



”מה טובו אהליך יעקב משכנותיך ישראל”

## The Assault of Balak and Bilam against the Two Names Yaakov and Yisrael to Annul the Name Yaakov that Finds Merit in Yisrael even When They Are Not Deserving

In this week’s parsha, parshas Balak, the Torah teaches us that Balak, King of Moav, was terrified of Yisrael. Therefore, he sent emissaries to hire Bilam to come and curse Yisrael. Despite the bold, determined, malicious efforts of these two wicked men, HKB”H in His infinite mercy and kindness foiled their efforts. Not only did HKB”H prevent Bilam from cursing Yisrael, but Bilam was compelled to bless Yisrael. As it is written (Devarim 23, 6): **”ולא אבה ה’ אלקיך לשמוע אל בלעם, ויהפוך ה’ אלקיך”** **—but Hashem, your G-d, refused to listen to Bilam; and Hashem, your G-d, changed the curse to a blessing for you, because Hashem, your G-d, loves you.**

Hence, I would like to explore with my esteemed audience a crucial point in this week’s parsha that has perplexed me for many years. If we scrutinize the prophecies the wicked Bilam uttered in the various locations, we find that in each one, he mentions both names that the people of Yisrael inherited from Yaakov Avinu—the name **”יעקב”** and the name **”ישראל”**. All told, Bilam harasha mentions them in his prophetic pronouncements seven times. Let us enumerate them:

1) (במדבר כג-ז): **”וישא משלו ויאמר מן ארם ינחני בלק מלך מואב מהררי קדם לכה ארה לי יעקב ולכה זועמה ישראל, מה אקוב לא קבה א”ל ומה אזעום לא זעם ה’, כי מראש צורים אראנו ומגבעות אשורנו.”**  
He declaimed his parable and said: **“From Aram, Balak, King of Moav, led me, from the mountains of the east, ‘Come invoke curse upon Yaakov for me, come bring anger upon Yisrael.’ How can I curse? G-d has not cursed. How can I anger,**

We will endeavor to explain why these two names specifically—**Yaakov and Yisrael**—caused Balak such intense trepidation and apprehension. So much so that he commissioned the services of Bilam to curse the people of Yisrael. The fact that HKB”H inserted these two names in all of Bilam’s pronouncements indicates their great significance and portent, even in his prophecy related to the future geulah: **”כעת יאמר ליעקב—now, it will be told to Yaakov and Yisrael what G-d has wrought.** Rashi comments that there will be a time in the future like this, when it will be revealed to all how much Yisrael are cherished—how they learn Torah directly from the mouth of HKB”H and how they sit in closer proximity to the Almighty than the ministering angels.

### A Fascinating Chiddush from the Ramban concerning the Number of Letters in the Names of the Avos and Imahos

We will begin to shed some light on the subject by examining the first prophecy that HKB”H placed in the mouth of Bilam harasha (ibid. 23, 7): **”וישא משלו ויאמר מן ארם ינחני בלק מלך מואב מהררי קדם, לכה ארה לי יעקב ולכה זועמה ישראל, מה אקוב לא קבה א”ל ומה אזעום לא זעם ה’, כי מראש צורים אראנו ומגבעות אשורנו.”**  
He declaimed his parable and said: **“From Aram, Balak, King of Moav, led me, from the mountains of the east, ‘Come invoke curse upon Yaakov for me, come bring anger upon Yisrael.’ How can I curse? G-d has not cursed. How can I anger,**

when Hashem has not been angry? For from its origin, I see it rock-like, and from hills do I view it.” Rashi (Bamidbar 23, 9) explains that HKB”H looks at Yisrael’s origins and roots and sees that they possess a strong, solid foundation like the rocks and hills—namely, the Avos and Imahos.

In Ohev Yisrael (Likutim parshas Bamidbar), the great Rabbi of Apta, zy”a, presents a Midrash Pliah related to the passuk (ibid. 2, 2): **“איש על דגלו באותות לבית אבותם, אל תקרי באותות אלא: באותיות, לפיכך אמר בלעם מזה אקוב לא קבה אל.”** **“Each man at his own banner with the insignia of their fathers’ houses”—do not read “באותות” (with insignias) but rather “באותיות” (with letters). Therefore, Bilam exclaimed (ibid. 23, 8): “How can I curse? G-d has not cursed.”** At first glance, the connection between the familial insignias and Bilam’s exclamation is not clear at all.

I had a wonderful idea! I believe that we can explain the Midrash based on a fascinating interpretation the Chanukas HaTorah (Balak 143) brings down in the name of the brilliant Rabbi Heschel of Krakow, ztz”l, concerning Bilam’s prophecy: **“From Aram, Balak, King of Moav, led me, from the mountains of the east, ‘Come invoke curse upon Yaakov for me, come bring anger upon Yisrael.’ How can I curse? א»ל has not cursed. How can I anger, when Havaya has not been angry? For from its origin, I see it rock-like, and from hills do I view it.”** Not only does he mention the names **Yaakov** and **Yisrael**, but he also mentions the names א”ל and **Havaya**.

We can explain the matter based on what the Ramban writes in the sefer HaEmunah V’HaBitachon (Chapter 13). He asserts that the reason HKB”H added the letter **“hei”** to modify the name Avram into אברהם was so that there would be thirteen letters in the three names of the holy Avos: אברהם יצחק יעקב. Likewise, there are thirteen letters in the names of the four holy Imahos: שרה רבקה רחל לאה. Thus, there is a total of twenty-six letters in the names of the Avos and Imahos combined. As we know, this is the gematria of the blessed name **Havaya**. Now, when HKB”H gave Yaakov the second name **“ישראל”**, this added five more letters. This brought the total number of letters in their names to thirty-one, the gematria of the name א”ל. This is alluded to by the fact that the additional name **ישראל** is sealed by the name א”ל.

## The Two Names א”ל הוי”ה Protect the People Named Yaakov and Yisrael

Additionally, I would like to introduce a teaching from the Zohar hakadosh (Terumah 175b): **“יעקב לאו שלימותא, ישראל שלימותא דכלא”**—Yaakov does not reflect perfection; Yisrael does. In other words, when Yisrael are lacking in some way, they are called **Yaakov**, which is related to the Hebrew word for heel, **“עקב”**. On the other hand, when their behavior and observance is exemplary, they are called **Yisrael**—a name that connotes dominance and significance. This is evident from the declaration made by the guardian angel of Eisav after it was defeated by Yaakov (Bereishis 32, 29): **“לא יעקב יאמר עוד: כי שרית עם אלהים ועם אנשים ותוכל”**—**your name will no longer be Yaakov, but rather Yisrael; for you have engaged the Divine and men and you have triumphed.”**

With this understanding, Rabbi Heschel explains the significance of the prophecy of Bilam harasha: **“From Aram, Balak, King of Moav, led me, from the mountains of the east, ‘Come invoke curse upon Yaakov for me, come bring anger upon Yisrael.’”** Balak wanted Bilam’s curse to apply both when the people of Yisrael are on the inferior level of **“יעקב”** and the superior level of **“ישראל”**.

Hence, HKB”H prevailed upon Bilam harasha to remark in his prophecy that he was incapable of cursing Yisrael, in any event. He explains why: **“How can I curse? א»ל has not cursed.”** In other words, when they are called **“ישראל”**, the combined names of the Avos and Imahos contain thirty-one letters, the gematria of the name א»ל. In that situation, I most definitely cannot curse them, since the name א»ל protects them. Furthermore, even when they are merely called **“יעקב”**, I am still incapable of cursing them: **“How can I anger, when Havaya has not been angry?”** Even with the name **Yaakov**, the combined names of the Avos and Imahos still contain twenty-six letters, the gematria of the name **Havaya**, which also protects them from all of the curses.

Then Bilam continues to explain himself: **“For from its origin, I see it rock-like (an allusion to the Avos), and from hills (an allusion to the Imahos) do I view it.”** Due to their immense kedushah, they protect

Yisrael with the two names א"ל הוי"ה (31 and 26). Hence, Bilam explains that he is incapable of fulfilling Balak's request. After all, HKB"H established a remedy well in advance of the ailment and troubling predicament in the form of the names of the Avos and Imahos. This concludes his fascinating insight.

It is with great joy that we can now illuminate the words of the Midrash אל"הותם, לבית אבותם, איש על דגלו באותות לבית אבותם, אל"הותם, לקרי באותות אלא באותיות, לפיכך אמר בלעם מה אקוב לא קבה אל". HKB"H is commanding us to cling to the kedushah of the Avos and Imahos. Thus, if we are on the superior level reflected by the name "ישראל", we will be inspired and protected by the thirty-one letters associated with the name א"ל. And even if, chas v'shalom, we are only on the inferior level reflected by the name "יעקב", we will still be inspired and protected by the twenty-six letters associated with the name Havaya.

This then is the allusion in the passuk: **"Each man at his own banner with the insignia of their fathers' houses"—do not read "באותות" (with insignias) but rather "באותיות" (with letters).** Every Jew must hold up his banner—"degel"—in life; demonstrating his connection with the Avos and Imahos, i.e., **"the houses of their Avos."** As we are taught in the Mishnah (Yoma 2a): **«ביתו זו אשתו»—his household refers to his wife.** If he does so, the two names א«ל הוי"ה, alluded to by the number of letters in their names, will shine within them and inspire them.

Hence, the Midrash concludes: **Therefore, Bilam exclaimed: "How can I curse? G-d has not cursed."** As we have learned from Rabbi Heschel, the names א«ל and Havaya were mentioned deliberately, since they allude to the Avos and Imahos; hence, they protect Jews whether they have the status of Yisrael or the status of Yaakov.

This provides us with a wonderful interpretation of the words of David HaMelech (Tehillim 118, 27): **«א«ל הוי"ה ויאר לנו»**—these two names א«ל and Havaya illuminate for us. He is emphasizing to us the importance of staying connected and attached to the Avos and Imahos, so that they will inspire and protect us. If we are on the level of ישראל«ל, HKB"H will illuminate us with the name א«ל (31); but if we

are only on the level of יעקב«ב, HKB"H will illuminate us with the name Havaya (26).

### Chasam Sofer: The Guardian Angel of Eisav Tried to Annul the Name Yaakov

Following this enlightening path, we will proceed to explain why Balak and Bilam joined forces to annul Yisrael's privileged status provided by the two names **Yaakov and Yisrael.** We will rely on a precious teaching from the great Chasam Sofer (Vayishlach), which also appears in Derashos Chasam Sofer. In his unique, sacred way, he comments on the narrative describing the dialogue that ensued after Eisav's guardian angel was unable to defeat Yaakov in their epic nocturnal wrestling match (Bereishis 32, 27): **"He (the angel) said, 'Release me, for the dawn has arrived.' He (Yaakov) replied, 'I will only release you if you bless me.' He asked him, 'What is your name?' He answered, 'Yaakov.' He said, 'Your name will no longer be Yaakov, but rather Yisrael; for you have engaged the Divine and men and you have triumphed.'"**

Why was Eisav's malach, the notorious "samechem," so magnanimous? Not only did he agree to concede the Berachos to Yaakov, he even gave him a personal berachah: **"Your name will no longer be Yaakov, but rather Yisrael."** Although Eisav's angel was compelled against its will to concede the Berachos to Yaakov; nevertheless, the berachah he formulated concealed a bit of treachery and deceit.

Let us elaborate. When HKB"H informs Yaakov of the change in his name, it states (ibid. 35, 10): **«ויאמר לו אלקים: --שמך יעקב לא יקרא שמך עוד יעקב כי אם ישראל יהיה שמך ויקרא את שמו ישראל»** **Then G-d said to him, "Your name is Yaakov; your name shall no longer be called Yaakov, but rather Yisrael shall be your name."** We must endeavor to explain why HKB"H prefaces His remarks to Yaakov with the seemingly superfluous statement: **"Your name is Yaakov."** It would have sufficed to say: **"Your name shall no longer be called Yaakov, but rather Yisrael shall be your name."**

To explain the matter, we will refer to what we have learned in the Gemara (Berachos 12b): **«לא יקרא שמך עוד יעקב כי אם ישראל יהיה שמך, לא שיעקר יעקב ממקומו, אלא ישראל עיקר ויעקב**

“טבל לוי”—not that the name Yaakov will be uprooted, but rather Yisrael will be the primary name and Yaakov will be secondary to it. Therefore, HKB”H prefaces his announcement by emphasizing that: “שמך”—your name is Yaakov. Thus, HKB”H made it patently clear that even in the future, the name Yaakov would remain in effect; however: “לא יקרא שמך עוד יעקב”—it would not be the primary name; “כי אם ישראל יהיה שמך”—Yisrael would become the primary name and Yaakov would assume a role of secondary importance.

Accordingly, the Chasam Sofer points out that Eisav’s ministering angel cleverly omitted the two prefatory words “שמך יעקב”. Instead, he stated directly: “לא יעקב”—Your name will no longer be Yaakov, but rather Yisrael—because he intended to uproot and replace the name Yaakov entirely. He intended for the name Yaakov to no longer remain in effect but to be replaced entirely by the name Yisrael. Here the Chasam Sofer explains why it was vital to Eisav’s malach to eliminate the name Yaakov, even as a secondary name. He writes in his Derashos (translation):

**We know that Eisav’s angel is none other than the Satan. Both names, Yaakov and Yisrael, are required to abolish the power of the Satan. The name יעקוב, spelled in its full form, with a “vav,” together with the name ישראל, possess a numerical value equivalent to the words קרע שטין. Thus, the two names in conjunction allude to the fact that they possess the power to destroy and eliminate the Satan. Despite the lofty grandeur of the name Yisrael, it alone does not suffice for us to combat the “samech-mem”; both names, ישראל and יעקוב, are necessary. Therefore, the “samech-mem” wished to eliminate the name Yaakov completely. But HKB”H did not want it to be uprooted completely; so that we would have the innate power to withstand that ministering angel and vanquish it.**

### The Name Yaakov Represents Jews when They Are Meritorious only in Comparison to the Goyim

Following the holy path blazed by the Chasam Sofer, we will proceed to explain the significance of the combination of the two names יעקוב ישראל, whose sum

equals קרע שטין. Why do they provide us with the power to vanquish the Satan? We will refer to an explanation provided by the brilliant author of Yeshuot Yaakov on the Torah (Vayishlach). He helps us understand the value of having the name Yaakov remaining in effect.

He explains that Yisrael have two distinct ways of being vindicated when judged: (1) On their own merit, because they are consummate tzaddikim or (2) due to their importance and superiority in comparison to the other nations of the world, even though they would not be deemed worthy in their own right. So, when HKB”H wishes to exonerate Yisrael in judgment, He first examines whether or not they qualify in their own merit. If, chas v’shalom, they do not, then He compares them to the other nations; in relation to the wickedness of the goyim, they certainly deserve exoneration, in keeping with the passuk (Devarim 9, 5): “לא בצדקתך וביושר לבבך אתה בא לרשת את ארצם, כי ברשעת הגוים האלה ה’ אלקיך מורישם”—not because of your righteousness and the uprightness of your heart are you coming to take possession of their land, but because of the wickedness of these nations does Hashem, your G-d, drive them away from before you.

Now, the name Yisrael reflects their worthiness in their own merit, in keeping with the statement (Bereishis 32, 29): “כי שרית עם אלהים ועם אנשים ותוכל”—for you have engaged the Divine and men and you have triumphed. In contrast, the name Yaakov indicates that they are somewhat lacking regarding their own merit; they only appear meritorious in relation to the goyim. After all, the name Yaakov reflects this phenomenon (ibid. 25, 26): “וידו אוחזת בעקב עשו”—he (Yaakov) emerged into the world “with his hand grasping onto the heel of Eisav.” Grabbing onto his brother Eisav’s heel alludes to the fact that Yaakov’s innocence and perfection are measured against Eisav’s guilt and deficiency.

This then is the implication of the Gemara’s statement: “לא שיעקר יעקב ממקומו”—not that the name Yaakov will be uprooted from its place. If the name Yaakov was uprooted and invalidated—and they were called only Yisrael—they could only be exonerated when judged, if they happened to be meritorious and righteous in their own right. “אלא ישראל עיקר ויעקב טבל לוי”—but rather Yisrael will be the primary name and

**Yaakov will be secondary to it**—without a doubt, the ideal is to be on the level of **Yisrael**, indicating that they can stand on their own merit. However, if that is not yet the case, chas v'shalom, then the name **Yaakov** indicates: "וידרו אוחות בעקב עשו"—that in relation to Eisav, they always appear perfect and meritorious. This is the gist of the Chasam Sofer's wonderful insight.

### It Interspersed Itself between the Egyptian Camp and the Camp of Yisrael

Next, I would like to introduce a beautiful interpretation from the Keren L'David (Beshalach) of the text describing the incredible miracle of Krias Yam Suf that is pertinent to this discussion (Shemos 14, 19): "ויסע מלאך האלקים ההולך לפני מחנה ישראל וילך מאחריהם... ויבוא בין מחנה מצרים ובין מחנה ישראל והיה הענן והחושך ויאר את הלילה ולא קרב זה אל זה כל הלילה." **The malach of G-d who had been going in front of the camp of Yisrael moved and went behind them; (and the pillar of cloud moved from in front of them and stood behind them). It came between the camp of Mitzrayim and the camp of Yisrael, and there were the cloud and the darkness (for the Egyptians)—and it (the pillar of fire) lit up the night (for Yisrael); and one did not approach the other throughout the night.**

Here is the explanation: When Yisrael are totally deserving in their own right, the malach of G-d advocates on their behalf and leads them from the front, since it does not need to evaluate them in comparison to the goyim. When, however, Yisrael are not deserving in their own right, it is necessary to evaluate them in comparison to the goyim to exonerate them. In the latter situation, the malach advocating on their behalf moves from in front of Yisrael and situates itself behind them—between Yisrael and the goyim (Egyptians). Upon witnessing the corrupt deeds of the goyim, it is able to justify the behavior of Yisrael and present it in a positive light.

Now, during "yetzias Mitzrayim," the guardian angel of Mitzrayim protested, "How are these any different than these? These worship avodah-zarah, and these worship avodah-zarah." Therefore, the only possible way to exonerate Yisrael legally was by evaluating them next to the corrupt Egyptians. This then is the

implication of the passuk: "**The malach of G-d who had been going in front of the camp of Yisrael,**" because they deserved exoneration in their own merit; "**moved and went behind them.**"

The narrative goes on to explain the reason it changed positions: "**It came between the camp of Mitzrayim and the camp of Yisrael,**" to evaluate the worthiness and innocence of Yisrael in comparison to the wickedness and guilt of the Egyptians. As a result: "**There were the cloud and the darkness (for the Egyptians), and it (the pillar of fire) lit up the night (for Yisrael).**" The reason being: "**And one did not approach the other throughout the night,**" because the camp of Yisrael and the camp of Mitzrayim are worlds apart! Compared to the Egyptians, the people of Yisrael are always viewed as proper and righteous.

Now, this enlightens us as to why Eisav's angel did not want the name Yaakov to remain in effect. He wanted to eliminate it completely, leaving the name Yisrael alone. It wanted to create a situation in which Yisrael could not be exonerated unless they were perfectly righteous and meritorious—i.e., when they are deserving of the name **Yisrael**. But if they are lacking and only meritorious in comparison to the other nations—when they are described as **Yaakov**—they would not be exonerated when judged. Under these circumstances, Yisrael would not have merited leaving Mitzrayim, because they would not have been evaluated in relation to the corrupt Egyptians.

Therefore, HKB"H, in His infinite rachamim and chesed, wanting what is best for Yisrael, stated emphatically: "**Your name is (still) Yaakov!**" He made it eminently clear that even if we are lacking and not deserving exclusively in our own merit, we will be exonerated when judged on account of our worthiness in comparison to the nations of the world.

We can now better appreciate the comment of the Chasam Sofer that the gematria of the two names יעקוב equals קרע שטן ישראל. This numerical equivalence alludes to the fact that these two names in conjunction possess the power to thwart the Satan, who prosecutes us. For, even if we are lacking, we nevertheless are able to be exonerated due to the presence of the name

Yaakov, which was given when **“his hand grabbed onto the heel of Eisav.”** This highlighted the fact that Yisrael are deemed righteous in relation to the other nations descending from Eisav.

**Balak and Bilam Aimed to Annul the name Yaakov so that Yisrael Would Have to Be Found Deserving in Their Own Merit**

Continuing along this sublime path, we can now explain why Balak and Bilam opposed the conjunction of the two names **Yaakov** and **Yisrael**. They intended to complete what the guardian angel of Eisav sought to accomplish but failed—to annul the name **Yaakov** completely.

Now, we have already cited the passuk: **“Not because of your righteousness and the uprightness of your heart are you coming to take possession of their land, but because of the wickedness of these nations does Hashem, your G-d, drive them away from before you.”** In other words, Yisrael only merited entering Eretz Yisrael on account of the name **Yaakov**, demonstrating their worthiness by comparing them to the goyim. The last of the forty-two journeys travelled by Yisrael in the midbar prior to entering Eretz Yisrael was to the plains of Moav. Therefore, Balak recruited Bilam specifically to curse the combination of **Yaakov and Yisrael**, so that they would no longer be called both names but only **Yisrael**. That would prevent the people of Yisrael from entering Eretz Yisrael.

This explains magnificently why Balak sent the following message to Bilam (Bamidbar 22, 5): **הנה: «עם יצא ממצרים—behold! A people has come out of**

**Mitzrayim.** As explained, they were not worthy or deserving in their own merit; they were only worthy in relation to the wickedness of the Egyptians. **הנה: «כסה את עין הארץ והוא יושב ממולי—behold! It has covered the surface of the earth, and it sits opposite me.** In other words, it sits opposite me to evaluate its worthiness and righteousness in relation to the corruption of my people, Moav. Therefore, I implore you: **«ועתה לכה נא ארה לי את העם הזה כי עצום הוא ממני»—so now, please come and curse this people for me, for it is too powerful for me.** He specifically says **«ממני»—for me**—because HKB”H was evaluating the worthiness of Yisrael in relation to his (Balak’s) actions.

This is why Bilam exclaimed: **“From Aram, Balak, King of Moav, led me, from the mountains of the east, ‘Come invoke curse upon Yaakov for me, come bring anger upon Yisrael.’”** He wanted to deny the people of Yisrael the privilege of being associated with the two names Yaakov and Yisrael; he wanted them to be left solely with the name Yisrael. Thus, they would only be exonerated when judged, if they were meritorious in their own right. Consequently, they would not be allowed to enter Eretz Yisrael. As we know, HKB”H intervened; He denied Bilam’s request, and He compelled Bilam to utter the following prophecy: **“How can I curse? G-d has not cursed. How can I anger, when Hashem has not been angry? For from its origin, I see it rock-like, and from hills do I view it.”** This prophecy confirmed that the two names Yaakov and Yisrael were afforded protection from the letters of the names of the Avos and Imahos; they are imbued and illuminated by the two names **א** and **ל**, as per the passuk: **«אל הוי»ה ויאר לנו: «הוי»ה**.

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