

Torah Thoughts from the YIGC Community

Vayikach Korach: The Man Who "Took Himself"

Rabbi Moshe Berger

קַרַח וַיִּקַּח = "And Korach took..." – Whom or what did he take? The Torah does not explicitly say.

Rashi suggests that the implied object of the verb "took" is Korach himself:

He took himself to another side with the view of separating himself out from the community, in order to protest regarding the priesthood.

Rashi continues his analysis by pointing out that Onkelos' translation agrees with his own [וְזֶה שֶׁתִּרְגַּם אוֹנְקֵלוֹס].

Onkelos translates the verb וַיִּקַּח as if it were the reflexive [hitpa'el] verb, וַאֲתַפִּילֵג, meaning *He separated himself*.

The verb implies, according to Rashi's paraphrase of Onkelos:

נֶחֱלַק מִשָּׂאר הָעֵדָה לְהַחֲזִיק בְּמַחֲלָקָת

*He separated himself out from the rest of the assembly in order to maintain dissention.*¹

Rashi's interpretation serves to endow the verse with appropriate meaning but it does not explain why the Torah chooses to keep us guessing as to the true object of the verb וַיִּקַּח. Why doesn't the Torah state, simply and explicitly, that Korach took himself aside? I would like to suggest that by deleting the verb's object, the Torah is suggesting that, from the perspective of Korach's inner world, no object exists!

For an act of **taking** to be considered legitimate in the eyes of the Torah, it must transform into an act of **receiving**. It must exist in a wholesome relational context with someone else who does the **giving**. In other words, such an action must reflect a **bilateral connection with the world external to oneself**.

Judaism teaches that a person's moral and spiritual existence depends upon his or her ability to suspend self-awareness in order to focus exclusively upon the reality of "the other." All genuine creativity or amelioration of the world [תיקון עולם], for example, requires a suspension of self-focus in order that the person be able to concentrate exclusively upon the needs of the created object or the recipient.

Korach's "taking," in tragic contrast to this ideal, was exclusively a function of self-involvement; self-aggrandizement was his only goal. When Rashi describes Korach as separating himself from the

community, he is not describing an act of physical withdrawal on Korach's part. Quite the contrary: the Torah narrative makes clear that he engaged in a significant amount of politicking. He was the demagogue par excellence. His confrontation with Moshe and Aaron was a publicly staged event, where he presented himself as the spokesman for the people, as if he were representing their interests exclusively:

The whole community is holy, with G-d in their midst [i.e., and as such He is equidistant to everyone]; why, therefore, do you raise yourselves above the assembly of the Lo-rd?

When Rashi and Onkelos refer to Korach's separation from the community, therefore, they are referring to an attitude, a transformation of values and world view. Korach separated himself in two ways. First, he distanced himself from Hashem by choosing to rebel against the Divinely-assigned communal roles that the rest of the congregation had accepted. Second, he removed himself from any concern for the communal welfare and channeled all his energies towards self-glorification.

Thus, Korach represents the Torah's conception of the paradigmatic sinner: the self-worshiper who refuses to view his existence in this world as a precious opportunity to serve God and to serve God's world. Rather, he sees value in life exclusively in the realm of self-aggrandizement. Rebelling against God's mandate to live a life of service, he withdraws from communal concerns. He becomes a self-worshiper, a spiritual and moral narcissist. The world outside of himself possesses significance only to the extent that it contributes to his own selfish goals. Therefore, the world that he endeavored to manipulate on behalf of his own infinitesimal self becomes reduced to being infinitesimal, even non-existent.

This attitude is characterized in three simple words by the prophets Yeshayahu (47:8, 10) and Tzfatia (2:15): אֲנִי וְאִפְסֵי עוֹד, meaning, *I, and I alone*; or, in Rashi's paraphrase, וְאִפְסֵי מְאוֹתֵי כִּמוֹ אֵין זוֹלָתִי – *Nothing of significance exists except me!*

In Korach's mindset, therefore, the external object of his "taking" did not exist.

¹ In a footnote, Rosenbaum-Silbermann suggest that Onkelos may have taken the root לָקַח to be the equivalent of the root חָלַק, meaning, *He divided or separated*.

The Atypical Inclusion of Parshas Balak

Yosef Rudolph

The Gemara in the first Perek of Bava Basra (14b) makes an interesting statement. In discussing the authors of the various books of the Bible, the Gemara says Moshe wrote "ספרו ופרשת בלעם ואיוב" – Moshe's own book (Torah), the section about Bilam (the soothsayer/prophet whom King Balak of Moav hired to curse the Children of Israel), and the book of Iyov (Job). It is important to tell

us that he wrote Iyov, as the book is otherwise anonymous, and it is useful to confirm that the Torah was written by Moshe Rabbeinu, but the inclusion of "Parshas Bilam" is surprising. If this phrase refers to what we know of as Parshas Balak, in which Bilam plays a prominent role, then we might wonder why this section of the Torah was singled out.¹

In fact, we could ask three questions about these two words in the Gemara. First, why would we have thought that Moshe did not write it? After all, he wrote (or transcribed what Hashem dictated) the entire Torah! Second, once we raise the possibility that Moshe was not the author, who else could it have been? Third, if this section of the Torah is so different that we would raise the possibility it was not written by Moshe, why is it therefore included in the Torah? What do we learn from the inclusion of Parshas Bilam?

The Nachalas Yaakov answers the first question by pointing out that the account of Bilam and Balak takes place “out of earshot” of Bnai Yisrael and Moshe. This is the only time since the beginning of Sefer Sh’mos that the “camera” is not focused on Moshe or the nation as a whole. How is it possible – one might ask – that Moshe knew what took place between Balak and Bilam or between Bilam and the Moabite messengers? (As far as Sefer B’reishis goes, we can understand that either Moshe was given the stories all at once while on Har Sinai, or he knew the stories from *mesorah*, tradition, and was guided by *Ruach HaKodesh* to write them down. There is no clearly separate setting as there is in the case of Parshas Balak.) Alternatively, Rashi highlights that this *parsha* has no *mitzvos* or stories about Moshe or Israel; that lack may make it seem distinct from the rest of the Torah that Moshe wrote, leading the Gemara to specify that he did write it. Etz Yosef also addresses relevance, but argues that Bilam’s first three blessings are relevant. It is the fourth, directed to the nations of the world, that has nothing to do with Israel; in his view, the Gemara’s phrase “Parshas Bilam” refers to only that fourth *bracha*, the section we would have wondered about.

The second question has the easiest answer. We are taught that Bilam was granted powers of prophecy parallel to those of Moshe²; we might have assumed he was also capable of writing a piece of Torah and that he wrote his story himself. Perhaps there were those at the time who even suggested such a thing, and the Gemara therefore saw a need to reaffirm this section’s Mosaic origin. Indeed, the few sources that address this issue generally take this direction. Rabbeinu Gershom (on the Gemara in Bava Basra) says that Moshe wrote Parshas Bilam even though Bilam was a prophet and presumably could have transcribed the words of Hashem himself. Anaf Yosef points out that the actual transcribing of this section of the Torah was different from the rest: Moshe had to translate the words of Bilam and Balak – including Bilam’s prophecies – from whatever language they spoke into Hebrew. Moshe wasn’t the “original” channel of the *nevuah* as he was for the rest of the Torah – but, the Gemara tells us, he did write it.

Rav Moshe Twersky, *zecher tzaddik v’kadosh l’vracha*, one of the scions of the Talner (Chernobyl) Chassidim and a grandson of Rav Soloveitchik, offers a reason for Bilam’s high level of prophecy and explains how that impacted on Moshe’s transcription. Typically, a prophet gets a message from Hashem, interprets the message, and passes it on. For that reason, no two prophets prophesy the same way (Sanhedrin 89a); each would put his or her individual “spin” on the message. However, for Bilam, since he was not on a spiritual level high enough to understand and interpret the will of God, Hashem granted him the exceedingly high level of knowing the specific words that Hashem chose. Therefore, when Moshe recorded this section, he wasn’t recording something his *nevuah* told him that someone else had said, but rather he received a duplicate *nevuah* to what Bilam had already received!

The final question is perhaps most interesting, yet little is written about it. What can we learn from the inclusion of a section of Torah that we might have thought should not be there?³ The Shelah (in *Torah SheBichtav, Balak, Torah Ohr*) answers by arguing that the message here is about transformation. Moshe could have come up with the same blessings through his own *nevuah*. However, the additional element of having the *kateigor* become a *saneigor*, that an antagonist could become an advocate, adds a measure of weight and credibility to the blessings. This could only have been achieved through a leading opponent such as Bilam.

Perhaps we can take the Shelah’s understanding a little differently. Perhaps the Torah’s message is not only one of potency through transformation, but also of redemption. Bilam prays – seemingly suddenly, as if coming to a new realization despite all that he was trying to do – “*Tamos nafshi mos yesharim* – Let me die the death of the upright individuals,” i.e. righteous people (Bamidbar 23:10). If aspiration to the Divine and a few thoughts of repentance were enough to grant the wicked Bilam the great merit of having his words written for all time in the Torah, then there is a chance for all of us to have our words and deeds remembered for good as well.

¹ For this reason, the Ritva supports an opinion that “Parshas Bilam” refers to an entirely separate book, like others mentioned in the Torah and Neviim: *Sefer HaYashar, Sefer Milchamos Hashem*, chronicles of various kings, etc.

² Sifrei Devarim, Piska 357:10, and Bamidbar Rabbah 14:20

³ Ritva avoids this issue by claiming that Parshas Bilam is a separate book. However, he does not explain why a non-Tanach book would be mentioned in the Gemara’s otherwise exclusively Biblical list of books.

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