

PENINIM ON THE TORAH

PARSHA BOOKLET

Rabbi A. Leib Scheinbaum

PARASHAT BALAK

Balak ben Tzipor saw all that Yisrael had done to the Emori. Moav became very frightened of the people. (22:2,3)

Balak saw, and Yisro heard. When Yisro heard all that had occurred during the Egyptian exodus, with the consequences that the Egyptian People sustained, he was inspired to leave his home and come to the wilderness to join the Jewish People. He wanted to be a part of their religious experience. Balak saw what Yisro saw, but with a contrasting effect. Why? How did their perspectives differ?

It is not what they saw with regard to the Jewish victory over their enemies. Rather, it is Who orchestrated this victory. Yisro heard everything that Hashem had done to Pharaoh and his henchmen. He recognized and acknowledged the "Hashem factor" in this victory. He saw the miracles and Divine Providence at every step of the way.

Balak also saw the miracles, but he ignored them. He acknowledged only what Yisrael had done to the Emori. He disregarded the fact that Hashem was guiding the Jewish victory. He only saw all of the Jews who were brutally killing the Emori. He did not see what the Emori had done to the Jews. His perspective was limited to the Jewish response - but he did not recognize it as a response, but, rather, as an unwarranted offensive.

History repeats itself. The world sees every Jewish victory as something the Jews have initiated on their own. They never see what prompted their reaction, what provoked their military response. It is only what we do to them, not what they have done to us. The astute observer sees Hashem's guiding hand in everything that involves His people. Yisro was such a person.

Balak ben Tzipor saw all that Yisrael had done to the Emori. Moav became very frightened of the people, because it was numerous. (22:2,3)

The Torah begins by stating that "Balak saw." It goes on to say that the people of Moav feared the Jews. Why did it not simply write: "Balak and the people of Moav saw... and they were afraid of the nation (of Yisrael)"? Why is the "seeing" of Balak distinguished from the "fear" of the people of Moav? Is it not one and the same? Horav Nossan Ordman, zl, explains that the Torah is teaching us that there was a huge contrast between what Balak saw and what the people of Moav saw, and,

consequently, their fear was also different. Balak feared the Jews because of what they had done to the Emori. The people of Moav were concerned, however, with the size of the Jewish Army. Balak saw all of the miracles that Hashem wrought against the Emori. He was no fool. He understood that the Jewish victory was not a result of their firepower or their skilled army. It was a miraculous victory which only Hashem could have orchestrated. His people were simple pagans who understood what appeared to them. They saw a large army vanquish the Emori. That was it. The Jews were simply stronger and bigger. They did not perceive the war with the same depth of vision that Balak was able to perceive. It was this unique perspective that indicated to Balak that victory over the Jews was not to be had through the medium of conventional warfare. He would have to battle them on a spiritual plane. Thus, he called on Bilaam, the pagan's answer to Moshe Rabbeinu. Bilaam would find a way to achieve victory over the Jews.

We should address another question. Throughout the parshah, we find Hashem maintaining a dialogue with Bilaam, making it seem that Bilaam is the primary enemy of the Jews. He is the one that seeks to curse them, and, ultimately, he counseled Balak how to destroy the Jews spiritually by using the young women to enchant the Jewish men and manipulate them into immoral behavior. When we think about it, however, Bilaam was only acting at Balak's behest. Balak initiated the entire debacle against the Jews. Bilaam was his hireling. In the end, we find that Hashem punished Bilaam for his evil intentions and actions. Balak seems to have left the scene unscathed. Indeed, Chazal teach us that in the merit of Balak's forty-two sacrifices, he was privileged to be the progenitor of Rus, who was the mother of royalty. Why did Hashem ignore Balak in terms of punishment? He surely was no saint.

Rav Ordman distinguishes between Balak's motivations and the basis of Bilaam's actions. Balak saw what the Jews had done to the Emori, and he feared for himself and his nation. As their king, their security was his responsibility. He did not take his role as their leader lightly. Therefore, he sought a way to limit the success of the Jews, to prevent them from overrunning his country. He certainly was no saint, but the fact that his actions were motivated by fear mitigates the evil that he sought to bring against the Jews.

Bilaam was a totally different story. He hated the Jews because of what they represented. He had two objectives: money; and honor. Balak was prepared to give him both if he could help him solve the Jewish problem. Bilaam was prepared to accommodate him for no other reason than for his prejudicial hatred of the Jewish people. If he could personally benefit, he could not refuse Balak's offer.

This gives us a new perspective on hatred. Balak hated, and Bilaam hated. Balak was in a state of fear: for himself; his land; his people. Bilaam hated simply because he was an evil person. Very often, we find individuals who are plagued by a deep malevolence towards others that garner support for their "cause" by arousing fear and discord. This fear often serves as a form of justification for some of the most heinous acts of destruction. Espousing hate is difficult. Sowing fear is much easier and generally more successful.

You shall not go with them... Arise, go with them. (22:12,20)

First, Hashem told Bilaam not to go with Balak's agents. Afterwards, Hashem told him to go with them. What happened? In the Talmud Makkos 10b, Chazal explain that b'derech she'adam rotzeh leilach, molichin oso, "In the way that a person wishes to go, they lead him." In other words, Hashem did not want Bilaam to go, but, after seeing that Bilaam wanted so much to join them, He said, "Arise,

go with them."

Let us try to understand what happened. Bilaam was an individual whose proficiency in the area of esoteric wisdom was prolific. He had reached unprecedented heights in his conception of the workings of the spiritual world. Well versed in Maaseh Bereishis, Creation, and Maaseh Merkavah, Holy Chariot, he achieved a level that had never before been attained by a non-Jew. He did not speak just to Eliyahu HaNavi; he conversed with the Almighty! In fact, he did not make a move without first consulting with Hashem. This is yiraas Shomayim, fear of Heaven, at its apex. What more could he do?

We see from here, explains Horav Reuven Grozovsky, zl, that everything is dependent upon one's ratzon, will. An individual can possess abundant wisdom and incredible depth of knowledge, but, if it stands in contrast to his ratzon, the wisdom will be of no avail. Ratzon is determined by one's middos, character traits. If his character is in consonance with his wisdom, he will grow in a positive manner. Otherwise, all the wisdom and knowledge in the world will be of no avail to him, because he is a slave to his base character. He is no different than a donkey carrying volumes of Torah novellae. He remains the same donkey. Yiraas Shomayim is of no avail to such a person, because the moment that his fear of Heaven challenges his ratzon - his ratzon prevails.

This idea precludes the notion that many have to legitimize their lack of observance. "If I would know more, I would be more observant" is a common rejoinder. Bilaam demonstrates for us that one's level of observance has nothing to do with knowledge or wisdom. It is intrinsically connected to desire and will. One acts according to his will. Bilaam had no shortage of wisdom, but, regrettably, his desire for good was at a premium. His negative ratzon overwhelmed his exceptional wisdom and brought him to his well-deserved and miserable end.

Ratzon can also work the other way. It has a flipside that can transform a person and motivate him to achieve the ultimate in spiritual success. There is certainly no dearth of stories that relate the extent of an individual's achievements when he has the will. I recently came across a collection of stories, published by Shuvu Chazon Avraham, the organization for reaching out and educating Russian immigrant children in Eretz Yisrael, which was founded by Horav Avraham Pam, zl. Among the many moving stories of return and faith, I take the liberty of sharing the following episode:

A teenager who had finally decided to give it a try and "check out" a Shuvu High School was asked to attend classes for one day in order to get a firsthand knowledge of the school. It was not an easy decision, and many hurdles and challenges had to be surmounted before this decision became a reality. The principal of the school was kind enough to accompany the young man on a tour of the school.

He dressed up for the momentous occasion, and, with a heart filled with pride and anticipation, he entered the halls of learning. Vibrant, enthusiastic sounds of Torah study greeted him as he walked into the bais hamedrash. Each classroom he visited was filled with students involved in serious Torah study, eager to learn and continue the heritage of our People. It was for this reason that he was almost totally stunned when he entered the last classroom where the rebbe was delivering a shiur to a classroom of students in which all but one were engrossed in his words. All but one, because one sixteen-year-old student with long hair sat with closed eyes, his head on his desk. He was out cold! How dare he do this in this hallowed makom Torah, place where Torah is studied? Where was his respect? If he was not interested, then he should have remained home. How dare he come to school and sit there with such insolence, ignoring the rebbe, the class, the Torah! Every student enrolled in the school had a story of triumph over adversity. This boy was undermining their achievements.

After a few minutes of silent observation which slowly led to seething anger, the prospective student

turned to the principal, and, without concealing his anger, asked, "Why is he here?"

The principal's reply teaches us a lesson in how far ratzon can go, and, incidentally, how to always judge people in a positive light. A loving smile crept across the principal's face as he said, "Oh, do not be misled by that boy's closed eyes. You see, he underwent his Bris Milah today. In fact, just three hours ago, he was under sedation for the procedure. I encouraged him to go home and rest, but he refused. He did not want to miss a day of Torah study, even if it meant dozing during class. He insisted that I permit him to stay - and I did.

This young man had closed eyes, but his heart was wide open. He wanted to be a part of the Torah study going on in his classroom. He had waited so long for it, he would not forfeit even one moment. That is ratzon. Nothing stands in the way of such positive desire.

Behold! The people will arise like a lion cub and raise itself like a lion. (23:24)

Horav David Moshe Rosenbaum, zl, the Admor m'Kretchnif, once remarked, "He who arises early in the morning to study Torah has arichas yamim, longevity." He explained that by arising early, he adds those extra hours to his day, making his day longer than he whose day begins later. This is much more than an anecdote. When we think about it, the time that we spend sleeping, reading and whatever else we might do in our past time is the time that Hashem allots to us - to live, to do, to achieve. When we use this time in a positive manner, we lengthen our days. When we waste it, we are wasting the most precious gift that Hashem has granted us.

Arising early in the morning is not "senior citizen" behavior, as some might suggest. Chassidic literature devotes a special place to this endeavor. Indeed, the Bais Yisrael, zl, would encourage his talmidim, students, to make use of the early morning hours to study Torah and prepare for Tefillas Shacharis, Morning Prayer service. He would often invite them to his home to join him in a cup of tea and words of Torah. Today, throughout the world, thousands of Jews have a morning seder, study session, prior to Tefillas Shacharis. Certainly, this preface to the morning prayers transforms their character and ultimately affects their development.

This unique Jewish quality did not escape Bilaam. When he was enumerating Klal Yisrael's enviable virtues, he made a point to praise their efforts in arising early in the morning with great alacrity and enthusiasm to greet the Almighty with their daily prayer. "They arise like a lion to grab mitzvos, to don the Tallis, recite the Krias Shema and to put on their Tefillin" (Rashi ibid 23:24). The Maharasha writes (Berachos 12b) that this pasuk is the source from which we derive the significance of arising early in the morning, taking great care not to be late in reciting Krias Shema.

How does one ensure that he arises "like a lion"? Many of us go to sleep with good intentions, but, in the morning when a warm bed is beckoning, it is difficult to leave. Horav Meir, zl, m'Premishlan, cites the Rema in the beginning of the Shulchan Aruch, who writes: "He should gather the strength to overcome and arise in the morning to serve his Creator." The Rema then adds a statement that is enigmatic: "When he retires, he should be aware before Whom he lies." We are discussing getting up in the morning - not going to sleep at night. Why does the Rema add how one should lie down?

Rav Meir explains that Rema was explaining how a person can arise in the morning like "a lion." It all depends on how and with what attitude one goes to sleep. One who goes to bed like a horse

will not get up like a lion! If one retires like a lion, however, knowing full well before Whom he lies and what his goals are, he will be able to arise the next morning with alacrity and enthusiasm to serve the Almighty. How one wakes up depends on how he goes to sleep.

The idea of lying down to sleep in the presence of the Almighty Whose Presence fills the entire world is a point of discussion in the chassidic sefarim. The Rizhiner Rebbe, zl, cites the Arizal who changes the tefillah of Hashkiveinu, "Lay us down," in Maariv, from Hashkiveinu Hashem Elokeinu, l'shalom, "Lay us down Hashem, our G-d, to peace" to, Hashkiveinu Avinu, our Father, l'shalom. He feels this is due to the enormous trepidation one should have in "lying down" in front of the King of Kings. When we view Hashem as our loving Father Who cares for us as His children, there is room for a dispensation to lie down. After all is said and done, however, the best advice for waking up in a timely fashion with the proper attitude is to prepare oneself for this moment when he goes to bed.

And behold! A man of Bnei Yisrael came and brought the Midyanite woman near to his brothers before the eyes of Moshe and before the eyes of the entire assembly of Bnei Yisrael... and Pinchas saw... and he stood up from amid the assembly... and he pierced them both. (25:6,7,8)

Why were they crying? Chazal explain that when Zimri brought Kosbi to Moshe Rabbeinu, he asked, "Moshe, is this woman forbidden or permitted? If you say she is forbidden, then who permitted Yisro's daughter to you?" Moshe did not respond because nisalmah mimenu halachah, "The law which applied to this travesty was concealed from him." The people cried as a reaction to what appeared as a weakness on the part of the great leader. They did not understand that Hashem had concealed the law from Moshe, so that Pinchas would come and take that which is fit for him. We must endeavor to understand the meaning of "the law being concealed from Moshe." Once Pinchas came to ask Moshe, "Rebbe, did you not teach us that one who has relations with a non-Jewish woman, zealots may kill him?" Moshe replied, "The one who reads the letter in public, let him be the messenger to carry out its contents." In other words, Moshe Rabbeinu deferred to Pinchas and allowed him to perform the act of kanaus, zealotry. Why? Now that the halachah was no longer concealed from him, he should have carried it out. Why did Moshe allow Pinchas to take over what rightfully was Moshe's function as leader of the Jewish nation?

Horav Chaim Mordechai Katz, zl, explains that the halachah of kanaim pogiin bo, zealots may kill him, is different from other halachos. All halachos are directed towards any Jew that possesses a modicum of intelligence. The commandment concerning zealotry applies only to he who is filled with righteous indignation, whose heart burns with emotion, whose passion has reached a frenzy seething with anger and hurt over the great desecration of Hashem's Name. Only such an individual may take the mantle of zealotry upon himself and act accordingly. He must sense within himself a drive to avenge Hashem's Name. Otherwise, he is not a kanai, zealot. Pinchas felt the pain and humiliation this act of debauchery engendered. One who feels the pain may carry out the punishment. To Moshe, however, it was now a halachah - not a passion. Since originally the halachah was purposefully concealed from him, it was now a halachah which had lost its fervor for him. He could not carry the mantle of kanaus, because he was not a kanai. Pinchas was the man of the hour. He saw; he questioned; he reacted. That is kanaus.

He (Balak) sent messengers to Bilaam... saying, "Behold! A people has come out of Egypt, behold! It

has covered the surface of the earth... Bilaam said to G-d, "Behold! The people coming out of Egypt has covered the surface of the earth." (22:5,10,11)

Upon careful perusal of the text, we note a disparity between Balak's actual request of Bilaam and the manner in which Bilaam later related this request to Hashem. Balak said, "Behold! A people has come out of Egypt." He described Klal Yisrael's exodus from Egypt in the past tense. They have left Egypt. There is nothing that binds them to that country, to that period in history. Bilaam seems to intimate something quite different when he says, "Behold, the people are coming out of Egypt." He refers to Klal Yisrael in the present tense. They are still in the middle of their exodus. It is not yet completed. What are they expressing, and what should we derive from their divergent statements?

In his sefer V'zos HaBrachah, Horav Eliyahu Schlesinger, Shlita, gives the following explanation. Balak's perspective of the emerging Jewish nation was quite different than that of Bilaam. Balak viewed Klal Yisrael through his human eyes, which gave him only a superficial view of the nation. He saw the "here and now" of the Jewish People. Bilaam, however, as a prophet who related what Hashem told him, could speak only the absolute truth. Thus, his perspective was quite different.

Balak was aware that the Jews were privy to an array of exceptional and unprecedented miracles and wonders as they left the land of Egypt. Balak figured that it was all over. The miracles and their influence were in the past. After all, let us look at the history of the Jews during their sojourn in the wilderness. They complained bitterly when they did not receive their meat. When water was at a premium, they complained. They left Har Sinai, k'tinok habore'ach mibais hasefer, "like a young child fleeing from school." They feared that Hashem would add more mitzvos to those that they had already accepted. The meraglim, episode of the spies, created a great chillul Hashem, desecration of Hashem's Name. Is it any wonder that Balak felt that this nation had left Egypt? They had severed any relationship with the past. A people that has broken its ties with the past has little foundation upon which to build its future. They should be easy to curse effectively, because, in reality, they had already handicapped themselves by disassociating themselves from the Almighty.

Bilaam, on the other hand, was an individual in whom Hashem placed His words. Thus, he could articulate only the truth. He saw a nation that was leaving Egypt. It was not an event that had passed, but rather, it was an ongoing manifestation of Hashem's miraculous power and awesome might. This nation had neither severed its bond with the Almighty nor disconnected itself from the Egyptian exodus. It is an experience that is alive and well in their minds and hearts, continuing to inspire them. Veritably, they had had setbacks, but these were merely delays that had temporarily impeded their forward march towards their home in Eretz Yisrael. Yes, their past is linked with their present.

We may add that this idea applies equally in contemporary society. While it is true that we see that many of our brethren have alienated themselves from the religion of their ancestors, let us not overlook the many who have returned. Those who have left have done so because there is nothing to bind them to the past, to their roots, to their heritage. It is an ongoing legacy that continues to inspire, specifically because it is evolving and progressing forward until the advent of Moshiach Tzidkeinu.

He crouched and lay down like a lion, and, like a lion cub - who can stand him up? (24:9)

Simply, this pasuk alludes to Klal Yisrael's ability to occupy its land with dynamism and strength. Once they are settled there, they will be firmly rooted. The Talmud in Berachos 12b takes this idea further. Chazal say that they wanted to include this pasuk in Krias Shema, but they did not do so because of its length. Rashi explains that its relationship to Krias Shema is to be found in the words b'shachbecha u'bekumecha, "When you retire and when you arise." Hashem watches over us, allowing us to lie down in peace and serenity, like a lion who fears nothing. Likewise, Hashem guards us when we are up and about, permitting us to move freely with confidence, manifesting the same calm as if we were laying down.

Horav Yerachmiel Kromm, Shlita, explains that Chazal are teaching us a powerful lesson. Ein baal ha'neis makir b'niso, "The one to whom a miracle has occurred is not (necessarily) aware of the miracle." This means that often situations occur which we do not realize are directly related to our well-being. Similarly, at times, we are unaware of a tragedy which has been averted. Hashem, Who saw to our being spared from disaster, knows. This is what occurred in the Bilaam/Balak dialogue. If we peruse the pesukim and compare this episode with the other wars fought against the Jews, we note that Amalek, Sichon and Og, archenemies of our people, harbored no secrets with regard to their feelings towards us. They openly came against us, battling us in a blatant attempt to destroy our nation. Balak and Bilaam did everything surreptitiously, concealing their evil behind closed doors. Indeed, we knew nothing of their evil machinations - at the time. This is why the Navi Michah (6:5) exhorts us, "Hear now, what Balak, king of Moav, Schemed, and what Bilaam ben Beor answered him, (and all the events) from Shittim to Gilgal, in order to recognize the righteous acts of Hashem." There is a special distinction in remembering how the evil Bilaam - together with Balak - schemed against us, because this will help us to realize how Hashem always protects us, even when we are unaware of His presence. This is the reason that the Torah goes to such length in detailing their evil dialogue.

In his Teshuvos, Yore Deah 356, the Chasam Sofer comments that throughout the Torah we find only one incident for which there is no verification from anyone who witnessed what took place. This is the episode of Balak and Bilaam and their scheme against our people. Every other miracle from Egypt throughout the forty-year trek in the wilderness was attested to by 600,000 men who transmitted these miracles to their children. According to those commentators who say that Yisro and Moshe Rabbeinu's sons arrived after the Giving of the Torah, they were the only individuals who did not stand at Har Sinai to witness the miracles. Even the beginning of the world, the story with the serpent, the Flood and the Tower of Babel, according to the Ramban, were events that were transmitted from Adam to Shem, the son of Noach, the rebbe of Yaakov Avinu, who was fifty years old when Shem died. Yaakov taught this to his son Levi, who, in turn, transmitted the history to Amram, Moshe's father. Every generation of elders has taught its children to the point that we can clearly say that we were there! We saw it all, except for the story of Bilaam. No one knew what went on covertly between these two. The Torah records it for posterity, because Hashem wants us to know - and always remember. This is why the Torah does not mince words in recording every aspect of the story: so that we will realize that Hashem is always there, even when we do not see a revelation of His might and wonders clearly before our eyes.

In his commentary to Parashas Haazinu, the Chasam Sofer cites the Mishneh L'Melech's explanation of David Hamelech's praise in Sefer Tehillim 136:4, "To Him Who alone performs great wonders." Is there anything novel about the fact that Hashem works alone? Certainly, He does not need assistance of any kind. David is teaching that there are miracles of which Hashem alone is aware. The baal ha'neis is unaware that he has just been the recipient of Hashem's beneficence in the way of a miracle. This is the lesson that the Torah seeks to teach us.

Horav Yitzchak zl, m'Volozhin, was well aware of Czar Nikolai's vehement hatred of the Jewish People. As Rosh Hayeshivah of the famous yeshivah in Volozhin, he met many times with the ministers in St. Petersburg in an attempt to avert a vicious decree against Russian Jewry. He was a respected and familiar face in the halls of power. During one of his trips, a minister asked him to explain a passage in Sefer Tehillim (117:1,2), "Praise Hashem, all nations; praise Him, all the states! For His kindness has overwhelmed us, and the truth of Hashem is eternal." What purpose is there in having the nations of the world praise Hashem for His kindness to the Jews? Does it not make much more sense for the Jews to praise Hashem?

Veritably, the Talmud in Pesachim 118b asks this question. Instead of directly responding, Rav Itzile (as he was referred to fondly) used this as an opportunity to convey some of his emotions to the minister. "Let me explain," he said. "There are often times when the ministers convene with the Czar to arrive at a collective decision on how best to deal with the 'Jewish problem.' Decrees are written up, some of which become law, and others which for some unknown reason do not materialize. Only you know the many conferences that have been held with the primary focus of making life miserable and unbearable for the Jews. For some reason, they did not reach fruition. That 'reason' is Hashem. Only you, the nations of the world, are aware of how often Hashem has covertly saved us. You know how many decrees were not actualized. Therefore, you are able to praise, because you know the truth. We have no idea of all you have attempted to do to us. We trust in Hashem's constant protection. You see it clearly."

The Brisker Rav, zl, used his great-grandfather's exegesis to explain Yisro's comment to Moshe (Shemos 18:11), "Now I know that Hashem is the greatest of all gods, for in the very matter in which [the Egyptians] had conspired against them." Hashem punishes a person middah k'neged middah, measure for measure. Klal Yisrael had been the subject of Egypt's harsh treatment, their cruelty and evil for many years. They understood the depth of many of the plagues and punishments that the Egyptians were sustaining, because they were acutely aware of how each punishment fit measure for measure to the evil which the Egyptians had perpetuated. They were limited, however, in their perception. They did not understand all of the punishments, because they did not know how they fit middah k'neged middah. Their awareness of the Egyptian evil was limited to their level of cognition and no more.

On the other hand Yisro, knew more. He had a deeper understanding of events, because he had a greater knowledge of these events. Chazal tell us that Hashem does not coalesce a machshavah, thought, with a maaseh, action. In other words, one is not punished for his evil intentions which are not realized. One is punished only for what he does, not for what he thinks and plans. His intentions do not catalyze punishment. Regarding non-Jews, however, this concept does not apply. Hashem does count their evil intentions against them. This presented a dilemma for the Jewish People. They certainly were aware of the Egyptian's evil actions, which enabled them to understand the punishment they were justly receiving. They remained, however, in a quandary regarding a number of punishments which did not "fit" into the scheme of measure for measure.

When Yisro entered upon the scene, he was able to understand all of Hashem's punishments. As a member of Pharaoh's elite cabinet, Yisro was privy to all of the evil intentions and machinations that Pharaoh and his rogue henchmen were planning against the Jews. They were held culpable for their intentions. As Moshe related the many miracles to his father-in-law, Yisro understood exactly why these punishments were meted against the Egyptians, because he knew the truth. "Now I know," he said, because he really knew.

We should be cognizant of and forever thankful to Hashem for all that He does for us - both of that which we are aware and, equally so, for that of which we are unaware.

Hashem opened up the mouth of the donkey... the donkey said to Bilaam, "Am I not your donkey that you have ridden all your life until this day? Have I been accustomed to do such a thing to you?"
(22:28,29)

We have before us an unprecedented phenomenon: A donkey opened its mouth to deliver a mussar shmuess, ethical discourse, to its master, the evil Bilaam. Chazal teach us that the "mouth of the donkey" - with which Hashem granted this animal the ability to speak - was among the ten things that were created at twilight on Erev Shabbos of the week of Creation. Bilaam accepted the donkey's admonishment, admitting the error of his ways and the folly of his actions. This leads Chazal to declare, "Woe is to us on the Day of Judgment! Woe is to us on the Day of Rebuke!" Bilaam was the wisest of all the pagans; yet, he could not withstand the reproof of his own donkey. What will we reply on our great Day of Judgment and Rebuke when Hashem rebukes each and every person according to what he is?

When Bilaam intended to curse the Jewish People, Hashem warned him to turn back, because he would not succeed in carrying out his scheme. Bilaam did not care. He forged ahead with his evil plan. Three times Hashem sent an angel to block his path. Bilaam was blind to the angel's presence. His donkey, however, was not. The donkey stood its ground in the presence of the angel, only to accept the merciless beatings of its master. Finally, the donkey "spoke out" against this mistreatment. It complained to Bilaam, "Why did you beat me? Is this what I deserve after my years of faithful service to you? Is it my nature to cause you distress and injury? If you saw me acting in a manner contrary to my norm, you should have realized that something extraordinary was taking place!" When Bilaam heard these powerful words, he conceded his error.

In his Ateres Avraham, recently translated by Rabbi Sholom Smith, Horav Avraham Pam, zl, derives two significant lessons from this rebuke. First, we should know how to respond to the actions of a person who suddenly acts in an uncharacteristic manner. It will occasionally happen that an individual who usually maintains self-control, who is quiet and relaxed, suddenly loses it and explodes. The mouth that is usually the paragon of refinement and calm suddenly unleashes a barrage of sharp, angry words. The usual reaction of bystanders is to reciprocate with their own impulsive cascade of words that parallel the original assault. Do they ever stop to think that this atypical behavior is the result of something gone extremely wrong? Perhaps there is a particularly serious situation that has developed in the man's home, an illness, a shidduch, matrimonial match, problem, a child at risk? Why do we immediately unleash a verbal assault on the offender? If we stop to think, we might discover that we are dealing with nothing more than a tormented and helpless victim crying out for help. Instead of criticizing him, we should realize that if a generally calm person suddenly "loses it," something unusual has provoked him. Allow him time to calm down and disconnect from the external pressures that are driving him.

This is what Chazal are teaching us. Bilaam saw his donkey acting in a strange manner. What did he do? He angrily beat it. Is that the way one should treat an animal that has been so faithful? This

was the nature of the animal's rebuke. If something strange is occurring, ask: What is wrong? Be patient. Bilaam failed to understand that there was an extraordinary circumstance that was compelling his donkey to act strangely.

Second, we learn from this incident that people are not inclined to accept mussar. When we hear someone speak about a specific failing that plagues the general community, our initial response is to absolve ourselves of any onus of guilt - and blame it on our neighbor. He is the guilty one - not I! When a rav or rosh yeshivah speaks to us, we do everything within our power to deflect the criticism and justify whatever wrong we have committed. Then there is the one who disparages the mocheach, rebuker, asking, "Who are you to give me mussar? What makes you so special?" This is also a ploy to divert the reproof. Fortunate is he who can see beyond his ego to accept the constructive critique and direction of others. Bilaam was a wise man but, when it concerned himself, he was foolish. We should be able to learn to better ourselves from everyone. Bilaam would not. Regrettably, some of us are no different.

The following anecdote reinforces this idea. An elderly man was visiting his relatives in another city for Yom Kippur. Enjoying being in the forefront, he managed to obtain a seat in the front row of the shul, right in front of the rabbi's lectern.

The rabbi arose to address the congregation after Kol Nidrei. In the spirit of the sanctity and seriousness of the day, the Rabbi admonished the congregation with fiery oratory, urging them to repent. He warned them strongly of the grave punishment that awaits those who do not mend their ways. The visitor appeared quite amused with the rabbi's remarks. Indeed, several times an audible chuckle could be heard from his lips. The rabbi was slightly perturbed with this behavior, but elected to ignore it.

The Shacharis service was followed by a passionate appeal by the rabbi prior to Yizkor to repent. His eloquence and fervor captured the seriousness of the day for everyone - except for the elderly visitor, who kept on smiling and chuckling. Needless to say, the rabbi was chagrined by this response to his speech.

In his pre-Neilah speech, the rabbi fared no better. Once again, he poured out his heart, exhorting the congregation that time was running out. They had to decide right away to repent and return to Hashem. Everyone was moved. Well, almost everyone. Our visitor continued his visible amusement. The rabbi could take it no longer. He was counting the minutes until the baal tokeah would blow the Shofar, signaling the end of Yom Kippur. He would then have some choice words for the rude visitor.

After Maariv, the congregants each went up to wish the rabbi a healthy year and to thank him for an inspiring service. When the elderly visitor came up to pay his respects, the rabbi could not refrain from asking him, "Tell me, sir, I delivered what I feel were three powerful speeches today. I addressed the seriousness of religion, the need to elevate our fear of Heaven, and the importance of repentance. I did my utmost to imbue the congregation with a feeling of the spirit of the day. Yet, for some reason, you seemed amused at every speech I delivered, and you even seemed to enjoy my words of serious reproach. You appeared to relish the thought of the severe punishments that await those who do not repent. Tell me, what did you find that was so entertaining about all of this?"

"I will tell you the truth, Rabbi, I thoroughly enjoyed all of your speeches. In fact, I thought they were quite good. I enjoyed the way you really told off your congregation. It was true fire and brimstone. You see, however, I am not a member of your congregation, so what you said does not affect me. Therefore, I just sat back and enjoyed!"

This story tells it all. We listen to our spiritual leaders exhorting us, condemning certain behaviors, but we ignore them. Why? Because we are sure they are not referring to us. We came to enjoy a good speech. Everybody else is here because they need to be here. That is the beginning of the problem.

Bilaam raised his eyes and saw Yisrael dwelling according to its tribes, and the spirit of G-d was upon him. (24:2)

Rashi explains that Bilaam took note how every tribe dwelled unto himself, maintaining its individuality, not intermingling with one another. Furthermore, he observed that the entrances to the tents were not aligned opposite each other, so that one would not be able to peer into the tent of his neighbor. When he saw this, he could not curse the Jews. Horav Yitzchak Zilberstein, Shlita, cites a novel homiletic exposition of the words, she'ein pischeiham me'chuvanim, "that the entrances (to their tents) were not aligned opposite each other." He says that this is a reference to Chazal who say, "Hashem says, 'Open up for Me an opening the size of a pin point, and I will open up for you an opening the size of a large hall.'" This means that if a Jew demonstrates a sincere desire to repent and return to Hashem, he has only to create a small opening to allow an opportunity for his return. Hashem will, in turn, magnify this opening, giving him every opportunity for a teshuvah sheleimah, complete repentance. Hashem wants the Jew to come home, to return to a life of observance and commitment. He just wants us to make the first move - however small it may be. He will enlarge it, allowing for our repentance to take effect.

This is the meaning of "their entrances are not aligned." The Jew only has to create a small entranceway for his return. Hashem will do the rest. Bilaam saw that the "entranceways" do not coincide. Hashem does so much more for us, because of His overriding love. When Bilaam realized how distinctive we are to Hashem, he decided not to curse us. Why is this? Why are we privileged to have such a unique relationship with the Almighty? Rav Zilberstein suggests that this idea applies not only to repentance, but even to every day mundane activities. The little that we do can have great ramifications. There is a domino effect based on the actions that we take. A smile, a few pennies, a good word - every little thing that we do can mushroom into a great act of kindness that can actually change someone's life. Hence, the small opening that we make can catalyze an awesome consequence.

Rav Zilberstein relates the story of an Israeli baal chesed, individual known for his many acts of loving-kindness, who met a family in the lobby of a hotel in Switzerland. He was checking into the hotel, and the family - consisting of a father, mother and daughter in her early twenties - were checking out. At the end of the day, he returned to meet this family once again. He asked them what they were doing in the lobby. They explained that their flight to Eretz Yisrael was leaving early in the morning and, rather than pay for an extra night's lodging, they preferred to spend the night waiting in the lobby.

"I cannot permit this," the man said. "What do you mean, that you cannot permit this?" they asked. "I cannot allow you to sit in the lobby all night while I sleep in my comfortable bed," the baal chesed replied.

A man of few words, but much action, he immediately went up to his hotel room and returned shortly with cakes, chocolates and fruit. He then proceeded to spend the night talking with the family about everything, from the weather to belief in the Almighty. Finally, they parted; the family left for the airport, and the man went up to his room for a much-needed rest.

A number of months later, the man received an invitation to a wedding, with a special note requesting his presence, since he was one of the primary mechutanim, relatives by marriage. The problem was that he had no clue to the identity of any of the principals involved in this wedding. The next day, he received a phone call that explained everything. It was the father whom he had met in the hotel lobby in Switzerland, who related the following story.

"Our daughter had moved to Switzerland in search of a change from the lifestyle she had grown up with in Eretz Yisrael. Soon, mitzvah observance became history, as she adopted a way of life completely antithetical to ours. Then came the tragic news: She had met a young man whom she wished to marry. Regrettably, he was not Jewish. Nothing we said could deter her from this drastic decision. We flew to Switzerland with the hope that we could plead with her. This was to no avail. When you met us, we were returning to Eretz Yisrael with our daughter, so that she could pick up her belongings in preparation for her wedding.

"During our stay in the hotel, no one spoke to us, no one asked about us, no one inquired about our welfare. No one - except for you. Not only did you speak to us, you opened up your heart to us. You shared your food and your time with us. This literally blew our daughter's mind. Suddenly, she perceived a frum, observant, Jew in a different light. As we flew back to Eretz Yisrael, our daughter opened up and said, 'I am willing to try again. That man made a difference.' My daughter returned with us and came back to Torah and mitzvos. She met a ben Torah, and they are about to get married. Do you understand now why you play such a prominent role in this wedding?"

An incredible story with a simple lesson: It is the little things that can make the biggest difference.

Pinchas saw...and he arose from amid the assembly and took a spear in his hand... and he pierced them both... and the plague was halted from Bnei Yisrael. (25:7,8)

In his hesped, eulogy, for Horav Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld, zl, the Telshe Rosh Hayeshivah, Horav Eliyah Meir Bloch, zl, cited the following Midrash. "Zimri showed respect neither for G-d nor for man. The Midyanite woman said to him, 'I will listen only to Moshe.' Zimri replied, 'I am just as great as he!'"

To prove this, he took her to Moshe Rabbeinu and said, "Son of Amram, is this Midyanite woman permitted to me or forbidden to me?" When Moshe told him that the woman was prohibited, Zimri countered, "And is your wife not a Midyanite?" At that point, Moshe's hands became weak as he was shocked into paralysis by these words, and the halachah suddenly became ne'elam, escaped him.

Did Pinchas see anything different than what was apparent to everyone else? No. Everyone saw Zimri's infamous act. Rather, Pinchas saw and immediately took action. He saw what was happening and remembered the halachah that demands that sinners such as Zimri be stricken down by those who are truly zealous for kavod Shomayim, the honor of Heaven.

"We are puzzled by the Midrash," the Rosh Hayeshivah asked. "We still do not know what caused Pinchas to 'see' what Moshe and the entire assembly did not. Why did the halachah elude Moshe and the rest of the assembly, but remain clear and entrenched in Pinchas' mind?"

"I once heard an explanation of this matter from my rebbe (his father, Horav Yosef Yehudah Leib Bloch, zl). He noted that the Midrash does not say that Moshe 'forgot' the halachah, but, rather,

nisalmah, "it escaped him." There are periods in one's life when his usual lucid knowledge of the halachah becomes clouded by the enormous burdens created as a result of distress or calamity. He remains aware of the halachic position concerning a certain situation, but it becomes befuddled by all the surrounding factors. This obfuscation detracts from the imperative to render halachic judgment with clarity and incisiveness. The nature of a human being is to view each individual action through the prism of the general situation at hand. Thus, he does not necessarily evaluate the matter as an isolated incident, but, rather, as part of whatever he is involved with at the moment. Hence, if he is involved in great upheaval, a time when everything seems to be falling apart, he will weigh in all the outside factors. All rules and ordinary priorities are cast aside as he is confronted by the total issue at hand.

Such was the situation when Zimri challenged Moshe. Suddenly, there was no Torah, no derech erez, decent conduct, no Moshe and Aharon, and no sense of embarrassment or modesty. A Nasi, who until that day had been a distinguished leader in Klal Yisrael, proceeded to march himself in and perform a lewd act of defilement in broad daylight! Moshe and Aharon observed this outrage and began to ponder its ramifications, the scandal and dreadful destruction that would ensue. They did not view a simple, isolated act to which a clear and defined halachah applied. They saw a treasonous act of rebellion against the Almighty. They saw the greater context, both sides of the story. It did not occur to them that immediate closure could be established by exercising the general and straightforward halachah of Kanaim pogim bo, "zealots are to strike him" (he who has relations with a non-Jewish woman).

Pinchas, on the other hand, looked at the incident from a different perspective. He saw an infraction, and he responded with the designated halachah. He isolated the incident from its shocking background. He understood that halachah represents Hashem's will and is immutable, applying in all situations and under all conditions. This is the meaning of "Pinchas saw" - he saw the act that was associated with the halachah that demands a zealot strike down one who has relations with a non-Jewess. He saw nothing else. He saw only the actual act and its halachic response. Therefore, he acted accordingly.

This character trait aptly defined Rav Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld. The battle for Orthodoxy in the Holy Land engulfed him from all sides. He was always in the midst of the fury. Every step that he took, every decision that he made, was constantly criticized by one group or another. He could never win.

Yet, this intense pressure did not hold him back from carrying out the halachah incisively. Despite all of the daunting challenges, he neither flinched, nor compromised on anything. He saw each particular issue for what it was - isolated from the side effects and circumstances surrounding it. Halachah was his beacon; it was his guide.

Balak ben Tzipor saw. (22:2)

The Midrash relates that Hashem foresaw that the gentile nations might claim that they adopted their lifestyle because they were lacking leadership. He, therefore, provided them with leadership that was both powerful and brilliant. When he established Shlomo Hamelech as monarch, he provided the pagans with Nevuchadnezer. Shlomo built the Bais Hamikdash, while his counterpart destroyed it. He gave great wealth to David Hamelech, who used it to build the Bais Hamikdash. Hashem also provided Haman with great wealth, which he used in an attempt to destroy the Jewish nation. Hashem provided the Jewish People with a great navi, prophet, Moshe Rabbeinu. The pagans were also afforded a

distinguished prophet, Bilaam, who did everything possible to catalyze the downfall of Klal Yisrael. This all demonstrates that, despite what Hashem did for the nations, they were not able to sustain it. In fact, they extirpated whatever opportunities Hashem granted them. Yet, when we consider the situation, they still have a legitimate reason to gripe about their circumstances. They could postulate that while Hashem provided the Jewish nation with righteous and noble leadership, He supplied the other nations with leadership that was wicked, evil and immoral. How could the pagans be expected to repent under the leadership of a man with the character of Bilaam, who redefined hedonism and took evil to a new low?

Otzros HaTorah cites the Lev Aharon who explains that prior to giving the Torah to Klal Yisrael, Hashem first went to every other nation and offered it to them. They flatly refused to accept it for various reasons, basically that the values of Torah were not consistent with their weltenshauung, world perspective, and national character. Nonetheless, they still demanded a prophet of the calibre of Moshe. They received what they had requested - a prophet without Torah. Bilaam probably had some incredible qualities, but, without Torah, they were meaningless. Hashem's response to the nations of the world is simple, "You want to repent and change your ways without the Torah? Impossible!" No prophet or any leader can create a lasting spiritual metamorphosis unless it is preceded by Torah.

He (Bilaam) said to them, "Spend the night here and I will give you a response, as Hashem will speak to me." (22:8)

Bilaam, the consummate liar, presents himself as a saint. He will do nothing without the express permission of G-d. Typical of his sinful demeanor, he continues reiterating his total deference to the Almighty. Indeed, his bogus personality, his ersatz character, is his greatest mark of evil. It is one thing to carry out evil, but to dress it up as an act of piety and virtuosity is the nadir of shamelessness. At least Bilaam was following in the legacy bestowed upon him by his ancestor Lavan HoArami, the virtuosic swindler who transformed evil into an art. Bilaam had no qualms about cursing Klal Yisrael. His hatred for Hashem's People burned with an intensity within him. Yet, he would never go against Hashem. He had to find a way to demonstrate his iniquity while preserving his sense of righteousness. It was necessary for him to find a heter, dispensation, to destroy our nation.

Bilaam thought that he could get away with his swindling. In the end, however, whom did he really succeed in fooling? Only one person - himself. When one lies enough, he begins to believe his own lies. When one attempts to fool those around him, by presenting himself as a righteous person, when, in reality, he is nothing more than a chameleon, he fools himself. He begins to believe that he is righteous! Bilaam asked to die as a righteous and just person. That is hypocrisy at its lowest point! He actually believed that he was worthy of sainthood.

Horav Avigdor Halevi Nebentzhal, Shlita, posits that the reason the Torah relates the episode about Bilaam is that a little bit of Bilaam lurks within the recesses of each one of us. Each of us has to contend with his own hypocritical nature and inconsistencies. The "Bilaam factor" is alive and well within all of us. The only question is: How much? We fool ourselves - for what purpose? It is related that an Admor, chassidic Rebbe, once asked one of his chassidim who had sinned and attempted to gloss over his iniquity, "Whom do you think you are fooling? You cannot fool Hashem. You also cannot fool all of the people around you. Apparently the only person whom you might succeed in fooling is yourself. What do you gain by fooling a fool?" This idea is regrettably true concerning each one of us.

The people of Sodom exemplified this form of evil. Chazal tell us that the Sodomites were very clever. They invited poor people to their community. They even gave freely of their money to the poor, making sure to mark each one of the coins that they gave to the poor. There was one clause in their charity policy: No one was allowed to sell food to a poor man. Consequently, when the man perished from starvation, they would retrieve their coins. Then there is the story of the bed that was set aside for guests. If the traveler was too tall for the bed, his legs were shortened. If he was too short, they would stretch him. Rav Nebentzhal contends that some of us use the Sodom bed as an analogy to the Torah. The Torah has to fit into our lifestyle. When its mitzvos are too much, we shorten the Torah. We make it fit into our purvue, consistent with our needs and values. In the end, we are only fooling ourselves.

Behold! The people will rise like a lion cub and raise itself like a lion; it will not lie down until it consumes prey. (23:24)

The Holocaust transformed the proud Jewish nation into homeless wanderers. Throughout his powerful homilies, The Piazesner Rebbe, zl, attempts to console and sustain his broken-hearted chassidim with the ideas that their present circumstance was already foreshadowed in the very manner that the Torah was given; and that the opportunity to serve Hashem is available anywhere, even in the ghetto. Inclusive in his derashos, homilies, are a number of themes to strengthen the inner resources of his people. He focuses on the nobility which the Jewish heritage confers on us. Our pedigree must remind us that we are princes and, even when the Nazi dogs beat and attempt to degrade us, we are still nobility and should act in a consistent manner. He writes that not only is the Jewish spirit holy, even the very body of a Jew is unique in its sanctity.

In his derashah to Parashas Balak, he posits that - unlike the rest of creation, which was created by the Divine word - Klal Yisrael was created directly by the hands of Hashem. Therefore, a Jew's holiness extends to all levels of his existence, even the physical. Actually, in his commentary to Bereishis 1:27, "And G-d created man in His image," Rashi says, "Everything else was created by the Divine word, but man was created by the Divine hands." What does this mean? One would think that being created by Divine speech is a higher level than being created by the physical action of hands. How is it then that man who stands at the pinnacle of creation was created by hand, while the rest of creation was created by Divine speech?

The Piazesner explains that for all other creatures, the holiness did not extend from Above all the way to their very essence; it remained in the realm of words. For the Jew, however, holiness extended into his lowest level, the level of physicality and action. He was created by the Divine hands, so that he is entirely holy.

This is also why Klal Yisrael is considered to be the eternal people. Everything was created by Divine speech, by means of a word that remains above and beyond them, which shines upon them only from afar. The light is not permanently available within them; it flashes like lightning, giving temporary illumination. Klal Yisrael however, was created with the Divine hands, so that the Divine sanctity penetrates to their level of physical action and to whatever place they may be found. Hence, as a nation, we are eternal and even the individual physical body of the Jew is eternal. When he expends his energies for Torah study and mitzvah observance, that physical energy becomes integrated with the Torah and Divine source. Thus, his body rises to the world of eternity and remains eternal. Only the foods which the individual ate throughout his life - and which are added onto his body - are subject to decomposition and decay.

Thus, the Jew is able to strengthen himself during periods of travail, so that even when he lies down, he is not fallen. Even in his low state, he is still able to vanquish his enemies. He was created with the Divine hands which causes his holiness to extend to his Jewish essence. This is the underlying meaning of Bilaam's blessing. The Jew rises and strengthens himself like a lion. He does not fall down completely; he just crouches. Even in this position, he can triumph over his enemies. He rises like a lion, even during the most difficult troubles; under the most compelling duress, he leaps up like the king of beasts.

At a time when the Jew's body was both attacked and maligned, the Rebbe emphasizes the solid affirmation of the corporeal holiness of the Jew. In both his physical and spiritual essence, the Jew is holy and eternal; he represents the Divine light hidden in all reality. It is specifically for this reason that he is despised, such that attempts are constantly made to destroy him. It is precisely for this same reason, however, that the Jew's dignity is inviolable, his nobility is sacrosanct, and his survival and ultimate triumph is assured: *Mi k'amcha Yisrael*. "Who is like Your Nation - Yisrael?"

Jewish resilience is a character trait endemic to Klal Yisrael. The ability to pick oneself up, shake off the dirt and go on, is something inherently Jewish. In *Moed Katan* 9b the Talmud cites the following story. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai told his son to approach two of his disciples and ask them for a blessing. His son was puzzled with the blessings he received. They began with what seemed to be an ambiguous blessing, such as, "May you plant and not harvest," which, after explanation was interpreted as, "May you have children, and may they not die." In the *Sefer HaChaim*, the brother of the Maharal m'Prague wonders why these wise men gave a blessing which sounded like a curse. Why did they not give an unambiguous blessing? He explains that this world is the world of hardship and yissurim, anguish. It is normal for every individual to experience vicissitude in life. When the wise men said, "May it be the will," they were not referring to Hashem's will, but rather, "May this be your will," namely, that you should desire these problems and prepare yourself for any eventuality that may arise, because that is the way of the world.

Horav Gedalya Eiseman, Shlita, comments that most of the damage caused by hardship results from a lack of anticipating it. If people would prepare themselves for possible hardship, accepting the fact that life is tough and that trials and tribulations are to be expected as part of normal living, and realizing that everyone suffers in one way or another, they would have an easier time coping with adversity.

Intellectual awareness of the truth is not enough. It is necessary that one live his life feeling this awareness in his psyche. This requires self-discipline and practice. Indeed, the Alter, zl, m'Kelm listed among his goals for character perfection the resolution to train himself not to expect everything to go his way.

Water will flow from their wells. (24:7)

In the Talmud *Nedarim* 81a, Chazal say, "Take heed with the sons of the poor, for from them Torah will go forth, as it is stated, "Water shall flow midalyo, 'from his wells,' which can alternatively be read *mi dalav*, 'from his poor.' The *pasuk* thus means: Torah, which is compared to water, shall flow from Klal Yisrael's poor. Horav Eliezer M. Shach, zl, would relate the story concerning a very wealthy and powerful man from a town near Kovno who sought a husband for his daughter. He was prepared to offer complete support, so that the young man could become a *posek*, halachic arbitrator, of such a

calibre that he ascend to a distinguished pulpit.

He was presented with two young men, both brilliant and erudite, but from diverse backgrounds. One was descended from an illustrious lineage of famous rabbinic scholars. The other young scholar came from a simple home, simple pedigree and simple surroundings. Not knowing what to do, he went to the preeminent Torah scholar and rav of Kovno, Horav Yitzchak Elchanan Spektor, asking for guidance in this dilemma. He described both young men, adding that his personal choice was the one whose background was most impressive, despite the fact that this young man's parents insisted on receiving a very hefty dowry.

Rav Yitzchak Elchanan told him, "If you ask my opinion, I suggest that you select the young man who hails from a simple background. Why? Because the young man who descends from Torah elite grew up in a home where Torah reigned paramount and its study and erudition was a way of life. His parents devoted their lives to raising him from day one to grow in Torah. It is no wonder that he is a Torah scholar. He simply followed in the manner of his breeding. If he were to be torn away from his parents' influence and would have to assume the yoke of family support on his own shoulders, would he be able to withstand the pressure? I do not know. The other young man, however, had to fight his entire life to overcome one obstacle after another, triumphing over life's challenges, in order to study Torah with proficiency and diligence. Such a young man is assured of a position.

And an angel of Hashem stood on the road to impede him. (22:22)

Hashem warned Bilaam not to curse the Jewish nation. Bilaam had the gall to attempt to defy Him. Hashem sent a Heavenly angel to block Bilaam's path. The angel stood there with a drawn sword. Yet, Rashi describes this angel as an angel of mercy, sent by a compassionate G-d to prevent Bilaam from committing a sin which would catalyze his self destruction. The donkey who saw the angel saw a menacing angel brandishing a sword. Yet, he is described as an angel of mercy. In *The Pleasant Way*, Horav Avraham Pam, zl, derives a compelling lesson from here. Life is not always what it seems cut out to be. What appears superficially to the human eye to be a fiery enemy brandishing a sword can really be an angel of mercy. It happens all of the time. Situations arise in which we think "for sure" that a menace stands in our way, or that our world is about to fall apart. In reality, it may be a blessing in disguise. Rav Pam cites an example from the world of shidduchim, matchmaking. A young man searches for his barshert, intended one. After awhile, he feels he has discovered the perfect girl, with the perfect background, wonderful middos, character traits, who shares his goals and aspirations for life. What could be wrong? Suddenly, the "Satan with an outstretched sword" stands in his way. Something comes out of the blue that places the shidduch on shaky ground. It usually begins with a bit of lashon hora, slander, that creates a cloud of ambiguity. No longer is he sure that this is his barshert. The Satan stands in his way. It takes very little to create a Satan - but it regrettably happens all the time. Someone has a problem with the shidduch, and they are intent on destroying it.

We, however, do not know Hashem's plans. What seems to be a Satan that destroys a shidduch is really an angel of mercy in disguise. We have no way of seeing into the future, knowing what was in store for this couple, had the shidduch gone through. This shidduch, instead of being Heaven sent, might actually have been a recipe for disaster. Not every shidduch that seems right on paper is consistent with the Divine plan. Problems beyond the scope of our ability to address could have arisen which would have transformed the perfect shidduch into a tragedy.

In summation, we do not know the Divine plan, and we do not have the ability to alter it. We should look at every angel - even the one with the fiery sword - as an angel of mercy. We have to fight the natural feelings of depression that accompany disappointment with trust in Hashem, knowing that everything He does is good. We just have to wait until the picture becomes clear. If we assimilate this realization into our being, it will be that much easier to deal with disappointing situations that have so frequently become part of life.

The following story is a classic case which relates to the above idea. It is the story about a young woman named Miriam who came to realize that her barshert had been determined many years earlier during an incident which, at that time, seemed innocuous and totally unrelated. At the same time, her barshert came to realize that the "Satan" who stood in his way for so many years was his own personal angel of mercy.

It was a hot day, and Miriam's family decided to spend Chol Hamoed Sukkos at a resort in the Galilee which catered to observant families. Nine-year old Miriam decided to take a walk with her little sister. Not realizing where they were going, they apparently walked to a nearby village not known for its love of chareidim, observant Jews. Suddenly, a group of young ruffians began to chase them. Fearing for their safety, they climbed up into a nearby tree. The hoodlums shook the tree and began hurling expletives at the two innocent children. Fearing for their lives, they began to cry and scream for help. This added to the hoodlums' frenzy, as they began to shake the tree in earnest.

Suddenly, from nowhere, a religious boy about thirteen years old appeared, who came towards the gang and told them to stop. They were bent on trouble, and no observant boy was going to prevent them from having their fun. They began to attack him and a fight ensued. As he started to run away, the gang took up the chase. He then signaled to the girls to escape while he would lead their would-be-attackers away. They caught up with him and began hitting him with a large piece of wood. He was beaten to within an inch of his life, but the girls were able to run back to safety. So ends part one of the story. Miriam was saved by a noble action of a young boy whom she had never met.

Years went by and Miriam, try as she did, could never find out what ever happened to the boy that saved her and her sister that fateful day. The incident remained forever engraved in her mind.

Part two of the story begins with Miriam turning older, as she rejects one shidduch after another. They were nice boys, but something was always missing. People began to think that Miriam might be a bit too choosy. When she turned twenty-three, someone suggested a fine young man named Yehudah. He had it all - learning, character traits, looks and a pleasant personality. He was on the older side -twenty-six - but after all, she was already twenty-three.

They went out. It was all true - he had everything, except for a deep terrible scar on his face that ran from his eye to his chin. It was shocking. A kind, gentle, handsome face ruined by this awful scar. As much as she was impressed by his personality and demeanor, she could not get her mind off of the scar. Yet, for some reason she kept on seeing him. Five dates later, she did not know what to do when Yehudah told her that he felt she was the right partner for him. She did not know what to say or how to say it, but Yehudah could see the answer in the way she looked at his scar. "You do not have to explain," he said. "I know what you want to say. If you have not managed to overlook the scar by now, I guess you will never reconcile yourself with it."

Feeling terribly ashamed and not knowing what to say, Miriam asked how he got the scar. Yehudah smiled sadly and related the following story: "It happened when I was thirteen years old. A group of young hoodlums were chasing two young girls. In my attempt to save them, the hoodlums gave me a thrashing with a large piece of wood. Unfortunately, the piece of wood had a rusty nail

sticking out of it which tore open my face. I do not know why I am telling you this. Now, you probably think that I was a wild kid who was into fighting. It just happened that I was with my aunt and uncle who were staying at a resort, and I happened to chance upon those frightened girls. I was simply trying to help them, and I received the scar on my face as a result. Well, now you know the story. Over the years, I managed to forget the incident, but as my dating stretched on from year to year, I guess Hashem reminds me about it every day."

The rest of the story can be filled in by the readers. Yehudah's "Satan," his terrible scar, was actually an angel of mercy. It had kept him waiting for all those years - until he found his true barshert. The scar no longer bothered Miriam. After all - it was her scar.

We hear such stories all the time. Interestingly, it was the donkey who saw a menacing angel. That might be our problem. We look with donkey eyes at life's events and forget that Hashem has plans that supercedes what we see.

Balak ben Tzipor saw all that Yisrael had done to the Emori. (22:2)

There are two types of individuals - the first can see; he has a clear outlook and can read the Heavenly map with its designated "road signs" which cover his entire life. He has one problem, however: execution. He is incapable of successfully executing what he sees, because he does not quite understand what he sees. Another type of person is perceptive and able to execute fully what he sees. He, regrettably, has one shortcoming: he does not see. One sees, but does not understand. Thus, he is incapable of following his map. The other is capable, but sightless. Both of these people look at Heavenly signs and are unable to act upon their destiny.

Horav Baruch Mordechai Ezrachi, Shlita, submits that this is the source of the downfall of two people: Korach and Balak. Korach saw, but failed to see the message clearly. He saw an illustrious lineage, Shmuel ha'Navi was to descend from him. He erred in his insight. Instead of following the signs to glory, he was mistaken and ended in infamy. Balak was another individual who saw. Indeed, he saw very well, with a clear perspective. Yet, he had a problem when it came to definition. He could not interpret what he saw and assimilate it into his thought process. He could not understand the message. Hence, what could have elevated him spiritually, instead brought about his downfall.

It is necessary to have both qualities: the ability to see and the ability to understand the message and act upon it. One person saw and understood his destiny - Yisro. He saw and "heard" the message. Unless there is a reason, one does not see a message that has been communicated by Hashem. Yisro understood the message and immediately acted upon it. This is the difference between "Balak saw" and "Yisro heard." Balak had acute vision; he saw with clarity, not overlooking a thing. It remained, however, nothing more than a vision, because he could not interpret its message. Yisro saw and heard. He understood that he must act. His destiny depended upon it. One who understands what he sees becomes the "eyes" for others. Yisro was asked to be Klal Yisrael's "eyes." Interestingly, while some are able to be the eyes for others, there are some who cannot even see for themselves.

Bilaam arose in the morning. (22:13)

It is incredible that some people can be privy to an unparalleled Heavenly revelation and proceed with business as usual. Bilaam did just that. He went to sleep only to be awakened by Hashem. After the ensuing dialogue with Hashem, what did Bilaam do? He went back to sleep! Is this not incredible? Veritably, Bilaam followed a long line of reshaim, wicked predecessors, who also had no problem returning to their slumber. Let us look back in history at some of these deep sleepers. Avimelech took Sarah Imeinu into his palace. Hashem appeared to him in a dream and admonished him for his actions. Avimelech was filled with fear and trembling. The next morning when he arose from his sleep, he acted upon Hashem's warning. When did Avimelech act? In the morning. First, he slept. Then he was prepared to act.

Horav Sholom Schwadron, zl, cites the classic episode which occurred concerning Pharaoh and his famous dreams. His first dream disconcerted him very much. In fact, he had trouble falling asleep a second time, so that he could dream his second dream. What happened after the second dream? In the morning when he arose, he was nervous! Not at night, but in the morning. As anxious as Pharaoh was, he still was able to return to sleep.

Pharaoh did it again, manifesting his insensitivity to anything spiritual in nature. Moshe warned him that at midnight death would rage in Egypt. This was the tenth plague. Moshe had now established his reputation as a man of integrity. If he stated a plague was on the way, it would surely arrive. The Torah tells us that Pharaoh arose at midnight. He arose. Surprisingly, thousands are about to die at midnight, and Pharaoh can still go to sleep. Does this make sense? This is like the horse who does not move when the whip is raised, poised to strike at him. He waits until the whip slams into his body before he reacts.

There is a flip side to this: The tzaddik, righteous person, is an individual whose faith in the Almighty is so absolute that he can go to sleep resting assured that Hashem will be there for him. Yonah ha'Navi was on a ship that was being tossed around in a raging storm. Yet, he went down to the hold of the ship to sleep. Everybody else was either praying to his god or screaming in terror. He went to sleep. The ship's captain wondered at this strange behavior. "Which nation are you from?" they asked. "The G-d of Heaven I fear, (He Who) created the sea and dry land," he responded. In other words, I trust in my G-d. What difference is there whether I am on the water or on dry land. It is all the same to Him. If He wants me to be protected, I will be safe wherever I am. He "lost no sleep," because of his unconditional faith in Hashem. Avraham Avinu was told to prepare for an olah, sacrifice to Hashem. He accepted Hashem's command with complete equanimity. He arose early the next morning to do Hashem's bidding. He arose - meaning he went to sleep. How does one sleep the night before he must carry out such an awesome command? The answer is equanimity. For Avraham every command from Hashem carried the same weight - so great was his trust, so absolute was his commitment.

How goodly are your tents, O'Yaakov, your tabernacles, O Yisrael. (24:2)

The Yalkut Shimoni notes that while all of Bilaam's blessings materialized, they did not endure - except for one. The blessing, "Mah Tovu," "How goodly are your tents," remains eternal. What was the essence of this blessing that endowed it with such exceptional lasting ability? Let us first explore what motivated this blessing.

The Torah teaches us that Bilaam noticed Klal Yisrael "encamped according to their tribes." His ensuing blessing was a direct result of what he had observed. Rashi cites two opinions in Chazal which

state that Bilaam was impressed by the manner with which each Jew pitched his tent in his own assigned area. Chazal also note that they positioned their tents in such a way that no man's door faced another's door. It was the Jewish people's exceptional modesty that moved even Bilaam to proclaim the unique virtue of Yaakov's tents. We still must understand what it was about their tents that catalyzed such blessing. Modesty is truly a remarkable virtue, but does it supercede all others?

To understand this, we must first posit that for the Jew modesty is not merely a virtue - it is part of his essence. It is an intrinsic component of his psyche, his Jewish DNA! Modesty, chastity, humility -are all words that describe the Jewish essence - or at least should. Bilaam had no alternative but to bless the Jews with regard to the tents and tabernacle after he noticed their distinctive approach to their camping, because the blessing was basically a description of their essence. One cannot deny the truth. Bilaam simply focused on their personality. He added nothing; he simply stated a fact.

Chazal view Mah Tovv as a blessing. What was the substance of this blessing? They explain that ohel refers to the ohalah shel Torah, the tents of the study hall. Mishkenosecha is a reference to the "mikdash me'at," minor Sanctuary, the shul/ house of prayer. Bilaam foresaw that regardless of Klal Yisrael's trials and travail, the synagogue and study hall, Torah study and tefillah, will always endure. We will remain close to Hashem during our most difficult periods via the shul and bais ha'medrash. Prayer and study have accompanied us wherever we have been exiled. Europe was burning; Jews were running for their lives; but, they always prayed: in cellars, in bunkers, in makeshift shuls. The inferno was raging, but the Jews that escaped Europe were able to create a yeshivah in Shanghai, because Torah study cannot cease - or else we do.

How is modesty linked to the shul and the bais ha'medrash? First, we must explain that modesty, keeping to oneself, full-scale separatism, does not necessarily mean that one seeks to be alone. It is quite possible - and in Klal Yisrael's situation this happens to be the case - that we are separate, not because we are alone, but, rather, because we connect with an entity that takes precedence over everything else - Hashem. Our all-encompassing relationship with Hashem separates us from everyone else. We are different, because we choose to be different. We are alone, because we choose to be alone. We do not need the glory and fanfare that accompanies the large group, because we have our own unique connection with Hashem. Bilaam perceived this. He was acutely aware of Klal Yisrael's unique character. Their ability to devoid themselves of their surroundings and rally to the two places which confirmed and sustained their relationship with Hashem - the beis ha'medrash and shul - is what motivated his sincere blessing. The Noam Elimelech explains why of all of Bilaam's prophetic blessings, only one - Mah Tovv - endures. It was because this was the only blessing which Bilaam uttered wholeheartedly. Even when he understood that Hashem wanted Klal Yisrael blessed and not cursed, Bilaam could not bring himself to do so with sincerity. His evil crept in. The blessing of Mah Tovv, however, remained sincere, because he could not speak against the Jews' essence. In their separate tents, in their modesty, characterized by their unique lifestyle, he saw a sign of their resolute separateness as prescribed by the Torah. They were not separate because they were alone, they were separate because they were with Hashem. Thus, his blessing regarding their continued separateness in the study hall and shul was a reflection of his insight that the tents of Torah and avodah will forever be a part of our lives, - because that defines the essence of the Jew.

*If the men came to summon you, arise and go with them...G-d's wrath flared because he was going.
(20:20,22)*

The question is apparent: Hashem instructed Bilaam to go with them. Bilaam listened and joined Balak's emissaries. Why was Hashem so angry with Bilaam for following His orders? In his sefer Be'er Moshe, the Ozrover Rebbe, zl, explains that when Hashem commands a person to do something, it is different than when a human asks another person to do something for him. When one person asks another to perform a function for him, his primary concern is that the activity be done, that his request be carried out. He does not really care if the person acts willingly or not. True, I would not mind if my agent is enthusiastic about what he is doing for me, but, as long as my goal is achieved, I am satisfied.

When Hashem asks man to act, the situation is different. Not only does the actual behavior matter, but the attitude one manifests during his performance is also important. Thus, when one executes Hashem's command, he must do so in exact accordance with His will. If Hashem's commandment requires hislahavus, religious fervor/fiery enthusiasm, then if one performs the mitzvah without the necessary enthusiasm, it falls dismally short of its mark. The flip side of this is that when Hashem does not want us to act with enthusiasm, when we are to act in a lackadaisical manner, the enthusiasm undermines the mitzvah.

We may better appreciate this distinction with the following analogy: two men set out on the road, each to perform a mitzvah. One is going to be marbitz Torah, disseminate Torah; the other, to earn a livelihood so that he can support his family. How should their inner emotions be manifest? The one who is on his way to teach Torah and inspire the masses walks with a happy and enthusiastic gait. His presence electrifies all those around him. The other Jew, who is compelled to leave his family in search of sustenance, who is forced to undertake a position in which he is probably not interested, surely does not proceed with equal anticipation. Now, if their attitudes were to be reversed, so that the one going into business is doing so with relish and excitement, and the one who is undertaking to teach Torah to Klal Yisrael is viewing his vocation with a lackluster - or, at best, a complacent attitude - they would be derelict in the performance of their particular mitzvos. Attitude is part and parcel of the mitzvah. It has intrinsic value in the mitzvah component.

We can now understand Hashem's displeasure with Bilaam. When Hashem told him that he could go, the meaning was clear: if they have come to call you and you have no way out - go. It should be something you are forced to do, not something you are excited about doing. Did Bilaam act in the prescribed manner? Did he heed Hashem's directive? No! The next day, he arose early in the morning and personally saddled his donkey. Is this the way a man who is compelled to join Balak's emissaries goes? Hashem was angry because he was going. He went as if it was his idea, not something he must do. He wanted to curse the Jews. He enjoyed every minute of this endeavor. His misplaced enthusiasm was part of his downfall.

Are we that much different? Do we focus only on certain mitzvos, while ignoring others? Do we pray fervently on those contemporary holidays to which we relate best, while simultaneously manifesting a lackluster attitude towards the festivals that Hashem has ordained? We must remember that if our intention and attitude are misplaced, the chances are that our reward will similarly be misplaced.

And Moav was disgusted in the face of the Bnei Yisrael. (22:3)

They tried everything to do away with the Jewish People. The parsha details how Balak and

Bilaam sought every opportunity to curse Klal Yisrael. In the end, when they saw that everything else had failed, they brought out their young women and relied on the yetzer hora, evil-inclination, to perform the function in which he excels. Regrettably, this approach met with success, as many Jews fell prey to the yetzer hora's blandishments. We wonder why Bilaam waited so long to attempt this proven method of destroying Klal Yisrael's spiritual stature. Why did he try the methods that were - at best - weak, when such a devastating method was available?

The Chasam Sofer addresses this question and offers a practical response. He explains that, without any doubt, Balak was acutely aware of Bilaam's "ace," but he felt that this plan would not succeed, to the point that it would be a waste to even attempt it. Why is this? Imagine the spiritual plateau that Klal Yisrael had attained at this point in time. They were the people who had stood at Har Sinai and experienced an unprecedented Revelation. They had not only received the Torah, but they also had meticulously observed and fervently studied it. Their superficial appearance coincided with their inner spirituality. They dressed modestly, totally in contrast to the immoral society that set the standard in those days. For all intents and purposes, the external behavior that was manifest by the Jews reflected an inner spiritual devotion. How could Balak succeed in ensnaring a nation to whom spirituality was so valuable? Imagine, if Balak would have dispatched his young women in their immodest dress to the Jewish camp. Who would have looked at them? Why would a frum, observant, man look or converse frivolously with such a wanton woman? Furthermore, what would these women have in common with the Jewish men? Their lifestyles were totally disparate from each other, their values in direct opposition to one another.

"Vayakatz Moav mipnei Bnei Yisrael", "And Moav was disgusted in the face of Bnei Yisrael." (22:3). Balak was in a predicament. The Jews remained sequestered from the progressive, decadent lifestyle that represented the norm in contemporary society. They did not speak like the Moavites, dress like them, or frequent the same places. There was no common language in which the Jews and the pagans could converse. How could they begin to entice the Jews to sin? This is where Bilaam entered the picture. He offered wise counsel concerning the most practical method for dealing with the Jewish problem. Bilaam understood how to bridge the gap between the observant Jew and the degenerate pagan. "Vayeshev Yisrael baShittim" "and Yisrael settled in Shittim" (25:1) The Midrash quotes Rabbi Yehoshua, who interprets shittim as being related to the word shtus, foolishness. Bilaam told Balak, "Do not attempt to overcome them with force. Begin with a small step - foolishness, an innocuous gesture of friendship, a joint program. It should be done strictly in accordance with their standards of kashrus and modesty: Glatt kosher, separate entrances for men and women - but, at least, they will be together. This will break down the barrier they have imposed upon themselves. Slowly, their mode of dress will change; they will become congenial, and before you know it, they will be cavorting with our daughters. Then - they will be ours!"

Does this not sound familiar? It is the story of Jewish assimilation. It begins with unity, followed by congeniality, succeeded by acculturation and total assimilation. Bilaam was clever. He knew that the Jew who maintains a Torah lifestyle, whose standard of living is based upon Torah values, and not those of contemporary society could not be lured away, due to the self-imposed barriers around them. Break the barriers and you are victorious over them. Bilaam understood that the gap between the Jew and the rest of the world was not to be found in hard-core idol-worship and immorality, but rather in the little nuances, the simple differences in behavior and lifestyle. The chasm is defined by those nuances, not necessarily by the Shulchan Aruch, Code of Jewish Law. These small disparities, symbols of segregation from an immoral society, make all of the difference.

He perceived no iniquity in Yaakov, and saw no perversity in Yisrael. (23:21)

The Baal Shem Tov Hakadosh once spent Shabbos in a city that was home to a large chassidic following. It happened that on that Shabbos a darshan, an ethical lecturer who would travel from city to city speaking from the podium, admonishing its inhabitants regarding their religious observance, also spent Shabbos in that community. The Baal Shem Tov was a person who empathized with all Jews. In his desire to provide the speaker with a large captive audience, he personally attended the drasha, lecture. The chassidim understandably followed suit. The darshan went up to the lectern and spoke penetrating words of inspiration. He laced his speech, however, with harsh criticism of the crowd for their lack of total religious observance, citing their lack of Torah study, flimsy minyan attendance, and diminished yiraas Shomayim, fear of Heaven. When the Baal Shem Tov heard the onslaught of invectives leveled at the community, he stood and proceeded to leave the room. Understandably, when the chassidim noticed the Baal Shem leaving, they, one by one, began to follow suit, until there was no one left to listen to the darshan's critique.

After Shabbos, the darshan came to the home where the Baal Shem was staying, complaining that because of the Baal Shem, everyone left his lecture, leaving him to speak to the four walls. He could not complete his intended drasha and who knows if now he would even get paid? Hearing this, the Baal Shem Tov arose from his chair. With tears streaming down his face, he turned to the darshan and said, "You permitted yourself to criticize Jews in public. I would like you to know that when a Jew toils throughout the day - going around the market in search of a livelihood for him and his family - and in the evening - after a full day of back-breaking labor, which has ultimately proven unsuccessful in yielding a decent financial return - just barely makes it to shul to pray with a minyan - his prayer causes an incredible uproar in Heaven. The entire Heavenly Tribunal gather together around the Heavenly Throne and say, "Who is like Your nation Yisrael"! And now, you - a creation of flesh and blood - have the audacity to censure such fine people!"

A similar incident occurred with Rav Meir, zl, the rav of Tiktin, Poland. A maggid once came to his community and asked permission to lecture in the main shul. Rav Meir not only gave permission, he even attended the discourse. The maggid began castigating the crowd, rebuking them with powerful words. He criticized their lack of business ethics, their petty infighting and lack of religious observance. In short, he was far from complimentary. Rav Meir listened intently to the maggid's words, and suddenly he began to cry with loud sobs.

After the drasha, the maggid came over to the rav's home to hear his opinion of the speech. Rav Meir said, "Your words were penetrating and indeed true, because - without a doubt - I am filled with sin. I must ask you, however, why you felt it important to reprove me in public? Was it necessary to humiliate me in front of the entire religious community? You could have rebuked me in private and still achieved the same effect."

The maggid, hearing these words, became visibly shaken "Rebbe, I did not mean you. I would never suspect the rav of any impropriety, let alone transgressions such as the ones I mentioned. No, I was speaking to the assembled members of the community."

"The people are pure of any blemish. They are pious and holy," answered Rav Meir innocently. "If you found reason to censure anyone, it must have been me to whom you were speaking. Hence, I ask you again: why did you embarrass me in public?"

This story sends home a number of messages. One of these messages identifies the chasm that

lies between our generation and those that preceded us. It might be a good idea to reflect on this point.

How goodly are your tents, O Yaakov, your dwelling places, O Yisrael. (25:5)

Rashi says that Bilaam was prompted to praise the Jewish home when he observed that the entrance to each person's home was not aligned one opposite the next. He was impressed with their modesty. In the Talmud Sanhedrin 108a, Chazal give an alternative explanation that does seem to coincide with that of Rashi. Rabbi Yochanan says that from the blessing of that evil one (Bilaam), we are to ascertain what was originally in his heart. He wanted to curse them, that there should no longer be houses of Torah study and houses of worship, but he ended up saying, "How goodly are your tents." He did not want the Shechinah to repose among the Jewish People. Now he said, "Mishkenosecha Yisrael," "Your dwelling place, Yisrael."

At first glance, it appears that Rashi's explanation is inconsistent with that of Rabbi Yochanan. According to Rashi, Bilaam's intention was to laud the individual Jewish home, while Rabbi Yochanan contends that Bilaam's focus was on the shuls and yeshivos and Hashem's resting His Presence there. Is there an irreconcilable dispute or can these two expositions be unified? The Baalei Mussar take a more penetrating approach towards understanding the meaning of "their doors were not aligned one opposite the other." It goes beyond the fact that they were modest, not exhibiting what goes on in the privacy of one's home to the rest of the neighborhood. No, there is a more profound aspect to this privacy between Jews. They had no interest in what was going on in their neighbor's home. They were not nosy; they were not envious. There was neither jealousy nor rivalry between them. Each one lived his own individual lifestyle, and his neighbor was not concerned if his house was huge, what type of furniture he had, if he had live-in-help, or how he spent his day. Each Jew was satisfied and happy with his individual way of life. The comings and goings of his neighbor was not his affair - unless his neighbor was in need. Then, he was there immediately, without question, prepared to assist in any manner.

When people are happy with their own lives, when there is self-satisfaction, there is no jealousy and there is no rivalry. Jealousy is a terrible character trait which can result in tragic consequences. Jealousy causes one to defer to his base desires. It stunts one's spiritual development as it chokes his life-line to spirituality. Commensurate with the manner and zest that one pursues materialism, so, too, does he detract from spirituality. Pursuit of materialism and spirituality do not complement each other. As one increases, the other decreases.

The primary prerequisite for maintaining the Shechinah's Presence in our shuls and yeshivos is that there be no rivalry among Jews. When we do not respect one another, when our differences constitute a reason for denigration or envy, then the yetzer hora, evil-inclination, takes a stranglehold on our souls, encouraging us through its blandishments to follow our physical desires. Only after one has cleansed himself of this demanding and demeaning character trait can he ascend the spiritual ladder.

May I die a death of the righteous, and may my end be as glorious as theirs. (23:10) The coexistence of conflicting ideas within one person is an unnatural, but not uncommon, phenomena. This is different from the hypocrite who knowingly acts to protect personal vested interests in a manner contrasting his true beliefs. We are, rather, addressing he who possesses two incompatible ideas within himself. Usually, this conflict is the result of the intellectual versus the emotional spheres. People can cogently understand the right and wrong of a given action or endeavor, although it will not

necessarily be reflected in their behavior, owing to the overwhelming impact of one's emotions. Reason and emotions do not necessarily coincide, creating tragic instability within some people.

Bilaam is a prime example of how one may be controlled by his emotions. He was so governed by his yetzer hora, evil inclination, that the clear reasoning resulting from his superior mind and degree of prophecy were to no avail. He was a weak person who was totally subject to the whims and desires of his evil inclination. He was privileged to communicate with Hashem, yet remained a degenerate who sought to bring ruin upon Klal Yisrael through licentious behavior. He was a man who, upon gazing at Klal Yisrael's entire historical journey, asked to "die a death of the righteous, and may my end be as glorious as theirs." He refused to "understand" what he perceived. He did not permit his intellect to govern his emotions. One's intellectual conclusions are real. They must be tempered with action, so that the whims and fancies of his emotions will not take hold of him as Bilaam's did.

Bilaam prayed to die the death of the upright. He wanted to leave this world as the Patriarchs did and be admitted into Olam Habah, the Eternal World. To paraphrase the Kotzker Rebbe, "Bilaam did not know a basic premise: in order to die as a Jew, one must first live as a Jew!" Throughout the millennia, the Jewish nation has been subjected to some of the most brutal and heinous forms of torture and death. We have been sacrificed on the fires of religious bigotry and anti-Semitism Al Kiddush Hashem, sanctifying the Name of Hashem.

Is this what Hashem asks of us? Is simply dying for Him the Jewish ideal, or is death to be the crowning point to a life of Kiddush ha'chaim, sanctifying His Name? Life on this temporary world is a gesher -- a gesher ha'chaim -- a bridge between two lives: the spiritual life one lives in the Olam ha'Emes, World of Truth, prior to his birth; and the life he lives after his physical remains are interred in the earth. The life we live in this world should be one of moral and spiritual rectitude, with faith in, and commitment, to the Almighty, so that the bridge of life is intact and strong, serving as the vehicle facilitating our entry into the Eternal world.

Hashem opened the mouth of the she-donkey and she said to Bilaam, "What have I done to you that you have struck me three times?" (28:28)

Bilaam's she-donkey "saw" the angel blocking its path. Bilaam's vision was obscured. Therefore, he had no idea why the animal was not moving on. His first reaction was to strike the animal three times, after which the she-donkey miraculously opened its mouth and asked why he had struck three "regalim," times. Rashi notes the Torah's use of the word "regalim," a word used to describe the three Jewish Festivals, rather than the more commonly used word of "paamim." Rashi, quoting Chazal, states that this unusual form -- which usually denotes festivals -- is used to teach us that Bilaam sought to uproot the three Jewish Festivals. The Ari z"l adapts this idea, suggesting that Bilaam had no intention to destroy Klal Yisrael in its entirety. He sought only to eliminate our observance of the Three Festivals. Why? While it is true that the Shalosh Regalim are the foundation of our religious observance, why would Bilaam be so driven to expunge their observance?

The Shem Mishmuel explains this in the following manner: He cites the Mishnah in Pirke Avos 5:22, "Those who have an evil eye, an arrogant spirit, and an insatiable soul are pupils of the wicked Bilaam." He feels that this Mishnah corresponds with an earlier Mishnah (4:28) in which Rabbi Elazar HaKappar says, "Jealousy, lust and the desire for honor remove a man from the world." The connection is clear: The evil eye corresponds to jealousy; the arrogant spirit is closely tied to the pursuit of honor,

and the insatiable spirit is the main ingredient for lust.

There is another set of threes - the three cardinal sins which a Jew may never transgress: murder; idolatry; and sexual immorality. If it is a question of one's life or transgressing these sins, he should forfeit his life. Indeed, it is precisely the three character defects mentioned in the Mishnayos which are the precursors of these sins. Jealousy leads to all violent crimes. Sexual immorality is the result of an insatiable lust. The desire for honor is a form of idol worship in which one "worships" his own ego. Chazal teach us this in the Talmud Sotah 4b, "An arrogant person is like an idol worshipper."

The Maharal says that each of the three Avos, Patriarchs, was able to rectify one of these cardinal sins. By extension, Klal Yisrael, through their observance of the Three Festivals, would continue the fight to rid themselves of these three reprehensible sins. We begin with Pesach, the festival which commemorates the first time the Jewish People were drawn away from the idols of Egypt and assembled under the banner of monotheism. The consumption of matzoh, the poor man's bread, the food of the humble, implies a humble spirit necessary for quelling the arrogance within us. Haughtiness, the root of idolatry, the character trait that defines Bilaam, is extirpated by our observance of Pesach.

Shavuot, the festival commemorating the Giving of the Torah, denotes the rejection of unbridled lust. Inappropriate sexual thoughts and behavior find their place in a mind devoid of Torah. Indeed, in preparation for the receiving of the Torah, the Jews were required to separate from their wives. Through Torah study, we triumph over the lust within us, rejecting the road followed by Bilaam with his unrestrained desires.

Sukkos is the festival when we set aside all our differences with our fellow man. The Arba Minim, four species, symbolize our ability to get along and love all types of Jews, regardless of their religious background or level of observance. This festival helps us to overcome the jealousy and evil eye within ourselves. When we learn to realize that Klal Yisrael is just that - a klal - a community which includes everyone, a community which functions best as a whole, then we will not be jealous of others. Using our "good" eye, viewing others in a positive perspective, avails us the opportunity to overcome the negative influence of Bilaam's selfishness.

And an angel of Hashem stood on the road to impede him.

In a few seemingly simple words, Rashi conveys a profound message. He says that this angel was a malach shel rachamim, an angel of mercy, who was sent to divert Bilaam from sinning. Horav Avraham Pam, Shlita, derives from here that a number of times in our life we imagine that the Satan is bent on destroying everything for which we have worked. The specific situation in question is the area of shidduchim, marriage. One sees a young woman a number of times (depending upon his orientation). He feels she is the one that is right for him; she is his G-d- sent zivug, match. Alas, something happens: either she is not interested, her parents are not interested, or simply "things" are just not turning out to his satisfaction. The Satan stands in his way at every step. Nothing seems to go right. While this may sound familiar to some, the reaction is not always the same. Some young men and women become depressed when the shidduch does not work out, while others become angry. How many feel that Hashem is doing them a favor, averting a later disaster?

Bilaam cursed the angel that stood in his way. He thought that the Satan was attempting to prevent him from achieving success. Little did this arrogant, self-centered pagan realize that it was actually Hashem, who in His compassion for this miscreant, sent an angel of mercy to save him from sin. So, too, should we see Hashem's compassionate Hand throughout our every endeavor, so that ultimately we will benefit.

From Aram, Balak, King of Moav, led me, from the mountains of the east, "Come curse Yaakov for me, come bring anger upon Yisrael." (23:7)

Bilaam begins his curse/blessing. His opening remarks convey a profound message. Bilaam lived in Aram, which was northeast of Eretz Yisrael. He says that Balak led him from the mountains of the east, which, according to the Midrash Tanchuma, is an allusion to the Patriarchs who were the spiritual "mountains" of the eastern world. He claims that Balak distanced him from the feelings of gratitude they both should have felt towards our ancestors. Balak's kingdom of Moav descended from Lot, Avraham Avinu's nephew, who lived to father children only as a result of Avraham's intervention. Bilaam's ancestor, Lavan, was blessed with sons only after Yaakov Avinu's arrival at his home. In other words, Bilaam was criticizing Balak, asserting that his people had no animus toward Klal Yisrael. In fact, they owed their very existence to this nation's ancestors. How could they curse this People?

Horav Baruch Mordechai Eizrachi, Shlita, takes note of Chazal's words. These base people feared nothing and no one. They had no compunction whatsoever about cursing an innocent, harmless nation who had done nothing to harm them. They were prepared to villify Klal Yisrael, wishing upon them disaster and annihilation. What prevented them from achieving their goals? What was there that evoked their conscience for what they were about to do? Ha'koras ha'tov, appreciation/gratitude, compelled them to refrain from following through on their malevolent intentions.

Let us momentarily focus on the reason for their gratitude. One would think that it was a saint who was making these remarks. They felt that they were indebted to the Jews, because indirectly their ancestors had been responsible for their existence. This is an incredible statement. Yet, this is what Bilaam said. He was not a saint, but a rasha merusha, evil and wicked individual, who was bent on destroying the innocent Jews. Nothing prevented him from seeing his evil objective reach fruition, other than ha'koras ha'tov. The lesson that applies to each of us is overwhelming. A pagan prophet, who represented consummate evil, felt he should refrain from cursing the Jews because of a sense of appreciation he should have to their ancestors. Need we say more regarding our responsibility towards ha'koras ha'tov?

From the top of rocks I see him and from the hills I behold him. (23:9)

Horav S.R. Hirsch, zl, interprets this pasuk as a perspective on history. Just as distances draw together in a panoramic view from a height, so it is with time. From a comprehensive survey of world history over centuries taken from above, events seem close together. When one views these events from the closer perspective of the present, they seem farther from one another. To quote Horav Mordechai Gifter, Shlita, "If one wishes to comprehend an event in history, one cannot look at it in the limited scope of the finite, here and now; rather, one must understand the event as having a place in the historical continuum. A historical occurrence extends itself beyond the isolation of time and space and reaches forth towards the future and back to the past in order to acquire true significance." In other words, a certain event might not be comprehensible to one looking at an occurrence in the present.

When he views it from afar, through the distance of time, however, it will seem to fit in and make sense.

Rashi cites the Midrash which offers an alternative interpretation. Bilaam proclaimed that he was helpless; he could do nothing to frustrate Klal Yisrael, to sway them from the proper path. Bilaam said, "I see them not only as they are now, but I see them from the tops of the rocks, I beheld them from the hills. They are anchored; they are firmly pinned down like rocks to their fathers and mothers." Bilaam understood Klal Yisrael's secret weapon, their shield against the challenge of assimilation. As Horav Moshe Swift, zl, aptly puts it, "Klal Yisrael is so firmly entrenched, the foundation of their relationship is so deep, that there is no dynamite in the world that can blow such rocks apart."

Bilaam did advise Balak. He related to him a method to effect Klal Yisrael's destruction. They cannot be destroyed by physical means, by conventional warfare. Too many people have attempted to crush us, to destroy us as a nation, to wipe us out as a people. They have failed. They might prevail in one country, only to observe us flourishing anew in another country. We are unlike any other nation. The only way to destroy Klal Yisrael is from within, by making us break with the past.

Klal Yisrael settled in Shittim. Bilaam knew that luring the men away from their families, husbands from their wives, fathers from their children, and children from their parents, would break the link, snap the chain, detach them from their secure anchorage. Yes indeed, whenever the past has been something of which we were ashamed, something we sought to conceal, a lifestyle and culture from which we sought severance, Bilaam has triumphed. Let us remember to build the future upon the foundation of the past.

And he (Balak) sent messengers to Bilaam ben Be'or. (22:5)

Bilaam's reputation was enviable in his pagan context. Indeed, employing the forces of tumah, impurity, he became a leader and prophet among the pagans. Chazal present their own description of this unsavory person. In Pirke Avos 5:19 they say, "Whoever has the following three traits is among the disciples of our forefather, Avraham, and whoever has three different traits are from the disciples of the wicked Bilaam. Those who have a good eye, a humble spirit and a meek soul are among Avraham's talmidim. In contrast, those who have an evil eye, an arrogant spirit and a greedy soul are among Bilaam's disciples. How do the disciples of Avraham differ from the disciples of Bilaam? The disciples of Avraham enjoy the fruits of their good deeds in this world and inherit Olam Habah. On the other hand, the disciples of Bilaam inherit Gehinom and descend into the well of destruction." The Tanna of the Mishnah is clear in maintaining that the character of Bilaam was reflected in his disciples' traits. Why does the Tanna distinguish between Avraham Avinu's talmidim and those of Bilaam? Why not simply differentiate between Avraham Avinu and Bilaam? What purpose is there in particularly focusing upon their disciples?

Horav Shlomo Heyman, zl, offers a profound explanation of this Mishnah. The Tanna wondered what would attract someone who lived in Avraham Avinu's generation to the Patriarch? It was a period in history when the world population had sunk to the nadir of idol-worship. Monotheism was preached by one person alone, Avraham. Why would anyone leave the commonly accepted status quo to follow the Patriarch?

We may ask the same question concerning Bilaam's disciples. They lived in a period in which Hashem's Shechinah was clearly manifest. Miracles were daily occurrences. One nation sought to wage war with the Jews after the Egyptian exodus. This was the nation of Amalek. This conflict became a

history lesson for others, asserting Klal Yisrael's affiliation with the Almighty. Why, then, would someone gravitate to Bilaam harasha? What qualities did Bilaam exhibit that would inspire a person to ignore gadlus HaBoreh, the greatness of Hashem, to become Bilaam's disciple?

The Tanna enlightens us with a characterization of Avraham and Bilaam's middos, character traits. Avraham Avinu's talmidim exemplified middos tovos, good character traits. They distinguished themselves in their character refinement: a good eye, a humble spirit and a meek soul. Popular opinion did not influence them. They did not capitulate to a society drowning in tumah, immorality, and self-worship. They were not washed away by the waves of paganism and perversion. They transcended society's depraved culture and followed Avraham. They believed in Hashem. Bilaam's disciples also transcended the world's religious philosophy. They were not moved by the miracles. They ignored the Revelation. They did not find the clear manifestation of the Almighty's power remarkable. They saw light when it was dark and vice versa. Their nefarious character traits motivated them to gravitate to Bilaam.

This is the origin of all kefirah, apostasy - middos. One whose middos have degenerated will do anything, regardless of the repugnancy of the act. All of the world's ills stem from a deficiency in middos tovos. People are not bad; they have bad middos. If their character traits are refined by Torah they will, in turn, become bnei Torah -- talmidei Avraham Avinu and the standard bearers of Judaism.

Hashem opened the mouth of the she-donkey and it said to Bilaam, "What have I done to you that you have struck me these three times?" (22:28)

Chazal note that the Torah does not use the word "pe'omim," which means "times." Rather, the Torah uses the word "regalim" which is an allusion to the Shalosh Regalim, Three Festivals -- when Klal Yisrael went on Pilgrimage to Yerushalayim -- and to the Bais Hamikdash. Bilaam wished to harm a nation whose devotion to Hashem was so strong, whose commitment so intense, that they left their fields and homes three times each year to serve Hashem in Yerushalayim. How could Bilaam think that the Almighty would permit him to harm such a dedicated nation? It is interesting to note that from the vast array of mitzvos that the Jew performs, the Torah emphasized the mitzvah of Pilgrimage during the Three Festivals as catalyzing praise for Klal Yisrael. Why? What is unique about the Shalosh Regalim that their observance is considered our greatest attribute?

Horav Mordechai Rogov, zl, takes a novel approach towards interpreting the words of Chazal. The Torah is alluding to Klal Yisrael's resistance to change. We have had the Torah for thousands of years and never have we changed one iota of it. We have never added anything to the Torah or to Jewish life that does not have its origin in the Torah. We have undergone and survived various catastrophies, some of which might suggest the need for a formal celebration. While our emunah, trust, in the Almighty becomes stronger, we do not initiate a new festival. The Torah has sanctioned three festivals, and that is to be the extent of our series.

The ability to contain our joy, constrain our celebration, and refrain from creating another festival that is not established by the Torah, is indicative of an extraordinary commitment to the Torah. In the Midrash Rus, Chazal tell us how the zekeinim and neviim, elders and prophets, were distressed before adding Purim as an official holiday. How could they add to the Torah a festival which its Divine Author had not included. Their anxiety was assuaged only after Hashem illuminated their eyes, so that they discovered allusions to Purim in Tanach.

Bilaam's she-donkey told her master: A nation whose allegiance is so steadfast that it will be self-sacrificed in order to preserve the integrity and immortality of the Torah, will not fall prey to your curses. If we would only retain that sense of fidelity, we might have less to fear from the Bilaams of every generation.

Behold! It is a nation who shall dwell alone and not be reckoned among nations. (23:9)

Bilaam was an archetypal anti-semitic. His ability to master the double-entendre is manifest in his description of the Jewish people. He portrays the Jews as a "people who shall dwell alone." He seems to be saying that the Jewish people have the ability to resist assimilation, to weather the tide of paganism and immorality that characterize secular society. That is what he seems to be saying. In reality, Bilaam was offering a critique of the Jewish people. He was branding them for their exclusivity, labeling them as reclusive and unsociable isolationists. Historically, the anti-semites reviled us for not distancing ourselves from the surrounding pagans. They vilified us for being different and keeping to ourselves. They denounced us as arrogant and ridiculed us for our lack of relationship with our pagan neighbors.

Bilaam's second compliment was even more ambivalent: "And (you) shall not be reckoned among the nations" is also an ambiguously laudatory remark. We are a nation unto ourselves with no reliance upon the nations of the world. Hashem is our G-d and Protector. Bilaam, however, did not mean that. He degraded us for not having national status on a par with the other nations of the world community. We have always been critiqued as a people who have no right to nationhood and no homeland. This characterization originated with Bilaam and has followed us for centuries. When you really think about it, Bilaam should not be blamed for his myopic view of our nationhood. To paraphrase Rabbeinu Saadia Gaon, our rights as a nation results from our allegiance to the Torah. "Ein umoseinu umah bli haTorah." Our nation is not a nation without the Torah. If some of us do not accept this dictum, how could we expect a degenerate such as Bilaam to understand our claim to national existence?

How goodly are your tents, O Yaakov, your dwelling places, O Yisrael. (24:5)

As we enter the shul, our daily encounter with the Almighty begins with the pasuk that Bilaam recited. Let us put this into perspective. Bilaam was impressed and inspired by Klal Yisrael's modesty and sensitivity to privacy issues, as evidenced by the arrangement of their tents. Bilaam was the paradigm of evil, a man whose sense of morality was so eroded that he sought to destroy Klal Yisrael through debauchery. He fully comprehended that Hashem despises licentiousness. He recognized Hashem's reaction to Klal Yisrael's promiscuous attraction to the daughters of Moav. Yet, during a brief moment of spiritual ascendancy, granted to him by Hashem, he realized the inherent relationship between Klal Yisrael and tznius, modesty/ morality. He understood that tznius is part of our national psyche, an integral component in our character. He sensed this unique aspect of the Jewish People and expressed it in praise of them. This is how we begin each day. It is remarkable that the first thing that should enter our minds when we enter a shul is tznius. Obviously, our shuls ought to reflect this concept.

Kol Yehudah renders a homiletic interpretation of this pasuk. Ohel, tent, implies impermanence. The ohel refers to the layman whose time allotted for Torah study is, at best, part-time. Being kovea

ittim la' Torah, designating certain times during the day for the specific purpose of Torah study, is truly a praiseworthy endeavor. The individual may not necessarily become an accomplished talmid chachom, Torah scholar, but his children will. Children emulate what they observe at home. When they see their parents demonstrate esteem for Torah, they will follow suit. When they see that their fathers devote night or early morning to Torah study, they will have the proclivity to spend their entire day and night engrossed in limud ha'Torah. When a child sees his father dedicating his evening to secular/recreational pursuits, the message he receives concerning the value of Torah study is equally clear.

This is the pasuk's message, "How goodly are your tents, o'Yaakov." The term Yaakov refers to the lay people. These individuals are fortunate when they are able to study Torah even temporarily, as implied by the term, "tents." One day they will merit to see their sons in the "dwelling places" of Yisrael. Both terms, "Yisrael" and "dwelling places," signify permanence and constancy. If the parents' learning is on the level of "tents," it will achieve a "dwelling place" in the lives of the children.

Behold! A man of Bnei Yisrael came and brought a Midyanite woman near to his brothers in sight of Moshe and in sight of the entire assembly of Bnei Yisrael; and they were weeping at the entrance of the Ohel Moed. (25:6)

Rashi attributes the weeping to the fact that Moshe "forgot" the law regarding a "boel aramis." This law states that one who publicly cohabits with a gentile may be slayed by kanaim, true zealots. Hashem caused Moshe to forget, so that Pinchas could react and merit the blessing he received. Pinchas reminded Moshe of the law, but Moshe told him to take action, claiming that the one who made the law known should execute it. Horav Simcha Zissel Broide, Shlita, comments on the remarkable lesson to be derived from this pasuk. If Hashem decrees that a person should attain a certain position, achieve a specific goal, accomplish a definite objective, it will happen, regardless of the overwhelming obstacles he must overcome. Moshe Rabbeinu, the Rabbon Shel Kol Yisrael, was the quintessential teacher of our People. He was the man who transcended this world and was welcomed in Heaven, who stood up to fiery angels during Kabbolas HaTorah. It is incredible that the man who resisted Klal Yisrael during the sin of the Golden Calf and then entreated Hashem on their behalf should forget halachah. Moshe would only forget a halachah with Hashem's specific intervention. This occurred so that Pinchas would remember, take action, and receive his reward.

Let us turn to look at ourselves and others who devise strategies, go to great lengths to follow them through and take significant risks. At times, we risk our health and welfare and -- by inference -- that of our families, in pursuit of our goals. Do we ever stop to think that Hashem "also" has a plan, one that will reach fruition regardless of our own manipulation? It would be wise to trust in Him, rather than work against Him. Everyone receives that which he deserves. If we keep this in mind, we might cause less harm to ourselves and to those around us.