

ALSHICH

INSIGHTS FOR THE SHABBOS TABLE

ספר במדבר

פרשת בלק

SAMPLE

WHERE WAS BIL'AM'S FREE WILL?

Chapter 22

22:12) G-d said to Bil'am, "Do not go with them; do not curse the people because they are blessed.

(כב:יב) וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹקִים אֶל־בִּלְעָם לֹא תֵלֵךְ עִמָּהֶם לֹא תָאָר אֶת־הָעָם כִּי בָרוּךְ הוּא.

20) G-d came to Bil'am at night and He said to him, "If the men have come to call you, arise and go with them — but you shall do only as I tell you.

(כ) וַיָּבֹא אֱלֹקִים אֶל־בִּלְעָם לַיְלָה וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ אִם־לְקָרָא לְךָ בָּאוּ הָאֲנָשִׁים קוֹם לְךָ אִתָּם וְאָךְ אֶת־הַדָּבָר אֲשֶׁר־אֲדַבֵּר אֵלֶיךָ אַתָּו תַּעֲשֶׂה.

Consider the following questions:

1. Having told Bil'am originally not to go with Balak's messengers (verse 12), why did G-d allow him to do so in verse 20?
2. How could G-d say to Bil'am (verse 20), "*If the men have come to call you...*"? It was obvious to everyone that this was the reason they had come. Additionally, why does the verse use the expression "*to call you*" rather than one like "*to bring you*," which would seem more appropriate?
3. What was the point of letting Bil'am go if G-d was not going to allow him to curse Bnei Yisrael as he wanted? Wouldn't it have been better to stop him from going in the first place?
4. In light of the principle that "In the way a man wishes to go, in that way Divine Providence leads him," how is it that Hashem changed Bil'am's words to be the opposite of what he wanted to say?

In the Gemara (Makkos 10b), the Sages give three sources for the principle בְּדַרְךָ שֶׁאָדָם רוֹצֵה לֵילֵךְ בָּהּ מוֹלִיכִין אוֹתוֹ — In the way a man wishes to go, in that way Divine Providence leads him. The Torah source is our verse 20. In *Nevi'im* (Yeshayahu 48:17) it says: *I am Hashem, your G-d Who teaches you to do what is effective and Who leads you on the path that you take for yourself.* And in *Kesuvim* (Mishlei 3:34) it states: *If a person wants to be among the slanderers, G-d will [allow him to] slander, and to the humble [He] will show favor.*

The three sources each teach a different aspect of our principle:

Aspect A is when a person chooses to do something which in and of itself is neither good nor bad. Hashem allows this, but does not aid the person. This is what happened to Bilam, because the actual act of going

with the officers of Moav was neutral; it was only when he arrived at his destination that he would actually choose whether to curse Bnei Yisrael, bless them, or stay silent. Once he showed a desire to go (in verse 19) by telling the messengers to stay another night after Hashem had forbidden him to go, Hashem now allowed Bil'am to use his free will, as it says in verse 20, "*Arise and go with them.*" However, He did not help or assist him. [\[This answers Question 1.\]](#)

Aspect B applies to a case where a person chooses to do good. Here, not only is he not prevented from doing the mitzvah, he is given Divine assistance to go on the path he has selected. This is illustrated by the verse in *Nevi'im* ("*I am Hashem...Who leads you on the path that you take for yourself*"). Not only does Hashem lead such a person on the path, He helps him, as it also says (*Shabbos 104a*), "He who comes to be purified, I will help him."

Aspect C relates to when a person chooses to do bad and harm the righteous. Here, Hashem acts differently. He will not limit the free will of the wicked; they will be allowed to lay their trap, down to the last detail. [\[This answers Question 3.\]](#) However, G-d will then protect the righteous person by making sure that he does not fall into the trap that has been prepared for him. This is the meaning of the third proof that the Gemara brings, from *Kesuvim*: *If a person wants to be among the slanderers, G-d will [allow him to] slander; but despite this, to the humble whom the wicked are trying to harm, G-d will show favor* – by saving them from being ensnared. Thus, G-d did not allow Bil'am to actually curse the Jewish people. [\[This answers Question 4.\]](#)

Thus, when Hashem said, "*If the men have come to call you,*" of course the reason for their arrival was obvious. The "*if*" – i.e., the uncertain part that is **not** obvious – relates to how Bil'am would use his free will in response to the invitation. By this statement G-d meant, "*If it is your own free will to act wrongly and to go with the men who have come as soon as they call you* – i.e., without needing to be convinced – then even though I had told you not to go, *arise and go with them.* I will not hold back your free will in this, because the act of going is [still] in and of itself a neutral action." Finally, by stating that Balak's men came "*to call you*" (rather than "*to bring you*"), Hashem conveyed the idea that Bil'am went willingly, without being pressured. [\[This answers Question 2.\]](#) It was also this immediate willingness that was the reason Hashem got angry at Bil'am when he went with Balak's men, as it says in verse 22: "The anger of God flared because he was going."

THE ALSHICH AND HIS COMMENTARY

The Alshich (1508–1600), was one of only five famous rabbis in Jewish history universally known by the title "HaKadosh" (the holy one). He served on the same Beis Din as Rabbi Yosef Caro, author of the *Shulchan Aruch*. The Alshich is most noted for his monumental Tanach commentary.

The Alshich uses his creative insight and encyclopaedic knowledge of Tanach, Talmud, and Midrash to weave together his profound interpretations. He simultaneously focuses on the text as well as the context of a series of verses by listing a range of questions and then answering them all with one or two concepts.

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