

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Balak
July 2023 / Tamuz 5783

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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Balak – What does Balak have to do with Chanukah?

In this week's Parasha of Balak we read about Bilaam's failed efforts to curse Bnei Yisrael. Despite numerous attempts, when Bilaam opened his mouth, only beautiful, positive praise of Bnei Yisrael came out. We could say that Bilaam was caught with a DUI (Declaring Under the Influence of Hashem). Bilaam might be horrified to know that some of his words even made it into our siddur! And we can even learn some lessons from his blessings and praises. Let's focus on one of Bilaam's comments, aided by a keen observation brought to us by Rashi.

Bilaam, directing his speech to Balak and his officers, stated:

G-d has brought them out of Egypt in accordance with the strength of His loftiness.
(Bamidbar 22:23)

Rashi comments as follows:

*You [Balak] said “Behold! A people **has come out** of Egypt”.¹ They did not come out by themselves [as you implied], but rather it is G-d who took them out.”²*

Bilaam's statement does not seem to be so original. He is merely stating that Hashem brought Bnei Yisrael out of Mitzrayim. We all know that. But the keen eye of the Midrash (upon which Rashi is based) draws out a subtle but extremely significant difference between Bilaam's phrase, and a similar statement by Balak at the beginning of our Parasha. When Balak is trying to enlist Bilaam's help to curse Bnei Yisrael, he says:

“Behold! A people has come out of Egypt, it has covered the ‘eye’ of the earth. Come and curse them for me, perhaps I will be able to fight against them and drive them out.”
(Bamidbar 22:11)

Balak used passive language to describe the Exodus from Mitzrayim. A nation of some three million people ‘came out’ of Egypt. Passive language is often used by lawyers when they want to obscure the facts and hide the active players. On the other hand, active language clearly identifies the active subject and uses an active verb. When we say, with passive language, that an event just ‘happened’, it is not clear who caused that outcome to occur. In contrast, Bilaam (while DUI) states clearly, employing active language, that *Hashem* was responsible for taking Bnei Yisrael out of Egypt.

This reminds me of one of the explanations as to why we light Chanukah candles. (Now that the northern hemisphere days are getting longer and the temperature is increasing, I can't help feeling that it is time for Chanukah. Growing up in the southern hemisphere, Chanukah was always celebrated in the heat of summer.) According to a number of commentators,³ the main miracle of Chanukah was the military defeat of the mighty Syrian-Greek army by the hopelessly outnumbered and untrained Jewish rebels. However, people have a habit of explaining miracles in accordance with natural phenomenon. The role of Hashem, the main Player, becomes obscured. Therefore, Hashem sent Bnei Yisrael an open miracle – the oil that burned for eight days. This clearly miraculous event

¹ See Bamidbar 22:11.

² Rashi is quoting the Midrash Tanchuma Balak 14 and Midrash Rabbah 20:20.

³ See for example the Maharal in his Chiddushai Aggadot.

made it clear that Hashem was also involved in, and responsible for, the military outcome. Every year when we light the Chanukah, we affirm that the military defeat was also a miraculous gift from Above.

Unlike the military defeat in the story of Chanukah, Yetziyat Mitzrayim was clearly miraculous. However, people have an amazing ability to downplay clear, open miracles and explain the events with science.⁴ (It's amazing the lengths that people will go to, and the mental acrobatics that they will perform, in order to avoid the need to answer to a Higher Power so that they can live their life as they please. This is similar to another phenomenon – people who have the audacity to deny massive events like the Holocaust!)

The Rashi quoted above teaches us that we have to actively acknowledge Hashem's involvement in our lives. We need to identify it, think about it, and talk about it. There are so many events that happen in our lives where Hashem's involvement is apparent. It is up to us to recognise those events.

But there are also so many more events where we are totally clueless! Rav Itzele of Volozhin⁵ was once asked by a Russian officer why there are pasukim in Tehillim that call on the nations of the world to praise Hashem because of Hashem's great kindness with Israel.⁶ It is understandable why Hashem's kindness to Israel should prompt the Jews to praise and thank Hashem. But why should the other nations praise Hashem? Rav Itzele responded that the other nations are in the best position to know the extent to which Hashem protects his beloved nation. Why? Because they are the ones whose plots and evil plans to attack the Jewish people were foiled time and time again. We, Hashem's people, often remain in the dark and therefore cannot fully praise Hashem for these salvations.

Indeed, our entire Parasha and the evil plots of Balak and Bilaam took place without Bnei Yisrael's awareness. There were no Jews present in the whole story. Bnei Yisrael were blissfully unaware of the drama that was unfolding so close by. The story of Hashem controlling Bilaam's mouth and foiling his plans was only revealed to Moshe and included in the Torah as a kindness to us. How many other times does Hashem save us without our awareness?

Some miracles are clear and (should be) undeniable. For example, the miracles associated with Yetziyat Mitzrayim and the miracle of Chanukah. Some miracles are hidden by nature, but one doesn't have to look hard to see that Hashem is clearly involved behind the scenes. For instance, the Israeli victory in the Six Day War and the Iron Dome missile defence that protects the residents of Israel in our own day. Sometimes Hashem's involvement is even more hidden, and we have to search harder. However, if we look more closely, we will start to notice many near-misses and apparent coincidences in our daily lives. And finally, there are many incidents that are totally hidden from us. We have no idea how often Hashem watches over us and saves us. And we have to acknowledge Hashem and thank and praise Him for all of these as well. After all, we are "Yehudim", and the Hebrew root of this term is "hod" – to acknowledge and to thank.

Let's try something this week:

1. Try to recognise Hashem's involvement in our life and the many hidden miracles that protect us and save us from harm. When we notice them, say thank you to Hashem.
2. We should also acknowledge and thank Hashem, Who with His infinite strength and kindness, often performs miracles and protects and saves us without us even noticing.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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⁴ See Darchai Noam for Parashat Bo 5782 (2022) where we discussed 'serious journalists' and 'reputable scientists' who seek to explain the great miracle of the splitting of the sea according to natural phenomenon.

⁵ The son of Rav Chaim of Volozhin, who was the main disciple of the Vilna Gaon and the founder of modern Yeshivas.

⁶ See for example chapter 117 of Tehillim.