

Parashat Balak 5782, 2022:

*Bilam: Navi or Sorcerer?*

Rabbi David Etengoff

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 Yechezkel, 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, the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The namesake of our *parasha* is Balak, King of Moab. He correctly believed that his country was existentially threatened by the fledgling Jewish nation. As such, he sought to annihilate us before we could become any stronger and wreak havoc upon his people. In order to achieve his malevolent goal, he hired Bilam ben Beor to curse our people and “stop us in our tracks.”

*Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin* 106a focuses on Bilam’s authentic nature: “[It states in *Sefer Yehoshua* 13:22:] ‘... and Bilam, the son of Beor, the sorcerer (*hakosame*)...’ Was he a sorcerer? He is a prophet (*navi*)! Rabbi Yochanan says: ‘Initially he was a prophet, but ultimately, he lost his capacity for prophecy and remained merely a sorcerer.’” (Translation with my emendations, *The William Davidson Talmud*, Koren Press, Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz *zatzal*, editor) This passage helps us understand that even though Bilam was labelled a sorcerer in *Sefer Yehoshua*, he had been an authentic prophet at an earlier time. This transformation is trenchantly analyzed by the Maharal (Rabbi Yehudah Loew ben Bezalel *zatzal*, d. 1609):

Here is the explanation: He was initially a prophet, as his prophecies were vouchsafed to him prior to the Jewish people having left Egypt; in addition, at that time, he was also a *navi* to the nations of the world. Afterwards, when the Jewish people left Egypt, Moshe asked [the Almighty] to no longer allow His *Shechinah* to dwell among the nations of the world, but rather, solely among the Jewish people. Prior to this request, however, it had not been determined that prophecy would be removed from the peoples of the world; as such, Bilam, himself, who was from the nations of the world, agreed to the *brachot* for the Jewish people. At this juncture, the *Shechinah* departed

completely from the nations of the world forevermore...” (*Chidushei Aggadot, Sanhedrin 106a*, translation and brackets my own)

According to the Maharal, Bilam was, indeed, a prophet prior to *Moshe Rabbeinu*'s entreaty to Hashem to cease His prophetic involvement with the nations of the world. Subsequently, however, Hashem honored Moshe's request and Bilam was reduced to an ordinary sorcerer.

What kind of *navi* was Bilam? How did he compare to *Moshe Rabbeinu*? At least two *midrashim* speak directly to these questions:

Bilam had three characteristics 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 in these *midrashim*, Bilam's prophetic characteristics, and the nature of his encounters with the *Shechinah*, surpassed even those of *Moshe Rabbeinu*.

Bilam's status as an authentic *navi*, however, has not been universally accepted. One of the earliest sources that rejects this idea is *Targum Onkelos*. Throughout his interpretative Aramaic translation of the Torah, Onkelos (c.35-120 CE) utilizes the term, “*itgali Hashem* (Hashem revealed Himself),” in regard to authentic prophets. By way of example, he deploys this phrase ten times in reference to Hashem's revelations to Avraham, Yitzchak and Ya'akov. In stark contrast, however, there is not one *pasuk* wherein Onkelos uses a form of “*itgali Hashem*” in reference to Bilam, this strongly suggesting that he did not recognize Bilam as a bona fide prophet. (See Rambam, *Moreh HaNevuchim* II:41 for the basis of this analysis)

In his *Commentary on Sefer Yehoshua*, the Abarbanel (Rabbi Don Isaac Abravanel *zatzal*, 1437-1508) explains the phrase, “and Bilam, the son of Beor, the sorcerer,” (13:22) in a straightforward manner in consonance with Onkelos’ approach: “He was a sorcerer in his very nature and true essence (*kosame m’tivo v’amitato*). For everything that is cited from his prophecy [in Parashat Balak] is simply something that he was gifted—solely for that moment—in honor of the Jewish people so that he could bless them.” (Translation and brackets my own)

Ultimately, Bilam attained infamy for having caused the death of 24,000 men of our nation through his nefarious plan concerning the *b’not Moab* (Daughters of Moab, *Sefer Bamidbar* 25:1-9). Little wonder, then, that *Chazal* gave him the appellation, “*Bilam HaRasha* (Bilam the Evil One, *Pirkei Avot* 5:19),” the name by which he will be known forevermore.

Shabbat Shalom

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

Please contact me at [rdbe718@gmail.com](mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com) to be added to my weekly email list.

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

\*\*\* 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: [The Rav](#)