

D'var Torah: Balak

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When Rabbi Moline asked me to deliver today's d'var in his absence, I jumped at the chance. After all, it's been nearly 20 years since I gave my last one, on the morning I became a bar mitzvah. But recalling that speech, I realized that I should have asked the rabbi what today's parsha would be about, considering that my last one was about leprosy. Although I did turn that into some compelling social commentary on the plight of those living with AIDS in our community, I have to admit the topic was sort of a downer.

Not to worry today. Today's parsha, Balak, is a veritable cornucopia of material. In just a few chapters, we find a false prophet for hire, a talking donkey, curses turned into blessings, a scandal and plague, and what has become the opening line of our morning services. And in the haftarah from Micah, we find one of the most quoted passages of the entire Bible. All in all, it's a lot better than leprosy.

The story begins in the parts of the parsha that we read in the other years of our triennial cycle, but it's important background for today's readings. Balak, king of the Moabites, was nervous that the Israelites had defeated other tribes and might be gunning for his. He sent his messengers to try to hire Balaam, a non-Jew, to curse the Israelites. Although there's much debate over the nature of Balaam's standing, with some calling him a prophet, some a sorcerer or wizard, and some just a huckster, it is clear that he was able to communicate directly with God in a way that most people – Jewish or otherwise – could not.

God appeared to Balaam in a dream and told him that he may not attempt the curse, because the Israelites were a blessed people. When Balak's emissaries tried to up the ante by offering Balaam unspeakable riches in exchange for his services, God allowed Balaam to go with the Moabites. Nevertheless, when Balaam actually went, God was angry. God placed an angel, armed with a sword, in Balaam's path, who was visible to Balaam's donkey, but not to Balaam himself.

Three times, the donkey tried to stop Balaam from encountering the angel's wrath, and three times Balaam ignorantly beat the donkey to punish her refusal to walk forward. Finally, God allowed the animal the gift of speech, an exceedingly rare occurrence in the Torah. The donkey asked Balaam if she was not the very same donkey that Balaam had ridden his whole life, and whether it had been her habit to let him down in the past. When Balaam saw the donkey's point, God allowed him to see the angel standing before him.

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There are many things right in front of us that we don't see. Sometimes, it's because we would have no way of seeing, and sometimes it's because we choose not to look. We go about our busy lives desperately trying to ignore many of the realities that threaten to detour us from our intended paths. We drive to fancy restaurants and don't see the homeless in the alleys behind them. We read the newspaper and skip the stories that are too difficult to bear. We walk down the street and avoid making eye contact with strangers, lest we become "too connected."

We also sin, as Balaam did, when we assume the worst in others. Balaam chose to see only the explanation of his donkey's actions that reflected the most poorly on the donkey, and in so doing he made himself contemptible in the eyes of God as well. Let's think about how this might apply to our daily lives.

When your employee, who has been a reliable worker in the past, starts arriving late, consider that she may be subject to a new stress about which you're not aware, instead of assuming that she's gotten lazy. When a waiter fails to bring you correct change, consider that he may have made a mistake, instead of assuming that he's trying to cheat you. When your child brings home a bad grade, consider whether she might be having trouble understanding the material, instead of assuming that she didn't try hard enough. And even when you see a tourist standing to the left on a Metro escalator – yes, even then – consider that he might be oblivious to our local customs, instead of assuming that he's deliberately trying to ruin your entire schedule for the day.

A few years ago, I was very sick. Over the course of my treatment, which eventually required surgery, I tried seven different medications. One of them was actually a form of chemotherapy, and it had the side effect of making me nauseated all day. As you can imagine, this was a very uncomfortable and distracting feeling, so I took to chewing gum or sucking on a mint quite often at work and during meetings. Now, whenever I see someone chewing gum at a time I might be inclined to think is inappropriate, I consider that perhaps he or she has cancer, or an illness like the one I had.

Plato said, "Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle." No matter how well off others may seem, we all wrestle with demons. Like Balaam's donkey, even our closest friends and family know things about their situations that we don't.

Now I'm not suggesting that you constantly overanalyze and second-guess your observations about other people, to the point that it makes you neurotic (or at least any more neurotic than our cultural disposition). If, God forbid, a stranger pulls a gun on you at the ATM, that would not be the time to consider whether he may have had a difficult childhood.

But in general, give some thought to the fact that there are greater forces at play than you may know. This is, after all, the essence of faith – the belief in things we can't see and can't even prove. Despite all our flaws, God still gives us the benefit of the doubt. Do the same for God and God's children. When you get a bad break, view it with the humility that should accompany our cosmic ignorance. As Max Ehrman famously put it, "whether or not it is clear to you, no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should."

When we try to see the best in others; when we avoid jumping to conclusions; when we allow God's light to shine on our lives; it not only illuminates confusing situations, but it reflects well on ourselves.

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A few minutes ago, we read about the next part of Balak and Balaam's story. After the angel permitted Balaam to continue with his mission – but only if he said exactly what God told him to – Balak led Balaam to a place overlooking the Israelites' encampment. Eager to hear the curse for which he was paying, Balak was livid when Balaam instead spoke the words God put in his mouth, and blessed the Israelites. Balak tried again and again to take Balaam to different vantage points, hoping that he might obtain the curse he desired. But the plan backfired, and Balaam, overcome by the sight of the Israelites, spoke these words we know so well: "How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, thy dwelling places, O Israel!"

To this day, we quote Balaam at the beginning of every morning service, when we first enter the sanctuary. This is especially significant, given that it is the only prayer in our daily liturgy that was written by a non-Jew. In this sense, Balaam became a sort of biblical Alexis de Tocqueville – an outsider who helped remind us to count our blessings, despite our troubles.

And how goodly are our dwelling places today! We are fortunate to have not only our own individual homes, but this wonderful communal home – our synagogue – in which to dwell with one another. Without emotional and physical investment, however, our synagogue is little more than an empty tent in the desert.

When you think about your relationship with our synagogue, don't be like Balaam. Don't simply stand far away, gazing on all our congregation has to offer and remarking on how wonderful it is. Even if you regularly attend services, which is undoubtedly important, consider how else you can be involved. Perhaps there is a committee you could join, or a class you could teach, or a gift you could make. If Balaam, who was not even a member of our community, found himself blessing us, imagine how you could bless our congregation with your additional involvement.

Now to finish our story. Balak finally grew tired of Balaam's complete failure as a prophet for hire, and told him to leave. Although Balaam's curses kept coming out as blessings, the Talmud teaches that he did have one more trick up his tunic. He suggested to Balak that the king entice the Israelite men with Moabite women, but only if the Israelites would agree to worship idols. The Israelites fell for the ruse, which Balaam knew would result in their destruction. God ordered the idolaters killed, and by the time the plague ended, 24,000 Israelites were dead.

In today's haftarah, Micah recounts examples of God's redemption of the Jewish people, and specifically cites the encounter with Balaam. God not only intervened to turn Balaam's curses into blessings, but God also stepped in to end the plague of idolatry that threatened to destroy us forever. And what does God want in return for this everlasting love and protection? What amount of sacrificial offerings would even the score? Of course, that's not what God truly wants. Micah explains that God has already told us "ma tov," what is good: to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God.

What a simple, yet profound, summary of our entire relationship with the Almighty and with each other. In one clause, Micah distills hundreds of commandments and thousands of words of biblical exhortation into three essential behaviors. I wish I had the time today to delve into all the nuances and

applications of Micah's statement, but I'll leave you with one thought about it in the context of what I've been discussing so far.

I think it's interesting to consider what these three things – justice, mercy, and humble fellowship with God – have in common, and what distinguishes them from other behaviors. Perhaps it is that our ability to act in these ways is what separates us from other animals.

Animals act out of instinct, not a sense of social justice. A lion on the African plain, with his paw on the neck of a gazelle, does not have the luxury of mercy if he is to survive himself. And despite God's love for animals, they are not able to know God in the way that we do, and to make the conscious choice to walk in God's ways.

All this is to say that when we heed Micah's call, we maximize what it means to be human, and we glorify the uniqueness with which God has blessed us. When we gather here in the tent of our synagogue, to treat each other as equals and to study Torah, God says it is good. When we strive to apply these lessons in our daily lives, we honor God.

But when we act like Balaam on his donkey – when we view others unfairly, abuse power, or fail to recognize before whom we stand – we are no better than animals. Justice, mercy, and humility are the very essence of our humanity.

So as you leave our tent today, think about how goodly it is to be with each other, and think about what you can do to bless our congregation through your increased participation. As you encounter others throughout the course of your life, consider whether they might be fighting hard battles that you can't see. And in everything we do, let us remember what makes us human. May we all do justly, and love mercy, and walk humbly with our God.

Shabbat shalom.