
Recanati Kabbalistic Insights

Weekly Teachings from the Mystical Torah Commentary

Parshat Balak

Three revelations from the 13th-century Kabbalistic master Rabbi Menachem Recanati.

Balak is the parasha of a single organ — the eye — and of the hidden machinery by which sight and thought reach up into the supernal systems of judgment and mercy. The greatest sorcerer of the nations aims his evil eye at Israel from a mountain; Hashem flips the very energy of his curse into blessing; and a people arranged by its tribes becomes a fortress no curse can pierce. The thread that binds all three: the ascent from the Lower Eye to the Upper Eye.

In This Issue

- I. The Eye as a Weapon — Sight as an Instrument of Judgment
- II. Thought That Builds Worlds — How a Curse Became a Blessing
- III. The Fortress of “Mah Tov” — The Tribes and the Middle Pillar

Section I

The Eye as a Weapon

Why the greatest sorcerer of the nations needed a mountain, and what his “evil eye” really was.

Balak, king of Moav, does not hire an army. He hires an eye. “Come, curse for me this people... perhaps I will be able to strike at it and drive it from the land.” And Bilaam, the master of the craft, takes Balak not to a war-room but to a vantage point: *Sadeh Tzofim*, the Field of Watchers, to the top of Pisgah, to the peak of Peor — each time a place from which he can see Israel. The Recanati fixes our attention on this strange detail. Why must a curse be aimed by sight?

Because, the Recanati teaches, sight is not passive. The eye does not merely receive the world; it acts upon it. The *eina bisha*, the evil eye that the Sages feared, is a real channel rooted in *Midas HaDin* — the divine attribute of strict judgment. To look at a thing with concentrated, grudging intent is to draw the energy of *Gevurah* down upon it. This is why Bilaam, whose gift was precisely this dark mastery of the gaze, required a physical line of sight: his *kavanah* rode upon his vision. Remove the seeing and you disarm the curse — which is exactly what Hashem does when He later shows him only the edge of the camp.

The Sages give the same force its plain name: “wherever they set their eyes, there is death or poverty.” An eye fed on judgment, fixed on another with envy or contempt, becomes a conduit for the supernal Left to discharge into the world. Bilaam was, in this sense, a technician of *Din* — he knew the hour Hashem is, as it were, angry, and he knew how to aim. His was the *Lower Eye*: sight bent downward and outward as a weapon.

And here the parasha sets its trap for him. The very faculty Bilaam has perfected — the seeing eye — will be turned in his hand. He will climb three mountains to look at Israel with the eye of judgment, and three times what leaves his mouth will be blessing. The instrument of the curse becomes the instrument of praise. To understand how, we must follow the Recanati into the machinery of thought itself.

Section II

Thought That Builds Worlds

How Hashem flipped the curse without changing a single word of it.

“And Hashem turned the curse into a blessing for you, because Hashem your God loves you” — *vayahafoch Hashem Elokecha lecha et ha'klalah livracha*. The Recanati pauses on the word *vayahafoch*, “He turned over.” Hashem does not block Bilaam’s words; He *inverts* their underlying energy. The same breath that was loaded to destroy is flipped at its root and arrives as blessing. To grasp this, the Recanati opens one of his foundational principles: *machshavah* — thought — is a creative force.

Human thought, the Recanati teaches, does not stay locked inside the skull. A mind attached to the upper realms reaches them; intention is a thread flung upward that fastens to its target. This is the secret of *tefillah* and of *korbanos* alike — not that words rearrange Heaven, but that a directed *kavanah* draws down the flow it is bound to. Bilaam understood this; his curse was an act of *machshavah* aimed through the eye. But a created mind aims into a system it does not own.

And so, the Recanati explains, Hashem — “who understands all intentions,” *meivin el kol ma’aseihem* — performs a *hipocha*, a reversal at the source. Bilaam’s thought is permitted to travel its whole arc; only its polarity is turned. The words emerge unaltered — *Mah tovu ohalecha Yaakov* — yet they carry the opposite charge. The would-be curser becomes, against his will, the mouthpiece of the very blessing he came to undo. The Recanati’s point is exact: the power of a thought to act is real, but it remains forever subordinate to the One who reads and, when He wills, flips the intention behind it.

For the reader this is not an ancient curiosity. Every *kavanah* you form is a real force — your blessing of another, your silent ill-wish, your prayer. The Recanati’s Balak teaches both the dignity and the limit of that force: aim your thought toward the good, for it truly reaches; and fear no curse aimed at you, for the same Hashem who reads Bilaam reads every heart, and turns what He wills.

Section III

The Fortress of “Mah Tov”

Why a people arranged by its tribes is a fortress no curse can enter.

On the third mountain Bilaam stops searching for omens. “And Bilaam lifted his eyes and saw Israel dwelling by its tribes” — *shochan l'shivtav* — and the spirit of God came upon him. What he sees breaks his craft. The Recanati reveals that the arrangement of the camp is not a logistical fact but a *physical mirror of the supernal structure*: the tribes below are set as the holy Names and channels are set above. Israel ordered by its tribes is a diagram of the *Sefirot* — and judgment cannot find an opening in a form that is already whole.

“Mah tovu ohalecha Yaakov, mishkenotecha Yisrael” — how good are your tents. The Recanati hears in the *ohalim*, the tents, the houses of study and prayer, and in their hidden depth the *Shechinah* herself dwelling among them. A curse is a probe for a gap, a place where the Left can be drawn in against the Right. But a people whose every tribe is aligned to its supernal root presents no gap. The fortress is not made of walls; it is made of *order* — each part standing in its true place.

And the Recanati lingers on one word: *Tov*, “good.” It is no mere adjective. *Tov* alludes to the *Amuda d'Amtzaita*, the Middle Pillar — *Tiferet* — the central column that reconciles *Chesed* on the right with *Gevurah* on the left, holding mercy and judgment in balance. When Bilaam is forced to say *mah tovu*, he is made to invoke the very attribute that neutralizes his weapon: the eye of judgment is overruled by the Pillar that balances all judgment with mercy. His curse had nowhere to land.

This is the parasha's quiet instruction to us. The defense against the evil eye is not a counter-curse but *integration* — a life and a people set in right order, every part included, nothing thrown to the isolated Left. Build your “tents” — your places of Torah, your home — in that balance, and you become, like Israel on the plain, a form into which no curse can enter.

May the light of these teachings illuminate your Shabbos table and stay with you through the week ahead.

As we read of the eye that was raised to curse and forced to bless, of the thought Hashem turned over at its very root, and of the tribes whose order became a fortress — may we learn to lift our own eyes the higher way. May we guard what we look upon until our sight becomes a Kisei, a throne for the Divine Eye to rest upon us; may our every thought be aimed toward blessing, knowing it truly reaches; and may we, like Israel dwelling by its tribes, stand so whole and so integrated that no curse can find a gap. May we learn to look at our family, our friends, and our own portion, and to find in them their Mah Tov — and may the Good Eye we turn upon the world be the eye Hashem turns back upon us, for blessing.

Based on the commentary of Rabbi Menachem Recanati (13th century, Italy)

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ברכה והצלחה

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May you continue rising, without pause.

If you felt a spiritual cleansing, a deeper connection with Hashem, a sense of inner peace, clarity, or a shift in abundance — don't keep it to yourself. Share this material with someone who may need it. In the words of the Sages, "Whoever causes the multitudes to be righteous, sin does not occur through him." By spreading this light, you not only help another soul rise, but you elevate yourself as well. Forward it to a friend, post it in a group, or share it with your community. The merit continues through you.

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