

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 propaganda 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 ^{people}. 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~~ ^{situations} 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

able to withstand the concentration camp primarily because they knew that they had self-worth. They did not let the Nazis de-humanize them and turn them into garbage. In spite of all the adversity they knew they were worth something and the Germans could not take that away from them.

In the Torah portion Balak we learn how Bilam, who the rabbis say was as great a prophet as Moshe, came to curse the Jewish people but, instead, he was forced to bless them. He was a man of talent. He could not deny his talent. He could not do something which was against the truth or integrity of his talent, otherwise he would turn into a hack, a political propagandist. He would no longer be the artist that he was, an artist with words. An artist, if he is to remain an artist, must be true to his inner vision. He must be true to what he sees. He cannot tell lies. If he does then he no longer becomes an artist but a hack. Bilam then had to bless the Jewish people. He, however, was not happy with this. He had to say what he saw, but he went to Balak and gave him advice on how to destroy the Jewish people, how to change the Jewish people so they would destroy themselves. He tried every which way to curse them. He looked at them from all different angles. Sometimes when you change the perspective you can see things you did not see from another perspective and he might have been able to curse the Jewish people, but he was forced to bless them from whatever perspective he looked at them. He told Balak if he would get the people involved in licentious, idolatrous, pagan rites that they would destroy themselves, their families. They would destroy the basis of Judaism, which is reaching out to others to help others, being G-d's partner in creation to make this a better world, so Jews can destroy themselves. I will give you advice how to do it, and he did do it. It is not always true that those people who have artistic vision, those people who can see things are also good people. It is true throughout history that many of these people in their private led despicable lives, Goethe, Lord Byron. The story is even told about Aristotle that one day he had given a lecture on ethics. A few nights

later some of his students found him in a very compromising position. He looked at his students and said, "Tonight I am not Aristotle." In Judaism it is not enough to recognize the truth but you also have to live by the truth. It is not just the art and words that a person produces but also how he lives by these words. Francis Bacon wrote a wonderful essay against bribery, and then when he was appointed a judge, he took bribes. His words were true, but his life was not true. Behind his life there were things that brought discredit upon him and upon what he seemingly stood for.

The rabbis say Moshe Rabbeinu wrote seven books. How is this possible? There are only five books in the Torah called the Five Books of Moses. What was the other two books that Moshe wrote? According to the rabbis and Bubbabasrah, Moshe also wrote the book of Job. He wrote the book of Job because in the book of Job we learn about human suffering. It was not enough for Moshe to be the law giver, for Moshe to set down rules and regulations for the people to follow. He also had to have a heart. He had to apply them to people with compassion and dignity and respect. If he did not, he would just turn into a bureaucrat, who, if a person coming before him does not follow the rules exactly even though the person is suffering terribly, he just throws him out. I remember when my wife was in the hospital and the nurse woke her to take a sleeping pill. It said on the chart she had to take a sleeping pill. She took the pill and then could not fall asleep. The nurse must have been afraid the doctor would yell at her if she did not give the sleeping pill to my wife. We find many illustrations of this throughout all society where people act as bureaucrats and not as sensitive feeling human beings.

The rabbis say Moshe also wrote the book of Bilam, which, of course, are the chapters we just read today. Now, of course, it could have been that this was separated into a separate or there were more chapters to this book of Bilam than appear in the book of Numbers. Why should the rabbis

say Moshe wrote this book of Bilam? The answer is that Moshe Rabbeinu was always castigating the people, as parents sometimes do. Jewish parents today, unfortunately, are not the way they were before. From teaching Hebrew school for over 35 years, I can tell you that this generation of children is not like the previous generation of children. The Yiddishe Mama is no longer here, the Yiddishe Mama which has been so roundly criticized, but they gave the Jewish children a sense of dignity and self-worth, a sense of knowing they could be counted upon, that they were able to go out and achieve things. Many of our children today do not have this sense of worth. They do not have this feeling that they are important and loved and that they are special and unique and only they can do certain tasks, and, therefore, their achievement levels have slipped. The physicist Isadore Rabe, who won a Nobel prize in 1944, has commented recently that Jewish scientists are no longer they way they used to be, and it is true.

Moshe Rabbeinu would castigate the people all the time as parents do to their children. He would look for their faults because he wanted to improve them. He wanted them better. He would do, as parents do, always criticize and come down hard on them because he wanted them to be better. It is not enough just to criticize people. You also have to many times sing their praises. You have to tell them they are really doing good. In this Torah portion, Balak, we learn the praises of the Jewish people, praises that came from an anti-Semite. It made the people feel good to hear these things. In fact, the rabbis at one time wanted to make all these chapters obligatory for the morning davening so the Jewish people should not only feel bad about themselves but also good about themselves. They reconsidered because it would make the davening too long, and, secondly, that our feeling of self-worth should come from within and not just from without. Occasionally it is good to hear praises from others, but we should know these things are true from within, not because they are said from without.

This is even true today. I remember when I first went into the rabbinate it was very hard to have a traditional Jewish funeral. People wanted very expensive caskets and lots of flowers, etc. Then about 20 years ago a book came out which lambasted funeral directors for causing people to spend too much money on funerals, etc., and pretty soon Jewish traditional funerals were back then. That is the way it has remained since then. Sometimes we do not realize the importance and beauty of our own tradition until people outside tell us about them, but that is not really the way it should be. The last few days we have all been glued to the television watching Oliver North. Oliver North is a superb witness. He makes Americans feel good about themselves. He is the can-do type of American. He is the American who displays courage and patriotism. He makes us feel good about all those traditional American values, how Americans can overcome problems, how we can stand against our enemies, how we do have honesty and integrity. He admits when he is wrong. He does not try to cover up. He even admits when he lied. He makes us feel good to be Americans because he is displaying all these American values. The only problem is that when we look at his words and see where they would lead we should think twice, because what he revealed especially yesterday is that William Casey (and I am not blaming North for this) was planning to have a secret CIA, a CIA responsible to no one. If the President of the United States did not know about this there was no elected official involved in this. There was not accountability. William Casey would have his own secret CIA funded by secret sources from selling weapons to Iran and from other sources, and he would be able to do with the secret CIA anything he wanted because it was not accountable to anyone. Who knows? He could even turn it against people in America and cut down those with whose views he disagreed. We would end up having a secret police here. That is a terrible thing, a very great danger to democracy. Yes, Ollie North makes us feel good about America. Yes, he makes us feel good about those values we have. We see mirrored in his can-do attitude and his courage and strength and patriotism all those

things we want America to be. We also have to look behind his words. It is not just enough to look at what Bilam told the Jewish people. We have to remember also the advice he gave to Balak on how to destroy the Jewish people. If we would follow what William Casey wanted to do we would end up with a secret police here, a KGB. It is good that this was found out so this type of CIA could not be founded, because if it would be founded America's democracy would be in grave danger. It is not enough just to look at the surface things. We also have to look behind them at a person's deed as well, not just at their words and impressions but at their deeds, too.

I am reminded of the story of the international woman tennis star who came into her hotel after winning a tournament. She was exhausted and did not want to meet with reporters. She just wanted to sleep for a few minutes. She began to register and the man asked how he should register her. She told him to just take her name off the luggage, that she had to go to her room and sleep. She went to her room to sleep for an hour or two before the reporters could get her. Instead she slept for 12 hours. She woke up the next morning and called down to the desk and wanted to know how they had registered her. The man said, "Oh, easy, Miss English Cowhide." Sometimes things on the surface may look good, but they do not reflect the truth. Ollie North looks good. He makes us feel good, but we have to be careful about especially what William Casey tried to do. If they would have succeeded America's democracy would have been in grave danger.

BAZAK

What's Important In A Friend

JULY 1987

Rabbi Joseph Radinsky

One of the most excruciating experiences in life is to be betrayed by a friend. People have come to me and said, "Rabbi, I am so disappointed. I am so hurt. Here I thought this person was my friend. How could he have done this to me? How can I ever believe in a friend again? How can I ever have any confidence that the next time I choose a friend he will not let me down, too? What traits should I look for in a friend?" These are not easy questions.

Each of us is composed of many parts. There are many people who have wonderful personalities but who do not have much intellect, and there are people who have brilliant intellects but they are not very responsible, and there are also people who have sterling characters and brilliant intellects but they have no personality. Our tradition teaches us that the most important trait we should look for in a friend is character. Without character no friendship can endure. ~~if~~ ^{with} a person ~~has~~ character ~~it~~ means that ~~he~~ ^{she} is willing to assume responsibility for his acts, ~~that~~ ^{she} he is willing to be fair and honest in all his dealings, and that he will not use his personality or intellect to take advantage of his friends. Unfortunately, brilliance and personality are no guarantee of character. In fact, the more brilliant a person is, the more capable he is of taking advantage of his friends. His brilliance will allow him to manipulate and manuever every situation to his own advantage, hurting his friends in the process. We all know about con men who have, because of the force of their personality or intellect, swindled others out of thousands of dollars and betrayed the trust put in them. Character is essential in

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any relationship. Brilliance and personality are nice, but brilliance and personality alone will not suffice.

In the Torah portion Balak we have a perfect illustration of this. In it we learn about Bilam, a man who was considered the foremost prophet of his day, a rival of Moshe Rabbeinu, a person of great intellectual brilliance, a person of tremendous insight, but a person with no character whatsoever. All he was interested in was in feathering his own nest, in doing that which would benefit him personally. This, unfortunately, is true of other talented people also. These talented people have no sense of responsibility to anyone but to themselves. All they are interested in is in pursuing their own talents. It is true that we should develop our talents. We all know that we are all created unfulfilled, and that we are mandated by our religion to fulfill ourselves. This we do by developing our talents. That is what we mean when we talk about growing. We all have to grow. We all have to continually develop our talents so that we can adequately serve as G-d's partner in creation. We all know that if we stop growing we will end up terribly depressed. All of us must live with the hope that we can all make a positive contribution to the world. That is why it is so important that we develop our talent, why it is so important that we try to make a contribution to the world. However, that is not the only responsibility we have. We also have a responsibility to make sure that our talents benefit society and not just ourselves. Unfortunately, there are people who misuse their talents. They use them to manipulate others and to show off their brilliance and to demonstrate how much power they can wield. They enjoy being able to manipulate others to cause them great pain. These people, instead of

using their G-d-given talents to make this a better world, use their talents to destroy their friends and society.

That, in essence, is the whole story of Bilam, a brilliant man endowed with great talents who misused them terribly. For the sake of money he was willing to sell his talents to anyone for any purpose. He was willing to destroy a people he did not even know, the Jewish people, if Balak Ben Tzipor would only pay him enough. He did not realize that his gifts were given to him in order to better humanity, not to destroy humanity. Unfortunately, there are many people today who act the same way. These people, who have brilliant minds and shining personalities and who could cause great joy to others, instead use their minds and personalities to blind other people to the truth so that they can take advantage of them. These people do not understand their talents were given to them to help make society better, not worse.

Bilam had good traits, too. He knew that he had to be true to his talents. He could not curse and destroy the Jewish people in their present condition although he wanted to. They did not warrant it now. However, he could advise Balak on what he had to do so that the Jewish people would warrant destruction. He told Balak that now the Jewish people are united and living in harmony but that they could be corrupted if Balak would send the young ladies of his people to entice the Jewish young men to worship idols using licentious idolatry rites as bait. The Jewish people would then destroy themselves. Even though Bilam did not curse the Jewish people and, in fact, even praised them, he was not intent upon doing them any good. He was intent only upon collecting as

large a fee as he could from Balak. Unfortunately, many people deal with their friends this same way. They praise them openly, but they would sell them out in a minute if it would benefit them. They do not know anything about decency, loyalty, morality, etc.

Bilam's lack of character is even illustrated by the way he used his gifts. When Balak brought him to curse the Jewish people Bilam told Balak to build him seven altars and prepare seven bullocks and seven rams, and then he said, "You stay by these sacrifices, and I will go, and perhaps G-d will happen to me, and the thing which He will show me I will tell to you." Then it says, "Vayelach Shefi - and he went to a bare height". "Shefi" can also mean "alone". Bilam was very secretive about his talents. He did not want to share them even with Balak. Watch out for a supposed friend who is secretive and wants to go it alone. He will dump you sooner or later and will take no responsibility for his actions. Bilam also said, "Perhaps G-d will happen to me." People like Bilam are interested in happenings. They are interested in amusing themselves. They use people for their own amusement. Watch out also for this type of friend. Contrast this with Moshe where the expression, "Vayikra - and He called", is used when he talks with G-d. This expression refers to an interchange, a convening of people together, an encounter which benefits everyone. The difference between a Moshe and a Bilam is that a Bilam is not interested in encounters which benefit everyone, only in encounters which benefit himself.

Character is the most important trait to look for in a friend. When we elect our officials we must make sure, too, that they have character. We

must make sure that they aspire to be a Moshe, not a Bilam. Sometimes brilliant people who make brilliant speeches taking all the right stands on the important issues should not be elected because they lack character. We have to remember that when we elect people. We have to elect them not solely on the basis of their stands on the different issues of today but also on how they will handle the issues of the future. No one knows what the issues will be a year or two or three from now. We have to elect people who we are confident will decide the issues in the coming years on what is good for the country as a whole and not just on what will benefit them or their cronies. What we will really decide in an election is not the issues, themselves, but who will decide the issues. That is why character is so important. We cannot know what the issues will be in the future, but we can know what a person's character is now. Will the candidate decide these issues on their merits, or will he decide these issues on how they will benefit him? Will he decide the issues in a reckless manner, or will he decide them in a deliberate manner? Will his anger cloud his judgement, etc.?

Bilam had no character. This is even emphasized in the way he reported back what G-d told him. He says, "Ko Tidabehr - so you shall say." The word "Ko" in Hebrew has negative connotations. It stands for G-d's anger. Bilam had no trouble saying things in order to destroy, in order to hurt people if it would further his own purposes. When Moshe reported what G-d told him he says, "Ze". This stands for clarity. Moshe wanted to clarify issues, to make people see things better. The rabbis say the difference between a Bilam and a Moshe is the difference between an eagle and a bat. They both look for the dawn. The eagle looks for it in

anticipation because at dawn he can see better, but 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 people who like to use words to confuse others and to break them. Moshe, on the other hand, used words to elevate people. He wanted the sun to shine on them. He wanted to use his talents to uplift them, not to put them down and in their place. We can always tell, too, what a person's character is by the way he treats his subordinates. If he treats his subordinates in a demeaning fashion, then watch out for that person, especially if he treats them in an arbitrary, callous, cruel fashion.

We also learn that when Bilam left to curse the Jewish people "he saddled his donkey - Vayachavosh Es Asono". The rabbis say that this was the same action that Abraham had taken when he left to take his son to the Akedah. He, too, saddled his donkey. The rabbis say that this donkey that Abraham saddled was the same donkey that later on Moshe was to saddle when he went down to Egypt, and that this is the same donkey that the Mashiach will saddle when He arrives to usher in the Messianic era. The rabbis all ask, why mention that Bilam saddled his donkey? The rabbis answer by saying that the image of the donkey used here is a symbol of leadership and character. The donkey is an animal that bears burdens and goes at a leisurely pace. A donkey is not flashy but steady and can be relied on. Avraham was chosen to be the founder of the Jewish people, among other reasons, because he was steady, bore his burdens, and made sure that what he did was in the best interests of everyone. The same was true of Moshe Rabbeinu. When he went down to Egypt he did not

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look for personal glory. He held to a steady course, bearing his burden, doing what he thought was best for everyone. Bilam did not do that. Bilam saddled his donkey but beat his donkey. He tried to pretend he was righteous like Abraham and Moshe, but he was not. He could not see the moral impediments which even his donkey could sense. He was a man who could not even see what a dumb beast could see because he was only interested in doing what was good for himself. The Mashiach, too, when He comes, will act with a steady hand. He will do what He has to do calmly and deliberately, bearing His burden for the good of all of us.

Yes, it is difficult to choose friends. Yes, it is a terrible disappointment when they let us down. We must always remember that it is not personality or brilliant intellect that is the most important trait we need in a friend; it is character. We must choose people with character. We must watch out for secretive people who use others for their amusement and who like to dwell on the dark side of things, who like to tear everyone down and who are only interested in their own advancement. We need as friends people who are steady, who are willing to bear their fair share of the burdens, and who look out for what is good for everyone. If we choose these type of friends we will have friends forever, and we will never be disappointed.

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In the Torah portion Balak we learn how Balak, the king of Moab, goes and hires Bilam, the Babylonian soothsayer, who the rabbis say was a prophet on the level of Moshe, to curse the Jewish people. He wanted the Jewish people destroyed. He acted the way all anti-Semites act. He did not want to bring himself up to the level of the Jewish people. He wanted just to destroy the Jewish people no matter what the consequences to his own people. When he sent messengers to go to Bilam to have him curse the Jewish people he said, "Because I know that those who you bless are blessed and those that you curse are cursed." If he knew that, why didn't he have Bilam bless his people so his people would be the equal of the Jewish people, and that way he would have nothing to fear from them? This is always the way of the anti-Semite. The anti-Semite looks at the Jewish people and sees that they are successful in the arts and sciences and that they are successful in economics and that they seem to rise to the top of the professions, that they are proportionately more Jews who are doctors and lawyers and accountants, etc. and instead of wishing his own people to bless, what does he want? He wants just to curse the Jewish people, to destroy them, even though we would wreak havoc on his own country. And it says in the very beginning, "And Balak saw all which Israel did to Amoree." Why doesn't he take into consideration what Amoree had done to the Jewish people? That's the same things we have today in the news reports. They always commiserate about the Arabs on the West Bank and Gaza Strip and do not at all say what the Arabs are doing to the Jewish people. They are only worried about the Jewish response, again a form of anti-Semitism.

What's more, we have here that Midian got involved. Why did the elders of Midian have to get involved? Midian was in no way near the Jewish people. They had nothing to fear from the Jewish people. We can make

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an excuse for Moab that perhaps they were afraid that the Jewish people would attack them, although G-d had told the Jewish people not to attack them, but why did Midian have to mix in? Unfortunately, there are people in the world who like to mix in. When it comes to anti-Semitism they are right there ready to help. It was not just the Nazis who were responsible for the destruction of the Jewish people in the second world war and the Holocaust. The Germans had helpers: the Poles, the Latvians, the Estonians, the Ukrainians, the Lithuanians, the Hungarians. The Ukrainians were probably the worst of all. They were the ones who were used as the guards in the concentration camps. So we see that nothing really has changed. When it comes to anti-Semitism people do not want to rise to the level of our people; they just want to destroy us even if it wreaks havoc on their country. There are always a lot of people who will join in to help them.

We learn that when Bilam came to curse the Jewish people, although at the beginning G-d said he could not come, and then Balak sent a second delegation, and then finally G-d at Bilam's urging said he could go but he had to only do what G-d had spoken to him. We learn how he saddled up his donkey, his she-ass, and went with the officers of Moab. Then when he was riding upon his donkey, his donkey saw an angel of G-d standing on the road with his sword outstretched in his hand, and the donkey turned from the path and veered to the side, and Bilam hit the donkey to get it back on the path, but then the path narrowed and there was a fence on one side and a fence on the other side, and the donkey, in order to get past the angel with the sword, had to press the foot of Bilam against the wall. Bilam hit him again, but then the path narrowed even further and the place was so small and narrow

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that the donkey could not go to the right or the left so all the donkey did was lay down, at which time Bilam hit him again with a stick. The donkey then did an unusual thing. He started to talk and he said, to Bilam, "What did I do to you that you hit me these times?" Bilam said, "Because you mock me." If I would have had a sword in my hand I would have killed you." Then G-d opened up the eyes of Bilam and he saw that there was an angel standing in front of him and his sword was drawn in his hand, and then the angel said to Bilam, "Didn't you realize that the donkey could see me three times and you could not see me? I would have killed you with the sword and I would have let her live. Remember, you go curse the Jewish people, but now only say what I tell you to say." Bilam then went on his way trying to curse the Jewish people, and Balak took him to three different places hoping he would be able to curse the Jewish people from these places. He took him first to Bamost Ba'ah and he told him to curse the Jewish people from there, but he could not. He could only bless them. Then he took him to Sofeem, so he should see only a part of the people, and once more he was not able to curse them but had to bless them. Finally, he took him to Pe'or and he asked him to curse the Jewish people but he could not again. He could only bless the Jewish people. We see that Balak took Bilam to three places and the angel of G-d had stopped Bilam from proceeding by standing in front of him with a sword that his donkey could see but Bilam could not see. Why do we have this whole story of the donkey here anyway? And what is this whole business with the three times?

If we look carefully at what is happening here we can see that Bilam tried to curse the Jewish people from three different angles because

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you can really tell a person on three different types of occasions. You can really tell what the character of a people is on three different views. First of all, you look at their general values. What do they say are their values? What do they purport to be their values in life? Do they have wonderful values? Do they say they want to be compassionate, kind, caring people? Is that the program or image they want to project, or do they want to project a macho cruel image? We see here that when Bilam first looked at them he looked at the whole people from Bamost Ba'ah. He wanted to see what image they projected from the heights. What was the image that they wanted to project as a people? He saw that they wanted to project a compassionate, kind, caring, concerned image. He could not curse them. Then we know that many times people put forth an image of care and concern but when you press them to the wall, when you give them a job to do they either demur or delay or they refuse. Many times because they feel guilty, they have to do it but they do it in such a bad way and with such bad grace that you know that they do not really believe in the ideals that you tell them. People say they believe in shul and charity and helping and then you ask them to come to shul or help people or give a donation and they really do not want to do it. You press them to the wall and they still do not want to do it. Maybe only because they are ashamed in the last instance they will do it. So Bilam, too, looked at only the part of the people. He saw what they were doing on a particular job. Were they really caring? Were they really concerned? People many times will say they are concerned all about the helpless children and diseases and about the problems of society, but they do not want to pay taxes and support institutions. All they want to do is talk nice. In fact, in this country there is a tradition that stresses manners and verbal

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expression over deed, that all you have to do is talk about problems the right way and they will disappear. You do not have to do anything about them. Commiserate with the poor, commiserate with the homeless and the hungry. You don't have to do anything about it them. Your job is done. In fact, at Harvard at the turn of the century there used to be something known as a gentlemen's C, and people who would get a higher grade than C were looked askance at. Yes, you were supposed to be studious and scholarly but not too much. Of course, that is why they had it in for our people because our people usually put their money where their mouth is. They put their actions where their beliefs are. That is why for such a small people you will find so many of us in all the do-good organizations. You would think that there are billions of Jews in the world if you look at all the do-good organizations. If we say we believe in something we must try to enact it in the real world. We must put our money and action and time where our beliefs are. Bilam wanted to see if that was really true about the Jewish people and it was true. He had to bless them.

The third time he looked at what the Jewish people do in their free time, when they are uncovered. What do they do then? How do they spend their time? Do they spend their time helping others? Do they spend their time doing things for their family? Do they spend their time working for their synagogue, working for their community? What do they do with their spare time? That is how you can tell what a people's values really are. This, too, is what the angel was telling him when he rode on his donkey and the angel stood in front of him with his sword. Bilam was blinded. The word Ason in Hebrew means a she-ass but it also can mean the hirer of a prostitute. In a sense

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Bilam had a wonderful talent, but he was willing to prostitute himself, to sell it to the highest bidder. He was trying to figure out how he could take even the blessings of the Jewish people and spin them into something else. We all know the spin control artists that work for the State Department and for every administration of the opposition and even some of the newspapers and how when they have an idea that something is right and good they will spin it and give it a bad image. It's like what people do when they go to Israel. They say, oh, yes, Israel is a democracy but look, they may not be pretty soon. Sharon is on the horizon. Or when they say, yes, Israel has wonderful courts and Israel protects the rights of the Arabs, but look some people violated their rights in the first place. They stress that rather than stressing the fact that Israel has courts that stand up for the rights of everyone. In the United States we have a lot of problems, too. We have poverty and racial discrimination. In America, too, there have been people's rights that have been offended but the courts are going to right them. We know that the government does not stand behind those kinds of things. On the other hand, if they want to find somebody righteous they can find somebody righteous who is not really righteous. Look what they did in Saudia Arabia. Saudia Arabia is a country which still has slavery, which still cuts off people's hands, in which women are treated like chattels. They cannot even drive cars, in which no one can worship their own religion freely. Can you imagine what would happen to Israel if Christians and Moslems could not worship freely? We would be pilloried, but in Saudia Arabia we came there to save them with our army and with our resources and our money and they would not allow Jews or Christians to pray openly, but it was fine. The spin control artists said it

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was nothing. They said we were honoring their customs, that it was a holy land. It is where Mecca is. Spin control artists try to take even blessings and turn them around.

That is what Bilam tried to do. He was going to go and look at the people as a whole and then turn to the right a little bit, to the left a little bit, spin it a little way, but it did not work. Then he was going to press people to the wall, see if the Jewish people really agreed with their ideals, see whether in practice when you push them to the wall whether they would really follow it, but, again, the angel would not let him do that. He saw, too, that when the Jewish people were pressed to the wall they actually followed through on their ideals.

The third time the donkey just sat down. What are they going to do when they are just sitting down, when they are resting? Are they also true to their ideals, or do they use their free time for all sorts of activities which are actually detrimental to society? He saw that they did not. They did not engage in monkey business and fooling around and all sorts of other things that can be detrimental to society.

So we see that we judge a people by what are their ideals? When they are pressed, do they really fulfill their ideals? Thirdly, what do they do with their free time? We have all come today to honor a couple who really espouses in all aspects Jewish ideals. John, himself, knows all about anti-Semitism. He comes from Hungary where he was attending medical school and in 1936 he was kicked out of medical school in Vienna and Prague because he was Jewish. He was hounded and harassed. Many of his family were lost in the Holocaust, but that did not change him into a bitter man. He stayed a positive man. He still embraced Jewish values, who not only says the words with his mouth, but, as G-d told

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Bilam, "You must do what I tell you. What I say to you you must do."
It is not enough just to say what G-d says. You have to do it, and he does. When he is called upon to do different tasks, he does it. He has visited the Veterans Hospital every week for the Elks for many, many years. He is on the Bnai Brith visitation committee for the sick. He is involved with countless other organizations. What do they do with their free time, Sophie and John? He just received an award for his 2,500 hours of volunteer service for Seven Acres and so did Sophie. He is a patron of the Jewish War Veterans, member of two Bnai Brith lodges. He raised \$12,000 to buy two Torahs for Bnai Brith Goldberg Towers. He is always there helping and doing wonderful things. May he and Sophie be blessed so that they can continue to do wonderful things for our community for many years to come. Amen.