

Bilam's fear of success (*Parshat Balak*)

This Shabbat we read about Bilam who is hired by Balak to curse the Jewish people. On first glance it appears that Bilam is someone who is deeply spiritually flawed. Yet, alongside this, it is also clear that Bilam is spiritually gifted. In this piece I would like to reflect on Bilam's unique abilities, and then consider why someone so spiritually capable was able to make such grave mistakes.

To begin with, when the Torah introduces us to Bilam he is found in *P'tor* (Bemidbar 22:5) - which is an interesting word that, aside from possibly referring to a location, also means to 'solve' or 'interpret' – especially dreams. For example, the word *P'tar* is frequently used in various forms with reference to Yosef, the interpreter of dreams (see Bereishit 40:8, 40:16, 40:22, 41:12, 41:13, 41:15). On this basis, the Midrash (*Bemidbar Rabbah* 20:7, *Tanchuma Yashan* Balak 5) writes that Bilam originally began his career as a dream interpreter.

At the same time, there is a remarkable rabbinic teaching found in the *Sifrei* on Devarim 34:10 stating that while 'no prophet (*Navi*) arose in Israel (i.e. the Jewish people) like Moshe' (Devarim 34:10), 'within the nations (i.e. among non-Jews) a [prophet on par with Moshe] not only arose but was active – namely Bilam'. In a similar spirit, Gemara *Bava Batra* 14b informs us that Moshe actively wrote the story of Bilam in the Torah – as if to say (as the Maharal explains in his *Chiddushei Aggadot*) that Moshe regarded the words of Bilam to be valid words of prophecy and thus authentic words of Torah.

Based on these teachings it is clear that our Sages drew parallels between Bilam and Yosef (the great dreamer), as well as between Bilam and Moshe (the great prophet). Bilam is understood to be able to solve things, as well as to prophecy things. In short, Bilam was a remarkably gifted person.

However, there is one further fact that we are taught about Bilam later on in the Tanach (see Yehoshua 13:22) which is that he was a sorcerer (*Kosem*) – meaning that he was someone who performed acts that appeared to be supernatural. Admittedly, as the Midrash (ibid.) notes, Bilam was not a dream interpreter (*P'tor*), sorcerer (*Kosem*) and prophet (*Navi*) all at the same time. Still, it is hard to comprehend how someone with so many genuine spiritual gifts would wish to use them to harm others, or how someone who was capable of true prophecy would succumb to engage himself in mere sorcery.

In order for us to answer this question, I would like to refer to two different teachings about Bilam – one from Pirkei Avot 5:19, and one as shared by Rav Chaim of Volozhin (and quoted in the *Torah Temimah* on Devarim 34:10).

Pirkei Avot 5:19 compares the disciples of Bilam and Avraham, noting that the disciples of Bilam have an *Ayin Ra'ab* (a bad eye), while the disciples of Avraham have an *Ayin Tova* (a good eye).

Before explaining what all this means, it is important to note that the basis for comparing Bilam and Avraham is the fact that we are told how Avraham arose early in the morning (*Vayashkem*) to saddle his donkey (see Bereishit 22:3), while we are similarly told that Bilam was up (*Vayakam*) early in the morning to saddle his donkey (see Bemidbar 22:21). But what is the difference between arising early (*Vayashkem*) and being up early (*Vayakam*), and what does that have to do with having a good eye (*Ayin Tova*) and a bad eye (*Ayin Ra'ab*)?

It is at this point that I would like to refer to the remarks of Rav Chaim of Volozhin who notes that both the eagle and the bat know when sunrise and sunset is – but for different reasons. Eagles

are diurnal creatures who only fly during the day. Given this, they look out for sunrise to begin their flight while they look out for sunset to know to settle. In contrast, most bats are nocturnal who only fly in the night. Given this, they look out for sunrise to cease flying, while they look out for sunset to begin.

Based on these sources we are now in a position to try and make sense of Bilam. Yes, he was an incredibly spiritually gifted person. However, he had an *Ayin Ra'ab* (a bad eye) - meaning that he was scared of being spiritually successful, and instead, he looked for opportunities for failure - both in the lives of others, and in his own life. Instead of harnessing his abilities as a dream interpreter and a prophet, he preferred to be a sorcerer. Instead of using his gifts to see and seek blessing, he developed a reputation as someone who looked for faults and failure. Avraham was like an eagle who woke up early to meet the light of the day, whereas Bilam was like a bat who was up during the night, unprepared to see the light.

Marianne Williamson famously wrote: *"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, 'Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?' Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others."*

Bilam feared his success and he looked for failure. This is what it means to have an *Ayin Ra'ab*. In contrast, Avraham feared failing, and so he did whatever it took for him to be spiritually successful – and this is what it means to have an *Ayin Tova*.

Shabbat Shalom!