

ParShaT BaLaQ - One Pager Series

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Rashi #1: Biblical Text: Nu22-28s [Background: The King of Moab requested from Balaq to curse the Jewish people. God and Balaq enter a dialogue on the request. Later we are told that Balaq is travelling back to Moab and an Angel greets him and stops him. The donkey sees the angel but not Balak who hits his donkey who says to Balak]

Biblical Text Why have you hit me, *three times* (A)

Rashi text: You [Balaq] are travelling to uproot a nation that observes festivals *three times* a year [Passover, Shavuoth, and Succoth at which time all Jews travel to Jerusalem to celebrate]

Rashiyomi explanation-Form: We first review the Rashi *form* principle. By analogy everyone knows that the English pun, *the principal* (versus *principle*) refers to the person since its last 3 letters end in *pal* indicating a person." Now this is silly. The meaning of a word is not determined by its last 3 letters. The last 3 letters are just a silly pun to help you remember the meaning which is determined by usage.

This example illustrates the *form* principle: Sometimes we state a reason – *since its last 3 letters end in pal, a person* – using a silly form, the real reason being otherwise. We apply the *form* principle to this Rashi. Rashi is simply harping on the pun of *hit donkey three times* and *Jews pilgrimage on Festivals three times*. That simply helps people remember. It is not the real reason.

Rashiyomi explanation-Reason: To explain the real reason we first recall the Rambam in his Guide to the Perplexed where he states that this entire biblical incident happened in a dream. After all, donkeys *do* talk in dreams; but they *do not* talk in the real world. The Rashiyomi approach enlarges this Rambam: All prophecies happen through the medium of Jews. They are therefore subject to the rules of dream interpretation.

In this case, the Angel tried to stop Balaq from going to curse the Jews three times. The straightforward explanation for this is found using the principle of context. We indeed find later on in the story, that the King of Moab asked Balaq to attempt to curse the Jewish people from three vantage points called, *Baal*, *Tzofim*, *Peor*. Each time, God stopped Balaq from cursing.

To further understand the symbolism of this, Rav Hirsch simply looked up in the Bible what *Baal*, *Tzofim*, and *Peor* mean. *Baal* is an idolatry; it means ownership and it refers to the idolatry of *possession*. *Peor*, is an idolatry; it literally means uncover; one worshipped this god by uncovering oneself and going to the bathroom (The idolatry emphasized man's commonality with nature); *Tzofim* although not an idolatry means *vision*, *high-view scan*.

Following the lead on these three terms, it is natural to interpret the attempts of King of Moab to curse the Jewish people, from three perspectives: 1) Curse them because they seek to *own* everything (recall King Moab was afraid the Jews would conquer and therefore *own* his land; 2) Curse them because they get *visionary* and high during which time they might do something crazy like conquer a land; 3) Curse them because they are *uncoverers* and want to conquer Moab for their woman.

But the Jews are not like that: They are not possessors trying to own; they do not get high on intoxicating beverages; they do not run around promiscuously. Furthermore, the three places the donkey was smitten in the dream are *consistent* with this. 1) Smite #1 pushed the donkey *from the main road, to the fields* (verse 23), symbolizing that the Jews are not business-people *on the road*, but a simple nomadic people *of fields*. 2) Smite #2 happened by the vineyards (verse 25) symbolizing that the Jews do not get intoxicated to become visionary; rather visions happen in non-alcoholic states and represent communications of the Divine. 3) Smite #3) happened in a very tight spot (verse 26) without room to deviate at all, symbolizing, that Jews observe the laws of family purity which do not allow even the slightest laxity less it lead to sin.

This then is the natural and straightforward interpretation of the dream: The donkey was hit three times, 1) from the road, 2) by the vineyard and 3) in a tight spot symbolic of the three attempts of King Moab to get Balaq to curse the Jewish people: 1) from the point of view of their quest for ownership, 2) from the point of view of their desire to get high and visionary, and 3) from the point of view of them not being so strict leading to promiscuity.

Rashi Form Revisited: This completes the explanation of this Rashi according to the principles of dreams and the *context* of the story. We note that we have extended the Rambam's dream interpretation of the story of the talking donkey also to the episodes where Balaq *gets up in the morning*; that is *in the dream, Balaq saw himself getting up*. Finally, although we don't have to, we can revisit the Rashi form, *hit three times, three festivals*. For indeed 1) Passover symbolizes that Jews do not want ownership but just freedom from slavery (They did not conquer Egypt to own as Moab thought; they conquered it to be free); 2) Shavuoth corresponds to the receiving of the Torah which was done through prophetic vision not through intoxication; and 3) Succoth corresponds to modesty since the Succah booths must be built with 3 sides assuring minimal modesty.