



THE RABBI BINYAMIN KAMENETZKY
TORAH LEGACY FOUNDATION
לזכרון של הרב בנימין קמנצקי זצ"ל

אמרי בנימן

דברי תורה, מחשבה וסיפורים מאת צדו של
הגאון רב בנימן קמנצקי זצ"ל

*A Dvar Torah from the writings of Rav Binyamin Kamenetzky zt"l,
transcribed by his grandson, Rabbi Shmuel Kamenetzky*

5779 - Parshas Balak - Past or Present

Parshas Balak discusses the attempt of the Balak, King of Moav, to destroy the Jews. He hired Bilam, the prophet and sorcerer, to curse the Jews, thus enabling Balak's mighty army to destroy them.

When Balak introduces his "Jewish problem" to Bilam, he says, "The people came out of Egypt, and behold, they have covered the 'eye' of the land, and they are stationed opposite me." Bilam refers to the Jews as having "left Egypt," in past tense.

Bilam however, in his reference to the Jews, says, "Behold the people coming out of Egypt has covered the 'eye' of the earth." Bilam calls them "The people who are coming out of Egypt," in present tense.

Why does Bilam change the tense?

Rabbi Ephraim Wachsmann, Rosh Yeshiva and noted speaker, tells over the following story. Many years ago when he was studying in yeshiva in Israel, a few of his friends visited a museum in Tel Aviv during the summer break. The price for admission for adults over 18 years old was 15 shekel, while children under 18 were only charged 10 shekel. A 19 year old student in the group had a young appearance and could have easily passed for 16 years old. When he asked for an adult ticket, the cashier looked at him. "Why do you need an adult ticket? Even if you are over 18, you can easily pass for a 16 year old! Take the cheaper ticket. No one will know the difference!" "I can't do that! It's dishonest, and it's stealing," replied the yeshiva student. "I will pay the correct price!"

But the cashier persisted. He nudged him again, and with a twinkle in his eye, he said, "A shood oif yiddeshe gelt. (A waste of Jewish money)! Just give me 10 shekel."

But the yeshiva student would not hear of it, and insisted on paying full price. He paid the adult fare and entered the museum. As he entered, a guard stopped him, and with a big smile, he proclaimed, "Thank you so much! I just made 100 shekel off of you!"

The yeshiva student looked at him quizzically, and the museum employee continued, "When my colleague and I saw your group coming, he noticed that you look younger than the rest, and he predicted that you will lie about your age. "After all," he claimed, "Yeshiva students are always looking to save some money." He bet me 100 shekel that you will buy a child ticket. When you refused, he tried to push you, because he had 100 shekel on the line" But I knew that you would be honest, and now he owes me 100 shekel!"

My grandfather, Rav Binyamin Kamenetzky zt"l, would often quote his cousin, Rav Shlomo Wolbe zt"l, mashgiach in Yeshiva Be'er Yaakov and author of Sefer Alei Shur, who explained Bilam's change of tense.

Balak saw things at face value. The Jews left Egypt. That is what they are, and that's how he defined them. Bilam however, was much smarter than that. He knew that to be successful in his mission, he would have to a chink in the armor of the Jews, and carefully direct his curse.

The Jews' exodus from Egypt was not only physical, but it was spiritual as well. During their time in Egypt, they nearly fell to the fiftieth level of impurity. Had they reached that low point, they would not have been able to recover and leave Egypt. With abundant mercy, Hashem took us out before we hit rock-bottom.

Bilam knew this, and acted upon it. His message to Bilam was, "Don't be so scared of the Jews. They did not yet emerge from the depths of the impurity of Egypt. They are still somewhere down there, and they are still coming out of Egypt!"

Bilam did not believe that we had left the impurity of Egypt behind, and thus we were still susceptible to his curse.

In reality, we have persevered and grown though many years of bitter exile. The power of a Jew to emerge pure, even from the lowest level of impurity, is the secret to our survival as the Chosen Nation.

Good Shabbos!

Rabbi Shmuel Kamenetzky is the Director of Advancement at Yeshiva of South Shore - ישיבה תורת חיים - בית בנימין. He is currently compiling the vast storehouse of all the Torah thoughts from his grandfather. If you have any stories to share from his grandfather, you can email him at skamenetzky@yoss.org.