

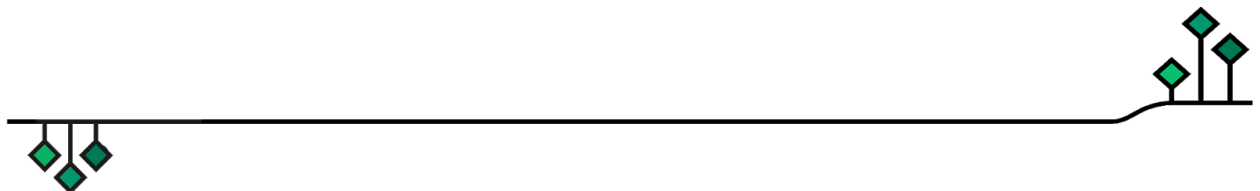


Prophetic Pluralism

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Parashat Balak 5781

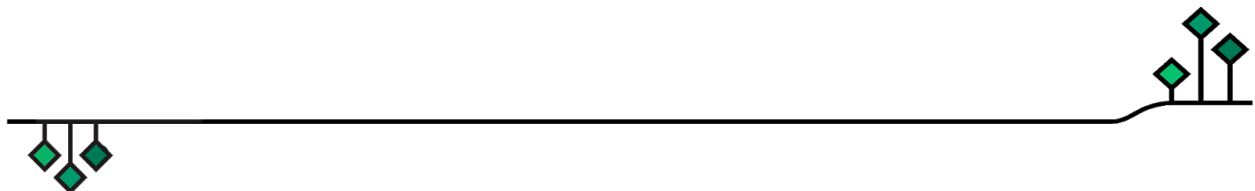
The story of Balaam the prophet in Parashat Balak has many layers. On the surface, the *parashah* offers a scathing critique—really a satire—of the man who is regarded as a great seer by the Moabites. He is portrayed as vainglorious, honor-seeking, looking for money and social recognition above all. Unlike Moses the prophet, he does not try to hear the word of God and give it over to others, rather he tries to wheedle the Deity into letting him get a big payoff from King Balak. Crazed by greed, Balaam makes a fool of himself and, in the end, sees less of the Divine Presence in his mission than does his donkey. Yet if one cuts through this blatant put down, in fact Balaam is revealed as a true prophet—in touch with and receiving profound revelation directly from God. His prophecy communicates some of the most beautiful and touching passages ever said about the Jewish people. In this way, the Torah demonstrates that God cares deeply about and connects to non-Jews; God sends them prophets and gives them true revelation. This is a foreshadowing of a prophetic pluralism which will not become a substantial part of Jewish tradition until millennia later than the Bible—namely in our time.



Let us start at the beginning. Balak, King of Moab, fears the rising Israelite people who have just shockingly defeated two mighty Kings, Sihon the Amorite and Og of Bashan (Numbers 21:25, 33-35; 22:2). He conceives of enlisting the great Midianite prophet, Balaam, to curse and defeat the Israelites with supernatural force (22:5). Balaam is all too ready to do Balak's bidding. Apparently, he senses the high intensity divine energy flowing through him, but does not understand the prophet's role. Balaam thinks of himself as a gun for hire and expects Balak to be the highest bidder. God tells him not to even think of cursing Israel because the Lord wishes to bless the people (22:12). However, Balaam is not listening. He is plotting how to get Balak to send even more important officers to recruit him and to offer an even higher reward to do the dirty work.

Balak does send the more imposing officials, with the implied promise of yet greater rewards if he curses Israel (22:15). Balaam responds with an even broader solicitation "...if Balak gives me a handful of gold and silver treasure, (hint, hint!—YG) I can still do only what God permits me to do" (22:18). He knows that God does not want him to harm Israel, but he is hoping that he can barrel his way through anyway. For the right price, he will somehow get around God's objections and deliver the knockout punch to the Israelites. Balaam even succeeds in getting God to let him go with the Moabite officials—albeit he is warned again that he is only to say or do what God permits him to do (22:20).

At this point, Balaam is blinded by visions of dancing treasure; he can see nothing but golden payoffs thanks to his cupidity. God sends an opposing angel to block Balaam's progress—but he is oblivious (22:22). The donkey sees the opposing force, but the great prophet can't see what the dumb animal sees (22:23). Three times the donkey shrinks back or stops short,



pushing back against Balaam’s angry goading (22:23-27). Finally, Balaam’s eyes open enough to see that the Lord does not want him to use his power to harm Israel (22:31). Balaam even offers to turn back—but he does not appear to mean it (22:34). He still hopes for an opening—or a moment of divine relenting—that will enable him to get in his curse and earn his pay day. So much—not much!—for a prophet feeling a higher calling to serve God’s purposes. So much—not much!—for a prophet trying to mediate between God’s anger and the people, by getting the Lord to forgive or carry the people and not harm them.¹

The next day, Balak honors Balaam with elaborate sacrifices (22:40). This is followed by a grandiose ritual sacrifice of seven oxen and seven rams (23:1-4). Alas for Balak’s plot and Balaam’s treasure hunt, God instructs the prophet to bless the people, Israel, climaxing with the words: “Let me die the death of the righteous and my final end be like his (i.e. Jewry’s—YG)” (23:10).

Balak is frustrated that the prophet has blessed his enemies (23:11). But he, too, still thinks that God can be manipulated. Two more times he and Balaam set up elaborate sacrifices on a plateau with a different view of the Israelites, somehow believing that with the right setup, they can get God to allow their spiritual assault on Israel (23:13-15; 27-30). But now he and Balaam learn that God is not to be trifled with. God cannot be tricked or maneuvered into doing the evil will of the Moabite King. This shuffling of the deck of sacrifices expresses the false and offensive claim of idolatry and magic: that there is some mystical formula, or ritual

¹ This is one of the most important roles of the prophet, as I argued in my essay on Parashat Shelah, “Mediating Between the Divine and the Human: The Prophet’s Other Central Role,” available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/mediating-between-divine-and-human>.

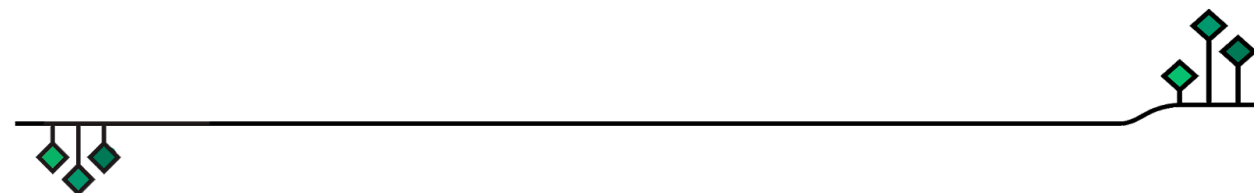


behavior, or other mechanism that can force God to do what humans demand. Instead, God has Balaam bless Israel twice with greater depth and greater force.

Here is the twist in the *parashah's* account: the move from prophecy as arcane evil arts to genuine revelation. The last two times that he speaks prophecy, Balaam stops searching for the magic key to get his malicious intentions fulfilled. Instead he opens up to God—and pure prophecy comes pouring out. In the second exchange, Balaam channels God's instruction: "There is no magic [operating] in Jacob and no sorcery in Israel" (23:23). Rather "the Lord his God is with him" (23:21). He proclaims: "I am bidden to bless [Israel]... [Israel] is blessed and it cannot be called back" (23:20).

In the final scene, the spirit of God rests on Balaam and he speaks beyond all calculation (24:1-2). "How goodly are your tents Jacob, your tabernacles, O Israel" (24:5). He compares Israel's blessedness to "winding brooks, gardens by the river's side, like aloes which the Lord has planted, and cedar trees beside the waters." (24:6). Israel is blessed. Blessed are those who bless Israel and cursed are those who curse Israel (24:9).

This is the astonishing and thunderous ending of a project that started as a mockery of the non-Jewish prophet. For the most part, the Bible sees the surrounding religions as idolatrous and spiritually ineffective. But this emergent blessing makes clear that God reveals truth to non-Jewish prophets. This in turn means that God deeply cares about non-Jews; after all, they too are in the image of God and precious to the Lord. Therefore, God does not abandon them in spiritual ignorance and in self-referential concern. God connects to them so they too can play their part in realizing the vision of *tikkun olam*. God seeks their partnership in world



repair. God seeks their blessing on Israel even as the Lord wants Israel—Abraham’s family—to be a source of blessing for all the families of the earth (Genesis 12:2-3).

This hidden but deep theme circulates through the tradition for millennia as a minor—often neglected—perspective. But in our time, the encounter between Jew and non-Jew has reached a new level of humanity and opening up to each other.² God has given us the chance to break through, to know the other as a precious image of God, to join a partnership to repair the world for everybody. After all, it will take the efforts of everybody to overcome entrenched interests, cumulative deprivation, and traditional negative stereotypes, in order to create a system of justice and equality for all.

To get there, God enters into covenantal community with more than one religion, more than one nation, more than one tradition.³ This task—made more difficult by the inherited negatives of the past—is the calling of this generation. This cooperation in common commitment to *tikkun olam* is in our hands to accomplish. In this moment, we can see past the blindness, the cupidity, the egotistic drive of a Balaam, and realize that God has given us a precedent of connection and relationship to a non-Jewish prophet and culture. This discovery of God’s concern for all can lead to a joint breakthrough to *shalom*—wholeness—for humanity. This can lead to uncovering and recovering the beautiful poetry of revelation in the other and their way of life. Such discoveries can unleash mutual love and concern which leads to blessing and to being a blessing to each other.

² This is of course not to deny that there is still anti-Semitism and hatred and degradation of Jews still circulating out there.

³ See also my prior essay on Parahat Lekh Lekha, “Covenantal Pluralism,” available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/covenantal-pluralism>.

