

## פרשת בלק

In retrospect, even though I have just completed my fiftieth year of teaching, my career in *Chinuch* began some three or four years earlier when I was a counselor at a religious overnight camp in the Midwest that took upon itself to work with non-religious school-age children as well as with religious ones. Besides being a counselor at the camp, I and my friends would travel from Chicago to other communities to encourage these children and their families to enroll in an Orthodox setting. In particular, we traveled to Milwaukee, St. Louis, Cleveland and Detroit. It was an exciting adventure for me. I enjoyed what I did and found it meaningful and so, looking back, that was the forerunner of my calling.

Why would non-Shomer Shabbos/Kashrus families send their kids to a religious camp? Even the ones who came from families that were 'traditional' in their outlook were far from being observant. Why would they come? Davening three times a day wasn't an attraction nor was having all of the Shabbos limitations imposed upon them a draw.

The recruitment speech that developed emphasized that ours was a camp like all other camps: baseball and basketball, swimming, arts and crafts and hikes – and *also* there was davening and some classes about Judaism. So, we explained, the children would have a regular summer experience, no different than those of all their other friends – with a dose of easy-going Judaism.

And many kids came, boys and girls - it was a co-ed camp, and a lot more than a few of them became religious and more than a few are B'nei and B'nos Torah today.

Our recruitment speech reflected the thinking of much of the religious world in those days. 'Emphasize the similarities between religious Jews and the general American society' was the theme in the 1950's, 1960's and 1970's. What today is called Torah Judaism did not exist then. If one wasn't *Chassidische* and very *Yeshivish* the emphasis of what made the *frum* Jew similar to all Americans was seen as a guard against abandoning observance altogether. The atmosphere today where many men wear *kippot* at work, where *minyan-attendance* during the week is significant and *Daf HaYomi* shiurim proliferate was unknown then. Few women covered their hair and *Dikduk B'Halachah*, such as we find necessary in *Hilchos Borer* for example, was rare at the best.

And now when we come to our Parshas Bolok in which the great and wicked prophet Bil'am became the mouthpiece for Hashem's *hashkafa* of how Israel can be protected against its enemies I am called to look back of what we said and what we believed and gain the meta-historical perspective that the Torah provides seeking an objective on what is right and what is wrong.

The emphasis then on the similarities of the religious Jew to the cultural profile of the general civilization was to serve as a guard against 'drop-outs'. Today, decades later with the changes that our dynamic world brings to us we are required to self-evaluate and see our similarities and differences between Torah Jews and the general society in which we live and evaluate its blessings and its shortcomings.

Of course, it is true that in fact the individual Jew must distinguish himself from the general society. Rambam makes this point in the clearest of fashions. We read (Mishneh Torah Hilchos Avoda Zarah Perek 11/Halachah 1):

אין הולכין בחקות העובדי כוכבים ולא מדמין להן לא במלבוש ולא בשער וכיוצא בהן שנאמר (ויקרא כ/כג<sup>1</sup>) ולא תלכו בחקות הגוים, ונאמר (שם יח/ג<sup>2</sup>) ובחקותיהם לא תלכו, ונאמר (דברים יב/ל<sup>3</sup>) השמר לך פן תנקש אחריהם, הכל בענין אחד הוא מזהיר שלא ידמה להן, אלא יהיה הישראל מובדל מהן וידוע במלבושו ובשאר מעשיו כמו

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<sup>1</sup> The entire verse reads:

וְלֹא תֵלְכוּ בְחֻקֵּי הַגּוֹי אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מִשְׁלַח מִפְּנֵיכֶם כִּי אֶת כָּל אֱלֹה עֲשׂוּ וְאֶקְזָבָם:  
Do not go in the ways of the nation that I Hashem am sending away before you; because they did all this and I was disgusted with them.

<sup>2</sup> The entire verse reads:

כַּמַּעֲשֵׂה אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁבְּתֶם בָּהּ לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ וְכַמַּעֲשֵׂה אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מְבִיא אֶתְכֶם שָׁמָּה לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ וּבְחֻקֵּיהֶם לֹא תֵלְכוּ:  
Do not do like the deeds of the Land of Egypt that you dwelled in it and do not do like the deeds of the Land of Canaan that I Hashem am bringing you there and do not go in their ways.

<sup>3</sup> The entire verse reads:

הֲשֹׁמֵר לְךָ פֶּן תִּנְקֹשׁ אַחֲרֵיהֶם אַחֲרֵי הַשְּׁמָדָם מִפְּנֵיךָ וּפֶן תִּדְרֹשׁ לְאֱלֹהֵיהֶם לֵאמֹר אֵיכָה יַעֲבֹדוּ הַגּוֹיִם הָאֵלֶּה אֶת אֱלֹהֵיהֶם וְאֶעֱשֶׂה כֵּן גַּם אֲנִי:  
Guard yourself that you should not follow them after their destruction from before you, lest you seek their gods saying, 'How do these nations serve their gods? And I will do the same.'

שהוא מובדל מהן במדעו ובדעותיו, וכן הוא אומר (ויקרא כ/כו<sup>4</sup>) ואבדיל אתכם מן העמים,

One may not go in the ways<sup>5</sup> of the behaviors of non-Jews and one should not be similar to them, not in dress and not in hair and not in similar ways. This is as it says, 'Do not go in the ways of the nations'. And it says, 'In their ways, do not go'. And it says, 'Guard yourself lest you follow<sup>6</sup> them'. These verses are all of the same subject that Hashem warns not to be similar to them.

Rather, Israel is to be separate from them, known by its dress<sup>7</sup> and in all of its other deeds just like Israel is separate in its beliefs and its temperaments. And so it says, 'I Hashem separated you from all the nations'.

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<sup>4</sup> The entire verse reads:

והייתם לי קדושים כי קדוש אני ה' ואבדל אתכם מן העמים להיות לי:  
You shall be holy for Me because I Hashem and holy; I separated you from the nations to be Mine.

<sup>5</sup> It is clear that the literal translation of *chok* is 'statute' not 'way'. Our translation was to allow the verse to flow.

However, the intent of the verse is to those laws that are part and parcel of the nations, as if they were 'engraved', the literal translation of the word *chok*, into their national psyche.

The translation of 'chok' is a 'law without a known reason' and the usage of that term in reference to Torah laws that are called חוקים is not inherently improper in this context referring to the laws of non-Jewish cultures and civilizations.

Certainly there are many rational laws that the nations enact which fulfill their Mitzvah of the *Sheva' Mitzvos B'nei Noach* to provide a just and fair system of law.

Those type of laws are binding for the Jewish citizens of their countries in keeping with the Halachic principle of דינא דמלכות דינא, the laws of the nations of the world in their respective countries are binding.

<sup>6</sup> Similar to what we wrote above, we translated תנקש as 'follows' in order for the verse's translation to flow.

*Onkelos* renders the word תנקש as 'you will stumble'. Rashi says that it means 'you will be stricken'.

<sup>7</sup> See *Sheilos UTshuvos Beis Shlomo* (Yoreh Deah I Siman 197) who relates to the question of a locale that forced its Jewish citizens to dress in a manner that was the same as non-Jews.

It is important to attend to the final verse that Ramban cites. What does:

ואבדיל אתכם מן העמים

I Hashem separated you from all the nations  
add to our understanding of the need for separation? Were not the words of  
Rambam until clear and distinct?

And, thus, it is clear that Rambam is teaching us that when we discuss the necessary  
separation and distinction between Jews and non-Jews we are talking about two  
different areas. Those areas are the individual and the nation. Certainly those  
areas overlap. That is why both appear in the same Halachah in Rambam. Yet, at  
the same time, they are distinct.

Individuals dress differently than others. The 'nation' doesn't have individual dress  
or styles, etc. Certainly the dress of the individuals of a nation provide a profile of  
the nation, but the nation still exists as a separate entity.

The point that the 'nation' as such is distinct from the individual is clearly expressed  
in Masseches Bava Basra. The discussion there (115 b) deals with tracing heirs  
when there are no immediate descendants who are alive. One traces descendants  
going up generation by generation until one finds some distant and remote  
ancestor who does have descendants who are among the living. These very distant  
cousins are the heirs of the deceased because they are his closest living relatives.

The Gemara expresses it as follows:

הא כיצד? נחלה ממשמשת והולכת עד ראובן. ולימא: עד יעקב! אמר אביי: גמירי,  
דלא כלה שבטא.

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Among the points that he makes, we read:

אחר שכבר כל היהודים שם במדינה נהגו ללבוש מלבושים אלו, עכשיו הבא לשם ולבוש כמנהגם,  
פשיטא דאין בזה מקום להחמיר.

Since the Jews in that state have already been accustomed to wear this non-  
Jewish clothing, now that one comes to that state and dresses as they dress, it  
is certain that one need not be stringent and [may] dress as they do.

A main point of this *Teshuva* is an investigation into the fundamental Teshuva of  
*Maharik* (Siman 88) which is the basis for our reaction to the entire subject of 'non-  
Jewish' clothing.

How does this search for heirs work? We check the eligible heirs until we get all the way back to Reuven [ben Yaakov].

Why not check until Yaakov [himself if we don't find heirs until Reuven]?

Abaye explained: We have a *Masores* – The tribes do not become extinct.

Of course, if a Shevet does not become extinct, certainly the nation of Israel will not become extinct.

Individuals die; the nation lives. The nation is made up of its people but its profile is distinct and separate from those who form it.

And so, we must view the distinctiveness of the Nation of Israel that the Torah requires in order for it to maintain its unique identity, an identity clearly distinct and separate from all the other nations.

It is not only the observance of Mitzvos and Torah study that are *sine qua non* to establish that distinctiveness. It would seem that Ramban's comment at the beginning of Parshas Kedoshim regarding the individual could be said about the nation as a whole in certain circumstances.

In discussing the need for the Mitzvah of *Kedoshim ti'h'yu*, Ramban wishes to teach us what that commandment adds to the other 612 Mitzvos that have as their goal the attainment of sanctity.

The Posuk there reads (Vayikro Perek 19/Posuk 2):

דַּבֵּר אֶל כָּל עֵדוּת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם קְדוֹשִׁים תְּהִיוּ כִּי קְדוֹשׁ אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:

Speak to the entire congregation of B'nei Yisroel and you shall say to them, 'Be holy because I Hashem your G-d am holy.

והענין כי התורה הזהירה בעריות ובמאכלים האסורים והתירה הביאה איש באשתו ואכילת הבשר והיין, א"כ ימצא בעל התאווה מקום להיות שטוף בזמת אשתו או נשיו הרבות, ולהיות בסובאי יין בזוללי בשר למו, וידבר כרצונו בכל הנבלות, שלא הוזכר איסור זה בתורה, והנה יהיה נבל ברשות התורה:

The subject of this Mitzvah is that since the Torah warned against forbidden relationships and forbidden foods but allowed marital relations and the consumption of [kosher] meat and wine, if so, a person with uncontrolled desires could be flooded [in immorality] with his wife or his many wives and to be among the over-drinkers of wine and gluttons of meat forever and

...speak whatever he wishes in improper language that are not [specifically] forbidden in the Torah and thus be a disgusting person in a way that the Torah does not forbid.

Ramban continues:

לפיכך בא הכתוב... וצוה בדבר כללי שנהיה פרושים מן המותרות... ויקדש עצמו מן היין במיעוטו, כמו שקרא הכתוב (במדבר ו/ה) הנזיר קדוש, ויזכור הרעות הנזכרות ממנו בתורה בנח ובלוט... וגם ישמור פיו ולשונו מהתגאל ברבוי האכילה הגסה ומן הדבור הנמאס... שנהיה נקיים וטהורים ופרושים מהמון בני אדם שהם מלכלכים עצמם במותרות ובכיעורים:

Therefore this verse of *Kedoshim* comes and commands a general principle that we should separate ourselves from excesses. A person should sanctify himself by drinking wine with limitations- just like the Torah refers to the *nozir* as 'holy'. He should remember the evils that befell Noach and Lot. He should guard his mouth and tongue from becoming disgusting with excessive overeating and from repulsive speech.

We are to be clean and pure and separate from the masses who dirty themselves with excesses and ugliness.

One of the most basic statements about this idea of the desired distinctiveness of *Am Yisroel* as a nation is found in our Parshas Bolok.

In his first prophecy, almost at its beginning, Bilam says (B'midbar Perek 23/Posuk 9):

כִּי מֵרֶאשׁ צָרִים אֶרְאֶנּוּ וּמִגְבְּעוֹת אֲשׁוּרֵנוּ הֵן עִם לְבַדָּד יֵשְׁבֵן וּבְגוֹיִם לֹא יִתְחַשְׁבּוּ:  
From the top of the mountains I will see the People [of Israel] and from the hilltops I will view it; behold it is a people that will dwell alone; it will not be considered [important] among the nations.

Rashi writes:

הן עם לבדד ישכון - הוא אשר זכו לו אבותיו לשכון בדד, כתרגומו:  
*Behold it is a people that will dwell alone* – This is the merit given to the people by its forefathers – to dwell alone. This is in consonance with what the Targum writes.

*Targum Yonoson* writes in reference to the 'mountains' and to the 'hills':

דְּהֵינּוּן מְדַבְּרִין בְּזָכוֹת אֲבֹהֵתְהוֹן צְדִיקָא דְּמִתִּילִין לְטוֹרָא וּבְזָכוֹת אִימְהֵתְהוֹן דְּמִתִּילִין לְגְלִימְתָא

They [Israel] are led by the merit of their righteous Patriarchs who are compared to mountains and their Matriarchs who are compared to hills.

That is, that separateness of the Nation of Israel is a legacy that was bestowed upon it from the very outset of its history. And to what does that separateness lead? Rashi continues:

ובגוים לא יתחשב - כתרגומו, לא יהיו נעשין כלה עם שאר האומות, שנאמר (ירמיה ל/יא<sup>8</sup>) כי אעשה כלה בכל הגוים וגו' אינן נמנין עם השאר.  
*It will not be considered among the nations – as the Targum renders it. They will not be made extinct with the other nations as it says, 'I will make all of the nations extinct, etc... Israel will not be calculated with the others.*

Targum Onkelos writes there:

ובעממיא לא יתדנון גמירא

They will not be judged with finality.

A test of this separateness of *Am Yisroel* is its exclusive reliance upon HaKodosh Boruch Hu. One example of many of the criticisms that were levelled against Israel because of their non-reliance is found in Sefer Yeshaya (Perek 10/Posuk 20).

The Novi writes there:

וְהָיָה בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא לֹא יוֹסִיף עוֹד שָׂאֵר יִשְׂרָאֵל וּפְלִיטַת בַּיִת יַעֲקֹב לְהִשָּׁעַן עַל מַכְהוֹ וְנִשְׁעַן עַל ה' קְדוֹשׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּאַמֶּת:

It will be on that day those who remain from Israel and the remnants of the House of Yaakov will no longer rely upon the one who smites it; it will rely in truth upon Hashem, the Holy One of Israel.

Rashi writes there:

להשען על מכהו - לסמוך על מלכי מצרים שהם היו תחלת המציקים להם:  
*To rely upon the one who smites it – to depend upon the kings of Egypt – they who were the first to cause Israel distress.*

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<sup>8</sup> The entire verse reads:

כי אתך אני נאם ה' להושיעך כי אעשה כלה בכל הגוים אשר הפצותיך שם אך אתך לא אעשה כלה ויסרתיך למשפט ונקמה לא אנקיך:

‘Because I am with you, says Hashem, ‘to save you; because I will bring extinction to all of the nations that I have dispersed you there – but you – I will not make extinct; I will afflict you for justice I will not clear you completely.

That is, it is ridiculous for Israel to rely on the nations. If they haven't done so already, sometime in the future the nations will bring anguish to our nation. Just as individuals who are abused often return to their abuser, so it is possible for a nation that was abused to return to the nation that abused it<sup>9</sup>.

That is, the message of Dovid HaMelech is given both to the individual and to the nation. He writes in (Tehillim Perek 146/P'sukim 3-5):

אל תבטחו בנדיבים בן אדם שאין לו תשועה: תצא רוחו ישוב לאדמתו ביום ההוא  
אבדו עשתותיו: אשרי שא... ל יעקב בעזרו שברו על ה' א... לקיו:

Do not trust benefactors, in people who have no salvation. His wind will go out from him and he will return to the ground; on that day all of his thoughts are lost. Happy is he who the G-d of Yaakov is in his aid; his hope is in Hashem his G-d.

That is, even if the intentions are good and worthy, a person's ability to realize those intentions are limited to his lifetime. When that life ceases, so do those plans.

However, such a thought regarding נדיבים, true benefactors, is not relevant to our Parsha whatsoever. No one will accuse either Bil'am or Bolok of good intentions. The only question may be which one is worse<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> For those who are interested in understanding this concept which seems so improbable, investigate the phenomenon called 'The Stockholm Syndrome'. Maran HaGaon Rav Yitzchak Hutner ZT"L gave expression to that phenomenon that is so counter-intuitive upon his release from his hijacked TWA airline in 1970.

<sup>10</sup> Rashi has an answer for that question: Bil'am is worse.

We read Bolok's missive to Bil'am at the beginning of our Parsha (Perek 22/Posuk 6):  
ועתה לכה נא ארה לי את העם הזה כי עצום הוא ממני אוילי אוכל נכה בו ואגרשנו מן הארץ כי ידעתי את אשר תברך מברך ואשר תאר יואר:

Now, go and please curse this people for me because they are stronger than me, perhaps I will be able to smite them and banish them from the land; I know that whom you bless will be blessed and whom you curse will be cursed.

In his prayer to G-d, Bil'am said (Posuk 11) that Bolok told him:

הנה העם היצא ממצרים ויכס את עין הארץ עתה לכה קבה לי אתו אוילי אוכל להלחם בו וגרשתיו:  
Behold the people who are going out of Egypt and they covered the eye of the land; now go and curse them for me, perhaps I will be able to fight against them and banish them.

When we are dealing with one, a person or a nation, who is not motivated to keep Israel's best interests in mind, we find the commentary of *Divrei Shaarei Chaim*<sup>11</sup> illuminating.

This passage comes to elaborate on a commentary of Rashi which was taken from the Midrash.

We read Hashem's response to Bil'am's request to curse Israel (B'midbar Perek 22/Posuk 12):

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים... לְקִיָּם אֶל בְּלַעַם לֹא תִלְךָ עִמָּהֶם לֹא תֵאָר אֶת הָעָם כִּי בְרוּךְ הוּא:

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Rashi notes that Bolok said, 'I will banish them from the land' and Bil'am, purportedly in the name of Bolok, said, 'I will banish them', and not more. He writes:

וגרשתיו - מן העולם. ובלק לא אמר אלא ואגרשנו מן הארץ, איני מבקש אלא להסיעם מעלי, ובלעם היה שונאם יותר מבלק:

*I will banish them* – from the world. Bolok only said, 'I will banish them from the land' – I only seek to move them away from me. Bil'am hated Israel more than Bolok did.

[Here and elsewhere the Posuk refers to Israel at 'the people' and it is written in the singular. We may choose to translate it in the plural and write 'they' rather than 'it' because the former it is less awkward for the native English speaker.

In this context see Parshas Mattos where we read Hashem's words to Moshe Rabbenu (B'midbar Perek 31/Posuk 2) where we read:

נָקָם נִקְמַת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵאֵת הַמִּדְיָנִים אַחַר תֹּאסֹף אֶל עַמִּיךָ:

Certainly take the revenge of B'nei Yisroel from the Midianites; afterwards you will be ingathered to your people.

Rashi writes there:

מאת המדינים - ולא מאת המואבים, שהמואבים נכנסו לדבר מחמת יראה שהיו יראים מהם, שיהיו שוללים אותם, שלא נאמר אלא (דברים ב, ט) אל תתגר בם מלחמה. אבל מדינים נתעברו על ריב לא להם.

*Revenge from the Midianites (the nation of Bil'am)* – but they were not commanded to take revenge from the Moabites (the nation of Bolok). This is because the Moabites became involved in this matter with Israel because of their fear that Israel would take their spoils. Thus it says, 'Do not instigate a war against Moav'. The Midianites, on the other hand, mixed in a dispute that was not theirs.

<sup>11</sup> Rav Chaim Sofer was a prolific writer on response and commentaries. He lived in Hungary in the 1800's. I was referred to this commentary.

G-d said to Bil'am, 'Do not go with them; do not curse the people because they are blessed.

Rashi wonders why Hashem has to say 'do not curse them because they are blessed' after He ordered Bil'am not to go. Once Bil'am wasn't going, he certainly was not going to curse them.

Thus Rashi writes that the various phrases of Hashem's words are in response to a dialogue that Bil'am wished to create – but was rebuffed at every stem. We read:

לא תלך עמהם - אמר לו אם כן אקללם במקומי. אמר לו לא תאור את העם. אמר לו  
אם כן אברכם. אמר לו אינם צריכין לברכתך, כי ברוך הוא. משל אומרים לצרעה לא  
מדובשיך ולא מעוקצריך:

*Do not go with them* – Bil'am responded, 'If so, I will curse them in my place, where I am.' Hashem said, 'do not curse the people'. Bil'am said, 'If so, I will bless them'. G-d said, 'They have no need of your blessing "because they are blessed".'

The parable is what we say to the hornet – 'give me neither from your honey nor from your sting'.

Do not think that Bil'am's offer to bless Israel stemmed from any positive motive. It was the same Bil'am who wished to curse Israel who was the same Bil'am to bless us – a blessing that would be a curse.

*Divrei Shaarei Chaim* explains that the nations of the world have two tactics that they employ in order to harm Israel.

The first tactic is one that is obviously harmful: persecution, restrictive laws, and openly anti-Semitic actions. All of these and more are included in Bil'am's desire to curse.

When Bil'am wished to bless Israel he hadn't changed his strategy – the overall outcome for which he hoped was the same – to exterminate our People, *chas v'Shalom*. He merely adjusted his tactics to achieve his unchanged goal.

The method Bil'am wished to employ would be one that might deceive Israel. He would make gestures of friendship, kindness and support. Bil'am, or Moav, would gain the trust of Israel and thus seek the same nefarious result – and this time Israel

would be caught unawares because they did not realize that the so-called friendship was no more than a deceitful mask intending to harm Israel. Only too late, Bil'am hoped, would Israel catch on to his intent and there would be nothing to be done to prevent it.

Not from the sting and not from the honey – because the sweetness of the honey would mask the bitterness of the poison of the sting.

And as we read this commentary, we are reminded that this theme of deceitful friendship was not the innovation of Bil'am.

We remember the pleasant words of Lovon when he spoke to Yaakov Ovinu (B'reishis Perek 30/Posuk 28):

וַיֹּאמֶר נְקִיבָה שְׂכָרְךָ עָלַי וְאֶתְנָהּ:

Lovon said, 'Indicate your wages and I will give it.'

Years later, Yaakov proposed how he would breed sheep and provide for his family. We read the response that he received (ibid. Posuk 34):

וַיֹּאמֶר לָבֵן הֵן לִוְיָהִי כְדַבְרְךָ:

Lovon said, 'Let it be like your words'.

We read in Parshas Ki Sovo (D'vorim Perek 26/Posuk 5):

וְעֲנִיתָ וְאָמַרְתָּ לְפָנָי ה' א...לִיקִיף אַרְמִי אֲבָד אָבִי וַיֵּרַד מִצְרַיִם וַיֵּגֶר שָׁם בְּמַתִּי מְעַט וַיְהִי שָׁם לְגוֹי גָדוֹל עָצוּם וָרֵב:

You shall respond and say before Hashem your G-d, Arami sought to destroy my father and he went down to Egypt and he sojourned there with a few people and he became there a strong and large nation.

Rashi writes:

ארמי אבד אבי - ...לבן בקש לעקור את הכל, כשרדף אחר יעקב.

*Arami sought to destroy my father* – Lovon sought to uproot the entire people of Israel when he pursued Yaakov.

And Par'o did the same. We read Par'o's words to his people (Sh'mos Perek 1/Posuk 10):

הֲבֵנָה נִתְחַכְמָה לּוֹ פֶן יִרְבֶּה וְהִיָּה כִּי תִקְרָאנָה מִלְחָמָה וְנוֹסֵף גַּם הוּא עַל שְׂנְאֵינוּ וְנִלְחַם בָּנוּ וְעָלָה מִן הָאָרֶץ:

Let us deal wisely with them lest they increase and when there will be a war they will join those who hate us and will fight against us and go up from the land.

What was the wise way in which Par'o chose to deal with Israel? We read (ibid. Posuk 13):

וַיַּעֲבֹדוּ מִצְרַיִם אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּפָרָה:

Egypt forced B'nei Yisroel to work with back-breaking labor.

As I read the verse without Chazal, I see only brute force; there does not seem to be any apparent 'wisdom' in such a method. But with Chazal I understand the 'wisdom' as we read in the Midrash Rabba (B'midbar Parshas B'ha'alo-secha Parshata 15/20):

אמר פרעה הבה נתחכמה לו...קבץ את כל ישראל. ואמר להם בבקשה מכם עשו עמי היום בטובה היינו דכתיב ויעבידו מצרים את בני ישראל בפרך בפה רך. נטל סל ומגריפה מי היה רואה את פרעה נוטל סל ומגריפה ועושה בלבנים ולא היה עושה? מיד הלכו כל ישראל בזריזות ועשו עמו בכל כחן לפי שהיו בעלי כח וגבורים. כיון שחשכה העמיד עליהם נוגשים ואמר להם חשבו את הלבנים מיד עמדו ומנו אותם ואמר להם כזה אתם מעמידים בכל יום ויום:

*Par'o said, 'Let us deal wisely with them' – He gathered the people and said to them, 'Please, do me a favor today, as it says, "Egypt made Israel work with פרך" – with פה רך, gentle speech.*

Par'o took a basket and a rake. Wouldn't anyone who saw Par'o take a basket and a rake also do the same? Immediately all of Israel went with alacrity and worked with Par'o with all of their strength because they were powerful people and warriors.

At nightfall, Par'o appointed oppressors and said to them, 'count the bricks [that they made].' They counted [and told Par'o]. Par'o said to them, 'this is the number of bricks you will produce daily.'

We need not belabor Par'o's goal of the destruction of Israel. That goal is so evident when he said (ibid. Posuk 16):

וַיֹּאמֶר בְּיַלְדֵיכֶן אֶת הַעֲבָרִיּוֹת וְרֵאִיתֶן עַל הָאֲבָנִים אִם בֵּן הוּא וְהַמֵּתָן אֹתוֹ וְאִם בַּת הוּא וְחֵיָהּ:

Par'o said to the midwives, 'When you birth the Hebrew women and look at them on the birthing stone, if it is a boy, you shall kill him; if it is a girl, she can live'.

And let us not be deceived. Lovon and Par'o, and those who preceded them and those who succeeded them, and who are living today, all received their impetus from the *nachash hakadmon* – the serpent in Gan Eden. It, too, hid its evil plans with the cunning regarding which the Torah warns us from the outset (B'reishis Perek 3/Posuk 1):

וְהַנָּחָשׁ הָיָה עָרוּם מִכָּל חַיַּת הַשָּׂדֶה אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה ה' אֵל... לִיקִים וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל הָאִשָּׁה אַף כִּי אָמַר אֵל... לִיקִים לֹא תֹאכְלוּ מִכָּל עֵץ הַגֶּן:

The serpent was more cunning than the other animals of the field that Hashem G-d made; the serpent said to the woman, 'Is it so that G-d said that you may not eat from any of the trees of the Garden?'

She replied (P'sukim 2-3):

וַתֹּאמֶר הָאִשָּׁה אֶל הַנָּחָשׁ מִפְּרִי עֵץ הַגֶּן נֹאכְלִים וּמִפְּרִי הָעֵץ אֲשֶׁר בְּתוֹךְ הַגֶּן אָמַר אֵל... לִיקִים לֹא תֹאכְלוּ מִמֶּנּוּ וְלֹא תִגְעוּ בּוֹ פֶּן תָּמּוּתוּן:

The woman said to the serpent, 'We may eat from the trees of the Garden. And from the tree in the middle of the Garden, G-d said, "do not eat from it and do not touch it lest you will die."'

Rashi writes (Posuk 4):

דחפה עד שנגעה בו, אמר לה כשם שאין מיתה בנגיעה כך אין מיתה באכילה:

The serpent pushed her and she touched it. The serpent said to her, 'Just like there was no death when you touched it, so there is no death if you eat it.'

And that is the meaning of the Torah in that verse:

וַיֹּאמֶר הַנָּחָשׁ אֶל הָאִשָּׁה לֹא מוֹת תָּמּוּתוּן:

The serpent said to the women, 'You will not die'.

That is why HaKodosh Boruch said to Bil'am – be silent<sup>12</sup>. Do not speak about Israel whatsoever.

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<sup>12</sup> And so we read G-d's words to Lovon (B'reishis Perek 31/Posuk 24):

וַיָּבֵא אֵל... לִיקִים אֶל לָבָן הָאֲרָמִי בַחֲלֹם הַלַּיְלָה וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ הַשְּׁמֵר לָךְ פֶּן תִּדְבַּר עִם יַעֲקֹב מִטוֹב עַד רָע:

G-d came to Lovon the Aramite in a dream at night and He said to him, 'Guard yourself, lest you speak with Yaakov good or bad.'

And as we know, the Divine exhortations did not prevent Bil'am from giving overt curses and one that was covert because it was in the guise of a blessing. That is what Rashi writes in our Parsha (Perek 24/Posuk 6):

אמרו רבותינו מברכותיו של אותו רשע אנו למדים מה היה בלבו לקללם...כדאיתא  
בחלק (סנהדרין קה א):

Our Rabbis said, 'from the blessings of that wicked person, Bil'am, we learn that which was in his heart to curse them' as we learn in Masseches Sanhedrin.

And thus, the message is clear. Our separateness from the nations of the world includes removing our reliance from upon them. If we do not know what they really have in mind, an enticing suggestion, promise or actualization may be good for the moment but have dire consequences as time goes on. Without Divinely revealed knowledge, such as is received by a *Novi* or from an outstanding personality, separateness and saying 'no thank you' is the best formula for the true welfare of Israel.

However, if our starting point is to refuse help and aid because we do not know to where it will lead, we must ask, 'How will we survive? Israel is a small nation, Medinat Yisrael is a tiny country; we cannot do it on our own.'

What is our alternative?

The Vilna Gaon<sup>13</sup> provides an answer to this question as he adds to our understanding of the dialogue between HaKodosh Boruch Hu and Bil'am and that of Bil'am with the messengers who were sent to bring him to Moav and with Bolok himself.

Bil'am told those messengers (B'midbar Perek 22/Posuk 18):

וַיַּעַן בְּלָעָם וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל עַבְדֵי בְלָק אִם יִתֵּן לִי בְלָק מְלֵא בֵיתוֹ כְּסָף וְזָהָב לֹא אוֹכֵל לַעֲבָר  
אֶת פִּי ה' אֶ...לְקִי לַעֲשׂוֹת קִטְנָה אוֹ גְדוֹלָה:

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<sup>13</sup> I have found this commentary in both *Kol Eliyahu* and *Divrei Eliyahu*. The quotations here are from *Kol Eliyahu*.

Bil'am answered and he said to the servants of Bolok, 'If Bolok will give me a house full of silver and gold I will not be able to violate the mouth of Hashem my G-d to do something small or big.'

The Gaon asks: If Bil'am says that he cannot even do something small, obviously he cannot do something big. What is the meaning of this verse and its final words?

The Gaon's answer is based on a Midrash<sup>14</sup> on another verse in our Parsha. When Bolok complains that Bil'am's words are not a curse, the following is the response that the Torah gives:

וַיִּשֶׂם ה' דָּבָר בְּפִי בִלְעָם וַיֹּאמֶר שׁוּב אֶל בִּלְקָם וְכֵן תִּדְבֹר:  
Hashem put the *dovor* –word in the mouth of Bil'om and He said, 'Return to Bolok and so shall you speak.'

We know that the word *dovor* can refer to an object, a 'thing', and not just a word. The Midrash adds a layer to the *p'shat* of this Posuk and says that besides dictating to Bolok what he was to say, his *dovor*-word, He put a *dovor*-a thing, in his mouth.

What was that object, that *dovor*? How does this verse explain the seemingly superfluous comment of Bil'am that he cannot do גדולה או גדולה - neither something small nor something big?

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<sup>14</sup> I searched for this Midrash somewhat extensively and was unable to locate it. I found other Midrashim that have parts of it, but none with the entire content and the contrasts upon which the Gaon builds his *p'shat*. If someone can locate it, I will be most appreciative.

The quotations that I will use are from *Kol Eliyahu*, a compilation of Divrei Torah from the Gaon. I cannot discern if the choice of words is a direct quote from the Gaon who directly quoted the Midrash or it is a paraphrase of the Midrash, either from the Gaon or from the compiler.

I did see one page of an article in the publication הקולמוס והספר from the year 5717. In that publication there is a major section entitled קונטרס אמר אליהו with a discussion regarding the many Divrei Torah that are said in the name of the Vilna Gaon but which the Gaon did not author personally.

The author relates to this Midrash and also notes that he could not find its source but brings proofs that bear testimony to the reliability that what we find in *Kol Eliyahu* is indeed from the *GRA TZ"l*.

We read in Kol Eliyahu to our Parsha:

...לכאורה התיבות או גדולה מיותרות.  
אמנם יבואר על פי דרשתם במדרש פליאה על הפסוק וישם ה' דבר בפי בלעם וכו'  
– חד אמר חכה הדא הוא דכתיב (במדבר כג/ח) מה קבה א...ל. וחד אמר רסן הדא  
הוא דכתיב (שם) מה אזעום ולא זעם ה'.

Seemingly, the words 'or big' are superfluous.

In truth, this can be explained by the interpretation of Chazal in a wondrous Midrash regarding the Posuk, 'Hashem put something in the mouth of Bil'am, etc.':

[The Midrash writes] One *chacham* said that the *dovor*-thing was a [fish] hook and that is what the verse says, 'What can I curse, א-G-d, did not curse.

One *chacham* says that the *dovor*-thing was a reins and that is what the [same] verse says [in its continuation], 'how can I be angry, Hashem was not angry.

החילוק בין רסן לחכה הוא דחכה הוא מחט קפוף שנכנס בלשון הדג ודוקרו...ורסן  
הוא להיפך שלוחץ את שפתי הבהמה דוחק עצום...שמתוך הלחץ...מוציאה את  
לשונה לחוץ.

The difference between a 'hook' and a 'reins' is that a hook is a bent needle that goes into the tongue of a fish and punctures it. A reins is the opposite. It places tremendous pressure on the lips of the animal and because of the pressure the animal is forced to protrude its tongue outside of its mouth.

ויש לפרש ששני המאן דאמרין לא פליגו – מר אמר הדא ומר אמר הדא כי באמת  
לשניהם הוצרך פעם לחכה לעצור לשונו בתוכו ופעם לרסן להוציא לשונו לחוץ לדבר  
יותר.

Thus, there is to explain that the two opinions do not argue. One says one aspect and the other says another aspect but in truth both ways are necessary: sometimes a hook is required to stop his tongue and sometimes a reins is required to extend his tongue outwardly and to speak more.

...תמיד היה חותר לקלל את ישראל. והנה ידוע דשם 'א...ל'קים מורה על הדין ותחילתו דהיינו 'א...ל' הוא שם מידת החסד [15] כמו שכתוב (תהילים נב/ג16) חסד א...ל כל היום].  
Bil'am always sought ways to curse Israel.

It is well-known that the Divine Name *E...lokim* refers to [harsh judgment] and its first letters, *e...l* refer to G-d's attribute of mercy as it says, 'the compassion of *e...l* is all the day'.

והשם 'הויה' הוא רחמים ותחילתו דהיינו 'ה...ה' מורה על דין [כמו שכתוב (תהילים צד/יב17) אשרי הגבר אשר תיסרנה י...ה].

The four-letter Divine Name signified by the word 'הויה' – 'Being' refers to Divine mercy. Its beginning letters *yud* and *heh* refer to [harsh] judgment as it is written, 'Happy is the man whom Hashem – *yud...heh* afflicts.'

והנה בלעם רצה תמיד לעורר הדין על ישראל בהזכירו עליהם שמות המורים על הדין.

Behold, Bil'am continually wanted to arouse harsh judgment against Israel by mentioning Divine Names that indicated harsh judgment.

אבל הקדוש ברוך הוא החפץ חסד ברחמיו שם דבר בפיו בעת שרצה לקללם שלא יוכל להזכיר עליהם שמות הדין – רק שמות הרחמים.

But, HaKodosh Boruch Hu Who desires compassion with His mercy placed an object in Bil'am's mouth when he wished to curse them so that he would be unable to mention the Divine Names that are associated with harsh judgment, but rather with only the Divine Names that are associated with mercy.

דהיינו כשהתחיל להוציא מפיו שם 'א...ל'קים' דהוא דין אז שם בפיו חכה לדקור בלשונו שלא יוכל לגמור רק התחלתו דהיינו שם 'א...ל' דהוא חסד.

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<sup>15</sup> These brackets and those that follow are in the original.

<sup>16</sup> The entire verse reads:

מה תתהלל ברעה הגבור חסד א...ל כל היום:  
Why does the warrior praise himself about the evil that he does? The compassion of Hashem is the entire day.

<sup>17</sup> The entire verse reads:

אשרי הגבר אשר תיסרנו!...ה ומתורתך תלמדנו:  
Happy is the man that G-d *yud...heh* afflicts and from Your Torah You shall teach him.

That is, when Bil'am began to utter the word *E...lokim*, which refers to harsh judgment, Hashem placed a hook in Bil'am's mouth to puncture his tongue so that he would not be able to finish that Divine Name and could only say its beginning which is *e.../*, a Name of compassion.

וכשרוצה להזכיר עליהם השם 'ה...ה' דהוא גם כן דין אז שם רסן בפיו להכריחו להוציא לשונו ולגמור את כל השם 'הוי...ה' שהוא רחמים...

When Bil'am wished to say the Name *yud...heh* which is also a Name of harsh judgment, then Hashem placed a reins on his mouth to force his tongue to go out and to complete the Name הוי'ה [Yud...Heh...Vov...Heh] and to say the entire Name of הוי'ה which is a Name of mercy.

זהו שאמר 'מה אקב לא קבה א...ל – פירוש: איך אקוב אם השם 'א...ל' אינו על הקללה ודין כי אם על החסד...?

That is the meaning of Bil'am's words when he said, 'How can I curse, when G-d, *E.../* did not curse. This means that he said, 'How can I curse if I use the Name *E.../* which isn't a Name for a curse or harsh judgment; it is a Name of mercy!

ומה אזעום אם לא זעם הוי'ה רוצה לומר – איך אזעום אם זה השם הוי'ה איננו מורה על זעם ורוגז? דהיינו על ידי הרסן אנכי מוכרח להזכיר רק השם הוי'ה ואין ביכולתי מפי להוציא רק שתי שמות הללו שהם חסד ורחמים...

[And Bil'am said], How can I be angry if G-d הוי'ה did not get angry? That is because the Name הוי'ה does not refer to anger and rage. That is, through the use of the reins I, Bil'am, am forced to say the Name of הוי'ה and I am unable to say only these two Names that signify G-d's compassion and mercy.

השתא יבואר...לא אוכל לעבור את פי ה' א...ל'קי. רוצה לומר שהם שמות רחמים ודין לעשות 'קטנה'...משם הוי'ה לקצר...ולומר רק השם 'ה...ה' או גדולה...לומר שם 'א...ל'קים' דכשאני מתחיל בשם 'א...ל'קים' לא אוכל לגמרו...

Now, the other verse will be explained. When Bil'am said, 'I cannot violate the mouth of 'Hashem' my 'G-d' he meant to say that these two names are mercy (הוי'ה) and harsh judgment (א...ל'קי) – to make a small word *Yud...Heh* from the larger הוי'ה or to make a big word *E...lokim* into the smaller *e.../* because when I begin with the letters *e.../* of *E...lokim* I am unable to complete it.

That's the answer to our question as to what we are to do if we do not rely upon the other nations. The answer is that there is a G-d. He is in control.

It is true. He can appoint representatives. Hashem did so some 2500 years ago or so when the King Coresh issued his remarkable proclamation as we read in Sefer Ezra (Perek 1/P'sukim 1-3):

ובשנת אחת לכורש מלך פרס לכלות דבר ה' מפי ירמיה העיר ה' את רוח פרש מלך  
פרס ויעבר קול בכל מלכותו וגם במכתב לאמר: כה אמר פרש מלך פרס כל ממלכות  
הארץ נתן לי ה' א...לקי השמים והוא פקד עלי לבנות לו בית בירושלם אשר ביהודה:  
מי בכם מכל עמו יהי א...לקיו עמו ויעל לירושלם אשר ביהודה ויבן את בית ה'  
א...לקי ישראל הוא הא...לקים אשר בירושלם:

In the first year of the reign of Coresh King of Persia when the Word G-d ceased from the mouth of Yirmiyahu, Hashem aroused the spirit of Coresh and he passed a proclamation throughout his kingdom, as well as in writing, saying, 'So says Coresh King of Persia: "Hashem the G-d of the heavens gave me all of the kingdoms of the earth and He appointed me to build for Him a House in Jerusalem that is in Judea. Who among you from all of His People, may His G-d be with him, and he shall ascend to Jerusalem that is in Judea and build a House for Hashem the G-d of Israel; He is the G-d in Jerusalem."

Coresh's words were not unexpected. Centuries earlier, Yeshaya already foretold this event, even explicitly writing the name 'Coresh' as we read there (Perek 44/Posuk 28):

האמר לכורש רעי וכל הפצי ישלם ולאמר לירושלם תבנה והיכל תוסד:  
Hashem is He Who says to Coresh My shepherd, 'He will complete all of My desire and to say to Jerusalem, "you shall be rebuilt and the Sanctuary shall be founded."

Thus, regarding the proclamation of Coresh there was no need to be skeptical or doubting. It was clearly a Divine proclamation for the welfare of Israel.

Today we have no such assurances. We cannot know if that which appears to be for our benefit masks ulterior motives that seek to cause us harm or, in fact, is a harbinger of opportunity and good.

Of course, we cannot ignore the world. We are not told to do so. The Posuk that we brought earlier says 'do not trust and rely'; it does not say 'ignore'.

As individuals we must know that we are to be cautious and to be fully cognizant and aware that the bounty that we receive comes from HaKodosh Boruch Hu—sometimes through a *shliach*. If, as individuals, we tread cautiously, alert and mindful, we have the opportunity to avoid pitfalls that could have tragic results. We must not be tempted by offers that look ‘too good to be true’. If that is how they look, that is probably what they are.

But we are not just individuals. We are a People and we have the leadership of *Gedolim* and the political leadership in Medinat Yisroel. We are not the ones who make the decisions, many of which are terribly complicated and fraught with danger. In such situations, we must ask the Ribbono Shel Olom to enlighten those leaders to heed the warning of the Torah and not to fall prey to the ancient and contemporary error of (D’vorim Perek 8/Posuk 17):

וְאָמַרְתָּ בְּלִבְבְּךָ לְחַי וְעֹצֵם יָדַי עָשָׂה לִי אֵת הַחֵיל הַזֶּה:

You might say in your heart, ‘My prowess and the strength of my hand has accomplished these great strides’.

We can be hopeful that the more that we as individuals *truly* put our faith in G-d that such sincere *emunah* will spread among His people, the small and the great, so that His praise will be upon our lips and in our hearts as we await His salvation.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi Pollock