

Parashat Balak 5781, 2021:

Who Was Bilam?

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, Shmuel Yosef ben Reuven, Shayndel bat Mordechai Yehudah, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Moshe ben Itta Golda, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, Reuven Shmuel ben Leah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Balak, King of Moab, is the namesake of our *parasha*. He believed that his country was existentially threatened by the fledgling Jewish nation and consequently sought to annihilate us before we could become any stronger. He, therefore, hired the infamous and powerful sorcerer, Bilam, to curse *klal Yisrael* in an attempt to achieve this malevolent goal.

In many ways, Bilam, rather than Balak, is the protagonist of our *sidra*, since his behavior and prophecies are its main focal points. Bilam was a complex person who, at various points in his life, was more than the unsavory individual depicted in our *parasha*. *Talmud Bavli*, *Sanhedrin* 106a gives us an insight into the evolution of his persona:

“And Bilam the son of Beor, the sorcerer...” Sorcerer? He [Bilam] was a prophet! Rabbi Yochanan said: “At first he was a prophet (*navi*), and in the end, a sorcerer (*kosame*).” (*Sefer Yehoshua* 13:22, this and all Tanach translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

Rashi (1040-1105) explains the phrase, “and in the end, a sorcerer,” as referring to the time period wherein Bilam committed himself to cursing *b’nai Yisrael*, “for at that time, prophecy was removed from him, and he henceforth became a [mere] sorcerer.”

(Translation my own) This helps us understand Bilam’s transition from *navi* to *kosame*;

yet, what kind of *navi* was he? How did he compare to the prophets of our people and, in particular, *Moshe Rabbeinu*? Given his ignoble end, we might be tempted to assume his prophetic experiences were on a very low level. However, according to various *midrashim*, nothing could be further from the truth:

Bilam had three characteristics (*middot*) that Moshe lacked: He knew Who was speaking to him, he knew when the Holy One blessed be He was going to speak to him, and he could speak with Him whenever he so desired. (*Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah* 14:20)

There were three things that made Bilam greater than Moshe: He could look upon the *Shechinah* (Hashem's Divine Presence), he could join himself to the *Shechinah*, and he could immediately open his eyes and speak [at will] with the *Shechinah*. (*Midrash Aggadah* 24:17, translations and underling my own)

Based upon the metrics of these *midrashim*, Bilam's prophetic encounters with the *Shechinah* surpassed even those of *Moshe Rabbeinu*. While noting this, my *rebbe* and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* ("the Rav," 1903-1993) emphasizes three additional differences between their prophecies:

The prophecy of Balaam differs from that of Moses in the use of mellifluous language, metaphor, and panoramic vision of the end of days. Who can compare to Balaam in his polished and elegant speech? His words were even integrated into the *Musaf* prayer of Rosh Hashanah: *He does not look at evil in Jacob and has seen no perversity in Israel; the Lord, his God, is with him, and he has the King's friendship* (23:21). When a Jew enters the synagogue each morning, he recites a verse of Balaam's prophecy: *How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel!* The wording of Balaam's prophecy was majestic. (*Chumash Mesoras HaRav, Sefer Bamidbar: with Commentary Based Upon the Teachings of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, Dr. Arnold Lustiger, editor, page 193, underlining my own*)

Clearly, for the Rav, "the wording of Balaam's prophecy was majestic," and its vision inspiring. Notwithstanding, Bilam has been viewed as a reprehensible figure. Rav Soloveitchik suggests this is because he was not anchored to absolute principles and values:

What is more important — a disciplined life, ruled by ethical laws, or a foggy mystical experience, devoid of any impact of the religious norm? It is clear that the former is far better, even if the experience of God in such a life is more remote... Balaam was close to God and was still a satanic figure... The religious norm provides a fulcrum for one's life. Such a fulcrum is to be greatly preferred to living one's life in a subjective religious fog. (*Lectures on Guide of the Perplexed*, pp. 212-213)

Bilam emerges as a fractured being. Although he reached the highest heights of prophecy and mystical experience, he lived a completely undisciplined life devoid of both ethical laws and religious norms. Therefore, as great as his spiritual experiences truly were, they could not save him from being remembered for all time as a satanic figure and the personification of evil.

Shabbat Shalom and may Hashem in His infinite mercy remove the pandemic from *klal Yisrael* and all the nations of the world.

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>

They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org> using the search criteria Etengoff and the *parasha*'s name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpd>

*** I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik's](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.