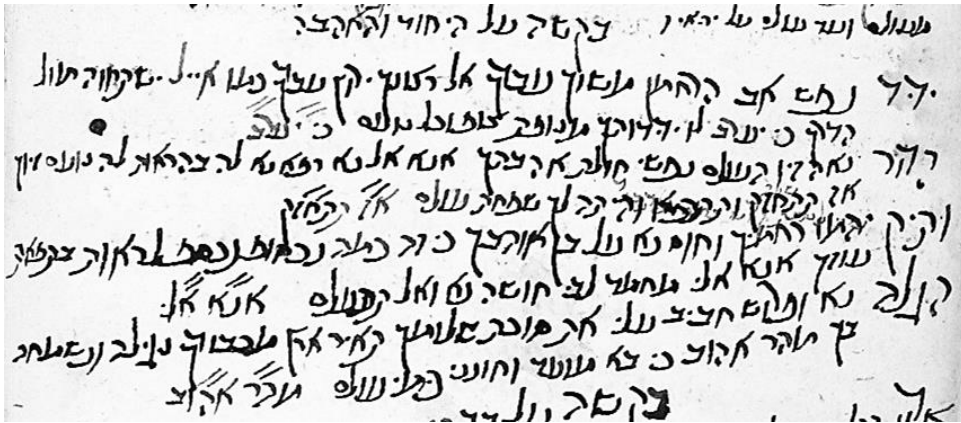


“traditional” version of *Yedid Nefesh*. For example, the latter version appears in a form that adopts the standards of biblical grammar, which is perfectly correct on its own terms, and it replaces a phrase that originally read “*shifhat olam*” (eternal handmaiden) with “*simhat olam*” (eternal joy), both of which make sense in context. But, in fact, the poem was originally written using the grammar of rabbinic Hebrew, so these changes, amongst others, distort the original meaning of the poem. How do we know this?



Because the autograph (that is, in the hand of the author) copy of the song is preserved in manuscript, a manuscript found in the Rare Book Room of the Library of JTS (see illustration). From this original copy, we know what the author intended, so the corrections found in our prayer books are not arbitrary. When a poet writes a poem, he or she composes the language of that poem in a very precise way. If we know what that poet wrote, we should respect her or his handiwork. Thus, changes of this kind in our prayer book are not an expression of pedantic scholarship; they are our way of respecting the poet’s creation—a creation the original of which you see before you. When our Rare Book Room reopens in the fall of 2019, please come by to see it in person!

See the image in high-definition at www.jtsa.edu/the-poets-hand

Balak 5778

בלק תשע"ח



The Seer Who Would Not See

Marc Gary, Executive Vice Chancellor and Chief Operating Officer, JTS

I believe in prophecy.
Some folks see things not everybody can see.
And, once in a while, they pass the secret along to
you and me.

—Steve Earle, “God is God”

Anyone who is an aficionado of late night comedy shows with a strong dose of political and social satire such as *Saturday Night Live* or *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* knows full well that comedy can be a very serious matter indeed. But can sacred narratives of the Torah be comedic? And if so, should we take that comedy seriously?

Consider the case of the gentile prophet Balaam and his talking ass in this week’s Torah portion, Balak. Is there a more absurd encounter in the entire Bible? Undoubtedly concerned that skeptics would use this episode to undermine the credibility of the entire religious corpus, our sages and scholars have worked overtime to rationalize this story and explain away its fairy tale quality.

In *Pirkei Avot*, we are taught that the mouth of the ass in the Balaam story was created on the Sabbath eve of Creation (*Avot* 5: 6). According to the commentary *Tiferet Israel*, this mishnah comes to teach us that God invested creation with the power to bring forth this and other wonders at the appropriate time. In other words, this miracle and others that we read about or even experience in life are not beyond nature, but in fact they are natural phenomena that only appear at particularly propitious times.

Maimonides—the rationalist philosopher *par excellence*—was clearly dissatisfied with this explanation. In his *Guide for the Perplexed* (II.42), he argued that the ass did not really speak at all but rather was seen in a dream. The Italian biblical commentator S.D. Luzzatto offers a different but equally rational explanation. Like Maimonides, Luzzatto denied that the ass actually spoke words. Instead, when Balaam beat the animal for not moving forward, the ass made plaintive sounds that implied protests. Balaam interpreted the braying as objections to the abuse he was heaping on the beast and he responded in words much as we might speak to a beloved dog or cat.

But what if the Biblical author does not want us to rationalize the story away but rather, like a great comedy sketch, asks us to marvel at its ingenuity and then take away a serious message?

As Robert Alter points out in *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (105), the very first word of the Balaam story is the verb “to see” (Num. 22:2), and that verb, with its notions of vision and perception, creates the unifying structure of this story. Balak, king of the Moabites, chooses Balaam to curse the Israelites because Balaam is considered the preeminent seer of his day. So it is a great irony that this seer cannot see that he has no power to curse a people whom God wants blessed. This point is driven home with satirical humor when Balaam rides off on his ass at Balak’s insistence to curse the Children of Israel. On the way, an angel brandishing a sword stands in the way of the ass and will not let it or its rider pass (v. 23). The animal can see the angel, but the seer cannot see it. When Balaam proceeds to beat the animal, God opens up its mouth so the ass can protest with speech. Balaam responds that “If I had a sword with me, I’d kill you” (v. 29)—further irony because the angel standing right in front of him has a sword in his hand, but Balaam, the great seer, cannot see it. Only when God “uncovered Balaam’s eyes” does Balaam see the angel and repent for mistreating his animal (vv. 31–35).

This story presents high comedy with a stinging rebuke. Balaam had awesome powers of prophecy (the Midrash [Sifrei Devarim 357:40] compares his prophetic gifts to those of Moses) but he could not see that those powers were useless unless they were employed for good

purpose. Perhaps the lesson here is that prophecy is not a gift bestowed on a chosen few but rather an inchoate ability that many possess to see what others refuse to acknowledge.

Years ago when Harlem was one of the poorest and most neglected parts of New York City, I used to ride the subway to JTS, which is only a few blocks south of Harlem. On the subway walls were posters that read: “When you get to 125th Street, look out the window. Give a damn.” Those posters reminded me of the lyrics written by Paul Simon: “The words of the prophets are written on the subway walls and tenement halls.”

The absurd story of Balaam’s ass comes to teach us this very serious point: we must take the blinders from our eyes, perceive the truth no matter how discomfiting, and then use our vision to turn curses into blessings.

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Speaking of Text

A WEEKLY EXPLORATION OF THE JEWISH BOOKSHELF

The Poet’s Hand

The Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary

Beginning with *Siddur Sim Shalom*, Conservative prayer books began including a slightly different version of the much-loved Sabbath evening hymn *Yedid Nefesh*. The changes, though mostly slight, caused—and sometimes still cause—confusion, disrupting those who learned the traditionally printed version of this hymn with different grammatical forms and a few different words. What caused the change and why was it deemed sufficiently important that it should supersede the better-known version?

Before answering these questions directly, it is important to note that different versions of the “same” text, common as they are, almost always make sense independently, such that the non-original version can be used without noticing any “mistakes.” This is the case with the non-original but