



# Likkutei Sichos

Volume 23 | Balak | Sichah 1

## Platforming Evil

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Considerable effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the translation, while maintaining readability. As in all translations, however, the possibility of inadvertent errors exists.

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## 1.

### WHY CALL IT BALAK?

On multiple occasions,<sup>1</sup> we have discussed the concept that since the names of the portions of the Torah were based on *minhag* Yisrael,<sup>2</sup> and “*minhag* Yisrael is **Torah**,” this makes these names “Torah-esque names.”

With this in mind, a difficulty arises in our *parshah*: The Gemara teaches that a person should not name his son after a wicked person (“*The names of the wicked shall rot...*”<sup>3</sup> – we do not give others their names.”)<sup>4</sup> This is unclear: How could the name of this *parshah* have been called *Balak*? After all, Balak was wicked. In fact, our Sages say<sup>5</sup> that his hatred of the Jewish people was “more than all other enemies”!

We cannot justify the name by saying, “there was no choice” since the name of the *parshah* must be taken from the beginning of the *parshah* – for on that basis, the question becomes more fundamental: Why don’t we call the *parshah* by its **first** word – “*Vayar*,” as we do for the *parshiyos* of *Vayera*, *Vayetze*, and the like?

We must also clarify: The *parshah*’s name (like the Hebrew<sup>6</sup> name of everything)<sup>7</sup> expresses its **character**. In our case, the **majority** of the *parshah* discusses the narrative and prophecies of Bilaam. On the level of *pshat*, the most prominent part of the *parshah* is the (very lofty) blessings Bilaam bestowed upon the Jewish people. And what’s more, the *parshah* also includes Bilaam’s prophecy about the “End of Days,”<sup>8</sup> and especially as Rambam describes in his work *Yad Hachazakah*,<sup>9</sup> at length: “He prophesied about two anointed kings: the first anointed king, David... and the final anointed king.”

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<sup>1</sup> See *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 5, p. 57 ff.

<sup>2</sup> {Lit., “Jewish custom.”}

<sup>3</sup> *Mishlei* 10:7.

<sup>4</sup> *Yoma* 38b and Rashi, loc cit.

<sup>5</sup> *Midrash Tanchuma*, “*Balak*,” sec. 2.

<sup>6</sup> {In the original, “*Lashon Hakadosh*”; lit., “the Holy Tongue.”}

<sup>7</sup> *Tanya*, “*Shaar HaYichud VeHaEmunah*,” ch. 1.

<sup>8</sup> *Bamidbar* 24:14.

<sup>9</sup> *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Melachim*,” ch. 11, par. 1.

What connection does Balak have with these blessings and prophecies? Balak detested the Jewish people and wished them harm. He was no more than a **secondary** cause {regarding the blessings} who brought Bilaam into all this.

## 2.

HOW COULD WE CALL IT BALAK?!

Seemingly, we could justify this (the issue raised in the first question) by equating it to the prohibition on mentioning the names of idols (“You shall not mention the name of other gods”)<sup>10</sup> — where “all idols the Torah mentions are allowed to be referenced by name.”<sup>11</sup> Similarly, in our case, the prohibition that “we do not give others their (the wicked people’s) names” would not apply when the name is written in the Torah.<sup>12</sup>

But this still requires clarification: This point only negates the prohibition. Meaning, it is not forbidden to mention the name of a wicked person written in the Torah. However, this is not an endorsement to use such a name. So why was the name of a wicked person, Balak, chosen {as the name of our *parshah*}?

It is even more challenging to understand this, in light of the view of *Baalei HaTosafos*, who ask regarding the verse,<sup>13</sup> “Speak to the children of Israel... and they shall camp... before *Baal Tzefon*” — “How could He tell them to camp near the sea, before *Baal Tzefon*? It was taught that a person may not tell his friend, ‘Wait for me near such-and-such an idol.’” *Baalei HaTosafos* explain that the prohibition applies “only to people” but not to Hashem.<sup>14</sup>

This is puzzling (as *Acharonim*<sup>15</sup> ask): As previously explained, the rule is that the name of an idol written in the Torah *may* be mentioned even by people!

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<sup>10</sup> *Shemos* 23:13; *Mechilta* and Rashi, loc. cit.; *Sanhedrin* 63b.

<sup>11</sup> *Sanhedrin* 63b.

<sup>12</sup> *Chida* writes this explanation in *Responsa of Yosef Ometz*, sec. 11.

<sup>13</sup> *Shemos* 14:2.

<sup>14</sup> This is how it appears in *Daas Zekeinim* (first answer); *Tosafos Hadar Zekeinim* leaves the question unresolved.

<sup>15</sup> *Or Sameach*, “Laws of *Avodah Zarah*,” ch. 5, par. 11

We must draw a distinction and say that according to *Baalei HaTosafos*, the permissibility to mention the name of an idol written in the Torah pertains only to a vague mention, with no purpose (or prominence). But mentioning it for a purpose (such as, “Wait for me near such-and-such an idol”), which “grants it validity,” is forbidden even for idols whose names are recorded in the Torah.<sup>16</sup>

On this basis, it is even more unclear: How was the name of Balak **established** as the name of a *parshah* in the Torah? Certainly, this affords the name importance, especially since this **immortalizes** the name (as the Torah is eternal)?

### 3.

IT DOES NOT APPLY TO HASHEM

To clarify this matter, we must first explain the aforementioned distinction of *Baalei HaTosafos* — that the prohibition to mention an idol’s name applies “only to people but not to Hashem.” This seems puzzling:

The rationale for the prohibition is to not affix any validity to idolatry (as discussed). If so, what is the difference whether the name is mentioned by a person or Hashem? **On the contrary**, Hashem’s speech, seemingly, validates idolatry more than a person’s speech, along the lines of the teaching,<sup>17</sup> “The speech of Hashem is considered an action”!

At first glance, it might appear that *Baalei HaTosafos* intended that prohibitions cannot apply to Hashem (as they cite the example of “Hashem sits and judges the entire world, even on Shabbos, although this is forbidden to the Jewish people”).<sup>18</sup> But this approach would not be smooth at all, for our Sages

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<sup>16</sup> Does the Torah’s mention of an idol’s name allow this idolatry to be validated? One reason the *poskim* omit this distinction {between a vague mention and a specific one for a purpose} is that, possibly, they believe the names of idols recorded by the Torah may be mentioned because these idols have ceased to exist {as discussed in Sec. 4}. Alternatively, this can be explained based on what is explained in fn. 37.

<sup>17</sup> *Bereishis Rabbah* 44:22.

<sup>18</sup> {*Baalei HaTosafos* on *Vayikra* 23:40.}

teach (on the verse,<sup>19</sup> “He tells His words to the Jewish people”) that “He tells the Jewish people to observe and guard that which He Himself does.”<sup>20</sup>

We must say that what *Baalei HaTosafos* meant is that, for Hashem, the **rationale** of the prohibition against mentioning the name of idols is not tenable.

#### 4.

IT DOES NOT APPLY TO A JEW AND TORAH, EITHER

We can explain this according to the reason offered by *Yereim*<sup>21</sup> why “an idol written in the Torah may be mentioned by name” — “since the Torah mentions it, it has certainly ceased to exist.” Therefore, there is no reason that we should be prohibited from mentioning its name.

A simple reading of this rationale raises the question: What is the proof that it is “certain” that the idol has “ceased to exist” just because “the Torah mentions it?”

Also, we find various idols mentioned in the Torah that did **not** cease to exist.<sup>22</sup> For example, the idol of *Baal Peor* is mentioned in our *parshah*,<sup>23</sup> and yet it did not cease to exist.<sup>24</sup>

We can posit that what *Yereim* meant is that for **this Jew** who mentions it, the idol “certainly ceased to exist.” (After all, every Jew truly desires to observe all the Torah’s commandments):<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> *Tehillim* 147:19.

<sup>20</sup> *Shemos Rabbah*, ch. 30, sec. 9.

<sup>21</sup> *Yereim*, ch. 75 (in *Yereim HaShalem*, ch. 245, although with variant wording).

<sup>22</sup> As is asked in *Responsa of Chavos Yair*, sec. 1 (gloss 11 and 12).

<sup>23</sup> *Bamidbar* 25:3, 5.

<sup>24</sup> See the mishnah in *Sanhedrin* (60b): “One who defecates before *Baal Peor*,” and the Gemara (64a) mentions actual incidents involving the service of this idol at that time.

<sup>25</sup> *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Gerushin*,” ch. 2, par. 20.

When the Torah mentions the subject (and names) of idols, it is to expose their utter emptiness, and that they have no utility<sup>26</sup> or substance. Naming them, uncovers their **falsehood**, and the **error** of those who worshiped them.

This illustrates that the idol did not benefit its worshipers (akin to “**you are lost**, people of Kemosh”).<sup>27</sup> Alternatively, it highlights that when the Jewish people worshiped idols, the Jews were punished. (As described at the end of our *parshah*, when “Israel became attached to *Baal Peor*,”<sup>28</sup> the Jewish people were afflicted with a plague),<sup>29</sup> **or something of the sort**.

Ultimately, when the Torah mentions the name of an idol, it degrades its prominence and undermines its importance. **In fact**, it emphasizes the idol’s **falsehood**.

The same applies to a Jew: When he mentions the name of an idol recorded in the Torah, he does so in the way the name is **written in the Torah** — attributing the opposite of prominence and validity to the idol. And such an idol (which the Torah already clarified as being void of substance) has “certainly ceased to exist” for him. Consequently, (as *Yereim* continues) “For the same reason the Torah mentions it (to express its nothingness), we are permitted to mention it.”

We can further posit that this point is analogous and **resembles** the rule that “we may poke fun at an idol,”<sup>30</sup> because mocking an idol doesn’t enhance its importance. On the contrary, the idol is reviled.

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<sup>26</sup> *Yirmiyahu* 16:19.

<sup>27</sup> *Bamidbar* 21:29.

<sup>28</sup> *Bamidbar* 25:3.

<sup>29</sup> See *Bamidbar* 25:18: “The plague on account of *Peor*.”

<sup>30</sup> *Sanhedrin* 63b; *Tur* and *Shulchan Aruch*, “*Yoreh Deah*,” sec. 147, par. 5.

## 5.

### A MENTION OF CONDESCENSION

On this basis, the meaning of the statement of *Baalei HaTosafos* that the prohibition of mentioning the name of an idol applies “only to people but not to Hashem” becomes clear:

When a person mentions an idol’s name, it is because he **wants** to mention it (particularly when it is a purposeful mention).<sup>31</sup> In turn, this confers significance to the idol. From Hashem’s perspective, however, this mistake of idolatry is impossible.

**On the contrary**, when Hashem, the G-d of **truth**, says the name of an idol (or, when it is said in the Torah of **truth**) the impact is that the idolatry is thereby eliminated. It is a statement and declaration of the truth, which eliminates and negates even a fleeting supposition of belief in the falsehood of an idol.

[We can posit that for this reason, the sign chosen to mark the location was “before *Baal Zefon*.” For notwithstanding that *Baal Zefon* “had certainly ceased to exist,” still, it is not a refined choice of words. But since by this very usage of the name, the fiction of *Baal Zefon* is exposed and ceases to exist, and — as a matter of course — the delusion that the idol had previously represented in the world also ceases {this choice of words is justified}.]

Similarly, this is true for Jews: When a Jew mentions the name of an idol (that is written in the Torah) as it appears in the Torah,<sup>32</sup> he brings to mind and underscores that the idol was nullified.

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<sup>31</sup> Which grants it validity, as explained above in Sec. 2.

<sup>32</sup> That is, the manner in which he says the name emphasizes that this is a name written in the Torah. However, a casual mention of the idol’s name, for some other purpose, has the opposite effect. He affirms its existence and this would be forbidden even for idols whose names are recorded in the Torah (according to *Baalei HaTosafos*, as explained above in Sec. 2).

With this approach, we can explain a narrative in the Gemara:<sup>33</sup> There was an *Amora*<sup>34</sup> who mentioned the name of an idol, and justified it by saying that he was allowed since it was written in the Torah. Seemingly, if not for any specific benefit or purpose, why would a person mention the name of an idol, even if it were permissible?

But now we understand: This *Amora*, whose entire being was all about the **Torah**, noticed a situation in the world (“he found a valley”)<sup>35</sup> that **required** the idol to be eliminated. Not only was it permitted (“one may mention”), but there was a **benefit** and need to do so. **His** mention of the idol had the same impact as its mention by the **Torah** — the idolatry was nullified, as explained earlier.

## 6.

### EXPLAINING “WHY BALAK?”

We can posit that this approach also explains why the *parshah* is called “Balak” (even though “we do not call {others} by their names”):

The **Torah’s narrative** of Balak articulates how his evil plot — “Please come and curse this nation for me... perhaps it will enable us to strike at him”<sup>36</sup> — was **foiled**. Therefore, relating the narrative does not contradict {the principle that} “the name of the wicked should rot.” The reverse is true. **Such** a mention only adds to the disgrace and rot of the name of this wicked person.

The same applies to calling this *parshah* by the name of Balak: When the Jewish people use the name *Balak* as the title of a *parshah* **in the Torah**, their intention is to Balak, as the **Torah** portrays him. It is a reference that is (not for

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<sup>33</sup> *Sanhedrin* 63b.

<sup>34</sup> {This is the title given to the Sages of the Gemara.}

<sup>35</sup> *Eruvin* 6a.

<sup>36</sup> *Bamidbar* 22:6.



the purpose of immortalizing Balak, but to the contrary) intended to express the disgrace of Balak.<sup>37</sup>

## 7.

### A DEEPER EXPLANATION

There is yet a deeper point here:

Not only was Balak's evil plan disrupted (akin to how idols must be nullified), but moreover, Balak's hiring of Bilaam led to **a gain** for the Jewish people. They were blessed with incredibly lofty blessings — which is a greater achievement than what is brought about by nullifying idols:

When nullifying an idol, which by itself is a “denial of His Unity,”<sup>38</sup> it must be **thoroughly nullified**.<sup>39</sup>

Conversely, in Balak's case, his wickedness and hatred of the Jewish people, which had motivated him to hire Bilaam to “come and curse for me,” led to the **support** of, and gain for, the Jewish people (who received his incredibly lofty blessings).<sup>40</sup>

This is also why we refer to the *parshah* with the name of Balak, for the Jewish people benefitted from Balak (and his hiring of Bilaam).

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<sup>37</sup> Similar to what is explained (in *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 14, p. 91) that the command to “remember what Amalek did to you,” does not contradict the command, “you shall wipe out the remembrance of Amalek,” because the idea is to remember Amalek in order to wipe out its remembrance; see there.

<sup>38</sup> *Tanya*, “*Likkutei Amarim*,” ch. 22, 24.

<sup>39</sup> Because the sparks of holiness encloded in the three impure *kelipos* are also concealed in the extreme, to the point that their light is darkened (*Hemshech 5672*, ch. 374; *Sefer HaMaamarim 5670*, p. 103).

<sup>40</sup> See *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 8, p. 121 (explaining the concept of a test) in the context of the miracle of the 3<sup>rd</sup> of Tammuz (and the 12<sup>th</sup>), that even the opposition itself (and through their own power) were compelled to assist in the liberation and redemption {of the Previous Rebbe}.

## 8.

### EVIL CO-OPTED FOR GOOD

We can posit that this is also a reason the prophecy of Bilaam is one of the prophecies in Chumash that discusses (openly) the “End of Days.” (And Rambam cites this prophecy about Moshiach in the context of **halachah**, as noted in Section 1.)

For one of the fundamental changes in the “End of Days” is that all the nations of the world will be rectified. Instead of utilizing their power to dominate the Jewish people, their power will be used to **assist** the Jewish people. As it says, “**Kings** shall be your nurturers; and their princesses, your wet nurses.”<sup>41</sup>

Therefore, this idea was conveyed through the prophecy of **Bilaam**, which possessed the same characteristic. The very same power (Bilaam’s ability to prophesy) that Balak had wanted to employ to “curse” the Jewish people was compelled to be used by Bilaam to **bless** the Jewish people.

This explains why this prophecy of Bilaam’s is part of *parshas Balak*.<sup>42</sup>

The epitome of this change {as depicted by the prophet}<sup>43</sup> — “Foreigners will stand and tend your flocks, and sons of the stranger will be your plowmen and your vineyard workers, and you shall be called the priests of Hashem...” “Their work shall be done by others”<sup>44</sup> — will materialize with the true and complete redemption through our righteous Moshiach, imminently, in actuality.

— From a talk delivered on Shabbos *parshas Balak*, 5724 (1964)

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<sup>41</sup> *Yeshaya* 49:23.

<sup>42</sup> The reason the *parshah* is specifically named after Balak and not Bilaam (in which case the *parshah* would have began: “And Bilaam was summoned by Balak because Balak the son of Tzipor saw...” - or something similar), is explained in a talk delivered on *Shabbos parshas Balak* 5733 {1973} (based on what is stated in the *Haftorah* [*Michah* 6:5], “What Balak... **had plotted** and what Bilaam... [only] **answered** him”). Seemingly, we may want to explain that since Bilaam has no share in the World to Come (*Sanhedrin* 11:2), it wouldn't be appropriate to name the *parshah* after him. However, this answer is untenable, because the mishnah’s statement above means that **even** Bilaam has no share in the World to Come; how much more so does this apply to Balak (see Rambam’s *Commentary on Mishnah*, on *Sanhedrin* 11:2; et al).

<sup>43</sup> *Yeshaya* 61:5-6.

<sup>44</sup> *Berachos* 35b.