''*Im likro lecha''*: An insight into last week's challenge''

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The problem we posed last week related to God's answer to Bilaam's second petition that he be permitted to accompany the delegation of Balak, King of Moab. God's answer is as follows:

וַיָּבֹא אֱלֹקִים אֶל בִּלְעָם לַיְלָה וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ אִם לִקְרֹא לְךָ בָּאוּ הָאֲנָשִׁים קוּם לֵךְ אִתָּם

And God said to Bilaam, 'If the men have come to call you, rise up and go with them' (Nu.22:20).

The problem we posed was regarding the phrase '*IF* the men have come to call you...' Surely there was no issue here. Of course they had come *to call* Bilaam? So, what is the import of that phrase?

You will recall that I opened up the question to wider suggestions, and I am happy to present here the first two replies that I received, and my thanks to both contributors. The first was from Mr Philip Skelker who felt that any solution had to take account of the philosophical issue of man's freedom of choice:

Free will exists alongside divine foreknowledge. Whether Bilaam will accompany the men Balak has sent is not determined by God's foreknowledge; rather it is down to Bilaam to exercise his free will, choose between the Almighty and the King of Moab and take responsibility for the consequences. The delegation can only be said to have called him when he declares that he is ready to accept the deal Balak offers him. Until then the matter is in the balance.

Much to chew on there!

The second was from Dr Michael Bliss (formerly of Stanmore, now Netanya) who supplied a pithy response related to the *peshat*, the implication of the plain text:

'If the men have come to call you, rise up and go with them'. I know you are dying to go with these people and earn the magnificent rewards offered to you, If this more prestigious delegation has come to call you to curse my people, so go with them and I will call them out and turn the curse into a blessing..'

The approach I instinctively take on textual interpretation is the one commended by Rashi (so I can't go far wrong!). Although he frequently quotes Midrashic statements, they are invariably those which approximate closest to the plain meaning of the text. In the following passage He makes very clear his assessment of their comparative significance.

> There are many Aggadic (folkloristic) *midrashim*; our rabbis have already arranged them in their proper place in Genesis Rabbah and other such collections. My mission, however, is to present only *peshuto shel mikra'* (the plain, or contextual, meaning of the text), as well as those Midrashic comments which explain the words of Scripture, each word in its appropriate place *(Rashi* on Gen.3:8).

Rashi's treatment of Midrashic statements has been the subject of countless books and articles. Suffice to say that, where he did quote them, he more than often, did not do so verbatim, but reworked them to support his own approach. His objectivity is also reflected in the fact that, on many occasions in his commentary his comment on a biblical word or phrase is, "לא ידעתי פירושו" – 'I do not know its import!' Significantly, the Midrash offers many interpretations on those particular passages, but clearly Rashi was of the opinion that Midrash is in a category of its own, and does not set out to provide any elucidation of the textual or plain meaning.

Until Rashi's period, the folkloristic, and often exotic, approach of Midrash was predominant. But he realised that his communities were becoming more sophisticated and more interested in allowing the Torah text to tell its own story. Indeed, Rashi's grandson, *RaSHbaM* (Samuel ben Meir, 1083-1174) observed that his grandfather disclosed to him that, had he his time all over again, he would rewrite his commentary in accordance with the textual approach that was more and more the vogue in his day (see on Gen. 37:2).

In that respect, Rashi was a trailblazer, and the pioneer of the textual approach in France and beyond. This was developed by such 12th century commentators as R. Joseph Kara , RaShbaM, and R. Joseph Bechor Shor of Orléans.

It is perhaps ironical that so many 'learned' people today take Midrashic statements at face value (peshat), notwithstanding their obvious homiletical intent, whereas some of the very sages whom they themselves would acknowledge as our greatest Bible commentators already looked beyond that approach some 800 years ago!

That is not to disparage Midrash, which is the fruit of the sacred and creative imagination, the insights and expositions, of our great Talmudic sages as they dreamed themselves back into the biblical period and episodes, as well as plumbing the depths of the text in order to provide timeless ethical and moral messages. However, attempting to discover what the text 'says' is quite different from what teachings we can extract from it or read into it!

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Now let's apply that peshat approach to our problem phrase. But, first, a word to those who are unfamiliar with biblical Hebrew semantics. It is axiomatic that Hebrew roots (that is, the three letters that constitute the root of every Hebrew Verb) invariably have more than one meaning, and frequently may have as many as two, three, even four.

To take a few examples:

The root חלה has three different meanings: (i) 'to be weak, sick,' (ii) 'to appease, entreat (the favour of),' and (iii) 'to adorn.'

The verb כרה, means, (i) 'to dig', (ii) 'to acquire by trade,' and (iii) 'to give a feast'.

The verb מלל has the four meanings: (i) 'to speak', (ii) 'to rub or scrape,' (iii) 'to wither, fade, languish' and (iv) 'to circumcise'.

Now, in the case of many roots, in addition to having one basic meaning, they possess a number of 'nuances,' or shades of meaning, flowing from them.

Let us take the root נשא as an example:

This basic root means 'to lift or carry'. However, the following are just some of the 'nuances' that it also bears: 'to be high or exalted', 'to raise' (one's voice, eyes, etc), 'to carry away', 'to embark on a journey (literally, 'to lift up [one's feet]')', 'to impose on someone (e.g. an oath)', 'to wield (e.g. a sword)', 'to display boldness (lit. *to lift up* one's

head confidently)', 'to restore (e.g. one's former honour or position)', 'to show love, favour, or pride (note the phrase in the priestly blessing, lit יִשָּׂא ה" פָּנָיו , lit. 'May God *lift up* His countenance towards you')', 'to remove (e.g. sin or guilt)', i.e. 'to forgive'.

There is much to say on the subject of nuances. Suffice to say— as we are dealing with the phrase (in English), 'if the men have come *to call* you'— that the English verb 'to call' similarly has a very large number of such applied meanings, such as, 'to visit' (as in 'pay a call'), 'to mock' ('to *call* names'), 'to confer a name' (as in the phrase, 'And God *called* the light, 'day', and the darkness He *called,* 'night''), 'to give life' (as in 'to *call* into being'), 'to cast doubt on' (as in 'to *call* into doubt'), 'to bring something back (as in 're*call*'), 'to reprove' (as in '*call* to account'), 'to elevate to an important position' (as in, '*call* to the bar') or holy order (a 'calling'), 'to challenge someone or something' (as in 'to *call* him, or it, out'), 'to request or summon the services of someone' (as in, they *called* the police')

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I think it should be clear now that translation is not a straightforward matter, for we have to know all the nuances of meaning that a phrase may have in the original language in order to be able to attempt to render it accurately and precisely in translation. Thus, Hebrew phrases may often be rendered in a variety of ways, which will become apparent if we look at all the well-known translations from antiquity (e.g. the Aramaic, Syriac, Greek and Latin versions) and until the modern day. Hence, for example, I was emboldened to render the Book of Psalms into rhymed verse in a manner that embodied many of the nuanced, rather than the literal, senses of the Hebrew.

Now, if you've read so far (well done!) you will appreciate the approach I have taken to the verb לִקְרֹא in our problem phrase אִם לִקְרֹא לְךָ בָּאוּ הָאֲנָשִׁים.

Students learning Hebrew will be taught to translate our verb קרא as either 'to call, proclaim,' or 'to read' (not really the same activity, eh?!).

I suggest that its import in our particular context will be discovered by searching for examples where that verb, קרא, usually translated 'to call', occurs in the Torah in the related, albeit nuanced, sense of 'to call *persuasively*', that is, 'to summons, entice, seduce, overwhelm, inordinately influence.'

This sense underlies several passages, such as in Exod. 34:15:

'Do not make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, for they will lust after their gods and sacrifice to their gods — ,וְקָרָא לְךָ וְאָכַלְתָּ מִזִּבְחוֹ This cannot mean, simply and tamely, 'and they will *call you* and you will eat of their offerings'. A simple 'call' is unlikely to be met with a ready response, especially from a nation forewarned about the consequences of rejecting the word of God! וְקָרָא לְךָ must therefore imply a much more powerful, persuasive and seductive type of 'calling'. I would therefore translate the phrase, 'and they will seduce you to eat of their sacrifices'.

The same powerful nuance of 'deviant calling' is found immediately after Balak returns home (Nu. 25:1-2), and it relates to the identical context of immorality and idolatry:

א וַיֵּשֶׁב יִשְׂרָאֵל בַּשִּׁטִּים וַיָּחֶל הָעָם לִזְנוֹת אֶל־בְּנוֹת מוֹאָב׃

ב וַתִּקְרֶאןָ לָעָם לִזְבְחֵי אֱלֹהֵיהֶן וַיֹּאכַל הָעָם וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲווּ לֵאלֹהֵיהֶן׃

ג וַיִּצָּמֶד יִשְׂרָאֵל לְבַעַל פְּעוֹר וַיִּחַר־אַף יְהוָה בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל׃

'And Israel settled in Shittim and the people became degenerate by committing immorality with the daughters of Moab. וַתִּקְרֶאןָ לָעָם לִזְבְחֵי אֱלֹהֵיהֶן — And they ''enticed'' the people into worship of their gods….Thus Israel became yoked to Baal Peor (worship) and God's anger was kindled against Israel.'

THUS, with that nuance of the verb לִקְרֹא in mind, we may now understand God's words to Bilaam as, ''If these men have totally 'enticed/lured/brainwashed you, then go with them.'

[It also explains an unnecessary repetition in King Balak's initial instruction to his delegation: וּשְׁלַח מַלְאָכִים אֶל-בִּלְעָם בֶּן-בְּעוֹר, פְּתוֹרָה אֲשֶׁר עַל-הַנָּהָר אֶרֶץ בְּנֵי-עַמּוֹ--לִקְרֹא-לוֹ לֵאמֹר ... 'And he sent messengers to Bilaam…*to call to him, saying'*. It would have been sufficient to say, 'And he sent messengers to Bilaam, saying...!' The phrase לִקְרֹא-לוֹ is therefore wholly unnecessary! The only way to justify it is as suggesting a further emphasis, which we understand as, 'to persuade/ summons/ induce him, saying…'.]

God understood that Bilaam's 'free will' – to use Mr Skelker's perspective - had been severely compromised by the drug of the inducements offered to him. God simply *had* to let him go, therefore, in order to restore to him that divinely-gifted freedom that was a precondition for human activity. God was entitled to defend His own position, however, and to convert the potential cursing into blessing.

It is the same with any other conflict. If my foe wishes to initiate an attack on me, God grants him the freedom to do so. However, that does not mean that I am forbidden to defend myself! The granting of that free will does not mean that God condones or allies Himself with the person's action. Hence, God also had the 'freedom' to frustrate Bilaam's offensive.

Dr Bliss's comment also supports my approach: *I know you are* **dying to go with** *these people and earn the magnificent rewards offered to you…*

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Jeffrey