

Parshat Matot-Mase'ei 5775

Amidst the fog of war with Midyan in the first of this week's Parshot, a familiar foe returns (31,8):

וְאֵת מַלְכֵי מִדְיָן הָרְגוּ עַל סַלְלֵיהֶם אֶת אֹיֵי וְאֵת רְקָם וְאֵת צוּר וְאֵת חוּר וְאֵת רְבֵעַ חֲמִשָּׁת מַלְכֵי מִדְיָן וְאֵת בְּלָעָם בֶּן בְּעוֹר הָרְגוּ בַחֶרֶב:

“And they [the army of Klal Yisrael] killed the Midyanite kings alongside their other casualties: Evi, Rekem, Zur, Hur, and Reba, the five kings of Midyan; and Bilaam the son of Beor they killed with the sword”. This death of Bilaam is referred to by the Gemora in Perek Cheilek, the final chapter of Sanhedrin. The Gemora there tells us (106b):

א"ל ההוא מינא לר' חנינא מי שמייע לך בלעם בר כמה הוה א"ל מיכתב לא כתיב אלא מדכתיב (תהילים נה) אנשי דמים ומרמה לא יחצו ימיהם בר תלתין ותלת שנין או בר תלתין וארבע א"ל שפיר קאמרת לדידי חזי לי פנקסיה דבלעם והוה כתיב ביה בר תלתין ותלת שנין בלעם

“A certain heretic said to R. Chanina: Have you heard how old Bilaam was [when he died]? He {R. Chanina} replied: It is not actually stated in the Torah, but since it is written (Psalms 55) ‘Murderous and deceitful men shall not live out half of their days’ [it follows that] he was thirty-three or thirty-four years old [as the average lifespan is 70]. He [the heretic] responded [to R.Chanina]: You are correct - I personally have seen Bilaam’s Chronicle, in which it is stated that Bilaam was 33 years old [when he died]”.

This seemingly simple deduction is in fact extremely problematic, in the context of the well-known Gemora in Sotah (11a).

א"ר חייא בר אבא א"ר סימאי שלשה היו באותה עצה בלעם ואיוב ויתרו בלעם שיעץ נהרג איוב ששתק ידון ביסורין יתרו שברה זכו מבני בניו שישבו בלשכת הגזית

“R. Chiya b. Abba said in the name of R. Simai: There were three people involved in that council; Bilaam, Iyov and Yitro. Bilaam who devised it was killed by the sword. Iyov who kept quiet was afflicted with sufferings. Yitro who fled merited that his descendants should sit on the Sanhedrin”. The Gemora identifies **that council** as referring to Pharaoh’s cabinet during the very first attempt in history to deal with the Jewish problem; the conclusion of which was to hurl all new born boys into the Nile. This council of Pharaoh certainly took place before the birth of Moshe (he was the highest-profile victim,) whilst the aforementioned war with Midyan occurred towards the end of Moshe’s 120 years. How could Bilaam have been at both if his

entire life lasted a mere 33? I would like to present two answers, which deal with this problem in very different ways.

a) Rabbeinu Menachem, one of the Ba’alei Tosfot, embraces the question in a literal sense. He explains **that council** analysed in Sotah is not the one of Pharaoh at all, but rather the much later council of Balak that resulted in the Jewish people sinning with the ladies of Moav. (This also helps explain why Yitro’s stated reward was that his descendants were to sit on the Sanhedrin, rather than the more obvious bonus of Moshe becoming his son-in-law. According to Rabbeinu Menachem, Moshe was already his son-in-law at the time Yitro sat on Balak’s council, thus a new reward had to be allocated.) It therefore makes perfect sense for Bilaam to have been involved in that decision, and to have died in the war aged 33 – the two events were consecutive. He doesn’t have to have ever set foot in Egypt, met Pharaoh or been alive during Yetziyat Mitzrayim.

b) The second answer requires a nuanced approach to aggadic materials. We have a situation as we often do of agudos chalukos, where two Talmudic stories interpreted literally cannot be reconciled. Thus the two Gemoras cannot possibly both be literal, but at the same time of course, they are both certainly true.

The Rambam often stresses the use of agadata as moshul – a parallel. So too people can appear as a moshul – representing the archetypal version of that character. Thus in Sotah where R.Chanina tells his colleague that Bilaam died aged 33, it does not have to be the original Bilaam, the attempted curser of the Jews and Minister for Anti-Semitism in the Pharaoh Government. Rather R.Chanina is discussing the Bilaam of Chazal’s generation, who many scholars ascribe as Jesus of Nazareth. Indeed, this fits with the age (33) at which we know Jesus died. (It also resolves the problem of how R.Chanina’s conversant in the Gemora found out the actual age of Bilaam’s death by checking it in the chronicles. Ancient copies of the Moav Times were unlikely to be circulating in Bavel.) Thus the characters in the Chumash are not just stand-alones, taking part in unique, once-in-a-lifetime events, of no relevance to our modern lives. They can in fact be symbolic, their actions leitmotifs through different types of human behaviour. And whilst it is intellectually lazy to ever ascribe with any certainty that such and such contemporary baddie is the Haman / Bilaam / Nachash of our generation, it is certainly worth bearing in mind that history may not repeat itself, but it does rhyme.

Dedicated to the memory of a genuine one-off. Written in the week of Dr. Henri Sueke’s shloshim l’zecher nishmas – Whilst in London Henri was a true friend of Ner, and remains a true Ner to all his friends.