

Parsha Balak

Numbers Chapters 22.2-25.9

I have read the story about King Balak, and a sorcerer Balaam and his donkey many times growing up, but I apparently have never had a chance to comment on it in all my years as your lay leader. I find it a very fitting parsha in our current society.

In the first aliyah, the Israelites have just conquered the Emorites and the Bashanites, the two neighbors of Moab. Balak, king of Moab, worries that his nation will be next. So he sent messengers to the Land of Midian, to Balaam, a famed non-Jewish prophet, hence a sorcerer, asking him to come and curse the Jews. But God appeared to Balaam that night and told him not to go to Moab. "You shall not curse the Israelites because they are blessed!"

In the second aliyah, Balaam understood God and sent the messengers back to Balak telling him that God won't let him do this. Then Balak sent another group of messengers to Balaam, promising him wealth in return for his services. The scene is repeated. Again God appeared to Balaam, only this time God allowed Balaam to go as long as he only speaks the words which God tells him to say.

In the third aliyah, as Balaam leaves with the messengers, God sends an angel with a drawn sword to block their path. Balaam can't see the angel, but his donkey can, and refused to move, so Balaam struck his donkey. This happens several times before the donkey miraculously speaks (think of Mister Ed), admonishing Balaam for hitting him. Eventually God "opens Balaam's eyes," and he sees the angel. A conversation between Balaam and the angel ensues, wherein Balaam is chastised for his behavior towards his donkey, and again he is reminded only to say what God tells him to say. Eventually, Balaam arrives in Moab where he is greeted by Balak. The talking donkey incident has been a subject for theologians for a very long time, but I'd rather comments on the next 3 aliyahs.

In the fourth aliyah, Balaam tells Balak to build seven altars and offer sacrifices to God. God then tells Balaam to say: "From Aram, Balak the king of Moab has brought me, from the mountains of the east: 'Come, curse Jacob for me and come invoke wrath against Israel.' How can I curse whom God has not cursed, and how can I invoke wrath if the Lord has not been angered?..." Balaam then proceeded to shower the Israelites with beautiful blessings and praises. Balak is very angry, but Balaam tells him he can only say that which God tells him to say.

The fifth aliyah is similar to the fourth. Balak takes Balaam to another location hoping for a better result. He again builds altars and offers sacrifices, but again God is in control, so Balaam repeats. "God does not look at evil in Jacob,

and has seen no perversity in Israel; the Lord, his God, is with Israel, and he has the King's friendship..."

The sixth aliyah is another replication. Balak takes Balaam to another place, hoping that Balaam can curse the Jews from there. There are more altars and offerings, yet for a third time, only blessings issue from Balaam's mouth, which begins with a famous Saturday prayer, the Ma Tovv: "How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel! ... God, who has brought them out of Egypt with the strength of His loftiness He shall consume the nations which are his adversaries ... Those who bless them shall be blessed, and those who curse them shall be cursed." At this point, Balak gives up and sends Balaam on his way.

Before I turn to the seventh and last aliyah in this parsha, *I would like you to close your eyes and envision almost any person in today's social media frenzy who wishes to speak their mind but is "confounded" by God and forced to only speak about goodness and love.* It boggles the mind but would be welcomed by all.

In the last aliyah, Balaam prophesies about the end of days, saying: "I see it, but not now; I behold it, but not soon. A star has gone forth from Jacob, and a staff will arise from Israel which will crush the princes of Moab and uproot all the sons of Seth..." He also speaks about the eventual destruction of Esau, Amalek and Assyria. The last few verses in chapter 25 recount Moabite and Midianite women seducing many Jewish men. They also entice a Jewish man to worship an idol. God commands Moses to execute the guilty people, and a lethal plague erupts amongst the Jews. When a Jewish leader, Zimri, publicly displays the Midianite princess with whom he was consorting, Phinehas, Aaron's grandson, kills them both, and the plague is halted. So concludes this parsha.

The Haftarah comes from the prophet Micah in chapters 5 and 6, who 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. Micah prophesizes about what will occur after the war of Gog and Magog, the war which precedes the coming of the Messiah and the Final Redemption. He describes how God will remove the idols and sorcerers and how He will destroy the Jews' enemies. Micah rebukes the Jewish people for not observing God's teachings, and reminding them of the great things God had done for them, especially when he replaced the curses that Balaam wanted to utter with blessings. The Jewish people respond by saying that they do not know how to serve God and ask for guidance. The prophet reminds them to follow the teachings of the Torah and "to do justice, love kindness, and walk discreetly with your God."