

PARSHAS BALAK 5778

Parshas Bolok is a confusing parsha. Bilaam is an enigma. Without Chazal, we would think Bilaam was some doddering magician who has some kind of power to bless and curse and it would be a complete mystery. Hashem bestows the power of bracha and kloloh and He gave it to Avrohom. But it seems Bilaam has a genuine koach.

Immediately after the events with Bolok and Bilaam, we have the tragic incident of bnos Moav and Midian which seems to be unconnected to the entire exchange with Bilaam. However, the novi in this week's haftara informs us that it was in fact Bilaam who was responsible for the whole thing.

Who was Bilaam? Chazal tell us that he was given the same gifts of prophecy and greatness as Moshe Rabbeinu. There is one man that Hashem gave to the nations of the world whose spiritual powers rivalled Moshe Rabbeinu. And apparently he had the power of bracha and kloloh as well.

But what did he do with these powers?

One feature of Moshe Rabbeinu's nevuoh was his ability to have an audience with Hashem on demand. Bilaam also had this ability. Bilaam anticipated talking with YKVK. But in reality, only the Shem Elokim comes to speak with Bilaam. Elokim represents Hashem as the power over nature. YKVK is beyond nature. Bilaam could not relate to Hashem as beyond nature. His life was too physical. Hashem eventually gives Bilaam permission to go, but He warns him that he won't have independent power to curse.

Bolok offers Bilaam kovod and honor, but Bilaam is interested in money. Lots of it. He decides to go with Bolok's emissaries despite Hashem's dissuasions. Hashem sends angels and eventually He opens the mouth of Bilaam's donkey.

Chazal reveal from the donkey's statements that Bilaam was the lowest of the low when it came to arayos.

Bilaam was like a lot of people—he possessed a formidable set of kochos hanefesh, but he is dominated by his various yetzirim. Hashem warns him that pursuing his passions will be his undoing, but Bilaam cannot resist his urges. We find that Bilaam is painfully aware of what he could be and how much eternal pleasure he could earn if he would be righteous. He asks to be given the death of the righteous and share in their ultimate reward. But he wants it while he indulges in all the pleasures of this world. He doesn't want to have to give up anything. But this is not the way it works. You can't have both. All the potential and all the spiritual greatness will not earn you olom haboh unless you use it to control your yetzer.

Bilaam saw the beauty of Klal Yisroel in their middoh of tzniyus. The middoh of tzniyus has many expressions and functions. It can be a powerful protection against arayos. But the fundamental definition of tzniyus is making the public statement that I identify primarily with my neshomo and not my body. It happens when

a person is inner-focused and not obsessed with how they appear on the outside. Our modern media is entrenched in the notion that what I present to the public is primarily my physical assets and attributes and not my spiritual essence. If that is the image you present to others, it becomes the image you have of yourself.

Tzniyus means you recognize you are a neshomo who uses the body to serve Hashem. Klal Yisroel identify as a mamleches kohanim and goy kodosh. The outside world is obsessed with their physical appearance and enhancing their body. The nations could have complained that they have no role-models to look up to and behave differently. If only we had a leader like Moshe Rabbeinu then we could be as special as Klal Yisroel. So Hashem sent them Bilaam who had the same potential as Moshe Rabbeinu, but he corrupted himself. In the struggle between the body and neshomo, Klal Yisroel identify with neshomo and the nations identify with the body.

At the end, we know from Chazal that Bilaam gives Bolok advice. The simple pshat is that Bilaam tried and was unsuccessful. He gave a final nevuoh about the end of days and he leaves. But in reality, Billam is not going to give up on his kovod and his money. He advised Bolok to get Klal Yisroel to succumb to arayos because this is what Hashem despises the most.

It is incredible how Bnei Yisroel engage in the most debasing form of idol worship. How could this happen? Klal Yisroel were in the midbor for 40 years living with Hashem's Shechinoh, surviving on miracles and under intense hashgocho protis. They are on the highest level of knowledge of Hashem and they understand that Hashem is the only absolute power in this world. How can they believe in avodo zoro?

Chazal explain that Klal Yisroel only participate in avodo zoro as a pretext to engage in arayos and release themselves from the discipline of the Torah.

When a person becomes a baal taivoh, it distorts his entire rational faculty. There is a posuk in Kriyas Shema about lo sosuru which warns us not to stray after our eyes and our hearts. The Rambam explains that these two things go hand in hand. If one allows himself to be dominated by the pursuit of taivoh, it will eventually corrupt his thought process and he will find all kinds of rationalizations to justify his lifestyle of taivoh. Lo sosuru acharei eineichem is a lifestyle choice. Choosing a lifestyle where indulgence in physical pleasure becomes a goal and a focus in your life, then you have gone too far.

Some people's whole existence is pursuing good food. It is making olam hazeh as a goal of your life.

You can enjoy a yom tov meal, but don't forget who you are.

Lo sosuru acharei levavchem is understood by the Rambam as something you wouldn't normally associate with someone with a reputation of intellectual openness. Th Rambam here does

not fit that bill. You are forbidden from studying avoda zora. One may not explore with his mind any doubts about the fundamentals of Yiddishkeit. Human minds are limited. If you go after the explorations of the mind—where ever it leads—will bring you to destroy the world. You cannot rely on your mind to reach the truth without any guidance. We need to set limits to our thinking and remain on safe ground.

But what does this have to do with znus? Why are they listed under the same mitzvah?

The human mind is an incredible tool. It can justify anything immoral and debasing. Hitler had an agenda and he convinced a leading intellectual nation to follow him. He convinced them with theories and philosophies which catered to their baser instincts of hate. It made them capable of killing millions of innocent people.

Klal Yisroel had a goal to pursue taivoh. So all Bolok had to do was bring out enough pretty girls, and 24,000 men will suddenly be able to forget they spent 40 years in the midbor with the Shechinoh and renounce their deepest beliefs in a moment.

Hashem gave these two individuals incredible kochos to reach tremendous heights in ruchniyus, and each one did something totally different. Bilaam was a complete lowlife sinking to the depths of taivoh. He took the unbelievable powers that he had and tried to figure out how he can make the most money and the most kovod out of it. Moshe Rabbeinu had the same kochos and channeled them differently.

Each Jew has kochos of ruchniyus which he inherited from the Ovos. No matter how far astray he wanders, he can always summon those kochos hanefesh and pull himself up. The only exception, says the Nefesh Hachayim, is when he converts to another religion. Then he loses it all. But barring that, there will always remain something pure within a Jew.

How does one develop and nurture those kochos to bring out his potential? Moshe Rabbeinu realized that he linked deeply to the Ovos. Bilaam realized that Klal Yisroel's stature is solid and unbudgeable because they inherited it from the Ovos.

In addition, we can develop our kochos in our own way. How? Through limud haTorah. Moshe Rabbeinu had one extra advantage over Bilaam. He had a heritage of limud haTorah going back for generations—from Levi to Kehos to Amram—which preceded Mattan Torah.

Moshe started with that pure core that exists in the heart of every Jew. There is something in the neshomo of every Jew that seeks ruchniyus and to live an elevated life. This core was nurtured by a culture of limud haTorah and tikkun hamiddos that influenced Moshe and made him a superior individual.

Bilaam had the same kochos hanefesh as Moshe, but he didn't have that insatiable pure spark thirsting for ruchniyus, and he didn't have limud haTorah to fan that spark which turned into a roaring flame. So he took all those kochos to fulfill all his taivos and it destroyed him.

We have a confrontation between two spiritual giants. The Ish Elokim vanquished Bilaam, but Bilaam advised Bolok to bring down 24,000 members of Klal Yisroel by tempting them with znus.

Now we have Pinchos—the zealot. Kannoim have a bad reputation nowadays because the standard kann'a'us you find today is wild and unfettered by Torah restraints. There is another type of kannoi who does everything within the limits of Torah. The drive for truth burns strongly within him and the

kedushoh of his neshomo cannot tolerate sheker and tumoh.

The Gemara says that kann'a'us has to be expressed in a specific way that is sanctioned by the Torah. You can't just do what you want because you are passionate about something important. Pinchos was putting himself on the line. He was a social outcast because of his background and he was trying to kill a prince of Shevet Shimon. But since his middas ho'emes could not tolerate the violation of the Torah, he is allowed to act in this extreme manner.

We find a surprising thing. Conventional wisdom would dictate that a confrontational kannoi like Pinchos would naturally bring division and discord. People don't want to get involved and stick out their necks about a problem because it ruffles feathers and generates discord. They want to talk and negotiate and maintain peace. But who brings peace to the world? The kannoi who shows that tumoh and sheker cannot be tolerated! The one who took a spear and stabbed this couple. Peace is generated by bringing Klal Yisroel closer to Hashem and healing the rifts caused by indifference and neglect. Hashem brings sholom into the world but only when He is engaged in the world. When a prince in Klal Yisroel and a princess of Midian stand to separate Hashem from His people, Pinchos stood to mend the breach.

People become uplifted and exalted when they tap into the kedushoh and bakoshas ho'emes of the Torah. Pinchos had this passion but he checked it with Torah and channeled it properly.

Human beings are complex and are torn by various pulls and conflicts between the guf and neshomo. Torah helps a person overcome those conflicts by channeling one's kochos of guf and neshomo in the proper way and elevating a person. Moshe Rabbeinu also had his challenges but he overcame them. The Meshech Chochmo in his introduction to Sefer Shmos says Moshe Rabbeinu had his free will removed from him in order to be able to receive the Torah without having the possibility of corrupting its authentic transmission. But he reached that level through his own efforts and willpower.

On the other hand, the Rambam says that with one's free will a person can sink to the lowest levels of animalistic behavior and his body will eclipse his neshomo to become like an intelligent animal.

Where you stand in the balance between guf and neshomo depends on how you negotiate the competing drives of each side. You can negotiate upward or downward. But each Jew has a spark of purity and ruchniyus which can be fanned by limud haTorah.

The head of a major baal teshuvah yeshiva told me that although the baal teshuvah movement began 50 years ago with a power thirst for ruchniyus and spirituality, he learned that people's commitment quickly fizzled out when it wasn't nurtured and supported by serious limud haTorah. So he had to open a yeshivah for baalei teshuvah which uses limud haTorah as the main tool for transforming secular Jews into solid bnei Torah. The Torah is compared to a maayan which has the potential to purify with any amount.

We have two personalities who had the greatest kochos hanefesh in human history. One actualized it to become the Ish HoElokim who received the Torah and transcended his own bechiroh, and the other descended into complete hedonism and narcissism. People often complain that they suffer from addictions and that they can't help themselves from pursuing their taivos. They are close to denying their free

will. But we have to strengthen the emunoh that we all have bechiroh chofshis for the most part to choose our actions and our thoughts. True, it may not be easy. We have to work to develop the tools and strategies that can give us back control over ourselves. But that is the avodah of bechiroh—Rabbeinu Yonah says it is a mitzvah which requires effort to perform. Just like you can't wake up Sukkos morning and expect a kosher mehudar set of arba minim waiting for you at your front door, so too, using one's bechiroh against one's taivos haguf takes foresight and strategy. We all have that mitzvah and we all have that ability.

Part of the process of uplifting yourself and transforming yourself is immersion in Torah. It helps us negotiate those conflicts and nurtures that pure spark within each Jew and makes it into a flame.

These parshiyos are not just interesting stories. They contain very deep insights into the human personality and how we are supposed to develop ourselves and perfect our middos and how to interact with the world around us. Immersing ourselves in Torah is the key to asserting our bechiroh chofshis and elevating ourselves to the levels of perfection we are capable of reaching.