

Parashat Balak

Parsha Summary

Balak, king of Moav, is scared of the B'nei Yisrael, and so he sends messengers to hire Bil'am ben Be'or to curse them. After asking God and refusing once, Bil'am consents. Three times, an angel appears on the road and is seen by Bil'am's donkey, which avoids the angel, and when Bil'am gets angry at it the donkey complains to Bil'am. Bil'am then sees the angel, which allows him to pass but warns that he must speak as God says. Bil'am comes to Balak, the two of them bring sacrifices and Bil'am makes three attempts to curse Israel: in Kiryat Chutzos, the summit of Sdei Tzofim, and "Rosh ha-Pe'or" overlooking Yeshimon. However, each time Bil'am says in front of Balak and his people that God wishes Israel to be blessed, describing how God took the people out of Egypt and guides them through history, praises Israel for its uniqueness and blesses Israel with strength and prosperity. Balak becomes angry, but Bil'am continues by prophesying about the "end of days," when Israel will reign supreme and all other nations will be laid waste.

In Shittim, the B'nei Yisrael stray after girls of Moav, even bowing to their gods. A plague starts, and God telling Moshe to kill the leaders of the nation, so he gathers the judges and tells them to do so. A person brings a Midianite woman before Moshe, and Pinchas ben El'azar stabs him and the woman with a spear, ending the plague.

Classic Questions

If God spoke to Bil'am, was he a prophet (attainable only by the righteous)? Or was he not?

- **Chazal** in many places indicate that Bil'am was a prophet, sorcerer, and philosopher
- **Ibn Ezra**: Bil'am was nothing more than a skilled astrologer (who could tell the future)
 - **Akeidas Yitzchak**: the Sages nevertheless call him a "prophet" because he happened to state the future, despite not knowing the future through divine
- **Abarbanel, Ramban, Ralbag**: Bil'am was just a magician, but God gave him prophecy to teach the nations about B'nei Yisrael through their most famous sorcerer
 - **Ramban**: when prophesying, he was just below the level of the avos
 - **R. Chisdai Crescas** (Ohr H' 2:4:3): Bil'am was not morally fit to be a prophet, but his prophecy was an unnatural miracle (and thus similar to Moshe's)
- **Rambam** (Moreh Nevuchim 2:41-45): Bil'am had degrees of actual prophecy

Would Bil'am's curse be effective, if God allowed him to make it? If not, why mess with him?

- **Chazal** in many places indicate that Bil'am either had the power to curse effectively
 - **Ramban** (see Iggeres Hakodesh ch. 5): Bil'am was indeed a powerful magician
 - **Rabbeinu Bachayei, Seforno**: Bil'am could only curse, not bless (effectively)
 - **Netziv explaining Midrash Tanhuma**: Bil'am knew how to use the "evil eye" which is a natural force for evil (and would be as effective as a physical attack)
- **Ibn Ezra**: Bil'am may have been a great astrologer, but had no power to harm anyone
 - **Ibn Ezra, Chizkuni**: God knew that there would soon be a plague at Ba'al Pe'or, and stopped Bil'am so that no one would attribute that plague to his curse
- **Meshech Chochmah**: although Bil'am's curse would not be effective, God wanted to scare the nations by literally putting words in his mouth (and his donkey's mouth)

What kind of blessing is it to say that Israel is a nation which dwells "alone" (*badad*)?

- **Rashi**: at the end of days, only Israel will remain when other nations are destroyed

- **Rashbam, Ibn Ezra:** the nation is alone in that it does not assimilate into other nations
- **Ralbag, Akeidas Yitzchak:** “*badad*” means distinctive
- **Bechor Shor:** “*badad*” means secure

How did the act of Pinchas relate to God and Moshe’s instructions to the judges?

- **Rashi (Sanhedrin 82a):** the judges set up courts to convict those guilty of inter-relations
 - [Zimri’s action was distinct enough from the rest of the nation’s for Pinchas to act]
- **Sifrei, Chizkuni, Seforno:** the judges were supposed to kill the perpetrators, but were hesitating until Pinchas got up and began to do so himself
- **Abarbanel:** Moshe commanded the tribe leaders to kill the idolaters, and Pinchas saw that one of the leaders (Zimri) was himself of the sinners

Important “Chazal”s and “Rashi”s

- A person is led down the path he wishes to go. We learn this in the Torah, where God first said to Bil’am not to go [with Balak’s men], and then told him to go (Makkos 10b)
- Bil’am knew when God got angry every day, and planned to give a curse at that moment, but on the day he came to curse Israel, God did not get angry (Berachos 7a, San. 105a)
 - **Yad Ramah:** not that God literally gets angry, but that it is comparable to the punishment a king would give if a subject is sinning before him at that moment
- The donkey said to Bil’am in front of Balak’s emissaries... “I serve you for riding during the day... and as a conjugal liaison for you at night” (Sanhedrin 105b)
 - **Maharatz Chajes (Mevo ha-Talmud, 20):** The rabbis have a principle [of interpreting the Torah], that the righteous should be praised as much as possible, and the wicked should be charged with all possible abominable deeds
- Bil’am saw how their tents were not facing each other, and blessed them (B.B. 80a)
- [Yisrael] lies down like a lion-- the Jew wakes up with the strength of a lion to perform mitzvos of the morning: reciting *Shema*, wearing *tzitzis* and *tefillin* (Rashi, Tanchuma)

A Short Vort

When God “opens the mouth of the donkey” and it speaks miraculously, Bil’am does not react in shock or wonderment, but instead continues berating her, now verbally instead of physically. We might think that only the most obstinate person, blinded by anger and self-importance, could be so oblivious as to not react to such a miraculous occurrence. Rav Shimon Schwab, however, sees in Bil’am an all-too common phenomenon, albeit taken to the extreme: the ignoring of God’s might and presence which guides us every day. A religious person must be sensitive to nature, especially any change or impressive natural feat (such as a thunderstorm) that he/she might encounter, in order to see God’s hand in the smaller miracles surrounding us constantly.