

# DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

## BALAK

### Bilaam and Prophecy

#### INTRODUCTION: WHAT DID BILAAM THINK WOULD HAPPEN?

When learning through the Torah's account of Bilaam's repeated failure in his attempt to curse the Jewish people, we are moved to ask the simple question: How could he possibly have thought that he would succeed? Bilaam may have been a vain, wicked and depraved person, but he was no fool. He knows full well that he cannot contravene a direct command from Hashem, and states so openly and repeatedly throughout the parsha. As such, having been told by Hashem in no uncertain terms that he was forbidden to curse the Jewish people, with what exactly in mind did he nonetheless proceed, believing that he would be able to do just that?

#### IN THE MIDRASH: A CONFOUNDING COMPARISON

Before attempting to answer this question, there is a certain statement of the sages regarding Bilaam that we need to consider; one which practically defies understanding. The verse toward the end of the Torah informs us:

וְלֹא קָם נְבִיא עוֹד בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל כְּמֹשֶׁה

*Never did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moshe.<sup>1</sup>*

Commenting on this verse, the Midrash<sup>2</sup> says:

אבל באומות קם, ואיזה? זה בלעם בן בעור

*But among the nations [one such prophet] did arise. And who was that? Bilaam the son of Be'or.*

The basis of this statement is the implication in the verse that specifically among Israel none ever arose like Moshe, but among the nations there was a prophet of equal stature, and that was Bilaam.

Needless to say, this comment is somewhat perplexing, if not completely baffling! Granted, for purposes of

<sup>1</sup> Devarim 34:10.

<sup>2</sup> Sifrei, V'zos Haberachah sec. 16.

blessing the Jewish people, Bilaam had to receive *some level* of prophecy, but why did he have to receive prophecy on the *ultimate level* of Moshe?

## THE PROPHETIC PROCESS

R' Yehoshua Leib Diskin<sup>3</sup> explains that in order to understand how Bilaam thought he could succeed in cursing the Jewish people, we need to understand how prophecy works. When Hashem chooses to communicate with a prophet, He does not speak to him in words. Rather, He projects the message onto the prophet's soul, who then receives it, interprets it and formulates it into words. It is for this reason, the prophet needs to be of sterling character, not only wise but also humble, in order to ensure that he will translate the message faithfully.<sup>4</sup>

### GOOD PROPHETS

In the blessing that we recite prior to reading the words of the prophets in the haftarah, we say:

ברוך אתה ה'... אשר בחר בנביאים טובים ורצה בדבריהם הנאמרים באמת

*Blessed are you Hashem... who chose good prophets and desired their words that are said in truth.*

These words are most intriguing. Given that it is Hashem who is the Source of the prophets' words, surely it goes without saying that He desires those words!

Rather, the point is as per above. Once we understand that the formulation of the prophecy into words is done by the prophet, we express and appreciate the sentiment that Hashem specifically chooses "good prophets," i.e. people who will be faithful to the message in the prophecy and thus, He desires their words which are said "in truth," that is, in true interpretation of the message.

Bearing this idea in mind, we can begin to understand how Bilaam thought he could succeed in cursing the Jewish people, even though he had been explicitly told by Hashem that he could only bless them. With his understanding of how the prophetic process works, Bilaam reasoned that even if Hashem projected a message of blessing onto his soul, his depraved character, coupled with his pathological hatred for the Jewish people would combine to ensure that the message that would emerge would be only that of a curse. Ultimately, his belief in Hashem's instructions was exceeded only by his belief in the corruption of his own soul, which could turn any blessing into curse.

## SCRIPTED PROPHECY

Having understood Bilaam's thinking, we now ask: Where, then, did it all go wrong for him? Why was he unable to bring his evil personality to bear on the blessings he received?

<sup>3</sup> *Maamar le'siyum HaTorah*, cited in the end of the sefer *Maharil Diskin Al HaTorah*.

<sup>4</sup> This approach can also be found in the Introduction of the Abarbanel to *Sefer Yirmiyahu*. This will help us explain the statement of the Gemara (*Sanhedrin* 89a) that "No two prophets prophesy in exactly the same manner," since each prophet formulates the prophecy in accordance with his soul's unique perception (for which reason, we can assume, Hashem chose that particular prophet to receive that specific prophecy). The Malbim (*ibid.*) and Netziv (*Commentary to the Sifrei*, beginning of *Parshas Matos*) however, understand that the prophets receive the actual words of the prophecy from Hashem. See also R'Yaakov Kamenetzky, *Emes le'Yaakov* Bamidbar 30:2.

The answer is in the words of the verse which introduce Bilaam's first prophecy:

וַיִּשֶׂם ה' דְּבַר בְּפִי בְלָעָם

*Hashem put words into Bilaam's mouth.*<sup>5</sup>

The verse informs us that, on this occasion, Hashem did not communicate with Bilaam through the normal manner in which prophecy is conveyed – sending him a message for him to interpret and formulate in his words. Rather, Hashem put the words of the message themselves directly into Bilaam's mouth! Being unable to send the message through Bilaam's system without it becoming as corrupt as Bilaam himself was, Hashem circumvented that system, effectively handing Bilaam a script and saying, "Read the following!" With this, Bilaam's great plan for turning blessing into curse was frustrated, and he found himself left with no choice but to shower praise and blessing on the Jewish people.

### BACK TO THE MIDRASH: WHEN OPPOSITES MET

The uniqueness of Moshe's level of prophecy is that he was not only able to perceive with total clarity the message Hashem was communicating to him, but also to apprehend with absolute precision the exact words with which Hashem wanted him to express it. This ultimate level of clarity is referred to in the Gemara's statement<sup>6</sup> that Moshe prophesied through "אספקלריא המאירה" – *an illuminated lens*.

We can now return to the mystifying comment of the Midrash that while no prophet among Israel ever achieved the level of prophecy enjoyed by Moshe, among the nations of the world, this was attained by Bilaam. How could Bilaam be in the same level as Moshe, surpassing all the great prophets of Israel throughout the generations? We now understand that this level of receiving words from Hashem was granted to Bilaam specifically because a prophetic message could not be allowed to go through his system. Thus, the level that Moshe achieved by perfecting his personality was, ironically, only ever replicated for Bilaam who had entirely ruined his.

### POSTSCRIPT: WRITING BILAAM'S PARSHA

The Gemara at the end of the first chapter in Bava Basra<sup>7</sup> discusses the individuals who committed the various books of Tanach to writing. Regarding Moshe Rabbeinu, it states:

משה כתב ספרו, ופרשת בלעם וספר איוב

*Moshe wrote his sefer [the Chumash], the section of Bilaam and the book of Iyov.*

Naturally, the commentators are puzzled by the separate mention of "the section of Bilaam" as something written by Moshe. Is that section not also part of the Torah? Would not the absence of even one letter from that section render an entire Torah scroll invalid?<sup>8</sup>

Rav Diskin explains. The reason why the Torah is referred to as "Moshe's sefer" is not merely because he wrote it down. Rather, it is because the contents of the Torah were perceived by Moshe on his unique level of prophecy – the illuminated lens. This means that even though many of the sections in the Torah were originally said to people who were themselves prophets, such Hashem's communication

5 Bamidbar 23:5.

6 Yevamos 49b.

7 14b.

8 See commentaries of Rashi and Ritva to Bava Basra ibid.

with the patriarchs, nevertheless, these communications took place on their level of prophecy. Therefore, when these sections were revealed to Moshe, it was on a higher level of prophecy than when they were originally communicated. As such, Moshe's imprint was felt on the entire Torah – having received it from Hashem on his unique level – and hence, it is referred to as “Moshe's sefer.”

But there was one exception to this rule. As we have seen, for reasons due to his personality, Bilaam could not be entrusted with a prophetic message in the normal manner, but rather, was given a script with the exact words to say – a level otherwise reserved only for Moshe Rabbeinu. As such, when Moshe subsequently received the section of Bilaam for purposes of writing it in the Torah, he did not add anything to the prophecy already received by Bilaam. All he did was transcribe it in the Torah. In this way, with no prophetic contribution from Moshe that would allow it to be called “Moshe's”, Bilaam's parsha retains its distinct identity as a section within the Torah known as “Moshe's sefer”!<sup>9</sup>

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9 Seemingly, according to this approach, the term “Bilaam's parsha” would not include the verses which were said about him, or even by him to people such as Balak etc. but rather, specifically to the prophesies that he received from Hashem which contained blessings for the Jewish people.