

D'var Torah
Eric J. Ellman

Parashah Balak

Numbers 22:2 – 25:9

3rd Year of the Triennial Cycle • Deut. 22:39 – 25:9

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Congregation B'nai Tzedek, Potomac, Maryland

Shabbat Shalom. Shalom Aleichem. Gut Shabbos.

I want to start, as I always do, by thanking Rabbi Weinblatt for giving me the honor of delivering a d'var Torah. I want to thank Cantor Kapell, whose musicality is so inspirational and lifts me and my prayers. I say that all the time because it's true all the time. And happy one year anniversary to Rabbi Werbin, who has become in that short time, a valued member of *makom ha'zeh*, this place. Most importantly, thank you to all of you, *chaverim sheli*, my friends. It is an honor to *daven* with you this morning. Thank you for your spirit and thank you for your presence. I say that all the time because it's true all the time. I also want to bid a Shabbat Shalom to those watching at home, including my parents (at least I hope they are watching). They are celebrating their 58th wedding anniversary.

Balak is unique because in this story we have a talking ass, and we all know that asses cannot talk. Right?

There are several characters in this story. There is Balak, the Moabite king who hired Balaam as a curse mercenary who was sent to torment the Israelites. Balak picked Balaam to curse the Israelites because Balaam was considered the preeminent seer of his day. Not unlike a client who picks the best lawyer he can find. Spoiler alert: In losing the case, Balak and Balaam end up winning a far greater victory. To find the Jews, Balaam sets out on his donkey and along the way the encounters an angel of G*d.

For a d'var Torah, this parashah has amazing material. It contains a beautiful and important passage, (מִה־טֹבוֹ אֹהֲלֶיךָ יִצְחָק מִשְׁכְּנֹתֶיךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל), "*mah tovu ohalecha, Ya'akov mishk'notecha Yisrael*" — How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel." I have recited this passage more times than I can count when I walk into a synagogue.

Mah tovu ohalecha, Ya'akov mishk'notecha, Yisrael. I have recited this phrase in this Beit Knesset, and in shuln around the world, including Warsaw, Prague, Cape Town, Berlin, Istanbul, and Jerusalem, and in many cities here in the U.S. This phrase is profoundly engrained in Jewish lexicon. It's in our siddurim and it's recited every day by Jews all over the world. But check this out. This deeply rooted passage of the magnificence of the Jewish people and their places of worship was recited by a person, Balaam, who set out to destroy the Jewish people. That seems so odd to me. Let's rewind.

Miriam and Aaron have died, and Moses continues to lead our ancestors through the desert. We have successfully defeated the Edomites, the Canaanites, the Amorites and the Emorites. Next up are the Moabites and the Midianites. Spoiler alert: we win there, too. Balak saw the handwriting on the wall, or maybe the writing in the sky, and set Balaam on mission to curse the Jews. Balaam set out on his donkey to complete his mission. Along the way, G*d sent an angel that at first only the donkey could see and the more the donkey steered away to avoid crossing the angel, the more Balaam beat the donkey to keep going. Three times this angel leads the donkey away from the path and three times Balaam hits his donkey in anger.

Then G*d opens the mouth of the donkey, and she says to Balaam, “What have I done to you that you hit me three times?” Balaam answers, “Because you act against me. If I had a sword in my hand I would kill you.” The donkey then says, “Am I not your faithful donkey whom you always ride? Have I ever done this to you before?” This was new behavior for the donkey, but Balaam missed that clear and important sign. When Balaam answers no, the donkey never acted this way before, G*d suddenly opens Balaam’s eyes so he could see the angel of G*d standing in the path with a sword in its hand. After seeing this, Balaam quickly bowed.

Balaam said to the angel of G*d. “I have sinned. I did not know that you stood in the way against me. If you want me to go back I will.” But the angel of G*d says, “Go to Balak but say only what I tell you to say.”

So Balaam reports all this to Balak and the pair make their way back to the Israelite encampment, to the Field of Seers. The field of seers. Here, Balak is still bent on destruction. After making altars and sacrifices, Balaam could see that in the eyes of G*d it was right only to bless Israel. When he saw the Israelites camping, the spirit of G*d came upon him inspiring him to say aloud, “How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel.”

Recall that I mentioned a moment ago that Balaam was considered the preeminent seer of his day, but this seer could not see. Or, perhaps he could see but he had no vision. Ironical that Balaam wound up in the Field of Seers. Remember also that as Balaam is being led on a wild donkey chase, he threatens to kill the donkey because he could not see that the donkey was being directed by an angel. Only when G*d “uncovered Balaam’s eyes” does Balaam see the angel and repent for his mistreatment.

You cannot see unless you are prepared to see. Similarly, we cannot recite the Amidah until we are prepared to pray. *Adonai s’fatai teftakh ufi yagid t’helatekha* (אֲדֹנָי שְׁפָתַי תִּפְתָּח וּפִי יַגִּיד תְּהִלַּתְךָ). G*d, open my lips that my mouth might proclaim Your praise.

According to Pirkei Avot, one of the ten things that G*d made on the Sabbath eve of creation was the mouth of the donkey. The other nine things seem so powerful, like the rainbow, the letters, the tablets, and the writings, but we also have the mouth of the donkey. Nu? What’s that about? From the very beginning the donkey must have been part of the vision to literally steer people away from harming others and towards a path of righteousness. That’s why I think the mouth of the donkey is right up there with rainbows.

There are signs and wonders all around us, but we must not only see, but have vision necessary to see. I firmly believe that the bush that was burning on Mt. Sinai was burning for years and others passed it by for a long time, but only Moshe Rabbeinu could see it. He had a vision to see more.

Sometimes signs are as powerful as a burning bush that will not be consumed. Sometimes they are in quotidian events like a donkey ride in the desert. Sometimes they are in the white spaces between the words, the white fire. Sometimes the words of the prophets are written on the subway walls and tenement halls. And yes, sometimes the signs are in the silence.

So, there is the seeing and the vision, but there is also the listening and the hearing. Look at what happened to Balaam when he did not listen to the donkey. He thought he was on a donkey ride through hell when he was actually being led to illumination. He just wasn't listening. He thought the donkey was just an ass. While the donkey was no Elijah, we know that Elijah can show up in many forms, we just have to see it and have the vision to see it. The same is true for G*d. Even while the donkey did not speak a human language, Balaam did nothing to understand what the donkey was trying to communicate. Communication also means hearing and listening.

I mentioned seeing and vision and hearing and listening. I want to turn amplify a comment I made a few moments ago about the beauty that Balaam saw. Balaam, an initial adversary, was turned by the beauty and power of the Jewish people. Like Ruth who said, "wherever you go, I will go," Balaam saw something worth treasuring.

So how did the authors of our Siddurim start with words that came from a person that was so bent on our destruction? What could Balaam have seen to alter his mindset so?

Were the tents that inspiring? Maybe. But maybe Balaam did not see tents. Maybe he saw something deeper, something bigger. Maybe he saw something in the people in those tents. Maybe he saw their lives, their pasts, and their futures.

Balaam's most famous curse, which was turned into a blessing, and codified in our siddurim, is a metaphor for our people. Balaam's curse became a blessing and that's the story of our collective history. Maybe Balaam saw that future. Maybe he saw that for thousands of years, we will be cursed, and we will turn those curses into blessings. We can turn mourning into dancing. Maybe he is saying that whatever happens, your tents are good. Maybe he saw, wherever you go, I will go.

Our sages have said that the expression "your tents," refers to periods when Israel is at peace in its homeland, whereas the phrase "your dwellings," refers even to periods when the Land and Temple of Israel is in ruins.

Rashi said that Balaam either saw that the entrances to the tents were misaligned and was amazed with their modesty, or that he was referring to the majesty of the Tabernacle where Jews made their offerings for atonement. Or Balaam was noting that the holy places of our people are holy even when in disarray because they can serve as what a Chabad Rabbi (Moshe Bogomilsky) called the “collateral security of the Jewish people.” Or it’s what others refer to as the collective memory of the Jewish people. This collective security or collective memory of why Balaam said what he said is what resonates for me.

In many *devrei Torah* on this *bimah* I have shared powerful memories of travels. My standing in the showers at Dachau; and of one of the most amazing Shabbatot I ever had one Friday evening in only shul in Warsaw to survive the Shoah; and of my dancing with the Torah on Simchat Torah one night in Berlin; and my sitting in silence for what seemed like forever at the edge of an abandoned railroad platform, also in Berlin, while staring into the empty distance. I have stood on the heights of Masada; before the Kotel in Jerusalem; and in the town cemetery in my family’s shtetl in Lomza, Poland. These are our tents and our dwelling places.

In these places I have seen p’nai Eloheim (פְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים), the face of G*d in ways that I can hardly describe in words. Even from the ashes there is *aish kodesh*, holy fire. These are the signs that are like a burning bush.

But I have also seen the greatness, mightiness, and awesomeness of G*d and His people – us – in the mundane. In this very shul, I saw three b’nai mitzvah – siblings – daven with such beauty that made it impossible for me to stay composed while sat here. I note this because the beauty of their prayer leadership belied what I am sure must have been brave struggles to make it to that day. On that day *hovo malay et hamishkan* (הִנֵּה מָלֵא אֶת הַמִּשְׁכָּן), the presence of G*d filled this place.

I saw our tents in summer camp in the 1979 when on Sunday movie night we watched *The Raid on Entebbe* and at the end, 200 campers and counselors stood up and erupted in thunderous applause and a non-Jewish counselor, who was sitting next to me, leaned over and said, “now I can see why you are such a proud people.” I saw our tents when I surreptitiously tucked a Whole Foods gift card into the shopping cart of an unhoused man whose cart, just outside the grocery store, was not full of food, but was stuffed with what must have been all his possessions.

Our tents are in the wide spaces and the narrow places, we just need to see them and have the vision to look for them.

Even on days when we are not our best selves or when we are just not feeling our prayer, we can think back to what Balaam saw when he said “*mah tovu ohalecha, Ya’akov mishk’notecha Yisrael.*” There is splendor in the fire and in the stillness. There is beauty in disarray. We can see it if only we had the vision. We can hear it if only we just listen.

Gut Shabbos. Aleichem Shalom.