

Parshas Balak

THE CALL OF DUTY

When studying prayer, you'll discover that Chazal use metaphors of "Gates" when discussing how prayer works. Anecdotally, the final prayer of Yom Kippur is called Neila – "Closing". The gates of Heaven that open for Yom Kippur are closing, and we seize the opportunity to squeeze one final prayer in. The Gemara in Brachos says that the gates of prayer do not always stay open, but one does: the Gate of Tears. It never closes because crying is the potent form of prayer; it is invariably genuine and sincere.

But if it never closes, why is there a Gate at all? It's just an open space!

Rabbi Moshe Sherer suggests that a Gate is required, because not all tears are equal. When Balak and Bilam schemed to entrap the Jews in immorality and licentiousness, they sent the young women of Midian into the Jewish camp to seduce the men, and there was not much resistance. Society collapsed, and this set off a plague. Right in the middle of the plague, with his brethren dying around him, one callous fellow, Zimri, also a senior member of Jewish government, was more brazen than anyone else:

וְהָיָה אִישׁ מִבְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בָּא, וַיִּקְרַב אֶל-אֶחָיו אֶת-הַמִּדְיָנִית, לְעֵינֵי מֹשֶׁה, וּלְעֵינֵי כָל-עַדְת בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל; וְהָמָּה בָכִים, פָּתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד. וַיֵּרָא, פִּינְחָס בֶּן-אֶלְעָזָר, בֶּן-אֶהֱרֹן, הַכֹּהֵן; וַיִּקָּם מִתּוֹךְ הָעֵדָה, וַיִּקַּח רֶמֶחַ בְּיָדוֹ. וַיָּבֵא אַחֵר אִישׁ-יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל-הַקְּבָה, וַיִּדְקַר אֶת-שְׁנֵיהֶם – אֶת אִישׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל, וְאֶת-הָאִשָּׁה אֶל-קִבְתָּהּ; וַתַּעֲצֵר, הַמַּגִּפָּה, מֵעַל, בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל – A Jewish man approached, and paraded the Midianite woman before Moshe's eyes, and before the eyes of all the people, and they were crying at the doors of the of the Mishkan. Pinchas, son of Elazar, son of Ahron HaKohen saw this, and took up a spear... He approached the group and pierced the two of them... And the plague stopped. (25: 6-8)

Clearly not all the Jews were involved. Unsure what to do, they went to Moshe and the then-holiest spot on the planet to cry and pray – פָּתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד – These Jews who were strong enough to stand up the temptation of Midianite promiscuity; asked for help, and did not get it. The Torah clearly states that his assassination of the provocateurs stopped the plague, not their prayers. God attests to this by saying הָשִׁיב אֶת-חַמְתֵּי מֵעַל בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל, – the Jews prayers are a non-factor, written off completely. Why weren't their prayers answered, considering that tears are the most sincere form of prayer?

The Kotzker Rebbe says that the reason there is a "Gate" of Tears is because tears don't work when it's a time for action. They are crocodile tears – they are not "tears" at all. If circumstances call for action, being "religious" may not be enough.

BILAM'S CURSE

Bilam was a prophet who had the abilities and potential to match Moshe, but usurped his skills and talents for personal gain and celebrity. He was hired by Balak to curse the Jews because his utterances were famously effective.

Chazal understood that he could identify a certain moment of the day in which God is “angry”, and in that moment, release God’s anger on his target.

What does that even mean?

The Midrash teaches that originally, God sought to create the world through a prism of strict justice; evil would be instantly punished, and good would be instantly rewarded. But existence would be untenable this way, and could never last. It was decided that an equal measure of mercy would be fused to creation, and the two balanced into equilibrium.

What Bilam could identify was the moment of indignance and outrage at the literal “injustice” of existence not being held to account.

Tosfos in Brachos wonder how much someone could really manage to squeeze in to a brief and transient moment, answering that he could cast his gaze on targets and say “כלם” – “Destroy them”. This was the curse he would have attempted to lay on the Jews..

The Maharal analyses how potent this curse would truly be. כלם is the reverse anagram of מלך – king, a critical function in Judaism; in Devarim, Moshe’s final speech to the people, he tells them the mitzva of appointing a king when they settle the land of Israel – שׁוּם תְּשִׂים עָלֶיךָ מֶלֶךְ – Appoint a king over yourselves (17: 15). The function of the king is a hierarchy that organises and implements a governmental structure. He organises the system.

The Maharal explains that מלך is the initial letters of כבד, לב, מח – brain, heart, liver. These are metaphors for the procedure and development of action. There is a thought, a feeling, and an instinct. The order is critical – the intellect has to operate the system, and everything follows suit. This is the charge of every Jew – to become a master of the self – מלך – like an actual king, to perfect the structure of the self and surroundings.

In the book of Shmuel, the prophet is approached and asked for a king “like the tribes and nations have”, and the people are rebuked. But weren’t they correct; was it not one of things Moshe told them?

What the Jews asked Shmuel was not for such a king – they wanted a king “like the tribes and nations have”. This is not the monarch function that is critical to Jewish makeup.

What Bilam tried to do was invert this capacity – he wanted to curse the Jews with “כלם” – the reverse of לב, מח, כבד, and the order would degenerate into מח, לב, כבד – where the instinct is dominant, and intellect and soul are enslaved to it – the antithesis of the Jews’ charge, and truly the ultimate curse.

STING IN THE TAIL

When Bilam attempts to curse the Jews, he is foiled, and attempts to bless them, which is accepted.

It is not clear why his failed curse compels him to bless them. Rashi explains Bilam's situation with a metaphor – it is best to avoid a bee's sting and its honey too. The parable and dialogue are not readily understood; honey is great if you can avoid getting stung! What is wrong with his blessing?

The Giznei Yosef explains that people's speech is powerful. A righteous person's speech is potent, but an evil person's too, albeit for a different reason. Rivka was blessed by Lavan to have many descendants – and she became barren. An evil person's blessings are not only not fulfilled, but as a result are potentially a curse.

This is the metaphor of the bee. Bilam's blessing was not as noble as it seems – it had a “sting” in its tail. This sheds light on the dialogue. Hashem had already chosen and blessed them, so Bilam's “blessing” couldn't supersede it or take effect.

This sheds light on what Hashem had told him at the outset:

לֹא תָאָר אֶת-הָעָם, כִּי בְרוּךְ הוּא – Do not curse this people, for they are blessed.

It was not a warning – it simply noted the futility of the journey. The sting and the honey were of no use!

WHAT GOES AROUND COMES AROUND

Lavan caught up with Yakov after he and his family escaped Lavan's ranch, and they agreed a pact to not harm each other. The pact was to have a signature:

...עד הגל הזה – This pile of stones shall bear witness... (31: 52)

The Midrash adds that Yaakov also thrust a sword into the wall, as a second witness. The Da'as Zkeinim points out that Bilam ben Be'or's downfall was through these two, a wall and a sword. What does Bilam have to do with Yakov and Lavan's agreement?

There is a Gemara in Sanhedrin that the figure called Be'or is in fact the same person as Lavan, and Kushan Reshasaim (a wicked king in Judges). Simply put, Bilam was Lavan's son.

Bilam was injured by a wall, and died by the sword, as it says in Bamidbar:

וַתִּלְחַץ אֶת-רַגְלוֹ בַּלְעָם, אֶל-הַקִּיר (22: 25) – his foot was crushed against the wall.

וַיָּאֵת בַּלְעָם בֶּן-בְּעוֹר, הַרְגוּ בְחַרְבּוֹ (31: 8) – also Bilam son of Be'or was slain by the sword.

There is a story told by the Gemara in Taanis that a boy found a girl who'd tripped into a pit, and agreed to rescue her on the condition that they marry. She consented, and they made the pit and a nearby animal witnesses. They went their separate ways, and years later he married another woman, who bore him two sons. But one died by falling into a pit, and another was killed by an animal. His wife asked lamented the bizarre misfortunes that had befallen them, and he recalled the vow and his witnesses. His wife told him to divorce her and find the girl, which he did.

This is similar to the case of Bilam in that the witnesses came back to “remind” them of their duties, a clear

demonstration of measure for measure.

When Yakov entered Lavan's house, Lavan clearly had no sons, as otherwise he would not send his daughters to tend the sheep, a man's job. Yet by Yakov's departure, he has since had sons: וַיִּשְׁמַע, אֶת-דִּבְרֵי בְנֵי-לָבָן לְאִמֶּר – he listened to Lavan's sons... (31: 1). Lavan only had daughters until Yakov arrived. Years later, Bilam, his own son, broke the pact that nothing befall his daughters.

The witnesses to the pact upheld it, and he was crippled by a wall, and killed by the sword. These are a fulfillment of the law that when witnesses give key testimony that sentence someone to death that יָד הַעֲדִים תִּהְיֶה בּוֹ בְּרֵאשִׁיטָה – The hand of the witnesses shall be first upon him to put him to death.

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