

## Balak and Bil'am

By Rav Amnon Bazak

### "Parashat Bil'am"

The *baraita* in [Bava Batra \(14b\)](#) discussing who wrote the books of the *Tanakh* includes a most surprising statement: "Moshe wrote his book and *parashat* [i.e., the episode of] Bil'am." Why is there any need for the *baraita* to note that Moshe wrote the story of Bil'am? After all, is this *parasha* not part of "his book"? This question led the Ritva (ad loc.) to conclude:

This would seem to support those who say that the reference here is not to the story of Bil'am that is written in the Torah – for that was written by the Holy One, blessed be He, along with the rest of the Torah – but rather to a separate *parasha* which he [Moshe] wrote, at greater length, and which they still possessed.

However, the simple understanding of the statement would seem to tend more to Rashi's view that the *baraita* is indeed referring to our *parasha*. According to Rashi, the reason that this is worthy of note is because Moshe recorded this episode "even though it was not needed by Moshe and his Torah and the record of his actions." We may perhaps add that the *baraita* comes to tell us that Moshe documented this episode even though he was not supposed to know anything about it; after all, the entire incident took place, according to a plain reading of the text, without *Am Yisrael's* knowledge.

All of this serves to amplify the question of what our *parasha* is supposed to teach us. Seemingly, the answer is given by the prophet [Mikha \(6:5\)](#):

My people – remember what Balak, king of Moav, devised, and what Bil'am son of Be'or answered him, from Shittim to Gilgal, in order that you may know God's righteous ways.

However, this answer fails to explain the great detail in which the episode is recorded, occupying an entire *parasha*. If all that the Torah meant to teach us here was God's kindness, the account could have been recorded far more concisely. Apparently, then, the details of the story are also significant.

In this *shiur*, we will address one central element of the *parasha*.

### Balak and Bil'am

Our *parasha* describes two people who sought to harm *Am Yisrael*. We will focus on the characteristic that they have in common – the stubbornness that prevents them from perceiving and acknowledging God's control of the world.

The *parasha* begins by introducing Balak, king of Moav, who fears that "this multitude [*Bnei Yisrael*] will lick up all that is around us, as the ox licks up the vegetation of the field" (22:4). Balak is fearful of *Am Yisrael* and enlists the aid of Bil'am son of Be'or, the magician. The reliance by kings on prophets and magicians is a familiar phenomenon in *Tanakh* and is usually an expression of the king's sense of control; he believes that the magician is able to affect a change in reality, and that in return for a reasonable sum, the magician will do whatever the king wants.<sup>[1]</sup>

Balak's stubbornness and his sense of control are apparent from the outset. When Balak's messengers reach Bil'am, he asks them to wait until he receives God's word. After

God prohibits him from accompanying them, he tells them: "Go off to your land, for God refuses to let me go with you" (22:13). However, Balak will not accept this negative response; he believes that he can maintain his control over the situation by offering a greater reward:

So Balak sent yet again princes – more numerous and more distinguished than they. And they came to Bil'am and said to him: "So says Balak, son of Tzippor: Do not withhold yourself from coming to me; for I will give you very great honor, and whatever you say to me I will do; come, therefore, I pray you – curse this people for me." (15-17)

Bil'am is just as stubborn, and even more so. While Balak might be excused for thinking that Bil'am is refusing merely as a negotiating tactic, with a view to extracting a better offer, Bil'am knows the truth, and has even said it openly to Balak's messengers:

Bil'am answered and said to Balak's servants, "Even if Balak would give me his house full of silver and gold, I cannot transgress the word of the Lord my God to do anything, small or great." (18)

Nevertheless, he tries his luck with the hope that God might change His mind, telling the messengers:

"And now – you, too, remain here tonight, I pray you, that I may know what more God will speak to me." (19)

At this point it becomes clear that both Balak and Bil'am need to learn that it is God Who controls the world, and that the powers given to mortals are meant solely to serve God's aims in the world. From here onwards, the *parasha* recounts how Balak and Bil'am came to learn this lesson – each in his own way.

## Balak

Before addressing the way in which the lesson was learned, let us point out the many parallels between the description of Balak's fears in our *parasha* and the description of Pharaoh and Egypt at the beginning of *Sefer Shemot*.

1. Both nations feared the sheer size of *Am Yisrael*. Pharaoh tells his people:

"Behold, the nation of *Bnei Yisrael* is more numerous and mightier than us." ([Shemot 1:9](#))

while our *parasha* records:

Moav was greatly afraid of the people, for they were numerous. (22:3)

"Behold, a nation has come out of Egypt; behold – they cover the face of the earth... for they are mightier than I." (22:5-6)

The responses prompted by these fears are likewise similar:

They felt dread on account of *Bnei Yisrael*. ([Shemot 1:12](#))

And Moav felt dread on account of *Bnei Yisrael*. ([Bamidbar 22:3](#))

2. In both instances, the possibility is raised that *Am Yisrael* might be caused to leave the country. Pharaoh regards this as a threat:

"And it shall be, if a war befalls us, that they will join themselves to our enemies, and fight against us, and go up from the land." ([Shemot 1:10](#))<sup>[2]</sup>

In our *parasha*, Balak expresses this as a hope:

"Perhaps I shall prevail, we shall smite them, and I will drive them out of the land." (22:6)

Each of these two kings tried to deal with *Bnei Yisrael* in a different way: Pharaoh tried killing and subjugation; Balak tried sorcery and magic. Both failed. As *Chazal* teach:

Pharaoh commanded – but God did not command accordingly; rather, "the more they afflicted them, the more they multiplied and grew" ([Shemot 1:12](#))... Balak and Bil'am tried to curse *Am Yisrael*, but God did not seek this." (*Tanchuma, Toldot, siman 5*).

Why does the Torah draw this parallel between Balak and Pharaoh?

The beginning of our *parasha* seems to place an emphasis on Balak's fundamental error. His claim concerning the Exodus from Egypt appears twice: first in his words to Bil'am:

"Behold, a nation has come out of Egypt. (22:5)

and then again when Bil'am repeats this to God:

"Balak, son of Tzippor, king of Moav, has sent to me. Behold, the nation that has come out of Egypt..." (ibid. 10-11)

Correspondingly, Bil'am later expresses twice the contrary claim – *Bnei Yisrael* did not “come out” of Egypt, but rather were brought out by God:

“God Who brought them/him out of Egypt, has strength like the wild-ox.” (23:22; 24:8)

The repeated articulation of this assertion shows that it stands at the center of Bil'am's speeches. Balak views the world from a secular perspective; he lacks a profound understanding that it was God Who brought *Bnei Yisrael* out of Egypt.

It is for this reason that the Torah draws a parallel between Balak and Pharaoh, the first king to declare:

“Who is the Lord, that I should obey Him?... I do not know the Lord, nor shall I let Israel go.” ([Shemot 5:2](#))

It is the same non-recognition of God that stands at the foundation of Balak's initiative. Had he drawn the right conclusions from the Exodus from Egypt, he would not have faced the humiliating reversal of his plan, which came to teach him the same lesson.

## Bil'am

Let us now turn our attention to Bil'am, and the way in which he came to learn his lesson – via his donkey.<sup>[3]</sup> Bil'am is faced with a situation that grows increasingly peculiar over three stages, but he is steadfast in his refusal to recognize the lesson that they come to teach him.

As the first stage, we are told:

The donkey saw the angel of God standing in the way, his sword drawn in his hand, and the donkey turned aside from the way and went into the field, and Bil'am struck the donkey, to turn her back onto the way. (22:23)

The fact that the donkey turns off the path for no apparent reason should cause Bil'am to question and investigate what is going on. However, he fails to address himself to the issue, instead striking the donkey in order to continue on his way.

The next scene is even stranger:

So the angel of God stood in a path of the vineyards, with a wall on this side and a wall on that side. And when the donkey saw the angel of God, it pressed into the wall, and crushed Bil'am's food against the wall, and he struck her again. (24-25)

There is no logical reason for the donkey to press itself against the wall, but Bil'am pays no attention; rather, he continues to strike the donkey. He is not prepared to accept the fact that God represents absolute truth that does not change. The donkey's behavior is meant to alert him to his own blindness and his stubborn tendency to view anything that is out of the ordinary as pure coincidence. At the third stage, the donkey's behavior is strangest of all, yet Bil'am remains steadfast:

So the angel of God went further and stood in a narrow place, where there was no room to turn right or left. And when the donkey saw the angel of God, it lay down under Bil'am. And Bil'am's anger burned, and he struck the donkey with a stick. (26-27)

After three clear hints leave Bil'am unmoved, more obvious measures become necessary. In order to bring Bil'am – without a direct Divine revelation – from his initial position to the realization that perhaps there is some connection between the donkey's behavior and his own decision to acquiesce to Balak, God brings about a most unique occurrence:

God opened the donkey's mouth, and it said to Bil'am, “What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?” (28)

Even a donkey, it seems, is capable of understanding that an unusual event that repeats itself three times should lead one to draw some sort of conclusion.<sup>[4]</sup> But Bil'am refuses to do so. He is so caught up in his own view that he expresses not the slightest surprise at the fact that his donkey is speaking to him; he answers right back, as though addressing a person who had angered him:

Bil'am said to the donkey, “Because you have mocked me, if only there were a sword in my hand, I would now kill you.” (29)

The donkey is not intimidated, but seeks to persuade Bil'am that he should reach the obvious conclusion:

The donkey said to Bil'am, “Am I not your donkey, upon which you have ridden your whole life, until this day? Have I ever done such a thing to you?...” (30)

To this, at least, Bil'am answers truthfully:

And he said: “No.”

However, he still refuses to consider what this implies. At this point, there God must appear to Bil'am and make the situation clear to him:

So God opened Bil'am's eyes and he saw the angel of God standing in the way, with his sword drawn in his hand; and he bowed and fell on his face. And the angel of God said to him, “Why have you struck your donkey these three times? Behold, I set out to distract you, for your path is perverse before me. And the donkey saw me, and turned aside from me these three times; had

she not turned aside from me, I would now have killed you, and left her alive.” (31-33)

Only now does Bil'am grasp the reality:

Bil'am said to the angel of God, “I have sinned, for I did not know that you were standing before me, in the path; and now, if it is evil in your eyes, I shall turn back.” (34)

However, his realization seems to have come too late. God has already decided to teach him his lesson in a stronger way:

But the angel of God said to Bil'am, “Go with the men, but only that which I speak to you – that is what you shall speak.” So Bil'am went with the princes of Balak.” (35)

When Bil'am reaches Balak, his old stubbornness makes a comeback. At first, he tries quite simply to receive a prophecy from God that will bring a curse upon *Am Yisrael*. When this fails, he tries a second time, but only after the third failed attempt to do we read:

When Bil'am saw that it pleased God to bless Israel, he did not go – as he had done on previous occasions [lit. “from one time to the next”] to seek enchantments, but rather set his face towards the desert.” (24:1)<sup>[5]</sup>

We must therefore deduce that the second time he moved, Bil'am still hoped that God might change His decision and curse Israel; only after the third attempt – as a function of the lesson he had learned from the episode of the donkey – did he understand that God was not going to change His mind, as Bil'am himself declares, at the end of his second prophecy:

“God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should change His mind. Has He said – and shall He not perform it? Has He spoken, and shall He not fulfill? Behold, I have been appropriated to bless, and He has blessed; I cannot turn it back.” (23:19-20)

Thus, Bil'am has managed to progress: while on his way to Balak, he was unable to discern an unusual phenomenon even when it repeated itself three times; now, he understands the message the second time.<sup>[6]</sup>

## Balak

Let us now return to Balak. It seems that he, too, is characterized by stubbornness, and he tries again and again to cause Bil'am to curse *Am Yisrael*. After the first failure, Balak tries a change of location, so that Bil'am will see only a part of the nation:

“Come, I pray you, with me, to a different place, from whence you might see them – but you will see only their periphery, you will not see them all – and curse them for me from there.” (23:13)

Even when this strategy ends in the same debacle, Balak does not give up. Although his confidence is shaken, he believes that his aim may still be achieved:

“Come, I pray you; I shall take you to a different place; perhaps it will please God that you curse them for me from there.” (27)

By this stage, as noted, Bil'am already understands the message, but Balak – who does not have the previous experience with the donkey – still wants to believe that perhaps everything that has obstructed his plan until now has had no real reason, and that it has not yet been proven that God does not wish to curse Israel.

However, after the third attempt, even Balak gives up:

Balak's anger was kindled against Bil'am, and he clapped his hands together, and Balak said to Bil'am, “I called you to curse my enemies, but behold – you have thoroughly blessed them these three times.” (24:10)

We may therefore say that Balak is one level higher than Bil'am, for Bil'am failed to draw the proper conclusions from the episode of the donkey even after three times (indeed, the angel chides him, “Why have you struck your donkey these three times?”), while after three failures, Balak realizes that his cause is lost.

Ultimately, *Parashat Balak* is the story of two stubborn individuals who tried to evade and ignore the Divine message that was presented to them over and over again. This would seem to be one of the main messages in Moshe's record of *Parashat Bil'am*.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

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<sup>[5]</sup> An example is the story of Na'aman, who is stricken with *tzara'at* (*Melakhim II* 5). The king of Aram believes the prophet Elisha to be a magician, and he appeals to the king of Israel to see to it that Na'aman, the commander of his army, is healed – out of his clear conviction that Elisha is subservient to the king. The events as they transpire show the king of Aram and the commander of his army that Elisha's powers represent God, and it is therefore the king

who is subservient to the prophet, rather than the other way around.

- [2] The translation here reflects the view of Ibn Ezra and Rashbam, who understand the words "*ve-ala min ha-aretz*" as referring to *Bnei Yisrael*. Rashi, adopting *Chazal's* interpretation, maintains that Pharaoh is alluding to the possibility that the Egyptians themselves may be forced out of the land: "Like a person who curses himself, but projects his curse onto others. In effect, what he means is, 'And we shall go up from the land' – and they will inherit it."
- [3] We shall not address here the famous question of why God became so angry with Bila'm – "And God's anger turned because he was going, and an angel of God stood in his way, as an adversary" (22:22), after God had told him explicitly, "If the men have come to call you, arise and go with them – yet only the word that I speak to you shall you do" (22:20). My esteemed teacher, R. Dr. Mordekhai Sabato, provides a beautiful explanation in his [article](#) on *Parashat Balak*.
- [4] The motif of events that repeat themselves three times (or twice) as an expression of Divine intervention, appears repeatedly in *Tanakh*. To cite two examples: First, God's first revelation to Shemuel: "And God called again to Shemuel for the third time, and he arose and he went to Eli, and he said, 'Here I am, for you called me' – and Eli understood that it was God Who had called to the boy" (*Shemuel I* 3:8). Second, after Eliyahu causes a fire from the heavens to consume the officers of fifty dispatched by Achazia in order to arrest him, the third officer pleads for his life: "Behold, a fire descended from heaven and consumed the first two officers of fifty, and their fifty men; let my life now be precious in your eyes" (*Melakhim II* 1:14).
- [5] Rashbam explains the verse as follows: "He did not go as he had done from one time to the next, seeking enchantments' – he no longer moved from place to place, hoping to be able to curse them, but rather, from now on, meant to bless them wholeheartedly."
- [6] Elsewhere in *Tanakh*, we find people drawing conclusions from unusual events that happen twice. We find another example in Yosef's interpretation of Pharaoh's dreams: "And concerning the dream coming twice to Pharaoh – [it is] because the matter has been decided upon by God, and God will hasten to do it" ([Bereishit 41:32](#)).