BS”D

Parshas Balak 5777

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Bilaam, the Failed Prophet

I have two questions to ask in Parashas Balak:

One, why was it so important for Bilaam’s donkey to speak? After the donkey balked and the angel revealed himself to Bilaam, the angel explained that the donkey had seen him and that Bilaam had struck him unnecessarily. Why did the donkey have to actually talk first? After all, Hashem doesn’t make miracles gratuitously.

The second question is not as obvious. When the angel explained matters to Bilaam, Bilaam immediately says, “*Chatasi*, I have sinned,” and offers to abandon his mission. We find many occasions in Tanach when someone sinned and was confronted by G-d or by a prophet that they did not readily admit their sin until they were almost forced to do so. Look at Adam and Chava, look at Cain, look at King Shaul. Yet here Bilaam immediately admits his error without excuses. This is hardly what you expect from a man like Bilaam.

When we read the Bilaam story carefully, we discover Bilaam’s arrogance. It is, however, on the face of it, subtle enough that it might actually be mistaken for humility.

When the delegation from Midian and Moav come to Bilaam to hire him to curse the B’nei Yisroel, he tells them he must ask G-d. That night Hashem tells Bilaam not to curse the Jews because they are blessed. The next morning Bilaam informs the messengers that G-d does not give permission for him to go with them. He leaves out the part that the Jews are blessed and are not to be cursed. Rashi reads into Bilaam’s words that he will not go with them because they are a low-level delegation. This is borne out by the next sentence that tells how Balak indeed sends a higher-level delegation. Bilaam’s arrogance is subtle; he doesn’t say but rather implies he needs a request from greater people.

After the second delegation comes, Hashem gives Bilaam permission to go, but only if he says exactly what G-d tells him. Bilaam conveniently doesn’t tell this condition to the delegation. He just goes.

Hashem sends the angel to warn Bilaam that he can *only* say what G-d allows him to say.

Bilaam’s response to the angel is also very nuanced. Indeed, he says right away, “I have sinned,” but he leaves out that he has sinned *to G-d*. I didn’t know you wanted to stop me, he says to the angel. If it is wrong *in your eyes*, I will go back. Not if it’s wrong *in G-d’s eyes*, but in the angel’s eyes. Rashi catches this nuance in Bilaam’s response. G-d is capricious, Bilaam implies. He tells me one thing, then He sends an angel to stop me. Well, I guess, I have to go back then. Bilaam is being brazen to G-d. Once more he ignores the fact that he didn’t tell the Moavite delegation that he was limited by G-d as to what he could say. In fact, the angel appeared to him to reinforce that very command.

One final example of Bilaam’s personality. Once he meets Balak, he has to admit that his ability to curse the Jews is limited by G-d. Balak wants him to try anyway.

After three failed efforts in which Bilaam blesses the Jews instead of cursing them, Balk fires Bilaam. Bilaam responds by saying that he told Balak’s original messengers that if Balak gave him a house full of silver and gold, he could only speak G-d’s word.

Really? We do not find Bilaam saying anything like that to the messengers. He never told them he was limited by G-d in all that he could say. Bilaam is rewriting history to show what a good honest man he was from the start. To be sure! Furthermore, he implies that his efforts are worth more than a house full of gold. No one ever offered that to him, but of course a wise, powerful man like Bilaam certainly deserves it!

Bilaam’s idea of what it means to be a prophet was this: a powerful man who can manipulate nature and even manipulate G-d by saying the right word at the right time. The sages say that Bilaam wanted to find a chink in the armor of the Jews. He wanted to find a legitimate complaint against them that G-d’s justice could not ignore and thus he could succeed in bringing a curse upon them.

But the true prophet, the Jewish prophet, is a humble servant of G-d who, because of the holiness of his personality is able to hear the Divine call and the Divine word. Like most of our prophets, Moshe resisted the role. When he, or any other prophet, accepts the gift of prophecy, it is to a certain extent a dissolving of self so that he may be a vessel to the Divine will.

Perhaps to show Bilaam how his approach to prophecy was wrong, G-d showed the donkey the angel and even more, he made the donkey talk. The message was: You think you can attain prophecy by *your* gifts, and you can get what *you* want out of it? But really prophecy is a gift that G-d bestows. He can make a donkey more of a prophet than you, for the donkey sees the angel, and you do not. You think you can speak G-d’s word because you are so great? G-d can make a donkey speak if He chooses to. Abandon your assumptions, the angel and donkey are trying to teach Bilaam. Become a servant of G-d. Of course, Bilaam doesn’t get the message. He doesn’t have it in him, at least at this point, to humble himself.

Bilaam was unable to harm the Jews, but the Jews were able to harm themselves. At the end of the Parsha, we read how the Jewish men were attracted to the Moavite women. Not only did they engage in immoral conduct, they also worshipped the Moavite god, Baal Peor. To add insult to injury, Zimri ben Salu publicly and brazenly said that it was alright for him to consort with the Midianite princess Cozbi bas Tzur. A plague broke out among the Jews that stopped only when Pinchas, son of Elazar, stepped forward and killed Zimri and Cozbi.

The Midrash says that the Moavite women attracted the Jews with a humanitarian argument. They said (Midrash BaMidbar Rabah 20:23), “Why do we love you and you hate us? We’re all children of the same ancestors, Terach and Avraham. You don’t want to eat our cooking; here take cattle and chicken and slaughter them by your Mitzvah standards and eat.” That’s how it started. Later, the Moavite women convinced the men to worship Peor, the Moavite god.

When Zimri stepped forward publicly with the Midianite woman, he was, in fact, saying that there was nothing wrong with what the Jews were doing. He challenged Moshe and all of the Jews by his actions.

Pinchas was not fooled. Not by Zimri and not by the claims of brotherhood made by the gentile women. Indeed, we look forward to a time when all humanity will be united. But not united by shared immoral behavior and the basest form of idol worship. Unity only comes under obedience to G-d’s commandments. When all of mankind recognizes G-d, we will indeed “worship Him all together.” Unity comes through a shared sense of the holy. A humanitarian unity based on depravity and G-dlessness is a sham. Pinchas by his decisive action silenced the Zimris and his ilk. Thus he saved the Jewish people.