

Parshas Balak

In this week's parsha we read about the King Balak-who called Bilam – a non-Jewish prophet to curse the Jews on their travels. Those curses were converted into blessings, when Bilam saw the encampment of the Jews.

In the early Rashis on the parsha- Rashi explains that even though Balak (a Moavite) was enemies with the Midianites (and historically related) they came together on the common ground of hating the Jews. Balak asked Midian for insight into the weakness of Moshe to find a method through which to defeat the Jews. The Midianites responded, that since Moshe's power is through his mouth, they should try to defeat him that way. Balak's response was to hire Bilam (with whom he had a previous relationship- apparently Bilam predicted Balak's rise to power¹) who would use his 'mouth' i.e., curse the Jews. There was divine power in non-Jewish profits, and in fact this route would have been fearsome, and possible. Obviously by divine intervention, and because of the morality of the Jews- Bilam's initial act to curse the Jews turned into a blessing.

The fact that the warring nations at this point in the Jews' travels in not by coincidence. Moav, who is the fore parent of Ruth- the foremother of David Hamelech, from who's house Mashiach will arrive. Balak's initiative wasn't so much to be a short-term gain to defeat the Jews, but it would seem, it was intended on a long-term effect of halting the growth of the Jewish people and our mission to ultimately be

rewarded with Mashiach. In parshas Chukas (last week) the nation of Edom (descendents of Esav) stopped the Jews from crossing through their land- and the words used in the posuk there (20:20), where Rashi explains, that Edom had the confidence to stop the Jews from passing because of their lineage and power from Esav. Therefore, now, Moav- and Balak's mission theoretically is cut from the same cloth, to stop the dominance of Jews- and Hashem and our mission for Mashiach. Furthermore, Rashi in Chukas 20:16 explains on the word "Vayishma Koleinu" (he heard our voice), that with blessing that Yakov received about conquering Edom (Esav)- that is Yakov's bracha was manifested to give the Jews the power to conquer a seemingly unworthy (and possibly stronger) adversary.

What we see is that the age-old war was still relevant on the Jews passage through the desert, that the mission and history was known to the leaders of the time, and the adversaries of the Jews were conducting everything in their power to stop it. Balak's audacity likely was born from his miraculous rise to power- in which perhaps it was not by might that he would alter history- it would be through his own trying of divine intervention- that is, using the power of words to curse the Jews.

As Bilam tried to reach his place of cursing, the path was blocked by an angel in 3 spots. Rashi explains that the angel was showing Bilam signs that represented the patriarchs- that is, signs that given a choice- he should bless the Jews instead of cursing them. This explanation supports the intentionality of

¹ As Rashi explains on 22:4) he was called to power in an abnormal way.

the Jews becoming who they were, and therefore our mission today. Meaning in past Divrei Torah- I have suggested through evidence in Rashi the intentionality of everything including Yosef being sent to Egypt as a necessary step toward redemption. Subsequent conclusion would be that since the beginning of time- at creation every step of history is in line with the conclusion that Mashiach is ultimately to arrive (and therefore we are the holiest version of the Jews ever to live, because we are at optimal potential to receive Mashiach). All the negative inputs by the characters of the Parsha were an effort to kibosh the inevitable outcome of the Jews' dominance.

In some way, even the choice of the words, "Vayosef Malach Hashem Avor" (22:26) has subtext- Vayosef means continued- but perhaps according to my suggested interpretation of Yosef's historically intentional purpose to go down to Mitzrayim could be implicated here. "Re read- and Yosef an emissary of Hashem passed- meaning the whole outcome of the Jews being who they were and are, was being shown to Bilam- Rashi even says this on the words- that this angel was showing Bilam the Patriarchs (and according to Tanchuma- Bilam's curse would have given credence in the alternate lineages to be the legacy of the Patriarchs – e.g., descendants

of Yishmael as opposed to Yitzchak etc.) We know this not to be true- and Bilam was being shown this. Balak tried to stop this, all unsuccessfully.

The power of speech- and the theme of mouth is evident. We spoke in Parshas Korach about the mouth of the earth which swallowed up Korach (a Friday afternoon creation as stated in Pirkei Avos 5:6), similarly the mouth of the Donkey used here was also one of those creations².

The fact that Midian stated that Moshe's power was derived from his mouth is also significant. We know based on medrish from Shemos- that Moshe was not a man of words- (for which Hasehm reprimanded Moshe- Mi Som Peh L'Adam)- he had a lisp, stutter, or some other speech impediment from his childhood (due to burning his mouth with coal- when given a choice between coal and money by the Pharoah in who's house Moshe grew up before running to Midian). Notwithstanding the obvious physical disability- Midian recognized that it was powerful- (perhaps even realizing that the source of the impediment was because of a miracle). Moshe's ability to lead, and the power of prayer was so miraculous- even the nations of the world recognized this. And how they stated it wasn't as a weakness, rather, this is the source of power-and Balak's subsequent

² A side note- Rashi explains the mouth of the Earth in Korach- as one may question if that punishment had been created at that time, Korach's destiny had been predetermined. Rashi there explains the nuance in the novelty of the creation and the type of punishment enacted on Korach. Whereas here, Rashi doesn't offer any insight into the mouth of the donkey-meaning the vessel of the mouth of the donkey- although created at Friday afternoon Bilam could have known that he would be communicated

to- and therefore not even attempt to go out-to try and change destiny. My thought on this, is the posuk we read about Pi Ha'Ason (mouth of the donkey) is in posuk 28- i.e., Koach- the letters 20- Chof- and 8- Ches. Meaning notwithstanding the creation at twilight on Friday afternoon- there was still a separate power- by Hashem to make this unique miracle, and it is by divine design that whatever is unfolding is happening intentionally.

counteraction was to curse the Jews- no war, no fight, just words.

Words, and the mouth are incredibly powerful. Colloquially one can state that they are not affected by words- but regardless of one's personal ability to deflect words we know words are incredibly powerful. In Chassidus we are taught about Levushim – clothes, which are the way we manifest core middos. Middos don't change as easily from scenario to scenario (think about people's personality which are far more ingrained) whereas how we present ourselves can change from situation to situation, much like one would dress differently depending on the occasion. The Levushim are "machshava (thought) dibbur (speech) maisheh (action)". Dibbur doesn't necessarily mean spoken word, but communication. Because without the conduit, and process from thoughts to actions- we wouldn't have optimal outcomes of anything. This is whether we do something ourselves, or we are asking of others to do for us³.

Communication is so key to optimal outcomes, and that is what is perhaps also being highlighted here with the mouth theme (relating to Moshe etc.). Furthermore, the power of positive speech and prayer knows no bounds.

This week's Haftora comes from Micah 5:6-6:8. Micah was from the Neviim Achronim (and Trei Asar). Micah is calling the Jews to repent- ultimately to bring the redemption of Mashiach. The Haftora simply connects

to the parsha as there is a direct mention of the events of Balak. I think on a deeper note, that the connection is to substantiate to us, the truth in the prophesy of Micah about Mashiach. Just as Balak and Bilam sought to change the course of history by cursing the Jews, the outcome remains the same, the Jews triumphed (and were blessed) and ultimately the truth that Mashiach will arrive (imminently). But there is work for us- lest we forget the mission. The problem is Bilam ultimately swayed a part of Israel wayward of morality (which Pinchas stopped) as a stumbling block to bringing out their downfall. Yet Rashi on Micha 6:5 states that even though Bilam succeeded in bringing about immorality- Hashem still brought the Jews into the Land of Israel. Therefore, we today, must realize, we are not too far gone, in fact we are closer than ever in history to welcoming Mashiach. Regardless of the state of the world or personally in our own lives we are at the finish line- as the Rebbe and our Chassidic masters state- we are tiny people on the shoulders of giants, and our buttons should be polished, ready to welcome Mashiach speedily in our days.

Good Shabbos

³ Although Bilam blessed the Jews he did show them amoral ways, which Pinchas had to stop. Meaning his conjured thoughts, words chosen led to suboptimal outcomes. Bilam had this power as evidenced in

Rashi on the explanation of why non-Jewish nations had Divinely inspired prophetic powers. These non-Jewish prophets however used the word entrusted to them to proceed in amoral ways.