



## ALIYA-BY-ALIYA SEDRA SUMMARY

RABBI REUVEN TRADBURKS  
RCA ISRAEL REGION

In memory of **Evelyn Rivers a"h**  
**חווה פֶּעסָא בת אהרן זלמן הכהן ע"ה**  
Mother of Reuven Tradburks

### PARSHAT BALAK

Parshat Balak is unique in the Torah; it is entirely from the perspective of those looking at the Jewish people. There is no other parsha like it. All the action and conversation are aimed at the Jewish people.

Here we are, moving toward the land of Israel, having fought and defeated Sichon and Og last week. The entire flow of the Torah at this point is the description of this march. And then an entire parsha, not of the view of the Jew in the march, but the view of the non-Jew, fearful of this march. We have heard plenty of how the Jews feel during this march; unsure, fearful, confronted by opposition both from within and from the nations through whom they are marching.

But this Parsha is a peek at what it feels like to be on the other side; fearful of the power of the Jewish people. While *we* are fearful in the march, *they* are just as fearful of us. Or more accurately, they are actually more fearful of us than we of them.

But more crucially Bilaam will say only what G-d says. And instead of cursing us, G-d blesses us.

This is perhaps the most powerful lesson of this story. Because the past few weeks have been failure after failure. The spies, Korach, plagues, punishments. We might surmise that

we are a failure of a people. And that G-d is displeased with us.

And then we overhear what G-d tells Bilaam. We are blessed. Good. Righteous. Now, we wouldn't have thought that at all. We would have thought we are a disappointment. Sometimes we need an outsider to remind us how blessed we are.

Failures, weakness, lack of faith? Yes, that is life. We have it all. But. Those things do not define us in the eyes of G-d. *Those are things we do; they are not who we are.* That is crucial. Then. And now. We make plenty of mistakes. We are unfaithful at times. We sin. Rebel. Yup, that is life and that is our people. But. It does not define us. We are a great people. And make mistakes.

This parsha is a powerful statement to us. Of the respect the nations have for us. And of the enduring love of G-d, in spite of all these conflicts and disappointments.



#### 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. That's quite a difference; grasshoppers or oxen.

The difference lies in 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 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.

Bilaam is told not to go by G-d. And then told he may go. What changed? This is an example of the maxim, on the path man chooses, he gets Divine assistance. Whether it is a good choice or bad. Bilaam is intent on going, so go he will.



## 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 satire. A donkey is not a smart animal. You, Bilaam, the one with prophecy, with great insight and vision, cannot see what a donkey can see? This is really not a smart animal. And it sees more than you? That is a pretty humiliating moment for the prophet.

And as a paradigm: be wary of those who speak in the name of G-d. Donkeys may be more reliable.



## 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

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His words in his mouth. Bilaam returns to Balak and pronounces the prophecy: How can I curse a people that is not cursed? They are a people that dwell apart. Oh, that my lot be theirs. Balak is not happy; Bilaam affirms that he says only what G-d places in his mouth.

Bilaam speaks in G-d's name; but not a curse but a blessing. After all the failures and disappointments of the past few weeks, what does G-d think of the Jewish people? Blessed. What a powerful reassurance. Were we to think we have lost His love through the various failings, we hear loud and clear His enduring love.

Bilaam describes the Jewish people as dwelling apart. Rabbi Sacks remarks that this is not to say we are isolated, scorned, though there have been plenty of times when we have been isolated and scorned. But rather, this refers to the Jewish peoples championing ethics. We are unique in our ethic, our values. At times in history, we will be the voice of conscience of the world, fighting the battles of principles against evil. And we will be a lone voice.



#### 5TH ALIYA (23:13-26)

Balak and Bilaam try a different location where only part of the Jewish people are 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. They are not sorcerers; G-d acts for them. They rise like lion cubs, stir as lions. Balak is again unhappy; Bilaam affirms he says what G-d instructs him to say.

The first blessing was general and focused on Jewish uniqueness, the quality of the Jewish people. The second blessing becomes a bit more relevant to the moment. If you, Balak, are looking for vulnerabilities in the Jewish people, to capitalize on those weaknesses to defeat the Jewish people in war. Well, G-d does not see those weaknesses. And when the moment needs, "the people will rise as a lion". Those are fighting words. Don't test us. We will attack like lions. Lions usually win.

This is the source of the name of the historic Israeli attack on Iran. If need be, "we will rise as a lion".



#### 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 your tents, 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.

In this third bracha, Bilaam gazes at the Jewish people and sees trees and gardens. This is in contrast to the lions of the second. Lions are power. Victory in war. Trees and gardens are the aftermath, the fruits of the war.

This a further taunt to Balak. You want to thwart the Jewish march to the Land. Not only are they as lions when taunted, so you

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do not stand a chance militarily with them. But, their goal, of settling the land of Israel, that too will happen. I see trees and gardens, the Jewish people planted successfully in their land.



### 7TH ALIYA (24:14-25:9)

Bilaam 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.

Balak understood the power of the Jewish people is in its relationship to G-d. And that relationship can be soured by inducing the Jews to sin. Appealing to human weakness and causing the men to sin is a true vulnerability of the Jewish people. Cursing may not work; reducing them to sin will. ■



### STATS

40<sup>th</sup> of 54 sedras; 7<sup>th</sup> of 10 in Bamidbar. Written on 177.8 lines (ranks 35<sup>th</sup>).

2 Parshiyot; 1 closed, 1 open.

There are 2 one-parsha sedras (Vayetzai, Mikeitz), and then this one, on the fewest parshiyot in a sedra list. 104 pesukim - rank 34 (8<sup>th</sup> Bamidbar). 1455 words - ranks 33 (8<sup>th</sup> Bamidbar). 5357 letters - rank 35 (8<sup>th</sup> 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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