



Likkutei Sichos

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Bilaam's Plot

Translated by Rabbi Moishy Goldman
Edited by Rabbi Eliezer Robbins and Rabbi Y. Eliezer Danzinger

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1.

BILAAAM'S ADVICE

On the verse,¹ “It was they who caused the children of Israel, by Bilaam’s word, to betray Hashem...,” Rashi cites the words, “by Bilaam’s word” and explains: “He said to them, ‘Even if you assemble all the world’s multitudes, you will not be able to vanquish them. Are you more numerous than the Egyptians, who were six hundred chosen chariots? Come, and I will advise you. Their G-d despises lewdness, etc.,’ as recorded in {*Sanhedrin*, chapter} *Chelek*² and in *Sifri*.”³

It is clear why Rashi must explain that this was Bilaam’s idea, although Rashi already articulated this point in *parshas Balak* in reference to the phrase, “Come, I will advise you”⁴ (and also on the verse, “And the people began to commit harlotry with the daughters of the Moabites”⁵): Since our verse is the source that this was Bilaam’s idea, as Rashi writes on the verse, “*Come, I will advise you* — The proof that Bilaam offered this counsel to cause them to stumble through immorality is that it says, **‘It was they who caused the children of Israel, by Bilaam’s word.’**”

However, we still need to clarify why Rashi belabors the point by adding, “He said to them, ‘Even if you assemble all the world’s multitudes... six hundred chosen chariots’”:

- a) How does this help to explain the verse?
- b) If Rashi, for whatever reason, wants to cite Bilaam’s argument, it would have been more appropriate to do so when he first explained this issue, on the words, “Come, I will advise you.”

¹ *Bamidbar* 31:16.

² *Sanhedrin* 106a.

³ *Matos* 43.

⁴ *Bamidbar* 24:14.

⁵ *Bamidbar* 25:1.

2.

UNDERSTANDING RASHI'S SUBTLETIES

Also, a number of nuances in Rashi's remarks need clarification:

- a) In Bilaam's argument — “Even if you assemble **all the** world's **multitudes**, you will not be able to vanquish them,” for “are **you** more numerous than the Egyptians...?” — the proof does not relate to the subject of Bilaam's argument. Alone, “you” are clearly not more numerous than the Egyptians; but together with “all the world's multitudes,” they {the Moabites} would surely have been more numerous than the Egyptians. For the Egyptians were only one nation, and as numerous as they were at the time, their numbers were fewer than all the world's multitudes!

In addition: We have learned previously that Moshe said to Hashem, “And the nations will say... since Hashem lacked the ability to bring...,” and “Pharaoh cannot be compared to thirty-one kings.”⁶ So clearly, they {the Egyptians} cannot be compared to, “all the world's multitudes.”

- b) On the other hand, since Rashi wishes to describe the profusion and might of the Egyptians, why does he only mention that “they were six hundred chosen chariots,” and does not include (the conclusion of the verse), “and all the chariots of Egypt, with officers over them all?” (It is clear that only a large number of “the chariots of Egypt” could have chased and intimidated them — “and they were very frightened”⁷ — “six hundred thousand men... and a mixed multitude.”⁸)

Seemingly, we could argue that by writing “six hundred chosen chariots,” Rashi wanted to emphasize (not their number, in and of itself, but rather) that the “six hundred” were the “chosen chariots,” from which we could conclude the vastness of the entire Egyptian military. However, this is not

⁶ *Bamidbar* 14:16 and Rashi's comment there.

⁷ *Shemos* 14:10.

⁸ *Shemos* 12:37-38.

entirely satisfactory, for if this were the case, Rashi would have alluded to the subsequent words in this verse by adding “etc.” Alternatively, at the very least, Rashi should have refrained from saying, “**they were** six hundred chosen chariots” (which leaves open the possibility that this was their total number). Instead, Rashi should have used different wording (similar to the *Sifri*)⁹ that would have implied that he was referring to more than just this number.

- c) What is the meaning of the expression, “Come, and I will advise you?”
- d) Rashi adds “(etc.,) as recorded in *Chelek* and in *Sifri*.” Apparently, this citation applies to the “etc.” — the remaining details of the incident as described in those sources. This requires explanation: Why is the full description of the incident in *Chelek* relevant? Why is it insufficient to refer to the rest of the story as described in *Sifri*?
- e) Even though Rashi cited both sources, he ought to have cited *Sifri* first, for:
 - (a) It further explains our verse.
 - (b) It is the source for Rashi’s entire comment, including the beginning — “He said to them, “Even if you assemble...” — while in *Chelek*, it only mentions the point that “their G-d despises lewdness.”

This demonstrates that when Rashi cites *Sifri*, his intention is not to identify the source of the beginning of his comment — “He said to them, ‘Even if you assemble...’” (for this is self-evident from the simple meaning of the verse). He also does not intend to allude to the detail that “their G-d despises lewdness” (for this is found in *Chelek*). Rather, his intention is to indicate that something in *Sifri* overlaps with something in *Chelek*, namely, the general idea that “their G-d despises lewdness.”

⁹ Where it says, “**He took** six hundred chosen chariots, etc.”

3.

BILAAM'S MESSAGE

The explanation: The simple difference between our verse and the one in *parshas Balak* is that in *parshas Balak* it says, “Come, and **I will advise you.**” Therefore, Rashi only elucidates the substance of the advice — “And what was the **advice**? Their G-d despises lewdness, etc.” In contrast, our verse does not say, “by Bilaam’s advice,” but rather, “by Bilaam’s word [בלעם] בדבר.” This implies that he conveyed a message along with, and related to, his advice.

And since this “word of Bilaam” was said in the context of Moshe’s admonishment (regarding the officers not killing the Midianite women during the war), it is specifically relevant here.

Therefore, Rashi explains not only Bilaam’s advice, but also his message — “He said to them, ‘Even if you assemble all the world’s multitudes, you will not be able to vanquish them, etc.’” This premise led to his advice — “Their G-d despises lewdness, etc.”

To further develop this idea: Moshe’s admonishment — “Did you allow all the females to live? It was they who caused the children of Israel... over the incident of Peor, resulting in a plague among the congregation of Hashem” — was not only said in reference to their **past** enticement of the Jewish people, which led to the plague. It was [also] said with regard to the current war that they were waging against Midian, which is why “Moshe became angry with **the officers of the army**... who had returned from the campaign of **war.**” That is to say, the fact that Midian had sent their “daughters to engage in promiscuity” was a form of warfare against the Jewish people, aimed at annihilating them, Heaven forbid. This was truly “Bilaam’s message”: It would be impossible to defeat the Jewish people through physical means, for “even if you assemble all the world’s multitudes, etc.” Therefore, “Come, and I will advise you. Their G-d despises lewdness, etc.” Ultimately, the daughters of Midian were (also) waging war against the Jewish people.

For this reason, it is pertinent to mention not only “Bilaam’s advice” here, but also “Bilaam’s word.”

4.

A SPIRITUAL ATTACK

We can now understand why Rashi quotes all the details of Bilaam’s retort: “He said to them, ‘Even if you assemble all the world’s multitudes, you will not be able to vanquish them.’”¹⁰ He had no need to prove this point, for Balak himself had witnessed that even Sichon and Og, the two mightiest kings, whom “no power could conquer,”¹¹ and who were hired to protect Moav from the Jewish people,¹² were defeated by the Jewish people in a wondrous fashion, to the extent that the might of Sichon and Og did not even **register** at all. So it was clear that physical advantages, whether abundant quantity {of troops}, or superior strength, would be to no avail in overcoming the Jewish people.

However, Balak and the Midianites adopted a different strategy — thinking to defeat the Jewish people through spiritual warfare. The same approach that led them to hire Bilaam to expel the Jewish people — {reflected in their request,} “Please come and curse this nation for me,”¹³ {relying on} Bilaam’s spiritual power as a prophet, “One who perceives the thoughts of the Most High”¹⁴ — led them (when Bilaam proved unable to assist them) to consider searching for other people with greater spiritual gifts and strengths to help them vanquish the Jewish people.

Bilaam’s responded to this mindset by saying, “Are you more numerous¹⁵ than the Egyptians, who were six hundred chosen chariots?” His intention was not to emphasize the quantity of six hundred as a reflection of the physical

¹⁰{Resolving the question raised in sec. 1.}

¹¹ Rashi to *Bamidbar* 21:23.

¹² See Rashi’s commentary on *Bamidbar* 22:5 {s.v. “*hinei chisah es ein haaretz*,” and on *Bamidbar* 22:2}.

¹³ *Bamidbar* 22:6.

¹⁴ *Bamidbar* 24:16.

¹⁵ {In the original Hebrew, “*merubah*”; lit. “great,” or “numerous.” Rashi is now suggesting that the term be understood in the sense of “great,” implying a qualitative greatness.}

strength and magnitude of the Egyptian army, but their spiritual strength.¹⁶ As Rashi explained earlier,¹⁷ the animals used to drive the chariots came from “those {Egyptians} who feared the word of Hashem” (so the numbers of the Egyptian army were irrelevant here) — yet this was of no use. When they attacked the Jewish people, they suffered a bitter end.

Therefore, it is pointless to seek a spiritually adept person to defeat the Jewish people, for he would not be greater than the Egyptians “who feared the word of Hashem,” yet who were unable to do anything to harm the Jewish people.

What could work? Bilaam said, “**Come**, and I will advise you.” Meaning, come closer to me, and I will give you advice **secretly** — “Their G-d despises lewdness, etc.” By implementing this advice, you will achieve your goal.¹⁸

5.

A DARK SECRET

A novice student of Torah¹⁹ might still ask: Throughout the forty years in the desert, we have no record of the Jewish people committing **such** {depraved} sins. In addition, regarding Shlomis bas Divri, Rashi says, “{by mentioning her by name, the Torah emphasizes} the virtue of the Jewish people, to indicate that she alone had behaved immorally.” We can extrapolate from here that the men’s behavior was similarly virtuous, which then begs the question — how could it be that so many Jews would have stumbled in this matter, to the extent that “those that died in the plague numbered twenty-four thousand?”²⁰

¹⁶{This resolves the questions in sec. 2, subsections a and b.}

¹⁷ *Shemos* 14:7. See also the *Sicha* of *Beshalach* 1, *Likkutei Sichos* vol. 16 pg. 148.

¹⁸{I.e. the only path to defeating the Jewish people is to cause them to self-destruct.}

¹⁹ {“*Ben chamesh lemikra*” in the Hebrew original, meaning, “a five-year-old beginning to study Scripture.” This is a term borrowed from *Pirkei Avos*, which teaches that the appropriate age for a child to begin studying Scripture is at the age of five.}

²⁰ *Bamidbar* 25:9.

Also — why {did Bilaam say,} “come” {implying secrecy}? Why did Bilaam have to impart advice clandestinely?

To address these questions, Rashi says, “as recorded in {*Sanhedrin*, chapter} *Chelek*.” There, the *Gemara* discusses how the Midianites seduced the Jewish people with “jugs of wine,” leading them to stumble into licentiousness and idolatry. Had the Jewish people been aware of Bilaam’s plot, they would have been more wary of such attempts. Therefore, Bilaam shared his counsel secretly — “come” — in order that the Jewish people should remain unaware of his cunning strategy.²¹

6.

SPOILED BY SPOILS

This is still not entirely clear. The *Gemara* explains in detail how the Midianites executed Bilaam’s idea:²²

Balak made for them enclosures using wall hangings, from the ‘snow mountain’ {Mount Hermon} until *Beis HaYeshimos*,²³ and he sat harlots in them, with an old woman on the outside and a young woman on the inside. When Jewish men were eating and drinking, and joyous, and going out to stroll in the marketplace, the old woman would say to a Jew....”

This raises another question: Isn’t such behavior — “eating... and joyous, and going out to stroll in the marketplace” among the tents of Midianite women and girls — highly inappropriate for the Jewish people? This was especially egregious, considering that this took place immediately after the wondrous miracles that the Jewish people had **just** witnessed at “the spilling of the streams”²⁴ and during the war against Og who had “uprooted a mountain, etc.”²⁵

²¹ {This resolves the question in sec. 2, sub-sec. d.}

²² *Sanhedrin* 106a.

²³ {*Ben Yehoyada* explains that these two names allude to the sin committed in these enclosures.}

²⁴ *Bamidbar* 21:15.

²⁵ Cited in Rashi at the end of *parshas Chukas*.

This clearly ought to have inspired the opposite outcome — **exceedingly** virtuous conduct!

To address this, Rashi also says “{as recorded} in *Sifri*,” referring to the section of *Sifri* that relates to the topic under discussion in *Chelek*: In discussing *parshas Balak*, *Sifri* says that “when Israel was overfilled with the spoils (from the war against Sichon and Og), they began “spoiling” the spoils — they tore apart garments and cast them away; they tore apart livestock and cast them away — for they desired only vessels of silver and gold, etc.”²⁶ Meaning, the overabundance of spoils caused the Jewish people to reach a state described as “Yeshurun {the Jews} grew fat”;²⁷ consequently, “{Yeshurun} kicked,” ultimately leading to their unseemly behavior and collapse into sin.²⁸

7.

HASHEM AND THE JEWISH PEOPLE ARE ONE

From the “wine of the Torah” in Rashi’s commentary:

Regarding the war against Midian, we find that Hashem said, “Take revenge for the **Jewish people** against the Midianites.” When Moshe relayed this commandment, he said, “so that **Hashem's** revenge can be taken against the Midianites” (and not “revenge for the Jewish people”).

My father²⁹ explains that the basis for the reversal is that Hashem was particular about the honor shown to the Jewish people, and Moshe was particular about the honor shown to Hashem. (Similarly, my father uses this approach to explain why, when in His command to the Jewish people [in *parshas Terumah*], Hashem mentioned the cherubs before the Ark, while in *parshas Naso*, the Ark is mentioned before the cherubs.)

²⁶ *Sifri*, sec. 131.

²⁷ *Devarim* 32:15.

²⁸ {This resolves the question in sec. 2, subsection e. Only once the details from *Chelek* have been established, can the additional citation from *Sifri* resolve the question that arises from *Chelek*.}

²⁹ The Rebbe’s father, in *Likkutei Levi Yitzchak* on *Zohar*, “*Shelach*,” p. 377; see *Tanchuma* and *Bamidbar Rabbah* on this verse.

We still need to clarify: Why is this switch {from wording that prioritizes the honoring of the Jews, to wording that prioritizes the honoring of Hashem} made only in the war against Midian, and not also with respect to other commandments?

Based on the above explanation of Rashi's commentary, it is clear: Midian's war against the Jewish people was waged on two fronts: a) The Midianites wanted to attack and vanquish the Jewish people {physically}. In response, Hashem said, "revenge for **the Jewish people**." b) Bilaam's plot {to undermine the Jewish people spiritually}: "their **G-d despises** lewdness..." In response, Moshe said, "**Hashem's** revenge."

Therefore, since Hashem was mindful of the Jewish people's honor, He emphasized "revenge for the Jewish people" in His commandment, relating to the Midianites' **goal** of vanquishing the Jewish people. And since Moshe was mindful of Hashem's honor, he emphasized "Hashem's revenge" — the Midianites' plot to defeat the the Jewish people was by means of targeting "**their G-d**" who "**despises** lewdness, etc.," thereby, further leading the Jewish people to stumble into the sin of idolatry (by worshipping *Baal Peor*).

We can now appreciate Rashi's explanation of the phrase, "Hashem's revenge": "For anyone confronting the Jewish people is considered as if he was confronting the Holy One, blessed is He."³⁰ These remarks appear specifically in the context of the war against Midian, since then was then plain to see that the Midianites' opposition to the Jewish people was opposition to Hashem — causing the Jewish people to stumble into licentiousness (and inducing them, thereby, to stumble into idolatry as well).

Therefore, the Torah says here, specifically in *parshas Matos*, "by Bilaam's *word*," and not merely Bilaam's *advice*, for this enlightens us about the purpose of the war against Midian — retribution for Hashem and for the Jewish people.

-From a *sicha* delivered on Shabbos *parshas Matos-Masei*, 5735 (1975).

³⁰ Rashi's commentary on *Bamidbar* 31:3.