**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

**Rav Yishai Jeselsohn**

**PARASHAT BALAK**

**The Mouth of the Donkey**

**I. What is the point?**

Our *parasha* contains one of the strangest miracles in the Torah:

And the Lord opened the mouth of the donkey. (*Bamidbar* 22:28)

So far, we have encountered miracles performed by God to bring about a certain benefit, such as the ten plagues or the splitting of the sea, or to demonstrate the truth of prophecy, such as the signs that Moshe performed before the people in Egypt. The miracle here is unique. First, it would appear that it is the angel, and not the donkey, who executes the bulk of the mission to Bilam and sets him straight about his mistake; what, then, is the function of the miracle of the donkey’s speech? Second, the words of the angel themselves are puzzling. Bilam tells the angel that he is willing to go back, but the angel responds:

**Go with the men**; but only the word that I shall speak to you, **that** **you shall speak**. (*Bamidbar* 22:35)

This answer seems exceedingly strange; why shouldn't Bilam retrace his steps and go home? Is that not precisely the goal for which the angel was sent?

On the whole, it seems that the whole episode with the angel and the donkey changes nothing for Bilam. The main points were already told to him earlier: God already told him not to go, so Bilam should have understood by now that the mission was contrary to God’s will; later, God allows him to go, with a message that is very similar to the words of the angel:

And God came to Bilam at night, and said to him: If the men are come to call you, **rise up, go with them**; but only the word which I speak to you, **that shall you do**. (*Bamidbar* 22:20)

As indicated by the words in bold, there are slight differences between the verses; however, the content is the same. Thus, what does the episode of the donkey and the angel come to teach?

The *Or Ha-Chaim* seems to have been troubled by a similar question, though he formulates it in a more general fashion:

"The donkey saw." We must understand God's intention in this matter of allowing the angel to become visible to the donkey. Why was the angel allowed to take up a threatening position, three times in three places? What was the point of squeezing Bilam's legs? Why did he strike the donkey? Why did God open the mouth of the donkey? Everything which happened here appears quite mysterious. (*Or Ha-Chaim* 22:23)

The *Or Ha-Chaim* assumes that this section has some further meaning, which we will have to uncover.

**II. Humiliating Bilam**

We may assume that the entire section was designed to show us how God humbled Bilam, seeing that he had earlier acted with arrogance before God, as we wrote above, in that he did not tell the officers that he was going with God's permission, but rather presented himself as a man who stands on his own. For this reason, God wished to humble him in a most degrading fashion. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, ibid.)

The *Or Ha-Chaim* suggests that the basic purpose of this section is to humiliate Bilam. He goes on to explain why the angel had to stand in three places so that the donkey could speak, and ends by pointing out how deeply this incident would have humiliated Bilam, in accordance with a *midrash* about Bilam’s relationship with his donkey:

Then God opened the mouth of the donkey, and it spoke words of understanding in the form of questions and answers, and it humiliated Bilam in a degrading manner before his men. And humiliation of this sort becomes widely known, because it is strange in two ways: first, that the animal spoke, and second, that a man of Bilam’s stature had a carnal relationship with the donkey as if it were his wife. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, ibid.)

If we read the *Or Ha-Chaim's* words as they appear, they seem to reflect a rather simplistic understanding that still raises many questions. Did God change the laws of nature and make the donkey speak simply for the sake of publicizing Bilam’s embarrassing behavior with the donkey? Is this the way of God, to perform such a great miracle only in order to disgrace a person?

It seems that the words of the *Or Ha-Chaim* are based on a much more fundamental principle, which is an essential cornerstone in the story of Bilam, as we will see.

**III. "Who knows the mind of the Most High"**

The Gemara in tractate *Berakhot* reveals the secret of Bilam's power, beginning with a contradiction between two verses.

Later in our *parasha*, Bilam states about himself:

The saying of Bilam the son of Be'or, and the saying of the man whose eye is opened; the saying of one who hears the words of God, who knows the mind of the Most High, who sees the vision of the Almighty, fallen down, yet with opened eyes. (*Bamidbar* 24:3-4)

The Gemara in *Berakhot* challenges this declaration:

"Who knows the mind of the Most High." Now, he did not even know the mind of his animal; how then could he know the mind of the Most High? Rather, this [verse] teaches that he knew how to fix precisely the moment in which the Holy One, blessed be He, is angry [at which point, he would deliver his curse]. (*Berakhot* 7a)

The Gemara proves from the story of the donkey that Bilam did not truly understand the mind of God at all. Elsewhere, however, *Chazal* say that Bilam's prophecy was similar to that of Moshe:

"And there has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moshe" (*Devarim* 34:10) – in Israel there has not arisen [such a prophet], but among the nations of the world, one has arisen. Who is that? Bilam, son of Be'or. (*Sifrei Ve-Zot Ha-Berakha*, 327)

In his commentary to our *parasha*, Rashi explains why God needed such a great prophet among the nations of the world:

And if you ask: Why did the Holy One, blessed be He, let his *Shekhina* rest upon so wicked a heathen? – So that the heathen peoples should have no excuse to say: "If we had prophets, we would have changed for the better," He raised up prophets for them. [Yet] they [these prophets] broke down the moral fence of the world…. (Rashi, *Bamidbar* 22:5)

In comparing Bilam’s prophecy to Moshe’s, which was on a higher level than that of any other prophet throughout the ages, the *midrash* seems to indicate that Bilam did in fact “know the mind of the Most High.” Why, then, does the Gemara make light of this?

It is the story of the donkey that shows us that Bilam's knowledge of “the mind of the Most High” lacked a very important dimension – a dimension that Moshe had. In order to appreciate the gap between Moshe and Bilam, let us dwell for a moment on some of the differences between the two: humility vs. arrogance, and their respective attitudes toward the material.

*Humility and Arrogance:*

Regarding Moshe, the Torah states: "Now the man Moshe was very humble, more than anyone upon the face of the earth" (*Bamidbar* 12:3).

Humility and self-abnegation are fundamental qualities in the personality of Moshe (evident in him already in his childhood). In contrast, the Mishna testifies about Bilam:

The disciples of Bilam, the wicked, possess an evil eye, a haughty spirit, and a *nefesh rechava* [sometimes translated as a limitless or over-ambitious soul]. (*Avot* 5:19)

*Attitudes Toward the Material:*

Moshe went up to Mount Sinai and for forty days detached himself from matter, neither eating nor drinking. After descending from Mount Sinai, he even separated himself from his wife.

With Bilam, we find the complete opposite: in the midrashic portrayal, he certainly possessed great desires. There is also an allusion to this in the plain meaning of the verses, for following Balak's entreaty, Bilam once again tries to ask God – even though the answer God gave him on the first day was unequivocal.

Of course, the two points are related to each other: Moshe's humility prevented him from becoming immersed in materiality, while Bilam's pride drew him to take control of the material and use it for his own needs.

**IV. The *Chamor* and the *Aton***

It is interesting to note that both Moshe and Bilam made use of donkeys, though Bilam’s was an *aton*, while Moshe returned from Midyan riding on a *chamor*. Rashi in *Parashat Shemot* notes the special nature of Moshe’s donkey:

"Upon **the** donkey" – the donkey designated for this purpose. This was the donkey which Avraham had saddled for the purpose of traveling to bind Yitzchak on Mount Moriya, and this is the donkey on which the messianic king will show himself in public, as it is stated: "Behold, thy king comes to you,…] lowly and riding upon a donkey." (Rashi, *Shemot* 4:20)

The letters in the word *chamor* are the same as the letters in the word *chomer*, "matter." When Moshe rides the donkey, he overcomes matter. Moshe lived in Midyan, where he had everything he needed: a wife, a livelihood, and even a respected father-in-law. Yet, he leaves all this and returns to the land where his very life may be endangered. He gives up the material in order to do God's will.

We find the same thing with Avraham Avinu. Avraham rides a *chamor* to fulfill God’s command to sacrifice his son and his entire future; he was ready to give up all the material pleasure that he would have derived from his son.

Thus, for both Avraham and Moshe, riding on the donkey symbolizes the overcoming of matter. For this reason, it is also the donkey of Mashiach.

On the other hand, Bilam's riding on his donkey is lacking. It would seem that Bilam also wishes to gain control of the physical world, in order to successfully curse the Israelites. But in his attempt to gain control over matter, something goes wrong. We see already in the account of the delays caused by the angel that Bilam fails to gain the control over his donkey that he needs, and to direct it in the paths of the material.

His failure intensifies and reaches a climax when the donkey speaks. Throughout the section, Bilam boasts about knowing the mind of the Most High. Balak says about him: "For I know that he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed" (*Bamidbar* 22:6). All along the way, Bilam tells Balak's messengers that he needs to hear the mind of the Most High, and it seems that this is where his power lies.

But in a single moment – the moment when the donkey opens its mouth – everything changes. Even within the plain meaning of the verses, the donkey sees the spiritual reality much more clearly than does Bilam. Instead of Bilam knowing the mind of the Most High, and thereby gaining control of matter (*chomer*), it is the donkey (like a *chamor*)that knows the mind of the Most High.

Perhaps that is why the *midrash* chooses to emphasize Bilam’s inappropriate relationship with the donkey. Fulfilling his desires by way of an animal so tied to *chomer* is the total opposite of Moshe's separation from his wife. The ability to truly know the mind of the Most High, to really understand what God is saying, depends on an unbroken connection to the ability to overcome the material.

Blinded by the goal of cursing Israel and by the money that Balak offers him, Bilam is not able to fully understand the mind of the Most High. Even though he explicitly hears the words of God, he fails to understand their meaning – God's true desire that he stay home and not go.

If we understand what is happening in this way, the *Or Ha-Chaim's* words become clear. Indeed, it is a tremendous disgrace when the person who boasts of knowing the mind of the Most High, who manages to hear the words of God, and who seeks to curse the Israelites in order to influence their material reality, is humiliated by a donkey, which represents matter, such that the donkey itself manages to see the spiritual reality better than he does. And even worse: the same donkey also reveals to everyone that this exalted spiritual leader actually fulfills his physical desires in the basest way.

**V. The Eve of Shabbat at Twilight**

The Mishna in tractate *Avot* lists ten things that were created on the eve of Shabbat at twilight, between sunset and the emergence of the stars [*bein ha-shemashot*]:

Ten things were created on the eve of Shabbat at twilight, and these are they: [1] the mouth of the earth, [2] the mouth of the well, [3] the mouth of the donkey, [4] the rainbow, [5] the manna, [6] the rod of Moshe, [7] the *shamir*, [8] the text, [9] the writing, and [10] the tablets. And some say: also the destroying spirits and the grave of Moshe and the ram of Avraham, our father. And some say: and tongs too, made with tongs. (*Avot* 5:10)

The Maharal, in his commentary to tractate *Avot*,explains the uniqueness of the things that were created at this special time:

The [uniqueness of the] time of the eve of Shabbat, at twilight, is the cause [that led the Sages to say there were certain things created then]. That is because the other twilights – which are not day and not night [but rather a doubt as to which it is] – what difference does it make? If it is day, behold, it is the time of the six days of creation; and if it is night, it is also the time of the six days of creation – so there is nothing new [in it being twilight]. But on the eve of Shabbat at twilight – since it is the twilight of holiness, it has a greater level than the other days of nature. It is impossible to say that nothing would be created, since it is not completely Shabbat. But it is [also] impossible to say that what would be created on it would be like that which was created on the six days of creation, since it is also not completely [of] the days of the week… Hence it is impossible that the twilight of the eve of Shabbat be without creation, since Shabbat – which is complete rest – had not yet begun. But it is [also] impossible that natural things would be created on it, since it is on a higher level than the six days of creation. And therefore, these things were created which were not completely natural, but that were close to nature. For all of these things were physical things, so from the angle of their being physical, they are natural things. But from the angle of their not being like other natural things, they depart from nature. (Maharal, *Derekh Ha-Chaim* 5, 6)

The mouth of the donkey is close to nature, since the faculty of speech is natural, but the mouth of this donkey is not a natural reality. Speech is one of the significant differences between humans and animals. While man is capable of verbally expressing elevated thoughts in a clear manner, animals do not need such a high level of expressiveness, as they are more material. When the donkey speaks, there is an elevation of matter to the level of speech that belongs to humans.

Thus, there is no more suitable time for Bilam's donkey to be born than on the eve of Shabbat at twilight – the time between the mundane days of the week and the holy. Riding the *chamor* (or *aton*) is a test to see whether Bilam will be able to understand the depth of God's will or whether he will remain on the level of physical and external understanding (God said he can go, so he goes). Whereas Avraham and Moshe, two great leaders of our nation, rode against the material – with Bilam, riding the donkey is for the sake of the material.

**VI. Bilam's Power**

The same passage of Gemara in tractate *Berakhot*, when it nevertheless suggests what Bilam's strength was, goes in a completely different direction from "knowing the mind of the Most High":

This [verse] teaches that he knew how to fix precisely the moment in which the Holy One, blessed be He, is angry [at which point, he would deliver his curse]. (*Berakhot* 7a)

Bilam knows how to touch the sensitive points. This is also how we understand his proposal to Balak after his failure to curse Israel. Bilam's real power lies not in spirituality and the ability to curse by way of the word of God, but on the contrary – his power lies in materiality that distances man from the service of God. This is also how Rashi encapsulates the difference between the prophet of Israel and the prophet of the nations of the world:

He raised up prophets for them. [Yet] they [these prophets] broke down the moral fence of the world, because at first they [the heathens] were fenced in against immoral living, but this man [Bilam] counseled them to freely offer themselves to prostitution. (Rashi, *Bamidbar* 22:5)

While Moshe warns Israel against illicit sexual relations, Bilam uses these human capabilities to cause Israel to stumble. Thus, Bilam's power is not to *overcome* the material, but specifically to *use* the material as a means to try to bring about Israel’s downfall.

The way the angel reveals himself to Bilam also leads to the same point. The donkey seems to be straying from the path; the material pulls man to deviate from the straight path, and man controls the material and straightens it. This is what Bilam seems to be doing – until the donkey opens its mouth and reveals to him that the situation is just the opposite. While the donkey, knows what the right path is, Bilam tries to force it down a path that leads to a head-on collision.

**Conclusion**

We have shed a little light on the story of the donkey as a fundamental part of the story of Bilam, which illustrates the magnitude of Bilam's lack of understanding of the mind of the Most High.

Bilam failed precisely on this point – he thought that, like everything material, the word of God belongs to him and therefore he can "take" the word of God wherever he wants. The donkey and the angel explained to Bilam exactly what his place is – you do not control matter; rather, you are controlled by it.

(Translated by David Strauss)