

Torah Talk—מאמרי תורה



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פרשת בלק
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Torah Reading: *Bemidbar* (Numbers) 22:2-25:9

In this *parasha*, the king of Moav asks Bil'am to curse the Bnei Yisrael after he sees them defeat various nations in battle. Bil'am's donkey sees an angel of God and refuses to move; Bil'am hits the donkey; and God speaks through the mouth of the donkey to tell him not to curse the Bnei Yisrael. Instead of cursing them, Bil'am blesses them.

The story of Bil'am and his donkey appears in chapter 22, verses 21-35:

כא וַיָּקָם בִּלְעָם בְּבֹקֶר, וַיַּחְבֹּשׁ אֶת-אַתְנֹן; וַיֵּלֶךְ, עִם-שָׂרֵי מוֹאָב. כב וַיַּחֲרֹ-
אֹף אֶל-לֹהִים, כִּי-הוֹלִיךְ הוּא, וַיִּתְּצֵב מִלֶּאֶד הִי בַדְרֹךְ, לְשֹׁטֹן לוֹ; וְהוּא
רָכַב עַל-אַתְנֹן, וּשְׁנֵי נַעֲרָיו עִמּוֹ. כג וַתֵּרָא הָאֵתָנוֹן אֶת-מִלֶּאֶד הִי נֹצֵב
בַּדְרֹךְ, וַחֲרָבוֹ שְׁלֹפָה בִּידּוֹ, וַתֵּט הָאֵתָנוֹן מִן-הַדְרֹךְ, וַתֵּלֶךְ בַּשָּׂדֶה; וַיֵּד
בִּלְעָם אֶת-הָאֵתָנוֹן, לְהִטָּתֵּה הַדְרֹךְ. כד וַיַּעֲמֵד מִלֶּאֶד הִי, בְּמַשְׁעוֹל הַכְּרָמִים-
גִּדְרֵי מִזֶּה, וְגִדְרֵי מִזֶּה. כה וַתֵּרָא הָאֵתָנוֹן אֶת-מִלֶּאֶד הִי, וַתֵּלַחֵץ אֶל-הַקִּיר,
וַתֵּלַחֵץ אֶת-רֶגֶל בִּלְעָם, אֶל-הַקִּיר; וַיִּסֹּף, לְהַכֹּתָהּ. כו וַיּוֹסֶף מִלֶּאֶד-הִי,
עֲבוּר; וַיַּעֲמֵד בְּמָקוֹם צָר, אֲשֶׁר אֵין-דֶּרֶךְ לְנִטּוֹת יָמִין וּשְׂמֹאלוֹ. כז וַתֵּרָא
הָאֵתָנוֹן אֶת-מִלֶּאֶד הִי, וַתִּרְבֹּץ תַּחַת בִּלְעָם; וַיַּחֲרֹ-אֹף בִּלְעָם, וַיֵּד אֶת-
הָאֵתָנוֹן בְּמִקֵּל. כח וַיִּפְתַּח הִי, אֶת-פִּי הָאֵתָנוֹן; וַתֹּאמֶר לְבִלְעָם, מֶה-עֲשִׂיתִי
לָךְ, כִּי הִכִּיתָנִי, זֶה שְׁלֹשׁ רְגָלִים. כט וַיֹּאמֶר בִּלְעָם לָאֵתָנוֹן, כִּי הִתְעַלְלָתְ
בִּי; לוֹ יֵשׁ חֶרֶב בְּיָדִי, כִּי עָתָה הִרְגִּיתִיךְ. ל וַתֹּאמֶר הָאֵתָנוֹן אֶל-בִּלְעָם, הֲלוֹא
אֲנֹכִי אֲתֹנָךְ אֲשֶׁר-רָכַבְתָּ עָלַי מֵעוֹדָךְ עַד-הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה--הֲהִסְכֹּן הִסְכַּנְתִּי,
לַעֲשׂוֹת לָךְ כֹּה; וַיֹּאמֶר, לֹא. לא וַיִּגַּל הִי, אֶת-עֵינֶי בִלְעָם, וַיֵּרָא אֶת-

מִלֶּאֶד הִי נִצָּב בַּדֶּרֶךְ, וַחֲרָבוֹ שְׁלֶפֶה בְּיָדוֹ; וַיִּקְדּוּ וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּ, לְאַפָּיו. לֵב וַיֹּאמֶר
אֵלָיו, מִלֶּאֶד הִי, עַל-מָה הַכִּיתָ אֶת-אֶתְנָדָּךְ, זֶה שְׁלוֹשׁ רִגְלִים; הִנֵּה אֲנִכִּי
יֵצְאֵתִי לְשֹׁטָן, כִּי-יָרֵט הַדֶּרֶךְ לְנִגְדִי. לֵג וַתִּרְאֵנִי, הָאֲתוֹן, וַתִּטּ לִפְנֵי, זֶה
שְׁלֹשׁ רִגְלִים; אוֹלֵי נִטְתָּה מִפְּנֵי, כִּי עָתָה גַם-אֶתְכָּה הָרִגְתִּי וְאוֹתָהּ הִחַיִּיתִי.
לֵד וַיֹּאמֶר בְּלָעָם אֶל-מִלֶּאֶד הִי, חֲטָאתִי--כִּי לֹא יָדַעְתִּי, כִּי אַתָּה נִצָּב
לְקִרְאתִי בַּדֶּרֶךְ; וְעָתָה אִם-רַע בְּעֵינֶיךָ, אֲשׁוּבָה לִּי. לֵה וַיֹּאמֶר מִלֶּאֶד הִי
אֶל-בְּלָעָם, לֵךְ עִם-הָאֲנָשִׁים, וְאַפֹּס אֶת-הַדָּבָר אֲשֶׁר-אָדָּבֶר אֵלֶיךָ, אֲתוֹ
תִּדְבָּר; וַיֵּלֶךְ בְּלָעָם, עִם-שְׁרֵי בָלָק.

21 And Bil'am rose up in the morning, and saddled his donkey, and went with the princes of Moav. 22 And God's anger was kindled because he went; and the angel of Hashem placed himself in the way for an adversary against him. Now he was riding upon his donkey, and his two servants were with him. 23 And the donkey saw the angel of Hashem standing in the way, with his sword drawn in his hand; and the donkey turned aside out of the way, and went into the field; and Bil'am hit the donkey, to turn her into the way. 24 Then the angel of Hashem stood in a hollow way between the vineyards, a fence being on this side, and a fence on that side. 25 And the donkey saw the angel of Hashem, and she thrust herself into the wall, and crushed Bil'am's foot against the wall; and he hit her again. 26 And the angel of Hashem went further, and stood in a narrow place, where was no way to turn either to the right hand or to the left. 27 And the donkey saw the angel of Hashem, and she lay down under Bil'am; and Bil'am's anger was kindled, and he hit the donkey with his stick. 28 And Hashem opened the mouth of the donkey, and she said unto Bil'am: 'What have I done to you, that you have hit me these three times? 29 And Bil'am said to the donkey: 'Because you have mocked me; I wish there were a sword in my hand, because now I would have killed you.' 30 And the donkey said to Bil'am: 'Am not I your donkey, upon which you have ridden all your life long until this day? Was I ever wont to do such a thing to you?' And he said: 'No.' 31 Then Hashem opened the eyes of Bil'am, and he saw the angel of Hashem standing in the way, with his sword drawn in his hand; and he bowed his head, and fell on his face. 32 And the angel of Hashem said to him: 'Why have you hit your donkey these three times? behold, I have come forth for an adversary, because your way is contrary to me; 33 and the donkey saw me, and turned aside before

me these three times; unless she had turned aside from me, surely now I would have killed you, and left her alive.' 34 And Bil'am said to the angel of Hashem: 'I have sinned; for I did not know that you stood in the way against me; now therefore, if it displeases you, I will go back.' 35 And the angel of Hashem said to Bil'am: 'Go with the men; but only the word that I shall speak to you, should you speak.' So Bil'am went with the princes of Balak.

There is a debate among the medieval commentators about whether this story is to be taken literally. *Chazal* (the Rabbis of the Talmud; an acronym for *chachameinu zichronam l'vracha* – “our sages of blessed memory”) took this story literally. In *Pirkei Avot*, The Ethics of the Sages, they make the following statement (5:9):

Ten things were created at twilight on the eve of the first Shabbat: the mouth of the earth [to be opened to swallow Korach and his followers]; the mouth of the well [to be opened for Moshe]; the mouth of the donkey [to be opened for Bil'am]; the rainbow [of Noach]; the manna; the staff [of Moshe]; the *shamir* [an insect which split the stones for the Temple]; writing; the inscription [on the tablets of the Ten Commandments]; and the tablets themselves.

I believe that the rabbis' intention in writing this is to convey the idea that God pre-ordained the miraculous nature of these items and had prepared them right from the beginning of existence. One should not think that any of these supernatural things were afterthoughts or capriciously created.

But a talking donkey? This seems far-fetched, even compared to the other items listed. It is interesting that very few people have difficulty with the concept of a talking snake (see *Bereshit* chapter 3), but we struggle with the idea of a talking donkey.

Even some of medieval commentators, most notably Rav Saadiah Gaon (9th-10th Century Egypt) and Maimonides (12th Century Spain/Egypt) believe this story to be homiletic in nature (sending us a specific moral message) and not literal, having occurred as a dream to Bil'am. They present as proof the Torah's statement that he was travelling with only two companions, hardly an entourage fit for such an important figure. Further, Bil'am exhibits no surprise whatsoever at the presence of a talking donkey. If the episode was a dream, perhaps it indicates to us Bil'am's internal conflict about cursing the Jewish people. We know that when we are

concerned or anxious about something, our subconscious often causes us to dream about it at night.

Or perhaps the story – whether real or a dream – is meant to tell us that “there is none so blind as one who will not see.” God’s presence, which was not obvious to Bil’am, the greatest non-Jewish prophet of the time, was clearly visible to a creature as lowly as a donkey.

The Talmud (Tractate *Bava Batra* 14b), when it lists the authors of the various Biblical texts, states, “Moshe wrote his book [The Five Books of Moses] and *Parashat Bil’am* and *Iyov* [The Book of Job]...” It is interesting to note that the story of Bil’am is listed as its own entity, separate and apart from the rest of the Five Books of Moses. Perhaps the Talmud is trying to impress upon us the importance of this episode. But why? To let us know that the One Above is in charge? To reinforce that the Jewish people are under Divine Protection whether we are aware of it or not? To clue us in to the importance of our words, as God would not allow Bil’am to curse us?

It is certainly worthwhile re-reading the entire episode of Bil’am to glean the various moral messages we can from it.

Shabbat Shalom.

For Discussion:

- Do you think the episode with the talking donkey really happened? Why or why not?
- What do you think is the message we should take away from the story of Bil’am and his donkey?
- The story of Bil’am is the only story in the Torah in which the Jewish people do not appear at all (after there is Jewish nation). Why do you think this is? What, therefore, is this story doing in the Torah?