YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

**PARASHAT BALAK**

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**Dedicated le-ilui nishmat Henri Sueke *z”l*   
R’ Moshe ben Yaakov and Shoshana,**

**Whose shloshim falls on Friday July 3rd.**

**A much loved husband, father, son and brother,   
May the family be comforted among the mourners of Yerushalayim**

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This *shiur* is dedicated *Le-zekher Nishmat*   
Avraham Mordechai Belaciano ben Faride, z”l whose yahrzeit is Tamuz 14th  
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**I Will Bless Those Who Bless You**

**By Rav Yair Kahn**

**I. The Story and the Prophecy**

The main part of *Parashat Balak* can be divided into two sections; the narrative and the prophetic. The prophetic section must be studied thoroughly in order to interpret its messages and decipher its codes. Some sections will probably remain ambiguous until the end of days. Regarding the narrative, the Torah presents us with fascinating drama, but we are left to ponder its significance. According to our Sages, the mouth of Bilam's donkey was created at twilight of the sixth day of creation. Apparently, they viewed this episode as warranting special divine consideration. We are therefore challenged to try to discover its meaning.

I will attempt to demonstrate a relationship between the narrative section and the prophetic one. Using this method, I hope to highlight certain basic issues that I believe the Torah is trying to convey. What did Bilam attempt to accomplish? How did he try to achieve it? What was God's response? What eternal message does the Torah wish to transmit in this section?

**2. Why did Hashem Get Angry**

When reading the story, we are troubled by a basic problem. The Torah tells us:

That night, God came to Bilam and said to him, "If these men have come to invite you, you may go with them. But whatever I command you, that you shall do." When he arose in the morning, Bilam saddled his donkey and departed with the Moavite dignitaries. But God was incensed at his going; so an angel of God placed himself in his way as an adversary. (*Bamidbar* 22:20-22)

It is not clear what Bilam did to arouse God's anger. He made it very clear to Balak's emissaries that he was dependent upon God's wishes, and he refused to join Balak without divine permission. Rashi (22:20) explains that in some way, Bilam planned to deviate from the express will of God:

"But whatever I command you, that you shall do" – "But" means that against your will you shall do what I command you; nevertheless, "And Bilam went," for he thought, "Perhaps I shall lead Him astray and He will consent."

When the first group of messengers arrive, God refuses Bilam permission to join Balak, explaining that *Bnei Yisrael* are a blessed nation and should not be cursed.

God said to Bilam, "Do not go with them. You must not curse that people, for they are blessed." (*Bamidbar* 22:12)

Why, then, did Bilam repeat his request to God at the behest of the second group of messengers? Did he really believe that *Bnei Yisrael* were no longer blessed simply because Balak had sent a more impressive entourage? What did he think when God changed His mind, as it were, and allowed him to travel to Moav?

When Bilam finally embarks on his journey to Moav, God, through His heavenly angel and a verbal donkey, wishes to convey to Bilam that he has no personal freedom in this matter. Just like the donkey, he merely must repeat that which God places in his mouth (see Ramban). However, we are immediately struck by the repeated attempts leading up to Bilam's eye-opening encounter with the angel. The donkey manages to circumvent the angel twice, until she is finally brought to a stop on the third encounter. What is the Torah trying to tell us by reporting the failed attempts? Is the Torah informing us that God sent an incompetent angel (or perhaps a good baseball player) who managed to connect only after two strikes? Or is the Torah educating us regarding the stubbornness of donkeys?

**III. The Three Encounters**

Let us take a closer look at the angel's two failed attempts to stop Bilam. In the first encounter, the angel blocks the path with sword drawn. The donkey manages to continue by leaving the path, venturing into the field and circumventing the danger. Bilam then beats the donkey to return him to the path.

We already noted that the donkey's miraculous speech indicates that just as the donkey merely verbalizes the sounds that God places in her mouth, so too Bilam has no choice but to repeat that which is put in his mouth by the Almighty. We therefore may assume that the donkey in the entire episode represents Bilam. (Bilam himself may be playing the role of Balak). In fact, doesn't the donkey act exactly like Bilam? God prohibits him from placing a curse on *Bnei Yisrael* because they are blessed. However, instead of stopping, Bilam tries to circumvent God's will and paradoxically avoid the Omnipresent's eye, in order to place a curse the Jewish People. Bilam at this juncture believes his words have power independent of God. If only he can escape the path and the view of God, he will succeed in bringing calamity on the Jewish nation.

Rashi already alluded to Bilam's heresy at the beginning of our *parasha*. When the first entourage from Moav arrives, God appears to Bilam in a dream and asks: "What do these people want of you?" (*Bamidbar* 22:9). Rashi comments:

He [Hashem] came to mislead him. He [Bilam] said, “Apparently, at times not everything is known to Him” ... [and therefore Bilam thought,] “I shall find a time that I will be able to curse them and He will not understand."

The first prophecy placed in Bilam's mouth counters this idea explicitly. God notes the absurdity of this position as He forces Bilam to proclaim:

How can I curse who God has not cursed, how doom when the Lord has not doomed? (*Bamidbar* 23:8)

It is preposterous even to entertain the possibility of bringing a curse upon a nation blessed by God. Moreover, it is ridiculous to attempt to escape the presence of God:

Where can I escape from Your spirit? Where can I flee from Your Presence? If I ascend to the heaven, You are there; if I descend to Sheol, You are there too. (*Tehillim* 139:7-8)

The angel tries to stop Bilam a second time. He chooses a place enclosed by fences on both sides; there is no possibility of straying from the path. Nevertheless, the donkey manages to pass the angel by squeezing to one side of the path in order to avoid the sword of the celestial messenger. If we continue our approach, viewing the donkey as symbolizing Bilam, it seems that the Torah is hinting at a second tactic Bilam employs. Even if he cannot hide from God and must remain on the path, he may nonetheless succeed in sidestepping God's will. He might be successful in finding some alternative that will enable him to place a curse on *Bnei Yisrael*.

Again, we find that Rashi detected Bilam's position at the beginning of the *parasha*. When the second group of emissaries arrives and God assents to Bilam's request, allowing him to travel to Moav, He warns Bilam that he is free to say only that which God will place in his mouth. According to Rashi (22:20), Bilam embarks on the journey because he believes that he will succeed in somehow influencing this divine decision, and thereby be allowed to place a curse on *Bnei Yisrael* - "Perhaps I shall convince Him astray and He will consent."

Bilam’s second prophecy contains an explicit rejection of this possibility. Before this prophecy, Bilam makes a renewed attempt at placing a curse on the Jewish People, although he has already been informed that they are a blessed nation. Balak tries to help him by finding a new location from which only a segment of *Bnei Yisrael* can be viewed.

Then Balak said to him, "Come with me to another place from which you can see - you will see only a portion of them; you will not see all of them - curse them for me from there." (*Bamidbar* 23:13)

Bilam had been forced to concede that the Jewish People as an entirety, a complete organic entity, is blessed. But, he thought, it may be possible to sidestep this problem by placing a curse on a limited section of the nation. Although the nation as a unit is blessed, it is reasonable to assume that this does not include every individual. Nevertheless, Bilam's second attempt at altering the will of God is also rebuffed.

God is not man to be capricious, or mortal to change His mind. Would He speak and not act, promise and not fulfill? My message was to bless: When He blesses, I cannot reverse it. (*Bamidbar* 23:19-20)

The second prophesy states unequivocally that the divine decision to bless the Jewish People remains intact, and the tactics of Balak and Bilam will not succeed in qualifying the divine will.

Despite being beaten for a second time, Bilam prods the donkey to continue the journey. The donkey continues until she meets God's messenger for the third and final time. She finds herself totally surrounded, with no possibility of avoiding the angel's sword. She stops dead in her tracks and refuses to advance. She has finally acknowledged that she cannot but comply with the will of God as expressed by the heavenly angel.

Similarly, we find that prior to his third prophecy, in spite of Balak's prodding, Bilam submits himself to God's will.

Now Bilam, seeing that it pleased Hashem to bless Israel, did not, as on previous occasions, go in search of omens, but turned his face toward the wilderness. (*Bamidbar* 24:1)

It is only at this point that Bilam finally surrenders himself to the Almighty. He can neither escape God's presence nor alter His will. He must humbly accept the divine decision.

**IV. Of Blessings and Curses**

At this juncture, we are confronted by a basic problem that lies at the very core of our *parasha*. How are we to understand the entire concept of blessing and curse? Why should human utterance have any significance? If one is worthy, we would expect divine justice to bestow blessings upon him, whether or not humanly blessed. The reverse is true with respect to one who is unworthy. In what way can man intervene and influence the Almighty? What role is played by the human word? What was the basis of Bilam's power to bless and curse, if ultimately only the divine will is relevant?

A complete discussion of this difficult topic is beyond the scope of this *shiur*. However, I would like to present a *gemara* (*Avoda Zara* 4a-b) that seems to address this issue.

Our Rabbis taught: "God is angry every day" (*Tehillim* 7:12), but how long does His anger last? - A moment. And how long is a moment? - One 53,848th of an hour is a moment. No creature could ever precisely fix this moment except Bilam the wicked, of whom it is written, "Who knew the knowledge of the Most High" (*Bamidbar* 24:16). Is that possible? He did not know the mind of his animal; how could he have known the mind of the Most High!?... What, then, is the meaning of "He knew the knowledge of the Most High?" He knew the exact hour when the Holy One, blessed be He, is angry. This indeed, is what the Prophet is alluding to when he says (*Mikha* 6:5), "O my people, remember now what Balak king of Moav suggested, and what Bilam son of Beor answered him from Shittim unto Gilgal; that you may know the righteousness of the Lord." Said R. Eleazar: The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Yisrael: O my people, see how many righteous acts I did for you, in that I abstained from anger all those days, for had I been in anger, none would have remained or been spared of Yisrael. This, too, is what Bilam refers to when he says, "How can I curse, seeing that God does not curse, and how can I be wrathful, seeing that Hashem has not been wrathful?" (23:8). And how long does His wrath last? A moment [*rega*]. And how long is a *rega*? Said Amemar (others say, Rabina): As long as it takes to utter this word. And whence do we know that His wrath lasts a moment? Because it is written, "For his anger is for a moment, His favor is for a life-time"... When is He wrathful? Said Abaye: During the first three hours, when the comb of the cock is white. And is it not white at all other times? At other times, it has red streaks, at that time there are no red streaks in it.

Without attempting to interpret the details introduced in this passage, it seems clear that Bilam's power to curse was associated by our Sages with the "*Midat Ha-Din*," the divine attribute focusing on absolute justice and truth. According to the above *gemara*, this attribute finds its purest expression during a fleeting moment within the first three hours of the day. At that instant, Bilam succeeded in registering a curse.

It appears that *Chazal* understood the concept of blessing and curse within the parameters of "*Midat Ha-Din*" (strict Justice) and "*Midat Ha-Rachamim*" (the divine attribute of Mercy). These two attributes, which seem contradictory from the limited perspective of finite man, somehow coexist within God, and together describe His involvement with the world. A blessing is ineffective where it is totally unwarranted. It can only appeal to the "*Midat Ha-Rachamim*," which may result in a response reflecting God's compassion and loving-kindness. Conversely, a curse merely appeals to the "*Midat Ha-Din*" and demands an uncompromising and exacting response, but does not cross the boundary of justice.

Although radically different, *Din* and *Rachamim* are legitimate ways through which Hashem relates to the world. Therefore, blessings and curses that are effective only within the parameters of *Din* and *Rachamim* reflect valid options. (Admittedly there is a secondary question, which goes beyond the scope of today's *shiur*, of how man can influence the attribute applied by Hashem.)

**V. Magen Avraham**

Rashi (22:21) notes that the impossibility of placing a curse on Yisrael is rooted in our father Avraham.

"And [Bilam] saddled his donkey" - God said: Scoundrel, Avraham their father has already preceded you, as it says (*Bereishit* 22), "And Avraham awoke early in the morning and saddled his donkey."

According to our approach, it is specifically Avraham and the legacy he imparted to his children that protect them from the "*Midat Ha-Din*." After all, Avraham is renowned for his kindness and sensitivity.

Give kindness to Avraham, which you have promised to our fathers from days of yore. (*Mikha* 7:20)

God shows his compassion and loving-kindness to those who act with kindness.

With a kind man You will perform kindness. (II *Shmuel* 22:26)

Therefore, the children of Avraham, who continue his legacy, are protected from harsh expressions of exacting justice. Hence, they may be blessed, but can never be cursed.

In fact, when Avram is chosen, Hashem says to him: "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you and I will make your name great and you shall be a blessing. And I shall bless those that bless you and those that curse you, I shall curse" (*Bereishit* 12:2-3). These *pesukim* seem to directly counter Bilam, who is called upon by Balak to curse the descendants of Avraham because he knows "that whosoever you bless is blessed and whosoever you curse is cursed" (22:6).

The *pesukim* in *Bereishit* are discussed in a *gemara* in *Pesachim* that discusses the beginning of the *amida* (prayer service):

Reish Lakish said: "I will make you a great nation" – this is a reference to "the Lord of Avraham." "And I will bless you" – this is a reference to "the Lord of Yitzchak." "And I will make your name great" – this is a reference to "the Lord of Yaakov." Perhaps the *berakha* should end with them all? Therefore it says, "and you shall be a blessing" – the *berakha* will end with you [Avraham], and not with them all. (117b).

Although the beginning of the *amida* mentions all of the forefathers, the signature of the *berakha* is “*Magen Avraham*” (the Protector of Avraham). Perhaps it is specifically the legacy of Avraham that protected his descendants from various expressions of *din*. It is specifically Avraham, who embodied compassion and kindness that helped protect Yisrael from the curses of Bilam.