

Parshas Balak – 5781

After Balak, the King of Moav, saw that the Bnei Yisrael was approaching, and they were winning battle after battle, he nervously sent a message to someone he thought could help save Moav.

Numbers 22:5

וַיִּשְׁלַח מִלְאָכִים אֶל־בְּלָעַם בֶּן־בְּעֹר * פְּתוּרָה אֲשֶׁר עַל־הַנָּהָר אֶרֶץ
בְּנֵי־עַמּוֹ לְקַרְאֵלּוֹ לֵאמֹר הִנֵּה עַם יֵצֵא מִמִּצְרַיִם הַנֵּה כֹסֶה אֶת־עֵין
הָאָרֶץ וְהוּא יֵשֵׁב מִמְּלִי:

“[Balak] sent messengers to Bilaam son of Beor to Pethor, which is by the River, in the land of his kinsfolk, to call to him, saying, ‘Behold, a People came out of Egypt; behold it covers the earth, and it is settled next to me.’”

Who was Bilaam? When looking into the identity of Bilaam the Torah gives us clues. The Gemara in Sanhedrin learns that his father, Beor, was Lavan or like Lavan. That is our first clue. Next, where is Pethor? The Passuk says it is by “the River.” The Torah calls two major rivers “the River.” The Euphrates is identified as the River in Bereishis (2:10). The Nile is also called “the River” in Exodus (2:5). The Nile is southwest of Moav and the Euphrates is east (running north-south so it is was east, northeast, and southeast). Bilaam says “From Aram has Balak brought me, Moab’s king, from the hills of the East.” (Numbers 23:7). Thus, Balak took Bilaam from the East not the West, from the Euphrates and not the Nile. (The Jordan River is also referred to as the River in the book of Joshua but almost always it is identified as the Jordan River, or the Jordan, somewhere in a close passage.)

It also identifies that Pethor is in Aram (ancient Aramia). Aram is the northern part of the Euphrates River. Like we just read, Bilaam tells Balak that “From Aram has Balak brought me.”

(Numbers 23:7), and Moshe recounted later that “because they hired Bilaam son of Beor, from Pethor of Aram-Naharaim, (ancient Aramia) to curse you.” (Deuteronomy 23:5).

Avraham is from Aramia as he tells his senior servant (on consensus identified as Eliezer) to go to his homeland and back to his family to find a wife for Avraham’s son Yitzchok. The servant “made his way to Aram-Naharaim, to the city of Nahor.” (Genesis 24:10). Nahor sits right on the northern River Euphrates and is located in the territory of Aramia. Bilaam is in Pethur, in the land where Avraham’s extended family lived and originated.

Interestingly, it does not say “MiPethor” from Pethor. It says “to Pethor.” This means that Bilaam was not a Pethorean but he lived there. He lived there either because he was from Avraham’s family or a descendant of Lavan who came from the area. However, he was not from a family called Pethor.

We also notice about Bilaam that whoever curses him is cursed and whoever blesses him is blessed as Balak says, “For I know that he whom you bless is blessed indeed, and he whom you curse is cursed” (ibid. 22:6). When Bilaam tries to curse the Israelites (for the third time) he says “Blessed are they who bless you, Accursed they who curse you!” (ibid 24:9). He was repeating a prophesy that was already given (and known to Bilaam, if he knew his own history) to Avraham. “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing.” (Genesis 12:3). And further, “I will bless those who bless you and curse him that curses you; and all the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you.” (ibid 12:4). Clearly, our verse (Numbers 22:6) is referring to a trait that Bilaam had and was

passed down to Bilaam. Bilaam, therefore, must be a descendant of Avraham to have this trait, because this blessing is not recorded anywhere else being given by HaShem to anyone else.¹

Balak sent dignitaries of Moav and Midyan to fetch and hire Bilaam. It is curious that these two nations teamed together as we will soon see. When Bilaam talked to the dignitaries of Midyan and Moav he said “He said to them, “Spend the night here and I shall reply to you as HaShem may instruct me.” (Numbers 22:8). He used the proper term for HaShem “YKVK.” He did not use “Elokim.” Later he talks to G-d “Elokim” in his dream (ibid Numbers 22:10) and is answered by Elokim (22:12). Then Bilaam reports back and tells the dignitaries to leave saying “for Hashem will not let me go with you.” (22:13), again using YKVK. The gentiles have gods and they have different names for gods. They may even refer to the god of the Israelites. However, who else besides, Avraham’s descendants, refer to the Lord as “HaShem” (YKVK)? It is Lavan himself.

The servant of Avraham uses that term (Genesis 24:12) because he learned it from Avraham himself. Lavan sees the riches that his younger sister received so he goes out to meet the man who gave them to her and says “Come in, O blessed of HaShem ... why do you remain outside, when I have made ready the house and a place for the camels?” (ibid 24:31). Lavan uses the YKVK term for HaShem. He does not hear the servant use it and he is nowhere near Avraham. It is clear from this clue that Avraham’s family knew of HaShem and that name. This term for G-d was passed down to Bilaam by his father or ancestor, as Gemara Sanhedrin says. We can answer the time gap by either saying Bilaam or Lavan was extremely old; or Beor is Lavan so either Bilaam is a son or descendant of Beor/Lavan; or we can also learn Beor is a descendant of Lavan, not literally Lavan himself.

¹ Lavan was Avraham’s great uncle. This must be a family trait passed down or known to the extended family. It can also be that Beor was not literally Lavan, but like Lavan and that Bilaam was a grand-child of Avraham’s either from Ketura or Hagar.

Getting back to the odd coupling of dignitaries, Midyan and Moav were enemies. The Gemara says in Sanhedrin 105a that Midyan and Moav were at odds with each other. However, to save themselves, they combined to fight a common enemy, Israel. The Torah tells us further that in the morning after Bilaam spoke to HaShem, “The Moabite dignitaries left, and they came to Balak and said, “Balaam refused to come with us.” (Numbers 22:14). The Gemara there says that where did the Midyanites go? Only the Moavites left. The Midyanites already knew that the Israelites were blessed, as they themselves are descendants of Avraham and his last wife, Ketura. (Genesis 25:2). They knew their history and had already left the night before, once Bilaam said he has to differ to HaShem (YKVK). They knew HaShem blessed the Israelites.

Now, Midyan and Moav were cousins as Midyan came from Avraham and Moav came from his nephew Lot. (Genesis 19:37). We also see they had another cousin, Bilaam from Lavan. This also answers the question of why Balak, who was urgently trying to fend off the Israelites sent dignitaries, two times, to a location 500 kilometers way (3 or 4 days journey by camel or donkey). It was because Balak, as a cousin, was familiar with Bilaam.

There are more clues. It says that after his second dream with HaShem, “When he arose in the morning, Bilaam saddled his she-donkey and departed with the Moabite dignitaries.” The Gemara Sanhedrin 105a points out that Avraham saddled his own donkey and Bilaam did the same. There is a familial connection to their work ethic.

Interestingly, HaShem’s anger flared “אֵתְּרָאֵף” against Bilaam. (Numbers 22:22) for going to curse when HaShem only gave him reluctant permission. We only find that HaShem’s אֵתְּרָאֵף anger flares against Avraham and his descendants: with Moshe (Exodus 4:14; 32:19) against the Nation of Israel (Numbers 11:1; 25:3; 32:13). HaShem did not even flare His anger against the world when He had to destroy it in Noah’s time or when He disseminated the people

after the Tower of Babel, or even against Sodom and Amora, which he had to destroy. There must be a familial connection between Bilaam and Avraham for HaShem to flare His anger.

When Bilaam had his fight with his donkey, HaShem spoke daytime to Bilaam through his Angel / Messenger. “The angel of HaShem (Malakh HaShem) then stationed himself in a lane between the vineyards, with a fence on either side.” (Numbers 22:24). HaShem honors Bilaam through his Malakh of HaShem. Avraham, too, had a similar experience. “Then an angel of HaShem (Malakh HaShem) called to him from heaven: “Avraham! Avraham!” And he answered, “Here I am.”” (Genesis 22:11).

In our Passuk (Numers 22:5), as we quoted, it says “Behold, a People came out of Egypt; behold it covers the earth, and it is settled next to me.” Balak says “covers.” What else covers the entire Earth? The heavens cover the Earth. HaShem had already promised Avraham “Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them...So shall your offspring be.” (Genesis 15:5). Balak knew the heritage of Avraham that his descendants would be like the stars, they would cover the Earth. He is referencing it here.

Bilaam’s first curse turned blessing was “Who can count the dust of Yaakov, Number the dust-cloud of Israel?” The dust is mentioned by Avraham that he said “How can I talk to HaShem, I am like dust and ashes.” (Genesis 18:27). And, thus, HaShem promised to Avraham that his descendants will be like “the dust of the Earth.” (Genesis 28:14). This can also be what Balak was referring to when he said Israel “covered” the Earth, (Numbers 22:5) as dust covers the entire land of the Earth.

To be successful Bilaam already knew the recipe given to Avraham. “Bilaam said to Balak, “Build me seven altars here and have seven bulls and seven rams ready here for me.”” (Numbers 23:1). HaShem gave Avraham his promise of longevity and multitude with the same

animals (Genesis 15:9). The seven was a long-prescribed number, already given to Noah “Of every clean animal you shall take seven pairs, males and their mates.” (Genesis 7:2). Ramban says similar that Bilaam was using seven alters of pure animals because of the sacrifices that are alluded to in the Torah.

Finally, interestingly about heritage, it says of Avraham that his primary heir was Yitzchok, “but to Avraham’s sons by concubines Avraham gave gifts while he was still living, and he sent them away from his son Yitzchok eastward, to the land of the East.” (Genesis 25:6). Meaning, while his main descendants would be Yitzchok’s sons, but he gave over his heritage, tutelage, and inspiration to his children of other wives, Hagar and Keturah. The land of the East could be in or around Pethor, where Bilaam’s ancestors settled and lived, on the Euphrates in Aram.

The point is clear. Avraham’s heritage is strong. Not only do we get the “gifts” of Avraham but we also get his yerusha, heritage, and estate. Just as our cousin could not come to curse us, so too, we should not come to curse each other. We are one family, not even cousins. We have a strong heritage of giving, chessed, fear of HaShem, kindness, and righteousness. May we always tap into that heritage and continue on as progeny of Avraham in his good way.