

Yeshivat Har Etzion Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash
(office@etzion.org.il)

permission. Rashi (22:20) explains that in some way, Bilam planned to deviate from the express will of God:

I Will Bless Those Who Bless You

By Rav Yair Kahn

The story of Balak is inserted into sefer Bemidbar after the successful campaign against the kingdoms of Sichon and Og. Of course, this may be merely an accurate chronological description, assuming that Balak's fears were generated by the total collapse of these kings' powerful armies (see Rashi). However, one might add that at this juncture, when the Jewish people are in the final stages of preparation for entry into the promised land, the Torah was interested in describing the spiritual victory of Israel over the dark spiritual forces of the rest of the world, represented by Bilam. Although the spiritual victory detailed in the final section of Bilam's prophecy will be fully implemented only in the future - "What I see for them is not yet, what I behold will not be soon" (Bemidbar 24:17) - nevertheless, this victory lies at the root of Jewish destiny.

The Torah presents us with a fascinating tale touching upon important theological issues. It is a story pregnant with symbolic references and coded messages. Before attempting an interpretation, one must be aware that Torah is not literature, and only then may one proceed with a sense of humility and an awareness of the limits of human perception.

Anyone versed in Scripture is familiar with the story of Bilam and his donkey, however, most people gloss over the enigmatic section that follows, containing the blessings and prophecies transmitted through Bilam. I will attempt to explain a certain aspect of the latter, based upon an analysis of the former. Using this method, I hope to highlight certain basic issues which I believe the Torah is trying to convey. What did Bilam attempt to accomplish? What was God's response? What eternal message does the Torah wish to transmit in this section?

When reading the story, we are troubled by a basic problem. The Torah tells us:

That night God came to Bilam and said to him, "If these men have come to invite you, you may go with them. But whatever I command you, that you shall do." When he arose in the morning, Bilam saddled his donkey and departed with the Moabite dignitaries. But God was incensed at his going; so an angel of God placed himself in his way as an adversary. (Bemidbar 22:20-22)

It is not clear what Bilam did to arouse God's anger. He made it very clear to Balak's emissaries that he was dependent upon God's wishes, and he refused to join Balak without divine

"But whatever I command you, that you shall do" - "But" means that against your will you shall do what I command you; nevertheless, "And Bilam went," for he thought, "Perhaps I shall lead Him astray and He will consent."

When the first group of messengers arrive, God refuses Bilam permission to join Balak, explaining that Bnei Yisrael are a blessed nation and should not be cursed.

God said to Bilam, "Do not go with them. You must not curse that people, for they are blessed." (Bemidbar 22:12)

Why, then, did Bilam repeat his request to God at the behest of the second group of messengers? Did he really believe that Bnei Yisrael were no longer blessed simply because Balak had sent a more impressive entourage? What did he think when God changed His mind, as it were, and allowed him to travel to Moav?

When Bilam finally embarks on his journey to Moav, God, through His heavenly angel and a verbal donkey, wishes to convey to Bilam that he has no personal freedom in this matter. Just like the donkey, he merely must repeat that which God places in his mouth (see Ramban). However, we are immediately struck by the repeated attempts leading up to Bilam's eye-opening encounter with the angel. The donkey manages to circumvent the angel twice, until she is finally brought to a stop on the third encounter. What is the Torah trying to tell us by reporting the failed attempts? Is the Torah informing us that God sent an incompetent angel who managed to connect only after two strikes? Or is the Torah educating us regarding the stubbornness of donkeys?

Let us take a closer look at the angel's two failed attempts to stop Bilam. In the first encounter, the angel blocks the path with sword drawn. The donkey manages to continue by leaving the path, venturing into the field and circumventing the danger. Bilam then beats the donkey to return him to the path.

We already noted that the donkey's miraculous speech indicates that, just as the donkey merely verbalizes the sounds that God places in her mouth, so too Bilam has no choice but to repeat that which is put in his mouth by the Almighty. We therefore may assume that the donkey in the entire episode represents Bilam (Bilam himself may be playing the role of Balak). In fact, doesn't the donkey act exactly like Bilam? God prohibits him from placing a curse on Bnei Yisrael because they are blessed. However, instead of stopping, Bilam tries to circumvent God's will and paradoxically avoid the Omnipresent's eye, in order to place a curse on the Jewish people. Bilam at this juncture believes his words have power independent of God. If only he can escape the path and the view

of God, he will succeed in bringing calamity on the Jewish nation.

Bilam's heresy was already detected by Rashi at the beginning of our parasha. When the first entourage from Moav arrived, God appeared to Bilam in a dream and asked: "What do these people want of you?" (Bemidbar 22:9). Rashi comments:

"He came to mislead him. He said apparently at times not everything is known to him ... [and therefore Bilam thought,] 'I shall find a time that I will be able to curse them and He will not understand.'"

The first prophecy placed in Bilam's mouth counters this idea explicitly. God notes the absurdity of this position as He forces Bilam to proclaim:

How can I curse who God has not cursed,
how doom when the Lord has not doomed?
(Bemidbar 23:8)

It is preposterous even to entertain the possibility of bringing a curse upon a nation blessed by God. Moreover, it is ridiculous to attempt to escape the presence of God:

"Where can I escape from Your spirit? Where can I flee from Your Presence? If I ascend to the heaven, You are there; if I descend to Sheol, You are there too." (Tehillim 139:7-8)

The angel tries to stop Bilam a second time. He chooses a place enclosed by fences on both sides; there is no possibility of straying from the path. Nevertheless, the donkey manages to pass the angel by squeezing to one side of the path in order to avoid the sword of the celestial messenger. If we continue our approach, viewing the donkey as symbolizing Bilam, it seems that the Torah is hinting at a second tactic Bilam employs. Even if he cannot hide from God and must remain on the path, he may nonetheless succeed in sidestepping God's will. He might be successful in finding some alternative which will enable him to place a curse on Bnei Yisrael.

Again we find that Rashi detected Bilam's position at the beginning of the parasha. When the second group of emissaries arrived and God assented to Bilam's request, allowing him to travel to Moav, He warned Bilam that he was free to say only that which God would place in his mouth. According to Rashi, Bilam embarked on the journey because he believed that he would succeed in somehow influencing this divine decision, and thereby be allowed to place a curse on Bnei Yisrael - "Perhaps I shall lead Him astray and He will consent."

The second prophecy contains an explicit rejection of this possibility. Before this prophecy, Bilam makes a renewed attempt at placing a curse on the Jewish people, although he has already been informed that they are a blessed nation. Balak tries to help him by finding a new location from which only a segment of Bnei Yisrael can be viewed.

Then Balak said to him, "Come with me to another place from which you can see - you will see only a portion of them; you will not see all of them - curse them for me from there." (Bemidbar 23:13)

Bilam had been forced to concede that the Jewish people as an entirety, a complete organic entity, is blessed. But, he thought, it may be possible to sidestep this problem by placing a curse on a limited section of the nation. Although the nation as a unit is blessed, it is reasonable to assume that this does not include every individual. Nevertheless, Bilam's attempt at altering the will of God is rebuffed.

God is not man to be capricious, or mortal to change His mind. Would He speak and not act, promise and not fulfill? My message was to bless: When He blesses, I cannot reverse it. (Bemidbar 23:19-20)

The divine decision to bless the Jewish people remains intact, and the tactics of Balak and Bilam will not succeed in qualifying the divine will.

Despite being beaten for a second time, Bilam prods the donkey to continue the journey. The donkey continues until she meets God's messenger for the third and final time. She finds herself totally surrounded with no possibility of avoiding the angel's sword. She stops dead in her tracks and refuses to advance. She has finally acknowledged that she cannot but comply with the will of God as expressed by the angel.

Similarly, we find that prior to the third prophecy, in spite of Balak's prodding, Bilam submits himself to God's will.

Now Bilam, seeing that it pleased the Lord to bless Israel, did not, as on previous occasions, go in search of omens, but turned his face toward the wilderness. (Bemidbar 24:1)

It is only at this point that Bilam finally surrenders himself to the Almighty. He can neither escape God's presence nor alter His will. He must humbly accept the divine decision.

At this juncture, we are confronted by a basic problem which lies at the very core of our parasha. How are we to understand the entire concept of blessing and curse? Why should human utterance have any significance? If one is worthy, we would expect divine justice to bestow blessings upon him, whether or not humanly blessed. The reverse is true with respect to one who is unworthy. In what way can man intervene and influence the Almighty? What role is played by the human word? What was the basis of Bilam's power to bless and curse, if ultimately only the divine will is relevant?

A complete discussion of this difficult topic is beyond the scope of this shiur. However, I would like to present a gemara (Avoda Zara 4a-b) that seems to address this issue.

Our Rabbis taught: "God is angry every day" (Tehillim 7:12), but how long does His anger

last? - A moment. And how long is a moment? - One 53,848th of an hour is a moment. No creature could ever precisely fix this moment except Bilam the wicked, of whom it is written, "who knew the knowledge of the Most High" (Bemidbar 24:16). Is that possible? He did not know the mind of his animal; how could he have known the mind of the Most High!? ... What, then, is the meaning of "He knew the knowledge of the Most High?" - He knew the exact hour when the Holy One, blessed be He, is angry. This indeed, is what the Prophet is alluding to when he says (Mikha 6:5), "O my people, remember now what Balak king of Moav consulted, and what Bilam son of Beor answered him from Shittim unto Gilgal; that you may know the righteousness of the Lord." Said R. Eleazar: The Holy One, blessed by He, said to Israel: O my people, see how many righteous acts I did for you, in that I abstained from anger all those days, for had I been in anger, none would have remained or been spared of Israel. This, too, is what Bilam refers to when he says, "How can I curse, seeing that God does not curse, and how can I be wrathful, seeing that the Lord has not been wrathful?" (23:8). And how long does His wrath last? - A moment [rega]. And how long is a rega? Said Amemar (others say, Rabina): As long as it takes to utter this word. And whence do we know that His wrath lasts a moment? - Because it is written, "For his anger is for a moment, His favour is for a life-time" ... When is He wrathful? - Said Abaye: During the first three hours, when the comb of the cock is white. And is it not white at all other times? - At other times it has red streaks, at that time there are no red streaks in it.

Without attempting to interpret the details introduced in this passage, it seems clear that Bilam's power to curse was associated by our sages with the "midat ha-din," the divine attribute focusing on absolute justice and truth. According to the above gemara, this attribute finds its purest expression during a fleeting moment within the first three hours of the day. At that instant, Bilam succeeded in placing a curse.

It would appear that Chazal understood the concept of blessing and curse within the parameters of "midat ha-din" (strict justice) and "midat ha-rachamim" (the divine attribute associated with compassion). These two attributes, which seem contradictory from the limited perspective of finite man, somehow coexist within God, and together describe His involvement with the world. A blessing is ineffective where it is totally unwarranted. It can only appeal to the "midat ha-rachamim," which may result in a response reflecting God's compassion and loving-kindness. Conversely, a curse merely appeals to the "midat ha-din" and demands an uncompromising and exacting response, but does not cross the boundary of justice.

Rashi (22:21) notes that the impossibility of placing a curse on the Jewish people is rooted in our father Avraham.

"And [Bilam] saddled his donkey" - God said: Scoundrel, Avraham their father has already preceded you, as it says (Bereishit 22), "And Avraham awoke early in the morning and saddled his donkey."

According to our approach, it is specifically Avraham and the legacy he imparted to his children that protect them from the "midat ha-din." After all, Avraham is renowned for his kindness and sensitivity.

Give kindness to Avraham, which you have promised to our fathers from days of yore. (Mikha 7:20)

God shows his compassion and loving-kindness to those who act with kindness.

With a kind man You will perform kindness. (II Shemuel 22:26)

Therefore, the children of Avraham, who continue his legacy, are protected from harsh expressions of exacting justice. Hence, they may be blessed, but can never be cursed.

I will bless those who bless you, and curse him that curses you. (Bereishit 12:3)