

Balak [Num 22:2-25:9]

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This week's parsha, called Balak, is a bit of an anomaly - a stand-alone story within the Torah. It's memorable because it features a talking donkey. What you may not recall is there is a heathen prophet, Balaam, who also speaks. Reviled in Jewish midrash, called by the rabbis, a "rasha", someone only out for themselves, Balaam's name can mean foreigner, as in "Not of the People", or "Destroyer Of People", "Confuser Of The People" and even, "Swallowing Up The People". Yet the prophet Balaam utters beautiful blessings on the Israelites, in spite of himself. Here's what happens:

King Balak, is fearful of the 2 million Israelites camped out, as far as the eye can see, that are about to enter his domain of Moab. Balak sends messengers to Balaam asking him to come curse the Children of Israel to prevent their conquering his kingdom, as they had the Canaanites and Amorites. The Torah tells us:

But God said to Balaam, "Do not go with them. You must not curse that people, for they are blessed." [Num 22:12]

So he remains where he is. A second set of emissaries is dispatched, with offers of silver and gold. This time, God tells Balaam:

"If these men have come to invite you, you may go with them. But whatever I command you, that you shall do." [Num 22:20]

Balaam saddles his donkey, and shortly after he and the Moabite diplomats start their journey, God sends an angel -- invisible to humans, seen only by the pack animal -- who stands in front of the travelers. The Torah says:

the ass caught sight of the angel of God standing in the way, with his drawn sword in his hand. The ass swerved from the road and went into the fields; and Balaam beat the ass to turn her back onto the road. [Num 22:22]

Three times this happens, and finally the donkey has had enough, and speaks to Balaam, asking why he is beating his steadfast beast of burden, who is not in the habit of disobeying him. Just then, the angel of God makes himself visible to Balaam, a kind of rebuke to him. While the ass had recognized holiness, Balaam had not.

There are several uncanny things happening here are worth unpacking. First, of course, is that fact that an animal is suddenly able to speak. The Torah tells us that God opened the donkey's mouth. The only other animal that speaks in the Torah, that I can think of, is the serpent in the Garden of Eden. In the earlier incident, the snake just starts speaking. In the case of our talking ass, the word used for "opened" is the same as was used a few weeks ago in the parsha Korach, when Moses foretells that God will create something entirely new and open ground, which happens, and the rebels are swallowed up by the earth. There's nice linkage between the unprecedented episode with Korach, and the really astounding ability of the donkey to have a conversation with Balaam.

Another remarkable feature of this story is that Balaam takes this in stride. He doesn't exclaim or shy away from his talking donkey. To me, his unperturbed tête-à-tête with his beast signals, and underscores, his receptivity to what we might think of as

supernatural occurrences, namely, God speaking to him, an angel blocking his path, and his talking donkey. This prepares us for the extraordinary events that follow.

Balaam arrives on the outskirts of the Moab territory, and is met by King Balak, who insists that he curse the Israelites. Balaam tells Balak:

“I can utter only the word that God puts into my mouth.” [Num 22:38]

But King Balak is intractable, and high on a hilltop, with a good view of the multitude of Israelites, he begins building altars, sacrificing oxen and sheep, offering up bulls and rams in hopes of a damning word from Balaam. Instead, after God speaks to Balaam, the prophet delivers a poetic blessing:

As I see them from the mountain tops,
Gaze on them from the heights,
There is a people that dwells apart,
Not reckoned among the nations,
Who can count the dust of Jacob,
Number the dust-cloud of Israel?
May I die the death of the upright,
May my fate be like theirs! [Num 23:9-10]

Balak is beside himself in anger, fulminating:

“What have you done to me? Here I brought you to damn my enemies, and instead you have blessed them!”

He replied, “I can only repeat faithfully what the God puts in my mouth.” [Num 23:11-12]

This happens two more times, much to Balak's dismay. The last time, the blessing is one we all know, one we say every Shabbat, indeed said at the beginning of every service.

Ma tovu oh halekha Ya'akov, mishk'notekha Yisra'el.

How fair are your tents, Jacob, your dwellings, Israel [Num 24:5]

This strikes me as amazing, that our liturgy includes words spoken by a non-Hebraic soothsayer, and a hostile one at that. The rabbis repurposed the words tents and dwellings to signify synagogues, places of worship, but the association with Balak and Balaam remains. Why, I wonder?

In the parsha, there is a nice rhyming of God's opening the donkey's mouth and God funneling blessings rather than curses through and out of Balaam's mouth. There is also not a little irony in the fact that Balaam, supposedly a prophet, is as blind to the angel of God as he is to the possibility of cursing the Israelites, something both Balak and Balaam himself desire. As it turns out, the tents of Jacob, that now signify the houses of study and prayer are the very dwellings that enabled Israel to survive. And they are perhaps the only words that Balaam speaks directly to the Israelite people. Balaam experiences a moment of consciousness. In short, "sees" them.