

פרשת
בלק
Parashat Balak

Bamidbar / Numbers 22:2-25:9, Micah 5:6-6:8
Mark 11:12-26

An Act of Double Mindedness

The Apostle James in *James 1:8* speaks of the double minded man being unstable in all his ways. The Didache translated as “*Teaching*,” a reference to the Teaching of the Twelve Apostles, is a brief anonymous early Christian treatise, which is dated by most modern scholars to the first century. The *Didache 2:4-5* states “*You shall not be double-minded nor double-tongued; for to be double-tongued is a snare of death. Your speech shall not be false, nor empty, but fulfilled by deed.*” Both James and the author of the Didache speak of our not being unstable in all our ways, but to be single minded having the motivation to do (to live) what we claim to believe by faith. This why it is said, our speech should not be false nor empty but filled with deed. In this week’s Torah portion, Bilam acted contrary to God’s Word, and sought riches over remaining in God’s truth. He seemed to follow in this way of double mindedness and chose to curse Israel. Balak was pleading with Bilam to curse these people that came out of Egypt. These Hebrews of ancient times, as we see here in the Torah, were no different than we are today. Often in moments of crisis we will plead with God to make a vow with Him, often unthinkingly and rashly saying “*Oh, Lord, I will go to church (or synagogue) every week,*” or “*I promise never to use swear words again,*” or “*I’ll never ask you for anything*”

ever again.” We have all done this and you can probably recall some big ones that you’ve either heard or actually uttered yourself. The problem is if we are going against God’s will, all the pleading in our lives will not change the situation. The point of a vow is according to *Bamidbar / Numbers 30:2* *If a man makes a vow to the LORD, or takes an oath to bind himself with a binding obligation, he shall not violate his word; he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth.* (NASB) According to these Scriptures, the making of an oath or a vow in the name of the Lord is a risky business. The Lord warns us not to “*swear falsely by My name, so as to profane the name of your God*” (*Vayikra / Leviticus 19:12*). This is also the meaning of the commandment “*You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain*” (*Shemot / Exodus 20:7*). The Lord God of Israel states if a person takes His name in vain, He will not leave that person unpunished. This is also why Yeshua warned His disciples against needlessly taking oaths (*Matthew 5:33-7 and 23:16–22*). In ancient times, when the nations would make oaths or vows, they were done so in the names of the gods. The idea was that if the person taking the oath proved false, the gods would deal with him. The Scriptures warn us not to make oaths in the names of other gods (see *Shemot / Exodus 20:13*). Instead, if one must make a vow or an oath, he should “*fear only the LORD ... and swear by His name*” (see *Bamidbar / Numbers 5:21*). We read according to the Scriptures when a person in ancient days wanted to make a vow or an oath, he would say something like, “*May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if I do not do such and such.*” Or he might say, “*As surely as the LORD lives, I will do such and such.*” These things illustrated for us the significance of having conversations with the Lord in heaven. Taking a vow or making an oath, one should make every effort to keep his word because the Torah says, “*He shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth.*” (*Bamidbar / Numbers 30:2*) This is an important factor of our lives as the children of God, to be careful about everything we say, not just vows and oaths, but also in everything that we do. Note also that Bilam made similar statements saying to the men Balak sent that he can do only what the Lord tells him, yet he went with them anyway going against his word. In this week’s Torah portion, Balak, the king of Moab, asked a Mesopotamian sorcerer name Bilam to come and put a curse on Israel so Moab (and their ally Mid-

ian) could fight against Moshe and his forces and defeat them in battle. The God of Israel however intervened in Balak's plan, had direct contact with Bilam, and revealed to Balak (i) even if he DID curse Israel it would have had no effect because whomever the Lord blesses cannot be cursed, and whomever the Lord cursed cannot be blessed; and (ii) the Lord God made it clear that Bilam could not curse Israel. Therefore, Bilam would not and could not curse Israel and so went back home without getting paid. Immediately following these events, we find out that Israel remained in the area of Moab and Bilam suggested to Balak that Moab could deceive Israel and thus weaken them by getting the Midianite (and Moabite) women to sexually entice the Hebrew men, and in the process persuade Israel to worship Chemosh. This plan worked. And, as a result 24,000 men died and the plague ended only when a priest named Phinehas thrust his spear through a Hebrew man having intercourse with a Moabite woman inside the camp of Israel, killing them both. The point is, what we say and what we do are both intimately connected. Just as a vow (neder, נדר) is a type of oath by which a person binds himself or herself to perform a certain act or refrain from a certain thing. A vow is understood as a promise, obligation or prohibition that a person declares upon himself or herself. In a similar way, we all have made a vow to the Lord God of Israel, and one day will be called to account on whether what we said has followed through by what we did in this life. Let's Discuss these things a little further in this week's Torah portion.

This week we are looking at *Bamidbar / Numbers 22:1-21*.

Bamidbar / Numbers 22:1-21

22:1 Then the sons of Israel journeyed, and camped in the plains of Moab beyond the Jordan opposite Jericho.

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. 22:4 Moab said to the elders of Midian, 'Now this horde will lick up all that is around us, as the ox licks up the grass of the field.' And Balak the son of Zippor was king of Moab at that time. 22:5 So he sent messengers to Balaam the

son of Beor, at Pethor, which is near the River, in the land of the sons of his people, to call him, saying, 'Behold, a people came out of Egypt; behold, they cover the surface of the land, and they are living opposite me. 22:6 'Now, therefore, please come, curse this people for me since they are too mighty for me; perhaps I may be able to defeat them and drive them out of the land. For I know that he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed.' 22:7 So the elders of Moab and the elders of Midian departed with the fees for divination in their hand; and they came to Balaam and repeated Balak's words to him. 22:8 He said to them, 'Spend the night here, and I will bring word back to you as the Lord may speak to me.' And the leaders of Moab stayed with Balaam. 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.' 22:15 Then Balak again sent leaders, more numerous and more distinguished than the former. 22:16 They came to Balaam and said to him, 'Thus says Balak the son of Zippor, 'Let nothing, I beg you, hinder you from coming to me; 22:17 for I will indeed honor you richly, and I will do whatever you say to me. Please come then, curse this people for me.' 22:18 Balaam replied to the servants of Balak, 'Though Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not do anything, either small or great, contrary to the command of the Lord my God. 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. (NASB)

In this week’s Torah Portion, the Torah states in *Bamidbar / Numbers 22:7*, וַיֵּלְכוּ זִקְנֵי מוֹאָב וְזִקְנֵי מִדְיָן וַיָּבִיאוּ אֶל-בִּלְעָם וַיְדַבְּרוּ אֵלָיו דְּבַרֵי בָלָק: *The elders of Moab and the elders of Midian, versed in divination, set out. They came to Balaam and gave him Balak’s message. (KJV)* It is interesting how we are told the elders of Moab and Midian were versed in divination. Throughout history, innumerable methods of divination can be found around the world, and many cultures practiced similar methods under different names. During the Middle Ages, scholars coined terms for many of these methods. For example, “*papyromancy*” is the practice of folding paper, especially paper money (*Greek papros, papyrus paper + manteia, prophecy*) for the purpose of divination. Divination is the attempt to gain insight into a question or situation by way of an occult, standardized process or ritual. When we read in the Torah of the elders of Moab and Midian approaching Bilam (בִּלְעָם) to curse the people, they brought money to pay him for his services, and it is said they come being versed in divination since they were seeking to gain insight into a future event by some other means than in seeking the God of Israel. They were carrying money and were said to be versed in divination. This seems to suggest their trust in money to pay off Bilam was a form of divination. This is a warning for us today to not trust in money because it has the capacity to occupy a place in our hearts in a “*primary*” capacity which may supercede the Lord God Himself. The Lord however is to occupy a primary position in our lives and in our hearts.

Rashi has the following to say concerning these Scriptures:

Rashi on Bamidbar / Numbers 22:7 Part 1

וקסמים בידם. כל מיני קסמים, שלא יאמר אין כלי תשמישי

עָמִי; ד' א — קֹסֶם זֶה נָטְלוּ בְיָדָם זִקְנֵי מִדְיָן, אָמְרוּ אִם יָבֹא
עִמָּנוּ בְּפַעַם הַזֹּאת יֵשׁ בּוֹ מִמֶּשׁ, וְאִם יִדְחֲנוּ אֵין בּוֹ תוֹעֵצֶלֶת,
לְפִיכֹךְ כָּשָׁאֲמַר לָהֶם "לֵינּוּ פֹה הַלְיָלָה" אָמְרוּ אֵין בּוֹ תִקְוָה,
הַנִּיחֻהוּ וְהִלְכוּ לָהֶם, שָׁנְאָאֲמַר "וַיֵּשְׁבוּ שָׂרֵי מוֹאָב עִם בְּלָעָם",
AND DIVINATIONS WERE IN THEIR HANDS — all kinds of divination, in order that he should not say, "I have not got my tools with me". — Another explanation is: this omen (קסם) the elders of Midyan took with them: — they said, "If he comes with us this time, there is something substantial in him, but if he puts us off there is no use of him". — Consequently when he told them, "Stay here tonight", they said, "There is no hope in him"; they left him and went away, as it is said, (v. 8) And the princes of Moab stayed with Balaam", but the princes of Midyan went away (Midrash Tanchuma, Balak 5).

Rashi considers *Bamidbar / Numbers 22:7* saying the form of divination the peoples brought with them was not just in the form of money. Their divinations went as far as to their interpretation of the words and the way in which Bilam had spoken to them. The princes of Midyan believed there was no hope when Bilam said to wait that night, whereas Moab thought there was hope when he said to wait that night. This speaks of sorcery and divination coming from the heart. This is similar to what Samuel wrote in *1 Samuel 15:23* "For rebellion is like the sin of divination..." It is something that comes from the heart that leads on into action.

Sforno and Daat Zkenim have the following to say concerning *Bamidbar / Numbers 22:7*.

Sforno on Bamidbar / Numbers 22:7 Part 1

וקסמים בידם כלי הקסם כי קוסם היה בלעם לכוין השעה
כאמרו ואת בלעם בן בעור הקוסם הרגו בני ישראל בחרב
the instruments by means of which to perform sorcery.. Bileam's specific expertise in such sorcery was to calculate precisely when certain

constellations would be favorable to what he planned to achieve. He is described as a sorcerer when his death his reported in Joshua 13,22.

Daat Zkenim on Bamidbar / Numbers 22:7 Part 2

וקסמים בידם. שכר קסמים בידם וכן תרגום ירוש' ואגרתא דקסמא בידיהון אי נמי אגרתא דקסמא בידיהון שהביאו לו ספרי קוסמין: וקסמים בידם, “*and they had brought instruments .of divination with them.*” *They brought money with them to pay Bileam for employing divinations with which to curse the Israelites. This is the way the Jerusalem Talmud translated our verse. An alternate interpretation is that seeing that Balak himself was no novice in that art, he sent along samples of what he used when practicing divination.*

Sforno states that Bilam used the stars to predict and achieve his sorcery to curse Israel. Daat Zkenim states their money was their instruments of divination which they used to pay Bilam for the curse they sought against Israel. Balak is said to have sent along samples of his divination, referencing the money he sent as a token to inspire Bilam to come and curse Israel. This led Bilam to a form of double mindedness, to say one thing but do another. The idea that money may be an instrument of divination is a warning for us on how we use our money, in service to the God of Israel, or as a form of worship in our hearts?

The rabbis in the *Midrash Mekhilta* have the following to say:

Midrash Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael 14:9:1

(Exodus 14:9) “And Egypt pursued them” (This is ostensibly redundant.) We are hereby apprised that not one of them stumbled on the way, lest they resort to divination and turn back. For thus do we find, that these nations resorted to divination, viz. (Devarim 18:14) “For these nations that you are to inherit resort to soothsayers and diviners, etc.”, and (Numbers 22:7) “And the elders of Moav and the elders of Midian went, with (instruments of) divination in their hands,” and (Joshua

13:22) “And Bilaam the son of Beor the augur they slew by the sword,” and the elders of Midian divined and turned back.

The midrash speaks of the people not stumbling in the way of God, and say if they did they would have resorted to stumbling and resorting to divination to turn back to Egypt. This is a parallel again to *1 Samuel 15:23* “*For rebellion is like the sin of divination...*” Rebellion is a form of wickedness the Lord hates and is what the nations were driven out for in the land of Canaan.

The *Talmud Bavli Sanhedrin 105a* has the following to say:

Talmud Bavli Sanhedrin 105a Part 13

With regard to the verse: “And the elders of Moab and the elders of Midian set out with their divinations in their hands, and they came to Balaam” (Numbers 22:7), it was taught in a baraita: Midian and Moab had previously never had peace between them, and they were always at war with each other. What led them to make peace at that time? There is a parable of two dogs that were with the flock, and they were hostile to one another. A wolf came and attacked one. The other one said: If I do not help him, today he kills him and tomorrow he comes to attack me. They both went and killed the wolf. Moab and Midian joined together to face the potential common threat, the Jewish people. Rav Pappa says that this is in accordance with the adage that people say: A weasel [karkushta] and a cat made a wedding from the fat of the luckless. Despite their hatred of one another, they join together for their mutual benefit at the expense of a third party.

Note how the Talmud brings out the idea that enemies may become friends when involved in a common sin. This however is not true fellowship or brotherhood. A parable of two dogs fighting illustrates this when a wolf attacks whereby these two dogs who were once enemies join together to fight the wolf who is stronger than they. In the Torah

portion, the daughters of Moab “*invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods. So Israel joined themselves to Baal of Peor*” (*Bamidbar / Numbers 25:2-3*). The choice of words here in the Torah intentionally evokes sexuality, a theme that the prophet Hosea picks up in his rebuke regarding the Israelite fertility cult. *Hosea 9:10 They came to Baal-Peor and devoted themselves to shame, and they became as detestable as that which they loved. (NASB)* The point is the people did not hold fast to the Word of God. The point is we are to hold fast to the Word of God and to teach God’s Word to others by the way we live our lives. The Mishnah has the following to say concerning this point.

Mishnah Pirkei Avot 4:6

“Rabbi Yishmael bar (son of) Rabbi Yossi said: One who studies Torah in order to teach is granted the ability to study and to teach. One who studies in order to do is granted the ability to study, to teach, to observe, and to do.”

The Mishnah describes the proper motive or agenda one should have when he or she studies the Torah. The proper motivations are very important, since before studying the Torah, one needs to have a least some purpose in mind such as for the application to life. Studying with no goal is a meaningless practice. Is this the outcome of most Christian churches who teach faith alone? If God’s Word does not become relevant to our culture today, it becomes meaningless which results in a loss of interest. One should have the goal of applying oneself to teaching God’s Word to others. This may be achieved by the way we live our lives. A person studies the Torah for the purpose of applying it to life and to speak of it to others, this is meant to transform us from the inside out. Studying the Scriptures needs to be approached with the proper mindset, as it says in the *Talmud Bavli Kiddushin 40b “Great is study for it leads to action.”* The rabbis teach us *“The purpose of wisdom is repentance and good deeds” (Talmud Bavli Berechot 17a)* and this is what both Yeshua and Paul taught us to do. The greatness of the Torah however is found not in its intellectual content, but in its content and relevance to us providing guidance for life (*i.e. the Gospel*



message) and inspiration since it is the Word of God. In addition, the Torah is sacred, holy, and good (*Romans 7:12*) and therefore studying it with no sense of its sanctity and divinity shows a lack of appreciation for what the Word of God truly is. These things are why the Talmud has played such a central part of Jewish life in the yeshivas (rabbinical colleges). The Talmud is filled with the lively discussions and debates of the Sages. It contains the intellectual investment which went into the development of the Mishnah (Oral Law). The Talmud contains centuries of interpretation and practice of the Scriptures, and therefore there is value in studying the rabbinic literature to understand how the Scriptures have been traditionally understood. The basic concept is while studying the Torah, we not only study facts and conclusions (in the Torah and the Talmud), we become a part of the text through our imaginations, we become a part of the stories and they become a part of us. This is a trans-formative process. The Scriptures are not simply an intellectual pursuit, it is meant as a way of life, a way of thinking and of viewing the world. The true student of the Torah is one who wants God's Word to become a part of him.

Sforno on Numbers 15:40:1

... the marvelous ways of the Torah, through the study of which you will come to recognize the greatness of the Creator and His amazing love for His creatures.... למען תזכרו, so that you would be free from thoughts of vain matters; once you are no longer concerned with the pursuit of the transient material allusions in this life...

So this form of Torah study is far superior to learning to teach because it requires a more profound understanding of the Torah than one who studies for his own edification. This is why David said what he did in *Tehillim / Palms 119:99* having greater understanding than his teachers.

Bilam's wicked plan succeeded because the people did not determine their hearts to place God's Words on their hearts. As a result, He motivated the nation into bringing a curse down on its own head where the LORD unleashed a plague among the tribes and 24,000 died. Note in the book of the Revelation, Yeshua rebuked the assembly at Pergamum for eating food sacrificed to idols and engaging in sexual

immorality under the influence of “*the teaching of the Nicolaitans*” (*Revelation 2:15*). Yeshua referred to sexual immorality and eating food tainted by idolatry as “*the teaching of Bilam.*”

Revelation 2:14-17

2:14 ‘But I have a few things against you, because you have there some who hold the teaching of Balaam, who kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols and to commit acts of immorality. 2:15 ‘So you also have some who in the same way hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. 2:16 ‘Therefore repent; or else I am coming to you quickly, and I will make war against them with the sword of My mouth. 2:17 ‘He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, to him I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, and a new name written on the stone which no one knows but he who receives it.’ (NASB)

The sexual allure and inherent idolatry of the world continues to entice believers even today to draw us away from our singular devotion to the LORD. To break free from the spell of sensuality and materialism takes a radical resolution on our part. Something to note here that this is part of the Gospel Message that Paul was speaking of in *Romans 8:15*, and elsewhere.

At the beginning of the study we mentioned that *James 1:8* speaks of the double minded man being unstable in all his ways, and the *Didache 2:4-5* states “*You shall not be double-minded nor double-tongued; for to be double-tongued is a snare of death. Your speech shall not be false, nor empty, but fulfilled by deed.*” Both James and the author of the *Didache* speak of our not being unstable in all our ways, but to be single minded having the motivation to do (to live) what we claim to believe by faith. The rabbis say this is accomplished by devoting our lives to the study of God’s Word, but our motivations must be correct or our studies will simply be meaningless knowledge. Valuable knowledge is what becomes wisdom after having been learned, such that our

speech is not false nor empty but filled with deed. The point is, what we say and what we do are both intimately connected. We must have purpose of mind to determine our hearts to meditate upon God's Word and to put it into practice. This is our obligation as believers and as the children of God. Though we are imperfect, we are called to live righteous and holy lives, to do the best that we can, and to seek the Lord for His help and empowering to overcome sin in our lives. This is the meaning of faith. This is the Gospel Message that is taught in the Scriptures. If we live our lives as Bilam, double minded, walking in both worlds, and neglecting the perfect way in which the Lord wants us to search out, to know and to live, we will one day will be called to account on whether what we said is our faith has followed through by the way we lived our lives.

