

Dreaming of Being Balaam

Rabbi Jan Uhrbach, Director of the Block / Kolker Center for Spiritual Arts, JTS



Rav Hisda said:

“A dream that is not interpreted
is like a letter that is never read.”

([BT Berakhot 55a](#))

The story of the heathen prophet Balaam—hired by Moabite king Balak ben Tzipor to curse the people Israel—is altogether strange. It concerns events happening outside the Israelite camp and seemingly unknown to them, characters we’ve not yet met, and a talking donkey. Its tone ranges from burlesquely funny to surreal.

One way to read it is as a comedic yet sharp cautionary tale about the seductions—but ultimate impotence—of selfish and shallow leadership. Though Balaam is much-sought-after and well-paid, skilled at glib oration, he is but a mercenary seeking money and fame. When he’s shown up by his own donkey, he is revealed as a buffoonish parody of the humble and service-focused Moses.

But here’s another possibility: perhaps the story is instead a dream Moses dreams. One hint of this is that Balaam comes from Petor ([Num. 22:5](#)), a word used for dream interpretation (e.g., in the Joseph narrative). Indeed, both the narrative context and several details (too numerous to list here) strongly suggest this is dreamwork, incorporating and transforming elements of Moses’s experiences, anxieties, doubts, and fears.

For example, Moses long resisted the prophetic role because of his difficulty speaking and his fears that his words would be ineffective. Most recently at this point, he’s been experiencing frustration and disappointment in moving forward: literal roadblocks in the form of foreign kings refusing to let the Israelites pass, and the ultimate roadblock—God has said he will not enter the Promised Land ([Num. 20–21](#)). His mortality is front and center,

highlighted by the recent death of his siblings and leadership partners, Aaron and Miriam, and by the encampment now on the steppes of Moab, opposite Jericho, near Beit Peor, the place where he will die (also see [Num. 22:1](#), 25, and [Deut. 34:1](#)). And he has grown distant from the people, with whom he once so strongly identified but from whom he will soon part ways. This is a new generation; they don’t share his past in Egypt, and he won’t share their future in the Land. He’s been increasingly impatient and even angry with them, and less effective in reaching them.

It is not a stretch to imagine Moses plagued with doubts about his legacy, his authenticity, and his character: “What have I really achieved? Will the people be able to sustain the vision without me? Has my service been true and my motivation pure, or have I used my spiritual gifts for my own gain? What does my anger and frustration with the people say of me? Have I loved the Israelites enough and genuinely served them?” In short: “Am I a true prophet and servant of God, following in Abraham’s footsteps, or merely an unworthy parody?”

One need not be a student of Freud to connect such doubts to a dream about a “heathen” prophet, who

- sees the Israelites only from afar, and whose name (Balaam) suggests *belo am*—“one without a people” (see [BT Sanhedrin 105a](#));
- is told by God to go forward and is then stymied by impassable roadblocks;
- is revealed as a buffoon when he is bested by a talking donkey; and
- repeatedly offers words which fail to “take.”

Perhaps most challengingly, the dream may reflect uncomfortable questions and feelings about God. Recently, Moses has twice tried to follow God's instructions, but to disastrous effect: sending spies to the Land ([Num. 13-14](#)), and taking a rod to draw water from a rock ([Num. 20:6-12](#)). Both incidents resulted in divine wrath, and a decree forbidding first the people, and then Moses himself, to enter the Land. So here, God seems inconsistent in dealing with Balaam, telling him to go forward, then being angry when he does.

Or perhaps Moses identifies even more closely with the donkey, a mute creature made to speak by God, whose complaint of being mistreated reads perfectly as a fantasy dialogue between Moses and God after Moses has struck the rock:

Donkey: "Why have you beaten me?"

Balaam: "Because you mocked me. Would that I had a sword in my hand, for now I would kill you."

Donkey: "Am I not your donkey that you have ridden forever until today? Have I been accustomed to do such a thing to you?" ([Num. 22:28-30](#))

Moses: "Why have you beaten me?"

God: "Because you failed to have faith in Me, and to sanctify Me publicly, therefore you will not bring this congregation into the Land." ([Num. 20:12](#))

Moses: "Am I not Your servant that You have used forever until today? Have I been accustomed to do such a thing to You?"

In other words, if the story of Balaam and Balak is actually Moses's dream, it is a dream emerging from a crisis of faith: faith in himself, in the people, in God and God's ways, and in the ability of human beings to connect, understand, and serve. It emerges from a fundamental anxiety: Not *am* I blessed or cursed, but am I *bringing* blessing or curse? Are my life and effort for the good? And reading it thus not only explains the bizarreness of the story but opens important teachings for us.

First, by revealing the full humanity of Moses, with all of his doubts, fears, mixed motives, and anxieties, the Torah simultaneously offers comfort and conveys responsibility. We need not judge ourselves harshly for our own self-doubts and anxieties, but neither can we use them to excuse a failure to move forward. Such concerns and anxieties don't disqualify us from leadership or service. On the contrary, self-doubt and introspection are hallmarks of authentic service; we should worry, instead, if we ourselves (or our putative leaders) *lack* such doubts.

Second, our parashah is no longer a story about a wicked man whose evil designs are thwarted by an interventionist God. Instead, it portrays righteousness as the courage to struggle with one's dark side, to face one's fears and doubts. If it is true that every character in a dream represents the dreamer, then God here is not a supernatural being but an aspect of Moses himself—the divine spark in him, able to illuminate his own inner challenges and impurities and to transform them.

At times we all are—or fear we are—Balaam. We have mixed motives, we get full of ourselves, or we are seduced by money and power. We push in the wrong directions, grasp at the wrong things, and sometimes fail to see what even an ass can see. We may doubt our ability to make a difference, doubt that good will ever triumph. But somehow—through our own efforts in confronting and managing the worst within ourselves, in combination with opening ourselves to being transformed in ways we can't quite understand—somewhat mysteriously and in spite of ourselves, we may turn even our curses to blessings.

This commentary originally appeared in 2016.