

How “Blessed” were Bilaam’s Blessings?

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This week’s Parasha contains one of the most well-known verses that comprise Jewish liturgy. Siddurim¹ and Machzorim instruct that when an individual enters the synagogue, the first of several verses to be recited is, (BaMidbar 24:5) “How goodly are your tents Yaakov, your dwelling places Yisrael.” While the simple meaning of Bilaam’s words is directed at the manner in which the Jews encamp, with families maintaining exceptional privacy and modesty, R. Yochanan in Sanhedrin 105b identifies synagogues and houses of study as the “tents” about which the prophet is speaking. Consequently, by invoking this verse, someone, coming to a place where others have congregated in order to pray as a community, demonstrates his appreciation for the creation of such institutions and their being part of a traditional Jewish lifestyle by invoking Bilaam’s blessing.

Yet in the responsa of MaHaRShaL² #64, the decisor states that he deliberately omits this verse when coming to the synagogue because “Bilaam’s intention was for a curse.” In other words, whether Bilaam had in mind the domestic arrangements of Jewish families or their houses of worship and Tora study, what he really intended to say was that these practices and institutions should be cursed, and Jews should maintain neither their family standards nor their communal forms of prayer and study. MaHaRShaL is clearly taking one side in a dispute over the narrow,³ literal meaning of BaMidbar 23:5, 16 “And He (God) Placed a thing in the mouth of Bilaam...”

Sanhedrin 105b

It is taught: R. Eliezer said: An angel.

R. Yochanan said: A hook he put into his mouth.

MaHaRSha⁴ explains the two views as follows: R. Eliezer posits that an angel would transform Bilaam’s words from curses into blessings, while R. Yochanan proposes that a hook, evoking the image of a fish

¹ E.g., ArtScroll Siddur, p. 12; Koren Siddur, p. 21.

² MAHARSHAL: Rabbi Solomon ben Jehiel Luria (Maharshal) was born ca. 1510 in Poznan, Poland. He served as rabbi in various communities before he founded his own yeshiva in Lublin, Poland, in 1567. His approach to Talmud study differed from the pilpulistic approach then in vogue in Poland. Maharshal wrote important novellae on the Talmud, as well as responsa. He died in 1574. His most famous book is Yam Shel Shlomo (“the sea of Solomon”), a commentary on some tractates of the Talmud, first printed in 1616, and reprinted in Jerusalem, 1996, in a new edition.

³ An approach that allows for figurative language would contend that HaShem “Told” Bilaam what to say, in accordance with Bilaam’s own words in BaMidBar 23:12, which he defines in 23:26; 24:13 as what God “Told” him rather than “Placed something” in Bilaam’s mouth.

⁴ MAHARSHA: R. Samuel Eliezer ben R. Judah HaLevi Edels - the Maharsha - was born in Cracow in 1555. His wife was from Posen, to where he moved and established a yeshiva. He and his yeshiva were supported by his mother-in-law Edel (thus the appellation Edel's). After her death, he served as a rabbi in a number of cities in Poland, until he passed away in 1632. He is primarily known for Hiddushei Halakhot, his commentary encompassing the entire Talmud, in which he elaborated difficulties in the Talmud, Rashi, and Tosofot; and, for Hiddushei Aggadot, his commentary on the Aggadaic material in the Talmud. Hiddushei Halakhot was first published from 1612 and onwards; Hiddushei Aggadot was published in 1627. Both commentaries have for many years been published

being forced to go where the fisherman on the other end of the line wishes it to go, is what was placed in Bilaam's mouth evoking a blessing rather than a curse. Only according to R. Yochanan's view would MaHaRShaL's objection to reciting BaMidbar 24:5 make sense, i.e., these were the begrudging words of Bilaam, who obviously, at least during his first two attempts (BaMidbar 23:7-10 and 18-24),⁵ tried with all his might and wile to satisfy Balak's mandate. However, according to R. Eliezer, these were never Bilaam's words, but rather those of an angel! If anything, since these words would make BaMidbar 24:5 even more holy and ethereal, since rather than being spoken by an enemy of the Jewish people, they emanate from such a pristine source representing God's Words, MaHaRShaL's objection does not make sense.⁶

Another element of Bilaam's words, whose blessing status has been recently challenged by a well-known Jewish thinker, is BaMidbar 23:9 "It is a people that dwells alone, not reckoned among the nations." R. Jonathan Sacks recalls in his latest book, Future Tense,⁷ a conversation where this verse was invoked by an observant Israeli diplomat as a means for positively justifying the isolation that the Jewish people and the State of Israel have experienced throughout history. In other words, if this was a blessing that God elicited from Bilaam, then we should, if not outright embrace such treatment, then at least accept this state of affairs as part of a Divine Plan. R. Sacks writes that he immediately challenged this assumption:

"What makes you so sure that Bilaam meant those words as a blessing?" I asked. "Might it not have been that he intended them as a curse?..."

"Consider," I said, "the incidence of the word 'Badad',⁸ 'alone', in the Hebrew bible. It is used about a leper: 'He shall live alone (Badad),⁹ his dwelling place shall be outside the camp.' (VaYikra 13:46). It was used by Yishayahu: 'The fortified city stands desolate (Badad),¹⁰ an abandoned settlement, forsaken like the desert' (Yeshayahu 27:10). Most famously, it occurs in the first line of the book of Lamentations: 'How solitary (Badad)¹¹

together with the standard Babylonian Talmud, alongside the commentaries of the R. Solomon Luria (MaHaRShaL and his Hokhmat Shlomo) and of R. Meir of Lublin (MahHaRaM).

⁵ There is a dispute among the commentators whether Bilaam finally resigned himself to willingly articulate God's Blessings when he spoke for a third time. This third speech in chapter 24 is preceded by 24:1,

"And Bilaam saw that it was good in God's Eyes to bless Israel, and he did not invoke as he had done previously magical powers, and he turned his face to the desert."

Some commentators, such as RaMBaM, understand this verse as demonstrating that Bilaam had finally given in to God's manipulations of his words. However, in light of the passage from Sanhedrin 105b cited below which seeks to identify Bilaam's true intentions, all of the examples are taken from Bilaam's third speech, starkly indicating that R. Yochanan clearly thought that these were also examples of Bilaam's reluctant blessings.

⁶ According to Tora Temima on BaMidbar 23:5 #2, the angel would have permitted Bilaam himself to speak if he was ready to bless; but since he was not, the blessings are the words of the angel, The hook altered Bilaam's words from the intended curses to make them sound like blessings.

⁷ Schocken Books, New York, 2009, pp. 114-5.

⁸ "Am LeVadad Yishkon..."

⁹ "...Tameh Huh Boded Yeshev..."

¹⁰ "Ki Ihr BeTzura Badad..."

¹¹ "Eicha Yashva Badad..."

sits the city once full of people.' Badad always has a negative connotation except when used of God, who in monotheism, is necessarily alone...

"It (the Talmud) also says that 'all Bilaam's blessings eventually turned into curses' with one exception: 'How goodly are your tents Yaakov, and your dwelling places Yisrael.'

The sages believed that though Bilaam had blessed the people, he had done so in deliberately ambiguous terms, so that the blessing would become a curse."

While R. Sacks makes a strong case why Jews and Israel should seek to be accepted as part of the overall world community rather than think that being looked upon as illegitimate pariahs is somehow a type of badge of honor, whether his reading of the verse in question lines up with the simple meaning of the text and traditional interpretation invites analysis and discussion.

The assumption that Bilaam's actual intended curses can be detected by reversing the blessings and that virtually all of the intended curses eventually "came home to roost" appears in the continuation of the Talmudic discussion cited earlier:

Sanhedrin 105b

R. Yochanan said: From the blessings of that wicked man you may learn his intentions. 1) He wished to curse them that they should possess no synagogues or houses of study—"How goodly are your tents, Yaakov..." 2) That the Divine Presence should not Rest upon them—"And your tabernacles, Yisrael." 3) That their kingdom should not endure—"As the valleys they are spread forth." 4) That they might not have olive trees or vineyards—"As gardens by the river's side." 5) And their reputation not be positive—"As the trees of aloes which the Lord has Planted." 6) That their kings might not be tall—"As cedar trees beside the waters." 7) That they might not have a king, the son of a king—"He shall pour the water out of his buckets." 8) That their kingdoms may not rule over other nations—"And his seed will be in many waters." 9) That their kingdom not be strong—"And his king shall be higher than Agag." 10) That their kingdom will not be awe-inspiring—"And his kingdom shall be exalted."

R. Abba bar Kahana said: All of them reverted to a curse, excepting the synagogues and schoolhouses, for it is written, (Devarim 23:6) "But the Lord your God turned the curse into a blessing for you, because the Lord your God Loved you." The curse, but not the curses.

Aside from the thought process of R. Abba bar Kahana who deduces that if any one of these potential curses is not allowed to be fulfilled, it must be the existence of shuls and houses of study, he certainly does not mention "It is a people that dwells alone..." as the exception to the rule, implying that this blessing which was intended by Bilaam to be a curse, like the vast majority of the others, is eventually fulfilled. It would be reasonable to assume that the reverse of this particular comment by Bilaam would result in the Jews being scattered and in turn assimilated into the majority cultures to which they were exiled, a phenomenon that indisputably has taken place and exacted a heavy toll on the fortunes of the Jewish people. Furthermore, the specific mention of the Jews dwelling alone (BaMidbar 23:9), as well as all the other things said by the evil prophet, is preceded immediately in verse 8 with the comment, "How can I curse, when God has not Cursed; How can I denounce when God has not Denounced?" , i.e., what Bilaam is about to say is by definition not a curse. And as for R. Sacks' contention that the manner

in which these blessings were reversed was by Bilaam employing ambiguous language that could then easily be reinterpreted, that does not seem to be R. Yochanan's point, since he does not point to language in any of the blessings that could serve as protean curses, but rather simply states that the opposite sentiment of each of the positive statements is what Bilaam really tried to say. Finally with regard to the Lord Chief Rabbi's contention that "Badad" is always a negative term unless it is being used to describe God's Uniqueness, such a view would appear to be countermanded by the penultimate statement of blessing pronounced by Moshe just prior to his death:

Devarim 33:28

Yisrael shall then dwell in safety "Badad"; the fountain of Yaakov will dwell upon a fountain of corn and wine, also his heavens shall drop down dew.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, ZTzL, could be understood to support R. Sacks' contention that Bilaam's invocation of the Jews being alone was a curse, when he contrasts Bilaam's invocation of "aloneness", a term that the Rav feels has an essentially negative connotation, with Moshe's more positive reference, which he translates as "solitude":¹²

To be sure, there is an element of separation present even in the experience of a shared destiny;¹³ however the separation entailed by destiny differs completely from that entailed by fate.¹⁴ It is not the negative feeling described in the prophetic vision of Bilaam, "Lo, it is a people that shall dwell alone" (Numbers 23:9), but rather a unique consciousness vouchsafed by Moshe, in the last hours before his death, to Keneset Yisrael, "And Israel dwells in security, alone the fountain of Yaakov" (Devarim 33:28). In truth the separation is naught but the solitude of a pure and holy, splendid and glorious existence. It is the solitude that finds its expression in a person's uniqueness, in his divine image and in his existential "I" experience. It is the solitude of the soul that dwells in concealment, in the depths of being; it is the solitude that is to be identified with a person's spirituality and individuality; it is the solitude that makes manifest man's dignity and freedom; it is the solitude of Moshe, whose great spirit and exalted vision were beyond the people's comprehension; it is the solitude of Eliyahu and the rest of the prophets; it is the solitude concerning which Avraham spoke when he told his young men, "Stay here with the donkey, and I and the youth will go there; and we will worship" (Beraishit 22:5). While isolation involves harmful inferiority feelings deriving from self-negation, a person's solitude testifies to both his greatness and his sanctity, the greatness that is contained within his private domain and the sanctity that

¹² The other extensive treatment of the condition of loneliness by the Rav is in his classical essay, "The Lonely Man of Faith" (Tradition, Summer 1965) to which I will return later in this article.

¹³ The contrast between fate and destiny is the key theme of Kol Dodi Dofek. According to the Rav, Jews can either bemoan the things that are happening to them, without successfully comprehending why they have taken place, or they can decide on what to do given the situation in which they find themselves. He feels that looking upon what occurs as fate is passive and not very productive; it is looking forward to and actively fulfilling a collective destiny that should fuel our outlooks upon life.

¹⁴ Both a sense of fate as well as one of destiny entail seeing oneself and one's people as different from others. However, the Rav reflects upon a qualitative difference between the experience of aloneness that arises as a result of each of these sensibilities.

permeates the inner recesses of his unique consciousness. Loneliness robs man of his tranquility; solitude bestows upon him security, worth and dignity—“security, alone.”¹⁵ However, as I noted concerning R. Sacks’ argument, there seems to be nothing intrinsic within Bilaam’s actual words that would lead us to assume that he meant harm by what he said, other than the assumption that he was evil throughout¹⁶ and therefore even when he said ostensibly positive things, they really weren’t what they appeared to be. Consequently, in my opinion, the Rav’s homiletical assumptions contrasting Bilaam’s “Badad” with that of Moshe, are not born out by the simple meaning of the text.

A Talmudic comment on the verse in Devarim at first glance might be viewed as a possible support to R. Sacks’ interpretation, but on further reflection, a different point seems to be at issue:

Makot 24a

Said R. Yose berav Chanina: Moshe Rabbeinu “Gazar Gezeira” (decreed a decree)¹⁷ upon Israel and a prophet came and cancelled it. Moshe said, “Yisrael shall then dwell in safety ‘Badad’ the fountain of Yaakov”, and Amos came and cancelled it, as it is said, (Amos 7:5) “I beseech You. How will Yaakov stand and he is small?” And it is written, (Ibid. 6) “And the Lord Relented concerning this. And the Lord Said, ‘And also this shall not be.’”

Most commentators take the same approach to this text as exemplified by RaShI:

RaShI, op. cit. Chadal Na

The blessing that Moshe invoked “Yisrael shall then dwell in safety ‘Badad’ the fountain of Yaakov”, i.e., when will Israel dwell securely? When they are as righteous as Yaakov.

RaShI is not interpreting the “decree” as having to do with being alone, as much as the nature of the prerequisite for achieving the state of being “securely alone” as a result of Divine Protection, i.e., to have to live up to high standards with regard to religious observance and spirituality, to in effect emulate one of the founding fathers of the religion. It is this prerequisite, rather than the state of being alone, that the prophet is challenging as being too rigorous, inevitably resulting in just the opposite, with the Jews being exposed to attack and ultimately endangered.

Even if the Written and Oral Traditions do not provide support for R. Sacks’ contention that Jewish isolation is a curse, a dichotomy offered by R. Soloveitchik in his essay “The Lonely Man of Faith” offers a means of conceptualizing how the state of “aloneness” can simultaneously be both a blessing and a curse, depending upon one’s perspective. The Rav distinguishes between the accounts of the

¹⁵ Fate and Destiny (Kol Dodi Dofek), Ktav, Hoboken, NJ, 1992, pp. 72-3.

¹⁶ The sense that Bilaam was evil is based upon the textual indication that he was responsible for the plot of Bnot Moav attempting to seduce the Jews and get them to engage in idolatry (BaMidbar 25:1-3). Bilaam’s complicity in this sin is reflected not only by his death being recorded alongside the other leaders of Midian in BaMidbar 31:8, but particularly because he is identified as being behind the sin of Pe’or in 31:16. Yet even if he had bad intentions at the time of the blessings/curses, that does not necessarily mean that the words themselves were either overtly or even implicitly curses, since God Intervened and Did not Allow him to carry out his initial intentions.

¹⁷ The language of “Gazar Gezeira” is reserved for punishments and afflictions. So does this mean that even when Moshe invokes “Badad”, it is something negative?

Creation in the first two chapters of Beraishit, designating the human being described in each of these chapters as Adam I and Adam II respectively. While the existential solitude that he writes about in Kol Dodi Dofek is identifiable as the mindset and sensibility of Adam II who asks metaphysical questions and wonders about the nature of the universe and himself, Adam I experiences a different type of loneliness.

Adam the first is challenged by a hostile environment and hence summoned to perform many tasks which he alone cannot master...

Whenever Adam the first wants to work to produce and to succeed in his undertakings, he must unite with others...

Consequently, Adam I's challenges are pragmatic and the community that he needs is a practical one whose members jointly try to deal with the vagaries of existence. However spiritual and unique the Jewish people might aspire to be, they still have to function within the parameters of human existence, and they cannot do this alone. It is in this sense that R. Sacks is eminently correct, and we cannot afford to be cut off from the rest of the world if we intend to participate in it and contribute to it. However, such a desire cannot come at the expense of our uniqueness and special destiny. If it does, then our aspiration to join with the rest of mankind to solve the world's problems will at the same time constitute the loss of our special identities and value system.

A reference from a third essay by the Rav provides a succinct, homiletical summary of this complex dialectic. In "Confrontation",¹⁸ an essay that also deals with the tension between universalism and particularism uniquely experienced by Jews, R. Soloveitchik cites the instructions given by Yaakov to the messengers that he sends to Eisav in anticipation of the meeting between the long-separated brothers. Yaakov tells them that they must be prepared to answer three questions: (Beraishit 32:18) "...To whom do you belong and where are you going and whose are these (the gifts that Yaakov is sending with them) before you." While Yaakov provides them with specific answers concerning these questions within the context of the biblical account, the Rav sees the questions as having relevance down through the generations. He explains that only once a person knows who he is and the goals that he has set for his life, can he decide the extent to which he will make contributions of material, time and effort to those outside of himself. Paradoxically, the self-knowledge that comes with being pristinely alone in terms of being and knowing oneself, independent of the thoughts and expectations of others, allows you then to turn around and participate with those same others to make the world a better place for all. Aloneness then becomes both a prerequisite and an end-in-itself with respect to the spiritual and civil life of the Jew.

¹⁸ Tradition, 6:2.