

Parschas Balak 5772

EARNED REPUTATION

WAS BILAM REALLY SO BAD?

Chazal leave no doubt as to their sentiments toward the seminal figure of this week's *parshah*: the prophet Bilam. Not only do they accord him the appellation "Bilam Harasha (Bilam the Wicked)," but they have choice things to say about those who follow in his path. As the Mishnah in Avos states (5:19):

עֵין רָעָה, וְרוּחַ גְּבוּהָהּ, וְנִפְשׁ רַחְבָּהּ, מִתְלַמְּדוּי שֶׁל בְּלַעַם הַרְשָׁע... תְּלַמְּדוּי שֶׁל בְּלַעַם הַרְשָׁע יוֹרְשִׁין גֵּיהֶנֶם וְיוֹרְדִין לְבָאֵר שַׁחַת, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר וְאַתָּה אֱלֹקִים תּוֹרִידִם לְבָאֵר שַׁחַת, אֲנִשֵׁי דָמִים וּמְרִמָּה לֹא יִחְצוּ יְמֵיהֶם...

"Those who possess an evil eye, are haughty of spirit and have expansive desires are considered 'disciples' of Bilam Harashah... The disciples of Bilam Harashah inherit a portion in Gehinom and descend to the nethermost depths, as is stated (*Tehillim 55:24*): 'And You, O G-d, shall bring them down to the nethermost pit; they are men of blood and trickery and will not live out half of their days...'"

Not the most flattering description.

But what may seem somewhat puzzling is the picture of Bilam one may acquire through a cursory reading of the *parshah's* narrative itself. Bilam is cajoled by King Balak and the Moavites to utilize his legendary power to place a curse on the nation of Yisrael, to facilitate their defeat at the hands of Moav. But Bilam initially refuses and repeatedly informs Balak that he is powerless in the face of Hashem's Will: "Even if Balak would fill his house with silver and gold and present them to me, I cannot violate the Word of Hashem" (*Bamidbar 22:18*). With such an answer, Bilam almost comes across as an earnest and *frum* individual!

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MOVING MOUNTAINS

The Beis Halevi provides insight with an analogy. Someone is approached by his friend with a daring recommendation: "Let's see if you can give our king a slap in the face," he suggests. Upon declining the offer, the individual answers, "I wouldn't do that — not for all the money in the world!" But consider a similar scenario, in which this individual is asked to pick up a mountain and carry it on his shoulders. Surely, he would likewise refuse; but this time, his answer would be somewhat different. No longer would he even mention money, for the whole idea is so impossible. In the first scenario, the statement, "I wouldn't slap the king for all the money in the world" carries the following interpretation: "Technically, it is possible for me to do that, but no thanks, I simply refuse, no matter what you pay me." But lifting mountains is another matter. It doesn't make sense to state, "I wouldn't lift that mountain, no matter what you pay me," because that would imply that he really could have if he wanted to — which is obviously not the case.

When Bilam was asked to flout Hashem's Will and curse His chosen people, Bilam should have issued the correct response: "Out of the question; that's unthinkable and impossible." Instead, he adopted the tactic suitable only for an act whose performance falls within the realm of possibility: "I wouldn't go against Hashem's Word — not for all the money in the world." As explained above, such a statement implies that it is *possible* to foil Hashem's plan, but Bilam the devoted servant is being nice enough to restrain himself in this instance. This, explains the Beis Halevi, is a window into Bilam's true nature and belief system: he felt he could prevail against Hashem if he wanted to. This is certainly a heretical belief of the highest order (*P'ninim Mishulchan Gavohah, parshas Balak*).

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THE THREE LEVELS OF LAW

In a well-known dissertation, R' Elchanan Wasserman (*Kuntress Divrei Sofrim*) presents another approach in assessing the true colors of Bilam's behavior in this week's *parshah*. As mentioned, it may almost appear — on the surface — that everything was in order. When the offer was made to Bilam, he consulted with the Almighty; he made clear to Balak that he could only do or say what Hashem permitted him to do; and not once, it seems, did he ever violate an explicit command of Hashem. Even after the episode of the donkey and the angel, wherein Bilam received a dressing-down from this disparate pair, he offered to cancel his trip to Balak but was told that he may “proceed with the men; however, you may speak only that which I will place in your mouth” (*Bamidbar 22:35*).

R' Elchanan develops a principle that is quite far-reaching in its scope. Based on a Scriptural verse — ... **צִוִּיתִי... דִּבַּרְתִּי... עָלְתָה עַל-לְבִי** (“I have commanded... I have spoken... I have contemplated”) (*Yirmiyahu 19:5*) — he asserts that there are three main categories into which fall the dictates of Hashem: **צִוִּיתִי** (“I have commanded”) refers to the *mitzvos* of Biblical origin, i.e., those that are *commanded* to us through the Torah. Another gradation refers to the expression of Divine Will as revealed through one of His prophets, this aspect being reflected by the term **דִּבַּרְתִּי** (“I have spoken”), i.e., I have transmitted my dictate by communicating through a prophet.

The final category is represented by the phrase **עָלְתָה עַל-לְבִי**, referring to the “reflections of Hashem’s heart”. This final aspect may best be understood by the Targum, who translates: **רְעוּא קְדָמִי** (My Will). That is, aside from the empirical and explicit commands of Hashem as contained in the Torah and as delivered through prophecy, there exists yet another fundamental feature of Divine service: the inherent Will of Hashem — even when not explicitly stated. (According to R' Elchanan, this category includes all of the Rabbinic enactments. While items such as the *muktzeh* prohibition [against handling certain mundane objects on Shabbos] may not possess an explicit Biblical reference, the Rabbis’ promulgation of the law reflects the Divine Will. That is, they were able to determine that it was the Will of Hashem that we refrain from handling *muktzeh* objects.)

This was where Bilam was corrupted; and his statement reveals his disdain for the totality of Divine Service. Although perhaps never explicitly stated or prophetically communicated to Bilam, it was clearly the Will of Hashem that His chosen people should not be cursed. What was Bilam’s attitude toward this state of affairs? “Even if Balak would fill his house with silver and gold and present them to me, I cannot violate *the Word* of Hashem.” In Bilam’s eyes, he felt obliged only to respect the explicit pronouncements of Hashem. Regarding a suggestion to violate the unstated but understood *Will of Hashem* — for that, Bilam would respond: “Name your price.”