



# DVAR TZEDEK

## Parashat Balak 5773

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Featuring a magician, sorcery and a talking donkey, *Parashat Balak* is a paranormal *parashah*. Despite including these somewhat less relatable features, however, the *parashah* offers us profound and relevant lessons about the very mundane and human behavior of listening.

The *parashah* details Moabite King Balak's unsuccessful attempt to curse the Israelites by contracting Bilam, a renowned gentile magician. Bilam is thwarted at various steps in the process and ends up blessing *B'nai Yisrael* three times, rather than cursing them. In fact, one of his blessings is featured in our daily prayers: How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel!<sup>1</sup>

A cursory read of the *parashah* implies that Bilam is decent—even virtuous. He turns to God for guidance at each juncture and refuses to curse the people of Israel, despite King Balak's incessant demands. The Rabbis, too, proclaim Bilam's potential in no uncertain terms: "There never arose in Israel a prophet like Moshe, but among the nations of the world there did arise; and who is that? Bilam son of Beor."<sup>2</sup> That the commentators acknowledge the prophetic status of a non-Jew is surprising. That he is compared with Moshe Rabbeinu is astounding.

Yet Pirkei Avot presents a very different view of Bilam: "The disciples of our father Avraham have a good eye, a meek spirit and a humble soul. The disciples of the wicked Bilam have an evil eye, a haughty spirit and a gross soul."<sup>3</sup>

How do we resolve this apparent contradiction in the rabbinic understanding of Bilam? Bilam's own words to Balak provide a hint: "Whatever word God puts into my mouth, that shall I speak!" he says.<sup>4</sup> His declaration reveals that God needs to put words directly in his mouth in order for Bilam to give them voice. Bilam's ears, it seems, are blocked. Though his words have power, Bilam does not truly listen. It is his inability to listen—to be humble, to be compassionate and to heed God's word—that separates Bilam from Moshe and Avraham.

Bilam's inability to listen also leads to his undoing. When the officers of Balak come to fetch Bilam, he appears to reiterate God's word and tells the officers: "Go to your land, for God has refused to give me [permission] to go with you."<sup>5</sup> While it seems on first glance that Bilam is acting virtuously, on closer inspection it is evident that Bilam did not faithfully listen to God and accurately recount God's mandate to him. What God had actually said to Bilam was, "You shall not go with them! You shall not curse the people, for it is blessed!"<sup>6</sup> Bilam omits the last two essential points.

The Or HaChaim, an 18<sup>th</sup>-century Talmudist, writes that this omission gives rise to the following scenario:

<sup>1</sup> Numbers 24:5.

<sup>2</sup> Midrash Tanaim Dvarim chapter 34.

<sup>3</sup> Pirkei Avot 5:19.

<sup>4</sup> Numbers 22:38.

<sup>5</sup> Numbers 22:13.

<sup>6</sup> Numbers 22:12.

God was angry because Bilam didn't tell the princes what God had really said, and instead, acted as if going with them was his own decision. Thus God humiliates him by blocking his path, by giving him an obstinate donkey, by showing him that the donkey sees and hears better than he does.

In this analysis, God punishes Bilam for failing to honestly transmit the full three points to the officers by making his donkey "see and hear better than he does." Bilam's inability to listen closely to the word of God stands in sharp contrast to his donkey's perceptive abilities. But did Bilam, in fact, not hear God? Or did he hear and willfully disobey? Perhaps God had to put words directly into Bilam's mouth because he *chose* not to listen. Perhaps Bilam selectively recounted God's mandate to the officers of Balak not because he failed to hear the full message, but rather because he preferred to ignore the Divine command.

Like Bilam, when we don't truly hear—or when we choose not to listen—we run the risk of diminishing our potential. I learned this lesson in 2004, in the cloud forests of Ecuador, where I was living and working as a teacher in a small, rural village. On my daily bike-ride to school, I would pass a concrete medical clinic with a bright "*Clinica*" sign hanging over the door. The smells and sounds made it clear that there were cows inside and one day I marveled aloud, to one of my students, at the level of care that the ill cows seemed to get. She didn't seem to understand the question. "In the U.S., I don't think we bring sick cows inside the clinic," I explained. She burst out laughing, "No! They're not being treated at the clinic. That's just where we keep our cows when it rains."

She went on to explain that, years earlier, a philanthropist had decided to build a health clinic for the village. He contracted with a landowner but never consulted with local Ecuadorians. If he had done so, he would have discovered that there were no doctors in the village and that local mores dictated that sick men and women be treated in their homes, not in a hospital. Thus, the clinic he built stood vacant for several years until farmers started using it to house cows while it rained.

While his intentions were admirable, the philanthropist missed an opportunity to build something truly useful. Deep listening—the kind that can help us bridge cultural differences and huge gaps of power and privilege—is difficult. Despite the challenge, we must do it to ensure that our intended blessings never become curses.



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