



# Parshas Balak

For the week ending 12 Tammuz, 5759  
25 & 26 June, 1999

Outside Israel Parshas Chukat is read together with  
Parshas Balak

## Overview

## Insights

**B**alak, king of Moav, is in morbid fear of *Bnei*

*I WOULD IF I COULD BUT I CAN'T SO I WON'T*  
**“Bilaam answered... ‘If Balak will give me his house full of silver and gold, I cannot transgress the word of Hashem, my G-d, to do anything small or great.’ (22:18)**

*Yisrael*. He summons a renowned sorcerer named Bilaam to curse them.

Rashi tells us that this verse reveals Balak’s lust for money. By talking about silver and gold, he reveals what’s uppermost in his mind.

First, Hashem appears to Bilaam and forbids him to go. But because Bilaam is so insistent, Hashem appears to him a second time and permits him to go. While en route, a *malach* (emissary from Hashem) blocks Bilaam’s donkey’s path. Unable to contain his frustration, Bilaam strikes the donkey each time it stops or tries to detour. Miraculously, the donkey speaks, asking Bilaam why he is hitting her. The *malach* instructs Bilaam regarding what he is permitted to say and what he is forbidden to say regarding the Jewish People. When Bilaam arrives, King Balak makes elaborate preparations, hoping that Bilaam will succeed in the curse. Three times Bilaam attempts to curse, and three times a blessing issues instead. Balak, seeing that Bilaam has failed, sends him home in disgrace. *Bnei Yisrael* begin sinning with the Moabite women, and worshipping the Moabite idols, and are punished with a plague.

There’s a problem here. Wasn’t it King David himself who said *“Better to me is the Torah of Your mouth than thousands in gold and silver?”* Why isn’t King David’s comparison to silver and gold considered as revealing a mercenary streak. Similarly, in *Pirkei Avot* Rabbi Yossi ben Kisma said *“Even if you were to give me all the silver and gold, precious stones and pearls in the world, I would dwell nowhere but in a place of Torah.”* That’s quite a shopping list. Why doesn’t this qualify as revealing a mercenary nature?

One of the Jewish leaders brazenly brings a Midianite princess into his tent, in full view of Moshe and the people. Pinchas, a grandson of Aharon, grabs a spear and kills both evildoers. This halts the plague, but not before 24,000 have died.

The difference is simple and fundamental. Bilaam said that he *“can’t transgress the word of Hashem.”* He didn’t say he wouldn’t — just he can’t. Given the potential — sure, why not! King David and Rabbi Yossi ben Kisma, however, were saying that they *wouldn’t* trade the Torah for all the money in the world — not that they couldn’t.

**SOLITAIRE**  
**“Behold! It is a nation that will dwell in solitude and not be reckoned among the nations.” (23:9)**

A man jumps off the top of the Empire State building. As he plunges downward at 33 ft/sec<sup>2</sup> someone sticks his head out of the 29th floor window and yells, “Are you okay?” Smiling, he shouts back: “So far, so good!”

The Jewish People are, in essence, an entity which exists in solitude. They are removed from the rest of society because they are essentially different from the other nations.

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Like oil and water. They cannot mix. And when they seem to mix, the eventual separation is violent and tragic in direct proportion to the desire to blend into the melting-pot. The Jews of Germany proclaimed their undying loyalty to a Germany that killed and tortured them. It was the ovens and the gas chambers which finally reminded us that Berlin was not Jerusalem.

America has proved a home of unparalleled acceptance for the Jewish People. That state has the merit of supporting enormous amounts of Torah scholarship. However, the rampant assimilation which is also a facet of American life should give us pause. We cannot afford to sit back and say "So far — so good."

In this week's Parsha we find a hint to the solitary nature of the Jewish People: "*Behold! It is a nation that will dwell in solitude and not be reckoned among the nations.*" The Hebrew word in this sentence for "it is" is "hein." *Hein* consists of two letters: *heh* and *nun*. The *gematria* (numerical equivalent) of *heh* is five. Five is a unique number. It dwells alone. It has no partner other than itself: In the series of numbers from one to nine, all other numbers will combine with a different number to make ten: One and nine, two and eight, etc. However, five only combines with itself. It dwells alone and can only combine with itself to reach ten.

Similarly, the letter *nun*, is exactly halfway through the extended Hebrew alphabet of twenty-seven letters. *Nun* is letter 13. If you pair the first letter with the last, the second with the next to last, and so on, each letter will have a partner. Until you come to the 13th letter. The *heh* and the *nun* are like the Jewish People. A nation that dwells alone.

#### THE ARAB SECRET WEAPON

### **"He declaimed his parable and said 'Who will survive when He imposes these!'"**

Hidden beneath the surface of this verse is a dark prophecy: Bilaam was prophesying that above all the seventy root languages in the world, G-d has only joined His name to two nations: The Jewish People — *Yisra-el* — and the Arab nations — *Yishma-el*. Continues Bilaam, woe will it be to he who lives in the "time of *Yishmael*."

We are living in the time of *Yishmael*. We have seen a people thrust from the backwaters of history into its center stage. The abject poverty of these nations a mere hundred years ago has been transformed to fabulous wealth.

However, the source of *Yishmael's* power is not oil, nor their vast numbers nor their rhetoric. It is their secret weapon — the power of prayer. As their name implies: *Yishma-el* — "G-d will hear."

Is there an Arab politician who finishes a speech without saying "with the help of Allah?" Is there a Moslem embarrassed to pull out a prayer mat and genuflect towards Mecca five times a day even in the most secular Western milieu? For every proud Moslem, I can find you at least one Jew who finds his religion "too Jewish."

Millions of Moslems every year make the *Haj* — the pilgrimage to Mecca. The majority of Jews who come to Israel treat it as something between cultural nostalgia and a good beach holiday with guaranteed sun. There was a time when the entire Jewish People would make the thrice-yearly festival pilgrimage to the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. Now, the main highlight of a Jewish Pilgrim is likely to be a disco in Tel Aviv or wine-tasting in the Golan.

By what power does the Moslem world control the Temple Mount? The El Aksa mosque has been sitting on the Temple Mount for nearly thirteen hundred years, while the sublime light of the Holy Temple only radiated from there for a mere eight hundred years. Isn't it ironic that in spite of the miraculous victories of the Six Day War, the Jewish People were not able to secure that holiest place on earth? What power allows *Yishmael* to hold that place? It is the power of prayer epitomized in his name.

When *Yitzchak* offered himself as sacrifice at the site of the Holy Temple, he became the eternal source of the Jewish People's ability to give up their lives for G-d. In Hebrew, this ability is called *mesirut nefesh* — "giving over the soul." However, one can be *moser nefesh* without dying. Every time a Jew turns to G-d in prayer, he is giving up his soul to G-d. When he sincerely asks G-d for his needs, he is being *moser* — handing over to G-d, his *nefesh* — his soul, his very existence. In effect he is saying, "G-d, my life is in Your hands." This is the essence of prayer.

In Hebrew, prayer is called *avodah*, a word that shares the same root as *eved* (servant). When a servant asks for something, he doesn't base his petition on his own merits; rather he relies on his master's kindness. When we ask G-d for something, we completely humble ourselves as servants before the King of Kings. This relationship is epitomized in our name "Yisrael," which means "*Yasher-Kel*" — G-d is upright. We declare with our very name that we do not have a right to anything. G-d is upright; He will do what He deems best for us.

*Yishmael's* concept of prayer is very different. We can see this in his name. "G-d shall listen!" His idea of prayer is that he can tell G-d what to do, like a spoiled child demanding gifts from his father.

Yet, there is hope for the Jewish People. That hope does not lie in promises of princes, nor in pieces of paper. That hope doesn't lie in the might and sophistication of weaponry. The prayer of *Yishmael* thrives only when the prayer of the Jewish People is half-hearted. An El Aksa Mosque can exist only when the Temple Mount is in ruins. *Yishmael* steps into the vacuum created by the emptiness of our prayers. But if we give our very souls to G-d, if we admit that everything G-d does is upright though we may not always understand, then we will truly live up to our name, *Yisrael*.

Sources:

*I Would If I Could But I Can't So I Won't* - *Ohr Yahas* as heard from Rabbi Mordechai Perlman  
*Solitaire* - Rabbi Menachem Nissel  
*The Arab Secret Weapon* - *Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer*, 30;  
*Rabbeinu Bachya*; Rabbi Menachem Nissel

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## Haftorah: Micha 5:6 - 6:8

**T**he Prophet Micha foresees “Yaakov’s Remnant” — the Jews who survive the mass murders and decimation of exile — sprout and flourish at the end of days. Once vassals, the Jews will grow into an independent people, relying on no man or nation for sustenance; once a sheep among lions, the Jews become like a lion who attacks its enemies with impunity. This stage is temporary, however; eventually, there will be no need for military might, horses, chariots, or fortresses, as peace will reign in the land.

After this promising forecast, Micha turns his eye to the past and present. Micha rebukes the Jews for their lax Torah-observance and reminds them of G-d’s historical kindness: G-d freed them from Egypt and put

three fabulous leaders, Moshe, Aharon and Miriam, at their head. And — drawing on the events described in this week’s Parsha — Micha recalls G-d’s special love and protection of the Jewish People against the nefarious plottings of Balak and Bilaam.

*PLEASE DEW*

**“And Yaakov’s Remnant among the many nations will be like dew from G-d...which looks to no one and waits for no man.” (5:6)**

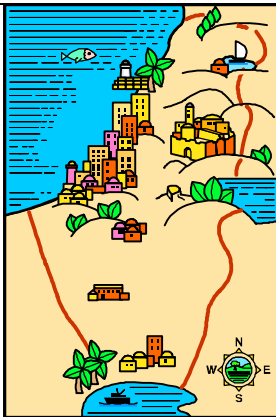
Almost an entire Parsha, Parshat Balak, chronicles the spiteful attempts by Israel’s bitter foes to obliterate the fledgling nation. During these attacks, the Jews are entirely passive — perhaps even unaware; they are protected by G-d alone.

So, at the end of days, will the Jews be like the dew which condenses miraculously upon the grass, independent of any human agency. Like the dew, the Jews will bring the nourishing waters of Torah to a thirsty world.

## LOVE OF THE LAND

*Selections from classical Torah sources which express the special relationship between the People of Israel and Eretz Yisrael*

### NEHAR HAYARDEN (JORDAN RIVER)



Israel’s major river, the Jordan once served as the border between two parts of Eretz Israel. Today it separates the Jewish state from its Arab neighbor, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan.

There are different accounts concerning the name of this famous river. One is that it is a contraction of two Hebrew words — Yored Dan — which refer to the Biblical city of Dan which is one of the river’s main sources.

The miraculous crossing of the Jordan by the Children of Israel on the 10th of Nissan, 40 years after the Exodus from Egypt, is described in great detail in the Book of Yehoshua (3-4). The Aron Hakodesh (Holy Ark), carried by the kohanim, went ahead of the people and entered the river at the command of Yehoshua. “As soon as the feet of the kohanim bearing the Ark of Hashem rested on the bed of the Jordan waters, the Jordan waters split, with the waters flowing down...forming a wall... and all of Israel crossed over on dry land.” (Yehoshua 3:13-17)

Following their miraculous crossing, the command came to remove twelve stones from the spot upon which the kohanim had stood and to replace them with twelve other stones. Both the stones removed and the ones which replaced them were intended to serve as reminders to future generations of the great miracle of the Jordan crossing.

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