

PARASHAH: Balak
ADDRESS: B'midbar (Numbers) 22:2-25:9
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(Note: all quotations are taken from the Complete Jewish Bible, translation by David H. Stern, Jewish New Testament Publications, Inc., unless otherwise noted)

Let's begin with the opening blessing for the Torah:

***“Baruch atah YHVH, Eloheynu, Melech ha-‘Olam,
asher bachar banu m’kol ha-amim,
v’natan lanu eht Torah-to.
Baruch atah YHVH, noteyn ha-Torah.
Ameyn.”***

(Blessed are you, O' LORD, our God, King of the Universe,
you have selected us from among all the peoples,
and have given us your Torah.
Blessed are you, LORD, giver of the Torah.
Ameyn.)

The power of rumor...

Balak had not only heard of what terrible acts Isra'el had committed in destroying the 'Emori, according to the first verse of our Torah portion, he also saw it! Did he witness it firsthand? Perhaps. Perhaps he saw the aftermath of the campaign and did the mental math. Whatever the case, the fame and reputation of HaShem was becoming more and more known among the tribes of Kena'an (Canaan). The offspring of Avraham was gaining a name for themselves: "the dreadful people who have come out of Egypt."

Indeed, the LORD was working mightily among them!

But our opening sequence has Balak, king of Mo'av (Moab) seeking a way to destroy these seemingly unstoppable and numerous people. Based on his observation of their might (because of their sheer numbers), he decides that a military campaign is futile. Therefore, he decides to fight fire with fire: he hires the top pagan prophet of his day, Bil'am (Balaam).

Now Bil'am was a peculiar man. Here is a prophet who hears, converses and knows the ineffable name of HaShem! Yet, he does not follow the ways of HaShem's Torah. How can this be? Occasionally in the Torah, to our seeming dismay, God actually converses with unbelieving pagans. In these dialogues we catch a glimpse of the incredible nature of our God in his dealing not only with the Jewish Nation, but with other people groups as well. I believe that even the

greedy Bil'am could have found a place in the community of God's Called-out ones, but as we shall see, he chose a different course for himself.

The power of blessing...

Balak sends messengers to Bil'am, with a request for Bil'am to pronounce a curse upon the blessed. Bil'am, at first, entertains the notion, and takes the matter before HaShem. The Holy One reminds him of the foolishness of such a request, and forbids him from pronouncing any such curse. But the messengers of Balak are soon found returning to Bil'am with a second similar request, backed by a more hefty reward upon Bil'am's success.

At this point Bil'am begins to make his mistakes.

He, knowing that HaShem has forbidden him to curse the people, conveys this information again to the messengers, but then proceeds to find another way around HaShem's apparent final answer. Why is Bil'am double-minded? Here is the revelation of his greedy nature. I believe that the increased reward was actually beginning to appeal to him, and an abuse of his relationship with HaShem might indeed secure for him the praise of Balak.

HaShem does something rather peculiar to Bil'am. He grants him permission to go with the men this time, provided he only does what HaShem specifically tells him to do. But HaShem, who sees the heart of all men, instead sees greedy gain in Bil'am's heart as he quickly saddles his own donkey and heads out the next morning. This is upsetting to HaShem. Left to his own devices, Bil'am will not follow the instructions of the LORD, but will rather follow his own baser nature and seek the wealth offered by Balak.

So the God of all circumstances decided to alter Bil'am's plans. He sends an angelic messenger to sway Bil'am from following through with his greedy plan. The angel finally succeeding in gaining the attention of Bil'am, through his miraculous talking donkey, informs Bil'am that his plans are not good ones, but are in fact opposite those of HaShem! Amidst this whole transaction, I am amazed that Bil'am does not even think it an incredible thing to have a conversation with a donkey! Such is the blindness of material lust. Even the incredible seems dull in comparison to our own heart of greed. It took the supernatural hand of ADONAI to open the eyes of Bil'am.

This is where Bil'am finally actually acts in accord with the Word of HaShem. He is summoned thrice to an overlooking hill to curse 'Am Yisra'el. Each time a blessing proceeds from his mouth, as he attempts to perform that which the king of Mo'av is asking him to do. Particularly on the third attempt, the prophet Bil'am does not use his usual form of divination, but instead the Ruach HaKodesh actually comes upon him and opens his eyes and mouth! The blessing, which he utters, is most significant, in the fact that it has impacted the Jewish people in the

form of a liturgical prayer which is recited at every Shacharit (morning prayer times)—down to this very day!

מֵה־טִבּוֹ אֹהֲלֶיךָ יַעֲקֹב מִשְׁכַּנֹּתֶיךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל

“Ma tovu ohalecha Ya’akov mishkanotecha Yisra’el!”

(How lovely are your tents, Ya’akov; your encampments, Isra’el!)

This is the utterance of Bil’am in 24:5. This is incredible, as it comes on the heels of his previous blessing that there is no divination in Isra’el (23:23)! This must have stunned the evil king of Mo’av, as well as shocked Bil’am into the reality that the very act that he was seeking to perform—indeed his very livelihood, was not only an abomination to HaShem, but powerless against his Chosen ones!

God is a God of covenant and he has promised to uphold his called-out ones in blessing and not condemnation. He will not allow anyone to pronounce upon them, that which is contrary to the plans and purposes that he alone has in store for them! Even still, the people survive the attempts of Bil’am, but succumb to their own fleshly instincts by intermingling and whoring with the forbidden women of Mo’av! Did the unsuccessful Bil’am succeed in getting the people to fall, not for the curses, but for the lust of the flesh? The Torah is silent at this particular parashah, but as the sages are quick to point out, this wicked man eventually meets his death in a few further chapters as Moshe and the people lay siege to Midyan (read B’midbar 31:7-20). Thus, the people survive the curses, but fall instead for the advice of Bil’am and give in to their lustful passions by taking foreign wives. This displeases HaShem and he unleashes a plague among the community slaying 24,000! Were it not for the noble demonstration of Pinchas, the plague might have slain countless more.

The actions of Bil’am and his dealing with Mo’av have a lasting effect on the community and indeed upon us as Renewed Covenant believers. For the community living in the period of the TaNaKH, the tribes of Mo’av would forever be an enemy of HaShem, thus an enemy of Isra’el (read D’varim 23:4[3]-7[6]). The evil deeds of Bil’am’s attempt at cursing the people become an object lesson from this time forward (read Joshua 13:22; 24:9, 10; Neh. 13:2; Micah 6:5). As far as “New Testament” lessons go, Kefa (Peter) warns us of the greed of those like Bil’am in 2 Kefa chapter 2, particularly verse 15. For these types, the Torah teaches us that it would have been better if they has not known the Way of righteousness, than to know it but later turn away from it!

Our Stark Warning

Couched in the tiny book of Y’hudah (Jude), we hear the Torah’s final warning against men like Bil’am:

“Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints. For certain men whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you. They are godless men, who change the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord.

“Though you already know all this, I want to remind you that the Lord delivered his people out of Egypt, but later destroyed those who did not believe. And the angels who did not keep their positions of authority but abandoned their own home—these he has kept in darkness, bound with everlasting chains for judgment on the great Day. In a similar way, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion. They serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire.

“In the very same way, these dreamers pollute their own bodies, reject authority and slander celestial beings. But even the archangel Michael, when he was disputing with the devil about the body of Moses, did not dare to bring a slanderous accusation against him, but said, "The Lord rebuke you!" Yet these men speak abusively against whatever they do not understand; and what things they do understand by instinct, like unreasoning animals--these are the very things that destroy them.

“Woe to them! They have taken the way of Cain; they have rushed for profit into Balaam's error; they have been destroyed in Korah's rebellion. These men are blemishes at your love feasts, eating with you without the slightest qualm—shepherds who feed only themselves. They are clouds without rain, blown along by the wind; autumn trees, without fruit and uprooted--twice dead. They are wild waves of the sea, foaming up their shame; wandering stars, for whom blackest darkness has been reserved forever.” (Y’hudah 3-13, NIV)

Bil’am provides for us an example of godless men who seek their own personal gain. The book of Revelation puts the cap on Bil’am in 2:14, and even tells us the incident with the women at Ba’al-P’or also involved idolatrous acts of eating meats offered to idols!

How did the people fall? I have seen this lesson played out in my own life all too well. I brace myself for the attack from the Adversary (or my own flesh), and just when I think I am successful, I get hit from the “blind side!” Isra’el fell prey to

their lustful passions, which was their blind side. The blessing of the LORD was their strong side, and Blessed be the Holy One for that! But it just goes to show that we all have weakness in areas that we least suspect at times, and that we are all in need of the supernatural protection of Almighty HaShem!

May we learn and understand from this valuable Torah lesson that is laid out so clearly for us in the ever-practical pages of God's gracious Word!

Nahar Deah

Impact of Blessing and Curse

With Gilyonot from Nechama Leibowitz

The story of Balaam presents a number of difficulties, some of which we have dealt with on previous occasions. We shall devote our Studies this time to discussing the following question asked by Abravanel:

Why did God prevent Balaam from cursing the Israelites? Why should they have cared about his curse, as long as the Lord blessed his people with peace? The Torah places no faith in divination and magic. Only the heathen deities were limited in their powers which were circumscribed by occult laws. They were powerless to break a spell or dissolve the potency of a malediction. But such was not the portion of Jacob. Even Balaam had to admit that - there was no divination in Jacob. The whole of our sidra is concerned with discrediting superstition and belief in magical practices. This is the aim of the story of the ass. Balaam was proceeding to curse a whole nation with his mouth. He, the seer and prophet, who claimed to probe the mysteries of time, could not even see what his ass beheld.

The most foolish of animals confronted the wisest of men. Yet the moment it spoke, he was confounded [B'midbar Rabba 20, 12].

In that event, greater force is added to our original question. What significance, indeed, could be attached to the curse of such a personality and why was it necessary to turn it into blessing? Some commentators suggest that this was done to teach Balaam a lesson, that he was not his own master. No magic rites (build me seven altars etc.) could prevail over the Supreme Master. He had no choice but utter the words the Almighty had put into his mouth (And the Lord put a word in the mouth of Balaam 23, 5), even if they were the opposite to what he wished to say.

Others however maintain that the curses were turned into blessings not so much as to teach Balaam a lesson as to benefit Israel. Did Israel need his blessing? Surely the Almighty was the true source of all blessing and it was He who blessed Israel? The answer given to this is that Balaam's words objectively speaking, maledictory or otherwise, were of no effect. It depended on the Almighty to do good or evil. But subjectively, from the point of view of the

Israelites, themselves who had been reared in Egypt on magic and superstition, his utterances as sorcerer-in-chief of the nations, were bound to have a considerable impact. This is the explanation outlined by Joseph Ibn Kaspi:

The curse of Balaam had no objective potency neither in terms of the author or the deed. Its effect must only be considered from the point of view of those at the receiving end, i.e. the Israelites. Balaam, was a renowned sorcerer and people were impressed both then and now by sorcerers and diviners. There is no point in asking the reason for the belief of Balak and his company just as there is no reason for doing so in the case of Jacob and Esau, who attached such importance to their father's blessing. If they did, how much more so the Israelites of those days, in particular the women and children, who would be greatly affected by the maledictions of such a renowned sorcerer!

A true friend will save his colleague any pain, even if he knows that no danger will ensue. Similarly the Almighty, out of the abundance of his love for Israel prevented Balaam from cursing them, though he was aware that his curses were impotent. But the Almighty did not rest content with this. He went so far as to make Balaam bless the people to give them pleasure, as it is stated: The Lord thy God would not hearken unto Balaam (Deuteronomy 23,6) ... The reason of this was - because the Lord loveth thee -. Similarly it is recorded in Joshua (24,9-10): Balak called Balaam to curse you. But I would not hearken to Balaam; therefore he even blessed you; so I delivered you out of his hand. This means that God delivered the Israelites out of his hand, according to his idea of the power of his own words and that of some of the children of Israel. At any rate, He delivered them from hearing his curse... all out of love for his people (Tirat Kesef).¹

The closing blessing is as follows:

***“Baruch atah YHVH, Eloheynu, Melech ha-‘Olam,
asher natan lanu Toraht-emet,
v’chay-yeh o’lam nata-b’tochenu.
Baruch atah YHVH, noteyn ha-Torah.
Ameyn.”***

(Blessed are you O' LORD, our God, King of the Universe,
you have given us your Torah of truth,
and have planted everlasting life within our midst.
Blessed are you, LORD, giver of the Torah.
Ameyn.)

“Shabbat Shalom!”

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¹ <http://www.jafi.org.il/education/torani/NEHAMA/bo.html>