

BILAAM LOST HIS SHOCK VALUE

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

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Bilaam Lost His Shock Value

Sages tell us an astounding fact: that Bilaam had prophetic powers on par with Moshe Rabbeinu. The verse says, "There arose not in Israel another prophet equal to Moshe" [Devarim 34:10]. The Rabbis explain that there did not arise another such prophet specifically in Israel -- but in the nations of the world there did arise another such prophet. Who was he? Bilaam the son of Be'or. [Sifrei]

We are therefore dealing with an individual who had a relationship with G-d that we can only dream about. And yet we see that he had an attitude that is hard to fathom. When G-d asked Bilaam, "Who are these people with you?," Rashi explains that Bilaam answers G-d arrogantly: "Even though I am not important in your Eyes, I am important in the eyes of Kings."

Later, in one of the most mind-boggling incidents in the Torah, Bilaam does not appear to be at all phased by the fact that his donkey starts talking to him. He just answers back and begins a dialogue with his donkey as if it was an everyday occurrence.

How do we explain the paradoxical personality of Bilaam? Rav Schwab offers an interesting insight. G-d gave us with certain senses. Most of us are blessed with the senses of sight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell. There is a sixth sense. That is the sense of being able to be impressed. G-d gave most human beings the ability to be impressed by certain phenomenon in this world.

This sense of being impressed ("nispael") is necessary for our service of G-d. The Rambam speaks of a person becoming impressed and overwhelmed with the awe of creation, and of the wisdom and beauty of nature. This is a sense that we need to develop within ourselves -- emotions of love and reverence towards the Creator.

However, just like the other senses can be deadened and destroyed if they are abused, so it is with the sixth sense. If a person listens to loud music for long enough, he can lose his sense of hearing. If a person continuously eats very spicy foods, he can lose his sense of taste. Likewise, a person can lose his sense of being impressed. How does that happen? What costs a person his sense of being impressed?

Rav Schwab suggests that a person can lose his sense of being impressed through gluttonous indulgence in every passion and lust in the world. If a person is obsessed with enjoying, taking, eating, consuming, and all he ever thinks about is indulging in the most obscene and gluttonous fashion, then after awhile, nothing impresses him any more. He is so consumed with just enjoying himself that nothing gets him excited anymore.

If it seems hard to relate to this concept, all we need to do is to open our eyes and look at what is happening today in the western world. Nothing makes an impression anymore. Movies have become more and more violent and explicit. Music has become more and more outrageous. The way people talk and the words we hear have become more and more astounding, because nothing makes an impression anymore. As a society, we have lost our sense of wonder. We have become coarsened.

To quote a recent piece in the Op-Ed page of the Baltimore Sun, "America has lost its 'shock value'. Nothing shocks anymore."

This is what happened to Bilaam. Nothing shocked him. His animal spoke to him and he took it in stride.

Everyone recognizes the seriousness of losing a sense of sight or hearing, chas v'shalom (Heaven forbid). We need to recognize that losing the sense of being impressed is also very serious. Losing the sense of being impressed is a by-product of the gluttonous and indulgent life that Bilaam lived.

"Trouble" Of Reciting Parshas Bilaam Daily

The Torah testifies that Bilaam knew the thoughts of his Creator (yodeah daas Elyon). The Talmud [Brochos 7a] explains that this means that he knew how to precisely pinpoint the times that were auspicious for invoking the wrath of G-d. The Talmud speaks of a certain moment each day when G-d becomes angry with the world. Bilaam knew how to gauge that moment, and this knowledge was his secret weapon. He intended to synchronize his cursing of the Jewish people with that moment of G-d's wrath, and thereby bring G-d's wrath down upon the Jewish nation.

Rav Ekyakim Schlessinger asks (in his sefer, Beis Av): if, in fact, Bilaam's power was limited to

knowing the moment of G-d's anger, that would seem to be a far cry from the Torah's testimony that he was a Yodeah daas Elyon -- he knew the mind of his Creator. The Beis Av therefore cites a Rabbinic teaching regarding the Creation of the world.

G-d's "initial plan" was to create the world only using His Attribute of Justice (Middas haDin). In such a world, if someone would sin, the punishment would be delivered immediately. But when G-d saw that human beings would not be able to exist in such a world, He partnered the Attribute of Mercy (Middas haRachamim) with the Middas haDin in His Creation of the world. This does not mean that if someone sins, G-d will forget about it. It simply means that G-d extends a grace period. G-d gives the sinner some slack, so to speak, giving him the ability to ultimately repent. This combination of Din [judgment] and Rachamim [mercy] is the way the world operates.

Bilaam knew "Daas Elyon". That means that he was aware of G-d's original plan. He knew that G-d originally wanted to create the world with only the Middas haDin. He knew that every single day of every single year there is one moment when G-d returns to his "Grand Plan" and looks at the world with the Middas HaDin. This is the intent of the Gemara which says that during one moment of the day G-d gets angry. At that moment, Heaven forbid, anything can happen. The Middas haDin has free reign at that moment. This knowledge was Bilaam's great strength.

Bilaam's power was to always look at the world askance. The Mishneh [Avos 5:22] teaches that Bilaam had an 'Evil Eye'. This means that he looked at the world in a non-generous fashion, rather than with an eye toward the Middas haRachamim. He would always look with an eye toward invoking the Middas HaDin.

This explains why Bilaam always refers to himself as the "one eyed man". Who would ever describe himself as delivering "the speech of a one-eyed man?" Is being blind in one eye something to brag about and be proud of?

Man was given two eyes: One to look at things with the Middas haDin and one to look at things with the Middas haRachamim. We should examine things and be able to see in them the positive aspects as well as the negative aspects. Bilaam bragged that he was a person who always looks only with an 'evil eye'. "My claim to fame is that I can invoke Judgment against the Jewish people because I know when G-d utilizes only his Attribute of Judgment."

Our great salvation was that "He perceived no iniquity in Jacob" (lo hibit aven b'Yakov) [Bamidbar 23:21]. In all the days that Bilaam tried to invoke the Attribute of Judgment, G-d in His Mercy abstained from Anger and never looked at us with Middas HaDin.

Finally, homiletically, the Beis Av suggests that this is the intention of the Gemara in Brochos which

states that "Would it not cause great trouble for the congregation (Torach Tzibbur), the Rabbis would have instituted the recital of the section of Balak in the middle of the daily recitation of Shma." The standard interpretation of this Gemara is that we would have included the reading of Balak within - in addition to -- the reading of Krias Shma. However, the Beis Av cites an opinion from the Satmar Rebbe that the Gemara is making an even stronger statement: We would have REPLACED the reading of Krias Shma with that of Parshas Balak. If that's the case how what that be "troubling the congregation"?

We can understand the term "Torach Tzibbur" if the option was to read both the three section of Krias Shma AND Parshas Balak. The inclusion of an additional paragraph in Shma would create a burden for the congregation. If, however, the alternative was to replace Krias Shma with Balak -- there would have been no net increase, so how would it trouble the congregation?

The answer is that we would be shattered if twice every day we were to hear that "Kel Zoem b'Chol Yom" -- that G-d is angry every day and that every day the Middas HaDin is given free reign, at least momentarily. We would not be able to handle the thought. A smile would not appear on our faces the entire day. This thought would be too chilling to contemplate on a daily basis. That is the "Torach Tzibbur" to which the Gemara is referring.

Whether we recite it daily or not, this fact remains the truth. Heaven forbid, when we see tragedies in our midst -- tragedies that should not have happened and do not make any sense -- we ponder and ask ourselves 'Why'? Sometimes, they can be the result of the severe Middas HaDin that can affect anyone at any time. This is why a person has to constantly examine his actions on a daily basis. Teshuva is not something that should only be relegated to the Ten Days of Repentance. The antidote to Middas HaDin is the Middas HaRachamim which we will be granted if we show G-d that we are constantly introspecting and that we are willing to improve.

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