



GEULAS YISRAEL

RABBI MOSHE TARAGIN
RAM YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
MAGGID SHIUR ALL PARSHA AND ALL DAF, OU.ORG

Chasing Avraham

Bilaam’s fascination with Sefer Bereishit and the world of the Avot is striking. Before he even utters his prophecies and curses, he seems intent on retracing their footsteps. Rising early in the morning, he personally saddles his donkey rather than delegating the task. Unmistakably, Bilaam is reenacting Avraham’s journey to the Akeidah. Like Avraham, he rises at dawn, prepares his own animal, and sets out on a mission that will ultimately be interrupted by a malach.

Bilaam tries to place himself within the story of Avraham.

Upon arriving at the vantage point from which he hopes to curse the Jewish people, Bilaam begins with a cryptic declaration:

“כִּי מֵרֹאשׁ צְרִיִם אֶרְאֶנּוּ, וּמִגְּבוּעוֹת אֶשְׁרֹנּוּ”

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

On the surface, Bilaam is describing his vantage point as he gazes down upon the Jewish camp from his mountaintop. Chazal,

however, understood these words differently. Rashi explains: “אני מסתכל בראשיתם ובתחלתם — שרשיהם” “I look to their origins, to the roots from which they emerged.”

Bilaam was not merely surveying our nation. He was searching for the source of our strength. Looking beyond the desert encampment before him, he turned his gaze back toward the beginnings of Jewish history and the figures who first set that history in motion.

Bilaam’s fascination with the Avot surfaces again in his repeated demand for seven mizbeichot. As Rashi notes, he was keenly aware of the seven mizbeichot erected by the Avot—four by Avraham, one by Yitzchak, and two by Yaakov. By constructing seven corresponding altars, Bilaam hoped to draw upon the same spiritual foundations upon which our nation had been built.

As his efforts begin to unravel, Bilaam voices a surprising aspiration:

“תָּמוּת נַפְשִׁי מוֹת יְשָׁרִים”

“Let me die the death of the upright.”

The term yesharim is one of the descriptions Chazal associate with the Avot. According to the Midrash, Bilaam’s final wish reflected a growing recognition that he could neither escape nor overcome their legacy. The Avot, whose footsteps he had tried to imitate, now became the figures whose fate he envied.

By now a pattern has emerged. Throughout the narrative, Bilaam’s thoughts repeatedly

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return to the Avot. He studies their beginnings, recreates their altars, echoes their actions, and ultimately longs for their destiny. Why is Bilaam so preoccupied with the Avot?

The answer lies in Bilaam's ambition. He was not merely trying to curse us. He was attempting to replace us. Bilaam imagined himself as the founder of a new chosen nation. That is why his attention repeatedly returns to the Avot and, above all, to Avraham. He studied the origins of our chosenness in search of the formula that had created our covenant and our destiny. If he could uncover the secret of why Avraham had been chosen, perhaps he could claim that role for himself.

Yet despite all his gifts, Bilaam failed to understand what actually made Avraham worthy of becoming the father of a chosen nation.

THE LIMITS OF PROPHECY

What does Bilaam miss? Why is he unable to become the founder of a new chosen nation the way Avraham did? He possessed extraordinary gifts. He was a prophet, and he obviously had keen historical sensitivity. What was his fatal mistake?

Firstly, he was theologically reckless. He declared himself:

יָדַע דַּעַת עָלַיִן

“One who knows the knowledge of the Most High.”

He allowed his prophetic abilities to swell his sense of self.

Avraham also hears the voice of Hashem. Avraham was first to discover the One God who had eluded humanity for nearly two thousand years.

In fact, because of Avraham's close relationship with Hashem, he feels compelled to challenge what appears to be divine injustice. How could the entire population of Sedom be destroyed?

הַשֹּׁפֵט כָּל הָאָרֶץ לֹא יַעֲשֶׂה מִשְׁפָּט

“Shall the Judge of all the earth not do justice?”

Avraham pleads for their salvation and enters into a remarkable negotiation with Hashem.

Yet even as he questions, Avraham never assumes that he fully understands the divine plan. He recognizes that however much he knows of Hashem's will, the divine mystery always extends beyond human comprehension. Avraham frames his theological challenge with humility and with the acknowledgment that

וְאֲנֹכִי עָפָר וָאֵפֶר

“I am but dust and ashes.”

Unlike Avraham, Bilaam never submits to the divine mystery. He never accepts the hierarchy between human understanding and divine knowledge. Intoxicated by his prophetic gifts, he presents himself as the ultimate knower of God's will. He attempts to retrace Avraham's path toward Hashem, but without Avraham's humility.

He is taught a devastating and almost comical lesson. His own donkey, bereft of intellect or spiritual awareness, perceives a heavenly messenger that Bilaam himself cannot see. The “great prophet” is reduced to arguing with his donkey, unaware that a malach is blocking their path. The scene borders on farce. The

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once-mighty visionary becomes a figure of ridicule, outmaneuvered by his own animal.

Bilaam is forced to confront how little he truly understands of Heaven and its workings. Whatever prophetic vision he possessed was not his own achievement, but a gift granted by Hashem. And a gift can be withdrawn. The heavenly insight in which Bilaam took such pride could just as easily be withheld from him and granted to a donkey.

Humility in the presence of Hashem is not merely a moral prerequisite for encountering Him. It is the natural consequence of that encounter. The more deeply we perceive Hashem, the more aware we become of the vast distance between Hashem and human understanding. The more we know, the more we recognize how much remains beyond our grasp.

In this light, Bilaam's theological arrogance reveals how little he truly understands of Hashem. Ironically, his confidence in his own knowledge exposes the severe limits of his knowledge of Hashem.

THE MORAL DISCOVERY

But Bilaam misses something else. Chazal detect not only theological error but moral failure. The Mishnah in Avot places Bilaam and Avraham side by side and measures them by the qualities of their character—and Bilaam comes up lacking:

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+972 54 883 6328
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איזו היא דרך ישרה שידבק בה האדם? ... כל מי שישי 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 Avinu, while whoever possesses three opposite traits is among the disciples of the wicked Bilaam. A good eye, a humble spirit, and a modest soul are the traits of the disciples of Avraham Avinu. An evil eye, an arrogant spirit, and an expansive appetite are the traits of the disciples of the wicked Bilaam.” (Avot 5:19)

Bilaam is greedy. He repeatedly hints at the reward he expects to receive for his services. He is arrogant — not only in the way he views Hashem, but in the way he treats other people. Finally, he possesses an evil eye, constantly searching for flaws — whether in individuals or in nations — that he can condemn and target with his supernatural powers. Rather than searching for redeeming qualities, he searches for weaknesses to expose.

Again, this is not merely a moral failing. It reflects a distorted understanding of Hashem's presence in the world. Avraham did not discover Hashem through prophecy, nor through scientific inquiry. He encountered Hashem through the moral fabric woven into creation. He beheld a world delicately balanced to sustain life and promote human welfare. As Chazal describe it, he saw a birah doleket — a palace illuminated with light and life.

Avraham intuited that a world so intricately calibrated toward life could not be accidental. It pointed to a Creator. More importantly, it pointed to a Creator who is moral, compassionate, and invested in the welfare of His world. Avraham discovered Hashem through the

moral spirit that Hashem infused into creation.

And this discovery compelled Avraham not merely to contemplate morality, but to become an agent of moral goodness. He did not wear two separate hats. He was not a part-time philosopher and a part-time do-gooder. These were two expressions of a single identity. Avraham discovered a moral God and therefore felt called to bring moral blessing into the world.

Avraham understood that without moral action, our knowledge of Hashem remains incomplete. There are limits to how much of Hashem we can grasp through intellect alone, and even through prophecy. Yet when we act with compassion, justice, kindness, and responsibility, we encounter Hashem in a different way. We do not merely think about Him; we strive to resemble Him. The more we act in His image, the more deeply we understand Hashem who stands behind those values.

This is precisely what Bilaam failed to grasp. He sought Hashem through prophecy, convinced that spiritual knowledge alone could bring him close to God. He never understood that without moral refinement and moral action, his knowledge of Hashem would remain shallow and incomplete.

WHY BILAAM FAILED

Bilaam was attempting to found a new chosen nation and, in his mind, replace the original one. He gambled that after forty years in the desert and the death of the generation that had left Egypt, the nation of Hashem might be supplanted. Perhaps history could be rebooted. Perhaps he could retrace Avraham's footsteps and succeed where others had failed. After all, he was a prophet whose stature, in certain respects, rivaled that of Moshe.

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But Bilaam made two fatal errors. First, he failed to understand the limits of human comprehension of Hashem. Rather than being humbled by his encounter with God, he became inflated by it. Second, he failed to recognize that moral behavior is itself a pathway to knowing Hashem.

Without humility in the face of Hashem and without moral and ethical refinement, he saw very little of Hashem—ultimately less than his own donkey.

According to Chazal, Bilaam died on the battlefield, an anonymous corpse among the fallen soldiers of Midyan. In the end, all his prophecy amounted to very little. He sought to become a new Avraham yet lacked the qualities that had made Avraham worthy of founding our nation in the first place. ■



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