



**THE GREAT
ATTEMPT
TO MALIGN
THE JEWISH
PEOPLE**

YadAvNow.com Weekly Video Series: Balak

Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky

Balance/Counterbalance: The Power Of Speech vs. the Sword

1. The Jewish People wanted passage thru Edomite territory.
2. *Moshe*: We were enslaved by the Egyptians & redeemed us when we called out to G-d.
3. *Rashi*: G-d responded due to the blessing we received from our Patriarch *Yitzchok* and the voice is the voice of *Yaakov*.
4. *Edom's* response to *Moshe* was: We shall come out with the sword against you.
5. *Rashi*: We also have a blessing from our Patriarch *Yitzchok* "And you shall live by the sword."
6. *Bilaam* wanted to curse the Jewish People but G-d didn't allow him.
7. *Bilaam* was killed by the sword.
8. *Rashi*: He exchanged his craft for ours so we exchanged ours for his.
9. His craft is "by the sword you shall live"; ours is power of speech – "the voice is of *Yaakov*."
10. "By the sword you shall live" is a classification, not a blessing.
11. *Edom* came out against the Jews with a strong hand.
12. *Rashi*: "Strong Hand" alludes to the blessing: The hands are the hands of *Esav*.
13. *Midrash*: When the voice is the voice of *Yaakov* the hands are not the hands of *Esav*.
14. *Esav* is the counterbalance to the Jewish People.

When The Megalomaniac Subverts His Will

1. *Bilaam* rises early to hitch his donkey.
2. G-d responds: Don't think your action is unique—*Avraham*, their forefather, preceded you in this area.
3. *Avraham* rose early to hitch his donkey to the *Akeida*.
4. He rose to curse the Jews, *Avraham* to do the will of G-d to sacrifice his son.
5. *Chazal*: Hate and Love disrupt protocol.
6. Why did G-d respond to *Bilaam*, which was contrary to G-d's will?
7. *Bilaam* personified evil; he wanted to bring intense prosecution upon the Jews.
8. Though *Bilaam's* alacrity and zeal were contrary to G-d's will, he demonstrated a level of negation never displayed before in a positive vein.
9. *Avraham* their forefather displayed this characteristic in a more difficult setting.
10. He rose early to sacrifice his son.

Weekly Torah Commentary Series: Balak



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

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.

"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: 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 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. "*Hakol kol Yaakov... - the voice is the voice of Yaakov.*"

Chazal: 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* alluded to *Edom* that the Jewish people were empowered with their power of speech and should be allowed to pass through the land of *Edom*.

"The king of *Edom* said to him, 'You shall not pass through me, lest I come against you with the sword!'"

Chazal: 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 what *Yitzchak* had said to *Esav* "By the sword you shall live." He understood it 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 of *Esav*. He was saying that *Esav* had no relevance to spirituality, and therefore his essence had 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 *Bilam*, "They killed the kings of *Midian*... and *Bilam* son of *Beor* they slew with the sword."

Rashi: Why does the *Torah* choose to reveal that *Bilam* was killed with the sword? When *Bilam* 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. *Bilam* came upon the Jewish people to curse them with his mouth. Therefore, when it was time to kill *Bilam*, 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.

The characterization that *Yitzchak* gave to *Esav* was not specific to him, but rather, it is the characteristic of the nations of the world. When *Yitzchak* gave his blessing to *Esav*, "By your sword you shall live," it was not a blessing 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.

Midrash: 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 their own reasons.

When G-d offered the *Torah* to the *Edomites* (*Esav*) they asked "What is written in it?" G-d responded with 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."

We see again that the response of the *Edomites* was based on a misconception of the words of their forefather *Yitzchak*. 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.

Bilam's Misperception of the Holy Patriarchs

Bilam 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, *Bilam* built seven altars and had *Balak* bring sacrifices upon them to G-d.

"*Bilam* said to *Balak*, 'Build for me seven altars...*Bilam* said to G-d, 'I have prepared the seven altars and brought up a bull and ram on each altar.'"

Rashi: "*Bilam* 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...'"

Bilam believed that his altars upon which sacrifices were brought for G-d were the equivalent of the altars of the Patriarchs. How could *Bilam* 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: 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: 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 zt"l: *Rambam* is not referring to the sacrifices that were brought in the *Mishkan* or the Temple. 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, as *Ramban* explains, was 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 Presence.

Gemara: 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 *Bilam* 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. Therefore, their value was 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: Before the *Mishkan* was built, the holy Patriarchs were the location of the Divine Presence. “*Hein hein hamerkava* (they are G-d’s chariot). Therefore, the altars that were built by the Patriarchs were altars that were in the presence of G-d. It was the equivalent of their sacrifices being brought in the Temple and not on a personal altar. This was something that *Bilam* 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 Patriarchs.

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 the context that he 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 is 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.

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.

Being Able to Discern Between Good and Evil

Midrash: “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 *Bilam*.”

Bilam 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 zt”l: *Bilam* did not have the same clarity as *Moshe*. If so, in what context was *Bilam* the equivalent of *Moshe*?

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.

Bilam 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 sensitivity to G-d, but rather it is rooted in his grasp and internalization of the dimension of G-d's Presence. *Moshe* negated himself fully to G-d to the degree that he said, "What are we (*nachnu mah*)?"

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 *Bilam* as a prophet, who behaved in the most unconscionable manner. *Bilam* was self-centered, egotistical, and depraved. *Bilam* is the equivalent of the bat and *Moshe* is the equivalent of the eagle.

Gemara: Although *Bilam* was "blind" to holiness, he was able to sense the exact moment of G-d's wrath.

Pirkei Avos: "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 *Bilam* the evil one."

Why does the *Mishna* distinguish between the "students" of *Avraham* and the "students" of *Bilam*? Why does it not distinguish between *Avraham* and *Bilam* themselves?

If one would see *Bilam*, one could believe that he was 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 was to evaluate the students of *Bilam*, one would clearly see the characteristics of the teacher. One would understand how *Bilam* was truly evil and how *Avraham* was truly holy.

Inspiration, An All-Consuming Trait

"*Bilam* arose (*vayakam*) in the morning and saddled his donkey..."

Rashi: "From here we learn, hate disrupts protocol." Although *Bilam* 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 *Bilam'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.

"*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.

Avraham was at the advanced age of 137, and 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 *Bilam* 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 *Bilam*, which only communicates that he had only awoken from his sleep, rather than sleeping later. Although *Bilam*’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 *Avraham*’s all-consuming love for G-d 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, *Bilam*, 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. *Bilam* as a person did not exist at that moment.

Rambam: “The Crown of *Torah* can be acquired by the one who is inspired by his heart to acquire it.”

“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 mine all the diamonds that he can, he 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 *Bilam* who merely arose early in the morning because of his hate for the Jewish people.

G-d the Master Composer

“*Balak* son of *Tzipor* saw all that Israel had done to the Amorite.”

Rashi: “These two giants, upon whom we relied upon to be our protectors, could not stand before them (the Jewish people). If so, how much more so could we (Moabites) not stand before them!”

Since the Moabites became overwhelmed with fear after they had seen how the two giants, *Og* and *Sichon* were defeated by the Jewish people, they commissioned *Bilam* to curse them.

The giant *Sichon*, king of the Amorites, was the first of the giants to be defeated. “For *Cheshbon* – it was the city of *Sichon*, king of the Amorites, and he warred against the first king of *Moab* and took all of his land from his control...The rulers say come to *Cheshbon*, let it be built and established as the city of *Sichon*.”

Rashi: “*Sichon* (although he was a powerful giant) was not able to conquer it (*Cheshbon*). He therefore went and commissioned *Bilam* to curse *Moab* (and was thus able to conquer it). This is to what *Balak* was referring when he said to *Bilam*, ‘I see what you bless is blessed and what you curse is cursed.’”

Although *Balak* had seen how the Jewish people were able to topple the two giants *Sichon* and *Og*, who were the protectors of the kingdoms of *Canaan*, through Divine Assistance, he did not despair. He believed that there was still hope of defeating the Jewish people.

Because *Balak* knew that despite the enormous power of *Sichon*, he could not capture *Cheshbon* without the assistance of *Bilam*, he believed that if he were to commission *Bilam* to curse the Jewish people, he would be victorious over them.

G-d allowed *Balak* to perceive and process these events in this context, so that *Bilam's* evil would ultimately be revealed and he would be destroyed.

Gemara: "The verse states, 'The rulers say come to *Cheshbon*...' Who are the 'rulers' to whom does the verse refer? The 'rulers' are all those who want to take control of their evil inclination. They must come and make a '*Cheshbon*.' One must make a computation as is stated in the *Mishna* in Ethics of our Fathers, 'What is the cost factor of a *mitzvah* compared to its reward?' 'What is the value of a sin compared to the ultimate loss it brings about?'

This is the meaning of the verse that states, 'the rulers say come to *Cheshbon*!' This is the ultimate computation that existence stands upon."

It seems what the *Gemara* is saying is a play on words, because the name "*Cheshbon*" is an actual location, which was a city of the Moabites that was conquered by *Sichon*.

When people witness and experience events in their lives or in the world at large, their understanding and perception of these events are based on a superficial and limited analysis. One does not appreciate the ramifications and consequences of one's decisions and behavior. However, the individual who is truly wise sees the consequences of his actions prior to acting upon and actualizing his intent.

Pirkei Avos: "Who is the wise person? It is the one who sees the consequences of his actions."

When one applies the spiritual formula and computation that is mentioned in the *Mishna* to understand the value of a *mitzvah* compared to its cost factor and the benefit of a sin compared to its loss, one will act wisely regarding his actions.

Initially, *Cheshbon* was part of the territory of *Moav*. The Jewish people were not permitted to conquer the territory of the *Moabites*. However, because *Sichon* conquered *Cheshbon*, making it his domain, the Jewish people were permitted to conquer it. The *Moabite* domain was purged through the conquest of *Sichon*.

G-d enabled *Sichon* to commission *Bilam* to curse the *Moabites* to allow *Cheshbon* to be conquered, so that ultimately it would become part of the territory belonging to the Jewish people.

One needs to appreciate G-d's computation – how He had orchestrated the events to ultimately manifest them as He wanted them to. In addition, *Chazal* tell us that the destruction of *Sichon* and *Og* was more difficult than destroying Pharaoh and the Egyptian armies.

If *Sichon* was so overwhelmingly powerful, why was he not able to conquer *Moab* without the assistance of *Bilam*? This was also part of G-d's calculation. It was to give *Balak* hope, that despite his protectors *Sichon* and *Og* being destroyed, he still had *Bilam* the prophet of the nations to be relied upon. G-d's orchestration of these events was for the sole purpose of bringing *Bilam*, the evil one, to be pitted against *Moshe* and the Jewish people in order to ultimately reveal his evil and bring about his destruction.

G-d orchestrates events with the ultimate level of computation that allows things to evolve to meet His objective. The interaction between *Bilam* and *Balak* regarding cursing the Jewish people, and ultimately *Bilam's* demise, brought about a sanctification of G-d's Name. It revealed to the world who *Bilam* truly was.

Chazal: *Bilam* was the prophet of the nations since his level of prophecy was similar to *Moshe's* within a certain context. However, while *Moshe* was holy and truly devoutly righteous and the servant of G-d, *Bilam* was the antithesis of holiness and humility.

