



NEFESH SHIMSHON

DIVREI TORAH ON THE WEEKLY PARSHA AND HOLIDAYS FROM
THE TEACHINGS OF RABBEINU SHIMSHON DOVID PINCUS ZT"l

ישראל בן רחל נחמה ויעקב בן רחל נחמה
MAY THEY GROW TO BE TALMIDEI CHACHAMIM AND OVDEI HASHEM.

PEARLS OF WISDOM FROM THE PARSHAH

Bilaam the Failed Prophet

וַיִּשְׁלַח מַלְאָכִים אֶל בִּלְעָם בֶּן בְּעוֹר (במדבר כב, ה)

He sent messengers to Bilaam son of Beor. (*Bemidbar* 22:5)

You might ask, why did *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* bring His *Shechinah* to rest on an evil gentile? It was so the nations of the world will not have the opportunity to say, “If we had prophets, we would mend our ways.” *Hashem* granted them prophets, and they broke down the world’s mores. Originally, the non-Jews refrained from illicit relationships. But Bilaam advised them to abandon themselves to licentiousness. (*Rashi*)

Let’s figure out how Bilaam’s prophetic mission countered the non-Jews’ claim of, “If we had prophets, we would mend our ways.” After all, they could still claim that had *Hashem* given them a righteous prophet like Moshe, they would have bettered themselves. What was accomplished by giving them the evil Bilaam?

This question is based on the mistaken assumption that Bilaam was an evil person who became a prophet. This is not so. Bilaam was not evil despite being a prophet; he was evil *because* he was a prophet. The faculty of prophecy made Bilaam’s

inner being go bad.

How so?

– “לא מֵרִבְכֶּם מְכַל הָעַמִּים חֶשֶׁק ה' בָּכֶם
is not because you are more numerous than
all the peoples that *Hashem* desired you”¹
– *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* said to Yisrael: I
desire you because even when I shower you
with greatness, you minimize yourselves
before Me. I gave greatness to *Avraham*

¹ *Devarim* 7:7.

Avinu, and he said, "I am dust and ashes." To Moshe and Aharon, and they said, "What are we?" To David, and he said, "I am a worm and not a person."

But the idol worshippers are not like that. I gave greatness to Nimrod, and he said, "Come, let us build a city." To Pharaoh, and he said, "Who is *Hashem*?" To Sancheriv, and he said, "Who among all the gods of the lands?" To Nebuchadnezzar, and he said, "I will rise up on the heights of a cloud." To Chiram king of Tyre, and he said, "I sat in the dwelling of G-d, in the heart of the seas."²

Greatness is a factor that promotes growth. It causes the seed planted deep down to grow. When a person is little, the hidden points inside him are so little and so deep that they are not noticeable to others. But when he grows greater, his inner self grows as well, and then it manifests itself externally, and his true nature is revealed.

This explains the difference between the Jewish people and the nations of the world. When they are still small, the differences between them are subtle, because they are buried deep inside them. But when they grow greater, it becomes apparent who they really are. *Avraham Avinu*, Moshe and David, when they grew, their humility grew along with them. Also Nimrod, Pharaoh, Sancheriv and Nebuchadnezzar, if not that they became great, we would not know much about their true inner nature. When they

grew, their wickedness grew along with them, and showed who they really were.

We may assume that if Bilaam had not become a prophet, he would have been the best and most praiseworthy non-Jew of all times. He would have been a really proper person and displayed all kinds of desirable qualities. *Hashem* chose the best non-Jew that was to be found, and granted him tremendous greatness, prophecy like that of *Moshe Rabbeinu*. This caused his inner self to grow and develop. What came out? A really wicked person. He even eliminated the world's existing moral practices.

This definitively refutes any claim of the non-Jews that had they been granted prophets, they would have bettered their ways.

Avimelech, who took Sarah, was a prophet. *Hashem* spoke to him. And so were Bilaam, Lavan and Eliphaz son of Eisav. They all were prophets from the nations of the world. Yet, all these "prophets" tried to uproot everything good. We know what Bilaam tried to do, and what Lavan tried to do. Eliphaz grew up around *Yitzchak Avinu* and knew very well that according to *Halachah*, he need not and should not obey his father, if his father tells him to transgress a Torah prohibition. But he still sought to kill Yaakov.

A prophet encompasses the entire world, as the Rambam writes.³ Thus, every prophet of the nations, who encompassed the whole world, wished to uproot and destroy the whole world. ●

2 Chulin 89a.

3 Mishneh Torah, Hilchos Yesodei Hatorah 7:2.

לעילוי נשמת

אמינו מרת חיה זיסל עלקא בת ר' שמעון דויטש ע"ה

ומרת אסתר רויזא בת אברהם יחיאל דויטש ע"ה

ומוה"ר משה בן אליעזר ע"ה ומרת חוה בת דוד האמבורגער ע"ה

ומוה"ר ברוך זאב בן נפתלי ע"ה ומרת גיטל צביה בת מרדכי קראוס ע"ה

ומוה"ר שמעון בן צבי דב ע"ה ומרת בלומא בת אפרים מעגלו ע"ה

נרבת משפחת מרדכי דויטש

Bilaam's War

Among all the special seasons of the year — such as Pesach, Sukkos and *Yamim Nora'im* — the one we have the least feeling for, and understanding of, is the three-week period called *Bein Hametzarim*.

This time is a fundamental one for the Jewish people, and we need to grasp its meaning. So let's focus on a certain well-known story in the Torah. It's the seemingly simple story of Balak and Bilaam who unsuccessfully tried to curse the Jewish people. There is a lot of hidden content in *Parshas Balak*, much more than meets the eye.

Chazal say that Bilaam knew how to calculate the exact moment of *Hashem's* anger. Bilaam thereby sought to cast his curse upon the Jewish people at that fateful moment, with disastrous results. But *Hashem* in His great mercy did not grow angry at all during those days on which Bilaam sought to curse.¹

So *Chazal* explain. Yet, as we look at the *pesukim*, we see that Bilaam used a lot of other strategies as well. Bilaam was the seat of all impurity and evil in the world. He went to war against the Jewish people; as a wily tactician, he did not put all his efforts into just one scheme. He tried every way possible.

Thus Bilaam did not just calculate the time of *Hashem's* anger; he also sought to bring an *ayin hara* on the Jewish people.² And he invoked *Cheit Ha'eigel*.³ He used all the forces of *tumah* at his disposal. Despite all the things he tried, he did not succeed in harming the Jewish people. Unfortunately, at the end of the *parshah*, the Jewish people harmed themselves, through their faculty of free choice. But without this, all the forces in the world were unable to harm the Jewish people.

Let's take a look at one of the battles that *Bilaam HaRasha* fought against us.

וַיֹּאמֶר בִּלְעָם אֶל בָּלָק בְּנֵה לִי בִזָּה שִׁבְעָה
מִזְבְּחֹת וְהִכֵּן לִי בִזָּה שִׁבְעָה פָּרִים וְשִׁבְעָה אֵילִים
– Bilaam said to Balak, “Build me here
seven altars, and prepare for me here seven
bulls and seven rams.”⁴

Rashi explains that Bilaam was saying to *Hashem*, “The forefathers of this people built You seven altars, and I have done as much as all of them.” Not only that, but Bilaam did this three times. Again and again, he set up seven altars and offered seven bulls and seven rams.

The Torah recounts this at length, and it seems that this was Bilaam's main battle plan, into which he put great effort. What exactly was he trying to accomplish by offering these sacrifices to *Hashem*? How will it help him achieve his goal?

To answer this question, we need to know something about the general meaning of *korbanos*.

The Meaning of Korbanos

An animal of the type offered as a *korban* comprises all the four elements. Although technically it belongs to the animal kingdom, nevertheless it has a living soul that bears a resemblance to the human soul, thus it alludes also to the human element. Furthermore, just as a human being comprises also the vegetable element, so does an animal.

Furthermore, when the animal is burned on the *mizbeach*, it goes back to its source. It returns to *Hashem*. This is because everything goes back to its source when it is burned.

An animal of the type used for a *korban* has a

¹ Berachos 7a.

² Bemidbar 24:2, Rashi ad loc.

³ Bemidbar 24:1, Onkelos ad loc.

⁴ Bemidbar 23:1.

form not so different from the human form. And a human being contains within him all the worlds (as *Nefesh HaChayim* explains at length in the first *shaar*). That is why we take such an animal and place it on the altar to be burned. This act is like bringing the whole world and all it contains back to *Hashem*.

Offering a *korban* with the proper intentions is called *reiach nichoach*. This means that the *korban* ascends in a way that pleases *Hashem's* Will. So to speak, it enters the realm of *Hashem's* profound Will. *Hashem* is pleased that the person who offered the *korban* has "brought back" the whole created world to Him.

In this way, *korbanos* are greater than all the *mitzvos*. Every *mitzvah* has a certain specific effect, but offering a *korban* encompasses everything. It includes all the 248 limbs and organs and all the 365 sinews and nerves.

In olden times, there were pagans who sought to offer up their own children, something which entails an even greater sacrifice to G-d. However, the Torah forbade this. *Avodas hakorbanos* alludes to certain concepts but does not actualize them in a literal sense.

Korbanos is such an exalted matter that the Vilna Gaon said if we would just offer one *korban* with proper *kavanah*, the world would come to its ultimate goal.

In short, *korbanos* express an extraordinarily profound idea: bringing everything back to *Hashem*. When we offer a *korban*, we are expressing the idea that the whole world and everything in it is *Hashem's*.

Hashem's Connection to the World

Now that we have explained what *korbanos* signify, we will explain something even deeper.

In this world there is a whole system of denying *Hashem* and His true nature. I am not talking about modern atheistic ideas, which are totally baseless. I am talking about the fundamental *kefirah* of the Greek philosophers, whose arguments the Rambam

addressed. Also the Rema wrote a special book about *korbanos* (*Sefer Toras HaOlah*) in which he refutes these arguments.

The basic idea of the Greeks was actually very simple. They reasoned as follows: Since G-d is so very great and exalted, since He is way above anything physical and far beyond all we can conceive, what connection could He possibly have to our lowly material world? Why should it matter to Him what a person does?

There are many different levels to this *kefirah*. Some claimed that G-d doesn't even know what happens in this world. Others claimed that G-d knows but doesn't care what happens in this world. This is actually the subject addressed in *Sefer Iyov*. Iyov spoke eloquently and at length about *Hashem's* greatness, but he argued that for this very reason, He doesn't care about us, *chas v'shalom*.

How do we answer them? How do we refute this idea?

We answer that if G-d was only as great as they say, then He would indeed be unable to connect with us tiny creatures on earth. He would not be able to lower Himself to such an extent. However, *Hashem* is far greater than they think, and for this very reason, He indeed is able to connect with us.

The following allegory explains how extreme greatness enables connecting with the very small.

Shlomo HaMelech was the wisest of all men, and he understood the language of animals. Now, when we encounter an animal, we don't understand its language. This is because we are distant from animals. We are much higher and greater than them. Yet, *Shlomo* did succeed in connecting with lowly animals; he understood their language. Why? Is it because he was smaller than us, and closer to animals? On the contrary! His tremendously great wisdom, which placed him very far above, granted him extraordinary powers. *Shlomo HaMelech* was so great that he was able to comprehend animal language. It comes out that his greatness was the very reason for his ability to connect to the small.

Thus it is written:

מִי כֵה' אֱלֹקֵינוּ הַמְגִבִּיהִי לְשָׁבֶת הַמִּשְׁפָּלִי
לְרֹאוֹת בְּשָׁמַיִם וּבָאָרֶץ – Who is like *Hashem*
our G-d? He dwells on high, and lowers
Himself to see heavens and earth.⁵

Hashem is so great and high that He is able to “lower” Himself to see what takes place in heaven and earth.

Hashem's Love for the Jewish People

This is what *Emunah* is all about. *Emunah* means believing that *Hashem* connects to our world and has a relationship with it. Whereas *kefirah* means believing that *Hashem* does not relate to our world.

Someone who doesn't even believe that the world has a Creator is not called a *kofer*. He is just plain stupid. Someone who claims that this table created itself is not a *kofer*. He is called a “modern thinker.” The Greek *kofrim* of old believed that the world has a Creator, but they denied that He is connected to the world and runs it.

Actually, all major world religions believe that G-d connects to the world. So what is unique about Jewish faith?

The Torah teaches that *Hashem* doesn't just relate to the world and direct its events. It's much more than that: *Hashem* has a personal relationship with us. He loves and cares for each one of His children!

Let's say a person has an aquarium. He looks with interest at the colorful fish swimming to and fro. He feeds them. And despite the distance between him and them, if he notices a fish that doesn't eat, he tries to find a solution. Nevertheless, it doesn't disturb him deeply. There is no personal relationship of love between him and the fish, because the distance between them is too great to enable this.

Now, even when love exists, there are different levels of it. There is the love that a mother has for

her child, and there is the love that the lady at the daycare center has for a child. The lady at the daycare center is devoted to the children. She loves them and takes good care of them. But this is nothing like a mother's love, which is much deeper and internal.

R. Yisrael Salanter tells the allegory of a righteous, illustrious *rosh yeshivah* who has a son who went off the *derech*. He also has a brilliant, promising *talmid* whose behavior is exemplary. The *rosh yeshivah* devotes all his time and energy to the *talmid*, while he has hardly any contact with his wayward son. The son just pains him and breaks his heart.

However, when a fire breaks out in the middle of the night and there is no time to waste, to whose rescue does the *rosh yeshivah* run first? He first rescues his son, not the *talmid*.

This is because of the deep inner love that a father has for his son. I know someone who has twelve children, and one of his children died fourteen years ago. Until this day, he and his wife have not recovered from that loss, because it's not just a matter of “another” child. That is not how parents feel about their children.

Hashem's trait of goodness is so powerful that He doesn't just know us, He doesn't just oversee our affairs, He is “*Habocheir b'amo Yisrael b'ahavah*.” He chose to establish a relationship of love with the Jewish people.

The first word that *Hashem* said to the Jewish people was:

אֲנִכִּי ה' אֱלֹקֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם
מִבֵּית עֲבָדִים – I am *Hashem* your G-d Who
took you out of the land of Egypt, out of
the house of slavery.⁶

He did not say, “I am *Hashem* your G-d Who created you.” Rather, He communicated to us the following: I am *Hashem* Who went into Egypt to take you out of there, and Who took care of you and bore you on eagles' wings. *Hashem's* first message to

5 Tehillim 113:5-6.

6 Shemos 20:2.

us is that He has a personal relationship of love with us.

This is the principle on which the whole Torah stands. And this is how *Shlomo HaMelech* in his great wisdom describes the Giving of the Torah:

יִשְׁקֵנִי מִנְּשִׁיקוֹת פִּיהוּ – May He kiss me with the kisses of His mouth.⁷

Thus when we pray for Torah we begin with the words:

אַהֲבָה רַבָּה אֶהְבֵּתֵנוּ ה' אֱלֹקֵינוּ חֶמְלָה גְּדוֹלָה וִיתֵרָה חֶמְלָתְ עָלֵינוּ – With a great love, You have loved us... abundant and excessive compassion You have shown us...⁸

What was the key to Bilaam's approach? Bilaam knew that *Hashem* loves the Jewish people, but he assumed there is a limit to this love. He thought there is a point where this love comes to an end, that deep down, there is a place where *Hashem* says to us, so to speak: True, I do love the Jewish people. But after all, I am the Creator, and you are mere created beings, and the distance between us is infinitely great.

Bilaam wanted to get to this deep inner point. Bilaam's plan was to offer one *korban* after another, corresponding to all the *korbanos* that the *Avos* offered. He wanted to symbolically burn up the whole world on the altar, turning everything to total nothingness. There would remain just *Hashem* Himself, the One and Only. There would no longer be a Jewish people or anything else. And when Bilaam would come to that place where *Hashem's* relationship with the Jewish people ends, there he would mention *Cheit Ha'eigel*. He would say to *Hashem*: There is a place where You don't actually care about the Jewish people, and in fact they did sin against You by making the Golden Calf. Why not just wipe them out?

Hashem answered Bilaam as follows: You are so foolish! Are you trying to bring up My children's sins to Me? That is like bringing up a child's misdeeds to his father. It doesn't undo a father's natural love for his son.

Hashem's love for the Jewish people is deeper than deep. In that innermost place, that is where the love is. That is where it flows from.

Another place where we see the depth of *Hashem's* love for the Jewish people is the story of Mordechai and Esther. Indeed, *Matan Torah* was a great expression of *Hashem's* love. However, *Chazal* say that the Jewish people accepted the Torah at *Har Sinai* under duress, with the mountain hanging over their heads. Only through the events of Mordechai and Esther did they tangibly experience *Hashem's* love for them. This persuaded them, and they accepted the Torah out of love.⁹

How did *Hashem's* love express itself at that time? It is written in *Megillas Esther*:

בַּלַּיְלָה הַהוּא נִדְדָה שְׁנַת הַמֶּלֶךְ – That night, the king's sleep eluded him.¹⁰

Chazal interpret that the sleep of the King of World eluded Him.¹¹ So to speak, *Hashem* couldn't "sleep" that night. What does this signify?

Imagine a doctor who works at a hospital. He is a very caring person and he dedicates himself unreservedly to his patients. But what happens when he comes home exhausted after a long work shift? He lays his head down on the pillow and falls asleep. When it's after work hours, he doesn't have a relationship with the patients in the hospital. It's not his own child that is laid up in the ICU.

About *Hashem* it says, "The king's sleep eluded him." *Hashem* "can't sleep," so to speak. Why? Because His child's life is in danger! This awesome

⁷ Shir HaShirim 1:2.

⁸ Birchas ahavah rabbah, morning prayers.

⁹ Shabbos 88a.

¹⁰ Esther 6:1.

¹¹ Megillah 15b.

love, this infinite caring of *Hashem* for the Jewish people, is what moved the Jews of that time to accept the Torah willingly.

When Hashem Cries

The relationship between *Hashem* and the Jewish people shows itself in all the holidays of the year. Pesach expresses the basic relationship: freedom from the Angel of Death, freedom from the *yetzer hara*. Shavuot expresses the Giving of the Torah. Rosh Hashanah expresses fear of Heaven, and Sukkos expresses joy. These are all aspects of our relationship with *Hashem*.

What about the period of the Three Weeks? It expresses *Hashem's* caring, His deep personal relationship with the Jewish people. This relationship shows itself through tears. *Chazal* say that on Tishah b'Av, *Hashem* cried.¹² Crying expresses the deepest type of connection.

And what about our caring for *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*? A person can dance and celebrate, eat *matzah* and *maror*, sit in a *sukkah*, but it is all external actions. Crying expresses an infinitely deep relationship of love.

We all have things we care about. If the air conditioner breaks down on a sweltering summer day, we care. If the fridge stops working and all the food inside is going to spoil, we care. But there are deeper levels of caring.

Do we care just about ourselves, or does the pain go deeper than that? We are willing to forgo celebrations for three weeks, to refrain from bathing and laundering for nine days, to fast on Tishah b'Av. Yet, it is all deeds. The purpose of this whole system is sharpen, clarify and deepen our inner caring.

This is our main *avodah* at this time of year — how much do we care about *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*, about the anguish of the *Shechinah*?

Bilaam did not understand this. He was a “Greek philosopher,” a classic *kofer*. He tried to penetrate deeper and deeper into *Hashem's* Will because he thought that deep down, there must be a point where *Hashem's* relationship with the Jewish people stops. However, *Hashem* did not grow angry during that whole period. The message was: *Hashem's* relationship with the Jewish people is infinitely deep, it has no stopping point. It is a relationship of love!

Our *avodah* on these days is to acquire true relationship with *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*.

Be Careful

These days teach us an additional point. This point, too, has to do with *Hashem's* relationship with the Jewish people.

This time of year is when we recall and speak of the troubles that the Jewish people went through in all the generations. The destruction of *Beis HaMikdash*, the destruction of the city of Beitar, and everything else. All this comes to teach us an additional point, highlighted by the following *Gemara*.¹³

The *Gemara* states that it is wrong to recite *Shema* and then repeat it. The question is asked: But maybe the person's mind wasn't focused the first time around, and that is why he is reciting *Shema* again? What is wrong with that? To this the *Gemara* retorts, “Is he *Hashem's* companion?!” (Rashi: “Will he treat *Hashem* the way he treats a fellow human being, and not be careful in the way he prays?!”) The *Gemara* then comments, “If the person didn't focus his mind the first time around, we hit him with a blacksmith's hammer until he concentrates!” (Rashi: “We instruct him to have *kavanah*, but if he makes a habit of not focusing his mind, we hit him.”)

Chazal are stressing the point that *Tefilah* is no small matter. How could a person not pay attention

¹² *Chagigah* 5b.

¹³ *Berachos* 33b-34a.

to what he is saying when he *davens*? If he would be under threat, if someone would be standing there and holding a hammer over his head, would he still be able to dream away? *Tefilah* is a most serious concern. *Sefer Nefesh Hachayim* explains how exalted and wondrous and awesome *Tefilah* is. You can't drift off when you are *davening*. You are not just chatting with a friend. *Tefilah* stands at the pinnacle of the world!

A similar message emanates from the Three Weeks. The Torah is no small matter. When the Jewish people failed to keep the Torah, a very great *Churban* resulted.

Why is it so terrible when we fail to observe Torah properly?

Let's picture the legendary giant *Og Melech Habashan*. With a single step, he can crush a whole town. Why? Because when you are dealing with somebody big, there are big consequences.

And what happens when we are dealing with *Hashem*?

When the Jewish people sinned by making the Golden Calf, *Hashem* said to Moshe:

לָךְ יֵרֵד כִּי שָׁחַת עַמֶּךָ וְגו' וְעַתָּה הִנֵּיחָה לִי
לְיָחֵר אֲפִי בָהֶם וְאַכְלֵם – Go down, for your
people has acted corruptly... and now let
Me be, and I will show My anger against
them and destroy them.¹⁴

The entire Jewish people was sentenced to death.

Only the prayer of Moshe brought *Hashem* to relent. And when the Jewish people sinned with the daughters of Moav, Moshe's strength ebbed, and again the Jewish people almost perished. Only the merit of Pinchas saved them.

Keeping Torah and *mitzvos* is not child's play. It is a very serious business! When *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* shows His anger, everything can be destroyed with a mere wave of His hand. When this happens, six million perish.

There is a very important message here. We have Pesach, Shavuos, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Sukkos; and we keep them. But in the Three Weeks, the whole issue of *Churban Beis Hamikdash* comes to teach us the significance of it all. It teaches us that the whole system of Torah and *mitzvos* is no small matter. It is an extremely serious system, and treating it lightly in any way results in tragedy.

On the other hand, there is another message here: there is a relationship of love between *Hashem* and the Jewish people. If slighting our Torah observance results in such devastating destruction, this teaches us how profound *Hashem's* relationship with the Jewish people is. When we sit for three weeks, and we hear, so to speak, *Hashem's* awful crying, we understand how much He cares. We realize how deeply *Hashem* is connected to the Jewish people. It is a relationship that runs infinitely deep. *Hashem* cries because He wants us to have this kind of a relationship with Him. ●

¹⁴ Shemos 32:7,10.