism, upon which the rest of the Torah rests. It is written that the Aseret HaDibrot contain 613 words, followed by a further 7 words at the end, to make 620 words in total. 620 corresponds to the numerical value of 'Keter' (crown) alluding to the fact that the Aseret HaDibrot are the crown of the Torah.

We need to be careful to perform all Mitzvot, no matter how small they seem. Every positive deed we perform will be remembered on our behalf and protect us. Nothing bad can result from doing good deeds.

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