

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Balak
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Parashat Balak – How goodly are your tents O Yaakov¹

In this week's Parasha of Balak we read about the wicked Bilaam's attempts to curse Bnei Yisrael. The nation of Moab was terrified of Bnei Yisrael who were encamped nearby, travelling on their way to the Promised Land. So Balak, the king of Moab, hired the powerful Bilaam to curse Bnei Yisrael. It was well known that whomever Bilaam blessed was blessed and whomever he cursed was cursed².

Almost the entire Parasha consists of the interactions between Balak and Bilaam, with Bnei Yisrael forming the backdrop to the action. Torat Kohanim³ teaches that the paragraphs of the Torah were inserted in order to give Moshe time to contemplate what was taught before moving on to the next paragraph. Interestingly, the entire story of Balak and Bilaam (which is almost the entire Parasha except for the last 9 pasukim), is one long paragraph without paragraph breaks. It is as if the Torah is 'holding its breath' trying to finish off its narrative of these wicked people as quickly as possible.⁴

As we wrote in last year's Darchai Noam for Parashat Balak, the Midrash⁵ teaches that Bilaam was a prophet who was in some respects comparable to Moshe Rabbeinu! Hashem did not want the other nations to excuse themselves from serving Him by arguing that they did not have a prophet of Moshe's stature. So Hashem gave them Bilaam - a powerful prophet on a similar level as Moshe. However when it came to middot, Moshe and Bilaam were in different worlds. Bilaam used his powers for evil – for cursing others and satisfying his own desires.

Much to Balak's chagrin, when Bilaam tried to curse Bnei Yisrael, Hashem placed blessings in his mouth instead. Against his own will, this powerful prophet amongst the nations declared Israel's praises. After a number of unsuccessful attempts to curse, Bilaam spouted a most beautiful and powerful blessing of Bnei Yisrael, including prophetic statements about settling in their land with might and power.⁶ Bilaam opens this prophecy with a well-known pasuk:

מה טוב אהליך יעקב משכנתיך ישראל

How goodly are your tents, O Yaakov, your dwelling places O Yisrael!!⁷

This pasuk appears at the very beginning of our siddur and is traditionally recited when one enters shul in the morning.⁸

¹ This week's Darchai Noam is inspired by Chapter 2 of "Building Foundations For Life – A Guide to the Challenge of Kedusha in our Generation" by Rabbi Chaim Dov Stark, Published by Feldheim.

² Bamidbar 22:6.

³ פרשה א ד"ה וידבר

⁴ See Darchai Noam Parashat Vayetze earlier this year, where we made a similar claim about Yaakov's time spent outside of the Holy Land and in the house of his wicked uncle Lavan.

⁵ Sifrei Devarim 357.

⁶ See Rashi to Bamidbar 24:9.

⁷ Bamidbar 24:5.

⁸ See page 12 of the standard Artscroll Ashkenaz siddur. See also Darchai Noam to Parashat Tetzaveh earlier this year where we discussed the recitation of this pasuk when one enters shul.

The Gemara⁹ and the Midrash¹⁰ explain the meaning of this pasuk. Bilaam was praising Bnei Yisrael for the fact that their tents were positioned such that their openings did not face each other, meaning that neighbours could not see into each other's tents. This lofty trait of modesty and privacy deserved to be highlighted at the beginning of Bilaam's prophecy.

Rav Matisyahu Salomon¹¹ asks some very basic questions about this Midrash. Why was Bnei Yisrael praised so highly for the fact that the entrances of their tents did not face each other? This is a very basic and common measure of privacy that most people would insist on. Who would want their door open to the public so people could see inside their home! And furthermore, why do we need the powerful prophet Bilaam to reveal this attribute of Bnei Yisrael? Anyone passing through the camp would surely notice this town planning regulation with merely a glance.

Rav Salomon explains¹² that the true underlying motivation behind the positioning of their tents was not just to preserve their own privacy, but rather in order to avoid seeing into their neighbour's homes! Their real intention was to ensure that they focused on their own home without being distracted by what was happening elsewhere. This was truly an exalted attribute, as human nature generally likes to pry into other's business. And this also explains why we needed prophecy to reveal this hidden aspect to Bnei Yisrael's positioning of their tents.

This explanation from Rav Salomon contains a very powerful lesson for us today. We live in a world of instant communication and social media. This allows us to stay in touch with our family and friends, keep up to date with their simchas and important events, and share their experiences. But there is a very significant downside to this world. Rather than living private lives, focused on our homes and families, we are opening our homes to the world and inviting everyone to see what we are up to. And we are becoming obsessed with keeping up to date with what everyone else is doing, of peering into the "tents of our neighbours".

This phenomenon is very common and is often associated with a fear of missing out and jealousy. As we look at the photos and read about the experiences of our 'friends', we feel bad that we are missing out on what they are doing. We don't realise that everyone tries to show their best side to the public, so what we see is not really an accurate reflection of reality. Our comparisons are unjust and we can feel jealous unnecessarily. We are not really missing out on other experiences. But ironically, we are missing out on our own experiences because we are not truly present, we are too busy thinking about posting our own update.

If we do need to 'live in the real world' and use social media, we should at least be conscious of the negative aspects of these powerful tools of communication. Bilaam praised us for our focus on privacy and our lack of interest in what is happening in our neighbours' tents. It would be a shame for us to lose this beautiful character trait due to modern technology.

Let's try something this week:

1. Try to be aware of how much we reveal about ourselves through social media, and before clicking 'share' consider whether it is appropriate or not.
2. When looking at other people's updates and posts, remember that it is human nature to only show your best side to the public, so there is no need to feel jealous.
3. When reciting the pasuk "How Goodly Are your tents O Yaakov", contemplate the beautiful idea that we learnt from Rav Matisyahu Salomon.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

⁹ Baba Batra 60a.

¹⁰ Midrash Aggadah Bamidbar 24:5, brought by Rashi in his commentary to this pasuk and to Bamidbar 24:2.

¹¹ The mashgiach ruchani of the Beth Medrash Govoha Yeshiva in Lakewood.

¹² Page 23 of "Building Foundations for life", cited in footnote 1 above.