

Toronto Torah

Beit Midrash Zichron Dov

Parshat Balak

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When a Talking Donkey Isn't Enough

Rabbi Sammy Bergman

The graphic imagery and gripping plot make the story of Bilam's talking donkey relatable and entertaining; in fact, many Hollywood films even feature talking donkeys. Nevertheless, one struggles to understand the Torah's purpose of including this episode at all.

Nothing changes about G-d's message to Bilam regarding his quest to curse the Jewish People through the course of the episode. In Bamidbar 22:20, immediately before the story involving the talking donkey, Hashem tells Bilam, "If [Balak's messengers] only come to invite you, rise, and go with them, but the matter that I will tell you, you must do". Next, on three consecutive occasions, Bilam's donkey sees a sword-bearing angel of G-d obstructing the path. Each time the donkey stops suddenly, and each time Bilam beats the donkey for doing so. (22:23-27) Finally, after the third beating, Hashem miraculously "opens up" the mouth of the donkey, and the donkey asks why it deserved three consecutive thrashings. (22:28) Ultimately, after Hashem reveals the angel to Bilam, Bilam offers to abandon his journey. (22:31-34) Nevertheless, the angel of G-d tells Bilam: "Go with the men, but the matter that I will tell you to do, you must do." (22:35) Yet, after the entire episode, Bilam still continues the same journey with the exact same instructions. The miraculous story seems totally unnecessary.

Rambam (Guide for the Perplexed 2:42) argues that stories in the Torah

which feature the appearance or speech of angels take place only in prophetic visions. Therefore, he argues that Bilam's donkey never actually spoke to him, but Bilam merely dreamed about the whole episode. Similarly, Rabbi Yosef Ibn Kaspi explains that haunted by the thought of Hashem's anger, Bilam imagined the scenes involving the donkey and the angels during his journey. These approaches solve the problem of unnecessary miracles. Furthermore, a scene involving a donkey fleeing from a sword-bearing angel and chastising its owner certainly sounds like a dream. However, the inclusion of the story in the Torah becomes even more difficult to understand. Why write about the dream at all?

Ramban (22:23, 22:28), and Rabbi Ovadiah Seforno explain that Hashem miraculously endowed the donkey with speech to rebuke Bilam for trying to contravene Hashem's will by cursing the Jewish People. Bilam should have understood that if Hashem can enable an animal to speak, He has the power to withhold a prophet from cursing His people. Nevertheless, the Ramban and Seforno's approaches do not fully justify the necessity for the story of Bilam's donkey. Were the donkey's haltings, the beatings by Bilam, the donkey's speech, and the appearance of the angel solely necessary to tell Bilam he couldn't curse the children of Israel against Hashem's will?

In a beautiful exposition on the parshah, Rabbi Elchanan Samet draws a

parallel between the donkey's three unsuccessful attempts to avoid the angel, and Bilam's three failed attempts to curse the Jewish People. (Balak, *Parshat Ha'Aton*; Bamidbar 22:39-24:13) In both cases, during their third attempts, the donkey and Bilam experience a breakthrough. After the angel obstructs its path for the third time, the donkey simply crouches on the ground under Bilam. (22:27) Similarly, after preparing himself to curse the Children of Israel for the third time, Bilam realizes that Hashem will not allow him to curse them and abdicates his quest. (24:1)

Based on these parallels, Rabbi Samet suggests that Hashem designed the donkey's encounter with the angel to simulate Bilam's future experience attempting to curse the Jewish People. Bilam grew frustrated at his formerly faithful donkey's failure to serve his purposes when, unbeknownst to him, it was the angel of G-d who truly controlled the donkey. Similarly, Bilam served as Balak's "donkey", a tool Balak used to achieve his goal of cursing the Jews. Balak grows frustrated with Bilam (23:11, 23:25, 24:10) but fails to realize that in truth, Hashem is utilizing Bilam to bless the Jewish People.

Hashem sends us messages in many forms. We often struggle to push through obstacles when we truly need to change our direction. May we heed the message that Bilam and Balak failed to understand, and walk on the path Hashem intends for us.

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Summary

This chapter is divided into two parts, following both Yeravam, king of Yisrael, and Rechavam, king of Yehudah. In the first half, Yeravam's son Aviyah falls ill. Yeravam instructs his wife to disguise herself, take gifts, and visit the prophet, Achiyah HaShiloni, in Shiloh to find out the boy's fate. However, G-d warns Achiyah that she is coming in disguise, and so as soon as she arrives, Achiyah issues his harsh message: G-d gave Yeravam the kingship, but as punishment for the terrible sins that Yeravam has committed, all male members of Yeravam's house will die in horrible ways. This child will die as soon as she returns to her city, and will be the only member of the family to be buried and eulogized properly, as he was the most righteous of the family. G-d further promises to appoint another king who will punish the house of Yeravam. The first half of the chapter ends with the boy dying in the way Achiyah predicted. (14:1-20)

The second half of the chapter turns to Rechavam, detailing the sins of Yehudah under his reign. They built *bamot*

(local unauthorized altars), as well as engaged in idolatry and sexual immorality. (14:21-24)

Moving to the political realm, the chapter details how in the fifth year of Rechavam, Shishak, the king of Egypt marched against Yehudah and took the treasures of the Beit HaMikdash, including the gold shields that King Shlomo had made. Rechavam replaced these with bronze shields which he gave to the palace guards. (14:25-28)

The chapter ends by noting that there was constant war between Rechavam and Yeravam, reiterating that Rechavam was the son of a woman named Naama Ha'Amonit, and that Rechavam's son, Aviam, took over as king. (14:29-31)

Insight

Rabbi Meir Leibush Wisser (Malbim to 7-8) notes that G-d's critique of Yeravam is not simply that he sinned. Rather, he emphasizes three points:

- 1) G-d elevated Yeravam from a commoner to king, which should have motivated him to serve G-d;

- 2) To make Yeravam king, G-d tore away the reign from the Davidic dynasty which demanded that Yeravam make himself worthy of that;
- 3) The onus on Yeravam was especially great, as David was an ideal king, who served G-d.

The first two points may explain why, even though both Rechavam and Yeravam are described as sinning, and even enabling idol worship, G-d specifically has a prophet deliver a harsh message to Yeravam, and no similar mention is made for Rechavam. Yeravam's sins expressed personal ingratitude in a way that Rechavam's did not. Furthermore, Rechavam, as the heir to the Davidic line, was the "natural king." Thus, even though he sinned, removing him would have been an undermining of the natural order. For Yeravam, G-d needed to justify such a deviation from what "should have been", which is more demanding. This contrast may be part of why the chapter is presented as two parallel stories, to highlight the differences between the two kings and their Divine treatment.

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The Israeli Farmer: Buying Flowers During Shemita

Buying flowers for Shabbat is a time-honoured tradition. During the shemita year, there are restrictions on deriving benefit from flowers, due to their shemita sanctity. (Mishnah Shevi'it 7:6) May shemita flowers be purchased for personal enjoyment? Rabbi Yosef Zvi Rimon addresses this question in depth (*Shemita*, Hebrew 1st ed., pp. 188-190, 237-238, 329), as follows.

A mishnah (ibid.) states that roses possess *kedushat shevi'it* (shemita sanctity), even though they are not food. (Succah 40a) It would seem to follow that roses, and flowers in general, should possess *kedushat shevi'it*.

On the other hand, the Talmud Yerushalmi compares roses to a certain white flower, which does not possess *kedushat shevi'it*. (Shevi'it 7:1) The Talmud Yerushalmi concludes that flowers that do not emit a pleasant fragrance do not possess *kedushat shevi'it*, whereas ones that do, may possess *kedushat shevi'it*. How may we reconcile this passage from the Talmud Yerushalmi with the mishnah which says that roses possess *kedushat shevi'it*?

Rabbi Avraham Yeshayah Karelitz explains that in order for flowers to possess *kedushat shevi'it*, they must emit a pleasant fragrance, but they must also have a taste. (Chazon Ish Shevi'it 14:9) After citing Rabbi Karelitz, Rabbi Shmuel Wosner (Shevet haLevi 2: 202) divides flowers and fragrant plants into three categories, **based on the qualities of the plant:**

- 1) Plants used for both fragrance and taste, such as roses. These have *kedushat shevi'it*.
- 2) Plants that are purely decorative, and do not emit a fragrance. These lack *kedushat shevi'it*.
- 3) Plants used solely for their fragrance. This is left unresolved by the Talmud Yerushalmi, and one should be stringent. Rabbi Eliezer Waldenberg (Tzitz Eliezer 6:33)

disagrees, contending that one may be lenient with flowers used solely for fragrance, as this doubt wasn't mentioned in the Talmud Bavli or by the Rambam.

Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach (quoted in Mishpitei Eretz Shevi'it 10) differentiates **based on the use we make of the plant:** Decorative flowers purchased and sold solely for their appearance do not possess *kedushat shevi'it*, even if they do in fact have a pleasant smell.

Another issue to be aware of when purchasing flowers during shemita is the prohibition against use of *sefichin* (plants that sprouted on their own during shemita). *Sefichin* are prohibited rabbinically, due to a concern that people would deliberately plant during shemita and claim that it had grown on its own. (Rambam Hilchot Shemita v'Yovel 4:1) According to Rabbi Binyamin Zilber, **all** annual flowers would be included in this prohibition. (Az Nidbiru 4:3-5) However, Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach argues that the prohibition of *sefichin* only applies to plants which possess *kedushat shevi'it*, as we discussed above. (Minchat Shlomo 51:11)

Rabbi Yosef Zvi Rimon summarizes the above discussion for the bouquet buyer during shemita:

- Annuals must be purchased with certification stating that they were grown hydroponically, or were grown with the *heter mechirah*, or were imported from outside of Israel.
- Perennial flowers may be purchased without certification, as they would likely not have been planted during shemita. However, it is preferable to buy these types of flowers with certification.

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Biography

R' Yekutiel Y. Halberstam

Rabbi David Zirkind

As one of the youngest Chasidic Rebbeim of pre-war Europe, Rabbi Yekutiel Yehudah Halberstam led thousands of chasidim in Romania from the age of 22, beginning in 1927. The early years of his life were filled with extraordinary challenges, starting at the age of thirteen when his father passed away. He married at the age of 21 and immediately began to impact the non-observant community in western Romania, where Klausenberg is located. The extent of his success was such that the Jerusalem Rabbinical Court offered him a seat on their Beit Din in 1937. Uncertain as to whether he should accept the position, the Klausenberger Rebbe sought out the advice of his mother, who felt he was still too young to leave for Eretz Yisrael.

The second great tragedy of his life, shared with millions of Jews during World War II, was the murder of his family – his wife and eleven children – at the hands of the Nazis. They were gassed in the Auschwitz death camp, where he was also held, in June of 1944. Later that year, Rabbi Halberstam was assigned to a labour detail which searched the remains of the Warsaw Ghetto after the uprising there. From there the Rebbe was marched, with six thousand others, to the Dachau concentration camp. Only one-third survived that terrible march, the Rebbe among them. In Fall 1945, the Rebbe was instrumental in incorporating religious life in the DP camps. He created slaughterhouses, mikva'ot and yeshivot that provided both physically and spiritually for his fellow survivors.

In 1947, the Rebbe remarried and moved to the United States, where his following grew. All the while, he continued to develop a community of chasidim in Netanya, and he eventually made aliyah himself in 1960. Operating from there, he continued his involvement with the Williamsburg community until his death.

One of the Rebbe's great accomplishments later in life was the establishment of the *Mifal haShas*, a worldwide project which encourages intensive Talmud study through exams and monetary incentives. After his passing in 1994, the program was continued by his two sons - his elder son in Israel and his younger son in the United States.

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Torah and Translation

Fasting While Pregnant on Tishah b'Av

R' Yekutiel Y. Halberstam, Divrei Yatziv Orach Chaim 232

Translated by Ezer Diena

א) הנה בשו"ע א"ח סי' תקנ"ד סעיף ו',
חיה כל ל' יום וכן חולה שהוא צריך לאכול
אין צריך אומד אלא מאכילין אותו מיד
דבמקום חולי לא גזרו רבנן, הג"ה ומיהו
נוהגין להתענות כל זמן שאין להם צער
גדול שהיה לחוש לסכנה והמיקל לא
הפסיד עכ"ל.

ובביאור הגר"א שם, דכמו שהתירו אמירה
לא"י בשבת וכן נעילת הסנדל לחיה כל
שלשים יום וסיכה לחשאב"ס ביוהכ"פ
מפני שהם מדרבנן לא גזרו בכה"ג ה"ה
כאן עכ"ל, והביאו ג"כ בשו"ת מהר"ם שיק
א"ח סי' רפ"ט...

ד) ועכ"פ נתבאר מדעת הרבה ראשונים וכן
דעת הטור דהוי מדברי קבלה, ואם נימא
דדברי קבלה כדברי תורה דמיא היאך כתב
הגר"א להתיר בחשאב"ס משום דהוי
מדרבנן ומקילין ביה? אא"כ נאמר שדעתו
כדעת הרשב"א במגילה דף ה' הנ"ל דהוי
מדרבנן...

ועכ"פ לכו"ע בחולה אפי' שאין בו סכנה
לא גזרו ופטור מלהתענות. ועיין בב"י סי'
תקנ"ד מה שהביא מרבינו ירוחם בשם
הגאונים דמעוברת אסורה להתענות בשאר
תעניות משום צער הולד...

ומכ"ש שיש ח"ו קצת סכנה להולד שהוא
גוף בפ"ע וה"ו להחמיר עליה, ומכ"ש
שהתענית ח"ו יוכל להזיק גם לה לעצמה
ואין הולכין בפקו"נ אחר הרוב ד"וחי
בהם" כתיב שלא יוכל לבא בשום ענין
למיתת ישראל...

1) Behold, Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chaim 554:6) writes: "A woman who has given birth within 30 days, and one who is ill who needs to eat, do not require a [medical] assessment. Rather, they are given food immediately, since in a situation of illness, the Sages did not decree [that one fast]. Rama: Nevertheless, they have the custom to fast any time that they do not have significant discomfort, such that one should be concerned for danger. And one who is lenient has not lost out."

Bei'ur HaGra (ad loc.) [adds]: "Just as [the Sages] permitted asking a non-Jew [to perform *melachah*] on Shabbat, and for a woman who has given birth within 30 days to wear leather shoes [on Yom Kippur], and one who is ill (but not in life-threatening danger) to anoint themselves on Yom Kippur, which are rabbinically prohibited, so too here [they permitted violation of a rabbinic prohibition, in a circumstance of illness]..."

4) Nevertheless, it is clear that the view of many early authorities, including the Tur, that [Tishah B'Av] has the status of *divrei kabbalah* [a term used to describe laws credited to the Prophets]. If we say that *divrei kabbalah* are considered to have biblical status, how could the Vilna Gaon write that eating is permitted for one who is ill (but not in life-threatening danger) because it is only a Rabbinic prohibition, about which we are lenient?! Unless he follows the Rashba's view (Megillah 5a) that [Tishah B'Av] is only rabbinic...

Nevertheless, according to all views, for one who is ill, even if they are in no life-threatening danger, [the rabbis] did not decree, and they are exempt from fasting. See what Beit Yosef (Orach Chaim 554) brought from Rabbeinu Yerucham in the name of the Gaonim, that one who is pregnant is prohibited from fasting on the other fasts because of the distress of the fetus...

Even more so, where there is also a slight danger to the fetus, which is a body of its own, G-d forbid that we should be stringent, and even more so, where the fast may, G-d forbid, harm the woman herself, since we do not follow the majority [of cases] in regards to [assessing danger to life], as it says "One must live through [the

mitzvot]", that we should not arrive in **any manner** to the death of a Jew...

To learn more about the requirement for pregnant and nursing women to fast, or to delve into various other fasting-related topics, please join our Beyond Hunger program on Sunday, June 27 between 10 AM and 4 PM.

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Free of Charge! ZOOM link: tiny.cc/beyondhunger

CALENDAR

- 10:00 AM, Rabbi Sammy Bergman, Yom Kippur Katan: The Fast Before the Feast
10:30 AM, Shyndee Kestenbaum, 20 Sivan: The Forgotten Fast
11:00 AM, Rabbi Seth Grauer, BaHaB: The Fast After the Feast
11:30 AM, Netanel Klein, Fast of the Firstborn: A Fast That Should Not Exist
12:00 PM, Rabbi Aaron Greenberg, Should We Fast on Yom HaShoah?

HALACHAH

- 12:30 PM, Rabbi Sammy Bergman, When a Torah Falls
1:00 PM, Ezer Diena, Fasting During Pregnancy
1:30 PM, Rabbi Mordechai Torczyner, Frightened Fasting: Fasting for a Nightmare

TANACH

- 2:00 PM, Rabbi Mordechai Torczyner, King Saul's Military Fast
2:30 PM, Rabbi Chaim Metzger, Isaiah's Ideal Fast
3:00 PM, Miriam Bessin, Performative Fasting: Ezra's Dramatic Example
3:30 PM, Rabbi Mordechai Torczyner, Do We Still Fast? Zechariah's Question
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SPECIAL PROGRAMMING

Shabbat June 26, Clanton Park, Farewell Derashah, Rabbi Alex Hecht

7:30 PM Wed. June 30: Religious Zionism, a mini-series, with Rabbi Sammy Bergman

8:00 PM Wed. June 30: Jewish Art, a mini-series with Rabbi Chaim Metzger

DAILY

Mon-Thu 10 AM to Noon, Seder Boker with Rabbi Moshe Yeres, via ZOOM (men)
Mon/Wed: Gemara Succah, Orot haTeshuvah Tues/Thurs: Parshah, Tanach: Melachim

WEEKLY

Shabbat June 26

- After minchah at Shaarei Shomayim, Pirkei Avot, Rabbi Sammy Bergman
After minchah at BAYT, Gemara Ketuvot, Rabbi Mordechai Torczyner (men)

Monday June 28

8:30 PM Gemara Shabbat, Chap. 15, Rabbi Moshe Yeres

Wednesday June 30

6:15 AM Talmud Eruvin, Rabbi Sammy Bergman

Thursday July 1

8:30 AM Daniel, Rabbi Chaim Metzger (University)

7:15 PM Gemara Bava Metzia, Rabbi Sammy Bergman (University women)

8:00 PM Gemara Beitzah, Ezer Diena (men, advanced) - Ezer Returns!

Friday July 2

8:30 AM Parshah, Rabbi Sammy Bergman (University)

10:30 AM Shemitah! with Rabbi Sammy Bergman and Rabbi Mordechai Torczyner

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