

Balak: Curses Into Blessings

- Nisson Shulman.

Bilaam's curses: Moshe in Devarim says they were turned into blessings by Hashem. How? Why? Rabbis considered his blessings a curse in disguise. How? Why? Why does Moshe speak harshly to our people, and Bilaam so gently? The deceptive simplicity of words. A true lover of our people speaks like a prophet, a hater says "You are good enough. Now e like us"....

Balak: Curses Into Blessings

We read today how Bilaam sought to curse, and in fact he blessed.

There are some problems with this. For instance: When God prohibits Bilaam from going with the princes of Moav, "Thou shalt not go with them, thou shalt not curse the people, for they are blessed", Rashi interprets this to be a dialogue, where Bilaam's words are understood, "behind the text" as it were. God says, "Thou shalt not go with them". Bilaam answers, "If so, I'll curse them from my home". God says, "Thou shalt not curse the people". Bilaam answers, "If that is the case, then I'll bless them". God answers, "They don't need blessings from such as you, for they are blessed by Me".

The first problem according to this interpretation is: If Bilaam's hatred was so all consuming, then why did he offer to bless them? Why did he volunteer that "If I can't curse them, then at least I'll bless them"?

The second problem has to do with the ultimate outcome, when Bilaam actually did bless the people. The Rabbis teach that the blessings were actually a curse in disguise. Why did they teach this and how is it apparent from the blessing?

And a third problem, related to the second is: Moses, in Devarim, wrote that "The Almighty did not want to listen to Bilaam, and he transformed his curses to a blessing". According to this, Bilaam did actually curse them, but it is God who transformed the curse into blessing. Where is this found in the text?

And perhaps a more general question: Why do we find Moses speaking only harshly to the people, only chiding, scolding, chastising, even reviling; Am keshe oref... Am naval velo chacham... while Bilaam appears for an instant in history and is full of blessing? About this, our sages explain the passage in Kohelet, that "It is better to listen to the anger of the sage", refers to the harshness of Moshe Rabbenu, "than to listen to the song of the foolish (or wicked)", referring to Bilaam's blessings which were a prelude to the great sin of our people at Shittim.

So we have four questions:

1. Why did Bilaam bless the people?
2. How were the blessings a curse in disguise?
3. Where is the transformation of his curses into blessings? How did this happen?

4. Why did Moses, and all the prophets speak so harshly, and Bilaam so gently about and to our people?

I would like to suggest the following answer to all these questions. There is a deceptive simplicity in words. They are often not what they seem.

Bilaam's blessings were really curses, because a true lover of the people desires better for them, and thus the prophets, loving our people, chided them and chastised. They desired and demanded better. Bilaam like the false prophets of old, tried to convince them that they had already achieved far beyond what was to be expected. There is no need for improvement. In fact, they cannot be faulted if they slid back a bit, and joined the style of other people.

And so his words of assurance, Ma tovu ohalecha Yaakov, that we had achieved so high a morality and pure family life, that we were beyond perfection; these words were really a prelude to our failure at Shittim, when we were led into terrible immorality, bestial sexual license.

Another example; his statement, Hen am levadad yishkon, we are a people that dwells alone. Is it good or bad? You will hear many arguments for not dwelling alone. You will hear that we should mix more with other peoples and faiths.

“A people that dwells alone”: You will hear people complaining that the Jews must dwell alone because they are rejected by others. You will hear many caviling at the loneliness of the Jewish people in the world, forsaken by those who should be objective, pressured by those who claim to be friends, but by all, judged and condemned whatever they do, however they act.

You will hear many crying out at the injustice of our loneliness in history; and how the world had forsaken us during the Spanish Inquisition; how the ears had been closed to the cries of the victims of the Crusades; how the world looked away at the time of Chmielnitzke; how the world was silent during Kishinev, and that were the world itself not threatened by the Nazis, the Nazi so called “Final Solution” would have been tolerated by most other nations of the world.

And all this is true. It is still true in the halls of the United Nations, in the deliberations of nations at any gathering of their representatives, ever so ready to condemn Israel. It is still true in the judgments of the Media when weighing the policies, the actions, and the terror of Arafat against the policies and the countermeasures of Israel.

But on the other hand: Hen am levadad yishkon; We owe our existence to God's providence. It is He who has kept us alive and above all separate amongst nations. We owe our resistance to intermarriage to the awareness amongst the many of our people to its dangers, to the dangers of losing our identity in the swamp of sameness. We owe our cohesiveness as a people to the uniqueness of our culture, to the difference of our Weltanschauung, to the world of God that was uniquely ours and that made us an Am levadad yishkon. Mi keamcha Yisrael, goy echad baaretz.

And also on the other hand; Am levadad yishkon; We are levadad, but yishkon, we live on, and that is the greatest miracle in history.

That is what our Rabbis meant when they said he sought to curse and instead he blessed, but that in his blessings was a curse.

The enemy says, Ma tovu ohalaecha Yaakov, your families, your society, is good enough as it is, too good; “Be like us, forget your uniqueness”.

The Jew says, Ma tovu ohalecha, How good your family life, your tents, because it is rooted in mishkenotecha, because you are part of Yisrael, the unique and one and only separate people.

The enemy says, am levadad. They are different. They are not like us. They are odd and somehow to be feared. They are sinister in their uniqueness. They are a mystery, in their continued existence without land, without nation, without one language, without any of the accouterments and necessities of nationhood. The enemy says they should not return to their land, for they are doomed to wander because of their religious heresies and because they have rejected our god. All this and more says the enemy in the words of Bilaam, hen am levadad yishkon, ubagoyim lo yitchashev.... And they do not consider our demands, they reject our requirements of how they should act towards their neighbors, their enemies, the world.

And the Almighty turns all this into a blessing. Ma tovu ohalecha Yaakov, mishkenotecha Yisrael; “In the homes and thy sanctuaries, are the lessons of goodness and the values that makes you a unique and a chosen people”; Hen am levadad yishkon, “For you are a people destined by Almighty God to dwell alone, to bear his word, and with it to illuminate the world”... Am levadad yishkon, ubagoyim lo yitchashav; “And we consider only Almighty God; He is our master, he is our commander, and we heed no mortal man or nation”! Ad ki yavo shiloh, velo yikhat amim, “And the time will come when we shall be secure in Zion, and nations shall acknowledge our oneness, our uniqueness, our destiny, our land and our God, declaring” - Umi keamcha yisrael, goy echad baaretz, “Who is like your nation, unique on the face of the earth”. So may it come to pass, soon, and let us say, AMEN.