

B”H

# You Hear What You Want To Hear

## Did G-d Want Balaam to Go? Four Perspectives

By Rabbi Y.Y. Jacobson

~~~

Dedicated by **David** and **Eda** Schottenstein

In the loving memory of  
Rabbi **Gavriel Noach** and **Rivki Holtzberg**  
And all of the **Mumbai Kedoshim**  
And in the loving memory of a young soul  
**Alta Shula Swerdlov**  
Daughter of Rabbi **Yossi** and **Hindel Swerdlov**

~~~

Dedicated in the merit of **Sholom Mordechai** HaLevi ben **Rivkah Rubashkin**  
By Miriam Leah Kaufmann

~

Dedicated in the honor of  
Ada Menucha bas Doba beryl

~

Dedicated in the honor of Rabbi Zalman Charytan  
By T.D. Hanshew

~

Dedicated by **Ira** and Hana Pressman  
In honor of Rabbi YY Jacobson

~

Dedicated by Roberta Schorr and family  
In honor of their son's birthday

~

In the merit of Elizabeth, Benima Bas Miriam  
for a complete and speedy recovery

~

Dedicated in the memory of:  
Judge Edward B. Davis  
Yosef ben Aliyahu Halevi for his Yahrtzeit  
Mazal Bas Yisroel  
Tevye ben Evesy  
Thelma Rush-Cole  
Chaya Riva Bas Gershon Mayer Ha Cohen  
Talia Geula Bat Shalom Moshe and Dina Miriam  
Niomi Rivka bas Eliyahu

Toibe bat Nochum  
Yoel Hakohen Ben Mshulam Feivel  
Esther Bat Miriam  
Aharon ben Shlomo  
~

Dedicated in the memory of Nosson Deitsch  
By Fran Mazer  
Hershel Tzucker  
~~~

If you want to sponsor a class in tribute to a loved one  
Please go to [www.TheYeshiva.Net/Donate](http://www.TheYeshiva.Net/Donate)

## **Curriculum:**

- 1. Class Summary**
- 2. Sources**
- 3. Bibliography**
- 4. Questions and Exercises**

### **1. Summary**

The portion of Balak tells the fascinating story of Bilaam, a prophet, who was summoned by the Moabite king to curse Israel. In the end, in lieu of curses, the prophet gushes forth the most splendid poetry ever written about the uniqueness and destiny of the Jewish people. His poetry has become classic, a wellspring of inspiration for thousands of years, recited daily in Jewish liturgy and prayers.

Yet there is something profoundly confusing about the narrative. The Bible relates how the emissaries arrive from Moab and Midian. They state their mission: They want Bilaam to curse the Israelites. Bilaam tells them to stay the night, while he consults with G-d.

G-d's answer is unequivocal: "G-d said to Balaam, 'Do not go with them. You must not put a curse on those people, because they are blessed.'"

Bilaam obeys. He refuses to go. Balak, the Moabite king, redoubles his efforts. Perhaps more distinguished messengers and the promise of significant reward will persuade Balaam to change his mind. He sends a second set of emissaries. Bilaam's reply is moving: "Even if Balak gave me his palace filled with silver and gold, I could not do anything great or small to go beyond the command of the Lord my G-d." However, he adds a fateful rider: "Now stay here tonight as the others did, and I will find out what else G-d will tell me."

The implication is clear. Bilaam is suggesting that G-d may change His mind. But this is impossible. That is not what G-d does. Yet to our surprise, that is exactly what G-d seems to do: "That night G-d came to Bilaam and said, "Since these men have come to summon you, go with them, but do only what I tell you."

Bilaam followed G-d's latest instruction. He got up in the morning, saddled his donkey and went with the princes of Moab. "But G-d was very angry when he went, and the angel of G-d stood in the road to oppose him." The narrative now shifts to the famous scene of Bilaam's donkey.

What is going on here? Why did G-d change His mind four times?! First G-d says no, then it becomes yes, then it is no again, and finally it's a yes! What was Bilaam suppose to do? Not go? But G-d told him explicitly to go. The story seems like an unfair setup for Bilaam. G-d tells him to go, and then gets angry at him for going!

The commentators offer various ways of resolving the apparent contradictions between G-d's first, second, third, and fourth reply. This class will explore four perspectives: The Ramban and the Malbim, the Akeidas Yitzchak, the Midrash, and the Chassidic explanation.

## 2. Sources:

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p><b>1. Inscription discovered in 1967</b><br/>Deir-Alla, Jordan</p> <p><i>"Bilam bar Beor" (Bilam ben Beor) was a man who saw G-d...</i></p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | <p><b>1. Inscription discovered in 1967</b><br/>Deir-Alla, Jordan</p> <p>"בלעם ברבער" (=בן בעור) "אש חזה אלהן"<br/> (=איש חוזה אלקים).</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| <p><b>2. Balak</b><br/>21:11-12</p> <p>11. "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."</p> <p>12. God said to Balaam, "You shall not go with them! You shall not curse the people because they are blessed."</p>                                                                                                                                                                                     | <p><b>2. בלק</b><br/>כב, יא-יב</p> <p>יא. הִנֵּה הָעַם הַיֵּצֵא מִמִּצְרַיִם וַיִּכַס אֶת עֵינֵי הָאָרֶץ עֲתֵה לָכֶה קְבֵה לִי אֶתֹ אוֹלֵי אוֹכַל לְהִלָּחֵם בּוֹ וְגִרְשָׁתִּיו :</p> <p>יב. וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹקִים אֶל בְּלָעַם לֹא תֵלֵךְ עִמָּהֶם לֹא תֵאָר אֶת הָעַם כִּי בְרוּךְ הוּא :</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| <p><b>3. Balak</b><br/>22:18-20</p> <p>18. Balaam answered and said to Balak's servants, "Even if Balak gives me a house full of silver and gold, I cannot do anything small or great that would transgress the word of the Lord, my God.</p> <p>19. Now, you too, please remain here overnight, and I will know what the Lord will continue to speak with me."</p> <p>20. God came to Balaam at night and said to him, "If these men have come to call for you, arise and go with them, but the word I speak to you-that you shall do."</p> | <p><b>3. בלק</b><br/>כב, יט-כ</p> <p>יח. וַיַּעַן בְּלָעַם וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל עַבְדָּי בְּלָק אִם יִתֵּן לִי בְּלָק מְלֵא בֵיתוֹ כֶּסֶף וְזָהָב לֹא אוֹכַל לְעֵבֵר אֶת פִּי ה' אֱלֹקֵי לַעֲשׂוֹת קְטִנָּה אוֹ גְדוֹלָה :</p> <p>יט. וְעַתָּה שָׁבוּ נָא בְּזֶה גַם אֲתֶם הַלַּיְלָה וְאִדְעָה מֶה יִסַּף ה' דָּבָר עִמִּי :</p> <p>כ. וַיָּבֵא אֱלֹקִים אֶל בְּלָעַם לַיְלָה וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ אִם לְקָרָא לְךָ בָּאוּ הָאֲנָשִׁים קוֹם לֵךְ אִתָּם וְאֵד אֶת הַדָּבָר אֲשֶׁר אֲדַבֵּר אֵלֶיךָ אֶתֹ תַעֲשֶׂה :</p> |

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p><b>4. Balak</b></p> <p>22:22</p> <p>22. God's wrath flared because he was going, and an angel of the Lord stationed himself on the road to thwart him, and he was riding on his she-donkey, and his two servants were with him.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | <p><b>4. בלק</b></p> <p>כב, כב</p> <p>כב. ויחר אף אֱלֹקִים כִּי הוֹלֵךְ הוּא וַיִּתְיַצֵּב מִלְאָךְ ה' בַּדֶּרֶךְ לְשָׁטֹן לוֹ וְהוּא רֹכֵב עַל אֲתוֹנוֹ וְשְׁנֵי נֶעְרָיו עִמּוֹ :</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| <p><b>5. Balak</b></p> <p>22:35</p> <p>35. The angel of the Lord said to Balaam, "Go with these men, but the word I will speak to you-that you shall speak." So Balaam went with Balak's dignitaries</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | <p><b>5. בלק</b></p> <p>כב, לה</p> <p>לה. וַיֹּאמֶר מִלְאָךְ ה' אֶל בְּלַעַם לֵךְ עִם הָאֲנָשִׁים וְאָפֵס אֶת הַדָּבָר אֲשֶׁר אֲדַבֵּר אֵלֶיךָ אַתּוֹ תִּדְבֹר וַיֵּלֶךְ בְּלַעַם עִם שְׂרֵי בָלָק :</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| <p><b>6. Abarbanel (Rabbi Isaac Abarbenel, Spain, 1437 - 1508)</b></p> <p><b>Balak</b></p> <p>If G-d Almighty allowed Bilaam to go, how does it say afterwards, "G-d's wrath flared because he was going"? He had only gone with permission and by G-d's word!?</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | <p><b>6. אברבנאל: דון יצחק אברבנאל, 1437 - 1508</b></p> <p>בלק</p> <p>אם הוא יתברך הרשה את בלעם ללכת, איך אחרי שהלך נאמר ויחר אף אלקים, והוא לא הלך אלא ברשותו ובמאמרו?</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| <p><b>7. Ramban (Rabbi Moses b. Nachman, Spain, 1194-1270)</b></p> <p>The proper explanation for this matter is as follows:</p> <p>Initially G-d prevented Bilaam from cursing because "the nation is [inherently] blessed." So why should he go with them if he is not cursing? That was all they requested from him!?! Therefore it says "Do not go with them". Bilaam passed along this message of G-d, but Balak did not believe him, and proceeded to increase to honor him with greater messengers and promised him greater reward.</p> <p>Bilaam answered the second group that the issue is not the money, and it is not up to him, rather it is up to G-d. He agreed to inquire again what G-d will command him. In this, he conducted himself properly, because Bilaam knew the Higher Knowledge, and that G-d's advice is always good, and that G-d teaches the wicked how to repent, and allows him to know the future actions of kings, and the future of nations.</p> <p>Now G-d told him: I already told you that this nation is blessed and unable to be cursed. Now why have they</p> | <p><b>7. רמב"ן: רבי משה בן נחמן, 1194 - 1270</b></p> <p>והנכון בעיני בענין הזה,</p> <p>כי מתחילה מנעו השם שלא יקלל את העם כי ברוך הוא, ולמה ילך עמהם אחרי שלא יקללם, והם לא יחפצו בו לדבר אחר, על כן אמר "לא תלך עמהם", שלא תאור את העם "כי ברוך הוא", ובידוע כי בלעם הודיעם את דברי האלקים. ובלק שלח אליו פעם שנית כי לא האמין, והוסיף לו כבוד בשרים רבים ונכבדים מן הראשונים ונדר להרבות שכרו וכבודו.</p> <p>ובלעם ענה אותם, שאין הדבר תלוי בממון ולא ברצונו, רק הכל ביד השם, וישאל ממנו עוד מה יצווה אותו, ועשה זה כהוגן, כי מה ידע הוא בדעת עליון ועצת ה' לעולם טובה, והוא יורה חטאים בדרך, ויודיענו מה יענה מלאכי גוי או יגיד לו מה יקרה להם בעתיד.</p> <p>והנה השם אמר לו: כבר הודעתך כי העם ברוך הוא ולא תוכל לקללם, ועתה חזור לפניך, ואם לקרוא לך בלבד באו, כלומר שיתרצו בלכתך עמהם על מנת שלא תקלל את</p> |

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>[Balak's ministers] returned to you? If they only want you to go with them and not curse at all, then "Get up and go with them, but only the word that I place in your mouth shall you do", and even if I command you to bless them you must bless them without being afraid of Balak.</p> <p>So G-d wanted Bilaam to go with the ministers after telling them first that he would not be able to curse the Jews, and would only follow G-d instructions. G-d wanted that the Jews to be blessed by a prophet of the non-Jews.</p> <p>Bilaam was supposed to tell all of this to the ministers of Balak—that he can accompany them but was forbidden to curse, and that if G-d would command him to bless them he would do that too—and if they would not want him, they would leave him alone. Balak specified the second time as well "Come please <u>curse</u> this nation" he only wanted Billam to curse, not prophesize or anything else. But Bilaam, in his over-eagerness to go, did not tell them any of this, and instead "he woke up early in the morning, saddled his own donkey, and went with them" as if he was going to fulfill their request. That is why G-d was angry that he went, because if he would have told them the truth, he would not be going.</p> <p>Furthermore, by going he desecrated the name of G-d, because they thought that G-d had retracted what He had said last time "Do not curse this nation because they are blessed" and even if he would eventually bless them, they would say that G-d had just changed His mind yet again. It is absolutely impossible that G-d do something like that, because "the Strength of Israel will neither lie nor retract." (Samuel I 15:29)</p> | <p>העם כאשר הודעתיד מתחילה - "קום לך אתם, ואך את הדבר אשר אדבר אליך אותו תעשה", שאפילו אם אצוה אותך לברך שתברכם, לא תירא מבלק, וזה טעם "אם לקרוא".</p> <p>וכן היה החפץ לשם הנכבד מתחילה שילך עמהם, אחרי הודיעו אותם שלא יקללם ושיתנהג בענינם כאשר יצווה, כי הרצון לפניו יתברך שיברך את ישראל מפי נביא לגויים.</p> <p>והנה היה על בלעם להגיד כן לשרי בלק ולאמר, הנה הרשה השם אותי להיות קרוא לכם בלבד, אבל על מנת שלא לקלל את העם ועל מנת שאם יצוה אותי לברך שאברכם, ואם לא יתמצו בכך - יהיו מניחים אותנו, כי גם בפעם הזאת השנית אמר בלק (פסוק י"ז) "ולכה נא קבה לי את העם הזה", לא יחפוץ בו להודיעו עתידות ולא לדבר אחר זולתי לקוב את העם. והנה בלעם מרוב חפצו ללכת לא הודיעם זה ולא אמר להם כלום, "ויקם בבוקר ויחבוש את אתונו וילך עמהם" כרוצה להשלים חפצם, על כן חרה אף ה' כי הולך הוא, שאילו הודיעם לא היה הולך.</p> <p>ועוד שהיה בזה חילול ה', כי בלכתו עמהם סתם, והוא ברשות השם, חשבו שנתן לו רשות לקלל להם את העם, והנה חזר בו ממה שאמר תחילה "לא תאור את העם כי ברוך הוא" כפי מה שהגיד להם, וכאשר יראו עוד שלא יקללם, יאמרו כי אחרי כן נמלך עוד או יהתל בהם כהתל באנוש, חלילה לה' מעשות כדבר הזה כי נצח ישראל לא ינחם.</p> |
| <p><b>8. Malbim (Rabbi Meir Weiser, Ukraine, 1809- 1879)</b></p> <p>There is a difference between the word <i>ito</i> and <i>imo</i>, though both mean "with him". <i>Imo</i> implies equality, (both are together equally), where as <i>ito</i> means one is dominant (and the other is secondary). G-d commanded Bilaam to go with them <i>itam</i>, meaning that his mind and purpose should be different than theirs, because he is not intending to harm Israel, but Bilaam went with them <i>imam</i>, (equally malicious). This is what</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | <p><b>8. מלבי"ם: רבי מאיר ליבוש וייזר, 1809–1879</b></p> <p>יש הבדל בין איתו ובין עמו – שעמו מציין השווי, ואיתו יורה שאחד הוא העיקר, וה' הודיעו שילך רק איתם, שיהיה דעתו נפרד מדעתם, שלא ילך בכוונה להרע לישראל, והוא הלך עמם, ועל זה אמר במדרש: "שמח בפורענות של ישראל כמוהם".</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| the Midrash states: "He rejoiced in the punishment of Israel exactly as they did."                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| <p><b>9. Bamidbar Rabbah</b></p> <p><b>20:10</b></p> <p>From here you see that "man is led down the path he wishes to travel" because originally Bilaam was told "Do not go with them" but since he had audacity, he went. That is why it says "God's wrath flared because he was going" G-d said to him: Wicked one! I do not want the destruction of the wicked, but since you insist on your own destruction, by all means, go!</p> | <p><b>9. במדבר רבה</b></p> <p><b>כ, י</b></p> <p>מכאן אתה למד, שבדרך שאדם רוצה לילך בה מוליכין אותו, שמתחילה נאמר לו "לא תלך איתם", כיון שהעיו פניו להלך הלך. שכן כתוב "ויחר אף ה' כי הולך הוא". אמר לו הקב"ה: רשע, איני חפץ באבודן של רשעים. הואיל ואתה רוצה לילך לאבד מן העולם – קום לך.</p> |

### 3. מקורות:

מדרש ומפרשי המקרא פרשת בלק.  
בת עין פרשת בלק.

#### 4. Questions and Exercises:

1. Did G-d want Bilaam to go to Balak or not? Present all of the perspectives.
2. Explain the difference between "iman" and "itam?"
3. Do you feel that most conversations you have are real and meaningful? Do you have many superficial and unreal conversations? How do you deal with that?
4. "We are lead in the path we wish to tread," the Midrash says. Do you find this to be true in your life? Give two examples.
5. What allowed Balaam to become a conduit for some of the greatest blessings ever recited to the Jewish people?