

## The One Curse that God Did not Allow to Take Effect

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A cursory reading of Parashat Balak can lead one to think that Bila'am did nothing but bless the Jewish people,<sup>1</sup> despite Balak's hiring him to do otherwise.<sup>2</sup> From this week's Parasha,<sup>3</sup> Bila'am does not appear to have a personal interest with regard to whether to curse the Jews per se; he only wishes to please his employer, Balak, but at the same time the prophet reiterates repeatedly, first to the messengers and then to Balak himself, that he will only be able to say what God Authorizes him to articulate.<sup>4</sup> It is therefore striking to find as part of Moshe's reprise of Jewish history in his valedictory address in Devarim the implication that Bila'am actually would have succeeded in cursing the Jews had God not Altered what the prophet had said!

Devarim 23:5-6

(Referring to why the Moabite men are not permitted to marry into the Jewish people)

...and because he (Balak, king of Moav) hired Bila'am son of Be'or from Petor Aram Naharaim to curse you.

And the Lord your God Refused to Listen to Bila'am, and the Lord, your God, Reversed the curse into a blessing, because the Lord, your God, Loves you.

While this verse could be understood to mean that while Bila'am was prepared to curse the Jewish people, God Insisted that he not do so, and this Commandment in effect constituted the reversal of the curse, the Rabbis view what happened as a literally miraculous change in the prophet's words, something beyond simple Divine Instruction to Bila'am as part of some personal Revelation.

BaMidbar 23:16

And the LORD Met Balaam, and Put *Davar* (a word/thing) in his mouth, and Said: 'Return unto Balak, and thus shalt thou speak'

While "Davar", understood as the noun "word", could simply be a reference to the script that God Ordered Bila'am to follow when ostensibly "cursing" the Jews, the Rabbis suggest that since Bila'am, as all human beings are endowed with free will, and therefore capable of defying God's Decree, an actual thing was placed within Bila'am by HaShem to guarantee compliance with HaShem's Plan:

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<sup>1</sup> BaMidbar 23:7-10, 18-24; 24:3-9.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 22:6, 11, 17; 23:11, 13, 25, 27; 24:10.

<sup>3</sup> Only in Parashat Matot, Ibid. 31:16, is there an explicit reference to Bila'am's attempt to corrupt the Jewish people, thereby making them susceptible if not to his curses, then at least to God's Punishments:

Behold, these caused the children of Israel, through the counsel of Balaam, to revolt so as to break faith with the LORD in the matter of Peor, and so the plague was among the congregation of the LORD.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 22:20, 35, 38; 23:5, 12, 16, 26; 24:13.

Sanhedrin 105b

(BaMidbar 23:5, 16) "And the Lord put a thing in the mouth of Balaam."

R. Eleazar said, An angel.

R. Yonatan said: A hook.

According to R. Eleazar, an angel was placed within Bila'am's body and the words that he ultimately pronounced therefore were not the prophet's at all, but rather completely independent of both his enunciation and his intention.<sup>5</sup> It was therefore an "out-of-body" experience whereby Bila'am thought he was speaking the words that he had intended and composed, and yet completely different words actually came out of his mouth, emanating from the spirit that had "possessed" him.

R. Yonatan, on the other hand, posits that Bila'am's vocal chords, diaphragm, energy and mental intention did contribute to and formed the original sounds that issued from the prophet's mouth, but due to some impediment that had been inserted into his mouth, the words ended up being transmogrified into the very opposite of his intentions. R. Yonatan, in contrast to R. Eleazar, presumes that Bila'am was more personally involved in his speech and therefore came much closer to actually cursing the Jews, curses that eventually would even "come home to roost":

Sanhedrin 105b

Said R. Aba bar Kahana: All of them (the blessings) turned back to curses (that were originally intended by Bila'am, once the Jewish people were deemed by God as deserving of these punishments)<sup>6</sup> with the exception of the synagogues and houses of Tora study (this last statement is a reference to an earlier comment in the Gemora on the same page:

Said R. Yochanan: from the blessings of that evil doer, you can learn what was in his heart. He wished to say that they [the Jews] should not

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<sup>5</sup> In the compendium Eliyahu Rabba, #46, the author quotes Responsa #64 of RaShaL (R. Shlomo Luria, 1510-73) as follows:

(When I first come into the synagogue) I begin with (Tehillim 5:8) "...BeRov Chasdecha..." and I skip the first verse "How goodly..." that Bila'am said, for he certainly said it as a curse...

It would appear that such a view would not follow that of R. Eleazar who stated the words were not Bila'am's at all, but rather those of a messenger of the Divine. Ironically, this would make the words more holy, rather than less, as RaShaL suggests.

<sup>6</sup> Is the fact that these particular things happened to the Jewish people the direct result of Bila'am's words, or did Bila'am's intended curses just happen to overlap with the Divine Punishments that were outlined in Parshiot BeChukotai and Ki Tavo, as well as other biblical passages where God Threatens to Punish His People when they fail to adhere to His Commandments. There are probably a finite number of negative events that could come to pass, and while it might appear that Bila'am had some role in their coming about, perhaps it was more coincidence than anything else.

have synagogues and houses of Tora study—[BaMidbar 24:5] “How goodly are your tents,<sup>7</sup> Yaakov; your Tabernacles,<sup>8</sup> Yisrael.”) as it is said, (Devarim 23:6) “...Reversed the curse into a blessing”—the curse (singular) and not the curses (plural) (i.e., the majority of the blessings when reversed into curses do eventually come true, based upon the premise that Bila’am in fact was not only attempting to curse the Jews, but that he succeeded for the most part, at least in the long term.)

Once we are alerted by Moshe in Devarim to God’s Intervention and Reversal of curses with regard to Bila’am’s words, we can also better understand the Tora’s introduction to the non-Jewish prophet’s third speech in Parashat Balak:

BaMidbar 24:1

And when Balaam saw that it pleased the LORD to bless Israel, he went not, as at the other times, to meet with enchantments, but he set his face toward the wilderness,

The Tora’s implication is that in contrast to the first two speeches, i.e., 23:8-10 and 19-24, where Bila’am apparently actively tried to curse the Jews despite God’s explicit Instructions not to do so,<sup>9</sup> resulting in the Tora’s stressing in 23:5, 16 that something was placed in Bila’am’s mouth, from Chapt. 24 on, the prophet no longer resisted, but rather simply allowed God to Speak through him, with the blessings actually emerging intact directly from Bila’am himself.

Yet if such an approach is correct, then when the Talmud suggests that even the blessings that appear in Chapter 24:5-9 (the third speech), are also mostly<sup>10</sup> reversed, i.e.,

How goodly are thy tents, O Jacob, thy dwellings, O Israel!  
As valleys stretched out, as gardens by the river-side; as aloes planted of the LORD, as cedars beside the waters;  
Water shall flow from his branches, and his seed shall be in many waters; and his king shall be higher than Agag, and his kingdom shall be exalted.  
God who brought him forth out of Egypt is for him like the lofty horns of the wild-ox; He shall Eat up the nations that are His adversaries, and shall Break their bones in pieces, and Pierce them through with his arrows. He Couched, He Lay down as a

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<sup>7</sup> The term “Ohel” is associated with “Ohel Shel Tora”—the tent of Tora, as in the case of Yaakov, (Beraishit 25:27).

<sup>8</sup> “Mishkan” is associated with not only the Tabernacle and the Temple, but also synagogues which are referred to in Rabbinic literature as “Mikdash Me’at” (a mini-Mikdash). Yechezkel 11:16.

<sup>9</sup> It would seem that he specifically looking at only a portion of the Jewish encampment (22:41; 23:13) as opposed to 24:2 where he looked upon the entire encampment, as well as the multiple alters and sacrifices all were actions intended to allow Bila’am to say whatever he pleased despite HaShem’s Orders. Fortunately for the Jews, it all proved ineffective in the face of God’s Determination that he not curse His People.

<sup>10</sup> With the exception of “Mah Tov”.

lion, and as a lioness; who shall rouse Him up? Blessed be every one that  
blesseth Thee, and cursed be every one that curseth Thee.

about which the Talmud specifically states:

R. Yochanan said: From the blessings of that wicked man you may learn his intentions:  
Thus he wished to curse them that **1)** they [the Israelites] should possess no synagogues  
or school-houses — [this is deduced from] (24:5) “How goodly are thy tents, O Jacob”;  
that the *Shechinah* should not rest upon them — (Ibid.) “and thy tabernacles, O Israel”;  
that **2)** their kingdom should not endure — (Ibid. 6) “As the valleys are they spread  
forth”; that **3)** they might have no olive trees and vineyards — (Ibid.) “As gardens by the  
river's side”; that **4)** their odour might not be fragrant —(Ibid.) “As the trees of lign  
aloes which the Lord hath Planted”; that **5)** their kings might not be tall — (Ibid.) “And as  
cedar trees beside the waters”; that **6)** they might not have a king the son of a king —  
(Ibid. 7) “He shall Pour the water out of his buckets”; that **7)** their kingdom might not  
rule over other nations — (Ibid.) “And his seed shall be in many waters”; that **8)** their  
kingdom might not be strong —(Ibid.) “And his king shall be higher than Agag”; that **9)**  
their kingdom might not be awe-inspiring — (Ibid.) “And his kingdom shall be exalted.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> The Talmud neither completes reversing the elements in Bila'am's third speech, nor does it deal with what was  
said in the first two speeches. As for the rest of the third speech, since it is describing HaShem, perhaps even  
Bila'am was not prepared to take on that challenge. The problem would seem to be more acute regarding the first  
two of Bila'am's speeches:

23:8-10

How shall I curse, whom God hath not cursed? And how shall I execrate, whom the LORD hath not  
execrated?

For from the top of the rocks I see him, and from the hills I behold him: lo, it is a people that shall dwell  
alone, and shall not be reckoned among the nations.

Who hath counted the dust of Jacob, or numbered the stock of Israel? Let me die the death of the  
righteous, and let mine end be like his!

23:19-24

God is not a man, that He should Lie; neither the son of man, that He should Repent:

When He hath Said, will He not Do it? Or when He hath Spoken, will He not Make it good?

Behold, I am bidden to bless; and when He hath Blessed, I cannot call it back.

None hath beheld iniquity in Jacob, neither hath one seen perverseness in Israel; the LORD his God is with  
him, and the shouting for the King is among them.

God who Brought them forth out of Egypt is for them like the lofty horns of the wild-ox.

For there is no enchantment with Jacob, neither is there any divination with Israel;

Now is it said of Jacob and of Israel: 'What hath God Wrought!' Behold a people that riseth up as a lioness,  
and as a lion doth he lift himself up; he shall not lie down until he eat of the prey, and drink the  
blood of the slain.

why should these verses be considered even remotely associated with curses? Apparently, at least according to the view of R. Yochanan, even if Bila'am said in 24:1 that he would play things "straight" from this point onward, perhaps this was with respect to the enunciation of blessings rather than curses. However, he simultaneously continued to harbor deep-seated resentment as a result of being controlled by God and therefore continued to think destructive thoughts, despite the positive qualities of his words. It was this negativity within his mind while pronouncing the blessings, that perhaps allowed them to be turned into curses in the future. Such a hypothesis is supported by Bila'am's participation in hatching the plot involving the seduction of the Jews by Moabite women,<sup>12</sup> suggesting that at least internally, he never really changed his tune, despite what is written in BaMidbar 24:1.

While the traditional interpretation of the verse "Mah Tovu Ohalecha Yaakov..." suggests that Bila'am was attacking the Jewish public institutions of shul and school, formats for prayer and Tora study that God Deemed indispensable for Jewish existence, I would like to apply the assumption that by reversing the blessing, one comes to recognize what the prophet had wanted to "wish" the Jewish people, by accessing the Peshat of BaMidbar 24:5 rather than its Derash. As an introduction to the third speech, in which "Mah Tovu Ohalecha" appears, the Tora states the following:

BaMidbar 24:2

And Balaam lifted up his eyes, and he saw Israel dwelling tribe by tribe; and the spirit of God came upon him.

To claim that Bila'am "saw" the synagogues and Temples that were part of the Jewish encampment, in any manner other than prophetically, as a future aspect of Jewish life and practice, would appear to be an anachronism. While the Mishkan, the Tabernacle, was at the center of the encampment, would Ohalecha, and Mishkenotecha, plural nouns, be appropriate for Bila'am to use to describe something positive which he sees and therefore wishes to curse and obliterate? A more literal interpretation would suggest that Bila'am was remarking about the Jews' domestic setups, how individual tribes, and family units were arranged, and the prophet noted in wonderment how these family values and sensibilities were special, admirable and apparently unique to the Jewish people.<sup>13</sup>

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Might this be because the elements in the third speech that are interpreted in the Gemora by R. Yochanan are considered more obvious or perhaps more fundamental to Israel's well-being, and therefore the concomitant curses can either be more easily be extrapolated, or are deemed more important to emphasize, or could there be some other reason for what R. Yochanan chooses to include and what he omits in his comment?

<sup>12</sup> See fn. 3.

<sup>13</sup> The section in VaYikra listing prohibited sexual relationships is preceded by the following verse:

VaYikra 18:3

After the doings of the land of Egypt, wherein ye dwelt, shall ye not do; and after the doings of the land of Canaan, whither I Bring you, shall ye not do; neither shall ye walk in their statutes.

Assuming that sexual mores among the Egyptians and Canaanites were typical rather than exceptional in terms of Middle Eastern cultural assumptions, then Jewish practices of modesty and privacy were atypical.

Before quoting the Rabbinic interpretation cited in the Gemora regarding synagogues and Batei Midrash, , RaShI on BaMidbar 24:5 states:

“How goodly are your tents, Yaakov”—because he (Bila’am) saw their doorways that were deliberately not facing one another.

Siftei Kohen adds detail to this approach:

He saw that their doorways did not face one another nor did their windows. He said, “These people are worthy of a blessing as we have said regarding (Shemot 1:1) “Now these are the names of the sons of Israel, who came into Egypt with Jacob; every man came with his household:”

ShaCh on Shemot 1:1

“Every man came with his household”—That is to say that two families did not live in a single dwelling, even when in exile, but rather each person individually in his own residence. And this was due to great concern with modesty and humility that characterized them. For it is great presumptuousness when a person becomes aware of the immersion of his acquaintance’s wife, that he not come to fantasize concerning this...

RaShI and ShaCh are echoing the Gemora’s offering a proof text for the Mishna’s statement of the following Halacha:

Bava Batra 60a

Mishna. In a courtyard which he shares with others, a man should not open/create/build a door facing another person’s door, nor a window facing another person’s window. If it is small, he should not enlarge it, and he should not turn one into two...

Gemora. From where is this rule derived? R. Yochanan said: From the verse, “ And Balaam lifted up his eyes, and he saw Israel dwelling tribe by tribe...” This indicates that he saw that the doors of their tents did not exactly face one another, whereupon he exclaimed: Worthy are these that the Divine presence should rest upon them!

MaHaRaL MiPrague<sup>14</sup> offers a spiritual explanation for the Gemora’s assumption:

That is to say, that since they were modest, separate from all matters of sexual promiscuity, it is appropriate for the Divine Presence to Come upon them, because the Divine Presence Dwells in a place where there is no sexual promiscuity, as it is said,

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<sup>14</sup> Chidushei Aggadeta, Part III, daf 85.

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Not only was particular modesty in evidence when Bila'am looked upon the Jewish encampment in the desert, but King David noted that this quality is one of the defining characteristics of Jewish identity for all time:

Yevamot 79a

He said: Three characteristics mark this people—they are compassionate, they are easily embarrassed (and therefore modest, private) and they engage in good deeds...Whomever possesses these three qualities is worthy of associating with this nation (and the converse, by inference, suggests that they cannot be considered truly part of the Jewish people.)

Consequently, the Peshat approach regarding what Bila'am was blessing in BaMidbar 24:5 is not so much communal institutions, as family integrity, loyalty, virtue mutual respect and admiration. The strength of the individual family is therefore being seen as a foundational dimension of the Jewish people as a whole. Extending R. Yochanan's insight, it was these qualities that Bila'am would have liked to curse and thereby divest the Jewish people of them, were he to have been able to have his way, and his involvement and perhaps even origination of the plot to seduce Jewish men sexually and in that way get them to worship idolatry (BaMidbar 25:1-3), leading to their alienation from HaShem.

It would be difficult to say which is more fundamentally important to our continuing existence as a people---the institutions in which we study Tora and engage in prayer and communal unity, or the stability and strength of the Jewish family. Nevertheless, significant erosion of either of these aspects of Jewish life could easily undermine who we are presently as well as what we will be in the future. Particularly Modern Orthodox Jews, who at the same time as they strive to be fully observant, also believe in the value of being familiar with and participating in broader society, become susceptible to incorporating some of the negative aspects of that society into our own lifestyles. Current philanthropic patterns in the general society which emphasize individual interests at the expense of concerns of one's community and communal institutions are a serious concern that has become the focus of attention at communal gatherings and conferences. And the mostly uninhibited content of our sources of entertainment and exposure to media introduce elements into our private lives that are not always in keeping with holiness and Jewish tradition. We should be vigilant to try to make sure that we do not assist Bila'am's implicit curses to take hold upon us and our community. While HaShem will Do His Part to Prevent the blessings from turning into curses, we have to exercise our free choice to do our parts if this goal is to be achieved.

