

BALAK



ALIYA-BY-ALIYA SEDRA SUMMARY



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The talking donkey in the story of Bilaam gives Bilaam his fame, or perhaps infamy. We like to give the donkey story attention. But far more important than Bilaam being spoken to by a donkey is that he is spoken to by G-d. He is not the only person in the Torah who enjoys communication from G-d, but he is the only non-Jew in the Torah (after the giving of the Torah) who enjoys prophecy, communication from G-d.

More significant for us, the reader, is that this parsha is a glimpse of the Jewish people from the other side. We have been experiencing all of Jewish history until here from our side. Avraham, Moshe, G-d speaking to us. Now the narration switches to the other side, the non-Jews watching our march to the Land. We get to see what we look like in their eyes. We've never had this perspective.

And actually, not just what we look like in their eyes – but what we look like in G-d's eyes. It's like a child and a parent.

Condolences to
Ruchie Majerowicz Cohen and family
on the passing of her
BROTHER ז"ל

The child misbehaves and gets scolded. But then, the child overhears the parent speaking of them with a neighbor. About how wonderful the child is and how much the parent loves them.

Here too. We hear through the mouth of Bilaam what G-d thinks of the Jewish people. How blessed we are in His eyes.

This is a crucial moment. Because the book of Bamidbar could get you down. We are pivoting from the pristine desert experience, the ideal world of the mishkan in our midst, to the rough and tumble of real-life human beings with all their foibles. Complaining about water and meat and reminiscing of the good life in Egypt. Then the spies and Korach. We could wonder whether G-d is tiring of us, perhaps not as committed to His people. Perhaps we no longer deserve His love. Miriam dies, Aharon dies, Moshe is told he is about to die. Perhaps the covenant is slipping away.

And then Bilaam. Balak's plan to curse the Jewish people turns into a grand favor to us, the Jewish people. As it gives us a glimpse into what G-d thinks of us - through Bilaam's mouth.

Bilaam's blessings transform the book of Bamidbar from a focus on Jewish failing to an affirmation of the strength and power of the Jewish people and G-d's enduring love for us.



1st aliya (Bamidbar 22:2-12)

Balak, king of Moav, is afraid of the Jewish people; they are like an ox, licking clean all in its path. He sends messengers to Bilaam, requesting of him to curse the Jewish people. Bilaam said he would only do as G-d instructs. G-d told him not to go, for the Jewish people are

blessed.



Balak figures that if the Jewish people can defeat the strongest of the strong, Sichon and Og, then defeating the Jewish people will require more than military prowess. He recognizes that the spirit of the Jewish people is its power. It is this spirit that must be disrupted.

This story is also a powerful lesson in self-perception. The spies thought that the people of the Land viewed them as grasshoppers. Here, Balak describes the Jewish people as oxen. The difference in the 2 is who is speaking; is it *us* imagining what people think of us or is it *the people* telling us what they actually think of us? The spies had no idea what the people of the Land thought of the Jewish people; all they could do was project. What do I think that you think of me? That says far more about me than it does about you. As if to say; if I were you, I would think of me as a grasshopper. Because that is what I think of myself. Here, Balak tells us himself what he thinks of the Jewish people. Oxen. Powerful. Formidable.



2nd aliya (22:13-20) Bilaam told the messengers to return to Balak, as G-d instructed him

not to join them. Balak tried again, with greater dignitaries as messengers. He promised Bilaam great honor. Bilaam replied that even the promise of a house



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full of silver and gold would not allow him to ignore G-d's word. G-d said: if these men want you to join them, you may go but only say what I tell you.

This story introduces us to the complexity of our relationship with the non-Jewish nations. Balak and Bilaam see a world of powers beyond the rational, physical world. They believe in the power to curse the people. And that this power is given to specific people. And we must assume that Bilaam had success in his powers, for Balak never questions Bilaam's ability. In addition, Bilaam enjoys communication from G-d. The Jewish people will need to contend with the world of the unseen when they enter the Land; people who believe in all sorts of powers that will vie with our G-d for our attention. There is fertile debate as to the veracity of Bilaam's powers; however, the simple reading of the story seems to indicate that he is a prophet, one who G-d speaks with and who has used his powers successfully before.



3rd aliya (22:21-38) Bilaam awoke, saddled his donkey and joined the noblemen of Moav.

G-d was angry. An angel with a sword appeared in front of the donkey, so it swerved to the side. It then stood in front of a narrow path; Bilaam's leg was pushed against the side. It then blocked the way of a narrow path and the donkey stopped. Bilaam hit the donkey. The donkey spoke: why did you hit me? Have I not served you loyally? Bilaam then saw the angel with its

sword. The angel spoke: you did not see what the donkey saw. Now go but only say as G-d instructs you to say. Bilaam continued with Balak's messengers, while Balak came to greet him. Why, Bilaam did you not come? Bilaam responded that he will say only what G-d instructs.

The talking donkey is a great image. Not the first animal to speak; the serpent in the garden of Eden also spoke. The speaking donkey is as if to say; there is a world out there that you just don't have a clue about. You human beings are so limited, have such impoverished perception that even the great Bilaam is embarrassingly myopic. This is one of the enduring lessons of this story: the limitations of our perception of the world.



4th aliya (22:39-23:12) Balak and Bilaam build 7 altars, offer offerings and peer out at the Jewish people. G-d speaks to Bilaam, placing His words in his mouth. Bilaam returns to Balak and pronounces the prophecy: How can I curse a people that is not cursed? Oh, that my lot be theirs. Balak is not happy; Bilaam affirms that he says only what G-d places in his mouth.

Bilaam unwittingly provides us with a glimpse behind the "pargod", the veil. He tells us what G-d thinks of us. Now, looking at the stories in the Torah, we might think the Jewish people are argumentative, brazen, of little faith. Perhaps G-d is a bit tepid by this point; there is a lot to

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Hannah & Menachem Katten and family
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be disappointed in us. But Bilaam tells us the exact opposite. The Jewish people are blessed. “How good are you”. Our errors do not impact the fundamental covenant – we are His people. A blessed people.



5th aliya (23:13-26) Balak and Bilaam try a different location where only part of the Jewish people is visible. After offering offerings on 7 altars, G-d places His words in Bilaam's mouth. Bilaam returns to Balak and prophecies: G-d does not see iniquity in Israel. He is their benevolent King. They are not sorcerers; G-d acts for them. They are as lions. Balak is again unhappy; Bilaam affirms that he says what G-d instructs him to say.

What are they hoping in choosing a different location? Perhaps Bilaam and Balak acknowledge that the Jewish people as a people are blessed. But not every single Jew. We have blemishes. When G-d looks at the whole, He sees that the good outweighs the weaknesses. If we can get Him to look at the blemishes, maybe He will overlook all the good. Oh, that we could learn from Bilaam and quit glaring at the blemishes but gaze at the Jewish people as a whole.



6th aliya (23:27-24:13) Balak and Bilaam try again from a different spot. Bilaam avoids his sorcery and gazes at the Jewish people. He prophecies: how wonderful are the Jewish people. They are as trees, watered gardens, powerful. G-d redeemed them; they are as crouched lions. Those that bless them are blessed. Balak is again angry; Bilaam affirms he says what G-d instructs.

Bilaam sees; Balak hears. Bilaam gazes

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at the Jewish people and sees its beauty. Balak who merely heard about the Jewish people saw them as oxen, licking clean all in their sight. Bilaam does not suffice with hearing, but looks at the people. And sees them as trees, water, and gardens.



7th aliya (24:14-25:9) Bilaam's prophecies regarding the other nations: all will fail to stop Israel, including Moav, Edom, Amalek, Keini. The Jewish people began to be seduced by the women of Moav, attaching to their gods. Pinchas arose and smote a Jewish man and Midianite woman before the people.

As Balak understood, the power of the Jewish people is in its relationship to G-d. Appealing to human weakness and causing the men to sin is a vulnerability of the Jewish people. Cursing may not work; reducing them to sin will.

HAFTORAH BALAK

MICHA 5:6-6:8

This week's *haftorah* makes mention of the incident of Balak the king of Moav

hiring the sorcerer Balaam to curse the Jewish people — the main topic of this week's Torah reading.

The prophet Micha prophesies about what will occur after the war of Gog and Magog, the war which precedes the coming of the Mashiach and the Final Redemption.

“And the remnant of Jacob shall be in the midst of many peoples — like dew sent by G-d, like torrents of rain upon vegetation that does not hope for any man and does not wait for the sons of men.” The prophet describes how Hashem will remove the idols and sorcerers and how He will destroy the Jews' enemies.

Micha then goes on to rebuke the Jewish people for not observing Hashem's commandments, calling as witness the “mountains and hills” — a reference to the Avot and Imahot — and reminding them of the great things Hashem had done for them. He took them out of Egypt and replaced the curses that Balaam wanted to utter against them with blessings.

The Jewish people respond by saying that they do not know how to serve Hashem and ask for guidance. The prophet reminds

A SHORT VORT

BY RABBI CHANUCH YERES

Rav, Beit Knesset Beit Yisrael, Yemin Moshe

ויאמר אלוקים אל בלעם לא תלך עמהם לא תאיר את העם כי ברוך הוא

And G-d spoke to Bilaam, don't go WITH them, don't curse the nation for they are blessed. (22:12)

There seems to be a contradiction here. This pasuk G-d denies Bilaam permission to go curse Israel. Yet, in pasuk 20, G-d allows Bilaam to go

קום לך איתם

“And G-d said to Bilaam, go WITH them”.

The Vilna Gaon answers that there is a difference in the Hebrew words in the psukim...between עמהם and איתם

“Imahem” infers to identify with someone on an ideological level While “Itam” infers to be with someone but not to identify with their ideas.

G-d allows Bilaam to go with them “Itam”, to go with them physically but not to identify with their goal of cursing Israel. That is why G-d prohibits Bilaam from going with them “ Imahem”, forbidding him from identifying with their idea of cursing the blessed people of Israel

them of the Torah and that all they need to do is contained within it: "He has told you, O man, what is good, and what G-d demands of you: but to do justice, love kindness, and walk discreetly with your G-d." ■

STATS

40th of 54 sedras; 7th of 10 in Bamidbar
Written on 177.8 lines (ranks 35th)
2 Parshiyot; 1 closed, 1 open
There are 2 one-parsha sedras (Vayeitzei, Mikeitz), and then this one, on the fewest parshiyot in a sedra list
104 p'sukim - rank 34 (8th Bamidbar)
1455 words - ranks 33 (8th Bamidbar)
5357 letters - rank 35 (8th Bamidbar)
Balak is close to average for the Torah's sedras but is on the small side for Bamidbar

MITZVOT

Balak is one of 17 sedras in the Torah without mitzvot

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