

חמודי שי על התורה והמועדים

Chamudei Shai on the Torah and Holidays

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Parashas Balak

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Parashas Balak

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I

The disciples of Bilam are in the secret of the great ones of the Gentile nations

We begin with the holy words of the *Sfas Emes* on our parashah from the year 5631 (1871):

The Mishnah teaches: "Whoever possesses these three traits is among the disciples of Avraham Avinu (our forefather): a good eye, a humble spirit, and a modest soul. And whoever possesses the opposite traits belongs to the disciples of the wicked Bilam... What is the difference between the disciples...? The disciples of Avraham Avinu eat in this world and inherit the World to Come, as it says: 'That I may cause those that love me to inherit substance (*Yesh*)' (Proverbs 8:21). But the disciples of the wicked Bilam inherit Gehinnom (Gehenna) and go down into the pit of destruction..." And what is the meaning of the term "the disciples of Bilam"? After all, what can [possibly] be learned from him? These evil traits – a bad eye, an arrogant spirit, and so on – any fool can acquire without study! Rather, [the matter is that] even the wicked humble themselves. Indeed, Bilam said, "If Balak were to give me his house full... I could not transgress..." From this very statement we learn that he

service) with a verse spoken by the wicked Bilam?

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possessed a greedy soul. For he considered it an achievement before Hakadosh Baruch Hu that he humbled himself despite being a very important person. His entire humility existed only so that he could later attain a higher level of self-glorification. This is the meaning of “fallen, yet with open eyes” – through his submission he reached his desired level. The righteous, however, possess a modest soul. They seek only to cleave to the Living G-d, constantly recognizing that no creature possesses life except through the power of Hashem. Like an axe in the hand of the woodcutter. In every action they remain attached to the inner Divine power...

The *Sfas Emes* is emphasizing the difference between the character traits of the *tzaddikim* (righteous) among Am Yisrael, inherited from Avraham Avinu, and the character traits of the greatest and most distinguished figures

of the nations of the world, represented by their prophet, the wicked Bilam. He illustrates Bilam’s nature through the verse (Bamidbar 22:18):

וַיַּעַן בִּלְעָם וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־עֲבָדַי בְּלֹק אִם־
יִתְּנוּ־לִי בְּלֹק מְלֵא בֵיתוֹ כֶּסֶף וְזָהָב לֹא
אוּכַל לְעִבֵר אֶת־פִּי הִ' אֲלֵכֶי לַעֲשׂוֹת
קְטָנָה אוֹ גְדוֹלָה

“Bilam answered and said to the servants of Balak: ‘Even if Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not transgress the word of Hashem my G-d, to do either a small thing or a great thing.’”

Rashi explains:

“‘His house full of silver and gold’ - from this we learn that he was greedy and desired the wealth of others. He said: ‘It is fitting that he (Balak) give me all his silver and gold, for he would need to hire many armies, and even then, victory would be uncertain, whereas I would certainly attain victory.’”

Bilam’s true intentions are revealed through his actions

We must ask: How do we know that Bilam’s words were not spoken

- ▶ **An opportunity for Aharon to rectify his part in the *chet ha'Eigel* (sin of the Golden Calf)**
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sincerely and in good faith? To determine what was truly in Bilam's heart when he uttered all of his "beautiful words," we must broaden our perspective on the entire narrative, and we will see that Bilam's true desires and intentions are revealed through his subsequent actions. He continued pursuing Balak's mission even after professing absolute devotion to the word of Hashem. He never ceased searching for a way to serve Balak and fulfill his wishes, even after receiving clear messages that this was not Hashem's will. His true intentions were evident from his actions, even to Balak himself! If Balak genuinely believed that even a house full of silver and gold could not persuade Bilam to violate Hashem's command, why did he not immediately abandon his efforts once he saw that they were futile?

From this it is evident that Bilam's declaration, "Even if you give me a house full of silver and gold, I cannot transgress the word of Hashem," was not spoken sincerely. He was not speaking truthfully. On the contrary, when we look specifically through the lens of his actions, then in

hindsight, we see that his words themselves exposed his true motives: love of wealth and arrogance. These qualities stand in complete opposition to the traits of Avraham Avinu: a good eye, a humble spirit, a meek soul, and a commitment to truth and to kindness

The bequeathing of Avraham Avinu's character traits to all future generations

This contrast appears in Tehillim (Psalms 119:72):

טוֹב־לִי תוֹרַת־פִּיךָ מֵאֶלֶפֶי זָהָב וְכֶסֶף

"The Torah of Your mouth is better to me than thousands of pieces of gold and silver."

Dovid HaMelech (King David), speaking on behalf of Am Yisrael (the Jewish nation), expresses the fundamental Jewish value: "The Torah of Your mouth is better to me" – we love the word of Hashem more than any material wealth.

Significantly, this verse is phrased in positive, absolute language, without any conditions. We do not say, "If you give me money, I will learn Torah," or "Even if you offer me gold and silver, I will not abandon the Torah." That is not our approach. Our

commitment is absolute and is expressed positively and absolutely.

“The Torah of Your mouth is better to me” – this is our central desire. We love the word of Hashem and His Torah more than any material possession. We value the spiritual world more than the physical one.

Avraham’s encounter with Ephron as a sign for future generations

This contrast also appears in Avraham’s dealings with Ephron Hachiti (the Hittite), a non-Jew. When Avraham sought to purchase the Me'aras HaMachpelah (the Cave of the Patriarchs), Ephron initially offered the field as a gift. Later, however, he said (Bereishis 23:15):

אֲדֹנָי שְׁמַעֲנִי אֶרֶץ אַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת שֶׁקֶל
כֶּסֶף בֵּינִי וּבֵינְךָ מֵהַיְהוּא וְאֶת־מִתְדָּ
קִבֵּר

“My lord, listen to me. A piece of land worth four hundred shekels of silver – what is that between me and you? Bury your dead.”

He implied that four hundred shekels of silver were insignificant, yet he said this only after publicly offering the field and cave as a complete gift. In doing so, he revealed his true

intentions, which were motivated by greed and self-interest rather than the benefit of Avraham Avinu. He portrayed himself as a noble and generous benefactor, but it was merely a performance. His true motives were revealed by his actions. Avraham Avinu, though perceiving Ephron’s true intentions, nevertheless accepted the terms without protest, in order to ensure that the field would become an eternal possession for himself and his descendants.

Ephron’s traits closely resemble those of Bilam. The *Sfas Emes* at the beginning of our parashah cites the Mishnah that urges us to be disciples of Avraham Avinu and not disciples of the wicked Bilam. This parashah teaches us much about our own identity as a people. By understanding the negative traits of others, we sharpen and affirm the values that define us: peace, a good eye, a humble spirit, and a modest soul.

And the wicked Bilam is the exact opposite, entirely bad traits: an evil eye and a haughty spirit.



II

The significance of the blessing: מַה טֹבוֹ אֹהֲלֶיךָ
יַעֲקֹב מִשְׁכְּנֹתֶיךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל
(“**How goodly are your tents, O Yaakov, your dwellings, O Yisrael**”)

When Bilam gazed upon the camp of Bnei Yisrael, he opened his mouth and proclaimed these wondrous words, a poetic and prophetic verse which merited becoming part of our daily prayers. Indeed, it is the very first verse recited upon entering the *beis haknesses* (synagogue). The custom of reciting “Mah Tovu” is ancient, dating back to the formative period of the *siddur* (prayer book). In *Seder Rav Amram Gaon* it says: “One who enters the synagogue says, “*Mah tovu o halecha Yaakov, mishkenosecha Yisrael. Va'ani b'rov chasdecha avo veisecha, eshtachaveh el heichal kodshecha b'yirasecha*” (“How goodly are your tents, O Yaakov, your dwellings, O Yisrael. But as for me, in the abundance of Your kindness will I come into Your house; I will bow down toward Your Holy Temple in the fear of You.”)

Similarly, *Machzor Vitry* opens the order of Shacharis (the Morning

Prayer) with these three verses:

“Va'ani b'rov chasdecha avo veisecha, eshtachaveh el heichal kodshecha b'yirasecha. Va'ani tefillasi lecha Hashem eis ratzon; Elokim, b'rov chasdecha aneini b'emes yishecha. Mah tovu ohalecha Yaakov, mishkenosecha Yisrael.” (“And as for me, may my prayer unto You, O Hashem, be in an acceptable time. O Elokim, in the abundance of Your mercy, answer me with the truth of Your salvation. How goodly are your tents, O Yaakov, your dwellings, O Yisrael.”)

In later generations, the Maharil writes (*Responsa*, 150): “When one enters the synagogue in the morning, does he not recite “Mah Tovu” and the accompanying verses?” Many later *poskim* (authorities of Torah law), down to our own day, reinforced this custom. For example, the *Darkei Moshe* (*Tur, Orach Chaim* 6:3) writes: “The *Kolbo* (subsection 87) wrote that when one enters the synagogue he should recite

“Mah Tovu... va'ani b'rov chasdecha” and so forth.”

Why begin the davening with a verse spoken by the wicked Bilam?

In *Chamudei Shai* on Bereishis (Parashas Toldos), a perplexing question is raised: Why do we begin our davening with a verse spoken by the wicked Bilam? A similar question may be asked regarding other verses uttered by wicked individuals that nevertheless became part of our liturgy. After careful consideration, an explanation was suggested as to why these verses were incorporated into the davening (see also *Chamudei Shai* on Megillas Esther, on the verse “*Mi hu zeh v'ei zeh hu*”).

In contrast with the above, however, the Maharshah writes (*Responsa*, 64) that when he enters the synagogue in the morning, he omits the “*Mah tovu*” verse and begins instead with “*Va'ani b'rov chasdecha...*” In his words:

“When I enter the synagogue in the morning, I begin with the verse “*Va'ani b'rov chasdecha*” and skip the first verse, “*Mah tovu ohalecha,*”

which was spoken by Bilam. Furthermore, he intended it as a curse, as explained in *Perek Chelek* (*Maseches Sanhedrin*), and in any event this would not be the right place for this verse.

In the Maharshah's view, how can we recite a verse that Bilam intended as a curse? After all, as explained in *Sanhedrin* (105b), Bilam's intention was that Bnei Yisrael should not have synagogues and Torah-study halls, except that Hakadosh Baruch Hu, turned his curse into a blessing!?

The “Blessing of Batei Knessiyos and Batei Midrashos” (“the Blessing of Synagogues and Study Halls”) endures forever

The Maharshah's objection is difficult to understand, for the Gemara in *Sanhedrin* (105b) states:

Rabbi Yochanan said: From the blessings of that wicked man, you can discern what was in his heart. He sought to say that they should have no

synagogues or study halls (but instead he said), "*Mah tovu ohalecha Yaakov*" ("How goodly are your tents, O Yaakov, your dwellings, O Yisrael"). He sought to say that the Shechinah (Divine Presence) should not rest upon them, but instead he said, "*mishkenosecha Yisrael*" ("your dwellings, O Yisrael")... Rabbi Abba bar Kahana said: "All of them eventually reverted to curses except for the blessing regarding the synagogues study halls, as it says: 'Hashem your G-d transformed the curse into a blessing for you' – the curse, singular, and not the curses."

In other words, all of Bilam's blessings eventually reverted to curses except for the blessing concerning *batei knessiyos* and *batei midrashos*, which remains forever. The plain meaning is that the verse "*Mah tovu ohalecha Yaakov, mishkenosecha Yisrael*" refers to synagogues and study halls and this blessing never reverted to a curse,

despite our sins. Bilam's intention regarding them was never realized. If so, why did the Maharshal refrain from reciting this verse, especially in light of the words of the Rishonim (medieval sages) and the halachic authorities who arranged the text of the *siddur*?

An explanation for the Maharshal's *shita* (approach)

Upon reflection, it appears that the Maharshal's view can be understood differently. The "*Mah tovu*" verse is composed of two parts:

- "*Ohalecha Yaakov*" refers to the synagogues and study halls, concerning which the Gemara teaches that they will never depart from us.
- "*Mishkenosecha Yisrael*" refers to the Beis HaMikdash (Holy Temple), for Bilam inwardly intended to curse them that "the Shechinah should not dwell among them." The Beis HaMikdash is the dwelling place of the Shechinah when we are on the elevated spiritual

level represented by the name "Yisrael."

The deeper meaning of the verse: two spiritual states of Am Yisrael

The verse "*Mah tovu ohalecha Yaakov, mishkenosecha Yisrael*" may therefore be understood as describing two distinct spiritual states of Am Yisrael, reflecting our condition in *galus* and our state in Eretz Yisrael (the Land of Israel).

A. "*Ohalecha Yaakov*" —the miniature Batei Mikdash in exile

Ohalecha Yaakov refers to the synagogues and study halls in exile, the *mikdashei me'at* (Holy Temples in microcosm). This recalls Yaakov Avinu, of whom it is written: יָשַׁב אֶהְלִים "[He] dwells in tents." Rashi explains that these were the tents of Shem and Ever, the ancient houses of study that were the focal point for Torah study and the preservation of faith. These *mikdashei me'at* are the source of Am Yisrael's protection and survival in the times of exile. Yaakov, who is the father, symbolizes the protection of the Jewish people during periods of darkness, when they are distant from both their land and the Beis HaMikdash.

The synagogues and study halls in exile are the basis for the preservation of faith and the connection with Hakadosh Baruch Hu, and regarding them it is promised that they will never cease from us.

B. “Mishkenosecha Yisrael”—the Batei HaMikdash in Eretz Yisrael

By contrast, *mishkenosecha Yisrael* refers to the state in which Am Yisrael dwells upon its land, the Land of Israel, and have the Sanctuary—the place of the indwelling of the Shechinah, which is the root of the word "your dwellings" (*משכנותיך*), in the Beis HaMikdash. There the Shechinah rests openly, and the nation is in a state of spiritual perfection. This also explains why the second half of the verse speaks only of *Yisrael* and does not mention *Yaakov*. The name *Yisrael* represents the Jewish people at their highest spiritual level, dwelling in their land with the indwelling of the Shechinah in the Beis HaMikdash, revealed to all. Unlike the first blessing, however, this condition is not guaranteed. We must merit it, and we may lose it if we

fail to maintain our spiritual stature.

The Maharshal's opposition to reciting the verse in the davening

This understanding of the verse "*Mah tovu...*" sheds new light on the Maharshal's objection to reciting Mah Tov at the beginning of davening. The Maharshal cites the Gemara that Bilam intended to curse Am Yisrael, but Hakadosh Baruch Hu transformed his curses into blessings. While Bilam's lips uttered words of blessing, his heart harbored evil intentions. He desired that the Shechinah depart from the Jewish people—both from the *batei knessiyos* and *batei midrashas* of exile, as well as from the holy dwelling places, namely the Batei HaMikdash in Eretz Yisrael. After having attained such lofty spiritual heights, these destructions are so painful and distressing that some authorities, such as the Maharshal, held that it is inappropriate to begin the day with a verse in which there is hidden, even if only in a hint of a mere intention, the curse of the wicked Balaam, which due to our many sins was fulfilled: the departure of the Shechinah's revelation

and the destruction of the Temple. To our sorrow, through our sins, the *Batei HaMikdash* were destroyed. That is, in the second half of the verse, the harmful intent of the wicked Bilam prevailed over the words of blessing.

If so, it is possible that the Maharshal was concerned about including a verse especially upon entering the synagogue, where the intention of the one who said it was the departure of the Shechinah and the destruction of the Beis HaMikdash. After all, many beautiful verses spoken by *tzaddikim* are available. Why give preference to a verse that emerged from the mouth of Bilam with the intention that it be a curse, even if the first half of the verse constitutes an eternal blessing?

Support for the Maharshal's view in the customs of Sefhardic communities

Upon further examination, it appears that the Maharshal was not alone in this view. There are other Rishonim who adopted the same approach. Indeed, in the Sefhardic liturgy, "*Mah tovu ohalecha Yaakov*" is omitted, and the prayers

begin with "*Va'ani b'rov chasdecha.*" They rely on this approach, preferring verses from the mouths of *tzaddikim*.

The enduring promise of the *mikdash me'at*, a source of consolation in exile

Sadly, when we sinned, we lost the privilege of experiencing the highest connection with Hashem through the Beis HaMikdash. But on the other hand, as the Gemara in *Sanhedrin* explains, the synagogues and study halls, the *mikdash me'at*, are guaranteed never to depart from us. They accompany us throughout every exile, providing consolation and inspiration until we once again merit the state of "*mishkenosecha Yisrael*" in its complete perfection, speedily in our days, Amen.

Reconciling the ancient custom, and a beautiful explanation of why one blessing remained forever

It seems to me that our custom to say Mah Tov upon entering the synagogue, which is ancient and rooted in the teachings of the early Rishonim, may be reconciled as follows.

Bilam's evil intention in these words is completely nullified through the power of the holy intention a Jew invests in these words when he prays. Furthermore, it appears that since "*ohalei Yaakov*" and "*mishkenosecha Yisrael*" – the synagogues and study halls – are places uniquely designated for Torah and *tefillah* (prayer), the holiness of the Shechinah rests there through the voices of Torah and *tefillah* that emerge from the mouths of the Jewish people in holiness and intentions of purity. This accords with the teaching of Chazal that הקול הַקּוֹל "the voice is the voice of Yaakov," refers to the voices of Torah and *tefillah* (prayer) that fill the synagogues and study halls. And through this, these places absorb this sanctity of the intentions of prayers and merit the indwelling of the Shechinah. In this sense, they possess an "Iron Dome," and constitute a protected zone against the evil intention of Bilam in these words. For this reason, specifically the blessing for synagogues and study halls alone remains eternally valid and can never revert to a curse.

How much more so when Jews recite these

words with intentions of purity when they enter the synagogue. This certainly transforms Bilam's evil intention into blessing, for that moment and for eternity.



III

The secret of a well-known Jewish expression found throughout the world

The expression אוי ווי "*Oy vey*" ("Oh, woe!") has been used for generations to express sorrow, frustration, or pain. The Yiddish expression "*Oy vey*" has reached far beyond the Semitic languages, and it is an expression in so many languages.

About twenty years ago, while listening to the Torah reading of Parashas Balak, I noticed what appears to be the ancient and holy source of this expression, in our *parashah*. The Torah states: אוי מי יחיה מי שמו אל *"Oy mi yichyeh misumo Kel"* ("...Woe, who shall live when G-d does this?") (Bamidbar 24:23). Onkelos translates these words as: "*Vai le'chayavaya de'yeichun kad yaavid Elaka yas ilein*" ("**Woe** to the wicked who shall live when G-d performs these

things)." This well-known Jewish expression is, in fact, a combination of the Biblical Hebrew word אוי "oy" together with the Aramaic word וי "vay" from Targum Onkelos. I presented this idea before my revered teacher, the Gaon Rabbi Dovid Cohen, *shlita*. He liked it and included it in his work *Yiddish: The Holy Language* (Addenda to the 5765 edition).

The word "oy", and the expression "oy vey," have always been distinctively Jewish expressions of sorrow and frustration; a heartfelt cry of pain over many hardships, great and small,

that have befallen us throughout the generations, including tragedies. But sometimes "oy vey" is used humorously. The expression has become one of our means of survival, a sigh that allows us to release our pain and continue onward.

There is a profound irony in the fact that the wicked Bilam – who intended that his prophecies serve as curses, but Hakadosh Baruch Hu transformed them into blessing, is the one who introduced the word "oy" into our holy Torah. The word "oy" appears one other time in the Torah, in

the previous *parashah*: אוי לך "Oy lecha Moav" ("Woe is to you, Moav"), where it is attributed to the poets of Moav which some say was composed by Bilam. Thus, Bilam is the one who brought the two expressions of sorrow, "oy" and "oy [vey]," into the Torah.

Just as Hashem transformed Bilam's curses into blessings, so may it be His will that all of our cries of "oy" likewise be transformed into blessing. Indeed, the *gematria* of אוי "oy" is seventeen, the numerical value of the word טוב "tov" ("good"). May Hashem transform all our "oy" into "tov." Amen.

ב-י-ל-א ואמן Maharaḥ Tzintz

PEARLS FROM THE TEACHINGS OF THE GAON FROM PLOTZK

Our *parashah* deals entirely with the attempt of the Moavites to wage war against the Jewish people. Let us study a small portion of it in the light of the teachings of Rabbeinu, the Maharaḥ Tzintz.

As is well known, Balak and the Moavites saw how Am Yisrael defeated Sichon, king of the Emori. From this they realized the great strength of Am Yisrael, and they became exceedingly fearful of them. What did the Moavites do? "And Balak the son of Tzippor was king of Moav at that time." They appointed Balak son of Tzippor as their king in order to confront "the Israelite challenge." What was Balak's war strategy? The third *pasuk* of the *parashah* tells us this:

"ויאמר מואב אל-זקני מדין עתה ילחכו הקהל את-כל-סביבתינו פלחך השור את ירק השדה." "Moav said to the elders of Midian: 'Now this assembly will lick up everything around us, as an ox licks up the grass of the field.'"

Rashi there already raises the question: Why did the Moavites turn to the

Midianites for assistance? After all, the Moavites and Midianites hated each other, as it says in Sefer Bereishis: "הַמִּכָּה אֶת־מִדְיָן בְּשָׂדֵה מוֹאָב" ...who smote Midian in the field of Moav"! Midian once fought against Moav! Does one seek the help of an enemy?

Rashi resolves this by explaining that the Moavites did this out of their fear of Bnei Yisrael. This explanation already appears in the Midrash: "But do we not find that Midianites fought against the Moavites, as it says (Bereishis 36:35), 'He defeated Midian in the field of Moav'? The hatred between them was from time immemorial. Rather," explains the Midrash, "This may be compared to two dogs that were fighting one another. A wolf came upon one of them. The other said, 'If I do not help him today, the wolf will kill him today and come after me tomorrow.' Therefore, Moav joined together with Midian."

According to the simple meaning of this Midrash, we are dealing here with straightforward military strategy. The Moavites saw that Am Yisrael possessed tremendous strength, to the point that they defeated the mighty Sichon. They therefore joined forces with Midian so that together they might overcome them. However, if we contemplate the matters, we must wonder: 1. When Sichon himself fought against Moav and conquered part of its territory—the city of Cheshbon—why did Moav not seek the assistance of Midian then to unite with them against Sichon? 2. Since they saw the immense and supernatural power of the Jewish nation, how would uniting Midian and Moav together? Would Am Yisrael surely not defeat the "union of Moav and Midian"?

To understand the matters thoroughly, we turn to the perspective of our master, the Maharal, on these verses. The Maharal views the calculation of Midian and Moav to unite together to fight the Jewish people not as a military calculation on the earthly plane, but as a Torah-based calculation on the heavenly plane.

He explains that when Bnei Yisrael defeated Sichon and conquered all his territory, part of that territory included the city of Cheshbon, which had originally belonged to Moav. Although Bnei Yisrael had been commanded not to conquer the Land of Moav, once Sichon conquered Cheshbon from Moav it became part of Sichon's kingdom, and Bnei Yisrael were permitted to conquer it. As Chazal said: "Ammon and Moav were purified through Sichon." From here stemmed the fear of the Moavites. They were afraid that Midian would wage war against them and conquer portions of their land. Once those territories became part of Midian, Bnei Yisrael would be permitted to conquer them, just as they conquered Cheshbon from Sichon.

This possibility was precisely what the Moavites sought to prevent. They therefore made peace with Midian. They understood that as long as Midian did not conquer any part of Moav, they remained completely protected from Bnei Yisrael, not through military strength, but through the mitzvah of the

Torah that prohibited the Jewish people from conquering the land of Moav.

Viewed in the light of Rabbeinu's approach, the earlier questions disappear. When Sichon fought against Moav, Midian had no realistic possibility of helping them against such a powerful enemy, and therefore Moav did not seek peace with them. Only when Moav feared Bnei Yisrael and were worried that the prohibition against Bnei Yisrael waging war against them could become undone, did they unite with Midian.

Rabbeinu goes on to explain the end of the verse with the same approach: **וַיְהִי בְּבִקְרֵי וַיִּקַּח בָּלַק אֶת-בִּלְעָם:** "And Balak the son of Zippor was king of Moav at that time." Rashi explains that until that time Balak had not been the king of Moav. Only then, after the downfall of Sichon, did they appoint him as king. Rabbeinu asks: What was unique about Balak that caused the Moavites to choose him as king? He answers that Balak was not a military strategist and possessed no exceptional military capabilities. But he was a sorcerer and understood the potential spiritual breaches of the Jewish people, and even more so than Bilam!

Thus says the *Midrash* (Bamidbar Rabbah 20:18): **וַיְהִי בְּבִקְרֵי וַיִּקַּח בָּלַק אֶת-בִּלְעָם:** "And it came to pass in the morning, that Balak took Bilam and brought him up into the high places of Baal." The Midrash comments:

Balak possessed greater skill in sorcery and divination than Bilam, and Bilam followed him like a blind man.

To what may this be compared?

To one who has a knife in his hand but does not recognize the joints [the convenient places for cutting], and his fellow recognizes the joints but does not have a knife in his hand. Such was the relationship between them. Balak knew the places where Am Yisrael falters.

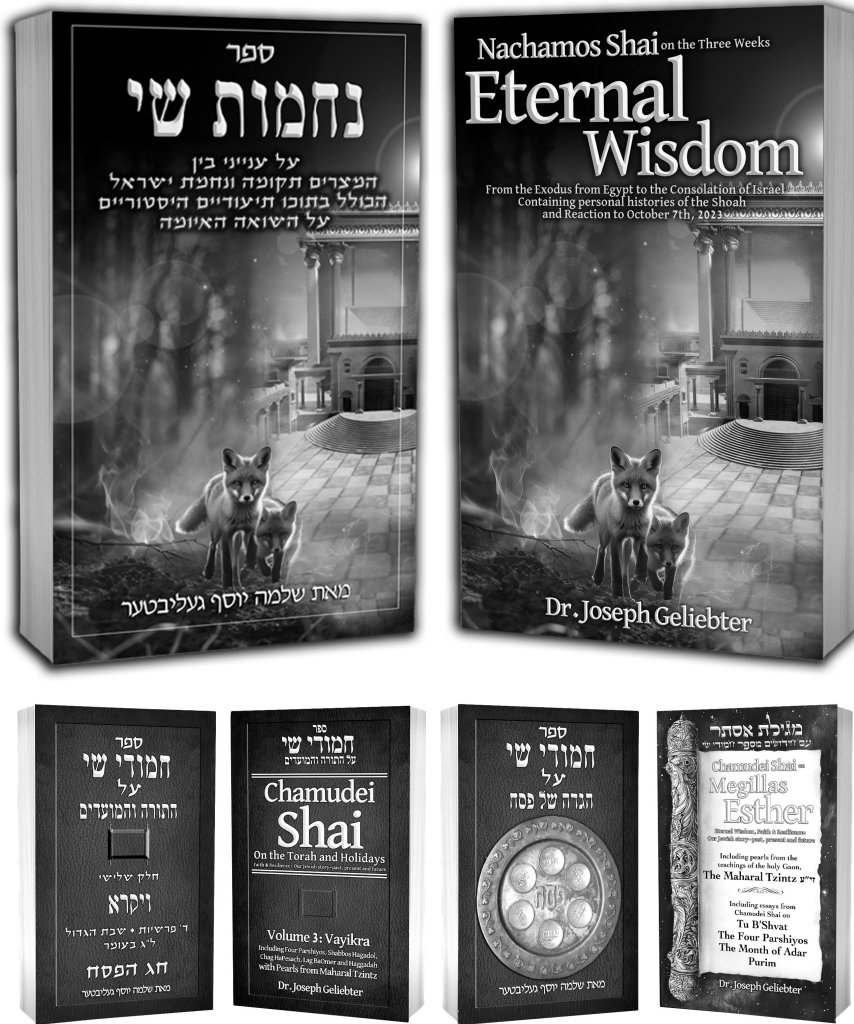
This tells us that the appointment of Balak as king at that particular time was likewise based upon spiritual considerations. The Moavites understood that the Jewish people's victories are not determined by earthly or military considerations, but rather by Heavenly considerations. Therefore, they chose Balak, who excelled in the power of the occult, hoping to overcome Bnei Yisrael through metaphysical forces.

What lessons should we take from these *pesukim*? First, Rabbeinu's remarkable explanations of why Moav and Midian joined together, and why the Moavites specifically chose Balak as their king. Second, there is an additional and important lesson concerning how we should view reality. When we see two nations forming an alliance, or when we see a king being appointed, we should not explain these events merely in terms of earthly calculations of political or military strategy. Rather, there is a heavenly battle taking place. The heavenly calculations revolve around the laws of the Torah

and higher spiritual forces, which ultimately determine the outcome of events and establish the order of the world.

It was not only Am Yisrael that understood this. Even our enemies, the gentile nations Midian and Moav, understood that things depend upon the altering of the heavenly systems and not on earthly forces at all.

Let us understand this, and we will know how to win our wars.



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