

Thoughts on Parashas Balak and Spiritual Growth

By Jeremy Richards

In Memory of my Dear Parents, a"h

L'ilui Nishmos Yitzchok Ben Nachman Halevi a"h and Yenta Bas Yisroel a"h

לעלוי נשמת יצחק בן נחמן הלוי ע"ה ולעלוי נשמת יענטע בת ישראל ע"ה



Rabbi Avraham Twerski writes,

"My definition of happiness is "self-fulfillment ." Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch notes that the Hebrew word for happy, *some'ach*, is closely related to the word *tzomeach*, which means "growth." He therefore concludes that personal growth is a major component of happiness..." (Ten Steps to Being Your Best, Rabbi Abraham J. Twerski, M.D. Mesorah Publ. 2004 pp.89-90) ⁽¹⁾

Elaborating on this theme, Rabbi Twerski continues:

"If happiness is personal growth, then it is the *process* of growing rather than the end-point that provides happiness. If a person feels that he has not achieved enough, this does not preclude his being happy. To the contrary, such a feeling means "I can do more" and as a stimulus for growth, it contributes to happiness." (Ibid. p.95)

Importantly, Rabbi Twerski notes, "Self-fulfillment requires the appreciation of process."

(Ibid. p.96)

Unless we appreciate the role of *process* in self-fulfillment, teaches Rabbi Twerski, then we will surely never be able to embark on the journey of personal growth that will bring us happiness. This is a profound lesson, which, properly understood, can doubtless be a catalyst for transforming lives. Who does not want to know the secret of happiness?

It emerges, then, that the revelation that the secret to happiness is personal growth is itself only the start of the journey, only the beginning of the process. For, as Rabbi Twerski himself intimates, appreciating the very role of *process* is a prerequisite for embarking successfully upon it! Let us also add that beyond appreciating the *role* of process, a safe and successful journey of personal growth must surely demand an understanding of the mechanics and dynamics of the process; knowing the importance of a map or Satellite Navigation System and a mode of transport for getting from A to B is indeed a start, but one also needs the skills to read that map, respond to the Sat. Nav., drive the car, interpret the road-signs and safely manoeuvre around the busy roads.

We shall see below that within the enigmatic parashah of Balak lie some keys to that elusive prize, the path to spiritual growth and how to traverse it.

Rabbi Chanan Morrison explains the beautiful commentary of Rabbi Avraham Isaac HaKohen Kook on the following possuk:

מִה־טֹבוֹ אֶהְלִיךָ יַעֲקֹב מִשְׁכְּנֹתֶיךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל: (במדבר כ"ד ה')

"How goodly are your tents, Jacob; your dwelling places, Israel." (Bemidbar 24:5)

The question addressed by Rav Kook is: what is the reason for the apparent repetition in this verse, in the mention of two very similar types of shelter? Is this merely a poetic device in Bilam's blessing, or is there a deeper significance?

Rav Kook proceeds to enlighten us, revealing a brilliant and inspirational insight:

"As we strive for spiritual growth, we make use of two contradictory yet complementary methods. The first method is our aspiration to constantly improve ourselves. We strive to attain greater wisdom and enlightenment. We seek to continually refine the emotions and ennoble the spirit.

The second method is the necessity to restrain our striving for spiritual growth, in order to assimilate changes and guard against spiritual lapses. We want to internalise our spiritual and ethical gains, and maintain our current level. This means that we must curb the desire for growth, so that our ambitions do not overextend the soul's natural capacity for change.

The *ohel* and the *mishkan* are both forms of temporary shelter. Both relate to the soul's upwards journey. However, they differ in a significant aspect. The *ohel* is inherently connected to the state of travelling. It corresponds to the aspiration for constant change and growth. The *mishkan* is also part of the journey, but it is associated with the rests between travels. It is the soul's sense of calm, its rest from the constant movement, for the sake of the overall mission.

Surprisingly, it is the second method that is the loftier of the two. The desire to change reflects a lower-level fear, lest we stagnate and deteriorate. Therefore, the blessing mentions tents first, together with the name Jacob, the first and embryonic name of the Jewish people. The need to stop and rest, on the other hand, stems from a higher-level fear, lest we over-shoot the appropriate level for the soul. For this reason, the blessing mentions *mishkan* together with the name Israel, Jacob's second and holier name.

In any case, both aspects are required in order to achieve stable spiritual growth..."

(Gold from the Land of Israel, Rabbi Chanan Morrison, Urim pp.269-270. Adapted from Olat Re'iyah vol. I, pp.42-43)

This profound interpretation of the "Mah tovu..." possuk, from the holy thought of Rav Kook, is explained and expounded beautifully in the deeply moving book, 'בכל לבבך... With All Your Heart: Insights into the Inner World of Israeli Hero Major Roi Klein', written by Roi's chavrusa, Rav Eliezer Kashtiel. In the following preamble, Rav Kashtiel outlines what he characterizes as Rav Kook's conception of "two key principles in the spiritual development of every person":

"It is obvious and natural that when dealing with character development, one needs a strong will to move ahead, an ambitious nature. The ambition to make progress is essential whether the subject is learning, or moving up in the levels of purity and sanctity, or refining one's feelings, or, in general, elevating one's soul to a state that is nobler than its pre-existing one..."

The second thing that one must emphasize is the ability to preserve achievements that we have already made. In every field, one can arrive at impressive achievements by dint of strong ambition and concentrated efforts, but these achievements can be dissipated because of lack of attention to the need to maintain them. If we do not take pains to preserve the achievement, to establish and maintain it, we will find ourselves slowly losing it. As with everything in life, so too is it in the field of the spiritual. Just as there is a need for spiritual progress, there is also a need to preserve spiritual achievements. There is a certain tension between these two ambitions, because in order to preserve what already exists, one must make a decision not to invest effort toward advancing but instead, in stabilising the status quo. We must ensure that what we have achieved through our labours shall indeed remain ours, and not become some fleeting experience that we had in the past without retaining from it something that we internalised..." (בכל לבבך... With All Your Heart: Insights into the Inner World of Israeli Hero Major Roi Klein: Binyan HaTorah 2012 p.64)

Rav Kashtiel then proceeds to explain how Rav Kook discovered these principles in the words of Bilam that, remarkably, we recite upon entering the synagogue every morning:

"Rav Kook now draws a parallel between the spiritual foundations that we have mentioned and the two kinds of structures mentioned in the verse, the tent and the dwelling:

"The tent" and "the dwelling" are two names for a place of residence that may be prepared for journeys, journeys which represent in the highest spiritual sense, the longed-for ascensions.

The tent symbolises the principle of motion, the aspect of preparation that accompanies travel, aimed always toward change and ascension, accompanied by the most sublime bliss, in the direction of the Divine radiance.

The dwelling place, though also connected in some way to preparing for a journey, represents the aspect of rest between journeys, and – in the soul of man – it is the calming feeling that halts incessant movement in order to firmly establish the higher goal, preserving the light and strengthening its foundations in place.

The tent is temporary and folds up quickly, and it therefore represents the element of **movement**. The dwelling, in contrast, is a structure characterised by permanency within the transient situation of the desert, and is therefore identified more with the element of **rest**. The tent parallels the element of aspiration for spiritual elevation, while the dwelling is the element of rest when we establish, internalise, and assimilate all of the spiritual wealth that we have accumulated during the stage of spiritual elevation..." (Ibid. pp.66-67)

Each of us is on a spiritual journey, and though the direction is always forwards it is important from time to time to stop, consider, internalise and consolidate. This, teaches Rav Kook, is the way to ensure that each stage embeds well and lays strong groundwork for advancing further.

Now, paired with an additional thought, these insights shine a spotlight on Bilam's character which enables us to view him not only with greater clarity but also in a glimmer of magnificent irony.

Rabbi Isaac Bernstein z"l explains some fascinating comments of the Chofetz Chaim ztz"l regarding the fact that there are no gaps in the Torah text of Parashas Balak (until, at least, one break right at the end of the Balak / Bilam narrative that separates it from the beginning of the Pinchos story) making it one of only a few sidros possessing this characteristic. Most parashios have both פתוחות 'ק', 'suchos', where the sofer leaves a space from part way along a line until its end, or סתומות, 'sesumos', where a gap is left mid-line, but the writing then continues on the same line after the gap until the end of the line. In Parashas Balak there are neither פתוחות nor סתומות. The Chofetz Chaim explains this phenomenon as it occurs here in Parashas Balak, and his commentary is expounded as follows by Rabbi Bernstein:

"The Chofetz Chaim says very simply the following: that when one looks at the career of Bilam, a man who is not famed for his piety, and we realise that here is a man who remains exactly as depraved and as morally degenerate and as infatuated with silver and gold at the end of his career as he was at the beginning of his career; not only is he morally degenerate but, as we see at the end of the sidroh, he even offers advice to other people how best they can bring the Jewish People down... And when we reflect, says the Chofetz Chaim, that here is a man who has remained 'loyal' to his degeneracy, despite the fact that the הקב"ה has spoken to him – not once and not twice, how is it possible that an individual can receive prophetic inspiration from the הקב"ה, the most majestic of experiences that a human being can aspire to, and still remain exactly as he was before?

"The answer must surely be, that he did not for one moment reflect on this particular phenomenon. He became a conduit for the הקב"ה's words, but it literally passed him by! He refused to be impressed, he refused to recognise, he refused to involve himself in reflection – on what this means – that the הקב"ה is there, and realising what the הקב"ה is and what His standards are, etc. So, what we can say about Bilam HaRoshו is, that despite the fact that he enjoyed the spirit of Nevu'oh (prophecy), he was totally oblivious to any message that such a nevu'oh might have for him as a person.

"Says the Chofetz Chaim," continues Rabbi Bernstein, "according to חז"ל ('Chazal', the Sages), the reason why there are פתוחות and סתומות, why there are gaps in the text, is because Moshe Rabeinu took a moment to pause and to reflect in between the various stages of Nevu'oh that were being communicated to him. Therefore, says the Chofetz Chaim, the absence of these gaps in the parashah of Balak is to indicate to us that, despite the fact that Bilam was a נביא who received נבואה, there was no pause

whatsoever in any period of his life, at any moment of his day, for reflection, and consideration of exactly what the implications of נבואה were for him as a person. It's a very, very majestic insight."

(Transcribed from the recorded Parashah shiurim of Rabbi Isaac Bernstein z"l, Balak Series 1. Based on Chofetz Chaim Al HaTorah, Parashas Balak, p.ג"ב, (רי"ג מעשי למלך ב) and on Rashi, (ויקרא א:א))

Now, I noted above that this latter observation regarding Bilam's nature will combine with our former discussion to leave us understanding Bilam's character not only with more clarity but also in a somewhat ironic light.

How so?

Let us remind ourselves that it was Bilam who articulated the sublime possuk, "Mah tovu..." Rav Kook taught us that this short verse is a veritable training manual in how to navigate one's journey upward from stage to stage on the journey of spiritual growth. We learnt that this journey demands occasional pauses on the way, some shorter, more fleeting and temporary, others longer, more lasting and contemplative. Bilam, it emerges, taught us the profound lesson that safely climbing one's spiritual ladder demands an appreciation not only of how to advance ever upwards but also of when it is necessary to take a break, rest, reflect, and ensure one's footing is firm before once again looking upwards and ascending once again. We learnt that a person needs to manage the desire for growth, "so that our ambitions do not overextend the soul's natural capacity for change."

We can indeed be grateful to Bilam for this sage counsel. However, the same Bilam who gifted us this wise advice did not apparently follow it himself! Far from recognising the importance of punctuating life with occasional stops, Bilam never stopped once! In contrast, Moshe Rabbeinu possessed this wisdom and built it into his life, as is evident from the gaps in the Torah text (Rashi, ויקרא א:א). But though it was Bilam's own mouth that articulated this wisdom, it did not infiltrate his actions once; he did not live by these words, and consequently his life was not one of spiritual growth but of inaction, sluggishness and stagnation. That he regularly spoke the Divine utterances of nevu'oh made no impact on him, despite the undeniable connection with the Almighty Himself that Bilam must have enjoyed.

The lesson for us, then, is twofold. First, that a life of spiritual growth must be punctuated with carefully timed and managed pauses; advancing always onwards and upwards without occasional reflection and consolidation is not a healthy way to proceed. Achievements in spiritual progress must be reinforced and embedded, lest they weaken and fall away.

Second, it is each person's duty to recognise, harness and utilise any connection with Hashem gained along the complex course of one's life. We may not be prophets, and so any links with the Divine that we may successfully cultivate – through merits that accrue out of either ritual or interpersonal activities – will be hazy and uncertain compared with those experienced by our great Nevi'im; but we must nevertheless do our best to spot those flashes and flickers of spiritual attachment and capitalise on them to whatever extent we are able.

Finally, we know from Rav Hirsch, as taught and elucidated by Rabbi Twerski, that if we get that process of personal spiritual growth right we are sure to achieve and enjoy the true happiness and contentment that is borne out of deep, genuine self-fulfillment.

May we indeed merit such growth, fulfillment and happiness.

(1) My wife 'ח and I first heard this idea directly from Rabbi Twerski when he once spoke publicly during a visit to London. I found this link between שמח and צמח – 'happiness' and 'growth' – to be a life-changing, indeed life-affirming notion. I shared this thought with others many times over many years, yet I always longed to know and

see the source/s for it in Rav Hirsch's זצ"ל writings. When I finally sat down to do this research I soon became very excited to discover the places where Rav Hirsch explicitly makes this connection between the two Hebrew roots, שמח and צמח, and to see the different nuances he employs in explaining the relationship. Reference to this linguistic-conceptual link is found in Rav Hirsch's writings in the following places:

1. Rav Hirsch's commentary on Tehillim 9:3, 14:7, 68:4, 118:24

9:3 "שמח, related to צמח, is the sensation of inner "expansion", of progress in emotional development, of that serenity and that mood of joy that should ever be the portion of the pure in heart, and which the righteous should always seek to attain and to preserve. ..."

14:7 "...שמח, related to צמח (as שוש is related to צוץ, "to bloom") is the feeling of inner growth, unhampered inner blossoming, serenity..."

68:4 "...שמח (related to צמח) is the sensation of inner "growth" or unfolding. ..."

118:24 "שמח, related to צמח, is quiet, inner joy, delight."

2. Collected Writings of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, vol.3 pp.212-213

"...Light illuminates life and also activates it; these two functions make light the metaphor of both cognition and the pulsating joy of living. For joy is essentially the feeling of awareness of blossoming life (compare שמח = צמח; ציץ = שיש).

3. Happiness as spiritual growth also appears in the following places, though without explicit reference to the צמח / שמח link:

Rav Hirsch's commentary on Tehillim 86:4, 100:2

86:4 "שמחת הנפש", "joy of the soul," is the feeling of the soul as it constantly grows in spiritual and moral strength, in understanding, loyalty to duty, dedication, אהבה, יראה, etc., and as it senses that it is coming ever nearer to G-d. This "joy of the soul" is the highest happiness of which man is capable here on earth; and he can attain this greatest happiness at all times and in all circumstances of fate. שמחת הנפש is completely independent of external circumstances. The most grievous tragedy, the most abject poverty or the most threatening peril can become the source of the purest, highest שמחת הנפש, when man can find the power to view it as his task to bear such troubles with dignity and resignation, and when he fully succeeds in discharging this task. ..."

100:2 "עבדו את-ה' בשמחה באו לפניו ברגנה"

"...mankind is called upon to dedicate itself to this life of solemn Divine service with rejoicing and to complete it with joy. For it is such a life, and such a life only, that can give us true שמחה, the feeling of steady and constant spiritual and moral "growth," the continuous growth of all that is truly human in us, a blissful joy of life that is not subject to change in any manner by the outward circumstances which life may bring. ..."

4. Of general importance in relation to this concept:

Rav Hirsch's commentary on Vayikra 23:40 (pp.702-703, partic. P.703, "With whatever worries... ...to him also it is said: "ושמחתם לפני ה' אלקיכם שבעת ימים")

"... With whatever worries and troubles the individual life of any Jew may be clouded, if only he is conscious, in his mind and in his doings, of his participation in the common national treasure of the תורה, and of the place he occupies in its Sanctuary, the Festival [of סוכות] with its varied expressions of all the varied conditions of life, calls him before his G-d, in the Sanctuary of the Torah, and he feels that to him also is said:

ושמחתם לפני ה' אלקיכם שבעת ימים!

[You shall rejoice before G-d, your L-rd, seven days]

"And with whatever joy and happiness his own private life may be graced, it is only when he is conscious in his mind and in his doings of his participation in the common national treasure of the תורה, and of the places he occupies in the Sanctuary, and knows how to rank himself along with the gathered "People of the Torah" before G-d in the Sanctuary, with the multiple expression of all the varied conditions and classes of life, only then does he, too, feel that to him also is said:

ושמחתם לפני ה' אלקיכם שבעת ימים!"



Wishing everyone a Good Shabbos,

Jeremy