

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Parshat Balak

Torah study is about learning from the biblical personalities. Often we gain from focusing on the righteous personalities, as we look for ways to emulate their refined character traits. Sometimes we have the opportunity to gain just as much by noting the ways of the wicked and avoiding them at all cost. Parshat Balak is a situation where we get the best of both worlds. Here it is specifically the contrast between the villain of the week, Bilaam and the righteousness of the Jewish people that is so enlightening.

Bilaam is a paradox. On the one hand, Bilaam is a model of what it means to obey G-d. When Balak, the Moabite king, asks him to curse the Jews, he states unequivocally, "Even if Balak were to give me his houseful of silver and gold, I will not be able to violate the word of G-d" (Bamidbar 22:18). And yet, Bilaam's whole mission is to avoid obeying. After Balak's messengers' first visit, Bilaam knows that G-d does not want him to curse the Jews. And yet, the rest of the parsha is filled with Bilaam's attempt to bypass the word of G-d. First, he repeats the request after Balak sends a second group of messengers. Then, after G-d gives him permission to go as long as he does not curse the Jews, Bilaam actually goes! And then he spends the majority of the parsha trying to curse the Jews. Will the real Bilaam please stand up?

The commentators point out a fascinating distinction. It is true – Bilaam is fully committed to following the word of G-d. However, at the same time he does not intend to follow the will of G-d! He is much more interested in the will of Bilaam, and the will of Bilaam was that he go and curse the Jews. Thus, although he recognizes that G-d does not want him to curse the Jews after request number one was rejected, he is undaunted. If at first he did not succeed, he can try, try, try again. And when G-d allows him to go with Balak's messengers Bilaam is thrilled. Even though he is not (yet) allowed to curse the Jews, but the word of G-d is slightly more in line with the will of Bilaam, and from his perspective that is a good thing.

Nowhere is this more evident than in Bilaam's encounter with the angel. When Bilaam finally realizes that an angel is blocking his way, he relents. "And now, if it is evil in your eyes I will return." It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that G-d doesn't want him to go – hence the sending of an angel to disrupt the



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continued ...

mission. What Bilaam is really saying is this: “G-d, are you going to stop me? If you won’t let me go, then I won’t. But if the only issue is that you don’t want me to go... well, that’s another story.”

Perhaps this is the significance of Mr. Ed’s biblical precursor, the miraculous talking donkey. G-d is showing Bilaam the error of his whole approach to G-d’s messages. You look at G-d speaking to you as a talking donkey. There are words, and they are binding, but you don’t perceive that there is a will behind them.

This idea is at the heart of a perplexing comment in the Midrash. The Midrash, asserts that the Jews’ celebration of the three pilgrimage festivals was what made Bilaam unable to curse the Jews. However, it’s not clear what makes the pilgrimage festivals a greater merit than any other mitzvah.

The Shem Mi’Shmuel, a great Chassidic sage, explains as follows: the pilgrimage festivals presented a great challenge to the Jews. To pick up and leave all material possessions at home three times a year while a person trekked up to Jerusalem requires a great deal of faith, especially in the days before home security systems. And yet, that is exactly what the Jews did. While that is definitely impressive, it only exhibits obedience to the word of G-d. However, the Midrash does not focus on the action of going up to Jerusalem; it emphasizes the emotion - they celebrate the pilgrimage festivals in a joyous manner. While Bilaam’s submission to G-d begins and ends with G-d’s word, the Jews’ dedication goes far beyond. They are focused on internalizing the will of G-d. They find meaning in G-d’s commandments, not limitations. Hence, they were filled with joy and happiness, and not bitterness and resentment. This higher level of dedication shows the Jews to be worthy of G-d’s blessings, and not Bilaam’s curses.

This is Bilaam’s eternal lesson. Listening to G-d’s word without sensitizing ourselves to G-d’s will is to be internally contradictory. Worse still, we will find ourselves locked in a struggle against G-d, a struggle which we cannot win. By contrast, the Jews communicate their love and dedication not just to G-d’s words, but to the will those words represent. The contrast is enlightening.

Shabbat Shalom

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