

PARSHAT BALAK

SHMUEL RABINOWITZ

Prophet or magician?

This week's Torah portion tells us about Balak ben Zipor, a Moabite king who was afraid of the Jewish nation camping adjacent to his land. He knew his chances of beating the Israelites in battle were slim, so he looked for unconventional solutions. He sent people far to the East to bring Bilaam ben Be'or, who was known as a man whose blessings and curses came true, from Aram Naharayim.

Bilaam asks God if he should go with Balak's men and God forbids it. Balak then sends a second, larger, more important delegation that promises him whatever he wishes. Bilaam again asks God for permission and this time God permits him to go with Balak's representatives, as long as he does what God wants.

Bilaam saddles his donkey and goes with the Moabite king's men. God is angered by this and sends an angel to delay Bilaam three times. Bilaam doesn't see the angel, but his donkey does and tries to escape. On the third attempt, Bilaam gets angry at the donkey and hits it over and over again. And then the donkey opens its mouth and speaks to Bilaam! The donkey protests being hit, while Bilaam claims it is the donkey who is abusing him.

Then God opens his eyes and he sees the angel. The angel tells him that he should continue on to Balak but only say what God wants him to say. Bilaam tries

to curse the Jewish people three times from three different places, but all that comes out of his mouth are blessings.

By examining this event, we reveal Bilaam's character, as well as the message hidden in this story. Indeed, Bilaam was a prophet and had great spiritual powers, but he was not connected to God's will.

This trait of Bilaam's comes up again and again. When Balak's people approached him, he knew that Hashem was the God of Israel and that He would not want them cursed, yet he still waited to ask God if he should go. The same happened with the second delegation. When God saw that Bilaam really desired to go to Moab, He permitted him to go on condition that he only speak the words of God. But Bilaam went in the hopes that God's will would change and that he would ultimately be able to curse Israel.

This is also the message given by the donkey: It has been years that you have been riding me day after day. I have been loyal to you. But as soon as something happens that isn't to your liking, you hit me? Have you asked yourself why I'm behaving this way? Have you tried to understand me?

In his prophecies about Israel, Bilaam says of himself, "one who hears God's sayings and perceives the thoughts of the Most High" (Numbers 24:16).

The Talmud says of this, "Now clearly, Bilaam did

not know the mind of his animal, so he would know the mind of the Most High? Rather, this teaches that he was able to determine the hour that the Holy One, Blessed be He, is angry" (Tractate Brachot 7:1).

The sages point out the gap expressed in the words of the donkey. Bilaam was incapable of understanding the rebuke of the animal he was riding. Could such a person understand God? They respond that Bilaam knew how to determine the one moment in the day when God was angry, and at that moment, he tried to curse Israel. Bilaam was not connected to God in his prophecy, but rather tried to harness God's power to his needs.

We can learn from this something about a suitable character and about our connection with God. We must aim for a connection that strives to understand God's will, and understand where we can fit in with this will, rather than a connection that strives to harness the Creator to our needs. We can extrapolate from this to an understanding of marriage or any relationship with others. We shouldn't see others only from our own perspective or try to take advantage of the relationship for our own needs. We must strive to understand others, to try to understand the motivations behind uncharacteristic behaviors, and sincerely connect with them.

The writer is rabbi of the Western Wall and Holy Sites.

DAVID WOLPE

A tale of three donkeys

Miracles are decisive. They change the trajectory of the story and the meaning of the outcome. Otherwise, why have miracles when natural means would do just as well? Without the plagues, the Exodus would be very different; without the birth of Isaac to centenarians, no Jewish people. The Torah records miracles when they make a profound difference.

Why then, is the story of Bilaam's donkey in the Torah? After all, it does not alter the substance of what happens. In very brief summary: Balak instructs Bilaam to curse the Jews; Bilaam objects; Balak insists and Bilaam, driven by greed and given permission by God, goes to do so. On the path an angel stands in the way, seen by the donkey but not by Bilaam. He beats the donkey, who complains to Bilaam, until at last his eyes are opened. The story of the prescient and articulate donkey is diverting but not determinative. Bilaam was on track to bless Israel as God wished. He still proceeds to bless Israel but now leaves in his wake a very curious tale of a talking donkey.

We may understand the purpose of the tale better if we invoke another donkey, known to the history of philosophy. It was named after the 14th century philosopher Jean Buridan, and it posits a donkey equidis-

tant between two bales of hay (or between water and hay, depending on the version). The donkey, being hungry, has to decide which bale of hay to eat. But since he is exactly between the two, there is no rational basis for deciding he should move toward one bale or the other. As this is a donkey driven entirely by reason, he constantly argues with himself between two equally balanced propositions. In the course of his endless, fruitless deliberations, the donkey dies of starvation.

The point of the parable is that there must be a value or principle that overrides logic alone. Without a value – even if that value sometimes is expressed in simple impulse – there is no rationale that can drive our lives.

The miracle in the Torah expresses the essential valuelessness of Bilaam. He does not care for himself if he curses Israel or blesses Israel. He does not care if he treats his faithful donkey well or badly. He cannot see the angel because without a value system one is unable to see. He knows that he cannot do what God forbids, but that is a conclusion of sober calculation, not reverence.

To move through life with a devotion to reason alone is to be blind. Bilaam thought himself enlightened because of the great prophetic powers with which he was endowed. Many gifted rationalists believe the same; how better to upend such a settled view than an

absurdist marvel like a talking donkey.

The title of this article refers to three donkeys. In addition to that of Bilaam and Buridan, there is a donkey named in Zechariah, the donkey who will carry on his back the Messiah: "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem; behold, your King comes to you; he is just, and victorious; humble and riding on a donkey..." (Zechariah 9:9).

The donkey, simple and labored though it may be, can see the angel and carry the Messiah. Neither the magician nor the philosopher can equal this outsized merit. As Bilaam's donkey represents to us, redemption is possible when we see the other, when our actions are motivated not by the peremptory cruelty of a Bilaam, but by kindness.

The donkey that will bring the Messiah is, according to the Midrash, the same that Moses rode into the land of Egypt. We have tied together miracle, goodness and ultimate redemption. Reason is an essential tool but unless one reasons from some basis of faith and value, one ends up as the other English synonym by which the donkey is known.

The writer is Max Webb Senior Rabbi of Sinai Temple in Los Angeles and the author of David the Divided Heart. On Twitter: @rabbiwolpe.

JUDAISM 3.0
GOL KALEV

The occupation & liberation of the Moabian territories

A careful reading of Parashat Balak can lead to far-reaching geopolitical implications for our days



'BALAK'S SACRIFICES,' print, Phillip Medhurst Collection. (Wikimedia Commons)

Something does not add up in the geopolitical actions of Moab's King Balak. He seems to be acting in contrast to the Moabian interest.

The arch rival of the Moabians is not the Israelis – it is the Amorites who captured Moab's land in a brutal war. It is clear that there is no "acceptance" of the loss, as evident 300 years later in the exchange that led to the Israeli-Amon war.

Such lack of acceptance existed in Theodor Herzl's time. He observed how the sentiment of "Revenge" consumed France. The French refused to accept their loss of Alsace-Lorraine to the Germans in the 1870 war. This French sentiment was the backdrop to the Alfred Dreyfus Affair and to French institutional antisemitism that spanned multiple branches of the French government, military, press and society.

Amon to Moab seems to be what Germany was to France in late 19th century.

And here comes a white night. The Israelis liberated the occupied Moabite territories from Amon. This while stating at the onset that they had no claims to those territories. They were just passing through on the way to Canaan. Moab's "revenge" was delivered by Israel.

In addition, the Israelis have taken down a possible secondary adversary of Moab: the Rephaites, who used to rule the territory then held by Moab. Og, the last remaining Rephaite King, likely represents a sense of insecurity for Moab. Some day he might seek to reclaim his old land. Indeed, Otto von Bismarck, the first German chancellor whom Herzl admired, predicted in late 19th century that as soon as France was strong enough, it would initiate a war with Germany to reclaim its lost territory.

The Moabian insecurity relative to the Rephaites is akin to Turkey's insecurity relative to Russia. Around the same time that France got its revenge at Germany, Turkey got its own prayers answered: Christian Russia was about to get Constantinople (Istanbul) after 460

The Bilaam effect on Wagner

Bilaam was meant to curse, but his words miraculously turned into blessings. This was the case with Wagner, the antisemite opera composer. He sought to curse the Jews, but it was through Wagner's operas in Paris that Herzl received unexplained inspiration for the Jewish state, and for charting the Jews' return back home to Zion. "Only on the evenings when there was no opera did I have doubts about the correctness of my ideas," he wrote. Herzl even played the overture of Wagner's *Tannhauser* in the Zionist Congress.

years of Muslim rule. But the 1915 Constantinople Agreement was never implemented, because a Revolution in Russia occurred. The Bolshevik revolutionaries withdrew from the war (World War I), and forfeited Russia's claim to Constantinople. But today, a century later, Communism is over and Russia has resumed its interest in Christianity. Hence, there is likely a growing latent insecurity in Turkey, just like there was in Germany relative to France, and in Moab relative to the Rephaites.

The two strategic threats to Moab – the Ammonites and Rephaites – were removed by Israel, whose strength enabled it to proceed toward Canaan and leave the area.

So why does Balak act against the Moabian interest, and hire Bilaam to curse and weaken Israel?

Is Balak a Midianite king?

A possible explanation can be found through a careful reading of the text. Balak is described as king to Moab, as opposed to king of Moab, seemingly "assigned" to Moab, and therefore not pursuing the Moabian interest, but that of someone else

This could be due to the outcome of the Amorite war, when the Amorite king took all the land of Moab till Arnon. It is possible that a puppet government was put in place in southern Moab, akin to the 1940s' Vichy government in France. Or similarly, as discussed in previous articles (see parshaandherzl.com), Midian likely wielded a "sphere of influence" in the region, and Balak could be a Midianite King assigned to Moab – hence referred to as king to Moab.

Moreover, while Balak is described by the biblical narrative as king to Moab, Bilaam, a member of the Midian coalition, describes him as king of Moab, e.g. for Midian, Balak is apparently the king; this while the Moabites themselves do not refer to Balak as King of any sort, and simply refer to him by his name.

Indeed, Balak's name supports the theory that he was not a Moabite, but rather a "colonialist" or puppet

Midianite king. His name, Balak ben-Zipor (son of a bird), is consistent with Midianite names: Zipora (female bird), and Orev (crow). More support is provided later when Israel launched a military operation against Midian. Israel killed the Midianite kings and among them the princes of Sihon. The presence of those Amorite princes in Midian is indicative that those local kings were in Midian's "sphere of influence."

The elimination of Midian's influence paved the way for others to impact the region's geopolitical realities: Aram, Assariya, Babylon and for the last 2,300 years, Europe (starting with the Greeks and Romans).

Indeed, shortly after France got its revenge at Germany, it was also set to avenge the British, who the French felt robbed them from getting a piece of the Middle East (the Sykes-Picot Agreement). The British were awarded a mandate for Palestine by the League of Nations, core to which was the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine (this was long before the term

was used for the local Arabs' national movement). In 1920, a utopian Middle East existed: an Arab Kingdom of Syria – led by pro-Zionist king Faisal, who strongly supported the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine – living peacefully next to such Jewish homeland in-the-making, under the caretaker governance of the British.

But the peaceful Middle East of 1920 was ruined by France (France has been a serial destabilizer of peace in the Middle-East from the Crusades through Napoleon). The French invaded Syria, kicked out the pro-Zionist Arab king, and plunged the Middle East into a century of turmoil: Artificial countries were formed to compensate the Arabs for the French aggression (Iraq and Jordan), and Arabs in Palestine were eventually forced by the outside to develop a new national identity as Palestinians, as opposed to as Syrians.

Luckily for Moab, Bilaam resigned and the anti-Israel actions of Balak failed. The subsequent Israeli operation in Midian liberated Moab from Midian's suffocating hug, and Moab prospered for centuries to come.

Today, Arabs in Palestine are still suffering from the suffocating European hug. Europe continues to promote its own interest at the expense of Palestinians, reflected for example in Europe's relentless effort to sabotage Palestinian employment and mentorship in Jewish-owned businesses, in creating debilitating dependencies and in funding organizations that perpetuate Palestinian victimhood.

Indeed, our evolving geopolitical realities today help us understand better the stories of the Bible. But reciprocally, it also helps us apply biblical geopolitical lessons to our own circumstances and to use them to promote peace.

The writer is the author of the upcoming book Judaism 3.0 – Judaism's transformation to Zionism. For details: Judaism-Zionism.com. For his geopolitical articles: EuropeAndJerusalem.com.