

Tell it Like it Is

PARSHA INSIGHTS - BALAK (5758)

BILAAM GOT IN TROUBLE FOR REMAINING SILENT

There are more than a few ways to explain an apparent inconsistency in today's *psukim* [verses]. The Jews were sitting right near Moav's border, at their last position before entering the Land of Israel (*Chukas* 22:1 with *Rashbam*, *Ibn Ezra* 25:1, *Mas'ai* 33:48-49, illustrated on page 771 of *The Living Torah* - Rav Aryeh Kaplan's biblical map). This area was in the Plains of Moav, from Bais Hayeshimos to Avel Hasheetim. On today's map, it is in Jordan. The nation of Moav felt threatened by the Jewish presence. They consulted Midian (a nation found in what is today southern Jordan or northern Saudi Arabia); the decision was to entreat the world-famous sorcerer, Bilaam, to pronounce some sort of curse on *Bnai Yisroel* [the Children Israel] to relieve Moav of the anticipated danger. Diplomats from Moav and Midian traveled to Aram (Mesopotamia, on the Euphrates) to request that the wizard, Bilaam, accompany them home to curse the *Bnai Yisroel*. Representatives from both nations made the trip to Mesopotamia, according to most commentators. (*Ramban* 22:13 maintains that only the emissaries from Moav, not Midian, actually traveled all the way to Bilaam's land of Aram.)

After these men arrived, Hashem forbade Bilaam to leave Aram and journey with them to Moav to curse the Jews. "Do not go with them" (22:12). After Balak, king of Moav, sent a second group to beg Bilaam's assistance, Hashem declared, "If the men have come to call on you, get up and go with them" (22:20). When Bilaam did begin to accompany them on the trip, "Hashem became angry because he was going" (22:22)! **Why did Hashem first prohibit this undertaking, then allow it, and then object strongly to it?**

As indicated earlier, there are numerous approaches. We will explore only one today, that of the *Ramban* 22:20. At first, Hashem held Bilaam back from going to curse the Jews because we were already a blessed nation. Why should the wizard go along with them for no reason at all? The Moavites only wanted him if he would fulfill their request to remove the "Jewish nuisance". This explains 22:12 - "do not go with them". *Ramban* states with certainty that Bilaam transmitted this full message to them. In fact, it says in 22:13 that Bilaam informed them of Hashem's refusal to allow him to go.

Shouldn't this have been the end of the episode? No, says the *Ramban*, because Balak, king of Moav, persisted by sending another group of representatives to Mesopotamia (22:15-17). What was going on in the mind of Balak? Why did he not take "no" for an answer? *Ramban* maintains that this king did not think that Bilaam's reason for refusal was that Hashem was controlling his actions. Notice the *Ramban* 22:13: "Balak suspected him that he did this in order to increase his payment...that is why he continued sending princes (officers, officials) more numerous and honorable, to show him that he wanted him badly..." Balak also promised Bilaam, through these messengers, that he would increase his payment as necessary. What was the reply of Bilaam? This matter does not depend on money nor on his own will. Rather, it is all contingent on Hashem's authorization, or lack of permission, to pronounce a curse on *Bnai Yisroel*. This is found in 22:18. Bilaam told these Moavite diplomats that he would ask Hashem, once again, how he should answer them. Recall that Bilaam had done this once when the first group of men had arrived (22:8).

The *Ramban* holds that Bilaam DID NOTHING WRONG yet at this point. It was understandable that since a delegation of high level officers had come, and this was the second arrival of Moavite officials, Bilaam needed to consult with the Creator concerning what to tell them. Perhaps Bilaam felt Hashem would tell him about the future of Moav, and this would be a meaningful message to convey to them. Hashem replied that He had already explained to Bilaam the first time that the Jewish people were blessed and could not be cursed. Since these people had returned despite that clear message, Bilaam was now allowed to accompany them with certain restrictions in mind.

If they had only traveled there to invite Bilaam to go with them for other purposes, not to curse the Jews, he was permitted to go. This explains 22:20 - Hashem was not changing His mind, G-d forbid. Rather, he was allowing Bilaam to join them ONLY if they would realize that he was not going to put his curses on the Jewish people. The first time, when he had been refused permission to go, this was like we explained above. Since there was no use in going because he could not curse *Bnai Yisroel*, he was forced to remain in Aram. Only now, due to their insistence that he accompany them, Hashem authorized him to join them if he would explain to them his

limitations. In this *pasuk*, G-d informed Bilaam that things could turn out MUCH unlike he expected. He might even be compelled to place a BLESSING on the Jews. *Ramban* understands that Hashem was also encouraging Bilaam not to fear king Balak, who would undoubtedly lose his temper if Bilaam blessed the Jewish people. *Ramban* adds that this was actually the wish of G-d, that Bilaam go with these Moavite diplomats after telling them that he could not torment the Jews. **It was the will of Hashem to bless *Bnai Yisroel* through the mouth of a gentile prophet.**

If all this is true, why did Hashem become angry when Bilaam went along with them (22:22)? *Ramban* explains that Bilaam did everything as commanded, but he omitted one “minor” detail. He was supposed to tell these officials that he was accompanying them ON A CERTAIN CONDITION - he would not be permitted to blaspheme the *Bnai Yisroel*. He was also supposed to break the news to them that he might be obligated to bless us. He was expected to let them know that if they were not pleased with these stipulations, they should simply return to Moav and leave him in Aram. Bilaam knew full well that Balak, king of Moav, was not interested in anything except Bilaam’s curse for the Jews. This was clear from Balak’s latest message (22:17). Balak was not eager to hear about his fortune, horoscope, or anything of the sort. *Ramban* states that Bilaam was required to tell the emissaries that G-d had placed restrictions on him. However, HE FAILED TO DO SO. Why? He was so enthusiastic about going, he neglected to convey to them these crucial facts. Instead, he arose, excitedly saddled his own donkey (22:21), and rushed along with them. He behaved as if he was truly planning to adhere to THEIR agenda of cursing the Jews. This is why Hashem became angry. If he would have told them what he was supposed to, he would not have even gone with them. They would surely have rejected his terms.

Another transgression of Bilaam, declares the *Ramban*, was *chilul Hashem* [desecration of G-d’s Name]. He made Hashem look illogical and inconsistent. Since he journeyed with them and failed to tell them that he would not be able to perform the task they sought, they thought that now he suddenly DID have permission to curse *Bnai Yisroel*. After all, he did not tell them any differently! He was simply accompanying them on their trip back to Moav, where the *Bnai Yisroel* were. This made it appear as if Hashem had changed His mind. This is because Bilaam had told the FIRST delegation that he could not curse the Jews. And now he was silently going with this second group, creating the impression that it was fine to go through with their sinister plot! Furthermore, when Hashem would later forbid Bilaam to pronounce a curse on *Bnai Yisroel*, it would look like Hashem altered His plan YET AGAIN. This *chilul Hashem* was the result of Bilaam’s failure to inform the princes of Moav that he was only going with Hashem’s plan, not theirs, in mind.

Hopefully, these words have given us profound insight into Hashem’s dialogue with the gentile prophet, Bilaam. One point we can take to heart is that at times, we are held accountable for what we SHOULD HAVE SAID but failed to express. Bilaam was expected to convey Hashem’s conditions to the second set of Moavite representatives, but he did not. That was the beginning of his end. May we remember to be silent when circumstances warrant this, but to speak up when that is the proper course of action.

By Rabbi Moshe Heigh

Text © 1998 Rabbi Moshe Heigh. Main title, formatting and definitions © 2011 Jewlight Inc. This Essay may only be printed unaltered in its entirety with copyrights displayed and given out free-of-charge. Linking allowed if your topic is relevant. Posting online is strictly prohibited.