

Parshas Mattos 5771

MAKING THE CONNECTION

WAS BILAM SCHITZOPHRENIC?

“And Bilam the son of Be’or was killed by the sword,” (*Bamidbar 31:8*). So the verse in this week’s *parshah* records Bilam’s death, as he was felled in the context of Yisrael’s war of vengeance against their Midianite enemies. Bilam’s ignominious end stands in sharp contradistinction to the sentiments he had previously expressed when he gazed admiringly at the Jewish nation: “Let my soul die the death of the upright ones, and let my end be like theirs,” (*ibid. 23:10*). Bilam hoped to die a natural death, and share in the reward of eternal bliss like the righteous; instead, he was killed, and dispatched to the netherworld (*cf. Rashi to Sanhedrin 105a s.v. “tamus” & s.v. “v’im”*).

Actually, Bilam’s whole essence seems to be one of contradictions. He possessed an intimate knowledge of Hashem, attaining a level of prophecy comparable to that of Moshe Rabbeinu (*Sifri*), yet he transgressed Hashem’s Will at every turn, and conducted his personal life in the most nefarious manner (to the extent that he even wed his donkey [*Avodah Zarah 4b*]). What could possibly account for Bilam’s mysterious behavior? As mentioned above, he yearned for the lot of the “upright ones,” a term which – as identified by the Gemara (*ibid. 25a*) – refers to Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya’akov. This means that Bilam a) recognized the upstanding qualities of the forefathers, b) recognized that through those qualities one merits eternal reward, and c) desired the same for himself. Yet, he lived a life of depravity and evil, guaranteeing that he would earn just the opposite! What was he thinking?

The answer, explains R’ Chaim Shmuelevitz (*Sichos Mussar*,

5731, *ch. 27*; 5732, *ch. 29*), is both simple and tragic. The laws governing accidental defilement of the Sanctuary prove illustrative of the notion R’ Chaim aims to highlight.

PUTTING TWO AND TWO TOGETHER

An individual who incurs ritual impurity may not enter the sanctified confines of the Sanctuary; if one does so (accidentally), he may gain atonement by bringing a sacrifice (known as *korban oleh v’yoreid*; *cf. Vayikra 5:1-13*). Commonly, it is a state of temporary forgetfulness which causes a violation, as the Mishnah in *Shevuos (1:2)* illustrates:

כל שיש בו ידיעה בתחלה וידיעה בסוף והעלם בנתיים, הרי זה בעולה ויורד.

“One who has prior knowledge (of his state of defilement) as well as final knowledge, but has forgotten in between is liable for an *oleh v’yoreid*.”

The standard scenario entails an individual who was aware of his state of defilement. He temporarily forgot, and entered the Sanctuary. Subsequently, he recalls that he is impure and recognizes his violation, which may be rectified through the bringing of the sacrifice.

In actuality, it is possible to become liable for this sacrifice even without such an overt display of temporary “memory loss.” Rashi (*Shevuos 5a, s.v. yedi’as*) lays out this more nuanced scenario: An individual was *knowledgeable* of the law (that through certain types of contact – e.g., with an unclean creature – one incurs defilement), was *aware* that he made contact (with an article of defilement), and entered the Sanctuary *without forgetting any of the above*; yet he may still be eligible for the sacrifice of *unwillful* violation! How

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is this possible? Rashi provides the key words: לא התבונן לשום על לבו שנקטמה (He neglected to take the fact of his defilement to heart). In other words, he knew that he came in contact with an agent of impurity; he knew *intellectually* what happens when one comes in contact with such an article; he simply failed to make the personal connection, and conclude that he himself was actually impure.

A MESSAGE FROM THE SURGEON GENERAL...

This same failure to internalize in one's heart what he knows with his mind is surprisingly prevalent in our everyday lives. For instance, a smoker knows that cigarettes are harmful; he knows that he's burning out the protective follicles of his lungs and obliterating their immunity to disease; yet he continues to engage in this practice. How does one reconcile

his behavior in light of his awareness? It would appear that the phenomenon mentioned above by Rashi is once again in play. He simply does not make that personal connection, and neglects to translate the theory into reality (*cf. Michtav M'Elياهو, vol. 1, p. 79*).

In truth, this is the exact strategy the *yetzer hara* (evil inclination) employs to lead us to sin. For example, how can anyone succumb to the temptation to speak *lashon hara* (evil gossip)? Doesn't he *know* that this act is considered a grievous transgression, which carries with it severe retribution? The Gemara in Sotah (3a) states that a person only commits a sin if he is first overcome with a spirit of insanity. The implication could be in keeping with the aforementioned notion: Although the violator knows *intellectually* that his action is both improper and harmful, he fails to relate this knowledge to himself. As if overcome with a bout of temporary foolishness, he ignores that which he really knows to be true. Had this individual paused for a moment to reflect on his deed, he may very well have come to his senses and made the right choice.

R' Chaim Shmuelevitz explains Bilam's conduct in a similar manner. How could someone who possessed intimate knowledge of his Creator behave with the utmost of depravity? How could one who yearned for a portion in the World to Come stoop to levels of unprecedented wickedness? The answer seems to be that Bilam chose to ignore Rashi's comments. Had he taken out a moment to examine his ways, he may have internalized in his heart what he knew in his mind. But he did not bother, and so his actions and character remained entirely disconnected from his intellectual knowledge. Hopefully, he will serve as a model for us, to avoid repeating similar mistakes.

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