

# United We Stand

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Parshas Balak

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## The Parsha's Path

This week's Parsha relates how Balak, the king of Moav, attempted to recruit Bilaam, a non-Jewish prophet and sorcerer, to curse the Jewish people in light of the former's fear that they would fight and defeat him. Bilaam and Balak both shrug off repeated signals from G-d that this attempt was both against His Will and doomed to fail, ultimately resulting in Bilaam uncontrollably forced to bless the Jews. While many lessons regarding humility, submitting to the Divine Will, Divine intervention on our behalf, and the nature of antisemitism are woven through the narrative, these fail to explain its anomalous nature. Nowhere else does the Torah interrupt the narrative of the Jewish people to focus on the activities of non-Jews. True, their actions are relevant to the Jewish story, but the fact that the Torah devotes so much time to these activities is striking. Indeed, Chazal single out this Parsha in their statement "Moshe wrote his book, the Parsha of Bilaam, and the book of Iyov" (Baba Basra 14b). What message is so singular to Bilaam that it could only be conveyed through him?

Rabbi Yoel Bin-Nun suggests that as an outsider, Bilaam could offer praise of the Jewish people (even if divinely coerced) that insiders could not. Bilaam's blessings consist of the most lavish and unmitigated praise of the Jewish people in the entire Torah, as just a sampling reveals:

*He perceived no iniquity in Jacob, and saw no perversity in Israel. H', his G-d, is with him, and the friendship of the King is with him ...*

*For there is no divination in Jacob and no sorcery in Israel ...*

*Behold! The people will arise like a lion cub and raise itself like a lion ... (23:21-23)*

*How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel ... (2:4).*

An insider would have neither the perspective nor the credibility to declare Israel's greatness in such terms; he is on the one hand suspect of bias and on the other hand too close to the imperfections which plague the book of Bamidbar and result in seemingly constant Divine rebuke and punishment. In contrast, there can be no greater testament to our greatness than the praise of our enemies.

Perhaps this is the deeper meaning of the statement in Micha (6:5): *My people – remember what Balak, king of Moav, devised, and what Bilaam son of Be'or answered him, from Shittim to Gilgal, in order that you may know God's righteous ways.* While at first glance the Prophet is merely saying that we should appreciate how G-d saved us from Bilaam's curse, perhaps the real kindness of G-d was in

how, through Bilaam, He revealed how treasured we truly are, even with all the rebukes and punishments.

I believe this message is especially important to remember in these times. As insiders who are more acutely attuned to our nation's flaws and who experience the sting of Divine rebuke, it's all too easy to get pessimistic and negative, which only increases hate, division, and despair. Parshas Balak reminds us that sometimes we need to look at ourselves from an outsider's perspective to *perceive no iniquity in Jacob*, and realize how astonishingly amazing we all are. While we cannot absolve ourselves from personal responsibility and must always focus on introspection and improvement, we must never confuse "this is beneath us" with "we're terrible".

Bilaam ultimately did succeed in harming Israel. In next week's Parsha it is revealed that he is the instigator behind a joint Moabite-Midianite plot to seduce Jewish men into harlotry and idolatry which marks the end of this week's Parsha; as great as we may be, we are not invulnerable to foreign influences and temptations. On the other hand, Bilaam was killed and the Jewish people survived. True, it would have been better if we didn't sin, but though we may stumble, the Jewish people continue to remain as a beacon of light.

## Deeper Meanings

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*Then G-d opened the donkey's mouth (22:28).*

This week's Parsha tells the story of how Bilaam, the non-Jewish prophet, was recruited by the Moabite king Balak to curse the Jews. Since Bilaam's powers are dependent on G-d, Bilaam consults with Him about going with Balak's messengers, and G-d refuses. However, after Balak continues sending more messengers, Bilaam consults with G-d again, this time getting permission to go with them with numerous conditions, including not being allowed to curse the Jews and effectively making the trip pointless and even forbidden. Bilaam seems to ignore these conditions, omitting them from his report to Balak's messengers, and joins them in journeying to Balak.

On the way, G-d enlightens Bilaam's donkey to the presence of a sword-bearing angel in the field it's traveling in. The donkey turns to the side. The angel appears again at a narrower pass and the donkey, in moving to avoid it, injures Bilaam's leg. Finally the angel appears at a pass where he blocks the road entirely, and the donkey stops entirely.

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Bilaam, oblivious to the angel, strikes the donkey in anger. G-d then opens the donkey's mouth and enables it to speak. "What have I done to you that you have beaten me these three times?"

Bilaam replied, "You made a mockery of me! If I had a sword with me, I'd kill you!"

The donkey then asked, "Look, I am the donkey that you've been riding all along until today. Have I been in the habit of doing this to you?"

Bilaam replied, "No."

Then the angel spoke directly to Bilaam, repeating the donkey's initial question. "Why have you beaten your donkey these three times? It is I who came out as an adversary, for the errand is obnoxious to me."

Rabbeinu Bachya points out that the behavior of Bilaam throughout this episode is highly peculiar. Anyone, and certainly an expert in metaphysical matters such as Bilaam, would have recognized the peculiarity in his donkey's behavior. Yet even after three consecutive incidents, instead of pausing to reflect on the omen his donkey may have been conveying, he just struck it and urged it to go further.

This is made all the more striking by Bilaam's response to his donkey. Bilaam did not act at all surprised or befuddled by the fact that his donkey could suddenly talk. He did not pause to think about what it meant. In fact, he misunderstood what his donkey was telling him. When his donkey asked, "What have I done?" The donkey meant what he clarified after Bilaam misunderstood him, that is, what had the donkey ever done before that would indicate that now he was merely being insolent. Bilaam, however, understood the question to mean, what had the donkey done right now, which was fairly obvious. If Bilaam had any sense, he would have realized what the donkey meant from the outset.

Ultimately, Bilaam's only reply to the donkey once he realized what his donkey was saying was - "No" - the donkey was not accustomed to acting in a way that appeared insolent. There is no sign of further comprehension on Bilaam's part or a willingness to reevaluate his plans. It is only when the angel of G-d spells it out to Bilaam directly, and Bilaam is literally forced to confront the gravity of his situation, that he offers to turn back, but at that point it is too late. Bilaam had shown his willingness to dodge the righteous path at every opportunity, so G-d allowed him to continue his attempt at his evil plan.

While not offering too much elaboration, Rabbeinu Bachya notes that the only other talking animal in the Torah is the snake in the Garden of Eden. If we look at that story, the similarities and differences are startling. While Bilaam's donkey did everything to prevent Bilaam from sinning, the snake didn't need much to get Chava to sin - according to the simple reading of the Torah, in a couple of sentences Chava was sold on the idea. Like Bilaam, Chava did not pause to wonder about the snake's ability to talk - despite the fact that she was presumably familiar with the other animals who could not talk, as the Torah attests regarding Adam (2:20).

Perhaps the Torah is teaching us that no matter what people tell us and no matter who says it - even an animal - and no matter how clear or forcefully they make their point, we have a tendency to hear what we want to hear and ignore what we want to ignore. Chava's desire to believe the snake's promises and Bilaam's yearning to curse the Jews blinded them to the hesitations they should have had - in Chava's case, she accepted the claims of the snake without question, and in Bilaam's case, he ignored every indication that he should turn back. They somehow managed to overlook the unusual or shocking phenomenon of talking animals so that they could pursue their desires undisturbed. They refused to be shaken.

There are many people that refuse to be shaken, and to some extent we're all guilty of it. Every event in our lives and every piece of advice, inspiration, or idea we hear is a chance for contemplation and self-evaluation. Every piece of information we hear - whether it be in health, politics, Torah values, safety, psychology, or anything else - offers us the chance to ignore it, accept it blindly, or examine it critically and objectively. We are constantly being confronted with opportunities and challenges to shape how we think and how we live, but if we're firmly set in our ways and determined to maintain certain attitudes, beliefs, and lifestyles, nothing in the world can change that. Not everything in our lives needs constant reevaluation - sometimes it's clear as day we're just doing the will of G-d. But if we look at ourselves honestly and recognize that maybe somewhere in our lives we haven't been listening to G-d as closely as we could, some areas where we may have allowed other voices to take control, we'll come to see that there's a whole lot we can learn from.

## Goal of the week

When davening *Modim*, have in mind how thankful you are for being part of the Jewish people.

*This week's bulletin is dedicated for a Refuah Sheleima for Shaindel Temma bas Rochel Zlotta, Masha Sarah bas Teiviah Leah, Reuven ben Golda, Ephraim Melech ben Teilah, Gavriel Margoliot Ben Malka, and all those injured by the war and acts of terror, as well as for the safe return of all the hostages and soldiers. Please have them in mind in your Tefillos.*

## Have A Great Shabbos !!

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