

A Tale of Two Prophets

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Rabbi Yosie Levine

The Jewish Center

On the Shabbos before July 4th weekend in 1964, Rabbi Norman Lamm stood in this pulpit and delivered a sermon on Parshas Balak. It was built on the premise that the vast majority of his congregants would be headed for their summer vacations and that the drasha they would hear that morning would be the last they would hear until they returned after Labor Day. His message was that the Torah and Talmud Torah should accompany you wherever you go. What better way to make a vacation meaningful than to infuse it with Jewish learning. I guess not that much has changed in 46 years.

Chazal say that when two people are taking leave of one another, they should share words of Torah. For the everlasting quality of those words will create a bond between them. They can ponder them while they're apart and return to the conversation when they're reunited. Now, Rachel and I will be here next Shabbos, but I know that many of you will not be. So this morning – before you go away – I thought we could do a little learning together.

There's one mishna in Pirke Avos that deals with the central character in our parsha and the mishna is a kind of puzzle.

Let's look at the first few lines together. (Avot 5:23)

כָּל מִי שֵׁישׁ בּוֹ שְׁלֹשָׁה דְבָרִים הִלְלוּ, הוּא מִתְלַמְּדֵיּוֹ שֶׁל אַבְרָהָם אַבְיָנוּ,
וְשְׁלֹשָׁה דְבָרִים אַחֲרֵיכֶם, הוּא מִתְלַמְּדֵיּוֹ שֶׁל בְּלַעַם הָרָשָׁע. עֵינַי טוֹבָה, וְרוּחַ
נְמוּכָה, וְנַפְשׁ שׂוֹפְלָה, תְּלַמְּדֵיּוֹ שֶׁל אַבְרָהָם אַבְיָנוּ. עֵינַי רָעָה, וְרוּחַ גְּבוּהָה
וְנַפְשׁ רְחֻבָה, תְּלַמְּדֵיּוֹ שֶׁל בְּלַעַם הָרָשָׁע. מַה בֵּין תְּלַמְּדֵיּוֹ שֶׁל אַבְרָהָם

Whoever possesses these three traits is one of the disciples of Avraham Avinu; whoever possesses the three opposite traits is one of the disciples of wicked Balaam: A good eye, a modest demeanor and a humble soul are the traits of the disciples of Avraham Avinu. A bad eye, an arrogant demeanor and an insatiable soul are attributes of the disciples of the wicked Balaam.

There are many questions that emerge – even just from reading these opening lines. But I want to focus on two of them specifically:

First, why is Avraham the opposite of Bilam? It seems a little arbitrary. If Bilam is considered the greatest non-Jewish prophet, wouldn't it seem more fitting to pit him against Moshe Rabbeinu? Where did Avraham come from? If there's a source for this comparison, what is it?

Second, let's just accept the comparison for a moment. I think I understand the piece about modesty and humility being attributes of Avraham. And while we don't know all that much about him, there does on the surface seem to be something arrogant about

Bilam. But what do we make of this opening contrast? If you have an עין טובה you're a disciple of Avraham; but if you have a עין רעה, you're a disciple of Bilam. What's the difference between an עין טובה and עין רעה and why is it meaningful?

What I'd like to argue this morning is that Chazal's decision to make Avraham the paradigmatic opposite of Bilam is anything but arbitrary. It emerges almost directly from a close reading of two narratives we know well: The story of Bilam and his donkey in our parsha and the account of the Akeidah back in the 22nd chapter of Bereishis.

The similarities between these two episodes are striking:

- וישכם אברהם בבקר. ויקם בלעם בבקר. – both characters wake up early in the morning to set out on their missions.
- Both Avraham and Bilam personally saddle their own donkeys. Rashi says it's a sign of alacrity and enthusiasm – as if they can't wait to go.
- Who accompanies Bilam? שני נעריו – two lads. Sound familiar? It's the same script as the Akeidah. ויקח שני נעריו עמו. – Avraham took two lads with him on his journey.
- And finally – in both cases – the mission turns on an encounter with an Angel of God.

The list could go on – but I think the evidence is quite apparent. When reading the tale of Bilam, one almost can't help but be reminded of Avraham. It's almost as if the narratives themselves demand that we think about them comparatively.

Given the extent to which the Torah goes out of its way to connect these two characters, there's something very telling about what sets them apart:

- Avraham starts out on a group mission together with Yitzchak, the donkey and two servants. But what happens? The donkey and the two lads stay behind and Yitzchak, bound on an altar, becomes the object to be acted upon. It's Avraham who ends up being the lone actor. Meanwhile Bilam starts out with the donkey and two lads and by the end of the story – irony of ironies – it's the donkey who becomes the subject and Bilam is the object.
- Avraham, following the divine command is ready to slaughter his own son. Bilam on the other hand is ready to slaughter his donkey – who's actually the one tuned in to the divine voice.
- Avraham says nothing to the angel but rather stays his hand. Bilam, on hearing the angelic voice, is ready to return home.

Again, there are other contrasts – and they become easy to spot when you place the two narratives side by side. But permit these to suffice for now.

We've essentially solved our first riddle. It's no accident that Chazal think of Bilam and Avraham as a pair. The Torah itself links them together for the express purpose of highlighting what separates them from one another.

But I'd like to suggest that there is one overarching phenomenon that separates these two characters and serves as the basis for their contrast in the mishna with which began. If you've been following the underlines, you've probably already picked it up.

The leitmotif of the Akeidah narrative is the word ירא – which depending on how it's vowelized – either means to see or to fear. In some form or fashion, the word appears at least seven times. And while the roots ראה and ירא are different – it's almost as if they conspire here to form a theme. Whatever the circumstance, Avraham's actions are guided by his fear of God and his capacity to see.

- Avraham sees the place – he spots his destination – from afar.
- The very site of the Akeidah is הר המוריה and then gets renamed – ה' יראה – Hashem will see.
- When Yitzchak asks where the sheep is that will be slaughtered, Avraham says לו אלוקים יראה – Hashem will show us. We'll see it. Have faith. Don't worry.
- And ultimately how does Avraham find a ram to offer in lieu of Yitzchak: וישא אברהם את עיניו וירא והנה איל אחר נאהז בסבך – he lifted up his eyes and he saw.

The picture of Bilam, on the other hand, is a spoof: an almost absurd tale intended to poke fun and utterly humiliate the protagonist. Bilam is supposed to be the world's most acclaimed prophet. He's supposed to be a great visionary – a great seer. Yet in the end, the Torah reveals that his vision is so profoundly limited that he cannot even see an angel standing directly in front of him – an angel that's visible even to the lowly donkey.

ותרא האתון: Three times the Torah repeats that the donkey saw; but Bilam did not.

The mishna in Avos surely has to be understood on many levels. But I would argue that first and foremost it should be taken literally. Avraham possessed an עין טובה. He had a good eye. He was a good spotter. He looked; he noticed; and then he seized opportunities to act in a way that demonstrated his allegiance to the divine voice.

Bilam's is the עין רעה. His was a deficient eye. By and large he remained blind to the circumstances and characters around him.

Vacations aren't just necessary breaks that renew us and give us a chance to come back to our lives refreshed and rejuvenated. They're opportunities for great moments of both יראה and ראייה – both inspiration and vision. It's on the journey that you can often see through the opacity of the everyday. It's on the mountaintop that you can develop Avraham's עין טובה.

There's a reason we make a bracha upon beholding breathtaking scenes in nature. Seeing God's world – especially that little piece of the globe that exists just beyond the borders of Manhattan – should give us pause to wonder – to be awestruck by the vast complexity of a little flower or the grandeur of the sea. Allow yourself to be inspired so that inspiration can spill over into the everyday life to which you'll return.

And when you do come back – I'm sure Rabbi Rackovsky will be here to greet you.

And when you do come back – I hope we'll have many opportunities to learn together – to share visions and aspirations about the year ahead – and to translate the summer's inspiration into greatness.

Until then: I wish you bon voyage.