

Torah Talk – מאמרי תורה



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Parashat Balak
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פרשת בלק
י"ד בתמוז תשע"ז

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

In this *parasha*, Balak, the king of Moav, asks Bil'am to curse the Bnei Yisrael after he sees them defeat various nations in battle. As Bil'am sets out to fulfill this task, his donkey sees an angel of God and refuses to move any further. Bil'am hits the donkey. 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.

Over the course of this incident, Bil'am blesses the Bnei Yisrael three times while attempting to curse them, and gives an additional prophecy to Balak and to the nations. The four visions feature some striking similarities.

Each one begins with the phrase, "וַיִּשָּׂא מִשְׁלוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר" – He took up his parable and said..." This particular phrasing hints at the brilliance of Bil'am's pronouncements. The person in the *TaNaKH* (Bible) most associated with the word *משל* – *mashal* (parable or proverb) is *Shlomo HaMelech*, King Solomon, to whom are attributed 3,000 *meshalim* (II Kings 5:12), in addition to *סֵפֶר מִשְׁלֵי* – *Sefer Mishlei*, the Book of Proverbs.

More striking are the similarities in how Bil'am refers to Bnei Yisrael in each of his visions:

מִן-אֲרָם יִנְחֹנֵי בָּלַק מֶלֶךְ-מוֹאָב, מֵהַרְרֵי-קְדָם--לֵךְ אָרְהָ-לִי יַעֲקֹב, וּלְכֵה זַעֲמָה
יִשְׂרָאֵל... מִי מָנָה עֶפְרַיִם יַעֲקֹב, וַיִּמְסַפֵּר אֶת-רֵבַע יִשְׂרָאֵל; תָּמֹת נַפְשֵׁי מוֹת יִשְׂרָאֵל,
וַתְּהִי אַחֲרֵיתִי כְּמֹהוּ.

From Aram Balak brings me, the king of Moav from the mountains of the East: 'Come, curse me Yaakov, and come, vilify Yisrael.' ...Who has counted the dust of Yaakov, or numbered the stock of Yisrael? Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my end be like his! (23:7, 10)

כִּי לֹא-נִחַשׁ בְּיַעֲקֹב, וְלֹא-קָסַם בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל; כָּעֵת, יֹאמֵר לְיַעֲקֹב וּלְיִשְׂרָאֵל, מַה-פָּעַל
אֶל-

For there is no enchantment with Yaakov, neither is there any divination with Yisrael; now is it said of Yaakov and of Yisrael: 'What hath God wrought!' (23:23)

מַה-טֹּבוֹ אֹהֲלָיִךָ, יַעֲקֹב; מִשְׁכְּנֹתֶיךָ, יִשְׂרָאֵל.

How goodly are your tents, O Yaakov, your dwellings, O Yisrael! (24:5)

אֶרְאֶנּוּ וְלֹא עֵתָהּ, אֲשׁוּרְנוּ וְלֹא קְרוֹב; דָּרָךְ כּוֹכַב מִיַּעֲקֹב, וְקַם שֶׁבֶט מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל, וּמַחֲץ
פְּאֲתֵי מוֹאָב, וְקִרְקַר כָּל-בְּנֵי-שֵׁת. וְהָיָה אֶדְוֹם יְרֵשָׁה, וְהָיָה יְרֵשָׁה שְׁעִיר--אִיבִיו;
וּיִשְׂרָאֵל, עֹשֶׂה חֵיל. וַיֵּרָד, מִיַּעֲקֹב; וְהָאָבִיד שָׂרִיד, מֵעִיר.

I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near; there shall step forth a star out of Yaakov, and a scepter shall rise out of Yisrael, and shall smite through the corners of Moav, and break down all the sons of Shet. And Edom shall be a possession, Se'ir also, even his enemies, shall be a possession; while Yisrael does valiantly. And out of Yaakov shall one have dominion, and shall destroy the remnant from the city. (24:17-19)

Note that each and every time Bil'am refers to the Bnei Yisrael, he uses both the names Yaakov and Yisrael. The medieval commentators pick up on this fact and attempt to explain it.

Rashi (11th Century Franco-Germany) says that "[Balak] told [Bil'am] to curse them using both names in case one of the names was not specific enough." Ibn Ezra (12th Century Spain) suggests that it is because poetry is spoken with repetition of the same idea in different words, or perhaps, Bil'am did this to strengthen his prophecy.

Both of these explanations seem a bit simplistic. The *pshat* (simple meaning of the text) in *Bereshit* (Genesis) may shed further light on the seeming redundancy.

In *Bereshit* the individual in question, Yitzchak's heir, is referred to as both Yaakov and Yisrael. A close reading of the text will show that Yaakov is the name used when referring to the individual aspects or episodes of the man's life, and Yisrael is employed when speaking about tribal or communal issues. Bearing this in mind, it seems that Bil'am is making sure to try to curse (but, nonetheless, ends up blessing) each individual in addition to the nation as a whole.

The origins and meanings of the two names offer additional insight. Yaakov is the name used for the one who manipulates events to acquire the birthright and his father's primary blessing. Yaakov, from the root *e-k-v*, means in part, "the one who tricks," as Esav himself says, (*Bereshit* 27:36) "וַיַּעֲקֹבֵנִי זֶה פַעַמַיִם – You have fooled me twice." Yisrael is much more straightforward. He receives this name after wrestling directly with an unknown entity, perhaps an angel, who says, (*Bereshit* 32:29) "לֹא יַעֲקֹב יֵאמָר עוֹד שְׂמֶךְ--כִּי, אִם--" .וַתִּוְכַל .כִּי-שָׁרִיתָ עִם-אֱלֹהִים וְעִם-אָנָשִׁים, וַתִּוְכַל . – Your name shall no longer be Yaakov, but Yisrael as you have wrestled with God and men and you have prevailed."

The One who shed the prophecy upon Bil'am made sure that he referred to both the manipulative and the straightforward personae and that he would allude to the one who "prevailed," ensuring the continuity of the blessings.

Balak's plot to curse the Bnei Yisrael was foiled in some very obvious ways, in the pronouncement of the blessings themselves, and in some subtler ways as well: in the particular language that made up those blessings.

Shabbat Shalom.

For Discussion:

- Do you have more than one name? If so, why? What does each of your names mean?
- Why did Balak think that Bil'am just saying words about Bnei Yisrael to curse them would make a difference? After all, they're just words!
- If you were Bil'am, what would you have thought if the wrong words kept coming out of your mouth?