

BILAAM'S OBSESSION

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

Bilaam was a man obsessed. And since Balak was as well, they made a great combination -- and a fine comic scenario.

King Balak sent a delegation, asking Bilaam to come curse the Jews. That very night Bilaam asked G-d if he could go, and G-d said no. "You shall not curse the nation, for they are blessed." [22:12]

Now, were they rational human beings, that would have been the end of it. We asked, G-d said no, so sorry, it's over.

King Balak, though, surmised that it was just a matter of politics -- Bilaam wouldn't go with a collection of undersecretaries, so Balak had to send cabinet-level officials. Back then they called them princes, but the concept was the same.

And of course, Balak was right. Bilaam was very happy to have these higher officers come to visit, because he truly wanted to go and curse the Jewish People. Bilaam told the princes, "if Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold I could not trespass the word of G-d... and now, you too should stay the night to see what more G-d will say to me." [22:18-19] As the princes realized, if Bilaam was so certain, why was he inviting them to stay overnight to get an answer?

At that point, G-d permitted Bilaam to go since he insisted -- but not to curse the Jews! "Only the word which I shall speak to you, that shall you do." [22:20] HaShem was not going to allow Bilaam to achieve his goal.

What did Bilaam do? He leaped out of bed in the morning, and ran to saddle his donkey. Where did he think he was going? Bilaam went running... even though he had been told that he could not curse the Jews once he arrived. Why did he run? Because he was still hoping to curse them, of course.

So HaShem sent an angel to stand in the way, to warn him. Three times Bilaam's donkey, who always obeyed his every instruction, turned aside. First it turned away from the path, then it scraped against the wall, and finally it lay down. And then, it started talking! As Rabbi Shamshon Rephael Hirsch points out, if Bilaam were not so totally obsessed, he would certainly have paid attention to these obvious signs. He lived his entire life following signs and omens, and now he ignored them at their most obvious. His obsession made him ignore everything else.

Even when his donkey started talking, what did he do? Did he react with surprise? Did he fall off the donkey? No! He threatened it instead: "I wish I had a sword in my hand, because I would have killed

you by now." [22:29]

Once he arrived, the story continued in the same vein. Three times Bilaam attempted to curse the Jews, and three times G-d made him bless them. And every time, Bilaam and Balak avoided the obvious and logical conclusion.

Balak took Bilaam to a place where he could see the Jewish camp, and Bilaam told Balak to build an altar and offer sacrifices. Balak did so, Bilaam wound up and... showered blessings on the Jews.

At this point, Balak should have either handed Bilaam his head on a platter, or at least sent him home in disgrace. What did he say to Bilaam? "Come with me please, to another place..." [23:13] Let's try again. I'm sure that was just an accident.

And so they did the whole show again. Balak built seven more altars, offered an ox and a ram on each, Bilaam wound up and... blessed the Jews once again. If we didn't know this was our history, we would suspect that Abbott and Costello had a hand in the plot line.

G-d was not going to change His mind. Bilaam and Balak were not going to get their wish. He placed His words directly into Bilaam's mouth: "G-d is not a man that he should twist [his words], or the son of man that he should regret." [23:19]

So, what do this great king and great prophet do next? "Come, please, and I'll take you to another place..." [23:27]

It seems ridiculous, but this is what an obsession can do to a person. It doesn't matter how many facts stand up in the way, facts that tell any rational person that the idea is wrong -- because an obsessed individual is not being rational. He has made an idol from his ideology, and shall cling to his worship until the end.

As comic as the story of Bilaam may be to us now, there are many Bilaam-style visionaries in our day, clinging to their irrational dreams long after every possible fact has proven them wrong. The lessons of our parsha have never been more relevant. May we learn from Bilaam, open our eyes, and see the truth that lies before us!

Good Shabbos,
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