

spiritual posture, reflecting nothing more than spiritual weakness. They lack the fortitude necessary to say, "No!" to decry the outrageous behavior of the *tzedukim* who seek to modernize Torah dictate, so that it is more equitable with the mores of society and so that it can appeal to a larger milieu of people.

Was Zimri any different? Bilaam advised Balak that Hashem had no tolerance for immorality. Moral turpitude was (and continues to be) an anathema to Judaism. Bilaam encouraged the Midyanite women to avail themselves to the Jewish men. This would ultimately take down the nation. The Midyanite women were not satisfied with a mere sinful liaison. They wanted to include idol worship into the equation. They would liaison with the Jewish men in return for a commitment to idol worship. It started with inter-faith relations and ratcheted up to immoral behavior, which ultimately led to worshipping the Peor godhead.

Moshe *Rabbeinu* rendered his verdict concerning those who had turned to Peor: execution. One hundred and eighty thousand sinners were executed. Zimri came to Moshe with his heathen Cosbi and said, "Moshe, why should our people go to the Midyanite camp where they will end up worshipping idols? Let us compromise and bring the females into our camp. Then the men will only sin morally, but they will not commit the ultimate transgression of idol worship. People began to support Zimri, because, after all, who does not like a *pesharah*, compromise? This way everybody is happy. The sin of the Jewish men was mitigated from idol worship to intermarriage. Wow! They were saving Judaism! The groundswell of support for Zimri must have been similar to what was evinced in Germany when the German Reform condemned thousands of years of Torah Judaism into the dung heap of history.

Suddenly, Pinchas jumped into the fray. Pinchas, the "extremist," they must have cried, "the one who is unwilling to adjust and make concessions." Pinchas declared, "No *pesharos*! The Torah is from Hashem. It is not ours to do with as we please. It is immutable." We are not allowed to make alterations to the Torah. Compromise is alteration! Adjustment denies the Divinity of the Torah.

Horav Yaakov Galinsky, zl, relates that at a rabbinical conference which took place in St. Petersburg, one of the noted *maskilim* (they called themselves enlightened, but, in truth, they were free-thinkers who were far from enlightened) turned to one of the distinguished *rabbanim* and said, "Why are you unable to make some changes within the context of religious observance? For example, why can you not eliminate the law of *chalitzah*? (Under the Torah's system of levirate marriage known as *yibum*, *chalitzah* is the process by which a childless widow and the brother of her deceased husband may avoid the duty to marry. On the surface, the procedure comes across as humiliating – but, on an esoteric plane, the humiliation and entire procedure is important.) *Chalitzah* seems a bit antiquated. Can we not simply do away with such laws?"

Overhearing the *maskil's* assault on tradition,

Horav Tzvi Hirsch Rabinowitz, zl, Rav of Kovno, rose from his seat and said, "This is a noteworthy suggestion, but our conference is not the venue for discussing the *chalitzah* issue. This should be discussed at a medical conference, where physicians can attempt to figure out a way to prevent people from dying. Once death is a thing of the past, *chalitzah* will hardly be an issue, as nobody will be dying!"

The *maskil* looked at the *Kovno Rav* as if he had become unhinged: "You understand, of course, that death is something no one can prevent. It is an inherent part of life."

"It is, likewise, with the Torah," countered Rav Rabinowitz. "There is no room for change concerning the Torah. It is immutable."

בנינו ראה בעינו – Re'eh b'anyeinu. Behold our affliction.

When we ask Hashem (or anyone, for that matter) to behold/look at our affliction, we are actually asking Him first to listen to our plea and then to look at our troubles. How well the listener hears the problem will determine the extent that he will look at it. When a person is spiritually or emotionally ill, it is impossible to provide a healing response until the healer has first heard his or her spiritual/emotional pain. Furthermore, not only is listening a prerequisite and precursor to a healing response, it is a healing response. When a person who is afflicted knows that he is being heard, he can begin the process of healing.

Thus, when we petition Hashem to behold/look at our troubles, we ask Him to listen, then look. It is, therefore, important that we speak with *kavanah*, intention, and sincerity, because how we present our problem, how we intone our pain, will determine how Hashem will listen. We do not have to shout our pain, but we must be sincere. When someone is in pain, it is obvious. When we rush through *Shemoneh Esrai*, it does little to show our sincere feelings of pain.

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Parashas Balak

תשע"ז

פרשת בלק

ויפתח ד' את פי האתון

**Hashem opened up the mouth of the she-donkey.
(22:28)**

At times, the truth can be painful. It can be brutal. Why? Because it is the truth. Unembellished truth can be enlightening – but, sadly, not all of us are able to withstand the power of illumination. Balak sought to defeat the Jewish People. He hired Bilaam, an evil pagan prophet, to curse them. Bilaam was a powerful individual who had been blessed with being the pagan world's response to Moshe *Rabbeinu*. In the end, Bilaam's intended negative intent was transformed into positive results.

Bilaam was not supposed to accept Balak's offer, but, true to his evil, weak nature, he proceeded anyway. As he rode his donkey on the way to cursing the Jews, his donkey saw an angel three times – and moved aside. Bilaam did not care to have his donkey take charge of the journey, and he indicated his displeasure by striking the donkey repeatedly. Hashem opened the mouth of the donkey, granting it the power of speech – a power generally reserved for human beings – and allowing it to rebuke Bilaam for planning to curse the Jews.

The donkey is not considered the "swiftest" of animals. Why did Hashem select the donkey to convey His message to Bilaam? Interestingly, when the donkey opened his mouth to rebuke Bilaam, the pagan prophet had no answers for his errant behavior. What about the donkey's rebuke stunted Bilaam?

In his *Bircas Peretz*, the *Steipler Gaon, zl*, explains that the donkey knew no *chochmos*; he spoke whatever came to his "mind," which was pure, unembellished truth. No one can stand up to the truth. No one can argue with the truth. The donkey had no personal desires that influenced him. Thus, he was able to give a straightforward, honest critique, untainted by personal interest. The wisest pagan, the individual who had reached the height of prophecy (or perhaps its nadir), was unable to justify his behavior when confronted by the less-than-swift donkey. Why? The truth is glaring and pierces right through one's misconceived rationalizations.

How often do we qualify our actions by self-prevarication? Lying to oneself is the most common, and probably most injurious, form of dishonesty. We rationalize activities that are less-than commendable by convincing ourselves that what we are doing is in the best interest of an individual, the community, our family, our self. If, at the end of the day, it is a lie – it is in no one's best interest.

**כי מראש צדים אראנו ומגבעות אשורנו הן עם לבדד ישכון
For from its origins, I see it rock-like, and from hills, I do
see it. Behold! It is a nation that will dwell in solitude.**

(23:9)

Tzurim is a reference to our *Avos*, Patriarchs. *Gevaos* refer, to our *Imahos*, Matriarchs. *Meirosh tzurim er'eenu*; I see the roots of this nation. They are firmly anchored in the *tzurim* and *geva'os*, Patriarchs and Matriarchs. It is part of their DNA. *Hen am levadad yishkon*. They are different in the sense that they live away from the pagans. They dress differently, eat differently, maintain a different set of morals. Bilaam was amazed by *Klal Yisrael's* ability to retain their exclusivity. They stood out in a world that was so different from theirs. They dressed with *tznius*, retaining a sense of moral modesty in their selection of clothing. The food that entered their mouths was kosher, thus not affected by the evil character traits of non-kosher animals and fowl. Their moral dignity was reflected in their adherence to the strict tenets of Judaism that banned unions that were perverse and irregular. They demonstrated respect for one another by making sure that their windows did not coincide with the windows of their neighbors.

Rambam (Hilchos Dei'os) writes: "By nature, a person is influenced by the thoughts and practices of his friends and neighbors, who act like the rest of the society in which he lives." Bilaam wondered how the Jews were able to resist the repugnant influence of the morally bankrupt society which surrounded them. He came to the realization that the Patriarchal and Matriarchal roots have played a prominent role in the Jewish DNA.

Indeed, we are captive to a society that is morally degenerate: where substance abuse is rampant, where ethics are considered to be antiquated and integrity is perverted. Yet, the Jewish people stand alone, an island of moral sanity in a sea of confusion. Why is this? Our roots. The *Avos* and *Imahos* imbued us with the ability to stand firm and resolute, as did our Patriarch, Avraham *Halvri*. He stood all alone on one side (so to speak), while the rest of the world looked at him with derision. He survived; they did not. Nothing is left of his antagonists. We, however, carry on his mission.

A Jew remains a Jew. The Patriarchal DNA might be covered with spiritual dross, but, when the proper time arrives, it is revealed in all its beauty and purity. Yirmiyahu Kaminsky stood at the side of his father's tombstone on *Har HaZeisim*. It was his father's *yahrzeit*. His father had been a mathematics professor in an institute of higher learning in Chullon. His father had related to him the story of his life and how he had ended up in the Holy Land. It was a fascinating

journey, a journey that ultimately brought his son, Yirmiyahu, to his grave on his father's *yahrzeit*.

His father was born in Kharkov, Ukraine, in 1919. His father's mother's name was Selma Glickstein. When she saw the winds of anti-Semitism churning up against the Jews, she decided that being Jewish was a disadvantage which would severely handicap the future of her infant son. She was a single parent who had become widowed shortly prior to her son's birth. She made the decision to enter his religion in the community registry as Christian. To concretize the change, she altered the family name from Glickstein to Kaminsky. Branislav Kaminsky would grow up as a *goy* – without a *bris*, circumcision, and with a non-Jewish name. He attended the finest government schools, unaware that he was a *Yid*.

One day, he was going home in the company of a group of friends, when they chanced upon a young, Jewish boy. His friends proceeded to hurl curses and maledictions at the innocent boy whose only offense was being Jewish. They completed the outrage by pummeling him until he was bleeding. One last kick in the chest, and they continued along their merry way, satisfied that they had hurt a helpless Jew.

Branislav was shocked beyond belief. How could they be so abominable? Their actions repulsed him, so that when he came home in an appalled state of shock, he asked his mother, "Why did they pick on that defenseless boy just because he is Jewish? Where does such implacable hatred originate?" His aunt, who happened to be visiting his mother at the time, banged on the table and declared, "I cannot tolerate the boy's pain any longer. Tell him the truth!"

"What are you saying?" Branislav asked his aunt, who turned to his mother with a pointed finger and said, "Tell him!" Selma was suddenly tongue-tied, so the aunt finished off what she had started. "You are a Jew! We are all Jewish! We have concealed our true faith for fear of violent repercussions."

Branislav was terribly shaken up by the news. He had been living a lie. The lie would stop now. He went to the government office and had his religious identity changed to Jewish. The next step was to go to the *Rav* of Kharkov and announce that he had not been circumcised. He was returning to the Jewish faith. He had his name changed to Avraham Baruch.

Yirmiyahu continued telling his father's story: "When the war broke out, my father was drafted to serve with the partisans. Shortly thereafter, he was caught, arraigned, judged and sentenced to death. They wasted little time when they caught an insurgent – especially if he was Jewish. By some miracle, the SS commandant remembered him from school. Instead of execution, he was sent to the Mauthausen concentration camp, where he survived the war. Following the liberation, he moved to France where he married and raised a family. He passed away in France, and his body was interred there. However, we recently brought his body to rest in the Holy Land."

One can change his name – but the Jewish *neshamah*, soul, remains unaltered.

Certain instances in a person's life engage his *neshamah*, and his Patriarchal DNA awakens within him. The head of the Jewish community in Koznitz, Poland, was a Jewish apostate. Dr. Grunshan had assimilated early on, when he was a student, and, as time progressed, his

distance from Judaism increased – to the point that he was known for his self-loathing nature, which manifested itself as anti-Semitism.

When the war broke out, the Nazis did not distinguish between observant Jew and apostate. If one had Jewish blood, his level of observance- or lack thereof – did not matter. Dr. Grunshan was taken prisoner and mercilessly beaten and tortured. During the entire time, he remained stoically silent, exhibiting pride that would not permit him to beg before these beastly fiends. Finally, the Nazi in charge had a *Sefer Torah* brought to the room, as he lit a bonfire outside. "Take the scroll and throw it into the fire!" the accursed Nazi commanded. "No!" Dr. Grunshan cried. "I will not burn a *Sefer Torah*. I am a Jew! You can do whatever you want to me, but I will never desecrate a Torah scroll!" The Nazis removed his clothing from him and flung him into the flames, where his body was quickly consumed. Later on, while going through his pants pockets, one of the Jewish prisoners found a note penned by the martyr. One could tell that the words had been written as tears were rolling down the face of their author.

"I apostatized myself and became a Christian purely for financial advantage. I continued along this route because of convenience. Nonetheless, all of this time, I have cursed the moment that I made that terrible decision. Due to my foolishness and greed, I missed out on the opportunity to live proudly as a Jew. *Yehi ratzon* – May it be the will of the Creator that my birth as a Jew should serve in my stead as a merit that I die as a Jew!"

Many stories attest to this verity. A Jew remains a Jew, despite the various layers of spiritual deficiencies that externally cloak his soul. It is what is inside that matters. That aspect of his Jewishness remains pure and unsullied.

מה טובו אהליך יעקב משכנותיך ישראל *How goodly are your tents, O Yaakov, your dwelling places, O Yisrael. (24:5)*

Chazal teach that the word *ohalecha*, your tents, alludes to the study halls, and *mishkenosecha*, your dwelling places, alludes to the *shuls*. The similes of tents and dwelling places have found fertile interpretation among the Torah's commentators. We will cite a few before suggesting our own. The *Shearis Menachem (Parashas Vayishlach)* wonders why we commence our daily prayers with a statement made by the wicked pagan prophet, Bilaam.

He explains that Bilaam made this remark after observing the *tznius*, moral modesty, of the Jewish people, manifested by each tribe living distinct from one another; the doorways of each home not being opposite one another, so that one doorway did not coincide with the doorway of his neighbor, thereby preventing one from peering into his neighbor's home. He observed the distinction between *Am Yisrael* and the pagan nations in this area, and was reasonably impressed, to the point that he declared, "*Mah tovu ohalecha!*"

The *Rebbe* explains that the origin of *kedushah*, holiness, is not the *bais ha'knesses, shul*. *Kedushah* streams forth like a river emanating from the *ohel*, the individual Jewish home. The home is where *kedushah* is planted and germinates to the point that it blooms and thrives in the *shul*. When the *ohel* is "Yaakov," and it rises to the standards of Yaakov, then the *mishkan*, the *shul*, will represent *Yisrael*.

A *shul* in which the *davening* is pure – the singing is traditional and holy, the *niggunim*, tunes of the songs, reflect dignity and not street fare – reflects that the *daveners*, worshippers, experienced solid Jewish foundations in their homes.

The *Divrei Chaim, Horav Chaim Sanzer, zl*, once approached a group of wealthy individuals to solicit them for a certain *tzedakah*, charitable endeavor. One of the would-be philanthropists said that he would contribute proportionately to the donation rendered by another wealthy man who had much more money than he. The *Sanzer* replied that Bilaam was impressed with the Jews that *ein pischeihem mechuvanim zeh k'neged zeh*, "their doorways were not facing one another." The *Rebbe* said *pischeihem* can serve as an allusion to *tzedakah*, as it says, *Pasoach tiftach es yadcha*, "You shall surely open up your hand" (*Devarim* 15:8) which is a reference to contributing toward the poor. Thus, we can interpret *pischeihen* as "opening their hands" in a manner which did not depend upon how much their contemporaries gave. Each person gave in accordance with his own understanding and appreciation of the need.

Perhaps we may suggest a standard for what ought to be a *rav's* conviction for determining the value of a *shul*. Some would have us think that a successful *I* must consist of a large edifice, filled with a sizeable crowd comprised of the finest, most distinguished lay and spiritual membership. Anything less is a *minyan*, a quorum, not a situation which reflects success.

Some leaders thrive on public acclaim and have difficulty surviving on the accolades of the few. They require large crowds, with small groups considered unworthy of their time and effort. Others do not need the limelight and view each Jewish *neshamah* to be of inestimable value, each Jew representing a microcosm of the world. The spiritual potential found in each and every Jew should be the motivating factor for outreach – not the public attention one might garner. True achievement, true greatness, lies in overcoming the *yetzer hora*, evil inclination, which seeks *kavod*, honor. Instead, focus in on the individual. Every *mitzvah* is a world.

Ohel Yaakov: a tent is small, thus, it represents the spiritual shelter provided for the individual. Yaakov is a single person; the term Yaakov refers to the Patriarch at his early – and perhaps most vulnerable – periods in life. *Mishkenosecha Yisrael*: a *mishkan* is a large repository which is the large house of worship; and *Yisrael* reflects the large Jewish community. Its strength is not only in numbers, but in *Yisrael*, the name given to the Patriarch after he bested Eisav's Angel. *Mah tovu ohalecha Yaakov*, "How goodly are your tents, O Yaakov." One should never ignore the small tents, the Yaakovs of our People, who have yet to reach their greatest spiritual potential, for it is those small shelters that reach out to the individual (often yearning) Jew, providing him with identity and encouragement. They represent *mishknosecha Yisrael*.

Rav Menachem Mendel Perr, zl, was *Rav* in South Ozone Park, Queens, for over fifty years. A *talmid*, student, of *Slabodka*, he recognized and encouraged the development of each individual Jew due to the inherent *gadlus ha'adam*, greatness of man, within him. As the years of his *rabbanus* progressed, the demographics of the congregants changed, to the point that *Rav Perr* barely had a

minyan of observant worshippers for *Shabbos* morning. Nonetheless, his devotion to them was consistent. As long as there was a congregant who came to *shul* – he would be there to serve his spiritual needs. When it came time for his grandson's *bar mitzvah*, his family expected him to attend. How surprised they were to hear that he would not abandon his *shul* – even for his grandson's *bar mitzvah*. His reason is what inspired me: "Even if only a few men attend the services, at least for those few hours, they will not be *mechallel Shabbos*, desecrating the *Shabbos*. How can I allow myself the luxury of attending a *bar mitzvah* at the expense of *chillul Shabbos*?"

This was a person to whom *ohalecha* Yaakov meant something. It is *rabbonim* such as he, who care about their congregants more than they care about themselves, who merit building *mishkenosecha* *Yisrael*.

וישב ישראל בשמים ויחל העם לזנות אל בנות מואב *Yisrael settled in the Shittim and the people began to commit harlotry with the daughters of Moav. (25:1)*

Bilaam tried acting out the façade of the righteous prophet who "could not" curse the Jewish people. In the end, his evil advice to have them stray after the pagan women was tragically successful. Bilaam's wicked intentions willed out. The façade was over.

The *Talmud Sotah* 22b relates that King Yannai was a scion of the *Bais Chashmonaim*, who had served both as *Kohen Gadol* and *Melech*. He became a *tzeduki*, massacring the *chachamim*. As a result, he was reviled by the *Perushim*, who were faithful to the *chachamim* and meticulously upheld the Torah – both Biblical and *Rabbinic*. He told his wife that she had nothing to fear from the *Perushim*. They were truly decent, righteous men who would not retaliate against her and her sons out of revenge against Yannai. The *tzedukim* were his allies and just as vile as he. She did, however, have to worry about the *tzevuim*, who looked like *Perushim*, but were actually as evil as the *tzedukim*. These chameleons were truly factitious, fakers who played by their own rules. They were wicked like *Zimri*, yet sought the honor accorded to *Pinchas*. Sadly, *tzevuim* are not a thing of the past. They thrive in every community, in every generation. Some people want to have their cake and eat it too. One is either *Zimri* or *Pinchas*. The two worlds are incompatible with one another.

One would be given to understand that *tzevuim* are individuals who externally present themselves as righteous and observant, while privately reflecting a completely different persona. Behind closed doors they act immorally, with evil intent and malicious. This seems to be the implied exposition, based upon *Rashi's* understanding of *tzevuim*. The *Brisker Rav, zl*, has a more "contemporary" take on *tzevuim* (I use the word "contemporary" by design. The *Brisker Rav* had lived through the effects of the modern day *tzevuim*.) He explains that *tzevuim* represent a third approach to Jewish religious posture. They seek to compromise between right and left – between the *Perushim* and the *Tzedukim*. Thus, they think they deserve a reward similar to that received by *Pinchas*. Just like *Pinchas* saved the Jewish People in his time, they, too, feel that they are the savior of the Jewish People. Compromise and flexibility are terms which they use due to their lack of moral and