**Parsha Potpourri**

**Parshas Balak – Vol. 12, Issue 36**

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**ויבא אלקים אל בלעם לילה ויאמר לו אם לקרא לך באו האנשים קום לך אתם**

**ואך את הדבר אשר אדבר אליך אותו תעשה ויקם בלעם בבקר ויחבש את**

**אתנו וילך עם שרי מואב ויחר אף אלהים כי הולך הוא (22:20-22)**

The back-and-forth between Hashem and Bilaam in the beginning of Parshas Balak is difficult to comprehend. Initially, when Balak’s representatives came to invite Bilaam to curse the Jews, Hashem told Bilaam in no uncertain terms (22:12): לא תלך עמהם – do not go with them. Bilaam refused, and Balak responded by sending higher-ranking officials. Hashem relented and explicitly permitted Bilaam to go with them, which he did the following morning. Curiously, the next verse relates that Hashem was angry with Bilaam for going. Why did Hashem change His initial position, and why did He get upset when Bilaam followed His instructions?

The Vilna Gaon brilliantly explains that there are two Hebrew words which mean “with them” – עמהם and אתם. The word עמהם is used when the subject is identical to the others, while אתם is appropriate when the subject is similar, but not identical, to the others.

Applying this distinction to Bilaam, Balak’s agents wanted him to go with them in kindred spirit, united in their plan to curse the Jewish nation. Not surprisingly, Hashem replied לא תלך עמהם – you may not go together with them if your motives are identical to theirs. When Hashem subsequently appeared to relent, it was with one critical condition: קום לך אתם – you may travel with them, but only if you are not united with them in your intentions. Hashem permitted Bilaam to say only what He would command him to say. Bilaam, with his intense hatred for the Jews, refused to accept this subtle but crucial distinction. The Torah records that וילך עם שרי מואב – Bilaam went joined with them in their mission, and it was precisely at that moment that Hashem got angry at Bilaam’s refusal to follow His directions.

Using this dichotomy, we may resolve another difficulty. After repeatedly obstructing the path of Bilaam’s donkey, the angel gave him permission to travel with Balak’s officers. Rashi comments (22:35) בדרך שאדם רוצה לילך בה מוליכין אותו – a person is led in the direction in which he wishes to go. In this case, Bilaam was given permission to go with Balak’s agents to curse the Jews. Why didn’t Rashi make this comment previously when Hashem allowed Bilaam to go with them?

The Vilna Gaon explains that Hashem permitted Bilaam to walk with them but not to be united with them in their wicked intentions. After blocking his way, the angel said to Bilaam לך עם האנשים, giving him permission for the first time to join them in their diabolical scheme. It was precisely at this point that Rashi noted that he was permitted to travel on the path that he truly desired.

While this is a beautiful linguistic insight to help us understand the events of Parshas Balak, on a deeper level, what was Bilaam’s underlying problem? Rav Elchonon Wasserman explains that Bilaam was unwilling to completely subjugate his personal wishes to Hashem. Even though he told Balak’s messengers that he was unable to transgress the word of Hashem (22:18), internally he still maintained his desires and attempted to find loopholes to get Hashem’s permission in backhanded ways. He emphasized that he could not violate Hashem’s explicitly-spoken words, but what he could read between the lines and infer to be Hashem’s desire was not included. This stands in contrast to the Mishnah in Avos (2:4) which teaches בטל רצונך מפני רצונו – nullify your will before that of Hashem.

In light of the explanations of the Vilna Gaon and Rav Elchonon, it becomes clear that Bilaam’s underlying problem was that he only heard what he wanted to hear. He had a clear agenda – his desire to curse the Jewish people and destroy them – and he interpreted all of his interactions through this distorted lens, instead of being open to viewing them objectively. Not surprisingly, Bilaam’s strong predisposition caused him to pervert all of Hashem’s messages to fit his personal agenda.

This can be understood more deeply in light of an explanation of Rav Yehoshua Leib Diskin. The Gemora (Yevamos 49b) teaches that one of the differences between Moshe and other prophets is that Moshe received his prophecies in an אספקלריא המאירה – lucid and polished prophetic vision – while Hashem communicated with other prophets through an אספקלריא שאינה מאירה – unclear vision. What is the difference between them? The Maharil Diskin explains that Hashem spoke to Moshe directly, as the Torah testifies (12:8) פה אל פה אדבר בו – mouth to mouth do I speak to him, with no room for confusion. Other prophets received unclear messages in the form of metaphoric parables that had to be deciphered and interpreted. This of course does not mean they erred and gave us incorrect information, just that it required extra effort on the prophet’s part to correctly figure out and understand Hashem’s message.

Taking this one step further, Rav Elozar Menachem Shach explains that part of the test of the Akeidah (Binding of Yitzchok) was for Avrohom to correctly interpret Hashem's instructions and not to distort them in light of his personal biases and love for Yitzchok. Rashi writes that Avrohom was puzzled by an apparent contradiction: Hashem had originally promised him (Bereishis 21:12) that Yitzchok and his descendants would be considered Avrohom’s offspring, only to apparently change His mind and command him (Bereishis 22:2) to offer Yitzchok as a sacrifice.

Avrohom’s biases could have convinced him to use this difficulty as a basis to reinterpret the command and to conclude that Hashem couldn’t have really meant that he should slaughter Yitzchok, but Avrohom didn’t hear what he wanted to. He was able to hear what Hashem was truly telling him because he was able to push aside his own agenda, in contrast to Bilaam, who could not.

**לא הביט און ביעקב ולא ראה עמל בישראל (23:21)**

Bilaam praised the Jewish people for the fact that Hashem doesn’t see any עמל – toil and hard work – among them. This is difficult to understand. In what way is it a compliment to say that the Jews don’t work hard in their service of Hashem?

The Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh explains that although the Jews certainly exert themselves to the fullest in their study of Torah and performance of mitzvos, these activities should intrinsically be enjoyable and invigorating. Thus, no matter how much effort a person puts into doing mitzvos, he won’t appear to be toiling, but will always be refreshed. This praise is exclusive to the Jewish people, as nothing else in the world has this unique ability to invigorate.

Of the thousands of parables developed by the Dubno Maggid, there were three which the Kotzker Rebbe declared were said with Ruach HaKodesh (Divine Inspiration). With a theme similar to the Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh, one of those three was used to explain a verse from the Haftorah for Parshas Vayikra (Yeshaya 43:22), in which the Navi rebukes the Jewish people, ולא אותי קראת יעקב כי יגעת בי ישראל – “But you did not call Me, Yaakov, for you grew weary of Me, Yisroel.”

The Dubno Maggid explained as follows: a businessman once returned home from his travels and hired one of the young porters at the train station to carry his luggage to his home. Upon arriving at the man’s house, the porter put down the bags and approached the man to receive his payment. The traveler took one look at the boy and informed him that he had mistakenly brought the wrong suitcases.

The surprised porter questioned how the businessman could make this claim with such certainty when he hadn’t even seen the bags, which were still outside. The man explained that it was clear from the boy’s appearance that he had sweated and exerted tremendous effort to transport the luggage. As the bags which belonged to the businessman were filled with lightweight items which wouldn’t have required such exertion, it must be that the porter mistakenly brought the wrong suitcases.

Similarly, Yeshaya relates that Hashem told the Jewish people, “You haven’t called Me” in your performance of mitzvos. Yeshaya teaches elsewhere (40:31), וקוי ד' יחליפו כח – those who look to and trust in Hashem will be constantly strengthened and refreshed. Just as the businessman informed the porter of his error, the Navi chastises the Jews that they must not be learning and doing mitzvos for Hashem’s sake. The proof of this claim is that instead of feeling renewed and energized, you grew weary of Me.

**Parsha Points to Ponder (and sources which discuss them):**

1. The Mishnah in Avos (5:8) teaches that just before Shabbos at the end of the week of Creation, Hashem created ten things, one of which was the mouth of Bilaam’s donkey and its miraculous ability to speak. Does this mean that Bilaam’s donkey actually existed from the time of Creation and was at the time of this incident more than 2000 years old? (Rav Ovadiah Bartenura, Tiferes Yisroel, and Tosefos Yom Tov Avos 5:8; Pirkei D’Rebbi Eliezer 30, K'Motzei Shalal Rav)
2. Hashem attempted to impede Bilaam by sending a sword-wielding angel to block his path, but only his donkey saw it. When the donkey tried to turn and avoid the angel, Bilaam grew angry at the donkey, striking it and threatening to kill it (22:23). As Bilaam’s power lay in his mouth, why didn’t he simply curse his donkey? (Baal HaTurim, Paneiach Raza, Oznayim L’Torah)
3. The Gemora in Pesachim (111a) teaches that it is forbidden for a woman to walk between two men or a man to walk between two women. Should this happen, the Gemora advises saying certain verses to minimize the damage caused. The two verses mentioned by Rashi in his commentary are both in Parshas Balak. What are they?

**Answers to Points to Ponder:**

1) **Rav Ovadiah Bartenura** writes that what Hashem created at the end of the first week of Creation was the ability for Bilaam's donkey to speak, but not the actual donkey. The **Tosefos Yom Tov** suggests that this explanation is necessary because it would be impossible for the donkey to have been created at that time and to have lived for so long. The **Tiferes Yisroel** adds that if the donkey had lived for more than 2000 years, the Torah certainly would have mentioned such a tremendous miracle. However, **Rav Yaakov Emden** argues that animals can live for so many years and cites a Medrash (Bereishis Rabbah 12:18) which says that the bulls donated by the tribal leaders at the time of the inauguration of the Mishkan lived until the building of the Temple, where they were brought as offerings after living close to 500 years. Additionally, the **Pirkei D'Rebbi Eliezer** teaches that the donkey on which Avrohom rode to the Akeidah was the son of Bilaam's donkey which was created at the end of the week of Creation, clearly indicating that the donkey itself was created at that time and not just its ability to speak.

2) The **Baal HaTurim** and **Paneiach Raza** answer that Bilaam wasn’t able to indiscriminately issue curses whenever he wanted. The Gemora (Berachos 7a) teaches that he was able to determine when Hashem was angry and to curse at that time. At the time of his confrontation with his donkey, he recognized that Hashem wasn’t angry, so he was unable to curse the donkey. Alternatively, Bilaam was planning to curse the Jews later that day, and cursing his donkey would “use up” his quota and render him unable to curse the Jews. The **Oznayim L’Torah** explains that Bilaam’s curses didn’t magically take effect. Rather, he was able to tap into the sources of impurity in a person to cause him to sin, for which he would be punished. However, this concept only applies to people, so he was unable to curse his donkey.

3) The Gemora says that if this happens, one should say verses which begin and end with Hashem’s name ק-ל or which begin and end with the word לא. The example of the former is 23:22-23: ק-ל מוציאם ממצרים כתועפת ראם לו כי לא נחש ביעקב ולא קסם בישראל כעת יאמר ליעקב ולישראל מה פעל ק-ל – It is Hashem Who brought them out of Egypt according to the power of His loftiness, for there is no divination in Yaakov and no sorcery in Yisroel; even now it is said to Yaakov and Yisroel what Hashem has wrought.” The example of the latter is 23:19: לא איש ק-ל ויכזב ובן אדם ויתנחם ההוא אמר ולא יעשה ודבר ולא יקימנה – Hashem is not a man that He should be deceitful, nor a son of man that He should relent. Would He say and not do, or speak and not confirm?”

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