

Parshat Balak, 20 July 2019  
Gilead Limor

*From the top of these heights I see them  
As I gaze from the mountain heights;  
A people that dwell apart and is not reckoned among the nations!  
Who can count the dust of Jacob, or number Israel's dust clouds?  
Let me die the death of the righteous, that my offspring may be like him.*

*How lovely are your tents, Jacob, O' Israel, your encampments!  
Like softly swaying palm groves, or gardens beside a river,  
Like aloes the Lord has planted, and cedars on watery banks.  
Water shall flow from his buckets, and his seed shall have mighty streams.*

*A star will come forth from Jacob, and from Israel rise up a sceptre,  
It will crush the Moabites' brow, and the forehead of all of Seth,  
Edom will be its possession, and Se'ir will fall to its spoil:  
Yes, Israel will triumph!*

Such a profound piece of poetry, it could easily stand alongside some of our favourite tehillim, with pride. Shame about the author though.

Offering several parallels, both actual and metaphorical, and a few prime and contrasting examples of putting words into peoples' mouths, this week's fascinating Parshah concerns itself with Balak's attempt to curse the Israelites, who – from his point of view - seem to be getting a bit too close for comfort, particularly after witnessing the recent Israelite conquest over the Amorites.

"No problem," Balak thinks to himself. "I'll recruit that prophet-for-hire Balaam to place a curse on the Israelites to weaken them. After all, he whom Balaam blesses is blessed, and he whom Balaam curses is cursed. Simple. What could possibly go wrong?"

...

Well, we all know what happens, but before we look at that aspect, I would like to dwell for a moment on Balaam, a prophet or soothsayer, with an apparent reputation of inflicting effective harm unto those that he curses. Balaam also seems to have a direct channel of communication with God (or a God) throughout this particular narrative. While we expect his god to be the latter, the narrative implies that he is communicating with our God, who speaks to Balaam clearly with the wellbeing of the Israelites at the forefront.

In 1967, in the Deir Alla excavation in Jordan, a fragmented inscription was found on a piece of plaster dated to the 7-8<sup>th</sup> century BCE, referring to Balaam, son of Beor, as a seer of the Gods: "the Gods came to him at night, and he saw a vision like an oracle of El..." possibly in reference to the Canaanite god "El", suggesting that this Balaam belongs to a polytheistic society – more in line with what we expect from the biblical narrative. The inscription continues with an

unrelated end-of-days prophecy, in which birds of various types turn against each other, and all hell breaks loose in the animal world... for anyone interested, google Deir Alla inscription. It is quite fascinating.

So there is indeed a possibility that such a person did exist, however, the authenticity of his communication with some form of deity, and indeed the existence of a donkey that can talk, remain speculative at best.

So, back to the story.

After spending a night at Balaam's home (Balaam's communications with God apparently happens at night), Balak's first emissaries return empty-handed. So Balak sends out an elite entourage offering "great honour and whatever thou sayest unto me I will do" ... in other words: name your price. This lot have a bit more success, Balaam will go with them, but with the caveat that he can only utter what God tells him, even if Balak pays him with his house full of silver and gold.

Balaam saddles his ass and prepares to go.

Now, donkeys are known to be rather stubborn, so I find it rather amusing that a donkey is Balaam's choice of transport, especially considering that big boss Balak stubbornly won't take no for an answer. It is also amusing that the donkey sees the angel blocking the road ahead long before Balaam - who is completely blind to the angel's presence - while the latter stubbornly reverts to violence to try and get his donkey to move. So who really is the stubborn ass here?

The fracas is brought to an abrupt halt as words come out of the donkey's mouth: "what wrong have I done you that you smite me three times? Have I ever refused to do what you ask of me?" To which a befuddled and somewhat diminished Balaam has to say: No.

The angel reveals himself to Balaam and gives him a good dressing down, reminding him again, only to utter what God tells him.

It is not surprising, therefore, that there is a stark contrast between what Balak has hired Balaam to do and the words that actually come out from Balaam's mouth.

When the two are standing together looking at the Israelites in the distance, Balaam has already reminded Balak that he can only say what God tells him to say. Balak, stubborn and short-sighted, prepares the altars for this ceremonious cursing of the Israelites, which never actually happens.

Balak is clearly not amused, and takes Balaam closer to the Israelites. More blessings come out of Balaam's mouth. Balak, furious now pleads to Balaam: don't curse them or bless them! But rather than quit while he is ahead, he then takes Balaam away to where only the desert can be seen, so that Balaam can not see the Israelite encampment and maybe have more success. Seven altars

seven rams and seven bullocks later, even more blessings, including the line *Ma Tovu Ohalieicha Ya'kov, Miskenoteicha, Ysrael*, that has won its place in our Shacharit liturgy.

Balak, needless to say, sends Balaam packing.

Where Balak was unsuccessful in cursing the Israelites, almost immediately after he dismisses Balaam, the Israelites (completely unaware of this entire narrative) bring woe unto themselves with the Moabites, in all manner of idolatry, harlotry and other sins, leading to the demise of 24,000 Israelites.

I believe that the moral of the story here is that sometimes we need to step back and examine our approach to things from a different vantage point, rather than stubbornly sticking to our guns in the hope that something may eventually give. We may be surprised at what we can achieve, or what may transpire without our persistent intervention.

Gilead Limor,  
July 2019.