Bilam's Donkey
By David Silverberg

Parashat Balak features among the more bizarre accounts in Tanakh – the "conversation" that takes place between the gentile seer Bilam, who is commissioned to curse Israel, and his donkey. As Bilam makes his way from Mesopotamia to Moav to administer his curse, an angel, invisible to Bilam, obstructs his path, prompting his donkey to veer off the road. Bilam repeatedly beats the animal, and, after the third instance, the donkey protests its rider's brutality:

The Lord opened the donkey's mouth, and it said to Bilam, "What have I done to you, that you have struck me, three times?" Bilam said to the donkey, "For you have scorned me; had there been a sword in my hand, I would have already killed you!" The donkey said to Bilam, "Am I not your donkey upon which you have rode since long ago, until this day – have I been accustomed to doing this to you?" He said, "No." (22:28-30)

Maimonides, in his *Guide for the Perplexed*, famously asserts that this "dialogue" did not occur in reality. This entire narrative of Bilam and his donkey, according to Maimonides, took place in a prophetic dream. He posits this theory amidst his discussion of prophecy, where he denies the possibility of a conscious, real-life encounter with angels (2:42):

We have already shown that the appearance of speech of an angel mentioned in Scripture took place in a vision or dream; it makes no difference whether this is expressly stated or not, as we have explained above. This is a point of considerable importance. In some cases the account begins by stating that the prophet saw an angel; in others, the account apparently introduces a human being, who ultimately is shown to be an angel; but it makes no difference, for if the fact that an angel has been heard is only mentioned at the end, you may rest satisfied that the whole account from the beginning describes a prophetic vision.

Later, Maimonides applies this principle – and controversially so – to a number of Biblical narratives that appear, on the surface, to speak of actual events, rather than prophetic visions. He boldly interprets the story of Avraham's three visitors (Bereishit 18) and the account of Yaakov's struggle against a mysterious assailant (Bereishit 32:24-32) as referring to prophetic visions experienced by the respective patriarchs. (Nachmanides, in his commentary to Bereishit 18:1, sharply rejects Maimonides' interpretation of the Avraham narrative as a prophetic vision; Abarbanel responds to Nachmanides' challenges in his commentary to the *Guide*.) He then briefly addresses the episode of Bilam: "That which happened to Bilam on the way, and the speaking of the donkey, took place in a prophetic vision, since further on, in the same account, an angel of God is introduced as speaking to Bilam." The "dialogue" between Bilam and the donkey culminates with Bilam's vision of an angel, who reprimands him for his mistreatment of his donkey (22:31-35). Thus, in light of Maimonides' theory that an angel's involvement towards the end of an episode reveals the prophetic nature of the entire episode, he concludes that this narrative describes a vision, rather than documenting an actual event.

Maimonides' Definition of Angels

The position Maimonides articulates here flows naturally from his stance concerning the nature of what the Tanakh and Rabbis termed *malakhim* – angels. Earlier in the second section of the *Guide* (chapter 6), Maimonides identifies "angels" with what Aristotle referred to as "intelligences,"

which are "intermediate beings between the Prime Cause and existing things," which "effect the motion of the spheres, on which motion of the existence of all things depends." Maimonides accepts this definition and claims that it is to these "intermediate beings" that Scripture and Rabbinic literature refer when they speak of *malakhim*. He arrives at this definition based on the etymology of the word *malakh*, which he demonstrates evolves from the Hebrew word for "messenger." *Malakh* thus refers to "every one that is entrusted with a certain mission," which, as Maimonides proceeds to explain, includes even the natural elements, ideals and man's physical powers. Any means by which God governs world events may be referred to as an angel. Among the compelling proofs he cites is a passage in *Bereishit Rabba* which tells of "an angel of lust" overcoming Yehuda as he passed by Tamar, disguised as a harlot. Clearly, the Midrash employs the term "angel" in reference to an emotion, an abstract force through which historical events unfolded.

Thus, Maimonides interprets *malakh* to mean an intangible, abstract force, rather than an actual, visible being. Naturally, then, he would deny the possibility of a real-life encounter with an angel. He therefore insisted that anytime in Tanakh we read of someone speaking to or beholding an angel, the narrative cannot refer to an actual experience, but rather to a prophetic dream or vision.

Other Commentators

The theory that Bilam's donkey did not actually speak is mentioned in Avraham Ibn Ezra's commentary (22:28) in the name of the "the *Gaon*," generally a reference to Sa'adya Gaon. Ibn Ezra ultimately dismisses this approach, but first explains its underlying rationale: "The rationalists were forced to take the words out of their straightforward meaning, because they said that God would not introduce a miracle in the world to change the natural course that He created, except to prove His prophet." Proponents of this theory, Ibn Ezra claims, found themselves compelled to arrive at such a far-fetched interpretation due to their assumption that miracles serve only one purpose: to prove a prophet's authenticity. Since no such motive existed to grant Bilam's donkey the power of speech, these scholars had no choice but to approach this episode as an apparition of sorts. Ibn Ezra disproves this assumption by noting the incident recorded in the Book of Daniel, where Chananya, Mishael and Azarya, three Jews who had been sentenced to burning at the stake – and who were not prophets – miraculously emerged from the furnace unscathed. Clearly, then, miracles can serve purposes other than verifying a prophet's stature.

Of course, Maimonides postulated this theory for an entirely different reason. Regardless of the purpose of miracles, he could not accept the straightforward reading of this narrative for the simple reason that it involved an angel. The moment the Torah speaks of a human being encountering and conversing with an angel, we must view it in terms of prophecy, rather than historicity.

Over the centuries, Maimonides' position has appeared in different variations. The Medieval commentator Yosef Ibn Kaspi, in his *Tirat Ha-kesef*, resoundingly accepts the general theory underlying Maimonides' reading, but presents it in psychological, rather than prophetic, terms. Ibn Kaspi likewise asserts that Bilam's donkey spoke only in a dream, but in his view, this dream did not come to him as a prophecy. Rather, Bilam experienced this dream while he slept during travel, and it reflected the pangs of conscience that weighed heavily on his mind as he made his way to place a curse on *Benei Yisrael*.

The overwhelming majority of commentators, however, accepted the literal reading of the verses, whereby Bilam's donkey in fact conversed with him. Among those who explicitly champion the straightforward reading are Ibn Ezra, Nachmanides and Abarbanel. The literal approach was taken by more modern commentators, as well, including Rabbi Samson Refael Hirsch, Rabbi Meir Leibush Malbim, and Rabbi Meir Simcha Ha-kohen of Dvinsk.

Exegetical Advantages

Several years ago, Professor Yitzchak Levine of Bar-Ilan University wrote an article addressing this narrative (available at www.biu.ac.il/JH/Parasha/balak/lev.html), where he demonstrated how Maimonides' position could help resolve a number of difficulties that immediately arise from this account. Among the glaring problems one confronts when approaching this narrative is the sudden absence of the Moavite officials who had come to bring Bilam to their country to curse *Benei Yisrael*.

The verse just prior to the donkey narrative (22:21) tells that Bilam left together with these officials, yet no mention is made of their response to the astonishing sight of a talking donkey. In fact, when the Torah introduces the donkey narrative, it specifically emphasizes that Bilam traveled with "his two lads" (22:22), seemingly underscoring the absence of the Moavite dignitaries. This peculiarity is easily resolved once we assume that the episode never actually occurred, other than in Bilam's mind.

More significantly, Maimonides' approach reconciles a glaring discrepancy in the text with which virtually all commentators struggled to resolve. Prior to Bilam's journey to Moav, he had told the Moavite noblemen to stay overnight, during which time God would appear to him in a prophetic dream to either sanction or forbid his acceptance of the task for which he was summoned. Indeed, God appears to Bilam and explicitly permits – and appears to even instruct ("Arise, go with them") – Bilam to undertake this dishonorable mission (22:20). And yet, just two verses later, we read that when Bilam embarks on his trip, "The Lord was incensed that he was going; an angel of God was thus stationed along the road to oppose him" (22:22). Why would Bilam's trip anger the Almighty if He explicitly sanctioned it? Rashi suggests that given God's disapproval of the plan which He expressed to Bilam initially, when the first Moavite delegation came to hire his services (22:12), Bilam should have refused the offer, even after receiving divine authorization after the second request. Rashbam explains that Bilam embarked on this mission with an eager desire to place a curse on *Benei Yisrael*, and it was this attitude that aroused God's ire. In a similar vein, Sa'adya Gaon writes that God was angered by the sheer financial greed that animated Bilam's undertaking.

According to Maimonides' theory, however, a far simpler answer emerges. As Professor Levine explains, the account of Bilam's prophetic dream in which God sanctions his mission (22:20) would be read – according to Maimonides – as the general summation of Bilam's dream, the details of which are presented in the subsequent verses. The Torah briefly summarizes this prophecy by telling that Bilam received God's permission to go to Moav. Thereafter, the Torah describes the vision in greater detail, describing the image the seer beheld of the angel attempting to obstruct his path, his conversation with the angel, and the angel's ultimate granting permission to proceed. God here vividly shows Bilam His displeasure with the entire enterprise upon which he embarks, while nevertheless allowing him to proceed on condition that he strictly obeys God's instructions. Thus, the vision of the angel and dialogue with the donkey constitute the details of the dream very briefly recorded earlier, in which God grants His conditional authorization to Bilam's undertaking. This reading, of course, very neatly resolves the striking discrepancy that troubled the classic exegetes.

This literary structure yielded by this reading directly parallels Maimonides' reading of another Biblical account which he likewise interprets as a prophetic vision: the famous story of the three mysterious guests who visit Avraham and predict the birth of his son. That narrative begins, "The Lord appeared to him in Elonei Mamrei, as he sat by the entrance of this tent at the heat of the day" (Bereishit 18:1). Based on a view expressed in the Midrash (as we will discuss later), Maimonides understands this verse as a brief summary of the entire narrative that follows. The subsequent account of the angels' arrival simply provides the details of this otherwise vague description of a divine revelation. God appeared to Avraham in the form of a prophetic vision in which the patriarch beheld three angels arriving at his tent and proceeded to welcome them and serve them a meal. Similarly, in Parashat Balak, Maimonides interpreted the donkey narrative as an elaboration of the dream recorded just prior to this account. God expressed to Bilam His reluctant consent by showing him this prophetic vision of the invisible angel and the talking donkey.

Additionally, Maimonides' theory eliminates another, more obvious enigma in this episode: Bilam's inexplicable composure while conversing with his animal. The Torah gives no indication of any astonishment on Bilam's part when he was suddenly berated by his donkey. To the contrary, he responds very naturally – albeit angrily – by pleading his case and accusing the animal of disobedience. As Rabbi Shemuel David Luzzato ("Shadal," Italy, 19th century) noted, had the donkey actually spoken, Bilam would have been seized by shock and horror, to the point of near death. The fact that Bilam responds with such ease leads us to believe that the donkey did not actually speak to him. Shadal, unwilling to relegate the entire episode to the realm of prophecy, resolves this enigma by proposing that the donkey did not verbalize his protestation, but brayed in a manner that would convey his frustration. For Maimonides, of course, the question never arises in the first place, since this entire drama never actually occurred.

Contradictory Sources

Based on what we have seen thus far, Maimonides theory concerning the donkey narrative, though far from immediately obvious from the text, is reasonable and perhaps even exegetically advantageous. Two sources, however, one from the Mishna and another from Maimonides' own writings, raise very serious questions about ascribing this incident to a prophetic vision. These questions were posed by Rabbi Moshe Alashkar (from the Spanish Inquisition era), in a responsum he wrote to defend Maimonides from the charges of his critics (Responsa of Maharam Alashkar, 117). Amidst his discussion he notes these difficulties with Maimonides' position and concedes that he has no adequate solution. (This responsum of Rabbi Mosh Alashkar is available online, at www.daat.ac.il/daat/mahshevt/pilosof/sefer3-2.htm.)

In Masekhet Avot (5:6), the Mishna lists ten objects of supernatural events which came into existence "on Friday, at twilight." As Maimonides explains in his commentary to this Mishna, just prior to God's completion of the process of creation at the end of the sixth and final day of genesis, He implanted within the natural order certain exceptions to its standard routine. Before setting the universe into motion, the Almighty imposed several extraordinary deviations from the otherwise consistent course it would follow from then until eternity, such as the opening of the ground to devour Korach and his fellow rebels, the manna that miraculously fell from the sky, and others. Included in this list is the *pi ha-aton* – "the mouth of the donkey," a clear reference to Bilam's donkey. If the Mishna considers Bilam's donkey's temporary power of speech a miracle, of equal stature to the manna and the ground that devoured Korach, then clearly it interpreted the incident of Bilam's donkey literally. The conversation between the beast and the seer took place in reality, and not merely in Bilam's divinely inspired imagination – in direct contradiction to Maimonides' theory articulated in the *Guide*.

The only answer, it would seem, is to acknowledge divergent views among the *Tanna'im* with regard to this issue. If not all *Tanna'im* accepted the position advocated by Maimonides, then we can simply attribute this Mishna in Avot to a proponent of the contrary view.

Sure enough, it seems abundantly clear that Maimonides' stance is subject to a dispute among the *Tanna'im*. Let us return to the aforementioned narrative of Avraham and the three angels. The Torah tells that upon seeing the three mysterious passersby, Avraham approached them and said, "My lord [*Adonai*]… do not pass by your servant" (Bereishit 18:3). The Gemara (Shavuot 35b) records a debate among the *Tanna'im* regarding to whom Avraham here speaks. According to one view, Avraham speaks to the Almighty, who had just appeared to Avraham moments earlier, and he asks God to wait there until he finishes tending to the needs of the three weary and famished wayfarers. Another view, however, argues that Avraham here addresses the most distinguished of the three visitors, asking that they spend some time with him in his tent, rather than passing by. According to this position, Avraham does not address God here at all, but rather turns directly to the wayfarers. This second position is cited in the Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 48:9) in the name of Rabbi Chiya.

Maimonides, of course, follows this second view, of Rabbi Chiya. According to the first position, when the Torah introduces the narrative by telling, "The Lord appeared to Avraham in Elonei Mamrei," it means that God came to Avraham directly, not through a prophetic vision of three angelic visitors. Avraham therefore had to request that God wait for him while he serves his guests. It is only the second view that interprets the description of God's revelation as an introduction to the angels' arrival, the vision of which was the manner through which God appeared to Avraham. Accordingly, Avraham had no need to address God and ask that he wait, for God had not appeared to him at all, other than through the vision of the three angels.

In the relevant chapter in the *Guide* (2:42), Maimonides builds very heavily on the view of Rabbi Chiya, noting that Rabbi Chiya interpreted this narrative as a prophetic vision, rather than an actual event. By invoking Rabbi Chiya's position as support for his contention, Maimonides implicitly acknowledges that the opposing view, recorded in the Talmud, accepted the literal reading of the narrative, by which the patriarch in fact encountered three angelic creatures. By Maimonides' own admission, then, there were those among the *Tanna'im* who recognized the possibility of visible encounters with angels, rather than ascribing all such encounters to the realm of prophetic vision. Although he emphatically embraces Rabbi Chiya's stance, insisting that all experiences with angels occur only in prophecy, other *Tanna'im* clearly felt otherwise. Accordingly, we can easily attribute

the aforementioned Mishna in Avot, which speaks of the donkey's speech as a miraculous event, to the opposing position. It thus poses no difficulty for Maimonides, who, as discussed, accepted the view of Rabbi Chiya.

The second question raised by Maharam Alashkar involves Maimonides' own comments earlier in the second section of the *Guide* (chapter 6). As we cited earlier, Maimonides defines the word *malakh* ("angel") as a reference to any kind of force through which God impacts world events. In this passage, Maimonides explains the possible effects of angels on animals: "Even the movements of the brute creation are sometimes due to the action of an angel, when such movements serve the purpose of the Creator, who endowed it with the power of performing that movement." He cites two examples from Tanakh of angels being dispatched to affect the behavior of animals: the angel that shut the lions' mouths, preventing them from hurting the prophet Daniel (Daniel 6:22), and Bilam's donkey. Regarding the latter, Maimonides writes, "Another instance may be seen in the movements of Bilam's donkey, described as caused by an angel." However one chooses to understand this reference (some commentaries to the *Guide* claim that Maimonides here speaks of the donkey's speech, but it might also refer to its steering off course to avoid the angel), it certainly appears intended to explain an actual event. Maimonides could not cite the angel's effects on Bilam's donkey in his effort to determine the essence and function of angels, if this entire episode occurred only in Bilam's prophetic imagination. If Maimonides invokes this narrative here, it would indicate that he approached it as an actual occurrence.

The most likely answer is that Maimonides indeed saw significance in the description of the donkey's conduct in Bilam's dream. Even if these "movements" were merely dreamt, and never transpired in reality, the very fact that they are said to have resulted from an angel's machinations may shed light on the nature of angels. If Bilam dreamt of a donkey acting a certain way due to the effects of angelic influence, then we may justifiably conclude that angels can, in reality, have impact upon the conduct of animals.

Word of Caution

In conclusion, it is perhaps worthwhile to warn against possible misguided attempts to recklessly extend Maimonides' approach beyond the parameters in which he himself applied it. It might be tempting to follow his lead and take the liberty of denying the historicity or historical accuracy of Biblical narratives, instead relegating them to the status of imagination or perhaps metaphor. It must be emphasized that Maimonides' novel theory (which, as mentioned, has precedent in the writings of Rav Sa'adya Gaon) resulted from a very particular philosophical tenet concerning the nature of angels and their encounters with human beings. Maimonides expresses no opposition to accepting – in principle – the possibility of a miraculous event of this nature, nor was he seeking to reconcile the Biblical narrative with conflicting theories and preconceptions. He indeed advances a similar theory regarding the Book of Iyov (*Guide*, 3:22), arguing that the story of Iyov is a fictional account intended to reflect the various philosophical approaches to the problem of theodicy. But this claim is firmly grounded in earlier, Talmudic sources, and – as Maimonides himself emphasizes – helps explain the otherwise inexplicable uncertainty among the Sages regarding Iyov's identity and historical context. In any event, Maimonides certainly employed this approach very judiciously. We may not, therefore, enlist his approach as a precedent for speculative theories undermining the historical truth of episodes documented in the Bible.