

Haftarot Unrolled: Balak

G-d does not work for us

When discussing the relationship between G-d and the Jewish People, as prophets often do, the Haftarah mentions Balak and Bilaam:

עמי זָכֹר נָא מָה יַעֲזֹב בְּלֶקְ מֶלֶךְ מוֹאָב וּמָה עָנָה אֹתוֹ בְּלֶעָם בֶּן בְּעוֹר מִן הַשִּׁטִּים עַד הַגִּלְגָּל לְמַעַן יֵדַעַת צְדָקוֹת ה' :
My nation! Remember what Balak king of Moav conspired, and how Bilaam ben Beor answered him, from the Shitim to the Gilgal - in order to know the righteousness of Hashem. (Micha 6:5)

But then instead of explaining what it is we have to remember about that story, the Haftarah continues with an apparent non-sequitur, questioning the purpose of sacrifices:

בְּמָה יִקְדָּם ה' אֶכְפֹּף לֹא-לֵהי מְרוֹם הָאֱקָדְמוֹנוּ בְּעוֹלוֹת בַּעֲגָלִים בְּנֵי שָׁנָה ; הֲיִרְצָה ה' בְּאַלְפֵי אֵילִים בְּרַבְבוֹת נְחֹלֵי שֶׁמֶן הָאֲתָן
בְּכוֹרֵי פִשְׁעֵי פְרִי בְטָנִי חֲטָאת נִפְשִׁי :

With what gift shall I greet Hashem, submit to G-d Above? Shall I greet Him with offerings, with yearling calves? Will Hashem be pleased by thousands of rams, by myriads of rivers of oil? Should I give my first-born for my crime, my offspring for the sin of my soul? (Micha 6:6-7)

What do these questions about sacrifices have to do with Balak and Bilaam?

Parshat Balak tells us of Balak, king of the nation of Moav which would share a border with the land of Israel. He saw how the Jewish People destroyed Sichon and Og, the powerful kings of the Emori, and did not want the same thing to happen to him. He knew that he was much weaker than the Emori, and that on the military front, he would have no chance against the Jewish People. He also understood that a major component of their success was G-d's blessing and favor. He thus decided to attack the Jewish People on the religious front, and approached a well-known miracle man, the non-Jewish prophet, Bilaam ben Beor. When Balak asked him to curse the Jewish People, he piously answered, "I can only say what G-d tells me." And less piously, "but I'll give it my best shot."

Bilaam's mission was to drive a wedge between G-d and the Jewish People. To that end, he asked Balak to build him seven altars and to sacrifice three animals on each. These sacrifices did not yield the desired effect: the words G-d put into his mouth were words of blessing. He tried again, from a different angle, with seven new altars, and yet again a third time. Despite the multitude of sacrifices, G-d continued to bless the Jewish People. Finally, Balak and Bilaam gave up in frustration.

What did Balak and Bilaam think they were going to accomplish with these sacrifices? Why would they turn G-d against the Jewish People? The Midrash connects Bilaam's seven altars with the verses in the Haftarah, turning them into a conversation between Bilaam and G-d:

בלעם הרשע הוא היה סגגורן של אומות העולם ועל ידי האומות הוא מדבר הדבר הירצה ה' באלפי אילים
ברבבות נחלי שמן רוצה הוא מה שאתם מקריבין לו לא לוג שמן אתם מקריבין לו אנו מקריבין לו רבי
רבבות נחלי שמן מה הקריב אברהם לפניו לא איל אחד ... אם רוצה אנו מקריבין לו אלפי אלפים ומה

הקריב אברהם לא בנו אני מקריב לו בני ובתי... ראה בלעם הרשע כמה היה ערום התחיל אומר את שבעת המזבחות ערכתי לא אמר שבע מזבחות אלא המזבחות אלו הן משנברא אדם הראשון עד עכשיו שבע מזבחות בנו ואני מקריב שבע כנגד שבעתן... אמר ליה הקב"ה רשע מה אתה עושה בכאן אמר ליה את שבעת המזבחות ערכתי ואעל פר ואיל במזבח אמר ליה הקב"ה הירצה ה' באלפי אילים... אייל הקב"ה רשע אלו הייתי מבקש קרבן הייתי אומר למיכאל ולגבריאל והיו מקריבין

Bilaam the Villain was arguing for the nations of the world. He said, "Will Hashem be pleased by thousands of rams, by myriads of rivers of oil? (Micha 6:6) Does He want what you, the Jewish People, bring to Him? Barely a pint of oil? We, the Nations of the World, bring Him millions of rivers of oil! What did Avraham bring, barely a ram? We bring thousands of rams! What did Avraham bring, not even a son? I'll bring my son *and* my daughter!"

Look at this villain Bilaam, how devious he was! He said, "I have arranged these seven altars" (Bamidbar 23:4), not just "seven altars", but very specific seven altars. He said, "Since Adam was created until now, the Jewish People have built seven altars, and I am going to bring seven altars to counteract them." G-d said to him, "You villain! What are you doing here?" He said, "I have arranged these seven altars and brought cows and rams on the altar". G-d said to him, "Will Hashem be pleased by thousands of rams?" (Micha 6:5) "Villain! If I had wanted a sacrifice, I would have told [the angels] Michael and Gavriel, and they would have brought them for Me!" (Midrash Tanchuma Tzav 1)

Bilaam attempts to discredit the Jewish People by pointing out to G-d that the nation He has chosen is not sufficiently dedicated to Him. The sacrifices that they bring are pitifully small. The Nations of the World are willing to do much more. They are willing to bring thousands of rams, rivers of oil, their sons and daughters; without limit.

Bilaam does a simple calculation: if G-d favors the Jewish People due to seven altars that were brought by their ancestors, then by offering triple the number of sacrifices, he is guaranteed to earn G-d's favor.

G-d responds by pointing out that He does not actually need any of these "gifts" in the first place. G-d does not auction off His favor to the highest bidder. As Rachelle Fraenkel phrased it, G-d does not work for us. He is not an employee who will do whatever project his employer requests as long as he gets paid. We do not get to make demands on Him, He makes demands on us.

The prophet Micha says it explicitly, in the last verse of the Haftarah:

הַגִּיד לְךָ אָדָם מַה טוֹב וּמָה ה' דּוֹרֵשׁ מִמֶּךָ כִּי אִם עֲשׂוֹת מִשְׁפָּט וְאַהֲבַת חֶסֶד וְהִצַּנֵּעַ לְכֶת עִם אֶל-לִהְיֶה
He has told you, mankind, what is good, what Hashem demands of you: simply doing justice, and loving kindness, and walking modestly with your G-d. (Micha 6:8)

The demand that G-d makes - not only of the Jewish People, but also of the Nations of the World - is to do justice and kindness. It is the Jewish People's commitment to His values of justice and kindness that is the reason why G-d continues to bless us, regardless of what the Bilaams of the world demand.

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In memory of my father, Peter Rozenberg, z"l

לעילוי נשמת אבי מורי פנחס בן נתן נטע ז"ל

ולעילוי נשמות יעקב נפתלי בן רחל דבורה, גיל-עד מיכאל בן בת-גלים, ואייל בן איריס תשורה, הי"ד