Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Chukat-Balak
June 27, 2026 *** 12 Tamuz, 5786

Chukat-Balak in a Nutshell
https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/2219/jewish/Chukat-Balak-in-a-Nutshell.htm

The name of the Parshah, “Chukat,” means “Statute [of the Torah]” and it is found in Numbers 19:2. The name of the Parshah, “Balak,” refers to Balak, king of Moab, and it is found in Numbers 22:2.

Moses is taught the laws of the Red Heifer, whose ashes purify a person who has been contaminated by contact with a dead body.

After 40 years of journeying through the desert, the people of Israel arrive in the wilderness of Zin. Miriam dies and the people thirst for water. G-d tells Moses to speak to a rock and command it to give water. Moses gets angry at the rebellious Israelites and strikes the stone. Water issues forth, but Moses is told by G-d that neither he nor Aaron will enter the Promised Land.

Aaron dies at Hor Hahar and is succeeded in the High Priesthood by his son Elazar. Venomous snakes attack the Israelite camp after yet another eruption of discontent in which the people "speak against G-d and Moses"; G-d tells Moses to place a brass serpent upon a high pole, and all who will gaze heavenward will be healed. The people sing a song in honor of the miraculous well that provided the water in the desert. Moses leads the people in battles against the Emorite kings

Sichon and Og (who seek to prevent Israel's passage through their territory) and conquers their lands, which lie east of the Jordan.

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 the angel that G-d sends to block their way before Balaam does. Three times, from three different vantage points, Balaam attempts to pronounce his curses; each time, blessings issue instead. Balaam also prophesies on the end of 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/895314/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

The Hardest Word to Hear by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z”l (5768)
https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/balak/the-hardest-word-to-hear/

The story of Bilaam, the pagan prophet, begins with a bewildering set of non-sequiturs. It involves a sequence of events that seems to have no logic.

First, the background. The Israelites are approaching the end of their forty years in the wilderness. Already they have fought and won wars against Sihon, King of the Amorites and Og, King of Bashan. They have arrived at the plains of Moab - today, southern Jordan at the point where it touches the Dead

Sea. Balak, King of Moab is concerned, and he shares his distress with the elders of Midian. The language the Torah uses at this point is precisely reminiscent of the reaction of the Egyptians at the beginning of the book of Exodus.

[The Egyptian Pharaoh] said to his people: “Here, the children of Israel are more numerous and powerful than us...” and he was disgusted at the Children of Israel. Exodus 1:9-12

[Balak, the King of Moab] was very fearful because of the people, because it was numerous, and Moab was disgusted at the Children of Israel. Numbers 22:3

The strategy Balak adopts is to seek the help of the well-known seer and diviner, Bilaam. Again there is a literary evocation, this time of the words of God to Abraham:

God to Abraham: “I will bless those who bless you, and those who curse you I will curse.” Genesis 12:3

Balak to Bilaam: “I know that whoever you bless is blessed and whoever you curse is cursed.” Numbers 22:6

This time the parallel is ironic (indeed the Bilaam story is full of irony). In the case of Abraham, it was God who blessed. In the case of Bilaam, the power was thought to reside in Bilaam himself. In fact the earlier statement of God to Abraham already prefigures the fate of Moab - one who tries to curse Israel will himself be cursed.

The historical background to the Bilaam narrative is well-attested. Several Egyptian pottery fragments dating from the 2nd millennium BCE have been found containing execration texts - curses - directed against Canaanite cities. It was the custom among pre-Islamic Arabs to hire poets thought to be under Divine influence to compose curses against their enemies. As for Bilaam himself, a significant discovery was

made in 1967. A plaster inscription on the wall of a temple at Deir Alla in Jordan was found to make reference to the night vision of a seer called Bilaam - the earliest reference in archaeological sources to a named individual in the Torah. Thus, though the story itself contains elements of parable, it belongs to a definite context in time and place.

The character of Bilaam remains ambiguous, both in the Torah and subsequent Jewish tradition. Was he a diviner (reading omens and signs) or a sorcerer (practising occult arts)? Was he a genuine prophet, or a fraud? Did he assent to the Divine blessings placed in his mouth, or did he wish to curse Israel? According to some midrashic interpretations he was a great Prophet, equal in stature to Moses. According to others, he was a pseudo-prophet with an “evil eye” who sought Israel’s downfall. What I want to examine here is neither Bilaam nor his blessings, but the preamble to the story, for it is here that one of the deepest problems arises, namely: what did God want Bilaam to do? It is a drama in three scenes.

In the first, emissaries arrive from Moab and Midian. They state their mission. They want Bilaam to curse the Israelites. Bilaam’s answer is a model of propriety: Stay the night, he says, while I consult with God. God’s answer is unequivocal:

But God said to Bilaam, “Do not go with them. You must not put a curse on those people, because they are blessed.” Numbers 22:12

Obediently, Bilaam refuses the emissaries. Balak then redoubles his efforts. Perhaps more distinguished messengers and the promise of significant reward will persuade Bilaam to change his mind? He sends a second set of emissaries and gifts. Bilaam’s reply is exemplary:

“Even if Balak gave me his palace filled with silver and gold, I

could not do anything great or small to go beyond the command of the Lord, my God." Numbers 22:18

However, he adds a fateful rider:

"Now stay here tonight as the others did, and I will find out what else the Lord will tell me." Numbers 22:19

The implication is clear. Bilaam is suggesting that God may change His mind. But this is impossible. That is not what God does. Yet to our surprise, that is what God seems to do:

That night God came to Bilaam and said, "Since these men have come to summon you, go with them, but do only what I tell you." Numbers 22:22

Problem 1: first God had said, "Do not go." Now He says, "Go." Problem 2 appears immediately:

Bilaam got up in the morning, saddled his donkey and went with the princes of Moab. But God was very angry when he went, and the angel of the Lord stood in the road to oppose him. Bilaam was riding on his donkey, and his two servants were with him. Numbers 22:21-22

God says, "Go." Bilaam goes. Then God is very angry. Does God change His mind - not once but twice in the course of a single narrative? The mind reels. What is going on here? What is Bilaam supposed to do? What does God want? There is no explanation. Instead the narrative shifts to the famous scene of Bilaam's donkey - itself a mystery in need of interpretation:

When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road with a drawn sword in his hand, it turned off the road into a field. Bilaam beat it to get it back on the road.

Then the angel of the Lord stood in a narrow path between two vineyards, with walls on both sides. When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord, it pressed close to the wall, crushing

Bilaam's foot against it. So he beat it again.

Then the angel of the Lord moved on ahead and stood in a narrow place where there was no room to turn, either to the right or to the left. When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord, it lay down under Bilaam, and he was angry and beat it with his staff. Then the Lord opened the donkey's mouth, and it said to Bilaam, "What have I done to you to make you beat me these three times?"

Bilaam answered the donkey, "You have made a fool of me! If I had a sword in my hand, I would kill you right now."

The donkey said to Bilaam, "Am I not your own donkey, whom you have always ridden, to this day? Have I been in the habit of doing this to you?"

"You have not," he said.

Then the Lord opened Bilaam's eyes, and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road with his sword drawn. So he bowed low and fell facedown. Numbers 22:23-31

The commentators offer various ways of resolving the apparent contradictions between God's first and second reply. According to Nahmanides, God's first statement, "Don't go with them" meant, "Don't curse the Israelites." His second – "Go with them" - meant, "Go but make it clear that you will only say the words I will put in your mouth, even if they are words of blessing." God was angry with Bilaam, not because he went but because he did not tell them of the proviso.

In the nineteenth century, Malbim and R. Zvi Hirsch Mecklenberg suggested a different answer based on close textual analysis. The Hebrew text uses two different words for "with them" in the first and second Divine replies. When God says, "Don't go with them" the Hebrew is imahem. When He

later says “Go with them” the corresponding word is itam. The two prepositions have subtly different meanings. Imahem means “with them mentally as well as physically,” going along with their plans. Itam means “with them physically but not mentally,” in other words Bilaam could accompany them but not share their purpose or intention. God is angry when Bilaam goes, because the text states that he went im – with -them - in other words, he identified with their mission. This is an ingenious solution. The only difficulty is verse 35, in which the angel of God, having opened Bilaam’s eyes, finally tells Bilaam, “Go with the men.” According to Malbim and Mecklenberg, this is precisely what God did not want Bilaam to do.

The deepest answer is also the simplest. The hardest word to hear in any language is the word “No”. Bilaam had asked God once. God had said “No”. That should have sufficed. Yet Bilaam asked a second time. In that act lay his fateful weakness of character. He knew that God did not want him to go. Yet he invited the second set of messengers to wait overnight in case God had changed His mind.

God does not change His mind. Therefore Bilaam’s delay said something not about God but about himself. He had not accepted the Divine refusal. He wanted to hear the answer “Yes” - and that is indeed what he heard. Not because God wanted him to go, but because God speaks once, and if we refuse to accept what He says, God does not force His will upon us. As the Sages of the Midrash put it: “Man is led down the path he chooses to tread.”

The true meaning of God’s second reply, “Go with them,” is, “If you insist, then I cannot stop you going - but I am angry that you should have asked a second time.” God did not change

His mind at any point in the proceedings. In scenes 1, 2 and 3, God did not want Bilaam to go. His “Yes” in scene 2 meant “No” - but it was a “No” Bilaam could not hear, and was not prepared to hear. When God speaks and we do not listen, He does not intervene to save us from our choices. “Man is led down the path he chooses to tread.” But God was not prepared to let Bilaam proceed as if he had Divine consent. Instead He arranged the most elegant possible demonstration of the difference between true and false prophecy. The false prophet speaks. The true prophet listens. The false prophet tells people what they want to hear. The true prophet tells them what they need to hear. The false prophet believes in his own powers. The true prophet knows that he has no power. The false prophet speaks in his own voice. The true prophet speaks in a voice not his (“I am not a man of words” says Moses; “I cannot speak for I am a child” says Jeremiah).

The episode of Bilaam and the talking donkey is pure humour - and, as I have pointed out before, only one thing provokes Divine laughter, namely human pretension. Bilaam had won renown as the greatest prophet of his day. His fame had spread to Moab and Midian. He was known as the man who held the secrets of blessing and curse. God now proceeds to show Bilaam that when He so chooses, even his donkey is a greater prophet than he. The donkey sees what Bilaam cannot see: the angel standing in the path, barring their way. God humbles the self-important, just as He gives importance to the humble. When human beings think they can dictate what God will say, God laughs. And, on this occasion, so do we.

Some years ago, I was making a television programme for the BBC. The problem I faced was this. I wanted to make a documentary about teshuvah, repentance, but I had to do so in a way that would be intelligible to non-Jews as well as

Jews, indeed to those who had no religious belief at all. What example could I choose that would illustrate the point?

I decided that one way of doing so was to look at drug addiction and recovery. Addicts develop behaviours that they know are self-destructive, but they are part of their lifestyle. To break these habits involves immense reserves of will. An addict looking to address these self-destructive behaviours must acknowledge that the life they have led is harmful to them and to others, and needs to change. That seemed to me a secular equivalent of teshuvah, which could illustrate the message to viewers.

I spent a day in a rehabilitation centre, and it was heartbreaking. The young people there - they were aged between 16 and 18 - all came from broken families. Many of them had suffered abuse. Other than the workers at the centre, they had no networks of support. The staff were exceptional people. Their task was astonishingly difficult. They would succeed in getting the addicts to break the habit for days, weeks at a time, until then they would relapse and the whole process would have to begin again. I began to realise that their patience was little less than a human counterpart of God's patience with us. However many times we fail and have to begin again, God does not lose faith in us, and that gives us strength. Here were people doing God's work.

I asked the head of the centre - a social worker - what it was that she gave the young people to make a difference to their lives and give them the chance to change. I will never forget her answer, because it was one of the most beautiful I ever heard. 'We are probably the first people they have met who care for them unconditionally. And we are the first people in their lives who cared enough to say "No."'

“No” is the hardest word to hear, but it is also often the most important - and the sign that someone cares. That is what Bilaam, humbled, eventually learned and what we, too, must discover if we are to be open to the Voice of God.

Who Sees the Truth, and Who Speaks It? By Loraine Enlow
https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/who-sees-the-truth-and-who-speaks-it/

Long-time New York subway riders are familiar with the slogan, “See something, say something.” Balaam’s story in this week’s parashah is closer to: “Say something, because you didn’t see something.” After all, “See something, say something” assumes that the hard part is speaking up, but Parashat Balak suggests the hardest part may be noticing at all, especially when Balaam, the professional seer, can’t see the angel in the road that his donkey does. This reversal of who notices (and who misses what’s right in front of them) is what draws me into this passage. As a scholar working primarily on medieval Jewish and Christian biblical commentaries, I’m especially interested in noticing how texts travel, how communities guard them, and how outsiders can sometimes help shed light on a tradition. Biblical interpretation is itself, in a sense, the discipline of noticing “angels in the road,” learning to see what is already present right in front of you in the text.

Balaam’s story is an unusually good place to watch that interpretive dynamic unfold, because his own character becomes a shared (and contested) reference point in both Jewish and Christian reading to think about dangerous speech and false prophecy. The New Testament already references

Balaam as a polemical tool (Rev. 2:14, Jude 11, II Pet. 2:15), while rabbinic traditions often interpret him as a paradigmatic wicked gentile prophet. But despite these categories established early in both textual communities, Balaam resists easy binaries. He is neither an Israelite nor entirely outside God's purposes; he is simultaneously an outsider, participant, critic, and unwilling witness. So perhaps the more interesting question to ask is not whether Balaam is good or evil, prophet or fraud, insider or outsider, but this: What does it take to see what has been there all along?

One small detail in the Torah's description of Balaam at the beginning of his speech, a phrase about his eye, became a hinge for generations of interpreters thinking about what it means to "see":

Num. 24:3 - *He took up his discourse and said: The declaration of Balaam son of Beor, and the declaration of the man shetum ha-ayin [meaning unclear].*

Explaining the unusual Hebrew phrase *shetum ha-ayin,* appearing only in this chapter, Rashi draws on BT Sanhedrin 105a's aggadic interpretation that the Torah's use of the singular "ayin" (eye) indicates that Balaam was blind in one eye. Whatever the philological merits, the exegetical point is vivid: the man who claims visionary authority is marked by partial sight. He sees, but only out of one eye; he knows, but not fully.

Balaam's failure, therefore, might be interpreted as not merely wickedness, but self-certainty. He assumes that because he is a seer, he sees; however, it is the donkey's attentiveness that actually perceives the angel in the road. The beauty of biblical commentary is that no one reader sees everything fully. Jewish readers, Christian readers, medieval readers, modern

scholars — all are, in some sense, seeing some things clearly and missing others. In the study of texts, traditions, and their long histories of encounter, the donkey's careful attentiveness is the rarer gift. But what makes sight possible at all?

Thinking beyond Balaam's physical condition and character, this narrative might be read about our human perception itself.

Num. 22:31 - And the Lord uncovered Balaam's eyes.

Rabbi Tobiah ben Eliezer, an eleventh-century contemporary of Rashi's from the Byzantine Empire, writes in his Lekah Tov:

And the Lord uncovered Balaam's eyes – this teaches that the whole entire world is presumed blind until the Holy One, blessed be He, uncovers their eyes. Similarly [of Hagar]: "And God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water" [Gen. 21:19]. There are many things, and the human eye has no power to see them until the Holy One, blessed be He, decrees it.

Ben Eliezer's movement from Balaam to Hagar is especially striking: in both cases, God opens non-Israelite eyes to something already there. The well and the angel may be miraculous, but the deeper wonder is that both were present before humans could see them. Moreover, Lekah Tov does not make this a story only about Balaam's flaws. The limit is simply human: "the whole entire world is presumed blind" until God uncovers our eyes. Read this way, the parsha is not mainly warning about wicked outsiders, but is asking insiders to admit how much of reality (textual, moral, spiritual) we regularly pass by without noticing.

There is something subversive, and I think genuinely hopeful, about a tradition that builds a central lesson about vision and divine wisdom around a non-Israelite prophet and a talking donkey. For an educated modern public living amid confident

claims from every side, Parashat Balak offers a counter-discipline to our New Yorker “see something, say something” instincts, encouraging us to move through the text with less certainty about what we already “see,” and more willingness to have our eyes uncovered before we speak. For if even Balaam can be made to speak truth, and even a donkey can notice what the prophet misses, then our task together is to become the kind of readers – and neighbors – whose attention makes room for truths we did not expect to hear, maybe even occasionally from people we did not expect to trust. *{Loraine Enlow is Adjunct Assistant Professor, JTS, Alumni (Kekst Graduate School); Asmissions Officer (Yale Institute of Sacred Music)}*

Parshat Chukat: Anxiety and Faith by Rabbi Dr. Susan Hornstein
https://yeshivatmaharat.org/parshat-chukat-anxiety-and-faith/

In the old silent movies, when a significant period of time had passed, a card would be displayed (which is known, incidentally, as an “intertitle”) saying something like “Five years later…” Today, a movie might indicate the passage of time by graying the hair of the characters a little. And novels routinely display a date at the beginning of a chapter, when the passage of time is relevant.

No such indicator is presented by the Torah, when suddenly, at the beginning of Bamidbar Chapter 20, we skip from the second year after the Exodus to the 40th year. The chapter begins: “The Israelites, the entire assembly, arrived at the wilderness of Zin in the first month…” (Bamidbar 20:1). The commentators agree, it is now the 40th year. Ibn Ezra tells us this, and adds that nothing significant had occurred in the intervening 38 years. Rashi comments on the phrase “the

entire assembly," saying that those who were destined to die in the wilderness during those 38 years had by now died, and the entire assembly was poised to enter the Promised Land.

Nothing significant had occurred? Nothing except a great deal of birth and death. The Israelites who had left Egypt, who had seen the miracles at the Red Sea, who had received the Torah on Sinai, and who, nevertheless, continued to lament the fact that Moshe had taken them out of their security in Egypt, were all dead, as promised by God after the sin of the spies. That generation was incapable of living the life that God had planned for them. Now, a new generation of Israelites has been born. Surely they would be capable of serving and trusting in God. But it seems that nothing has changed. The old refrains are new again, as this generation complains about both water and food, and imagines that they too would have been better off in Egypt:

> Why did you make us leave Egypt to bring us to this wretched place, a place with no grain or figs or vines or pomegranates? There is not even water to drink!" (Bamidbar 20:5).
>
> And the people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why did you make us leave Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread and no water, and we have come to loathe this miserable food" (Bamidbar 21:5).

These complaints occur at very specific times: the first, about water, occurs immediately after the death of Miriam, whose death is recorded at the very beginning of the passage:

> The Israelites, the entire assembly, arrived at the wilderness of Zin in the first month; Miriam died there

> and was buried there. And the community was without water, and they assembled against Moses and Aaron (Bamidbar 20:1-2).

Miriam's death is followed directly by a lack of water. The Talmud in Ta'anit 9a explains that the people had an ever-ready well of water because of Miriam's merit, and that this gift disappeared upon her death. Miriam has been their source of sustenance. She was there from the very beginning, ensuring that the infant Moshe would be saved from the Nile, and she led them in song after they crossed the Sea of Reeds. Her death deprives them of both physical and emotional stability.

Of course, the people do need water. Their complaint is addressed by God, who instructs Moshe and Aharon to speak to the rock. That same Gemara explains that this rock was actually Miriam's well, which had oozed with water before her death. Rashi says that the rock was reluctant to shed its water, because of the death of Miriam, leading to the tragic continuation of the story, in which Moshe hits the rock and is denied entrance into the Promised Land. The rock is disoriented by Miriam's death, and it seems that Moshe may be disoriented as well. Everyone is mourning.

The second complaint, about food, occurs immediately after the death of Aharon, later in the same chapter, on Mount Hor. Aharon has been their religious leader, presiding over their relationship with God. As the Israelites leave Mount Hor, they are again uncomfortable and disoriented. This time, they complain about the lack of food, saying that they are sick of the manna that they've had to eat since they left the "paradise" of Egypt.

This generation never lived in Egypt. They have never lacked for anything. Why are they complaining?

Our story is coming to an end. For 40 years, one family has led the Children of Israel through the wilderness. This family has given everything to the people. Moshe sacrifices his marriage and home life to his leadership role. Aaron sacrifices two of his sons to the arcane laws of the sacrificial service. Both Miriam and Aharon are married, but we hear nothing about their spouses. The one time that Miriam and Aharon are criticized is when they speak ill about Moshe's marriage. It seems that there is no place for family life in this triumvirate; they are all about serving the Israelites. Now, after almost 40 years of total dedication, the picture is changing. Miriam dies, and not long thereafter, Aharon dies too. The people have never known anything else. Will Moshe die too? (Spoiler alert: yes.) How will they go on? When anxiety about the future overtakes them, as their beloved leaders die one by one, they express themselves through the familiar language of complaint.

Even when we have faith, we may still experience anxiety. Moshe himself, the greatest leader of all time, was anxious when he was called upon by God to lead. The Israelites, after 40 years in the wilderness, have no reason to doubt that they will be cared for. The water was never going away; it only paused briefly while mourning Miriam's death. The manna would continue until they were safely in the Promised Land. But anxiety is a natural reaction to instability. And when we are anxious, we may fall back into familiar patterns of behavior that don't serve us well. In the coming chapters, we hope that the anxiety will be transformed into excitement as the Israelites prepare for their entry into the Promised Land.

(Rabbi Dr. Susan is an educator and lifelong learner. She is a founder of the Women's Tefillah Group of Raritan Valley and has been active in the Highland Park, NJ community for over 35 years. She is is also a

musician and a HaZamir conductor. R' Susan has founded a community, Kol Ami, a welcoming halakhic congregation.)

Balak: A Blueprint for Blessings by Yael Turitz Kaplan (2025) https://yeshivatmaharat.org/balak-a-blueprint-for-blessings/

I've been thinking a lot about blessings lately. This summer, I am privileged to be completing a unit of Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE), where I work as a chaplain in a hospital. Often, when I introduce myself to patients as a chaplain, the first thing they ask for is a blessing.

But what is a blessing? As Jews, we say them constantly—before we eat, after we go to the bathroom, as we usher in Shabbat each week—but what does it really mean to bless someone or something? Is it a form of prayer? An acknowledgement of holiness? A compliment? A moment of gratitude?

This week's parsha gives us some excellent examples of blessings. Twice Bilaam tries to curse Bnei Yisrael, and twice, none other than God Godself intervenes and places words of blessing in his mouth instead. What better place to look for how we are meant to give brakhot than God's own formulation of blessings!?

Both of God's blessings (found in Bamidbar 23) are about the people's relationship with God. Bnei Yisrael are praiseworthy because God said they were praiseworthy, and they are successful in their wars and endeavors because God made it so. "How can I damn whom God has not damned, how can I doom when God has not doomed?" asks Bilaam (Bamidbar 23:8). "Their God is with them, and their King's acclaim in their midst; God who freed them from Egypt is for them like the

horns of the wild ox," says the second blessing (Bamidbar 23:21). The focus is not on what qualities the people of Bnei Yisrael themselves possess, but on their relationship with the Divine. I think this aspect is key for understanding blessings in a Jewish context.

The first two times the word for blessing, brakha, is mentioned in the Torah both occur during the creation story. On day six of creation, we read:

> God created man in His image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. God blessed them and God said to them: "Be fertile and increase; fill the earth and master it" (Bereishit 1:27-28).

Here, the blessing God gives to God's newest creations seems more like a charge, an action they have to undertake as part of their ongoing relationship with the one who created them.

Similarly, on the seventh day, after God rests, the Torah tells us: "And God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it" (Bereishit 2:3). In his commentary on this verse, Ibn Ezra suggests that "a blessing means an increase in wellbeing. On the Sabbath, the body is blessed with a renewal of its strength and the soul with an increase in its intellectual and reasoning capabilities." It is possible to understand this in a metaphysical sense—to say that something almost magical happens on Shabbat, a renewal of body and soul by God. The brakha of Shabbat, then, is that it is a weekly encounter between human beings and God.

This is echoed in a famous midrash told about Avraham Avinu. When he is told to leave his father's land and sojourn to the

land of Canaan, God says to Avraham: "I will make of you a great nation, And I will bless you; I will make your name great, And you shall be a blessing" (Bereishit 12:2).

Midrash Rabbah tells us that, in this moment, God bestowed upon Avraham the right to bestow blessing:

> Rabbi Berekhya said: "I will bless you" is already written; why does the verse state [further]: "And you shall be a blessing?" The explanation is that He said to him: "Until this point I was required to bless My world. From now on, the blessings are passed to you; whomever you deem worthy to bless, bless him" (Bereishit Rabbah 39:11).

Avraham, the first person to have a true relationship with the Divine, is the first person who can bestow blessings upon other people because brakhot are actually about that very relationship. When we make a brakha, we not only acknowledge but actively take part in our everlasting relationship with God. In a sense, giving a brakha is a godly endeavor, perhaps the closest divine encounter we can reach as human beings. "If you ask me what Judaism is," Rabbi Joseph B. Soleveitchik wrote in his Blessings and Thanksgivings, "I will respond: Judaism is contained in the words 'Barukh Ata.' The recognition that the Almighty, as it were, needs our brakhot, means that He, as it were, needs to be discovered by us and needs our constant aspiration to seek and find Him" (p.125).

The third time Bilaam is asked to curse Bnei Yisrael, he does not need God to tell him how to bless them instead. After having two intense personal encounters with the Divine, he now knows what it means to bless someone, and he composes the final brakha himself. When he says "ma tovu

ohalekha Yaakov, how great are your tents, Jacob" (Bamidbar 24:5), a line that will go on to be canonized in Jewish liturgy for generations to come, he is not speaking of Bnei Yisrael's physical tents or even of their character, but he is making a comment about and partaking in the everlasting bond between God and the Jewish people. How good is that bond, how awesome that God dwells amongst them!

To bestow blessing is to acknowledge the link between the Divine and the human. For many of the patients I see, this link so often feels tenuous, if not completely severed. When they ask for a blessing, they are asking for me to help them restore that bond, to help them reconnect to a God they fear has abandoned them. There are no perfect words to say that can instantaneously rebuild that relationship, and I often struggle to find any words to say in these moments. But the lesson I'm taking from this week's parsha is that the very act of blessing itself can serve as an opening for engaging in a relationship with God. By offering blessings to others, I hope that I might play a small role in helping people reconstitute their spiritual lives. *(Yael Turitz Kaplan is originally from Silver Spring, Maryland. She is passionate about Jewish education and wants to help make Torah accessible and inspiring for the next generation. Yael comes to Maharat after 4 years of working as a special education teacher at The Shefa School. While there, Yael earned a masters in special education and Jewish education from Touro College, and she holds a BA in religion from Barnard College.)*

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Yahrtzeits

Lenny Levin remembers his father Emanuel Levin on Tue. June 30
Ronnie Klein remembers her mother Bette Liebowitz on Wed. July 1
Barry Ostrowsky remembers his father Abe Ostrowsky on Wed. July 1