

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Chukat-Balak
July 4, 2020 *** 12 Tammuz, 5780

Kol Rina – An Independent Minyan, is a traditional egalitarian community. We are haimish (homey/folksy), friendly, participatory, warm and welcoming. We hold weekly services in South Orange as well as holiday services and celebrations which are completely lay led. We **welcome all** to our services and programs from non-Hebrew readers to Jewish communal and education professionals.

Chukat-Balak in a Nutshell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/2219/jewish/Chukat-Balak-in-a-Nutshell.htm

Moses is taught the laws of the Red Heifer, whose ashes purify a person who has been contaminated by contact with a dead body.

After 40 years of journeying through the desert, the people of Israel arrive in the wilderness of Zin. Miriam dies and the people thirst for water. G-d tells Moses to speak to a rock and command it to give water. Moses gets angry at the rebellious Israelites and strikes the stone. Water issues forth, but Moses is told by G-d that neither he nor Aaron will enter the Promised Land.

Aaron dies at Hor Hahar and is succeeded in the High Priesthood by his son Elazar. Venomous snakes attack the Israelite camp after yet another eruption of discontent in which the people "speak against G-d and Moses"; G-d tells Moses to place a brass serpent upon a high pole, and all who will gaze heavenward will be healed. The people sing a song in honor of the miraculous well that provided the water in the desert. Moses leads the people in battles against the Emorite kings Sichon and Og (who seek to prevent Israel's passage through their territory) and conquers their lands, which lie east of the Jordan.

Balak, the King of Moab, summons the prophet Balaam to curse the people of Israel. On the way, Balaam is berated by his donkey, who sees the angel that G-d sends to block their way before Balaam does. Three times, from three different vantage points, Balaam attempts to pronounce his curses; each time, blessings issue instead. Balaam also prophecies on the end of days and the coming of Moshiach.

The people fall prey to the charms of the daughters of Moab and are enticed to worship the idol Peor. When a high-ranking Israelite official publicly takes a Midianite princess into a tent, Pinchas kills them both, stopping the plague raging among the people.

Chukat-Balak Haftarah in a Nutshell - Micah 5:6-6:8.

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/895314/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm

This week's *haftarah* makes mention of the incident of Balak the king of Moab hiring the sorcerer Balaam to curse the Jewish people — the main topic of this week's Torah reading.

The prophet Micah prophesies about what will occur after the war of Gog and Magog, the war which precedes the coming of the Messiah and the Final Redemption.

"And the remnant of Jacob shall be in the midst of many peoples — like dew sent by G-d, like torrents of rain upon vegetation that does not hope for any man and does not wait for the sons of men." The prophet describes how G-d will remove the idols and sorcerers and how He will destroy the Jews' enemies.

The prophet Micah then goes on to rebuke the Jewish people for not observing G-d's commandments, calling as witness the "mountains and hills" — a reference to the Patriarchs and Matriarchs — and reminding them of the great things G-d had done for them. He took them out of Egypt and replaced the curses that Balaam son of Beor wanted to utter against them with blessings.

The Jewish people respond by saying that they do not know how to serve G-d and ask for guidance. The prophet reminds them of the Torah, and that all they need to do is contained within it: "He has told you, O man, what is good, and what G-d demands of you: but to do justice, love kindness, and walk discreetly with your G-d."

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Kohelet, Tolstoy and the Red Heifer (Chukat-Balak 5780) by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

<https://rabbisacks.org/chukat-5780/>

The command of the parah adumah, the Red Heifer, with which our parsha begins, is known as the hardest of the mitzvot to understand. The opening words, zot chukat ha-Torah, are taken to mean, this is the supreme example of a chok in the Torah, that is, a law whose logic is obscure, perhaps unfathomable.

It was a ritual for the purification of those who had been in contact with, or in, certain forms of proximity to a dead body. A dead body is the primary source of impurity, and the defilement it caused to the living meant that the person so affected could not enter the precincts of the Tabernacle or Temple until cleansed, in a process that lasted seven days.

A key element of the purification process involved a Priest sprinkling the person so affected, on the third and seventh day, with a specially prepared liquid known as "the water of cleansing." First a Red Heifer had to be found, without a blemish, and which had never been used to perform work: a yoke had never been placed on it. This was ritually killed and burned outside the camp. Cedar wood, hyssop, and scarlet wool were added to the fire, and the ashes placed in a vessel containing "living" i.e. fresh water. It was this that was sprinkled on those who had become impure by contact with death. One of the more paradoxical features of the rite is that though it cleansed the impure, it rendered impure those who were involved with the preparation of the water of cleansing.

Though the ritual has not been practised since the days of the Temple, it nonetheless remains significant, in itself and for an understanding of what a chok, usually translated as "statute," actually is. Other instances include the prohibition against eating meat and milk together, wearing clothes of mixed wool and linen (shatnez) and sowing a field with two kinds of grain (kilayim). There have been several very different explanations of chukim.

The most famous is that a chok is a law whose logic we cannot understand. It makes sense to God, but it makes no sense to us. We cannot aspire to the kind of cosmic wisdom that would allow us to see its point and purpose. Or perhaps, as Rav Saadia Gaon put it, it is a command issued for no other reason than to reward us for obeying it.[1]

The Sages recognised that whereas Gentiles might understand Jewish laws based on social justice (mishpatim) or historical memory (edot), commands such as the prohibition of eating meat and milk together seemed irrational and superstitious. The chukim were laws of which “Satan and the nations of the world made fun.”[2] Maimonides had a quite different view. He believed that no Divine command was irrational. To suppose otherwise was to think God inferior to human beings.

The chukim only appear to be inexplicable because we have forgotten the original context in which they were ordained. Each of them was a rejection of, and education against, some idolatrous practice. For the most part, however, such practises have died out, which is why we now find the commands hard to understand.[3]

A third view, adopted by Nahmanides in the thirteenth century[4] and further articulated by Samson Raphael Hirsch in the nineteenth, is that the chukim were laws designed to teach the integrity of nature. Nature has its own laws, domains and boundaries, to cross which is to dishonour the divinely created order, and to threaten nature itself. So we do not combine animal (wool) and vegetable (linen) textiles, or mix animal life (milk) and animal death (meat). As for the Red Heifer, Hirsch says that the ritual is to cleanse humans from depression brought about by reminders of human mortality.

My own view is that chukim are commands deliberately intended to bypass the rational brain, the pre-frontal cortex. The root from which the word chok comes is h-k-k, meaning, “to engrave.” Writing is on the surface; engraving cuts much deeper than the surface. Rituals go deep below the surface of the mind, and for an important reason. We are not fully rational animals, and we can make momentous mistakes if we think we are. We have a limbic system, an emotional brain. We also have an extremely powerful set of reactions to potential danger, located in the amygdala, that lead us to flee, freeze or fight. A moral system, to be adequate to the human condition, must recognise the nature of the human condition. It must speak to our fears.

The most profound fear most of us have is of death. As La Rochefoucauld said, “Neither the sun nor death can be looked on with a steady eye.” Few have explored death and the tragic shadow it casts over life more profoundly than the author of Kohelet (Ecclesiastes):

“The fate of man is the fate of cattle; the same fate awaits them both, the death of one is like the death of the other, their spirits are the same, and the pre-eminence of man over beast is nothing, for it is all shallow breath. All end in the same place; all emerge from dust and all go back to dust” (Eccl. 3:19-20).

The knowledge that he will die robs Kohelet of any sense of the meaningfulness of life. We have no idea what will happen, after our death, to what we have achieved in life.

Death makes mockery of virtue: the hero may die young while the coward lives to old age. And bereavement is tragic in a different way. To lose those we love is to have the fabric of our life torn, perhaps irreparably. Death defiles in the simplest, starkest sense: mortality opens an abyss between us and God's eternity.

It is this fear, existential and elemental, to which the rite of the Heifer is addressed. The animal itself is the starkest symbol of pure, animal life, untamed, undomesticated. The red, like the scarlet of the wool, is the colour of blood, the essence of life. The cedar, tallest of trees, represents vegetative life. The hyssop symbolises purity. All these were reduced to ash in the fire, a powerful drama of mortality. The ash itself was then dissolved in water, symbolising continuity, the flow of life, and the potential of rebirth. The body dies but the spirit flows on. A generation dies but another is born. Lives may end but life does not. Those who live after us continue what we began, and we live on in them. Life is a never-ending stream, and a trace of us is carried onward to the future.

The person in modern times who most deeply experienced and expressed what Kohelet felt was Tolstoy, who told the story in his essay, *A Confession*.^[5] By the time he wrote it, in his early fifties, he had already published two of the greatest novels ever written, *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*. His literary legacy was secure. His greatness was universally recognised. He was married, with children. He had a large estate. His health was good. Yet he was overcome with a sense of the meaninglessness of life in the face of the knowledge that we will all die. He quoted Kohelet at length. He contemplated suicide. The question that haunted him was: "Is there any meaning in my life that will not be annihilated by the inevitability of death which awaits me?"^[6]

He searched for an answer in science, but all it told him was that "in the infinity of space and the infinity of time infinitely small particles mutate with infinite complexity." Science deals in causes and effects, not purpose and meaning. In the end, he concluded that only religious faith rescues life from meaninglessness. "Rational knowledge, as presented by the learned and wise, negates the meaning of life."^[7] What is needed is something other than rational knowledge. "Faith is the force of life. If a man lives, then he must believe in something ... If he does understand the illusion of the finite, he is bound to believe in the infinite. Without faith it is impossible to live."^[8]

That is why, to defeat the defilement of contact with death, there must be a ritual that bypasses rational knowledge. Hence the rite of the Red Heifer, in which death is dissolved in the waters of life, and those on whom it is sprinkled are made pure again so that they can enter the precincts of the Shechinah and re-establish contact with eternity.

We no longer have the Red Heifer and its seven-day purification ritual, but we do have the shiva, the seven days of mourning during which we are comforted by others and thus reconnected with life. Our grief is gradually dissolved by the contact with friends and family, as the ashes of the Heifer were dissolved in the "living water." We emerge,

still bereaved, but in some measure cleansed, purified, able again to face life. I believe that we can emerge from the shadow of death if we allow ourselves to be healed by the God of life. To do so, though, we need the help of others. “A prisoner cannot release himself from prison,”[9] says the Talmud. It took a Kohen to sprinkle the waters of cleansing. It takes comforters to lift our grief. But faith – faith from the world of chok, deeper than the rational mind – can help cure our deepest fears. Shabbat Shalom. [1] Saadia Gaon, *Beliefs and Opinions*, Book III. [2] Yoma 67b. [3] *The Guide for the Perplexed*, III:31. [4] *Commentary to Leviticus 19:19*. [5] Leo Tolstoy, *A Confession and Other Religious Writings*, Penguin Classics, 1987. [6] *Ibid.*, 35. [7] *Ibid.*, 50. [8] *Ibid.*, 54. [9] Brachot 5b.

The Hidden Meaning of the Bilam Story (Balak 5780) by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

<https://rabbisacks.org/balak-5780/>

Many questions have rightly been asked about the story of Balak and Bilam and the would-be curses that turned into blessings. Was Bilam a true man of God, or was he a fraud, a magician, a sorcerer, a practitioner of dark arts? Did he have genuine powers? Was he really – as some of the Sages said – the equal of Moses?[1] Was he driven by the prospect of reward and honour from the Moabites and Midianites, or was he motivated by animosity toward the Israelites and their seeming closeness to God? Why did God first tell him not to go, then seemingly change His mind and tell him to go? What is the meaning of the episode of the talking donkey? Did it really happen, or was it, as Maimonides argued, a vision in Bilam’s mind?[2]

These are real questions, much debated. But there are more fundamental ones. What is the story doing here at all? The entire episode occurred away from the Israelites. No one from their side, not even Moses, was there to witness it. The only witnesses were Balak, Bilam, and some Moabite princes. Had the Israelites known the danger they were in, and how they were saved from it, it would have given them pause for thought before engaging in immorality and idol worship with the Moabite women, in the episode that follows on immediately from the story of Bilam. They would have known that the Moabites were not their friends.

Even Moses would not have known what happened, had God not told him. In short, the Israelites were rescued from a danger they knew nothing about by a deliverance they knew nothing about. How then did it, or could it, affect them?

Besides which, why did God need Bilam to go at all? He said ‘No’ the first time. He could have said ‘No’ the second time also. The curses would have been avoided, Israel would have been protected, and there would have been no need for the angel, the talking donkey and the various locations, sacrifices, and attempted curses. The entire drama seems to have been unnecessary.

Why did God put into Bilam’s mouth the extraordinary poetry that makes the blessings among the most lyrical passages in the Torah. All He really needed Bilam to say – and Bilam did eventually say it[3] – was the promise He gave to Abraham: “I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse” (Gen. 12:3).

Who was to be affected by this episode? What was the intended change it was meant

to bring about? Who was its target audience? It did not affect the Moabites. They proceeded to get their women to successfully entice the Israelite men. A plague then struck the Israelites, taking 24,000 lives.

It did not affect the Midianites, whose hostility to Israel was such that God later told Moses: “Treat the Midianites as enemies and kill them” (Num. 25:17-18). Several chapters later God instructed Moses to take military vengeance against them (Numbers 31).

It did not affect Bilam himself. The Torah is very subtle about this. First, we read about the Moabite seduction of the Israelites and the deadly plague it caused. Then, six chapters later, we read that in the course of the war against the Midianites, Bilam was killed (31:8). Then, several verses later, “They were the ones who followed Bilam’s advice and enticed the Israelites to be unfaithful to the Lord in the Peor incident, so that a plague struck the Lord’s people” (Num. 31:16). In other words, having gone through what should surely have been a transformative experience of finding curses turned to blessings in his mouth, Bilam remained implacably opposed to the people he had blessed, and seemingly to the God who put the words into his mouth, and was still capable of devising a plot to injure the Israelites.

It did not change the Israelites, who remained vulnerable to the Moabites, Midianites, and the enticements of sex, food and foreign gods. It did not change Moses, who left it to Pinchas to take the decisive act that stopped the plague and was soon thereafter told that Joshua would succeed him as leader.

So, if it did not change the Moabites, Midianites, Israelites, Bilam or Moses, what was the point of the episode? What role did it play in the story of our people? For it does play a significant role. In Deuteronomy, Moses reminds the people that the Moabites “did not come to meet you with bread and water on your way when you came out of Egypt, and they hired Bilam son of Beor from Pethor in Aram Naharaim to pronounce a curse on you. However, the Lord your God would not listen to Bilam but turned the curse into a blessing for you, because the Lord your God loves you” (Deut. 23:4-5).

Joshua, when he came to renew the covenant after the conquest of the land, gave an abridged summary of Jewish history, singling out this event for attention: “When Balak son of Zippor, the king of Moab, prepared to fight against Israel, he sent for Bilam son of Beor to put a curse on you. But I would not listen to Bilam, so he blessed you again and again, and I delivered you out of his hand.” (Josh. 24:9-10).

The prophet Micah, younger contemporary of Isaiah, said in the name of God, “My people, remember what Balak king of Moab plotted and what Bilam son of Beor answered,” just before he delivers his famous summary of the religious life: “He has shown you, O man, what is good and what the Lord requires of you: to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Mic. 6:5, 8).

At the culmination of the reforms instituted by Ezra and Nehemiah after the Babylonian exile, Nehemiah had the Torah read to the people, reminding them that an Ammonite or Moabite may not enter “the assembly of the Lord” because “they did not

meet the Israelites with food and water but had hired Bilam to call a curse down on them. Our God, however, turned the curse into a blessing” (Neh. 13:2).

Why the resonance of an event that seemingly had no impact on any of the parties involved, made no difference to what happened thereafter and yet was deemed to be so important that it occupied a central place in the telling of Israel’s story by Moses, Joshua, Micah and Nehemiah?

The answer is fundamental. We search in vain for an explanation of why God should have made a covenant with a people who repeatedly proved to be ungrateful, disobedient and faithless. God Himself threatened twice to destroy the people, after the Golden Calf and the episode of the spies. Toward the end of our parsha, He sent a plague against them.

There were other religious peoples in the ancient world. The Torah calls Malkizedek, Abraham’s contemporary, “a priest of God most high.” (Gen. 14:18). Yitro, Moses’ father-in-law, was a Midianite priest who gave his son-in-law sound advice as to how to lead. In the book of Jonah, during the storm, while Jonah the Hebrew Prophet was sleeping, the Gentile sailors were praying. When the Prophet arrived at Nineveh and delivered his warning, immediately the people repented, something that happened rarely in Judah/Israel. Malachi, last of the Prophets, says:

From where the sun rises to where it sets, My name is honoured among the nations, and everywhere incense and pure oblation are offered to My name; for My name is honoured among the nations – said the Lord of Hosts – but you profane it ...” (Mal. 1:11-12)

Why then choose Israel? The answer is love. Virtually all the Prophets said so. God loves Israel. He loved Abraham. He loves Abraham’s children. He is often exasperated by their conduct, but He cannot relinquish that love. He explains this to the prophet Hosea. Go and marry a woman who is unfaithful, He says. She will break your heart, but you will still love her, and take her back (Hos. 1-3).

Where, though, in the Torah does God express this love? In the blessings of Bilam. That is where He gives voice to His feelings for this people. “I see them from the mountain tops, gaze on them from the heights: This is a people that dwells apart, not reckoned among the nations.” “Lo, a people that rises like a lion, leaps up like the king of beasts.” “How good are your tents, O Jacob, Your dwellings, O Israel!” These famous words are not Bilam’s. They are God’s – the most eloquent expression of His love for this small, otherwise undistinguished people.

Bilam, the pagan prophet, is the most unlikely vehicle for God’s blessings.[4] But that is God’s way. He chose an aged, infertile couple to be the grandparents of the Jewish people. He chose a man who couldn’t speak to be the mouthpiece of his word. He chose Bilam, who hated Israel, to be the messenger of His love. Moses says explicitly: “The Lord your God would not listen to Bilam but turned the curse into a blessing for you, because the Lord your God loves you.”

That is what the story is about: not Balak, or Bilam, or Moab, or Midian, or what happened next. It is about God’s love for a people, their strength, resilience, their

willingness to be different, their family life (tents, dwelling places), and their ability to outlive empires.

The Rambam explains that all God's acts have a moral message for us.[5] I believe that God is teaching us that love can turn curses into blessings. It is the only force capable of defeating hate. Love heals the wounds of the world.

Shabbat Shalom [1] Sifrei Deuteronomy 357. [2] Guide for the Perplexed, II:42. For Nahmanides' critical view on Maimonides' approach, see his Commentary to Gen. 18:1.

[3] Num. 24:9: "May those who bless you be blessed, and those who curse you be cursed!" Earlier, 23:8, he had said, "How can I curse those whom God has not cursed?" [4] However, Devarim Rabbah 1:4 suggests that God chose Bilam to bless the Israelites because when an enemy blesses you, it cannot be dismissed as mere partiality.

[5] Hilchot Deot 1:6.

Parashat Hukat-Balak 5780 by Rabbi Len Levin

<https://ajrsem.org/teachings/divreitorah/>

We are reading two parshiyot this week, each rich in lessons. We can only present a few hors d'oeuvres here; enjoy the rest at your leisure!

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The ritual of the red heifer raised many puzzles for the rabbis, to the point that they said that the wise king Solomon, frustrated in trying to solve them, gave up in despair and said: "All this I tested with wisdom, I thought I could fathom it, but it eludes me." (Ecclesiastes 7:23; Pesikta Rabbati 14:1) The central mystery arises from the fact that it is a ritual for purification from contact with death. We are still struggling to understand the causes of death, which even now are evolving and mutating as we try to cope with them. A favorite question was: How is it that the ashes of the heifer are the agent of purification, yet the priest who prepares them is rendered unclean by them? Perhaps a contemporary analogy to this phenomenon is the doctor or nurse who spends all day healing the sick, who at the end of the day must throw all his or her garments into the laundry and take a long, hot shower to be purified of the residue of the day's work.

* * *

The portion of Balak and Balaam raises other challenges. In my adolescence, I was stimulated by the interpretation of Maurice Samuel (Certain People of the Book, Knopf 1955) which provided me with the kernel of my present understanding of this enigmatic pagan prophet.

The political and military conflict of Israel and Moab is accompanied by a propaganda and public relations competition. Balaam is an intellectual, with a much deeper understanding of the spiritual issues at stake than his employer, the king Balak. As intellectual, he perceives the truth. As hired public relations agent, he is paid to parrot a party line that he can see through all too clearly. He is caught between the demands of his pocketbook (see Numbers 22:17-18) and those of his intellectual conscience. Central to that inner conflict is the difference between two religious outlooks. In the pagan outlook, the gods are selfish beings who can be bribed through sacrifice and

manipulated through magic and divination. (Numbers 23:1, 23:13-14) In the Israelite outlook, God is the God of truth who cannot be bought, bribed, or manipulated. ("Lo, there is no augury in Jacob, no divining in Israel!"—Numbers 23:23) Balaam knows that God cannot be manipulated, yet he has been hired to manipulate God after the pagan fashion in order to coerce God to curse the Israelites. He tries to strike a balance: how much truth can he convey without alienating his employer? Can he somehow produce a result that will satisfy Balak while remaining within the bounds of God's truth?

The Israelite narrator has fun ridiculing this hypocritical pundit. We are reminded that the semantic connotation of "asinine" has an ancient history. A prophet who thinks he can bamboozle God must have a level of intelligence and spiritual sight inferior to that of his donkey. What the donkey can see—the arm of the angel stretched out to forbid his blasphemous journey—Balaam is blind to. (Numbers 22:31)

For the time being, integrity prevails and Balaam utters the classic blessing of Israel's habitations that even now adorns our synagogues and opens our prayer services (Numbers 24:5). But in the end, Balaam imparts to Balak his fatal knowledge of the Israelites' weak spot, leading to the spiritual disaster of Baal Peor (see Numbers 31:16), and he also suffers death for his collaborative role (Numbers 31:8).

Political leaders and their house intellectuals still conduct an uneasy partnership. The demands of power and truth often pull in different directions. The prophet Isaiah envisioned an ideal political leader imbued with the spirit of divinely inspired wisdom, counsel, and reverence (Isaiah 11:2). Such leaders are rare in the real world. In the meantime, those intellectuals who serve political leaders must balance the dictates of serving their masters and declaring truth to all those who seek it. (Rabbi Len Levin is professor of Jewish philosophy at AJR and editor of Studies in Judaism and Pluralism)

Learning From the Nations by Sophie Bigot-Goldblum

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Admitting we've learned astronomy from the Chaldeans and philosophy from the Greeks is something that the Jewish tradition has come to terms with. In a sense, less than conceding to the intellectual and scientific superiority of foreign nations, by admitting that there is wisdom among the nations, we are defending our holy turf: The Bible. Each nation has its field of excellence, but only Jews have been chosen as depositary of the Holy Word and the sole partner in God's covenant. True, the other nations may have inherited the mastery of science and art but none can claim knowing God like we do. Not too bad a deal.

However, time and time again, the Bible itself cunningly challenges this claim of exclusivity between God and the Jewish people. In Parshat Balak we hear of a man having direct contact with the God of Israel. This man's name is "Bal'am" which literally translates, "not of the people." Nevertheless, this "Bal'am" worships God, the God of the Israelites no less, as his own -'The Lord my God' (Numbers : 22:18) Through the prophecy he receives, he becomes the mouthpiece for God's blessing and

protection against the destructive ambitions of Balak - whose name means "devastator."

At first glance, Bal'am seems to be a perfect candidate for the title of "gentile ally." Here is a non-Israelite prophet who confirms our sense of the supremacy of our God. Bal'am states repeatedly that he cannot circumvent the wishes of the powerful God of the Israelites-if God refuses to curse Israel, then Balak's wishes will be thwarted. And yet, rabbinic tradition portrays him as a rather dubious character. Perhaps there is some level of ambiguity in the verses regarding Balaam's true heart's desire. The intensity of this criticism reveals discomfort with redemption, even so modest, coming from an outsider.

The Kli Yakar, a 16th century commentator from Prague writes about Bal'am: Hashem opened the mouth of the donkey: This, too, was a necessity for that specific time. It was intended to show Bal'am that he is comparable to this donkey which does not naturally speak but, only to honor Israel [...] Additionally, it was to prevent the nations of the world from claiming that if they were given prophets, they would have improved their ways.

And yet Bal'am is not the first non-Israelite to have a relationship with the God of Abraham. Before him, Hagar - whose name once again bears witness to her own estrangement-"ha-ger: the alien" - is, like Bal'am, visited by a "malakh haShem," an angel of the Lord. The angel's intervention saves her child, Ishmael, and even goes so far as to promise her his future greatness. The story of Hagar and Ishmael illustrates that God's mercy and redemption extend to the child of a foreign servant. The case of Bal'am shows that God's blessing can spring from a foreigner, that redemption's agents are just as unpredictable as redemption itself.

Like Bal'am with his wounded foot hitting the donkey who can feel what he does not see, it is our denial of the knowledge and wisdom of others that too often leads to violence and ultimately hurts us. Our parasha teaches us that we must acknowledge our own shortfalls and experience gratitude for all of the wisdom that God has granted to the nations of the world, the wisdom that we have already received from others, and for what is yet to be learned from foreign lips. (*Sophie Bigot-Goldblum was a student at the Conservative Yeshiva, 2018-19*)

[A World that Will Endure by Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein](http://campaign.r20.constantcontact.com/render?m=1102506082947&ca=c17e6287-0d34-499d-8346-b7bd20689032)

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Micah's opening prophecy presents an idyllic time when Israel's needs will be met without the need to rely on others. Israel itself will be considered both blessed and feared by those around it because God will be the source of their strength. (5:6-8) That which follows in Micah's message seems strange: "In that day, declares the Lord, I will destroy the horses in your midst and wreck your chariots. I will destroy the cities of your land and demolish all of your fortresses. I will destroy the sorcery you practice, and you shall have no more soothsayers. I will destroy your idols and the sacred pillars in your midst; and no more shall you bow down to the works of your hands. I will tear down the sacred posts in your midst and destroy your cities." (9-14)

These verses appear, at first glance, to be a punishment, but actually their intention is exactly the opposite. The essence of their message is that in idyllic times, there will be no need to depend on anybody or anything other than God. Weapons will be unnecessary, as will fortified cities. Security will be insured and as a consequence, human beings will shed the insecurity which leads them to dependence on false things.

This interpretation, which appears to be the correct one, is not without its difficulties. In particular, commentators seem to have had trouble seeing how a number of these promises were really blessings and developed creative interpretations to fit the difficult promises into this particular interpretation. Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra (13th century Spain) felt compelled to explain how removing the wall from a walled city (10) was a blessing since it endangered the inhabitants of the city. He explained that God would bring peace in order that the city dwellers would be able to enjoy fresh air instead of the stuffiness caused by the city walls.

Similarly, other commentators found difficulty in the last promise - that "[God would] destroy your cities" since, in part, this seems redundant and it also seems the most difficult to understand as a blessing. Already, Targum Yonathon, the Aramaic translation of the Prophets (7th century), attempted to rectify these difficulties by translating this phrase: "I will destroy your enemies" after finding a reference where the word "eer" means enemy.

Ultimately, God's promises in Micah's prophecy remain a profound reminder that the world should be a better place where insecurity will be replaced by Divine guidance, where human weakness will be replaced by divinely inspired assurance and where belief in God will hopefully lead to building the kind of world that would make God proud.

Yahrtzeits

- * Lenny Levin remembers his father Emanuel Levin on Tuesday July 7th (Tamuz 15)
- * Barry Ostrowsky remembers his father Abe Ostrowsky (Avraham ben Baruch) on Wednesday July 8th (Tamuz 16)
- * Ronni Klein remembers her mother Bette Liebowitz on Wednesday July 8th (Tamuz 16)
- * Linda Chandross remembers her mother Pearl Glick on Friday July 10th (Tamuz 18)