

**LIGHT
FROM
THE
FUTURE
PARSHAS BALAK**

BY

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LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE - PARSHAS BALAK

**LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE
ESSAYS ON PARSHAS BALAK**

**Published by the
Jewish Discovery Center
Institute for Jewish Studies**

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**Dedicated to the Lubavitcher Rebbe, who,
more than any Jewish leader, has prepared us
for Moshiach and the imminent Redemption**

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

- 1. CURSES AND BLESSINGS**
- 2. THE VISUALLY CHALLENGED SEER**
 - 3. JUST FOR NOW**
 - 4. COVERT OPERATIONS**
 - 5. TWO SCENARIOS**
- 6. SUBSTANCE, PROFIT AND HOPE**
- 7. TORAH, GOLD AND SILVER**
- 8. TWO TIERED CONQUEST**
- 9. HONEY OR A STING?**
- 10. RUNNING FROM OR RUNNING TO?**
 - 11. MISPLACED SPIRITUALITY**
- 12. THE TWELFTH AND THIRTEENTH OF TAMMUZ**
 - 13. WALK!**
- 14. WHAT CAN WE ACCOMPLISH IN ONE INSTANT?**
 - 15. SINGULAR BLESSING**

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

16. CATCHING UP

17. MOSHIACH

18. REMOVING THE BILAM CURSE OF GALUS

19. NO PARAGRAPHS

B”H

INTRODUCTION

The following collection of essays on *parshas Balak* was taken from the weekly Torah messages that I have been sending to hundreds of individuals over the past 22 years.

These messages were written in the spirit of the talks of the Lubavitcher Rebbe. Several of them are actually based on or adaptations of his essays and discourses on the parsha.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe declared that we are living in unique times. He applied the words of the Midrash to our day:

“The time of your Redemption has arrived.”

The Rebbe stated further that the straightforward way for us to bring about the actual Redemption is by learning what the Torah says about Moshiach and Redemption. While learning Torah in general has the capacity to change our mindset, learning about Moshiach and Redemption has the capacity to alter of exile-constrained way of thinking and cultivating a liberating manner of thinking.

In this spirit, each one of these messages concludes with an application of the Torah lesson of that week to our understanding of Moshiach and Redemption, as well as to

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

help us prepare for the coming of Moshiach and the imminent Redemption.

It is my fervent hope that these essays will contribute to the process of changing our *galus/exile* mindset into a Moshiach mindset, which is effected by the study of these themes in Torah.. And may this effort contribute to the imminent Redemption through our righteous Moshiach. Amen.

The parsha Balak features the most explicit reference to Moshiach and the Messianic Age. This prophecy came from the vile mouth of Bilam, the heathen prophet who sought to curse the Jewish people, but instead uttered the most beautiful blessings.

The Rebbe would point out the fact that these blessings came from Bilam; it was to demonstrate the power of Moshiach to transform the darkness into light!

ESSAY ONE

CURSES AND BLESSINGS

Transforming curses into blessings is the ultimate expression of G-d's true unity because it proves that not even the evil has any power of its own, but to serve G-d's purpose in creation. And therefore, ultimately, even the curses will be transformed into blessings.

ESSAY ONE

CURSES AND BLESSINGS

Bilam's Cressings (Curses Converted into Blessings)

The most potent weapon is the tongue. And the tongue is most destructive when it is used to curse another person. So harmful can one's curse be, according to the Torah, that there are several commandments directed against cursing G-d, a leader, ones parent and any person.

In this week's Torah portion, Bilam, the heathen prophet was hired by Balak, the King of Moab, to curse the Jews. Miraculously, every time he attempted to utter a curse against the Jewish nation, his curses were converted by G-d into blessings. Indeed, some of these blessings are unmatched in poetic beauty, and spiritual elegance. One of these converted curses, "*Mah Tov*u-How goodly are your tents, Jacob, your dwelling places Israel" appears at the beginning of our *Sidurim*-prayer books, and extols the beauty of the Jewish homes and places of worship.

Bilam is also responsible for uttering the most earth shattering prophecies about the future destruction of those

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

very nations that tried to destroy the Jewish people, specifically Amalek. Bilam is also responsible for the most dramatic blessing/prophecy concerning the future of the Jewish people and of the entire world- the coming of the Moshiach!

Why the Vile Bilam?

One obvious question that comes to mind is why did G-d have to convert Bilam's curses into blessings and powerful prophetic visions? If G-d wanted to neutralize the deleterious effects of Bilam's curses, He could have done just that. G-d could have taken away the power that Bilam obviously possessed that enabled him to harm others through his curses. And if the A-mighty wanted to bless the Jewish people, He could have found some more suitable person through whom the positive message could have been channeled. Why did G-d want a person, as horrible as Bilam, to be the conduit of G-d's blessings to Israel?

The Purpose of Evil

The answer lies in our understanding of the dynamics of good and evil. Unlike other religions, Judaism does not believe that G-d has no control over evil; that evil is G-d's

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

rival for power. On the contrary, evil was created by G-d with a purpose.

What purpose can there possibly be for evil?

On the lowest and most basic level, the purpose of evil is to pose as an obstacle in our path. Evil was designed to give us a challenge so that our positive efforts are more meaningful and valuable. But, on this level, our purpose is to ignore the evil and even attempt to destroy those aspects of evil energies that cannot be salvaged by channeling them in a positive direction.

But, there is a higher purpose for evil. The ultimate objective and purpose for evil is to have it transformed into good. Our mystical tradition - Kabbalah - teaches us that even evil possesses hidden “sparks” of holiness and G-dly energy. So hidden, however, are these G-dly forces embedded in them that we cannot, under normal circumstances, access them. All that we can do is to ignore the evil, resist it and destroy its most powerful manifestations.

Only G-d has the power to liberate those “sparks of holiness” and thereby transform these very evil forces into positive ones.

There are two ways in which G-d allows for that process of liberation to occur so that we can access these hidden sparks

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

The first method applies only to those who have already transgressed and upon realizing their guilt are so motivated to Teshuvah and get close to G-d with such passion that they are able to reveal and harness the hidden sparks of evil.

The second method will occur in the future; in the Messianic Age, at which time “the darkness will be transformed into light.” There are aspects of evil that cannot be salvaged; those will cease to exist. But the salvageable aspects of evil will be transformed.

This is one of the reasons that Maimonides writes, based on Biblical verses, that in the future all of the saddest days of the year, including the upcoming fast day and national day of mourning - Tisha B’Av – will not only cease to be sad days, but they will be transformed into joyous holidays.

Transforming curses into blessings is thus the ultimate expression of G-d’s true unity. This proves that not even the evil has any power of its own, but to serve G-d’s purpose in creation. And therefore, ultimately, even the curses will be transformed into blessings.

G-d therefore chose one of the most vile people - Bilam – to prophesy concerning the ultimate future Messianic Age, to underscore that evil has no power of its own and that in that period – on whose threshold we are now standing – all the darkness of the world will be transformed into light!,

ESSAY TWO

THE VISUALLY CHALLENGED SEER

Moses and Moshiach's commanding the respect of the entire world lies in their ability to see with "both" eyes.

This clarity of vision is also what will characterize the entire world in the Messianic Era that will be ushered in by Moshiach.

ESSAY TWO

THE VISUALLY CHALLENGED SEER

A Bizarre Relationship

Bilam, was a heathen prophet, hired by Balak, the King of Moab, to curse the Jewish people.

On the face of it, the entire image of a man who communicates with G-d and – more significantly – a person with whom G-d chose to communicate, and who is known for his ability to curse, is incongruous, to say the least.

Why would G-d maintain a “relationship” with a man as vile as Bilam?

The Midrash anticipating this question responds in the following manner: The nations of the world protested to G-d: The reason we do not follow the righteous ways of the Jewish people is because you have not given us men of the spirit, such as Moses, to lead and inspire us. G-d, therefore, gave them Bilam, who, notwithstanding his sophisticated knowledge of G-d, did not prevent him from becoming an evil tyrant, whose example was followed by his own people.

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

The question still persists. Granted that G-d wanted the nations to have a man whose communication skills with G-d rivaled those of Moses, but, of what benefit is a leader who is evil?

Secondly, how was it possible for a man who had such good “connections” with G-d, to be so evil? Isn’t awareness of G-d the very foundation upon which the structure of goodness and justice are built?

Only One Eye

The answer lies in Bilam’s own description of himself: “a man whose eye is open.” Rashi comments that this meant that one of his eyes were missing.

Commentators explain that his blindness in one eye was more than just an anatomical anomaly. A person has two eyes, to reflect on two matters. With one eye one should reflect on the greatness of G-d. With the second eye one must look inwards, at oneself, to realize one’s own insignificance.

Figuratively speaking, to have but one eye is in many ways worse than having no eyes. If one has the ability to appreciate the greatness of G-d, but fails to see his/her own insignificance, the appreciation of G-d can actually enhance the person’s inflated ego.

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

Bilam's partial blindness was the reason for his downfall. The more of G-d's majesty he was able to see, the greater his ego became. He was utterly blind in seeing his own inadequacies.

The Right and Left Eyes

A story is told of the Previous Lubavitcher Rebbe – whose anniversary of liberation from Soviet imprisonment we are observing this week on the 12th and 13th of Tammuz – who, as a child, asked his father and predecessor, the fifth Lubavitcher Rebbe, known as the Rebbe Rashab, why G-d created us with one mouth, one nose, but two eyes. His father's response to him was that we are to look at a candy or a toy with our left (i.e., critical) eye, but our right (i.e., approving and affectionate) eye must be reserved for the way we view another individual.

Self-Effacement a Necessary Component of Prophecy and Leadership

Here too, blindness in one eye can mean failure to be critical of oneself and to check one's ego, desires and pursuit of material acquisitions. This blindness, albeit in one eye, can sometimes get in the way of one's "good" eye, as in the situation where the other individual's interests

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

conflict with our own. This obsession with self can taint the other “good” eye’s favorable view of the other individual.

When the nations of the world demanded a leader of the caliber of Moses, they meant a person who had great spiritual vision. They were not interested, however, in a leader who was also self-effacing and who realized his own insignificance. Their view of leadership was to serve as a force to promote themselves to higher levels.

G-d’s response to them was: “Fine. I’ll send you Bilam, a person who exemplifies the futility in being a man of the spirit, without the other ingredient of self-assessment that leads to self-effacement.” The greatness of a Jewish leader is not only his ability to scale the heights of spiritual awareness, but lies also in his ability to plumb the depths of his soul and eradicate all traces of impurity and ego.

Moses was such a leader, and Moshiach is another great person whose ability to command the respect of the entire world lies in his ability to see with “both” eyes. This clarity of vision is also what will characterize the entire world in the Messianic Era that will be ushered in by Moshiach.

ESSAY THREE

JUST FOR NOW

Earth shattering events are indeed very appealing to us.
But, even the most insignificant act can forever change the
world.

We cannot fathom the ripple and snowballing effect all the
good that we do has on the world.

ESSAY THREE

JUST FOR NOW

Unfit for Leadership

Balak, the king of Moab was terrified of the Israelites after seeing what they did to the Emorites and their mighty king *Sichon*. He then hires the heathen prophet Bilam to curse the Jews. Instead, G-d forces him to utter the most beautiful blessings and glorious predictions of the future of the Jewish nation

When the Torah introduces us to Balak, it states that he was “the king of Moab **at that time.**”

What does the Torah mean when it emphasizes that he was the king “at that time?” Why would it have occurred to us that he was the king at any other another time?

Rashi replies that Balak was not really fit to be king, but with the death of Sichon, they appointed him king for that moment.

On the surface, Rashi means that because of the “emergency” situation that existed for the Moabites at that time, they appointed Balak to the leadership person to

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

serve as an ad hoc leader to defeat the Jews.

One could also look at the temporary appointment of Balak in another more positive vein.

A Delay Tactic

Balak and the people of Moab were evil people with malice in their hearts. When they wanted to harm the Jewish people they were satisfied with any amount of pain. Even though they knew that the Jewish people would ultimately prevail, they wanted to, at least, temporarily halt their journey and progress.

Similarly, Bilam, the heathen prophet Balak commissioned to curse the Jews, spoke of the Messianic deliverance of the Jews. However, he prophesied that it would be in the distant future. Bilam knew he could not eliminate the inevitable Redemption of the Jewish people from exile through the Moshiach. Nevertheless, if he could delay that process by even one day, he would have been content.

Balak therefore says to Bilam, “and **now**, go curse this nation for me..,” with the emphasis on the word “now.” With this he meant to suggest to Bilam, “True, you cannot destroy them and adversely change their situation permanently, but you could curse them now and set them back a bit.”

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

“From my enemies I gain wisdom.”

We also find that Bilam tried to anticipate the split second G-d got angry, and to utilize that fleeting moment to curse the vulnerable Jews. Here again we confront someone utilizing the fleeting moment to do something evil.

What is true in the realm of evil is equally true in the realm of goodness. We can even learn lessons from rather unsavory characters. King David said as much in the Psalms: “From my enemies I gain wisdom.”

In this vein, there are three lessons one can learn from the actions of Balak and Bilam:

Seizing the Opportunity

First one should seize every opportunity to do good. If there is even one window of opportunity, it should not be closed. Just as Bilam sought to divine the precise moment G-d's anger was aroused. When one feels even a bit of inspiration, take advantage of it immediately. Do something special; bless someone, perhaps that inspired moment was a gift by G-d to use for the benefit of others.

A story is told of how a prominent Polish rabbi, Rabbi Saul Wall was appointed king for a night when the Nobles of Poland could not agree on a candidate. The rabbi-king utilized that “king for a night” opportunity to annul various

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

anti-Semitic laws before he relinquished the throne to one of the Noblemen.

Appreciate and Savor Every Effort

Second, one could conclude from the episode of Balak that one should appreciate even what appears to be the most temporary change for the good just as Balak was satisfied to inflict temporary pain on the Jewish people.

We should not think that a person should only do the type of good deeds that lead to a permanent change in our lives or in the lives of others. Earth shattering events are indeed very appealing to us, but of what value are the simple gestures that may not even seem to have any enduring effects?

The truth is there is really no such thing. Even the most insignificant act can forever change the world. We cannot fathom the ripple and snowballing effect all the good that we do has on the world.

But even if it were possible that the benefits of one good act that we perform should last for only a short period of time, one should learn the lesson from Balak, and still do it.

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

One Day Sooner

The Third lesson is that just as Bilam wanted to only delay the Messianic Age, but not push it off indefinitely, one should be motivated, in the realm of holiness, to hasten its coming even if it were only advanced by one day.

In short, not only does every act and every opportunity count, we should never underestimate the power of one temporary change in the world and the importance of hastening the coming of Moshiach by each and every positive act, word or even thought that we engage in.

ESSAY FOUR

COVERT OPERATIONS

There are two dimensions of good:

**The good that is overt and easily accessed and the
dimension of good that is covert and is hard to access.**

**G-d, in His infinite kindness, has allowed us to access both
forms of good.**

We will fully experience that in the Messianic Age

ESSAY FOUR

COVERT OPERATIONS

Converting Curses into Blessings

Why would G-d play games with a vile individual as Bilam, the Heathen prophet who was hired to curse the Jews when they were on their way into the Promised Land of Israel?

This is a question that arises when one reviews the content of this week's parsha that begins with the description of how Balak, the king of the Moabite nation, was terrified of the Israelites after they defeated the two mighty kings, Sichon and Og.

Realizing that he would not be able to defeat them the conventional way — by way of the sword — he hired the powerful prophet called Bilam to curse the Jews. Every time Bilam attempted to deliver, his curses turned into blessings. Indeed some of the most powerful blessings that have since been incorporated into our daily liturgy derives from the vile mouth of Bilam.

Why would G-d want to reveal Himself to such a lowly

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

individual as Bilam? Why did G-d give him qualified permission to go with Balak and thereby give him the impression that he has the license to curse the Jews? If G-d was going to frustrate his intentions, why did He give him the mistaken notion that he would be able to curse them?

Two Dimensions of Good

The answer to these questions lies in a better understanding of the concept of “transformation”. There are two dimensions of good: The good that is overt and easily accessed and the dimension of good that is covert and is hard to access.

There is an advantage to each dimension of good. From the perspective of the one who has the experience, there is no question that one would prefer an overt goodness to a goodness that cannot be appreciated, even if, eventually, we will come to realize the preeminence of the covert form of goodness.

Conversely, the covert form of goodness from G-d’s perspective, who is eternal, is a far more sublime and absolute form of good. The fact that it cannot be easily accessed by us is not because it is lacking in its goodness, but, on the contrary. Because it is so sublime, one must be on an extremely high level to sense this goodness.

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

To most of us this transcendent goodness looks like a curse rather than a blessing.

G-d in His infinite love for the Jewish people wanted that we should have the advantages of both forms of goodness. G-d wanted us, therefore, to be able to apprehend and internalize the transcendent good, so that the otherwise elusive goodness should be appreciated by us.

Sowing the Seeds

This phenomenon of taking something that is inherently Divine and beyond our perception of good and transforming it into something that is eminently accessible, is one of the characteristics of the Messianic Age. At that time the Prophet Zecharya declares, and reinforced by our Sages our sages, that the fast days that we currently observe (as the anniversaries of past tragedies, such as the upcoming fast of the seventeenth of Tammuz, which commemorates the breaching of the walls of Jerusalem) will not only cease to be observed as fast days, but they will also be transformed into days of celebration.

To facilitate this transformation of curses into blessings and darkness into light that will characterize the future Messianic existence, G-d had sown the seeds of transformation at the very inception of the Jewish nation. Right before they entered into the Land Of Israel, an event

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

that would portend the ultimate return of all Jews from the Diaspora to Israel, G-d channeled the most sublime blessings through the vile Bilam. This meant that G-d was giving them the potential to take the hidden good that appears to be curse and have it transformed into visible and palpable blessing and good.

Once these seeds were sown, the Jewish nation was given a G-dly ability to cope with adversity in the most unusual way. Not only do we survive adversity, but we also have an uncanny albeit limited way of using adversity for growth and the attainment of much greater heights.

Cumulative Power

When we accumulate enough of these minor transformative experiences, we will then be ready to receive the Moshiach who is the great Jewish leader the prophets spoke of who has the uncanny ability to see good in everything and transform the most negative experiences into the most positive.

In some years the fast day of the 17th of Tammuz, coincides with the Sabbath and is therefore postponed until Sunday. This is a vivid reminder of how negativity and sadness will ultimately be transformed when we reach the Sabbath of our world's existence: the Messianic Age.

ESSAY FIVE

TWO SCENARIOS

**There are two distinct scenarios for the unfolding of the
Messianic drama.**

**If we are not worthy, Moshiach will still come, but his
coming will be at the appointed time, rather than sooner,
and will also occur in a natural and non-dramatic way.**

**If we are meritorious and deserving, Moshiach's coming
will be hastened and will manifest itself in a rather
spectacular way.**

ESSAY FIVE

TWO SCENARIOS

Two Moshiachs

Bilam the heathen prophet, was hired by Balak, the Moabite King, to curse the Jewish people. Instead,

G-d compelled him to utter some of the most beautiful and powerful blessings for the Jewish people. One of these prophetic blessings reads as follows:

"I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not nigh.
A star steps out from Jacob and a scepter will arise
from Israel..."

Most classical commentators interpret Bilam's prophecy as a prediction of the coming of the Moshiach/Messiah. However, these commentators differ as to why the Torah uses repetitive language to describe the future arrival of Moshiach: (a) "I see him, but not now"; (b) "I behold him, but not nigh." (a) "A star steps out from Jacob"; (b) A scepter will arise from Israel."

According to Maimonides, the great Jewish philosopher and authority on Jewish law, the "doublet" refers to Bilam's

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

prediction of two great Jewish leaders: King David and the Moshiach.

The first leader to bolster Jewish existence, consolidate power in Israel and lay the foundation for the building of the Holy Temple was King David, represented by the first part of the verse: "I see him, but not now," and "a star steps out from Jacob." The second leader to complete the task begun by King David, by bringing total peace to Israel and the entire world, rebuild the Temple etc., is the Moshiach. This is alluded to in the second part of the verse: "I behold him, but not nigh," and "a scepter will arise from Israel..."

Two Scenarios

Rabbi Chaim ben Atar (an 18th century Sephardic Sage, whose anniversary of passing is this week, on the fifteenth of Tammuz) in his classic commentary Or HaChaim, provides a novel interpretation of the foregoing verse, based on the words of the Talmud that there are really two distinct scenarios for the coming of Moshiach:

"Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi raised a contradiction. It is written [with respect to Moshiach's coming]: 'in its time' (Isaiah 60:22). And it is written [in the very same verse]: 'I will hasten it.' If they are

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

meritorious, I will hasten it. If they are not meritorious, in its time.”

In other words, if the Jewish people will act meritoriously and earn the arrival of Moshiach, he will come before the prescribed deadline. If we are undeserving, Moshiach will still come, but not before the designated time.

The Talmud then proceeds to cite another apparent contradiction:

“It is written: ‘And behold, with the clouds of heaven, one like a man came,’ [implying that Moshiach will arrive ‘on a cloud’ in a majestic and miraculous fashion] ” (Daniel 7:13) And it is written: ‘A humble man, riding on a donkey,’ [implying that Moshiach will make his entry onto the Jewish scene in a humbled and inconspicuous way].” (Zechariah 9:9).

The Talmud then resolves this discrepancy by stating:

“If they are meritorious, with the ‘clouds of heaven.’ If they are not meritorious, a ‘humble man, riding on a donkey.’”

From the foregoing it is clear that there are two distinct scenarios for the unfolding of the Messianic drama. If we are meritorious and deserving, Moshiach’s coming will be hastened and will manifest itself in a rather spectacular

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

way. If we are not worthy, Moshiach will still come, but his coming will be at the appointed time, rather than sooner, and will also occur in a natural and non-dramatic way.

Two Temples

Others have suggested that the distinction between our behavior being meritorious or not will also determine how the third Temple will be rebuilt. If we will be deserving it will descend from Heaven as the Zohar suggests. If we will not be deserving it will be built by us, under the direction of Moshiach, as stated by Maimonides.

According to Or Hachaim, these two distinct scenarios were actually intimated in the use of dual expressions in Bilam's Messianic prophecy.

When the Torah refers to Moshiach's coming in the most ideal manner, it refers to Moshiach's arrival as a "star" that is visible in the heavens. This means that his coming shall be in a glorious and "star-studded" manner. However, when the Torah states "a scepter shall arise from Israel," it is referring to Moshiach arising in a natural process.

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

Our Actions Count

The obvious lesson for us is that although Moshiach will be “sent” by G-d to usher in the Age of Redemption, our efforts can affect the entire process.

Our good actions will hasten the process and bring an end to the suffering and misery in the world. Moreover, the entire experience will be one that will be punctuated with excitement and joy.

ESSAY SIX

SUBSTANCE, PROFIT AND HOPE

To counter the power of the modern day Bila'ams who attempt to distance us from the Messianic Age we must connect ourselves to the three elements: *mamosh-* substance, benefit and hope.

We must realize that Moshiach and Redemption are reality.

We must also recognize that our actions benefit the world.

We must also hope, yearn and anticipate the coming of Moshiach and that it should be right now!

ESSAY SIX

SUBSTANCE, PROFIT AND HOPE

Charms in their Hands

Balak, the king of the Moabite nation, saw the approaching Jewish nation on its way to conquer the land of Canaan. They had just defeated the two mighty kings Sichon and Og, whom Balak relied upon as a first line of defense against an enemy conqueror. Now he feared they were poised to conquer his nation as well.

The Moabites conferred with their erstwhile enemies, the Midianites, on how to deal with the threat from the Israelites. They decided to hire Bila'am, a heathen prophet widely known for his effective curses.

The Torah then describes how

“the elders of Moab and the elders of Midian went, with magic charms in their hands, and they came to Bila'am and conveyed Balak's message to him.”

Rashi asks about the meaning of the “magic charms in their hands.” What kind of magic charms were these and what was their purpose?

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

Rashi first translates the phrase literally, as they took “all types of charms, so he could not say, ‘I don’t have my tools with me.’”

Rashi then cites a second figurative interpretation as an omen:

The elders of Midian took this omen with them, saying, “If he comes with us this time, there is some **substance** (*mamosh*) to him, but if he pushes us off, he is **useless** (literally: “there is no benefit in him.”).” Thus, when he said to them, “Lodge here for the night” (verse 8), they said, “He is **hopeless**”; so they left him and went away, as it says, “The Moabite nobles stayed with Balaam” but the Midianite elders left.

One who examines Rashi’s second commentary, even superficially, will notice the use of three different terms the elders used to describe Bila’am’s willingness or lack of willingness to come with them. First Rashi uses the word *mamosh* “substance” then he uses the word “useless,” and then Rashi states, “his refusal demonstrated that he was ‘hopeless.’” Why doesn’t Rashi use the same terminology throughout this comment? He could have used any one of the terms “substance,” “hopeless or “useless,” consistently.

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

Countering Holiness with Concrete Action

In order for evil to have power it must counter the positive energy of holiness. For G-d to dwell in a revealed manner we must make room for Him in all three areas of human endeavor: thought, speech and action.

When the elders of Midian tried to discern whether Bila'am had the potential to counter the salutary aspects of Jewish life, they felt he had to act and act with dispatch. Thus they said, "He had to **come at this time**," meaning they expected him to translate his willingness to curse the Jewish nation (thought and speech) into concrete action.

Moreover, for him to have the power to counter the Jewish people, his action had to be immediate. Procrastinators may have the right thoughts, and may even wax eloquently about the virtues of a certain action, but they are content with good intentions and flowery language.

This then is what the elders of Midian meant when they said, "If he **comes** with us **this time**, there is some **substance** (*mamosh*) to him." If he actually, physically comes this time and does not procrastinate that is a sign that he is in touch with the realm of action. The word *mamosh* has twin meanings: the first is "in actuality" (as opposed to "in theory"); it also refers to something that is not ethereal but rather is corporeal; it has physical substance,

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

[This is how the Previous Rebbe cites the explanation of the words of the statement in the Tanya (Chapter two) where he refers to the G-dly soul as “a part of G-d *mamosh*.” This means first, that it is not just hyperbole; it is to be taken literally that our soul is a part of G-d. Secondly, it means that “though it is sheer ethereal spirituality, it impacts physicality at its most palpable.” (See Hayom Yom 23 Menachem Av).]

The elders of Midian felt that to counter the Jewish people’s ability to express spirituality in the world of action, not just in a figurative sense, they needed a man who likewise had *mamosh*-substance.

Just a Dud?

The elders of Midian then stated, “but if he pushes us off, he is useless.” Here, the elders intimated that if Bila’am would agree to come but not at this particular time, it would prove that while he lacked true substance he was at least harmless. His ability to curse the Jews would be neutralized because he could not counter their substantive spirituality. But, by stating that he would be useless or of no benefit, they meant that he could neither help them nor harm them. He might be a dud but not a hopeless one!

However when they heard him say “Lodge here for the night and I will give you an answer when G-d speaks to

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

me,” they realized that he was much worse than useless; he was hopeless. There was absolutely no hope that anything “beneficial” will come from him; on the contrary, G-d will probably force him to bless the Jews.

They were hoping that he postponed his response to them because he needed time to bring his negative and impure thoughts into the realm of speech and action. Then, they thought, there was a hope that in he could be of some use in the future. But when he told them to wait for G-d’s response, they knew their mission was in trouble and they left.

“I see him but not now, I perceive him but he is not near!”

Among the blessings that eventually came out of Bila’am’s mouth was: “I see him but not now, I perceive him but he is not near!” Here, Maimonides states, Bila’am was predicting the coming of Moshiach. However, even while blessing the Jews he revealed his true intentions. He wanted the Moshiach to be delayed until the very distant future. (See *Tzemach Tzedek*’s response in MiGolah LiGeulah p. 136).

To counter the power of the modern day Bila’ams who attempt to distance us from the Messianic Age we must connect ourselves to the three elements: *mamosh*-substance, benefit and hope.

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

Rebbe, Mamosh and Reality

Mamosh stands for bringing the Divine into the physical world. The Rebbe, whose initials spell *mamosh*, introduced the Mitzvah campaigns to the “street.” Jews were encouraged and assisted in performing the Mitzvah of Tefillin, among other Mitzvos, even in public places. With the Rebbe’s revolutionary program, the very streets began to declare G-d’s presence and His supremacy over all aspects of the mundane world.

The Rebbe showed us that Torah is real—*mamosh*! Reality is not necessarily what our ears hear and our eyes see. Reality is determined by G-d, Who communicates reality to us through the Torah.

The Rebbe, acting as the counterforce to the Bila’ams of the world who wish to delay the Redemption, told us in no uncertain terms that the Redemption is in front of us, and “all” we have to do is “open our eyes” to see the new reality.

The Rebbe taught us that Galus-exile is the dream and Redemption is reality.

Where’s the Profit?

But, in addition to realizing what reality is, we also have to be useful and see the benefit and profit in our work.

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

Chassidic thought explains that our soul's entry into the physical world is much like a business investment. If there is no profit then it is not a business. The Talmud (*Bava Metzia* 40b) coins the phrase: "One who purchases and sells for the same price, is he called a merchant?"

It does not suffice for us to translate lofty ideals into action and be in touch with true reality, unless we also realize that every Mitzvah we do and all of the Torah we study actually transforms the mundane world into a G-dly world, paving the way for Moshiach.

We can be committed to performing the Mitzvos strictly because G-d has so commanded, and that's fine. We then connect to true reality; the physical involvement with G-d's will. It can fairly be said that we have substance. However, G-d also wants us to know that we change the world and generate a huge profit. The things we do are not simply mechanical acts but actions rich in spiritual energy. Our every Mitzvah generates G-dly light. Although we may not be able to see and feel it presently, that G-dly light is "stored" and will be revealed in the Messianic Age.

Hope and Motel Six!

But even that does not suffice. We must also **hope** for the future. We cannot just live in the present, even if it is in a substantive and profitable manner. We cannot just fulfill

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

our mission by getting in touch with reality in our observance of Torah and Mitzvos. Even realizing that we are generating powerful G-dly energy that will be revealed in the future is not sufficient. It is also incumbent upon us to hope, yearn, pray, plead, anticipate and long for the coming of Moshiach and that it should be right now!

Bila'am's response to the elders of Moab and Midian, to stay overnight to await G-d's response, can apply to us in a similar fashion, albeit, in the opposite direction.

The Rebbe explains that exile is like staying overnight in a temporary lodging. When we are on the road and not in our own home, we know that it is only temporary.

We too must realize that this Galus, even in the best of circumstances, when we are in touch with *Mamosh*-true substance, and recognize the tremendous power we generate now, is still only a "motel" on the road. We must never mistake the best of Galus for our permanent home. We must always yearn to be in our own home.

So while we make the most of our stay in the Galus-Motel Six for one evening (and even when the lights are kept on for us) we also anxiously await G-d's response to us that He is taking us out of Galus and authorizing the building of His permanent home—the building of the Third and final Bais Hamikdash!

ESSAY SEVEN

TORAH, GOLD AND SILVER

Torah must be augmented by good deeds.

However, the emphasis on Mitzvos over Torah study is not because Torah study is less significant than other ideals of Judaism.

On the contrary, Torah study is the greatest Mitzvah of them all.

ESSAY SEVEN

TORAH, GOLD AND SILVER

Coveting Wealth

Balak, the Moabite king, hired Bilam, the Heathen prophet, to curse the Jewish people. He feared they would encroach on his territory while on their way to conquer the Land of Cana'an. Balak sent two separate delegations of messengers to hire Bilam, but he rebuffed them, as G-d had instructed him not to go with Balak's messengers. They entreated him to go with them, promising him great honor and everything he would care to ask for. Bilam replied:

“If Balak will give me his houseful of silver and gold, I cannot transgress the word of G-d, my G-d, to do anything small or great.”

Rashi observes that speaking of a “houseful of gold and silver” revealed Bilam's greed. In Rashi's words: “He had a greedy soul and coveted others' money.”

A question is raised when we contrast Bilam's mention of gold and silver with that of a great Talmudic Sage, Rabbi

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

Yossi ben Kisma, who made a similar reference to gold and silver. There is no suggestion that Rabbi Yossi coveted gold and silver too.

In Ethics of the Fathers (6:9) we read:

Said Rabbi Yossi the son of Kisma: Once, I was traveling and I encountered a man. He greeted me and I returned his greetings. Said he to me: "Rabbi, where are you from?" Said I to him: "From a great city of sages and scholars, am I." Said he to me: "Rabbi, would you like to dwell with us in our place? I will give you a million dinars of gold, precious stones and pearls." Said I to him: "If you were to give me all the silver, gold, precious stones and pearls in the world, I would not dwell anywhere but in a place of Torah. Indeed, so is written in the book of psalms by David the king of Israel: 'I prefer the Torah of Your mouth over thousands in gold and silver' (Psalms 118:72)."

What was the crucial difference between Bilam's mention of gold and silver and what the great Sage Rabbi Yossi said? They both mentioned gold and silver and they both spurned the offer of such wealth and riches to follow G-d's will. Yet Bilam's mere mention of it was interpreted by our Sages as a sign of his incredible greed, whereas Rabbi Yossi's mention of it was understood as a repudiation of

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

riches. Why do our Sages draw opposite conclusions from almost identical statements?

Three Answers

First, as some commentators point out, Rabbi Yossi only mentioned gold and silver in response to the man's offer of great riches if he would relocate. Bilam, on the other hand, introduced the idea himself. Balak's representatives hadn't offered gold and silver to him. The fact that he raised the topic strongly suggests that he really craved the gold and silver. It was only because of his fear of disobeying G-d's express command that he rejected the gold and silver.

This first answer is somewhat problematic. Although king Balak's messengers did not mention gold or silver specifically, they did offer Bilam "honor and everything that he would ask for." That certainly suggested the possibility of gold, silver and even more treasures.

A second answer, found in a Midrashic work, sees Rabbi Yossi's mention of gold and silver as obviously rhetorical and hyperbolic. In point of fact it was impossible that they would be able to give him "all the silver, gold, precious stones and pearls in the world." However, when Bilam spoke of Balak giving him "his household of gold and silver" that was within Balak's power to do. Bilam was not

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

exaggerating; Bilam's true desire was to obtain that gold and silver.

The Best Answer: Bilam Syndrome?

A third answer may be based on the difference in how they expressed themselves. Bilam said:

“If Balak will give me his houseful of silver and gold,
**I cannot transgress the word of G-d, my G-d, to do
anything small or great.**”

Notice that Bilam did not say it in the affirmative: “if Balak will give me his houseful of silver and gold I will still follow G-d's word.” By phrasing it in the negative Bilam implied that but for G-d's clear command against it, he might very well have consented to receive the gold and silver. It was only his fear of violating G-d's directive that quashed his desire for the riches he coveted.

By contrast R. Yossi does not say, “Even if you were to give me all the gold, etc., **I cannot live in your city.**” Instead he accentuated the positive, that gold and silver notwithstanding, he could only live in a place of Torah. He made it clear that his main interest was Torah and that it was worth more than all the world's wealth to him. Rather than saying that he was compelled to reject the other

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

person's offer, he stated the positive about living in a place of Torah.

This third answer provides us with a powerful psychological and spiritual lesson about the way we demonstrate our priorities. When we have two options, either follow G-d's command, or do what is selfish, when one makes the correct choice it can manifest itself in two ways.

First, we can decide to do the right thing, but reluctantly. We would really like to be able to do the selfish thing but we feel compelled to restrain ourselves. This suggests that we may be tainted with Bilam's Syndrome. As was the case with Bilam, this personality type will attempt every method possible to wriggle out of the "straightjacket" with which G-d clads us. Even if we acquiesce at first, we retain the desire to revert to our base cravings.

In the alternative, we can decide to follow Rabbi Yossi's example where the appeal of gold and silver pales by comparison with the wealth of Torah and Mitzvos. To Rabbi Yossi it was no contest; he was simply not enticed by the gold and silver even though he truly appreciated its temporal value.

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

The Final Answer: Preeminence of Torah Study

A fourth approach to the question of the difference between Bilam and Rabbi Yossi's references to gold and silver can be offered based on the Rebbe's analysis of the story of Rabbi Yossi:

Rabbi Yossi rejected the proposal that he become a rabbi in another town because he was single minded about his study of Torah.

Generally speaking, Torah must be augmented by good deeds and time and energy spent influencing others to perform the Mitzvos. However, Rabbi Yossi teaches us that the emphasis on Mitzvos over Torah study is not because Torah study is less significant than other ideals of Judaism. On the contrary, Torah study is the greatest Mitzvah of them all.

When one performs a Mitzvah, it is comparable to wearing a garment that envelops the individual.

By contrast, when one studies Torah, the Torah is digested, absorbed and internalized within the person. Since, Torah is Divine wisdom, and, as Maimonides states, G-d and His wisdom are one, Torah study creates a unity with G-d that cannot be achieved with any other Mitzvah.

Rabbi Yossi wanted his fellow traveler to realize the preeminent value of Torah study. He referred to gold and

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

silver but not because there was a contest between the Torah and material wealth. As the Rebbe explained it, R. Yossi was actually referring to the most appropriate use of material wealth: doing Mitzvos, such as tzedakah. Even so, Rabbi Yossi made the point that while wealth can enable Mitzvos it cannot match the importance of Torah study.

We can now understand that Rabbi Yossi demonstrated that, for him, gold and silver meant the ability to change the world by using one's material resources for good. Rabbi Yossi went to the next level, however, and underscored that Torah study surpassed all forms of gold and silver, even including in their spiritual dimension.

Application to the Present

In the present day and age we must forego some of our pleasure and delight in Torah study to change the world—using the gold and silver of Judaism. At the same time, we must prepare ourselves for the day when the entire world will be inundated with Torah knowledge. We must do so by devoting more of our time and resources to Torah study, particularly the inner dimension of Torah that deals with our relationship with G-d. This study will condition us to be receptive to the phenomenal mystical teachings of Torah that will be revealed by Moshiach in the Messianic Age.

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

In the words of Isaiah, as cited by Maimonides is his ultimate description of the Messianic Age: “The entire world will be filled with the knowledge of G-d as the water covers the sea.”

However, in that time we won’t have to forgo the gold and silver for Torah study; we will be able to possess ultimate Torah knowledge as well as gold and silver in all of its dimensions.

This, indeed, is how Maimonides (in the very last paragraph of his Mishneh Torah) describes the future Messianic Age: that it will be a time of material wealth and abundance. He then concludes by citing the foregoing verse from Isaiah that the world will be inundated with Torah knowledge. At that time we will have both gold and silver and Torah knowledge, with the knowledge that Torah knowledge is superior to even the most sublime understanding of gold and silver.

ESSAY EIGHT

TWO TIERED CONQUEST

Jealousy will only be erased in the more advanced stages of the Messianic Age.

Nevertheless there are ways of tempering it even now, in these last moments of exile.

When a person is engaged in the higher form of conquest and seeks to spread the awareness of G-d to the entire world, that individual will have channeled the innate need for conquest in a positive fashion.

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Balak, the Moabite king, hired Bilam, the Heathen prophet, to curse the Jewish people. Balak sent messengers to Bilam, promising him great honor and everything he would care to ask for. Bilam replied:

“If Balak will give me his houseful of silver and gold,
I cannot transgress the word of G-d...”

Rashi observes that speaking of a “houseful of silver and gold” exposed Bilam’s greed. In Rashi’s words: “He had a greedy soul and coveted others’ money.”

What’s the Difference?

A question is raised when we contrast Bilam’s mention of gold and silver with that of a great Talmudic Sage, Rabbi Yossi ben Kisma, who made a similar reference to gold and

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

silver. There is no suggestion, however, that Rabbi Yossi coveted gold and silver too.

In Ethics of the Fathers (6:9) we read:

Said Rabbi Yossi the son of Kisma: Once, I was traveling and I encountered a man... Said he to me: "Rabbi, where are you from?" Said I to him: "From a great city of sages and scholars, am I." Said he to me: "Rabbi, would you like to dwell with us in our place? I will give you a million dinars of gold, precious stones and pearls." Said I to him: "If you were to give me all the silver, gold, precious stones and pearls in the world, I would not dwell anywhere but in a place of Torah..."

What was the crucial difference between Bilam's mention of gold and silver and what the great Sage Rabbi Yossi said? They both mentioned gold and silver and they both spurned the offer of wealth and riches to follow G-d's will. Yet Bilam's mere mention of it was interpreted by our Sages as a sign of his incredible greed, whereas Rabbi Yossi was understood as repudiating riches. Why do our Sages draw such opposite conclusions from almost identical statements?

In the preceding essay we cited four different answers. In this essay, we will focus on a fifth approach (based on a brief treatment of this subject in the work *Minchas*

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

Marcheshes), which has a direct bearing on the way our personality flaws will be corrected in the Messianic Age and how we can prepare for that age now.

Whose Gold Did He Covet?

Bilam referred specifically to the silver and gold of Balak, as the verse states: “If **Balak** will give me **his** houseful of silver and gold, I cannot transgress the word of G-d, my G-d, to do anything small or great.” Rabbi Yossi, by contrast, said: If you were to give me all the silver, gold, precious stones and pearls **in the world**, I would not dwell anywhere but in a place of Torah.” Note that he doesn’t respond to his interlocutor by saying, “If you were to give me all **your** silver, gold, precious stones and pearls...”

The difference between mentioning a specific person’s wealth and wealth generically is significant. A careful examination of Rashi supports this distinction: “He had a greedy soul and coveted **others’** money.” Rashi does not say, “He had a greedy soul and coveted money,” but rather **others** money.” Bilam was not simply hungry to amass great wealth; he sought the wealth of others. In this case he coveted Balak’s wealth precisely because it belonged to Balak.

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

Jealousy: Innate Human Weakness

This is a reflection of a human weakness that we have from the time of infancy. People with very little can still be happy because they are content with what they have. But as soon as they see someone who has more, they suddenly decide that they have been dealt a raw deal; they were cheated. And in many instances this feeling of having been wronged will lead to hatred and even violence.

In truth, this human failure goes even deeper and was implanted in us from the days of Cain and Abel. These two primeval brothers couldn't get along because the world was not big enough for the both of them. Jealousy seems to have been embedded in our psyches from the very dawn of humanity. Indeed, our Sages (See Rashi on *Beresihis* 3:15) tell us that the serpent's motivation in getting Adam to partake of the forbidden fruit was that he should die, allowing the serpent to have Eve to himself!

In other words, the very first act of evil (represented by the serpent), even before Adam and Eve partook of the forbidden fruit, was the serpent's desire for something that wasn't his. And it was this destructive vice that was introduced to and instilled in humanity.

A story is told of a man who lost a monetary dispute he had with another and directed his anger at the rabbi who rendered the decision. The Rabbi was puzzled by this man's

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

reaction. Some time previously the rabbi had ruled that a cow the same man had purchased was not kosher. Despite the far greater financial loss caused by the ruling, the man accepted it without complaint.

The man's response was: "When I lost the cow as a result of your ruling it was no one else's gain. But in this case, my loss is the other's gain; that I cannot tolerate."

It is no wonder that the commandment to not covet another's property is mentioned last in the Ten Commandments (more accurately: Ten Statements). The impulse to covet is the most difficult to eradicate. While we can see how it is possible for a person to desist from all the other crimes which are based on behavior, it is difficult for us to see how the feelings of jealousy can be suppressed. And as long as these feelings are there it will inevitably lead to the commission of other crimes.

Root Cause of Jealousy

Why do we harbor jealousy? Why are we not content with what we have? Why does another person's existence and success bother us?

There may be several explanations for this phenomenon. One of them is that the physical world is defined by the

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

desire to conquer. This is what G-d told Adam to do when he was created (*Beresishis* 1:28).

This desire for conquest is not exclusively evil and is actually rooted in the soul's psyche. Conquest can be understood on two diametrically opposite levels. On a crass, materialistic level to conquer means to control everyone and everything. Hence the desire for other's money is not rooted solely in greed. It is also, and perhaps primarily so, motivated by the need to be in total control of one's environment.

On a more profound level, this desire to conquer becomes debased when it is diverted from the Divine objective of having us, human beings, control the physical world in order to transform it into a G-dly world. When we are influenced by the material world and its blandishments, we forget why and how we are to conquer the world. Stripped of the Divine intention, we are left with the naked desire for world domination; or at least to acquire someone else's fortune, as Bilam coveted Balak's silver and gold.

The Last Vice

The vice of jealousy will be the last vestige of human degradation to be eliminated, as Rambam states in the very last paragraph of His discussion of the Messianic Age (which is the very last paragraph of his monumental

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

encyclopedic work *Mishneh Torah* also known as *Yad Hachazakah*).

“In that era there will be neither famine nor war, no envy or rivalry...”

Why is this going to be among the last of the changes to occur in the Messianic Age?

The answer is that only after we conquer the world by transforming it into a habitat for the Divine will we cease to engage in misplaced conquest, the root of all jealousy and rivalry.

This is, essentially, the rationale the Rambam gives (in that foregoing citation) for the absence of jealousy:

“for... the occupation of the entire world will be solely to know G-d.”

Once the world is inundated with the awareness of the Divine we will have succeeded in actualizing the positive form of conquest. This will automatically negate the misguided distortion of the conquest imperative which has led to jealousy and rivalry throughout the entire expanse of human history.

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

Getting Rid of Jealousy Now!

While it is true that jealousy will only be erased in the more advanced stages of the Messianic Age, nevertheless there are ways of tempering it even now, in these last moments of exile. When a person is engaged in the higher form of conquest and seeks to spread the awareness of G-d to the entire world, that individual will have channeled the innate need for conquest in a positive fashion.

The Rebbe has charged our generation with the mission to conquer the world by revealing the positive Divine energy within humanity and the world at large. The Rebbe created the institution of *Shluchim*-emissaries; a veritable “army” of bearers of peace and light, to bring the light of Torah and Mitzvos to the entire Jewish world, and the Seven Noahide laws of a civilized society to the non-Jewish world. When we join this army we weaken the desire for the base form of conquest, the source of disharmony.

However, as soldiers who are ready to give their life and limb, we must never forget our objective, which is total victory for our Commander-in Chief. When a soldier forgets the objective and thinks about his own self-aggrandizing glory the idealistic form of conquest degenerates into the lower, ignoble and divisive form of conquest. There is nothing more destabilizing to a military campaign than internal division. Indeed, this is the goal of

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

the enemy: to divide and conquer. Abandoning the higher form of conquest gives way to its destructive twin.

Moshiach, like Moses and other great Jewish leaders, possesses not even a tinge of desire for personal glory. It is his influence and inspiration that empowers us to reach the same spiritual level by awakening the spark of Moshiach within each of us.

ESSAY NINE

HONEY OR A STING?

The phenomenon of identifying with our enemies when we receive some measure of good from them is a well-known psychological phenomenon known as the “Stockholm Syndrome.”

When a Jew identifies with and pays homage to exile forces (or in the language of this week’s parsha, “Bilam’s honey”), he digs himself deeper into exile.

ESSAY NINE

HONEY OR A STING?

The Choice

Balak, the King of Moab, is terrified of the Jewish people. Their triumphant victory over the two mighty kings, Sichon and Og, instills terror in the hearts of the Moabites. To deal with the “Jewish problem” and threat, Balak hires a heathen prophet and professional “curser” named Bilam to bestow his most vile curses on the Jewish nation. In the end, Bilam was unable to utter even one curse. Moreover, the curses that he intended to utter were transformed into the most beautiful blessings, including predictions of the ultimate Redemption through Moshiach!

In the beginning of this narrative, when the elders of Moab (and Midian) approach Bilam with their request, G-d comes to Bilam in a dream and orders him not to go with the Moabites and not to curse the Jewish nation “because they are blessed.”

Balak, however, does not take no for an answer. He sends a more distinguished delegation to implore Bilam to curse

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

the nation. That night, G-d appears to Bilam once more and [and] instructs him: “If the men have come to call you, rise up and go with them, but only the word which I speak unto you that shall you do.”

What did G-d have in mind when He told Bilam that he could go with them?

Nachmanides explains that G-d was, in effect, instructing Bilam to tell the Moabite emissaries that they have to make a choice. Either they return without Bilam, who not only lacks permission to curse the Jews, but might actually be compelled to bless them, or go with Bilam, despite his likely inability to perform the curse. In the end, Bilam did not transmit G-d’s message, leaving the emissaries under the impression that G-d was going to permit Bilam to curse the Jews.

Commentators are baffled at the choice that was given to the Moabite emissaries. Why would they want to go with Bilam if they knew that he could not curse the Jews and he might even bless them? What benefit would they reap from simply going along with Bilam? And if G-d wanted Bilam to tell them that under no circumstances would he be able to curse the Jews, He could have stated just that. Why did G-d seem to leave some room for a “change of heart,” and perhaps plant false hopes by suggesting that they may go along with Bilam? Wasn’t He teasing them?

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

Whose Sting and Whose Honey?

In truth, it may be suggested that the Moabite emissaries would have agreed simply to go along with Bilam in the hope that he would do something, even if it were blessing the Jewish nation. This premise is based on Rashi's earlier comment in which G-d tells him not to curse the Jews "because they are blessed." Rashi observes that Bilam asked G-d if he could at least bless them. G-d's response was, "they do not need to be blessed because they are already blessed." Rashi then adds a parable of what one would tell the bee: "I don't want your sting or your honey."

At first glance, this entire response is difficult to grasp. Why would we reject the bee's honey? Indeed, we don't normally reject it. Honey is a delicacy and a sought-after commodity that sweetens our lives. Indeed, there are bee keepers who are more than willing to sustain bee stings as a way to procure this food.

Upon deeper reflection, it becomes apparent that the blessing of Bilam is not really honey; it is just another façade to obscure the sting. When an evil person blesses us, beware. It might be a subterfuge that, in the end, will prove to be a curse. Hence, the emphasis, "I don't want your sting or your honey." Honey from a friend—and even an occasional rebuking sting from a well-intentioned

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

person—is desirous, but not when either come from a vile Bilam.

Identifying with the Enemy

On a deeper level, the danger of Bilam blessing them is valid even if he meant to bless them because they might ascribe their blessings to him. Instead of realizing that G-d is the true source of blessing, people will think that their good fortune is associated with outside forces—with the Bilams of the world. This phenomenon of identifying with our enemies when we receive some measure of good from them is a well-known psychological phenomenon known as the “Stockholm Syndrome.” When a Jew identifies with and pays homage to exile forces (or in the language of this week’s parsha, “Bilam’s honey”), he digs himself deeper into exile.

This explains why G-d says to Bilam, “Don’t bless them for they are blessed.” Offhand, this response is difficult to understand. What is wrong with giving a blessing to one who is already blessed? Is there a limit to G-d’s blessings? Aren’t we all encouraged to bless one another? Isn’t there a Biblical obligation for the Kohanim to regularly bless the Jewish people?

The answer is that when a blessing comes from G-d, it is infinite; one could never exhaust all of G-d’s goodness and

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

kindness. However, as soon as one attributes their blessings to forces that are not G-dly, it actually decreases the blessings he or she already possesses. Instead of drawing from the reservoir of G-d's infinite blessings, we identify with the finite, prosaic and utterly limited notion of a blessing. (The Hebrew word for blessing, *beracha*, is related to the word that means to "draw down". The word *beracha* is also related to the word *breicha*, a reservoir, because G-d is the source of all blessing.)

In effect, Bilam's blessing is not really honey. Rather, it is another form of a sting because it deprives us of the real sweetness of G-d's blessing.

We can now understand why the Moabite emissaries would agree to go along with Bilam knowing that he might bless rather than curse the Jews. In their mind, Bilam's blessing would be almost as good as his curse. It would strip the Jews of their connection to an infinite G-d and blessings. Instead, the Jews would be "hostages" to the conventional blessings that are associated with Bilam. Once the Jews lose their connection to the true and infinite source of blessing, they are then reduced to the level of every other nation which would make them vulnerable to all the forces that threaten their existence.

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

Transforming Bilam's Curses into the Ultimate Blessing

However, two questions still persist.

First, if Bilam's blessings were not much better than his curses, why did G-d give the emissaries the option of going along with Bilam, who would then "bless" the people?

Second, why did G-d eventually allow Bilam to bless the Jewish people? If Bilam's blessings make us vulnerable and are more sting than honey, why did G-d put all the exquisite blessings in his vile mouth?

The answer is that there are actually two models for Bilam's blessings. The first model is a negative one because it reduces true blessings into tainted ones, because we begin to ascribe them to Bilam and his powers. To diminish the blessings that they already enjoyed is, in truth, a curse.

But there is a second model in which the blessing is magnified when it issues from the mouth of a lowly and vile individual such as Bilam. This model conveys a powerful idea. When the lowliest forms of existence express the most exquisite words of praise of G-d and of the Jewish people—as do Bilam's blessings—it reveals G-d's omnipotent aspect; nothing can stand in the way of His blessings. It demonstrates that G-d's power is so great that it can even "reach down", break through all the barriers and even transform the lowest forms of existence into conduits for G-d's greatness.

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

This explains why Bilam focuses so much on Moshiach and the future Redemption in his predictions of the future. In the present era of exile, we have to avoid identifying with Bilam and his “honey sweet” blessings. A Jew does not grow spiritually when he attributes his good fortune to the forces of nature. When a Jew exhibits obsequiousness towards the various institutions that provide for our wellbeing and blessings, such as government, business, insurance he or she is identifying with Bilam’s sting, albeit subtly, and not with the Divine honey. Groveling to the forces of exile—even if they are necessary conduits of G-d’s blessings—demeans us and denies us the ultimate blessings that assist us in breaking out of exile.

However, as we stand now on the threshold of the future Redemption, we are witnesses to the beginnings of a new phenomenon. We have seen how some of the most distant and nether forces are starting to recognize the blessings of the Jewish people. Even the Bilams of the world are evincing respect and admiration for Judaism, Jews and their special role and relationship with G-d. This process of the Bilam’s total transformation to good will be complete with the imminent arrival of Moshiach.

ESSAY TEN

RUNNING FROM OR RUNNING TO?

A Jew cannot be indifferent to the pain and suffering, and must cry out to G-d for Him to see our pain.

But a Jew cannot wallow in the negative even if it is for the purpose of escaping it.

Dwelling inordinately on the bitterness of Galus can cause us to be depressed and fall into Galus despair, thereby preventing us from escaping its grip.

ESSAY TEN

RUNNING FROM OR RUNNING TO?

Expansion of the Shema

One of the most enigmatic portions of the Torah is the one entitled Balak, which features the prophetic words of Bilam, one of the most vile people mentioned in the Torah. Balak hired Bilam to curse the Jewish people whom he viewed as an existential threat to him. Instead, G-d put the most beautiful and powerful words of praise and prophetic pronouncements in Bilam's mouth.

Yet, the Talmud (*Berachos* 12b) remarks that our Sages entertained the notion of incorporating the narrative of Bilam in our daily prayers alongside the reading of the Shema.

What is it about this section of the Torah that it would even be considered as an integral part of our daily prayers? And how could the Talmud entertain the notion that it is

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

comparable to the Shema, arguably Judaism's most important prayer?

The Talmud itself addresses these questions and answers with a quote from that section: "G-d brought them out of Egypt." In other words, this narrative contains the fundamental subject of the Exodus.

However, the Talmud argues that this explanation is inadequate: If it was important to mention the Exodus in the Shema, why was this parsha selected? Aren't there other sections of the Torah that mention the Exodus that could have been incorporated in our prayers?.

The Talmud then concludes that the importance of this parsha is based on another verse: "He crouched and lay down like a lion and like a lion cub, who can stand him up?" Rashi explains that this verse is similar to the phrase in the Shema "when you lie down and when you arise." It teaches that the Holy One, Blessed is He, watches over us when we go to sleep and wake up, so that we may rest peacefully like a lion and its cub."

According to Rashi, this parsha is comparable to the Shema because it reminds us of how G-d watches over us at all times.

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

A Second Reason

The Jerusalem Talmud (*Berachos* 1:5), adds a second reason for the selection of this parsha as a “candidate” for inclusion with the Shema:

“Rabbi Yosi the son of Rabbi Bon said: ‘Because in it is written the Exodus and Royalty.’”

(In the end, both Talmuds state that the Sages decided not to require reciting this parsha because it would unduly inconvenience the congregation by having to recite this very long parsha.)

What does Rabbi Yossi mean by royalty?

The simple understanding is that it refers to Bilam’s prophecy concerning King David and Moshiach. Indeed, in some versions of the text the words “The Kingdom of the House of David “ is mentioned explicitly.

Why is it that in the Babylonian Talmud the reason given for the consideration of the parsha of Bilam for inclusion in our prayers is based on its similarity to the Shema, whereas the Jerusalem Talmud adds the notion of royalty?

G-d’s Unity in Times of Exile

The recitation of the Shema is intended to impress upon us the unity of G-d. It is our affirmation that there is

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

absolutely no other power in the world other than G-d. Moreover, as Chassidus explains, the oneness of G-d expressed in the Shema negates the existence of anything but G-d. Everything that exists is an extension of G-d's Ten Utterances with which He created the world and continues to create the world every instant.

In times of darkness, which is the state of exile, it is difficult for a person to appreciate this unity. Even the simple meaning of G-d's unity that negates other forces can be a challenge to some in exile due to the multitude of competing forces that vie for our allegiance. This is why we were commanded to recite the Shema in the **evening** and morning. Even when we lie under the burden of Galus conditions we must declare that there is one G-d.

To buttress this appreciation for G-d's overarching role in our lives it was suggested that we also recite the story of Bilam which demonstrates how, even when we are in a compromised position, we are strong because of G-d's constant supervision over us and His presence in our lives.

This explanation—the only explanation in the Babylonian Talmud for the inclusion of the parsha of Bilam in our prayers—is intended primarily for those who are mired in the darkness of exile—for whom the **Babylonian** Talmud speaks. They have to be reassured that G-d is with them and will raise them up from their crouched position. The

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

Babylonian Talmud was composed in exile and is referred to as the Talmud of Darkness because it empowers us to survive in exile and ultimately escape from it.

Exodus Coupled with Royalty

However, the Jerusalem Talmud, which has been characterized as the Talmud of Light, adds a new dimension and perspective to the recitation of Parshas Bilam: the idea of the Exodus coupled with royalty.

Most people who think of the Exodus from Egypt focus on the liberation from slavery and misery. This indeed is an integral part of the remembrance of the Exodus.

There is, however, a more advanced perspective on the Exodus from Egypt and Redemption from exile. It involves viewing the Exodus, not as a departure **from** a negative state, but rather as a step closer to the positive and sublime state of Redemption.

This positive perspective is captured by the Jerusalem Talmud's juxtaposing the Exodus with royalty. Royalty, as some commentators suggest, refers to the kingship of the House of David, which includes Moshiach, the descendant of King David, the ultimate Jewish leader.

The emphasis on Moshiach being the "son of David", perhaps, is intended to emphasize that we are discussing

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

Moshiach the son of David and not Moshiach the son of Joseph. According to the Talmud (*Sukkah* 52a) Moshiach ben Yosef will precede the coming of Moshiach ben Dovid. His role is to wage war against the forces of evil that are impediments to the final Redemption. Moshiach ben Dovid's primary role, by contrast, is to build the Bais Hamikdash and unify the Jewish people. His is primarily a positive mission to usher in the age when G-d's absolute unity will be recognized by the entire world.

Thus, the Jerusalem Talmud is not content with explaining that to recite the parsha of Bilam is to reinforce the idea of G-d's protection and providence when we are down. That satisfies the need to strengthen us against the debilitating forces of exile and the need to get out of exile because of its negativity. The Jerusalem Talmud goes a step further and emphasizes the need to incorporate the message contained in the parsha of Bilam as a way of advancing towards the future.

A Gematria

One can find a hint in the Torah for this distinction between the Babylonian Talmud and Jerusalem Talmud in the last verse of the first Chapter of Isaiah: "Zion will be redeemed with justice and its captives with tzedakah."

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

R, Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld, one of Jerusalem's leading rabbis of the last century, discovered that the words, "Zion will be redeemed with justice" have the same gematria-numerical value as the words "Talmud Yerushalmi-The Jerusalem Talmud." The final words "and its captives with tzedakah" is numerically equivalent to "Talmud Bavli-the Babylonian Talmud."

In light of the above analysis of the divergent approaches of the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds, we can appreciate this discovery. The simple meaning of "Zion" in this verse relates to Jerusalem. It may thus be explained: From the perspective of the Jerusalem Talmud, there is no real captivity. The Jerusalem Talmud mentality is one where Galus never altered a person's perspective. This individual has a clear vision of the future and is not governed by Galus attitudes.

Nevertheless, even the Jerusalem Talmud-personality will discover that some of the intensity of his or her soul is diminished by Galus, and calls out for Redemption. However, the focus is not on dealing with Galus, but rather going forward by removing the cover. This person's motivation is to run towards Redemption. Indeed, running towards Redemption is the default position of our soul. If it is blocked by Galus, all we have to do is remove the blockage to allow our soul's natural instincts to take over.

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

There are those, however, who tragically have been taken captive by Galus. They have to use the Babylonian Talmud approach of dealing with the exile condition, engaging it, fighting it, and then ultimately fleeing from it. They have to focus on realizing the debilitating nature of exile and the need to run away and escape its clutches that can be so destructive.

In this approach we see the pain and suffering that exile has brought. We see the immorality and general decline of society and we want out. Exile is so bitter that we cry out: “*Ad masa?*”-How much longer?” We cannot tolerate another instant of Galus. This is the Babylonian Talmud approach that focuses on how G-d picks us up from our crouched and compromised period of darkness and alienation and enables us to survive in the last moments of exile and [then] ultimately escape from it.

Forward!

The Jerusalem approach, by contrast, focuses on the positive features of Geulah-Redemption, dwells on the future and sees the positive influences of Moshiach that can be seen even in these last days of Golus. Instead of crying over the exile, the Jerusalem Talmud mentality causes us to exult over the miracles that we see and how they portend even greater good and greater miracles. This

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

Jerusalem Talmud individual focuses on royalty and declares “*Yechi*-Long live the King” looking for Moshiach and following his forward march towards the Redemption, when G-d’s presence will be fully revealed and G-d’s plan for the universe fully implemented.

The truth is that we need both approaches. A Jew cannot be indifferent to the pain and suffering, and must cry out to G-d for Him to see our pain. But a Jew cannot wallow in the negative even if it is for the purpose of escaping it. Dwelling inordinately on the bitterness of Galus can cause us to be depressed and fall into Galus despair, thereby preventing us from escaping its grip. We must alternate from the Babylonian Talmud approach to the Jerusalem Talmud approach.

ESSAY ELEVEN

MISPLACED SPIRITUALITY

Our quest for Moshiach—the descendent of Moab—is for the Moshiach who will, in Maimonides’ words, facilitate total Torah observance.

To the extent that our messianic fervor takes us in that direction it is the fulfillment of Judaism’s directive that we “anticipate (and prepare for) Moshiach’s coming every day.”

ESSAY ELEVEN

MISPLACED SPIRITUALITY

Bilam's New Diabolical Tactic

Bilam, the heathen prophet was hired by the Moabite monarch, Balak to curse the Jews. Balak was terrified that they would overrun his country as they did the land of Sichon and Og, two mighty leaders of neighboring countries.

In the end all of Bilam's curses were all converted by G-d into incredible blessings. Every curse he attempted to utter came out of his vile mouth as the most eloquent and poetic blessing.

When Bilam realized that his curses did not work, he tried a different tactic. He advised Balak to send Moabite women to seduce the men and coax them into idol worship. Tragically, this idea worked and, as a result, tens of thousands of Jews perished in a plague.

In the foregoing narrative the Torah describes his plan in a way that raises several questions.

The Torah describes what happened thus:

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

“The Jewish people settled in Shitim, and (as a result of Bilam’s plot—Rashi) the people began to consort with the daughters of Moab.”

Two Questions

Two questions arise when we examine this verse carefully:

First, what does the Torah mean when it says that “the people ‘began’ to be immoral?” It should have said simply: “the people consorted with the daughters of Moab.” Why the addition and emphasis on the word “began?”

Second, the text later on reports that they also consorted with the daughters of Midian. Indeed, the pivotal event related in the Torah here was that the Jewish prince Zimri had an affair with the Midianite princess. Yet, the Torah here mentions only the role of the daughters of Moab.

One of the Chassidic masters, Rabbi Tzvi Elimelech of Dinov, provides a fascinating explanation based on a concept mentioned frequently in Kabbalah.

Moab: Sparks of Moshiach

Moab was the nation from which Ruth, arguably the most famous convert to Judaism, descended. Ruth, in turn, was the great-grand mother of King David, from whom

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

Moshiach, the most distinguished human-being to have ever walked the face of the earth, descends. Moshiach, a full-fledged human being, is the Jewish leader who will usher in an age of permanent goodness and peace.

According to the teachings of Kabbalah, the original Moabites already possessed sparks of Moshiach's soul. And according to the teachings of Kabbalah, whenever there is a potent force of holiness vested within a person, object or experience, it beckons to us to help "liberate" it. This explains why we are attracted to certain things that appear neutral or even forbidden. They possess hidden sparks of holiness. In some situations, the attraction seems irresistible because the sparks of holiness possess incredible power and crave to be liberated.

The challenge for us is to know how to react to the attraction. In some cases it suffices for us to engage that situation in a positive fashion, whereby the holy spark embedded in it flows through our positive engagement with it. Once the spark is released from its bodily prison it is free to bring light to the world at large.

There are, however, situations where there is no way we can liberate that spark because it is so deeply ensconced in the person, object or experience. To try to remove it by engaging it will only wreak destruction. It is comparable to one who performs surgery to remove a growth by cutting

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

into vital nerves and organs causing irreparable harm. In these situations the surgery will prove disastrous.

To extricate these really hidden sparks we must wait for the right circumstances, time and place.

Bilam to the Jews: “Liberate the Sparks of Moab!”

Now we can understand why the sinister scheme of Bilam commenced with the daughters of Moab as the Biblical text indicates. Only later did it encompass the daughters of Midian as well.

For his diabolical scheme to work, Bilam knew that he could not simply attempt to entice them into immoral behavior. Bilam was too cunning for that for he knew that they would never degenerate to that level of immorality. Instead, he knew that he had to make them feel that what they will be doing was not immoral after all. On the contrary, consorting with the daughters of Moab who possessed these potent sparks of holiness was a way to access these powerful spiritual forces and thereby hasten the world's perfection.

Slippery Slope

Only after Bilam succeeded in getting them to engage in a well-intentioned but misguided sin, did he unleash his

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

ultimate weapon: releasing the daughters of Midian to seduce the Jews. At this point they were ready to debase themselves without the need to rationalize their behavior. Once they had descended into the clutches of the forces of impurity they had become more vulnerable.

Thus the Torah stresses that they “began” to consort with the daughters of Moab because that was only the first step in bringing about their downfall. Subsequently, they went downhill to a no holds-barred state of immorality, where they had no need to define their errant behavior in spiritual terms.

We can now also understand why the daughters of Midian are not mentioned here because, in fact, they were only introduced to the people after they had sinned with the daughters of Moab towards whom they felt a spiritual attraction.

Modern False Messianic Movements

The lesson in this approach is quite relevant to our day and age.

In the last two centuries many different spiritual and Messianic movements arose that sought to entice us. And indeed they succeeded in ensnaring countless people to follow these movements blindly. In the end, these

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

movements proved to be utterly destructive and immoral despite their superficial appeal.

When a movement sounds idealistic or spiritual one must examine first whether its ideals are in consonance with the teachings of the Torah. There is but one criterion whether a certain course of action is right. Not whether it is laden with sparks of holiness and is attractive, but whether it is moral, ethical and legal—as the Torah defines these imperatives. And it is not to suggest that spirituality is a negative thing, but that spirituality that is at odds with the basic tenets of decency and morality is not true spirituality the way G-d defines it.

Our quest for Moshiach—the descendent of Moab—is for the Moshiach who will, in Maimonides' words, facilitate total Torah observance. To the extent that our messianic fervor takes us in that direction it is the fulfillment of Judaism's directive that we “anticipate (and prepare for) Moshiach's coming every day.”

ESSAY TWELVE

THE TWELFTH AND THIRTEENTH OF TAMMUZ

It is incredible that the Previous Rebbe—as well as the Rebbe, his successor—in addition to their leadership of the Jewish people in all matters, have produced an unprecedented amount of scholarly literature as well as voluminous correspondence with tens of thousands of Jews.

It is estimated that the Previous Rebbe and the Rebbe each have penned around 100,000 letters, as well as several hundred volumes of scholarly works between them!

ESSAY TWELVE

THE TWELFTH AND THIRTEENTH OF TAMMUZ

Describing the Inner Character of the Jewish People

This week, the Torah portion deals with Bilam who was hired to curse the Jewish people. In the end, all of his curses were transformed into blessings; many of which extol the virtues of the Jewish people. Bilam sought to denigrate them so that they would ultimately lose their identities as Jews. Instead, he was compelled by G-d to exclaim their virtue.

“Behold! To bless have I received – He has blessed, and I shall not contradict it. He perceived no iniquity in Jacob, and saw no perversity in Israel. G-D his G-d is with him, and the friendship of the king is in him.”

These immortal words—transmitted through the vile mouth of Bilam—describe the inner character of the Jewish people that has been expressed time and again throughout

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

Jewish history. Even when it seems that we are far from the accolades G-d has given us, in times of crisis we rise to the occasion. In particular, there are certain individual leaders who personify these lofty ideals that Bilam extols and seek to cultivate and reveal these traits in others.

Reversing the Sadness of Tammuz

One such leader—whose life was devoted to actualizing the good in every one—was the Previous Lubavitcher Rebbe of sainted memory—Rabbi Joseph Isaac Schneerson.

Chassidim throughout the world are celebrating (in 2017) the 90th anniversary of the release of the previous Lubavitcher Rebbe from Soviet imprisonment and the commuted death sentence, which occurred on the 12th and 13th of the Hebrew month of Tammuz.

Tammuz, historically, is known as a sad month because of the breaching of the walls of Jerusalem by the Romans that led to the destruction of the Holy temple and the subsequent exile of the Jewish people. However, in the spirit of Bilam's curses turning into blessings by G-d, this month has been transformed into a month of joy by virtue of this miraculous release of the Rebbe in 1927.

The Rebbe was accused of counterrevolutionary activity by the Communists because he publicly defied the regime's

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

ban against Jewish education. Although the Rebbe established a network of clandestine schools for older students, classes for adults, synagogues, Mikvas and other Jewish institutions, the Rebbe put special emphasis on the education of children and established hundreds of underground schools that produced thousands of students whose knowledge of and allegiance to Judaism saved a generation of Jews.

Did Not Bow or Rest!

The Rebbe's release from prison was therefore more than just a victory for him personally and for the tens of thousands of his followers. It was a victory for the entire Jewish people. The Rebbe was arguably the only individual—who was viewed by the wicked, murderous Soviet regime as a major threat to their system—who did not bow to them, triumphed and survived to tell the story. Moreover, as a result of his efforts there are now hundreds of thousands of Jews who proudly identify themselves as Jews and who are carrying on the Jewish tradition, while the Soviet regime was relegated to the ash heap of history.

The Previous Rebbe did not rest on his laurels. Even after he was liberated from the Soviet Union he continued to have extensive secret contact with his followers in Russia

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

who continued to spread Judaism at great peril to their lives.

In addition to the continuation of those efforts, he established a network of Jewish Schools in Poland attracting thousands of the best and brightest of Polish Jewry. Those who survived the Holocaust became the nucleus of many of the world's leading Jewish educational institutions throughout the world.

However, the crown achievement of the Previous Rebbe after he had miraculously escaped Nazi occupied Poland was, arguably, the rejuvenation of Jewish life in America. His clarion call to American Jewry was, "America is no different," meaning that America was ripe for Torah true Judaism. There was no reason why the "old fashioned," pure and unadulterated Judaism could not be transported to, take root and blossom in this hemisphere.

And while the Rebbe was physically disabled, paralyzed, confined to a wheel chair, stricken with a host of illnesses, and broken and shattered from the horrendous reports of the Holocaust that were emerging, including the loss of his daughter, her family and thousands of his closest relatives, friends, disciples and followers, he was nevertheless undaunted by all of the obstacles in the pursuit of American Jewry's future. His life was dedicated to

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

transforming the negativity of “Tammuz” into a positive force.

America is No Different!

True to his obsession with Jewish education for children, he then proceeded to lay the foundation for the Jewish Day School movement, establishing, in the early forties, dozens of Day Schools, among dozens of other projects intended to bolster Jewish morale and identification in this country.

Through his influence, and that of his successor—the Rebbe—millions of Jews throughout the world have been exposed to their heritage in one form or another.

And parenthetically, it is incredible that the Previous Rebbe—as well as the Rebbe, his successor—in addition to their leadership of the Jewish people in all matters, have produced an unprecedented amount of scholarly literature as well as voluminous correspondence with tens of thousands of Jews. It is estimated that the Previous Rebbe and the Rebbe each have penned around one hundred thousand letters, as well as several hundred volumes of scholarly works between them!

To summarize the previous Rebbe’s life: It was one saga of total dedication and self-sacrifice for the Jewish people’s physical and spiritual well-being. Nothing could stop him

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

from forging ahead to reveal the beauty of each Jewish soul and of Judaism.

Both the Previous Rebbe and the Rebbe have also understood our role as links in a chain that leads inexorably to the ultimate Redemption.

Our task is to look out for the well-being of our brothers and sisters—even as we educate ourselves—affording them an opportunity to know who they are as Jews and to empower them to bring the world to its state of perfection—the ultimate Messianic Age, when darkness will be transformed into light and the month of Tammuz will be fully appreciated as a month of exclusive joy.

ESSAY THIRTEEN

WALK!

The last generation of exile has been compared by our Sages as the “heels of Moshiach.”

Our generation is paradoxically the lowest generation of history, being the farthest removed from the defining experience of Sinai.

It is also the most powerful generation that can uplift and bring fulfillment to all the preceding generations; the hearts and heads of our nation.

ESSAY THIRTEEN

WALK!

Coming and Going

One of the things we take for granted (besides breathing and the like) is our ability to walk. Walking is one of the great gifts given to us by G-d that we often don't appreciate.

What does all this have to do with this week's parsha that deals with the failed attempts of Bilam, the heathen prophet hired by Balak the king of Moab, to curse the Jews?

One of the themes subtly couched in the narrative of Balak and Bilam is walking, or going from one place to another.

Repeatedly the Torah speaks of how the "elders of Moab went... to Bilam..."; G-d said to Bilam don't go with them..."; "Bilam arose in the morning and said to go to your land..."; "And the ministers of Balak arose and came to Balak, and they said, 'Bilam refuses to go with us.'"; "...and they came to Bilam and they said to him, 'so spoke Balak the son of Tzippor, please do not refrain from coming to me,'" etc.

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

Throughout the parsha, we read of Balak telling Bilam to go with him to one place or to a more appropriate place from which he might be more successful in cursing the Jewish people.

To these evil people, moving from one location to another had meaning.

The Virtuous Walking

And on the positive side of things we also find a reference to the virtue of walking as well in this week's parsha:

When Bilam was riding on his donkey the donkey pressed his leg against the wall because it saw an angel standing in the way. Bilam then struck the donkey three times, whereupon "G-d opened the mouth of the donkey" and it complained to Bilam: "Why did you strike me three times?"

Now, in Hebrew the standard word for "times" in this context is *p'amim*. Yet, here the Torah uses the word "*regalim*," which actually means legs. Rashi explains that G-d (through the medium of the donkey) was, in effect, scolding Bilam by telling him why do you wish to harm the Jewish people who go by foot on their pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem three times a year?"

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

Indeed, the Biblical word for Holidays is *regalim* which means feet because it involved the process of traveling, specifically by the mode of walking.

What is it about walking from one place to another that features so prominently in this week's parsha in both the realm of evil and good?

Leaving the Gulag

To understand the spiritual quality of walking the following story will help to illustrate the point.

A prominent rabbi was held captive in the Soviet Gulag for many years. At one point the rabbi felt that he could not survive much longer. He then thought of sending a telepathic message to his Rebbe, his spiritual mentor who lived thousands of miles away from the Soviet Labor camp, to pray to G-d on his behalf. Obviously, this was in addition to his own heartfelt prayers to G-d in the spirit of the Talmudic dictum: "When one has a sick person in their family they should go to the sage of the town and ask him to pray for them."

However, before the Rabbi "sent" his message he snuck out of his barracks and walked towards the gates of the camp. When he reached the gates that were obviously locked and well-guarded—that involved no small risk to his life—and

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

he could walk no further, he dispatched his telepathic letter to his Rebbe.

To many the behavior of this rabbi would appear bizarre, not because he believed that he could communicate with someone thousands of miles away. That makes much sense if one believes that there are more connections in our universe than just the physical. And people whose spiritual makeup dominates their lives are capable of picking up these signals. But what does seem bizarre is that he walked to the gates of the camp to send that telepathic letter. If he believed that there are spiritual connections that defy the parameters of the physical world why did he have to walk to the gates? Couldn't he as easily send his letter from his barracks?

The answer is that before one wants to travel from one place to another in the spiritual realm they must first make every effort to move towards their destination in the physical world. Once we make the physical move by literally walking in the direction of our goal, we can then attempt to reach our destination in the spiritual sense as well.

A Holiday Mode of Transportation

Every holiday required that Jews travel on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Even if they traveled by horseback or the like,

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

the last “legs” of the trip (pun intended) involved walking. Indeed, the reason holidays are called *regalim* in Hebrew, which means feet, is because a holiday is all about traveling to a different realm in the spiritual vein. This required that we first travel to Jerusalem and the Holy Temple in the physical and literal sense of the word.

A Holiday is when we move from one state of mind to another. To achieve the movement from one spiritual state to another one must first make a move in our physical plane of existence from our location to a better and holier location.

Moving Towards the Burning Bush

When Moses saw the burning bush and the Divine manifestation it represented he said: “I will move away from here to see this great vision...” Rashi comments on the words “I will move away” and adds the phrase “to get closer to there.”

Why was it so important for Moses to step a few feet closer to see the vision? Fire is something that can be seen from afar as well.

However, Moses realized that this vision represented a major change in his awareness of G-d. He had never before been exposed to the Divine power that allows for a bush to

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

burn and not be consumed at the same time. Moses felt that for his to perceive this sight and awareness and become more receptive to it he had to move away from where he was in the spiritual sense. Moses had to change himself first. And in order to do that, Moses actually attempted to physically move in the direction of the place where the Divine presence manifested itself.

Walking is the natural ability to move from one place to another. Walking that involves the lowest part of our bodies can transport our heads as well.

A Kabbalistic Axiom

One of the axioms of Kabbalah and Chassidic thought is that everything that exists in the physical plane is paralleled in a higher spiritual realm.

In truth, this axiom is a threefold one:

First, every physical thing has a spiritual counterpart.

Second, the physical thing actually derives from the spiritual. That means that the spiritual plane existed prior to the physical and is the force that generated the emergence of the physical.

Third, and conversely, whenever we engage in a physical activity it impacts the spiritual plane and helps to activate it.

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

Accordingly, when one walks from one place to a better and holier place, that exercise does more than just strengthen the muscles of our legs and heart. It actually activates the spiritual mechanism that helps us get to the next level. Moreover, the act of using our legs and feet to walk to a good place for a good cause can actually enhance the spiritual state of our minds and hearts as well.

The *Heels* of Moshiach

Concerning the Messianic Age the prophet Isaiah states that G-d will split the river and help us **walk** through it in our shoes.

The last generation of exile has been compared by our Sages as the “heels of Moshiach.” This means that our generation is paradoxically the lowest generation of history, being the farthest removed from the defining experience of Sinai, when G-d made His connection to us, and it is also the most powerful generation that can uplift and bring fulfillment to all the preceding generations that are likened to the heart and head of our nation.

The reference to walking can be understood in light of the above analysis. When we want to make the transition from one state to another, there is a need to make whatever physical effort in that direction. Going from the Diaspora to the Land of Israel, from exile to Redemption is primarily

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

a spiritual transition. But to facilitate that move from one space to another much higher space, one needs to do their part, very literally.

For one Jew it can mean making the move to the Land of Israel. For another it can be making an effort to walk to the synagogue. For a third person it can be walking to visit someone in the hospital or any other act of kindness that requires one's physical movement from one place to the other.

Moreover, the metaphor of walking is that it involves action not emotion or intellect. Precisely those people whose dedication to G-d is based on simple faith and devotion to G-d's will that transcends understanding are the ones that will march at the front of our people into the Age of Redemption. Their simple marching song will inspire all of the other more intellectual souls to make the inexorable move from exile into Redemption.

ESSAY FOURTEEN

WHAT CAN WE ACCOMPLISH IN ONE INSTANT?

In the current “bridge” to the Messianic Age we have the accumulated good of the past at our disposal.

All it takes to finally cross the bridge and enter into the Age of Redemption is one seemingly insignificant mitzvah that takes perhaps one moment to do.

That lone mitzvah can be the proverbial “straw that broke the camel’s back,” and break the back of the last vestiges of exile and will bring redemption and salvation to the entire world.

ESSAY FOURTEEN

WHAT CAN WE ACCOMPLISH IN ONE INSTANT?

G-d Didn't get Angry

When Bilam, the heathen prophet, was hired to curse the Jewish people, he knew what he had to do. The Talmud relates that there is one split-second every day when G-d “gets angry,” as it were. Bilam, who knew when that moment was, hoped to take advantage of that “window of opportunity,” and curse the Jews at that propitious time.

G-d, however, thwarted Bilam's plan by not “getting angry” for even that one instant during the entire period that Bilam tried to curse the Jews.

The classic Talmud commentator Tosphos raises a simple question. If Bilam relied on the split second when G-d vents His anger to curse the Jews, what curse could he have uttered in a split-second?

Tosphos provides two answers:

First, Bilam could have just said the word “*kalem*,” which means “destroy them.”

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

Second, all Bilam had to do was to **start** his diatribe against the Jews at the “right” time. Even if the “juicy” stuff would follow at a less favorable time, it would still be effective.

There is a general principle established by our Sages: G-d’s attribute of kindness is more powerful than G-d’s attribute of justice. As powerful as evil can be, the power of goodness is much greater.

If one instant of G-d’s displeasure could suffice for the purpose of destruction, certainly one instant of Divine good will can go a long way to bring about favorable results.

For example: When we pray in the specified times (Shacharit in the morning, Mincha in the afternoon, Ma’ariv in the evening) we can also take advantage of the “windows of opportunity” to elicit G-d’s manifold blessings for ourselves and for the entire world.

Confronting Obstacles

There is also a deeper lesson we can derive from the “instant” of G-d’s wrath on which Bilam sought to capitalize.

Whenever we consider doing a Mitzvah we confront obstacles. There is an inner voice—our Sages referred to as the “yetzer hara-the evil impulse”—that tries to dissuade us

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

from doing the right thing. And this inner voice is quite creative.

First it gives us all sorts of arguments why doing a particular mitzvah is not possible. From, “I’m too busy,” to “I don’t know how to do the mitzvah properly,” the yetzer hara is a pro at finding excuses why not to do a mitzvah.

Hypocrisy

Occasionally the yetzer hara will convince the person that if they do the mitzvah they will be a hypocrite, because it will be incompatible with their lifestyle. “How can I put on tefillin, if I don’t eat kosher and observe the Sabbath,” is a popular refrain uttered by those who feel that one must observe everything if he or she is to observe anything.

Obviously, this argument is seriously flawed, for it would suggest that one should never do any good unless it is consistent with all their other actions. And since nobody is perfect, we could never do anything good.

Furthermore, if there is hypocrisy in doing something good that is incompatible with the negative, the question that the person using this excuse has to consider is: “perhaps it is the other things that I am doing that is incompatible with the good that makes me a hypocrite?”

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

In truth, all of life is a struggle between good and evil, right and wrong. We win some battles and we lose some. Just because we lost one battle doesn't mean that we must lose the other battles. The charge of hypocrisy should be reserved for those who do good only to hide their true intentions and interests.

What's the Use

If one can see through the fallacy of the “hypocrisy excuse,” the yetzer hara has at least one more tactic in his arsenal: “What good is there in me doing a mitzvah if I will only spend a few minutes or even seconds?” And this sounds like a very good question. What can a person accomplish in one instant?

The answer to this challenge has been provided for by Bilam. Bilam realized the power of even one well positioned word. Even one word—*kalem*—could bring the desired negative results.

The same—and even more—can applied to each and every one of us in the positive sense. We can accomplish something phenomenally great even in one instant.

Indeed, we are living in an age where this lesson is much easier to appreciate than ever before.

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

Modernity Great Support for Judaism

Many people cite the modern world as a conflict with our Jewish lifestyle. On the contrary, everything that modern technology has given us makes it much easier to be a practicing Jew. And the issue of “instant power” we have been discussing is a case in point.

We live in the age of instant everything. From instant coffee and instant gratification to instant communications and jet travel, our modern world is a powerful testimony to what we can accomplish for the good in one instant.

This lesson would have been valid in any period of our history. It is even more poignant in the current bridge to the Messianic Age. As has been stressed in many of these Torah messages, we have the accumulated good of the past at our disposal. All it takes to finally cross the bridge and enter into the Age of Redemption is one seemingly insignificant mitzvah that takes perhaps one moment to do. That lone mitzvah can be the proverbial “straw that broke the camel’s back,” in the positive sense and will bring redemption and salvation to the entire world.

ESSAY FIFTEEN

SINGULAR BLESSING

Prayer is complemented by Torah study.

**If prayer is the story of our relationship with G-d then
Torah study is where G-d shares His most intimate
thoughts with us.**

**This expresses dramatically His love for us because He
allows us to learn and absorb His most intimate knowledge.**

**While prayer expresses our love for G-d, Torah study
reveals His love for us.**

ESSAY FIFTEEN

SINGULAR BLESSING

Dissipated Blessings

This week's parsha is known for the incredible blessings uttered by the vile, heathen prophet Bilam. Bilam was hired by the Moabite King Balak who was terrified of the Jewish people who were on their way to the Promised Land. Realizing that he could never defeat them on the battlefield—inasmuch as they had already defeated the two “superpowers” of Sichon and Og upon whom he depended to protect his country—Balak resorted to an entirely different strategy. He would hire Bilam, a heathen prophet, to curse the Jewish people. Bilam was notorious for his power to utter curses that would materialize.

Bilam intended to do the bidding of Balak and curse the Jews. G-d, however, intervened and transformed all of his curses into the most exquisitely beautiful blessings, among them the blessing about the future Messianic Age.

The Talmud (Sanhedrin 105b) makes a startling claim concerning the curses-turned-into-blessings of Bilam:

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

Despite the fact that the Torah states that only blessings came out of Bilam's mouth, they all reverted to curses as per Bilam's original intention. Tragically these blessings did indeed revert to curses that have come true throughout our long and difficult existence in exile.

The Lone Blessing

According to the Talmud, there is but one blessing that remained a blessing notwithstanding Bilam's intention. It is the blessing of:

“How goodly are your tents, O Jacob; your dwelling places, O Israel.”

This blessing, our Sages tell us, alluded to the Houses of Prayer (synagogues) and Houses of Torah Study that would remain intact throughout our bitter exile and serve as sources of inspiration and strength for the Jewish people. Even in the most trying times we persevered because we had access to places where we could pray to G-d and study His holy Torah. This blessing was the only one that did not revert to a curse.

The Talmud there cites a Biblical passage to prove this point. In Deuteronomy (23:6) the Torah speaks of how “G-d, your G-d, did not want to listen to Bilam, and G-d your G-d transformed **the curse** into a blessing for you, because

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

G-d your G-d, loves you.” Now the verse mentions “curse” in the singular and not “curses” in the plural. This indicates that only one curse was actually transformed by G-d into a blessing.

Two interrelated questions arise when we analyze this passage of the Talmud:

First, **how** do we know that the one curse—that was effectively transformed into a blessing and that did not revert to a curse—was the one concerning Houses of Prayer and Houses of Torah Study? From the use of the singular word “curse” we only know that it was one curse that was unalterably transformed into a blessing. How do we know which one it was?

Second, **why** is it that all the other blessings reverted to curses while the one about Houses of Worship and Houses of Study did not? If Bilam’s evil thoughts were so potent that they prevailed over all the other blessings why did his negative thoughts not prevail over this blessing as well?

Our Vulnerability: Two Causes of Exile

The answer can be found in a better understanding of our vulnerability as a people, a vulnerability that caused our exile in the first place. How was it possible for G-d’s chosen people to be exiled from the Land promised to them by

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

G-d and subsequently led to our people's suffering innumerable and unparalleled forms of persecution that have punctuated our stay in exile? Certainly, as our prophets predicted and as we recite in our Festival prayers, it occurred because of our sins. Specifically, the First Temple was destroyed because of our lack of respect for G-d as we degenerated into idolatry, whereas the Second Temple was destroyed—and the long exile commenced—because of our disunity.

From the above it follows logically that the method to combat exile conditions—combat which will eventually bring an end to the exile—is to reverse the two primary causes of our being in exile.

By maintaining Houses of Prayer and Houses of Study we rectify both causes of exile—our lack of reverence for G-d and our internal divisions. The two most powerful means of expressing our loving relationship with G-d is prayer and Torah study. Prayer—which in Hebrew is Tefilah—actually means “bonding.” It is our way of lifting ourselves out of the physical world of separation from our true feelings and connections to bond with G-d.

The Four Rungs of Prayer

We begin with the acknowledgment of G-d as our Creator, followed by the prayers known as “*pesukei*

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

d'zimrah”(Verses of Praise), also rendered as, “Verses of Pruning.” By reciting these praises of G-d we cut away all of our entanglements with the physical world that distract us from expressing our true love to and reverence for G-d.

We then follow these verses of “disentanglement” with the Shema—with its accompanying blessings—that focus on our love for G-d. Having experienced this intense love for G-d in our recitation of the Shema we then reach the climax of our Tefilah-bonding with the “Shemonah Esrei (Eighteen Benedictions), also known as the “Amidah-the Standing Prayer,” at which point we stand before G-d in total submission and devotion.

Torah Study: G-d Sharing His Most Intimate Thoughts

Prayer is complemented by Torah study. If prayer is the story of our relationship with G-d then Torah study is where G-d shares His most intimate thoughts with us. This expresses dramatically His love for us because He allows us to learn and absorb His most intimate knowledge. While prayer expresses **our** love for G-d, Torah study reveals **His** love for us.

(Torah study alone, however, does not suffice. It must be translated into Mitzvah observance, otherwise the Torah study is deemed superficial and is not expressive of a profound and intimate relationship with G-d.)

The Unique Form of Unity

However, prayer and Torah study can be performed by each individual. When we join with others in a communal setting and pray and study Torah in Houses of Prayer and Houses of Torah Study, we can thereby rectify the second cause of exile—the lack of unity—as well.

And while we can experience unity in other forums that involve joint meetings and projects, the degree of unity with G-d that is accomplished through Prayer and Torah cannot be matched. The rationale for this is that no matter how much two people attempt to remove the barriers that separate between them, physical human beings cannot escape the reality that our bodies, and the interests that derive from our physical existence, can never be fully harmonized.

The only way we can achieve genuine unity is when we experience our **soul's** passion for G-d and for one another. And the only way we can extricate ourselves from our bodies and our physical ambitions is through prayer and Torah study. Prayer allows us to disentangle from our physical drives and passions while Torah study has the ability to liberate us from our exile mindset. Through prayer we pull **ourselves** out of the prison of the body

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

while Torah study is G-d's way of transporting us to the world of G-dly consciousness.

Once we try to unite in the context of prayer and Torah study we can achieve genuine unity and thereby rectify both causes of exile: the lack of reverence for G-d and the deplorable divisions within the Jewish community.

We can now understand why the blessing of Houses of Prayer and Houses of Torah Study were singled out as exempt from ever reverting to curses as was Bilam's true intention. If Bilam would have succeeded in abolishing these institutions, G-d forbid, we could not have survived the exile into which we have been thrust. The only anti-exile forces that enable us to endure the exile and persevere is prayer and Torah study in a communal setting; these together provide us with the ability to experience liberation from exile conditions, if only sporadically. And since G-d promised us that we will survive the exile, there was no way that this blessing could ever be subverted.

More Potent Prayer and Torah Study

Within the parameters of prayer and Torah study there are more specific dimensions that are more potent in negating the effects of exile. Not only do these two endeavors enable us to endure the exile by temporarily escaping its clutches,

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

they also provide us with the ultimate power to eliminate exile entirely.

When we survey the Amidah prayer—the central prayer of Judaism—among countless others, we realize that the most recurrent theme for which we petition G-d is the request for Moshiach and Redemption. It stands to reason that despite the efficacy of **all** prayer to extricate us from our internal exile—which, in turn, contributes to liberation from the external form of exile—the passionate demand for Redemption is the most effective.

Similarly, notwithstanding the power of all forms of Torah study—particularly communal Torah study—to liberate us from exile, the teachings of the Torah concerning Moshiach and Redemption possess an even greater capacity to, once and for all times, liberate us from all forms of exile.

ESSAY SIXTEEN

CATCHING UP

**There must be a separation between the holy and the
ordinary.**

But the ordinary is also holy and replete with meaning.

**Ultimately and ideally, the holy will influence and permeate
the ordinary.**

ESSAY SIXTEEN

CATCHING UP

Parity with Israel

This week, there is something rather unusual about the Torah reading. We will have finally caught up with our brethren in Israel who, for the last few weeks, were reading a different weekly parsha. They were one parsha ahead of us in the Diaspora.

Let me explain: The Festival of Shavuos we observed a little over a month ago, occurred on a Friday and Saturday. However, in Israel, they were only required to observe one day of the Festival, so that the next day (Shabbos) was an “ordinary” Shabbos. (Of course there is no such thing as an ordinary Shabbos; the intention here is that it was not a Shabbos that coincided with a Festival.)

As a result, in Israel, they read the weekly parsha of Naso, on the day that we, in the Diaspora, read the festival Torah reading, not the weekly parsha. For the next three weeks, thus, we were a week behind.

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

This week, we read the double-parsha of Chukas and Balak, while in Israel they only read the second parsha of Balak. And so, this is the week where we are one with our brethren in Israel insofar as the Torah reading is concerned.

No Coincidences

The Ba'al Shem Tov (whose passing occurred on the Holiday of Shavuot from which the aforementioned division began) taught us that there are no coincidences. And that everything that we hear or see must serve to teach us something about our relationship with G-d and our Judaism.

What does this phenomenon of reconciling the Torah portions teach us?

One obvious lesson is that despite the fact that Torah, which comes from one G-d, is the very source of unity in our lives, nevertheless, the Torah itself recognizes the legitimate division that exists between holy and the ordinary. The world was designed to have times, places, personalities and experiences that are special and holier than others.

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

Respecting Differences in Space, Time and Personalities

In terms of “space,” Israel is the Holy land, while the rest of the world is not.

In time, we have the Shabbos that is qualitatively holier than the rest of the week. And when it is over we recite the Havdalah (Separation) service that highlights the difference between the holy and the profane.

In terms of personalities, we also have certain individuals, who are “head and shoulders” above the level of the ordinary person. People such as Moses and Aaron, were/are considered to be holier than the rest of the Jewish people.

And there are experiences in everyone’s life that are special, holy, Sabbath like, that are clearly demarcated by us as being different from others.

With this approach of the need to recognize and respect the abovementioned differences there is also room for some challenges and misconceptions.

Challenges

Some might think, as Korach did, that, in fact, everyone is holy. There ought not be a hierarchical structure within the Jewish community, where one Jew is considered more holy than the other. Even the most ordinary Jew, he argued, was holy.

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

A second challenge, from the opposite direction, is that it is wrong to make these separations since we should maintain a constant state of Holiness, at all the time and in all places. This extreme view might have been the view of the spies who wanted to stay in the desert. As explained in Chassidic literature, they wanted to preserve the exalted spiritual atmosphere they experienced in the desert where they had no distractions from the physical world. All of their needs were taken care of by the Manna and other miraculous sources of nourishment and protection they were afforded. In other words, they wanted a perpetual Shabbos.

Misconceptions

And then there are two misconceptions that can arise from the assertion that there are two states of existence: holy and ordinary.

The first misconception is that the definition of “ordinary” is a life devoid of meaning and holiness, thereby legitimizing the removal of all standards from an “ordinary” person’s life, on an “ordinary” day in an “ordinary” place. This translates in a frequently heard statement that only in Israel does one have to act in a prescribed manner; only on Shabbos or on a Holiday do we have to act Jewishly etc.

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

The second misconception, conversely, is that the separation between the holy and profane is etched in stone. The ordinary must remain ordinary and separated from the holy.

Meeting Challenges and Dispelling Misconceptions

This week's double-portion of Chukas and Balak, where the reconciliation of the Torah readings in Israel with the Diaspora takes place, suggests that none of the four challenges and misconceptions are valid:

First, there is indeed a separation that must be preserved between the Holy and the profane. One must recognize that the Shabbos is unique and must be treated differently from all the other days of the week. And we must also realize that the Land of Israel cannot follow the rules that govern all other places; it is a land that is directly answerable to G-d. And there are individuals who stand apart, and whose special status must be respected and revered.

Second, there is a need to appreciate that there are times in which the person must “descend” from the lofty perch of Shabbos, and that there is a lesser degree of holiness outside of Israel, and that the ordinary person has certain limitations that do not apply to those on a higher level. In

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

short, we cannot live on and maintain the same spiritual plane all the time.

Third, notwithstanding the first two points, we must also understand that even in the weekdays, there is spirituality and meaning. Even in the Diaspora a Jew must live a holy and Torah life. Not being on the level of Shabbos and not living in Israel is not a license to do whatever pleases us.

And finally, the reconciling of Israel with the Diaspora this week suggests that even though there is a designated separation between the holy and the ordinary, the ultimate goal is for the holy to “invade” the ordinary, for the boundaries to be removed, so that even during the week, we sense the holiness of Shabbos, and even in the Diaspora we feel the holiness of the Land of Israel. And the lofty heights that certain holy individuals attain affect and uplift the plain ordinary individual.

To summarize: there must be a separation between the holy and the ordinary, but the ordinary is also holy and replete with meaning, and that ultimately, the holy will influence and permeate the ordinary.

This indeed, is what our Sages meant when they said that in the days of Moshiach the Land of Israel will spread to the entire world. This refers to the spiritual state of the Land of Israel. It will eventually break through its own boundaries and borders to instill its holiness throughout

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

the world. And we facilitate this process on our end by “making Israel here,” i.e., attempting to make every aspect of our lives more G-dly.

To be sure, in the Messianic Age, the state of holiness of Land of Israel will also grow to greater heights because, “Jerusalem will spread to the entire Land of Israel,” and the holiness of the Temple will spread throughout Jerusalem. But, the increase of holiness in each of these realms will pierce through the barriers to make the entire world bask in the aura of the Holy of Holies. May we see the fulfillment of this experience with the coming of Moshiach, imminently.

ESSAY SEVENTEEN

MOSHIACH

If one evil person was able to galvanize a nation of tens of millions to carry out the worst genocide in history, how much more so, is the same possible in the realm of goodness.

One person can unleash the positive energy lying dormant in humanity.

ESSAY SEVENTEEN

MOSHIACH

The Primary Biblical Source

The Jewish belief in the Moshiach and the Messianic Age is firmly rooted in the Torah and in the hearts and minds of Jews throughout their long and painful history in exile. Jews have always expressed their belief that a day will come when G-d will make good on His promise that there will be peace in the world and the Jewish people will be free to realize their destiny and the entire world will be filled with the knowledge of G-d .

This Week's Torah portion of Balak, Maimonides, writes is one of the Biblical sources for the belief, not only in a Messianic Age, but that it will be ushered in by a human, leader, we call Moshiach .

Bilam the Heathen prophet, sought to curse the Jewish people. Instead, G-d compelled him to utter blessings. One of these prophetic blessings reads as follows :

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

“I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not nigh.
A star steps out from Jacob and a scepter will arise
from Israel...”

The event Bilam predicted is the coming of a great Jewish leader ("star" and "scepter") who will reshape the world in the mold, G-d had intended for it .

Why a Human Moshiach?

The question many have asked is why there is a need to believe in a human Messiah who will usher in this age of utopia? Why can't we just believe in a Messianic Age which will ultimately evolve?

The answer lies in a fundamental belief that Judaism introduced to the world, that our efforts count and that all major spiritual changes in this world have come through people.

G-d, even when He wishes to change the world, does so through special people, who serve as the role models and catalysts for these changes.

By awakening the spiritual potential of every Jew, Moses, for example, was the one who brought the Torah to the Jewish people.

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

Joshua was the leader who connected the Jewish people with the Holy Land.

King Solomon was the one who built G-d's home - the Holy Temple.

Throughout every generation, the Jewish people were led by unique individuals, who enlightened, inspired and activated our own internal, goodness.

If one evil person was able to galvanize a nation of tens of millions to carry out the worst genocide in history, how much more so we have to believe that one person can unleash the positive energy lying dormant in humanity.

This individual is Moshiach!

Moshiach, will be the one who will bring out the best in all of us, and enable us to access our own essential holiness. When that happens the entire world will realize its own spiritual potential and we will see a world of total goodness and G-dliness..

ESSAY EIGHTEEN

REMOVING THE BILAM CURSE OF GALUS

Bilam suffered from two impediments. He was lame and partially blind.

He lacked healthy spiritual legs i.e. faith.

Bilams spirituality was based on his limited understanding of G-d's existence.

Bilam's was also spiritually blind; blind to his own state of lowliness.

We defeat the Bilams of the world by strengthening faith and seeing G-d's greatness and our own limits.

ESSAY EIGHTEEN

REMOVING THE BILAM CURSE OF GALUS

The Three Festivals

Bilam, the heathen prophet hired by the Moabite king Balak to curse the Jewish people, was riding his donkey on the way to meet Balak. Suddenly his donkey stopped in the road and would not move a step farther. When Bilam struck the donkey G-d opened its mouth. It exclaimed, “What have I done to you that made you hit me these three times?”

Rashi, citing a Midrashic interpretation, said that the word used here for “times” is *regalim*, which can also be translated as pilgrimage festival [literally: “legs” because one would walk to Jerusalem for these festivals]. Thus, the donkey was actually reprimanding Bilam for his attempt to destroy a nation that celebrates three such festivals.

What was it about these three festivals that distinguished the Jewish people from all other nations? What about the many other Mitzvos that a Jew performs? Did they count for nothing?

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

The simple answer is that when a Jew went to Jerusalem three times a year he left behind his home and property and relied on G-d's protection. Indeed, the Torah relates that no one suffered from break-ins or loss of property when they went on a pilgrimage. This phenomenon actually became the basis for the Talmudic principle, "messengers who are sent to do a Mitzvah will not be harmed."

Incidentally, this is also the basis of the widespread custom to give money to a person who is about to go on a trip. The objective is for him or her to give it to tzedakah on arrival so that he is engaged in a Mitzvah which will protect him from harm.

The Power of Faith

Bilam was told by G-d, through the medium of a donkey, that the Jewish people are unique and cannot be destroyed because their faith is so strong.

The Midrash adds more details to the dialogue between G-d (presumably through the medium of the donkey) and Bilam:

G-d said to Bilam, "if you will destroy Israel who will fulfill the Torah?" Bilam replied that he would observe the Torah.

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

G-d then said to him, “while that would be possible for all the other commandments, you cannot fulfill the commandment to go on a pilgrimage three times a year because you are lame and blind in one eye. The Mishnah rules that one who is lame and one who is blind is exempted from the Mitzvah of appearing [in the Temple three times a year].. If so, if you cannot fulfill this mitzvah, it will be impossible for you to curse them.”

What does the Midrash mean when it says that Bilam was willing to accept all the commandments? How could anyone imagine that one of the most vile people, known for his immoral, depraved and cruel behavior, was ready to embrace the totality of Judaism except for the Mitzvah of the thrice annual pilgrimage.

No Leg to Stand On

To answer this question we must understand the deeper meaning of the exemption for one who is lame or blind in an eye.

The legs may be the lowest part of our body but they transport our entire body, including the head, wherever we wish to go. Legs are therefore used as a metaphor for our faith in G-d; the foundation of Judaism. When we have

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

pure faith in G-d we can be transported to the highest places; even to the Holy Temple in Jerusalem.

Faith is so powerful that it even can control our mind. If we want our minds to go in the right direction and not stray into alien territory our faith in G-d must be intact and complete. One who is spiritually challenged and cannot “walk” because he or she lacks the “legs” of faith, will end up directing his or her mind toward the wrong things.

But faith alone does not suffice. When a person is imbued with faith and has sufficient mobility to go towards Jerusalem, both literally and figuratively, there might be another serious impediment to getting there successfully. This second impediment is blindness; even if it is only blindness in one eye.

Blindness in One Eye

What is the significance that Bilam was blind in one eye?

G-d created us with two eyes because in the spiritual realm there are two different focuses for a Jew.

With one eye a Jew must reflect on G-d greatness. The other eye must look at one's own limitations and humble state.

Chassidic commentators explain that Bilam's blindness in one eye meant that while he was endowed with a prophetic

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

eye that enabled him to see G-d's power, he was nevertheless blind when viewing himself. He was an egotist, obsessed with his own importance.

Moreover, his ability to see G-d's greatness with one eye actually placed him lower than one who is so materialistic that he is blind in both eyes. Not only was Bilam an egotist but his excessive ego was enhanced when he realized how well he was able to recognize G-d's greatness. Rather than making him more G-dly, moral and sensitive to others, his ability actually contributed to his ego becoming even more overinflated.

Bilam thus suffered from two impediments. First, he did not possess healthy spiritual legs; his faith was tainted. While Bilam certainly knew of G-d's existence - indeed, he was a prophet of no mean ability - his knowledge was not based on pure faith; it was based on his limited understanding of G-d's existence and the gift of prophecy G-d conferred upon him.

Second, Bilam's awareness of G-d's existence and greatness, precisely because it was based on his knowledge and the gift of prophecy he was given by G-d, it made him even more blind to his own lowly state.

When Bilam said to G-d that he was prepared to fulfill all the commandments he meant a fulfillment devoid of faith and humility. He wanted a crippled Judaism, one that that

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

lacked legs and eyes. He wanted a Judaism without sacrifice; one that would bring him unearned glory.

Bilam's True Intentions

The Talmud states that Bilam's involuntary blessings of the Jewish people were the opposite of what he really wanted to say. As such, we can infer the baleful curses he really wanted to inflict on the Jews. One of his most powerful and beautiful blessings was about the coming of Moshiach. From this we know that his real intention was to keep us in eternal Galus, which would make us vulnerable to all of his wicked curses.

It follows that Galus is associated with a profound lack of mobility (our spiritually hobbled "legs"), which comes from a dearth of pure faith, and the lack of G-dly vision in our eyes.

Three Festivals, Patriarchs, Pillars, Traits

In addition, commentators point out that the three times/legs Bilam was referring to are the three Patriarchs, who parallel the three Festivals. Others interpret the three legs as a metaphor for the three pillars upon which the world stands: Torah, service (prayer) and act of lovingkindness.

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

It is also likely that the three legs refer to the three distinguishing Jewish traits listed in the Talmud: kindness, modesty and compassion, which parallel the Patriarchs. Abraham personified kindness; Isaac was the epitome of humility and submission; and Jacob is associated with the trait of compassion.

If Bilam was the personification of Galus and the three “legs” referred to by his donkey are the keys to withstanding the Galus curse of Bilam, there must be something about these three traits, specifically, in relation to getting us out of Galus.

Hidden Talents Surfaced

The Rebbe warned us about a phenomenon that is prevalent in these last moments of Galus. Heretofore hidden energies, both positive and negative, are coming to the surface, where they are revealed. Thus, we see how otherwise very good people exhibit some rather unsavory behavior and, conversely, otherwise ordinary people exhibit extraordinary virtue and talents.

Because these are the last days of exile, it is important that we deal with and refine even the subconscious aspects of our personalities.

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

How does one cope with these formidable and challenging forces that are coming out into the light of day?

The Rebbe counseled that we should each seek out a mentor who possesses the three abovementioned traits of kindness, modesty and compassion.

Bilam's Antithesis of the Three Jewish Traits

Bilam was the antithesis of these three traits. According to Ethics of the Fathers (5:19) Bilam had a jaundiced eye, a haughty spirit and a greedy soul. His jaundiced vision is the opposite of compassion. His arrogance is the opposite of modesty. And his greed at not wanting to part with his resources, is the opposite of kindness.

To rid ourselves of the Bilam syndrome we need to find a mentor who possesses these positive admirable traits so they can help rid us of the Bilam forces of hidden evil. It follows that the goal of the mentor is to implant within us those very traits, which will get us out of Galus.

Three Approaches for Ahavas Yisroel

Our Galus started 2000 years ago with the destruction of the Second Temple. The primary reason for the Temple's destruction, the Talmud states, was the lack of love of one for the other. This can be caused by three factors: The

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

first is that we see only the negative in others; we have jaundiced vision when it comes to other people and cannot see the good in them.

The second factor is greed, where we think everything in is or should be ours and cannot tolerate the other because we feel that the other is depriving us of our rightful blessings.

The third factor is arrogance and inflated ego. The egotist cannot tolerate even the existence of the other.

By reversing these three negative traits, associated with Bilam, and by inculcating the three positive ones, we rid ourselves of the last vestiges of Bilam's hidden curse. Instead, we reveal our love for one another. With this all powerful love we will usher in the Final redemption with Moshiach, about whom Bilam so eloquently prophesied.

ESSAY NINETEEN

NO PARAGRAPHS

We have become a society in which everything has to be analyzed.

There are times when we should allow positive statements of people to remain the way they are on the surface without probing for some hidden agenda.

Give people the benefit of the doubt.

Frequently, the superficial begins to seep in and can change a person's attitude.

ESSAY NINETEEN

NO PARAGRAPHS

Dependence on the Oral Law

It is well known that the written Torah does not have any vowels or punctuation. To know how to read the words and punctuate the sentences, we depend on our Oral tradition handed down to us at Sinai. There is, however, one feature in the written text of the Torah that tells us where the conclusion of a subject is. In virtually every Torah portion there are spaces that indicate the end of a paragraph. Occasionally these “paragraphs”—also known as *parshiyos*—can be just several words, as in the Ten Commandants: “Don’t steal;” in other instances they can be several columns long.

It is obvious then that these “paragraphs” serve a different function from the “modern” style and purpose of paragraphs.

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

Reflection

Rashi, citing earlier Sages, states that the spaces and separations that occur in the Torah were intended to provide Moses with the opportunity to reflect on the subject matter between paragraphs. Paragraphs in the Torah thus were not intended for grammatical purposes but rather to give Moses—and, even more so, people who are not on Moses' level—an opportunity to pause, regurgitate and delve more deeply into what had just been studied.

Anomalies

All this will serve as an introduction to a question that has been raised concerning this week's Torah portion of *Balak*. The entire section—comprising over a hundred verses—is one long paragraph in the Torah scroll.

Why was there no need to break-up the narrative to allow Moses and everyone else the opportunity to reflect on the subject matter?

There is one other anomaly in this week's *Parsha* that will help shed light on this matter. This *Parsha* is the only one that contains words of prophecy uttered by a most vile individual, *Bilam*. This heathen prophet was hired by *Balak*, the King of Moab to curse the Jewish people. Instead of

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

curses, G-d made sure that only blessings would come from his mouth. These blessings rank among the most beautiful and inspiring words of spiritual poetry in all of the Torah. So much so, that sections of it have been incorporated in our daily liturgy, such as the prayer “*Mah tovu..*.-How goodly are your tents..”

However, our Sages tell us that as positive and beautiful were his utterances; Bilam’s thoughts were entirely evil and were the opposite of what G-d compelled him to speak. In other words, these blessings were only blessings on the surface. Were we to probe beneath the surface to find their underlying intent that existed in the mind and heart of *Bilam*, we would find curses and not blessings.

Don’t Probe

We can now appreciate why the Torah leaves no room for reflection in this *Parsha*, to underscore that there are times when it is better to leave well enough alone. Occasionally, it is preferable to leave things the way they are on the surface and do not try to probe into the psyche of a person and his statements to find that the intentions are not as pure as they appear on the surface.

We have become a society in which everything has to be analyzed. There are political analysts, business analysts, psycho analysts and every other type of profession that

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

employs people whose primary function it is to reflect, probe and parse other people's words. In many situations this is positive and beneficial. But there are times when we should leave the positive, albeit, superficial statements of people the way they are on the surface. Give people — who say good things — the benefit of the doubt. Don't try to find a trace of insincerity beneath the surface because if one will search he will always find some imperfection. Rather than unearth it and allow it to surface, let the person's positive speech define him or her, not his or her hidden thoughts. In many situations the superficial begins to seep in and can change a person's attitude.

The Secret

One could explain the anomaly of this week's *Parsha* not having any breaks or pauses in yet another way. One of the distinctive elements of this *Parsha* is that it contains prophecies concerning the coming of the Moshiach. One of the characteristics of the Messianic Age is that its **precise** timing was and will always be a secret until it happens.

By keeping the entire *Parsha* "closed," the Torah intimates to us that we should not focus on when Moshiach will come. Rather we should focus our efforts on praying, hoping and working for Moshiach to come.

In the words of the Talmud: "Moshiach's coming will be

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS BALAK

when we are distracted from it.” How do we reconcile this statement with many others of our Sages that we are commanded to wait for Moshiach’s coming every day?

One answer is to define the word wait. It means to yearn for it and prepare for it. When one tries to figure out when it will happen but does nothing to make it happen, he misses the whole point. It can be compared to someone who tries to figure out how to open the door, without first trying to simply turn the door knob.

On yet a deeper level, the “closed” nature of this *Parsha* conveys to us the notion that whatever we think we can know about Moshiach and the Messianic Era, there will always be something closed and hidden from us. It will be much greater and more sublime than anything we can imagine.