



Bilaam's Failed Curses

Sicha Summary

Chelek 18 | Balak | Sichah 1

The Context:

After Bilaam fails to curse the Jewish people in his first prophecy, divinely compelled to bless them instead, he attempts a second time, and again pronounces blessings. During his prophecy he proclaims, “For there is no divination in Jacob and no soothsaying in Israel. In time it will be said to Jacob and Israel, ‘What has God wrought?’” (*Bamidbar 23:23*)

The Rashi:

For there is no divination in Jacob — They are worthy of blessing since there are no diviners or soothsayers among them.

In time it will be said to Jacob and Israel — There will come another time like this, when G-d's love for them will be revealed to all, for they will be seated before Him and learn Torah from His mouth. Their place will be closer to the Divine Presence than the ministering angels. The angels will ask them, “What has God wrought?” This is the meaning of, “your eyes shall behold your Teacher” (*Yeshayahu 30:20*).

Another interpretation: [The phrase] **יֵאָמַר לְיַעֲקֹב** is not in the future tense [“it shall be said to Jacob”] but in the present tense. They have no need for a diviner or sorcerer, for whenever it is necessary to tell Jacob and Israel

what God has wrought and what decrees He enacted on high, they do not need diviners or soothsayers, because the decrees of the Omnipresent are transmitted to them through their prophets, or the Urim VeTummim... [Midrash Tanchuma Balak 14, Bamidbar Rabbah 20:20]

The Questions:

- a) Why does Rashi need to provide such rich detail in his first explanation? What is the source of the details Rashi offers in explaining, “they will be seated before Him...,” “they will be closer than the angels...”? And what does Rashi add in his final line, “this is the meaning of “your eyes shall behold your teacher?”

- b) Why does Rashi offer two explanations?

The Groundwork for the Explanation:

Balak hired Bilaam to curse the Jewish people, yet Bilaam consistently failed. To excuse his failure, he explained that he was unable to curse the Jewish people because they possessed superlative qualities. In the first episode, he said “From their beginning, I see them as mountain peaks,” (*Bamidbar* 23:9) referring to the lofty lineage of the Jewish people. In the second episode, he claimed that he could not curse because “they [the Jewish people] have the King's friendship.” (*Ibid*, 21)

He then continued to explain that not only were the Jewish people impervious to curses, they were deserving of blessing since, “there is no divination in Jacob.” As Rashi says, “They are worthy of blessing since there are no diviners or soothsayers among them.”

But because Bilaam was a “diviner and soothsayer” himself, this disparaged him and implied that he was responsible for this failure. To deflect blame further, Bilaam alluded to still more remarkable advantages that the Jews had, in his prophecy, “In time it will be said to Jacob and Israel, ‘What has God wrought?’”

Rashi's First Explanation:

Rashi's first explanation understands the words "in time" to refer to an auspicious, well-known event. Because the subject here is G-d's love of the Jewish people, this clearly refers to the Giving of the Torah, when G-d taught the people directly. The verse implies that this closeness will occur once again, at the time of the future redemption, when G-d will teach Torah to the people in an intimate setting. Privilege is expressed through closeness. Because the gentiles do not have a relationship with Torah, the chosenness of the Jews had to be expressed by contrasting them with the supernal angels. Thus, Rashi deduces that "their place will be closer to the Divine Presence than the angels," who will have to ask the Jews "what has God wrought."

Yet Rashi must probe further. At the Giving of the Torah, the Jews were unable to withstand direct Divine revelation. They expired at G-d's voice. (*Shemos* 20:16) How, then, can we expect them to withstand G-d's revelation in Messianic era? Rashi, therefore, cites scriptural proof for this future phenomenon: "Your eyes shall behold your **Teacher**." G-d will be their teacher, and the Jewish people will be able to receive a G-dly revelation.

Bilaam implied that it was due to this incomparable stature of the Jewish people, and not due to his own inferiority, that he was unable curse them.

Rashi's Second Explanation:

The drawback of the first explanation is that it highlights an advantage that will only be revealed in the Future Era. Perhaps, then, it would not have been sufficient to have prevented Bilaam's current curses. To address this concern, Rashi offers a second explanation that focuses on the present. The Jews do not need diviners or soothsayers because their prophets (or the Urim VeTummim) convey to them exactly what G-d plans or desires.

It is for this reason, Bilaam explained, why his curses were destined to fail. Although he knew the moment of G-d's anger and sought to curse the Jews

at that time (*Rashi* to 23:8), they already knew when that moment was, and they engaged in repentance and prayer for protection.

Superlatives First:

Rashi chose the future-oriented explanation first because it highlights a much deeper and loftier quality of the Jewish people. This is more relevant when Bilaam explained his failure to curse.

The Lesson:

G-d's intimate teaching of Torah to the Jewish people happens today, when we study Torah. The closeness of learning Torah directly from G-d is merely concealed; it will be revealed in the Messianic Era. Thus, we never have reason to fear those who oppose or ridicule our devotion to Torah and *mitzvot*, because G-d is always with us.