

DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

Parshas Balak

Balak's Message According to Bilaam – A Lesson in Listening

BACKGROUND

Our parsha begins by describing Balak's alarm at the approaching Jewish people and his message to Bilaam to come and curse them. This section of the parsha provides us with a fascinating insight into the way people hear things, for it records for us not only Balak's message to Bilaam, but Bilaam's subsequent "replaying" of that message to Hashem. Let us begin by taking a look at these two versions.

"LOST IN QUOTATION": BALAK'S COMMISSION AND BILAAM'S TRANSMISSION

Verses 5 and 6 of Chapter 22 present Balak's message to Bilaam, sent via emissaries, as follows:

הִנֵּה עַם יֵצֵא מִמִּצְרַיִם הִנֵּה כֶּסֶף אֶת עֵינֵי הָאֲרָץ וְהוּא יֵשֵׁב מִמּוֹלִי. וְעַתָּה לְכֵה נָא אֲרָרָה לִּי אֶת הָעָם הַזֶּה כִּי עֲצוּם הוּא מִמֶּנִּי אוּכַל נִכְּה בּוֹ וְאֶנְרִשְׁנּוּ מִן הָאֲרָץ.

Behold, a nation has come out from Egypt behold, it has covered the surface of the land and it has settled opposite me. And now, please come and source this people for me, for it is more powerful than I, perhaps [then] I will be able to strike it and drive it away from the land.

A few verses later,¹ Hashem comes to Bilaam and engages him in conversation, asking him who these emissaries are. Bilaam responds:

וַיֹּאמֶר בִּלְעָם אֶל הָאֱלֹקִים בְּלֶק בֶּן צֶפֶר מִלֶּךְ מוֹאָב שְׁלַח אֵלַי. הִנֵּה הָעָם הַיֵּצֵא מִמִּצְרַיִם וַיְכַסּוּ אֶת עֵינֵי הָאֲרָץ עַתָּה לְכֵה קְבֵה לִי אֶתֹ אוּכַל לְהִלָּחֵם בּוֹ וְגִרְשְׁתִּיו

Bilaam said to God, "Balak son of Tzippor, king of Moav, sent to me: 'Behold, the people coming out of Egypt has covered the surface of the land. Now go and curse it for me; perhaps I will be able to wage war against it and drive it away.'"

RASHI: TWO DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE VERSIONS

At a glance, this is basically a verbatim quote from Balak. However, that is why verses of the Torah should be learned at a glance. When we look closer, we will see that Bilaam has actually made a number

¹ 22:10-11.

of changes from the original version, two of which are pointed out by Rashi:

1. “Arah” vs. “Kavah”: The first difference is in the term used to denote the proposed curse: Balak asked Bilaam “אָרַח לִי”, while Bilaam quoted him as saying “קָבַח לִי”. Rashi explains that קבחה is actually a more damaging form of curse than ארה.
2. “And I will drive it away” — From Where? Balak stated his goal regarding the Bnei Yisrael as “וְאֶגְרָשְׁנוּ מִן הָאָרֶץ” – I will drive it [the nation] away from the land,” while Bilaam cited him as saying simply “וְגִרְשְׁתִּירָ – I will drive it away.” Rashi explains that the former phrase denotes a desire to get rid of them from their current position opposite me, while the latter phrase denotes removing them from the face of the earth.

What is behind these changes? Why did Bilaam not present Balak’s words exactly as stated? Rashi explains that Bilaam actually hated the Jewish people more than Balak, so that whereas Balak was only looking for a lower-level curse to remove them from their current threatening location, Bilaam was seeking to administer a much more powerful curse that would allow Balak to completely wipe them out. It turns out that in turning to Bilaam, Balak found someone who was not only more capable of cursing the people, but also significantly more desirous of doing so!

FURTHER DIFFERENCES

The Lubavitcher Rebbe² points out that there are other difference between the two versions that can likewise be explained by Rashi’s comment:

1. “Am” vs. “Ha’Am”: Balak’s message refers to the people as “עַם – a people,” while Bilaam’s version uses the term “הָעַם – the people.” The difference in connotation is whereas Balak is de-emphasizing the fact that they are a particular people, focusing only on the threat they pose to him – whomever they may be. By contrast, Bilaam uses the term “the people.” it is their identity as the Jewish people particularly that is the cause for his desire to curse them.
2. “Opposite me”: Balak mentions that the people have settled opposite me, implying that it is their location which is the basis of his request to curse and disable them. Additionally Rashi himself notes that the word “מִמְּלִי” is written without the letter vav, which associates it with the word “to cut down,” as we say in Hallel, “כִּי אֶמְלֵם – for I will cut them down.”³ All of this further accentuates that he is acting in response to a perceived threat. Bilaam, however, neglects to mention this aspect, indicating that he would like to curse them even if they were not a threat.

ACTIVE LISTENING

The most fascinating point throughout all of this is that Hashem did not ask Bilaam what *he* would like to do; He asked him what Balak wanted him to do! Why did Bilaam then start injecting his own personal feelings on the matter, instead of simply quoting Balak’s message?

The answer is, Bilaam thought he *was* quoting Balak’s message! His acrimonious feelings toward the Jewish people were so firmly embedded they became part of the “receiving apparatus” with which he heard Balak. Bilaam knows that he cannot lie when he is talking to Hashem, yet as far he is concerned, this is exactly what Balak said. It is truly amazing to see from here how much the listener can project from within onto something he hears someone else say.

2 *Likutei Sichos* 5751.

3 Tehillim 118:11.

What is further fascinating is the irony that accompanies this entire situation. Bilaam is well aware, and states this plainly to Balak's emissaries, that without Hashem's permission he will be unable to accept Balak's request. Why he thought would agree to let him curse the Jewish people is, of course, a mystery; however, by additionally substituting his own version on the request in place of the original one he was only serving to make it infinitely more unlikely that the request would be granted. Instead of asking for permission to allow Balak to defend himself, as he saw it, he was asking – in Balak's name – for permission to curse the people regardless of any threat and with absolute finality. However, as per the above, all of this was lost on Bilaam, who could surely swear that all he was doing was delivering a verbatim quote from Balak.

LEARNING PARSHAS BALAK

In seeking to determine where this quality came from, we need look no further than the negative character traits that the Mishnah in Pirkei Avos⁴ associates with Bilaam. Firstly, he was possessed of “עין רעה – negative vision.” This found ample expression in his pathological hatred of the Jewish people, which led him to replay Balak's request in his own hate-filled words without even examining if there were any differences between them. Additionally, the Mishnah identifies him with the trait of “רוח גבוהה – A haughty spirit.” Possessed of supreme arrogance, Bilaam was sure that his views on things were definitively correct, to the extent that he naturally assumed that anyone who spoke to him in any subject held the same views as him – in his opinion, the only views worth having.

Ultimately, the Torah does not present the story of Bilaam for our entertainment, nor for our self-glorification. If the sages identify his core negative qualities, it is with a view to ensuring that we note their destructive capacity and take care not to emulate them or, as the Mishnah puts it, become his “students”. For Bilaam possessed to a chronic and extreme degree can be found in regular people at least to an active and influential degree. Making sure that we take note of Bilaam's negative traits and endeavor not to be associated with them to *any* degree is an important and integral part of the study of Parshas Balak.

4 5:19.