

The bedside TORAH

wisdom, visions, and dreams



Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson

Edited by Miriyam Glazer, Ph.D.

Contemporary Books

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woman's lipstick does the same. These things gain their value not from the particular practice, but from the context that such practices creates.

So, too, with the *hukkim*, the unexplainable *mitzvo*t in the Torah and in rabbinic literature. Any living culture requires distinct customs and practices to maintain its own special identity, to affirm the loyalty of its members and its continuity across generations. Judaism has those same needs.

But Judaism posits an additional reason as well. The ultimate justification of parental instruction is always, "Because I said so, that's why." Judaism claims to preserve the loving *brit* between God and the Jewish people.

Just as close-knit families develop special customs to maintain their closeness, just as nations develop unique foods or holidays to heighten the loyalty of their members, so God and the Jewish People developed the *hukkim* in the context of creating deeds that cement the loyalty among Jews and with God.

BALAK/Balak

Numbers 22:2-25:9

Balak, the king of Moab, seeks to hire Balaam, a soothsayer of great repute, to curse the Israelites so he can defeat them. When the elders offer this invitation to Balaam, he tells them to wait so he can inquire as to God's wishes. God tells him not to go with the Moabites, nor to curse the Israelites, since they are a blessed people. The dignitaries return to Balak, who sends another delegation. Once more, Balaam inquires of God, and God permits Balaam to go with them, but insists that "whatever I command you, that you shall do."

Balaam saddles his donkey, and proceeds. But God is furious at Balaam and sends an angel with a drawn sword. The donkey sees the angel and swerves from the path, but Balaam beats it to force it to return. This happens again and again, until God causes the donkey to speak, berating Balaam for his lack of gratitude or vision. Then God allows him to see the threatening angel.

When Balaam arrives, he tells Balak, "I can utter only the words that God puts into my mouth." They make a sacrifice, and then Balak leads Balaam to a place where he can see some of the Israelite encampment. Balaam builds seven altars and offers seven bulls and rams. God tells Balaam what to say. This is a blessing that includes the famous description of the Jews: "There is a people that dwells apart, Not reckoned among the nations. . . . May I die the death of the upright, May my fate be like theirs!"

Balak is distraught that the seer he hoped would curse the Israelites blessed them instead, so he tries again from another locale. A similar message emerges: "The Lord their God is with them, and their King's acclaim in their midst."

Balak attempts a third oracle, which offers the blessing, "How fair are your tents, O Jacob, Your dwellings, O Israel!" At this final blessing, Balak sends Balaam back to his home. Before leaving, Balaam offers a fourth oracle, unrequested, predicting Israel's victory against the enemy nations that surround it. He then returns home.

While encamped at Shittim, the Israelite men are enticed by Moabite women to participate in the idolatrous cult of Baal-Peor. As a result, a plague erupts among the Israelites, and God commands Moses to impale the leaders of the rebellion. Before he has a chance to carry out God's grim decree, however, the priest Pinhas finds an Israelite man and a Moabite woman copulating near the sanctuary. Zealous on God's behalf, he impales the two with a spear during their copulation, and his action stops the plague.



Parashat Balak/Balak

Take 1

Balaam: Gentility and Compassion

With great anguish, the Holocaust taught the Jewish People that we ourselves must be the guardians of our own survival and our own needs. The vaunted "civilization" of the West, at whose altar post-Enlightenment assimilated Jews worshiped, revealed itself to have moral and religious shortcomings for which Jews paid with their lives.

The tragedies of our past taught us that our own identity as Jews, the sacred traditions of Judaism, and our people's *brit* with God merit another look, a renewed allegiance, and greater fidelity.

But we can also go too far if we look only inward and reject the claim of universal values. Today's Torah portion about the Gentile prophet Balaam is about balancing those extremes. The Torah describes Balaam as speaking directly with God. Time and time again, following God's instruction, Balaam blesses the Jews, praising their beauty as a people, and reminding us of the legitimacy of our distinctiveness: "There is a people that dwells apart, not reckoned among the nations." Coming from the mouth of a prophet from another nation, these words force us also to look at the larger human context that transcends the particularity of our identity.

Midrash Ba-Midbar Rabbah comments on how striking it was that God should speak through a Gentile prophet. The rabbis then ask why, if in the biblical period, it was possible for prophecy to transpire through non-Jews, why was that no longer true? The answer, according to the *Midrash*, was that Balaam eventually lost compassion for the Jewish

People since they weren't his own nation: "The reason the section of Balaam was recorded was to make it known why the Holy Blessing One removed the holy spirit from the idolaters, for this man rose from their midst, and see what he did!"

Not so the prophets of Israel. According to these same rabbis, "all the prophets retained a compassionate attitude toward both Israel and the idolaters." That compassion for others was what marked the prophets of Israel as worthy of transmitting God's voice to the world.

What was true then is no less true today. Our concern with explicitly Jewish issues—our sense of identity, life in Israel, religious observance, our spiritual lives as Jews—is a vital part of who we are. But it is only *part* of who we are. If we turn our back on social and humanitarian involvements with the larger world, we betray what was distinctive about our prophets of old, and what was beautiful about an earlier vision of what Judaism should be.

As we plumb the depths of our sacred traditions, becoming increasingly at home with Torah, Talmud, and *midrash*, as we learn to pray and to converse in Hebrew, as we grow in observance of the *mitzot*, may we always remember that we are descendants of those prophets who knew that God's revelation to our ancestors was based on love and compassion for all peoples.



Parashat Balak/Balak

Take 2

Who's Really the Ass?

Our relationship with animals is ambivalent, yet strong. On the one hand, we allow animals into our homes, our bedrooms, and our most intimate moments, lavishing our affection on them during the quiet moments of our days. We love to go hiking to watch birds and see deer, rabbits, and other wild animals, reveling in our sense of union with the natural order. We admire animals for their beauty, grace, and the warmth they bring to our lives. At the same time, we also perceive ourselves as their superiors. After all, only people were made in God's image. Humanity seems never to have quite settled on what animals mean to us or how we should treat them.

In today's Torah portion, we see that same ambivalence, this time in the relationship between Balaam and his remarkable donkey. Balaam has been summoned by the king of Moab to curse the Israelites, making it easier for the Moabites to destroy their Jewish victims. Saddling up his animal companion, Balaam is infuriated when the donkey refuses to follow orders. Ironically, we know that the donkey is trying to protect her less-insightful human cargo. After enduring several blows, the animal finally speaks out, saying, "What have I done to you that you have beaten me these three times? . . . Look, I am the ass that you have been riding all along until this day! Have I been in the habit of doing thus to you?"

Against Balaam's thoughtless fury, the donkey answers calmly and with reason. The rabbis of *Midrash Ba-Midbar Rabbah* expand this observation. They ask, "Why is it that animals don't use speech?" And their answer is, "had they been able to speak, it would have been impossible to put them to the service of people or to stand one's ground against them. For here was this ass, the most stupid of all beasts, and there was the wisest of all the wise, yet as soon as she opened her mouth he could not stand his ground against her." Therefore, conclude the rabbis, "the Holy Blessing One has consideration for the embarrassment of people, and knowing their needs, shut the mouth of beasts."

The *midrash* raises this inescapable question: What might animals say if they could speak?

Our dogs might ask us why they are able to be so agreeable and loving all the time while we seem incapable of achieving that same love and loyalty among ourselves.

Our cats might inquire about our admiration for their cleanliness and the care they take of their own bodies while we destroy our own health through our refusal to exercise or to control our eating, drinking, smoking, and any number of other destructive habits.

Those same cats might also puzzle about why we admire their independence while it is so difficult for us to be alone. Are we afraid of our own thoughts, or our own company?

Our pet birds might ponder with confusion as we rave about their beautiful singing but devote no time at all to our own creativity and playfulness. For most of us, poetry, art, and drama are child's play.

Always able to find time to play or socialize, our pets might ask why we always complain about our lack of time but never take the steps necessary to reorganize our lives to care for our real needs.

But most of all, animals—wild and domestic—would wonder why we so pervert and cheapen our own noblest instincts. Dogs are able to play together and to live up to our expectations. Cats and birds also care for their own kind.

Almost solely in the world, human beings demonstrate a level of aggression and cruelty to their own kind that would be considered truly beastly—except that beasts don't do it.

Balaam's ass embarrassed Balaam because the prophet was less able to live up to his own expectations than was the donkey. Blessed and cursed by our gift of reason, we rely on our brains just enough to get ourselves in trouble, but not enough to resolve to live better, more thoughtful, and more reasonable lives.

Think of all the secrets our pets have seen. And imagine how embarrassing it would be if they could speak.



Parashat Balak/Balak

Take 3

Blessed, and a Source of Blessing

Every year that I read the remarkable story of the Gentile king, Balak, hiring the Gentile prophet to curse the Israelites, I am struck by how remarkable this story really is. After all, how often does the Torah concern itself with the internal affairs of other peoples? Understood as the love letters between God and the Jewish People, it is quite proper that the Torah's focus is on the relationship, the *brit* between God and Israel. Yet this story stars a non-Jew who is seen as a holy and a wise seer.

Balak demands that Balaam curse the Jews so that they will be easier to defeat in battle. Faithful to God, Balaam explains that he cannot curse or bless without first receiving divine authorization. When he asks God what to do, God tells him, "Do not curse the people, *ki varukeh hu*, for it is blessed."

What is God really saying about us? In what way are the Jewish People *barukeh*, blessed?

The medieval commentary *Lekach Tov* understands this phrase to mean that we are blessed because of the *zekhut avot*, the righteous deeds

of the patriarchs and the matriarchs. Their goodness was such that God blessed us with an irrevocable blessing. We, their later descendants, benefit from their blessing to this day.

Another related way to understand this verse is to ask ourselves in what way are we blessed. It does sound like God is saying that there is some intrinsic blessing with which we are imbued. How are Jews blessed?

- We are blessed with a rich memory: As a people, we enjoy a continuous identity stretching back to the very earliest layers of human history. From Abraham and Sarah down to the youngest Jewish baby alive today, we know where we come from, and we know who we are. In an age of rootlessness, in a time of confusion about identity, we Jews have the luxury of knowing our beginnings and of identifying with our rich and varied history. As the Passover *Haggadah* urges, each generation understands the history of the Jews not merely as something from the past, but as something informing our own identity today: *We* were freed from Egypt, *we* fashioned the Talmud, *we* explored the depths of Jewish philosophy and Kabbalah, *we* enjoyed the modern fruits of emancipation and of Zionism.
- We are blessed with a wise and profound way of life: Not only do we have a history that is ancient and continuing, but we also have a way of life that is rich and rewarding. The cycle of Sabbaths, holy days, and festivals adds shape and texture to our weeks and years, allowing us to rejoice with our loved ones and to create precious occasions to cherish and to enjoy. The beauty of the holidays becomes part and parcel of our love for each other and our sense of community. Linked as they are to ethical values and religious expression, their beauty is enhanced by moral depth and by great insights to be learned anew.
- We are blessed with being the messengers of God's love and justice: Our religious tradition harnesses beautiful ritual for the sake of ethical rigor. By teaching us to care for the sick, to feed the hungry, to shelter the homeless, to care for the earth, our religion offers a message as vital now as it was when it was first articulated. No less revolutionary today, the notion that all people reflect God's Divine image and are worthy of respect and dignity contin-

ues to transform and elevate the world. Ours is the privilege of carrying that message and reiterating it, even when it seems that others may have forgotten it.

In these and other ways, we are indeed blessed to be Jews. But there is another way that we can understand Balaam's rejoinder. The Hebrew word *barukh* may be passive, meaning blessed. But it might also be an active adjective, like *hanun* or *rachum*. In that case, it means "source of blessing" or "bountiful." When we say a *berakbah*, then, we are saying that God is generous to us, and then specifying how God's bounty is manifest in that particular instance.

Using this understanding, we can say that Balaam is refusing to curse the Jews because we are a source of blessing.

In that reading, Balaam offers us a great challenge: Our mission as Jews is to be a source of blessing, not merely for ourselves, but for all humanity. As Balaam says, "Blessed are those you bless, and cursed are those you curse." Our task as Jews is to serve as God's representatives on earth: Just as God is known as a source of blessing for creation, so we are to be a source of blessing for all.

The way we live our lives, then, must be measured not only by our ritual observances, important as they are, but also by how we embody the ethical *mitzvot*. By shouldering the burdens that weigh others down, by conducting our business lives in an honorable and productive fashion, by embodying patience and compassion in all we do, we live up to Balaam's and God's high expectations.

Are we a blessing? Are you?