

Dedicated in loving memory of Morris Novetsky, Z"L,
on the occasion of his third *yahrzeit* 8 Tammuz,
by his children: Jay and Paula Novetsky,
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THE TANACH STUDY CENTER www.tanach.org
In Memory of Rabbi Abraham Leibtag
Shiurim in Chumash & Navi by Menachem Leibtag

PARSHAT BALAK

Is Bil'am really such a 'bad guy'? This may surprise you, but if you read this week's Parsha carefully, you'll have trouble pinpointing any specific transgression that he commits.

Indeed, God's anger with his decision to travel with Balak's messengers (see 22:12,22) suggests that his true intentions may have been to curse Am Yisrael. However, this fact may prove exactly the opposite - that Bil'am is a man of high stature! After all, over and over again, Bil'am **overcomes** his personal desire to curse Yisrael and blesses them instead - "exactly as God commands him" (see 22:18,38 23:12,26 & 24:13 - note how most of these are the last lines of each "aliya"). In fact, his final blessing - where he is quite fond of Am Yisrael - appears to have been delivered on his own initiative (see 24:1-6).

Why, then, do Chazal cite Bil'am as the archetype 'rasha' (a wicked person / see Pirkei Avot 5:22)? Simply for once having 'bad intentions'?

In this week's shiur we attempt to answer this question.

INTRODUCTION

As we mentioned above, in Parshat Balak it is quite difficult to pinpoint any specific sin that Bil'am commits. Instead, by the time the Parsha is over, one is left with the impression that Bil'am may even be a rather righteous and God-fearing individual. Let's cite some examples:

Before he departs upon his journey, Bil'am makes sure to make it absolutely clear to Balak's messengers that he will not stray one iota from whatever God will tell him (see 22:18).

Later on, upon his arrival at 'sdeh Mo'av', Bil'am actually blesses Am Yisrael instead of cursing them, precisely as God commands him (see 23:1-24:9). In fact, Bil'am's blessings are so 'pro-Israel' that by the conclusion of the story, Balak becomes so angry that he basically tells Bil'am to 'take a hike':

"Balak's anger was kindled with Bil'am and, striking his hands together, Balak tells Bil'am: I asked you to curse my enemy and instead you have blessed them three times! Now, **run away** to your own place..." (24:10-11).

Then, as though he had not disappointed Balak enough, Bil'am's 'farewell address' to Balak includes a harsh predication of how Yisrael will one day defeat Mo'av and Edom in battle (see 24:15-19).

Finally, it's all over when "Bil'am gets up and goes to his homeland, and Balak also went on his way" (24:25). Clearly, as Parshat Balak reaches its conclusion, we are left with the impression that Bil'am & Balak split on 'no-speaking' terms. Bil'am, the 'loyal prophet of God', returned home - leaving Balak 'empty handed'.

Surely, had this been the only story in Chumash about Bil'am, it would be quite difficult to judge him as a "rasha". In the following shiur, we will show how the primary source for Chazal's negative view of Bil'am may be rooted in a different story, one that is recorded later on in Parshat Matot - where the Torah tells us about Bil'am's 'untimely death'.

We begin our shiur by showing how the story in Parshat Matot forms the continuation of the story in Parshat Balak.

BIL'AM & THE WAR WITH MIDYAN

Recall that immediately after the story of Bil'am in chapters

22-24, we find the story of Bnei Yisrael's sin with 'bnot Mo'av' (the daughters of Mo'av and Midyan) in chapter 25. Although the Torah does not tell us who instigated this sin, the juxtaposition of these two stories already suggests a thematic connection (see Rashi & Ramban 25:1).

Due to their sin, Bnei Yisrael are punished by a terrible plague, but finally they are saved by the zealous act of Pinchas (see 25:1-9). At the conclusion of that entire incident, God commands Bnei Yisrael to avenge the Midyanim (i.e. to launch a reprisal attack / see 25:16-18).

The details of that ensuing battle are recorded several chapters later - in Parshat Matot (see 31:1-12).

[Even though logic would dictate for Chumash to record this battle immediately after its command, i.e. in chapter 26; for some reason, Chumash interrupts this narrative with several other 'parshiot' instead. The reason for this 'interruption' will be discussed in next week's shiur on Parshat Pinchas.]

In its brief detail of the battle against Midyan (in Parshat Matot), the Torah informs us, almost incidentally, that Bil'am is killed together with the five kings of Midyan (see 31:8).

Why was Bil'am executed? Was he an officer in Midyan's army, or was he simply 'caught in the cross-fire'?

The Torah doesn't tell us explicitly why he was killed, but it certainly wants us to know that he indeed deserved this 'death penalty' together with the other leaders of Midyan - for it was they who instigated the 'sin of Baal Peor'.

To find the connection between Bil'am and that sin, we simply need to pay attention to a tiny detail that surfaces later in that story - when Moshe Rabbeinu meets the officers who had returned from that battle.

DVAR BILAM

Let's pay careful attention to the section where Moshe reprimands the military officers for taking female captives, noting how and why he mentions Bil'am in this censure:

"And Moshe became angry at the military officers... saying: Why did you leave the female captives alive? Were they not the very ones who seduced Bnei Yisrael -* **bi-dvar Bil'am** *- at the **bidding of Bil'am** - to go against God in the matter of Pe'or, causing a plague..." (See 31:14-16).

What is Moshe referring to when he mentions '**dvar Bil'am**'? From the context of these psukim, it seems quite clear that **dvar Bil'am** refers to Bil'am's advice to use the daughters of Mo'av and Midyan to lure Bnei Yisrael towards the idol worship of 'Baal Pe'or'. [This explanation is also advanced by the Gemara in Sanhedrin 106a.]

If this assumption is correct, then the connection between these two parshiot becomes clear. It was Bil'am himself who instigated this entire incident - as it was **his** idea to lure Bnei Yisrael into sinning. Bil'am was so involved in this plot that this entire incident is associated with his name!

Furthermore, from the very casual mention of "**dvar Bil'am**" in Moshe's censure to the officers, it appears that Bil'am's involvement in this scheme was 'common knowledge'. In other words, Moshe takes for granted that the military officers are aware of what **dvar Bil'am** refers to. Hence, everyone seems to know that Bil'am was the instigator behind this devious plot.

Therefore, when Bil'am is executed, it is not because he had once intended to curse Bnei Yisrael. Bil'am is found guilty for it was he who orchestrated this entire scheme.

So what led to Bil'am's sudden change of heart? Why, after blessing Am Yisrael, does he turn around and orchestrate their demise? Was 'dvar Bil'am' simply some last minute advice to Balak before leaving?

It doesn't seem so. Recall from Parshat Balak that when Bil'am was sent away, he and Balak were not exactly on speaking terms. Furthermore, what was Bil'am doing in Midyan at all? Had he not gone 'home' - i.e. back to Petor?

To answer these questions, we must first determine where Bil'am is from. To do so, it's time for a short lesson in 'Biblical geography'.

BIL'AM'S 'HOME-TOWN'

To better understand Bil'am's true character, we must first establish that he lived in Mesopotamia, a **very far distance** away from Mo'av and Midyan! How do we know this? In the opening psukim of the Parsha we are told that:

"Balak sent messengers to Bil'am ben Be'or, to city of Petor, which is by **the River**... to call him." (22:5).

In Chumash, the phrase: **the River** ('ha-nahar') usually refers to the Euphrates (i.e. 'nehar prat'), the main river flowing through Mesopotamia.

[See Devarim 1:7 - "...ad ha'nehar ha'gadol - nehar perat"]

This assumption is confirmed in Sefer Devarim, in a short reference to Mo'av and the story of Bil'am:

"... and because they hired Bil'am ben Be'or from Ptor, **Aram Naharayim**" [Aram - (located between) the two great rivers (the Euphrates and Tigris)] (see Devarim 23:5).

Furthermore, Bil'am's opening blessing states specifically that he came from Aram, from the East (modern day Syria/Iraq): "from **Aram**, Balak has brought me... from mountains in the **East** [harerei **kedem**]" (23:7).

Now we must show how that fact that Bil'am resided in Mesopotamia affects how we understand a few 'missing links' in the story.

THE RETURN OF BIL'AM

Recall from the conclusion of Parshat Balak that Bil'am had returned **home** (see 24:25), i.e. to Mesopotamia, after blessing Bnei Yisrael (instead of cursing them). Nevertheless, only a short time later we find that Bil'am is 'back in the neighborhood' (as we discussed above) - when Bnei Yisrael sin with bnot Midyan. [See 31:8.] Thus, we must conclude that after Bil'am had returned home, he **came back** to Mo'av - i.e. for a second time!

So what motivated Bil'am's lengthy trek back to Mo'av? Why was he so interested in giving Mo'av and Midyan advice that he knew would cause Bnei Yisrael to sin?

The answer is startling, but simple:

Bil'am the **prophet** went home - but Bil'am the **consultant** returns! Let's explain:

The very fact that Bil'am later returns to Mo'av proves that his true intention all along was to curse Bnei Yisrael. Yet as a 'prophet, [professionally speaking,], he could not do so for 'how could he curse he whom God Himself does not curse' (see 23:8).

However, even though he may be faithful to God as a professional 'prophet', he is far less faithful as a person.

It seems as though Bil'am's desire to cause Bnei Yisrael harm was so great that he searches for a different venue to bring about their demise. Instead of using his 'prophetic **abilities**', this time Bil'am uses his 'prophetic **knowledge**' to create a situation where God Himself will curse Am Yisrael.

As reflected in his blessing of Bnei Yisrael, Bil'am 'the prophet' recognizes the special relationship between God and His Nation. He fully understands why God does not allow him to curse them, for it is His will that Bnei Yisrael fulfill their Divine purpose to become God's special nation.

On the other hand, Bil'am finds a loophole. Being a prophet, he also realizes that should Bnei Yisrael themselves fail in their obedience to God, He Himself would punish them. In other words - this special nation could not be cursed without reason. However, should they sin, God would have ample reason to punish them. Bil'am's conclusion is shrewd: to **cause** Bnei Yisrael to be cursed - by causing them to sin.

Bil'am finally found a method to 'curse' Bnei Yisrael. He advises Mo'av and Midyan to cause Bnei Yisrael to sin.

This may be the underlying reason why Chazal consider Bil'am the archetype "rasha" - for he utilizes his prophetic understanding, the special trait which God gave him, to further his own desires rather than to follow God's will. In a general sense, taking special God-given qualities, but using them in an improper manner, can be considered the 'way of life' of the wicked.

BETWEEN AVRAHAM AND BIL'AM

In the Mishna in Pirkei Avot (5:22), not only is Bil'am called the rasha, he is also contrasted with Avraham Avinu:

"Whoever has the following three traits is among the 'talmidim' (disciples) of **Avraham Avinu**; and whoever has three other traits is among the 'talmidim' of **Bil'am** ha-rasha:

BIL'AM	AVRAHAM
evil eye	good eye
arrogant spirit	humble spirit
greedy soul	meek soul ...

Both Avraham and Bil'am are men of renowned spiritual stature. However, Bil'am exploits this quality for his own personal pride and gain, while Avraham Avinu utilizes this quality towards the perfection of mankind. A rasha, according to Chazal is one who harnesses his God-given traits and abilities towards an unworthy purpose. A disciple of Avraham Avinu is one who harnesses these qualities towards a worthy purpose.

In Chumash, we find several textual parallels between Bil'am and Avraham Avinu that support this comparison. We will note two examples:

(A) BRACHA & KLALA

Avraham:

"and I will **bless** those whom you bless, and those who **curse** you shall be cursed, and through you **all nations** on earth **shall be blessed**" (Br.12:3).

Bil'am:

"for it is known, that he whom you **bless** shall be blessed, and he whom you **curse** shall be cursed" (22:5).

(B) ARAM NAHARAYIM

The homeland of both Avraham and Bil'am is in Aram Naharayim, the center of ancient civilization:

Avraham: see Breishit 24:4 & 24:10, and Br.11:27-31.

Bil'am: see Bamidbar 23:7 & Devarim 23:5.

These parallels point to this thematic contrast between Bil'am and Avraham Avinu. As Bnei Yisrael, the chosen offspring of Avraham Avinu, are about to enter the Land that God had promised him - to become a 'blessing for all nations' (Br. 12:3), they meet a final challenge. Just as God's prophecy concerning Avraham is about to become a reality, Bil'am - the prophet with the ability to bless and curse - together with Mo'av (the descendants of Lot) and Midyan (the descendants of Yishmael) make a last minute attempt to thwart the fruition of this destiny.

PROFESSIONAL BIAS

One could suggest that this confrontation may be reflective of a more fundamental conflict. Unlike the people of Mo'av, whose fear was motivated by a practical threat upon their national security (22:3-4), Bil'am's fear of Am Yisrael may have been more ideological.

From a thematic perspective, the very existence of Am Yisrael posed a 'professional threat' to Bil'am himself! Bil'am, as echoed in his three blessings, perceived the Divine purpose of Am Yisrael: a Nation destined to bring the message of God to mankind. This novel concept of a Nation of God threatened to upset the spiritual 'status quo' of ancient civilization. Up until this time, if there was a Divine message for mankind - it would be delivered by inspired 'individuals' - e.g. men such as Bil'am himself.

However, once Bnei Yisrael would become a nation in their land, this same purpose could be fulfilled by a nation - and not only by an individual.

On a certain level, this confrontation between Bil'am and Am Yisrael continues till this very day. Is it possible for a nation, a political entity, to deliver a Divine message to all mankind? While Bil'am and his 'disciples' continue to endeavor to undermine this goal, it remains Am Yisrael responsibility to constantly strive to achieve it.

shabbat shalom
menachem

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FOR FURTHER IYUN

A. Note the commentary of the Abarbanel where he explains that Bil'am is a descendant of Lavan.

1. Does this support the basic points made in the shiur.
2. What parallels exist between Bil'am and Lavan?
3. Did Lavan ever receive 'nevu'a'? Did Hashem ever speak to him? If so, what was the content? Is it parallel to Bil'am?
4. Could the struggle between Lavan and Yaakov also be considered of a spiritual nature?

B. Bil'am was almost successful. Bnei Yisrael's sin with bnot Mo'av and Midyan led to some 24 thousand casualties. The plague was stopped due to the zealous act of Pinchas (25:6-9). His act returned Bnei Yisrael to their covenantal partner. In reward, Pinchas receives the covenant of the 'kehuna' (25:10-13).

1. In what way does his reward reflect his deed?
2. What are the responsibilities of the 'kohanim' in addition to working in the mikdash?
3. How does this relate to the ultimate fulfillment of our national destiny?

C. An additional textual parallel exists between Avraham and Bil'am: Travelling in the morning with two servants etc.:
Avraham - Va-yashkem Avraham ba-boker, **va-yachavosh** et chamoro

Va-yikach et **shnei na'arav ito** .. (Br. 22:3)
Bil'am - "Va-yakom Bil'am ba-boker, **va-yachavosh** et atono...
u-shnei na'arav imo" (Bamid. 22:22-23)

Could this parallel be the source of the Midrash Chazal describing the 'satan' who challenges Avraham Avinu on his journey with Yitzchak to the Akeida? If so, explain why.

D. As you read the opening chapter of Parshat Balak, note the the numerous textual parallels between this story, and the opening story of the Exodus as described in the first chapter of Sefer Shmot. Can you suggest a thematic parallel that this textual parallel may be alluding to?

E. Who wrote 'Sefer Bil'am'?

Parshat Balak seems to be an integral part of Chumash; however, the Gemara in Bava Batra 14b makes a very strange statement: "Moshe katav sifro (chumash -his book), parshat Bil'am, and sefer Iyov (Job)."

It is understandable that we need to know that Moshe wrote Sefer Iyov, but why would there be any 'hava amina' that he didn't write Parshat Bil'am ?

Rashi (in Bava Batra) explains that every other parsha in Chumash is connected in some way to Moshe - either 'tzorcho', 'torato' (mitzvot), or 'seder ma'asav' (narrative). Rashi explains that everywhere else in Chumash Moshe is in some way directly involved. In parshat Bil'am, no one including Moshe should have known about the entire incident between Bil'am and Balak.

The obvious question then arises, who wrote the story of Bil'am that appears in Chumash?

If not Moshe, what other navi was there who could have?

This question is answered by Rabbeinu Gershom (al atar) that the possibility exists that this parsha was written by Bil'am himself! Since he was a navi, his brachot and conversations are quoted directly!

In order that we do not come to that conclusion, the Gemara must tell us that Moshe wrote down this entire Parsha directly from Hashem, and did not receive them via Bil'am.

How does this relate to the machloket regarding: 'Torah - megila nitna', or 'sefer chatum nitna'?

F. One could also ask how Bnei Yisrael aware of Bil'am's involvement in the sin of bnot Mo'av. Why was dvar Bil'am common knowledge among Bnei Yisrael? Who told them that it was Bil'am's idea?

The answer could be quite simple. Most probably, the daughters of Midyan (who sinned with Bnei Yisrael) had informed their 'patrons' as to who had sent them. [The 'word' got around.]

G. "Ma Tovv Ohalecha Yaakov"

From the time that Bnei Yisrael leave Har Sinai, Sefer Bamidbar has few positive events to record. The nation appears to be going from one sin to the next (mit'onenim, mit'avim, meraglim, korach, mei meriva etc.). With all the complaining, internal strife etc., it is difficult to find anything positive.

It 'davka' takes an outsider, like Bil'am, looking from a distance at Am Yisrael, to perceive the greatness of this nation despite all of its problems. When Bil'am recognizes that an entire nation is following Hashem through the desert, he proclaims:

"Ma tovu ohalecha yaakov..."

This is an important insight for today also. Sometimes we become over-disillusioned with ourselves, as we see so much disagreement, lack of unity, lack of commitment etc. We become so involved with the details that we sometimes are unable to take a step out and look at the whole picture, to see our achievements. With all the problems in Israel today, there continue to be great achievements in all walks of Jewish life. It is important to periodically take a step back and assess the good as well as the bad. It gives us the motivation to continue to achieve. "Ma tovu ohalecha Yaakov" - a nice attitude to start off the day!