

Parashat Balak
Numbers 22:2 – 25:9 (Plaut pg. 1050)
July 20th, 2024

“The Prophet Balaam:
Good guy or bad guy?”

Thank you, Tech Maven and Meal Captain,
Announcements

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ
בְּמִצְוֹתָיו, וְצִוָּנוּ לְעִסּוֹק בְּדַבְּרֵי תוֹרָה.

Baruch atah, Adonai Eloheinu, Melech haolam, asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu laasok b'divrei Torah.

Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of all, who hallows us with mitzvot, commanding us to engage with words of Torah.

Set Induction, 3 Answers

How do you know when someone is lying to you? A fraud? A con-man/woman?

Framing

Many questions have rightly been asked about the story of Balak and Balam and the would-be curses that turned into blessings. Was Balaam a true man of God, or was he a fraud, a magician, a sorcerer, a practitioner of dark arts? Did he have genuine powers? Was he really – as some of the Sages said – the equal of Moses? Was he driven by the prospect of reward and honor from the Moabites and Midianites, or was he motivated by animosity toward the Israelites?

***We don't study together to distribute information.
We study together to make sense of information.***

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Parsha Balak: Numbers 22:2 – 35 (Plaut pg. 1050-1053)

Some rabbinic sources, beginning with the ancient Midrashic commentary on Numbers and Deuteronomy known as *Sifrei*, make a point of comparing Balaam with Moses, emphasizing that the former is a great Gentile prophet while the latter is the greatest prophet of the Jews.

Comparative stories: Abraham vs Balaam

1. “Parsha Lech L’cha” Genesis 12:3 (Plaut pg. 91) vs “Parsha Balak” Numbers 22: 6 (Plaut pg. 1050)
2. Genesis 22:3 (Plaut pg. 135) vs Numbers 22: 21, 22 (Plaut pg. 1051)

- a. Abraham: Early the next morning Abraham got up and loaded his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about.
- b. Balaam: Balaam got up in the morning, saddled his donkey and went with the Moabite officials. But God was very angry when he went, and the angel of the LORD stood in the road to oppose him. Balaam was riding on his donkey, and his two servants were with him.

3. Why does the Torah use stories to compare and contrast Abraham and Balaam?

4. Genesis 22: 17, 18 (Plaut pg. 136)

I will bless you, and I will increase your descendants to as many as there are stars in the sky or grains of sand on the seashore. Your descendants will possess the cities of their enemies, and by your descendants all the nations of the earth will be blessed.

3 blessings God spoke to Abraham in summary:

- a. **Descendants will be great**
- b. **Conquer the land/destroy enemies**
- c. **All the nations of the earth shall be blessed**

5. Compare this to the 3 blessings from Balaam:

- a. Numbers 23:10 (Plaut pg. 1054): “Who can count the dust of Jacob, Or number one-fourth of Israel?”
- b. Numbers 23: 24 (Plaut pg. 1056): Behold, a people rise like a lioness, and as a lion it lifts itself; it will not lie down until it devours the prey and drinks the blood of the slain.”
- c. Numbers 24: 9 (Plaut pg. 1057): Blessed is everyone who blesses you, And cursed is

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everyone who curses you"

Whoever possesses the following three traits is of the disciples of our father Abraham, and whoever possesses the opposite three traits is of the disciples of the wicked Balaam. The disciples of our father Abraham have a good eye, a meek spirit, and a humble soul. The disciples of the wicked Balaam have an evil eye, a haughty spirit, and a coarse soul. ...

(Pirkei Avot 5:19)

Rashi explains that "a good eye" means that a person is not envious of his fellow and that his fellow's honor is pleasant to him as his own honor. A meek spirit means a person is humble and willing to kneel before others. A humble soul means that a person is willing to lower himself before others, has good relationships with others and is not coarse of spirit. The evil Balaam, on the other hand, had an evil eye, (as is written "And Balaam raised his eyes") a haughty spirit (as is written "God refuses to let me go with you") and a coarse soul (as is written "If Balak will give me his entire house filled with silver and gold"). An evil eye is envy, a haughty spirit is expressed in arrogance and pursuit of honor and a coarse soul is lust. According to this, the three evil attributes of Balaam are the same as the *Mishnah* in chapter 4 of Pirkei Avot: "Envy, lust and honor drive a man from the world."

Havruta:

Dale Chihuly- American glass artist known for blown glass large-scale sculptures.

Dale Chihuly has been given the gift of artistry, vision and leadership. Dale was born in Tacoma, Washington in 1941. As a young 21-year-old, he felt he was "floating" in life. He partied and drank his days away. Escaping an unusually cold winter, Chihuly traveled south through Greece and Turkey, and then to Israel, where he worked (1962–1963) at Kibbutz Lahav in the Hagev Desert. Although he is not Jewish, like other Americans who participated in the kibbutz movement during the 1960s, Chihuly developed a new sense of purpose from this experience in collective living:

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“I remember arriving at the kibbutz as a boy of 21 and leaving a man, just a few short months later. Before Lahav my life was more about having fun, and after Lahav, I wanted to make some sort of contribution to society—I discovered there was more to life than having a good time. It’s difficult to explain how this change came about, but it had a lot to do with going out on border patrol during the night with guys my own age who had more responsibility and maturity than adults twice their age in the States. I was changed by watching how my Jewish friends lived and cared for each other and their communities. After the kibbutz experience my life would never be the same. “

Chihuly: In the light of Jerusalem (1999)

<https://youtu.be/svi-snoYyYk?si=a9bS5CmOcuHXarhR>

Nechemta, Takeaway Text

One of the first Balaam blessings is Numbers 23:8-9: How can I curse whom God has not cursed? How can I denounce whom the Lord has not denounced? From the top of the rocks, I see them, and from the hills I gaze down: a people that dwells alone; not reckoned among the nations.

Can it be that this phrase means: *If you define yourself as the people that dwells alone, you are likely to find yourself alone.* When you look at our history of anti semitism and the holocaust, and even what has happened since October 7th, it sure feels like we are a people that dwells alone – not reckoned among the nations.

But is this truly what the sages tell us that this means? That we are alone as Jews. That is not how the commentators understood the phrase. Rashi says it means that Jews are indestructible. Ibn Ezra says it means that they don’t assimilate. Ramban says it means that they maintain their own integrity. It does not mean that they are destined to be isolated, without allies or friends. There is no suggestion in the Torah that Jews will live alone. God says to Abraham, “Through you all the families of the earth will be

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blessed.” Abraham was different from his neighbors, but he fought for them and prayed for them. He was apart but not alone.

Jews have long been cast in the role of the ‘Other,’ the one who does not fit into the dominant paradigm, the majority faith, the prevailing culture. One of Judaism’s central themes is the dignity of dissent. Jews argue, challenge, question. That is why the fate of Jews in any given time and place is often the best index of freedom in that time and place.

When, therefore, Jews fight for the right to be, whether as a nation in its historic home, or as a religious group in other societies, they fight not for themselves alone but for human freedom as a whole.

To be different is not necessarily to be alone. Each one of us has something unique that we alone can contribute to others. In our uniqueness, and our individual contributions we are blessing those around us. The Torah states, “Through you all the families of the earth will be blessed.” In this week’s Haftorah, it tells us how to be a blessing to others. In a world that seems to be in chaos and polarization, this is what we are asked to do. Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world’s grief. Do justly, now. Love mercy, now. Walk humbly now. The Talmud tells us - You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it. That is our call to action. Shabbat Shalom.

Mourner’s Kaddish in Aramaic

(courtesy of [Sefaria](#))

[אמן: קהל] . ויתגדל ויתקדש שמה רבא :אבל
[אמן: קהל] : בעלמא די ברא כרעותה וימליך מלכותה בתיכון וביומיכון ובחיי דכל בית ישראל בעגלא ובזמן קריב, ואמרו אמן
:יהא שמה רבא מברך לעלם ולעלמי עלמין :קהל ואבל
[ברוך הוא: קהל] . ויתברך וישתבח ויתפאר ויתרומם ויתנשא ויתקדר ויתעלה ויתהלל שמה דקדשא . בריך הוא :אבל
[אמן: קהל] : ושירתא תשבחתא ונחמתא דאמירן בעלמא . ואמרו אמן בעשי”ת : לעלא לעלא מכל לעלא מן כל ברכתא
[אמן: קהל] : יהא שלמא רבא מן שמיא וחיים עלינו ועל כל ישראל . ואמרו אמן
[אמן: קהל] : במקרומיו הוא יעשה שלום עלינו ועל כל ישראל ואמרו אמן בעשי”ת : השלום עושה שלום

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Mourner's Kaddish in Aramaic Transliteration

Yitgadal v'yitkadash sh'mei raba b'alma di-v'ra

chirutei, v'yamlich malchutei b'chayeichon

uvyomeichon uvchayei d'chol beit yisrael, ba'agala

uvizman kariv, v'im'ru: "amen."

Y'hei sh'mei raba m'varach l'alam ul'almei almaya.

Yitbarach v'yishtabach, v'yitpa'ar v'yitromam

v'yitnaseh, v'yithadar v'yit'aleh v'yit'halal sh'mei

d'kud'sha, b'rich hu,

l'eila min-kol-birchata v'shirata, tushb'chata

v'nechemata da'amiran b'alma, v'im'ru: "amen."

Y'hei shlama raba min-sh'maya v'chayim aleinu

v'al-kol-yisrael, v'im'ru: "amen."

Oseh shalom bimromav, hu ya'aseh shalom aleinu

v'al kol-yisrael, v'imru: "amen."