

MESHECH CHOCHMAH

Parshas Balak

What God has Wrought

אל מוציאתם ממצרים... כי לא נחש ביעקב ולא קסם בישראל פעת יאמר ליעקב ולישראל מה פועל אל. הן עם כלביא יקום

It is God Who brought them out of Egypt... For there is no divination in Yaakov and no sorcery in Israel, as now it can be aid to Yaakov and to Yisrael what God has wrought. Behold, the people arise like a lion cub (23:22-24)

Needless to say, there are many approaches among the mefarshim to the berachos of Bilaam. The Meshech Chochmah's approach to our pesukim is based on the idea that the letter lamed at the beginning of a word, while generally translated as "to", can also mean "concerning". For example, in the beginning of Parshas Beshalach,¹ when the pasuk says, "וַיֹּאמֶר פַּרְעֹה לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל נִבְכָּיִם הֵם בְּאֶרֶץ", it means, "Pharaoh will say concerning the Bnei Yisrael, 'they are confused in the land'".

Here, too, Bilaam surveys the Bnei Yisrael, noting that not too long ago, they were a nation of slaves with no capability of asserting any control over their national existence. Now, from a state of national repose, they have risen up like a lion cub, conquering the formidable armies of Sichon and Og who opposed their entry into the land of Canaan and are poised to do likewise to any other nation in the land itself who opposes them. "פַּעַת", at a time such as this, all one can say "לְיַעֲקֹב וְלִישְׂרָאֵל", concerning Yaakov and Yisrael is to exclaim "מַה פֶּעַל אֵל", see what God has wrought in creating such a nation, as if to say, "ברוך שככה לו בעולמו – Blessed is He Who has such as these in His world!" Such a stunning phenomenon is manifestly not the product of any divination of sorcery; rather, it is an expression of the supervision of "God Who took them out of Egypt," and continues to guide their destiny.

These beautiful words of the Meshech Chochmah cannot fail to resonate in light of the events of the last century. May Hashem continue to guide and strengthen His people until even the Bilaam's of the world will find themselves overwhelmed by "what God has wrought," able only to respond by exclaiming: "Blessed is He Who has such as these in His world!"

¹ Shemos 14:3.

Pure Intentions

וַיֵּרָא פִּינְחָס בֶּן אֱלֶעָזָר בֶּן אַהֲרֹן הַכֹּהֵן וַיִּקָּם מִתּוֹךְ הָעֵדָה וַיִּקַּח רֶמֶחַ בְּיָדוֹ

Pinchas son of Elazar son of Aharon the Kohen saw, and he arose from amidst the assembly and took a spear in his hand (25:7)

TAKING ACTION

It is interesting to contrast the episode of Baal Peor in this week's parsha with the earlier episode of the Chet Ha'egel. At the time of the Egel, Moshe's rallying call to dispense justice was answered by the entire tribe of Levi; while in our parsha, no such call nor response occurred, and only one person, Pinchas, took action.

The Meshech Chochmah explains. At this stage, the Leviim had already been appointed as the ones to perform the avodah in the Mishkan. As such, their motives in taking action against those who had strayed after Baal Peor would be suspect: Perhaps they would be acting out of self-interest, for the more people who worshipped Baal Peor, the less people would be coming to the Mishkan where they officiated. As long as it was not clear that their taking action was motivated purely by the desire to sanctify Hashem's Name, no such sanctification would take place. This is in contrast to the earlier episode of the Egel, when they had not yet been separated from the rest of the people to preside over the domain of avodah. Any action taken at that time was clearly discernible as being motivated by pure intentions, and hence Moshe called them to act.

WHEN DID PINCHAS BECOME A KOHEN?

It is for this reason that Pinchas alone took action at Baal Peor. According to the Gemara,² Pinchas only became a Kohen as a result of his act of killing Zimri in our parsha. The background to this is that initially, only Aharon and his sons were sanctified as Kohanim, together with all their descendants who would subsequently be born. Pinchas, who was already born at that time, did not belong to either category, and hence he "fell between the cracks" of the initial sanctification of the Kohanim.

As the only living descendant of Aharon who was not himself a Kohen, if there were any feeling of self-interest on Pinchas' part, it would be one of begrudging the other members of his family who had been sanctified, and perhaps secretly willing that their elevated status be nullified. This was certainly not an easy feeling to overcome, as the Midrash states:³ "Let a person die a hundred deaths rather than have one moment of jealousy!" For Pinchas to nonetheless take action protecting the Kehunah of which he alone had no part could only have been motivated by pure intentions; something to which Hashem Himself attests when He says "אשר קנא לאלהיו – He acted zealously on his God's behalf."

BUILDING THE BEIS HAMIKDASH

In this vein, the Meshech Chochmah proceeds to explain Hashem's words to David

2 Zevachim 101b.

3 Devarim Rabbah 9:9.

Hamelech regarding who would be the one to build the Beis Hamikdash:⁴

אָנִי לָקַחְתִּיךָ מִן הַנֶּגֶה מֵאַחַר הַצֹּאן לְהִיּוֹת נָגִיד עַל עַמִּי עַל יִשְׂרָאֵל... וְעָשִׂיתִי לְךָ שֵׁם גָּדוֹל כְּשֵׁם
הַגְּדֹלִים אֲשֶׁר בְּאֶרֶץ... וְהִקְיִמְתִּי אֶת זְרַעְךָ אַחֲרֶיךָ... וְהִכְיִנְתִּי אֶת מַמְלַכְתּוֹ. הוּא יִבְנֶה בַּיִת לְשֵׁמִי

I have taken you from the sheepfold, from following the flock, to become a ruler over My people, over Israel... and I gave you great renown, like the renown of the great men of the world... I will raise up your offspring after you... and I will make his kingdom firm. He will build a House for My Name.

The intent of this message was that since David's role was that of initiating and establishing his kingdom, he could not be the one to build the Beis Hamikdash; for to do so could be perceived as being motivated by a desire to further strengthen his monarchy. It would only be Shlomo, who inherited an established kingdom, from his father, who could then be free of such extraneous considerations and would be able to build the Beis Hamikdash purely for the sake of Heaven.

4 Shmuel II, 7:8-9, 12-13.