

# PARSHAS BALAK

תשפ"א

Bolok was not a simple person. Chazal tell us that his descendant was Rus. In the zechus of all the korbonos he offered, he merited to have Rus as his offspring. His grandson Eglon, was a person who showed tremendous respect for the Shem Hashem. He rose from his seat when he heard it uttered by the shofet. On the other hand, he was killed for his wickedness. These are complex human beings.

Bilaam was also a very complex human being.

The Mishna in Sanhedrin says every human being is an entire world to himself. If you look at Planet Earth, there are all different climates and seasons, there is day and night, all of it happening simultaneously in different parts of the globe. People are similar. They have all different kinds of temperaments and middos working within them – all at the same time. We are very complex.

Who is Bilaam? The posuk in V'zos Habrochah extols Moshe Rabbeinu as the greatest novi Klal Yisroel will ever have. But why does the verse limit his unsurpassed greatness to within Klal Yisroel? Why not the whole world? Chazal answer that in the non-Jewish world, Bilaam was just as great a novi as Moshe who spoke with Hashem face-to-face.

Chazal are telling us there are two individuals who start on similar paths – Moshe and Bilaam.

Hashem endowed Moshe with tremendous gifts and put him through great tests. He was the adopted son of Pharaoh's daughter. Yet, somehow he knew he was a Jew and strongly identified with Klal Yisroel. Despite possessing tremendous talents and gifts, and being brought up in the royal palace of the most advanced culture and technological power in the ancient world, young Moshe was not impressed in the slightest. He saw how his people were persecuted by this evil nation and decided to risk his life to help them. With all those incredible powers Hashem blessed him with, Moshe worked on himself and built himself until he became Moshe Rabbeinu.

At the very same time, Hashem bestowed tremendous talents and gifts to another person – Bilaam – and he chose to use those gifts in the opposite direction. He became Bilaam HoRosh. He was capable of understanding the truth, but refused to follow it.

The emissaries of Bolok first came to Bilaam to proposition him to curse Klal Yisroel. He first checked if Hashem approved. The verse says 'Elokim' came to Bilaam and instructed him not to go with them to curse Klal Yisroel. So Bilaam tells them what Hashem said and turns them down. Bolok gets the message and sends more dignified emissaries to give Bilaam greater honor. But Bilaam really wants money. He tells them he will check with Hashem again.

According to Rashi, Hashem told Bilaam that if you think you can get money from Bolok, go ahead and follow them. But you will not be able to do anything contrary to what I want. This time, Bilaam did not tell the dignitaries what Hashem said to him. He just went.

Bilaam was out to make his fortune. But, his own donkey saved him from Hashem's anger by evading the malochim Hashem sends. Bilaam doesn't realize what is happening and he strikes his donkey. Hashem makes an amazing miracle and gives the donkey the ability to speak.

The Rishonim were very bothered. Why is Hashem doing such an unusual miracle with such a small audience? This incredible event was just for Bilaam's sake! Bilaam gets humiliated by his own donkey in front of Bolok's dignitaries because the donkey saw what Bilaam

couldn't see.

In the end, the maloch then tells Bilaam to continue going with Bolok's emissaries, but you will say only what I tell you. Hashem is no longer dealing with Bilaam. He is using a maloch.

Bilaam was very proud of his prophetic abilities. But, Hashem basically used Bilaam as a puppet to say the words that Hashem was putting in his mouth. He told Bolok that you don't appreciate the greatness of the people you are trying to curse. They have tremendous merits from their Ovos and Imahos. They are special – you cannot treat them like any other nation.

Bilaam claimed to know "daas Elyon" but in reality, he had one talent – he knew the exact moment in the day when his curse would be effective. He was trying to manipulate this special knowledge and power for his personal enrichment.

Chazal asked: if Bilaam was so interested in obtaining wealth and honor, why was he riding a mere donkey and not a higher status animal like a horse? Chazal explained that he needed this donkey to come along on this trip to satisfy his taavoh for z'nus with his donkey. Hashem gave him all the gifts he gave Moshe Rabbeinu – plus! But he was a human being and he let his life become dominated by z'nus. He used all his powers to figure out the exact moment which he could manipulate Hashem and curse Klal Yisroel in order to make his fortune. He has unbelievable talents and abilities. But he squandered them because he couldn't get control of his taavos.

Bilaam knew the truth. He knew Hashem is all-powerful and all-knowing. But his taavos twisted his mind and he somehow convinced himself that he can trick Hashem into letting him curse Klal Yisroel. In a moment of honesty, Bilaam declared that although he wants to live the life of a baal taavoh, he still wants to enjoy the afterlife of the tzaddikim.

He knew Klal Yisroel are destined for a great future. He knew all the non-Jewish empires will rise and eventually fall and Moshiach will finally come and dominate the world for the rest of human history. Throughout history, different nations have ruled the world for a time – Greece, Rome, Persia, England. Eventually their vast empire collapsed. They shrank and became just another country on the globe today. In the end, Klal Yisroel will rise and will never fall.

The wicked live their lives for the short-term. Tzaddikim live their lives for the long-term. This is the essential difference between following the yetzer horo and following the yetzer tov.

So Bilaam thinks he can manipulate Hashem. He is painfully aware that his entire life is being manipulated by his taavos. He is using all these talents to get the money and prestige he is seeking, trying to find the weakness of Klal Yisroel that he can exploit. But he is stopped cold. He sees the modesty of Klal Yisroel in stark contrast to his own lack of control in this area and is incapable of cursing them. He compares the tents of Torah to the purifying waters of a flowing stream. Just like the stream purifies, the Torah also purifies those who immerse themselves in it.

What is the connection between these two blessings? Bilaam realizes where his path departed sharply from Moshe Rabbeinu's path. They started out with the same talents and abilities. But Bilaam's mind is constantly preoccupied by his taavos and he neglected to build himself like Moshe Rabbeinu did. Klal Yisroel are human beings like all other

human beings. But if you are immersed in Torah, you can avoid sinking into the void of taavoh.

Bilaam can't succeed in cursing Klal Yisroel. Bolok is threatening that Bilaam will have to leave empty-handed – no money and no honor. But Bilaam isn't about to just walk away. A baal taavoh doesn't give up just because his plans are frustrated by Hashem. So he has a final piece of advice for Bolok. Hashem hates zhus. While Klal Yisroel act modestly and are immersed in Torah, no-one can touch them. But if you can get Klal Yisroel to stumble in arayos and get them to give up their tzniyus and distract them from their connection to Torah, you can destroy them.

This is what precipitated the incident with the Bnos Moav and Midian, with Zimri and Pinchos. Hashem instructed Klal Yisroel to wage war against Midian. If someone is threatening your life, you may stop it pre-emptively by killing them first. But this is difficult to understand. Did Moav or Midian wage a war against Klal Yisroel? Did they kill any Jews? The answer is that Chazal understood that a spiritual threat to the ruchniyus of Klal Yisroel is worse than death. If someone is rodef our neshomos, you may kill him first. The Rambam learns from this Chazal that one may kill a missionary who is trying to convert Jews – because a spiritual rodef is as dangerous as a physical rodef.

The verses say that Bilaam was also killed in this war. What was Bilaam doing there? Rashi explains that Bilaam came to receive his reward for giving Moav and Midian the winning battle-plan to defeat Klal Yisroel. He came up with the idea of getting Klal Yisroel to stumble in zhus and caused 24,000 Jews to be killed. As a result of his greed, he was caught in Midian just as Klal Yisroel attacked, and he was killed by the sword.

The story of Bilaam is tragic. Unfortunately it is a familiar story among our own Jewish community. Hashem gave every Jew unbelievable kochos hanefesh. But we squander it. Chazal describe someone who passes by a gigantic, beautiful tree and he takes off a twig, a branch. Then someone else comes by and decided to cut it down to the roots. But they realize it runs too deep. We get our kochos hanefesh from the Ovos and Imahos and we get our basic identity from them. We still draw our tremendous ruchniyus power from them till today.

This is what Bilaam realized and gave up trying to curse them. Bilaam realizes they have tzniyus and they can't be brought down to his level of obsession with zhus. Bilaam is constantly comparing himself to Klal Yisroel and Moshe Rabbeinu and sees he is sorely lacking. He is painfully aware of the potential which he had but wasted, and which Moshe Rabbeinu actualized. Why did Moshe become Moshe Rabbeinu and Klal Yisroel become Hashem's nation? Because they have their roots in the Ovos and Imahos and they are steadfast in their trait of tzniyus.

Where do we get this strength today? You look at the world nowadays and you can see very clearly that it is obsessed with zhus beyond description – in normal and abnormal ways. What gives Klal Yisroel the kochos hanefesh to keep their tzniyus? Their immersion in Torah which keeps them connected to Hashem. The only way to stop Klal Yisroel is to get them to stumble in arayos. Just bring out the 24,000 pretty girls

who will get them to leave the Torah and worship avodo zoro.

Just imagine, Klal Yisroel in the desert have been immersed in Torah for 40 years and now they are worshiping the most disgusting idol imaginable? It glorifies every animalistic aspect of the human being and puts it on a pedestal. How could Klal Yisroel do this? Chazal explain that the only way a Jew can indulge openly in arayos is by pretending they have a belief system which justifies it.

Pinchos comes in to stop this sharp decline of Klal Yisroel by performing a shocking act of zealotry, but only after 24,000 Jews fell. This was Bilaam's strategy. They will become like me and become obsessed by taavoh. They will fall. And as he is collecting his fee, he is caught in the cross-fire and is killed – it is an example of Hashem's middoh k'negged middoh.

We live in a crazy, upside-down world and Klal Yisroel are caught in a desperate struggle. Who are we? Moshe Rabbeinu or Bilaam ben Be'or? In the middle of Bilaam's long speech, Bilaam openly admits that Klal Yisroel get their spiritual power from their Ovos and by being connected to Torah. The Mishna in Kesuvos says you have one set of choices – either your mind is immersed in Torah or you will be constantly distracted by zhus.

Our entire world is obsessed with zhus. We have said many times that the dor hamabbul's society started to crumble with zhus and then finally collapsed with theft. So too in the United States, we see the moral barriers against crime and violence crumbling day by day. The police are vilified and the criminals are glorified. You can commit crimes in broad daylight in the major cities today and no-one will do anything. The justice system is simply non-existent. There is a clear progression from unbridled pursuit of zhus to unlimited freedom, to theft and violence. Society is breaking down just as it did in the dor hamabbul.

There is unlimited pursuit of taavoh and glorification of criminality. But we have to remember who we are. Bilaam knows he can't destroy Klal Yisroel when they come with the power of the Ovos. But only if they preserve their tzniyus and are connected to Torah. The battle-plan against us is to get the pretty girls out to distract Klal Yisroel and they will quickly abandon tzniyus and Torah.

This message speaks to our generation more than it has for hundreds of years. It is not only for those outside our community. It is for our own community as well.

Chazal say there are two schools – that of Avrohom Ovinu and Bilaam HoRosho. You are a disciple of either one or the other. You can't have both. You can't live a life like Bilaam and die like tzaddikim. We are in it for the long-term – not for the short-term like Bilaam.

One cannot allow one's self to get pulled into a world that has become totally poisoned and corrupt. Hashem recently shook up the world. He is telling us to separate ourselves from this world which is obsessed with zhus and taavoh. We have to strengthen our identity and choose the correct side. There is no in-between.