



Between Pinhas and Balaam: On the Democratic Nature of the Relationship with God

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Is the relationship with God open to all who seek it? And what is the model of human communication with God? Our *parashah* suggests an answer to these questions which generates an unexpected role reversal between Moshe and the Israelites, on the one hand, and Balaam and the Moabites on the other. A comparison between the beginning of Parashat Balak and its end is, in fact, a comparison between the conduct of the Moabites, their leader Balak and their prophet, Balaam, and that of their corollaries in the Israelite camp—the Israelites, Pinhas and Moshe. This comparison clarifies the identity of those who are invited to be in a relationship with God.

The *parashah* opens with a description of the emotional state of the Moabites and their leader: “Balak son of Tzippor saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites. Moab was alarmed because that people was so numerous. Moab dreaded the Israelites” (BeMidbar 22:2-3). The Moabites analyze the situation correctly, understanding that anyone who fights the Israelites loses. They experience great fear since they see the Israelites triumph in battle after battle: “and Moab said to the elders of Midian, ‘Now this horde will lick clean all that is about us as an ox licks up the grass of the field’” (v. 4).

In contrast to the accurate/precise analysis of reality on the part of the Moabites, the *parashah* describes the behavior of the Israelites as one that is guided not by any analysis or

observation, but rather by base urges and impulsiveness: “While Israel was staying at Shittim, the people profaned themselves by whoring with the Moabite women” (25:1).

The Israelites’ behavior is also characterized by another dimension: a lack of leadership. Moshe’s character is absent in the description of the events of this *parashah*; it is unclear what role he played in them. The Israelites are swept away by events, unlike the situation in the Moabite camp, where the leader of both the analysis of the situation and the attempt to address it is the king, who consults with other Moabite leaders: “Balak son of Tzippor, who was king of Moab at that time, sent messengers to Balaam son of Beor ...” (22:4-5).

In both cases, that of the Israelites and that of Moabites, there is a turn to a higher power. However, it is again clear that the Moabites’ attempt to harness a higher power is rational, considered, self-aware and preemptive, whereas the Israelites’ call for help is the result of a loss of judgement and is made retrospectively, not as the result of a decision but rather as a collective reaction to a situation. We are told of the Moabite king: “[Balak] sent messengers to Balaam son of Beor... saying, “There is a people that came out of Egypt; it hides the earth from view, and it is settled next to me. Come then, put a curse upon this people for me, since they are too numerous for me; perhaps I can thus defeat them and drive them out of the land. For I know that he whom you bless is blessed indeed, and he whom you curse is cursed” (vv. 5-6).

In other words, the king turns to Balaam knowing that his words have cosmic influence. Regarding the Israelites, on the other hand, we hear that the Moabites “invited the people to the sacrifices for their god. The people partook of them and worshiped that god. Thus Israel attached itself to Baal-peor...” (25:2-3). The Israelites turn to a foreign god (the god of the Moabite women), not because of any insight into the cosmological order, but rather as a response to a call, an invitation, on the part of these women.

Both supplications are refused; only one, however, causes a fracture in the relationship between God and humanity, while the other is a natural part of it, a moment of discord, of the kind that occurs every so often in every relationship. The divine reaction to the Israelites' action is fury: "and God was incensed with Israel" (25:3), followed by a summoning of the leadership and a demand that they act in a way that will temper the divine wrath directed at the people: "God said to Moshe, 'Take all the ringleaders and have them publicly impaled before God, so that God's wrath may turn away from Israel'" (v. 4). The result is a violent and extreme commandment on the part of the leader, Moshe: "So Moshe said to Israel's officials, 'Each of you slay those of his men who attached themselves to Baal-peor'" (v. 5), a result to which the cosmic reality of a plague (v. 8) is then added. This destruction is ended only by an additional impulsive and violent intervention:

במדבר כה, ז' – ח'

וַיֵּרָא פִּינְחָס בֶּן־אֶלְעָזָר בֶּן־אֶהֱרֹן הַכֹּהֵן וַיִּקֶּם מִתּוֹךְ הָעֵדָה וַיִּקַּח רֶמֶחַ בְּיָדוֹ: וַיָּבֹא אֶחָד אִישׁ־יִשְׂרָאֵל
אֶל־הַקִּבָּה וַיִּדְקֹר אֶת־שִׁנֵּיהֶם אֶת אִישׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֶת־הָאִשָּׁה אֵלֶּיָּהּ קָבָתָהּ וַתַּעֲצֹר הַמִּגֵּפָה מֵעַל בְּנֵי
יִשְׂרָאֵל.

BeMidbar 25:7-8

When Pinhas, son of Eleazar son of Aharon the priest, saw this, he left the assembly and, taking a spear in his hand, he followed the Israelite into the chamber and stabbed both of them, the Israelite and the woman, through the belly. Then the plague against the Israelites was checked.

The reaction to Balaam's actions, on the other hand, is a dialogue in which the two sides agree to disagree:

במדבר כב, ט' – י"ב

וַיָּבֹא אֱלֹהִים אֶל־בִּלְעָם וַיֹּאמֶר מִי הָאֲנָשִׁים הָאֵלֶּה עִמָּךְ: וַיֹּאמֶר בִּלְעָם אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים בָּלֶק בֶּן־צֹפָר מֶלֶךְ
מוֹאָב שָׁלַח אֵלָי: הִנֵּה הָעָם הַיֵּצֵא מִמִּצְרָיִם וַיִּכַּס אֶת־עֵינָיו הָאָרֶץ עֲתָה לָכֶה קָבָה לִי אֹתוֹ אוֹכְלִי

לְהִלָּחֵם בּוֹ וַיִּגְרָשׁוּתָיו: וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶל-בִּלְעָם לֹא תֵלֵךְ עִמָּהֶם לֹא תֵאָר אֶת-הָעָם כִּי בְרוּךְ הוּא:

BeMidbar 22:9-12

God came to Balaam and said, “What do these people want of you?” Balaam said to God, “Balak son of Tzippor, king of Moab, sent me this message: Here is a people that came out from Egypt and hides the earth from view. Come now and curse them for me; perhaps I can engage them in battle and drive them off.” But God said to Balaam, “**Do not go with them. You must not curse that people**, for they are blessed.”

While Balaam accepts the limitation that his relationship with God places on him—“Balaam arose in the morning and said to Balak’s dignitaries, ‘Go back to your own country, for God will not let me go with you’” (22:13)—the Israelites choose the opposite approach. They continue their contrary behavior even after Moshe commands the leaders of the tribes to kill those of the people who cleave to a foreign God: “So Moshe said to Israel’s officials, ‘Each of you slay those of his men who attached themselves to Baal-peor.’ Just then one of the Israelites came and brought a Midianite woman over to his companions, in the sight of Moshe...” (25:5-6).

The rules of relationships with God are further clarified when one examines the details of both stories. There is no limit to what those who are in a relationship with God can request; God is not angered by Balak’s desire to curse the Israelites, He just makes it clear that this desire is not in line with His will and that He will therefore not take part in it. Yet He does not prevent Balak from offering Him sacrifices and attempting to change His mind.

In contrast to this lack of anger toward a request that is not to God’s liking, God does get angry with Balaam when he chooses to go with Balak despite knowing that this is contrary to God’s wishes—thus effectively betraying his relationship with Him. (Behind this story stands the unasked question of why, in fact, Balaam capitulated and went with Balak’s

messengers, if he knew this was not God's will): "When he arose in the morning, Balaam saddled his ass and departed with the Moabite dignitaries. But God was incensed at his going; so an angel of God placed himself in his way as an adversary...." (22:21-22). God's anger is expressed in His placing of an obstacle, an adversary, in his path.

This obstacle, however, is also a symbolic one, and it makes clear to Balaam—like it does to the Israelites, and to us, the readers—that the price of treachery toward God is a suspension of one's relationship with Him. This is made clear to Balaam through his ass, who is able to see God's emissary even though he, Balaam, remains blind to his presence. The statement, in essence, is that other creatures will have direct relationships with God, while you, the traitor, will not. The ass will see the angel, correctly divine God's present in its world, while Balaam will be forced to function in blindness.

However, the ass makes its message transparent not only to Balaam, but also to the Israelites and to us, the readers of the Bible. We too learn of the simple nature of the relationship between God and his creatures; the relationship is a mutual one, one who chooses it is a part of it, whereas one who scorns the choice remains external to it.

At the very heart of the Israelites' journey in the desert, a journey which is the direct product of God's unique relationship with His people, we find a clarification of the boundaries of the uniqueness, or more precisely, of a significant, limitless aspect that characterizes it. The uniqueness of God's relationship with the Israelites does not exclude other relationships with anyone who desires the embrace of such a relationship. God is faithful to those who are faithful to Him, even if they are the prophets of other nations, or people who, in their innocence, order their lives out of a sense of relationship with God. One can conduct oneself with a consciousness of relationship, with an attentiveness to God's will, or blindly strike an ass on one's way to a journey whose purpose is a curse.