

בס"ד

THE RASHI OF THE WEEK

Week of

Parshas Balak

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**An Outline of the Rebbe's Explanation of Rashi
Parshas Balak**

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Rashi in His Own Words

במדבר כ"ב, ה': וַיִּשְׁלַח (בלק) מַלְאָכִים אֶל בְּלַעַם גּוֹ הַנֶּהָ עִם יֵצֵא מִמִּצְרַיִם הַנֶּהָ כִּסֵּה אֶת עֵינֵי הָאָרֶץ וְהוּא יֵשֵׁב מִמְּלִי:

במדבר כ"ב, ו': וְעַתָּה לְכֵה נָא אֶרֶץ לִי אֶת הָעַם הַנֶּהָ פִּי עֲצוּם הוּא מִמֶּנִּי אוֹלֵי אוֹכֵל נִפְהָ בּוֹ וְאֶגְרָשׁנּוּ מִן הָאָרֶץ פִּי יִדְעֵתִי אֶת אֲשֶׁר תִּבְרָךְ מִבְּרַךְ וְאֲשֶׁר תֵּאָר יוֹאָר:

במדבר כ"ב, י': וַיֹּאמֶר בְּלַעַם אֶל הָאֱלֹקִים בְּלֶק גּוֹ שְׁלַח אֵלַי:

במדבר כ"ב, י"א: הַנֶּהָ הָעַם הַיֵּצֵא מִמִּצְרַיִם וְכִסֵּה אֶת עֵינֵי הָאָרֶץ עַתָּה לְכֵה קִבֵּה לִי אֶתוֹ אוֹלֵי אוֹכֵל לְהִלָּקֵם בּוֹ וְגִרְשָׁתִּיו:

במדבר כ"ב, י"א: רש"י ד"ה קבה לי: זו קשה מארה לי, שהוא נוקב ומפרש: וגרשתי: מן העולם. ובלק לא אמר אלא ואגרשנו מן הארץ, איני מבקש אלא להסיעם מעלי, ובלעם היה שונאם יותר מבלק:

Bamidbar 22:5: He (Balak) sent messengers to Bilaam ... saying, "A people has come out of Egypt, and behold, they have covered the "eye" of the land, and they are stationed opposite me;

Bamidbar 22:6: And now, please come and curse (אָרָה) this nation for me, for they are too mighty for me. Perhaps I will be able to smite them and drive them out of the land, for I know that whomever you bless is blessed and whomever you curse is cursed."

Bamidbar 22:10: Bilaam said to G-d, "Balak ... has sent to me, (saying);

Bamidbar 22:11: Behold the people coming out of Egypt, a nation, has covered the 'eye' of the earth. Now come and curse (קִבֵּה) them for me, perhaps I will be able to fight against them and drive them out."

Bamidbar 22:11: Rashi Heading - curse for me: Heb. קִבֵּה לִי. (This expression used by Bilaam) is stronger than אָרָה לִי (used by Balak in verse 6), for it specifies and details (the curse). **And drive it out:** of the world. Balak said only, " I will drive him out of the land" (verse 6). (His intention was), only to get them away from me, but Bilaam hated them more than Balak did.

Synopsis

This week's Torah portion, Balak, tells us how the king of Moav decided to hire a gentile prophet, Bilaam, to curse the Jewish people. Knowing that his absolute power to curse came from Hashem, Bilaam first asked Hashem for permission before accepting this mission. However, Rashi points out two differences between Balak's words to Bilaam, describing his request, and Bilaam's to Hashem. When Balak asked Bilaam to curse the Jews, he used the Hebrew word ארה, meaning curse. While Bilaam was presenting his request to Hashem, he used the word קבה. Rashi points out that the phrase קבה is a more potent curse because it "specifies and details the curse." Furthermore, Bilaam says he was being asked to drive out the Jews, while Balak asked Bilaam to "drive them out of the land." Rashi explains that Bilaam hated the Jews more than Balak, and he wanted to drive the Jewish people out of the world.

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Other commentators point out that there are several other differences between Balak's speech to Bilaam and Bilaam's to Hashem. However, Rashi seemingly overlooks these. We need to understand why. Additionally, how does Rashi know that Bilaam's hatred for the Jews was greater? Even if his hatred was greater, one would think that Bilaam would have toned down his words and used less severe language when speaking with G-d. He knew how much Hashem loves the Jewish people! He was trying to "persuade" Him to permit a curse to be delivered to His people.

Additionally, why was Balak afraid of the Jews? Why did he want to hire Bilaam to curse them? The Jews were commanded not to "distress Moav, and not to provoke them to war." Had Balak done nothing, he would not have been attacked by the Jews. Even if he was unaware of the prohibition which would have prevented the Jews from attacking, Bilaam, as a prophet, was undoubtedly aware! Why did he not simply tell Balak not to be concerned about the Jews? He was pleased to have an excuse to curse the Jews because his hatred of the Jews was greater than Balak's. His hatred was irrational. Upon seeing how powerful the Jews were, Balak did not wish to be conquered. For him, it was merely a question of self-preservation. This explains why Bilaam used a stronger term for cursing. It also explains why he sought to remove the Jews from the earth rather than from the land.

Rashi's Explanation

This week's Torah portion, Balak, tells us how the Balak, the king of Moav, sought to defeat the Jews by employing a curse. He sent for Bilaam, a gentile prophet, and commissioned him to take on this task. Balak sent messengers to Bilaam, saying¹, "A people has come out of Egypt, and behold, they have covered the 'eye' of the land, and they are stationed opposite me. So now, please come and curse these people for me, for they are too powerful for me. Perhaps I will be able to wage war against them and drive them out of the land, for I know that whoever you bless is blessed and whomever you curse is cursed."

Bilaam was, to say the least, very excited about the proposition. However, in his position as a prophet, he knew he could only do what Hashem permitted. He was also aware of Hashem's abounding love for His nation. Therefore, before accepting this commission, he spoke to the Almighty. He said², "Balak ... has sent to me, (saying), 'Behold the people coming out of Egypt, a nation, has covered the 'eye' of the earth. Come and curse them for me; perhaps I will be able to fight against them and drive them out.' "

For the most part, Bilaam repeated to Hashem what Balak told him. However, Rashi points out that there are several differences between the two³. Rashi cites the words "curse them," meaning the Jewish nation. He points out that even though Balak did ask Bilaam to curse the Jews, he used a different Hebrew word than Bilaam used when

1. Our Parshah, Bamidbar 22:6.

2. Our Parshah, Bamidbar 22:11.

3. See Rashi *ibid*.

asking Hashem. Bilaam said "קָבַהּ לִי." This expression is stronger than "אָרַהּ לִי," the phrase used by Balak, "for it specifies and details (the curse)." Rashi also points out the expression "and drive it (the nation) out." Rashi comments that Bilaam was implying to Hashem that Balak wanted him to drive the Jews out "of the world." Balak said only, 'I will drive him out of the land.' (His intention was), I want only to get them away from me. However, Bilaam hated them more than Balak did."

Difficulties in Understanding Rashi

The commentary of the holy Ohr Hachaim⁴ asks about several other differences between Balak's words and those of Bilaam. We also find that:

1. Balak said, "A people has come out of Egypt," and Bilaam said, "the people coming out of Egypt."
2. Balak said, "Behold, they have covered," and Bilaam said, "and they covered."
3. Balak said "and now," and Bilaam said "now."
4. Balak said, "smite them," and Bilaam said, "battle against them."

Why does Rashi ignore these other differences?

There is (at least) one other difference between the two. Namely, Balak said, "they are stationed opposite me," which Bilaam did not mention. This difference may be the most significant of all. Rashi explains it to mean that "they are close by, ready to knock me down." This explains Balak's urgency.

The Ohr Hachaim builds the answer to all his questions on one foundation. Namely, as much as Bilaam knew how much G-d loves the Jews, he wanted to understate Balak's hatred toward the Jewish people. To gain Hashem's permission to undertake this mission, he tried to underplay the damage Balak wished to be done to the Jews. Therefore, the Ohr Hachaim explains that the word for a curse, אָרַהּ, which Balak used, is stronger than the word קָבַהּ, which was used by Bilaam while speaking to Hashem. On this basis, the Ohr Hachaim explains all of the differences. However, according to Rashi, who says that "Bilaam hated the Jews more than Balak did, accordingly "קָבַהּ" is a stronger expression than "אָרַהּ," and rather than expressing a desire to rid himself of the Jews, Bilaam stated that he wanted to remove the Jews from the world. According to Rashi, the enmity Bilaam bore for the Jews was the basis of all the abovementioned differences. Why does Rashi feel compelled to explain the differences in this manner? From where does he understand that Bilaam's hatred was greater than Balak's? Granted, the Midrash does make that point. However, as we have often explained, Rashi explains the Torah according to Peshat.

Despite Bilaam's hatred toward the Jews, why would he think Hashem would be likelier to permit him to use harsher expressions of destruction than even Balak? Rather than saying to remove them from the land, he said to remove them from the earth, using a stronger form of a curse, etc. He intended to "persuade" Hashem to permit him

4. Rabbi Chaim ben Moshe ibn Attar, best known as the Ohr Hachaim for his classic commentary on the Torah, He was a Talmudist and a Kabbalist; and was perhaps the greatest rabbi of his time. He was born in Morocco 1696, and deceased in Jerusalem in 1743.

to accept Balak's commission. He, who was granted prophecy, certainly knew of Hashem's unbounded love of the Jews!

The Explanation

This will all be understood by first understanding the answer to a different question. This question brought Rashi to explain the verses as he did. Rashi did not draw any conclusions from the word קבה used for cursing or the expressions "drive the Jewish people out," which Rashi explains as driving them out from the world. These expressions can be defined in two different ways, as we see from the difference in how the Ohr Hachaim explains them as opposed to how Rashi explains them. The actual question bothering Rashi is why Balak was afraid of the Jews. Hashem had told the Jewish people⁵, "... do not distress the nation of Moav, and do not provoke them to war. I will not give you any of their lands as an inheritance ..." Actually, Balak himself saw that the Jews would not even enter his land because he did not permit them to do so. Rashi already told us this⁶. The Jewish nation "circled the southern and eastern borders of the land of Moav, until they came to the other side of the Arnon River in the middle of the Emorite territory, to the north of the land of Moav." In other words, the Jews would not even enter the land of Moav to get to the Emorites, let alone wage war against them. Why was Balak afraid?

Perhaps Balak and the Moavites were not aware of the commandment not to distress Moav. They may have assumed that the only reason that the Jews did not attack them was because they had the giants Sichon and Og to protect them; as Rashi said⁷ that the nations "paid them tribute to protect them from marauding armies." Possibly Balak thought that the only reason the Jews were not attacking Moav was not to incite Sichon and Og against them. However, he was afraid once Balak saw that the Jews defeated Sichon and Og. That was why he approached Bilaam.

The question is, however, that Bilaam, as a prophet, must have been aware of the prohibition against provoking Moav to war. This being the case, why did he not simply tell Balak that he had no cause for worry? This is why Rashi says Bilaam's hatred of the Jews was greater than Balak's, and it was not merely greater quantitatively but qualitatively. Balak hated the Jews because he feared they would wage war against him and conquer his land.

In contrast, Bilaam's hatred stemmed from a deeper place, and it had to do with his essence, and it had no rational basis. Based on this, we can understand why Bilaam did not inform Balak that Moav did not need to fear the Jewish nation; he was glad to have any excuse to harm the Jews.

This also explains the reasons for the differences between the way that Bilaam and Balak phrased something essentially the same. Balak was concerned with the Jewish nation's current actions since this caused him to fear them. Bilaam, on the other hand, was not worried about what the Jews were doing; he was a rabid anti-Semite. Therefore, Balak said, "they are stationed opposite me," which Rashi explained meant that "they are close by, ready to knock

5. Parshas Devorim, Devorim 2:9. This was previously cited in *Rashi's commentary* to Parshas Chukas, Bamidbar 21:26.

6. Rashi's commentary to Parshas Chukas, Bamidbar 21:13.

7. Parshas Chukas, Bamidbar 21:23.

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me down." That was his concern. Bilaam did not mention this at all; he knew that the Jews would not "knock him down," for they were prohibited from doing so.

Balak said, "A people has come out of Egypt, and behold, they have covered the 'eye' of the land." In other words, he was stating two separate things. First, he identified the nation regarding whom he spoke, "a people which has come out of Egypt," i.e., the Jews. He also said it in the past tense because that did not concern him. He then made a new statement: "Behold, they have covered the 'eye' of the land." Therefore, he was afraid.

Bilaam, on the other hand, said, "Behold the people coming out of Egypt, a nation, has covered the 'eye' of the earth." He said both things together and in the present tense. He said that the Jews cover the 'eye' of the earth, meaning they are a destructive nation. The same is true of all the other differences between Bilaam and Balak's words. There are only two words that we would not have understood on our own. We would not have known which word implying curse is harsher and whether "and drive the nation out" or "drive it out of the land" is more severe. Therefore, those are the only two differences that Rashi explains.

A Deeper Lesson from Rashi

Further, it says, "the Lord, your G-d, did not want to listen to Bilaam, so Hashem transformed the curse into a blessing for you because He loves you." Hashem transformed Bilaam's curses themselves into blessings. Based on the above, it is easy to understand what happened. Bilaam's hatred was pointless, and it lacked any logical basis. Similarly, his blessings emphasized the love the Almighty has for the Jews, which transcends intellect. G-d's love for the Jewish people is the same as a father's love toward a child.

This is also why in this Torah portion, the Torah foretells the ultimate Moshiach, who will redeem the Jewish people with the complete and true redemption⁸. The future redemption also transcends human comprehension, which is in keeping with Hashem transforming the curses into blessings. In place of the irrational hatred toward the Jews, the prophecy of the complete and true redemption was revealed.

(Adapted from a talk given on Shabbos Parshas Balak 5734, 5740)

I hope you gained as much by reading this as I did by translating and adapting it.

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8. See Mishnah Torah, Laws of Kings and Their Wars, 11, 1.

**DEDICATED IN HONOR OF
THE LUBAVITCHER REBBE**

* * *

IN LOVING MEMORY OF

**Dr. Mindel Rivka (Muriel) bas Reb Menachem Mendel Shlomo ע"ה
Stitt**

Passed away on Shabbat Parshat Lech Lecha, 10 Mar-Cheshvan, 5782
May Her Soul be bound in the Eternal Bond of Life

*

DEDICATED BY HER FAMILY שיחיו

* * *

IN HONOR OF

The Soldiers of "Tzivos Hashem"
Chaim and Aiden Oded שיחיו
Morris

May they merit to be a source of Chassidic pride
to their family and a Torah light to their community

*

DEDICATED BY THEIR PARENTS

Rabbi & Mrs. Menachem M. and Chaya Mushka שיחיו
Morris

* * *

IN HONOR OF

Mrs. Esther שתחילי Sharabani

May she go from strength to strength
in health, happiness, Torah, and mitzvot

*

DEDICATED BY HER SON

Mr. Gershon (Geri) שי' Bentov

מוקדש לזכות

כ"ק אדמו"ר נשיא דורנו מליובאוויטש

* * *

לעילוי נשמת

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סתית

נפטרה ש"ק פרשת לך לך, יו"ד מר-חשון תשפ"ב

ת. נ. צ. ב. ה.

*

נדבת בני משפחתה שיחיו

* * *

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חיילי "צבאות השם"

חיים ועדן עודד שיחיו

מאריס

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נדפס ע"י הוריהם

הרה"ת ר' מנחם מענדל וחי' מושקא שיחיו

מאריס

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ומתוך בריאות הנכונה ולשנת ברכה והצלחה בגו"ר

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