

PARSHAS BALAK – “WHAT’S IN A NAME” – BERNHARD BERGMAN

The gemorah in Sanhedrin 105a offers a couple of explanations as to why this week’s villain, Bilaam, had the name that he had:

- (1) Bilaam was so called as he was not part of a nation (“B’lo am”)
- (2) Alternatively, he was so called because he confused the nation, Israel, to sin (“Bilah am”) through the advice he gave to Balak.

We know that a name in Loshen Hakodesh is more than something by which one calls somebody, more than just a Tom, Dick or Harry! Let us look into the subject in a little more detail – what indeed is in a name?

We are first introduced to the concept that, rather than being a mere label, a name conveys the essence of a creature, in the Sedrah of Bereishis (2:19). Adam HaRishon (not his surname!) displayed an aspect of superiority over the Malachim (Angels) by naming the animals in such a way that their names reflected their characteristics. For example, the horse was named “sus” because he recognised it would rejoice (“yasis”) to go into battle (Middrash Rabbah (ch. 17) and Imrei Yosher there).

That one’s name represents one’s inner essence is alluded to by the fact that the word “shem” (name) forms the root of the word “neshamah” (soul).

The Arizal, as cited by the Amudai HaShamayim¹, writes that a name informs us of a person’s nature and activities. The Talmud (Yoma 83b) relates an incident that illustrates this point. R’ Meir and his colleagues, R’ Yose and R’ Yehudah sought lodging at an inn for Shabbos. R’ Meir, who was known to pay close attention to character traits implied by one’s name, upon learning that the innkeeper’s name was “Kidor”, refused to leave his purse with the innkeeper for safekeeping, for it brought to mind the verse “for they are a generation (i.e. “Ki Dor”) full of reversals, children in whom I have no trust” (Devorim, 32:20). His two colleagues on the other hand, who did not pay such regard to names, handed their money over for safekeeping and that was almost the last they saw of it! There is no truth in the rumour that the innkeeper was a Cypriot banker! In a similar incident, R’ Meir warned his students to be careful of another student, a “ben Torah”, who was named Kidor. They ignored this advice, left their clothes with Kidor when they went to the bathhouse and you can work out what happened – they were taken to the cleaners (Yalkut Shemoni on Yeshayahu (41:449)).

R’ Yosef Karo, in the Maggid Meisharim on the sedrah of Shemos, supports the idea that a person’s name indicates the character traits he is likely to possess by noting that a person named Avraham tends to do acts of kindness and a person named Yosef is likely to be able to resist urges of immorality or will feed and sustain people.

There is also the notion that a person’s name can cause events to occur during their life, as pointed out in Berachos 7b. Quoting the possuk “Go and see the works of G-d, Who has put destruction (shamos) upon the earth” (Tehillim 46:9), it argues that rather than reading the word as “shamos” (destruction) it should be read as “shemos” (names). The Maharsha explains that we cannot ascribe evil deeds such as destruction to Hashem, hence requiring the interpretation as per the piece of gemorah just quoted, which implies that Hashem’s works are drawn through a person’s name and hence that the name is the cause.

Perhaps aptly for the “three weeks” that are about to commence and the tradition that the Moshiach was born on Tisha B’Av (Yerushalmi, Berachos 2:4), we can conclude by noting the Talmud’s discussion regarding the name of the Messiah (“Moshiach”). In tractate Sanhedrin (98b) there is a debate regarding the name of the Moshiach. Included amongst the suggested names are the following four: Menachem, Shiloh, Yinon and Chaninah. As an aside, the Vilna Gaon² observes that the first letters of these four names spells the word “Moshiach”! More directly relevant to our theme however, R’ Avigdor Miller (zt”l)² suggests that the discussion was not merely on the name of the Messiah, but also on his characteristics, e.g. Menachem for the comfort he will bring, Chaninah for his grace and charm and the universal favour he will find, etc.

May we merit to witness the coming of the Moshiach speedily in our days!

Written l’illui nishmas my dear father ר' שמואל צבי בן דוב, whose first Yahrzeit fell on 12th Tammuz this year.

¹ As quoted in ArtScroll’s “Divrei Hayammim I - Names and their Significance in Scripture”.

² As quoted by Rabbi Paysach Krohn in his sefer “Bris Milah”, which was also the source of several other references quoted in this article.