

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.

**ותאמר האתון אל בלעם הלוא אנכי אתנך אשר רכבת עלי מעודך עד היום הזה
ההסכן הסכנתי לעשות לך כה ויאמר לא
“The she-donkey said to Bilam, ‘Am I not your she-donkey that you have ridden
all your life until this day? Have I been accustomed to do such a thing to you?’
He said, ‘No.’” (22:30)**

The donkey complained to Bilam that she had never led him wrong before and he was wrong for hitting her for her first offense. Instead, said the donkey, Bilam should have been patient with her because perhaps the donkey knew what she was doing this

time as well, which was actually true. The words of the donkey teach us an important lesson. When someone has always come through for us in the past but seems to do something to hurt us, we should cut the person some slack and assume that he is doing it for a reason. Bilam immediately assumed the worst even though the donkey had never led him wrong before.

Another lesson we can learn from the donkey is that people have the tendency to judge others by what they have done lately. One mistake can overshadow many other good deeds. We must be careful never to let the most recent actions color our perceptions of people. Instead, we should make every effort to look at the big picture and take everything into account.

Another interesting point is that Bilam did not bat an eyelash when the donkey spoke to him. He just immediately answered back. He did not display any astonishment whatsoever. Bilam was so determined in his mission to curse the Jews that he was not going to let anything get in his way. He was so dedicated to his task that even a talking donkey did not faze him. He did not even lose a step in the conversation.

ויאמר בלק אל בלעם מה עשית לי לקב איבי לקחתך והנה ברכת בך
“Balak said to Bilam, ‘What have you done to me! To curse my enemy have I brought you – but behold you have even blessed!’” (23:11)

The name Balak contains the same letters as the word “lakov,” “to curse.” Our names can be turned for good or bad. We determine this based on our actions. Balak could have used his potential for cursing against the wicked but, instead, he chose to use it against the Jews. Nobody is bound to a pre-determined destiny. Our future depends on what we make of it. We must strive to determine what our talents are and to use them for good, rather than for the opposite.

כנחלים נטו כגנת עלי נהר כאהלים נטע ה' כארזים עלי מים
“Stretching out like brooks, like gardens by a river, like aloes planted by Hashem, like cedars by water” (24:6)

The Gemara in Berachos 16a explains the comparison of the Jewish tents to a brook in the following manner: Just like a mikveh cleanses a person from his impurity, a tent changes a person from guilt to acquittal. What is the meaning of this comparison?

The Chofetz Chaim explains that speech can really drag a person down because it is so easy to sin by speaking. An action has to be planned and the person has to then go do it but words come out so fast and can never be taken back. Thus, speech has a tremendous negative potential. However, it also has an equally potent positive capacity. When a person enters the tent of Torah and uses his speech for a positive purpose, he can also achieve so much very quickly. The Vilna Gaon asked: Why do we say that learning Torah is equivalent to all other mitzvos? He answers that every word of Torah that one learns or hears is a mitzva in itself. One can accomplish so many mitzvos

every time he learns and that makes it equal to all other mitzvos. Learning Torah also purifies a person's mouth and power of speech. If a person feels that he has used his speech wrongly, he should learn Torah and use his power of speech for a holy purpose. Thus, the Jewish tents, a reference to their houses of study (just like Yaakov was called a "tent dweller"), have the ability to change a person just like a mikveh.

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.

Baruch College/NYU Parsha Shiur
Shiur given by Rabbi Mayer Friedman
Written by Michael Gutmann