

# SEPHARDIC INSTITUTE

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בס"ד

## Parashat Balak Part I

### 1. General Remarks

Upon seeing what Israel did to the mighty Amorite kings Sihon and Og, and with the newly triumphant nation encamped on the plains of his country, Balak, king of Moab, dreaded what Israel might do to his land. Together with emissaries from neighboring Midian he sent a delegation to "Pethor, on the river" to summon a famous soothsayer, Balaam, to come and curse Israel, thereby weakening it so that he may drive it from the region. Since Balaam's home was in Aram (Num. 23:7; Deut. 23:5) and "the river," when unnamed, usually refers to the Euphrates, Pethor is probably the city known as *Pitru* in Mesopotamian documents, located in northern Syria on the Sagur River, a western tributary of the Euphrates. It is about four hundred miles from Moab, a significant distance in the ancient world requiring many days to traverse.

When Balaam did not come with the first delegation, Balak sent a larger and more dignified mission on the long journey with promises of riches and honor awaiting Balaam should he come. Balak was determined to bring the seer at any cost. Verily, "the chieftains of Moab were seized with trembling" (Exod. 15:15) at the approach of the Israelites. Ironically, the latter had no intention of conquering Moab, planning to merely pass through on their way to the promised land. It was their intention to pay for whatever provisions they might require. Moses had notified the leaders of the neighboring nations of this intention (Num. 20:17-19; 21:22) but they mostly chose to ignore or discredit it.\*

The three chapters that narrate the story of Balak and Balaam and which include the latter's oracles (Num. 22-24) comprise a self-contained unit in the Torah. It is essentially a sidelight to the unfolding chronicle of Israel's experiences with no explicit link to the preceding or following narratives. It opens a window on the thinking and character of these two non-

Israelites of note and the inhabitants of the region in biblical times.

In Deuteronomy, Moses invokes the summoning of Balaam to the long-term opprobrium of Moab and cites the episode as an example of G-d's love for Israel: "But Hashem your G-d would not heed Balaam and...transformed the curse into a blessing for you, for Hashem your G-d loves you" (Deut. 23:4-7). In Micah, G-d adduces the episode with a different emphasis: "My people, recall, please, what Balak king of Moab devised [against you] and what Balaam the son of Beor responded to him...that you should recognize the righteous acts of Hashem" (Mic. 6:5). Later in Numbers, Moses refers to Balaam as associated with the promiscuity that was linked with the Baal-pe`or idolatry that brought a great deal of backsliding to the Israelites and a divine visitation of plague upon them (Num. 31:16).

The Balaam pericope contains four poetic oracles that bespeak blessings of all types for Israel and contain restatements of the divine promises to the nation. It transmits to the reader a sense of G-d maintaining his glorious plans for the Israelites even while they are mired in their unworthy behavior. This provided valuable optimism for the future, as there were many difficult periods to come in Israelite history. Attached to the fourth oracle are three additional visions of regional relevance.

Balaam is an enigmatic individual. The Torah presents him as gifted with psychic powers and capable of receiving oracles from G-d. He describes himself as limited in his powers, bound by G-d's will that he cannot contravene. Although his response to Balak's first emissaries is somewhat ambiguous on this latter point, from his meeting with Balak's second delegation onwards he does make a major issue of his limitation, continually referring to it in his dialogues with Balak. He faithfully transmits the

messages he receives and it appears that eventually he received a full-fledged prophecy.

On a deeper level, however, and in a way probably even hidden from himself, it is clear that Balaam does, indeed, try to contravene G-d's will. When Balak's emissaries first approached him, he received a divine communication that was unambiguous in instructing him not to go with them and not to curse Israel, because it is a blessed nation. So certain was he of the divine intention that he sent the emissaries home. But he did not fully inform them of the content of the oracle, that Israel was blessed and that it was futile to try to curse it. Perhaps he intended to leave the door open for a subsequent request by Balak and a subsequent attempt on his part to receive G-d's permission for the mission, as did transpire.

When Balak's second delegation approached him, offering great rewards, he responded that regardless of the size of the reward, "I cannot contravene the will of Hashem my G-d to do small or great, but please remain here overnight while I may find out what additional message Hashem may give me" (Num. 22:18-19). Enticed by the prospect of honor and material gain, he searched for an opening, hoping to find some loophole to justify what he already knows is prohibited.

G-d does appear to acquiesce to one aspect of Balaam's importuning – not concerning the essential matter of cursing Israel, of course, but in allowing him to accompany the messengers. Balaam's responsibility to obey G-d was shifted to a different plane and joined with a stipulation that he be careful to do as instructed. G-d will now educate him in the proper commitment to His will and transmit a message to Balak. Obviously, Balaam thinks that just as he managed to get by the first hurdle with the Deity toward accomplishing his personal ends he might manage to get by subsequent ones.

Considering that Balaam truly knows the Deity's position on this matter, he should have understood the divine acquiescence to mean, "If you insist on going, I won't stop you, but be careful – and you should know I am unhappy with your decision." The sages cite this verse as an illustration of the principle: "In the path a man wishes to go, in that path will he be led" (*b. Mak.* 10b). It is a profound commentary

on the depth of man's free will. Divine directives do not overwhelm that fundamental freedom.

The following verse (Num. 22:21) deftly reveals Balaam's satisfaction with having wheedled permission to go. From the perspective of advancing the narrative it was unnecessary to state at length that "Balaam rose in the morning, saddled his ass, and accompanied the Moabite emissaries." The verse indicates eagerness. The Midrash, in what appears to be the peshat, points out this literary artifice and contrasts it with Abraham's arising in the morning and saddling his donkey (Gen. 22:3). In the latter case, the statement reveals Abraham's full commitment to G-d's will even for what undoubtedly was to him personally a detestable act, were it not for G-d's command (which was a test of Abraham's commitment).

Not surprisingly, in the next verse we read that G-d really is angry that Balaam is going (Num. 22:22). His acquiescence – with the proviso that Balaam must observe G-d's will – had been a compromise, a reflection of Balaam's strong desire to accompany the emissaries. However, a man, especially one so gifted, should know better. This verse introduces the famous episode involving G-d's angel, Balaam and his "talking" ass (Num. 22:22-35).

## 2. The Talking Ass

Abarbanel (Num. 22:22) stated that "each commentator went his own way" in interpreting the matter of the talking ass. Some took it literally, despite the difficulties of understanding how an ass could talk and how Balaam could respond to its remarks in a matter-of-fact manner. Others viewed it as a prophecy, a vision granted to Balaam, occurring in his mind, in which G-d transmitted a relevant message to him (Rambam, *Guide* 2:42). Some understood it as a description of Balaam's dream that night, revealing his subconscious anxieties concerning his manner of relating to the Deity. Others have seen the passage as a type of parable.

Since the episode is not introduced as a prophecy to Balaam or as his dream, and there is no hint that it should be so construed, it appears most likely that the Torah is presenting a parable. It is a sophisticated and multifaceted parody that directs the reader to

appreciate the essential message of the story; it derides Balaam's superficial service of G-d and his behavior. This is a case in which the Torah's point can best be made through the use of humor, providing a satire that depicts all the important features of Balaam's pathetic situation. It illuminates while lampooning, and foreshadows the upcoming events.

The ass finds itself in a serious predicament. It tries to negotiate the conflicting claims of G-d's angel with his sword drawn standing in its way on the one hand and its loyalty to its human master who insists on proceeding on the other. This reflects Balaam's own dilemma. He was trying to accommodate the will of G-d, which he acknowledges and to which he feels bound (on a shallow level, to be sure), while at the same time pandering to his own material desires, which in a way represent his own master. As in each succeeding encounter the angel increasingly limits the ass' room for maneuver, in the unfolding of events Balaam's freedom to maneuver around G-d's will is also progressively restricted.

Moreover, Balaam's steadily increasing exasperation with his ass the three times it disregarded his will, his striking it, his ranting and raving, yet stubbornly proceeding, refusing to acknowledge what was really transpiring, closely parallels Balak's reactions. The latter progressively expressed frustration with Balaam on the three occasions that the seer returned to the king with oracles not to his liking. Yet the king stubbornly pushed forward until he became enraged at Balaam and ranted and raved and smacked his hands at him.

The ass sees what is happening but Balaam does not. The scene exposes the wretched reality of an individual with great potential bent on an unholy venture, an endeavor predicated on spiritual blindness.

The ass asks Balaam, "What have I done to you that you have struck me these three times?" and Balaam answers, "[I struck you] because you have mocked me." He adds, "Had I a sword in my hand I would now have killed you" (לו יש סרֵב בְּיָדִי כִּי עָתָה הִרְגָתִיךָ). The animal asks him, "Am I not the ass you have ridden upon all your life until this day, have I ever been wont to do so to you?" And he said, "No."

Obviously, there is an explanation to the animal's strange behavior. It bests its master in the dialogue; it points out how Balaam would have put to death a long-term loyal servant, which he admits had never before deviated from his will, without considering the possibility that perhaps he, the master, was mistaken.

Subsequently, with a play on the ass' words, the angel told Balaam, "Had she not swerved before me I would now have killed you and kept her alive" (כִּי עָתָה גַם אֶתְכֶּה הִרְגָתִי וְאוֹתָהּ הִקְיִיתִי). The sages commented (*b. 'Abod. Zar. 4b*): "The mind of his animal he did not understand, how could he claim to understand the knowledge of the Most High?" (דַּעַת עֲלִיּוֹן). And they interpret the ass as saying, "You acknowledge you cannot slay me except if you have a sword in your hand, how do you intend to uproot an entire nation?" (*Num. Rab. 20:14*).

The ass' decision to yield to the superior power confronting it indicates that Balaam had an opportunity to learn an important lesson concerning his own decision to proceed on his mission against G-d's wishes. Unfortunately, when Balaam is presented the message, he does not draw the appropriate conclusion; so long as there is some way, any way, to interpret G-d's will in a manner that is in harmony with his personal desires, he does so. This is sharply brought out in the two concluding verses of the parable, which are fused into the narrative proper.

After being granted the capability to see what had been transpiring, Balaam says to G-d's angel: "I sinned, for I did not know you were blocking my way. Now if it is wrong in your eyes I will return" (*Num. 22:34*). Sadly, even after the overwhelming experience with the ass and the angel, he is still looking for a way to carry on. The angel's response (v. 35) is expected and anticlimactic, allowing Balaam to continue with the emissaries providing he abides by the divine instructions he receives. In addition to concluding the section and resuming the narrative, by repeating the key words from the verses that immediately preceded the parody (20-21), this verse confirms the integrity of the digression.

### 3. Balak and Balaam Compared

The Torah makes a point of the honor Balak extended to Balaam upon the latter's arrival to Moab: Balak

went to greet him at the northern border, “to Ir-moab on the Arnon border, to the border’s edge” (Num. 22:36). Together with this veneration, while convinced his nation is in great need of the soothsayer’s services, Balak’s ego and blatant haughtiness are also pointed out. The first utterance the narrative furnishes from him to Balaam is an expression of his pique that Balaam did not come the first time he was summoned: Did I not [previously] send for you? Why did you not come? Did you think I could not honor you enough? (One must bear in mind the four-hundred-mile journey.)

Balaam calmly responded: Here, I have come to you – but I can say nothing that G-d does not place in my mouth. The juxtaposition of Balak’s enormous pride with Balaam’s external “modesty” and “religiosity” once again points to Balaam’s failings. On the surface, Balak is insensitive and crass while Balaam is respectful and refined; the latter’s shortcomings are located deep within him. These include inordinate ambition for personal gain and self-deception in the religious sphere. The story is so artfully told that these failings can only be detected by reading between the lines; in this case, literally between the lines, as the text moves directly from his declaration of faithfulness to G-d to his attempt to circumvent His will with pagan-influenced practices.

#### 4. Pagan Vestiges

Balaam is depicted as using the Israelite name for G-d, Y-H-V-H, a term that connotes the revolutionary theological concepts of the Torah, and he is seemingly respectful of it. It may be that the Torah recognizes his “official” conception of the Deity, whatever term he may have employed in referring to Him, as compatible with the Tetragrammaton and as articulating the basic elements of its connotations. However, he harbored within himself the vestiges of pagan practice.

When Balak’s first envoys approached him, they had “articles of sorcery in their hands” (קְסָמִים בְּיָדָם [Num. 22:7]), in accord with Balaam’s reputation for being associated with such practices. (In Josh. 13:22 he is referred to as “Balaam the son of Beor the sorcerer” [בְּעוֹר הַקּוֹסֵם]). In his first two attempts at complying with Balak’s wishes he went off “to encounter omens” (לְקַרְאֵת נְחָשִׁים) [Num. 24:1]),

imagining that he might find divination-signs that he could exploit for his nefarious purpose. In this he engaged in a practice prohibited to Israel (Lev. 19:26; Deut. 18:10). As he accompanied Balak from site to site and each time called for constructing seven altars and sacrificing seven bulls and seven rams he manifested belief in a magical, mechanistic approach to G-d. It is a belief that if G-d does not look favorably on cursing a people from one location perhaps He will do so from another location. And there is potency in certain mechanical acts. Balak explicitly says, “I’ll take you to another place, perhaps it will be fit in G-d’s eyes that you curse them for me from there” (Num. 23:27). The single quotation the text provides of Balaam’s words to G-d in his attempt to curse are, “I have set up the seven altars and offered a bull and ram on each” (Num. 23:4), as if such rites possess inherent efficacy.

All this is part of the fundamental flaw in Balaam’s approach to the Deity, implied earlier in the text, namely, his belief that a skillful human being can maneuver around G-d, manipulating Him to do what He might not have wanted to do or to allow such to happen. In paganism, men projected upon their gods characteristics associated with the realities of human society – as men could be persuaded or pressured to modify their thinking and renege on their commitments, so too could the gods. Those who rose above paganism did not necessarily fully eliminate all traces of their former beliefs.

The messages of Balaam’s oracles proceed incrementally. The first one he received after meeting Balak included confirmation of what he had been informed of before embarking on his expedition – that he cannot curse Israel because G-d does not want Israel to be cursed (Num. 23:8). Nevertheless, he tries again. In the second oracle, G-d addresses Balaam’s religious orientation, teaching him that G-d is not like a man who can be made false to his promises or manipulated to change his mind. He is also informed that there is no augury or sorcery (נְחָשִׁים or קְסָמִים) in Israel. When Balaam goes off for his third visionary encounter, the Torah indicates that he finally internalized at least part of the message and did not proceed as he had previously – “to encounter omens” (לְקַרְאֵת נְחָשִׁים). This time “the spirit of G-d” came upon him and he received a glorious prophecy about Israel and its future. In his fourth oracle – again

received without consulting divination – he speaks of a future time when Israel, among its many successes, will crush Moab, meting out to Balak his just desserts for having brought the seer to curse Israel.

Some sages considered Balaam as possessing the great capacity of Moses (*Num. Rab.* 14:20; *Sifre*, Deut. 34:10). The lesson is that despite such great potential his unrefined character led him to disaster. Subsequent to his failure to curse Israel he was involved in some manner in the insidious scheme to undermine Israel by enticing its men with the daughters of Midian, a matter connected to the idolatry of Baal-peor. We know about his playing some role in that matter through Moses' mention of it (*Num* 31:16), but details are not provided. He was killed shortly thereafter in the war against Midian (*Num.* 31:8). In our coming study we will comment on the possible connection between the curse and the seduction.

## 5. Extrabiblical Attestation

We now have some extrabiblical information from an ancient inscription that reveals how Balaam was perceived in the ancient Near East. The inscription was discovered in 1967 at Deir Allah in the Jordan Valley, near the intersection of the Jabbok and Jordan Rivers, less than ten miles east of the latter. It was originally written on the plaster of a temple wall or a monument that has been dated to the eighth century B.C.E. As the plaster has fallen the inscription is not totally readable but a significant portion of it is.

It speaks of Balaam son of Beor (his name is mentioned several times), using the Aramaic term *bar* for son, consistent with the biblical statements that he derived from Aram (*Num.* 23:7; *Deut.* 23:5). As the inscription did not introduce him it appears that he was well-known. Referring to times long past, the inscription speaks of him as a prophet who receives oracles from the gods at night. Apparently, he was granted an oracle in connection with a request that had been made of him by the king to seek a message from the gods. It states that Balaam received notice from the gods informing him of a coming famine, when darkness and wild creatures will overtake the land and the laws of nature will be overturned. This prompted him to fast and weep,

beseeching the gods to reverse their decree, apparently successfully.

The inscription contains several word-usage parallels to the biblical text and some descriptions reminiscent of imagery found in the visions of a number of prophets in Tanakh. It may be significant that two ancient Near Eastern fertility deities, Sheger and Ashtar, appear in it, terms that in the Torah are used strictly for offspring, often as a pair referring to cattle and flock (*Deut.* 7:13; 28:4, 38, 51). J. Milgrom is of the opinion that linking Balaam with the fertility deities may reflect an association that helps explain Moses' accusation that Balaam devised the scheme of sexually seducing Israel's men to serve Peor (*JPS Commentary on Numbers*, Excursus 60).

## 6. Regarding a Talmudic Statement

In a discussion regarding authorship of the books of Tanakh, the Talmud cites a *baraita* that states: "Moses wrote his book, *Parashat Balaam* and the book of Job" (*b. B. Bat.* 14b). "His book" refers to the Torah, but what is *Parashat Balaam*? Why is it cited separately from "his book?" It surely appears to refer to our *Parashat Balaam*, especially as everything else cited in that passage is part of Tanakh and because an extrabiblical *Parashat Balaam* written by Moses is unattested in all rabbinic literature. Also, the Dead Sea Scrolls, which reflect the national corpus as of the second century B.C.E. do not contain any extrabiblical work that can justify such a heading. This is the general opinion of commentators on that talmudic statement.

Perhaps the Balaam pericope was singled out for the comment that Moses wrote it because it is a self-contained unit that occurred outside the orbit of Israel that primarily deals with the thinking and doings of two prominent non-Israelites that Moses had no contact with. It is embedded in the larger context as a sidelight to the narrative. It does not advance the action and does not directly connect with the preceding or following narratives; there is no law incorporated in it. It does not include a statement that "G-d spoke these words to Moses." Although it includes inspiring oracles, it may have been thought by some that Moses did not write it and the *baraita* sages corrected that view. One may wonder: Is entertaining the possibility that Moses did not write

this section necessarily in conflict with the talmudic statement, “even if one asserts that the whole Torah is from heaven except for one verse that [he maintains] was not uttered by the Holy One blessed be He, but rather Moses uttered on his own, it is regarding him [that it is said], “Hashem’s word he despised” (Num. 15:31)...even one letter” (*b. Sanh.* 99a)?

This question has often been asked in relation to the talmudic view that Joshua wrote the last eight verses of the Torah (*b. B. Bat.* 15a). Rabbi S. D. Sassoon addressed this matter:

In *Sanhedrin*, the statement’s emphasis is on the phrase “Moses stated on his own.” If one maintained that certain Torah verses were said by another prophet מפי הגבורה (lit.: “from the mouth of the Might”), acknowledging that the passage is מן השמים (lit.: “from heaven, from the mouth of the Might”), he would not be termed heretical...[The latter term only applies] when one maintained that Moses stated it from his own mind and on his own and that it is not מן השמים (“from heaven”).

*Natan Hochmah Lishlomo*, Heb. section, p. 106

In other words, it all depends on whether or not the passage or word in question is acknowledged to be written under the inspiration of prophecy from G-d.\*\*

### Endnotes

\* In Deuteronomy 2:29 it appears that the descendants of Esau and the Moabites in Ar had agreed to allow Israel passage with the understanding that they would pay for food and water, whereas in Deuteronomy 23:4-5 Moab is castigated for not having come forth with bread and water. In Jephthah’s message to the king of Ammon he cites the king of Moab as having refused to allow passage (Judg. 11:17).

\*\* For a discussion of this view and related matters, see *The Limits of Orthodox Theology*, Marc B. Shapiro, Littman, 2004, p. 112.

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