**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 MOSHEH LICHTENSTEIN**

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Dedicated in memory of Yitele bat Nathan Hacohen z”l   
whose yahrtzeit is 11 Tammuz   
By Family Rueff

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Sorcerers and Prophets

Adapted by Binyamin Fraenkel

Translated by Kaeren Fish

The sorcerer’s toolbox

*Parashat Balak* can be read in two different ways: as a spiritual struggle against *Am Yisrael*, or as a political and military challenge. I shall adopt the first option here, as does the *haftara* from *Mikha*. Mention is made of the episode recorded in our *parasha* in a few different places in the books of the Prophets; let us compare the mentions in *Sefer Shoftim* and *Sefer* *Mikha*.

In *Shoftim*, the judge Yiftach challenges the king of the children of Ammon: “Are you now any better than Balak, son of Tzippor, king of Moav? Did he ever strive against Israel, or did he ever fight against them?” (*Shoftim* 11:25). Yiftach makes no mention of Bil’am, since he makes his declaration in a political, military context. Our *haftara*, in contrast, focuses on a completely different aspect:

“O my people, remember now what Balak, king of Moav, devised, and what Bil’am, son of Be’or, answered him: from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the righteous acts of the Lord. With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before the high God? Shall I come before Him with burnt offerings, with calves of a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, or 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? He has told you, O man, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you, but to act justly, and to love true loyalty, and to walk humbly with your God.” (*Mikha* 6:5-8)

Let us consider this excerpt from the perspective of the *parasha*. The Gemara deliberates concerning Bil’am’s true essence: “‘And Bil’am, son of Be’or, the sorcerer’ – a sorcerer? [Was he not] a prophet! R. Yochanan said: At first he was a prophet; in the end he was a sorcerer” (*Sanhedrin* 106a). What is the relationship between a prophet and a sorcerer?

A sorcerer makes use of the tools available in the world in order to “influence” God. A similar situation of a king using sorcery as part of his struggle against *Bnei Yisrael* is to be found in the case of Pharaoh. Nevertheless, there is a clear distinction between the two instances. Pharaoh conducts two separate battles, as reflected explicitly in the text: “I know not the Lord, nor will I let Israel go” (*Shemot* 5:2). Pharaoh could have let *Bnei Yisrael* go without recognizing God, or he could have recognized God while still refusing to let *Bnei Yisrael* go. The sorcerers play a theological/philosophical role in Pharaoh’s court; when he needs political advice, on the other hand, he turns to “Pharaoh’s servants.”

In contrast to Pharaoh’s sorcerers, who do not accept God’s sovereignty at all, Bil’am is aware of God’s presence, and he ‘exploits’ it, as it were. Balak seeks to use sorcery as part of his political assault on *Bnei Yisrael* – as Yiftach testifies later on – and so he calls upon Bil’am to direct his powers towards cursing Israel.

The *parasha* presents an array of magical devices and procedures that Bil’am employs as a prophet: he offers seven bullocks and seven rams, he takes up a vantage point at the very edge of the camp, etc. He tries to “manipulate” God so that He will accede to his wishes.

“He reveals His secret to His servants, the prophets”

A contrast to Bil’am’s attitude towards God is the attitude of the prophets. Elsewhere in *Sanhedrin* we find:

“A Tanna recited before R. Chisda: “One who suppresses his prophecy receives lashes.” He said to him, “[It would be equally absurd to state that] one who eats dates out of a sieve receives lashes, for [since his act is carried out in private,] who could have warned him?” Abaye said: “His fellow prophets [warn him].” But how could they know? Abaye answered: “For it is written, ‘Surely the Lord will do nothing without revealing His secret [to His servants, the prophets]’ (*Amos* 3:7).” (*Sanhedrin* 89b)

God reveals His secrets to the prophets; this is part of the relationship that exists between them. Concerning Avraham Avinu, we are likewise told:

“And the Lord said: Shall I hide from Avraham the thing which I intend to do, seeing that Avraham will surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment, that the Lord may bring upon Avraham that which He has spoken of him.” (*Bereishit* 18:17-19)

Within the framework of the close and intimate relationship between God and Avraham, it is clear that God cannot hide from Avraham that which He intends to do, although He knows that all of Avraham’s prayers and efforts will not succeed in saving Sedom.

Where this sort of relationship exists between the prophet and God, there is a very high level of trust and the prophet is able to request certain things of God. Bil’am, as noted, does not maintain a relationship with God; rather, he tries to “use” and manipulate God.

The difference between them goes deeper. What Bil’am ultimately wants is his own will, and he employs the powers with which he is blessed to achieve that aim. Bil’am chooses not to go with the princes of Moav not because he appreciates the severity of such a move as an act of disloyalty towards God, but simply because “God refuses to allow me to go with you.”

The prophets, in contrast, seek to perform the will of God. They stand ready to serve God and direct their actions towards His will. They identify with God’s will and do not see it as an external force that coerces them to act (or refrain from acting) in a certain way. When the prophet tries to align his actions with God’s will, God similarly aligns His will, as it were, with the will of the prophet, and reveals His secret to them.

The mind of his donkey

*Chazal* are conscious of the problematic use that Bil’am makes of his powers, and they are highly critical of him:

“‘And knowing the mind of the most High’ – now, seeing that he did not even understand the mind of his own donkey, is it possible that he could know the mind of the most High?!” (*Sanhedrin* 105a)

Moreover, the story of Bil’am and his donkey is one of the most ironic units in the Torah. The text uses irony over and over to express the extent to which Bil’am himself actually understands nothing, and through his relationship with his donkey the Torah demonstrates how Bil’am exploits those who are close to him.

“For it is good in the Lord’s eyes to bless Israel”

Although Bil’am’s curse turns into a blessing, the Gemara states that Bil’am’s intention was negative, and that this is evident in his ‘blessing’:

“R. Yochanan said: He wished to say that [*Am Yisrael*] should have no synagogues or study halls, [so he said:] ‘How good are your tents, O Yaakov.’ [He wished to say] that the Divine Presence should not rest upon them, [so he said] ‘and your Tabernacles, O Israel.’ That their kingdom should not endure – ‘like winding brooks’; that they should not have olive orchards and vineyards – ‘as gardens by the side of the river’; that their fragrance should not be dispersed – ‘like aloes which the Lord has planted’; that they should not have kings of stature – ‘like cedars beside the water’; that they should not have a royal dynasty - ‘He shall pour the water out of his buckets’; that their kingdom should not rule over other nations – ‘and his seed be in many waters’; that their kingdom should not be strong – ‘and his king shall be higher than Agag’; that their kingdom should not be awe-inspiring – ‘and his kingdom shall be exalted.’” (*Sanhedrin* 105b)

However, there is one element of the blessing which *Chazal* view as emerging from a different psychic position:

“R. Abba bar Kahana said: All of [Bil’am’s blessings] reverted to a curse, except for [the matter of] synagogues and study halls, as it is written, ‘And the Lord your God turned the curse into a blessing for you, for the Lord your God loved you.’ The verse says ‘the curse,’ but not ‘the curses.’”

What is so special about the blessing, “How good are your tents, O Yaakov”? It would seem that Bil’am is motivated by something different when he utters this blessing:

“And when Bil’am saw that it pleased the Lord to bless Israel, he did not go, as at other times, to seek enchantments, but he set his face toward the wilderness. And Bil’am lifted his eyes and he saw Israel dwelling by their tribes, and the spirit of God came upon him…” (*Bamidbar* 24:1-2)

At this moment, Bil’am is not trying to have his own will fulfilled, but rather is paying attention to the will of God. He is not trying to find magical ways of ‘forcing’ God to act in a certain way; he is not ‘seeking enchantments,’ but rather receives ‘the spirit of God’ and becomes a channel for God’s will. It may be that here R. Yochanan would say that Bil’am reverts to being a prophet, and for this fleeting moment he maintains a relationship with God.

(This sicha was delivered on leil Shabbat parashat Balak 5774 [2014].)