

Parshas Balak

For the week ending 12 Tamuz 5756
28 & 29 June 1996

Summary

Balak, the king of the Moav, is in morbid fear of the Bnei Yisrael. He summons a renowned sorcerer named *Bilaam* to curse them.

First, Hashem appears to *Bilaam* and forbids him to go. But because *Bilaam* is so insistent, Hashem appears to him a second time and permits him to go. While en route, a *malach* (angel, messenger from Hashem) blocks the path of *Bilaam's* donkey. Unable to contain his frustration, *Bilaam* strikes the donkey each time it stops or wants to make a detour. Miraculously, the donkey speaks, asking *Bilaam* why he is hitting her. The *malach* instructs *Bilaam* what he is permitted to say, and what he is forbidden to say regarding the Jewish People. When *Bilaam* arrives, King *Balak* makes elaborate preparations in the hope that *Bilaam* will succeed in the planned curse. Three times *Bilaam* attempts to curse, and three times a blessing issues instead. *Balak*, seeing that *Bilaam* has failed, sends him home in disgrace. The Bnei Yisrael begin sinning with the Moavi women, and worshipping the Moavi idols, and are punished with a plague.

One of the Jewish leaders brazenly brings a Midianite princess into his tent, in full view of Moshe and the people. *Pinchas*, a grandson of Aaron, grabs a spear and kills both evildoers. This halts the plague, but not before 24,000 have died.

Commentaries

“ONCE MORE UNTO THE BREACH...”

“How goodly are your tents O Yaakov!” (24:5)

What was so ‘goodly’ about the tents of Yaakov? *Bilaam* noted that not one of Israel’s tent entrances was aligned opposite the other. Every tent was angled so that its entrance looked out only onto the side of the tent of its neighbor. But was so special about that? True, it showed a discretion and a respect for privacy - but why, specifically, should it be this non-alignment of the tent-openings that caused *Bilaam* to proclaim the Jewish People deserving of the Divine Presence to dwell among them?

In fact, *Bilaam's* whole intention was to find some universal flaw in the Jewish People which would allow him to bring them down - to curse them by accusing them of some endemic sin.

However, he could find no such common flaw. For, even though one Jew might stumble in one area, his neighbor would, as it were, step into the breach and excel in that same area, compensating for him.

And so on throughout the entire people. *Bilaam* could not find one ubiquitous vice that ran throughout the body politic of the Jewish People, try as he might. That’s the hidden meaning of his words here “How goodly are your tents, Yaakov!” “None of your entrances (to sin) are aligned corresponding to the entrance of your neighbor. None of your sins are aligned opposite the sins of your neighbor. And so - I can’t get a ‘clear shot’ through to the middle! I can’t wound you by lobbing a shot clear into your midst - into your heart. For each one of you steps into the breach - the weakness of one is the strength of the other - leaving no opening to the sin which crouches at the door...”

(Kehillas Yitzhak)

ANIMAL CRACKERS?

“What have I done that you have struck me these three times” (22:26)

Bilaam's donkey was not asinine. When the donkey said “these three times”, he was alluding to the three festivals of Pesach Shavuos and Succos. The donkey was asking *Bilaam* how he could have imagined that he would uproot the Jewish People who make the three pilgrimage festivals. But what is so special about the three festivals that they are singled out as such a protective force for the Jewish People?

The Jewish People are above time. Since they can establish the day on which the month begins, they are essentially ‘partners in time’ with the Creator, and not totally subject to time’s constraints.

Bilaam, however, could only receive prophecy at night. His prophecy was time-dependent. Thus the donkey was reminding *Bilaam* that he was ‘yoked’ to time, and how could he possibly imagine that he would be able to dominate a people who were above time? That donkey was certainly not asinine.

(Based on Admo'r R. Dovid M'Kotzke in Iturei Torah)

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THE MOMENT OF WRATH

“For I know that whomever...you curse is cursed” (22:6)

There is a mystical concept that Hashem ‘gets angry’ every day (*Avodah Zarah 4a*). This ‘anger’ is the *Midas HaDin*, the Attribute of unyielding justice, with which Hashem judges sinners. Clearly, someone who has transgressed is most vulnerable at that time.

The ‘talent’ of Bilaam was that he was able to discern the exact time in each day when this attribute is active - when Hashem ‘gets angry.’ Thus, Bilaam wanted to direct the *Midas HaDin* against the Jewish People by cursing them and calling forth upon them Divine punishment.

However, Hashem foiled Bilaam’s scheme by ‘closing up’ the *Midas HaDin* and not sitting in judgment. But, necessarily, as there was no *Midas HaDin* during those days, the world received, in its place, the opposite *midah*, the *Midas HaChesed*, the attribute of kindness.

Bilaam realized that due to the influx of this ‘excess kindness,’ the time was propitious to get the Jewish People to sin through immorality, which is, in essence, unbridled ‘kindness.’ Thus he advised Balak accordingly, (*Rashi 24:14*) and Balak was successful in luring Yisrael into degrading themselves with the daughters of *Moav*.

YOU LOSE - I WIN

“So now - please come and curse this people for me, for it is too powerful for me.” (22:6)

When Balak ben Tzipor, the king of Moav was frightened of the Jews, he went to Bilaam and asked him, not to bless *him*, but to *curse* the Jews!

This is the way of the wicked - rather than seek a blessing for themselves, they would prefer a curse for someone else!

What does a Jew do when he finds himself in trouble? He goes to a big *tzaddik* and asks him to give him a *bracha*. He *davens* to the Creator of the world to save him.

(*The Chafetz Chaim*)

Haftorah: Michah 5:6-6:8

WALKING HUMBLY

“O Man, what is good and what does Hashem seek from you, only to do justice and love kindness, and walk humbly with your G-d” (6:8)

“to walk humbly with your G-d” - this refers to the *mitzvos* of providing for a bride and escorting the dead - (*Rashi*)

To perceive the true essence of a person, one must see him both in moments of transcendent joy - providing for a bride - and abject sorrow - escorting the dead. For in these moments of extremity, the inner qualities are revealed in stark relief. Only then can it be seen whether he can be said “to walk humbly with your G-d.”

(*Kochav M'Yaakov*)



Insights into the Zemiros sung at the Shabbos table throughout the generations.

Mah Yeduts- `ashlyn
“How Beloved...”

Like being hedged in by roses
 In it son and daughter will rest

כשושנים סוגה
 בו ינוחו בן ובת

koshoshanim sugoh
 bo yonucho bayn uvas

A hedge of roses is the poetic description of the disciplines imposed by the Torah on Israel (*Shir Hashirim 7:3*). Such a hedge does not use its physical power to prevent one from penetrating it. Its ability to deter a potential trespasser is its beauty, which anyone with sensitivity will respect.

No visible wall stands between the Jew and the violation of the Sabbath. But his love of the beauty and fragrance of the hedge of roses which is made up of the Torah and Rabbinical laws of Shabbos restrain him more effectively than any human policing.

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