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בָּלָק Balak

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מָה בַּפָּרָשָׁה • In This Week's Parashah

- Balak, the king of Moav, wants to curse Benei Yisrael. He sends for help from Bilam, who is known for cursing people.
- God says no to this, but Bilam tries to get a different answer. Eventually, God says yes—as long as Bilam only says whatever God tells him to say.
- Bilam sets out to meet Balak. God sends an angel with a sword to stand in his way, but only Bilam's donkey can see it.
- The donkey swerves off the road, then squishes into a wall, and finally stops and sits down. Bilam hits the donkey each time. Then, God lets the donkey speak! It asks: "What have I done to you that you have hit me three times?"
- God reveals the angel to Bilam. The angel criticizes Bilam for hitting his donkey, and emphasizes that Bilam must only speak God's words.
- Balak and Bilam meet up. Balak is ready for Bilam to curse Benei Yisrael. But whenever Bilam opens his mouth to speak, blessings come out! After this happens three times, Balak sends Bilam away.
- Some of Benei Yisrael start to worship the false god Baal Peor, so God sends a plague. But Pinhas kills the two people who were leading the sinfulness most publicly, and that stops the plague.



מִדְרָשׁ • Midrash



R. Shimon bar Yohai notices that Bilam, in our parashah, does the exact same thing Avraham once did:

בראשית כב:ג

וַיַּשְׁכֵּם אַבְרָהָם בַּבֹּקֶר וַיַּחֲבֹשׁ אֶת חֲמֹרוֹ

Bereishit 22:3

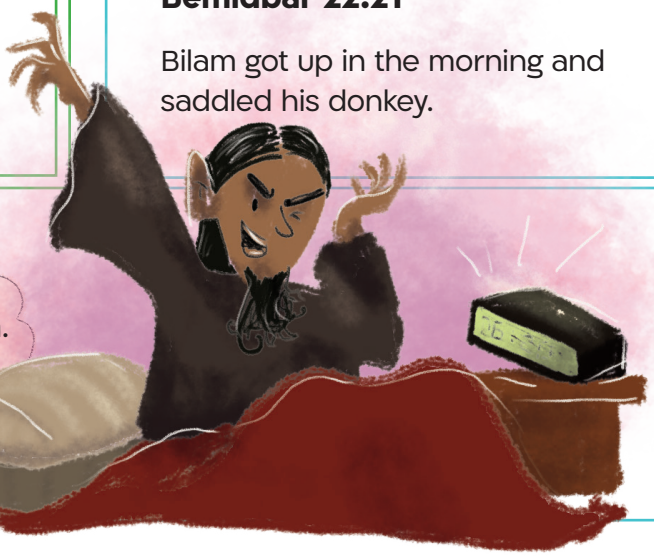
Avraham got up early in the morning and saddled his donkey.

במדבר כב:כא

וַיָּקָם בִּלְעָם בַּבֹּקֶר וַיַּחֲבֹשׁ אֶת אֲתֹנוֹ

Bemidbar 22:21

Bilam got up in the morning and saddled his donkey.



It's almost like the Torah wants us to compare Bilam to Avraham. So what's the connection between them?!



בראשית רבה נה:ח

אָמַר רִ' שִׁמְעוֹן בֶּן יוֹחַאי: אַהֲבָה מְקַלְקֶלֶת אֶת הַשּׁוּרָה וְשִׂנְאָה מְקַלְקֶלֶת אֶת הַשּׁוּרָה.

אַהֲבָה מְקַלְקֶלֶת אֶת הַשּׁוּרָה, דִּכְתִיב: "וַיַּשְׁכֵּם אַבְרָהָם בַּבֹּקֶר וַיַּחֲבֹשׁ אֶת חֲמֹרוֹ"—וְלֹא הָיָה לוֹ בַּמָּה עֲבָדִים? אֶלָּא, אַהֲבָה מְקַלְקֶלֶת אֶת הַשּׁוּרָה.

וְשִׂנְאָה מְקַלְקֶלֶת אֶת הַשּׁוּרָה, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: "וַיָּקָם בִּלְעָם בַּבֹּקֶר וַיַּחֲבֹשׁ אֶת אֲתֹנוֹ"—וְלֹא הָיָה לוֹ בַּמָּה עֲבָדִים? אֶלָּא, שִׂנְאָה מְקַלְקֶלֶת אֶת הַשּׁוּרָה.

Bereishit Rabbah (Eretz Yisrael, 1,500 years ago)

R. Shimon ben Yohai said: Love makes people break the normal rules, and hatred makes people break the normal rules.

Love makes people break the normal rules, as it is written, "Avraham got up early in the morning and saddled his donkey." But didn't he have lots of servants to do this job for him?! Rather, love made him break the normal rules.

Hatred makes people break the normal rules, as it is said, "Bilam got up in the morning and saddled his donkey." But didn't he have lots of servants to do this job for him?! Rather, hatred made him break the normal rules.

According to this midrash, Avraham and Bilam both put in way more effort than people like them normally do. But they put in extra effort for very different reasons. Avraham saddles his own donkey because Avraham loves God. Bilam saddles the donkey himself because he hates Benei Yisrael.

- What's the connection between love, or hate, and wanting to saddle your donkey yourself? Why would one thing lead to the other?
- What can this teach us about powerful emotions like love and hate? What is the midrash trying to teach us about Avraham? What is it teaching us about Bilam?
- Do you ever notice yourself being willing to do extra work or pay extra attention to detail because you're doing it for someone you love?

Our parashah begins with Balak sending messengers to Bilam to help him curse Benei Yisrael. Bilam doesn't seem too upset by the idea of cursing Benei Yisrael, but he wants God's permission. So first he says he wouldn't go, but he keeps asking God if he can, and then God says yes! Just as long as he only says what God tells him to. (Look it up! Bemidbar 22:2–35.)



דַּקָּה שֶׁל דִּיּוּן • One-Minute Debate

Debate: It's obvious that Bilam had bad intentions.

How to play:

- Here are some arguments to get you started, but try to come up with your own. Then debate someone!
- For a true one-minute debate, give each side 30 seconds to make its best case.



Agree!

- Bilam asks God multiple times if he can curse Benei Yisrael. He seems to really want to do this.
- He must have been doing something wrong because God gets angry at him and sends an angel to get in his way.
- He is very cruel to his donkey. No one should treat animals that way.



Disagree!

- Bilam makes it clear that he will only say whatever God tells him to. That's better than anyone I know!
- Balak is the one who wanted to curse Benei Yisrael. He started all this, not Bilam.
- Bilam ends up saying some really beautiful things about Benei Yisrael.



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שְׁאֵלוֹת הַשָּׁבוּעַ • Parashah Scavenger Hunt

aliyot:
1) Bemidbar 22:2 to 22:12
2) 22:13 to 22:20
3) 22:21 to 22:38
4) 22:39 to 23:12
5) 23:13 to 23:26
6) 23:27 to 24:13
7) 24:14 to 25:9

haftarah: Micah 5:6 to 6:8

The answers to the first seven questions can be found in the matching numbered aliyah in the Torah reading. The answers to questions 8 and 9 are harder and can come from anywhere in the parashah. The answer to question 10 is in this week's haftarah.

Good luck!

1. What does Balak plan to do after Bilam curses Benei Yisrael?
2. On what condition does God let Bilam go to Balak?



3. Who is with Bilam when he is on his donkey ride?
4. How many altars does Balak build in Bamot Ba'al?
5. What is the name of the second place where Balak tries to curse the people?
6. What famous line from the Siddur is in this aliyah?
7. How is Pinhas related to Aharon?
8. How many words for animals appear in our parashah?
9. What phrase in our parashah might remind you of Pesah, Shavuot, and Sukkot?
10. **From the haftarah:** What will God do to sorcery?



* Look for the answers on page 8!

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פַּרְשָׁנוּת • Commentary

Do you ever think of God as a friend?



Bemidbar 23:21

God does not see sin in Yaakov, nor does God see anything wrong in Yisrael.
God their Lord is with them,
and the teruah of the King is with them.

במדבר כג:כא

לֹא הִבִּיט אָוֶן בְּיַעֲקֹב
וְלֹא רָאָה עָמָל בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל
ה' אֱלֹקָיו עִמּוֹ
וּתְרוּעַת מֶלֶךְ בּוֹ:



"Teruah" usually means a blast from a horn or shofar. But some of our פַּרְשָׁנִים (parshanim, commentators) say that, in this pasuk from Bilam's blessing, the word "teruah" is connected to רֵעוּת (re'ut), which means friendship.

Rashi (France, 1,000 years ago)

The Holy Blessed One does not see sins in Yaakov. When they go against God's commands, God doesn't scrutinize them too closely to try to understand what they are doing wrong....

"The **teruah** of the King"—This is language of love and **re'ut** (friendship).

רש"י

לֹא הִבִּיט הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא אָוֶן שֶׁבְּיַעֲקֹב—כְּשֶׁהֵן עוֹבְרִים עַל דְּבָרָיו אֵינוֹ מְדַקְדֵּק אַחֲרֵיהֶם, לְהִתְבּוֹנֵן בְּאוֹנְיוֹת שֶׁלָּהֶן וּבְעַמְלָן שֶׁהֵן עוֹבְרִין עַל דָּתוֹ....

"**וּתְרוּעַת** מֶלֶךְ"—לְשׁוֹן חִבָּה **וְרֵעוּת**.



Rabbeinu Bahaye (Spain, 700 years ago)

When is it that "God their Lord is with them"? When the people have "the teruah of the King with them"; when they cling in friendship to the King.

רבנו בחיי

אֵימָתַי "ה' אֱלֹקָיו עִמּוֹ"?

כְּשֶׁ"תְּרוּעַת מֶלֶךְ בּוֹ"—
כְּשֶׁיֵּשׁ בָּהֶם דְּבֵקוּת עִם
הַמֶּלֶךְ, וְהוּא מִלְּשׁוֹן רֵעוּת.



According to Rashi, God acts as a friend to Benei Yisrael, not looking too closely at our flaws. This is what friends do; they see the best in each other.

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According to Rabbeinu Bahaye, Benei Yisrael act as a friend to God. And when we show our love and friendship to God by clinging to God, then God responds by being with us.

- What does it mean for God to be a friend of yours? How does it change the way you think about God to know that God is your friend?
- What does it mean to be a friend to God? What's the behavior of a person who is acting like God's friend?
- Can both be true? How?

הַפְטָרָה • Haftarah

One of Bilam's blessings for Benei Yisrael opens with the words מַה טֹּבוּ (mah tovu, "how good," Bemidbar 24:5). Can you find some very similar words in our haftarah? We highlighted them for you!

מיכה ו:ח

הִגִּיד לְךָ אָדָם **מַה טּוֹב**
וּמָה ה' דּוֹרֵשׁ מִמְּךָ
כִּי אִם עֲשׂוֹת מִשְׁפָּט וְאַהֲבַת חֶסֶד
וְהַצְנֵעַ לֶכֶת עִם אֱלֹקֶיךָ:

Micah 6:8

God has told you, humanity, **what is good ("mah tov")**, and what God is asking of you: Only to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk modestly with God.

This pasuk makes it sound like it's going to summarize for us what's most important to God.

Wow! What is it? What does God consider most good???

The first two things are: doing justice and loving kindness. But what's the meaning of the third thing, "walk modestly with God," and why is that included here? Our פַּרְשָׁנִים (parshanim, commentators) have different ideas about what this could mean.

מצודת דוד

לָלֶכֶת עִם אֱלֹקֶיךָ בְּדַרְכֵי מִצְוֹתָיו
בְּצִנְעָה לֹא בְּפִרְסוּם רַב וּלְהִתְיַהֵר.

Metzudat David (Prague, 300 years ago)

This means walking with God—in the path of God's mitzvot—with modesty, not doing it too publicly and being a show-off.

- It's good to be proud of our mitzvot, but it's also important to have modesty and not become too showy. How can you balance those things?
- Why is it important to have humility and modesty in performing mitzvot? Why is that better than doing mitzvot in a showy kind of way?
- Is this just for mitzvot? When else is modesty a good thing? Is it ever ok to be showy?

Radak (France, 800 years ago)

"Walk modestly with God"—This is accepting that God is one and loving God with all your heart and soul. Micah calls it "modestly" because it's in your heart and private....

Our Rabbis explained:
"Do justice"—These are laws.
"Love kindness"—This is helping others.
"Walk modestly with God"—This is helping people pay for funerals and weddings.

רד"ק

"וְהַצְנֵעַ לֶכֶת עִם אֱלֹקֶיךָ"—הוּא יִחוּד
הַאֱ-ל יִתְבָּרַךְ וְאַהֲבָתוֹ בְּכָל לְבָבוֹ
וּבְכָל נַפְשׁוֹ. וְאָמַר "וְהַצְנֵעַ" כִּי הַדָּבָר
הַזֶּה מָסוּר לַלֵּב וְהוּא דִּבַּר צְנִיעוּת...

וְרַבּוֹתֵינוּ זִכְרוֹנָם לִבְרָכָה פֵּרְשׁוּ כִּי
"עֲשׂוֹת מִשְׁפָּט"—אֵלּוּ הַדִּינִים,
"אַהֲבַת חֶסֶד"—זוֹ גְּמִילוּת חֲסָדִים,
"וְהַצְנֵעַ לֶכֶת עִם אֱלֹקֶיךָ"—זֶה
הוֹצָאַת הַמֵּת וְהַכְנָסַת כַּלָּה.

According to Radak's first explanation, "walk modestly" is about having faith in God and love for God in the privacy of your own heart.

Radak's second explanation comes from Bavli Sukkah 49b. According to this explanation, "walk modestly" is telling us to do acts of kindness in a private and secret way, without making a big fuss about them.



- If you're helping someone to pay for a funeral or a wedding, why is it important to do it privately? How would a person feel if you made it very public that they could only afford their wedding because of your help?
- Why might respecting privacy, or saving someone from embarrassment, be one of Micah's "top three" values, together with justice and kindness? Why might faith in God belong on this list?

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פֵּרוּשִׁים • Commentary

Bilam calls himself שְׁתוּם הָעָיִן (shetum ha-ayin) (Bemidbar 24:3). This means something like, "the person whose eye is open." But what does THAT mean?

According to the Talmud (Bavli Sanhedrin 105a), it means Bilam was blind in one eye.

It's also possible that shetum ha-ayin could be a metaphor for the way that Bilam looked at Benei Yisrael.

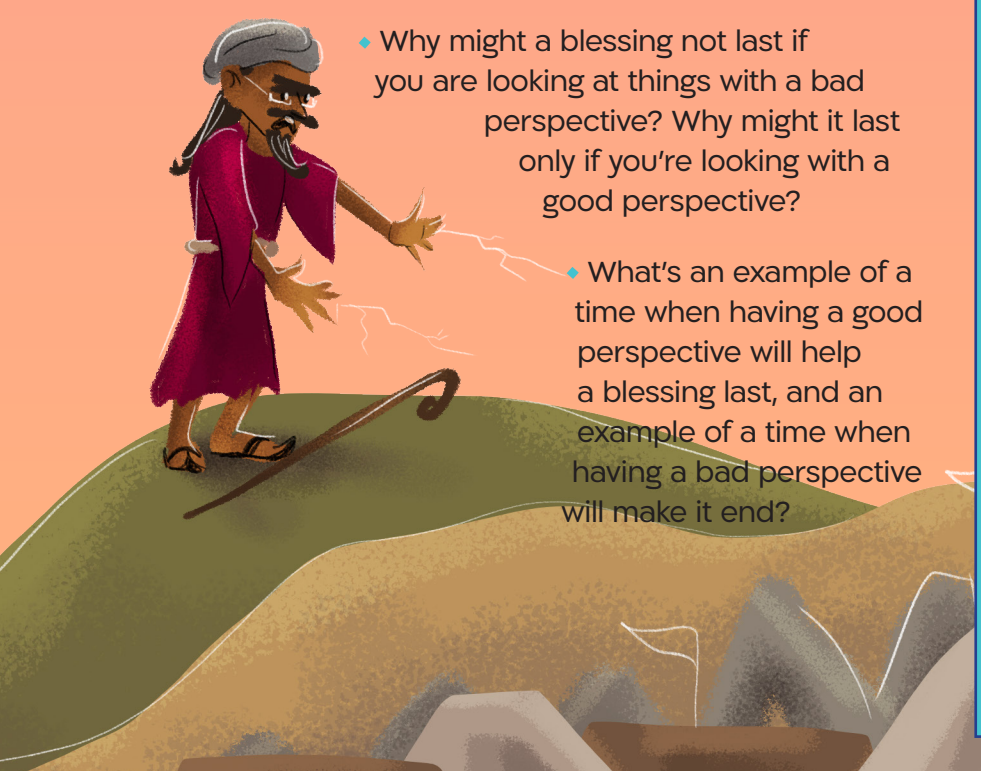
ספר הזהר, נשא

תָּאנָא, אָמַר ר' יִצְחָק, בֹּא וּרְאֵה מַה כְּתִיב בְּהַהוּא רָשָׁע דִּבְלְעָם, בְּשַׁעֲתָא דְּאִתְמְסַר לֵיהּ לְבָרְכָא לְיִשְׂרָאֵל, הֲוָה מַשְׁגַּח בְּעֵינָא בִּישָׁא, בְּגִין דְּלָא יִתְקַיְּימִין בִּרְכָתָא, וַהֲוָה תָּלֵי מִלּוֹי בְּהַהוּא עֵינָא בִּישָׁא, דִּכְתִיב... וּנְאֻם הַגֶּבֶר שְׁתוּם הָעָיִן, דְּסָתִים עֵינָא טָבָא מִנַּיְיהוּ, בְּגִין דְּלָא יִתְבָּרְכוּן, וְלָא יִתְקַיְּימִין בִּרְכָתָא.

Zohar

We have learned that R. Yitzhak said: Come and see what is written about that wicked Bilam. When he blessed Benei Yisrael, he looked with his evil eye so that the blessing would not last. And he made his words depend on that evil eye, as it is written... "And the word of the shetum ha-ayin." He closed (satam) his good eye from them, so that they would not be blessed, and the blessing would not last.

- What's the difference between looking at things or people with a good eye vs. looking at them with a bad eye?
- How can your perspective have an impact on the words you say or the people you meet?
- Why might a blessing not last if you are looking at things with a bad perspective? Why might it last only if you're looking with a good perspective?
- What's an example of a time when having a good perspective will help a blessing last, and an example of a time when having a bad perspective will make it end?



Parashah Scavenger Hunt Answers:

1. Wage war against Benei Yisrael (22:6)
2. As long as Bilam will only say whatever God tells him to (22:20)
3. Two of his servants (22:22)
4. Seven (22:41-23:1)
5. Sedei Tzofim, which means "the field of scouts," probably because you could see things at a far distance from there (23:14)
6. מַה־טֹּבוּ אׇהָלֶיךָ יַעֲקֹב מִשְׁכְּנֹתֶיךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל (mah-tovu ohalekha Yaakov, mishkenotekha Yisrael; how fair are your tents, Yaakov, your dwellings, Yisrael) (24:5)
7. Pinhas is Aharon's grandson (25:7)
8. Eleven! צִפּוֹר (tzippor, bird), שׁוֹר (shor, ox), אָתוֹן (aton, donkey), בָּקָר (bakar, ox), צֹאן (tzon, sheep), פָּר (par, cow), אַיִל (ayil, ram), רְאֵם (re'em, ox), נָחָשׁ (nahash, in our parashah it means "magic," but it's the same word for "snake"), לָבִיא (lavi, lion), אֲרִי (ari, another word for lion)
9. שָׁלֹשׁ רְגָלִים (shalosh regalim, in our parashah it means "three times," but in other places it refers to the holidays when you would walk with your feet to celebrate at the Beit HaMikdash!) (22:28)
10. Get rid of it (Micah 5:11)