

BILAM: A PERFECT TZADIK?

by Shlomo Katz

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Today's Learning:

Gittin 4:4-5

Orach Chaim 468:1-3

Daf Yomi (Bavli): Kiddushin 61

Daf Yomi (Yerushalmi): Berachot 15

In this week's parashah we meet Bilam, the gentile prophet who is called upon by the Moabite king Balak to curse Bnei Yisrael. R' Avigdor Nebenzahl shlita (rabbi of the Old City of Yerushalayim) observes that when one reads the parashah superficially, Bilam appears to be a perfect tzaddik. Throughout the parashah, Bilam asserts repeatedly that he cannot do anything against Hashem's will; he cannot speak a word that G-d has not commanded. Do we acknowledge this?

Yet, Bilam is counted by the Sages (Sanhedrin 90a) as one of the seven people who have no share in the World-to-Come. Indeed, the gemara (ibid. 106b) states that any negative inference that can be drawn from a verse regarding Bilam should be drawn (in contrast to the general rule that one should interpret people's actions favorably, even the actions of other wicked people who have no share in the World-to-Come). How is this consistent with the image of Bilam that our parashah conveys?

R' Nebenzahl explains: Bilam's righteous image was part and parcel of his wickedness. The midrash

states that Bilam was the same person as the trickster Lavan. Whether this is meant literally or whether it simply means that Bilam was a disciple of Lavan's ways, it conveys that Bilam was thoroughly deceitful. Bilam's piety was itself an act! After all, did he really have to ask Hashem whether he should curse Bnei Yisrael? Did he think that Hashem performed the ten plagues, split the sea and appeared at Har Sinai just to have Bnei Yisrael die in the desert? Of course not!

What was Bilam's end? The same end that befalls so many dishonest people. Bilam's patron, Balak, soon realized that this "prophet" was a fraud, but Bilam himself believed his own lies. He even had the audacity to pray (23:10), "May my soul die the death of the upright and may my end be like his." We should not wonder that someone whose entire life is a lie convinces himself that he will share eternity in the company of the greatest tzaddikim. (Sichot L'sefer Bemidbar)

"G-d said to Bilam, 'You shall not go with them . . .'"

"Bilam arose in the morning and said to the officers of Balak, 'Go to your land, for Hashem refuses to let me go with you.'" (22:12-13)

Rashi writes: "Bilam said, 'Hashem refuses to let me go with you,' but He will let me go with higher officers. From here we learn that Bilam was haughty."

But Hashem Himself said, "You shall not go _with_them_!" Why did He even allow Bilam to think that these officers were not important enough to accompany him, but that he could go with greater officers? R' Moshe Shick z"l (1805-1879; rabbi of Chust, Hungary) explains:

Every mission requires messengers worthy of the task. Hashem was preparing Bilam for a very important task. Specifically, a tremendous sanctification of Hashem's Name resulted from Bilam's failed attempts to curse the Jewish people. The midrash even states that Hashem miraculously magnified Bilam's voice so that all the nations of the world could hear him.

Thus, great messengers were required to accompany Bilam. (Maharam Shick Al Ha'Torah)

"If Balak will give me his houseful of silver and gold, I cannot transgress the word of Hashem, my G-d, to do anything small or great." (22:18)

R' Avraham Grodzensky z"l hy"d (mashgiach of the Slobodka Yeshiva; killed in the Holocaust) taught:

We read (Tehilim 19:10), "The fear of Hashem is pure." In fact, one can have fear of Hashem which is pure or fear of Hashem which is not pure. It all depends on a person's character.

King David said (Tehilim 27:4), "One thing I asked of Hashem . . . Would that I dwell in the House of Hashem all the days of my life." These words demonstrate fear of Hashem which is pure. However, if one has any ulterior motives, then his fear of Hashem is not pure. Still, it can be "more pure" than the

fear of Hashem felt by those on a lower level.

Even the person who descends to the lowest possible level still has some fear of Hashem. Our Sages hold Bilam out (in Pirkei Avot) as the symbol of the worst possible character traits, yet even he acknowledged G-d's dominion over him (in the above verse). Nevertheless, Bilam sought to curse Bnei Yisrael, and his fear of Hashem had little practical impact on his behavior. Why? Because he was blinded by the bribes that Balak offered him. (Torat Avraham p. 8)

"Even now it is said to Yaakov and Yisrael, 'What has G-d wrought?' Behold! The People will arise like a lion cub . . ." (23:23-24)

In the days of Czar Alexander III (died 1894), the Russian banker Baron Horace Guenzburg z"l (1833-1909) arranged for several leading rabbis to meet with the Interior Minister to plead for the annulment of various anti-Semitic decrees. However, the Minister invited one of his most anti-Semitic advisors to attend, and the latter succeeded in undoing any positive impression that the rabbis made. He said, "I understand the purpose of every single creature that G-d created, from the inanimate to the human. However, I fail to see what benefit the Jewish People bring to the world. They are like a leprosy on our holy land, Russia," and so on.

The rabbis left downcast, but then they noticed that one of their number, R' Yitzchak Elchanan Spektor z"l (1816-1896; rabbi of Kovno), was laughing. In response to their inquiry, he explained that he now understood the verses quoted above as never before. "A day will come when the world will say, 'Why did G-d create the Jewish people? What has G-d wrought?' And when that happens, it will be a sign that better days are coming for the Jewish People; 'The People will arise like a lion cub'."

And, indeed, it was in the days of Alexander III that the chain of events began which lead to the fall of the czars. (Otzar Tzaddikei U'geonei Ha'dorot)

"Reishit goyim Amalek" / "Amalek is the first among nations" (24:20)

Amalek was the first nation to attack Bnei Yisrael and thus represents the epitome of evil. Appropriately, R' Shlomo David Yehoshua Weinberg z"l hy"d (the "Slonimer Rebbe"; killed in the Holocaust) taught that the above phrase alludes to a common trait which is one of the foremost tools of the evil inclination.

The initial letters of the phrase "Reishit goyim Amalek" spell the Hebrew word "rega" / "one moment." When a person knows that it is time to repent, the yetzer hara tells him, "One moment! There will time to repent later." (Zichron Kadosh)

"Yisrael settled in the Shittim and the people began to commit harlotry with the daughters of Moav."
(25:1)

The gemara (Sanhedrin 106b) relates that after Bilam failed in his attempts to curse Bnei Yisrael, he advised Balak: "The G-d of this nation hates immorality." Therefore, Bilam recommended that Balak place Moabite girls along the road and cause Bnei Yisrael to sin, leading Hashem to (G-d forbid) destroy Bnei Yisrael. This would accomplish indirectly what Bilam was unable to achieve through his curses.

R' Shimshon David Pinkus shlita (rabbi of Ofakim, Israel) writes: There is an awe-inspiring lesson here - that no person and no force in the world can harm a Jew. Only the Jewish people can cause their own downfall through their own actions [either individually or collectively].

There is a second lesson here, as well, writes R' Pinkus - sins are caused by outside influences. The Jewish soul is pure and it does not sin unless it first allows itself to be exposed to harmful influences. (Tiferet Torah)

Shemittah Observance Today

[We began last week to examine one of the halachic strategies that allows farmers in Eretz Yisrael to tend their orchards and fruit trees during the shemittah year. This is the "Otzar Bet Din" / "the storehouse of the court." As was explained last week, a farmer who participates in the Otzar Bet Din must appear before bet din at the beginning of shemittah and declare that the produce of his fields will be hefker / ownerless and available to all takers. Thereafter, bet din hires workers - sometimes the farmer himself - to tend the land to the extent permitted during shemittah and to harvest whatever grows on behalf of all Jews, including those who do not themselves come to the fields to gather food. We now continue this discussion.]

As was noted last week, the Otzar Bet Din concept is mentioned in the Tosefta, a work from the early Talmudic period (approximately the third century). However, Rambam, the major codifier of the laws of shemittah makes no mention of the concept. This raises a question: was the concept of Otzar Bet Din only a hora'at sha'ah / an emergency decree that has no applicability today? Another question arises: what agricultural activities are permitted if one places his field in the trust of the bet din - are all normal activities permitted, or only those which a private individual could perform in his own field during shemittah? (Some of these restrictions have been discussed in prior issues of Hamaayan.)

Resolution of these issues is beyond the scope of this space. Suffice it to say that such great 20th century poskim / halachic authorities as R' Kook (who conceived the idea in 1910) and R' Avraham Yeshayahu Karelitz z"l (the "Chazon Ish") endorsed the use of an Otzar Bet Din and permitted a very broad range of agricultural activities in reliance on this concept.

Nevertheless, to the extent that one can perform his labors in a manner that acknowledges the

shemittah year, many poskim require this to be done. For example, in the town of Komemiyut, an Israeli community whose rabbis (R' Binyamin Mendelson z"l and his son R' Menachem shlita) have taken a lead in promoting strict shemittah observance, the bet din makes a point of appointing as agents people who are not farmers (R' A.H. Goldberg shlita, Ha'aretz U'mitzvotcha p. 245). Also, R' Yosef Shalom Elyashiv shlita writes that one must approach the bet din for permission before watering the orchards in his care (Kovetz Teshuvot 231:5).

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