

Greed and Reasoning around the Command

In this weeks reading from *Parashat Balak* (*Bamidbar / Numbers 22:2-25:9*) Balak king of Moab saw what the children of Israel had done to the Amorites and both he and the people of Moab were afraid being very anxious about Israel's presence. As a result, Balak asks for help from a man called Bilam. Now Bilam was well known according to Balak saying, *וַאֲשֶׁר תְּבַרֵךְ מְבֹרָךְ וְאֲשֶׁר תְּאָר יוֹאֵר*, “*For I know that he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed.*” (22:6). According to the Torah, Bilam was a man who had the ear of the Lord God in Heaven. He had a reputation that he could hear from God. As the story goes, at the persistence of Balak, Bilam travels with the men from Balak and God's anger burned against Bilam. The Angel of the Lord stood in the way of Bilam's donkey to slay him. Bilam is very persistent; three times he turns to continue on his way being unaware that his life was in eminent danger. How often do you think we walk in eminent danger if we are not walking and living according God's Word? Last week, Moshe and Aaron failed to sanctify the Name of God (*Bamidbar / Numbers 20*) with dire consequences. In this week's reading, Bilam failed to obey God's Word and if it wasn't for the mercy of God, Bilam would have died.

ספר במדבר פרק כב *Bamidbar / Numbers 22:21-22, 34-35*

כא וַיִּקָּם בַּלְעָם בְּבֹקֶר וַיַּחְבֹּשׁ אֶת-
אֲתוֹנוֹ וַיֵּלֶךְ עִם-שָׂרֵי מוֹאָב: כב וַיַּחֲר-
אֹר אֱלֹהִים כִּי-הוֹלֵךְ הוּא וַיִּתְּיָצֵב מִלְּאֹךְ
יְהוָה בְּדַרְךְוֹ לְשַׁטֹּן לוֹ וְהוּא רֹכֵב עַל-
אֲתוֹנוֹ וּשְׁנֵי נְעָרָיו עִמּוֹ:

22:21 So Balaam arose in the morning, and saddled his donkey and went with the leaders of Moab. 22:22 But God was angry because he was going, and the angel of the Lord took his stand in the way as an adversary against him. Now he was riding on his donkey and his two servants were with him.

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לד וַיֹּאמֶר בַּלְעָם אֶל-מִלְּאֹךְ יְהוָה
חָטָאתִי כִּי לֹא יָדַעְתִּי כִּי אַתָּה נֹצֵב
לְקִרְאָתִי בְּדַרְךְוֹ וְעַתָּה אִם-רָע בְּעֵינֶיךָ
אֲשׁוּבָה לִי: לה וַיֹּאמֶר מִלְּאֹךְ יְהוָה
אֶל-בַּלְעָם לֵךְ עִם-הָאֲנָשִׁים וְאַפְסֵ אֶת-
הַדָּבָר אֲשֶׁר-אָדַבֵּר אֵלֶיךָ אֲתוֹ תְּדַבֵּר
וַיֵּלֶךְ בַּלְעָם עִם-שָׂרֵי בְּלָק:

22:34 Balaam said to the angel of the Lord, 'I have sinned, for I did not know that you were standing in the way against me. Now then, if it is displeasing to you, I will turn back.' 22:35 But the angel of the Lord said to Balaam, 'Go with the men, but you shall speak only the word which I tell you.' So Balaam went along with the leaders of Balak. (NASB)

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In *Bamidbar / Numbers 22:28*, the Scriptures say that God opened the donkey's mouth and we read the following, *God opened the mouth of the donkey, and it said to Bilam, "What have I done to you, that you hit me these three times.* While reading this text, it is noteworthy the word the donkey uses to describe Bilam striking him three times. In the Torah, the word that is generally used for "times" in the case of repetition is "Pe'amim" (פעמים), however, when the donkey spoke he used the word "regalim" (רגלים) which

generally denotes the “*Festivals.*” What is the Lord trying to tell us by inspiring this donkey to speak to Bilam saying “*Shelosh Regalim*” (שְׁלוֹשׁ רֵגְלִים) regarding the three times Bilam struck him? We read the following from Targum Pseudo Jonathan on *Bamidbar / Numbers 22*. The Aramaic Targum has the following to say on the incident:

Targum Pseudo Jonathan, Numbers 22

“... And the ass saw the angel of the Lord, and fell under Bilam; and Bilam’s wrath was strong, so that he smote the ass with his staff. - Ten things were created after the world had been founded at the coming in of the Sabbath between the suns, - the manna, the well, the rod of Moshe, the diamond, the rainbow, the cloud of glory, the mouth of the earth, the writing of the tables of the covenant, the demons, and the speaking ass. And in that hour the Word of the Lord opened her mouth, and fitted her to speak: and she said to Bilam. What have I done to thee, that thou hast smitten me these three times? And Bilam said to the ass, Because thou hast been false to me; if there was now but a sword in hand, I would kill thee. And the ass said to Bilam, Woe to thee, Bilam, thou wanting-in-mind when me, an unclean beast, who am to die in this world, and not to enter the world to come, thou art not able to curse; how much less (canst thou harm) the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, on account of whom the world hath been created, but whom thou art going to curse! So hast thou deceived these people, and hast said, This is not my ass, she is a loan in, my hand, and my horses remain in the pasture. But am I not thine ass upon whom thou hast ridden from thy youth unto this day? And have I been used to do thus with thee? And he said, No. And the Lord unveiled the eyes of Bilam, and he beheld the angel of the Lord standing in the way, his sword unsheathed in his hand; and he bowed, and worshiped on his face.”

In the middle of the narrative the rabbis add a comment on the ten things God created after the word has been founded at the coming of the Shabbat. The ten things are (i) manna, (ii) the well, (iii) the rod of Moshe, (iv) the diamond, (v) the rainbow, (vi) the cloud of glory, (vii) the mouth of the earth, (viii) the writing of the tables of the covenant, (ix) the demons, and (x) the talking donkey. Notice that the rabbis list food and water, the rod which is a symbol of power, wealth / money (diamond) the covenant and the glory of God, destruction (“*the mouth of the earth*” e.g. Parashat Korach), evil spirits and then the donkey that spoke. Why do you think these things are added into the Targum translation? Bilam’s reason for beating the donkey was because he was false to him. The beast responds pointing out that he is an unclean beast and Bilam is unable to destroy him (he has no sword). Considering the list of ten things God created, these ten things are immutable. Man is not able to change these ten things that God has done. The way the Lord has saved Israel and worked in her deliverance, the covenant He has made with her, all of these things can be drawn out of the context of the beast speaking

“*Shelosh Regalim*” (שְׁלוֹשׁ רִגְלִים). The parallel is that though Bilam desires to curse and destroy Israel, he is unable to do so because the world itself was created on behalf of the righteous, the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In your walk before the Lord God, are you counted as one of the righteous, in the Messiah Yeshua, as a child of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob?

The rabbis of the Mishnah teach in *Mishnah Avot 5:22*:

Mishnah Avot 5:22

Those who have an evil eye, an arrogant spirit, and an insatiable soul are pupils of the wicked Bilam.

In another Mishnah we read:

Mishnah Avot 4:28

Rabbi Elazar HaKappar says, “Jealousy, lust, and the desire for honor remove a man from the world.”

According to the Mishnah, the evil eye is synonymous to jealousy and the arrogant spirit to the desire for honor, and the insatiable soul to lust. Bilam had an evil eye to do harm to Israel and in the process to be honored by men and get wealthy at the same time for cursing Israel. Consider also what the donkey said to Bilam asking him why he struck him “*Shelosh Regalim*” (שְׁלוֹשׁ רִגְלִים)? According to the Torah, the Shelosh Regalim are Pesach, Shavot, and Sukkot.

1. **Pesach** - According to the Torah, Passover was the first time when Israel was drawn away from the idols of Egypt and brought under God’s protection. The matzah (unleavened bread) is a symbol of the poor and humble of spirit. This typifies the rejection of the path of Bilam who was arrogant, prideful, and an idolater.
2. **Shavuot** - Is the time the Torah was given to Israel at the mountain of Sinai. This represents the nation turning from sin and from the ways of the world and receiving God’s love, mercy, and covenant. In preparation for the receiving of the Torah, one was told to separate themselves (consecrate) for three days. This typifies the rejection of the path of Bilam and his desires of lust, wealth, and fame.
3. **Sukkot** - This is the festival in which we set in booths, setting aside our differences in wealth and riches and come together to celebrate the deliverance of the Lord. This typifies the rejection of the path of Bilam which corresponds to jealousy and the evil eye.

After the beast had said these words, the Lord opened Bilam’s eyes and he was able to see the angel of the Lord standing against him with his sword drawn. The Lord stands



against evil men who seek to do harm to others, and who follow the path of Bilam.

Today, do we take our walk, our faith, and our relationship with God seriously enough? What about prayer; do we understand prayer according to the Bible or do we understand prayer like Bilam understood prayer? In *Bamidbar / Numbers 22:34-35*, the Hebrew text is written in the past tense, Bilam says “*Khatati*” (חָטָאתִי) “*I have sinned*” and “*ki lo yadati*” (כִּי לֹא יָדַעְתִּי) “*because I did not know.*” The verb tense indicates that Bilam recognized his sin and says, אִם-רָע בְּעֵינַי אֲשׁוּבָה לִי וְעַתָּה אִם “*now if it is evil in your sight then I will ashuvah.*” The word “*ashuvah*” is from the same root for “*Teshuvah*” meaning to turn, repent, go in a different direction. Bilam recognized his sin and is repenting, “*turning back,*” “*turning away*” from the sin that he was committing. An interesting point is that Bilam was not given the Torah, so his repenting and turning was not in the way God wanted. This might be one explanation for the Lord seeking to kill Bilam after having given him permission to go to Balak. The most interesting aspect of the text for this week is that even though Bilam was seeking God’s will and praying, He failed to understand the purpose of drawing close to the Lord God Almighty. Based on the text, Bilam believed that through prayer and by his actions, he would be able to force God to do his will. Bilam failed to understand that the function of prayer is not to influence God but rather to change the nature of the one who prays. When you pray, do you have this kind of mind-set that through prayer we can make God do what we want? How about with regard to Torah observance? Do you think you can get God to do what you want if you obey His commands? Is that the purpose of the Mitzvot? Are we begging the Lord to do our will when we pray if we think He will hear our prayers if we live a certain way? According to the Scriptures we know that prayer is not intended to manipulate God into giving us our own way, but to be in His will. Yeshua spoke of this in *Matthew 6:5-14*, saying that when we pray, we are not to be like the hypocrites, who love to stand and be known of men. He taught his disciples to pray saying, “*Our Father who art in Heaven, holy is Your Name, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven ...*” (*Matthew 6:9-13*). In addition to this, if we walk in the path of Bilam, arrogant, prideful, having a lust for wealth and fame, being jealous and having the evil eye, regarding sin in our hearts, will the Lord hear our prayers? Bilam did not know the truth and he followed the path of destruction all the way up until the end. Based upon the narrative in Parashat Balak, a donkey can see God’s will, but a greedy person will always look for a way around it. The Apostle Paul’s exhortation to the believers in Thessalonica on the will of God is given in *1 Thessalonians 4:1-8*.

1 Thessalonians 4:1-8

4:1 Finally then, brethren, we request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us instruction as to how you ought to walk and please God (just as you actually do walk), that you excel still more. 4:2 For you know what commandments we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus. 4:3 For this is the will of God, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality; 4:4 that each of you know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, 4:5 not in lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know

God; 4:6 and that no man transgress and defraud his brother in the matter because the Lord is the avenger in all these things, just as we also told you before and solemnly warned you. 4:7 For God has not called us for the purpose of impurity, but in sanctification. 4:8 So, he who rejects this is not rejecting man but the God who gives His Holy Spirit to you. (NASB)

Paul says the will of God is to sanctify ourselves by abstaining from sexual immorality and not to live in lustful passion like the Gentiles do who do not know God. He also says we should not transgress and defraud our brothers because the Lord sees and avenges in all these things. Lustful passion can come in many forms, as in the case of Bilam, arrogance, pride, desiring wealth and fame, jealousy and having the evil eye towards a brother. The question before us based upon this week's Torah reading, "*do we want to follow God's truth or the path of our own destruction?*" According to the Scriptures, God's truth is believing in Yeshua the Messiah which is followed by an obedient lifestyle (abiding in the Messiah). The way, the truth, and the life is found in Him, and the fruit of this life in Him is found in the Holy Spirit that is given to overcome our lustful passions and turn from the path of Bilam to God's ways of righteousness, justice, and truth!

