YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**STUDENT SUMMARIES OF Sichot of the Roshei Yeshiva**

**Parashat Balak**

**Sicha of HarAV Yaakov Medan**

**"The Lord Your God Turned the Curse into a Blessing to You"**

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The story of Balak and Bilam is an esoteric and supernatural story, one that seems to deal with a unique event that will never recur. Throughout the story, we encounter miracles and marvels – the angel of the Lord stands in the way with his sword extended, the ass opens its mouth and speaks, and more.

In what way is this miraculous event connected to our lives? What does the story come to teach us? Moreover, we must try to understand the matter of the curse turning into a blessing.

Two enemies of Israel, Bilam and Balak, are presented to us as two people with very different spiritual worlds. Balak asks of Bilam:

Come now therefore, I pray you, curse me this people; for they are too mighty for me; perhaps I shall prevail, that we may smite them, and that I may drive them out of the land; for I know that he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed. (*Bamidbar* 22:6)

Bilam, who perceives himself as a prophet of God, replies:

And Bilam rose up in the morning, and said to the princes of Balak: Get you into your land; for the Lord refuses to give me leave to go with you. (*Bamidbar* 22:13)

Bilam is sure that he cannot go against the word of God and use his own powers against God's commandments, and he repeats this idea throughout the story:

If Balak would give me his house full of silver and gold, I cannot go beyond the word of the Lord, to do either good or bad of mine own mind; what the Lord speaks, that will I speak. (*Bamidbar* 24:13)

Balak, however, disagrees. He knows that Bilam has spiritual powers: "For I know that he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed," and he believes that he can use them even against God's commands.

There seems to be room for Balak's thinking. In studying *Massekhet* *Gittin*, we noted the distinction between agency (*shelichut*) and authority (*harsha'a*). An agent serves as the hand of the party who sent him; he represents him in all matters. In contrast, there is another model: A person authorizes his agent to perform a certain action, which will be attributed to him. In this case, the agent is a distinct and independent entity. This idea is found in the law relating to the nullification of a *get* (writ of divorce). Rabban Gamliel enacted (*Gittin* 32) that if a husband appointed an agent to deliver a *get* to his wife, he can only cancel the agency in the presence of the agent. After a person appoints an agent to divorce his wife, that agent has full freedom of action to divorce the woman. This is how Balak perceived Bilam: God gave Bilam certain spiritual powers, which he could use independently, and it is therefore within his capability to curse Israel.

One of the roles of a prophet is to bless and curse, but it is clear that the prophets of Israel fulfill that role as agents of God and that they cannot act against His will. Elisha cursed the forty-two children, and his curse worked:

And he went up from there to Bet-El; and as he was going up by the way, there came forth little children out of the city, and mocked him, and said to him: Go up, you baldhead; go up, you baldhead. And he looked behind him and saw them, and cursed them in the name of the Lord. And there came forth two she-bears out of the wood, and tore forty and two children of them. (II *Melakhim* 2:23-24)

So also is it stated in the *gemara* in *Makkot*:

R. Abahu said: The curse of a sage, even if uttered conditionally, comes true. (*Makkot* 11a)

But it is not clear that this is also the case with Bilam, a non-Jewish prophet. Balak believes that Bilam can act on his own by way of his own powers. A similar process, by way of which people distinguish between God's agents and the source of their authority, God Himself, is described by the Rambam in *Hilkhot Avoda Zara*:

In this manner, the people began to make images in temples, under trees, and on the tops of mountains and hills. People would gather together and bow down to them and the [false prophets] would say: This image is the source of benefit or harm. It is appropriate to serve it and fear it…Thus, these practices spread throughout the world. People would serve images with strange practices - one more distorted than the other - offer sacrifices to them, and bow down to them. As the years passed, [God's] glorious and awesome name was forgotten by the entire population. [It was no longer part of] their speech or thought, and they no longer knew Him. Thus, all the common people, the women, and the children would know only the image of wood or stone and the temples of stone to which they were trained from their childhood to bow down and serve, and in whose name they swore. (Rambam, *Hilkhot Avoda Zara* 1:2)

It seems, however, that the logic behind Balak's thinking is found in our *parasha.* Three times the Torah describes the act of offering sacrifices to God:

And Bilam said to Balak: Build me here seven altars, and prepare me here seven bullocks and seven rams. And Balak did as Bilam had spoken; and Balak and Bilam offered on every altar a bullock and a ram. (*Bamidbar* 23:1-2)

Balak thought that if sacrifices were offered to God, He would be appeased and agree to Bilam's cursing of Israel. He failed to understand that God does not do injustice because of the sweet savor that rises up from sacrifices.

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The *gemara* (*Bava Batra* 15a) compares *Parashat Balak* to the book of *Iyov*, stating that both of them were written by Moshe Rabbeinu. We also find that Bilam and Iyov were partners in the counseling of "Come, let us deal wisely with them" (*Shemot* 1:10):

R. Chiyya bar said in the name of R. Simai: Three were involved in that counsel: Bilam, Iyov, and Yitro. (*Sota* 11a)

Let us try to understand the comparison. At the beginning of the book of *Iyov* it says:

And it was so, when the days of their feasting were gone about, that Iyov sent and sanctified them, and rose up early in the morning, **and offered burnt-offerings** according to the number of them all; for Iyov said: **It may be that my sons have sinned,** and blasphemed God in their hearts. (*Iyov* 1:5)

It seems that Iyov's entire life revolved around cursing God. His wife says to him: "Blaspheme God and die" (*Iyov* 2:9). He suspects his sons of having blasphemed God. Later in the book, he himself does that.

Iyov had seven sons, and for each of them he offered a sacrifice. Iyov thinks that if his sons sinned, he can atone for them by bringing sacrifices. Balak, too, thinks that God is willing to change his mind if sacrifices are offered to Him. Just as the story of Balak deals with the attempt to curse Israel, the book of *Iyov* deals with the blaspheming of God.

We learn an important lesson from this comparison: Israel and God are united, and therefore the attempt to curse Israel is identical in its severity to the attempt to blaspheme the Master of the universe! This also follows from the description of the curses of Golyat the Pelishti:

And he stood and cried to the armies of Israel, and said to them: Why do you come out to set your battle in array? … And the Pelishti said: I do taunt the armies of Israel this day… For who is this uncircumcised Pelishti, that he should have taunted the armies of the living God? … But I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have taunted. (I *Shmuel* 17)

The term "the armies of Israel," which Golyat taunted, describes both God and the people of Israel.

The same *gemara* in *Bava Batra* cited above also draws a comparison between Iyov and Avraham. Iyov over the course of his life lost his sons and lost his property. Avraham as well was commanded to offer his son as a burnt-offering, and could have suffered like Iyov, had he sacrificed Yitzchak. The verses evoke comparison:

And Avraham rose early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and Yitzchak his son; and he cleaved the wood for the burnt-offering, and rose up, and went to the place of which God had told him. (*Bereishit* 22:3)

And Bilam rose up in the morning, and saddled his ass, and went with the princes of Moav… Now he was riding upon his ass, and his two servants were with him. (*Bamidbar* 22:21-22)

The *midrashim* draw comprehensive comparisons between the story of the binding of Yitzchak and the stories of Bilam and Iyov. There is, however, an important difference between the various stories. In the end, Avraham did not sacrifice his son Yitzchak as a burnt-offering, but rather worshiped God in other ways. Avraham was able to understand that the service of God has various and extensive expressions, and not just the offering of a sacrifice to God.

The *haftara* for *Parashat Balak* also seeks to convey a similar message:

O My people, what have I done to you? And wherein have I wearied you? Testify against Me. For I brought you up out of the land of Egypt, and redeemed you out of the house of bondage, and I sent before you Moshe, Aharon, and Miryam. O My people, remember now what Balak king of Moav devised, and what Bilam the son of Beor answered him; from Shitim to Gilgal, that you may know the righteous acts of the Lord. With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before Him with burnt-offerings, with calves of a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? It has been told you, O man, what is good, **and what the Lord does require of you: only to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.** (*Mikha* 6:3-8)

Indeed, this is a message that all the prophets try to convey:

To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices to Me? says the Lord; I am full of the burnt-offerings of rams, and the fat of fed beasts; and I delight not in the blood of bullocks, or of lambs, or of he-goats… Wash you, make you clean, put away the evil of your doings from before My eyes, cease to do evil. Learn to do well; seek justice, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow. (*Yeshayahu* 1:11-17)

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Add your burnt-offerings to your sacrifices, and eat you flesh. For I spoke not to your fathers, nor commanded them in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, concerning burnt-offerings or sacrifices; but this thing I commanded them, saying: Hearken to My voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be My people; and walk you in all the way that I command you, that it may be well with you. (*Yirmeyahu* 7:21-23)

The world of God's service is much wider than the offering of sacrifices. Admittedly, this is a very important mitzva. Sacrifices express the closeness and connection between the people of Israel and their heavenly Father. But without doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God, it is nothing. The world of God's service is a wide world that cannot focus on one and only one detail.

Nowadays, this message is taken for granted. Neither we nor our forefathers were privileged to offer sacrifices to God. Today, we cannot understand the people of Israel in the time of the Temple, and it is difficult for us to identify with the cry of the prophets.

But it should be noted that this message is true for other areas. Today, the substitute for the sacrificial service is Torah study, which expresses the dialogue and connection between us and God through our occupation with the word of God. Many statements of *Chazal* relate to the great virtues of Torah study, including the statement that "whoever reads the law of the burnt-offering is regarded as if he brought a burnt-offering."

In our generation, there are those who fear that our service of God will become restricted to this realm alone and that we will abandon the rest of the service of God that He requires of us. *Parashat Balak* comes to teach us that no one mitzva, whether the offering of sacrifices or Torah study, can serve as an alternative for full worship of God.

Let us pray that the verse be fulfilled in us:

Nevertheless the Lord your God would not hearken to Bilam; but the Lord your God turned the curse into a blessing to you, because the Lord your God loved you. (*Devarim* 23:6)

[This *sicha* was delivered on Shabbat *Parashat Balak* 5779.]