



GEULAS YISRAEL

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Lost in Sefer Bereishit: Bilaam's Defeat

The Gemara in Berakhot (12b) discusses the selection of the third section of *Keri'at Shema*. To fulfill the daily obligation of remembering *Yetziat Mitzrayim*, Chazal expanded *Keri'at Shema* to include a Torah passage that explicitly recalls our liberation. In the end, they selected the concluding section of *Parashat Shelach*, which discusses Tzitzit but closes with the familiar declaration:

“אני ה' אלוהיכם אשר הוצאתי אתכם מארץ מצרים”

“I am the Lord your G-d, who brought you out of the land of Egypt.”

The Gemara poses a striking question. Why did Chazal not choose Bilaam's prophecies, which mention *Yetziat Mitzrayim* not once, but twice? In his vision, Bilaam describes the Exodus in bold, elevated terms:

“א-ל מוציאם ממצרים כתועפות ראם לו”

“G-d who brought them out of Egypt—His strength like the towering horns of a wild ox.”

The Gemara ultimately disqualifies Bilaam's section because it is too long. Including his prophecies in *Keri'at Shema* would have been considered a *tircha de-tzibbura*—a burdensome addition for the *tzibbur*.

Yet, the very fact that his words were considered reveals something deeper. Many verses in the Torah mention *Yetziat*

Mitzrayim, but Bilaam's prophecy touches on a more fundamental level. The themes woven through his vision are so essential that, in principle, they might have warranted inclusion—were it not for technical reasons that ruled them out.

OBSESSED WITH BEREISHIT

Bilaam shows a strange fixation on Sefer Bereishit and the story of our Avot. He rises early to begin his campaign against the Jewish people, personally saddling his donkey instead of delegating the task. This imagery is unmistakable—he is echoing Avraham's journey to the Akeidah. Like Avraham, he wakes at dawn, readies his own animal, and will meet a *malach* emissary who might block his path.

Before he even climbs the desert mountain, Bilaam tries to climb into Avraham's footsteps.

When he arrives, Bilaam begins his prophecy with a cryptic line:

“כִּי מֵרֹאשׁ צָרִים אֶרְאֶנּוּ, וּמִגְבָּעוֹת אֶשְׁוֹרְנוּ”

“From the tops of rocks I see him, from the hills I behold him.”

Literally, the verse shows Bilaam standing atop a summit, looking down at the nation he wants to weaken. Yet Chazal see a deeper meaning. Rashi explains, “אני מסתכל בראשיתם,”

“I look to their beginnings, to the root of their origin.” Bilaam wasn’t just surveying the land; he was probing the spiritual roots of the Jewish people, tracing their foundation all the way back to Sefer Bereishit. Somehow, he believed that by uncovering their origin story, he could disrupt their destiny.

SEVEN ALTARS AND A RIGHTEOUS DEATH

Bilaam’s fixation with *Sefer Bereishit* surfaces once again in his demand for altars. He repeatedly instructs Balak’s men to construct seven altars, hoping they will serve as the spiritual platform for his intended curse. As Rashi notes, Bilaam was deeply aware of the seven *mizbeichot* described in *Sefer Bereishit*—four built by Avraham, one by Yitzchak, and two by Yaakov. By replicating these seven altars, he hoped to tap into the foundation of Jewish identity. His strategy was to first confront our spiritual legacy and afterwards to curse our people and our history.

As Bilaam begins to sense that his efforts to derail Jewish destiny are failing, he utters a surprising wish:

“תָּמוּת נֶפֶשִׁי מוֹת יְשָׁרִים”

“Let me die the death of the righteous.”

The term *Yesharim*—the upright—is one of the titles Chazal assign to our *Avot*. According to the Midrash, as Bilaam realizes his plan is unraveling, he expresses a longing for the fate of the *Avot*. He can’t seem to get *Sefer Bereishit*—and the lives of the *Avot*—out of his mind. He awakens early, as Avraham did. He personally saddles his donkey, mirroring Avraham’s journey to the *Akeidah*. He studies the roots of Jewish history before attempting to curse us. He erects seven altars to parallel the altars built by Avraham, Yitzchak, and

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Yaakov. And as his failure becomes clear, he yearns for an end like theirs.

Sefer Bereishit and the lives of our *Avot* are circling constantly through Bilam’s imagination.

ANTI-AVRAHAM

Chazal noticed the striking parallels between Avraham and Bilaam and drew a sharp contrast between them. They taught that whoever has certain traits is counted among Avraham’s disciples, while those with opposite traits belong to Bilaam’s followers: “כל מי שיש בידו שלשה דברים הללו, מתלמידיו של אברהם אבינו. ושלשה דברים אחרים, מתלמידיו של בלעם הרשע. עין טובה, ורוח נמוכה, ונפש שפלה – מתלמידיו של אברהם אבינו. עין רעה, ורוח גבוהה, ונפש רחבה – מתלמידיו של בלעם הרשע.”

Whoever possesses these three traits is among the disciples of Avraham. Whoever possesses three other traits is among the disciples of Bilaam. A generous eye, a humble spirit, and a modest soul—these are the disciples of Avraham. A jealous eye, an arrogant spirit, and a greedy soul—these are the disciples of Bilam the wicked. (Avot 5:19)

In this way, Bilaam stands as the anti-Avraham. His actions embody the opposite of Avraham’s virtues. Where Avraham shows

humility, generosity, and purity of heart, Bilaam displays arrogance, envy, and selfish ambition.

Though Bilaam is obsessed with our Avot, he becomes their dark reflection—a twisted mirror image of all they represented.

BALAK, AS WELL

It seems that Balak and his emissaries were also deeply engaged with *Sefer Bereishit*. When Balak hires Bilam, he declares:

כִּי יָדַעְתִּי אֶת אֲשֶׁר תְּבָרֵךְ מְבָרֵךְ וְאֲשֶׁר תָּאָר יֵאָר
“יֵאָר”

“For I know that he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed.”

The wording here echoes Hashem’s promise to Avraham:

וְאֶבְרָכָה מְבָרְכֶיךָ וּמְקַלְלֶיךָ אָאָר

“I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse.”

It was not only Bilaam who sought to understand the foundations of *Sefer Bereishit*. Balak, too, recognized that the key to overcoming the Jewish people lay hidden within the ancient promises made in that sefer.

Why is *Sefer Bereishit* at the heart of this struggle? Why is it the key to the future and victory of the Jewish people? Why do Bilaam and Balak seek to outmaneuver the Avot by retracing and mimicking their journeys and experiences?

What was Bilaam thinking?

UNCHOSEN?

Bilaam was no fool. He claimed to be a prophet who understood Hashem’s will. The story suggests this was empty boasting, but even without prophecy, recent history was clear. The Jewish people were Hashem’s chosen, marked by supernatural miracles. Hashem had brought the mighty empire of Egypt to its knees and split the roaring sea.

He spoke from heaven and sent down heavenly bread to sustain us through a perilous forty-year journey in the desert. The fierce warriors of Canaan trembled before us. We had defeated the powerful king Sichon and toppled the giant Og.

So what was Bilaam thinking? How could he believe that Moav—a weakened nation recently defeated by Sichon—could overcome us?

Bilaam was betting that the course of history had changed. Maybe we were once chosen, but clearly we had betrayed that chosenness. Twice we defied Hashem—first by crafting a golden idol, and again by rejecting the Land He promised us. We were condemned to wander the desert for forty years, until a whole generation passed away. Perhaps we had been chosen once, but the generation that left Egypt no longer lived up to that legacy.

A new generation arrived, bringing fresh hope. Maybe this time, faith and covenant would endure. Yet sadly, it seemed like the old story repeated itself—complaints about water and manna, popular uprisings longing to return to Egypt, even complaints against Hashem Himself. Once again, the people acted as if they were no longer chosen.

This was exactly Bilaam’s wager. Perhaps we had once been chosen, but history had moved on. Hashem had bypassed our people. We were stuck east of the Jordan, unable to enter Israel freely. Trapped in local conflicts with no clear victory. The old leadership had passed away, and Moshe was forbidden from the Land. History was shifting, and the story of Jewish chosenness seemed to be slipping away.

A NEW ORIGIN STORY

Bilaam saw an opportunity to craft an

alternate narrative of redemptive history. Perhaps Hashem was ready to restart the story—with a new prophet and a new people. After all, the Moabites traced their lineage to Lot. Maybe another branch of Shem ben Noach's family would carry the divine legacy forward.

Bilaam was the first to suggest what later became known as “Replacement theory”—the idea that Hashem had rejected us as His chosen people and selected another nation instead. This claim, echoed by various religions over time, finds its earliest expression in Bilaam's words.

To challenge Bereishit, Bilaam retraced its footsteps. He studied Sefer Bereishit to grasp the origins of the chosen people. He built altars, hoping to ignite a new narrative of chosenness and redemption.

To his dismay, Bilaam discovers that our covenant is unshakable—sealed in salt and beyond decay.

He laments:

“מה אקוב לא קבה קל”

“What can I curse? God has not cursed; what can I denounce? The Lord has not done anything evil.”

The Midrash explains that Bilaam expected Hashem to be angry with the rebellious Jewish people and to curse them. He imagined his own curse would echo a divine wrath already in motion—amplifying judgment and sealing their fate.

But when he realizes that even after all our sins, Hashem still loves us, Bilaam grasps the futility of his plan. If Hashem refuses to curse us—even after our betrayals—then Bilaam has no power to do so. His voice is meaningless if Heaven remains silent.

He is stunned to see that despite religious

failings, Hashem remains devoted to His chosen people:

“לא הביט און ביעקב ולא ראה עמל בישראל ה’

אלוקיו עמו ותרועת מלך בו”

“He has not looked upon wrongdoing in Jacob, nor seen trouble in Israel; the Lord his God is with him, and the shout of the king is among them.”

Bilaam had naively assumed that after our sins, Hashem would regard us with disfavor.

He is shattered when he realizes that even amid our spiritual struggles, Hashem does not turn away or condemn us.

A MESSAGE FOR HISTORY

It is this unraveling of Bilaam's gamble that gives his prophecy its enduring historical and religious power. For this reason, Chazal considered including it in *Keri'at Shema* and would have done so if not for practical considerations.

Beyond recalling *Yetziat Mitzrayim*, Bilaam uncovers that our covenant with *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* is eternal and unbreakable. His revelation stands as a refutation to all who, throughout history, have claimed that Am Yisrael was replaced by the passing of time.

Many have followed in Bilaam's footsteps, but history has proven their claims wrong. We were chosen by Hashem thousands of years ago. Sometimes we failed to live up to our mission. Sometimes we were expelled from our Land. None of this cancels Jewish history. None of this undoes our chosenness. We are not just chosen; we are His children. A father never abandons his child. ■



Rabbi Taragin's newest sefer entitled **“To be Holy but Human: Reflections upon my Rebbe, Rav Yehuda Amital (Kodesh)”** is now available at: mtaraginbooks.com and in bookstores