



Parshat Balak: The Choice of Every Individual

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Rabbi Avishai David

Parshat Balak discusses the episode of the evil prophet Bilam, who attempted to curse the Jewish nation. The Mishna in Avot says, "Whoever has these three qualities is considered among the disciples of Avraham: a good eye, a modest spirit, and a humble soul. In contrast those who exude arrogance are among the students of Bilam. The Mishna concludes with the difference between the two. The students of Avraham eat in this world and will eat in the next world while the students of Bilam will inherit gehinom and descend to the nethermost depths."

There are many analogies drawn between the syntax, tone, and tenor of the story of the Akeida and the saga of Bilam. After the Akeida, Hashem tells Avraham, "People who bless you will be blessed. People who curse you will be cursed." Similarly, Bilam is told by Balak, "People who curse you will be cursed. People who bless you will be blessed."

Avraham saddles his donkey to carry out the word of Hashem. Bilam too saddles his

donkey to carry out his mission to curse the Jewish people.

Chazal say the Akeida took place on Rosh Hashana. Similarly, Bilam constructed seven altars and offered a parah (cow) and an ayil (ram), the sacrifices that were brought on Rosh Hashana. Bilam said, "Tamut nafshi mot yesharim." He wanted to die the death of the forefathers who are called yesharim.

So we can understand the question of the Mishna, what is the comparison between the students of Avraham and Bilam? Yet Avraham is the recipient of blessing and Bilam is the recipient of curses.

Hashem gave the nations a great prophet who had the potential to bring them to repentance. Bilam and Avraham were both given incredible talent. Avraham used his gifts to carry out not only the command of Hashem but also His will. Bilam may have tried to convince himself that he was fulfilling Hashem's command but he certainly didn't follow His will. Avraham was not motivated by any self-interest while Bilam

was solely motivated by selfish concerns.

Avraham tried to proclaim Hashem's unity while Bilam tried to curse Klal Yisrael.

At the end of the parsha the pasuk says, "Vayakam Bilam vayelech vayshav l'mekomo, Bilam got up and returned to his place." He was unaffected by all that happened. He even regressed somewhat. In contrast, after the Akeidah, Avraham was transformed and metamorphosized into a totally different personality. Avraham was the fulfillment of Tzadikim yelchu bam, the righteous shall go in them, while Bilam was the fulfillment of u'poshim yichashlu bam, and the sinners shall stumble in them.

Chazal say, "In the path that a person seeks to travel, he is led." Every person, through his choices, can chart his own destiny. He can use his talents in a positive or negative way. Bilam channeled his strengths to greater arrogance and greed while Avraham utilized his gifts for the honor of Hashem.

Parshat Balak: A Good Eye

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Mrs. Shira Smiles

The mishna in Avot tells us, "Those who have a good eye, a humble spirit, and a meek soul, are disciples of our forefather Avraham. Those who have an evil eye, an arrogant spirit, and a greedy soul are disciples of the wicked Bilam. What is the difference between the disciples of Avraham and Bilam? The disciples of Avraham gain both this world and the next world while the disciples of Bilam inherit purgatory and descend into the pit of destruction."

The Matnat Chaim explains that even though a person may be involved in Torah and mitzvot all day, if he is missing the three attributes of Avraham he will not be able to benefit from this world or the next. This

mishna is especially wordy to emphasize that each one of us needs to introspect and ask himself, "What kind of person am I? To which group do I really belong?"

With the lesson of this mishna, we can also understand the gemara that explains why the second Beit Hamikdash was destroyed. The Jews of that era were well versed in Torah and involved in chesed, yet they harbored baseless hatred against each other. A person can do kindness out of selfishness. He can be the biggest baal chesed and still possess a greedy soul, evil eye, and arrogant spirit. His whole motive for acting in a benevolent manner may be to gain prestige or better his position. His focus is not on how to help others but on how

to help himself.

Our challenge is to become disciples of Avraham. When we do chesed it should be with the goal of helping the other person, as opposed to self-gain. If this entails exerting ourselves beyond our normal limits, we should do that too. Having an unjaundiced eye and giving without expectation of anything in return are hallmarks of true chesed.

As the Three Weeks approach and we begin to mourn the destruction of the Beit Hamikdash, let us make a commitment to cultivate the middot of Avraham Avinu and thereby rectify the baseless hatred that led to our long exile.



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Tehillim 85 – Shivat Zion

Based on a shiur by Dr. Esther Shkop

“For the conductor, a song of the sons of Korach. O Hashem, You have appeased Your land; You have returned the Captivity of Jacob.” Korach was one of the Levites who rebelled against Moshe, but some of his children survived.

L'ratzot means to appease and the Yalkut Shemoni says that in the tochacha (admonition) at the end of Vayikra, Hashem says: If you will not let the land rest you will be exiled and then the land will be placated because she will be given back her Sabbath, the year of shemitta. In the first exile in Bavel, the land wasn't tilled and cultivated for 70 years, rectifying the 70 shemittot that were violated.

Now the 70 years are over and Hashem has placated the land and is ready to take us back. This psalm was written in the days of Ezra and Nechemya when the Jews began to return.

“You have forgiven the iniquity of Your people; You have concealed all their sin forever. You have taken in all Your wrath; You have retreated from the fierceness of Your anger. Return us, O Hashem of our salvation and revoke Your anger with us.”

Nasata avon usually means to forgive but can also mean to carry. In the Biblical mindset, you've got this proverbial sack and every time you do something wrong you put a heavy rock in it and you walk around carrying it. Every action has its consequences. When you do something wrong, it creates a psychic spiritual burden and according to natural law there are consequences.

Rav Soloveitchik explains that when Hashem lifts the sin off us it means there aren't immediate consequences to our actions. There's a chance to rehabilitate and change our relationship. We can cover the damage but since we betrayed Hashem's trust in us, we must prove our faithfulness again. We ask Hashem not only to cover the sin but to undo all the anger.

“Show us, O Hashem, Your kindness, and Your salvation You shall give to us.” This was a song and a prayer of the captives returning from Bavel. They came to a land that was desolate. They needed to start all over again and rebuild. They took the desert and made it bloom but it didn't come easy, hence this prayer.

“I shall hear what Hashem will speak when He

speaks peace to His people and to His pious men, and they will not return to folly.”

Some commentators explain chasidov as righteous non-Jews who have chosen to recognize Hashem. Hashem speaks to them too. A kesil is a fool and kisla means trust. Hashem says: Don't fall back on the foolishness of misplaced trust. Throughout our long exile we trusted the foreign nations and maybe even ourselves, relying on our own strength and forgetting who it is that's actually protecting us.

“Truly, His salvation is near those who fear Him, so that His glory dwell in our land.”

“Truth will sprout from the earth, and righteousness will look down from heaven. Righteousness will go before Him, and He will place it on the way of His steps.”

We have to take the first step, then Hashem will respond in kind. We have to try to set things right again and prove that we are trustworthy. We must win back not only Hashem's love that's given to us unconditionally, but also His truth and justice, and then we will merit to experience peace.