

WHAT GOES AROUND

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

The she-donkey saw the angel of God, and she was pressed against the wall. (Bamidbar 22:24)

Everyone knows about Lavan, Ya'akov Avinu's uncle and father-in-law. They knew about him already from the days of Avraham and Eliezer, when the latter was sent by the former to find a wife for Yitzchak. Lavan was the brother of Rivka, who was the very antithesis of her brother. At least when Rivkah pulled the wool over Yitzchak's eyes to get the brochos for her son Ya'akov, it was completely for selfless reasons.

Everyone also knows Bilaam. He is the famous evil sorcerer hired by Balak, the king of Moav, to curse the Jewish people as portrayed in this week's parshah. They know that it was Bilaam's advice that led to the death of 24,000 men from the tribe of Shimon, and the execution of 176,000 others for their worship of Ba'al Peor.

Less famous, however, is Naval HaCarmelli. Who was Naval HaCarmelli? He was someone who lived long after the close of the Torah, during the time of Dovid HaMelech. This is what it says in Sefer Shmuel:

There was a man in Maon, whose possessions were in Carmel. And the man was very great, and he had 3,000 sheep and 1,000 goats; and he was, while shearing his sheep, in Carmel. The man's name was Naval . . . Dovid heard in the desert that Naval was shearing his sheep. Dovid sent ten youths, and Dovid said to the youths, "Go up to Carmel, and you shall come to Naval, and greet him in my name. You shall say, 'So shall you be living next year, and may peace be to you, and peace to your household, and peace to all that is yours. And now, I have heard that they are shearing for you. Now, your shepherds were with us. We did not disgrace them, neither was anything missing to them all the time they were in Carmel. Ask your youths and they will tell you, and may the youths find favor in your eyes, for we have come on a festive day. Give now, what your hand will find, for your servants and for your son Dovid.' " Dovid's youths came and spoke to Naval according to all these words in Dovid's name, and they rested. Naval answered Dovid's servants and said, "Who is Dovid and who is Ben Yishai? Nowadays, there are many slaves who break away, each one from his master." (I Shmuel 25:2-10)

This was not the answer that Dovid had anticipated or wanted. Instead of paying Dovid's kindness to his own shepherds forward, Naval rejected his request for hospitality, basically cursing the king. He had signed his own death warrant, but not exactly as one might have thought:

It was in the morning, when the wine had left Naval, that his wife told him these things, and his heart died within him, and he became like stone. It was just ten days after that God inflicted a stroke on Naval, and he died. (I Shmuel 25:37-38)

On the surface of it, it may have seemed "coincidental" to many at the time that Naval died just after his mistreatment of Dovid HaMelech. At the very most, it probably appeared like Divine punishment for his appalling behavior towards the future king of the Jewish people. Naval, and apparently Dovid HaMelech as well, knew differently:

Then Naval remembered, and knew that in the beginning he had reincarnated into a rock to rectify the evil speech of Bilaam, and that now he had cursed again. Therefore "his heart died within him" when he remembered that he had originally been a rock to become rectified, as mentioned. (Sha'ar HaGilgulim, Introduction 22)

When the incident occurred in which he angered Dovid and said, "Who is Dovid and who is Ben Yishai?" (I Shmuel 25:10), Dovid wanted to kill him since he had come to rectify the evil speech of Bilaam and instead sinned more by again transgressing with his mouth, cursing Dovid, the king of Israel. (Sha'ar HaGilgulim, Introduction 22)

Naval was the reincarnation of whom? Bilaam? The sorcerer? Apparently, yes, regarding whom it says:

Bilaam the Evil, who was a snake charmer, only had power in his mouth and was able to curse people effectively. Thus when Bilaam was killed he reincarnated into a single rock, the level of speechlessness, to atone for the snake charming he did with his mouth, as mentioned. When he reincarnated after that it was into Naval HaCarmelli, which was the beginning of his return to this world to become rectified. (Sha'ar HaGilgulim, Introduction 22)

Fascinating, to the say the least. It gets even more interesting, because it turns out that Bilaam was not the beginning of Naval HaCarmelli's story, but the middle of it. Bilaam himself was a reincarnation, something that is alluded to in this week's parshah, but something you need a little Kabbalah to recognize.

There was Bilaam, happily riding his donkey together with Balak's messengers on their way to Moav, when all of a sudden he started to have "engine trouble":

The she-donkey saw the angel of God stationed on the road with his sword drawn in his hand, so the she-donkey turned aside from the road and went into a field. Bilaam beat the she-donkey to get it back onto the road. The angel of God stood in a path of the vineyards, with a fence on this side and a fence on that side. The she-donkey saw the angel of God, and she was pressed against the wall. She pressed Bilaam's leg against the wall, and he beat her again. (Bamidbar 22:23-25)

There does not seem to be very much that is unusual about this, at least from a Torah perspective.

The angel was sent to confront Bilaam while he passed between two walls to limit the movement of the donkey. This way Bilaam's leg could be trapped and he would become angry, setting up his eventual humiliation.

Kabbalistically though, there is a much deeper message:

The angel of God stood in a path of the vineyards, with a fence—gahder—on this side and a fence—gahder—on that side. (Bamid- bar 22:24)

Unless specified otherwise, [the Hebrew word] "gahder" refers to [a fence] made of stone. (Rashi)

... And therefore? And therefore, the wall against which the donkey pressed Bilaam's leg was not just any stone wall, but a specific one:

So Ya'akov took a stone and set it up [as] a monument. And Ya'akov said to his kinsmen, "Gather stones," and they took stones and made a pile, and they ate there by the pile. And Lavan called it "Yegar Sahadusa," but Ya'akov called it "Gal Eid." (Bereishis 31:45-47)

A monument to what? The Torah explains that as well:

Lavan said to Ya'akov, "Behold this pile and behold this monument, which I have cast between me and you. This pile is a witness, and this monument is a witness, that I will not pass this pile [to go] to you and that you shall not pass this pile and this monument to [come to] me to [do] harm." (Bereishis 31:51-52)

And yet, that is exactly what Lavan was coming to do. He was on his way to do harm to the descendants of Ya'akov, this time as Bilaam, and this is why it was by this specific wall, called "Gal Eid," that he was injured. It was a warning to Bilaam that he was violating that which he promised as Lavan, just as Naval was warned that he was undoing the tikun he underwent because of Bilaam.

Did Bilaam figure it out? It seems not, since he was anxious to continue on with his mission, and did so in spite of the warnings he received. Did Naval figure it out? It seems yes, but too late, and he paid the price shortly after. Once he died, that seemed be the end of the story of Lavan's soul, whose name is not only "Naval" in reverse, but whose three letters, Lamed-Bais-Nun, actually stand for "Lavan," "Bilaam," and "Naval." When it comes to tracing a soul 's reincarnations through history, it doesn't get more obvious than this.