

Parshat Balak – Common Identity

Simon Wolf

Reflecting the view of Chazal, Bil'am is known colloquially as Bil'am HaRasha (the evil Bil'am). That title is bestowed upon him by the Mishna in Avot where it states that anyone who possesses these three character traits: an evil eye, a haughty spirit and an insatiable appetite (עין רעה, רוח גבוהה, ונפש רחבה) is a student of the evil Bil'am.¹ Rashi on the Parsha reinforces this characterization of Bil'am when he goes out of his way to point out where each one of these traits of Bil'am is manifest in the Pesukim.² In addition, the Mishna in Sanhedrin enumerate Bil'am in its list of lay people that do not have a share in the World to Come (אין להם חלק) (לעולם הבא).³ Looking at Parshat Balak, it is hard to understand how Chazal came up with such a negative depiction of Bil'am.

After soundly defeating Sichon, the king of the Emori, and Og, the king of Bashan, Bnei Yisrael are now encamped at the doorstep of Mo'av. Balak, the king of Mo'av, understandably concludes that he is likely facing a formidable threat on his border from this ferocious enemy that has just trounced two of his neighbors. In order to shift the odds in his favor, he sends a delegation to Bil'am in order to engage his services in the cursing of Bnei Yisrael. Bil'am responds to the overture by stating, "stay here for the night and I will let you know what God tells me"⁴ regarding your request. That night, God inquires with Bil'am as to the nature of the guests that he is hosting. Bil'am responds that the mission, at the behest of Balak, has come to recruit his aid in their efforts to stave off "the people who have left Egypt" by having him curse these invaders. God responds firmly, "do not go with them, do not curse this nation because they are blessed."⁵ Bil'am faithfully conveys God's response to the delegation by telling them that God refuses to allow him to join their efforts (כי מאין ה' לתתי להלך עמכם). Rashi, following the lead of Chazal,⁶ based on a linguistic inference ("with you"), incriminates Bil'am with being haughty (רוח גבוהה) because his response implied that he could not join the ministers that Balak had sent, but left open the possibility that he might be swayed to join their cause with a more significant delegation. Balak responds to Bil'am's demurrer by sending a larger and higher ranking mission to convince Bil'am to assist Mo'av. This only serves to reinforce the claim that this was Bil'am's intent all along.

The Ramban⁷ summarily dismisses Rashi's interpretation because there was no reason for Bil'am to believe that God would change His mind if Balak sent more prestigious envoys. Instead, it was Balak who suspected Bil'am of rejecting his overtures for monetary reasons and honor and that is why when Bil'am finally arrives, Balak greets him with a rhetorical question "don't you know I have the means by which to honor you (האמנם לא אוכל)?"⁸ Balak thinks Bil'am's reluctance is simply a negotiating tactic and that is why he sends emissaries to inform Bil'am that he has the resources by which to compensate him generously for his services. Bil'am immediately informs the delegation, "even if Balak were to give me his entire house full of silver and gold, I cannot do anything, big or small, contrary to the will of the Lord my God."⁹ Rashi, once again, sees this exaggerated sample compensation level as evidence of Bil'am's unbridled greed (נפש רחבה).⁹ Whereas, according to the Ramban, his prompt and unequivocal dismissal of the new delegation is strong evidence that Bil'am did not think that God would alter his position with regards to his participation in Balak's diabolic plan.

Bil'am tells Balak's entourage to stay overnight so he can hear what God would like him to do. Shockingly, God appears to Bil'am that night and tells him that if the delegation is seeking his assistance, he should accompany them, but with the recurring caveat that he must comply with whatever God tells him to do. Bil'am obeys God's directive and in the morning he saddles his donkey and heads out with the ministers to meet Balak. Then almost inexplicably, the Torah indicates that God was angry with Bil'am for traveling with Balak's mission. Therefore, unbeknownst to Bil'am, by means of a Malach, God obstructs Bil'am's progress by spooking his donkey. After a number of exasperating incidents with his recalcitrant donkey, Bil'am hits his donkey so hard that it dies from the blow. God then reveals to Bil'am the Malach that was halting his progress and that caused the donkey to veer from the path to spare Bil'am's life. After being rebuked by the angel of God, Bil'am immediately offers a mea culpa (טאתי כי לא ידעתי) (כי אתה נצב לקראתי בדרך). He then suggests that if God is upset with him continuing on this journey that he will happily head back home. The Malach tells him to resume his trip to Balak, but once again qualifies that Bil'am will only be able to say that which God prompts him to convey. Upon meeting Balak, Bil'am compliantly makes the disclaimer,

¹ משנה אבות ה, יט

² רוח גבוהה – רש"י כב, נפש רחבה – רש"י כב, יח עין רעה – רש"י כד, ב

³ משנה סנהדרין י, ב...וארבע הדיוטות אין להם חלק לעולם הבא...בלעם ודואג ואחיתופל וגחזי

⁴ ויאמר אליהם לינו פה הלילה והשבתי אתכם דבר כאשר ידבר יקרא אלי וישבו שרי-מואב עם בלעם: (במדבר כב, ח)

⁵ ויאמר אליהם אל-בלעם לא תלך עמהם לא תאר את העם כי ברוך הוא: (שם יב)

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⁶ תנחומא בלק ו

⁷ רמב"ן עה"ת במדבר כב, יג

⁸ במדבר כב, לז

⁹ מלא ביתו כסף וזהב - למדנו שנפשו רחבה ומחמד ממון אחרים. אמר, ראוי לו ליתן לי כל כסף וזהב שלו, שהרי צריך לשכור חיילות רבות, ספק נוצח ספק אינו נוצח, ואני ודאי נוצח: (רש"י במדבר כב, יח ע"פ תנחומא בלק ו)

which becomes a constant refrain for the remainder of the Parsha, that I cannot act of my own volition because I am beholden to whatever God wants me to say. This leads to much frustration and disappointment for Balak when time after time God compels Bil'am, much to his chagrin, to bless, rather than curse, Bnei Yisrael.

Rashi¹⁰ suggests that God offers Bil'am the opportunity to join the second delegation, if he feels it will be lucrative for him, as long as he is willing to abide by the instructions of God. Obviously, Bil'am's desire to profit from this excursion and God's unwillingness to curse Bnei Yisrael were incongruous. Therefore, Rashi comes to the inescapable conclusion that Bil'am must have thought he could convince God to change his mind. In keeping with his negative view of Bil'am, Rashi sees God's anger being kindled by the alacrity and enthusiasm Bil'am demonstrates when granted permission by God to join Balak's attempt to impair Bnei Yisrael. It was an affront to God that Bil'am was so eager to engage in an activity that God had clearly rejected. In the end, the Malach tells Bil'am to proceed with aiding Balak because God enables a person to walk the path they so choose in life (בדרך שאדם רוצה לילך בה מוליכין אותו)¹¹ even if it is to their detriment.

Once again here, the Ramban is critical of Rashi's explanation of the incident.¹² The Ramban believes that God did not change his mind between the two sets of emissaries, but rather was answering a different question in each case. In the first instance, God tells Bil'am that he may not join Balak's envoys in order to curse Bnei Yisrael. When the second mission requests Bil'am's assistance, God tells him he can join them as long as they are willing to abide by the conditions that God had originally set out – that he has no right to curse Bnei Yisrael. God gets angry with Bil'am when he joins the second delegation without communicating this important caveat. Had he divulged the information upfront, it is clear that they would have no interest in his services and it would have scuttled his plan to join them. The omission of this critical information deceives them into believing that Bil'am now has permission to curse Bnei Yisrael. It also causes a profaning of God's name by implying that God is either playing games with them or vacillating on whether to curse Bnei Yisrael. Therefore, his lack of disclosure makes him complicit in their plan and angers God. After the incident with the donkey, God accepts Bil'am's apology for suppressing this

information and then instructs Bil'am to continue on to Balak with the provision that he divulges this stipulation to Balak upfront. Upon encountering Balak, Bil'am immediately complies by disclosing to Balak that he is bound to speak solely that which God desires.

Looking unbiasedly at the story as it unfolds in Parshat Balak, one would likely conclude that Bil'am is a sheepishly compliant emissary of God. He continuously seeks counsel with God and then seemingly complies with whatever he is told. While not perfect, the Ramban's explanation of the story seems far more plausible than the interpretation of Chazal as quoted by Rashi. Given that, how did Bil'am acquire the title of the evil one? It almost seems like Chazal engaged in wholesale character assassination when it comes to Bil'am.¹³

There is evidence in other places in Tanach that Bil'am was not just an obedient servant of God. Firstly, in Parshat Matot, Bil'am is enumerated among the high-ranking casualties of the war with Midyan.¹⁴ A similar verse in Yehoshua adds that Bil'am was a soothsayer (קוסם).¹⁵ In addition, Moshe chastises the officers of the army for taking the Midyanite women captive because, "they were the ones, at the coaxing of Bil'am, to seduce Bnei Yisrael to violate God in the matter of Pe'or which caused a plague in God's congregation."¹⁶ The most damning evidence is found in Parshat Ki Teitzei where the Torah explains the reason that nationals of Mo'av and Amon are precluded from joining Bnei Yisrael is because they failed to provide you with provisions when you left Egypt and because they hired Bil'am to curse you. As an aside, the Torah notes that "the Lord your God refused to heed Bil'am; instead the Lord your God turned the curse into a blessing for you, for the Lord your God loves you." The verse is very difficult to understand because it implies that Bil'am actually cursed Bnei Yisrael and God intervened to convert it into a blessing, but we find no evidence of this in Parshat Balak. The Gemara¹⁷ says that from the blessings of Bil'am you can infer what his intended curses were. Either way, it is a serious indictment of Bil'am. Chazal also interpret the Pasuk from Micha¹⁸ which we read in the Haftorah as implying that God intervened on our behalf (למען דעת צדקות) to spare us from Bil'am's evil intentions. The cumulative evidence seems to indicate that Bil'am was no angel and maybe even a Rasha. Like in other instances, the small pieces of evidence, that almost seem to contradict the sense one gets from

¹⁰ במדבר כב, כ

¹¹ ...מן התורה ומן הנביאים ומן הכתובים - בדרך שאדם רוצה לילך בה מוליכין אותו. מן התורה, דכתיב: לא תלך עמהם, וכתיב: קום לך אתם... (מכות י:)

¹² הרמב"ן במדבר כב, כ גם שולל פירוש הגאון והאבן עזרא

¹³ עיין עוד בגמ' ע"ד ד-ד: ובסנהדרין קה-קו.

¹⁴ ואת־מלכי־מדון־הרגו על־חלליהם את־אוי־וְאת־רְקֹם וְאת־צוּר וְאת־חֹרֹר וְאת־רֶבֶע חַמֶּשֶׁת מַלְכֵי מִדְיָן וְאת־בַּלְעָם בֶּן־בְּעוֹר הַרְגוּ בְחָרֵב (במדבר לא, ח)

¹⁵ וְאת־בַּלְעָם בֶּן־בְּעוֹר הַקּוֹסֵם הַרְגוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּחָרֵב אֶל־חַלְלֵיהֶם (יהושע יג, כב)

¹⁶ הוֹ הִנֵּה הִ' לִבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּדַבֵּר בַּלְעָם לְמַסְרֵ־מַעַל בִּיקוּקָק עַל־דְּבַר־פְּעוֹר וְתַהִי הַמַּגְפָּה בַעֲדַת יְקוּקָ (שם טז)

¹⁷ אמר רבי יוחנן: מברכתו של אותו רשע אתה למד מה היה בלבו (סנהדרין קה:)

¹⁸ עֲמִי זְכַרְנָא מִה־יַעַץ בַּלְק מַלְךְ מוֹאָב וּמִה־עֵגָה אִתּוּ בַלְעָם בֶּן־בְּעוֹר מִדְּהַשְׁטִימִ עַד־הַגְּלָגֶל לְמַעַן דַּעַת צְדָקוֹת יְקוּקָ (מיכה ו, ה)

the primary source in Parshat Balak, cause Chazal to reinterpret all the actions of this particular individual through the prism of negativity established by the secondary sources.

The question though is whether there is corroboration of this view within Parshat Balak and more importantly can it shed light on why God was angry at Bil'am for acquiescing to travel to Balak when God had just given him permission to do such. Looking more closely at the story of the second delegation sent by Balak to Bil'am, there is a nuanced difference between that which God instructs to Bil'am and that which he does in actuality. God tells Bil'am that if these individuals came to call upon you then "get up and go with them (קום לך אתם)." ¹⁹ In the subsequent verse, the Torah tells us that "Bil'am arose in the morning, saddled his donkey and went with the ministers of Mo'av (וילך עם שרי מואב)." Immediately afterwards, God is angered by the fact that Bil'am actually went. Interestingly, the Torah uses a different word for "with" in each of the verses – Itam (אתם) in God's command and Im (עם) when Bil'am joins the ministers. The difference is significant. Itam (אתם) denotes to go along with them while Im (עם) means to join them. ²⁰ The Gemara ²¹ tells us that Shimon Ha'Amsuni went through all the Etim (אתים) in the entire Torah and found something to include from each one. When he reached "and you shall fear the Lord your God (את ה' אלקיך תירא)," ²² he was flummoxed as to what one could possibly include that could be associated with God. Out of academic honesty, he then retracted all of his previous inclusions from the word Et (את) because he failed to be able to consistently apply it to the entire Torah. Rabbi Akiva in the end salvages Shimon Ha'Amsuni's work when he explains that the Et (את) of "and you shall fear the Lord your God" comes to include Talmidei Chachamim like the Mishna in Avot says, "the awe of your teacher should be like your awe of heaven." ²³ In the context of that discussion in the Gemara, it says that the word Et (את) includes something that is secondary (טפל) to the primary object mentioned in the Pasuk. Et (את) or Itam (אתם) implies something or someone that tags along. There is a superficial connection between the objects or the parties because of some commonality that brings them together, but they nevertheless remain independent. On the other hand, Im (עם) implies a shared identity or a common goal, a deep connection that unifies.

God instructs Bil'am to go along with (אתם) Balak's emissaries. God's intent was that they were to travel "together", but their goals and identity would remain independent. Bil'am was traveling at the behest of God to go and bless Bnei Yisrael while the ministers of Mo'av were traveling back to see what harm they could inflict on Bnei Yisrael. They were to share a common destination (יעד), but not a common purpose (יעוד). This is in consonance with God's first command not to join them (לא תלך) ²⁴ where God is instructing Bil'am not to identify with the mission of the ministers. In the end, Bil'am joins them and travels with, Im (עם), the delegation of Mo'av. He did not just accompany them for the journey, but he identified with their goals and purpose. ²⁵ That corroborates the evil intent of Bil'am identified by the other Pesukim in Tanach and precipitates Chazal's impression that Bil'am was just as keen as Balak to curse Bnei Yisrael. After the incident with the donkey, God tells Bil'am to "go with (עם) the men." Rashi commenting on that phrase says that God takes an individual on the path they choose to walk on. Once Bil'am showed his true colors by identifying with Balak's mission, God instructs him to go as one with the delegation because as Rashi continues Bil'am now shared a common destiny with them to be eliminated from the world. Continuing to the end of the Pasuk, Rashi, commenting on "and Bil'am went with (עם) the ministers of Balak," states that Bil'am was just as happy to curse Bnei Yisrael as were the ministers sent to summon him. Once again, we see here that Im (עם) implies a deeper unifying shared purpose. ²⁶

In life, we do many things together with other people (or objects). The question we must always ask ourselves, whether it is with work, family, prayer, learning, or anything else in life, is are we simply coming together in a common place or do we share a common identity. ²⁷ Sometimes, we need to be Itam (אתם) to succeed and yet create clear differentiations, distinctions and boundaries, and sometimes, we need to be Im (עם) to become unified and to coalesce around common goals and purpose. Answering that question, will help crystalize what our priorities are and destiny is in life and who are our true partners for that journey.

Shabbat Shalom

¹⁹ במדבר כב, יב

²⁰ שמעתי את הדיק הלשוני הזה מניצול שואה מנוה דניאל

²¹ כדתינא: שמעון העמסוני, ואמרי לה נחמיה העמסוני, היה דורש כל אתים שבתורה

(פסחים כב, י)

²² דברים י, י

²³ רבי אלעזר בן שמעון אומר יהי כבוד תלמידך חביב עליך כשלך וכבוד חברך כמורא

ברך ומורא רבך כמורא שמים (אבות ד, יב)

²⁴ במדבר כב, יב

²⁵ רש"י במדבר כב, כא כותב לבו כולם שוה

²⁶ החילוק הזה גם מופיע בעקידה אצל שני הנערים שמלווים אברהם במסע ליעד

העקידה אבל אינם חלק מהיעוד "ויקח את שני נעריו אתו" אבל אח"ז "שבנו לכם עם

החמור" שחז"ל דורשים עם הדומה לחמור יש להם יעוד משותף עם החמור

²⁷ מענינא דיומא - אפשר שגם צריך לחשוב על זה ולשאול את השאלה לגבי הצטרפות

בהפגנות למיניהם