

Parshat Balak

Bilaam. Good or Evil?

At first glance, this week's parsha looks like something out of Dungeons and Dragons: We have blessings and curses, talking donkeys, a frustrated demented king, and a travelling wizard whose curses repeatedly turn into blessings. Bilaam the sorcerer and prophet is invited to curse the Children of Israel and it all goes rather wrong.

We would like to focus, this week, on one central question whose answer will radically affect our entire view of the Parsha.

Is Bilaam evil?

Chazal (the Rabbinic tradition) refer to Bilaam quite standardly as Bilaam HaRasha. He is seen as greedy, egoistic, and a Jew hater. He attempts to subvert even God himself! Was he really such a villain?

Chavruta:

1. READ CH.22 according to p'shat. Read it with no preconceptions.

Does Bilaam come over as a particularly evil person?

- In which sections does he seem to be good?
- From where do we see his evil?

2. RISHONIM

- See RASHI on passuk 5, 8-22
- Now see the opinion of the RAMBAN on passuk 15, 20.

How is it that they have such different views? Look into the pesukim and for each parshan, note which pesukim they read as p'shat and which pesukim they "read in to"!

3. to complete our Biblical view of Bilaam, see also

- Bamidbar 31:1-2,8,15-16
- Devarim 23:5-7

Shiur:

THE POSITIVE VIEW.

A number of commentators, the Ramban (Nachmanides) at the top of the list, view Bilaam in a remarkably positive light. They bring convincing proofs for their position from the text of the story itself. In fact, if you would stop reading now, pick up a Chumash and read the start of our parsha (Ch.22 v.2-20) you might begin to see what they mean.

Bilaam's motto, a phrase which he repeats time after time throughout the Parsha, seems to be :

"Even if Balak gives me his house full of silver and gold, I cannot do anything, big or little, contrary to the word of the Lord my God" (See also 24:13)

and in another variation (23:12 and see also 22:7,13,38. 23:26.):

"I can only repeat faithfully what the LORD puts in my mouth."

Bilaam appears as a paradigm of obedience and submission to God. One can view almost the entire story from this vantage point. At every step, Bilaam does nothing before he has consulted with God. When God tells him not to accompany Balak's ministers, he faithfully transmits God's message and refuses to go along with them. Only when God lets him go does he agree to their summons. Even when asked by King Balak himself, he gives no assurances. He simply repeats his motto that he is subject to the desires of God and that God is his sole controller.

Bilaam comes over as a man of integrity. A good man.

This character appraisal of Bilaam would appear to be accurate were it not for some strong contrary indications in the text. After Bilaam forwards Balak's second request to God, God allows him to go. However no sooner had he left, we read (22:22) how

"God was incensed at his going and placed an angel of the Lord in his way as an adversary"

In addition, there is the story of the angel with sword drawn coming apparently to stop Bilaam fulfilling his evil plan.

Here is the opinion of the RAMBAN (22:22) in his own words:

"God's desire, was to bless the people of Israel through the prophet of the gentiles. Bilaam should have told Balak's ministers explicitly "I have been permitted by God to accompany you, but only with the condition that I do not curse the people and that if God instructs me, I will bless them" ... Now Bilaam in his eagerness to go with them did not relate this message and said nothing at all. "When he rose in the morning, Bilaam saddled his ass and departed with the Moabite dignitaries" (22:21)... as if he desired to do their bidding. God was angry at his going because had he told them, they would not have asked him to go. In addition there was the defamation of God in that his leaving, as if by God's consent, gave the impression that God had given permission to curse the people...."

The incident with the angel, says the Ramban, is to correct this fault in Bilaam's attitude. The angel tells Bilaam how he has distorted God's permit in letting him go to Balak (See the Ramban's translation of passuk 22). He should have made his intentions clearly understood. Bilaam offers to return home but God simply warns him a second time that he will say none other than that which God instructs him to say.

BILAAM HARASHA

RASHI, in contrast, sees Bilaam as a negative figure from the very

outset. We will review just a few of his comments in this vein.

After the first approach by Balak's people, God tells Bilaam (22:12) "Do not go with them. You must not curse that people, for they are blessed." Rashi (quoting the Midrash Tanchuma) reads this as an exchange between Bilaam and God:

God commands: "Do not go with them."
Bilaam replies, "Then I will curse them from here!"
"You must not curse that people" says God,
to which Bilaam answers, "Then I will bless them."
God says "They are (already) blessed," ... as one says of the
hornet: 'not of your honey nor your sting.'

Bilaam replies to the Moabite messengers: (22:13) "The Lord will not let me go with you". Rashi, quoting the Tanchuma again, reads this phrase in an arrogant, self-centred tone:

" The Lord will not let me go with YOU - but rather with ministers of a higher rank than you. We see from here his haughtiness. He didn't want to demonstrate that he was under the authority of God, but rather used a proud tone. Balak got the hint: - (22:15) "Then Balak sent other dignitaries, more numerous and distinguished than the first."

Rashi here illustrates Bilaam as egoistic, fortune seeking and proud .

Rashi also accuses Bilaam of "an insatiable desire for wealth and excessive greed" . When Bilaam turns down Balak's offer with the words "Even if Balak gives me his house full of silver and gold ..." (22:18) Rashi reads between the lines noting Bilaam's hidden agenda of wealth. Bilaam realises his market value if he could defeat the Israelites single-handed and save Balak the cost of a war. He therefore suggests that an appropriate reward might be a house worth of gold and silver.

Rashi completes the picture of the evil Bilaam with a note on the verse (22:21) "When he rose in the morning, Bilaam saddled his ass and departed with the Moabite dignitaries.". Why would the proud, honour seeking Bilaam do his own dirty work? Why would he saddle his own animal? Rashi comments :

" We learn from here that intense hatred can distort even ingrained character traits...Here he saddled his ass personally.

WITH THE MOABITE DIGNITARIES: his heart and their hearts in unison."

There is one significant question which threatens to challenge this view of Bilaam. Why did God let Bilaam go? Why did he not ban him from making the journey?

To this Rashi presents an answer that reflects our principle of free will as well as the determination of Bilaam (22:33)

"A person is lead in the way in which he desires to go"

God helps people to travel along the path of their desires. If Bilaam wishes to curse the Israelites, so be it. Let him pay the cost of his crime

at a later date. In the meantime, God lets him follow his hearts desire.

UNDERSTANDING RASHI AND THE RAMBAN

When confronted with a difference of opinion of this type, we must ask ourselves how two Bible scholars could come to such contrasting conclusions based on the same text. What are the textual basis of each opinion?

We shall answer this question by re-examining the structure of the text. When one looks closely, one begins to see that in a certain sense, chapter 22 (the beginning of our Parsha) seems to give two separate (even contradictory) stories of Bilaam. We shall soon demonstrate that it is the disparity between the two stories which gives rise to the ambiguity about the nature of Bilaams character.

Let us explain. The story can be split into two discreet sections. In essence, we see before us two 'stories':

The first, which relates the story of Bilaam being approached with an offer from Balak and his faithfully turning to God with each request, following His word at every turn.

The second story is that of Bilaam and his ass. In this second story, the Moabite dignitaries seem to be nowhere in sight (See Ramban 22:33) and we witness Bilaam in his confrontation with the angel who is seemingly coming to stop him.

Interestingly enough, both stories conclude with almost an identical phrase:(Compare verse 20-21 with verse 35. There are some variations)

"Go with the men but you will only repeat what I tell you. And Bilaam went with the dignitaries of Moav/Balak".

The first 'story' seems to present a near perfect Bilaam. He is God-fearing, loyal and obedient. When Bilaam accompanies the Moabite emissaries, we know that it as full Divine approval. We have no reason to believe that God should be angry in any way

The second 'story', however, sets a different scene. It's opening line is "God was incensed at his going" and it continues with the strange story of the talking donkey. The impression one draws from the story is definitely one of God's displeasure at Bilaam. This strange episode would seem to be God's way of trying to "get through" to Bilaam. What message is God sending him? God is expressing to Bilaam the limits of human perception. Bilaam cannot see that which his donkey sees. The human mind does not always see the Divine. Bilaam has some thinking to do if he is to 'see' the truth. Maybe , in addition, we might say that God is telling him how the power of speech is in the hands of God and not of man. In the usual order of things donkeys cannot speak, Humans can. But if God chooses, donkeys CAN speak and by the same logic, Bilaam should realise that his speech is in God's hands. Important messages for a man on a mission to curse an entire nation.

These two 'stories' are the background information that we are told as regards Bilaam. It would seem that the RAMBAN takes the first section of Chapter 22 as his starting point. Bilaam is basically good. O.K., he

slips up. Honour and glory get in the way of his better side. God gets angry, Bilaam apologises, and we move on. And, in the final analysis, Bilaam comes through. Bilaam blesses the Jewish people rather than cursing them. He deviates not a letter from that which God has told him to say.

RASHI's approach, however, seems to rely on the second story as the defining factor as regards Bilaam. The first half of Chapter 22 is read with the prior knowledge of the latter half. God is clearly angry with Bilaam for going. Bilaam never seems to get the message that God is displeased, maybe because he doesn't want to accept its implications.

Bilaam acts like a child nagging his parent for something that the child wants contrary to his parent's better judgement. Bilaam seems persistent in asking God repeatedly, and when he hears a positive response, jumps at the chance. He seems not to notice that God isn't exactly 'smiling' at him and that from an outsiders perspective, it would be clear that God would prefer that he stay at home.

It is in this light that Rashi interprets the entire first section of the Chapter. Bilaam is painted with foreboding colours.

BILAAM'S SECOND ATTEMPT

If this was all the information at our disposal, it would difficult to understand why Bilaam is so widely perceived in a negative light. Both Rashi and the Ramban have logic and support behind their positions. However, the story does not end with Bilaam returning home (24:25). He reappears later in Sefer Bamidbar in two places.

The story of Bilaam and Balak is followed immediately (Ch. 25) by an epidemic of promiscuity and idol worship in the camp of Israel. A plague ensues leaving 24,000 dead. The apparent perpetrators of the immorality are the Midianites.

God says:

"Assail the Midianites and defeat them for they assailed you by the trickery they practised against you ...". (25:7)

Apparently, there is some element of "trickery", underhand activity, which has been deliberately perpetrated against the Israelites. Someone has planned to ensnare the Israelites and has chosen to use the "tool" of idolatry and immorality in order to sabotage the national spirit of Israel.

Who is behind it all?

The children of Israel go to war against the Midianites (31:8-15):

"They killed BILAAM BEN BEOR by the swordAnd Moses said "Why have you left the women alive? They are the very ones who, on BILAAM'S advice, induced the Israelites to trespass in the matter of Peor and the community of the Lord was struck by the plague"

It would appear that Bilaam is the mastermind behind the scheme, the

trickery. It is Bilaam who set out to damage the Israelite camp. The Talmud (Sanhedrin 106a) describes Bilaam's thinking:

" Bilaam said: "Their God despises promiscuity and they (the Israelites) enjoy fine cloth. Let me suggest a plan. Set up stalls selling fine cloth. Place an old woman at the door and a young prostitute inside." They set up the stalls ... When the Israelites came to the market, the old woman offered fine cloth at a high price, the younger girl offered it for less, time after time."

The Talmud continues as to how this familiarity was used to offer the Israelites wine, leading to sexual activity which after some time was conditioned on idol worship.

The Talmud continues:

" And they killed Bilaam by the sword (31:8). Why was he there? (He had returned home (24:25)). He had returned to receive his payment for causing the plague of 24,000 dead amongst the Israelites."

In the light of this information, it is difficult NOT to see Bilaam as a cunning, greedy and downright evil. He is a dangerous man. The Mishna in Avot states :

"He who has an evil eye, greed and haughtiness are following the hallmarks of the wicked Bilaam."

POTENTIAL AND FULFILLMENT

It would seem that we have reinforced Rashi's perspective. Rashi builds his opinion based on the wider context and looks at the totality of what we know about Bilaam before making a judgement. He realises that a mind which can devise and activate a plan to bring Israel into disfavour with its' God must have a motivation. That motivation is one of three: pure wickedness, pride, or greed. God would not let Bilaam curse the Jewish nation so Bilaam found another way to cause harm.

But what of the Ramban? The Ramban, certainly, is truer to the language of the beginning of the parsha. How might he fit in contextually?

Maybe we can offer the following thought. Bilaam is a prophet. Indeed Bilaam is seen as the Gentile equivalent of Moses, the greatest of the prophets (Sifrei).

According to the Jewish tradition, prophecy comes only to those with perfected intellect and character. A controlled, ethical temper is a prerequisite for prophecy. The Ramban is unwilling to define Bilaam as evil from the start because his gift of prophecy would indicate otherwise.

However, with prophecy, as with any Divine given talent, comes responsibility. Balak testifies to Bilaam's exceptional power :

"whom you bless is indeed blessed and who you curse is cursed" (22:6).

Only one other figure in the Bible is described by a similar epithet. It is Abraham. God tells Abraham

“I will bless those who bless you and curse him that curses you” (Genesis 12:3)

But Abraham uses his power to promote kindness, faith in God, honesty and Justice, whereas Bilaam promotes immorality and idolatry.

“A person is lead in the way in which he desires to go”

Every person, no matter what his or her background, can determine their life. We can choose good and we can chose bad. We can build or destroy. Only we decide. And God lets us be the way we want to be. Even the greatest past does not necessarily secure a great future.

Whether Bilaam started off good or bad is of no relevance to us. He goes down in history as Bilaam Harasha - the wicked Bilaam because of the course of action that he chose. Bilaam is described as being the ultimate Gentile prophet. The questions that this parsha leaves us with relate to direction, potential and fulfilment. The man with the greatest potential seems to squander it.

This is a parsha where donkeys see more clearly than humans. God shows Bilaam what is right and Bilaam is determined to close his eyes, going his own way. Maybe the lesson for us is to follow the clues that God leaves on our path and to let that pathway lead us towards God and goodness.

Shabbat Shalom.