

Parshat Balak 5776

starts with בלק watching how בני ישראל conquered the land of the אמורי/Emorites; בלק becomes afraid and incites fear not only in his own nation, but also מדין. They then send messengers to בלעם to relay בלק's fears and ask him to curse בני ישראל in the hope of overcoming them. בלעם asks the messengers to stay the night

בלק's more or less repeat's בלעם - ויאמר בלעם אל האלקים "בלק בן צפר מלך מואב שלח אלי" request to 'ה and continues by asking whether he can go with.

then sends the messengers back because 'ה has not allowed him to go with them. When the messengers come back to בלק, and relay בלעם's message בלק tries again, starts sending more prestigious officers and בלעם offers more and more honour if he will go. בלעם first answers בלק; it doesn't make any difference what you offer me I can't go against the will of 'ה. But nevertheless, stay the night and let's see what 'ה will add when he speaks to me. 'ה comes to בלעם and tells him אשר אדבר בלעם and בלעם gets up, מואב שרי מואב, and sets off to do what he thinks' he's just been commanded to do. Immediately, 'ה straight away gets angry with בלעם for going, and sends a מלאך and a talking donkey to rebuke him. So what's going on here? We see that בלעם had two sets of messengers from בלק. The first time they come, בלעם asks 'ה who says 'no', then when בלעם sends more prestigious messengers, 'ה asks 'ה again and this time he receives permission to go, yet as soon as 'ה sees him going, 'ה gets angry with בלעם for doing what he'd just been told he could do! 1. Why did 'ה first say לא תלך עמם, then apparently 'change his mind' so to speak the second time around by saying קום לך בלעם and 2. When בלעם does go with the messengers, having just given בלעם permission to go, why does 'ה get angry?

The Vilna Gaon compares 'ה's first and second responses to בלעם's request to go with בלק's messengers. The obvious difference is that the first time, 'ה says לא תלך עמם, no you can't go and the second time 'ה says לך אתם, yes you can. But the subtle difference is in the exact language 'ה uses in these responses in the way he says "with them": - 1st time 'ה says ועמה and second time אתם. The Vilna Gaon explains that simply means to be or go with someone / something - it's just a factual preposition which tells you what is happening but nothing deeper; עמה/עמו on the other hand, means to go along with the other person/party, completely sharing the same motives, goals and enthusiasm. Armed with this insight/knowledge, we can go back and understand a bit more about this exchange/incident between 'ה and בלעם.

The first time around, 'ה tells בלעם, לא תלך עמם, - 'ה wasn't forbidding him from going, rather 'ה was telling him "don't join in with their mission". The implication here being, 'you can go with if you like, but just don't adopt their ideas or intentions'. The second time בלעם asks, 'ה tells בלעם, לך אתם, בלעם asks, 'ה with them,' but only in the physical sense; not to share their goal or attitude.

So coming back to the first question we had on our פרשה - why did 'ה change his mind - well, we see that actually the answer was essentially the same both times, just expressed in slightly different words, and it was only because בלעם, misunderstand the messages that he thought the answer had changed.

As for the second question - why did 'ה get angry and send a מלאך against בלעם? If we take another look at exactly what happens immediately prior to 'ה getting angry, the פסוק says that בלעם got on his donkey מואב שרי מואב - and went along with them, not just physically but also in mindset, with the intention of carrying out בלק's mission which was exactly what 'ה had been trying to warn him not to do which is why the מלאך was sent to stop him.