

Sedra Highlight

- Dr Jacob Solomon

BALAK

Bil'am's method of initiating the Israelites' downfall was to ruin the link between the Almighty and His Chosen People. He attempted to do this twice:

1. By planning to curse Israel. That first time he was unsuccessful, because, "G-d did not wish to listen to Bil'am, but because (He) loved you, He turned the curses into blessings" (D'varim. 23:6).

2. By making it possible for Israel to sin through idol worship and sexual immorality in the incident of Baal Pe'or. After Bil'am had to face Balak's wrath for his failure to curse the Israelites for the third time, he said to Balak, "Come, let me advise you..." The Talmud (Sanhedrin 106a) brings the tradition that the advice was to incite the Israelites to take part in prostitution with the eligible ladies of his kingdom: "Their god hates sexual immorality." The 'passport' to a Moabite woman was participating in the worship of Baal Pe'or (a particularly obnoxious procedure detailed in the Midrash: Sifrei 131). Thus the second time Bil'am did succeed in ruining the links between G-d and the Israelites: twenty-four thousand Israelites died by plague in

consequence of the sin of Baal Pe'or.

In his unsuccessful efforts to undermine Israel by cursing them, the Torah mentions Bil'am's name over and over again. In his successful efforts to undermine Israel through initiating the sin of Baal Pe'or, his name is not mentioned even once in the main account. Only much later on, in a different context, does the Torah explicitly connect Bil'am with Baal Pe'or: Moshe said to his military officers, "Did you indeed let every female live? Behold! - They caused Israelites to commit treachery against G-d, by the word of Bil'am, in the matter of Baal Pe'or, and the plague occurred..." (31:15-16)

Why therefore does Bil'am's connection with Baal Pe'or not appear in the main account?

The Rashbam suggests that the connection actually does occur in Bil'am's final words to Balak where he gives him a piece of advice without elaborating on what the advice was: "Let me advise you..." (24:13) That advice, the Rashbam says, was given in whisper; 'not for publication at this stage'. His sage insight passed on the information that if you want to get the Israelites into G-d's disfavour, don't waste your time trying to curse them, but tempt them with idolatry and forbidden sexual relations.

Perhaps one reason that the advice

was not explicit is to teach the following. As long as people are aspiring and doing their best to act correctly, they should trust that G-d is behind them. The second generation of Israelites in the desert had not been involved with the downfalls of the Golden Calf and Spies. Enemies appeared here and there, openly and behind the scenes. Bil'am was the latter: he worked entirely without the Israelites knowledge at the time. His agenda was not the success of Moav, but the fall of Israel. He did his best, but G-d frustrated him.

But once a person or for that matter a community acts in a way that negates positive values, such as avoda zara and gilui arayot, they do not need an outsider to undermine them. They are the ones who do the undermining for themselves. Bil'am opened the door, but the offending Israelites walked through it. They didn't have to. But they did. With the consequence of 24,000 dead (25:9).

The situation may be compared to an owner of a jewellery shop that goes home for the night and leaves his business unlocked. Thieves enter in the middle of the night and take out the pearls, diamonds, and rubies. When arrested and on trial, the thieves cannot excuse themselves with "it wasn't us: the owner did not lock the door." Of course it was them. Leaving the door open does not alter

the fact that the people entered and stole the valuable jewellery.

Bil'am is like the owner of the shop, and the B'nei Yisrael were the thieves. As the Israelites fell for the temptation of Baal Pe'or, they could not blame Bil'am for giving in to their own temptations.

And that is the message of Bil'am's absence from the last section of the Parasha. It teaches us that as long as we are positively true to our roots, we should not worry about what others think of us. But once we abandon our principles we can weaken and even destroy ourselves. We ourselves are to blame; we cannot put the blame on others.

Chukat and Balak are always read on separate Shabbatot in Israel. Outside Israel, as this year, they are combined during the years where Shavuot falls on Friday. Due to Shavuot lasting two days in those locations, the second day's falling on Shabbat means reading the special portion for that day, whereas in Israel the reading is the next regular Parasha. Therefore Israel is one Parasha ahead - until Balak, when Israel splits Chukat and Balak to let us get back into sync.

Why, in such circumstances, are Chukat and Balak joined up, instead of any other combination - for example Shelach and Korach. What is the connection between the two Parshiot?

One possibility is that the stick appears in both Parshiot. In Chukat, Moshe struck the rock with his stick, and was forbidden to enter the Promised Land by Higher Authority in consequence. And in Balak, Bil'am struck his ass with a stick when she strayed from the highway, whereupon G-d 'opened the ass's mouth' (22:28).

When Moshe struck the rock instead of speaking to it as G-d commanded, he failed to 'make G-d holy' (20:12) in the eyes of Israelites. As Rashi puts it, had he spoken to the rock, the Israelites would have learnt the following lesson. If the rock, which neither speaks nor hears obeys the Word of G-d, then how much more should we do likewise! Therefore, decreed G-d on Moshe: 'You shall not bring (the Israelites)... into the land I [promised to] give them' (20:12). So the stick brought Moshe one spiritual level downwards...

In contrast, Bil'am striking the ass led to something positive - a communication from G-d. In response, he showed a degree of humility when he was prepared to 'return' if it would be 'bad' in G-d's 'eyes' (22:34). And when G-d told him to 'go with the men and say whatever I will tell you to say' (22:34), he did precisely that. Even though it was to cost formidable reputation, personal prestige, and high salary. So the stick brought Bilaam one spiritual level upwards...

The connection may be made with the opening section of Parashat Chukat: 'The kohen shall take a stick made of cedar, hyssop, and a scarlet thread, and throw them into the burning of the cow...' The stick of cedar used in the purification from the defilement from contact with a human corpse is an integral part of that process. As the text shows, it paradoxically 'defiles' the pure (a ritually pure man shall gather the ash of the cow... and is defiled until evening) and 'purifies the defiled' (he shall purify himself with [the ashes of the red cow] on the third day and on the seventh day, then he will be pure)...

Homiletically the stick reappears twice in Chukat-Balak. In Chukat, it 'defiles the pure' - Moshe striking the rock, and in Balak it 'purifies the defiled' - Bilaam striking the ass...

