

Zera Shimshon

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Chapter XL: Balak (Num. 22:2–25:9)

Essay 2. The angel of mercy visits Balaam

"וַיַּעֲמֵד מִלֵּאָהָהּ בְּמִשְׁעוֹל הַכֹּהֲנִים גֹּדֵר מִזֶּה וְגֹדֵר מִזֶּה."

The Moabite king, Balak, sent messengers to the prophet Balaam, asking him to curse the Jewish people. Balaam asked G-d what to do, and G-d told him not to go to Balak, and not to curse the Jewish people, for they are blessed. Balaam told the messengers he would not return with them. Balak then sent more messengers repeating the request, and Balaam again inquired of G-d what to do. This time, G-d told him that he could go with the messengers, though he must follow G-d's instructions. Balaam agreed to follow the messengers, and he set out riding upon his donkey.

But G-d was incensed at his going, so an angel of the L-rd placed himself in the way as an adversary to him; he was riding on his donkey, with his two servants alongside. When the donkey caught sight of the angel of the L-rd standing in the way, with his drawn sword in his hand, the donkey swerved from the road and went into the fields; and Balaam beat the donkey to turn her back onto the road. **The angel of the L-rd stood in a hollow way between the vineyards, a fence being on this side, and a fence on that side.** The donkey, seeing the angel of the L-rd, pressed herself against the wall and squeezed Balaam's foot against the wall; so he beat her again. Once more, the angel of the L-rd moved forward and stationed himself in a narrow place such that there was no room to swerve right or left. When the donkey now saw the angel of the L-rd, she lay down under Balaam; and Balaam was furious and beat the donkey with his stick.

- Num. 22:22–27

קָשָׁה לְמַה דְּנִקְא "בְּמִשְׁעוֹל הַכֹּהֲנִים", וְעוֹד מֵהוּ "גֹּדֵר מִזֶּה" וְכִי? וַיֹּשֶׁב לֵאמֹר דְּאִתָּא בְּמִדְרָשׁ פְּרָשַׁת נֹחַ כְּשֶׁנֹּחַ הִלְךָ לִישָׁע כְּרָם פְּגָעָה בּוֹ שִׂידָה אַחַת אֶמְרָה לוֹ שׁוֹתֵפֵי עֲמֻדָּה וְהִזְהֵר שְׁלֵא תִגַּע בְּחִלְקֵי שְׂאֵם תִּגַּע אֲנִי אֲזִיקָהּ.

A question is why is it specifically stated “in a hollow way between the vineyards,” and also, what is the meaning of this “a fence being on this side etc.”? It can be said that it's brought in the Midrash Gen. Rabbah (36:3) for parshat Noach, that when Noah went to plant

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a vineyard, he came across a demoness, who said to him, “I will partner with you, but be careful that you won’t touch my part [of the vineyard], for if you do touch it, I will harm you.”

ולנה רמז לו המלאך הגה בכרמים יש לשטן שותפות בהם, ואף כה יש חלק בשטן ויש חלק בנבואה, הנזהר שלא תגע בשטן שטן כי מיד תהיה נאבד.

Regarding this, the angel hinted [to Balaam], “Here in the vineyards, Satan has a partnership in them, and even in you there is a portion of Satan (i.e., the Accuser, the evil inclination) and there is a portion of prophecy. Be careful not to touch that [portion] of Satan, because you would immediately be lost.” Sukkah 52a explains that the greater a person, the stronger his evil inclination.¹ While Balaam was not Jewish, he was a prophet who recognized the One True G-d. He was thus a very great person, and consequently had a strong evil inclination within him.

ונהו "גדר מזה" וכו'. ונהו "לשטן לו", כלומר לרמזו לו שיש לו חלק השטן.

This is the meaning of, “a fence being on this side, and a fence on that side” (Num. 22:24). I.e., this is a hint that Balaam struggled between being a prophet of G-d, i.e., a great person, and having a strong evil inclination that was encouraging him to sin, to travel to Balak and to contemplate accepting his mission to curse the Jewish people. This is the meaning of, “as an adversary to him” (Num. 22:22), that is to say that the intent of the angel was to hint to [Balaam] that he has a portion of Satan, i.e., the evil inclination, and that he should strive to overcome it, which despite the difficulty is always possible.²

אבל כל זה לכוננה טובה שיחזור בו, ונהו "ניצמד במקום צר", ונהו שפירש רש"י שמלאך רחמים היה ובה לחוס עליו שלא יאבד.

But this episode of the angel stopping the donkey was all for good intention, that [Balaam] should turn from the evil inclination, and turn from his trip to Balak, and this is the meaning of “in a narrow place” (Num. 22:16), i.e., that he had to choose between good and bad. This is what Rashi explained, that it was an angel of mercy that appeared to the donkey and (finally) to Balaam, and that he came to show mercy upon [Balaam], that he shouldn’t be lost.

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¹ Sukkah 52a: “A certain Elder came and taught [Abaye]: Anyone who is greater than another, his evil inclination is greater than his.”

² Sukkah 52a: “Rabbi Yehuda taught: In the future, G-d will bring the evil inclination and slaughter it in the presence of the righteous and in the presence of the wicked. For the righteous, [the evil inclination] appears to them as a high mountain, and for the wicked it appears to them as a [mere] strand of hair. These weep and those weep. The righteous weep and say: How were we able to overcome so high a mountain? And the wicked weep and say: How were we unable to overcome this strand of hair?”