



5785 Divrei Torah on Jerusalem by Rabbi Reuven Schrier Parashat Balak / פרשת בלק

The Scent of Surrender: *Bilaam* vs. *Avraham* on *Har HaMoriah*

Throughout the entire narrative of *Parshat Balak*, there is an undertone of competition between *Bilaam* and the holy *Avot*. As *Bilaam* attempts to curse *Klal Yisrael*, he builds seven altars and offers numerous *korbanot* upon them. *Chazal* see great significance in his choice of the number seven. As *Rashi* explains (*Bamidbar* 23:6), the Torah records the *Avot* building seven altars over the course of their illustrious lives. *Bilaam*, by building the same number, is trying to counteract and overcome their spiritual merits, hoping that this will enable him to curse their descendants. In fact, he brings both seven cows and seven rams to outshine *Avraham Avinu*. After all, *Avraham* only brought a single ram on the altar of the *Akeidah*.

Obviously, *Bilaam's* attempts to surpass the *Avot* were a miserable failure. But to understand why his attempts were so utterly useless, we must first appreciate what *korbanot* are truly about. Obviously, *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* has no need for sacrificial parts. And yet, the sacrifice and burning of a *korban* serves as a "satisfying aroma" for *Hashem*. Why?

As the *Maharal* explains at length (*Netiv HaAvodah* 1), when a Jew brings a *korban* to *Hashem*, he is metaphorically surrendering himself to the *Ribbono Shel Olam*. The *makriv's* monetary investment represents that all his resources belong to his Creator. The animal parts consumed by fire on the *mizbeach* symbolize his own limbs and faculties. Ultimately, the power of a *korban* has nothing to do with quantity; it is about the sincere, qualitative act of handing oneself over to *Hashem*.

This is why the *mizbeach* stood at the center of Jerusalem, precisely at the spot from which humanity was created (*Rambam Beit HaBechira* 2:2). What more fitting place to surrender oneself than the very source of man's creation itself? As the *korban* is slaughtered in the *Beit HaMikdash*, the *makriv's* personal agenda dissolves. Only *Hashem's* will remains.

Here is where *Bilaam* so spectacularly fails. This pagan prophet, fully aware that *Hashem* does not wish him to curse *Bnei Yisrael*, cynically tries to exploit his spiritual power to "manipulate" God into fulfilling his own agenda. He is ironically using *korbanot* to advance precisely what *Hashem* has rejected. This is what the *navi Micha* sharply condemns in this week's *haftorah* (*Micha* 6:5-8):

"My people, remember now what *Balak* king of *Moav* planned, and what *Bilaam* the son of *Beor* answered him...With what shall I come before *Hashem*, bow before the Most High God? Shall I come before Him with burnt offerings, with yearling calves? Will *Hashem* be pleased with thousands of rams, with myriad streams of oil?...He has told you, O man, what is good, and what *Hashem* demands of you; but to do justice, to love loving-kindness, and to walk discreetly with your God."

The *navi* is highlighting the utter foolishness of "buttering up" *Hashem* with thousands of *korbanot* while your personal behavior brazenly defies His will. "What good are your countless rams?" Like *Bilaam*, you



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assume that great quantities of sacrifice carry weight before the Master of All. But *Hashem* has no need for petty

physical gifts. The *korban* becomes a pleasing aroma only when it reflects a genuine, qualitative act of surrender to the Divine.

Now we can appreciate the profound irony of trying to outshine the ram of the *Akeidah*. Standing on *Har HaMoriah*, the future site of the *mizbeach* in the *Beit HaMikdash*, *Avraham Avinu* demonstrated his willingness to sacrifice everything – his beloved son, his legacy, and his entire future – for the *Ribbono Shel Olam*. The ram was the symbolic replacement for that ultimate act of surrender. Though quantitatively small, it embodied *Avraham's* pure and boundless devotion to *Hashem*. No number or price can ever outweigh that awesome act of cosmic sacrifice.

On *Shivah Asar B'Tammuz*, we fast in mourning over the breaching of Jerusalem's walls. But we also mourn the cessation of the sacrificial service on this day so many centuries ago. The lack of sheep forced the besieged Jews to discontinue the *korban tamid*.

Yet as Rav Chayim Volozhiner explains (*Nefesh HaChayim* 1:4), the physical destruction of Jerusalem was only possible because we had already corroded it spiritually from within. The Romans merely ground up "already ground flour." In truth, we ourselves had already dismantled the sacrificial service long before the Temple fell. To reclaim the sacrifices of Jerusalem, we must rebuild the concept of *korbanot* from the inside – through sincerity and devotion as we offer ourselves up to the *Ribbono Shel Olam*.

