

Balak

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Light points

FROM THE TEACHINGS OF
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Lightpoints
לזיכרון ולעילוי נשמת
הרה"ח הרה"ת
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בלק Balak

כג:י | 23:10

מִי מִנָּה עֲפָר יַעֲקֹב

Who has counted the dust of Yaakov?

Outnumbering

When Bilaam attempted to curse Bnei Yisrael, G-d caused him to bless and praise them instead. Extolling their impressive merit and endearment to G-d, Bilaam said, “Who has counted the dust of Yaakov?”

What does this mean?

According to one interpretation, Bilaam was saying: Even the mitzvos they observe with dust are innumerable! For example, says Rashi, the Jewish people may not harness an ox and a donkey together when plowing the earth,¹ nor may they plant a mixture of seeds together.²

1. Devarim 22:10.

2. Vayikra 19:19.

These two examples emphasize another nuance in Bilaam's praise. The Talmud identifies several mitzvos that the Torah demands not only of the Jewish people, but of all of human-kind, including the prohibition against crossbreeding animals and the prohibition of grafting different species of trees together. Still, as the Talmud notes, only limited forms of these hybrids are forbidden for gentiles. "They are permitted to... sow diverse seeds together; they are forbidden only to hybridize animals and to graft trees of different kinds."³ The Torah prohibits a non-Jew only from direct and active mutation of nature, such as crossbreeding animals or grafting one species of tree upon another. A Jew, however, may not even place two different types of animals under one yoke, or plant a mixture of seeds in which the hybridization happens on its own.

By citing these specific prohibitions, Rashi highlights the fact that even in the mitzvos incumbent upon all of humanity, the Jews' obligations—and therefore merits—far outnumber those of all others.

—Likkutei Sichos, vol. 38, p. 96, fn. 50

3. Sanhedrin 56b.

 כג"י | 23:10

מִי מִנָּה עֹפֶר יַעֲקֹב

Who has counted the dust of Yaakov?

Uncountable Mitzvos

Bilaam's plan to curse the Jewish people was foiled when G-d forced him to bless and praise them instead. Describing the Jewish people's endearment to G-d, Bilaam said, "Who has counted the dust of Yaakov?" According to one interpretation brought by Rashi, Bilaam was saying, "Even merely the mitzvos they observe that involve dust are innumerable!" For example, says Rashi, the Jewish people are commanded not to harness an ox and a donkey together when plowing the earth,⁴ not to sow their fields with a mixture of seeds,⁵ to use the dust-ashes of the red heifer for purification,⁶ and to use dust in the examination of a sotah, a woman suspected of infidelity.⁷

The Midrashim enumerate many more mitzvos associated with dust, yet Rashi names these four in particular. In doing so, Rashi hints that the mitzvos involving dust are not only numerous, but that to a certain degree they are actually innumerable.

Rashi's first two examples are agricultural prohibitions. The Jewish people's primary occupation in biblical times was farming. Accordingly, their fulfillment of the laws related to

 4. Devarim 22:10.

5. Vayikra 19:19.

6. See Bamidbar, chapter 19.

7. See Bamidbar 5:11–31.

plowing and planting was constant, each time they plowed or planted in the permissible manner.

In the same vein, the mitzvos involving the ashes of the parah adumah and the dirt used to examine the sotah contain an element of immeasurability: their fulfillment was not a one-time occurrence. For in addition to using the ashes to maintain the purity of Bnei Yisrael, we are commanded to set aside a portion of the ashes “as a keepsake for the congregation of Israel.”⁸ Hence, the fulfillment of this mitzvah continues as long as some ashes remain in existence. The same is true of the dirt used in the examination of the sotah. Its significance as “mitzvah-dust” extends throughout the duration of its use, and for as long as it is effective. This includes the effects of the sotah-waters on the woman’s future—“she is cleansed and she will bear seed”⁹—i.e., the dust of the sotah-water restores her marriage and infuses it with continuous blessing.

Considering the Jewish people’s “incalculable” observance of these innumerable mitzvos, said Bilaam, no curse could possibly affect them.

—Likkutei Sichos, vol. 38, pp. 93–96

8. Bamidbar 19:9.

9. Bamidbar 5:28.

 23:24 | כג:כד

הֵן עַם כְּלָבִיא יָקִים וְכֹאֲרִי יִתְנַשֵּׂא

Behold, a people that rises like a lioness,
and raises itself like a lion.

Live Prey

Bilaam compared the Jewish people to lions. The Midrash explains that the comparison hints to the vigor with which the Jewish people recite the Shema—like a lion pouncing on its prey. “They arise from their sleep like lions, seize the recitation of Shema and proclaim the Almighty’s kingship.”¹⁰

Why is the recitation of Shema compared specifically to a lion’s attack on its prey, as opposed to any other animal?

The Shema begins with a declaration of G-d’s Oneness: “Hashem is our G-d, Hashem is One.” As Chassidus explains, this means that everything in existence is truly an extension of the Divine energy that creates it and continuously maintains its existence. It follows that even the yetzer hara, man’s self-serving and negative inclination, has a G-dly purpose. The Shema therefore continues with the command to love Hashem “with all your heart,” which, our Sages explain,¹¹ means that all of your heart’s passions and desires, even those which stem from the yetzer hara, should be directed toward your devoted service of G-d. In the words of Rabbi Yochanan, “Invest in Torah the very same energies” that you used until now for wrongdoing!¹²

10. Tanchuma, Balak 14.

11. Mishnah, Berachos 9:5.

12. Bava Metzia 84a.

This explains why Bilaam compared the recitation of Shema to a lion seizing its prey. According to the Talmud,¹³ the lion eats its victim while it is still alive, unlike other animals, which first kill their prey and then eat it. This is analogous to the message of the Shema: the ultimate service of G-d is not to drain the yetzer hara of its energy, but to “eat it alive,” to absorb and channel its passion into your service of G-d.

—Igros Kodesh, vol. 1, pp. 156–157

13. Bava Kamma 16b.

 כד:ה | 24:5

מֶה טִבּוֹ אֹהֶלֶיךָ יַעֲקֹב

How beautiful are your tents, Yaakov!

Beauty is in Detail

What was the beauty that Bilaam saw in Bnei Yisrael's tents?

According to the Talmud,¹⁴ Bilaam observed that the Jewish people arranged their tents so that the entrances did not line up, and they did not peer into each other's homes. This demonstrated their dedication to maintaining privacy.

Recognizing their modest conduct and the purity it engendered, Bilaam exclaimed, "These people are worthy of having the Divine Presence rest upon them!"¹⁵ This, says Rashi,¹⁶ is what caused Bilaam to reconsider his plans to curse them, and he blessed them instead.

The Torah's ethic of *tznius*—not exposing those aspects of life intended to be private—clearly involves much more than not peering into another person's tent. Yet Bilaam reconsidered his curses upon noticing this seemingly minor detail of the Jewish people's conduct. From here we see that adherence to the details of *tznius* (and not sufficing with the general laws alone) has the power to transform even the worst curses into blessings.

Moreover, Bilaam's reference to Bnei Yisrael's tents highlights that they maintained this high standard of modesty even when they were in a temporary setting. This teaches us

14. Bava Basra 60a.

15. Ibid.

16. Bamidbar 24:2.

that adherence to the Torah's standards of tznius not only in our regular environments, but also in temporary and short-term settings, is truly our most beautiful feature and our greatest source of blessing.

—Likkutei Sichos, vol. 13, pp. 83–84



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