On Oenomaus, Balaam, and Jewish Education

Amram Tropper

Ateret Zvi Prize in Hiddushei Torah 5778

Some thirty years ago, I met Professor Zvi Szubin for the very first time. I was in tenth grade and Professor Szubin was unlike anyone else I knew; he taught innovative interpretations of ancient Jewish texts he lovingly called his hiddushim with an infectious passion that amazed me. Over the decades since then I was privileged to hear many of his hiddushim and, in the course of our discussions, I was not only struck by Zvi’s unrelenting passion for insightful scholarship, but also by his unwavering dedication to Jewish education. In my mind, Zvi was entrusted with a sacred mission not only to enlighten us, to reveal long lost meanings of ancient Jewish texts, but also to encourage us to follow in his footsteps. Having learned so much from this exemplary scholar and educator, I am thrilled to be able to participate in a project designed to honor his memory with divrei torah.

In parashat Toldot, Jacob famously tricks his father into mistaking him for his brother Esau but in the midst of the subterfuge, Isaac grows suspicious and says to Jacob: וא长时间נא גשה לאאם אתה בינא בני זה אתה בני שעון אמרו לא, “Come closer that I may feel you, my son—whether you are really my son Esau or not” (Genesis 27:21).1 In response to his father’s request, Jacob approaches his father, knowing that his father will not feel his own smooth skin but rather the hairy goat skin his mother placed over him in order to simulate his twin’s hairy body: יצחק אל יעקב ויגש אשו וידיו יעקב קול חלי ויאמר אביו והידו ימשו אביו, “So Jacob drew close to his father Isaac, who felt him and wondered: ‘The voice is the voice of Jacob, yet the hands are the hands of Esau’” (Genesis 27:22). In its exposition of this biblical verse, Bereishit Rabbah cites the following story in the name of R. Abba b. Kahanah:

1 All biblical translations are from the NJPS translation.
The story opens by introducing two men said to have been the greatest philosophers of all time. Although many ancients probably would have listed Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle as the greatest philosophers ever, the midrash surprises us by referring to two other individuals: Balaam and Avnomos. Balaam was obviously a prophet, not a philosopher, but the midrash portrays him as a philosopher in keeping with the times. While prophets of the biblical era offered wisdom and counsel, philosophers were the lovers of wisdom in rabbinic times, hence the midrash elected to classify Balaam as a philosopher. Avnomos (or Avnomos) was most probably the second century CE Cynic philosopher Oenomaus of Gadara. Oenomaus (alongside Proclus and, perhaps, Epicurus) is one of only two or three gentle philosophers mentioned by name in rabbinic literature and it bears noting that a substantial portion of his literary output has been preserved till today; in fact, his extant writings are more extensive than that of any other ancient Cynic philosopher. In short, our story begins by presenting Balaam, the well-known gentile prophet of biblical times, and Oenomaus, a major second century Cynic from Roman Palestine, as the greatest philosophers who ever lived.


3 My translation is heavily indebted to that by H. Freedman, Midrash Rabbah: Genesis (London and Bournemouth: Soncino, 1951), p. 596.

Having set the stage, the story proceeds to describe a fateful consultation where all the nations of the world sought Oenomaus’ counsel. After assembling together, the nations asked Oenomaus: Do you think we can subjugate this nation, i.e. the Jewish people? By enlisting the very same word in its description of both the gentiles and Jews, that is by contrasting “all the nations of the world,” כל אומות העולם, to “this nation,” זו אומה, the story spotlights the tension between polar opposites. The nations of the world, despite their multitudes, were fearful of the small Jewish nation and sought to crush it.

In response to the nations’ query, Oenomaus offered a litmus test designed to reveal whether the present was an auspicious time for battling the Jews. He counseled the nations to visit both synagogues and Jewish study-houses in order to find out whether the children in these institutions were chirping, that is, whether they were learning Torah. If the Jewish youth were learning Torah, claimed Oenomaus, the Jews could not be vanquished, but if they were not studying Torah, the Jews could be vanquished. In other words, Oenomaus set forth a correlation between the Torah-study of Jewish children and the prospect of subjugating the Jews, a correlation he derived from a midrashic interpretation of Isaac’s famous words to Jacob: “The voice is the voice of Jacob, yet the hands are the hands of Esau.” While Isaac was simply expressing his confusion over the identity of the son before him according to the straightforward meaning of this biblical passage, Oenomaus interpreted Isaac’s words as a promise: so long as “the voice is the voice of Jacob,” so long as Jewish children study Torah, “the hands of Esau,” the hands of Jacob’s enemies, will find no traction. Befitting Rabbinic literature but not ancient philosophy, this gentile philosopher did not offer advice on the basis of an empirical analysis of reality, a rational analysis of clear and distinct ideas, or an interpretation of earlier philosophical writings, but rather on the basis of a midrashic analysis of a biblical passage.

Isaac’s promise to Jacob, according to Oenomaus, correlates the invincibility of the Jews with the Torah-study of Jewish youth and one naturally wonders about the rationale underlying this correlation. Why should the Torah-study of Jewish children safeguard the Jews against the massive armies of the nations of the world?

Before responding to this question, let us consider the rabbinic interpretation of the victory against the Amalekites found in the Mishnah:

משנה ראש השנה ג
"והיה נשמה ארץ מישראל ביד בני עMcCדש יז'ו. גם ידعي שמלשה Cuando תחלה אין乙烯ה מתחלה אלא כ Ramadan שיבחרו וכפי טעמננו את
לכם לאברהם ששבים ויהו מחבריו ויאֲו הנפליים. 5

5 The text is that of the Kaufmann manuscript.
Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 3:8

“Then, whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed; but whenever he let down his hand, Amalek prevailed” (Exodus 17:11). But could the hands of Moses promote the battle or hinder the battle? It is, rather, (to teach that) all the time that Israel looked above and directed their hearts to their father in heaven, they prevailed; and if not, they suffered defeat.6

The key to the victory over Amalek, according to the Mishnah, was not Israelite military prowess or magic radiating from Moses’ hands, but rather trust in God. When the Israelites prayed and put their faith in God, they prevailed, but why they failed to trust in God, they foundered. Like this mishnah, Oenomaus also maintained that the superior size and might of the gentile armies are irrelevant in conflicts with the Jews. What matters instead is whether the Jews merit God’s support, and the surefire way to assess whether the Jews are in God’s favor is to check whether their children are learning Torah. So long as Jewish youth study Torah, God protects his people and renders them invincible. God rewards faithfulness with faithfulness and the study of the Jewish youth, just like the prayers of the Israelites during the battle against Amalek, is a sign of Jewish faithfulness.

We may wonder, however, why Oenomaus focused specifically on the Torah-study of children and not on that of adults. Since the biblical phrase, “the voice is the voice of Jacob,” does not refer to children and the mishnaic precedent regarding Israelite prayer also makes no reference to children, why did Oenomaus relate to the Torah-study of children specifically? Perhaps he imagined that the voices of children are especially powerful because they arouse God’s mercy and pity, prompting God to protect them and their families. Perhaps Oenomaus focused on children because they represent the future and he reasoned that God would protect the Jewish people so long as they ensured the future of Torah scholarship. Perhaps Oenomaus viewed the strength of the education system as a proxy for the moral strength of Jewish society as a whole, thinking that a Jewish community, united in spirit, could not be overcome. Perhaps he simply believed that well-educated Jewish youth would fight unbelievably hard to preserve their Jewish identity. Whatever the case may be, Oenomaus advised the nations that so long as Jewish children were studying Torah, the Jewish people would not suffer defeat.

Having explored Oenomaus’ advice, let us return to the story’s opening line: “Never arose such great philosophers in the world as Balaam son of Beor and Avnomos of Gadara.” This introduction, which links Oenomaus to Balaam, is puzzling for two reasons. First, why

---

connect Oenomaus to Balaam, and second, why mention Balaam in the story’s introduction when he has no role to play in the rest of the narrative?

In response to the first puzzling question, why connect Oenomaus to Balaam, Menahem Luz offered three suggestions. Luz first argued that Oenomaus was linked to Balaam “since both refused to curse the Jews in a similar geographical setting (Gader-Moab),” but this suggestion is incorrect. Unlike Balaam, no one in our story ever asked Oenomaus to curse the Jews and therefore he never refused such a request. Luz’ second suggestion points out a supposed play on words between Oenomaus’ hometown, Gadara, and the fence, the גדר, located on both sides of Balaam during his encounter with the angel. This supposed play on words is not only weak, for why make a play on words between Gadara and a minor prop in Balaam’s story, but it also supplies little grounds for linking Oenomaus to Balaam. Luz’ third suggestion is that both Balaam and Oenomaus advised the pagans “to refrain from attacking the Jews,” but Oenomaus did not actually do so, he merely taught them how to assess whether it was a fortuitous time to attack. As far as Balaam is concerned, a biblical tradition, as we will see below, already implicated him in the Baal-peor episode, viewing him as an enemy of the Israelites who sought their downfall.

In contrast to Luz, I hope to reveal a more substantive connection between Oenomaus and Balaam. At the tail end of parashat Balak, following Balak’s failed attempts to induce Balaam to curse the Israelites, the parashah concludes with the story of the Moabite women who seduced Israelite men while persuading them to worship Baal-peor. The Torah in parashat Balak does not indicate that Balaam devised this scheme to ensnare the Israelites, but the juxtaposition of the episodes is suggestive. Moreover, later on, the Torah in parashat Matot explicitly blames Balaam for inducing the Israelites to worship Baal-peor: "היו הנשים הפוערות את ישראל על מעול הלגום. "Yet they are the very ones who, at the bidding of Balaam, induced the Israelites to trespass against the Lord in the matter of Peor, so that the Lord’s community was struck by the plague” (Numbers 31:16). In line with this passage, Targum Pseudeo-Jonathan further develops Balaam’s role in the Baal-peor episode by presenting the seduction of the Israelite men as the realization of a detailed plan he recommended to Balak:

---

8 See Numbers 22:24.
Targum Pseudo-Jonathan to Numbers 24:14

Go, prepare inns, and place there prostitutes, selling food and drink for less than their value; then bring this people together so that they may eat and drink. When drunk, they will lie with them and denounce their God. In a short time they will be delivered into your hand, and many of them will fall.  

In light of these traditions which link Balaam to the Baal-peor episode, the connection between Oenomaus and Balaam is clear: both figures offered practical advice to gentiles who hoped to subjugate the Jews and, in both cases, the advice assumed that the less faithful the Jews were to God, the more vulnerable they were to their enemies. In counseling the gentiles in their efforts against the Jews, Oenomaus echoed Balaam’s advisory role to Balak.

Oenomaus’ role as the new Balaam answers, at least in part, our second question as well, namely: why bother to mention Balaam in the story’s introduction when he has no role to play in the story itself? In light of Balaam’s parallel advisory role, his appearance in the introduction prompts us to recall his advice regarding the Baal-peor plot, encouraging us to compare his counsel to that of Oenomaus. While both Balaam and Oenomaus understood that God safeguarded the Jewish people so long as they remained faithful to him, only Balaam spelled out how to actually go about undermining God’s protection.

In addition to the resonant intertextual backdrop supplied by the aforementioned traditions about Balaam, I would to suggest that there is one more Balaam tradition in dialogue with R. Abba b. Kahanah’s Oenomaus story, one further reason to mention Balaam in the story’s introduction. This tradition, found already in the Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael, is of tannaitic origin and most probably emerged long before the Oenomaus tradition of amoraic times. In this tradition Balaam does not simply advise Barak but rather he, just like Oenomaus, advises “all the nations of the world.”

מיכלא דרב בריבי, שמועת בריד
ברא ה’ ע’ ברל (שמוט וכ”ב - סכמך לדק). או: "אנני ה’ אלי, אלי, התייה ארץ חולה שונ... וואו "קוה ר’ ה’ חותב", "קוה ה’ חותל" ו"ביהודי כל אדם כבוד" (תר היי כ”ב דוע)
שנת verfüg בתיימ מודי שכינה.

At that time all the nations of the world assembled and came to Balaam son of Beor. They said to him: Perhaps God is about to destroy His world by a flood? He said to them: Fools in the world! Long ago God swore to Noah that He would not bring a flood upon the world, as it is said: “For this to Me is like the water of Noah: (As I swore that the water of Noah nevermore would flood the earth)” (Isaiah 54:9). They said to him: Perhaps He will not bring a flood of water, but He may bring a flood of fire. But he said to them: He is not going to bring a flood of water or a flood of fire. It is simply that the Holy One, blessed be He, is giving the Torah to His people, as it is said: “May the Lord grant strength (i.e. Torah) to his people” (Psalm 19:11). As soon as they heard this from his mouth, they all turned back and went each to his place.

In light of the biblical descriptions of God’s thunderous voice at Mount Sinai and the consequent trembling of the Israelites and even the mountain itself, the Mekhilta imagines how the gentiles reacted when the earth suddenly shook at that time, as the divine presence filled up their homes. By identifying God’s voice in the Sinai wilderness with the voices of the Lord in Psalm 29 (presumably because of the reference to the wilderness in Psalm 29:8), the Mekhilta enlists the psalm’s imagery to portray the gentiles reacting to God’s thunderous voice with shock and fear. Ignorant of the source of the clamor and tremors, “all the nations of the world assembled” before Balaam just as they assemble before Oenomaus in later amoraic tradition. Mollifying the nations’ fears that God was destroying the world, Balaam assured them that God was simply giving the Torah to His people.

---

12 Cited according to ms. Oxford 151; H. S. Horovitz and I. A. Rabin (eds.), Frankfurt am Main: J. Kaufmann, 1931, pp. 220-221). See also Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael, Amalek 1 (Horovitz and Rabin eds., p. 188); Babylonian Talmud Zevahim 116a.
Beyond the shared rare phrase “all the nations of the world assembled” and the common role of the advisor to the gentile nations, there is another salient feature common to both the Oenomaus tradition and the Mekhilta’s Balaam tradition. Both traditions focus on the word קול, “voice.” In the Oenomaus tradition, the voice of Jacob, who spent his days in his tent studying Torah as per the rabbinic imagination, is identified with the voices of children learning Torah. By learning Torah, the children extend and renew Jacob’s voice in the present.

In the Mekhilta’s tradition, the overpowering voice of God at Mount Sinai is heard by all the nations of the world and is equated with voices of Psalm 29. In my mind, the shared phrase, common role of advisor to the nations, and mutual concentration on the word “voice” encourage us to read the Oenomaus tradition in light of the earlier Mekhilta tradition. When doing so, the echoes of the earlier Balaam tradition in the later Oenomaus tradition prompt us to add two more voices to the equation of voices in the Mekhilta, identifying the thunderous voice of God at Mount Sinai with both Jacob’s voice and the chirping of his youthful descendants. In tandem with the Mekhilta’s Balaam tradition, the innovative message of the Oenomaus tradition is that God’s voice at Mount Sinai, the voice of Torah which instilled fear in the nations of the world, continues to protect the Jewish people so long as it emanates from the mouths of Jewish children. The sound of children studying Torah, in other words, echoes the primordial voice of God.