



YadAvNow.com Weekly Video Series: Balak

Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky

Weekly Video: The Protagonist As Antagonist

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All Pales When Subsumed in Passion

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A Myriad of Personalities to Maintain The Equilibrium

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An Acute Sensor Unaccompanied by Clarity

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Balance/Counterbalance: The Power Of Speech vs. the Sword

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1. The Jewish People wanted passage thru Edomite territory.
2. Moshe: We were enslaved by the Egyptians & redeemed us when we called out to G-d.
3. Rashi: G-d responded due to the blessing we received from our Patriarch Yitzchok and the voice is the voice of Yaakov.
4. Edom's response to Moshe was: We shall come out with the sword against you.
5. Rashi: We also have a blessing from our Patriarch Yitzchok "And you shall live by the sword."
6. Bilaam wanted to curse the Jewish People but G-d didn't allow him.
7. Bilaam was killed by the sword.
8. Rashi: He exchanged his craft for ours so we exchanged ours for his.
9. His craft is "by the sword you shall live"; ours is power of speech – "the voice is of Yaakov."
10. "By the sword you shall live" is a classification, not a blessing.
11. Edom came out against the Jews with a strong hand.
12. Rashi: "Strong Hand" alludes to the blessing: The hands are the hands of Esav.
13. Midrash: When the voice is the voice of Yaakov the hands are not the hands of Esav.
14. Esav is the counterbalance to the Jewish People.

When The Megalomaniac Subverts His Will

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1. Bilaam rises early to hitch his donkey.
2. G-d responds: Don't think your action is unique—Avraham, their forefather, preceded you in this area.
3. Avraham rose early to hitch his donkey to the Akeida.
4. He rose to curse the Jews, Avraham to do the will of G-d to sacrifice his son.
5. Chazal: Hate and Love disrupt protocol.
6. Why did G-d respond to Bilaam, which was contrary to G-d's will?
7. Bilaam personified evil; he wanted to bring intense prosecution upon the Jews.
8. Though Bilaam's alacrity and zeal were contrary to G-d's will, he demonstrated a level of negation never displayed before in a positive vein.
9. Avraham their forefather displayed this characteristic in a more difficult setting.
10. He rose early to sacrifice his son.

The Exponential Value of the Seemingly Inconsequential

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1. Bilaam was commissioned by Balak to curse the Jews.
2. He suggested Balak build 7 altars to sacrifice a bull and ram on each of them.
3. Bilaam's diatribe: He built 7 altars himself, which equaled number of altars of Patriarchs combined.
4. Guide For The Perplexed: The objective of sacrifices is an outlet for one to express his need to serve a Higher Being- G-d.
5. Without this outlet of expression one would serve a deity.
6. Ramban vehemently disagrees & rejects Rambam.
7. Sacrifices activate-coalesce spiritual forces.
8. Reb Meir Simcha of Dvinsk: Ramban misunderstood Rambam.
9. Rambam concurs regarding sacrifices brought in the Mishkan and Temple.
10. These were brought in locations that had the special effect.
11. Rambam refers to sacrifice one brings on his private altar when this was permitted.
12. Midrash: The Patriarchs are the location for the Divine Presence.
13. The altar of the Patriarchs was the equivalent of the altar of the Temple.
14. This was not the case with Bilaam.

All-Consuming Emotion Trumps All

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1. Bilaam hitched his own donkey for travel to curse the Jews.
2. Why would a man of Bilaam's renown, a pompous, self centered, megalomaniac, hitch his own donkey?
3. Avraham at 137 was told by G-d to bring his beloved son as a burnt offering.
4. He rose early in the morning and hitched his own donkey.
5. A man of Avraham's age, wealth, and stature prepared his own donkey?
6. Midrash: Intense love disrupts protocol.
7. When one is consumed with intense love or hate, all that exists is negated; all that matters is the objective of the love or hate.
8. One is consumed and subsumed by the objective.
9. To love is greater than to revere.
10. If one is able to achieve an advanced level of love, one will succeed to do the will of G-d because one's personal interests are negated due to the love.

Weekly Torah Commentary Series: Balak



G-d the Master Composer

Torah: “Balak son of Tzipor saw all that Israel had done to the Amorite.”

Rashi citing Chazal: “These two giants upon whom we relied upon to be our protectors, could not stand before them (the Jewish people). If so, how much more so could we (Moabites) not stand before them!” Since the Moabites became overwhelmed with fear after they had seen how the two giants, Og and Sichon were defeated by the Jewish people, they commissioned *Bilaam* to curse them.

Portion of *Chukas*: The giant *Sichon*, king of the Amorites was the first of the giants to be defeated.

Torah: Regarding the conquest of *Sichon*, “For *Cheshbon* – it was the city of *Sichon*, king of the Amorites, and he warred against the first king of *Moav* and took all of his land from his control...The rulers

say come to *Cheshbon*, let it be built and established as the city of *Sichon*.”

Rashi citing Chazal: “*Sichon* (although he was a powerful giant) was not able to conquer it (*Cheshbon*). He therefore went and commissioned *Bilaam* to curse *Moav* (and was thus able to conquer it). This is to what *Balak* was referring when he said to *Bilaam*, ‘I see what you bless is blessed and what you curse is cursed.’”

Although *Balak* had seen how the Jewish people were able to topple the two giants *Sichon* and *Og*, who were the protectors of the kingdoms of *Canaan*, through Divine Assistance, he did not despair. He believed that there was still hope of defeating the Jewish people. Because *Balak* knew that despite the enormous power of *Sichon*, he could not capture *Cheshbon* without the assistance of *Bilaam*, he believed that if he were to commission *Bilaam* to curse the Jewish people, he would be victorious over them. G-d allowed *Balak* to

perceive and process these events in this context, so that *Bilaam's* evil would ultimately be revealed and he would be destroyed.

Gemara in Tractate *Bava Basra*: "The verse states, 'The rulers say come to *Cheshbon*...' Who are the 'rulers' to whom does the verse refer? The 'rulers' are all those who want to take control of their evil inclination. They must come and make a '*Cheshbon* (computation).' One must make a computation as is states in the *Mishna* in Ethics of our Fathers, 'What is the cost factor of a *mitzvah* compared to its reward? 'What is the value of a sin compared to the ultimate loss it brings about?' This is the meaning of the verse that states, 'the rulers say come to *Cheshbon*!' This is the ultimate computation that existence stands upon." It seems what the *Gemara* is saying is a play on words, because the name "*Cheshbon*" is an actual location, which was a city of the Moabites that was conquered by *Sichon*.

When people witness and experience events in their lives or in the world at large, their understanding and perception of these events are based on a superficial and limited analysis. One does not appreciate the ramifications and consequences of one's decisions and behavior. However, the individual who is truly wise sees the consequences of his actions prior to acting upon and actualizing his intent. As it states in Ethics of our Fathers, "Who is the wise person? It is the one who sees the consequences of his actions." When one applies the spiritual formula and computation that is mentioned in the *Mishna* to understand the value of a *mitzvah* compared to its cost factor and the benefit of a sin compared to its loss, one will act wisely regarding his actions.

Initially *Cheshbon* was part of the territory of *Moav*. The *Torah* tells us that the Jewish people were not permitted to conquer the territory of the Moabites. However, because *Sichon* conquered *Cheshbon*, thus making it his domain, the Jewish people were permitted to conquer it. The Moabite domain was purged through the conquest of *Sichon*. G-d enabled *Sichon* to commission *Bilaam* to curse the Moabites to allow *Cheshbon* to be conquered, so that ultimately it would become part of the territory belonging to the Jewish people. One needs to appreciate G-d's computation – how He had orchestrated the events to ultimately manifest themselves as He wanted them to.

Chazal: The destruction of *Sichon* and *Og* was more difficult than destroying Pharaoh and the Egyptian armies. If *Sichon* was so overwhelmingly powerful, why was he not able to conquer *Moav* without the assistance of *Bilaam*? This was also part of G-d's calculation. It was to give *Balak* hope, that despite his protectors *Sichon* and *Og* being destroyed, he still had *Bilaam* the prophet of the nations to be relied upon. G-d's orchestration of these events were for the sole purpose of bringing *Bilaam*, the evil one, to be pitted against *Moshe* and the Jewish people in order to ultimately reveal his evil and bring about his destruction. G-d orchestrates events with the ultimate level of computation that allows things to evolve to meet His objective.

The interaction between *Bilaam* and *Balak* regarding cursing the Jewish people, and ultimately *Bilaam's* demise, brought about a sanctification of G-d's Name. It revealed to the world, who *Bilaam* truly was. *Chazal* tell us that *Bilaam* was the prophet of the nations since his level of prophecy was similar to *Moshe's* within a certain context. However while *Moshe* was holy and truly devoutly righteous and the servant of G-d, *Bilaam* was the antithesis of holiness and humility.

Leadership, a reflection of the People

Torah: *Balak*, the king of *Moav*, commissioned *Bilaam*, the prophet of the nations of the world to curse the Jewish people.

Midrash: "The verse states, 'There was no prophet among the Jewish people that was as great as *Moshe*.' Inferring that among the nations of the world there was one who was the equivalent of *Moshe*. This prophet was *Bilaam*. (However, this was only true within a certain context)." *Bilaam* was a person who possessed corrupted characteristics and behaved in a depraved manner. He engaged in bestiality, and was one who had no relevance to spirituality. He was the antithesis of one who would be expected to be a prophet. Being deficient in all spiritual qualities and being a personification of evil, why did *Bilaam* merit to have such a level of prophecy?

Chazal: At the end of time, when G-d will come to judge existence, the nations of the world will come with a claim saying, "The only reason the Jewish

people were so special is because You gave them *Moshe*, who was a great prophet. If You had given us a prophet as great as *Moshe*, we would have also been special. Thus, it is not just for You to condemn us for our past behavior.” Therefore, G-d provided the nations of the world with *Bilaam* to be their prophet as great as *Moshe*. This was to preempt and silence this eventual claim. G-d’s response however seems to be difficult to understand since the claim of the nations was not fully addressed.

Had G-d provided the nations of the world with a prophet similar to *Moshe*, who possessed the qualities and attributes of holiness, then they too would have been as righteous as the Jewish people. However, since G-d provided them with *Bilaam*, who was evil, they continued to be corrupt and evil. Seemingly, *Bilaam* despite his exalted level of prophecy should not be a sufficient response to the ultimate claim of the nations of the world.

Midrash citing a verse: “‘The Rock! – perfect is His work; for all His ways are justice.’ G-d did not want the nations of the world to come with a claim at the end of time, saying ‘You have kept us away from You. You did not provide for us as You did for the Children of Israel.’ What did G-d do? Just as He established kings, wise men, and prophets for the Jewish people, so too did He establish them for the nations of the world. If one compares the kings, wise men, and prophets of the Jewish people with those of the nations, one will see the difference. G-d allowed king Solomon to reign over the entire world. Similarly, G-d allowed *Nebuchadnezzar* (Babylonian emperor) to dominate the world.

“King Solomon, in his lofty position built the Temple and supplicated and sang many praises to G-d. *Nebuchadnezzar*, on the other hand, used his power to destroy the Temple and blaspheme G-d. He had said, ‘I will ascend to the heavens and will be the equivalent of the One above.’ G-d granted wealth to king David. What did he do with this wealth? He purchased the location of the Temple, for His name. *Haman* also merited enormous wealth; however, he expended it on trying to have a nation slaughtered (Jewish people). The greatness that the Jewish people were given, was also given to the nations of the world. Just as the Jewish people had the prophet *Moshe*, who was able to communicate with G-d whenever he chose to do so, so too did the nations of the world

have *Bilaam*, who was also able to communicate with G-d whenever he chose to do so.”

Midrash: “What is the difference between the prophets of the Jewish people and the prophets of the nations of the world? The prophets of Israel forewarned the nations not to transgress. However the prophets of the nations created breaches to destroy mankind, so that it should have no connection with the world to come. The prophets of the Jewish people expressed the Attribute of Mercy, while their prophets expressed cruelty. *Bilaam*, the prophet of the nations, wanted to uproot and destroy an entire nation. This is the reason the *Torah* tells us the portion of *Bilaam*, so that one should understand why there is no longer Divinely inspired people (prophets) among the nations of the world. This person (*Bilaam*) assumed the position of prophet and see what he did.”

We are able to learn from this *Midrash* that the leadership of a people, is only a reflection of who the people truly are. Their essence is manifested in the type of leadership that they are given.

Torah: After the sin of the spies, the generation between the ages of 20 and 60 were decreed to perish in the desert over a forty year period. During this period of time, the Jewish people were in a state of depression due to their state of hopelessness. Because the Jewish people were in a depressed state, G-d’s open communication with *Moshe* was not the same as it had been due to the emotional state of the Jewish people. This is because *Moshe* only assumed his exalted status and intimate relationship with G-d because he represented the Jewish people, who were worthy of that relationship. If this would not be so, *Moshe*’s level of prophecy would not be affected by the state of mind of the Jewish people.

Regarding *Bilaam*, although his level of prophecy was advanced, since he was chosen by G-d to be a prophet despite his depraved and evil ways, his quality of person was only a reflection of the evil of the nations he represented. As we see from the *Midrash*, when G-d granted wealth to King David, he used it to purchase the location of the Holy Temple. When *Haman* was granted wealth he used it to destroy G-d’s people.

Through the many examples that are given by the *Midrash*; such as the prophets, kings, and wealth of the nations, in every instance it manifested itself in a

context of evil and destruction. It is only because the leaders of the nations are only a reflection of what the people are and what they would have done on their own if they could have done so. Therefore, at the end of time, the nations of the world will not have a claim against G-d, that He did not provide them with a prophet such as *Moshe*.

The Eyes Lens of the Heart

Torah: “*Balak* son of *Tzipor* saw...”

Midrash: “What did *Balak* see? He foresaw all the tragedy that would befall the Jewish people. *Balak* was the greatest archenemy of the Jewish people. All the other enemies of the Jewish people went to war with them and although they enslaved them; nevertheless, the Jewish people were able to survive. However, *Balak* was seeking someone who could uproot and totally annihilate the Jewish people. ‘*Balak* saw...’ It would be better if the evil were blind because their eyes bring curse and destruction to the world. Where do we find this? It is written regarding the generation of the Great Flood, ‘They had seen the sons of...’ Regarding *Cham*, the evil son of *Noach* the *Torah* states, ‘*Cham* saw...’ Regarding the ministers of Pharaoh the verse states, ‘They saw (the beauty of *Sarah* our Matriarch)...’ Before *Dinah*, the daughter of *Yaakov* was defiled the *Torah* states, ‘*Chamor* the son of *Shechem* saw...’ In our portion it is written, ‘*Balak* saw...’”

Chazal: The heart lusts and the eyes are the “brokers” of the heart. Meaning, the eyes seek out what the heart desires. The heart of the evil one continuously lusts for things that are the antithesis of purity and holiness. Therefore, the eyes of the evil one will seek out the things that will satisfy the desires of his evil heart. When *Cham* saw the nakedness of his father *Noach*, rather than feeling pained and disgraced by it as his brothers, he chose to castrate (and sodomize) his father. This was a consequence of “And *Cham* saw...” (within his context of evil). Thus, the *Midrash* tells us that it would be better if the evil were blind.

Chazal: “One should not believe in himself until the moment he is no longer alive.”

Midrash: G-d does not associate His Name with a person, regardless of his dimension of holiness, during his lifetime. As we see, He did not associate His Name with *Avraham* and *Yaakov* during their lifetimes,

despite their exceptional level of sanctity and unique levels of accomplishment. However, regarding *Yitzchak* our Patriarch, because he was blind and confined to his house, there was no concern that he would revert to a path of evil. Thus, G-d associated His Name with *Yitzchak* during his lifetime. Regarding the other Patriarchs, G-d associated His Name with them after their passing as it states, “the G-d of *Avraham*” and “the G-d of *Yaakov*.”

The paragraph structure of the Portion of *Vayechi* as it appears in a *Torah* scroll is identified as a “sealed Portion.”

Chazal: “Why is the Portion of *Vayechi* a ‘sealed Portion (*Parsha stumah*)?’”

Rashi citing the *Midrash*: “Because when *Yaakov* passed away, the eyes and hearts of the Jewish people were sealed (became desensitized) because of the suffering of the bondage.” If the eyes are the “brokers” of the heart, and seek out what the heart desires, seemingly the order should have been reversed. It should have stated, “their hearts became sealed and then their eyes.” Meaning, since their hearts were no longer sensitive to spirituality, their eyes no longer sought out what the heart desired. Why did *Chazal* chose to write, first “their eyes” and then “their hearts?”

Ibn Ezra regarding the commandment of “*Lo Tachmode* (do not designs on you fellow’s wife, possessions...)”: How is one able to take control of one’s heart? Seemingly one’s desires are not under one’s control. He explains with an allegory. A commoner, for example, who knows with certainty that he could not marry the princess, regardless of all of her qualities, he will not lust for her or desire her. It is because the commoner understands that she is a woman that is not within his reach. She is not even available for consideration. Because he understands with certainty that she has no relevance to him, the commoner does not lust after the princess.

The heart only lusts after something that one believes is attainable. However, if one understands with absolute certainty that each individual only possesses (whether it is qualities or material possessions) it is only because G-d endowed him with them and each individual’s situation is unique to itself, one would not have any deigns or lusts for what another possesses because he understands that it has no relevance to him.

The eyes of the human being in the words of *Chazal* are “the brokers” of the heart. The moment *Yaakov* passed away, the eyes “the brokers” were no longer sensitive to spirituality and thus the heart ceased desiring advanced levels of spirituality because they were no longer attainable. The eyes not being able to provide the desires of the heart, caused the heart to cease yearning for the unattainable levels of spirituality. Therefore the order of the statement of *Chazal* is correct. Since the eyes of the Jewish people became desensitized to holiness, their hearts ceased to desire it.

Arrogance, the Basis for Distortion

Torah: *Balak*, the king of *Moav* sent agents to commission *Bilaam* to curse the Jewish people. *Bilaam* had said to them, “Spend the night here and I shall give you a response, as *Hashem* shall speak to me.” That night G-d came to *Bilaam* and said, “Who are these men to you?” *Bilaam* responded, “*Balak* son of *Tzipor*, king of *Moav* sent to them to me...” It would have been sufficient for *Bilaam* to answer G-d’s question by saying that they were the agents of *Balak* son of *Tzipor*. Why did *Bilaam* identify *Balak* as “the king of *Moav*?”

Rashi citing *Chazal*: “*Bilaam* said to G-d, ‘Although I am not important and special in Your eyes, I am considered special in the eyes of mortal kings.’” By identifying *Balak* as “the king of *Moav*,” *Bilaam* was communicating to G-d that although He does not value and appreciate him, mortal kings do value him as special. Implying that G-d Himself does have the capacity to appreciate *Bilaam* sufficiently. Seemingly, *Bilaam*’s level of arrogance and disrespect is not to be fathomed, otherwise he could not have expressed himself in this manner to G-d.

Chazal: One with the negative characteristic of *Bilaam* was “*ruach gevuah* (haughty).” He was someone who was totally focused on himself and believed that he was unique and special. If G-d did not value him as the mortal kings did, *Bilaam* believed that it must be because G-d has a deficiency and thus did not assess him properly. How could *Bilaam*, being a prophet with whom G-d communicated, even consider that G-d had any level of deficiency?

Chazal: When G-d asked *Bilaam* “Who are these men with you?” G-d gave *Bilaam* an opportunity to

make a mistake. *Bilaam* believed that if G-d asked him such a question, it is evident that G-d is not continuously fully aware of everything. Meaning, there are things that are not necessary revealed to Him. Consequently, the question demonstrated that G-d was deficient (G-d forbid). It was because of this misunderstanding, which G-d led *Bilaam* to believe, that led to his ultimate destruction. Subsequently *Bilaam* chose to curse the Jewish people, believing that G-d would not be aware of the moment of his actions. In essence he would curse the Jewish people in G-d’s “blind spot.” *Bilaam* reasoned, if G-d was fully aware and all was revealed to Him, He would have valued *Bilaam* as much as *Moshe*.

Bilaam was seen not only seen by the world as one whose curse was lethal, but also he was seen as the prophet of G-d by the nations of the world. Since *Bilaam* regarded himself in such high honor and esteem, he believed that he was the setting for bringing about a sanctification of G-d’s Name. *Bilaam* believed, as a prophet of G-d that he was bringing glory to G-d’s Name because the only reason he was summoned by *Balak* was due to his special relationship with G-d as His prophet. If G-d would understand this, He would value *Bilaam* differently.

Bilaam’s understanding of G-d’s awareness of existence is contrary to one of the thirteen principles of Jewish belief that states that G-d knows the true thoughts and intentions that exist in man’s heart and mind. It was because of *Bilaam*’s degree of arrogance and self-centeredness that caused him to believe that G-d was unaware of everything. Similarly, G-d gave *Korach* the opportunity to fail by allowing him to see the prophecy that Samuel the Prophet would descend from him. *Korach*, however, did not process this information correctly due to his arrogance and ego. This led to his destruction.

We see from this something profound; that although one may be a prophet and be in communication with G-d, one’s arrogance could cause him to misunderstand the Omnipotence of G-d and ultimately lead to his destruction.

Blessing, an Expression of the Soul

Torah: *Balak* wanted to commission *Bilaam* to curse the Jewish people because he was concerned that

they were going to conquer him. The verse states, "So now please come and curse this people for me... For I know that whomever you bless is blessed and whomever your curse is accursed."

Rabbeinu Bachya: "If *Balak* believed that whomever *Bilaam* blesses is blessed, why did *Balak* not ask *Bilaam* to bless his nation so that they should not be protected from the Jewish people? Why did he choose to ask *Bilaam* to curse rather than bless?"

Rabbeinu Bachya: Since *Bilaam* was the epitome of evil, his blessing had no value. However, since he was so evil, his curse was potent because he had an evil eye. *Balak* said to *Bilaam* that whomever he blesses is blessed to only bring false praise upon him so that he should feel special. However, *Balak* understood that *Bilaam* did not have the ability to bless, but rather, only to curse.

Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh: "What is the meaning of 'whomever you bless is blessed?' Initially *Bilaam* blessed *Balak* that he should become the king *Moav*. *Balak* said, 'Since you blessed me to become king and I became king, it is evident that your blessing is effective. I know that your curse is effective because you cursed *Moav* and allowed *Sichon* to defeat them.'

There are two reasons *Bilaam's* curses were effective. Firstly, he possessed an evil eye. Secondly, because he knew the exact moment of G-d's Wrath, as *Chazal* tell us, he would curse at that particular moment. However, how could a blessing emanate from the mouth of *Bilaam*, who was so evil?

In actuality, the blessing of *Bilaam* was no more effective than the blessing of a donkey. Rather, he was deceptive in a way that he would cause people to believe that the blessing that came upon them was due to him. When he would see through astrology that an individual was going to rise to power in the future, he would go and bless him. When this individual would rise to power, everyone thought that it was attributable to *Bilaam's* blessing. However, it was only a deception since *Bilaam* only offered his blessing to those who he

had prior knowledge from stargazing would succeed. This is what had happened to *Balak*. *Bilaam* saw in the stars that *Balak* was to become king..."

Chazal: A person is comprised of three components: *nefesh* (life source), *ruach* (spirit), and *neshama* (Divine soul). Every living creature only possesses a *nefesh* which gives it life. However, man has a *neshama* which is totally spiritual.

Maharal of Prague z'tl: A blessing is a spiritual concept and thus has no limitation. Anything that is spiritual is outside of the realm of physicality and thus is not finite. Thus, the blessing that is given by an individual emanates from his spirituality, which is rooted in his *neshama* (soul). There are many sources that state (cited by *Ohr HaChaim Hakadosh* and *Chofetz Chaim*) "an evil person, although he is alive, is considered to be the equivalent of a dead person. Why is this so?"

Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh: Due to the evil of the *rasha*, his soul departs from his body because it cannot remain in a location that is the antithesis of holiness. Since, *Bilaam* was the essence of evil, his *neshama* had departed from him. He was the equivalent of a living species that possessed only a *nefesh*, which also provides life to the animal; however, he had not spirituality at all. Therefore, *Bilaam* had no relevance to blessing. *Bilaam's* blessing has the same value of the blessing of a donkey who also does not possess a spiritual component, *neshama*.

Chazal: "Even the blessing of an ordinary person should not be taken lightly." Although the individual may not be learned or devoutly righteous, he still possesses a soul, which is the source of blessing. In contrast, one should avoid the blessing from an evil person because he has no relevance to blessing due to his lack of spirituality. What may appear to be a blessing, can be the equivalent of a curse. As *Chazal* tell us, when *Bilaam* wanted to bless the Jewish people, "You are like the bee. As one says to the bee, 'I do not want your honey and I do not want your sting.'"

Chazal: "From the evil emanates evil."



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