

In this week's *Parashah*, Balak hires Bil'am to curse *Bnei Yisrael*. Bil'am declares, however (23:8), "How can I curse? *Elokim* has not cursed! How can I express anger? *Hashem* is not angry!" R' Yitzchak Isaac Chaver z"l (1789-1852; rabbi of Suvalk, Lithuania) explains Bil'am's words as follows: It is impossible for me to curse *Bnei Yisrael*, for the Source of All Blessings dwells among them. "Bad" is the absence of *Hashem's* revelation, as we read (*Devarim* 31:17), "I will conceal My face from them and [then] they will become prey." A curse, Bil'am understood, can take hold only where *Hashem's* "presence" is absent. Where *Hashem* is present, there is no anger, as we read (*Divrei Ha'yamim I* 16:27), "Might and joy are in His place."

When *Hashem* conceals Himself, the agents of Strict Justice are permitted to operate. They are known as *Hashem's* "anger," R' Chaver writes. The degree to which *Hashem* conceals Himself determines the extent to which "anger" can rule. Even when *Hashem* is "angry," the world continues to exist, because *Hashem* does not absent Himself completely. Instead, He draws a line, so-to-speak, as if to say: "The messengers of Strict Justice can operate until here, but no farther."

Bil'am continued (verse 9): "For from its origins, I see it rock-like, and from hills I do see it." The "rock," say our Sages, is a reference to Avraham Avinu. *Hashem* does not "dwell" with an ordinary individual, for he is incomplete; He dwells only with the nation as a whole. Bil'am was acknowledging why the Divine Presence was found among *Bnei Yisrael*--it was because of the unity and "wholeness" that came from being descendants of one man: Avraham. (*Drush L'Shabbat Ha'gadol*)

## Shemittah

*Midrash Mechilta* considers--and ultimately rejects--the possibility that *Shabbat*--the Sabbath Day--need not be observed during the *Shemittah*--the Sabbath Year. Though the *Midrash* rejects this idea, the fact that it could even be entertained hints at significant connections between *Shabbat* and *Shemittah*. In this space, we are exploring those connections.

We read in the *Aseret Ha'dibrot* (*Shmot* 20:8, 11), "Remember the *Shabbat* day to sanctify it. . . for in six days *Hashem* made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and He rested on the seventh day. Therefore, *Hashem* blessed the *Shabbat* day and sanctified it." R' Moshe Mes z"l (Przemsyl, Poland; died 1606) observes: The Torah does not give a reason for any of the other "Ten Commandments." Why does the Torah give a reason for the *Mitzvah* of *Shabbat*?

He answers: *Midrash Rabbah* relates that, when *Bnei Yisrael* were slaves in Egypt, Moshe convinced Pharaoh that even slaves need a day off. Pharaoh told Moshe to pick a day, and Moshe responded that it is not productive to work on the seventh day of the week because of the alignment of the stars on that day. Lest we think that the *Mitzvah* of resting on *Shabbat* is for our health or because of the stars' alignment, the Torah makes clear that it is not so. Says the Torah: The reason for observing *Shabbat* is that doing so testifies that *Hashem* created the world.

The same is true of the *Shemittah* year. We might have thought that the purpose of leaving our fields fallow is so they will rest and rejuvenate. No, says the Torah, it is a "*Shabbat La'Hashem*" / "a Sabbath for *Hashem*" (*Vayikra* 25:2). It may very well be good for the land to rest one year out of seven, but that is not the reason for this *Mitzvah*. Rather, like resting on the seventh day, resting in the seventh year testifies to Creation.

(*Mateh Moshe* 473)

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**“Balak said to him, ‘Go now with me to a different place from which you will see them; however, you will see its edge but not see all of it--and you will curse it for me from there.’” (23:13)**

R’ Shmuel Zanvil Chaim Turner z”l (Poland; late 19<sup>th</sup> century) writes: Balak was telling Bil’am, “Look only at the fringes, at the lowliest members, of the Jewish People, for it is impossible to curse all of *Bnei Yisrael*.” As a whole, the Jewish People’s deeds are beautiful, for they compensate for each other’s shortcomings.

This, writes R’ Turner, is the meaning of the well-known verse (*Yeshayah* 60:21), “And your people, they are all righteous . . .” As a whole, all of the Jewish People are righteous. Likewise, this is the meaning of the verse (*Shir Ha’shirim* 4:7), “All of you is beautiful, My beloved, and there is no blemish in you.” (*Derech Chaim: She’eirit Yehuda*)

*A related thought:*

R’ Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook z”l (1865-1935; first *Ashkenazic* Chief Rabbi of *Eretz Yisrael*) writes: The great love that we have for our people does not blind us to its faults. However, even after the most exacting inspection of those faults, we still find our people to be free of inherent blemishes, as it is written (*Shir Ha’shirim* 4:7), “All of you is beautiful, My beloved, and there is no blemish in you.” (*Orot Yisrael* 4:3)

R’ Nachman of Breslov z”l (1772-1810; Ukraine) writes: The most pitiful thing is when *Yisrael*, the holy nation, falls into sin, may Heaven protect us. All the suffering in the world is nothing compared to the weight of sin.

He continues: One who knows the holiness of *Yisrael*--from whence they come, their spirituality, and their fine nature--knows how removed they are from sin. Given their great holiness, sin has no connection to them at all.

How then does one of *Yisrael* sin? Rabbi Nachman asks. It happens only when his *Da’at* / sense fails him. The *Gemara* (*Sotah* 3a) teaches: “A person does not sin unless a spirit of lunacy has entered him.” Thus, a sinner deserves our pity and our help returning to his sense.

(*Likkutei Moharan* II 7:3)

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In this light, R’ Luria adds, we can understand Bil’am’s words (23:20), “Behold! to bless have I received--He has blessed, and I shall not contradict it.” Besides referring to *Hashem*, this verse can mean: It was my desire to bless *Bnei Yisrael*, as we read (*Bereishit* 32:1), “Lavan awoke early in the morning; he kissed his sons and his daughters and blessed them.” I cannot now retract that blessing and curse them.

(*Meshivat Nafesh*)

**“Hinei / Behold! A people has come out of *Mitzrayim* / Egypt . . .” (22:5)**

R’ Moshe Yehoshua Hager z”l (1916-2012; *Vizhnitzer Rebbe*) writes allegorically: “*Hinei*” (הִנֵּה) is an acronym of “*Ha’Shabbat noam ha’neshamot*” / “the *Shabbat* is the pleasure of the souls.” Through observing *Shabbat*, our verse hints, one can come out of his own “*Mitzrayim*,” i.e., his personal physical and spiritual troubles.

This, of course, presumes that one observes *Shabbat* correctly. “*Shabbat*” (שַׁבָּת) is an acronym of “*Shabbat bo tashuv*” / “on *Shabbat* you will return [to *Hashem*].” In particular, *Shabbat* is a time for repentance, and one who repents gets a clean slate. In this vein, the *Vizhnitzer Rebbe* quotes his father, R’ Chaim Meir Hager z”l (1887-1972; the prior *Vizhnitzer Rebbe*): “We read (*Vayikra* 9:1), “*Va’yehi*/ And it happened on the eighth day. . .” The *Gemara* (*Megillah* 10b) teaches that the word “*Va’yehi*” is an expression of sadness. Allegorically, the verse is stating: How sad it is when a person has an “eighth” day! Had he repented properly on *Shabbat*, *Shabbat* would have been followed by a “first” day, i.e., a clean slate, not by an eighth day. (*Yeshuot Moshe*)

**“They came to Bil’am and said to him, ‘So said Balak son of Tzippor, ‘Do not refrain from going to me.’” (22:16)**

R’ Shlomo Oheiv z”l (Ragusa, Italy; late 1500s) writes: Commentaries ask why Balak said, “Do not refrain from going to me,” when he should have said, “Do not refrain from coming to me.” It appears to me, writes R’ Oheiv, that this was intended to show honor to Bil’am. Generally, a lesser person “comes” to a greater person. Therefore, Balak did not say to Bil’am, “Come to me.” Rather, Balak used words that could be understood to mean, “As you are going about your own business, please go in my direction.”

(*Shemen Ha’tov*)

**“The angel of *Hashem* stood in the path of the vineyards, a fence on this side and a fence on that side.” (22:24)**

*Rashi* z”l writes: The term “*Gader*” / “fence,” without further definition, is one of stone. [Until here from *Rashi*]

R’ Yochanan Luria z”l (1440-1511; Alsace) asks: How does *Rashi* know that the fence was made of stone. Maybe it was made of wood?

He answers: *Kabbalists* say that Bil’am was a *Gilgul* / reincarnation of the soul of Lavan, who had taken an oath (*Bereishit* 31:52), “This mound [of stones] shall be witness, and the monument shall be witness, that I may not cross over to you past this mound . . .” The mound of stones became the fence on either side that tried to remind Lavan/Bil’am of his oath.

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