SUMMARY OF PARASHAT BALAQ

FIRST ALIYA

Forty years after leaving Egypt, and shortly before entering the land of Israel, the Jews have just conquered the Emorites and the people of Bashan, who were in what is today northern Jordan. The one who sees this with great concern is Balak, the king of the neighboring town of Moab. He fears that his nation will be targeted by the Jewish army. He knows that the power of Israel does not consist of his army, but of his God. Balak then looks for a non-conventional way of weakening Israel. He sends for Bil'am, a non-Jewish sorcerer, famous for the effectiveness of his predictions and curses. Balaq asks him to come to him and curse the Jews. But God appears to Bil'am and orders him not to go to Moab. "You shall not curse the people, for Israel is blessed [by Me]!"

SECOND ALIYA

At the behest of the Divine request, Bil'am declines the invitation and does not proceed to Moab. But King Balak insists and suggests that he will reward him handsomely for his services. God allows Bil'am to accept the invitation, but warns him that he should only speak the words that God will put in his mouth.

THIRD ALIYA

Bil'am leaves the land of Midian and goes to the kingdom of Balak. God sends an angel that Bil'am does not get to see. But Bil'am's donkey registers the presence of the Divine angel, gets scared and refuses to go on. Bil'am hits his animal and miraculously –or in the form of a prophecy– the donkey communicates with Bil'am and reproaches him for hitting his animal. God then opens Bil'am's eyes and allows him to see the angel. The angel questions Bil'am for his violence. And he once again exhorts him to only say what God tells him. Bil'am

finally reaches Moab, where King Balak is waiting for him.

FOURTH ALIYA

Following Bil'am's instructions, Balak builds seven altars and offers sacrifices to God. But God dictates to Bil'am in a poetic/prophetic way the exact words that he should address to Balak and his ministers: "From Aram, King Balak of Moab has brought me, from the mountains of the East and has asked me to curse Israel… But how could I curse those whom God has not cursed, and how would dare I invoke the wrath of God if He has not been angry with Israel?… " And then he went on to pronounce blessings and praises to the Jewish people. Balak is angry at Bil'am's blessings and reminds him to petition God only what he tells him.

FIFTH ALIYA

In an attempt to convince Bil'am to curse Israel, Balak takes him to another place, as if the change of location will inspire him to curse Israel. They build altars and offer sacrifices, but God again puts blessings for Israel into Bil'am's mouth. "God [loves Israel so much] that he ignores when they do not do the right thing, forgives them and sees no evil in Israel's children."

SIXTH ALIYA

Once again, Balak takes Bil'am to another place in the hope that he can curse the Jews from there. Despite the new altars and offerings, only beautiful blessings and praises come from the mouth of Bil'am: "How beautiful are your tents [the houses of the Jews], O Jacob, your dwellings, O Israel! … God, who brought them out of Egypt … will destroy the nations of the enemy… Those who bless them will be blessed, and those who curse Israel will be cursed. Balak loses his patience with Bil'am and asks him to leave empty handed.

SEVENTH ALIYA

Before leaving, Bil’am expresses a prophecy about the end of days: “I see it, but it would not be now; I contemplate it, but it won’t be soon. A star will come out of Jacob, and out of Israel will arise a staff that will defeat the princes of Moab and uproot the sons of Seth… ». He also speaks of the eventual destruction of Esav, Amalek and Assyria.

Bil’am’s plan to curse Israel, trying to get God to punish His people for their eventual sins, has failed. A new plan is then put into practice: the Moabite and Midianite women go to the camp of Israel to seduce the Jews and lure them into sexual activity and idolatry. This was the way to serve the pagan deity of Ba’al Peor. Many men fall into temptation and sinned. God then commands Moses to execute the guilty. A deadly plague breaks out among the Jews, causing the death of 24,000 men. Zimri, a Jewish leader who was part of this great sin, publicly cohabited with a Midyan princess. Pinechas, the grandson of Aharon haCohen, executes both of them and the plague ends.