Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Balak
July 20, 2024 *** 14 Tamuz, 5784

Balak in a Nutshell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/2982/jewish/Balak-in-a-Nutshell.htm

The name of the Parshah, “Balak,” refers to Balak, king of Moab, and it is found in Numbers 22:2.

Balak, the king of Moab, summons the prophet Balaam to curse the people of Israel. On the way, Balaam is berated by his donkey, who sees, before Balaam does, the angel that G-d sends to block their way. Three times, from three different vantage points, Balaam attempts to pronounce his curses; each time, blessings issue forth instead. Balaam also prophesies on the end of the days and the coming of Moshiach.

The people fall prey to the charms of the daughters of Moab, and are enticed to worship the idol Peor. When a high-ranking Israelite official publicly takes a Midianite princess into a tent, Pinchas kills them both, stopping the plague raging among the people.

Haftarah in a Nutshell: Micah 5:6-6:8

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/696140/jewish/Haftorah-in-a-Nutshell.htm

This week's haftorah makes mention of the incident of Balak the king of Moab hiring the sorcerer Balaam to curse the Jewish people — the main topic of this week's Torah reading.

The prophet Micah prophesies about what will occur after the war of Gog and Magog, the war which precedes the coming of the Messiah and the Final Redemption.

"And the remnant of Jacob shall be in the midst of many peoples — like dew sent by G-d, like torrents of rain upon vegetation that does not hope for any man and does not wait for the sons of men." The prophet describes how G-d will remove the idols and sorcerers and how He will destroy the Jews' enemies.

The prophet Micah then goes on to rebuke the Jewish people for not observing G-d's commandments, calling as witness the "mountains and hills" — a reference to the Patriarchs and Matriarchs — and reminding them of the great things G-d had done for them. He took them out of Egypt and replaced the curses that Balaam son of Beor wanted to utter against them with blessings.

The Jewish people respond by saying that they do not know how to serve G-d and ask for guidance. The prophet reminds them of the Torah, and that all they need to do is contained within it: "He has told you, O man, what is good, and what G-d demands of you: but to do justice, love kindness, and walk discreetly with your G-d."

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

A People That Dwells Alone by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l 5771

https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/balak/a-people-that-dwells-alone/

The dictionary defines epiphany as "a sudden manifestation of the essence or meaning of something; a comprehension or perception of reality by means of a sudden intuitive realisation." This is the story of an epiphany I experienced one day in May 2001, and it changed my perception of the Jewish fate.

It was Shavuot and we were in Jerusalem. We had gone for lunch to a former lay leader of a major Diaspora community. Also present at the table was an Israeli diplomat, together with one of the leaders of the Canadian Jewish Community.

The conversation turned to the then forthcoming – now notorious – United Nations' Conference against Racism at Durban. Though the conference would not take place until August, we already knew that it, and the parallel gathering of NGOs, would turn into a diatribe against Israel, marking a new phase in the assault against its legitimacy.

The diplomat, noting that the conversation had taken a pessimistic turn, and being a religious man, sought to comfort us. "It was ever thus," he said, and then quoted a famous phrase: "We are 'am levadad yishkon', the people that dwells alone."

It comes from this week's parsha. Bilaam, hired to curse the Jewish people, instead repeatedly blesses them. In his first utterance he says to King Balak King of Moab:

How can I curse whom God has not cursed? How can I denounce whom the Lord has not denounced? From the top of the rocks I see them, and from the hills I gaze down: a people that dwells alone; not reckoned among the nations. (Num. 23:8-9)

Hearing these words in that context I experienced an explosion of light in the brain. I suddenly saw how dangerous this phrase is, and how close it runs the risk of being a self-fulfilling prophecy. If you define yourself as the people that dwells alone, you are likely to find yourself alone. That is not a safe place to be.

“Are you sure,” I said to the diplomat, “that this was a blessing, not a curse? Remember who said it. It was Bilaam, and he is not known as a friend of the Jews.” Bilaam is one of the people mentioned in the Mishnah (Sanhedrin 10:2) as having no share in the world to come. Having failed to curse the Israelites, he eventually did them great harm (Num. 31:16).

“Remember,” I continued, “what the Talmud says in Sanhedrin (105b), that all the blessings with which Bilaam blessed the Jewish people turned into curses with the sole exception of the phrase, ‘How good are your tents, Jacob, your homes, O Israel’” (Num. 24:5). The Rabbis suggest that Bilaam was deliberately ambiguous in what he said, so that his words could be understood as blessings but also had another and darker meaning.

“Nor,” I said, “is badad, being alone, a good place to be according to the Torah. The first time the words “not good” appear in the Torah are in the phrase Lo tov heyot ha’adam levado, ‘It is not good for man to be alone’ (Gen. 2:18). About a leper the Torah says, badad yeshev michutz lamachaneh moshavo, ‘He shall dwell alone, outside the camp’ (Lev. 13:46). When the book of Lamentations seeks to describe the tragedy that has overtaken the Jewish people it says Eichah yashva vadad ha-ir rabati am, ‘How alone is the city once filled with people’ (Lam. 1:1). Except in connection with God, being alone is rarely a blessing.

What I suddenly saw, when I heard the diplomat seeking to give us comfort, was how dangerous this Jewish self-definition had become. It seemed to sum up the Jewish condition in the light of antisemitism and the Holocaust. But that is not how the commentators understood the phrase. Rashi says it means that Jews are indestructible. Ibn Ezra says it means that they don’t assimilate. Ramban says it means that they maintain their own integrity. It does not mean that they are

destined to be isolated, without allies or friends. That is not a blessing but a curse. That is not a destiny; still less is it an identity.

To be a Jew is to be loved by God; it is not to be hated by Gentiles. Our ancestors were called on to be “a kingdom of Priests and a holy nation.” The word kadosh, “holy,” means set apart. But there is a profound difference between being apart and being alone.

Leaders are set apart, but they are not alone. If they really were alone, they could not be leaders. Athletes, writers, actors, singers, pianists may live apart when they are preparing for a major performance, but they are not alone. Their apartness is purposeful. It allows them to focus their energies, hone and refine their skills. It is not an existential condition, a chosen and willed isolation.

There is no suggestion in the Torah that Jews will live alone. God says to Abraham, “Through you all the families of the earth will be blessed.” Abraham was different from his neighbours, but he fought for them and prayed for them. He was apart but not alone.

For some time now – the Durban conference was one sign of it – Israel and Diaspora Jewry have faced growing isolation. Israel has been the object of a sustained campaign of delegitimisation. Meanwhile, shechittah is under attack in Holland, and brit milah in San Francisco. Battles we thought we had won for the freedom to live as Jews, individually in the Diaspora, nationally and collectively in the state of Israel, are now having to be fought all over again.

These are important fights, good fights, whose outcome will affect more than Jews. In ancient times, Israel was a small nation surrounded by large empires. In the Middle Ages, Jews were the most conspicuous minority in a Christian Europe. Today the State of Israel is a vulnerable enclave in a predominantly Muslim Middle East.

Jews have long been cast in the role of the ‘Other’, the one who does not fit into the dominant paradigm, the majority faith, the prevailing culture. One of Judaism’s central themes is the dignity of dissent. Jews argue, challenge, question. Sometimes they do so even with God Himself. That is why the fate of Jews in any given time and place is often the best index of freedom in that time and place.

It is no accident that the story of Abraham begins immediately after the biblical account of the Tower of Babel, which opens with the words, “Now the whole world had one language and a common speech.” Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin (Netziv) says that this means that there was no dissent. There was an enforced uniformity of opinion. Such a society leaves no room for dialogue, debate, disagreement and difference, the things essential for freedom.

When, therefore, Jews fight for the right to be, whether as a nation in its historic home, or as a religious group in other societies, they fight not for themselves alone but for human freedom as a whole. It was the Catholic writer Paul Johnson who wrote that Jews are “exemplars and epitomisers of the human condition. They seemed to present all the inescapable dilemmas of man in a heightened and clarified form… It seems to be the role of the Jews to focus and dramatise these common experiences of mankind, and to turn their particular fate into a universal moral.”

As we prepare ourselves for the next battle in the long fight for freedom it is vitally important not to believe in advance that we are destined to be alone, to find ourselves without friends and allies, confronting a world that neither understands us nor is willing to grant us a place to live our faith and shape our future in loyalty to our past. If we are convinced we will fail, we probably will. That is why the Rabbis were right to suggest that Bilaam’s words were not necessarily well-meant.

To be different is not necessarily to be alone. Indeed, it is only by being what we uniquely are that we contribute to humankind what we alone can give. Singular, distinctive, countercultural – yes: these are part of the Jewish condition. But alone? No. That is not a blessing but a curse.

Balak: Bilam’s Donkey: Judaism’s First Emotional Support Animal by Yedida Kanfer

https://truah.org/resources/yedida-kanfer-balak-moraltorah_2024_/

My emotional support dog, Gabi, is a cute, fluffy, white bichon frise. She comes with me everywhere — to shul, to work, to the doctor — and sits calmly next to me, or rides in my little blue backpack. Having an emotional support animal requires tremendous vulnerability: Gabi is a public reminder that I am a work-in-progress. And yet, she is essential to my journey of healing. Through loving Gabi and practicing compassion, I am learning to be compassionate with myself. For me, practicing is the process of becoming.

I think about Gabi when I read about Bilam and his donkey in this week's Torah portion. Balak, the king of Moav, has asked Bilam to curse the children of Israel. Bilam sets off, but his donkey doesn't cooperate. Taking out his frustrations — and most likely his ambivalence about his mission — on his donkey, Bilam hits the animal repeatedly. Remarkably, the donkey speaks back to him. A famous mishnah (Pirkei Avot 5:6) states that this special animal was created at the world's beginning. In reminding Bilam that she is his faithful donkey, she reminds him of her place — and his place — in creation. God has "uncovered" Bilam's eyes (Numbers 22:31), and with the spiritual-emotional support of his donkey, he continues on his journey.

Many midrashim and commentators understand Bilam to be so ill-intentioned that he is not capable of growth: God has to put words in his mouth for all three blessings. But I am drawn to the Ramban's detailed analysis of the text, which suggests change and evolution. Bilam's second blessing had included the line, "There is no augury in Jacob, no divining in Israel" (Numbers 23:23). Bilam genuinely takes this in, the Ramban says, which is why we read several verses later that when preparing for his third prophecy, Bilam does not go "in search of omens" (Numbers 24:1). Rather, "the spirit of God came upon him" (Numbers 24:2). This language of "the spirit of God," the Ramban argues, is the same as is used with other prophets. When Bilam himself speaks the phrase "eyes uncovered" in his third blessing (Numbers 24:4), it reminds us of the incident with the donkey and, as I read it, is a testament to his continued growth. In other words, Bilam has to practice speaking the truth; it is through speaking the word of God that he becomes a prophet.

Indeed, the biblical text reads "Bilam saw that it was good in God's eyes to bless Israel" (Numbers 24:1). The Hebrew phrase is ki tov — the same refrain that is repeated seven times in the story of creation. It's as if, by Bilam's third prophecy, he has begun to see connections to all living things: to his donkey, to the children of Israel — whom he now turns toward as he begins to speak — and, of course, to the Divine. Avivah Zornberg notes that it is only with the third prophecy that Bilam is able to switch from third to second person: how good are your tents, O Jacob ("Bewilderments," 261). When Bilam looks out to the wilderness at Israel's "dwelling places," and, in particular, the Mishkan, we can imagine a genuine yearning, an envy, for the constant presence of the Shechina.

Here in the United States, as we draw nearer to the November elections, we see constant reminders that our democracy is a work-in-progress. We have a fascist demagogue leading in the polls and judicial and legislative institutions that are quickly losing their legitimacy. In the next several months, as the news cycle runs its endless course, we will face obstacles that will make us feel like we need a punching bag. Yet in an era in which truth is assailed from all sides, we must bravely move forward with "eyes uncovered." By practicing democracy — working to get out the vote, engaging in conversation, writing letters to the editor — we will make democracy a reality. We must choose our areas of service, and through our actions, recreate our Dwelling Spaces as a true mirror of the Divine. For this task, we have been endowed, through Bilam and his donkey, with words of steadfast emotional support. Each morning, when we say 'ma tovu,' we turn our gaze out towards the wilderness around us and know that we are connected to each precious, unique creation — a unity that has tremendous power. If Bilam is capable of speaking his truth, so are we. *(Yedida Kanfer, PhD, is a rabbinical student at the Academy for Jewish Religion – California and a member of the first cohort of T'ruah's D'var Torah Fellowship).*

The Sounds of No Hands Clapping: Balak by Marcus Mordecai Schwartz
https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/the-sound-of-no-hands-clapping/

Shabbat, the day of rest, is a cornerstone of Jewish life, filled with customs aimed at creating a sanctified atmosphere. One lesser-known custom is to avoid clapping on Shabbat. This custom finds its roots in rabbinic sources and reveals lessons about self-control, the sanctity of Shabbat, and divine interaction with humanity. It is also surprisingly connected to the Torah's story of Balaam and Balak. To recap, Balak, the king of Moab, feared the Israelites who had recently come out of Egypt. Seeking to curse them, he hired Balaam, a prophet known for his ability to bless or curse with powerful words. The Torah narrates how Balaam, on his way to meet Balak, encountered an angel of God standing in his path. Balaam's donkey, seeing the angel, turned aside, causing Balaam to become angry and strike the donkey. This scene culminates with the donkey speaking to Balaam, questioning why he was beaten. Balaam's behavior highlights the dangers of anger, which led him to strike an innocent animal and miss the divine message before him.

The Yerushalmi (Jerusalem Talmud) will draw the connection between our parashah and clapping. It states that clapping, particularly when done in anger, is discouraged on Shabbat, and bases the prohibition on Numbers 24:10, where

Balak, enraged by Balaam's blessings instead of curses, claps his hands together in frustration. Balak's clapping symbolizes a loss of control and submission to anger—actions that go against the peaceful spirit of Shabbat.

Shabbat is intended to be a day of peace and joy, a taste of the World to Come. Anger and frustration disrupt this tranquility. By refraining from clapping, especially in moments of anger, we maintain the sanctity and serenity that Shabbat demands. This prohibition reminds us to cultivate a sense of calm and to avoid actions that might lead to discord. The story of Balaam and Balak further illustrates the significance of divine intervention in human affairs. Balak hired Balaam, confident in his ability to curse the Israelites. However, God's intervention turned intended curses into blessings, demonstrating His protection over Israel.

Balaam had a unique relationship with anger. The sages considered Balaam one of the seven prophets of the nations and believed his prophetic level was close to that of Moses. However, they also depicted Balaam as morally corrupt, driven by greed, and possessing an evil eye. The Talmud discusses Balaam's ability to discern the precise moment of divine anger, during which he could pronounce effective curses. This ability underscores the potential power of curses but also highlights God's mercy in preventing such moments of anger during Balaam's attempts.

The Talmud notes that God prays for His attribute of mercy to prevail over anger. This divine self-restraint serves as a model for human behavior, especially on Shabbat, a day dedicated to emulating divine rest and mercy. By avoiding actions that might show anger, such as clapping in frustration, we align ourselves with the divine attribute of mercy. The act of clapping, particularly in a moment of anger, symbolizes a loss of control and submission to baser instincts. Shabbat, on the other hand, is a time to rise above everyday impulses and connect with a higher spiritual reality. By consciously avoiding actions that might further anger or frustration, we reinforce the values of self-control and spiritual elevation that Shabbat embodies.

The story of Balak and Balaam teaches us about the limits of human intention, the supremacy of divine protection, and the consequences of moral and spiritual corruption. Refraining from clapping on Shabbat, rooted in the example of Balak's angry reaction and in Talmudic teachings, reminds us to cultivate an atmosphere of moral uprightness, spiritual elevation, and peace and to embody the divine

attribute of mercy. By avoiding actions that disrupt the tranquility of Shabbat, we honor the day's sanctity and strive to elevate our own character, aligning ourselves more closely with divine examples. Through these practices, we transform Shabbat into a sanctuary in time, a day of peace, joy, and spiritual renewal. *(Marcus Mordecai Schwartz is the Ripps Schnitzer Librarian for Special Collections and Assistant Professor of Talmud and Rabbinics at JTS)*

Balak: The Nature of Bil'am's Prophecy by Ilana Stein
https://www.growtorah.org/bamidbar/2022/07/13-balak-the-nature-of-bilams-prophecy

In Parshat Balak, a non-Jewish navi, named Bilaam is hired by King Balak of Mo'av to curse Bnei Yisrael, only to find himself proclaiming four blessings instead. Each blessing builds on the one before it, each more sophisticated and far-seeing than the last. The third blessing is the first to embrace symbolism. Specifically, it is rich in imagery taken from the natural world.

The third blessing begins with Bilaam's most famous statement: "Mah tovu ohalecha Ya'akov, mishkenotecha, Yisra'el" - "How goodly are your tents O Jacob, and your tabernacles, O Israel."[1] But the pasuk that follows is less well known: "Like the winding brooks, like gardens by the river's side, like aloes which the Lord has planted, and cedar trees beside the waters." Upon close inspection what is notable is that the verse does not follow any of the patterns used in Biblical poetry—neither A-B-A-C (staircase parallelism) nor A-B-B-A (chiastic structure) nor even the style of the previous verse, where the first half of the verse is simply parallel to the second. Here, one of these things is not like the other - one body of water is followed by a list of three types of flora; one desert plant is put in the middle of three references to water. None of the usual structure patterns mentioned above seem to fit.

Various commentators offer different explanations. Ibn Ezra sees trees as something implied in the first image of the river, as trees usually do grow next to winding rivers or brooks[2]. This would make the verse chiastic, with trees bookending the planted gardens and aloe. The Da'at Mikra[3] takes this one stage further: the word "nachal" most often refers to a riverbed, as opposed to an actual flowing river, usually within an arid or desert ecosystem. Such riverbeds are sandy and dry, there is no surface water for most of the year, but they can be seen from afar since greenery and even large trees grow next to them, marking them clearly within the vast expanse of arid land. In southern Africa, it is these slivers of green,

toward which the elephants head in the dry season. Here they dig down into the desiccated sand with their front legs until brackish water oozes out from the depths and they can drink.[4]

If we look at the general ecosystems in which these plants or rivers are found, rather than the plants themselves, we find the verse in fact has an A-B-A-B structure:

A – “nachal” – riverbed in a desert environment

B – “nahar” – greenery next to a broad river

A – “ahalim” – aloes (plants that usually live in semi-arid or arid areas)

B – “arazim alei mayim” – cedars that stand next to water (tall trees that require great amounts of water to grow)

By this understanding, the verse actually follows a standard parallel structure, containing a repeated image of two kinds of biomes or ecozones: a desert with aloes and a river that flows only rarely, and a more temperate zone with a perennial river and cedar trees. In Egypt and Israel both biomes were well-represented. Bnei Yisrael knew the desert environment intimately, as well as the power of the Nile River, and eventually the Jordan, to create “gardens” on its banks.

The parallel structure, therefore, conveys an understanding of these two ecosystems as distinct and diverse, while communicating an appreciation for the power and beauty of nature generally. The natural imagery in Bilaam’s prophecy becomes a cry for us to reconnect with the world in which Hashem placed us. On both a poetic and philosophical level, the Torah teaches us to appreciate nature—and to react with praise of its Creator. Hashem did not create such a spectacular world merely to provide food and industry, but also to bring us beauty. If one truly sees all of nature in its complexity, beauty, and harmony, one’s reaction might more often be the same spontaneous outburst of David Hamelech in Tehillim: “Mah rabu ma’asecha Hashem, kulam bechachmah asita, mal’ah ha’aretz kinyanecha” - “How diverse are Your works, Oh Lord! You make them all with wisdom, the world is full of Your possessions.”[5] *(With degrees in Nature Conservation and English, and an MA in Jewish Education, Ilana Stein combines both in her*

work – as a writer for conservation and ecotourism in Africa and as a Head of Education of The Academy of Jewish Thought and Learning in Johannesburg.)

[1] Bamidbar 24:5 Trans. The Jerusalem Bible. Koren Publishers Jerusalem LTD, Israel 1992. I have replaced 'thy' and 'thou' with 'you' and 'your' for clarity. [2] Ibn Ezra, Abraham ben Meir ibn Ezra (1092 or 1093–1167), was one of the most distinguished Jewish men of letters and writers of the Middle Ages. [3] Ad loc. Da'at Mikra, Y.Z. Moslowitz, Mossad Harav Kook [4] Wild Ways, Field Guide to the Behaviour of Southern African mammals by Apps, Peter, Southern Book Publishers, 1992, South Africa [5] Tehillim 104:24 (Trans. The Jerusalem Bible. Koren Publishers Jerusalem LTD, Israel 1992.)

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Yahrtzeits

Lenny Levin remembers his father Emanuel Levin on Sunday July 21st
Ronni Klein remembers her mother Bette Liebowitz on Monday July 22nd
Barry Ostrowsky remembers his father Abe Ostrowsky on Monday July 22nd
Rebecca Greene remembers her mother Marian Greene on Thursday July 25th
David Rubin remembers his mother Hortense Janofsky Rubin on Friday July 26th