Points to Ponder

Balak 5779

He sent messengers to Bilaam son of Beor () - Bilaam is called “HaRasha” but also recognized as a Novi. Was his appearance that of a Rasha or that of a Novi? Rav Schachter Shlita would often point out that in Pirkei Avos we do not contrast Avraham and Bilaam, we contrast the students of Avraham and students of Bilaam. The reason, notes Rav Schachter, is because the differences were most apparent in their students. There are many people who dress the part but are not internally consistent. When choosing a teacher one does not look at the outward appearance, s/he looks at the students who are the best reflection of the Rebbe’s true qualities.

If the people are coming for your benefit then go with them (22:20) - First Hashem tells Bilaam that he cannot go with Balak, now Hashem changes his mind. Rashi notes the change of position and comments that the issue seems to be one of whether Bilaam will make profit. Is Hashem really worried about Bilaam’s livelihood? Rav Schwab ztl. explains that  the difference was one of Lishma. When people are willing to do something altruistically, it is potent, but when the motivation is one of the almighty dollar, it loses its potency. This is what Hashem was telling Bilaam -- if you are going for your hatred, then you cannot go. However, once you are going for Kavod and money -- your words are meaningless.

He dressed his donkey () - Rashi explains that Bilaam’s getting up earlier was pre-empted by Avraham who did the same thing at the time of the Akaida. What is the connection? Rav Moshe Feinstein ztl explained that this Rasha tried to claim that he was better than the Jews who do not serve Hashem in the same way that they take care of their own needs. The answer preceded the question. Hashem told Bilaam that Avraham preceded him -- Avraham was ready to be embarrassed personally in order to promote Kavod Shomayim.

I have sinned () - Why did Bilaam say that he sinned when the Malach rebuked him if he did not know that the Malach was standing there? How could one sin if one did not see the Malach offering a counterpoint? Rav Chaim Sanzer ztl. explained that “not knowing” is a sin in of itself. Everyone makes mistakes but when it negatively impacts others, claiming “I didn’t know” is not an excuse.

Behold a people that arises like a lioness () - The praise of Bilaam here is indicative of Bnei Yisrael’s prowess in battle. However, Rashi notes that the praise here is of the people who rise to grab every Mitzva on time -- including Tzitzis, Tefillin and Kriyas Shema. Rav Ozer Glickman ztl noted that there is a deeper connection here. The Torah is reminding us of our need to recapture the sense of doing Mitzvos with a heroic valor associated with it. Torah life is not something we escape to, it is something we we elevate our lives toward. We need to rise up like lions to serve Hashem -- as part of the path of life.

He perceived no iniquity in Yaakov and saw no Amal in Yisrael (23:21) - Rashi explains that Amal refers to sin because it is laborious in Hashem’s eyes (it usually refers to labor). Rav Wolbe ztl. explains that people relate to sin and Mitzva differently. When it comes to Mitzva performance we tend to be somewhat lethargic but we seem to always have energy for sin. Hashem sees it in the opposite. Deep down we know that every Mitzvah is worth more than diamonds. The difficulty we have when it comes to learning, davening or any other Mitzva is a result of ignoring that which we know to be true.

Bilaam got up and went home Balak too (24:25) - Rav Gifter ztl points out that even after this entire experience, nothing changed. Both Bilaam and Balak went back to where they came from -- unchanged.

Haftarah - And I sent you Moshe, Aharon and Miriam (Micha 6:4) - Rav Yosef Carmel Shlita noted the contrast of Miriam versus that of Pharaoh and Bilaam. While they used their voices to murder and destroy, Miriam advises and believes.