

PARASHA BALAK

Truth in
Prophecy

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Chief Rabbi, Great Britain

The story of Bilaam, the pagan prophet, begins with a bewildering set of non-sequiturs - a sequence of events that seems to have no logic. First, the background. The Israelites are approaching the end of their forty years in the wilderness. Already they have fought and won wars against Sihon king of the Amorites and Og king of Bashan. They have arrived at the plains of Moab - today, southern Jordan at the point where it touches the Dead Sea.

Balak king of Moab is concerned, and he shares his distress with the elders of Midian. The language the Torah uses at this point is precisely reminiscent of the reaction of the Egyptians at the beginning of the book of Exodus.

Egypt: [Pharaoh] said to his people: "Here, The children of Israel is more numerous [rav] and powerful than we . . ." and [the Egyptians] felt a disgust at the children of Israel.

Moab: And Moab was very fearful because of the people because it was numerous [rav], and

Moab felt a disgust at the children of Israel.

The strategy Balak adopts is to seek the help of the well known seer and diviner Bilaam. Again there is a literary evocation, this time of the words of G-d to Abraham:

G-d to Abraham: *I will bless those who bless you, and those who curse you I will curse.*

Balak to Bilaam: *"I know that whoever you bless is blessed and whoever you curse is cursed."*

This time the parallel is ironic (indeed the Bilaam story is full of irony). In the case of Abraham, it was G-d who blessed. In the case of Bilaam, the power was thought to reside in Bilaam himself. In fact the earlier statement of G-d to Abraham already prefigures the fate of Moab - one who tries to curse Israel will himself be cursed.

The historical background to the Bilaam narrative is well-attested. Several Egyptian pottery fragments dating from the 2nd millennium BCE have been found containing execration texts - curses - directed against Canaanite cities. It was the custom among pre-Islamic Arabs to hire

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Prayer Schedule

SHABBAT

PARASHAT BALAK

Friday, June 25th

Minhah & Arbit 7:00 pm
Candle Lighting 7:50 pm

Saturday, June 26th

Shaharit 8:30 am
Tehillim Reading 6:00 pm
Minhah & Arbit 6:45 pm
Motzei Shabbat 8:31 pm

WEEKDAYS

Sunday, June 27th

Shaharit 7:30 am

Monday, Wednesday, Thursday

Shaharit 6:30 am

17TH OF TAMMUZ FAST

Tuesday, June 29th

Fast Begins 4:13 am
Fast Ends 8:48 pm

PARASHAT PINHAS

Friday, July 2nd

Minhah & Arbit 7:00 pm
Candle Lighting 7:50 pm

Parasha Balak

Parasha pages 669-682
Haftara pages 682-685

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poets thought to be under Divine influence to compose curses against their enemies. As for Bilaam himself, a significant discovery was made in 1967. A plaster inscription on the wall of a temple at Deir Alla in Jordan was found to make reference to the night vision of a seer called Bilaam - the earliest reference in archaeological sources to a named individual in the Torah. Thus, though the story itself contains elements of parable, it belongs to a definite context in time and place.

The character of Bilaam remains ambiguous, both in the Torah and subsequent Jewish tradition. Was he a diviner (reading omens and signs) or a sorcerer (practicing occult arts)? Was he a genuine prophet or a fraud? Did he assent to the divine blessings placed in his mouth, or did he wish to curse Israel? According to some midrashic interpretations he was a great prophet, equal in stature to Moses. According to others, he was a pseudo-prophet with an "evil eye" who sought Israel's downfall.

What I want to examine here is neither Bilaam nor his blessings, but the preamble to the story, for it is here that one of the deepest problems arises, namely: what did G-d

want Bilaam to do? It is a drama in three scenes. In the first, emissaries arrive from Moab and Midian. They state their mission. They want Bilaam to curse the Israelites. Bilaam's answer is a model of propriety: Stay the night, he says, while I consult with G-d. G-d's answer is unequivocal: *But G-d said to Bilaam, "Do not go with them. You must not put a curse on those people, because they are blessed."*

Obediently, Bilaam refuses. Balak redoubles his efforts. Perhaps more distinguished messengers and the promise of significant reward will persuade Bilaam to change his mind. He sends a second set of emissaries. Bilaam's reply is exemplary: *"Even if Balak gave me his palace filled with silver and gold, I could not do anything great or small to go beyond the command of the LORD my G-d."* However, he adds a fateful rider: "Now stay here tonight as the others did, and I will find out what else the LORD will tell me." The implication is clear. Bilaam is suggesting that G-d may change His mind. But this is impossible. That is not what G-d does. Yet to our surprise, that is what G-d seems to do:

That night G-d came to Bilaam and said, "Since these men have come to summon you, go with them, but do only what I tell you."

Problem 1: first G-d had said, "Do not go." Now He says, "Go." Problem 2 appears immediately: Bilaam got up in the morning, saddled his donkey and went with the princes of Moab. But G-d was very angry when he went, and the angel of the LORD stood in the road to oppose him.

G-d says, "Go." Bilaam goes. Then G-d is very angry. Does G-d change His mind - not once but twice in the course of a single narrative? The mind reels. What is going on here? What is Bilaam supposed to do? What does G-d want? There is no explanation. Instead the narrative shifts to the famous scene of Bilaam's donkey - itself a mystery in need of interpretation:

Bilaam was riding on his donkey, and his two servants were with him. When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD standing in the road with a drawn sword in his hand, it turned off the road into a field. Bilaam beat it to get it back on the road. Then the angel of the LORD stood in a narrow path between two vineyards, with walls on both sides. When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, it pressed close to the wall, crushing Bilaam's foot against it. So he beat it again.

Then the angel of the LORD moved on ahead

and stood in a narrow place where there was no room to turn, either to the right or to the left. When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, it lay down under Bilaam, and he was angry and beat it with his staff. Then the LORD opened the donkey's mouth, and it said to Bilaam, "What have I done to you to make you beat me these three times?"

Bilaam answered the donkey, "You have made a fool of me! If I had a sword in my hand, I would kill you right now." The donkey said to Bilaam, "Am I not your own donkey, which you have always ridden, to this day? Have I been in the habit of doing this to you?" "No," he said.

Then the LORD opened Bilaam's eyes, and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the road with his sword drawn. So he bowed low and fell face-down.

The commentators offer various ways of resolving the apparent contradictions between G-d's first and second reply. According to Nachmanides, G-d's first statement, "Don't go with them" meant, "Don't curse the Israelites." His second - "Go with them" - meant, "Go but make it clear that you will only say the words I will put in your mouth, even if they are words of blessing." G-d was angry with Bilaam, not because he went but be-

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In Memoriam

It is customary to light a memorial candle in the evening and to donate tzedakah. Family members are encouraged to attend prayer services in honor of loved ones.

Shabbat / 14 Tammuz
Rachel bat Aziza

Sunday / 15 Tammuz
Mazal Sawdayi bat Rima Cohen

Tuesday / 17 Tammuz
Abdallan ben Ezra Itzhak

Wednesday / 18 Tammuz
Naamat ben Simha Zelkha

Friday / 20 Tammuz
Rahel bat Nahid Pourati

Names with asterisks are missing family members' information. To update, please call the office at 310.474.0559.

To Publish KM Newsletter Notices

To publish information regarding life events such as births, bar/bat mitzvahs, graduations, weddings, anniversaries or passings, call the synagogue office at 310.474.0559 by noon on Wednesday.

Shabbat Shalom U'Mevurakh

Community News

CONDOLENCES

To the family and friends of
David Mukamal, z"l

brother of Hilda Dallal and
uncle of Tracy Dallal

son of Mary and Abraham
and brother of Stephen,
Ernie, Linda & Yvonne

Refuah Shlemah

*Please include these individuals in
your prayers :*

Yonatan ben Alizah ▪ Mazal Tov bat
Sulha Mitana ▪ Matilda Louisa ▪ Ya-
heskel ben Regina ▪ Ayala bat
Naomi ▪ Khayah Noa bat Sara ▪
Haim ben Mordechai ▪ Pnina bat
Esther ▪ Yosi ben Esther ▪ Victor ben
Latif ▪ Ramah Regina bat Farha ▪
Aziza bat Sara ▪ Merna bat Marsel ▪
Judith bat Malka ▪ Ofek ben Yochai
▪ Efrayim Zev ben Fayga ▪ Sulha
Matana bat Mozelle

Learn the Haftarah

Wouldn't you like to chant the final portion from the Torah on Shabbat—the portion known as the Haftarah? Reserve a Haftarah by calling Sarah at 310.474.0559. The Haftarah portion can be dedicated in honor of a family life event such as a memorial, a bar or bat mitzvah, or a babynaming. Then, schedule time with Saeed Jalali & learn your haftarah with authentic Baghdadi ta'amim, Iraqi melodies for Torah.

Congratulations KJ 2010 Graduates!



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Beverly Hills

Demi Itzhaki
Beverly Hills High School
Beverly Hills

Sam Shaaya, MBA
Claremont Graduate University
Peter F. Drucker Masatoshi Ito
School of Management

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cause he did not tell them of the proviso.

In the nineteenth century, Malbim and R. Zvi Hirsch Mecklenberg suggested a different answer based on close textual analysis. The Hebrew text uses two different words for "with them" in the first and second Divine replies. When G-d says, "Don't go with them" the Hebrew is imahem. When He later says "Go with them" the corresponding word is itam. The two prepositions have subtly different meanings. Imahem means "with them mentally as well as physically," going along with their plans. Itam means "with them physically but not mentally," in other words Bilaam could accompany them but not share their purpose or intention. G-d is angry when Bilaam goes, because the text states that he went im them - in other words he identified with their mission. This is an ingenious solution. The only difficulty is verse 35, in which the angel of G-d, having opened Bilaam's eyes, finally tells Bilaam, "Go with [im] the men." According to Malbim and Mecklenberg, this is precisely what G-d did not want Bilaam to do.

The deepest answer is also the simplest. The hardest word to hear in any language is the word No. Bilaam had asked G-d once. G-d had said No. That should have sufficed. Yet Bilaam asked a second time. In that act lay his fateful weakness of character. He knew that G-d did not want him to go. Yet he invited the second set of messengers to wait overnight in case G-d had changed his mind. G-d does not change His mind. Therefore Bilaam's delay said something not about G-d but about himself. He had not accepted the Divine refusal. He wanted to hear the answer Yes - and that is indeed what he heard. Not because G-d

wanted him to go, but because G-d speaks once, and if we refuse to accept what He says, G-d does not force His will upon us. As the sages of the midrash put it: "Man is led down the path he chooses to tread."

The true meaning of G-d's second reply, "Go with them," is, "If you insist, then I cannot stop you going - but I am angry that you should have asked a second time." G-d did not change His mind at any point in the proceedings. In scenes 1, 2 and 3, G-d did not want Bilaam to go. His "Yes" in scene 2 meant "No" - but it was a "No" Bilaam could not, was not prepared to hear. When G-d speaks and we do not listen, He does not intervene to save us from our choices. "Man is led down the path he chooses to tread."

But G-d was not prepared to let Bilaam proceed as if he had Divine consent. Instead he arranged the most elegant possible demonstration of the difference between true and false prophecy. The false prophet speaks. The true prophet listens. The false prophet tells people what they want to hear. The true prophet tells them what they need to hear. The false prophet believes in his own powers. The true prophet knows that he has no power. The false prophet speaks in his own voice. The true prophet speaks in a voice not his ("I am not a man of words," says Moses; "I cannot speak for I am a child" says Jeremiah).

The episode of Bilaam and talking donkey is pure humour - and, as I have pointed out before, only one thing provokes Divine laughter, namely human pretension. Bilaam had won renown as the greatest prophet of his day. His fame had spread to Moab and Midian. He was known as the man who held the secrets of blessing and curse. G-d now proceeds to show Bilaam that when He so chooses, even his

donkey is a greater prophet than he. The donkey sees what Bilaam cannot see: the angel standing in the path, barring their way. G-d humbles the self-important, just as He gives importance to the humble.

When human beings think they can dictate what G-d will say, G-d laughs. And, on this occasion, so do we. Shabbat Shalom

SHABBAT MITZVOT

We now offer for donation the following Mitzvot on Shabbat: **1. Petichat Hechal** The opening of the ark where the Torahs are kept; **2. Carrying of the Sefer Torah and Sefer Haftara**; **3. Hakamat Sefer** The lifting and showing of the Torah; **4. Mashlim*** The seventh aliya to the Torah who recites Kaddish; **5. Maftir*** The last aliya to the Torah which includes the reading of the Haftara (which will be read by the clergy unless member reading has been preapproved)

Since we count on your donations to the synagogue to keep our membership fees as low as they are, we suggest a minimum donation for all those who are called to the Torah of \$126 or multiples of \$18 or \$26. We appreciate your support. *Paid members may call the office to book the Mashlim or Maftir in advance, in memory of a departed relative. You will receive confirmation before Shabbat if you will receive the aliya or if there is a conflict. The member may also reserve any other aliya in advance by calling the office. Non-members interested in reserving aliyot should contact Sarah in the office for availability at 310.474. 0559, 11 am-4 pm, Mon-Thurs.