

Balaam's View

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THE TORAH PORTION OF BALAK IN THE BOOK OF Numbers gives us a chance to fulfill a wish that pretty much everyone has, but pretty much no one should be granted: the wish to see ourselves as others see us.

It's a wish rarely achieved without regrets. We should know: As Jews we've always felt the need to keep track of what other people think of us. And like most eavesdroppers, we don't always like what we hear. Who can forget the tizzy and communal meltdown, lo these many years ago, when we discovered what the Rev. Jesse Jackson really thought of New York City? But beyond the sometimes self-destructive curiosity is a more complicated yearning — one that parashat Balak seems custom-designed to satisfy. We all want not just to see what others see when they look at us — we want those others to see us deeply and truly, and to approve.

When we walk into a synagogue, the first thing we're supposed to say is, *Mah tovu ohalekha, Yaakov, mishkinotekha, Yisrael / How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your habitations, O Israel*. These are the soaring, immortal words of appreciation and blessing from Balaam — as the commentators remind us, a wicked, hypocritical, opportunistic, non-Jewish sorcerer.

Why? What's the big deal about these words? They are, of course, significant in the history of the Jewish nation; for the first time, we see ourselves from the outside, so to speak. The modern commentator Shammai Engelmayer notes that the Israelites may not even know this episode is happening. Certainly, any blessing or curse by Balaam is not going to affect them; indeed, by the end of the parashah, despite their blessed status, they've gone on to have some unpleasant adventures. So the point is not so much to bless them as to acknowledge their blessedness in public.

Balaam is a figure of some heft; some suggest he is as powerful a prophet among his people as Moses is among his. Maimonides says Balaam is on a level, as a prophet, with David and Solomon. He may be the only figure in the Five Books of Moses to be attested independently by archaeology. He may even be mentioned in the Qu'ran. And he blesses the Jews! But there is more to the episode that leads to these words being spoken. If we look carefully, we will find not only the goofy story of the king, the sorcerer, and the donkey, but a story of painstaking psychological preparation for these words to be spoken and — more important and difficult — for them to be freely given and freely meant. Balaam always makes me think of a journalist friend of mine, who used to say, “The facts are trying to tell you something!”

Let's review. As Numbers 22 opens, Balak, king of the Moabites, observes the encroaching Israelites and gets nervous. He sees he cannot best them numerically in battle, so he thinks that if he sends for Balaam, a noted sorcerer of seemingly neutral standing, and has them curse the Israelites, that will weaken them enough so he can then attack. He sends emissaries to Balaam, offering riches if he will come do this. Balaam is eager at first, but he consults God — one of the many striking things about Balaam is the way he seems to have a more reliable direct line to God than most of the patriarchs — and is told that no one may curse the nation of Israel, because it is blessed. Balaam explains this to the emissaries, who report to Balak that Balaam won't come. Balak responds by offering yet more money and more distinguished emissaries, so Balaam, despite perfectly clear previous communication with God, goes back to God to see if He really meant it.

This is the first point at which Balaam's state of mind becomes worthy of closer attention. There is copious debate among the Sages as to what Balaam means by going back to God in this weak-kneed fashion, and why God puts up with it — which He does! God tells Balaam that he won't be able to curse the Jews, but if he wants to go with the emissaries, fine. Rashi thinks Balaam's enthusiastic hostility toward the Israelites outstrips even Balak's — his language is more extreme — so that he can't help himself. One midrash notes that because God began by asking Balaam, “Who are these men?,” Balaam figures, Aha, there are things God doesn't know; maybe he won't notice a little curse, so I can do what the king wants. Me, I like to put it in parochial terms: Balaam is now in the position of a pundit who knows, based on his own impeccable sources, that the government is pursuing a

policy he approves of, but who also knows he can make *so* much more money attacking it on Fox News.

For whatever reason, Balaam goes back to God — yes, he gets a second audience, on demand — gets God’s grudging permission, and sets off on his donkey with his escort. God is described as incensed by this — engendering more puzzled commentary from the sages, who wonder why God would offer Balaam the choice to go but still be disappointed when he decides to. (But if you’ve ever tried to argue your spouse or your teenager into doing something because *they* really want to, you may not find it so odd.) When Balaam fails to come around, things get nuttier: The donkey is blocked in the road by an invisible angel with a sword. Balaam doesn’t see the angel, but the donkey does; she stops to avoid the angel; Balaam beats her to make her go; the angel is right in front of her, so she lies down in the road. Balaam beats her again, and the donkey suddenly is given speech — saying, Wait, I’m your faithful donkey, I’ve never acted this way before, right? — and then Balaam himself sees the angel and offers to go home. Again, God’s messenger urges him to go on, but reminds him he will have to say exactly what God tells him.

Of the many meanings that have been ascribed to the talking donkey episode, to me the simplest seems to be that it represents one more step in God’s increasingly aggressive, if determinedly indirect, efforts at persuading Balaam to do the right thing of his own accord. It’s not that, when the donkey speaks, she says anything particularly illuminating; indeed, the more rationalist commentators, such as Maimonides, suggest that the donkey simply brayed in a suggestive manner, bringing the angel to Balaam’s attention. But the angel does make clear that the donkey speaks because God wants her to, and for no other reason — just the way Balaam is going to speak as God, or Balak, wants him to, one or the other. Surely this strikes at Balaam’s personal self-respect and professional pride! He has been acting, and intending to act, as a total tool — he might be Balak’s, he might be God’s. The donkey episode forces a question: Whose donkey are you?

Is it this shock to pride that finally gets through to Balaam, that prepares him to clear his head? God wants him for the same reason Balak wants him: what he says about the children of Israel will be heard and remarked. But God, unlike Balak, doesn’t really want a donkey. He wants

Balaam to say the right thing on his own and really mean it. As with God's desire for human beings to have free will and yet do the right thing, this is a difficult trick to pull off.

The thing is, it happens. But not easily. Atop the mountain, there is frantic manipulation in all directions. Balak orders Balaam to view and curse from various locations, Balaam orders Balak to set up networks of altars. Balaam urges God to manifest himself. God does ventriloquism as promised. Twice, Balaam opens his mouth and God “puts a word in it” — instead of cursing, Balaam blesses. Together, Balak and Balaam seek different angles from which the Jews can be effectively cursed. The third time, Balak takes him to the very top, where he can see the whole people. And here the story reaches its turning point, for Balaam, in a clearly marked shift, is imbued with authentic prophecy and speaks an authentic blessing in his own voice. This is the Mah Tovu. For good measure, he then tells Balak the future of all the peoples he can see, the long-term outcomes, the messianic age, and then he goes his way.

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Balaam gets more attention from God in this parashah than many an Israelite prophet — with God speaking to him on demand, answering Balaam's specific questions night after night, kindly “manifesting” himself when called for — and certainly more than any other non-Jew in the Torah except, perhaps, Pharaoh. Indeed, if you recall the sustained attention that God puts into “hardening” Pharaoh's heart so the ten plagues can run their course, it's possible to spot almost the same kind of sustained attention put into “softening” Balaam's. And if, as one of many explanations has it, Pharaoh's heart is hardened in the interest of a larger and more instructive world spectacle later on, then in the case of Balaam God seems to be up to something similar, though subtler, and easy to miss.

The Sages are tough on Balaam. He comes in for a lot of abuse. They note that he is later associated with persuading the Israelites to immorality at Baal-Peor and that he dies by the sword in the Book of Joshua. They see his moment of truth as fleeting, his fame as fakery. Ibn Ezra says he attained that

fame by knowing exactly when something bad or good was about to happen to someone, and cursing or blessing accordingly, so as to get the credit; in our terms, then, a skilled anticipator of, and surfer on, the conventional wisdom. The Sages say he was initially so enthusiastic about his cursing mission that he got up early in the morning and saddled his own donkey — like Abraham rushing to obey God in the Akedah!

But the details of his journey make Balaam a more sympathetic figure to us, who in the end is remembered for doing something significant and impressive. He reaches a shining moment of prophecy, which we might call truth, or, in modern terms, intellectual honesty. Ignoring the stunned king at his elbow, he prophesies honestly; he calls the situation as he sees it. The stress laid by our Sages on the moment's fleeting quality just underlines how difficult it is to come by such moments — there or anywhere.

Picture the thing in our own time and place. We see a lot of argument night after night on television, or what looks like argument; much of it is closer to a ritual exchange of blessings and cursings. There's a hunger for something that increasingly seems almost unattainable — an actual, impartially rendered response.

If you are as prominent as Balaam, if you have reached a position or made a name for yourself by holding certain views, you change them at your peril. A really open mind at the wrong moment could do significant career damage.

The funny thing is, at the key moment for Balaam, all of the coercion disappears. Balak, after two weird prophecies, has lost patience: “Do not curse them and do not bless them!” He seems disinclined to punish Balaam for his non-curses. God, meanwhile, has afforded Balaam plausible deniability; Balaam has told Balak three or four times already that he's helpless to say anything but what God commands him. (In effect, he can claim that God hacked his Twitter feed.)

But then as chapter 24 opens, something happens. The text says, “He did not go in search of omens, as before, but turned his face toward the wilderness” — and saw the people's tents. And what happens? “The spirit of God came upon him” — the formulation used for the prophets of Israel. In a luminous moment, Balaam seems to realize that he is neither Balak's donkey nor God's. For one remarkable moment, though he speaks God's will, he sees it and speaks it entirely for himself. Unlike the first two oracles which invoke

Balak's orders, this one bears his own name: "Word of Balaam son of Beor, word of the man whose eye is true." Unlike the others, it is made of poetry, of visual images that he sees. And unlike the others, this one turns out to be deathless. Which is why we are still invoking it whenever we set foot inside our houses of worship, three thousand or so years on.

And why not? It's really quite a moment, when all is said and done. Sure, most of us don't face choices that merit quite this much special coaxing and stage-managing by God. But our intellectual honesty will always matter, and at every moment there's going to be some large or tiny pressure on it, some tiny reason for it to flicker. Wouldn't it be great if for just one moment, we could turn our faces away from the king and toward the wilderness — if we could see others as they are, completely free of special pleading or coercion; if we could see them clearly and judge them fairly, totally against our own self-interest? If we could call it as we really see it? If Balaam could do it, maybe it's worth a try.



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