

# Zera Shimshon

by Rabbi Shimshon Chaim Nachmani zt"l

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## Chapter XL: Balak (Num. 22:2–25:9)

### Essay 3. The death of a loyal donkey

**"וְאִתָּהּ הִחַיִּיתִי"**, פִּירַשׁ רַש"י שְׁלֵא יֵאמְרוּ וְכוּ' שְׁחַס הַמָּקוֹם עַל כְּבוֹד הַבְּרִיּוֹת.

An angel appeared three times to Balaam's donkey, blocking its path, without Balaam observing the angel. Balaam beat the donkey, which then spoke: "The donkey said to Balaam, 'Look, I am the donkey that you have been riding all along until this day! Have I been in the habit of doing thus to you?' And he answered, 'No.'" The angel then appeared to Balaam. "The angel of the L-rd said to [Balaam], 'Why have you beaten your donkey these three times? It is I who came out as an adversary, for the errand is obnoxious to me. And when the donkey saw me, she shied away because of me those three times. If she had not shied away from me, you are the one I should have killed, **while sparing her.**'" (Num. 22:32-33).

**Rashi explained** Num. 22:33, based on Midrash Tanchuma, Balak 9, "But now because [the donkey] spoke and rebuked you and you could not stand against its rebuke, just as it is written, 'and he said, No!'—I have killed it in order **that [people] should not be able to say:** 'This is [the donkey] that silenced Balaam by its rebuke, so that he could not reply.' **For G-d has regard for human dignity.**"

וְהַקְשָׁה הַלּוֹנֵת הִיא דְאִתָּהּ בְּסִנְהֶדְרִין (דף נ"ד ונ"ה) גוֹי הִבָּא עַל הַבְּהֵמָה מֵהוּ שְׁתַּסְקַל עַל יְדוֹ, תַּקְלָה בְּקַלּוֹן בְּעֵינָיו וְהִבָּא תַּקְלָה אִיכָּא וְקַלּוֹן לִיכָּא, דְאִתָּהּ דִּידְהוּ לֹא קִפִּיד רַחֲמֵנָא, וְהָרִי מְצִינּוּ כָּאֵן שְׁחַס הַקַּב"ה עַל קַלּוֹן שְׁל בְּלַעַם וְהָרַג אֶת הַבְּהֵמָה בְּשִׁבִיל קַלּוֹנוֹ. וְלִדְיֹן לֹא קִשְׁיָא מִיְדֵי, לְפִי שְׁאִוְתָהּ שְׁעָה בְּלַעַם כְּשֶׁר הִנֵּה שְׁהָרִי רוּחַ נְבוּאָה שׁוֹרָה עָלָיו.

**The Leviat Chen<sup>1</sup> questions this, for** Lev. 20:15 states that, "And if a man lies with an animal, he shall be put to death, and you shall kill the animal," and **it is brought in** tractate **Sanhedrin (page 54 and 55):** "They asked Rav Sheshet: **[Regarding] a gentile who engages in intercourse with an animal, what is [the halacha]? That it should be stoned by his action? Do we need the calamity [caused] and the shame [as reasons to kill the animal], for here [in the case of a non-Jew] there is calamity [as it caused a person to sin and to be executed], but there is no shame, as [regarding] this shame, for [the non-Jews] the Merciful One is not stringent,**

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<sup>1</sup> Aryeh Yehudah Leib ben Shmuel Gershon Sirkin (1665-ca. 1745), "Leviat Chen v'Or Yekarot" (Venice 1742), page 67b.

i.e., G-d does not take shame into consideration for non-Jews.”<sup>2</sup> On this point, the *Leviat Chen* questions: **Behold! We find here** in Rashi’s comment on Num. 22:33 **that the Holy One, Blessed be He, had mercy on the shame of Balaam and killed the beast because of his shame.** So how can tractate *Sanhedrin* say that G-d does not take shame into consideration for non-Jews?

**For us this is not something difficult, for at the same hour, Balaam was fit** to receive G-d’s mercy, **as the spirit of prophecy flowed upon him.** Thus, he was not treated like an ordinary non-Jew, for whom G-d is not strict about whether they suffer from shame or not.

ומשום הכי נמנה בסנהדרין עם ארבעה הדיוטות שאין להם חלק לעולם הבא. ומדאיצטרייך למיתנגייה שמע מינה שהנה סלקא דעתך שהיה לו חלק לעולם הבא כמו שפירשו המפרשים שם.

**Because of this** understanding of Balaam’s prominence, **he is named in tractate Sanhedrin as one of three Jewish kings and four prominent commoners** (three Jewish commoners and Balaam), **who have no portion in the World to Come.**<sup>3</sup> **Why do we need a tanna to teach us this Mishnah? Hear from this, if it should enter your mind that he should have a portion in the World to Come, what the commentators explained there** on Mishnah *Sanhedrin* 10:2. The Rambam and Bartenura have similar comments, that we say that all Israel have a portion in the World to Come, as do the righteous of all nations. Since we recognize that six of these men were Jewish, and since we recognize that Balaam was a man of great wisdom, we might therefore expect them to have a portion in the World to Come. Therefore, we need the Mishnah to teach us that these seven men do not have a portion in the World to Come, for their fundamental belief in G-d was corrupted. Thus, the six Jewish men were the exception to the rule that all Jews have a part in the World to Come, and Balaam should not be considered as one of the righteous among the nations.

ומפל שפן לדברי רש"י עצמו שפירש על פסוק "לא אוכל לעבר את-פי ה' ". כאן לא נאמר "אלהי" כאשר בראשונה לפי שידע שנבאש בהקב"ה ונטרד עכ"ל. אם כן מתחלה היה ראוי ומשום הכי חס רחמנא על כבודו ונהרג את האתון.

**In any event,** also pay heed **to the words of Rashi himself on the verse** of Num. 24:13. This verse, in which Balaam is speaking to Balak, is very similar to Balaam’s first conversation with Balak’s messengers. In the conversation with the messengers, in Num. 22:18, “Balaam replied

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<sup>2</sup> The relevant text appears on page 55a. A review of the Friedberg Project for Talmud Bavli Variants, <https://bavli.genizah.org>, shows that while our current Vilna edition of the Talmud uses the term “idol worshipper” (עובד כוכבים) instead of “gentile” (גוי), older versions of the Talmud use the term “gentile.” None include the text “that it should be stoned by his action” or “as [regarding] this shame, for [the non-Jews] the Merciful One is not stringent,” but these additions are consistent with how commentators understand the text.

<sup>3</sup> Mishnah *Sanhedrin* 10:2 and *Sanhedrin* 90a: “Three kings and four [prominent] commoners [named in the Bible] have no share in the World-to-Come. The three kings are: Jeroboam, Ahab, and Manasseh. . . . The four commoners are: Balaam, Doeg, Ahithophel, and Gehazi.”

to Balak's officials, 'Though Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not violate the command of the L-rd my G-d, to do anything whether small or big.' ”<sup>4</sup>

In the conversation with Balak, in Num. 24:13, the same underlined words appear: “Though Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, **I could not violate the command of the L-rd**, to do anything good or bad; what the L-rd says, that I must say.”

Rashi notes a crucial difference between the verses, writing on Num. 24:13, “**Here it does not say ‘my G-d,’ as it is said at first [Num. 22:18], because [Balaam] now knew that to the Holy One, Blessed be He, he had become something vile and banished from His presence.**”

**If so, in the beginning**, up until Num. 22:35—when, despite the efforts of the angel of mercy, Balaam still decided to continue to travel to meet Balak, **[Balaam] was fit, and because of this, the Merciful One did have mercy on his honor, and He killed the donkey.**

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<sup>4</sup> Regarding the first part of the verse, Rashi wrote, based on Midrash Tanchuma, Balak 6, “This tells us that he was avaricious and covetous of other people's wealth. He said: He ought to give me all his silver and gold, for, behold, he would otherwise have to hire many armies to fight against them. Even then it is doubtful whether he would conquer or not conquer, but I would certainly conquer.” Regarding the second part of the verse, “I could not violate the command of the L-rd,” Rashi wrote, again based on the same source from Midrash Tanchuma, that Balak divulged this against his own will, “and he prophesied here that he would be unable to annul those blessings with which the patriarchs had been blessed by the mouth of G-d.”