

# PARSHAS BALAK - DID BILAM'S ASON SURVIVE? DO ANGELS READ MINDS?

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

## Did Bilam's Ason Survive? Do Angels Read Minds?<sup>1</sup>

*The ason saw me, and turned from before me these three times. Perhaps she turned because of me. Now, I would kill you, and keep her alive.*

Did the ason live to tell (figuratively, of course) her story? Rashi doesn't think so, but there may be another way to looking at the pasuk more favorable to the animal's longevity. Her life span hinges on the word ulai, which usually means "perhaps." Rashi observes that sometimes the word means "were it not so," and prefers that meaning here. He reads the middle and end of our pasuk as follows: "See here. You've been saved in the nick of time. Were it not that your faithful ason thwarted your bee-line to your sinful destination by leaving the path, I would have had to kill you, while she would have lived. Now that you've had your little conversation, everything is reversed. You will survive - but not the ason. Since she bested you in debate, I have had to kill her, to protect your human dignity. The image of G-d - even of an evildoer such as yourself - should not be abused by people pointing to an animal that made a fool of a human being."

We see that the ason, according to Rashi, did not survive beyond her command performance. If, however, we preserve the usual meaning of ulai as "perhaps," we arrive at an entirely different conclusion.

The angel appeared to the ason as a sword-wielding human, not as an angel. The ason reacted with fright not because of her contact with other-worldly spirituality, but because the appearance of any human form can often intimidate an animal. The malach, in fact, was uncertain about the cause of the ason's reaction. Did she turn away "from before me" - as animals often do, moving away deferentially from any human, or ulai, perhaps she turned "because of me?" Perhaps she sensed something more than just another human being, and was frightened to the point of death, sensing enormous danger.

The malach continues, after answering his own question. "In truth, I must have made a frightful appearance, being that I appeared to be in a rage, not as a calm stranger. The ason certainly sensed that I was ready to kill you, and certainly herself. She was on the verge of expiring from fright! I saw

to it, though, that only you, Bilam, need to be killed, but I have revived and sustained her!" Bilam, of course, manages to talk his way into a stay of execution.

The point of the entire episode was to disabuse Bilam of a notion that might have sustained his quest to move ahead with his plan. Surely, he thought, if G-d does not want me to proceed, He will prevent me from completing my mission. No harm in trying. The malach showed him that this was not so. Hashem might go so far as to warn the evildoer. He will show Himself in some way to the person willing to bend his ear in order to listen. If a person stubbornly holds on to his plan nonetheless, He will not intervene. The evildoer will bear responsibility for all the consequences of his sin. Hashem will have none of the responsibility, having given prior warning to the sinner. Bilam will have to make his own choices, and live with their consequences.

Reading ulai as "perhaps" can be questioned. Do angels have any doubts? Shouldn't they be able to read minds? Tosafos[2] ask how it could be that angels do not do well with prayers in Aramaic because the "do not understand Aramaic," as the gemara tells us. Angels, claim Tosafos, understand even our inner thoughts! Certainly they ought to have no trouble with any expressed language. Yet this seems to be precisely the gemara's position. Angels can't read human minds. There is no reason to believe that they have an easier time teasing out an animal's thoughts.

Assuming that this is true, a difficult pasuk in Tehillim[3] comes alive. I sinned to You alone - I did evil in Your eyes, so that You would be righteous in Your speech, and meritorious in Your judgment. The word chet for sin connotes a milder offense than the "evil" of the second phrase. Furthermore, the "eyes" of G-d mean His angels, which spread out all over to testify to the activities of men. The last phrase is a mystifying non sequitur. Dovid does evil in order to justify G-d's actions?

The gemara[4] sees this verse as Dovid's retrospective on a tragic episode in his life. He had questioned why we only refer speak of the G-d of Avraham, the G-d of Yitzchok, the G-d of Yaakov. Should they not also make mention of the G-d of Dovid? Hashem responds that they merited such treatment by having been tested in their lifetimes, and passing the tests. Dovid then asks for a chance to win the same distinction. He asks to be tested so that he, too, can prove himself. HKBH accepts the offer, even making offering him as advantage that the patriarchs did not have. Hashem tells Dovid that his test would involve the yetzer hora of arayos.

Dovid failed the test in the incident with Batsheva. The gemara sees Dovid, through the pasuk in Tehillim, mitigating his failure. "It is revealed and known to You that had I wanted to subdue my yetzer hora, I could have done so. I did not do so, because I did not want people to say that the servant has bested his Master." Are we really to believe that Dovid acted as he did for noble purposes?

Here is what the pasuk means. Dovid failed, but his transgression was a lesser one than it seems. It should be termed a chet, not the more serious ra. Hashem knows that people need Divine assistance to prevail when they wrestle with their yetzer hora. Ordinarily, He provides that assistance

to those who ask. Without that assistance, they are often powerless to resist temptation. Dovid, however, had sinned in asking for the test, in bringing the temptation upon himself. As a consequence of that misstep, Hashem withheld His expected assistance from him, and Dovid succumbed.

To Hashem, therefore, Dovid's misconduct was only a chet. The angels, however, the "eyes of Hashem" who do not grasp inner human intention, who do not know the thoughts of man, saw his behavior as thoroughly evil. Dovid, they thought, had chosen not to suppress his yetzer hora, and bore full responsibility.

Dovid, however, understands what transpired. "It is revealed and known to You that had You wanted to subdue my yetzer hora, [this is the correct text!] You could have done so. You constantly help people do just that. No one would could stand up to his evil inclination without Your help. By not helping me in my inner battle, You allowed me to lose the fight - and therefore to be judged by the angels as thoroughly evil.

"I understand why You did not come to my assistance. Had I passed my test, people would say that the servant has bested his Master. I have no complaints for what has befallen me. I justify Your judgment. It is proper for me to have failed after being so brash as to ask for a test. I accept You as righteous in Your speech, and meritorious in Your judgment."

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1. *Shabbos 12B*
  2. *Tehillim 51:6*
  3. *Sanhedrin 107A*
  4. *Sukkah 52B*
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