



Chukas-Balak: Reading the Roadblocks

Rabbi Shmuel Silber

“How many emperors and how many princes have lived and died and no record of them remains, and they only sought to gain dominions and riches in order that their fame might be ever-lasting.”

Leonardo Da Vinci

Bilam wanted his 15 minutes of fame. On a deeper level, he sought affirmation of his prophetic identity. He wanted to know he mattered. And so, after receiving the invitation of Balak, the king of Moav, to curse the Jewish people, Bilam gathered some possessions, loaded his donkey, and began the journey.

“In the morning Balaam arose, saddled his she-donkey and went with the Moabite dignitaries. God’s wrath flared because he was going, and an angel of the Lord stationed himself on the road to thwart him, and he was riding on his she-donkey, and his two servants were with him.” (Bamidbar 22:21-22)

Rashi comments:

to thwart him: *It was an angel of mercy, and he wanted to prevent him from sinning, for should he sin, he would perish.*

The Hebrew word the Torah uses for “thwart” is *l’satan*. This word conjures up many images. The *Satan* is often understood to refer to the prosecuting angel who highlights our shortcomings and faults before the heavenly tribunal. At other times, the *Satan* is a reference to the *yetzer hara*, the evil inclination which seeks to undermine our dynamic life growth. Yet Rashi explains that this angel, which came *l’satan* (to thwart), was an angel of mercy sent to try to prevent Bilam from making a terrible mistake.

It is in this simple statement that Rashi teaches us a profound life lesson about failure. There are times when, like Bilam, we set out to accomplish something great. We load the proverbial donkey and ready ourselves to move forward only to encounter a roadblock. These roadblocks occur often throughout the journey of life. At times they are barriers which prevent us from moving forward and at other times they actively derail and overturn us. We must always remember that the roadblocks are merciful. God puts roadblocks in front of us for two primary reasons. Sometimes the roadblocks tell us that we are headed down the wrong path. This is not the proper road.. We need new direction, a new destination. Many times, we think we know where we are supposed to go, but we are wrong. The destination we think we need to get to is not the right one, either for right now or perhaps forever. The roadblock tells us to turn around, choose a new destination and try again. Yet, sometimes the roadblock is there to make us work harder. The roadblock tells us to find an alternate route, a detour; the destination is correct but will be so much more impactful and meaningful if we put in the additional effort to reach it. The roadblock is there to test our resolve. How badly do we want to get to our individual intended destinations? How far are we each willing to travel? How hard are we willing to work? The roadblock does not tell us to turn around just to try harder.

It was an angel of mercy who tried to tell Bilam to turn around. He was headed down the wrong path; a path which would ultimately lead to his demise. It is this same angel of mercy who often stands in our way as well. At times he tells us to turn around and find another path and at times he smiles as he directs us onto the shoulder or towards a detour and gently encourages us to try harder and travel wiser.

May God grant us the wisdom and understanding to know when to take the detour and when to turn around.