

Torah Talk – מאמרי תורה



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Parashat Balak
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פרשת בלק
י"ז בתמוז תשע"ח

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.

According to the Talmud in Tractate Bava Batra 15a, Bil'am was one of the "seven prophets [who] prophesied to non-Jews, namely, Bil'am and his father, Iyov [Job], Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, Zophar the Naamathite, and Elihu the son of Barachel the Buzite [Iyov's four friends]."

However, when Bil'am's death is recorded in *Sefer Yehoshua* (the Book of Joshua), it describes him differently (13:22): "וְאֶת-בְּלַעַם בֶּן-בְּעוֹר, הַקּוֹסֵם--הָרְגוּ בְנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל" – Also Bil'am the son of Beor, the *kosem*, the Bnei Yisrael killed with the sword among the rest of those they killed."

Kosem is a Hebrew word meaning "soothsayer, diviner, or magician;" someone who works with fortune-telling or charms. So was Bil'am a true prophet or merely a *kosem*?

The rabbis in the Talmud Tractate Sanhedrin 106a ask the same question:

It is stated, 'Also Bil'am the son of Beor, the *kosem*, the Bnei Yisrael killed with the sword among the rest of those they killed.' The *gemara* [a rabbinical commentary on the Mishnah, forming the second part of the Talmud] asks: Was he a *kosem*? He is a prophet. Rabbi Yochanan says: he

was a prophet, but ultimately, he lost his capacity for prophecy and remained merely a *kosem*.

The Talmudic rabbis' discussions always contain deeper meanings than just the superficial interpretation. So, what is Rabbi Yochanan's point here? Perhaps that as a natural consequence of wanting to curse Yisrael, Bil'am lost his ability to prophesy and became merely a *kosem*. Perhaps that the intrinsic abilities that each of us has – whether intellectual, artistic, or other abilities – are gifts that we should not take for granted, and that we need to appreciate them as they are expressed. Perhaps that as we go through life, our affinities and our aptitudes change, and we need to deal with who we are at each different moment in our lives.

Whichever explanation you resonate with, it is also interesting to note that Bil'am is described by the Talmudic rabbis as being "wicked." Even those who are not necessarily positive role models for us can serve to teach us lessons about life.

Shabbat Shalom.

For Discussion:

- Why do you think that Bil'am went from being a prophet to being a *kosem*?
- What "gifts" do you have that you should be grateful for?
- For what reason do you think that the book of Yehoshua says that the Bnei Yisrael killed Bil'am? After all, he did not succeed in his attempt to curse them.