

The Sin of going through the motions

In this weeks reading from Parashat Balak (*Bamidbar / Numbers 22:2-25:9*) Balak king of Moab saw what the children of Israel had done to the Amorites and both he and the people of Moab were afraid being very anxious about Israel's presence. As a result, Balak asks for help from a man called Bilam. Now 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). According to the Torah, Bilam was a man who had the ear of the Lord God in Heaven. As the story goes, at the persistence of Balak, Bilam travels with the men from Balak and God's anger burned against Bilam. The Angel of the Lord stood in the way of Bilam's donkey to slay him. Bilam is very persistent; three times he turns to continue on his way being unaware that his life was in eminent danger. 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*) with dire consequences. 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.

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

ט וַיְבֹא אֱלֹהִים אֶל-בִּלְעָם וַיֹּאמֶר
מִי הָאֲנָשִׁים הָאֵלֶּה עִמָּךְ: י וַיֹּאמֶר
בִּלְעָם אֶל-הָאֱלֹהִים בְּלֹק בְּנֹ-צֹפֵר
מִלְּךָ מוֹאָב שְׁלַח אֵלַי: יא הִנֵּה הָעָם
הַיֵּצֵא מִמִּצְרָיִם וַיִּכֶס אֶת-עֵין הָאָרֶץ
עַתָּה לִכְהֵן קָבָה-לִי אֹתוֹ אֲוֹלִי אוֹכֵל
לְהִלָּחֵם בּוֹ וַיִּגְרֹשׁוּ: יב וַיֹּאמֶר
אֱלֹהִים אֶל-בִּלְעָם לֹא תִלְךָ עִמָּהֶם לֹא
תֹאֵר אֶת-הָעָם כִּי בְרוּךְ הוּא: [שני]
[חמישי כשהן מחוברין] יג וַיִּקָּם
בִּלְעָם בַּבֹּקֶר וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל-שָׂרֵי בְלָק
לָכוּ אֶל-אַרְצְכֶם כִּי מָאֵן יְהוָה לְתַתִּי
לְהִלָּךְ עִמָּכֶם: יד וַיִּקְוֹמוּ שָׂרֵי מוֹאָב
וַיָּבֹאוּ אֶל-בְּלָק וַיֹּאמְרוּ מָאֵן בִּלְעָם
הִלָּךְ עִמָּנוּ:

22:9 Then God came to Balaam and said, 'Who are these men with you?' 22:10 Balaam 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 Balaam, 'Do not go with them; you shall not curse the people, for they are blessed.' 22:13 So Balaam 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, 'Balaam refused to come with us. (NASB)

While studying the Torah, it is interesting what we read in the Hebrew text, the Lord tells Bilam (בְּלָעַם) that he may go with the men but to only say what He tells him to do (וְאָמַר אֶת-הַדְּבָר אֲשֶׁר-אֶדְבֵּר אֵלֶיךָ אֲתוֹ 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 Balaam 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 Balaam 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 הַלַּיְלָה וְאִדְעָה מַה-יִסְרֶף יְהוָה דִּבְרַ עֲמִי: כ וַיָּבֹא אֱלֹהִים | אֶל-בְּלָעַם לַיְלָה וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ אִם-לִקְרָא לְךָ בָּאוּ הָאֲנָשִׁים קוּם לְךָ אִתָּם וְאָמַר אֶת-הַדְּבָר אֲשֶׁר-אֶדְבֵּר אֵלֶיךָ אֲתוֹ תַעֲשֶׂה: [שְׁלִישִׁי] כֹּא וַיָּקָם בְּלָעַם בַּבֶּקֶר וַיַּחֲבֹשׂ אֶת-אֲתוֹנוֹ וַיֵּלֶךְ עִם-שְׂרָי מוֹאָב: כב וַיַּחֲרֶ-אֵף אֱלֹהִים כִּי-הוֹלֵךְ הוּא וַיִּתְּנִיצַב מַלְאָךְ יְהוָה בְּדַרְךְ לְשַׁטֹּן לוֹ וְהוּא רֹכֵב עַל-אֲתוֹנוֹ 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 that we are told, Bilam rose (וַיָּקָם) and went with the men, whereby he did not mention to them what the Lord had said that night. 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, 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 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 בְרוּךְ הוּא: [שני] [חמישי כשהן מחוברין], 22:12 *God said to Balaam, 'Do not go with them; you shall not curse the people, for they are blessed.'*) 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. Nehemiah 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 Balaam 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. His confidence 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*, ד וַיֹּאמֶר מוֹאָב אֶל-זִקְנֵי מְדִיַן עֲתָה יְלַחֲם, כּוּ הַקְהֵל אֶת-כָּל-סְבִיבֵי תֵיבּוֹנוֹ בְּלַחֲמֵי הַשּׁוֹר אֶת יָרֵק הַשְּׂדֵה וּבָלֵק 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). Balaam 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-הוֹלְכֵהוּ 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, Balaam 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 אליי פז התימני ובלדד השוחי וצופר הנעמתי ואליהוא בן ברכאל הבוזי (א"ל) וליטעמיד 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 (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. Balaam was wise in the sense that his intention was to curse Israel at the moment of God's wrath, 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-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?

Throughout the Scriptures, the Lord God is very demanding in scripture to stay away from sexual immorality 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*, (i) to abstain from food polluted by idols, (ii) from sexual immorality, (iii) from the meat of strangled animals and (iv) from blood. Why these 4 things? If the Holy Spirit lives within us and we are the temple of God, he dose not want these things our bodies! The people of Israel were living in a holy kehal (ekklesia, congregation), and incorporating these things into one's life, one brings these things into the community, into the midst of the congregation. The implications of this, based upon Parashat Balak, is darkness (unrighteousness), death, destruction, etc.

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 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 Balaam (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)."

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 Jewish people 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 רַבְתִּי), *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 (note last week’s portion, Parashat Chukat). The manna was also known according to the rabbis as a spiritual food, bread from heaven, 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 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, that as long as they ate manna, they did not produce waste. Human waste causes uncleanness. So the idea is that the people 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. 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 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)*, that 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.

The point of this week’s Torah portion is with regard to the sin of go-

ing through the motions. 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 purpose and point of 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, 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 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 our Father in heaven.

