BS”D

Parshas Balak 5778

Rabbi Chaim Zev Citron

*Modesty being the strong suit of the Jews, Bilaam couldn’t help but be moved by it. But if that was their strong point, he would find a way of undermining it.*

Bilaam’s Plot to Destroy the Jewish People (*chas v’shalom*)

As Bilaam prepared for the third time to attempt to curse the Jewish people, the Torah tells us Bilaam did not search for omens by which he could bring misfortune upon the Jews. Instead, he looked up and saw Israel encamped according to their tribes, and “the spirit of G-d came upon him.”

Rashi has some interesting comments. Bilaam looked at the Jews with an evil eye. Rashi says this is the last of the three traits of Bilaam (as mentioned in Pirkei Avos). In addition to an evil eye, Bilaam was also arrogant and greedy. And yet, when he saw the tribes encamped in such a way as to ensure privacy, when he saw that the opening of each tent was placed in such a way as to not be able to look into the door of the neighboring tent, he was filled with the spirit of G-d. Rashi says that at that moment, it occurred to him—his heart told him—not to curse the Jewish people at all.

By the way, not all commentaries agree with Rashi. Some (See, for example, Tosfos Baba Basra 60a.) say that the “him” of the phrase “the spirit of G-d came upon him” refers to Israel. Bilaam saw the modesty of the Jewish people and that the spirit of G-d rested on them. (“Him” in the singular would be referring to the people as a whole.)

At any rate, according to Rashi, Bilaam, the one with the evil eye, the arrogant and greedy, couldn’t help being moved by the modesty of the Jewish people.

However, this raises a problem. We know that after the story with Bilaam, the Jews strayed after the women of Midian and Moav. First, they engaged in immoral liaisons, they then partook in the sacrifices of the Moavite god Ba’al Pe’or, worshipped and were “attached” to that deity. This brought a plague upon the Jewish people, stopped only by the intervention of Pinchas.

How did this suddenly happen? The Torah later blames Bilaam. Later, after the battle of the Jews with the Midianites, Moshe says, referring to the Midianite women, “They were the ones who, at the bidding of Bilaam, caused a desecration of G-d concerning the matter of Pe’or.” (Bamidbar 31: 16) Indeed, the Torah says the Jews killed Bilaam in that battle. (See ibid 31:8.)

Rashi says that Bilaam said to Balak, “The G-d of Israel hates immoral conduct.” He therefore suggested enlisting the women to lure the Israelite men into immorality and ultimately idolatry. (See Rashi ibid 24, 14.)

My question is: How can this be? Bilaam himself was moved by the purity of Israel. The spirit of G-d descended upon him. How could he turn around and counsel precisely the opposite?

A careful reading of Rashi, I think, will solve the problem.

Rashi makes it clear that the only reason Bilaam didn’t try to curse the Jews was that he realized G-d would not allow it. On the passage, “He (Bilaam) turned his face towards the desert,” Rashi says it should be understood as in the Aramaic translation of Onkelos. Rashi’s version of Onkelos (according to the Ramban) reads, “He turned to the desert where the Jewish people had made the golden calf.” In other words, although Bilaam couldn’t curse them, he could remind G-d, as it were, of their grave sin of the golden calf.

Afterward, as I mentioned earlier, Rashi says that Bilaam looked at the Jews with an evil eye. Bilaam was trying to use whatever method he had at his disposal to harm the Jews. Bring up their old sins. Hit them with the evil eye.

Then, when he sees the tents of Israel, he recognizes their modesty and holiness, and he can’t help being impressed. But note Rashi’s exact words: “It occurred to him not to curse them.” Not that he was moved to actually bless the people of Israel. Rather, he felt the momentary fleeting feeling of “How can I curse such a holy people?!?” He saw what was good, and it was hard at that moment to curse.

But Bilaam’s character had not changed despite that momentary lapse. He was still the arrogant, hateful Bilaam. It occurred to him after this, the third prophetic blessing, to exploit this very quality of the Jews.

Modesty, moral conduct, was the strong suit of the Jews. Bilaam couldn’t help but be moved. But if that was their strong point, he would find a way of undermining it. He masterminded a situation where first the Moavite women would merely greet the Jews. Then they became more friendly. And more friendly. Soon it led to immoral behavior and to partaking of a feast of idolatry and finally to idolatry itself. The very clever Bilaam had found what he admired about the Jews and turned it inside out. The behavior of the Jewish people at that point nearly destroyed them. Only Pinchas’ valiant and dangerous intervention turned the tide around.

We must realize that to survive as a people we must maintain the highest moral principles. Society chips away at that, not by force, but by friendliness. Why be so uptight? Relax! Have some fun! You don’t have to dress so primly, so old-fashionedly. Come on, enjoy life!

Our strength, our only strength, is to be morally pure. The truth is that ultimately the outside world can and will appreciate that extraordinary specialness, that holiness. Don’t give up the unique purity of a Torah Jewish life. Live in such away that the world will declare, “How good are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling-places, O Israel!”