

THE SEGULOT OF MITZVOT

by Shlomo Katz

Parshas Balak

The Segulot of Mitzvot

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The Midrash Rabbah on our parashah comments on the incident in which Bilam's donkey spoke after Bilam struck it. The donkey said (22:28), "What have I done to you that you struck me these shalosh regalim / three times?" Says the midrash: The donkey was saying, "Do you think that with your curses you can destroy the nation that observes the shalosh regalim / three pilgrimage festivals [Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot]?"

R' Yitzchak Ze'ev Yadler z"l (1843-1917; Yerushalayim) observes that the midrash is able to search for a deeper meaning in the donkey's words because donkeys ordinarily don't talk; the words were really the words of Hashem. Why did He single out the mitzvah of shalosh regalim as the mitzvah that would protect Bnei Yisrael? R' Yadler explains: Every mitzvah has a "segulah" / power of its own. For example, we read (Devarim 28:10), "Then all the peoples of the earth will see that the Name of Hashem is proclaimed over you, and they will revere you," which our Sages interpret as a reference to tefilin. This teaches that proper observance of the mitzvah of tefilin will cause Jews to be viewed by gentiles as bearing a special majesty. Another example: The mitzvah of ma'aser / tithes and charity is a segulah for wealth.

Similarly, the mitzvah of aliyah la'regel / making a pilgrimage to the Bet Hamikdash for the shalosh regalim is a segulah to conquer and retain Eretz Yisrael. This is based on the verse (Shmot 34:24), "For I shall banish nations before you and broaden your boundary; no man will covet your land when you go up to appear before Hashem, your G-d, three times a year." Bilam was trying to stop Bnei Yisrael from reaching Eretz Yisrael, but the merit of the (future) mitzvah of aliyah la'regel protected Bnei Yisrael. (Tiferet Zion)

"The elders of Moav and the elders of Midian went with divinations in their hand; they came to Bilam

and spoke to him the words of Balak." (22:7)

Rashi z"l explains: "This omen the elders of Midian took with them - they said, 'If he comes with us this time, there is something substantial in him, but if he puts us off there is no use in him.' Consequently, when he told them, 'Stay here to-night,' they said, 'There is no hope in him'."

Why does Rashi use three different expressions -- "something substantial in him"; "no use in him" and "no hope in him"?

R' Yitzchak Halevi z"l (19th century rabbi in Warsaw) quotes an explanation from an unnamed "wise man." He writes: The elders of Moav and Midian wanted to test whether Bilam was a suitable opponent for Moshe Rabbeinu, who could count on Hashem's answering him any time he called. They said: "If Bilam comes right away, without even asking Hashem, then we know he is greater than Moshe, who often had to ask Hashem for instructions. In that case, 'There is something substantial to him.'"

"On the other hand, if Bilam puts off the elders because he has to ask Hashem, then he is, at best, as great as Moshe, but not greater. In that case, 'there is no use in him'."

What actually happened? Bilam told them to stay overnight because, unlike Moshe, Bilam could speak to Hashem only at night. The elders then realized that "There is no hope in him." (Geress Carmel)

"Behold! A people has come out of Egypt. Behold! It has covered ('kisah') the surface of the earth and it sits opposite me." (22:5)

"Behold! The people coming out of Egypt has covered ('vy-chas') the surface of the earth." (22:11)

R' Moshe Feinstein z"l (1895-1986) observes that Balak referred to the Exodus (in verse 5) in past tense, while Bilam referred to it (in verse 11) in present tense. Why?

He answers: Balak assumed that Bnei Yisrael, like other nations, wished to forget the dark parts of their history. The Exodus, being a reminder of hundreds of years of slavery, was surely forgotten forty years later. In contrast, Bilam understood that Bnei Yisrael are not like other nations and would never forget the Exodus.

Balak's and Bilam's different understandings led them to have different motives for wanting to curse Bnei Yisrael, which explains the difference in the second halves of the above verses. Balak was concerned solely with the present: Bnei Yisrael has recently covered ('kisah' -- past tense) the surface of the earth and must be repelled. Bilam, on the other hand, used the term 'vy-chas' which includes both past and future tenses. His concern was that Bnei Yisrael would influence the world to believe in the living G-d of the Exodus; that was what he wished to stop. (Darash Moshe)

"Hashem opened the mouth of the donkey and it said to Bilam . . ." (22:28)

R' Shimon bar Tzemach Duran z"l (Rashbetz; Spain; 1361-1444) writes: One should have no trouble accepting this, since we see several species of birds that can be taught to speak.

He adds: The reason that Hashem showed this to Bilam was to teach him that just as He gives the power of speech to creatures that do not ordinarily speak, so He can take away the freedom to speak from those who usually have it--as He does in our parashah to Bilam. (Magen Avot, Part II, ch.3)

"How can I curse? -- G-d has not cursed. How can I anger? -- G-d is not angry. For from its origins, I see it rock-like, and from hills do I see it. Behold! it is a nation that will dwell in solitude and not be reckoned among the nations." (23:8-9)

R' Yitzchak Isaac Chaver z"l (1789-1852; rabbi of Suvalk, Lithuania) explains: The "rock-like" quality of Yisrael comes from the Patriarchs, as it is written (Yeshayah 51:1), "Look to the rock from which you were hewn." Yisrael's existence is miraculous, starting with the fact that the Patriarch Avraham was naturally unable to father children. But, only if Yisrael maintains its solitude among the nations does it retain its special protection. That is why, after Bilam failed to curse Bnei Yisrael, he came up with a plan to weaken them by having the daughters of Moav seduce them. (Haggadah Shel Pesach Yad Mitzrayim p.96)

"Ma tovu / How good are your tents, Yaakov, your mishkenot / dwelling places, Yisrael." (24:5)

R' Avraham Moshe Rabinowitz shlita (the Skolye Rebbe in Brooklyn, N.Y.) writes: The Gemara (Ta'anit 7a) states that the words of Torah can endure only in a humble person. The Gemara (Berachot 5a) also states that the only real "tov" is Torah. Finally, the term "mah" refers to humility, as in the verse (Shmot 16:7), "Mah / what are we?"

In this light, our verse can be understood as follows: "Mah tovu" - In a person who is "mah" / humble there will be "tov" / Torah.

Also, Hashem told Bnei Yisrael to build a mishkan so that He could dwell among them. However, Hashem's primary "dwelling place" is in the midst of humble people. Thus, "Mah . . . your mishkenot, Yisrael" - If you are humble, Hashem's dwelling place will be among you. (Chakima B'remiza)

Letters from Our Sages

This letter was written in Elul 5690 [1930] by R' Chaim Ozer Grodzenski z"l (1863-1940), the pre-eminent leader of Lithuanian Jewry during the four decades preceding the Holocaust, to raise money for Chorev / the Central Committee for Religious Education, an umbrella organization founded to strengthen Jewish education while meeting legal requirements for some secular education. At its height, the Chorev system included more than 70,000 students.

Honored Rabbi!

After inquiring regarding your welfare - In the month of Tammuz 5686 [1926], at a large conference of rabbis in Vilna, the organization Chorev was founded with the purpose of organizing and arranging schools for Torah and distinction, i.e., the chadarim [plural of "cheder"] and talmud Torahs. This happened after the requirement for general education was imposed, for the soul of the nation depends on the chadarim which are fortunate to teach young children, and they are the foundation of the House of Yisrael. In the four years of its existence, it has accomplished a great deal because it calls the attention of those "outside" to the importance of the chadarim, while calling the attention of those "inside" to those subject matters that must be covered based on the prevailing legal requirements. In general, it has become a source of information from expert teachers, and it even played a significant role in preventing the imposition of a requirement to attend school on Shabbat. Likewise, Chorev was involved in many other matters in support of traditional education. At the time that the organization was founded, the assembled rabbis each promised that he would arrange a collection in his own town on behalf of the organization. Likewise, at a rabbinical conference during the past month of Sivan, all recognized its importance, and they agreed that they were obligated to make efforts in their towns to obtain some amount so that the organization could persevere. How sad it would be if, because of a few hundred coins a year, this necessary organization would be cease to function. . . For the organizations that want to destroy Judaism there are workers and redeemers, but to strengthen G-d's "altar" which lies in ruins, the workers are lethargic and no one pays attention. . .

I beseech your honor regarding this and hope that he will turn his pure heart to bring this to fruition as soon as possible, for a locked door is not easily re-opened, and it would be fitting to hurry to strengthen the organization so it will not be abolished. May G-d come to your aid so that the merit of the many will be yours. (Igrot R' Chaim Ozer III p.100)

The editors hope these brief 'snippets' will engender further study and discussion of Torah topics ('lehagdil Torah u'leha'adira'), and your letters are appreciated. Web archives at **Torah.org** start with 5758 (1997) and may be retrieved from the [Hamaayan](#) page.

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