

Parashat Balak, 5772, 2012:

Bilam: A Study in Squandered Potential

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, my sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, and Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, Yehonatan Binyamin Halevy ben Golda Friedel, and Moshe Reuven ben Chaya.

In a well-known mishnah found in *Pirkei Avot* (Ethics of the Fathers) 5:22, *Chazal* (our Sages) compare Avraham, the embodiment of purity of soul, to the evil gentile prophet Bilam, who in many ways is the protagonist in our *parasha*:

Whoever possesses the following three traits is of the disciples of our father Abraham; and whoever possesses the opposite three traits is of the disciples of the wicked Balaam. The disciples of our father Abraham have a good eye, a meek spirit and a humble soul. The disciples of the wicked Balaam have an evil eye, a haughty spirit and a gross soul. What is the difference between the disciples of our father Abraham and the disciples of the wicked Balaam? The disciples of our father Abraham benefit in this world and inherit the World To Come, and as is stated, “To bequeath to those who love Me there is, and their treasures I shall fill” (Proverbs 8:21). The disciples of the wicked Balaam inherit purgatory and descend into the pit of destruction, as is stated, “And You, G-d, shall cast them into the pit of destruction; bloody and deceitful men, they shall not attain half their days. And I shall trust in You” (ibid., 55:24). (Translation as presented at <http://www.chabad.org/library/article.asp?AID=2099> with my emendations.)

Rav Nisson Alpert *zatzal* (d. 1986), the leading disciple of Rav Moshe Feinstein *zatzal* (1895-1986), raises a very insightful point regarding this mishnah in his posthumous work entitled *Limudei Nisson al HaTorah*. He notes that the *tanna* (Mishnaic period sage) spent a significant period of time depicting the differences that obtain between Avraham and Bilam. Rav Alpert suggests that if that is the case, Avraham and Bilam must also have had a very substantive similarity, i.e. they must have shared an important quality, for if this were not the so, why would the *tanna* have been so singularly focused upon their differences? What, however, could possibly have been the *tzad hashaveh* (the

similar trait) that was shared by the righteous Avraham and the wicked Bilam? Rav Alpert's answer is straightforward: "Bilam the Evil One continued in the work of our father Avraham to teach the nations of the world the knowledge that there is only one G-d in the world. He is the Architect, Creator, and Continuous Supervisor of all of creation." In other words, Bilam was a thoroughgoing monotheist in a raging sea of idolatry. This, then, was the reason why he merited and achieved the special status of being the greatest prophet of all time to the non-Jewish nations of the world. (Ibid.)

Rav Alpert supports his contention by utilizing Rashi's (1040-1105) approach and commentary to *Sefer Bamidbar 23:1-4* that is based upon *Midrash Tanchuma*. The verses state the following:

Balaam [Bilam] said to Balak, "Build me seven altars here, and prepare for me seven bulls and seven rams." Balak did as Balaam had requested, and Balak and Balaam offered up a bull and a ram on [each] altar. Balaam said to Balak, "Stand beside your burnt offering, and I will go. Perhaps the L-rd will happen to appear to me, and He will show me something that I can tell you," and he went alone.

G-d chanced upon Balaam, and he said to Him, "I have set up the seven altars, and I have offered up a bull and a ram on [each] altar." (This and all Tanach and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

Rashi explains this crucial vignette in the following manner:

the seven altars: "I prepared seven altars" is not written here, but "the seven altars." He said to Him, "Their patriarchs built seven altars before You, and I have prepared [seven] corresponding to them all." Abraham built four - "There he built an altar to the L-rd Who appeared to him" (Gen. 12:7); "Abraham moved from there to the mountain... [and built an altar there]" (ibid. 8); "Abraham pitched his tent [and built an altar there]" (ibid. 13:18), and one on Mount Moriah (ibid. 22:9). Isaac built one - "He built an altar there" (ibid. 26:25), and Jacob built two - one in Shechem (ibid. 33:20) and one in Beth El (ibid. 35:7). - [See *Midrashei Tanchuma Balak 11, Tzav 1, and Bamidbar Rabbah 20:18* (Underlining my own)]

Clearly, according to Rashi and his Midrashic sources, Bilam saw himself as a direct continuation of not only Avraham, but of all the *Avot* (Patriarchs) in his desire to spread the truth of the existence of the one true G-d. Since this is manifestly the case, we must

ask two simple, yet profound, questions: “What went wrong?” Stated somewhat differently, “Why did Bilam, the one individual in world history who matched Moshe in his prophetic insights (*Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah* 14:19), fail to achieve his true potential?”

There are many possible answers to my questions. I would like, however, to focus upon one of the differences between Avraham and Bilam, as delineated in the mishnah with which I began. As stated therein, one way in which Bilam was the polar opposite of Avraham was that he had a “*nefesh rachavah*” (a “gross soul”); he was an uncontrolled profligate who personally indulged in all manner and variety of perversion and dissolute activity (*Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin* 105a). As one of the world’s greatest *baalei taavah* (hedonists), he used *taavah* to try to destroy us. It was he who urged the leaders of Moab to prostitute their daughters, so as to ensnare Jewish men in a web of lust and idol worship (*Sefer Bamidbar* 31:16). Bilam knew full well that Hashem hated idol worship; he understood that Hashem is “jealous” solely in regards to this heinous betrayal of faith. Yet, he was willing to do anything, regardless of the price, to try to bring the Jewish people to their knees. The Rambam (1135-1204) formulates this idea in his explanation of our mishna:

It was Bilam who gave the advice to have the daughters of Moab run wild and abandoned in harlotry. If he himself were not a *baal taavah* (hedonist) he never would have given this advice. This is the case since it is well-known that a person will only command and give advice to others according to his own orientation and disposition...

In short, I believe that it was Bilam’s unfettered profligacy that blinded him to the same truth he proudly proclaimed to the nations of the world. Although he passionately believed G-d is One – and the only One, he no less zealously refused to allow this most

exalted of all truths to determine his practical behaviors. He was, therefore, a study in contrasts and confusion, a conflicted individual who believed in monotheism and yet pursued a life of licentiousness. Beyond question, it was the latter that blinded him to the truth of the former.

The picture that emerges in comparing Avraham to Bilam is, in actuality, a very familiar one. Each *Motzai Shabbat* (the period immediately following Shabbat), we recite Havdalah, the service that formally recognizes the separation between Shabbat and the other days of the week. In the context of this *mitzvah*, we acknowledge that it is Hashem, and no other, who separates the holy from the profane, the light from the darkness, and Shabbat from the Six Days of Creation. We recognize, as well, that it is Hashem who “separates the Jewish people from the nations of the world.” This was true in regards to Avraham and Bilam. It is no less true regarding Hashem’s ongoing desire to keep us separate from the wayward culture of our time.

May Hashem, the Master of the Universe, help us to reject the Bilams of our time, and enable us, instead, to become Avraham’s authentic disciples. *V’chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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*** I have recently posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik’s** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. They are available here:

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