

Balaam's Secret

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Moses wrote his own story, and the story of Balaam

(BABA BATRA 14B)

THE CENTRAL PART OF THE BOOK OF NUMBERS DETAILS THE VICTORIES AND TRIBULATIONS OF ISRAEL IN THE WILDERNESS. THE THEME IS REPETITIVE TO THE POINT OF PREDICTABILITY: ISRAEL GRUMBLES, Moses complains, God provides, the people are plagued, the journey continues. When the people obey God's command, they prevail against their enemies; when they rebel, they are routed. Moses, as manager, must shepherd a bunch of whining ingrates on a task not of his own choosing, and is rewarded for all his trouble with more whining, more plagues, and his own angry frustration.

Chapters 22-24 abruptly shift the scene. We are no longer travelling with Moses and Israel, but find ourselves, of all places, in the court of Balak, King of Moab. Balak, strategizing a preemptive strike against a possible Israelite invasion, hires Balaam, a professional prophet-magician from Mesopotamia, to deal with his adversary by means of his effective imprecations. We are not told the reason for Balaam's acclaim; were there no professional sorcerers in Moab? Of course, an expert is by definition someone from out of town, but what does this add to the story? Why is it important that Balaam is not a local Moabite?

The more we are drawn into this story, the more questions confront us. Why spend three whole chapters of the Bible with Moabite and Mesopotamian potentates? What do we care if a pagan prophet listens or does not listen to his employer's instructions? Why have we left Israel in the middle of her journeys? And where oh where is Moses? Since the birth of Moses in the beginning of Exodus, the Torah has not left him alone for a moment. And

now, for three chapters, he is not even mentioned.

Pondering this anomaly, I am struck by an astounding possibility. Have you noticed that Moses and Balaam are never seen together? When Moses leaves, Balaam arrives. When Balaam departs for Mesopotamia at the conclusion of his mission, Moses reappears. No, we say, as Lois Lane has said hundreds of times, that's impossible; the two are nothing like each other. But maybe, just maybe...Could it be? Could Balaam be Moses's secret identity? Is that why Balaam must be an unknown foreigner whose past is a mystery and visage unfamiliar?

I believe this suspicion percolated in the minds of the Rabbis as well, who opined in a midrash (Numbers Rabbah 14:20) that Balaam was as great a prophet as Moses, if not greater. Most astounding is their suggestion that while Moses had to wait for the Word, Balaam could initiate the oracle himself.

Suppose we read these chapters from Moses's perspective. He has, after all, expressed his frustration many times, requesting to be relieved of his assignment. It would be in character to contemplate a career move; after all, his present job is his third, after Egyptian noble and Midianite shepherd. And a little moonlighting is always possible.

Let us pursue this unlikely hypothesis a bit further. Why would Moses leave the camp of Israel to take another position? We know Moses was in the unhappy position of middle-management: the task was impossible, the boss demanding and relentless, the job satisfaction nil. Imagine him thinking: What has brought me, a former prince of Egypt, to the unhappy role of nursemaid to a nation of snivellers? I, who speak to God face to face, who humbled Pharaoh and his hosts, who scaled Sinai and brought Torah to this people—why have I been reduced to an underpaid tour guide? That's what I get for working in the non-profit sector. If I marketed my talents in the private sector, boy, could I clean up! I wouldn't have to waste my talents feeding six hundred thousand Jews who are always longing for the good old days and complaining about the menu!

And Moses closes his eyes, and his mind wanders off to the melody of what-ifs and could-have-beens, and there he is, hanging up his shingle: prophet for hire. Oh for the life of a consultant: set your own hours, choose your own projects, and enjoy the fruits of your accomplishments. I should have done this years ago! And now he is visited by the princes of Moab with a generous offer. Such blandishments are in stark contrast to the prophetic call at the Burning Bush, where there were no choices, no emoluments, no way

out. Is it any surprise that the first job dreamed up by this new prophet-for-profit is damning Israel? In his reverie, if not in reality, revenge is sweet.

Like the professional he is, Balaam/Moses piously defers to God when it comes to the substance of the offer. A prophet must wait for God's word. But in his new role, Balaam/Moses discovers a new side to God: capriciousness. First God tells him that he may not accept the job, and then, when the remuneration becomes substantial, that he may; but as soon as he accepts, God turns on him: "God was incensed at his going, so an angel of the Lord placed himself in his way as an adversary." First no, then yes, then no; God was not like this before. If God gave you a job, you had it for life. Is this how it works among the multinationals? A yes can mean no, or even maybe. Oh well, there's still a job to-be done, and off he rides.

"...so an angel of the Lord placed himself in his way as an adversary." This is new! When God had something to tell Moses, He—and not an angel—found the time to say it directly. It is one thing to be chastened by God, even if it hurts; but by an angel! Still, in his reverie, he pursues his goal.

And now the beast he's riding has crushed his foot against a wall. The ass, now also a prophet, has swerved to avoid the fiery sword of the marauding angel. Not the Divine Voice speaks to Balaam/Moses now, but the voice of an ass. In a moment Balaam/Moses realizes that the ass could see God where he could not. In Israel, to be a prophet was noble station. Among the nations, even an ass can be a prophet. This is not a cute talking-animal story: this ass, who can see the presence of the Divine and whose mouth is opened by God, is a rival to Balaam/Moses. Earlier in his life, Moses had protested that he was no speaker. God promised him the help of Aaron as spokesman, and visions of God permitted to no other. Now the gifts of prophetic vision and prophetic voice have become, well, asinine.

This is not the first time that Moses has encountered a God who maims. In Exodus 4:24-5 we read: "At a night encampment on the way, the Lord encountered him and sought to kill him. So Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin, and touched his legs with it, saying, 'You are truly a bridegroom of blood to me.'" And now Balaam/Moses is saved from divine attack by a she-ass! The career of this paid consultant is strangely similar to that of the Moses we know, but made grotesque, a parody of the intimacy he shared with God. Even the form of the call of prophecy has been parodied: while God calls to Moses (*vayikra*), God chances upon Balaam (*vayiker*). The parallelism

between these two forms of address was diagnostic for the Rabbis. For them, *vayikra* (call) suggests love, familiarity, respect, while *vayiker* (happen) suggests chance, rudeness, even sexual impurity. This reverie of Moses is not going well.

As a curser, Balaam/Moses is not successful at all. Much as he might savor the opportunity, cursing is not his long suit. But even his blessing reveals the bitter love of a defeated leader and a failed expatriate: *There is a people that dwells apart, not reckoned among the nations*. Indeed, Israel is not like the nations of the world, at least not for an Israelite. You can live among the nations, but you cannot be at home. Moses, who left Israel to become an Egyptian, then a Midianite, and now a Moabite, once again returns home.

What has Moses learned from his alter ego? One is tempted to say the futility of trying to escape one's destiny. But none of us knows our destiny; we discover it only by pushing at the borders of our experience and allowing failures to define our path. Moses—the real Moses, not the received Moses of the tradition—was, as are we all, a creature of both a sacred and a secular culture. By stepping outside the *heilgeschichte* of the Bible and its sacred commentaries and entering the "real" world, Moses could gain a perspective on his own life that would be otherwise unavailable. Like the wicked child of the Haggadah who must stand outside the community to question it, he experienced the giddiness of freedom and the terror of a life separated from the sacred. Perhaps he could only be Moses after he had written the story of Balaam.

Later, of course, we are informed that Moses sent his armies to kill Balaam. No matter that Balaam was no longer in Midian, but back in Mesopotamia; the Torah tells us that Balaam was slain in the Midianite campaign. Like Moses, he died far from home. It is well that he died; perhaps he never existed save in Moses's mind. But his prophecy, whether curse, blessing, or both together, has endured as much as that of Moses. Each morning, even before the Sh'ma or any of Moses's words of exhortation, we begin our daily devotion with Balaam's most beautiful prayer, a praise of Israel that could only be offered from a distance: *Ma tovu! How good are your homes, O Israel*.

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