

CLASS 14 - CHUKAS-BALAK

by Rabbi Heshy Grossman

The prophet Bil'am goes on his way, attempting to destroy the B'nai Yisrael. Hashem gives him one last chance to turn back, sending an angel who warns him to desist.

"Va'Ya'amod Malach Hashem B'Mish'ol HaKramim, Gader Mizeh, V'Gader MiZeh" - "You cannot overpower them, for in their hands are the Luchos, written from both sides, MiZeh U'MiZeh Hem Kesuvim." (Bamidbar Rabbah 20,11)

Bil'am is told that he is doomed to failure; he cannot defeat those who hold the Luchos HaBris, the tablets of Sinai whose message was miraculously read from both sides.

What is the lesson of this particular miracle, and how do these Luchos subdue Bil'am, the prophet of the nations?

In our shiur this week, we will address these questions, demonstrating that a proper Navi must do more than speak well in public.

1

The Talmud lists the authors of each book of Tanach.

"Moshe wrote his book, and Parshas Bil'am, and Iyov...." (Bava Basra 14b)

In this passage, the story of Bil'am is considered a separate book, of a different nature than the rest of the Torah. Why should that be so?

It is the prophecy of Bil'am that is different, a truth revealed in a unique way.

The Mishna contrasts the students of two men:

"Whoever has the following three traits is among the disciples of our forefather Avraham; and [whoever has] three different traits is among the disciples of Bil'am HaRasha...." (Avos 5,22)

Avraham, the father of our nation, represents one type of prophet, bestowing health, blessing, and prosperity on all his environs. Bil'am, on the other hand, is the source of all Klalla. It is he who is called upon to curse and destroy the descendants of Avraham.

This is the distinction between two types of messengers; Bil'am - the prophet of the nations; and the righteous Neviim of Tanach - represented by Moshe Rabbeinu. The evil eye of the wicked, or the

good fortune of Divine approval.

The root of the word 'Navi' in Lashon HaKodesh is 'Niv' - produce or 'Tnuva', as in 'Niv Sfasaim' (Isaiah 57.19).

A man's speech is his produce, the development of abstract intellectual ideas into concrete expression. Let us analyze how this process evolves.

Man's first thoughts are always hazy intimations that he intuitively grasps, but these ideas remain as yet undefined. It is only as he searches for the words to actualize his musings that he crystallizes these concepts into shape and form.

If this would be a mechanical process, with man carrying out step-by-step the speaking instructions he has internalized since childhood, the time-frame from thought to word would be interminable. Modern man barely has the initiative to read, much less so, the desire or capacity to do anything that makes him think.

Speech then, works a bit differently. Man expresses himself, not merely the ideas that he hopes to develop. The words he utters exist deep inside, and his native language is merely the form of expression he naturally uses.

It is for this reason that man's power of speech is the very breath of his life.

"And the Lord G-d created Adam dust from the earth, and He blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and it became within Adam a speaking spirit" (B'reishis 2, 7 - see Targum and Rashi)

Herein lies the crossroads separating Divine blessing and curse; Bil'am from Avraham Avinu.

Words can be an exposition of wisdom, articulating the inner essence of spirit, or mere tools of conversation, filling idle time with mindless chatter.

Every D'var Torah is an element of the Divine, reflecting the Heavenly word in its descent towards this finite world. While common methods of communication explicate nothing but the surface exterior, the speech of creation echoes the G-dly spark of man's soul, incorporating depth and breadth of varied dimensions.

The power of speech is more than discourse, more than an effective way to enhance one's relationships. It is the mark of a Tzelem Elokim, and should be utilized to express the wisdom that distinguishes man from animal.

We can now understand why sins of the tongue are judged with such severity. Slanderous talk is akin to murder, for it destroys the human face of the talebearer. His punishment of Tzora'as is a form of death, for he has discarded all trace of the image in which he was created.

Speech is the sign of life, while in the grave there is silence for eternity.

"The dead cannot praise G-d, nor all who descend into silence." (Tehillim 116,18)

The dead have nothing to say, much as all those who never appreciate the strength of their own words.

In a sense, life is an ever-flowing spring, a 'Ma'ayan Mayim Chaim', blessing the world with an infinite bounty. Life itself never ends, rather, it is the empty void of man's own making that brings about his demise.

Similarly, true wisdom likewise reflects this wellspring of life. CHACHAM = CHAIM B'Gimatriya. It is man's task to open this tap of Divine blessing and beneficence. His words then connect his life to the source of all existence.

While the words of Avraham reveal the word of G-d to the world, Bil'am is his polar opposite, his words fomenting evil and destruction.

"Said G-d to Israel: Know what righteousness I have done for you [Israel], for I did not come to anger during the days of the wicked Bil'am. Had I been angered, there would be no remnant of the enemies of Israel [a euphemism]....and how long is G-d's anger? A 'Regga' . And how long is a 'Regga'? As quick as you can say it." (Brachos 7a)

"And if you will ask: what would he have been able to say in a moment? The answer: Kalem! (destroy them)." (Tosafos, ad. loc.)

As opposed to the perspective of eternity exemplified by Avraham Avinu, Bil'am lives a life of each moment, waiting for the Regga that provokes G-d's wrath. 'Kalem' is the speech most appropriate for these moments, and Bil'am's world stands in direct opposition to the Torah of Klal Yisrael.

3

We can readily understand that G-d has put into existence two parallel worlds; one: an endless flow of wisdom and life; the other: a silent world of death and darkness.

Bil'am, however, reflects something more: an existence of pure evil, denying the ability of G-d and defying His word. Bil'am believes that he can force G-d's Hand and hide from His will. Cunningly, he proceeds with his dastardly plan, despite G-d's admonition.

G-d has allowed for the possibility of evil, but for good reason. It is this option that enables freedom of choice, and only this grants man a place in existence.

But evil in life has taken form, much more than mere potential, with entire domains under its actual control. This is the world that Bil'am sees at his disposal, and we are left to wonder: is there benefit to this, too?

"Amar Rabbi Yochanan: From the blessing of that wicked one, one can learn what was in his heart. He tried to say that they should not have any Battei Kenissios or Battei Midrashos - "Mah Tovu Ohaleicha Ya'akov, Mishkenoseicha Yisrael.".....Amar Rabbi Abba bar Kahana: All of them [the curses of Bil'am] subsequently reverted to curse, except for 'Battei Kenissios and Battei Midrashos', as is written: "and G-d overturned the curse to blessing...." - "curse", not "curses". (Sanhedrin 105b)

Our Sages reveal this: it is the very curse of Bil'am that is a blessing in disguise.

He tries to speak evil, but the resulting Bracha stands for all time.

Chazal have taught that Bil'am and Lavan are one and the same. The path among the vines that Bilam passes through is the very line that Lavan had sworn never to cross.

Lavan - white, is always the background, the contrast that highlights an overlying message.

G-d has a plan - the revelation of true unity, the goodness and justice of His ways. There is no point in revealing secrets to a fool, one who lacks the ability to distinguish wisdom from stupidity. Evil then, must be made real, visible and heard, if the revelation of truth is to have significance.

Here is the irony: in their haste to destroy all remnant of good, Bil'am and Lavan become the vehicle that reveals the truth they endeavored to hide.

When a tired and weary world despairs of finding the promise that Bil'am proffers, when the emptiness of his scheme is discarded in shame, it is upon this waste that righteousness trods.

The Klalla is transformed - "and G-d overturned the curse to blessing"

From Moshe Rabbeinu we learn: Bil'am has written a book of his own. Despite himself, the truth is revealed.

The Luchos are read both backwards and forwards, inside and out. Every way you turn, the message is there: G-d and His people are One.

4

We live in a world of words. Endless talk, at the flip of a switch, or the click of a button, every hour on the hour. These words dominate our lives, censoring our thoughts and controlling our values. Public opinion can be swayed for a price, and the mores of society shift with the drift of an editor's pen.

Talk fills the air, but nothing is said.

Whether it's the weather in Zimbabwe, or champion of the moment, the latest news highlights only the king of the day.

It's the words of Bil'am, his curse that threatens to overrun our world. Evrywhere we turn, his message is there: 'we can do what we wish, G-d doesn't care!'

Unbeknownst to him, little seen or heard, his words are mere background to the timeless lessons we learn.

In the Bais Medrash, a good question merely begs a response. The more difficult the problem, the deeper the understanding when the answer is found.

The words of Bil'am may have conquered the rest, but the Bracha still echoes in the one place that's ours: "Mah Tovu Ohaleicha Ya'akov Mishkenoseicha Yisrael"

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