

BILAM'S BIG APPETITE

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Chukas - Balak

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Today's Learning:

Sukkah 1:11-2:1

Orach Chaim 307:20-22

Daf Yomi (Bavli): Ketubot 107

Daf Yomi (Yerushalmi): Kiddushin 2

In the second of this week's two parashot, Balak, we read of Bilam's attempt to curse the Jewish people. It appears from the verses and from statements in the gemara that this was a real threat to Bnei Yisrael, writes R' Elya Meir Bloch z"l (1895-1955; founder and rosh yeshiva of the Telshe Yeshiva in Cleveland). But why? Why should Bilam's words have any effect?

R' Bloch explains: Things which are foreign and supernatural to us were perfectly normal and obvious to our ancestors. Why? Because, despite our supposed sophistication, we live on a lower plane of existence than those earlier generations did. Specifically, our spiritual stature (in R' Bloch's words, our "shiur komah", lit. "measure of height") is lower and we cannot see or understand certain things which were commonplace in earlier times.

We all know that when one puts a seed in the earth and gives it proper care, a plant will grow. Many people, however, do not understand how this happens, and even fewer understand why it happens. Do we therefore ridicule the fruit of that plant? No, we take for granted that the fruit exists, and we eat it. Similarly, there are other forces at work in the world, including the power to curse, and the fact that we cannot understand them does not make them less real.

The power of the mouth and the ability of a seed to produce fruit actually come from the same place - they are extensions of G-d's Will in creating the world. And, because Bilam's powers were as real as the fruit we eat, he did pose a threat to Bnei Yisrael. (Quoted in Peninei Da'at)

"This is the decree of the Torah . . ."

(19:2)

Rashi comments: Because the yetzer hara and the gentiles tease the Jewish people saying, "What is this mitzvah and what is its reason?" therefore the Torah says, "This is the _decree_ of the Torah," and you have no right to question it.

Why is the yetzer hara's and the gentiles' question referred to as "teasing"? R' Yehuda Leib z"l (late 18th century dayan / rabbinical judge in Linicz) answers:

In fact, the midrash gives a reason for this mitzvah. It says, "Let the mother cow come and clean up the mess made by the calf." In other words, the Parah Adumah atones for the sin of the Golden Calf.

The yetzer hara and the gentiles referred to by Rashi know this midrash, says R' Yehuda Leib. They also know that mentioning the sin of the Golden Calf awakens the Heavenly prosecutor against the Jewish people. Thus, they "tease" us by asking us the reason for the mitzvah of Parah Adumah, hoping to trick us into mentioning the Golden Calf.

Don't! says Rashi. Just say, "This is the _decree_ of the Torah,' and you have no right to question it." (Quoted in Otzrot Tzadikei Ve'geonei Ha'dorot p. 455)

The gemara (Avodah Zarah 24a) relates that a certain gentile named Damah ben Netinah had a gem that was needed for the choshen / breastplate of the Kohen Gadol. The Sages approached him and asked to buy the stone, but Damah refused to sell it. His father was sleeping on the key to the safe, and he did not wish to disturb his father's sleep. The following year, a Parah Adumah was born among Damah's cattle, and he sold it to the Sages and recouped his earlier loss.

Why, asks R' Yehoshua Baruch Reinitz z"l (1823-1912; rabbi of Chechowicz) was Damah rewarded specifically with a Parah Adumah? He answers:

Damah's act must have awakened a loud complaint in Heaven against the Jewish people. "Look," the prosecutor said. "The gentiles are not commanded by the Torah to honor their parents, yet Damah gave up a fortune for his father's sake. Why do the Jews not honor their parents thusly?"

Hashem answered the prosecutor: "True Damah's act was meritorious, but, after all, honoring parents is a matter of common-sense. Look how much money the Jewish people will forego for the sake of Parah Adumah, a mitzvah that seemingly makes no sense! (Ibid.)

"Bilam answered and said to the servants of Balak, 'If Balak will give me his house-full of silver and gold, I cannot transgress the word of Hashem. . .'"
(22:18)

Rashi writes: We learn from here that Bilam had a big appetite [for wealth] and desired the money of others.

We learn in Pirkei Avot (Chapter 5):

Whoever has the following three traits is among the disciples of our forefather Avraham; and whoever has the following three traits is among the disciples of the wicked Bilam. Those who have a good eye, a humble spirit and a meek soul are among the disciples of our forefather Avraham. Those who have an evil eye, an arrogant spirit and a greedy soul are among the disciples of the wicked Bilam.

R' Leib Chasman z"l (1869-1935; mashgiach of the Chevron Yeshiva) explains: These three traits - an evil eye, an arrogant spirit and a greedy soul - parallel "jealousy, honor and desire," the three traits which Pirkei Avot says can destroy a person. There is nothing inherently wrong with jealousy, honor and desire; indeed, all three traits can be put to positive uses. However, if these traits become a person's primary aspirations, they will destroy him.

Why? Because a person's aspirations are manifestations of his spirit, and a person has only one spirit. To whatever extent a person's spirit is devoted to pursuing wealth and honor, he cannot simultaneously pursue closeness to G-d. In the end, someone like Bilam ends up consorting with a donkey (as Chazal say he did). On the other hand, to whatever extent one suppresses his desire for wealth and honor and instead has a good eye, a humble spirit, and a meek soul, he is a disciple of Avraham and close to G-d.

The mishnah quoted above continues:

How are the disciples of our forefather Avraham different from the disciples of the wicked Bilam? The disciples of our forefather Avraham enjoy the fruits of their good deeds in this world and inherit the World to Come . . . but the disciples of Bilam inherit Gehinnom and descend into the well of destruction.

This means: Do not think that the disciples of Avraham will therefore live in poverty and misery, since they have no material ambitions. This is not the case; rather, they inherit this world and the next. To the contrary, it is the disciples of Bilam who will never satisfy their lusts and will live as if in

Gehinnom. (Ohr Yahel II, p. 132)

A chassid of R' Simcha Bunim Alter z"l (the "Gerrer Rebbe"; died 1992) once came to seek the Rebbe's blessing before undergoing a medical imaging procedure (perhaps a CAT scan). It was Friday, Erev Shabbat Parashat Chukat. The Rebbe gave his blessing and added enigmatically, "It's in this week's parashah."

Upon leaving, the puzzled chassid asked several scholarly chassidim what the Rebbe might have meant. After discussing it amongst themselves, they answered as follows:

The Aramaic translation of the Torah known as Targum Yonatan Ben Uziel states (Bemidbar 19:3) that the Parah Adumah / Red Heifer must be examined for the eighteen signs of treifah / blemishes that render an animal non-kosher. Commentaries ask, however, how this is possible, since the gemara (Chullin 11a) states that the Parah Adumah must be burnt whole. (Many of the treifot are internal, for example, certain types of holes in certain internal organs, and cannot be detected when the animal is whole!)

Commentaries answer: the midrash states that during all of the forty years that Bnei Yisrael were in the desert, they had no need for sunlight. Rather, the Clouds of Glory radiated a special light that was brighter than the sun and even allowed people to see through solid objects. This, said the chassidim, explains the Rebbe's comment: how did Bnei Yisrael check the Parah Adumah for internal treifot? They used "x-ray vision"! (Quoted in Otzrot Tzadikei Ve'geonei Ha'dorot p. 457)

[Ed. Note: The above answer does not explain how later generations, which did not have the benefit of this special light, inspected the innards of the Parot Adumot which they slaughtered. The anonymous commentary on Targum Yonatan (printed in the Chumash Mikraot Gedolot) explains simply that the author of Targum Yonatan disagreed with the gemara. This was his prerogative, since he was a contemporary of the Sages of the Talmud. Indeed, the gemara itself states that the Parah Adumah does not require an examination for treifot.]

Sponsored by Martin and Michelle Swartz in memory of grandfather, John Hofmann a"h Michael and Naomi Cowen in honor of the marriage of their daughter Dena to Yaakov Morton

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