

(Dvar Torah continued from front page...)

So what is going on here? Despite recognizing his limits as a conduit for divine speech and will, it is apparent from Bilaam's multiple requests that he really wants to curse Israel. The text signals this when it tells us that "Bilaam got up in the morning and saddled his donkey." (21:1). This odd bit of information, Rashi notes, parallels a line in the story of the Binding of Isaac, where Avraham also woke up early and saddled HIS donkey for the journey to Mt. Moriah. In both cases, Rashi explains, it would have been normal to have their attendants saddle the donkey, but their strong motivations made them do it themselves.

But the Chassidic tradition delves deeper into the psychology of these "donkey-saddlers" by inviting us to see the donkey and rider as one being. The Baal Shem Tov taught that a donkey (חמור/*chamor*) is connected to both the word for clay (חימר/*cheimar*) and material (חומר/*chomer*), thus the donkey symbolizes the body and the rider the soul/intellect. When Bilaam and Avraham are described as saddling their donkeys, it was not just to RIDE their bodies but to OVERRIDE them. Avraham's love for God caused him to override his body's unwillingness to sacrifice his beloved son. But what was Bilaam's motivation to override his body's unwillingness to curse Israel? For Rashi, it was hatred for Israel, but it could also have been fear, jealousy, desire for profit, or ego.

In both cases, it would seem, the bodies got it right, as neither is ultimately allowed to do the deed. In the split second before he kills his son, Avraham hears the angel and looks up to see the ram he is to sacrifice instead. Bilaam, on the other hand, needs God to open the mouth of the donkey for him to hear anything and open his eyes for him to see anything.

Religion often asserts that the body - materiality and carnal desire - is the source of sin, and that the soul and intellect are pure and good. Our tradition sees the intellect as the seat of the *yetzer hatov* (good inclination) and the body as the seat of the *yetzer hara* (the evil inclination), and prescribes that the former should "saddle" and drive the latter. But this story flips that on its head and reminds us that goodness and morality can sometimes be natural instincts - something rooted in our gut. Sometimes things that we THINK are right can FEEL wrong, and our intellects can betray us through elaborate rationalizations. But if we habituate ourselves to doing good, our own bodies may keep us from taking the wrong path.

At the Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem, we offer students of all backgrounds an opportunity to engage with Jewish texts in a dynamic, inclusive, and collaborative environment. We help students gain the skills necessary for Jewish learning and spiritual growth as individuals and in their communities in North America, Israel, and around the world.



TORAH SPARKS

Parashat Balak

July 20, 2019 | 17 Tammuz 5779

Annual (Numbers 22:2-25:9): Etz Hayim p. 894; Hertz p. 669
Triennial (Numbers 23:27-25:9): Etz Hayim p. 903; Hertz p. 677
Haftarah (Micah 5:6-6:8): Etz Hayim p. 914; Hertz p. 682

D'var Torah: Trusting Your Gut

Rabbi Andy Shapiro Katz, *Conservative Yeshiva Director of Engagement*

Afraid of the approaching Israelites, Balak, King of the Moabites, sends messengers to convince Bilaam, a Mesopotamian prophet, to curse them. Bilaam consults with God and is told not to go. But after King Balak sends a more impressive delegation, Bilaam asks again and God relents; he can go, but he must do whatever God commands.

In the morning, Bilaam saddles his donkey to ride to where he can look down upon the Israelite encampment. But as he travels, suddenly his donkey refuses to move forward. God has sent an angel with a flaming sword to stand in their path. But while Bilaam doesn't see it, the donkey does, and it turns to the side rather than proceeding forward. Bilaam is incensed and begins to beat the donkey to get it back on the path. But the donkey swerves again to avoid the angel. Bilaam beats it again, and the donkey gives up, laying down in the middle of the road. Now totally enraged, Bilaam beats the donkey to within an inch of its life.

But then, miraculously, God enables the donkey to speak. It calls out to Bilaam: "What have I done that you are beating me? Am I not the same donkey you have always ridden, who has never done this before? Is my odd behavior - my refusal to move forward - not a sign to you?" God uncovers Bilaam's eyes and he sees the angel, who explains how the donkey actually saved Bilaam's life. Bilaam says to the angel that he'll turn back if God still disapproves, but the angel lets him go, reiterating that he may ONLY speak what he is told.

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D'var Haftarah: A Core Concern

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

For decades the Jewish community has been roiled with the question of “Who is a Jew?” This question focuses on conversion policies and procedures and boundaries between communities. But the deeper question is, “What is a Jew?” or more exactly, “What is it that makes a Jew a Jew?” What should we make of a Jew who has no cognizance of the past - a Jew who has no Jewish consciousness? This has been a debate within our tradition since time immemorial, and it permeates this week’s haftarah.

The prophet Micah records a confrontation between God and Israel where God presses his case for why Israel should remain faithful: “For the LORD has a case against His people, He has a suit against Israel. ‘My people! What wrong have I done you? What hardship have I caused you? Testify against Me! In fact, I brought you up from the land of Egypt, I redeemed you from the house of bondage, And I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam.’” (6:3-4) Micah reminds us that the root of Jewish consciousness - our identity and mission - is the Exodus from Egypt.

That we were enslaved and then freed was to inspire in us feelings of humility and gratitude. Thus we find the Exodus mentioned more than forty times by the Prophets. But lest we think that God expects our gratitude to exclusively take the form of prayer, sacrifice, and acts of dedication, Micah later offers a corrective, saying: “With what shall I approach the LORD, Do homage to God on high? Shall I approach Him with burnt offerings, With calves a year old? Would the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, With myriads of streams of oil? Shall I give my first-born for my transgression, The fruit of my body for my sins? ‘He has told you, O man, what is good, And what the LORD requires of you: Only to do justice And to love goodness, And to walk modestly with your God.’” (6:6-8). The Exodus was meant to inspire tangible action as well, not just to defend ourselves from new would-be oppressors, but to make the world a juster place for all people.

Leaders in Israel and the diaspora make dire pronouncements about the diminution of the Jewish people, through inter-marriage and so forth. But taking Micah’s message seriously means spending less time policing our borders and more time sharing and living our story. Jewish communal vibrancy flows directly from this deep shared sense of purpose.

Parashat Balak Self-Study

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

The People of Israel are camped on the border of Moav, on the eastern bank of the Jordan; causing the Moabites great concern. Rather than attempt to ward them off by an army, Balak the king invites Bilaam, a person who supposedly has the power to get rid of the enemy by placing a curse on it. But not all goes as planned...

1) Balak, the king of Moav (in trans-Jordan) sees what Israel did to the Amorites (Israel conquered their land). The nation of Moav became fearful of Israel for they were many (22:2-3) and decide to act in non-conventional ways. Have there been others who were fearful of Israel’s great numbers, and chose to act in non-military ways?

2) Balak, eager to have Bilaam join him in his struggle against Israel, offers to honor him greatly. Bilaam responds that even if Balak offered his house full of silver and gold he will not be able to transgress God’s word (22:16-18). Why do you think that Balak and Bilaam speak of different ‘motivations’? What might we learn about the speakers from the rewards they mention?

3) When Balak’s messengers came to Bilaam he told them to wait the night and he will let them know what God said. But when he is in Moav on his mission he sounds less certain: ‘maybe God will happen upon me’ (23:3). How do you explain the difference?

4) In the beautiful blessings that Bilaam delivers about Israel is the famous verse that some say at the beginning of the morning prayer: “How good are your tents Jacob, your dwellings Israel” (24:5). Why do you think that such an evaluation of the nation is placed by the Torah?

5) While dwelling near Moav, the people of Israel begin to whore with the women of Moav and are drawn to their god, Baal Peor. God orders Moshe to impale the leaders (25:1-4). We are not told why the leaders must be impaled. What do you think might be the reason?

(Come back next week for more details.)