

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 5779

בלק תשע"ט



## The Sorcery in Our Midst

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In this week's Torah reading, Parashat Balak, we read a riveting story of the diviner, Balaam, who was commissioned by Balak, king of Moab, to curse the Israelites (Num. 22:2–24:25). Balak's goal was to weaken the Israelites, encamped at the borders of Moab, so that he could defeat them in battle. Balaam is richly and, at times, inconsistently described in our detailed narrative. Part of the story's complexity is due to the historical fact that two narratives about Balaam were conflated in the finally redacted text of the Bible. The internal contradictions in the Balaam story before us attest to the literary history of the text. Whereas Balaam was a faithful servant of God who wouldn't curse the Israelites without God's consent (22:8, 13, 18, 38), he also sought to curse Israel without God's permission (22:22, 34). God was angry at Balaam for going on his journey to curse the Israelites (22:22), even though he previously had permitted Balaam to go (22:20). Indeed, the story of Balaam is an important example of how the discipline of biblical criticism skillfully unravels combined literary layers in the Pentateuch. Serious students of Bible are advised to read the untangling of the embedded narratives in our parashah by the late bible scholar, Jacob Milgrom (*The JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers*, pp. 468–473).

The contradictions in the narrative in its current form certainly spawned inconsistent characterizations of Balaam, through the ages. The Rabbis of the Mishnah, for example, emphasized Balaam as evil—they called him “Balaam the Wicked”—and proclaimed that he, and his followers, forfeited the world to come (Avot 5:19). The midrash *Seder Eliyahu Rabbah* (Ish Shalom ed., p. 142), on the other hand, credited Balaam with having greater wisdom than even Moses! In this commentary, I highlight another aspect of the narrative presentation of Balaam. The literary parody in the scenes of Balaam and the

donkey, evidently a self-contained literary unit, is worthy of independent treatment. In the final analysis, we will explore the significance implicit in the mockery of Balaam and in the fact that the Balaam story is made up of originally conflicting traditions.

Returning to our storyline, Balaam was commissioned by Balak to curse the Israelites because he believed Balaam to be a sorcerer, able to alter future events. In truth, however, Balaam was not a sorcerer, but, rather, a diviner. He could not change the future; he only aimed at predicting it. For biblical Israel, and according to normative Jewish practice to this day, sorcery, that is, all forms of witchcraft, was and remains forbidden (see Deut. 18:10, BT Sanhedrin 67b and corresponding codes). In the Bible it was even punishable by death (Exod. 22:17). Although not an Israelite, Balaam could still communicate authentically with the God of the Israelites, since he was a diviner and not a wizard. But, as we shall see from our analysis of the donkey episode, even a diviner could be seen as sinning before the Israelite deity.

After being hired by Balak, Balaam set out on his donkey to view the Israelite encampment and pronounce his curse. Along the way, God placed an angel bearing a sword on the road, but only the donkey could see the angel. When, due to the roadblock, the donkey went aside, Balaam beat his donkey. This happened three times until the donkey spoke [!] to Balaam and rebuked him. The angel became visible to Balaam, at which point he rebuked Balaam for beating the donkey who had, actually, just saved his life (22:22–35).

The fundamental mockery of Balaam is obvious. The one perceived to be able to control the Israelites with words could not even control his donkey with a stick. The one who claimed to be a seer of the unseen could not even see what his donkey saw (and was right in front of him!). The one who is the wise among the wise was beaten in a spoken exchange by the dumbest of animals. In the end, Balaam did not curse Israel; only blessings spewed forth from his mouth.

What exactly does the narrative mock? Certainly, the purpose of this plot is to disgrace Balaam. But why? As a diviner—and not sorcerer—was he not able to communicate with and execute the will of the Israelite God? As the rabbinic tradition reads it, Balaam's quick acceptance to set out on the journey demonstrates that Balaam was, in fact, intent on cursing the

Israelites (see Rashi to 22:20). It seems, therefore, that the donkey episode comes to caricature Balaam and any other seer, for that matter, who, even with authentic access to God, sets out to do evil. In short, even those with access to the truth can attempt to do harm. As we see from the ending, the plan was foiled. Ultimately only the will of God, the blessing of the Jewish people, prevailed. What are we to make of the fact that this same sinister seer was intertextually cloaked in the robes of the righteous? Is there a lesson to be drawn from the editorial activity in the biblical text?

Certainly, the intertwined contradictory narratives about Balaam—presenting him at times as a saint and at others as a sinner—teach an important lesson. Like the contradictions evident in the integrated narratives of Balaam, at times there are ideas presented to us in a faithful looking package that only once unraveled reveal layers of challenges and affronts to Judaism's tenets, values and aspirations. Beware: there are no small number of contemporary threats to the core values and tenets of Judaism packaged and repackaged as authentic and compatible with Judaism. These can take many different forms and are not limited to the contemporary occult. I refer to evil ideologies and tendencies—including political extremism, racism and intolerance—masquerading as Jewish values. We would be well advised to beware of these contemporary “sorceries” and their representatives; those attempting to veer us away from the righteous path. If we always remember our primary allegiance—the singular truth of the God of Israel—we too will only spew forth from our mouths a Torah of blessing, moderation, and equality for all.

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## 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 suffering that accompanies