



# MISHNAS CHAYIM

# משנת חיים

## MISHNAH ON THE PARSHAH

פרשת מטות- מסעי תשס"ט 5769 Parshas Matos-Massei

### THE MANY DEATHS OF BILAM

(Please note: Some of the following material may appear as somewhat striking to the otherwise "faint of heart." However, concerning Bilam specifically, the sages have instructed (*Sanhedrin 106b*), "In whatever way one is able to expound upon and cast Bilam in a more negative light, he should engage in such denigration." In that spirit, we have not refrained from discussing this fascinating subject in some detail.)

While Bilam's character and exploits in countering B'nei Yisrael are relatively well-known, there is a chapter of his life of which many may be unaware. To be sure, it was a very short chapter, but the last few moments of Bilam's life – much to his chagrin – were surprisingly "action-packed." We choose to share some of the "highlights" here.

#### UP, UP, AND AWAY...

This week's *parshah* tells of the demise of Bilam Harasha at the hands of the Jews, as the verse says (*Bamidbar 31:8*), "And Bilam... they killed by the sword." Chazal fill in some of the details of his capture and execution. In fact, the Targum Yonasan (*ibid.*) depicts how a high-altitude chase took place between Pinchas and Bilam:

"When the wicked Bilam saw Pinchas in pursuit, he utilized his powers of sorcery and took to the air. Immediately, Pinchas pronounced the Holy Name of Hashem and likewise became airborne and flew after him. Pinchas grabbed Bilam by the head and dragged him back down to Earth..."

The Targum Yonasan goes on to outline how Bilam begged for mercy, promising never to agitate against the Jewish people again. However, after presenting a very extensive list of Bilam's numerous campaigns against B'nei Yisrael, Pinchas denied

the request, unsheathed his sword, and the rest is history.

Actually, the very end of the story is somewhat more complicated and even more extensive and eventful. Whereas the simple implication of the verse seems to be that Bilam was killed by a stroke of the sword, Chazal expound and reveal that a lot more was taking place.

#### THE END

The Gemara in *Sanhedrin (ibid.)* reports that far from being a mere battlefield casualty, Bilam was actually meted out capital punishment by *beis din*. To be exact, there are four methods *beis din* employs to execute those convicted of various capital offenses; these are outlined in the Mishnah (*Sanhedrin 6:4; 7:1-3*):

אַרְבַּע מִיתוֹת נִמְסְרוּ לְבֵית דִּין, סָקִילָה, שָׂרִפָּה, הָרָג, וְחָנֵק... זוֹ מִצְוַת הַנִּסְקָלִין... בֵּית הַסָּקִילָה הָיָה גְבוּהָ שְׁתֵּי קוֹמוֹת. אֶחָד מִן הָעַדִּים דּוֹחֵפוּ... מִצְוַת הַנִּשְׂרָפִין... מְדַלִּיק אֶת הַפִּתִּילָה וְזוֹרְקָהּ לְתוֹךְ פִּיו וְיוֹרְדָתָּ... וְחוֹמֶרֶת אֶת בְּנֵי מַעֲיוֹ... מִצְוַת הַנִּהָרְגִים, הֵיוּ מַתִּיזִין אֶת רֹאשׁוֹ בַּסִּיף... מִצְוַת הַנִּחְנָקִין... נוֹתְנִין סוּדָר... וְכוֹרֵךְ עַל צְנָאוֹ, זֶה מוֹשֵׁךְ אֶצְלוֹ וְזֶה מוֹשֵׁךְ אֶצְלוֹ עַד שֶׁנִּפְטְוּ יוֹצְאָהּ.

"Four methods of execution can be administered by *beis din*: stoning, burning, decapitation, and strangulation... Stoning is carried out in the following manner... The stoning arena was two stories high. One of the witnesses would push the condemned from that height (Only if he survived the fall would they proceed to pelt him with actual stones)... For burning... they would ignite a wick and toss it down the throat of the condemned, where it descended... and scorched his innards... For decapitation, he was beheaded with a sword... For strangulation... a cloak was wrapped around his neck; a person standing on either side would pull the fabric toward himself, until the condemned would expire."

לד"ר

מרן הגה"ר שמואל יעקב בן הרב יצחק מתתיהו זצוק"ל

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of אסתר בת יוסף ע"ה, a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange for Torah study on behalf of her neshamah.

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To be sure, *beis din* only carried out capital punishment in rare instances (*Makkos 7a*). Bilam, however, was found "worthy" of execution, to the extent that – according to the aforementioned Gemara (*Sanhedrin 106b*) – he was executed with *all four methods of punishment*.

The manner in which this amazing feat was accomplished is a matter of much debate. Rashi (*ibid.*) explains the procedure: Bilam was hanged (strangulation), and his gallows was set on fire. The executioner then cut off his head (decapitation). Consequently, the head fell to the ground (similar to the stoning process) and was consumed by the fire (burning).

The commentaries note that there appear to be some difficulties with this approach. Firstly, some of the "ministrations" performed on Bilam did not conform to the execution methods outlined by the Mishnah above. For instance, death by burning is supposed to be accomplished by searing a person's innards by way of his mouth; here, Bilam was consumed externally by fire. Furthermore, according to Rashi's rendering, some of the punishments were administered on Bilam post-mortem, after he undoubtedly had expired through decapitation, for example.

After raising these issues, the Maharsha (*ibid.*) offers an alternative scenario. The Maharsha contends that each method of execution was carried out in some limited fashion: Bilam was pelted with a few rocks, he was strangled for only a brief time, etc. The sum of all these efforts together is what did him in.

The Yad Ramah (*ibid.*), however, maintains that the penalties were carried out in full force, but they were performed simultaneously. The officers of *beis din* charged with administering the executions were able to coordinate their efforts, such that the stones, the flame, the sword, and the noose all found their mark at the exact same moment.

Either way, it wasn't pretty.

### **RISHUS (WICKEDNESS) DOESN'T PAY**

But the fun was not yet over for Bilam.

The Gemara relates a story that took place many hundreds of years later, when Onkelos was contemplating conversion to Judaism. Through sorcery, he summoned and consulted with the forlorn, departed souls of some of the Jews' most notorious enemies, to hear their "unique perspectives."

One of those wretched souls contacted by Onkelos was none other than Bilam. He related to Onkelos the relentless and excruciating torment that was his lot in the afterlife (*see details in Gittin 57a*).

Bilam's ordeal can serve as an instructive reminder to us. Although the Jewish people may be plagued by implacable foes in each and every generation – ours is no exception – the situation is by no means permanent. When Hashem decides the time is right, the *reshaim* will fall – and receive their just desserts.

"So shall all of Your enemies perish, O Hashem," (*Shoftim 5:31*).

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