

A Taste of Torah - Nourishment in the Parasha

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Parashat Balak: Like Gardens by a River

What Do Bilam's Blessings Teach About Israel's Constant Connection to Hashem?

What Makes Trees and Souls Flourish in the Land of Israel?

Last Shabbat, as I strolled through our back garden, I was struck by how much the trees had grown. Just over twenty-five years ago, they were tiny saplings. Today, they form a living wall at the edge of our property, their branches intertwined, concealing the unattractive grey house below. The transformation from tiny saplings to towering trees did not happen overnight. It unfolded so gradually that I hardly noticed it.

The same is true of my children and grandchildren. My son, who was only three years old when we planted those trees, is now nearly thirty. Over the years, he has matured from a carefree child into a responsible husband. Changes that seem imperceptible while we are living through them eventually reveal themselves all at once. My granddaughters, once tender and mischievous little girls, now stand taller than many of the adults around them. They are graduating from high school and preparing to enter either the army or *Sherut Leumi* (National Service).

We adults continue to grow as well, for revealed and hidden good alike. Each wrinkle arrives with a gentle measure of wisdom. It seems like only yesterday that I danced ecstatically at my own wedding. Later, I danced at the weddings of my children, and with G-d's help, I hope to dance at the weddings of my grandchildren as well. Our skin has been tanned by years beneath the sustaining sun, our faces weathered by time, and our hearts have been opened through the steady streams of Torah in which we have immersed ourselves.

Reflecting on these changes, I am reminded of the profound insight of Rabbi Akiva. Watching water drip steadily onto a stone, he realized that if something as soft as water could eventually carve a hole in solid rock, then surely the words of Torah could penetrate and transform the human heart. Living in the Land of Israel, surrounded by the atmosphere of Torah and nourished by its teachings day after day, I have come to appreciate the truth of that lesson. Just as trees flourish through years of sunlight and water, so too people are shaped and elevated through the steady nourishment of the Land of Israel and its Torah.

What Nourishment Enabled Israel to Flourish Like a Garden?

Like the gardens beside the river in Bilam's prophecy, growth is often imperceptible from day to day, yet over time it transforms us completely. What is the source of the nourishment that enables such flourishing? Bilam's blessing offers a beautiful answer through its imagery of gardens, rivers, and mighty trees nourished by abundant waters.

ספר במדבר פרק כד פסוק א כְּנַחְלִים נָטְיוּ כְּגִנְתַּי עָלַי נְהַר כְּאֵהָלִים נָטַע ה' כְּאֶרְזִים עָלַי מַיִם:

"Like valleys stretched out, like gardens by a river, like aloes planted by Hashem, like cedars beside the waters" (*Bamidbar 24:6*).

Although Balak hired Bilam to curse Israel, Hashem transformed his intended curses into blessings. In one of the most beautiful blessings in the Torah, Bilam compares the Israelites to flourishing gardens, fragrant aloes, and mighty cedars nourished by abundant waters.

The common thread uniting all of these images is nourishment. Gardens flourish because they receive a constant supply of water. Trees grow tall and strong because their roots remain connected to a source of life. In the same way, the spiritual vitality of Israel depends upon remaining connected to the flow of Divine

blessing. This imagery echoes King David's description of the righteous person: "He shall be as a tree planted beside streams of water, that yields its fruit in its season, and whose leaf does not wither, and whatever he does prospers" (*Tehillim* 1:3). Just as a tree flourishes through its continual access to water, so too spiritual growth depends upon remaining connected to a constant source of Divine nourishment.

Unlike a building, which can be completed in a short time, a garden develops gradually through continual care and nourishment. Spiritual growth follows the same pattern. The Jewish people became holy not through a single moment of inspiration but through the steady nourishment of Torah, mitzvot, prayer, and Divine providence. Just as a garden must be watered continually, so too the soul requires constant nourishment in order to flourish.

Why Does Bilam Compare Israel to Gardens Beside a River?

The Midrash explains that Bilam secretly wished to deprive Israel of its spiritual vitality, yet every intended curse emerged as a blessing instead. The depth of Bilam's evil intentions and hatred for Israel far exceeded that of the wicked Balak. While Balak merely said אָרָה/arah - "curse" (*Bamidbar* 22:6), Bilam intensified the request and said קָבַח/kavah - "utterly curse" (*Bamidbar* 22:11). Bilam led the Israelites astray through immorality, seeking to undermine Israel spiritually as well as physically - uprooting them from both this world and the World to Come (*Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah* 20:9).

Yet precisely through his unintended blessing, Bilam revealed the secret of Israel's endurance and flourishing. When he declared, "Like gardens by a river," he unknowingly testified to the enduring source of Israel's strength.

Bilam's blessing describes far more than physical prosperity. The people of Israel are compared to gardens because they draw their vitality from an unceasing source. A garden dependent upon occasional rainfall may flourish one season and wither the next. However, a garden planted beside a flowing river enjoys a constant source of nourishment. The river itself often goes unnoticed, yet everything around it flourishes because of its presence. Just as the river continually nourishes the tree, Torah continually nourishes the soul. The more deeply rooted we become in Torah, the more resilient and fruitful our lives become.

Why Are Torah Scholars Compared to Rivers and Gardens?

According to Rabbi Ovadiah Sforno, the synagogues and study halls of Israel are compared to rivers that flow out to irrigate distant fields. Just as water spreads life wherever it travels, Torah scholars spread nourishing wisdom wherever they teach.

Those who teach Torah are compared to flowing rivers that carry life-giving waters to distant places, while those devoted to prayer are compared to gardens flourishing beside a river. The river channels nourishment outward, while the garden receives that nourishment and transforms it into fruit, beauty, and blessing. Together, they illustrate two complementary forms of Divine sustenance: transmitting spiritual abundance and cultivating it until it bears fruit.

This distinction reveals two important dimensions of spiritual growth. Some people excel at receiving nourishment. They devote themselves to prayer, contemplation, and personal spiritual development. Others focus on transmitting nourishment by teaching, encouraging, and guiding others. Both are essential. Just as a river and a garden depend upon one another, spiritual life requires both inward growth and outward influence.

How Do We Become Rivers of Nourishment for Others?

Much of our spiritual nourishment comes from sources that we may take for granted: daily prayer, Torah study, acts of kindness, and the quiet workings of Divine providence. These steady streams of nourishment shape us far more profoundly than occasional moments of inspiration.

Rabbi Avraham Chaim of Zlotchov explains that Bilam's blessing, "Like cedars beside the waters," refers not to isolated righteous individuals who keep their spirituality to themselves, but to those who remain connected to others. The ideal tzaddik receives from those greater than himself and shares with those who need guidance and encouragement. The blessings he receives do not end with him but continue onward to nourish many others (*Orach LaChaim, Balak*).

Spiritual nourishment is meant to flow. Water that ceases to flow eventually becomes stagnant, whereas flowing water remains fresh and life-giving. Those who receive Torah, wisdom, and inspiration are called upon to become channels through which these blessings reach others.

Similarly, the Chozeh of Lublin explains that "Like gardens by a river" refers to those who gather together to serve Hashem and fulfill His will. The river symbolizes the Divine flow that nourishes the garden, while each person contributes according to the unique spiritual path that Hashem has planted within them (*Divrei Emet, Balak*). Just as no two plants in a garden are identical, each soul receives its own mission and nourishment from the same Divine wellspring.

Bilam's blessing teaches that lasting growth depends not upon sporadic bursts of spiritual enthusiasm but upon remaining connected to a constant source of living waters. The healthiest gardens are not those that receive the most dramatic rainfall, but those continually nourished by an ever-flowing river. When we remain connected to the wellsprings of Torah and share their waters with others, we become part of the very blessing that Bilam was compelled to pronounce upon Israel.