

Putting on a good show

This weeks reading is from **Parashat Balak** (*Bamidbar / Numbers 22:2-25:9*). Based upon the opening verses of the Torah portion, Balak king of Moab saw all the children of Israel had done to the Amorites (*Bamidbar / Numbers 22:2 Now Balak the son of Zippor saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites. 22:3 So Moab was in great fear because of the people, for they were numerous; and Moab was in dread of the sons of Israel.* *NASB*, וַיֵּרָא בָּלָק בֶּן-צִפּוֹר אֶת כָּל-אֲשֶׁר-עָשָׂה יִשְׂרָאֵל לְאֹמְרֵי: ג וַיִּגַּר מוֹאָב מִפְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: (הָעָם מְאֹד כִּי רַב-הוּא וַיִּקְוֶן מוֹאָב מִפְּנֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: *NASB*). Both he and the people of Moab were afraid and devised a plan to overcome Israel. Balak asks for help from a man called Bilam. Bilam was well known according to Balak saying, “*For I know that he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed.*” (22:6, וְעַתָּה לְכֵה-נָא אָרְה-לִּי אֶת-הָעָם הַזֶּה כִּי-עֲצוּם הוּא מִמֶּנִּי אֲוִלִי אֲוִכַל נֶכֶה-בוֹ וְאֶגְרָשְׁנוּ מִן-הָאָרֶץ כִּי יִדְעֹתִי אֶת אֲשֶׁר-תְּבַרֵךְ מְבָרֵךְ וְאֲשֶׁר תִּפְאֹר יִפְאֹר: *NASB*). According to the Torah, Bilam was a man who had the ear of the Lord God of Israel. As the story goes, Balak was very persistent and eventually convinced Bilam to travel to meet him. Bilam travels with the men sent from Balak and God’s anger burned against him. The Angel of the Lord stood in the way of Bilam’s donkey to slay him. This text suggests to us how the Lord will stand in our way to prevent us from going against His Word, but we must be sensitive in the Spirit to recognize the obstacles the Lord is placing in our path. Bilam was very persistent in his sin and three times he turns to continue on his way being unaware that his life was in eminent danger. The question then is how persistent are we in our sins to do what our flesh wants us to do, as opposed to the path the Lord wants us to walk in? How often do you think we walk in eminent danger if we are not walking and living according God’s Word? Last week, Moshe and Aaron failed to sanctify the Name of God (*Bamidbar / Numbers 20*) and with dire consequences that prevented their entering into the promises the Lord had made to His people. Their sin caused them to not obtain what the Lord had promised them in this life. In this week’s reading, Bilam failed to obey God’s Word and if it wasn’t for the mercy of God, Bilam would have died. However, we know according to the Torah that Bilam eventually died at the hand of Israel because of His sin. He put

on a good show having the ear of God, however, his sins had found him out and he died because he persisted in his sin as opposed to walking in God's ways of righteousness, justice, and truth.

ספר במדבר פרק כב Bamidbar / Numbers 22:9-14

ט וַיָּבֹא אֱלֹהִים אֶל-בִּלְעָם וַיֹּאמֶר
מִי הָאֲנָשִׁים הָאֵלֶּה עִמָּךְ: י וַיֹּאמֶר
בִּלְעָם אֶל-הָאֱלֹהִים בָּלַק בֶּן-צִפּוֹר
מֶלֶךְ מוֹאָב שָׁלַח אֵלָי: יא הֲנִה
הָעָם הַיֵּצֵא מִמִּצְרַיִם וַיִּכַּסּוּ אֶת-
עֵין הָאָרֶץ עֲתָה לְכֶה קָבֵה-לִּי אֹתוֹ
אוּלַּי אוּכַל לְהִלָּחֵם בּוֹ וַיִּגְרָשׁתִּיו:
יב וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶל-בִּלְעָם לֹא
תֵלֵךְ עִמָּהֶם לֹא תֵאָר אֶת-הָעָם כִּי
בָרוּךְ הוּא: [שְׁנִי] [חֲמִישִׁי כִשְׁהוֹן
מִחוּבְרִין] יג וַיָּקָם בִּלְעָם בַּבֹּקֶר
וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל-שָׂרֵי בָלַק לָכוּ אֵל-
אַרְצְכֶם כִּי מֵאֵן יְהוָה לְתַתִּי לְהֵלֵךְ
עִמָּכֶם: יד וַיִּקְוּמוּ שָׂרֵי מוֹאָב
וַיָּבֹאוּ אֶל-בָּלַק וַיֹּאמְרוּ מֵאֵן בִּלְעָם
הֵלֵךְ עִמָּנוּ:

22:9 Then God came to Bilam and said, 'Who are these men with you?' 22:10 Bilam said to God, 'Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab, has sent word to me, 22:11 'Behold, there is a people who came out of Egypt and they cover the surface of the land; now come, curse them for me; perhaps I may be able to fight against them and drive them out.' 22:12 God said to Bilam, 'Do not go with them; you shall not curse the people, for they are blessed.' 22:13 So Bilam arose in the morning and said to Balak's leaders, 'Go back to your land, for the Lord has refused to let me go with you.' 22:14 The leaders of Moab arose and went to Balak and said, 'Bilam refused to come with us. (NASB)

While studying the Torah, the Hebrew text describes the Lord telling Bilam (בִּלְעָם) that he may go with the men but to only speak what He tells him to say or do (וְאָזְנָה אֶת-הַדְּבָר אֲשֶׁר-אֶדְבַּר אֵלָיךְ אֹתוֹ תַעֲשֶׂה). Following what the Lord said, we are told that in the morning, Bilam rose and went with the men, and the Lord was angry with Bilam.

Bamidbar / Numbers 22:19-22

22:19 'Now please, you also stay here tonight, and I will find out what else the Lord will speak to me.' 22:20 God came to Bilam at night and said to him, 'If the men have come to call you, rise up and go with them; but only the word which I speak to you shall you do.' 22:21 So Bilam arose in the morning, and saddled his donkey and went

with the leaders of Moab. 22:22 But God was angry because he was going, and the angel of the Lord took his stand in the way as an adversary against him. Now he was riding on his donkey and his two servants were with him. (NASB)

יט וְעַתָּה שָׁבוּ נָא בְּזֶה גַם-אִתָּם הַלִּילָה וְאֲדַעְהָ מִה-יִסֹף יְהוָה דַּבֵּר עִמִּי: כ וַיָּבֵא אֱלֹהִים | אֶל-בְּלָעָם לִילָה וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ אִם-לִקְרָא לְךָ בָּאוּ הָאֲנָשִׁים קוּם לְךָ אִתָּם וְאִךְ אֶת-הַדָּבָר אֲשֶׁר-אָדַבֵּר אֵלֶיךָ אֹתוֹ תַעֲשֶׂה: [שְׁלִישִׁי] כֹּא וַיָּקָם בְּלָעָם בַּבֹּקֶר וַיַּחְבֹּשׁ אֶת-אֲתָנּוֹ וַיִּלְךָ עִם-שָׂרֵי מוֹאָב: כב וַיַּחַר-אֵף אֱלֹהִים כִּי-הוֹלִךְ הוּא וַיִּתְּיָצֵב מִלְּאֵף יְהוָה בְּדַרְךָ לְשַׁטֵּן לוֹ וְהוּא רֹכֵב עַל-אֲתָנּוֹ וּשְׁנֵי נֹעָרָיו עִמּוֹ:

The question is always asked why was the Lord angry with Bilam if he was going with these men having been given permission by the Lord to go? The reason may be what we are not told, which is the intention of his heart. We are told, Bilam rose (וַיָּקָם) and went with the men, however he did not mention to them what the Lord had said that night which may provide some insight on the intention of his heart. The idea is that his intention was to go and see if he could do as the princes and king of Moab requested, to curse Israel, so that he could get paid, which is in opposition to what the Lord was wanting him to do. What is implied by the MT is that Bilam did not have within his heart a desire to obey the Lord. Note that earlier the Lord had told Bilam that Israel is blessed, and not cursed. (יב וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶל-בְּלָעָם לֹא תִלְךָ עִמָּהֶם לֹא תֵאָר אֶת-הָעָם כִּי בָרוּךְ הוּא: [שְׁנִי]) [חמישי כשהן מחוברין], *22:12 God said to Bilam, ‘Do not go with them; you shall not curse the people, for they are blessed.’*) When the Lord says something, is it in His nature to overturn what He has previously proclaimed? A summary of what has taken place helps to understand what is happening here in *Bamidbar / Numbers 22:22*.

Bilam is the son of Beor and a prophet of Pethor in Mesopotamia. The narrative relating to Bilam is found in *Bamidbar / Numbers 22-24*. According to the Torah narrative, Balak, king of Moab, sent messengers to Bilam, requesting him to come and pronounce a curse against Israel. Question, was Israel at war with Moab prior to this point? This is an important question because of what Nehemiah wrote in the Tanach. Nehe-

miah stated that Moab did not come out to bless Israel, rather, they went out to curse Israel.

Nehemiah 13:1-9

13:1 On that day they read aloud from the book of Moses in the hearing of the people; and there was found written in it that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever enter the assembly of God, 13:2 because they did not meet the sons of Israel with bread and water, but hired Bilam against them to curse them. However, our God turned the curse into a blessing. 13:3 So when they heard the law, they excluded all foreigners from Israel. 13:4 Now prior to this, Eliashib the priest, who was appointed over the chambers of the house of our God, being related to Tobiah, 13:5 had prepared a large room for him, where formerly they put the grain offerings, the frankincense, the utensils and the tithes of grain, wine and oil prescribed for the Levites, the singers and the gatekeepers, and the contributions for the priests. 13:6 But during all this time I was not in Jerusalem, for in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon I had gone to the king. After some time, however, I asked leave from the king, 13:7 and I came to Jerusalem and learned about the evil that Eliashib had done for Tobiah, by preparing a room for him in the courts of the house of God. 13:8 It was very displeasing to me, so I threw all of Tobiah's household goods out of the room. 13:9 Then I gave an order and they cleansed the rooms; and I returned there the utensils of the house of God with the grain offerings and the frankincense. (NASB)

Note the interpretation here on the Torah from the prophet Nehemiah. Both Moab and the Amorites did not come out to bless Israel, they came out to curse instead. In addition, both the Moabites and the Amorites are the sons of Lot where Lot's daughters had children in sexual sin with their Father. The older daughter had a son, and she named him Moab; the younger daughter also had a son, and she named him Ben-Ammi (see *Bereshit / Genesis 19:30-38*).

The moabites were in fear of Israel and so Balak hoped, with the aid of the Bilam's powerful curse, that he would be able to overcome Israel. Balak's faith in Bilam is illustrated by the declaration he makes saying, *"I know that he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed"* (*Bamidbar / Numbers 22:6*, וַיֹּאמֶר מוֹאָב אֶל-זִקְנֵי מִדְּבַר עַתְּהָ יִלְחָם, כִּי הִקְהֵל אֶת-כָּל-סְבִיבֵינִי בְּלַחֵץ הַשּׁוֹר אֶת יָרֵק הַשְּׂדֵה וּבָלַק בֶּן-צְפּוֹר מֶלֶךְ לְמוֹאָב: (בְּעֵת הַהוּא: Bilam seeks an answer from the Lord and is forbidden to go back with the princes of Moab (שָׂרֵי מוֹאָב). Bilam refuses to go and says it does not matter the size of the reward, he cannot go with them. Balak tries again to persuade Bilam, and is anxious to go. Bilam asks the men of Moab to await a second night and he will seek the Lord again on this matter. This time the Lord permits Bilam to go to Balak, but requires him to do only *"the word which I shall say"* (22:20). Bilam then arises and departs with the Moabites, however, we are told 22:22 *But God was angry because he was going...* (וַיִּחַר-אַף אֱלֹהִים בְּכִי-הוֹלֵךְ הוּא) the reason being, his intention was to curse and not to bless.

According to the *Talmud Bavli Baba Bathra 15b*, Bilam is represented as one of seven heathen prophets.

Talmud Bavli Baba Bathra 15b

Say, As long as from the time they entered Egypt till they left it. An objection was further raised [from the following]: Seven prophets prophesied to the heathen, namely, Bilam and his father, Job, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, Zophar the Naamathite, and Elihu the son of Barachel the Buzite. He replied: Granted as you say [that Job was one of these], was not Elihu the son of Barachel from Israel, seeing that the Scripture mentions that he was from the family of Ram? Evidently [the reason why he is included] is because he prophesied to the heathen. So too Job [is included because] he prophesied to the heathen. But did not all the prophets prophesy to the heathen? — Their prophecies were addressed primarily to Israel, but these addressed themselves primarily to the heathen. אימא כמשעה שנכנסו ישראל למצרים ועד [שעה] שיצאו מיתבי שבעה נביאים נתנבאו לאומות העולם ואלו הן בלעם ואביו ואיוב אלי-

פז התימני ובלדד השוחי וצופר הנעמתי ואליהוא בן ברכאל הבוזי
(א"ל) וליטעמיך אליהוא בן ברכאל לאו מישראל הוה והא כתיב
ממשפחת רם אלא אינבוי אינבי לאומות העולם ה"נ איוב אינבוי
אינבי [לאומות העולם] אטו כולהו נביאי מי לא אינבוי לאומות
העולם התם עיקר נביאותיהו לישראל הכא עיקר נביאותיהו
לאומות העולם

The idea that Bilam was one of seven heathen prophets is that the Lord listened to Bilam's prayers and that he had prophesied to the heathen nations. In addition, according to Midrash Rabbah, Bilam gradually received the position among the heathen as the exalted one, similar to that of Moshe among the chosen people of Israel (see *Midrash Rabbah Bamidbar 20, Part 1*). According to Midrash Rabbah, Bilam was at first an interpreter of dreams, then he became a magician, and finally the spirit of prophecy descended upon him. Bilam was wise in the sense that his intention was to curse Israel at the moment of God's wrath, this is why he advised Midian to cause Israel to sin at Baal Peor in Parashat Pinchas. However, the Lord restrained His anger in order to save Israel and destroy Bilam. (see *Talmud Bavli Berakhot 7a*).

According to the Torah (*Bamidbar / numbers 25:1-9*), Bilam was responsible for Israel sinning at Baal-Peor in idol worship which led to the destruction of 24,000 persons falling to a pestilence that was sent out by the Lord. When Bilam saw that he could not curse the children of Israel, he advised Balak to tempt Israel to immoral acts through the worship of Baal at Peor. What is interesting to note is how Israel was actively involved with the surrounding nations, even though they were in the wilderness for 40 years. The people did not stay exclusively in the camp. Based upon the description of the sin at Baal-Peor, some of the people were going into the surrounding nations, talking, and interacting with the people. What does this speak of for our lives today? If we are careless in our walk before the Lord and seek out friends who are not believers, then sin is crouching at our doors.

Throughout the Scriptures, the Lord God is very stern in His warning to stay away from sexual immortality and not eat anything offer up to idols. For example, there are 4 things that gentiles are not to do, at the advice of the Jerusalem Council, according to *Acts 15:9-21*:

1. To abstain from food polluted by idols.
2. From sexual immorality.
3. From the meat of strangled animals.
4. From drinking or eating blood.

Why these 4 things? If the Holy Spirit lives within us and we are the temple of God, the Lord wants us to be careful how we live our lives, specifically, what we allow into our lives by the way of the lusts of the flesh. The people of Israel were living in a holy kehal (ekklesia, congregation), and by incorporating these things into one's life, one brings these things into the community, into the midst of the congregation. Note the significance of these things in light of the Spirit of God dwelling in our bodies. The implications of this, based upon Parashat Balak, is darkness (unrighteousness), death, destruction, will come to the one who chooses to live his or her life in sin as opposed to seeking the Lord for help to overcome sin and for a righteous life.

Based upon the narrative in the Torah regarding Bilam, the rabbis according to the Talmud put together a play on the name Bilam by calling him "*Belo 'Am*" meaning "*without a people,*" with reference to the one who does not have a share with Israel in the world to come. They also say his name means "*Billa' 'Am*" meaning "*one that ruined a people.*" (see *Talmud Bavli Sanhedrin 106b*). The Jewish Encyclopedia states:

"In the process of killing Bilam (Num. xxxi. 8), all four legal methods of execution—stoning, burning, decapitating, and strangling—were employed (Sanh. l.c.). He met his death at the age of thirty-three (ib.); and it is stated that he had no portion in the world to come (Sanh. x. 2; 90a). The Bible devotes a special section to the remarkable history of the prophet, in order to answer the question, why God has taken away the power of prophecy from the Gentiles (Tan., Balak, 1). Moses is expressly mentioned as the author of this episode in the Pentateuch (B. B. 14b)." (Jewish Encyclopedia)

The intent of this evil prophet to go against the will of God is realized in

his recommendation to Balak when Bilam realizes that it is useless to go against the word of God, he abandons this approach and tries instead the temptation of idol worship and sexual immorality. The question though is, *“Why would such a mode of worship attract a person, let alone the Israel who had lived with the presence of God in their midst for 40 years in the desert?”* Could the answer be found in what the people were doing by going into the surrounding nations, talking, and interacting with the people who were involved in sin? The rabbinic answer to this question is to say that the 40 years in the desert was like 40 years in the Garden of Eden (see *Bereshit Rabbati* (בְּרֵאשִׁית רַבָּתִי), a Midrash on the Book of Genesis usually ascribed to Moses ha-Darshan of Narbonne, and *Ibn Ezra on Devarim / Deuteronomy 8:4*). The idea is that Israel was tired of the Garden of Eden and wanted to be like the surrounding nations. The Garden of Eden analogy causes the rabbis to say that the manna was fully absorbed into the body, there was no waste (defecation). The manna also offered the children of Israel any taste they desired. (*Remember our discussion in last week’s portion, Parashat Chukat.*) The manna was also known according to the rabbis as a spiritual food, bread from heaven, and angels food, etc. The Garden of Eden was a holy place, and a place without sin. When Adam and Eve sinned, they were forced to leave the Garden of Eden. The practice of Baal-Peor however involved defecation. This is important to the rabbinic understanding of Israel in the wilderness, on the Garden of Eden, and the manna being fully absorbed, where as long as they ate manna, they did not produce waste. Human waste causes uncleanness. So the idea is that the people did not want to be Holy, they desired uncleanness, they wanted to be less spiritual, to be more like the nations, to defecate, and to celebrate the physical senses in immorality, lust, and idolatry. These concepts brought together suggest that immorality, lust, and idolatry are synonymous to human waste (defecation), something that should be completely detestable and abhorrent to God’s people. The peoples excursions into the nations to learn the way of the nations resulted in a national tragedy and a plague breaking out amongst the people because of their sins. It was only through the intercession of Pinchas that the people returned to their senses and ceased the strange worship. This is why it is written of Bilam saying in *Bamidbar / Numbers 23:9* *As I see him from the top of the rocks, And I look at him from the hills; Behold, a people who dwells apart, And will not be reckoned among the nations*

(NASB) God's people will not be counted among the nations meaning that they will not be practicing the things the nations practice which stand in opposition to the Word of God. Can you see the kind of distinction the Lord is making for His people?

The point of this week's Torah portion is with regard to the sin of going through the motions, or putting on a good show for others to see. The prophet Isaiah has a little to say concerning going through the motions.

Isaiah 58:1-59:2

58:1 'Cry loudly, do not hold back; Raise your voice like a trumpet, And declare to My people their transgression And to the house of Jacob their sins. 58:2 'Yet they seek Me day by day and delight to know My ways, As a nation that has done righteousness And has not forsaken the ordinance of their God. They ask Me for just decisions, They delight in the nearness of God. 58:3 'Why have we fasted and You do not see? Why have we humbled ourselves and You do not notice?' Behold, on the day of your fast you find your desire, And drive hard all your workers. 58:4 'Behold, you fast for contention and strife and to strike with a wicked fist. You do not fast like you do today to make your voice heard on high. 58:5 'Is it a fast like this which I choose, a day for a man to humble himself? Is it for bowing one's head like a reed And for spreading out sackcloth and ashes as a bed? Will you call this a fast, even an acceptable day to the Lord? 58:6 'Is this not the fast which I choose, To loosen the bonds of wickedness, To undo the bands of the yoke, And to let the oppressed go free And break every yoke? 58:7 'Is it not to divide your bread with the hungry And bring the homeless poor into the house; When you see the naked, to cover him; And not to hide yourself from your own flesh? 58:8 'Then your light will break out like the dawn, And your recovery will speedily spring forth; And your righteousness will go before you; The glory of the Lord will be your rear guard. 58:9 'Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; You will cry, and He will say, 'Here I am.' If you remove the yoke from your

midst, The pointing of the finger and speaking wickedness, 58:10 And if you give yourself to the hungry And satisfy the desire of the afflicted, Then your light will rise in darkness And your gloom will become like midday. 58:11 'And the Lord will continually guide you, And satisfy your desire in scorched places, And give strength to your bones; And you will be like a watered garden, And like a spring of water whose waters do not fail. 58:12 'Those from among you will rebuild the ancient ruins; You will raise up the age-old foundations; And you will be called the repairer of the breach, The restorer of the streets in which to dwell. 58:13 'If because of the sabbath, you turn your foot From doing your own pleasure on My holy day, And call the sabbath a delight, the holy day of the Lord honorable, And honor it, desisting from your own ways, From seeking your own pleasure And speaking your own word, 58:14 Then you will take delight in the Lord, And I will make you ride on the heights of the earth; And I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father, For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.' 59:1 Behold, the Lord's hand is not so short That it cannot save; Nor is His ear so dull That it cannot hear. 59:2 But your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, And your sins have hidden His face from you so that He does not hear. (NASB)

Note what Isaiah said, he is speaking of a people full of transgression (sin). They say they delight in the Lord, they seek Him and His ways, but there is something that is amiss in their lives. Their motivation is wrong, they fast for the wrong reasons. The fast the Lord chooses is to loosen the bonds of wickedness, to free one from the yoke of bondage, to free the oppressed, feed the poor and widows, and to cover the naked, having love towards one another, these things are the definition of one living righteously before God. Having love for one another as opposed to hatred for others in our hearts. I know a number of people who constantly ask or feel that God doesn't listen to them. If these things are in our lives, if we are mingling with the nations and walking in the way of the nations, if our relationship with others is in disarray, if our relationship with our spouses

are not right, is there any question why God does not hear our prayers? According to what we are studying this week, we need to examine ourselves before the Lord and ask Him to reveal the sin that is in our lives, and those sins that are preventing our prayers from being answered. (see *Tehillim / Psalms 66:18, 1 Peter 3:7*) Bilam did not have a heart that was wholly devoted to the Lord God in heaven. He was seeking to satisfy his appetite for wealth and for power. He was going through the motions in an attempt to get God to do something for him so that he could satisfy his appetite for these things. Do you go through the motions like Bilam did to satisfy your appetite?

In the Messiah Yeshua, we are called to change our value system, and to pursue the things that will last in this life that are eternal which proceed on into the world to come. It is in and through the Messiah Yeshua that we are empowered to do so. The only things we are able to take into eternity is our relationship with God and with people. The things on this earth are merely tools we use to prepare for the World to Come. Bilam did not realize this and he sought the Lord for all the wrong reasons. Let's seek the Lord for all the right reasons and stop going through the motions when it comes to Yeshua and the Lord God of Israel, our Father in heaven.



