

Parsha Shiur by Rabbi Mayer Friedman

פרשת בלק

וישלח מלאכים אל בלעם בן בער פתורה אשר על הנהר ארץ בני עמו לקרא לו
לאמר הנה עם יצא ממצרים הנה כסה את עין הארץ והוא ישב ממלי
“He sent messengers to Bilam son of Beor to Pesor, which is by the river of the land
of the members of his people, to summon him, saying: Behold a people has come out
of Egypt, behold it has covered the eye of the land and it rests opposite me” (22:5)

There is an interesting discrepancy between how Balak and Bilam describe the Jewish people. Balak refers to them in Posuk 5 as "the people that left Egypt." In Posuk 11, Bilam describes them as "the people that are leaving Egypt," in the present tense. What is the reason for this difference?

R' Moshe Feinstein answers that Balak was under the impression that the Jews had left Egypt behind. They were a different people, adapting to their new circumstances. Bilam knew differently. He said that they were still leaving Egypt. They had not forgotten where they had come from. This is the strength of the Jewish people to this day. We do not forget our past and the lessons that we can learn from it. We mention the exodus from Egypt twice daily specifically to remind ourselves of our past and to insure that it is never forgotten.

Why did Balak give Bilam a historical background of the Jewish people and refer to their exodus from Egypt? The Or HaChaim writes that Balak was sending Bilam a deeper message. The midrash says that Bilam was a former advisor of Pharaoh in Egypt and it was he who made the suggestion to throw the Jewish babies into the river in order to control their population. Balak was hinting to Bilam: You were the one who devised a plan to destroy them and failed. Now, you need to try a different method and attack them by cursing them. Just like Balak was creative and chose to try a new plan rather than give up, we need to be creative in serving Hashem. If something is difficult for a person to do, he should not just give up and feel hopeless. He should just try a different way to accomplish his goal and to grow. He should come up with creative ways to do things that are difficult for him.

ויען בלעם ויאמר אל עבדי בלק אם יתן לי בלק מלא ביתו כסף וזהב לא אוכל
לעבר את פי ה' אלקי לעשות קטנה או גדולה
“Bilam answered and said to the servants of Balak: If Balak will give me his houseful
of silver and gold, I cannot transgress the word of Hashem, my G-d, to do anything
small or great” (22:18)

Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch notes that this posuk clearly illustrates Bilam's evil character traits. Bilam was exceedingly haughty. Earlier, the posuk clearly indicates that this second set of messengers sent by Balak consisted of "officers, greater and more honorable than the others." Nevertheless, Bilam still addressed them as "servants of Balak." He was arrogant toward everyone and felt he was superior to even the greatest

officers.

Another fault of Bilam's was his avarice. He coveted honor and money more than anything else in the world. Balak had sent to Bilam that "I will surely honor you very much." He had made no mention of any monetary payment. Yet Bilam translated honor to mean money because he could think of no greater reward than gold and silver. Thus, this posuk clearly demonstrates the character flaws that were Bilam's trademarks, as the Mishna in Pirkei Avos (5:22) says: "Those who have an evil eye, an arrogant spirit and a greedy soul are among the disciples of the wicked Bilam."

When contrasting those who follow the example of Avraham Avinu to those who follow in the ways of Bilam, the Mishna says that the disciples of Avraham enjoy this world and inherit the World to Come. This is supported by the posuk (Mishlei 8:21) which says, "To cause those who love me to inherit 'yesh.'" The word "yesh" refers to the World to Come. Rav Chaim Volozhin, in his sefer Ruach Chaim, explains that the word "yesh" means something of substance. The World to Come has substance. Worldly pleasures, such as the money and honor that Bilam coveted, do not. In the end, the wicked achieve nothing in their pursuit of pleasure while the righteous achieve the best reward conceivable.

מה טבו אהליך יעקב משכנתיך ישראל

“How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your tents, O Israel” (24:5)

Rashi comments that the openings of the Jewish tents were set up so that the entrances did not face one another. In this way, nobody could see into anyone else's home. This display of modesty was what drew Bilam's attention and caused him to exclaim how beautiful the Jewish tents were. We must be sure to emphasize this characteristic of modesty in our lives, especially in this time of year when there is a tremendous lack of modesty in the world at large.

וירא פינחס בן אלעזר בן אהרן הכהן ויקם מתוך העדה ויקח רמח בידו

“Pinchas son of Elazar son of Aharon the Kohen saw and he stood up from amid the assembly and he took a spear in his hand” (25:7)

The numerical value of "romach," "spear," is 248. This is same number as there are limbs in the human body. Pinchas threw himself body and soul into performing his duty. He did not allow himself to be deterred by the political connections of his victims. He was truly offended at this outright disdain for the word of Hashem and nothing could stop him from doing what had to be done. This is why the Torah does not mention the names of the individuals who were killed until the summary in next week's parsha. Pinchas did not care if the people who he killed were the leader of a tribe and a Midianite princess. The job had to be done and he made sure that he did it properly.

Another possible explanation as to why the names of the victims are not mentioned is because Pinchas did not spend time thinking about the magnitude of the task that he faced. He just went ahead and did it. Many times when we know that we have a job ahead of us, we spend so much time contemplating how hard the job is that we only scare ourselves and

never actually get around to doing it. We should first act and only afterwards reflect upon what we have accomplished, just as the Torah teaches us that Pinchas did. If one takes the initial steps to act, Hashem helps him complete the job that he began. We see this principle by Pinchas as well, as the Midrash Rabbah at the end of the parsha enumerates the ten miracles that occurred to assist Pinchas in the accomplishment of his task.

Kesharim Baruch College/NYU Parsha Shiur

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