

## Parshas Balak

For the week ending 17 Tammuz 5758  
10-11 July 1998

### Overview

**B**alak, king of Moav, is in morbid fear of *Bnei Yisrael*. He summons a renowned sorcerer named *Bilaam* to curse them.

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* (angel, messenger from Hashem) blocks the path of *Bilaam's* donkey. Unable to contain his frustration, *Bilaam* strikes the donkey each time it stops or wants to make a 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 in the hope 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.

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.

### Insights

A GUEST APPEARANCE

**“And from there he saw the edge of the people.”  
(22:39)**

“Unbeknownst to our hero, the wicked count Carlo was looking down at him from the gallery of the grain silo. A huge metal anvil hung silently, poised to drop sixty-five feet to the granary floor and turn our hero into Steak Tataré. Just a few more feet and he would be directly under the anvil. “Heh, heh, heh!” laughed Carlo quietly to himself. “This time, my fine friend, you will not escape my clutches!” Inch by inch our hero drew closer to his fateful nemesis. Inch by inch. And then he was there — directly under the massive anvil!

“Count Carlo relished the moment for a few nanoseconds, and then very gently he let go of the cord. The anvil, released from its restraints, fell like a stone, like an eager racehorse let loose from the starting gate. Said Baklava, the count’s faithful bumbling butler: “Master, you let go of the anvil!” “I know I did, you bumbling idiot!” “But Master — the end is tied to your right leg!” “What! You fool! How did that happen?” “I did it, Master,” said a beaming Baklava. “I didn’t want us to lose the anvil!” “Quickly, grab the rope, you idiot, maybe our combined weights will stop the anvil and I won’t be pulled to my death!” “That would be nice, O master... But I’m not so heavy anymore, I’ve been going to Weight Watchers.” “Don’t argue with me, you, you, you, you bumbling Balkan!”

“In the time it takes to say Sidney Greenstreet and Peter Lorre, Count Carlo and Baklava grabbed the rope. The anvil was suddenly checked in its downward plummet. But it wasn’t going to give up without a struggle. It hoisted the two men right up to the pulley which was set into the granary roof and there they swung like a couple of trussed chickens. The anvil came to an abrupt stop eighteen inches above the head of our hero.

Prepared by Ohr Somayach in Jerusalem, Israel

©1998 Ohr Somayach International - All rights reserved.

22 Shimon Hatzadik Street, POB 18103, Jerusalem Israel

☎ 972-2-581-0315

fax: 972-2-581-2890

✉ info@ohr.org.il

38 East 29th Street 8th floor, New York, NY 10016, USA

☎ 1-212-213-3100

fax: 1-212-213-8717

✉ RZCorlin@aol.com or estern@Aol.com

613 Clark Avenue West, Thornhill, Ontario L4J 5V3, Canada

☎ 1-905-886-5730

fax: 1-905-886-6065

✉ Somayach@MSN.com

Dedication opportunities are available for Torah Weekly — Please contact us for details.

Written and Compiled by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair

General Editor: Rabbi Moshe Newman

Production Design: Eli Ballon

"Our hero could have sworn that he heard something. He looked around him. Nothing out of the ordinary here. He sighed his diffident sigh and sauntered out of the granary into the morning sunlight, unaware that he had come within a few inches of his life."

There's something very unusual about the story of Balak. If the Torah had not revealed the episode of Bilaam trying to curse the Jewish People, we would never have known about it. Other events that the Torah records concerning the Jewish People could also be known from tradition, but not this week's Parsha. When this week's Parsha was taking place, the Jewish People were way out of earshot. You could only see them somewhere in the distance — from the top of a hill; across a field; in the wilderness. But we never see them close up. They're like extras in their own movie. Had it not been for the Torah, we would never know what a narrow escape we had. The Jewish People walk through this week's Parsha blissfully unaware of the machinations of Balak and Bilaam.

At the end of the sixth century, the Byzantine Empire completely destroyed the Jewish settlement in the Land of Israel. Unbeknownst to the Jews of Babylon, the Byzantines then poised themselves to make Babylon "Judenrein." Before they could implement their plans, however, the Moslem revolt toppled them from power.

Jews played a prominent role in the overthrow of Czarist Russia and in the subsequent Soviet government. Secretly however in 1953, Josef Stalin tried unsuccessfully to destroy the Jews in what became known as "The Doctors' Plot." According to one theory, had the Doctors' Plot reached its climax there would have been a mass expulsion of Soviet Jewry. But these plans died along with Stalin in 1953.

The shortest Psalm, Psalm 117, speaks of a world in the time of the Mashiach: "Praise Hashem *all nations*; laud Him *all the peoples*; for His kindness to us was overwhelming..."

Once, a Russian prince asked Rav Itzaleh of Volozhin why *non-Jews* will be expected to praise Hashem for His kindness to Israel. Rav Itzaleh replied "The princes of the nations constantly plot our annihilation but our Merciful G-d foils their plans. You keep your plots so secret that we Jews don't even realize in how many ways you have tried to harm us and in how many ways G-d has saved us. Only you, the nations of the non-Jewish world, truly see the extent of G-d's kindness to us, and therefore only you can praise Him adequately."

## NAME CALLING

**"I cannot transgress the word of Hashem, my G-d to do anything small or great." (22:18)**

**G**-d can have no name. A name distinguishes something from everything else. It separates. A name says: It's *this* — not *this*.

When we speak of Hashem being One, it is not just that He is the only G-d, but rather that nothing else exists except for Him. He is One and All. Obviously then, He cannot have a name, for a name would separate Him from All.

And yet Hashem has names. The very word "Hashem" means "The Name."

When we talk of Hashem having names, it is only in the context of His connection to the world that He created. Hashem's names relate to the ways in which we perceive Him running the world. Sometimes, we perceive G-d's actions as merciful. Other times, we perceive G-d's actions as conforming to the letter of the law. G-d's names refer only to the way we perceive His actions. For at an ultimate level, He is neither merciful, nor just, nor any epithet or quality. For these adjectives relate only to our understanding of Him.

In the above verse, Bilaam says he cannot "transgress the word of Hashem, Elokai (my G-d) to do anything small or great." The order of this sentence is puzzling. If Bilaam cannot do a small transgression, then all the more so he will not be able to do a large one. So why does the Torah need to spell out "small or great?" Tell me "small" and automatically, I'll know "great."

Bilaam's method of cursing the Jewish People was to invoke against them names of G-d which represent unyielding justice — *Elokim* and *Kah*. Thus, he surmised, there would be a possibility for his curses to strike home. However, when he tried to use the name *Elokim*, his mouth was closed prematurely and the name that came out was *Keil* — a name expressing mercy. And when he wanted to utter the name *Kah*, his mouth suddenly experienced a moment of garrulousness. His tongue ran on ahead of him and what came out was the four-letter name of Hashem which epitomizes G-d's mercy.

That's why Bilaam said "I cannot transgress the word of Hashem, my G-d (Elokai) to do anything small or great;" meaning: "I cannot change these two names, neither to shorten *Hashem* to *Kah* nor to lengthen *Keil* to *Elokim*."

---

## Parshas **Balak**

For the week ending 17 Tammuz 5758, 10-11 July 1998

Torah Weekly is available from several sources:

- World Wide Web: Our address is <http://www.ohr.org.il>
- Fax and Mail in Israel and US-MAIL in America . Send us a note requesting a subscription in Israel, or call 800-431-2272 in the US for details.
- E-Mail via InterNet. To subscribe, send the message "sub weekly {your full name}" to [listproc@virtual.co.il](mailto:listproc@virtual.co.il)

This publication contains words of Torah. Please treat it with due respect. Do not let this land on a garbage heap.

*YOU LOSE — I WIN*

**“So now, please come and curse this people for me, for it is too powerful for me.” (22:6)**

**W**hat does a Jew do when he finds himself in trouble? He goes to a great *tzaddik* and asks for a *bracha*. He *davens* to the Creator of the world to save him. But how do some nations react to trouble?

When Balak ben Tzipor, the king of Moav was frightened of the Jews, he went to Bilaam and asked him, not to bless *him*, but to *curse* the Jews!

This is the way of the wicked — rather than seek a blessing for themselves, they would prefer a curse for someone else.

*ASININE TALK*

**“And Hashem opened the mouth of the donkey...” (22:28)**

**W**hat does it mean when a donkey starts to speak? The essential difference between Man and the animals is the power of speech. Man is called “*The Speaker*” — this is the quality that epitomizes his elevation above the animals.

The power of speech is given to Man to elevate the physical world, to inject spirituality into the physical.

Describing the creation of Man, the Torah says that Hashem “blew into his nose a spirit of life.” *Targum Onkelos* translates this phrase as “He blew into his nose a *speaking* spirit.”

In the Hebrew language, the word for “thing” — *davar* — has the same root as *dibur* — “word.” Speech is the threshold between the world of things, the physical world, and the spiritual world.

When Man uses his power of speech to add spirituality to the world, he fulfills his true purpose, he epitomizes the “speaking spirit.” He elevates both himself and the world with him. But when he degrades the power of speech by using it to curse and to denigrate, then Man becomes no more than a talking donkey.

*Sources:*

*A Guest Appearance - Rabbi Reuven Subar*

*Name Calling - The Vilna Gaon*

*You Lose, I Win - The Chafetz Chaim*

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

*WALKING HUMBLY*

**“O Man, what is good and what does Hashem seek from you, only to do justice and love kindness, and walk humbly with your G-d.” (6:8)**

“To walk humbly with your G-d’ — this refers to the mitzvos of providing for a bride and escorting the dead” — Rashi.

To perceive the true essence of a person, one must see him both in moments of transcendent joy — providing for a bride — and abject sorrow — escorting the dead.

For in these moments of extremity, the inner qualities are revealed in stark relief. Only then can it be seen whether he can be said “to walk humbly with your G-d.”

*Kochav M'Yaakov*

---

**Parshas Balak**

*For the week ending 17 Tammuz 5758, 10-11 July 1998*

Torah Weekly

is available from

several sources:

• World Wide Web: Our address is <http://www.ohr.org.il>

• Fax and Mail in Israel and US-MAIL in America . Send us a note requesting a subscription in Israel, or call 800-431-2272 in the US for details.

• E-Mail via InterNet. To subscribe, send the message “sub weekly {your full name}” to [listproc@virtual.co.il](mailto:listproc@virtual.co.il)

*This publication contains words of Torah. Please treat it with due respect. Do not let this land on a garbage heap.*

# LOVE OF THE LAND

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

## THE CONSOLATION OF DESOLATION

***“And I shall make the land desolate and your enemies that dwell in it shall dwell in desolation.” (Devarim 26:32)***

In this Torah passage, warning the People of Israel about the exile from *Eretz Yisrael* if they turn away from observance of the Torah, there is a note of comfort, say our sages.

Our land will never accept our enemies.

This is an extraordinary promise, because you will not find anywhere in the world a land so good and bountiful which was once so developed and is so in ruins. For ever since we left it the land has accepted no other nation, although so many have unsuccessfully tried to settle it.

*Ramban, Commentary on the Torah*

