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Leib ben Dovid a”h
a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of his *neshamah*

PARSAHAS BALAK 5775

Bilam and (*L’havdil Elef v’alfei Havdalos*) R’ Yose ben Kisma

One of the areas whereby Chazal emphasize Bilam’s low character and nefarious motives takes place near the beginning of this week’s *parshah*. Balak King of Moav, intent on solving his “Jewish Problem”, reaches out to Bilam the prophet/sorcerer/imprecation expert to place a curse on B’nei Yisrael. Bilam confers with the Almighty, Who (initially) informs him to refuse the request. Balak persists in his request, to which Bilam responds (*Bamidbar* 22:18):
וְאִם יִתְּרֵלִי בָּלַק מְלֵא בֵּיתוֹ כֶּסֶף וְזָהָב לֹא אוּכַל לְעַבֵּר אֶת־פִּי ד’ – “(Even) if Balak were to give me his entire house filled with silver and gold, I would not be able to transgress the command of Hashem.” While on the surface everything may seem kosher, in fact, the inference indicates the opposite. As Rashi states (*ibid.*): “From here we see that he possessed an avaricious nature, craving the wealth of others.” In referring to this “house filled with silver and gold”, Bilam revealed where his eyes and heart really lay.

Same Answer, Different Meanings

The issue the commentators point to is that there appears to be a similar incident, recorded in Pirkei Avos. Only here, the protagonist, R’ Yose ben Kisma, is heralded as a selfless *tzaddik* (righteous individual) willing to sacrifice everything for what’s right. In the Mishnah (6:9), R’ Yose relates his encounter:

פַּעַם אַחַת הָיִיתִי מֵהַלֵּךְ בְּדֶרֶךְ וּפָגַע בִּי אָדָם אֶחָד, וְנָתַן לִי שְׁלוֹם, וְהִחֲזִירְתִּי לוֹ שְׁלוֹם, אָמַר לִי, רַבִּי, מֵאִיזָה מְקוֹם אַתָּה, אָמַרְתִּי לוֹ, מֵעִיר גְּדוֹלָה שֶׁל חֲכָמִים וְשֶׁל סוֹפְרִים אֲנִי, אָמַר לִי, רַבִּי רְצוֹנָךְ שֶׁתְּדוּר עִמָּנוּ בְּמִקְוָמֵנוּ וְאֲנִי אֶתֶּן לְךָ אֶלֶף אֲלָפִים דִּנְרֵי זָהָב וְאַבְנֵים טוֹבוֹת וּמְרַגְלִיּוֹת, אָמַרְתִּי לוֹ אִם אַתָּה נוֹתֵן לִי כֹל כֶּסֶף וְזָהָב וְאַבְנֵים טוֹבוֹת וּמְרַגְלִיּוֹת שֶׁבְּעוֹלָם, אֵינִי דָר אֶלָּא בְּמִקְוָם תּוֹרָה.

“One time, I was going along the way when I met up with a certain man. He greeted me with ‘Shalom’, and I returned the greeting. He said to me: ‘Rebbi, from what place do you hail?’ I said to him: ‘I am from a great city of wise men and scholars.’ He said to me: ‘Rebbi, would you like to dwell with us in our location? If so, I will give you millions of gold coins, precious stones, and pearls.’ I said to him: ‘If you were to give me all of the silver, gold, precious stones, and pearls that exist in the world, I still would choose to live only in a place of Torah!’”

At first glance, R’ Yose’s reply to his supplicant is reminiscent of Bilam’s response to Balak. Like the gentile prophet, R’ Yose also states that he can’t betray his principles – “not for all the money in the world.” Yet, no one accuses R’ Yose of trying to pass on any hints. What, indeed, is the difference? They seemed to have expressed the same sentiment; yet in one case, Chazal detect an undercurrent of greed, while in the other, they have nothing but high praise!

One could have suggested (as some do; cf. *Emes L'Ya'akov* to Avos 6:9, footnote 176) that there is not necessarily any significant difference in the formulation of their answers; rather, Chazal accurately interpreted their respective intentions based on their inherent nature. The Mishnah elsewhere in Avos (5:19) states that Bilam possessed a “*nefesh rechavah*” (craving soul); based on this knowledge, it stands to reason that his answer was dictated by his greed. R' Yose ben Kisma, who is known for his piety, surely did not harbor such coarse intentions.

However, as stated, Rashi intimates that the order was reversed; that is, it was from Bilam's response that Chazal inferred that he was a covetous individual. Apparently, Rashi detected some distinction in the actual wording of their answer which accounted for the opposing assessments. The question remains, then: what was the difference?

Know Your Man

R' Ya'akov Kamenetsky (*Emes L'Ya'akov, ibid.*) points out a concrete distinction. True, in both refusals, both stated that even a large sum of money wouldn't make them change their minds. The difference lay in the feasibility of their “non-offer”. Notice Bilam's careful wording, in which he utilized defined and limited terminology: “(Even) if Balak were to give me *his entire house* filled with silver and gold, I would not be able to transgress the command of Hashem.” That's only one house of which Bilam was speaking. But he left room for a counter-offer. “Okay, you won't do it for one gold-filled house. But maybe if we threw in a second or third treasure-filled structure...” That's where Bilam was hoping the conversation would turn. But R' Yose ben Kisma was unequivocal: “Even if you were to give me all of the silver, gold, precious stones, and pearls that exist in the world, I still would choose to live only in a place of Torah!” That basically covers it all. R' Yose obviously would brook no compromise.

Perhaps we may suggest another approach, based on an observation of the Maharal (*Derech Hachaim*). Where did Chazal perceive the difference? Perhaps their assessment came not so much from a distinction in the formulation of their response, but rather from the nature of *the individuals who were making the offering*. In Bilam's case, he was dealing with Balak, a would-be employer of flesh-and-blood. Bilam had no reason to expect that Balak was making anything other than a serious offer. And so Bilam knew he had someone with whom to negotiate. As such, he tried to drive a hard bargain.

But the encounter of R' Yose ben Kisma was a different matter. “One time, I was going along the way when I met up with a certain man.” Who was this mysterious figure? According to the Maharal, it was none other than the *yetzer hara*, come to try and tempt R' Yose away from the proper path.

This is where Chazal saw to draw a distinction. It became apparent that R' Yose was on to the stranger's identity and plan. He realized he wasn't dealing with a regular “negotiating partner” looking to close a deal. As opposed to Bilam, then, when he insisted he would not betray his ideals for the promise of wealth – he really meant it.