

DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

Parshas Balak

Engaging Yaakov and Yisrael: Bilaam's Two-Pronged Plan of Attack

BACKGROUND

A very noticeable feature within Bilaam's blessings is the ongoing double reference to "Yaakov" and "Yisrael", A classic example being the verse, "מה טובו אהליך יעקב משכנתיך ישראל" – *How goodly are your tents, O Yaakov, your dwelling places, O Yisrael.*¹ In all, this occurs about half a dozen times over the course of the blessings. What is behind this double reference?

In order to attain an understanding of this phenomenon, we first need to appreciate that these terms actually refer to two groups of people. Moreover, as we will see, Bilaam had a separate plan for inflicting damage on each of these two groups.

BILAAM'S PLAN: "CURSING YAAKOV" AND "BRINGING ANGER UPON YISRAEL"

In verse 7 of chapter 23, Bilaam quotes Balak as requesting of him, "לכה ארה לי יעקב ולכה זעמה ישראל" – *Go and curse for me Yaakov, and go and bring anger upon Yisrael.* He then proceeds to exclaim, "מה אקב מ' לא קבה קל ומ' אקבם לא זעם ה' – *How can I curse those whom God has not cursed, and how can I bring anger if Hashem has not become angry.*"

What is the difference between these two ideas of "cursing" and "bringing anger"?

There is a well-known passage in the Gemara² which states that one of Bilaam's most potent weapons was that he knew the exact time in the day when Hashem becomes angry. This time lasts for only a moment, as the verse in Tehillim³ says "כי רגע באפר" – *for His anger is but a moment,* indeed, as the Gemara explains, it lasts only as long as it takes to say the word "רגע".⁴ Bilaam knew when that moment was. Moreover, the Gemara states that had Hashem actually been angry at that moment, nothing would have remained of "the enemies of Israel" – a euphemism for the Jewish people themselves. However, Hashem preempted this notion by suspending His anger in that moment during the days the Bilaam

1 Bamidbar 24:5.

2 Berachos 7a.

3 30:6.

4 Tosafos (Berachos ibid. s.v. *she'ilmalei*) ask how much Bilaam could have actually said within that single moment, answering either that he could have said the word "כלם" – *destroy them,* or alternatively, that if one starts at the right moment, he can then continue.

tried to access it, as Bilaam himself concluded, *“How can I bring anger when Hashem has not become angry”*.

We see that the notion of “bringing anger” refers to accessing the moment of Hashem’s anger. We also note, however, that in the above-mentioned verse, Bilaam associates this idea specifically with “Yisrael,” while with reference to “Yaakov” he simply mentions cursing them. Why?

WHO ARE YAAKOV AND YISRAEL?

An idea found in many the works of many commentators throughout the Chumash is that the name “Yaakov” as applied to the Jewish people refers to the lower echelons of the people, while the name “Yisrael” refers to those on a higher spiritual level. In a sense, this mirrors Yaakov’s own personal experience, whereby he was born with the name Yaakov and then attained the name Yisrael as a title of distinction.

Accordingly, Bilaam reasoned that with regards to the group known as “Yaakov,” he did not need to time his curse at the moment of Hashem’s anger, for their spiritual shortcomings would leave them vulnerable to his curse whenever he uttered it. By contrast, the group known as “Yisrael” would need to be cursed at the moment of Hashem’s anger, which represents the full expression of the Divine Attribute of Justice, in whose scrutiny virtually no one is immune from indictment. It turns out that his intended attack on the Jewish people was actually two-pronged. Hence, he only mentions the concept of “anger” regarding Yisrael, while he refers to cursing generally when it came to Yaakov.⁵

“DO NOT CURSE THE PEOPLE, FOR THEY ARE BLESSED”

In seeking to understand how Bilaam thought Hashem would allow him to curse the Jewish people, it appears that his thinking was that if they were spiritually remiss, then they should naturally be susceptible to damage from his curse. In other words, Divine protection as being afforded through a special connection with Hashem should only be available for those who show themselves to be worthy of such. What he did not appreciate was that when Hashem told him at the outset *“do not curse the people for they are blessed,”* this blessed status was not a function of their *deeds*, but of their *identity*. This was something Bilaam had never experienced. In fact, if anything, he had experienced the opposite with the forbears of the Jewish people themselves...

The Gemara⁶ identifies Bilaam as a son of Lavan. This means that his first exposure to the Jewish people was with their forefather, Yaakov, himself. At that time, inclusion in the Jewish people was by no means a given. Indeed, by that point, Avraham’s son, Yishmael, had excluded himself from the program, as had Yaakov’s own brother, Esav. In terms of Lavan’s direct experience, therefore, lineage was no guarantee of inclusion within Hashem’s people. As such, he sought to wreak damage against those among the people whose deeds he considered likewise excluded them.

YAAKOV’S CONTRIBUTION

What Bilaam did not realize, however, was that the very nature of who is included in Hashem’s

⁵ R’ Shaul of Amsterdam, *Binyan Ariel*.

⁶ Sanhedrin 105a, see comments of R’ Yaakov Emden there. [See also Targum Yonasan ben Uziel to Devarim 26:5 who identifies Bilaam as Lavan himself.] Indeed, the Midrash Tanchuma to our parsha identifies the wall against which Bilaam’s foot was crushed as the pile of stones that Lavan had erected together with Yaakov as testimony to their pact of non-aggression (See Bereishis 31:52), which Bilaam was currently on his way to violate.

people underwent a major change from the time he first met Yaakov. In fact, the change was actually due to Yaakov. In a number of places throughout his writings,⁷ Rav Yitzchak Hutner explains how each of the Avos contributed to the consolidating of Jewish identity among the Jewish people:

- ▷ **Avraham** introduced the notion that a person could become Jewish.
- ▷ **Yitzchak** introduced the notion that a person could be born Jewish to someone who already was.
- ▷ **Yaakov** introduced the final idea that once a person is born Jewish, that is something they can never lose. Hence, all of his children remained part of the Jewish people.

It turns out that, in terms of his assessment of the vulnerability of the Jewish people, Bilaam was somewhat “behind the times,” having failed to factor in Yaakov’s contribution as the third of the Avos, after which no one is excluded or discarded. Alternatively, perhaps he was seeking to turn back time to the “good old days” when those who didn’t make the grade were excluded from any Divine connection.⁸ Either way, ultimately, he was forced to recognize that all of the Jewish people, even those among them who ranked as “Yaakov”, were essentially part of Hashem’s blessed people and included within His protection.

THE THREEFOLD CONFRONTATION WITH THE ANGEL

This idea will give us a deeper understanding of a comment made by Rashi concerning the three times the angel stood in the way of Bilaam’s donkey, namely, that these three times were an allusion to the three Avos.⁹ The meaning behind this allusion is not “merely” about the *collective merits* of the Avos, but about their *cumulative contribution* in forming the identity of the people Bilaam was hoping to curse.

Indeed, one of the classic commentaries on Rashi, the *Tzeidah la’Derech*,¹⁰ points out that on the first two occasions when the angel stood in its way, the donkey was able to maneuver around it, reflecting the fact that the descendants of the first two Avos were not all included as Hashem’s people. By contrast, when confronted the third time, representing Yaakov, the donkey simply crouched down, with no way around, for there is no one descended from Yaakov who is not part of Hashem’s people.

Based on all this we can fully understand why Bilaam’s subsequent blessings and prophecies concerning the Jewish people contain a consistent double reference to “Yaakov” and “Yisrael”. With this, Bilaam was forced to express the depth of his error concerning certain sections of the people. For even while the group called “Yaakov” do not have the lofty attainments that accrue to “Yisrael”, they have the full ongoing capacity to attain them, and pending that time, they have their own fundamental worth which makes them worthy of recognition as part of Hashem’s blessed nation.

⁷ See e.g. Pachad Yitzchak, Chanukah maamar 5.

⁸ The Vilna Gaon (Aderes Eliyahu, Parsha Balak) notes that on all the altars on which Bilaam offered sacrifices prior to his prophecies, he used only bulls and rams. Conspicuously absent is the third type of animal commonly used as an offering – sheep. The Gaon explains this based on a comment of Rashi (Bamidbar 28:19) that the three animals, bulls, rams and sheep, correspond to the three forefathers, Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov. In other words, Bilaam, through his offerings, was looking to appeal to Hashem to act as He had done in the days of Avraham and Yitzchak specifically, foregoing any change that was brought about through Yaakov.

⁹ Bamidbar 22:26 s.v. *va’yosef*.

¹⁰ By R’ Yissachar Ber Eilenberg.

FROM THE BLESSINGS

Let us conclude our discussion by considering one such statement Bilaam was forced to issue, in which he pays tribute to the groups of Yaakov and Yisrael respectively:

לֹא הִבִּיט אֶנּוֹן בְּיַעֲקֹב וְלֹא רָאָה עֲמָל בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל

*He perceived no iniquity in Yaakov, and saw no corruption in Yisrael.*¹¹

The first phrase, referring to “Yaakov”, mentioned that which Hashem has not “perceived”, while the second, relating to “Yisrael”, mentions what He has not “seen.” What is the difference between these two ideas?

The **Ohr HaChaim** explains:¹²

The term לראות — *to see*, refers to that which one immediately sees without much effort or investigation.

In contrast, להביט — *to perceive*, refers to that which one discovers upon looking deeper into the matter

When it comes to Yisrael, the *tzaddikim*, Hashem does not “see” iniquity in them, for they have little or no wrongdoings for there to see.

When it comes to the lower level of Yaakov, however, one would indeed be able to “see” wrongdoings amongst them, for not all of their acts are up to par. However, Hashem looks closer at this group, He ponders their essence and their inner core, and when He does, He does not “perceive” wrongdoing with them as people.

There is no question that there is a higher level to which Yaakov can and should aspire. However, Hashem’s message through Bilaam’s is that is not a level which is currently *beyond* them that they need to *attain*; rather, it is a level that currently resides *within* them that they need to *access*.

11 Bamidbar 23:21.

12 Bamidbar ibid.