

Parsha Ponders

Balak | June 25, 2021 | 15 Tammuz 5781

Bilaam's interaction with Hashem¹

ויבא אלקים אל-בלעם ויאמר מי האנשים האלה עמך: ויאמר בלעם אל-האלקים בלק בן-צפר מלך מואב
שלח אלי

G-d came to Bilaam and said to him: "Who are these men who are with you?"² Bilaam said to G-d:
"Balak, the son of Tzippor, the King of Moav, sent [them] to me"³

ויאמר אלקים אל-בלעם לא תלך עמהם לא תאר את-העם כי ברוך הוא: ויקם בלעם בבקר ויאמר אל-שרי
בלק לכו אל-ארצכם כי מאן יקוק לתתי להלך עמכם

G-d said to Bilam: "**Do not go with them.** Do not curse the nation, as they are blessed". Bilaam got up in the morning and told the ministers of Balak: "Go back to your land, as Hashem has withheld permission for me to go **with you**"⁴

ויבא אלקים אל-בלעם לילה ויאמר לו אם-לקרא לך באו האנשים קום לך אתם ואך את-הדבר אשר-אדבר
אליך אתו תעשה

G-d came to Bilaam in the night, and said to him: "If these men came to invite you, then get up and **go with them.** However, relate [only] that which I will tell you. That is what you shall do"⁵

The King Balak, whom this *parsha* is named after, hired the sorcerer Bilaam to curse the Jewish people. The verses show that he was a non-Jewish prophet, and communicated with G-d. It's interesting to see and analyze their interactions. Rav Rutterman, the founder and *Rosh Yeshiva* of Ner Yisroel, related that we can glean two fascinating insights into the human psyche from these interactions.

The first comes from an apparent inconsistency on Hashem's part. First, He tells Bilaam not to go with Balak's men to curse the Jews. Then, He tells Bilaam to go with them. What changed?⁶ We can discern the answer from Bilaam's response to Hashem's initial refusal. Hashem told Bilaam not to go with these men. Bilaam understood this to mean not to go with *these* men, since they were not prominent enough for someone of Bilaam's stature. Rather, men who are honorable and more significant should escort Bilaam⁷.

These verses are teaching us a profound lesson. When someone is one hundred percent committed to doing something, you should take them seriously. If they mean harm, you have to take precautions. You

¹ Based on a *schmooze* heard from [Rav Beryl Weisbord](#), the *Mashgiach* of Yeshivas Ner Yisroel, quoting [Rav Rutterman](#) *zt"l*, on the occasion of his 34th *yartzheit*, which was yesterday (14th of Tammuz)

² It requires clarification how or why Hashem would ask such a question, when is Omnipotent. [Rashi](#) to [Genesis 3:9](#) says that this is how Hashem interacts with Man. He doesn't out of nowhere start talking to the person, as it would throw them off and be overwhelming. Instead, he starts the conversation with a rhetorical question, to ease them into the conversation. However, [Rabbeinu Bachaye](#) to [Numbers 22:9](#) says that Hashem only does this with the wicked, to trick them into thinking that Hashem isn't Omnipotent. This way, they'll sin more and be wiped off the Earth. As a side point, I've heard a question on this [Rabbeinu Bachaye](#) from Hashem asking a question to Adam ([Genesis 3:9](#)), Moshe ([Exodus 4:2](#)), and Eliyahu ([I Kings 19:9](#))

³ [Numbers 22:9,10](#)

⁴ [Ibid](#) v. 12,13

⁵ [Ibid](#) v. 20

⁶ [Chazal](#) learn that even though Hashem didn't want Bilaam to go and curse the Jews, there's a concept that "They in Heaven guide a person on the path that they desire" ([Makkos 10b](#)). Even so, one could still ask why Hashem initially refused to grant permission, if it was what Bilaam wanted

⁷ [Rashi](#) to v. 13, quoting [Midrash Tanchuma Balak](#) § 6

have no idea what they're capable of. Hashem, when Bilaam initially expressed interest in cursing the Jews, denied him permission. Bilaam seemed dead-set on cursing them, and perhaps he'll have an effect. However, when Bilaam later showed he was more interested in his own honor, it was revealed that he wasn't one hundred percent focused on the Jews. He had ulterior motivations. If so, there's no harm in sending him. Hashem gave him permission to go, as he won't be successful anyways.

A second lesson is clear from Bilaam's initial statement to Hashem. Hashem asked Bilaam who these men were who had come to him⁸, and Bilaam responded that they were sent by Balak, the son of Tzipor, the King of Moav. Rashi tells us⁹ that Bilaam was trying to relate to Hashem a message: Although I am of no importance to You, G-d, see how prominent I am in the eyes of Man. Even the great King Balak sends his messengers to me! What was Bilaam's intent with this? Did he really think that this would impress Hashem?

Bilaam was really trying to subtly besmirch the Jewish people. Bilaam was a sort of leader of the nations. He was a prophet of G-d. He was somewhat comparable to Moshe¹⁰. Bilaam was saying that you see how the Jewish people treat Moshe? They are constantly complaining to him, causing him pain and anguish, and not listening to his commands. They don't treat him with much respect. I, on the other hand, see how much respect the nations, including their kings, treat me. His point was to defame the Jews.

How did Hashem respond? When He eventually gave Bilaam permission to go with Balak's men, He told Bilaam that he could only say what he was commanded. He wasn't to deviate a word from what Hashem said. Hashem was telling Bilaam that the reason why the non-Jews respect him is because he doesn't listen to Hashem. Moshe, doesn't move a finger without Hashem telling him to. He follows Hashem's word to the letter. If Bilaam were to start listening to Hashem, saying only what Hashem commanded him to say, we'll see how much respect the nations give him.

Good Shabbos

⁸ See note 2

⁹ *Ad. loc.*, quoting Midrash Tanchuma Balak § 5

¹⁰ Bamidbar Rabbah 14:20; ibid 20:1; Sifrei Devarim § 34; Yalkut Shimoni Vezos HaBeracha § 966