

# PARSHAS BALAK

תשפ"ו

Parshas Bolok centers around a very interesting individual – Bilaam ben Beor. Chazal tell us he was a novi with great potential – on par with Moshe Rabbeinu himself! Hashem endowed him with unbelievable kochos hanefesh. He could have been greater than Moshe Rabbeinu. What happened to him?

We see from the opening pesukim that Bolok sent for him using very distinguished envoys from Midian and Moav. But Bilaam said he isn't out for kovod. He wants money – a palace filled with gold and silver. That's what he really wants.

Bilaam understood quite well what kind of great nation Klal Yisroel was.

Hashem instructs Bilaam to go along with Bolok's plans, because Hashem is going to use this to bring brochos to Klal Yisroel. But then strangely, when Bilaam actually leaves, Hashem gets upset and sends a maloch to stop him! Why? Because Bilaam thinks he can fool Hashem and somehow manage to curse Klal Yisroel against Hashem's command. This is a common trap people fall into. They think they can fool Hashem and get around the hashgocho to do what they want.

Hashem sends malochim in three places along the journey. Bilaam doesn't see the maloch – yet the donkey sees the maloch!

But what's the point of sending a message to Bilaam through malochim, if Bilaam can't see it? The answer is that Bilaam not seeing the maloch and the donkey seeing it is exactly the point. Hashem is sending the message: "you think you are so clever and perceptive that you can fool Me and curse Klal Yisroel? You can't even see a maloch which your own donkey can see! Don't be so confident in your powers that you think you can outsmart Hashem."

Hashem is showing Bilaam that he is blinded by his greed. He can't see a maloch right in front of him because he is so obsessed with this big reward he thinks he'll get for cursing Klal Yisroel. He is willfully blinding himself to the fact that Hashem will not let him be successful in cursing.

Bolok initially shows Bilaam a view where he can see a part of the nation. Bilaam gets an audience with Hashem b'derech mikreh. It is not a consistent level. He goes from being completely consumed with taivoh to becoming a spiritual master who can prepare himself at will to get prophesy.

In the first attempt, Bilaam realizes that Klal Yisroel have very great ancestors – the Ovos and Imahos. We talked about the way the Ovos founded Klal Yisroel – they were able to permanently imprint their special middos and kochos hanefesh into their future offspring. It is an incredible accomplishment. The neshomo of every Jew throughout history is elevated because it is rooted in the Ovos. Yaakov was the perfect balance of all the middos of the Ovos and was able to have 12 shevotim who drew from each of those middos. Till today we have special characteristics that are unique to the Jewish people which we received from the Ovos.

The Rambam in Hilchos Geirushin explains that a forced get by a beis din is still valid. How? It is because every Jew has a deep will to connect to Hashem through following Torah and mitzvos. But this deep will is often covered over by other factors that push him away from the will of Hashem – his upbringing, his society, his taivos and bad middos, etc. What do we do? We give him a different pressure of physical pain to cancel out the negative pressure of not listening to beis din. Now

his true deep will to follow the halacha is able to come to the surface, and he sincerely says he wants to give the get.

We have a very unique Jewish neshomo. We have to value it tremendously and we need to nurture this natural draw towards ruchniyus in the right direction. We see many Jews who go to other sources of spirituality – like the religions of the Far East – to satisfy their neshomo's natural pull towards ruchniyus. There is a deep will to connect to Hashem inside every Jew.

Bilaam says we are a different kind of nation. We cannot be compared to other nations.

Later in the Torah it says: וישכון ישראל בטח בדד עין יעקב. What is this referring to? It is the vision that Yaakov Ovinu had when going down to Egypt. Yaakov Ovinu realized that if Klal Yisroel are going to survive golus Mitzrayim and preserve their unique Jewish identity, they have to be separate and segregated from the rest of society. And this will actually protect us from physical harm as well.

This is the exact opposite philosophy of the early Zionists of 140 years ago. In that time, antisemitism in Russia was putting enormous pressure on the Jewish community. Jews were desperate to solve the problem of persecution, and each group had their solution. The Zionist solution was to say the problem was caused by our being different. We have no state, no flag, no language of our own. This is why we are hated. If we would only become like every other nation with their own country and their own national institutions, we would be accepted like every other nation. No one would have a reason to hate us.

But if you look at all the antisemitism in the world today, you see that it is blamed on the State of Israel! Exactly the opposite result that the Zionists predicted! The plan of original Zionism was to assimilate on a national scale. We will become a nation like all other nations and this will make us accepted and safe from persecution. Bilaam teaches us that this won't work. Our security comes just from being separate and different from the non-Jews. They come from different roots, and our neshomos are fundamentally in tune with ruchniyus.

Onkelos says that in the future, Klal Yisroel will be on top and the non-Jews will be subordinate to us. We will never be destroyed.

After saying all this, Bilaam has to ask himself – if this is the case, why am I bothering to try to destroy them? Hashem won't let me succeed! I might as well join them! But Bilaam can't bring himself to do it. He wants to die the death of the righteous and reap the benefits in the next world, but he can't give up his mad pursuit of pleasure in this world to earn it.

Chazal tell us that as great a spiritual giant Bilaam was, his taivoh and his moral corruption matched his greatness. If a person is mediocre in one area, it stands to reason that he is mediocre in many other areas too. He'll just muddle through life.

Some people have tremendous drive and ambition to do great things in the world. But those great things can be positive or negative. Bilaam had greatness, but he can't channel it in the proper direction to earn the eternal reward that he sees Klal Yisroel getting. He wants that reward – he knows it is better than everything temporary in this world. But he can't bring himself to give up anything for it.

Bolok is upset because Bilaam blessed Klal Yisroel instead of cursing them. This pattern repeats itself two more times.

Bilaam praises Klal Yisroel for their ability to jump out of bed in the morning with alacrity to do mitzvos right away in the morning. They know that their purpose for being alive and waking up each morning is to do mitzvos. Hashem gave you a unique neshomo that can grow and develop to become close to Hashem through keeping mitzvos. We don't want to waste that potential by staying in bed longer into the morning.

We are routinely reminded that this is our mission in life – from when we wake up to when we go to sleep. We say krias Shema on our beds right before we fall asleep. Why? We want ol malchus shomayim to be on our minds as the last thing we think about before falling asleep. What is the first thing I want to think about when I wake up in the morning? I have another day, another opportunity to do Torah and mitzvos and develop my neshomo.

Bilaam is describing the special, unique qualities of a Jewish neshomo.

Hashem gave us this unique neshomo for a specific purpose. Hashem wants us to take the pure neshomo He gave us to fulfill His will. Bilaam was also given a unique neshomo that had more potential for ruchniyus than even Moshe Rabbeinu! But he didn't take care of it. He corrupted it with his pursuit of taivoh.

In the next round of brochos, Bilaam reveals the major secret of Klal Yisroel's ability to preserve their ruchniyus – tzniyus in how we live and how we set up our homes.

What is the philosophy behind tzniyus? It is to reorient your self-perception towards your ruchniyus existence. Dressing in a tzanu'a manner helps us think of ourselves in terms of who we truly are under the surface – a neshomo that wants to serve Hashem. Not to identify ourselves by a purely outward, physical appearance.

Dressing and conducting one's self in a tzanu'a fashion projects a certain image to others about who we are – essentially as a neshomo – not highlighting the body. This is the message we send to the world and that we also send to ourselves. If I project my neshomo as my identity, it is eventually the person I become.

When a person dresses in a tight shirt so that people will notice his bulging muscles, he is telling us something about himself. He is telling the world that this is the part of me that I want people to notice about me and identify me with. I'm someone who has a well-shaped physique. That is who I feel I am. The more he projects that image to people, the more he will perceive himself internally in that light, and create a feedback loop.

When a person dresses tzanu'a, he or she is showing the world that they use their body for the purpose of the neshomo – as they were intended. We say every year in Tefillah Zakoh: Hashem gave us hands to do mitzvos. He gave us every part of our body as a means to serve Hashem. So when we dress in a way that doesn't highlight the body, it shows our body is subservient to the neshomo's goals and is not a goal in itself.

Tzniyus has another aspect. It fosters a sense of privacy and space away from the public eye to develop yourself as a unique individual. You aren't always out in public trying to impress people and make a statement. You have an internal identity that is unique and you don't have to conform to everyone else out there.

But the human being is caught in a pull between the neshomo and the body. How do we win this struggle when Bilaam failed?

Bilaam compares a nachal – a fresh mountain stream – to an ohel. The gemara explains the comparison. Just as a nachal functions as a mikveh and bestows taharoh – purity – to a body that is tomei, so too the Torah that is learned in an ohel can purify the taint and corruption of a Jewish neshomo. The Rambam quotes this gemara in the end of Hilchos Mikvaos and adds the following parallel. Just like getting taharoh from a mikvah requires total immersion with intent to become tahor, so too, in order for Torah to change and purify you, you need total immersion in the ideas of the Torah with the intention that the Torah will transform you.

This is how we win the struggle that Bilaam failed to overcome. We have Torah which has the power to change us if we want it to.

Then, after all this failure to curse, Bilaam wants to collect his fee! Bolok obviously refuses. So Bilaam has one final piece of advice to take down Klal Yisroel. The one thing that will cause them to stumble is znus.

You need to appreciate how high Klal Yisroel have risen since leaving Egypt. They have been through forty years of learning Torah in the desert, seeing open miracles constantly on a daily basis. But now they succumb to avodo zoro. And not just any avodo zoro, but the most despicable, vile avodo zoro of Ba'al Pe'or! How could this happen?

The answer is that if you offer znus as a reward, Klal Yisroel are capable of doing anything to get it. This is why the Torah is so careful with tzniyus. The Torah was aware of how vulnerable Klal Yisroel are to this kind of temptation. Znus grabs a hold of the mind and preoccupies it all the time. It consumes a person's imagination.

This is what we read in the haftara after the Parsha. We have a deep enmity towards Bilaam which we never forget. Why? Because he knew what our biggest weakness was, and exploited it by advising Bolok to bring out the pretty girls. It caused us tremendous harm by undermining the pure neshomo Hashem has given us.

This parsha has incredibly important lessons for us. We need to respect the taharoh of our neshomo. Respect the power of the Torah to transform us and elevate us. We have opportunities to elevate ourselves through serious limud haTorah in this generation that few in Jewish history have experienced. Don't take it for granted.

We are a separate nation. We are a different type of human being with different goals, different values, and different types of kochos hanefesh. Don't waste them.