

“The Parsha Discussion” by Rabbi Alex Israel

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Balak. Learning the Hard Way



Why did Bilaam – a prophet or possibly a wizard – want to travel across the Middle East to curse a small Israelite tribe? It is difficult to know! Was he after money¹, prestige², did he hate the concept of slaves who had gained their freedom, or was he possessed by an irrational Jew-hatred?

We can only speculate about that, but it seems that Bilaam really wanted to do this job. How do we know?

First, he is approached by a Moabite royal delegation who invite him to curse Israel. Bilaam requests God’s permission. God says: “You cannot go” (v.7-12)

Second, the Moabites return with a higher ranking delegation, offering Bilaam greater rewards. (v.16-17) God responds:

“If the men have come to call you, rise, go with them; but only do what I tell you.”(22:20)

This is strange language! Did God change his mind? Why does He allow Bilaam to go? Even when He allows him, it sounds like there is a certain reluctance: “**IF** the men have come ... **go** with them. **BUT** only do what I tell you.” God sounds like a parent who reluctantly allows his teenager to go out to a party until 2am. The parent doesn’t want the teenager to be there, but also doesn’t want to ruin his social life. The parent reluctantly agrees but isn’t happy about it. Is God a conflicted parent?

In a third scene we sense that God doesn’t want Bilaam to go because he then sends an “angel of the Lord standing in the way, with his drawn sword in his hand.”(v.31) Bilaam’s donkey draws the conclusion that God doesn’t want Bilaam to do this job! Bilaam also suspect that this is the case. He says:

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“Now therefore, if it is evil in your sight, I will turn back.”³⁵ And the angel of the Lord said to Balaam, “Go with the men, but speak only the word that I tell you.” So Balaam went on with the princes of Balak.’

Again, I pose the question:

- If God wants him to go, why send the angel?
- If God doesn't want him to go, then why allow him to do it?

Rashi³ suggests a far-reaching theory of human freedom and divine guidance:

לך עם האנשים. בדרך שאדם רוצה לילך בה, מוליכין אותו:

GO WITH THE MEN — On that road which a man is resolved to go, he is led.

Please discuss:

- What does this proverb mean?
- What does it tell us about Bilaam?

It seems that Bilaam desperately wishes to curse Israel. True – he knows that God controls him, and he states it clearly to Balak: “Behold, I have come to you! Have I now any power of my own to speak freely? The word that God puts in my mouth, that must I speak.”(v.38) And yet, he tries, over and over to pronounce a curse, only to be frustrated again and again.

What can we learn from this:

God allows us to follow our choices.

God allows us to make mistakes.

God warns us.

God allows us to learn the hard way.

God told Bilaam not to go. Bilaam asks again and again. God tries to explain it is a bad idea. But ultimately, Bilaam needs to find out for himself. And in the end, all the “honor” that Bilaam sought turns to shame:

“I summoned you,” Balak said to Balaam, “to curse my enemies, and instead you have blessed them these three times! Go back at once to your own place! I was going to reward you richly, but the Lord has denied you the reward.” (24:10-11)

We humans have the choice. But we also bear the consequences of our choices. God leads us the way we want to go, but we might only learn the hard way.

Please discuss.

- How is this principle true in many areas of human behaviour?

Shabbat Shalom!

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¹ 22:18; 24:13

² 22:15,17,37; 24:11.

³ Based on Talmud Makkot 10b