



A Wonderful Chiddush from the Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh The Good Spark of Bilam HaRasha Reincarnated into Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair's Donkey

in honor of the yahrzeit of the Ohr HaChaim hakadosh, the 15th of Tammuz

This week we read parshas Balak. We will focus on the deep desire of the wicked Bilam to die a death befitting the righteous, which he expresses as follows (Bamidbar 23, 10): **"תמות נפשי מות ישרים ותהי אחריתי כמוהו"**—**may my soul die the death of the upright, and may my end be like his!** In the Gemara (A.Z. 25a), our blessed sages interpret this to mean that he wished to die like the holy Avos—Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov—who are described as upright—"yesharim."

The Maharsha explains how they arrived at this interpretation. Previously, he exclaims in desperation (ibid. 8): **"מה אקוב לא קבה אל ומה אזעום לא זעם ה', כי מראש צורים אראנו—ומגבעות אשורנו—how can I curse? G-d has not cursed. And how can I display anger? Hashem has not displayed anger. For from its origin, I see it rock-like, and from hills do I view it. Rashi comments (ibid. 9): I look at their origin and at the beginning of their roots, and I see them anchored securely and strong as these rocks and hills by means of the Avos and the Imahot.** From this statement, it was evident to our sages that his subsequent remark—"may my soul die the death of the upright"—meant that he wished to die like the holy Avos.

In his own inimitable, sacred way, the Ba'al HaTurim (Balak) provides us with several fascinating allusions: **The gematria of the word "ישרים" (560) equals "אבות העולם" (409+151).** Furthermore, when Bilam says: **"And may my**

end be like his," he is alluding to the fact that the ends—the final letters—of the names of the Avos--**יצחק יעקב**—are the letters **מקב**, which is the gematria of the name **בלע"ם (142)**. In other words, he aspired to be like the Avos.

We can add a fantastic insight from Chazal presented by the divine kabbalist Rabbi Mordechai HaKohen of Tzfat, ztz"l, a disciple of the Arizal, in Sifsei Kohen. They note that Bilam begins his pronouncement employing the plural—"מות ישרים"—referring to the death of the **"upright."** Yet, he concludes in the singular: **"May my end be like his!"** To be consistent, he should have concluded with the word **"כמוהם"**—meaning **"like theirs"** rather than with the word **"כמוהו"**—meaning **"like his."** (You can see that the Kli Yakar addresses this point.) He explains that on the one hand, Bilam opens his remark employing the plural, because he wanted to die like the **"upright"**—namely, like Avraham and Yitzchak—who did not suffer very much in their lifetimes. On the other hand, he concludes his remark in the singular, because he aspired to be like Yaakov especially, of whom it is taught (Ta'anis 5b): **"יעקב אבינו לא מת"**—**Yaakov Avinu never died.** Additionally, Avraham and Yitzchak both produced children that were wayward and did not follow in their footsteps—Yishmael and Eisav—whereas all of Yaakov's children were righteous. On the other hand, he desired the authority and less complicated life of Avraham and Yitzchak, rather than the tumultuous, troubled life of Yaakov.

The Malach Confronted Bilam Three Times Alluding to the Three Avos

It is with great pleasure that we will experience the wondrous delights of the Torah together. Why was it specifically at this juncture in time—when compelled by HKB”H to bless Yisrael—that Bilam HaRasha saw fit to express his sincere desire to “**die the death of the upright**”—like Avraham and Yitzchak—and to have “**an end like his**”—like Yaakov Avinu who never died? To answer this question, we find that before HKB”H permitted Bilam to see the malach of Hashem obstructing his path, the malach impeded his progress three times with the aim of preventing Bilam from cursing Yisrael.

The first time, it says (ibid. 22, 22): **“ויחר אף אלקים כי הולך הוא, ויתיצב מלאך ה' בדרך לשטן לו והוא רוכב על אתונו ושני נעריו עמו, וטרא האתון את מלאך ה' ניצב בדרך וחרבו שלופה בידו, ותט האתון מן הדרך.”** **G-d’s wrath flared, because he was going, and a malach of Hashem stood on the road as an impediment to him. He was riding on his she-donkey, and his two young men were with him. The she-donkey saw the malach of Hashem standing on the road with his sword drawn in his hand, so the she-donkey turned away from the road and went into the field; then Bilam struck the she-donkey to turn her back onto the road.**

The second time, it says (ibid. 24): **“ויעמוד מלאך ה' במשעול הכרמים גדר מזה וגדר מזה, וטרא האתון את מלאך ה' ותלחץ אל הקיר, ותלחץ את רגל בלעם אל הקיר ויוסף להכותה.”** **The malach of Hashem stood in the footpath of the vineyards, a fence on this side and a fence on that side. The she-donkey saw the malach of Hashem and she pressed against the wall, and she pressed Bilam’s leg against the wall, and he continued to strike her.**

The third time, it says (ibid. 26): **“ויוסף מלאך ה' עבור ויעמוד במקום צר אשר אין דרך לנטות ימין ושמאל, וטרא האתון את מלאך ה' ותרבץ תחת בלעם, ויחר אף בלעם ויך את האתון במקל, ויפתח ה' את פי האתון.”** **The malach of Hashem continued to pass ahead and stood in a narrow place, where there was no room to turn right or left. The**

she-donkey saw the malach of Hashem and crouched beneath Bilam. Bilam’s anger flared, and he struck the she-donkey with the staff. Hashem opened the mouth of the she-donkey and she said to Bilam, “What have I done to you that you have struck me these three times?”

The Midrash Tanchuma (Balak 8) explains the significance of these three appearances of the malach: **What reason did he have to go ahead of him three times? He showed him symbols of the Avos.** The Midrash explains that on the first occasion, the malach forced Bilam into the field, where there was ample room to turn both left and right. This was an allusion to Avraham Avinu. For, if Bilam had wished to curse his children, he could have found opportunities to curse him on both the right and the left—namely, the offspring of Yishmael and the offspring of Keturah.

Next, the malach stood in the path of the vineyards. This time, when the donkey saw the malach, **“she pressed Bilam’s leg against the wall.”** On this occasion, Bilam only had room to turn one way. This was an allusion to Yitzchak Avinu. Had Bilam wished to curse his children, he had only one option—to curse Eisav HaRasha and his offspring. On the third occasion, however, the malach stood **“in a narrow place, where there was no room to turn right or left.”** The Midrash explains that the **“narrow place”**—**“makom tzar”**—is a reference to Yaakov, of whom it says (Bereishis 32, 8): **“Yaakov was very frightened, and it distressed him (‘vayeitzer lo’).”** If he wished to curse Yaakov, Bilam had no place to turn, since none of his children were tainted. (Translator’s note: The Midrash drawing a connection between the word **“tzar”** and **“vayeitzer.”**)

We can now understand the strong desire of Bilam HaRasha to die the death of the “yesharim”—to emulate the holy Avos. It became apparent to him that even after they had passed away, their incredible righteousness persisted forever, protecting their offspring Yisrael and preventing him from cursing them. He expressed this with the pronouncement: **“How can I curse? G-d has not cursed. And how can I display anger? Hashem has not displayed anger. For from its origin, I see it rock-like, and from hills do I view it.”** It was apparent to him that the merit of

the Avos and Imahot protected Yisrael even after they had passed away. Hence, he expressed the desire: **“May my soul die the death of the upright”**—to be like the holy Avos; and **“may my end be like his!”**—that even after their lives had ended, they continue to protect their descendants.

Now, as to why he concluded his pronouncement in the singular: **“May my end be like his!”** As explained, he yearned to be like Yaakov Avinu who never died. Why? Because as the malach inferred to him on the three occasions that it blocked his path: With regards to Avraham and Yitzchak, he had some room to curse Yisrael—on account of Yishmael and Eisav. With regards to Yaakov Avinu, however, he had nowhere to turn, not to the right and not to the left, because his children were all righteous. Therefore, he was impressed especially with Yaakov and spoke of him enthusiastically (ibid. 23, 10): **“מי מונה עפר יעקב”**—**Who has counted the dust of Yaakov?** For, even after he was buried in the dust, he is still alive. Hence, he said of Yaakov: **“May my end be like his!”**

The Plain Meaning According to the Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh

Let us now introduce the sacred words of the Ohr HaChaim hakadosh apropos the wish of Bilam HaRasha: **“תמות נפשי מות ישרים ותהי אחריתי כמוהו”**. He provides interpretations based on “pshat”—the plain reading of the text—and based on “sod”—mysticism and esoterica. In terms of the “pshat,” he asserts that these words were his own and not influenced by “ruach hakodesh.” He cites the teaching in the Yalkut Shimoni that when Bilam’s words did not constitute any harm to Yisrael, Hashem gave him free reign to say whatever he pleased.

With this understanding, the Ohr HaChaim interprets Bilam’s statement: **“תמות נפשי מות ישרים ותהי אחריתי כמוהו”** and in the process reconciles the fact that he initially uses the plural **“ישרים”** but concludes with the singular **“כמוהו”**. On the one hand, he had every intention of continuing his corrupt, malevolent ways, since he was a consummate rasha; however, he realized that he would be held accountable and punished appropriately for doing so. Hence, he wanted to perform teshuva prior to his death, so that he would be considered to be an upright man, like the upright people of the nations of the

world. This is the implication of his statement: **“תמות נפשי מות ישרים”**. He even had illicit relations with his donkey; so, by his nature, he was incapable of being upright. Hence, he hoped that at least in the throes of death, he could be upright.

Then, the Ohr HaChaim adds a personal testimonial of his own. He says that he knew reshaim who told him explicitly that if they knew they could perform teshuvah and die immediately thereafter, they would have done it. They admitted, however, that they could not remain penitent for any significant length of time, because they were under the influence and control of the yetzer hara. With this understanding, he interprets Bilam’s concluding remarks in the singular: **“May my end be like his!”** He hoped that his end could be like Yisrael’s—that he, too, would be granted a portion and place in Olam HaBa.

The Esoteric Interpretation of the Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh

Now, let us entertain the mystical, esoteric interpretation of the Ohr HaChaim hakadosh of Bilam’s pronouncement. According to this version, Bilam’s words were not scripted on his own but rather via “ruach hakodesh.” Thus, he yearned: **“May my soul die the death of the upright”**—instead of dying at the hands of the Malach Hamaves, he wanted to be killed by the upright people of Yisrael. For, in this manner: **“My end might be like his!”**—the goodness within his neshamah might achieve tikun by attaching itself to Yisrael. The Ohr HaChaim hakadosh explains that every klipah has a spark of kedushah within it that sustains it. So, when an evil person is killed by a member of Yisrael, that good spark may be cleansed of its impurities. Occasionally, that good spark will attach to the Yisrael that killed its owner. This is what Bilam was praying for: **“תמות נפשי מות ישרים ותהי אחריתי כמוהו”**.

According to the Ohr HaChaim hakadosh, this, indeed, is what happened to the good nitzotz in Bilam. He was killed by Pinchas ben Elazar, and his good nitzotz achieved its tikun by reincarnating into the donkey of his killer’s later namesake Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair. (The Noam Elimelech, Lech Lecha, discusses the significance of a namesake.) As to why the tikun did not occur immediately when Bilam was killed, it

is because the nitzotz was so badly sullied by Bilam that it required several gilgulim to cleanse it. Ultimately, however, it reached the donkey of Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair from where it could be restored to its original status.

The Neshamah of Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair Descended into Bilam's Mouth

As a loyal servant in the presence of his master, I would like to latch onto the coattails of the Ohr HaChaim hakadosh and explain how Bilam became aware of the fact that his good nitzotz was destined to ultimately achieve a tikun. Let us refer to a passuk in this week's parsha (ibid. 23, 5): **"וישם ה' דבר בפי: 'וישם ה' דבר בפי בליק וכה תדבר'—Hashem placed a thing in Bilam's mouth and said, 'Go back to Balak, and thus shall you speak.'** The Gemara explains (Sanhedrin 105b): **'וישם ה' דבר בפי בליק'—it is the opinion of Rabbi Elazar that Hashem placed a malach in Bilam's mouth. Rashi comments: Hashem placed something in Bilam's mouth, a malach was located in his throat; if he wanted to bless, it allowed him; if he wanted to curse, it restrained him (shut him up) and did not allow him.**

In relation to this phenomenon, we find a fascinating chiddush in the Techeiles Mordechai, authored by the brilliant Gaon of Berzhan, ztz"l. He asserts that the malach HKB"H placed in Bilam's mouth coercing him to bless Yisrael rather than curse them was none other than Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair. He supports this assertion with a teaching from the Yerushalmi (Shekalim 5, 1):

"מעשה בחסיד אחד שהיה חופר בורות שיחין ומערות לעוברים ושבים, It happened that a pious person used to dig cisterns, ditches, and caves for travelers. Once, his daughter travelled to get married, and she was swept away by a river. This tragedy caused people to wonder: אפשר שהיה מכבד את בוראו במים והוא מקפחו במים—is it possible that this man who honored his Creator with water, and He made him suffer with water?! A miracle was performed on his behalf: מלאך ירד כדמות רבי: a malach descended in the likeness of Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair and rescued her. It is apparent from this incident that Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair was able to take on the guise of a malach to save a person's life.

Now, we have learned that the good nitzotz from Bilam's neshamah reincarnated into the donkey of Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair and achieved its tikun due to the immense kedushah of its owner. So, just as Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair appeared as a malach in the incident above, the Techeiles Mordechai proposes that he was the malach that HKB"H sent from the heavens to control Bilam's mouth. Thus, by preventing Bilam from cursing Yisrael, the good spark within him was protected from further corruption. Furthermore, since Bilam was forced to bless Yisrael, his good nitzotz merited reincarnation into the donkey of Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair to achieve its tikun. This then is the "remez"—allusion—in the passuk: **"וישם ה' דבר בפי בליק".** The word **בפי** can be interpreted as an acronym for **ב'נחם ב'ן יאיר**—the malach HKB"H placed in Bilam's throat preventing him from cursing Yisrael, so his good spark would ultimately be rectified.

Based on what we have learned, the Techeiles Mordechai explains a passage in the Sifre (Zos HaBerachah) related to the passuk (Devarim 34, 10): **"ולא קם נביא עוד בישראל כמושה, וכישראל לא קם אבל באומות העולם קם, ואיזה זה בליק בן בעור"—never again has there arisen in Yisrael a prophet like Moshe; however, among the other nations of the world one has arisen. Who is that? Bilam ben Beor.** The commentaries are baffled by this statement. It seems inconceivable to compare the nevuah of Moshe Rabeinu to the nevuah of the wicked Bilam.

Yet, in light of what we have learned, he explains the matter. He refers to what we have learned in the Gemara (Chullin 7a). It was the practice of Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair to fulfill the mitzvah of "pidyon shevuyim"—redeeming captives. He reached the banks of the Ginai River and ordered it to part for him. The Gemara concludes by venerating the power of Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair; it compares his feat to that of Moshe Rabeinu, who split the sea for 600,000 Bnei Yisrael.

Thus, according to this discussion, it turns out that the Berachos Bilam bestowed upon Yisrael were attributable to the power of the neshamah of Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair, whom our blessed sages compare to Moshe Rabeinu. So, now, we can propose the following interpretation of Chazal's statement: **"Never again has there arisen in Yisrael a prophet like**

Moshe”; however, among the other nations of the world one has arisen. Who is that? **Bilam ben Beor**. They were hinting to us that Bilam’s nevuah regarding Yisrael was due to the power of the neshamah of Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair, whose greatness is compared to that of Moshe Rabeinu.

We can now answer the question posed above. How did Bilam know to prophesy: תמות נפשי מות ישרים ותהי אחריתי כמוהו—that he would ultimately be afforded a tikun? We have learned that Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair was the malach sent from above and placed in Bilam’s mouth to prevent him from cursing Yisrael. The Midrash explains that this malach compelled him to bless Yisrael. Therefore, it was Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair himself speaking from Bilam’s mouth who revealed to him that he would ultimately be afforded a tikun through his donkey.

The Donkey of Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair Suffered for Three Days

It is with great pleasure that we can apply what we have learned to explain a teaching in the Gemara (Shabbas 112b): אם הראשונים כמלאכים או בני אדם, ואם הראשונים כבני אדם או כחמורים, ולא כחמורו של רבי פנחס בן יאיר. **If the earlier ones were like malachim, then we are human beings (sons of men); if the earlier ones were like mortals (sons of men), then we are like donkeys, but not like the donkey of Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair.** Our blessed sages tell a fascinating story about this donkey in the Yerushalmi (Demai 1, 3). Thieves came during the night and stole the donkey of Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair. It was secluded with them for three days and refused to eat. So, after three days, they decided to return the donkey. For, they did not want it to die while in their possession and have their theft revealed. They released the donkey, and it walked on its own to the door of Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair’s house, and it began to bray.

Rabbi Pinchas instructed the members of his household to open the door and feed this poor creature that had not eaten for three days. They opened the door and brought the donkey into the house. They gave her barley, but she still refused to eat. Rabbi Pinchas inquired whether or not the barley had been properly tithed. They answered that it had

been. So, Rabbi Pinchas asked them once again whether or not they had removed the “demai,” which is possibly “ma’aser.” They responded, “Didn’t you teach us: ‘One who buys seeds for an animal is free from separating demai?’” Rabbi Pinchas said to them, “What can we do in the case of this poor creature who is so demanding of herself?” They separated the “demai” from the barley, and the donkey began to eat. [Translator’s note: “Demai” is agricultural produce whose status is in doubt, i.e., whether it was tithed or not.]

In light of what we have discussed, let us suggest an explanation for the donkey’s exacting behavior. Now, Bilam HaRasha defiled his mouth by attempting to curse Yisrael. Therefore, he reincarnated into an animal that is incapable of speaking. Nevertheless, to make amends for the improper use of his (Bilam’s) mouth, the donkey went to great extremes not to allow anything even questionably prohibited into its mouth.

In this manner, we can also explain why Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair’s donkey endured the discomfort of starvation for three days. For, upon careful scrutiny, we find that Bilam HaRasha’s efforts to curse Yisrael took place over the course of three days. On the first day that Balak’s emissaries came to Bilam to try to persuade him to curse Yisrael, he said to them (Bamidbar 22, 8): “לינו פה הלילה והשיבותי אתכם דבר”—**rest here for the night and I will give you an answer.**

Subsequently, on a second day, Balak sent a more distinguished delegation to Bilam. This time Bilam said to them (ibid. 19): “ועתה שבו נא בזה גם אתם הלילה”—**and now, you, too, please stay here for the night.** Afterwards, on a third day, it states (ibid. 21): “ויקם בלעם בבוקר ויחבוש את אתונו וילך עם”—**Bilam arose in the morning and saddled his she-donkey and went with the officers of Moav.** Here, Rashi comments: “**With the officers of Moav**”—**his heart was like theirs, equally.** On that third day, he attempted to curse Yisrael, but was thwarted by HKB”H and was compelled to bless them instead. Thus, we find that these events transpired over the course of three days.

This explains very nicely why it was necessary for the donkey of Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair to suffer starvation for three days. For, as we learned from the Ohr HaChaim

hakadosh, the good nitzotz of Bilam HaRasha reincarnated into the donkey of Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair. Therefore, to atone for Bilam's three days of iniquity, preparing to curse Yisrael, the donkey suffered for three days.

In conclusion, what we have discussed confirms the message conveyed by David HaMelech (Tehillim 92, 6): **מה גדלו מעשיך ה' מאד עמקו מחשבותיך, איש בער לא ידע וכסיל לא יבין את זאת—how great are Your deeds, Hashem; extremely**

profound are Your thoughts. A boor cannot know, nor a fool understand this. Among the wonders of Hashem is reincarnation! No one is deserted or neglected; through the phenomenon of gilgulim, a person can correct everything that needs to be corrected and achieve a tikun. We must, however, yearn to make these tikunim ourselves while we are still alive and present in Olam HaZeh by means of Torah-study and the performance of mitzvos with a sound mind and body for the length of our days and years.



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