



# DVAR TZEDEK

## Parshat Balak 5768

By Evan Wolkenstein

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In *Parshat Balak*, a distinguished entourage knocks at the humble door of Bilaam, the soothsayer. Bilaam's eyes fall on the silk-robed emissaries of King Balak. The King, they say, requires Bilaam's services to curse Israel. Bilaam asks them to spend the night while he inquires as to God's direction. God prohibits the mission and Bilaam dutifully sends the emissaries home. When, once again, a knock comes at the door, Bilaam finds himself standing before princes more honorable than the first. Gold-encrusted and bejeweled, they promise great wealth from the king if Bilaam takes up the task. Bilaam, again, invites them to stay. In the dark of night, God tells Bilaam to go with the princes.

When Bilaam sets out on the journey, a puzzle unfolds before us. First, we are informed that God is angry about Bilaam's actions. Then, an invisible angel stands in Bilaam's way, sword in hand, and Bilaam's donkey (who by miracle, speaks) comes to save his life.

Why does God initially forbid the mission, and afterward permit it? And why does God then push Bilaam within inches of his life for following God's instructions?

As a high-school teacher, I encounter a mindset in many of my teenage students that is reminiscent of Bilaam's. It is the mindset I call, "I know you said 'no,' but perhaps you meant 'maybe?'" It emerges when students ask to work alone when the explicit assignment is to work with a partner, when they suggest using Tanach *chevruta* time as Algebra II study time, when they insist on being allowed to visit a shop while the rest of the class waits for the tour guide. And when I give the answer, "no," they hear, "maybe." Perhaps they cannot imagine that a rational, compassionate adult would say no to their request. Or perhaps they have difficulty seeing the needs of the community beyond their own.

We all struggle with this same challenge. I look at my own life and consider the commitments I have made: to attend rallies, to send letters and sign petitions, to consume responsibly. I say 'no' to sweatshops. I say 'no' to the abuse of economic and gender privilege. But when I review the facts of my life—what I do with my free time, what I buy day-to-day—I see that during times of busyness and stress, my desire to be socially conscious slips lower and lower on my list of priorities. And replacing consciousness on the list are convenience, profit and personal preference. The frustration I feel at my students is actually a frustration at the conflict of pressures to which we all succumb.

As we return to Bilaam, we rewind the film and zoom in: Bilaam, inviting the second royal entourage to stay the night, is not being hospitable, nor is he being a loyal servant of God. He knows that he is prohibited from performing the mission, yet he hopes that perhaps he misunderstood. He hopes that God's "no" is actually a "maybe." God's anger at Bilaam, then, is not prompted by Bilaam following God's instructions, but rather because Bilaam continues to ask when the answer is already quite clear. Bilaam here acts out a common pattern—even when we know we should do one thing, we instead do another; our mouths say no, our feet say yes.

For my students, I can understand their deep desire for a moment of freedom. Yet when I ask them, "do you think it's right for you to go buy candy while the rest of us wait for the bus?" they inevitably come to the same decision I had originally given. Bilaam, like all of us, knows that the right thing to do is not always convenient or profitable.

We must say 'no' to that which we know is wrong and say 'yes' to our commitments. For if we do not, we slip into the loopholes that allow us to fall further and further from our values, and our students will continue to show us where we fail. We do not need a punishing blade or a talking donkey to remind us of how we have sinned. We need only look at the state of the world around us.<sup>1</sup>



**Evan Wolkenstein** is the Director of Experiential Education and a Tanach teacher at the Jewish Community High School of the Bay in San Francisco. He views working with teenagers as a pathway to helping students understand the world around them. Evan holds a Masters Degree in Jewish Education from Hebrew University and a Certificate of Advance Jewish Study from the Pardes Institute in Jerusalem. He has a passion for learning about world music and dance, the sublime short story, and how to brew the perfect cup. Evan can be reached at [matthewevan23@yahoo.com](mailto:matthewevan23@yahoo.com).

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