



Parashat Balak 5770

Ask Rav Aviner: mororly@bezeqint.net

Prepared by Rabbi Mordechai Tzion

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On the Parashah... Bilam's Wickedness

[Tal Chermon]

The closer we come to Eretz Israel, the more fear we generate all around: “And Moav was extremely fearful of the Nation for it was very great” (Bemidbar 22:3)... Furthermore, it is clear that we did not overcome our enemies through superior physical strength. This is as true for Sichon and Og as it was for the Egyptians. Balak, King of Moav, realized that he needed spiritual, not physical power, to stand up to the Nation of Israel. He turned to Bilam, one of the greatest and most wicked spiritual powers in the world (see Devarim 34:10, Sifrei ibid and Maran Ha-Rav Kook, Igrot Reiya 2, 34). Bilam was a philosopher of great stature who chose to use his spiritual powers for evil and not for good.

As Bilam was on his way to curse the nation, we were witness to a strange showdown with his donkey. What role did this incident play within the larger context? Did it have anything to do with the conflict between the Nation of Israel, Bilam and Moav? Indeed, this confrontation clarified our conflict with Bilam. Rashi pointed out that Bilam's failure to defeat his donkey presaged his future failure in the conflict with Israel. When he told his donkey, “If only I had a sword in my hand now, I would kill you,” (Bemidbar 22: 29), “This showed him in a very bad light before the princes of Moav. Here he was on his way to kill a whole nation by cursing them, but he needed a weapon to punish his donkey” (Rashi ibid.). The question therefore asks itself: “Why was Bilam powerless against his donkey, and what is the moral of this story?” The story begins with three “sins” of the donkey: It turned off the road, then pressed Bilam's foot to the wall on the narrow path through the vineyard and finally it simply sat down and refused to continue on. Each time, Bilam beat the donkey. It finally opened its mouth and asked: “What have I done to you to make you strike me these three times?” (Bemidbar 22:28). This is a rhetorical question which is actually a moral accusation directed at Bilam. In effect it asked if he thought that it is all right to oppress animals, and need not account for such action. (Rabbi Yehuda HeChassid,

in Sefer HaChassidim, 44, stated that on the Day of Judgment, men will be called to account for pain caused to their horses by sharp-nailed shoes.) How did Bilam react to this accusation? He lost all control and was ready to kill! “For you have mocked me. If only I had a sword in my hand now, I would kill you!” Before, when the donkey pressed against his foot, he merely struck it, and now he was ready to kill. Why? Physical pain is not nearly as provocative being rebuked by a donkey. That was more than he could take. The donkey, however, continues explaining: “For I am your donkey, which you have always ridden, until this very day. Have I ever done such a thing to you before?” (ibid. v. 30). This is the first time I have behaved this way. Why were you so fast to strike me? You should have tried to understand what was happening if my behavior changed so drastically. Secondly, why did you pay so much attention to this one negative action and not look at the whole picture? You are the type of person who is attracted to the bad things in the world. You have an “evil eye.” You may be a great philosopher, but as soon as you become personally involved in something, you lose all ability for objective ethical judgment.... Bilam had no answer. He had to admit that he was wrong. He had been bested by the ethical superiority of his donkey. And this received Divine affirmation: “And G-d opened Bilam’s eyes, and he saw the angel of G-d standing on the road with his sword drawn in his hand” (ibid. v. 31). Until then, only the donkey had been capable of seeing the angel of G-d; now Bilam saw him too. “Angels” are Divine laws given a physical representation. There are Divine laws which function within the natural, physical world, Divine powers which appear in man’s soul, and even spiritual Divine powers. The donkey “saw” the “angel” of simple morality. The fact that the donkey spoke up was a miracle, but not the fact that it saw the angel (see Avot 5:5). It had an instinctive understanding of the basic moral principles which had escaped Bilam, wise as he was. Only after he admitted being morally inferior to his donkey was he privileged to also “see the angel” and realize that his eagerness to accept Balak’s invitation was morally reprehensible. “And Bilam said to the angel of G-d, ‘I have sinned’” (ibid. v. 34).

Scientific experiments have shown that animals do have instincts of right and wrong. In one such experiment, every time one monkey took a piece of food, the other monkey was given an electric shock which caused it to cry out in pain. When the first monkey realized the causal effect here, it fasted for long periods of time! Not only that, but when the roles of the two monkeys were switched, the second monkey fasted for even longer periods of time, as it itself had previously experienced the punishment caused by the other monkey.

We know that animals are loyal and devoted to their owners (see Netzach Yisrael, chap. 2). The prophet Yeshayahu (1:3) tells us that “The ox knows its owner and the donkey its master’s crib.” The ox is very loyal, but it needs to be comfortable. The donkey, however, may be a bit rebellious, but it works very hard under the most difficult conditions. The Hebrew word for “donkey – chamor” - is very similar to the Hebrew terminology for “material – chomer.” The Messiah is described as “poor and riding on a donkey” (Zechariah 9:9). The Zohar explains that a donkey is “bad on the outside and good on the inside” (Tikkunei Zohar 60), very “material” but loving and

loyal (Igrot Reiya #555). The Messiah “takes a ride” on a generation comparable to a donkey (a generation steeped in materialism).

Bilam, great as his spiritual powers were, lacked this simple morality. His failure to win the argument with the donkey showed that spiritual power alone was insufficient. He lacked even the basic primitive sense of right and wrong which animals possess. If his spiritual powers failed in the face of the moral superiority of his donkey, they would certainly not suffice to contend with the tremendous moral superiority of the Nation of Israel. Thus his failure in the conflict with the donkey is an indication of his future failure in the conflict with Israel.

Rav Aviner on... Beggars

Question: Very often we encounter beggars on the street, especially at the Western Wall Plaza. Are we obligated to give something to everyone who puts out his hand? How much must give? It has happened to me that I gave a pauper a small sum and he scornfully returned it to me. How is it possible to know whether someone is really poor or simply a liar? Is it permissible to refuse to give a donation?

Answer: Generally speaking, we do not give Tzedakah without a serious investigation. There is only one exception, and that is if someone approaches asking for food because he is hungry. There, we must give him something immediately. The Shulchan Aruch says as follows: "If a poor person whom we do not know says, 'I am hungry. Feed me,' we do not investigate the possibility that he is a liar. Rather, we contribute immediately. If someone lacked clothing and said, 'I lack clothing. Give me money to buy some,' we investigate to see whether he is a liar" (Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah, 151:10).

Indeed, if someone refuses to give Tzedakah when he has money in hand, he is considered cruel, and he violates a mitzvah of the Torah. Yet as with all mitzvot, the mitzvah of Tzedakah has restrictions as well. The restriction on Tzedakah is that we do not give it to everyone who asks for it, but only to those who it has become clear really need it, as in Rambam's words, "According to our information, they are in financial straits" (Sefer Ha-Mitzvot, Lo Ta'aseh 232). If someone gives without investigating, and the collector turns out to be a cheater, then he has not fulfilled the mitzvah of Tzedakah. Rather, he has squandered his money and caused loss to genuine poor people.

Wicked men tried to kill Yirmiyahu. He then cursed them saying, "Master of the Universe! Even when those people perform charitable acts, make them stumble by having them perform their acts for disreputable people, so that they should not reap merit for it" (Baba Kamma 16b). Even the wicked are sometimes aroused to perform good deeds, yet if they give their money to charlatans, they will not fulfill any mitzvah thereby.

It is true that regarding all the mitzvot of the Torah, a person is presumed reputable, truthful, honest and good, until proven otherwise. This principle has several

exceptions, however, for example, the beggar mentioned above, and that is because of the large number of cheaters. The same applies in our own time. The great halachic authorities of our generation have ruled that all beggars are to be presumed swindlers until proven otherwise. There are some very wealthy beggars, for example, in Jerusalem. A beggar who walks from the Central Bus Station to the Kotel can collect 500 to 800 shekel per day.

Obviously, the investigative process to find out whether the beggar is a swindler or not cannot be carried out by just anyone, but only by a Bet Din, a Rabbinic court (see *Otzar Mefarshei Ha-Talmud, Baba Metzia, 27b*). The Bet Din then awards the beggar a certificate which the legal authorities have labeled a *Ketav Kibbutz* [writ of collection] (*Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 253:12 in the Rama*).

Yet we must be cautious to ensure that the beggar's "*Ketav Kibbutz*" is not forged. There was a swindler who forged the certificate of a great Rabbi, yet got confused between the Rabbi and the Rabbi's father-in-law, also a great Rabbi, who had passed away several decades previous. Another swindler collected money for a deathly ill person, using a genuine certificate, but pocketed the money for himself. Nonetheless, Divine Providence brought him to the home of the ill person himself, who had already been healthy for quite a while. All of the preceding relates to a person who is suffering financial distress and approaches members of a charitable institution in hopes of their solving his problem. They therefore share a sizable portion of the responsibility for saving him from his troubles.

Regarding the beggar who approaches everyone, one after another, the law is different, however. The halachic authorities call that person a "door-to-door beggar," and the *Shulchan Aruch* rules: "We are not obligated to give a large sum to the beggar who goes door to door. Rather, we may give him a small sum" (*Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 250:3*). That beggar is approaching many people, and from all of them together he will attain what he needs.

How much is "a small sum"? *Rambam* writes: "If a beggar goes door to door, we are not obligated to give him a large sum, but only a small one. Still, the Rabbis forbade us to turn him away empty-handed. It is enough, however, to give him a single dried fig, as it says, 'Let not the oppressed return ashamed' (*Tehillim 74:21*)" (*Matanot Aniym 7:4*). It is therefore enough to give him a fig or its monetary equivalent, in other words, twenty Israeli agorot (at present, about five American cents). In that way, the beggar will be able to collect 100 shekels per day. If he is insulted and refuses to accept a small gift, it is a sign that he is not really poor. *Rabbi Chaim David HaLevi* wrote: "If a pauper begs door to door, it is enough to give him a small gift. At the same time, it is forbidden to turn him away empty-handed... In our day, however, there are poor people who are not satisfied with a little bit, and they demand set amounts, emphasizing that they must be given nothing less. These people bear letters from Rabbis or physicians assisting them in their cause. The number of people behaving licentiously in this regard has become great, and I am not certain that it is possible to rely on a recommendation. In any event, since these people are classed among those who stretch out their hands, there is no obligation to give them more than a small gift, as is defined by Halachah. A real poor person such as in called an "*Evyon*" in the Torah (*Devarim 15:4*) does not pamper himself. He accepts whatever

he is given, even a dried fig, as in Rambam's definition. If someone refuses small gifts, we bear no responsibility for him" (Aseh Lecha Rav 9:34-35).

Therefore, whoever wishes to fulfill the mitzvah of Tzedakah properly should give to known and recognized organizations of Tzedakah and kindness.

Stories about Leaving the Land of Israel - #3

Rav Asi had an elderly mother. She said to him: I want jewelry. Rav Asi got them for her. She said: I want a man to marry. He said: I will look. His mother: I want you to find a man as beautiful as yourself for me to marry! He then understood that she was not able to think clearly and he was unable to honor her properly. He decided to leave her and find others to take care of her. Rav Asi made Aliyah. He heard that she was coming after him. He asked Rabbi Yochanan: Am I permitted to leave Eretz Yisrael to greet her and come back with her? Rabbi Yochanan responded: I don't know. Rav Asi waited a while and then came to ask again. Rabbi Yochanan said: "Asi, I see that you want to go. Hashem should return you safely." Rav Asi went to Rabbi Elazar and asked: Perhaps, G-d forbid, Rabbi Yochanan is angry at me? He said: What did he actually say to you? He responded: "Hashem should return you safely." Rabbi Elazar: If he was angry with you, he would not have blessed you. Rav Asi left Eretz Yisrael, but before he reached her, he was informed that she had died and she was being brought to Eretz Yisrael for burial. He said: Had I known, I would not have left Eretz Yisrael (Kiddushin 31b, Meharsha ibid., Rambam Hilchot Mamrim 6:10 and see Yam Shel Shlomo on Kiddushin ibid. and Shut Noda Bi-Yehuda Tanina Even Ha-Ezer #45).

Text Message Responsa

Ha-Rav answers hundreds of text message questions a week. Some appear in the parashah sheets "Ma'ayanei Ha-Yeshu'ah" and "Olam Ha-Katan." Here's a sample:

Holocaust

Q: Why did Hashem, who is completely good, allow the Holocaust?

A: This is not a question for a text message. Call or look in my book: Orot Me-Ofel.

Annuling Marriages

Q: Is it possible to retroactively annul a marriage in order to solve the problem of Agunot (women whose husbands refuse to grant a religious [divorce](#) and they are therefore unable to remarry)?

A: No. Halachic authorities already rejected this idea (Shut Melamed Le-Ho'il 3:51. Shut Tzitz Eliezer 1:2 #2).

A Man Wearing a Wedding Ring

Q: It is forbidden for a man to wear a wedding ring?

A: There is no prohibition. Shut Igrot Moshe, Even Ha-Ezer 4:32 #2.

Christian Date

Q: Is it permissible to use the Christian date?

A: One should definitely not use it. Derashot Chatam Sofer vol. 1, p. 93. Shut Maharam Shik, Yoreh Deah #171.

Cards

A: Is it permissible to play cards?

A: It is certainly not recommended. Sidur Yavetz, sha'ar #6 chalon #7.

Davening without a Kippah

Q: I accidentally davened without a Kippah. Do I have to daven again?

A: You fulfilled your obligation after the fact. Shut Yabai Omer, Orach Chaim 15 #6.

Speaking Hebrew

Q: Is it permissible to use English and Yiddish words while speaking?

A: One should speak pure Hebrew. Sifre – Devarim 46.

Jewish DNA

Q: Is it possible to prove someone's Jewishness by their DNA?

A: No. Although there is above-average closeness of genetic material among Jews, it is merely statistical. And after all, people converted to Judaism from among 200 different races.

Kallah Classes

Q: How much should one pay a woman who teaches a bride the laws of Family Purity?

A: 1000 shekels.

Lottery

Q: Is it permissible to play the lottery?

A: No, our Sages looked negatively upon one who gambles (Shut She'eilat Shlomo 3:201).

Shuls

Q: Why are non-Jewish houses of worship so much more beautiful and glorious than shuls?

A: The essence is the service of Hashem and not the human experience.

Talking with My Wife

Q: My wife needs me to talk to her every evening. What about learning Torah?

A: This is a mitzvah, and we learn Torah in order to fulfill it (The blessing Ahavah Rabbah before the Shema).

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Yeshivat Ateret Yerushalayim P.O.B. 1076 Jerusalem 91009 Tel.02-6284101 Fax.02-6261528

www.ateret.org.il To subscribe, send e-mail to: mororly@bezeqint.net

