

THREE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN BILAAM AND RABBI YOSI BEN KISMA

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Balak

Three Differences Between Bilaam and Rabbi Yosi ben Kisma

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape #775, Wine at a Shul Kiddush. Good Shabbos!

In this week's parsha, Bilaam makes the statement "Even if Balak will give me his house full of gold and silver I would not be able to transgress the Word of the Almighty." [Bamidbar 22:18] Rashi comments that we see from here that Bilaam was greedy and he coveted the property of others.

Many commentaries ask on this Rashi from a Mishneh, which relates the story of Rabbi Yosi ben Kisma: "Once I was walking on the road when a certain man met me. He greeted me and I returned his greeting. He said to me, 'Rabbi, from what place are you?' I said to him, 'I am from a great city of scholars and sages.' He said to me, 'Rabbi, would you be willing to live with us in our place? I would give you thousands upon thousands of golden dinars, precious stones and pearls.' I replied, 'Even if you were to give me all the silver and gold, precious stones and pearls in the world, I would dwell nowhere but in a place of Torah.'" [Avot 6:9]

The question is, why is Rabbi Yosi ben Kisma any different than Bilaam? If Rashi says that Bilaam's suggestion and rejection of the possibility that he receives an exorbitant salary shows that he is a greedy person, why don't we say the same thing about the apparently similar statement by Rabbi Yosi ben Kisma?

The Torah Temima raises this question and explains that in the case of Rabbi Yosi ben Kisma, someone already brought up the subject of an exorbitant salary. In that case, it was proper for the rabbi to answer as he did. Once someone broached the subject of money, then the appropriate response is "even if you can give me all the money in the world, I will only live in a place of Torah!" The officers of Balak, on the other hand, only offered to give Bilaam "honor". Bilaam raised the issue of money and said, "even if you give me a million dollars, I am not going to transgress G-d's Word." This, Rashi says, proves he had his eye on the money the whole time.

The Chidah, in his Sefer Roshei Avos, writes a different answer to this question. Bilaam's words are "I am unable to transgress the Word of my G-d." This implies "between you and me, I would love to do it, but my hands are tied -- I am not able to violate Hashem's command." Rabbi Yosi ben Kisma made a blanket statement of principle: "I will only live in a place of Torah." That statement represented his personal inner desire, rather than a coerced course of action.

I also saw a third distinction. Bilaam's problem was that he wanted OTHER people's money. He does not state "If Balak will give me a house full of money..." He states "If Balak will give me HIS house full of money..." This indicates that beyond just wanting the money, he really wanted that someone else should NOT HAVE the money. He is like the person who is not really bothered by the fact that he has to drive a 10-year-old car. However, he is bothered that his neighbor has a new car. Rav Yosi ben Kisma merely refers to "all the money in the world." He does not hint that he wants other people's money.

I am sure that this does not exhaust the possibility of answers. Feel free to discuss this further and suggest other answers at your Shabbos table.

A Clash Between Torah and Secular Ethics:

In the dramatic confrontation between the Malach [angel] and Bilaam, after Bilaam's donkey speaks to him, the Malach tells Bilaam "Had she not turned away from me, I would now even have killed you and let her live!" [Bamidbar 22:33]. In other words, if I had my preference, I would have killed you and left the donkey alive. Rashi writes that, in fact, the Malach did kill the donkey, the reason being so that later people would not say about it "This is the donkey that put Bilaam in his place." This is an example of the Almighty being concerned about a person's dignity. We find the same idea with the mitzva to kill an animal involved in human-animal bestiality [Vayikra 20:15-16].

I remember as a little kid, when I first heard this Rashi, I felt so bad for the donkey. This was an innocent donkey, a wondrous talking donkey. It had to die to preserve the honor of the wicked Bilaam so that later, people would not mock Bilaam and point to this donkey as the one who bested him in a debate!

The Torah is concerned about the dignity of a low-life, degenerate human being -- the wicked Bilaam. The donkey on the other hand, could have been a walking Kiddush Hashem. People would point to it and speak of the miracle that happened through it. Why kill this poor donkey to spare the honor of a low-life?

We clearly see that the Torah is more sensitive about the honor and dignity of man, albeit the worst of men, than it is about any animal, albeit the best and most glorious of animals. In ethics classes in the secular world, they always pose the following question: If a person has the choice of rescuing from a fire or from drowning or from some emergency scenario, only one individual -- the family's trustworthy dog who has been in the family for 15 years and saved countless people's lives etc., etc. or a homeless smelly person who is drunk one day and strung out on drugs the next day -- who

should the person save, the dog or the drunk? In most classes, everyone says that we should save our dog rather than the homeless person. This is not the Torah's way of viewing things. Not only should we save the human being in such a scenario, but we should even kill the animal to save the dignity of a human being -- even a wicked human being!

Everyone Wants To Die Like a Tzadik

Among the blessings that Bilaam utters once he gets going with his attempt "to curse" the Jewish people is one in which he expresses the following very interesting prayer: "May my soul die the death of the upright, and may my end be like his." [Bamidbar 23:10]. Bilaam is inspired and against his will, he pronounces these Divinely inspired blessings about Israel. He expresses the wish that his death should be like theirs. The Gemara in Avodah Zarah says that Bilaam longed to expire in the same fashion as Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov. The Talmud expounds there that the Book of Bereshis is called Sefer HaYashar [the book of the Just]. Similarly, the Mos Yesharim [death of the Just] mentioned by Bilaam refers to the death of the Patriarchs whose lives are portrayed in the Book of Bereshis.

The Or Hachaim haKadosh writes that Bilaam knew that he was a disgusting person. He was the most degenerate person of the nations of the world, a World Class Rasha. He knew, as the Talmud writes, that he had relations with his donkey day and night. However, he had one request -- that on his deathbed he would be able to do Teshuva and thus merit the World to Come -- the world that is entirely good. There is only one problem. A person cannot live like a wicked person his entire life and then figure "Well, at the end, I am going to pull it out!" It does not work like that.

The Or Hachaim haKadosh writes further, "I knew such wicked people who told me explicitly that were they to be guaranteed that immediately after they repented, they would die, they would definitely repent. If they could be certain that they would not need to face the trials and tribulations of living and would never again have to face their Yetzer HaRa, they would certainly do Teshuva. The problem is that they know they cannot live a righteous life for any length of time."

Everyone wants to go out like a Tzadik, but one cannot just go out like a Tzadik after he has lived the life of a degenerate person. In order to die the death of a Just Person, one has to live the life of a Just Person as well.

This week's write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tapes on the weekly Torah portion. The complete list of halachic portions for this parsha from the Commuter Chavrusah Series are:

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