

Perashat Balaq 5781: “Bribes Blind the Sighted”

Rabbi Nathan Dweck

‘Never again did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moshe’ (Debarim 34:10). In Israel [a prophet like Moshe] did not arise, but in the nations of the world [a prophet like Moshe] arose...And which prophet did they have that was like Moshe? Bil’am. (Sifre Debarim)

In the above Midrash, we are told that in regards to prophecy, Moshe and Bil’am were on the same level. The Midrash goes on to enumerate *three* prophetic attributes of Bil’am that Moshe Rabbenu himself did not have. But if Bil’am was on the same level of prophecy as Moshe, what led Bil’am to accept Balaq’s request to come curse Israel, attempting to manipulate G-d through numerous tactics?

Initially, Bil’am refuses Balaq’s invitation, “because G-d refuses to let me go with you” (22:13). The second time, however, the king of Moab knows how to entice Bil’am: he sends him more distinguished messengers, who tell Bil’am that Balaq will reward him richly. To this, Bil’am responds: “Even if Balaq were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not do anything, big or little, contrary to the command of Hashem my G-d” (v. 18). If Bil’am was honest about this, he would have stopped there, and sent the messengers once again back to Balaq.

However, he *continues* speaking to the messengers: “So you, too, stay here overnight, and let me find out what else Hashem may say to me.” He first made it sound as if he cannot be convinced by these external factors—the gold and the silver, and then does his best to convince G-d otherwise! We see, then, that Balaq’s offer *did* indeed convince him enough *to the extent that he tried to circumvent G-d’s word*. He would set out to go meet Balaq and would attempt to curse Israel!

On the way to Balaq, G-d teaches this prophet that his “sight” is perverted. His donkey sees the Angel of G-d, while Bil’am himself cannot see the Angel—until G-d opens his eyes (v. 31). He was blinded by his thirst for money, fame and power. Even after G-d “opens” his eyes to see the truth, he continued to attempt to manipulate the G-d of Israel—who of course cannot be manipulated by silly tactics and formulas.

This is precisely the message of this week’s Haftarah from Sefer Michah. G-d charges Bene Yisrael with betraying Him, forgetting all the good He had done for Israel (6:1-5). Michah anticipates that the people may ask, “With what should I approach G-d...with burnt offerings?...” (v. 6). In response to this, Michah states (vv. 7-8):

Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, or with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love loving mercy, and to walk humbly with your G-d?

You want to know what is straight in the eyes of G-d? He does not want your rams or your firstborn child! Rather, says Michah, He wants you to do **justice**—that you should not act unfairly with your friend, or oppress one’s fellow with words or money; He wants you to do **kindness** with your fellow man with all your heart; He wants you to walk **humbly** with G-d alone, that you should walk in His ways with a pure heart, and should be modest in your observance of the Mivot. (See Ibn Ezra and Malbim on v. 8.)

True leaders are ones who see the *power, money and fame* as perversions of *justice, righteousness and humility*. A leader needs to stand up for what is right in the eyes of G-d, irrespective of the influence of others. If leaders allow these material considerations to affect their decisions, then they will be controlled by them, as “bribes blind the sighted and perverts the words of the innocent” (*Shemot* 23:8). This is precisely what led to the downfall and eventual death of an individual who we are told was on the same level of prophecy as Moshe. Bil’am had enormous potential, but his sight was blinded by bribes. In the end, he was indeed *nothing* like Moshe, the humblest man on the earth.