5786 Divrei Torah on Jerusalem by Rabbi Reuven SchreierParashat Balak / פָּרָשַׁת בָּלָק

A City of Power or Submission?

When reading through the narrative of *Parshat Balak*, *Bila'am* seems to be surprisingly confident in his prophetic capabilities. He tells the ministers of *Moav* and *Midyan* to stay the night, assured that *Hashem* will inform him what to do before morning. He seems to have constant access to prophetic revelation in ways that only the greatest prophet – *Moshe Rabbeinu* – had.

Indeed, *Chazal* inform us that *Bila'am*'s level of prophecy was equal to *Moshe*'s. This astounding assertion leads to a fundamental teaching that appears in the very beginning of the *Midrash*'s analysis of *Bila'am* (*Bamidbar Rabbah* 20:1). The *Midrash* asserts that *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* granted the other nations of the world a parallel personality to every great heroic figure in Jewish history.

Just as *Klal Yisrael* received the great prophet *Moshe*, the other nations received *Bila'am*. While *Moshe*'s prophecy leads to moral refinement and Godly values, *Bila'am*'s powerful spiritual capabilities were directed toward disastrous sin and near annihilation.

The *Midrash* notes that *Bila'am* is not the only expression of this phenomenon. This is part of a broader pattern of זה לעומת זה עשה אלוקים – this one against that one God made. For every powerful spiritual hero granted to the Jewish people, *Hashem* established a parallel personality among the nations of the world.

Chazal highlight *Shlomo HaMelech* and *Nevuchadnetzar* as the next pairing. *Shlomo* was granted unparalleled political power and wealth. He used these resources to glorify *Yerushalayim* and build a magnificent home for the *Shechinah*. With wisdom, *Shlomo* composed beautiful literary works of praise and supplication to the Almighty.

Nevuchadnetzar, the Babylonian ruler of the ancient world, was likewise granted domination over the nations of the world. But instead of facilitating *Hashem*'s connection to His people and His world, *Nevuchadnetzar* utilized his power to destroy the *Mikdash* and divorce the *Shechinah* from *Yerushalayim*. Instead of recognizing and extolling *Hashem*'s greatness, he blasphemes *Hashem* (until he is forced into submission, of course; see for example *Daniel* 4).

This distinction between *Shlomo* and his Babylonian counterpart highlights a fundamental distinction between how *Klal Yisrael* and the other nations view *Yerushalayim*. For *Klal Yisrael*, *Yerushalayim* is a symbol of *hachna'a*, submission before *Hashem*. To draw His Presence into our world, we surrender our wealth, capabilities, and ambitions to the King of Kings, recognizing that He is the ultimate source of everything we possess.



Not so the other nations. Their kings seek to usurp God's power for their own cynical purposes. Instead of building *Yerushalayim* as the focal point of *Hashem*'s connection to this world, they destroy it. Instead of facilitating *Hashem*'s revelation in Creation, they mask it.

And even when they seek to possess *Yerushalayim* rather than destroy it, the city still does not represent to them what it did to its original architects. *Yerushalayim* is not a symbol of political power or worldly dominance. Quite the opposite. It proclaims that all political power and worldly accomplishment ultimately belong to *Hashem*. Its message is that no king, empire, or civilization stands at the center of history: *Hashem* does. The holiness of *Yerushalayim* emerges not when man exalts himself, but when he willingly places everything he has achieved at the feet of the King of Kings.