

# PARSHAS BALAK

תשפ"ב

Parshas Bolok is a very confusing parsha. The Torah describes certain events, but it also goes into depth about certain personalities because the Torah wants to teach us very important lessons about these people. Parshas Bolok is a study in the contrast between Bilaam and Moshe Rabbeinu. The verse says there will never be a novi like Moshe among the Jewish People. Chazal were bothered: why only among the Jewish people? Why not among the whole of humanity? They give a shocking answer. Moshe was indeed only unique among the Jewish People. But there was a novi on the level of Moshe among the nations. Who was that? Bilaam!

Hashem gives every human being various traits and predispositions. The gemara in Niddah says, Hashem takes every child that is about to be born and bestows it with its unique combination of talents and abilities. The verse at the beginning of Sefer Yirmiyahu says even before Yirmiyahu was born, Hashem already prepared him to be a novi to send His message to the nations. It doesn't mean that Yirmiyahu didn't have to invest a tremendous amount of effort and make difficult choices with his bechirah to become a novi. It means Hashem gave Yirmiyahu this potential that he needs to actualize over his lifetime.

Similarly, Moshe Rabbeinu had to develop his tremendous potential over the course of 80 years in order to become the one Hashem chose to receive the Torah and lead Klal Yisroel. At the same time, Hashem gave equivalent if not more kochos hanefesh to Bilaam than to Moshe. In this parsha we find out exactly what Bilaam decided to do with those tremendous talents and gifts.

The parsha starts with Bolok the King of Moav sending a message to Bilaam telling him about this nation that left Egypt and is now settled at his borders. Please come and curse this nation to make them leave the region. Bolok speaks very casually about them. He doesn't name this nation, even though all of Canaan and all the world knew full well which nation left Egypt. Klal Yisroel struck abject terror in the hearts of the Canaanites because they heard of all the miracles and victories that this nation experienced in Egypt and in the desert.

How can Bilaam's curses have any power at all?

Hashem created a parallel system of laws. He runs the physical world normally within physical law. He easily can – and does – manipulate events and people while still not breaking any laws of nature. There are rare occasions where Hashem breaks the laws of nature for a limited time and for a specific purpose. Then things go back to their preferred functioning within physical laws.

The same is true in a parallel with the spiritual world. There are spiritual rules by which the forces of ruchniyus – kedushoh and tumoh – operate and impact this world.

A great scientist can understand and manipulate the laws of physics in order to gain certain advantages and reach certain outcomes. So too Bilaam understood the spiritual laws of ruchniyus that Hashem set up and learned how to manipulate them with kollos at just the right times to get the results he desired. This was how Bilaam used his tremendous gifts of nevuah.

The elders of Moav and Midian came to bring Bilaam to Bolok to curse Klal Yisroel. Bilaam told them to wait overnight and Hashem will talk to him in a dream and tell him what to do. Here we see the first difference between Bilaam and Moshe. Moshe didn't communicate with Hashem in a dream. He spoke to Hashem face to face – fully conscious.

Hashem tells Bilaam not to go with these people, and don't even bother to curse them here where you are. You can't manipulate any spiritual force to curse Klal Yisroel. They are blessed by Me directly. They don't need your blessings or your curses.

Bilaam woke up the next morning and told the emissaries only half the truth. He said Hashem will not let me come with *you*. He leaves out the part where Hashem told him he cannot curse Klal Yisroel under any circumstances. Bilaam lets them think he is holding out for better terms, and Bolok sent higher level dignitaries to bring more honor to Bilaam. But Bilaam says they are mistaken. The only reason he would go is for the money – more than for the honor. He told the second set of emissaries to wait another night to see if he can change Hashem's mind. Hashem told Bilaam he can go if he wants. But, he must realize he cannot say anything that Hashem doesn't approve of.

Great! Bilaam gets up early in the morning with zest to go curse Klal Yisroel – and it's not just for the money. Rashi says there is another motivation at work here. He hates Klal Yisroel on a personal level. Why? What did they do to him? Why doesn't he appreciate all the great spiritual achievements that Klal Yisroel attained? The answer is that this is exactly why Bilaam hates Klal Yisroel. They are showing Bilaam what kind of greatness human beings can achieve when they use their spiritual talents and abilities for the good. With all the enormous potential given to Bilaam – a potential equal to Moshe Rabbeinu! – he wound up a baal taivoh and devoid of any redeeming spiritual qualities. He simply used his spiritual insights to serve his greed. So he resented Klal Yisroel's very existence which stands as a powerful rebuke to his entire wasted life.

Bilaam knows if he will end up just giving Klal Yisroel blessings, he won't receive a penny. So why is he bothering to go at all? Bilaam is so self-confident that he is convinced he can manipulate Hashem Himself into agreeing to let him curse Klal Yisroel.

Then we have the strange story of Bilaam's talking donkey. What is so special about this donkey that Bilaam has an entire conversation with him? Chazal tell us that Bilaam is such a low-level human being that he uses this donkey for z'nus. Hashem did an unbelievable miracle and opened the mouth of the donkey to speak to Bilaam. The angel of Hashem is standing right next to him the entire time to make sure Bilaam says exactly what Hashem instructs.

Bolok welcomes Bilaam and takes him to a place where he can see the fringe elements of Klal Yisroel. He is trying to emphasize the problematic and weaker members. Maybe Hashem will take notice of them and allow me to curse them? Hashem comes to Bilaam and tells him that all his ploys and tactics will not achieve anything. Bilaam is humiliated when he is forced to admit openly to Bolok that he is a complete puppet in Hashem's hands.

Bilaam exclaims that he wants to die like the tzaddikim. This means that he doesn't want to put in the effort of living like the tzaddikim! This is another contrast with Moshe Rabbeinu. Moshe devoted all his tremendous gifts and abilities into making himself the most perfect human being – like a maloch – an Ish Ho-Elokim. But Bilaam isn't willing to put in the effort. He follows his taivos and whims and can't be bothered to apply himself to maximize his great potential.

Bolok takes him to yet another place to view part of Klal Yisroel from a different negative angle. Bilaam responds that Hashem looks at Klal Yisroel as a totality. Klal Yisroel has tremendous power as a group.

When we confront Hashem in tefillah as a minyan, which represents the totality of Klal Yisroel, we are guaranteed that our tefillos will be accepted. Hashem doesn't see any shortcomings when looking at the totality.

Bilaam proclaims that the Shechinah dwells with Klal Yisroel. There is no avodo zoro among them. The special level of Klal Yisroel comes from the fact that they do not try to manipulate spiritual forces to get what they want. They wake up every morning and perform the mitzvos of the morning with enthusiasm because they are connected to Hashem directly. That is their inherent nature and it conquers all their shortcomings. They don't need to use any alternative channels in shomayim or engage in any avodo zoro.

Why do we say kriyas shema before we go to sleep? To repel mazikim. Why is a talmid chochom exempt from saying kriyas shema? How is he safe from mazikim? The Meiri explains that when the average person goes to sleep, his mind is usually preoccupied with all kinds of negative non-spiritual thoughts. These are mazikim. He needs to say kriyas shema to refocus his mind to ruchniyus before he goes to sleep. But a talmid chochom is naturally thinking about the Torah he was learning that day. He doesn't need to refocus his mind on ruchniyus before he falls asleep because that is where his mind already is! He doesn't have to worry about any bad thoughts in his mind.

Klal Yisroel wake up with enthusiasm to do mitzvos and they go to bed with Hashem and Torah on their minds – they are protected from any weakness that can be exploited by Bilaam.

Now Bilaam explains that there are two secret powers of Klal Yisroel: 1) tznius – which Bilaam will try to break down before he leaves Moav, 2) the power of the Torah which can purify a person. The Rambam explains there is tumas haguf which is removed by immersing in a mikvah. There is tumas hanefesh – bad thoughts, attitudes, beliefs etc. There is a mikvah for this tumoh – immersing your mind in the pure daas of Torah. But it doesn't happen automatically. Many people learn Torah and they remain low-level people. The Rambam says you need to want the Torah to change you and make you a different person. You need a total immersion – total contact of Torah with all aspects of your personality will transform you.

In the end of the parsha we have the incident with 24,000 Jews who defiled themselves with the Bnos Moav. Where did this strategy come from? Chazal tell us that Bilaam told Bolok that he is giving up and going home. After trying to curse Klal Yisroel three times and ending up blessing them three times, Bilaam realizes no-one can destroy Klal Yisroel unless Klal Yisroel destroy themselves first. Hashem hates znus and the only way to make Klal Yisroel vulnerable to destruction is to get them involved in znus.

Bolok thought his secret weapon was Bilaam's power to curse. In the end, his secret weapon was 24,000 pretty girls whom he enlisted to seduce Klal Yisroel. They used the power of the yetzer for znus which takes over men's minds. They got Klal Yisroel to justify doing the most nonsensical thing – worshiping the avodo zoro of Baal Peor. This was the most disgusting form of avodo zoro we know about.

Pinchos came and stopped it with his act of kana'us.

Moshe Rabbeinu has been leading this nation for 40 years in the desert with overwhelming miracles on a daily basis. These people are on a high spiritual level. They achieved a level of nevuah. Moshe was

punished with not entering Eretz Yisroel. The Rambam in Shemoneh Perakim writes that it was because he addressed Klal Yisroel in a derogatory way when he hit the rock to get water. But despite this great level Klal Yisroel were on, and despite the fact that less than 4% of Klal Yisroel succumbed to the temptation of znus, it was enough to endanger the existence of the entire Jewish People.

The Rambam writes that a person is susceptible to thoughts of znus when his mind is empty – not preoccupied with Torah. Bilaam realized that their tznius and connection to Torah makes Klal Yisroel invincible. Let us find a way to distract them and get their minds away from their preoccupation with Torah and then we can destroy them with znus.

The Netziv resolves a well-known contradiction. One gemara says the churban bayis rishon was brought about by the three severe aveiros of avodo zoro, murder, and znus. Another gemara says the churban came because they were guilty of bitul Torah. Which sin was really responsible? The Netziv answers that the power of Torah is so great that even with the severe aveiros of avodo zoro, etc., one can be protected from any punishment through his Torah. Neglecting Torah makes you open to getting the punishments you deserve for other aveiros. But it goes deeper than that. If one's mind would be preoccupied in Torah, then one wouldn't be tempted to commit these sins in the first place. It is only when a Jew is not immersed in Torah that his mind can wander and be led to do all kinds of horrible aveiros.

Rashi says in Parshas Bechukosai that when Klal Yisroel are toiling in Torah, it brings all the blessings in the world – you are a superior human being. What sets in motion the entire set of klollos is that you aren't preoccupied in Torah. Without Torah, you don't rise above the ordinary human weaknesses that can ruin you. This is the secret Bilaam discovered and he exploited it to the point where Klal Yisroel almost destroyed themselves with znus because they were distracted from their immersion in Torah.

Our entire western world today is preoccupied with one thing – znus. This makes life very difficult for us as frum Jews. They want to live a hefker life of znus with no consequences. They demand to have a right to abort their unborn children because the yetzer of znus justifies anything and everything – even murder. Chazal taught us how to deal with this – be preoccupied with Torah. But not only that. You need to want the Torah to change you and purify you.

In the world we live in, one of the biggest temptations we have is znus. In this parsha, we see that from the mistake of just 4% of Klal Yisroel, a tremendous danger was placed on the entire community. The problem with technology and the internet today isn't that it only destroys the individual – it is much more than that. It breaks down the kedushoh and taharoh of the entire community.

The protection of Klal Yisroel is tznius and Torah. Without them, all kinds of destructive thoughts and behaviors can take root and destroy our society.

There is a final confrontation between Moshe Rabbeinu and Bilaam. Hashem endowed both of them with tremendous gifts and talents. One of them used his tremendous potential to achieve unbelievable greatness in Torah and kedushoh. The other one sank to the depths of tumoh. Finally in the end, Chazal tell us Moshe killed Bilaam. The Torah and Chazal tell us these stories in order to guide us and show us how we should live our own lives.