



The Greater Washington Community Kollel

Torah Minute

In memory of *Rabbi Kalman Winter zt"l*

Parasha Balak 5773

Growing increasingly alarmed at the advancing nation of Israel, Balak, King of Moab, commissioned the powerful sorcerer and prophet Bilaam to employ his craft and attempt to halt their steady march toward the Land of Israel. Bilaam, eager to enrich himself in the service of Balak, agreed to misemploy his G-d given powers and cast curses at the Jewish nation. Through Bilaam's maledictions, Balak hoped Israel would be debilitated and susceptible to military defeat. With his nefarious plot in hand, Bilaam traveled to Balak in Moab, but G-d repeatedly intervened to transform Bilaam's curses into blessings, demonstrating for all G-d's great love for his people.

Studying the passage and its concomitant commentaries, including the Midrash and Talmud, a rich composite of the complex character of Bilaam begins to emerge. Great in intelligence and endowed with G-dly gifts, including prophecy itself, Bilaam, through his venal pursuit of wealth and honor, displayed his base character and covetous nature, nonetheless. In fact, the Mishna in Avos (5:22) depicts Bilaam as the personification of jealousy, arrogance, and avarice. Thus, we have a picture of a man abounding with the greatest spiritual gifts, yet unable to emancipate himself from under the spell of his impulses and desires. Perhaps the greatest window into his nature and philosophy is found in his plea "may my soul die the death of the Righteous, and may my end be like his" (23:10).

The Chofetz Chaim explains that Bilaam pined for the "death" of the righteous -- his rightful lot of eternity and the World to Come, but eschewed the "life" of the righteous -- its apparent duties and obligations. Bilaam desired a life of perceived freedom and indulgence while coveting the eternal reward set aside for the righteous.

In truth, in contrast to Bilaam's false choice between the goodness of this world and the next world, when we exact self-control over our drives and impulses, and fill our lives with the beauty of Torah and Mitzvos, we suffuse our days with meaning and satisfaction.

Indeed, by connecting to G-d, we are able to taste and experience a measure of the great joy and bliss of the World to Come, here and now.

***Have a great Shabbos,
Rabbi Menachem Winter***