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PARASHAT HASHAVUA

PARASHAT BALAK

A Commentary on Bilam's Prophecies
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A. General Overview of Bilam's Prophecies

The first part of *Parashat Balak* is devoted to a detailed description of the delegation of Balak, King of Moav, and Bilam's response to these princes of Moav and his behavior towards God. Following a long and complex process Bilam meets with Balak, and the latter asks him to curse Israel. The second half of the *parasha* deals with Bilam's prophecies which, as we know, turned out to be blessings rather than curses. In this *shiur* we shall try to explain some central points in Bilam's prophecies, to which the Torah devotes considerable space.

How Many Prophecies Were Uttered by Bilam?

The story of Bilam's prophecies is composed of introductions, describing dialogues between Balak and Bilam, and the prophecies themselves. If we divide the prophecies according to this principle – i.e., the beginning or ending of each dialogue is considered a unit of prophecy – then we have four prophecies:

A. "He took up his discourse and he said: Balak, King of Moav, has brought me from the mountains of the east, [saying,] Go and curse Yaakov for me; go and denounce Yisrael... Who can count the dust of Yaakov, and the number of a quarter of Yisrael? Let me die the death of the upright, and let my end be like his." (23:7, 10)

B. "He took up his discourse and said: Arise, Balak, and hear; listen to me, son of Tzippor... The nation will rise like a great lion and lift itself up like a lion; it shall not lie down until it eats the prey and drinks the blood of the fallen." (23:18, 24)

C. "He took up his discourse and said: The speech of Bilam, son of Be'or; the speech of the man whose eyes are open... He crouched, he lay down like a lion and like a great lion; who can cause him to rise? He who blesses you is blessed, and he who curses you is cursed." (24:3, 9)

D. "He took up his discourse and said: The speech of Bilam, son of Be'or; the speech of the man whose eyes are open... Ships shall come from the coast of Kittim and they shall afflict Ashur, and they shall afflict Ever, and they too will be gone forever. Then Bilam rose up and went and returned to his place, and Balak also went on his way." (24:15, 24-25)

The division into four prophecies also makes sense in light of the opening words of each, which are either related to Balak or

an official appeal to him, or a declaration on the part of Bilam that he is a prophet.

However, the separation between the third prophecy and the fourth is not as clear as the others. The third prophecy arouses Balak's anger and convinces him that there is no point in trying to coax Bilam to curse Israel:

"Balak's anger was kindled against Bilam, and he clapped his hands together; and Balak said to Bilam: I called you to curse my enemies, and behold – you have now altogether blessed them three times already. And now, flee to your place; I said that I would give you great honor, but now God has kept you back from honor." (24:10-11)

Why is it specifically this prophecy that causes Balak to despair of Bilam and the possibility of him cursing Israel? Perhaps, as his words suggest, it is the fact that his plan has gone wrong for the third time ("three times already"), such that there now seems no hope of ever getting it right. But it seems that there is another reason, too. Balak feels that it is bad enough that Bilam is not blessing Israel instead of cursing them; what makes the situation unbearable is that he is enjoying it. Bilam's attitude is connected to the way in which the prophecy comes about, as we shall explain below, but also – and perhaps mainly – to the actual content. His prophecy becomes increasingly militant; it speaks of Israel's valor and their crushing victory over their enemies. The words that were supposed to curse Israel, and which started off as blessings to them instead, are about to be directed against Balak himself, as a curse to him and his nation: "He shall consume the nations that are his enemies, and break their bones, and pierce them with arrows." Balak is not only bitterly disappointed by the failure to curse Israel; he fears that at any moment Bilam is going to curse **him**. At this point Balak raises his voice angrily and claps his hands, as if to stop Bilam in the middle of his prophecy. But the vision that has begun to flow cannot be stopped, and Bilam continues. The fourth prophecy is therefore, according to this view, a continuation of the third, which was halted in the middle, and in it Balak's fears are indeed realized. Bilam turns to curse Moav: "A star shall emerge from Yaakov, and a scepter shall rise up from Yisrael, and smite the corners of Moav and destroy all the children of Shet."

This is the only prophecy that is not uttered at Balak's bidding, but rather on Bilam's own initiative, and it is here that he speaks explicitly of Bnei Yisrael's future victory over Moav.

Perhaps, then, the fourth prophecy is really the second half of the third one.

However, the question is not decisively solved. A different criterion for the division of the prophecies is based on the official introduction: "He took up his discourse and said"; this clearly represents the beginning of an independent unit of prophecy. All four of the prophecies enumerated above begin with these words. However, during the course of the fourth

prophecy, the same expression occurs another three times, but with no break indicating a new prophecy:

1. "He took up his discourse and said: The speech of Bilam, son of Be'or..."
2. He looked upon Amalek and he took up his discourse and said...
3. He looked upon the Keni and he took up his discourse and said...
4. He took up his discourse and said: Who shall live, who does these things?"

According to this criterion for division, we have seven prophecies instead of four. However, this does not necessarily present a problem. Apparently, there were actually seven separate prophecies, each with its own subject. The three first prophecies focus on Bnei Yisrael; the fourth describes Israel's victory over their enemies – Moav and Edom; and the last three focus on other nations, not Israel.

From a literary point of view, however, the Torah presents the prophecies in such a way that the fourth includes all of the last four. We may propose various possible reasons for this:

- The four last prophecies are not related to the main story, since they are not part of the dialogue between Balak and Bilam, and are not the result of Balak's invitation.

- They deal with events that will happen at the end of days, rather than describing the character of a nation or its present state, as the preceding prophecies do.

- All of them deal with foreign nations, unlike the first three prophecies which focus on Bnei Yisrael.

B. The Purpose of the Various Prophecies

As stated, the Torah takes pains to describe the development of the plot and the interaction between Balak and Bilam, as well as the content of the various prophecies. Let us now examine more closely the context of the appearance of each prophecy, as well as the relations between them.

We have already noted that the fourth prophecy (and the three that follow on from it) are uttered without any prompting from Balak. The three first prophecies were uttered at his bidding, and all three were preceded by the offering of sacrifices. Prior to each of them, Balak builds seven altars and offers on each of them an ox and a ram: "He built seven altars, and he offered an ox and a ram on each altar" – 23:1,14,29). Only the fourth prophecy comes with no preceding sacrifice, further proof that it is the continuation of the third prophecy.

The first three prophecies are uttered by Bilam after he observes Bnei Yisrael from various observation points:

Prophecy 1: "And it was in the morning that Balak took Bilam and brought him up to Bamot-Ba'al, that he might see from there the outermost part of the nation" (22:41)

Prophecy 2: "Then Balak said to him, Come then with me to another place, from which you will see nothing but the very outermost part of them, but you shall not see them all, and curse them for me from there. And he took him to a field with a vantage point, to the top of Pisga" (23:13-14)

Prophecy 3: "Balak said to Bilam: Come, then,; let me take you to another place; perhaps it shall please God for you to curse them for me from there. So Balak took Bilam to the top of Pe'or, which looks out over the desert" (23:27-28).

The fourth prophecy is not preceded by any chance of position, nor is there any mention of location. And in contrast to the previous prophecies, Bilam does not relate here to *Am Yisrael* in their present state – as he sees them – but rather expresses a vision of Israel:

"And now, behold, I am going to my people; let me then tell you what this nation will do to your nation at the end of days" (24:14)

The observation points are important for two reasons: Firstly, they offer Bilam a view of Bnei Yisrael, thereby focusing his thoughts and imaginings so as to arouse prophecy. A view from different angles may arouse various negative feelings in him – as Balak hopes. Secondly, to Balak's mind, the different places may be sources of negative energies, magic, and curses for Israel. Two of the places are explicitly given names of idolatry: "Bamot-Ba'al" and "Rosh ha-Pe'or." As to "the field of Tzofim" there is no clear reason for this particular place, but it is possible that Balak's intention here was the same. Rashi, taking a similar view, explains that either Balak or Bilam foresaw the death of Moshe there, and therefore concluded that this place was a source of curses for Israel.

Let us now pay close attention to the manner in which the prophecies come about. In this context a distinction should be drawn between the first two prophecies and the latter two. In the first two prophecies, after Balak takes Bilam to the place that he regards as appropriate, and after offering the sacrifices, the prophecy develops as follows:

"Bilam said to Balak: Stand by your burnt offering, and I will go; perhaps God will come to meet me, and whatever He shows me I shall tell you. So he went to a steep place. And God met Bilam and he said to him: I have prepared the seven altars, and I have offered an ox and a ram on each altar. And God put words in Bilam's mouth, and He said: Return to Balak, and so shall you speak. And he returned to him, and behold – he stood by his burnt offering, he and all the princes of Moav. And he took up his discourse and said: Balak, king of Moav, has brought me from Aram, from the mountains of the east, saying: Go and curse Yaakov for me; go and denounce Yisrael." (23:3-7)

Bilam separates from Balak and goes off alone, in the manner of prophets, so as to "invite" a state of prophecy. God is indeed revealed to him; He puts words in his mouth, and Bilam goes and conveys what has been given to him to Balak. And indeed, the opening words of the prophecy concern Balak – the dispatcher, whose mission Bilam is fulfilling (although he fails to meet Balak's expectations): "Balak, King of Moav, brought me from Aram."

The very same repeats itself in the second prophecy:

"He said to Balak: Stand here by your burnt offering, and I will go to the meeting over there. And God met Bilam and put words in his mouth, and said: Return to

Balak, and so shall you speak. And when he came to him, behold, he was standing by his burnt offering, and the princes of Moav were with him, and Balak said to him: What has God spoken? So he took up his discourse and said: Arise, Balak, and hear; listen to me, son of Tzippor." (15-18)

The prophecy develops in exactly the same way: Bilam goes off into isolation, and God is revealed to him; He puts words in Bilam's mouth, and the prophecy is conveyed back to Balak. As we shall see below, the crux of the message of these two prophecies is also similar.

The third prophecy is very different in its development. It feels different even at the preliminary stage of the observation: Bilam sees not only the outermost part of the nation, but rather "Israel dwelling by their tribes." Why? This time, Bilam is not seeking to arouse his prophetic powers through the power of the god in whose vicinity he is standing. Nor is he seeking mysterious signs and wonders, nor a sudden revelation: "So he did not go, as at previous times, to seek enchantments...." He turns his face towards the wilderness – apparently the wilderness in which Bnei Yisrael are encamped. All of this testifies that he quite understood, by now, that "it pleased God to bless Israel." This awareness frees him to receive prophecy that is not forced upon him ("God put words..."), but rather as an inner revelation that inspires him: "The spirit of God came upon him." This prophecy is no longer a response to Balak's invitation, but rather entirely independent. It has nothing to do with the altars, and is certainly not related to the location. Therefore, instead of speaking about Balak's invitation at the beginning of the prophecy, as he did in the previous two prophecies, he speaks of his own prophecy, and of the sharpness of the revelation and vision:

"He took up his discourse and said: The speech of Bilam, son of Be'or; the speech of the man whose eyes are open (*gever shetum ha-ayin*). The speech of he who hears the words of God, who sees the vision of the Almighty, falling down, but having his eyes open (*gelui einayim*)." (24:3-4)

Onkelos, Rashi and Rashbam all interpret the expression "*shetum ha-ayin*" as meaning "whose eyes are open" – i.e., who sees well that which he is shown. This prophecy of Bilam can truly be called full prophecy, and therefore he has no need to distance himself from Balak, nor has he any need for divination.

Apparently, this is a further reason for Balak's fury and despair at the end of this prophecy. Balak sees that Bilam is no longer even trying to perform his will; he has come to identify with the idea of blessing Israel, and therefore Balak's despair is absolute.

Finally, the introduction to the fourth prophecy opens with the same language as the third. Here again, the prophecy is not at Balak's bidding at all; on the contrary, Balak sends Bilam away, and the latter prophesizes against his will:

"Now, behold, I am going to my people; let me then tell you what this nation will do to your nation at the end of days. And he took up his discourse and said: The speech of Bilam, son of Be'or; the speech of the man whose eyes are open. The speech of he who hears

the words of God, and knows the knowledge of the Most High, who has a vision of the Almighty, falling down but having his eyes open." (14-16)

C. Content of the Prophecies

The development that we noted in the manner of the prophetic revelation is complemented by a development in the content of the prophecies. Most of us have a general recollection that Bilam blessed Bnei Yisrael. A question that has bothered commentators since the earliest times is, why does the Torah bless Bnei Yisrael specifically through this gentile? Would it not be more fitting and appropriate for these praises of Bnei Yisrael to be uttered by Moshe, or one of our other prophets?

Various answers have been proposed for this question. Below we shall attempt to propose another view of the content of Bilam's prophecies, paying attention to the relationship between the stage of development of the plot and the content of the prophecy.¹

The First Prophecy

"He took up his discourse and said: Balak, king of Moav, has brought me from Aram, from the mountains of the east, saying: Go curse Yaakov for me, and denounce Yisrael. How can I curse whom God has not cursed, and how can I denounce whom God has not denounced? For from the top of the boulders I see him, and from the hills I behold him: it is a people that shall dwell alone and shall not be counted among the nations. Who can count the dust of Yaakov, and the number of a quarter of Yisrael? Let me die the death of the upright, and let my end be like his." (23:7-10)

The beginning of the prophecy is a sort of brief preface describing what preceded the prophecy itself: in verse 7 Bilam describes Balak's request and his journey to the plains of Moav, while in verse 8 he describes his positions as a prophet vis-à-vis the will of God – and hence, his inability to curse. In verses 9 and 10 he describes the unique status of Bnei Yisrael, who are not subject to the forces that control other nations. They cannot be counted; i.e., a curse that is manifested in number cannot apply to them.² Finally, he wishes for himself that his end should be like the (apparently beneficent) end of Israel. It should be noted that this prophecy contains no positive assertions as to the qualities, traits or fate of Israel. All that Bilam says is related to Israel's status in relation to his prophecy, and his ability to curse or bless them. In other words, this entire prophecy is a sort of apology by Bilam addressed to Balak, explaining why he is unable to fulfill his request, but no more than that.³

Second Prophecy

¹ We shall not propose a detailed explanation of words and sentences; such interpretations are offered by both earlier and later commentators.

² Other interpretations have been offered for these words of Bilam, but this seems to be the most straightforward understanding of the words in their context.

³ Obviously, Bilam's words teach us some important principles about *Am Yisrael's* status among the nations, the system of causality that acts on them, etc., but none of this is Bilam's primary intention.

"He took up his discourse and said: Arise, Balak, and hear; listen to me, son of Tzippor. God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should have regret. If He has said, then shall He not do? If He has spoken, shall He not fulfill? Behold, I have been bidden to bless, and He has blessed; I cannot turn it back. He has observed no iniquity in Yaakov, nor has He seen any perverseness in Yisrael; the Lord his God is with him, and the trumpet blast of the king is in his midst. God, Who brought them out of Egypt, has as it were the strength of a wild ox. For there is no enchantment amongst Yaakov, nor any divination amongst Yisrael; at the proper time it shall be told to Yaakov and to Yisrael what God has done. Behold, the people will rise up like a great lion, and lift itself up like a lion; they shall not lie down until they have eaten the prey and drunk the blood of the fallen." (23:18-24)

The prophecy opens (verse 18) by directly addressing the person who sought it – Balak. Then, since this is already the second prophecy, there is an explanation for why its content will be no different from that of the first prophecy. In the first prophecy Bilam explained that he could not curse those whom God had not cursed, nor make use of divination and other forces that have no power over Bnei Yisrael. Now he explains why the expectation that something will change because of the change in location or offering of sacrifices, is unfounded: "God is not a man, that He should lie" (19). And lest anyone think that perhaps there exists some sin amongst Bnei Yisrael as a result of which God would be prepared to curse them, Bilam adds: "He has observed no iniquity in Yaakov..." (21); therefore, "The Lord his God is with him." Bilam then goes on to explain that enchantment is of no value against Bnei Yisrael, and emphasizes the warm connection between God and this nation, precluding any possibility of a curse: "The strength of a wild ox." Only at the end of the prophecy does he finally say something that goes beyond a refusal to curse or an explanation for his inability to do so: "Behold, the people will rise up like a great lion..." (24). Although his words are very general in nature, they touch directly on Balak's concerns: Balak's fear was that "Now this company will lick up all that is around us," and he had hoped that "Perhaps I shall prevail, that we may wage war against them and I shall drive them out." The final verse of the second prophecy, despite its general nature, establishes quite the opposite. It speaks of the power and "cruelty" of Bnei Yisrael, such that Balak has good reason to fear them.

Balak's Surprising Stubbornness

Why does Balak persist, hoping that Bilam will still curse Bnei Yisrael? Twice he has been disappointed. After the first prophecy, when he had heard Bilam's refusal but had not yet heard an explicit blessing as to Bnei Yisrael's strength and power, he could still have thought that Bilam's refusal was a temporary problem, and that conditions would change. He had not yet been told that his fear of Bnei Yisrael was well justified. In his pagan mind, he could still believe that a change of perspective on Bnei Yisrael, and his own offering of sacrifices, could influence the content of Bilam's prophecy. This thinking is characteristic of a culture of magic, divination and enchantment, where everything depends on technique and on the order of the rituals that act on nature, rather than on the absolute will of God. From this point of view, Bilam and Balak are completely disconnected from each other's reality. Balak is

trying to employ methods of magicians and diviners, while Bilam is explaining to him that none of this makes any difference; God bestows His prophecy according to His absolute will. No divination is operative here, only a moral principle: "He has observed no iniquity in Yaakov." It is impossible to manipulate God: "God is not a man, that He should lie."

Where two completely different languages meet here, Balak tries a third. After hearing what he so badly wanted not to hear – that he has good reason to fear Bnei Yisrael – he feels that he has nothing to lose, and so now he wagers everything on this initiative. The first two times, he showed Bilam only the outermost part of the camp of Bnei Yisrael, not the whole nation. The second time, this is actually emphasized in his words, as an intentional act: "You shall see only the outermost part of them, but you shall not see them all." The third time, Balak takes him to a position from where he looks out over the entire camp of Israel. Clearly, his hope for a change is related, in his mind, to the change in location: "Come, now, I shall take you to another place; perhaps it shall please God for you to curse them for me from there." But the hope for change is not just because it is some other place. We read, "Bilam lifted his eyes and saw Israel dwelling by their tribes." In other words, this time he sees the entire nation. What was Balak thinking? Perhaps at first he chose to show Bilam only the outermost part of the camp so as to create a dismal impression, perhaps because the outskirts of the camp truly lacked the order and glory of its center, and because of its moral inferiority (as we discern from the story of the complaints in *Bamidbar* 11). Now, Balak puts everything on the line: perhaps the sight of the whole of Israel will reveal to Bilam some fault; perhaps it will arouse in him some objection that will goad him into cursing them. Another reason for the choice of location is that it is at "the top of Pe'or." Further on, the text describes the sin of Bnei Yisrael concerning Pe'or. Perhaps something of this was already discernible at that time, and it is possible that this represents the root of the idea of a negative influence emanating from Pe'or. In any event, Balak had reason to hope that a curse may arise.

Third Prophecy

The sight of the entire camp of Israel not only fails to cause Bilam to curse them, but instead fills him with inspiration and an inner belief in their goodness, to the extent that he has no need to go off and seek God's word: "How good are your tents, Yaakov; your dwelling places, Yisrael." Until now this was not said, because – in accordance with Balak's plan - Bilam had not yet seen the entire camp. Now he has a complete picture of Israel, and his prophecy relates to this image:

"He took up his discourse and said: The speech of Bilam, son of Be'or; the speech of the man whose eyes are open. The speech of he who hears the words of God, who sees the vision of the Almighty, falling down, but having his eyes open. How good are your tents, Yaakov; your dwelling places, Yisrael. Like the winding brooks, like gardens alongside the river, like aloes that God has planted, like cedars beside the water. He shall pour water from his buckets, watering his seed plentifully, and his king shall be higher than Agag, and his kingdom elevated. God brought them out of Egypt, He has as it were the strength of a wild ox. He shall consume the nations that are his enemies,

and break their bones, and pierce them with his arrows. He crouched, he lay down like a lion, and like a great lion; who shall cause him to rise up? Blessed is he who blesses you, and he that curses you is cursed." (3-9)

We have discussed the introduction to this prophecy (verses 3-4) above: it contains no further address to Balak, since he is no longer in the picture; rather, it includes a description of the change in the nature of the prophecy. Bilam now provides a spiritual description of the physical vision that he is seeing for the first time, as he looks out over the camp of Israel. Thereafter he elaborates at length on the strength and might of Israel, developing the idea that was mentioned only briefly at the end of the second prophecy. The expressions here complement the description there:

In the second prophecy, we read, "Behold, the people shall rise up like a great lion, and shall lift itself like a lion; he shall not lie down...", while here we read, "He crouched, he lay down like a lion... who shall cause him to rise?" In the second prophecy we read, "And drink the blood of the fallen," while here we read, "And break their bones and pierce them with his arrows."⁴ Bilam concludes his second prophecy with a decisive conclusion that offers no possibility of reconsideration: "He that blesses you is blessed, and he that curses you is cursed." Clearly, he will not be able to curse Bnei Yisrael, and anyone else will also avoid doing so, since anyone who curses Bnei Yisrael will himself be cursed. This hints at a curse upon Balak, who sought to curse Israel. The threats that Balak is hearing about the might of Bnei Yisrael, and the curse that is directed towards all who curse them, are what arouse his anger. Not only has Bilam been of no help to him; he has told Balak in so many words that Bnei Yisrael are stronger than him, and the possibility of cursing them through any other agent has been foreclosed: "Then Balak's anger was kindled against Bilam and he clapped his hands together...."

Fourth Prophecy

Since Balak has already sent Bilam away, having despaired of his curse, this prophecy looks like a sort of "bonus." However, a close look reveals that it may be this prophecy that holds the principal message. As we have seen thus far, the messages of Bilam's first three prophecies do not deviate, in terms of content, from the actual framework of the dialogue between Balak and Bilam and its political and spiritual context. Although those prophecies include elements that seem to be of a general nature and above time, we have

⁴ The blessing, "His king shall be higher than Agag" appears, I believe, to be meant to impress Balak with Israel's might, which exceeds even that of the Amalekites who dwell in the mountains, on the western side of Moav. Bilam is telling Balak that the enemy now facing him is a more difficult adversary than the one with which he is familiar. According to this interpretation, "Agag" here refers not to the figure known to us from a much later period, at the end of Shemuel's life, but rather, apparently, to another king of Balak's time who had the same name. Of course, it is possible that this was the name of a dynasty (like "Pharaoh" in Egypt), as the title "Haman the Agagite" suggests. The identification of Agag here as the king from the time of Shaul and Shemuel is problematic, since he has no relevance to Balak, and Bilam's prophecy of the "end of days" comes only later.

explained that all that Bilam has said so far is related to Balak's desire to curse Bnei Yisrael and his fear of them. Indeed, what would be the logic of having a *parasha* devoted to prophecies about the metaphysical essence of Israel in the middle of the description of their journey towards their land? To my mind, the whole of *Parashat Balak*, including Bilam's prophecies, is part of the overall theme of Bnei Yisrael's journey on the eastern side of the Jordan.

The fourth prophecy opens with the words, "Come, let me tell you what this nation will do to your nation at the end of days." In other words, Bilam has exhausted the prophetic vision that arises from observation of *Am Yisrael* in their present state; he now wants to talk about what will happen in the future. However, attention should be paid to the fact that the introduction already tells us that it is specifically here that the most burning issue will be addressed. After all, this is precisely the question that led Balak to recruit Bilam: what will *Am Yisrael* do to his nation? Thus far, he has heard no explicit forecast. Now, Bilam is about to prophesy as to Moav's fate at the hands of Israel:⁵

"I see it, but not now; I behold it, but it is not near: a star shall emerge from Yaakov, and a scepter shall arise from Yisrael, and smite the corners of Moav and destroy all the children of Shet. (Then Edom shall be his possession, and Se'ir too – his enemies - shall be his possession, and Yisrael will perform valor. And one shall come from Yaakov and destroy the remnant of the city." (24:17-19)

Bilam starts by emphasizing that his prophecy concerns a distant time, not the near future. What he sees in the distant future is that Moav will be defeated by the future kingdom of Israel – apparently, judging by the formulation, the kingdom of David. With these words Bilam at the same time confirms and assuages Balak's fears: Bnei Yisrael are indeed great and powerful, and – as Balak fears – they are destined to crush Moav, but this will happen only a long time from now. For the meantime, then, Balak need not fear. In truth, it is specifically these verses, which look like an appendix, that are the crux of all the prophecies, since only these relate directly to the main subject of the *parasha*, presenting a solution to the question that has accompanied us from the outset.

Moreover, through these verses the entire *parasha* assumes a broader context that concerns much more than just the fears of Balak and his nation. In *Parashat Chukat* we were puzzled by Bnei Yisrael's reluctance to engage in battle with Moav and Edom because of tactical considerations; the reason for this was not clear. Now our perspective widens: while it is true that right now, for their own internal reasons, Bnei Yisrael refrain from conquering Moav, they are destined to return and defeat them, and to rule over their land. Furthermore, Bilam talks about Moav and Edom in the same breath. This would seem to contradict the introduction to his own prophecy: "That which this nation will do to your nation." (The prophecies concerning the other nations are separate, according to their introductions: "He took up his discourse and said....") Why does Edom appear here together with Moav? The answer to this question lies in what we have said above. Through Bilam's

⁵ I have not addressed the introductory verses, describing the manner of the prophecy, since it is the same as that described in the third prophecy.

final prophecy, the Torah brings us back to the main subject of the *Sefer*: the journey on the eastern banks of the Jordan. Edom and Moav are the two nations that Bnei Yisrael leave out of their journey of conquest, and now we learn from a prophetic perspective that this is just a temporary measure; in the future, Bnei Yisrael are destined to conquer them, too.

D. Structure of the *Parasha* – Summary

We can now go back and take an overall view of the *parasha*, which presents it in the following way:

A. Edom: Description of the journey around Edom: "Edom did not permit Israel to pass through their border"

B. Moav and Israel: "Moav was greatly afraid of the nation... and Moav was seized with dread"

C. God's anger: "God's anger burned because he went"

D. Bilam's prophecies: Three prophecies of Bilam turn from cursing to blessing – inversion

c. Balak's anger: "Balak's anger burned against Bilam"

b. Moav and Israel: "A scepter shall rise up from Yisrael and smite the corners of Moav"

a. Edom and Israel: "Edom shall be his possession"

The central axis is D., where the expectation of a curse is met with a blessing.

On either side of this central axis, and related to it, are limbs C-c. At first God is angry with Bilam for going; ultimately it is Balak who is angry with Bilam for obeying God and blessing. Bilam undergoes a complete transformation: having departed on his mission as someone motivated by greed, and perhaps also a desire to curse, he returns as a prophet who has been loyal to God's will.

The next limbs outward address the relations between Israel and Moav: at first there is Moav's real fear of Bnei Yisrael and their strength; the conclusion provides confirmation that Bnei Yisrael will indeed crush Moav, but this fate is postponed to the distant future. The outermost limbs concern the relations between Israel and Edom. It is with this subject that the journey opens, in *Parashat Chukat*, and Bilam comes back to the same subject at the end of his prophecies. Here the difference between the actual journey, with its ceremoniousness and caution, is sharply contrasted with what is destined to happen in the future: right now Edom is powerful and refuses Bnei Yisrael entry into its borders, but at a later time Bnei Yisrael will take possession of Edom.

The prophet is not led astray by what his eyes see: "Whose eyes are open." With his prophetic vision he is able to distinguish between that which is reflected by the actual reality – Moav's fears, and Israel's caution – and what will happen in the future. This seems to be the main contribution of Bilam's prophecies to *Sefer Bamidbar* and the main story of the

journey on the eastern side of the Jordan: the time has not yet come for a conquest of all the nations on that side of the Jordan, since Bnei Yisrael are not yet ready, but the day will come when "a star shall emerge from Yaakov and a scepter will rise up from Yisrael...."

Appendix – Appended Prophecies

The three brief final prophecies are not part of the main plot, as their description testifies: "When he looked upon Amalek he took up his discourse...." These prophecies arise for a separate reason, when Bilam observes other sights. These may have been at the same time, or later. In any event, they obviously share something in common with the prophecies about Moav and Edom: they are prophecies about what is going to happen to these nations. Three prophecies, contained in four verses, provide us with an overall prophetic view:

"When he looked upon Amalek he took up his discourse and said: Amalek is the first of the nations, but his end will be lost forever. And he looked upon the Keni and took up his discourse and said: Strong is your dwelling place; you put your nest in a rock. Nevertheless, Kayin shall be laid waste; to where shall Ashur carry you captive? And he took up his discourse and said: Woe; who shall live who does these things? And ships shall come from the coast of Kittim, and they shall afflict Ashur, and they shall afflict Ever, and he too shall be gone forever." (20-24)

The nations mentioned here are Amalek, Keni, Ashur, Ever, and Kittim (perhaps referring to the Greeks). The first, Amalek, comes as no surprise. Agag was mentioned already in the third prophecy; the Amalekite threat always hangs over Israel. Apparently, the prophecy about Amalek also comes to complete the description of the journey, since just before the encounter with Edom, Bnei Yisrael met Amalek, dwelling in the Negev, and waged war against them, as well as another two wars against them during the first and second years in the wilderness. This is the only nation with which Bnei Yisrael maintain an "open account." This was the first nation to wage war against Israel ("the first of the nations"). Therefore, the prophecy concerning Amalek follows immediately after Edom, thereby completing the flashback to Israel's journey: Amalek, too, is destined to be defeated by Bnei Yisrael.

The Keni are often mentioned alongside Amalek, since these two tribes dwelled in close proximity (see *Shemot* 17-18; I *Shemuel* 14-15).

Thereafter Bilam's prophecy moves forward to the even more distant future. After describing the fall of the kingdoms close to Israel – at Israel's hands, he completes the description of the new world order with a prophecy concerning the downfall of the kingdoms of Ashur and Ever ("ever" meaning "ever *ha-nahar*," i.e., the eastern side of the Jordan, perhaps also including Aram or Babylon and Persia)⁶ at the hands of the Kittim who are seafarers (perhaps referred to the Greeks, or the

⁶ To Ramban's view, "Ever" refers to Bnei Yisrael themselves, and this is a prophecy concerning the destruction of the Temple. This interpretation is not suited to the general atmosphere of Bilam's prophecies, which come to bless Israel.

Romans) (Rashi).⁷ Finally, the kingdoms of Greece and Rome will also be destroyed: "He, too, will be lost forever."

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⁷ This is apparently how Rashi understands the end of the prophecy: a mixing up of the nations. All that seems, for now, to be stable and certain, says Bilam, is destined to disappear and to change completely. Rashbam understands the prophecy as referring to the King Mashiach.