

suffering that accompanies failures of understanding, refusals and denials of the sort that characterize many relationships.

Vicki Hearne, *Animal Happiness: A Moving Exploration of Animals and Their Emotions* (172–173)

While Balaam's donkey is notable for being one of only two animals who speak in the entire Tanakh (the other being the serpent in Gen. 2), to me, and probably to any human with a companion animal, it's clear that the donkey begins talking well before God opens her mouth. Based on her research on the relationship between lions and their trainers, scholar Vicki Hearne has argued that animals and humans do converse, but spoken words make up only a part of that communication; there are also gestures, postures, and forms of physical contact. Blurring the sharp line between humans and animals (for which language often serves as strong evidence), Hearne imagines interspecies relationships as being very much like those between humans, where communication can lead to mutuality and trust but is also prone to failures that can have dire consequences.

Balaam's interaction with the donkey is an example of the failure that leads to suffering when someone isn't listening. The donkey knows something about God and tries to communicate that to her human. But she's in the frustrating position of being unable to use human language to share what she knows. Instead she uses another form of communication—bodily movement—moving three times to avoid the angel. Balaam should have “gotten” that something unusual was happening. As the donkey herself points out after God enables her speech, she's been carrying Balaam for a long time and she's never done anything similar before. But each time she moves, Balaam becomes angry and lashes out in violence. The problem is not that she can't speak his language; it is his unwillingness to really understand hers.

Balak 5777

בלק תשע"ז



Fear, Truth, and a Donkey

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Bilam, the highly paid but visionless prophet, sits high in his saddle on his donkey's back as she swerves off the path. She's strayed, it seems, for no reason; an angel standing with sword drawn is as yet unseen by him. He beats the donkey to drive her back onto the path. The next time she stops short she traps her rider's leg against a stone wall. He winces in pain. I imagine him throwing one hand down toward his leg and perhaps grabbing his headdress, by now slipping off, with the other. He frantically beats his donkey again, flailing to regain control. Bilam is coming undone: a prophet made a fool by an ass (Num. 22:22–25).

With a bruised ego and in great frustration, he loses his temper when the donkey sits down under him in a narrow passageway, reducing him to a ridiculous heap of silks and saddle bags, like a howling child astride a broken tricycle, going nowhere fast. He beats the beast with his staff. Where Moses struck the rock instead of speaking to it, here our donkey responds to Bilam's abuse with calm, reasonable speech: “What have I done to you that you have struck me three times?” (vv. 27–28).

An internationally sought-after sorcerer, Bilam is rendered by a few quick strokes of Torah as laughably absurd.

What is this slapstick figure doing here in the Torah?

Two concerns drive our story, both of current, and timeless, relevance: The first is fear. The second, at root, is truth.

Our parashah opens with the report that the kingdom of Moab is terrified of the Israelites, having seen what they did to King Sihon and the Amorites. In a deliberate, extended echo of Pharaoh and the Egyptians' fear of the Israelites

in Exodus, our passage tells how the vastness of the Israelite nation—significantly, an explicit fulfillment of the blessing God conferred upon them—unnerves King Balak and his people (Num. 22:3). The Israelites are seen as less than human—an animalistic horde posing a mortal threat simply by being. Essentially, they fear that Israel will eat Moab alive. It is only reasonable for Moab to be concerned that a large, passing nation may overwhelm it, but that fear quickly demonizes Israel irrationally.

The Rabbis recognize the Moabites' fear as hatred, and they find it contagious. Bilam, merely a hired hand, comes to hate the Israelites, too. He takes his paid mission to curse the Israelites as his own. Observing that a man of Bilam's station has no business saddling his own ass, which he does when setting off on his journey (Num. 22:21), the Talmud teaches in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar: "Hatred cancels out the norms of high status. That is, even the high and mighty do lowly work when motivated by hatred" (BT Sanhedrin 105b).

And what is Bilam's mission? To use his ostensive skill with poetic invocations to reverse God's decree and independently bless or curse the subject of his words. In other words, Bilam's mission is to thwart God's will. Bilam learns, as any ass can tell you, that one ought not to set out against God's will.

When a Jew hears terrible news, most commonly of a death, tradition teaches us to recite a blessing which names God as the arbiter of truth, *dayan ha'emet*. In reciting these words we confront unflinchingly what we will need to come to terms with over time: that the reality we see before us is true. It is irreversible. It is of God in the sense that all that is real, all that is impervious to dissembling or spin, all that sheds the evasions of wishful thinking and stands firm in its truth, is from God.

What's going on in the story of Balak and Bilam is a doomed attempt to change what is, and will remain, true. God's first instruction to Bilam is "You shall not go with them. You shall not curse the [Israelite] people for it is blessed" (Num. 22:12). At the conclusion of the donkey episode, God revises His instruction: "Go with the men. But the word that I speak to you, it alone shall you do" (22:35). Thrice, Bilam opens his mouth and offers lasting words of blessing that affirm and enhance Israel's standing. By the end, it is Balak's turn to be exasperated as Bilam—and by extension, God—proves as impossible to steer as our famous donkey.

There is much to ponder in this story. For example, it's of great significance that our portion concludes with the inalterably blessed people Israel committing a particularly ugly episode of idolatry and violation. What does it mean to be blessed, or cursed, when we retain the freedom to act in exalted or debased ways?

An opening to the answer can be found in the first part of the teaching of Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar, quoted above. "Love cancels out the norms of high status. That is, even the high and mighty take up lowly tasks when motivated by love." Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar cites Abraham as his example. Out of love for God and a desire to carry out God's command, Abraham arose early in the morning to saddle his donkey and offer up Isaac. Now, for many of us, the Akeda, or binding of Isaac, is not a model we embrace as expressing love of God, or even an expression of God's will that we can countenance. Nonetheless, Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar's insight about the power of love remains true, whether in human society or in seeking to discern God's true will and to live, with love, in alignment with it.

When fear festers into hatred we are stupefied, unable to face up to the truths that stand squarely in front of us, sometimes even with sword unsheathed. To paraphrase Shakespeare's Puck, what fools we mortals be when we try to force God's hand, when we seek to falsify what's true or tar truth as falsehood. Rather, we learn this week to affirm truth from love and with modesty, for there is no other path to God's blessing.

The publication and distribution of the *JTS Parashah Commentary* are made possible by a generous grant from Rita Dee (z"l) and Harold Hassenfeld (z"l).

דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



Listening to Lions

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[Lions] have personalities, temperaments, moods, and they can be voluble about all this, sometimes chatty, sometimes (when they are working) radiating a more focused informativeness. Nor are the exchanges and the work in question suffering-free. In particular, they are not free of the