

BALAK 1982  
Rabbi Joseph Radinsky

At the Rabbinical convention one of the Rabbis opened his talk by telling about a person who fell into a vat of honey. After he was fished out the other people present asked him what he was thinking and praying for when he fell into this vat of honey. He said he was praying that his tongue should be equal to the task. That, of course, is the principal job of a Rabbi; to talk. We all need talk in order to give us strength and to comfort us and to give us goals in life. Talk is very important because you can destroy others as well. You can get them to doubt themselves and their own cause. You can get them to feel miserable about themselves and cause them to harm themselves. This, of course, is what the Torah portion, Balak, is about. Balak hired Belam to curse the Jewish people. Balak's full name was Balak Ben Sipur. Sipur Nephesh means the very essence of an individual. Balak knew that he could destroy the Jewish people. He knew that he could do it by destroying their own self-image of themselves. He would get Belam to curse the Jewish people from many different vantage points. Propaganda can be a very potent tool if the people you are directing it against come to believe it themselves. Also, of course, to third parties it can seem like the whole truth. I remember once being called by an angry woman who said, "Rabbi, you have to come quickly. There is a man in his backyard beating a little boy." I came over and, sure enough, there was a grown man hitting a boy, but it was the boy's father and he was spanking him. The boy had just pushed his two-year old sister into the pool. It looked terrible, though, this six foot man hitting this little boy, but the boy needed a lesson. You are not supposed to push your little sister into the pool. Today, too, propaganda is being used very effectively to try to destroy the Jewish people. Even many Jews have been affected by it. They claim that there are 650,000 refugees in Lebanon when only 300,000 lived there before the Israeli invasion. This is ludicrous! Also, the claim that Israel is being barbaric and killing civilians wantonly is a complete fabrication. Many Israeli soldiers have been killed because Israel tried to spare the civilians. It is very important that we do not believe the lies other people tell about us. Belam, according to the Rabbis, was as great a prophet as Moshe, but he was willing to use his talents for his own self-interests. When money was involved, he was able to rationalize whatever he did. In this Torah portion we have the story of Belam

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and his donkey. A fiery angel with a sword in his hand was blocking Belam's path while he was riding his donkey. A donkey in Jewish literature is considered one of the dumbest animals. Belam was the smartest of all men yet he could not see what his donkey could see. His own self-interest had blinded him. His donkey could see that the road was blocked. Belam could not and he whipped his donkey mercilessly. Today, too, when self-interests and oil are involved people cannot see what the simplest person can see. The PLO does not want a state. They had a state in South Lebanon. If all they wanted was a state they could have developed what they had there instead of buying ammunition for a 500,000 to 1,000,000 man army. What they want to do is destroy Israel. In these days it is very important that we do not let propoganda undermine our own belief in the right of Israel to exist. Sticks and stones will break my bones but words will never hurt me. That's one of the biggest lies that was ever stated. Words can sometimes hurt much worse than sticks and stones. As Blake said, "The truth told with bad intent beats all the lies that you can invent". Truths and partial truths told in the wrong context can destroy. Balak knew this. We Jews should stand up for ourselves and tell the world the truth as it is, not the way they would like it to be. As the person who fell in the vat of honey said, "May our tongues be equal to the task".

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In the Torah portion, Balach, we learn how Balach tried to destroy the Jewish people with words. Words are a very important tool. They can uplift and they can destroy. Man is really the only animal who can communicate. All other creatures cannot communicate their deep feelings and their hopes and their dreams. They may be able to master a few gestures but that is not communicating. In fact, they have taught some chimpanzees to say a few words. Only man is equipped with a voice box and can speak. Even after they have made an operation in a chimpanzee he could still only say a few words. They have taught them to do some sign language, but there really is no communication of ideas or concepts, etc. We are in large part who we are because of the way we can communicate. Communication can be used to destroy and also to lift up. Balach hired Bilam to curse the Jewish people. The Rabbis say that in many ways he was a bigger prophet than Moshe. When he prophesied the word Ko is used. The word Ko, the Rabbis say, stands for the fact that Bilam knew G-d's anger. He knew how to sense the weak spot in any situation. He knew how to use words to destroy. Moshe, on the other hand, saw things clearly. The word that is used to describe his communication with G-d is Zeh, this. It stands for clarity. The Rabbis say that the difference between Bilam and Moshe is the difference between an eagle and a bat. They both look for the dawn. The eagle looks at it in anticipation because he can see better. The bat looks for it with dread because he prefers the darkness. Bilam was a man who preferred the dark. He knew how to break people and confuse them with words. Even in our own day we see the effect of brainwashing, etc. Moshe, on the other hand, wanted to elevate people. He wanted the sun to shine upon them. He wanted their communication to help uplift them not put everyone down and keep them in their place. How is it that we can destroy people with words? One of the ways to do it is through confusing the levels of communication. We do that by confusing fantasy with reality and confusing the levels of expectations with both of them. Bilam tried to confuse the people's level of communication. He first started from Bamod Baal which means the master of the heights. He looked at only part of the people then because reality is a concrete situation. It cannot really be generalized. He then went to Soday Sofim, to the field of expectations. So many people confuse their expectations with reality. They expect too much from people. "You mean you got one B?" He then went to Roshapor, to

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the head of the uncovering. All of us fantasize, but we cannot let our fantasies intrude upon reality. This Roshapor, the Rabbis say, look upon the face of desolation. So many people get caught up today in fantasy. Fantasy can be fun and diverting and relaxing, but it cannot be confused with reality. How many marriages are broken up because the woman thought she was a movie star or the man because he thought he was a Don Juan? We must always keep our lines of communication straight if we are not to have communications which destroy us instead of helping us. The story about the fellow who went into a stable and he heard a horse saying, "I won the Kentucky Derby, I won the Kentucky Derby". The guy standing near him said, "Don't listen to that horse". The man said, "But, he's talking". The man said, "Don't listen to him. He only came in second." It is good to maintain our sense of wonder, but we must know what is real and what is expectation and what is fantasy.

# BALAK

Should we let it all hang out?

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Confrontations seem to be in vogue, not only in government but also in community affairs and in many people's private lives. This vogue seems to be based on one of the most prevalent ideas today, the idea that it is important that a person get everything off his chest, that unless a person lets everything out, that unless a person says everything that he feels, he will be somehow stifled and not be able to function. Keeping things in is bad. It can lead to neurosis. This idea is sometimes carried over even into action. A person should do everything he feels like doing; otherwise, his psyche will be scarred and he will end up a maimed individual. I remember once visiting a boy in jail who had just attacked an old woman. I asked him why he did it. He said he did it because he felt like it. I asked him if he thought he should do everything he felt like doing and he said, "Of course, Rabbi, you wouldn't want me to become neurotic, would you?"

Judaism cannot agree with the idea that a person cannot be happy unless he lets it all hang out. Sometimes it is best not only not to do what we feel like doing, but also not to say what we feel like saying. Words can get us into a lot of trouble. One of the biggest lies that was ever written was "Sticks and stones will break my bones but names will never hurt me". Names and insults have been the cause of more hatred, more fighting and even more wars than almost any other cause. This point is stressed by the prophet, Micah, in his wonderful definition of religion which we find in the Haphtorah for the Torah portion, Balak. "It has been told you, man, what is good and what G-d requires of you; to do justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with thy G-d." In Hebrew the word for walking humbly is Hatznea. Actually, this word means more than the English word "humble". It means to be under restraint. It refers to privacy, to not revealing everything.

Each of us human beings is a world unto himself or herself. Each of us has many wants and desires and unless we are careful we will constantly collide with others about us. We all today understand what Micah meant when he said "to do justly and to love mercy". To walk humbly is something which we, in the modern day, cannot fathom at all. We want to bare everything but not everything we bare is beautiful and nice or conducive to living with others. In Judaism public confession is never allowed. We do not want a person to

debase himself. We do not want them to be embarrassed and abashed in public. Even in a Jewish court of law a person cannot be convicted of a crime based only upon his own confession. Words have a power. They can lift up and they can throw down. All these books that famous personalities are now writing in which they admit to all sorts of scandalous things are destructive to not only their reputations, but also to all human effort to improve.

Obviously, none of us are perfect. None of us have to be told that. What we have to be told is that in spite of our imperfections we can still achieve great things. We are not proud of the fact that we have erred in the past. What we should stress are the good things we have accomplished in spite of our imperfections. The problem, too, with publicly wallowing in our own imperfection is that it gives us an excuse to lambaste other people in public for their imperfections. It encourages confrontations. Too many people have sought confrontations, have sought to tell the other person off and have, as a result, ruined any chance for peace or understanding or friendship. True, this gives the person telling another person off a certain temporary emotional satisfaction. But there is a difference between a certain temporary emotional satisfaction and solving a problem. Temporary emotional satisfaction will not solve a real underlying problem. Each of us come to problems with a set point of view. Every point of view has blind spots and most of the time we can never overcome our blind spots unaided. Confrontations delay us from coming to grips with the real problem.

In the Torah portion, Balak, we have this theme of confrontation dramatically portrayed. Balak ben Tzipor, whose name in Hebrew means "to destroy", wanted to destroy the essence of the Jewish people. He was going to bring a man of words, Bilam, who with words was going to confront the Jewish people with all their vices and in this way destroy their will to continue. Balak knew that he could not destroy the Jewish people by force so he decided he was going to destroy them with words, with Bilam's curses. Bilam in Hebrew also means "a glutton". With Bilam's profuse use of words, which would magnify all Jewish vices and put them in the worst possible light, he was going to destroy the Jewish people.

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Today, too, the enemies of the Jewish people are trying to destroy us with words. They are trying to destroy the essence of the Jew by making him feel ashamed of himself and by portraying Israel as the anti-thesis of Jewish values, by portraying her as a Nazi state, etc.

Bilam, who the Rabbis say was a prophet on the level of Moshe, solved his problems by confronting people with their vices and destroying them this way. He never tried to solve the real problem. He, instead, dealt in personalities. Character assassination was his game. His name in Hebrew, Bilam ben B'or, from Ptorah indicates this. B'or means destruction and Ptorah means solving problems. He used the power of the word to solve his problems by character assassinations, by destroying others. Bilam tried to convince himself that what he was doing was right. On his way to confront the Jewish people even Bilam's donkey could see that what he was doing was wrong, but Bilam, who had been blinded by money and hatred, could not see this. Even his donkey could see the angel of G-d warning them not to proceed but Bilam could not see this until his donkey refused to proceed any further. Confrontations for the most part should not be sought. Words are a terrible weapon. A person has to know when to talk and when to be silent.

When Bilam had asked G-d whether he should go with the servants of Balak to curse the Jewish people G-d told him that he could not go "Emohem", that he could not go with them. Later when Balak sent other messengers to fetch him G-d said he could go "Eitam". The difference between Eitam and Emohem is the difference between letting it all hang out confronting another and knowing when to talk and when not to talk. Emohem means that a person recognizes only his own world, that he feels everyone else has only his perceptions of the problems at hand. He completely identifies others with himself, with his own thoughts and actions. Since they don't agree with him, it must be because they are stupid ~~people~~ or willful <sup>people</sup>. Therefore, he feels justified in seeking confrontations with them. Eitam means that you are with people. You realize that they are a world and that you are a world, that you must respect their feelings and ideas as they must respect you and that

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you cannot let it all hang out, that you cannot use words to harm. Words spoken can never be taken back. They leave their impress. It takes a lot longer to get over a bad word from a dear one than almost anything else.

In the end Bilam failed to destroy the Jewish people with words and he was forced to say "How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your habitations, O Israel". The Rabbis interpret this to mean that every Jew respected the other's privacy and integrity and did not try to force another person to lose his self-respect or dignity. Even the doors of the Jewish people's tents were so constructed as to be not exactly opposite one another so that no one could ~~not~~ look directly into another's tent and invade his privacy. Modesty demands that we allow a fellow human being to preserve their dignity and their inner breathing space, that we do not attack them personally. Our words should never humble or destroy another. They should always be used to help a person improve and overcome their problems, not to make them sink deeper and deeper into them. Telling a person off might make you feel good for a few minutes, but it will, at the end, harm you and harm the other person for a long time.

Our mentor in these matters should be Avraham Oleinu. He was the first Ivri, Hebrew. He was called Ivri, the Rabbis say, because he was on one side and the whole world on the other side. He disagreed with the whole world but he was not disagreeable. He helped everyone. We, too, must learn how to disagree without being disagreeable. Confrontations are not ~~things~~ <sup>situations</sup> we should seek.

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In the Torah portion Balak we learn how Balak Ben Tzipor hired Bilam, a noted soothsayer and, according to the rabbi's, Moshe's equal in prophesy, in order to curse the Jewish people. He tried to curse the Jewish people. He tried to look at them from all different angles in order to curse them, but he could not. You know the way you look at something can depend upon whether you bless it or curse it. A mountain looks different from different angles. As all photographers know, if he takes a picture one way you will look ugly and another way you will look beautiful. Photographs are many times lies because they only show a person from the most flattering angle. I once met a movie star and she really was not very pretty. She was short and from different angles was not very good looking. From one angle she looked very pretty and that was the angle they always used in the movies. Bilam tried to use the angle that showed the people at the worst, but G-d would not let him curse the Jewish people. The rabbis at first wanted to put Bilam's words right next to the Shma because they spoke so highly of us. In fact, the very first words we say when we enter the synagogue "Yaacov Mishnamasecha Yisroel, how goodly are your tents of Jacob your Tabernacles, O Israel" are taken from the words of Bilam. The rabbis originally wanted to take all of Bilam's praises that were stated in the Torah portion and put it right next to the Shma and have the Jews say it two times a day. However, they changed their minds and decided not to include it at all. The question can be asked, why did the rabbis want to have Bilam's words put right next to the Shma originally and then why did they change their minds? We all know that one of the major problems of life is to maintain a sense of self-worth. Many people sink into terrible depression because they think that they are no good and the world is rotten. We each need to have a sense of self-worth and self-esteem. That's why many times the words of outsiders are so important. They help bolster our own ego and make us realize that we are worthwhile and that we have self-worth. That's also one of the reasons why computer learning is so effective. It divides knowledge into small units and the pupil always feels good when he can do the problem and immediately get a feedback that his answer was right. He is important. He is worth something. He knows something.

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I remember once in junior high when I took Spanish I thought I knew a lot of Spanish and while I was in Hebrew school I thought I knew nothing, but it was really just the opposite. In Spanish I had a few words only to learn and I thought I learned a lot while in Hebrew school I was studying with the Chumash, a mature text, and there were so many words I did not know. The truth was I could not have read a mature Spanish text, but I thought I knew Spanish because I mastered everything they threw at me. Outside reinforcement is very important. That's why originally the rabbis thought that the words of Bilam should be read every day next to the Shma because it is important to know that outsiders think good of Judaism and Jews, too, even if they must do so against their will. Even today we find that many Jews and Jewish organizations will not believe that something is good about Judaism until an outsider will tell them it is good. Many Jews have opted for ostentatious expensive, pageantlike funerals until a book came out in the United States telling about how these were shams and a fake and then they went back to the simple Jewish funeral. It is true that it is good to have outsiders good opinion to reinforce our feelings of self-worth, but that is not the most important thing the rabbis concluded. We will not have Bilam's words set next to the Shma. The most important thing is to know that your self-worth comes from within yourself, that you know not just because other people tell you but you know that you have self-worth because you are important not just because you possess certain talents, but because you were created by G-d. Self-worth comes from knowing yourself and your heritage. Jewish pride should come not because other people tell us good things about ourselves but because we know there are good things in our tradition because we have studied them and know them. I am reminded of a famous Chassidic story which tells about how a poor man in a small village was hardly eking out a living. He name was Reb Itzakel. One night he had a dream. He had a dream that right under the pillar of a bridge in the next town was a huge treasure. He woke up early and set out to the next town to unearth the treasure. When he got to the bridge he saw soldiers. He tried to sneak up but every time he did a soldier saw him

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and he was forced to retreat. This happened four or five times when finally a soldier noticed him doing this and said, "What are you doing here? Go away." The poor man felt desperate and feeling that he had no choice he decided to reveal his secret in hopes of sharing the treasure. He told the soldier he had had a vision of a great treasure which was located under the pier of the bridge. He told the soldier that he would split it with him if he would let him dig for it. The soldier started to laugh and said, "You believe in dreams like that? They are all nonsense. Last night I just had a dream about finding a big treasure in the next little village over in the middle of the house of a man named Reb Itzakel. Now did I go to his house to dig it up? Go away." Reb Itzakel, upon hearing this, quickly went home and dug in the middle of his house and found the treasure. It is the same with us. For our self-respect and our feelings of self-worth we have to dig into our own heritage to find the treasure and we will find it. Too often people today only are interested in impressing the neighbors and getting their oohs and ahs. This does not help them find their own treasure. I am reminded of the famous story of a man who went to play golf for the first time. When he came back into the clubhouse he told everyone he shot a 68. They were amazed. This was a champion's score. They were aghast and decided to ask his caddy if this was so. His caddy said, "Oh, yes, it is true, and tomorrow he will shoot the second hole." We should always be interested in more than what we really can know about ourselves than what other people say.

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In the Torah portion Balak we have the famous line which we say every day when we enter the synagogue: "Matovo Olecho Yaakov Mishnosecha Yisroel - How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel."

This sentence was actually said by Bilam when he came to curse the Jewish people, but, instead, he blessed them. It is strange to note that this phrase which we say every time we enter a synagogue was actually said by an anti-Semite, by Bilam. It is interesting to note that the rabbis were a little uncomfortable with this because it is true that when even your enemies praise you, it makes you feel good, but our self-worth should really flow from ourselves and not from what other people tell us. Our self-worth should really come from within. This, of course, was always the case in the typical Jewish family. It was the Jewish mother, the Yiddishe Mama, who gave the children that inner confidence to go out and achieve. The children knew who they were and where they were going, and they knew they had a place to return to if things got bad. They knew they were unconditionally loved, and, therefore, they did not have the problems of determining who they were and where they were going, etc. They knew who they were. They knew that they were loved. They knew they had identity. They knew they had a past. Their self-worth flowed from within because they were given this self-worth by their families.

That, of course, is something which is lacking today. So many people today feel bad about themselves. They do not feel they have self-worth, that they have dignity, that they are needed and are counted on.

Judaism, of course, teaches that each of us has self-worth and dignity because G-d needs us and that is why G-d has created us, that each of us has something unique and special to give to the world that only we can give to the world. There is a whole school of psychiatry now founded by Victor Frankel, a Jew who is a survivor of a concentration camp, who noted that those Jews who were not killed or murdered by the Nazis were

