

# Parsha Ponders

Balak | June 30, 2023 | 11 Tammuz 5783

## *Hashem's curious questioning<sup>1</sup>*

ויבא אלקים אל-בלעם ויאמר מי האנשים האלה עמך

G-d “came” to Bilaam and said: “Who are these men with you?”<sup>2</sup>

Bilaam, the non-Jewish prophet, was sought after by the Moabite King Balak. Balak intended to hire Bilaam to curse the Jews. Bilaam foolishly thought that he could get Hashem to curse His own people. When Balak’s men first came to Bilaam, Hashem asked Bilaam a simple question: “Who are these people with you?” Bilaam responded that they were Balak’s men, etc. Rashi explains that obviously Hashem knew who these men were. Why then did He ask this to Bilaam? The intent was to trick Bilaam into thinking that Hashem isn’t completely omnipotent, Heaven forbid. Bilaam thought that Hashem only sometimes knows what’s going on, but doesn’t know everything<sup>3</sup>. Bilaam thus felt empowered to try to “trick” Hashem into cursing the Jews, which ended up backfiring, as the story shows.

The commentaries on Rashi are bothered by this explanation, as it seems to contradict a different explanation of Rashi. We find other times that Hashem asked people questions which we would expect G-d to know the answer. Right after Adam and his wife Chava ate from the Tree of Knowledge, they went into hiding. Hashem then asked Adam: “Where are you?”<sup>4</sup> Rashi explains<sup>5</sup> that obviously Hashem knew where Adam was. What was the intent of asking? In order not to shock Adam suddenly by punishing him right away, giving him the ability to properly repent. Rashi continues by saying that we find the same thing with Kayin, after he killed his brother Hevel<sup>6</sup>, and we find the same thing with Bilaam<sup>7</sup>. The intent was to gradually enter a dialogue<sup>8</sup>. How does that fit with what Rashi says in our *parsha*, that Hashem’s intent was to trick Bilaam?

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<sup>1</sup> Based on [Rashi to Numbers 22:9](#), with his various commentators

<sup>2</sup> [Numbers loc. cit.](#)

<sup>3</sup> The [Maskil L’Dovid ad. loc.](#) explains that Bilaam couldn’t think that Hashem was totally oblivious to things, since, after all, he was a prophet. He poetically quotes [Isaiah 46:10](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Genesis 3:9](#)

<sup>5</sup> [Ad. loc.](#)

<sup>6</sup> [Genesis 4:9](#). It’s interesting that all three of these instances are verse 9

<sup>7</sup> [Rashi](#) cites as well [Isaiah 39:3](#) regarding King Chizkiya, although there it was the prophet Yeshaya who asked him, not Hashem Himself

<sup>8</sup> The [Mizrachi](#), both to [Rashi on Genesis 3:9](#) and [Numbers loc. cit.](#) says [Rashi](#)’s source is [Bereishis Rabbah 19:11](#). That *Midrash* also appears in [Yalkut Shimoni Melachim § 245](#), as well in [Bamidbar Rabbah 20:6](#) (albeit with some slight differences). There, we are told that there are four who Hashem hit their קנקן (literally: bottles; it could also mean head), and it turned out their קנקן was full of urine: Adam, Kayin, Bilaam, and Chizkiya ([Bamidbar Rabbah](#) omits Adam. [Imrei Yosher](#) to [Bereishis Rabbah](#) suggests it’s because Adam only responded to Hashem the way he did because he was embarrassed; *Cf.* [Maharzu ad. loc.](#) [Radal](#) cites [Zohar III parshas Balak](#) p. 200a, which teaches a similar teaching, yet only mentions Bilaam, Chizkiya, and Yechezkel. The other *Midrashim* referenced Yechezkel positively). “[Rashi](#)”, [Yefei Toar](#), [Mattanos Kehunah](#), and [Eitz Yosef](#), all to [Bereishis Rabbah](#), explain the intent is that Hashem asked these individuals a question in order to test them, and they all failed. Indeed, [Bamidbar Rabbah](#) explicitly says Hashem tested them. As such, [Nachalas Yaakov](#) on [Rashi to Genesis](#), brought by [Be’er BaSadeh ad. loc.](#), and [Yefeh Toar](#) argue that this can’t be the source for our [Rashi](#)’s comment, as he explains the intent of the question was to enter into conversation with them. In fact, the [Yefeh Toar](#) says that we don’t find any source for [Rashi](#)’s comment, so we must assume he came up with it on his own as the simple understanding of the verse. [Be’er BaSadeh](#) understood the [Nachalas Yaakov](#) as saying similarly (although I didn’t see it explicit in his wording). Something noteworthy is [Rashi to Isaiah loc. cit.](#) brings [Bamidbar Rabbah](#) (although he cites it as [Midrash Tanchuma](#), which I was unable to locate), explaining that Hashem asked Chizkiya (as well as Kayin and Bilaam) in

Mizrachi suggests<sup>9</sup> that the two teachings in fact go together. It's true, that Hashem asked Bilaam this question in order to enter into conversation with him, just like the other instances. However, the reason Hashem did this is different than the other times. With Adam and Kayin, they had sinned, and Hashem was giving them an opening to repent. However, with Bilaam, he hadn't sinned yet. He was only planning to curse the Jews. As such, Rashi explains that Hashem's intent was to enter into conversation with Bilaam, with the goal of tricking him into thinking Hashem isn't totally omnipotent.

The problem with this approach<sup>10</sup> is we are left wondering why Rashi listed Bilaam together with Adam and Kayin, when as the Mizrachi himself explains, they had a different reason why Hashem entered into conversation with them. Why then does Rashi seemingly equate Hashem's question to them with the one posed to Bilaam?

The Maharal has a different approach<sup>11</sup> than the Mizrachi. He is bothered with the simple reading of our Rashi. What does it mean that Hashem wanted to trick Bilaam? Since when does Hashem trick people, even the wicked? We have a principle<sup>12</sup> that someone who wants to defile themselves with transgressions, Hashem will open the path for them, but won't He help them<sup>13</sup>. Consequently, if there was no other explanation to Hashem's question, "Who are these people?", other than an attempt to trick Bilaam, Hashem never would have said it. But now that Rashi tells us that there's another explanation, that it was in order to enter into conversation with Bilaam, it's perfectly fine for Hashem to ask this question. We don't have to say that Hashem was trying to trick Bilaam. Rather, Hashem simply opened the path to err. Bilaam allowed himself to be tricked, and mistakenly concluded Hashem wasn't omnipotent<sup>14</sup>. This enabled his eventual downfall, and subsequent blessing of the Jews.

Good Shabbos

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order to test them. This is noted by Tzeidah LaDerech on Rashi to Numbers. He concludes from this that the different Rashis are simply quoting differing Midrashim in different places, as is the style of Rashi (according to the Mizrachi himself in many places). Cf. Ma'aseh Hashem 1:1, brought by Tzeidah LaDerech on Rashi to Numbers 13:2, who strongly disagrees with this premise

<sup>9</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>10</sup> Tzeidah LaDerech on Rashi to Numbers 22:9

<sup>11</sup> Gur Aryeh on Rashi to Numbers *loc. cit.* § 18. Ba'er Heitev *ad. loc.* says the same without attribution. The Tzeidah LaDerech quotes the Ba'er Heitev without citing the name of the sefer, and says he heard the same in the name of a "Rav Mendel R. Avigdors" (16<sup>th</sup> century Krakow; apparently he signed his last name "R. Avigdors" as a way of conveying that his father-in-law was Rav Avigdor)

<sup>12</sup> Shabbos 104a

<sup>13</sup> Rashi *ad. loc.* See Gur Aryeh *loc. cit.* fn. 57

<sup>14</sup> The Maharal agrees with the Mizrachi that the reason Hashem wanted to enter into conversation with Bilaam was different than Adam and Kayin. With the latter two, it was so they wouldn't be too flustered to respond. This reason doesn't apply to Bilaam, for why wouldn't Hashem want the wicked to be flustered? Rather, it was to give him room to err. See also Be'er Yosef to Numbers 22:9 (<https://parshaponders.com/balak-5777/>)