

Yad Avraham Institute
Weekly Torah Commentaries Series
Portion of Balak

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Presented By: Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky, *Shlita*

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About the Yad Avraham Institute

The Yad Avraham is a Torah learning institute located in midtown Manhattan. Classes are offered every day during the week starting at 5:50am and throughout the day. Classes in Chumash, Halacha, Hashkofa, Gemara, and general topics are well attended by businessmen, professionals, and students. The Yad Avraham invites you to participate in our extensive offerings of classes and events.

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Balak

Presented by

Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky, Shlita

Dean

1. Yitzchak's Words to His Son Esav, "By the sword you shall live"

The Torah tells us that when the Jewish people were in the desert they approached the territory of Edom in order to pass through their land to go into the Land of Canaan. The Torah states, **"Moshe sent emissaries from Kadesh to the king of Edom, 'So said your brother Israel: You know the hardship that has befallen us...let us pass through your border...(In Egypt) we cried out to Hashem and He heard our voice...'"** Rashi cites Chazal who explain that Moshe wanted to remind the king of Edom that their forefather Esav was the brother of Yaakov (Israel) who established the twelve tribes of Israel. Both of them were the children of Yitzchak. Moshe mentioned as part of his communication to the king of Edom that the Jewish people cried out to G'd and He redeemed them from Egypt. This was to communicate to Edom that the blessing that Yitzchak had given his son Yaakov was effective. The Torah states regarding Yitzchak's blessing to Yaakov, **"Hakol kol Yaakov... - the voice is the voice of Yaakov."** Chazal explain this statement to mean, that when the Jewish people utilize their "voice" as the "voice" of Yaakov, which is the use of the power of speech in the study of Torah and prayer, G'd will respond. Moshe thus alluded to Edom that the Jewish people were empowered with their power of speech and thus should be allowed to pass through the land of Edom.

The Torah continues, **"The king of Edom said to him, 'You shall not pass through me, lest I come against you with the sword!'"** Chazal explain that the king of Edom was not intimidated by Moshe's allusion to the power of speech of the Jew, but rather, he referred to the promise that Yitzchak had given his son Esav, **"By the sword you shall live."** The king of Edom believed that since they had the blessing of Yitzchak that they would live by the use of the sword, he need not be concerned by the power of Yaakov, that he was endowed with the power of prayer. However, the king of Edom actually misunderstood that Yitzchak, his forefather had said to Esav "By the sword you shall live." He understood that Yitzchak had given Esav a blessing that he and his descendants would be victorious through the sword. However, Yitzchak's words to Esav were not a blessing

but rather a quantification of the essence Esav. He was saying that Esav had relevance to spirituality, and therefore his essence relevance only within the material. There was no spiritual connection between Yitzchak and Esav. We see this misconception of the words of Yitzchak our Patriarch to Esav manifest itself in many other locations.

The Torah states regarding the war against the Midianites and the death of Bilaam, **"They killed the kings of Midian...and Bilaam son of Beor they slew with the sword."** Rashi cites Chazal who ask, "Why does the Torah choose to reveal that Bilaam was killed with the sword? When Bilaam came against the Jewish people, he exchanged his craft with their craft. The Jew only advances through the articulation of his mouth through prayer and supplication. Bilaam came upon the Jewish people to curse them with his mouth. Therefore, when it was time to kill Bilaam, the sword was chosen to bring about his death, to indicate that the Jewish people had exchanged their craft (power of speech) with the craft of the nations of the world, which is the sword. Where do we see that the craft of the nations of the world is the sword? As it states regarding the blessing that Yitzchak had given to his son Esav, **"By your sword you shall live."** The verse that is cited by the Midrash to establish that the sword is the craft of the nations of the world is drawn from Yitzchak's statement to Esav. Seemingly, the words are particular to Esav and the Edomites, his descendants, and not the nations of the world. We clearly see from the Midrash cited by Rashi we see that the characterization that Yitzchak had given to Esav was not specific to him, but rather, if the characteristic of the nations of the world.

When Yitzchak had given his blessing to Esav, **"By your sword you shall live"** it was not a blessing (as is normally understood) that was unique to Esav (Edom), but rather he was quantifying his son as a physical being, no different than all the nations of the world. He had no relevance to be the spiritual heir of his father. Yitzchak's words were only a revelation of Esav's essence, thus confirming that he was no different from any other gentile.

The Midrash tells us that when G'd offered the Torah to each of the nations of the world at Sinai, they

asked G'd, **"What is written in it?"** They were not willing to accept it unless they knew in advance that it did not conflict with their own interests. Each of the nations rejected the Torah for each of their own reasons. When G'd offered the Torah to the Edomites (Esav) they asked "What is written in it?" He said that the Torah contains the commandment **"Thou shall not kill."** They responded, "We cannot accept the Torah, because it is contrary to the blessing that we received from our grandfather Yitzchak that we should live by the sword." They thus rejected it. The response of the Edomites to G'd was not a correct understanding of what Yitzchak had said to Esav, It was not a blessing but rather a quantification of his being, that his essence was no different than any other nation of the world. We see again that the response of the Edomites was based on a misconception of the words of their forefather Yitzchak. It was a blessing, but rather a quantification.

2. Bilaam's Misperception of the Holy Patriarchs

The Torah tells us that Bilaam was commissioned by Balak, the king of Moav, to curse the Jewish people. In order to endear himself to G'd to allow him to curse the Jewish people, Bilaam built seven altars and had Balak bring upon them sacrifices to G'd. The Torah states, **"Bilaam said to Balak, 'Build for me seven altars...Bilaam said to G'd, 'I have prepared the seven altars and brought up a bull and ram on each altar.'"** Rashi cites the Midrash, "Bilaam said, 'The seven altars that I built are the equivalent of all the altars that were built by their forefathers. Avraham built four...Yitzchak built one and Yaakov built two...'" Bilaam believed that his altars upon which sacrifices were brought for G'd were the equivalent of the altars of the Patriarchs. How could Bilaam have even considered comparing himself to the holy Patriarchs and their service to G'd? One could say that perhaps it was due to the fact that he was fully self-absorbed and arrogant that he actually believed that he was the equivalent of the Patriarchs.

Rambam writes in the Guide for the Perplexed, that because man has an innate need to be subservient to a greater power, it was necessary for G'd to establish a means for man to express that subservience through worship in a permitted context. This is the concept of sacrifices. When one brings a sacrifice, he is expressing that subservience to G'd. Ramban rejects the position of Rambam and states that the object of sacrifices is to activate and coalesce spiritual forces that are necessary for

existence and the Jewish people. Sacrifices are unrelated to the need to be subservient to a greater power. Reb Meir Simcha of Dvinsk z'tl explains the position of Rambam. He explains that Rambam is not referring to the sacrifices that were brought in the Mishkan or the Temple. But rather, he is referring to the sacrifices that were permitted to be brought on one's personal altar (*bamah*), which was only permitted during certain times in Jewish history. This was a time when the Mishkan was not classified as "Mishkan" but rather "*Bamah gedola* (communal altar)." It was a time when the Holy Ark was not located in the Mishkan. When one was not able to bring a sacrifice before G'd in the Mishkan, G'd permitted one to build a personal altar to express his subservience to Him. However, when the Mishkan was in place and the Temple was built, the personal altar was no longer permitted. The sacrifice that was brought in the Mishkan or Temple, was as Ramban explains to activate and coalesce spiritual forces that were needed. Rambam fully concurs with Ramban. The Mishkan and Temple were the location for the Divine Presence. Thus, the sacrifices that were brought in the Mishkan or the Temple were brought before G'd. However, this was not the case when the sacrifice was brought on a personal altar. It was not before the Divine.

The Gemara tells us that a non-Jew is permitted to bring a sacrifice to G'd wherever and whenever he chooses to do so. What is the difference between a sacrifice that was brought in the Temple and outside of the Temple when it was permitted? The Temple was the location of G'd's Presence and the sacrifice that was brought there was considered to be brought "before G'd." However, if one brings a sacrifice outside of the Temple on a personal altar, it is only an expression of his subservience to G'd but it has no relevance to G'd's Presence. The sacrifice brought in the Temple, because it was "before G'd" is an exalted level of service.

Although Bilaam established seven altars and had sacrifices brought upon them, because they were classified as "*bamah* (personal altar)" they were not in the location of the Divine Presence. Their value was thus minimal. It is not comparable to any degree to the sacrifice that was brought in the Temple before G'd in the location of the Divine Presence. Chazal tell us that before the Mishkan was built, the holy Patriarchs were the location of the Divine Presence. As Chazal state, "*hein hein ha merkava* (they are G'd's chariot). Thus, the altars that were built by the Patriarchs were altars that were in the Presence of G'd. Therefore, the service that was performed there was in the

Presence of the Divine. It was the equivalent of their sacrifices being brought in the Temple and not on a personal altar. This was something that Bilaam did not understand or appreciate.

The Men of the Great Assembly who authored the Amidah (silent prayer) chose to refer to G'd in the first blessing as “*Elokei Avraham, Elokei Yitzchak, Elokei Yaakov* (G'd of Avraham, G'd of Yitzchak, G'd of Yaakov)...” One would think that it would have been sufficient to refer to Him as “G'd of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov” without repeating the word “*Elokei* (G'd)” before each of the Patriarch. The Commentators explain that since each of the Patriarchs chose to emulate G'd in another one of His characteristics, each of them related to G'd in a context that he had emulated Him. Avraham emulated G'd in the context of chesed (acts of loving kindness). Yitzchak in the context of judgment and Yaakov in the context of mercy. Therefore, each of the Patriarchs are prefaced with the word “*Elokei*.” However, we are able to explain it differently. If the text of the blessing would have stated, “*Elokei Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov*” it would imply that He was the G'd of all of them. However, by prefacing each of the Patriarchs with “*Elokei*” it emphasizes that G'd's location in existence was associated with each one of the Patriarchs. Thus, each of the Patriarchs was the equivalent of the Holy of Holies.

3. Being Able to Discern Between Good and Evil

The Midrash states, “There was no prophet among the Jewish people that was as great as Moshe. Inferring that there is one who is the equivalent of Moshe among the nations of the world. This prophet was Bilaam. (However, this is only true within a certain context that Bilaam was the equivalent of Moshe).” Bilaam was a person who possessed corrupted characteristics and behaved in a depraved manner. He engaged in bestiality and was one who had no relevance to spirituality. He was the antithesis of what is expected of a prophet. How is it possible that a man who seemingly had a similar sense of G'd as Moshe behave as he did?

Reb Chaim of Volozhin z'tl explains that in fact Bilaam did not have the same clarity as Moshe. If so, in what context was Bilaam the equivalent of Moshe? He explains that the eagle possesses a unique visual ability. He is able to see hundreds of miles as he flies. His eyes use the light that is reflected off the surface of the earth in order to see things with an unusual level of clarity. In

contrast the bat cannot see whatsoever because he has no power of sight. However, it has a unique and innate sensitivity to light that is not comparable to any creature. The moment the bat senses any degree of light it will escape and flee into the deepest recesses of a cave in order not to be exposed to the light. Although the bat possesses an unusual sensitivity to light, it has no understanding of what light is, because it has no visual ability. It senses its presence but has no inkling regarding the illumination of light. Bilaam had no inkling or capacity to understand spirituality or holiness. Because of the quality of his essence, he had no relevance to the Divine Presence, yet he was endowed with a unique sensitivity to holiness that made him able to sense G'd to a similar degree as Moshe. In contrast, Moshe's sense of G'd is not based on a sensitivity to G'd but rather it is rooted in his grasp and internalization of the dimension of G'd's Presence. Moshe had negated himself fully to G'd to the degree that he said, “**What are we (*nachnu mah*)?**” Meaning, he was nothing. Because of his level of humility and self-negation he was able to merit a unique capacity and level of clarity regarding spirituality. Moshe was therefore referred to by G'd, “**My servant Moshe; in My house he is the trusted one. Mouth to mouth do I speak to him...**” Since Moshe was imbued with holiness due to his internalization of G'd, he had no relevance to Bilaam as a prophet, who behaved in the most unconscionable manner. Bilaam was self-centered, egotistical, and depraved. Bilaam is the equivalent of the bat and Moshe is the equivalent of the eagle. Although Bilaam was “blind” to holiness, the Gemara tells us that he was able to sense the exact moment of G'd's Wrath.

The Mishna in Ethics of our Fathers states, “A person who possesses the three characteristics of: a good eye, a humble spirit, and minimal need for physicality is considered to be a student of Avraham, our Patriarch. However, a person who has the three characteristics of an evil eye, an inflated spirit, and an insatiable desire for the material is considered to be a student of Bilaam the evil one.” Why does the Mishna distinguish between the “students” of Avraham and the “students” of Bilaam? Why does it not distinguish between Avraham and Bilaam themselves? If one would see Bilaam, one could believe that he was a holy and devoutly pious, who radiated holiness. One would not be able to sense his evil essence. One may not be able to discern between him and Avraham, our Patriarch. On the other hand when one were to evaluate the students of Bilaam, one would clearly see the characteristics of the teacher. One would understand

how Bilaam was truly evil and how Avraham was truly holy.

4. *Inspiration, An All-Consuming Trait*

The Torah states when Bilaam went to curse the Jewish people, "**Bilaam arose (*vayakam*) in the morning and saddled his donkey...**" Rashi cites Chazal who state, "From here we learn, hate disrupts protocol." Although Bilaam was a self-centered and egotistical person with an insatiable desire for material, honor, and glory, he nevertheless saddled his own donkey (which is a demeaning chore). One would think that a man of Bilaam's demeanor and temperament would not allow himself to act so disgracefully to saddle his own donkey. He would have summoned one of his servants to do it on his behalf. However, because he was driven by rabid hatred for the Jewish people, he chose to hitch his donkey without hesitation.

The Torah states regarding Avraham, our Patriarch, "**Avraham arose (*vayashkaim*) in the morning and saddled his donkey...**" Despite the fact that Avraham was world-renowned (father of all nations) and possessed great wealth, he personally saddled his own donkey to take his most beloved only son to be brought to G'd as a sacrifice. Although Avraham was at the advanced age of 137 he could have had one of his servants saddle his donkey for his journey. However, he chose to do it himself. This seemingly unbecoming behavior is based on the principle, "Love disrupts protocol."

It is interesting to note that although in both instances Avraham, our Patriarch and Bilaam both "arose in the morning" the Torah uses a different word to express each of their early risings. Regarding Avraham, the Torah uses the expression, "***vayashkaim* (arose)**" which clearly connotes the earliness of his rising. It indicates his eagerness and excitement to fulfill the Will of his Maker, G'd. Despite the fact that Avraham was going to slaughter his beloved son Yitzchak, he rose early in the morning with zeal to fulfill the Word of G'd because of his all-consuming love for Him. In contrast, the Torah uses the word "***vayakam* (arose)**" regarding Bilaam, which only communicates that he had only awoken from his sleep, rather than sleeping later. Although Bilaam's hatred for the Jewish people was so intense, he nevertheless did not rise with zeal and excitement as Avraham had in order to fulfill the Word of G'd.

When one loves or hates on an all-consuming level, all that exists at that moment for that individual is to achieve the objective of that love or that hate. When Avraham was told by G'd to bring his son Yitzchak as a sacrifice, despite his all-consuming love for his son, he acted with zeal to selflessly carry out the Will of G'd. Because of Avraham's all-consuming love for G'd that superseded his love for his son and himself, he negated himself totally. All that existed for Avraham was the execution of G'd's Will. Therefore, the inappropriateness of Avraham saddling his own donkey was not an issue. Similarly, Bilaam, because of his all-consuming hatred for the Jewish people, was negated as a person despite his pompous and self-absorbed personality. At the moment of his rising, all that existed was the objective to annihilate the Jewish people through his curse. Bilaam as a person did not exist at that moment.

Rambam in the Laws of the Study of Torah states, "The Crown of Torah can be acquired by the one who is inspired by his heart to acquire it..." Rambam writes when he outlines the life one needs to live in order to acquire the Crown of Torah: "Bread with salt you shall eat, water in measured amounts you shall drink, on the floor you shall sleep, and a life of deprivation you shall live." Regarding the level of dedication needed to acquire the Torah, Rambam chooses the term, "the one who is inspired." He does not state, "the one who has an interest in Torah." This is to clearly communicate that it is only the one who is singularly focused by his all-consuming inspiration to acquire Torah that is able to acquire it. This person, because of his level of inspiration, has no concern or level of distraction for anything other than the Torah itself. All the amenities of life are only incidental to his objective. For example, if one is given the opportunity to enter into a diamond mine and allowed to mine all the diamonds that he can, that individual would not be concerned about his own physical condition and comforts. He will mine the diamonds unceasingly without any thought of his hands being lacerated or his level of exhaustion because he is singularly focused on the tremendous wealth he will have for generations. If one understands the infinite value of the Torah, he will be consumed by its acquisition to the degree that nothing else exists other than that purpose.

Avraham, our Patriarch because of his special dimension of being and humility, negated himself totally to the Will of G'd. He internalized fully the infinite value of fulfilling the Word of G'd, despite its challenge. When he arose (*vayashkaim*) in the morning, he did so with zeal and excitement in contrast to Bilaam who merely arose

early in the morning because of his hate for the Jewish people.

5. Refined Speech, a Characteristic of Spirituality (Chukas)

The Torah states, **“This is the statute of the Torah, which Hashem has commanded....”** The Midrash cites a verse from Psalms, “ ‘The statements of G’d are statements of purity.’ Reb Yehoshua ben Levy says, ‘We find that the Torah adds two or three words so that something of impurity does not emanate from His mouth. (This is considered unusual because the Torah always expresses itself in the most concise manner). As it states (regarding the Kosher and non-Kosher species that entered into the ark of Noah), **‘...from the animals that are pure and from the animals that are not pure...’** Regarding the animals that are not pure, the Torah could have stated ‘from the animals that are contaminated.’ However in order to identify the species in a refined manner, G’d chose to state ‘from the animals that are not pure...’” When G’d expresses Himself, it is in the most refined manner, although it may require a more lengthy level of expression.

The Midrash continues, “Reb Yudon says, ‘When the Torah presents the non-Kosher species it identifies it by with the Kosher sign rather than the non-Kosher sign. In order for an animal to qualify to be a Kosher species, it must have split hooves and chew its cud. For example, the camel is a non-Kosher species because **‘it only chews its cud...’** The Torah chose not to identify it as a non-Kosher species by mentioning that it does not have split hooves, because it would be highlighting its non-Kosher characteristic... Regarding the pig, the Torah tells us that it is a non-Kosher species because it **‘only has split hooves.’** The Torah does not identify it as non-Kosher by mentioning that ‘it does not chew its cud,’ in order to express itself in the most positive manner, rather than the negative. This is the meaning of the verse in Psalms, “The statements of G’d are statements of purity.”

The Gemara in Tractate Pesachim states, “One should not utter from his mouth something that is inappropriate. One should always speak in a refined (pure) manner.” The Mishna in the beginning of Tractate Pesachim states, “*Ohr le’Arba’ah-Asar Bodkin es ha’Chometz le’Ohr ha’Ner*’. In the light (evening) of the fourteenth of Nissan, one searches for *chametz* by candlelight.” The search for *chometz* needs to occur at the beginning of the nighttime period of the fourteenth of

Nissan. If this is so, why does Judah the Prince (the redactor of the Oral Law) choose to use the word “Ohr” which literally means light rather than state the word “*Leil* (nighttime period)?” He chose not to use the word “night” because it has an ominous connotation whereas “Ohr (light),” which also is a reference to the beginning of the nighttime period (since the horizon is still slightly illuminated at that moment), because it is a more positive expression of “nighttime”. From here, we understand that if it is possible for one to express himself in a more refined/positive manner one should do so.

There is a positive commandment, **“You shall walk in the ways of G’d...”** The Jew has an obligation to emulate G’d. The Gemara explains this to mean, “Just as He is Merciful, you should be merciful. Just as He is Gracious, you should be gracious, etc.” Chofetz Chaim explains that if one does not speak *lashon hara* (evil speech) he is emulating the way of G’d. Where to we find that G’d does not speak negatively about others? Chofetz Chaim cites the Gemara in Tractate Sanhedrin that tells us that at the battle of Ai there were thirty-six Jewish casualties. G’d said to Joshua, **“The Jewish people have sinned.”** Someone had taken from the spoils of Jericho, when they were not permitted to do so. Yehoshua asked G’d, “Who was the individual who had taken of it spoils?” G’d responded, “I am not one who speaks *lashon hara* (*tale bearer*). Thus, I will not reveal the name of that individual.” Thus, Chofetz Chaim states that it is indicated from Yehoshua and G’d that if one is careful regarding his purity of speech, he will fulfill the positive commandment of **“You shall walk in His ways.”** Just as G’d does not speak negatively about others, so too one should not speak negatively about others.

In order for one to be close to G’d and cleave to Him, one must establish a commonality with Him. Therefore, if one’s behavior reflects G’d’s characteristics, then the individual has established a likeness to Him. This will enable him to cleave to G’d in a more secure manner. Since G’d chooses to express Himself in a pure and refined manner (despite the length of that expression), if one emulates G’d in his manner of speech, one is fulfilling the positive commandment, “You shall walk in His ways.”