



ICJW Bea Zucker Online Bible Study Program

“The Five Books of Moses: Contemporary Issues and Classic Perspectives”

By Dr. Bonna Devora Haberman

40 Balak — Prophets: Ours and Theirs

Text

N.B. Please read the full parasha before beginning to study this lesson.

במדבר כד

א וַיִּרְא בַלְעָם כִּי טוֹב בְּעֵינֵי יְהוָה לְבָרֵךְ אֶת-יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלֹא-הָלַךְ כְּפַעַם-בְּפַעַם לְקִרְאֵת נְחֻשִׁים וַיֵּשֶׁת אֶל-הַמַּדְבָּר
פְּנִיּוֹ. ב וַיֵּשֶׂא בַלְעָם אֶת-עֵינָיו וַיִּרְא אֶת-יִשְׂרָאֵל שֹׁכֵן לְשִׁבְטָיו וְנָתַח עָלָיו רוּחַ אֱלֹהִים. ג וַיֵּשֶׂא מִשְׁלוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר
נָאִם בַּלְעָם בְּנוֹ בְּעֵר וְנָאִם הַגָּבֵר שְׂתֵם הָעֵינַי.
ד נָאִם שִׁמְעוּ אִמְרֵי-אֵל אֲשֶׁר מַחְזֵה שְׂדֵי יַחְזֵה נִפְלָא וְגִלְוֵי עֵינָיִם.
ה מֵה-טֹבוֹ אֵל הַלֵּיךְ יַעֲקֹב מִשְׁכַּנְיֹתֶיךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל.
ו כְּנַחֲלִים נָטְיוּ כְּגֹנֹת עָלַי נִהַר כְּאֵהָלִים נָטַע יְהוָה כְּאֲרָזִים עָלַי-מִיָּם.
ז יִזְל-מִיָּם מִדְּלִיּוֹ וְזָרְעוּ בְּמִיָּם רַבִּים וַיִּרְאוּ מֵאֲגַג מְלָכָו וְתִנְשֵׂא מְלָכְתּוֹ.
ח אֵל מוֹצִיאֻם מִמִּצְרַיִם כְּתוֹעַפֹת רָאִם לֹא יִי אֲכַל גּוֹיִם צְרִיּוֹ וְעֲצַמֹת תִּיהֵם יִגְרָם וְחֻצְיוֹ יִמְחֹץ. ט כָּרַע שֹׁכֵב כְּאֲרִי
וּקְלָבִיא מִי יִקְיָמְנוּ מִבְּרַכְיֶךָ בְּרוּךְ וְאֵי רְרִיךָ אֲרוּרָה.

Bamidbar 24

1 Now Balaam, seeing that it pleased the Lord to bless Israel, did not, as on previous occasions, go in search of omens, but turned his face toward the wilderness. 2 As Balaam looked up and saw Israel encamped tribe by tribe, the spirit of God came upon him. 3 Taking up his theme, he said,
Word of Balaam son of Beor,
Word of the man whose eye is true,
4 Word of him who hears God's speech,
Who beholds visions from the Almighty,
Prostrate, but with eyes unveiled:
5 How fair are your tents, O Jacob,
Your dwellings, O Israel!
6 Like palm-groves that stretch out,
Like gardens beside a river,
Like aloes planted by the Lord,
Like cedars beside the water;
7 Their boughs drip with moisture,
Their roots have abundant water.
Their king shall rise above Agag,
Their kingdom shall be exalted.
8 God who freed them from Egypt
Is for them like the horns of the wild ox.
They shall devour enemy nations,
Crush their bones, and smash their arrows.
9 They crouch, they lie down like a lion,
Like the king of beasts; who dare rouse them?
Blessed are they who bless you,
Accursed they who curse you!



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Context

The king of Moav, Balak, sends for a prophet, Balaam, to curse the Children of Israel before going to war against them. Parshat Balak describes the experience of a prophet caught between divine and human messages. Refusing at first, God permits Balaam to go with the second contingent of Balak's messengers. Blocked by an angel in his path, he rages at his donkey who opens her mouth and speaks to him. Finally reaching Balak, after due sacrificial ceremonies in four different locations overlooking the Israelite camp, Balaam speaks divine poetry of praise rather than the curses Balak seeks. The parasha concludes with a plague brought on by Israelite sexual and religious indiscretion with the Moabites. A priest, Pinchas, spears a fornicating couple and thereby quells the plague.

Explorations

Moshe - who is known as *Rabbeinu*, our teacher – is considered the greatest prophet of the Jewish People, "There was no prophet in Israel who reached the level of Moshe" (Devarim 34:10). Yet, there is one person who is compared to Moshe, and according to some, even surpasses him. On this verse, an ancient midrash comments, "In Israel there was no prophet like Moshe, but amongst the nations of the world there was. . . . What prophet were they led by who reached the level of Moshe? Balaam the son of Be'or" ([Tanhuma](#), Balak, 1).

With its sustained attention to the inner workings of a prophet's experience, this parasha proposes an opportunity to begin to explore prophecy.

Contrasting Balaam with Moshe, a different midrash claims that Balaam's prophetic capabilities exceed Moshe's.

Moshe would not know Who was speaking to him, but Balaam would know Who was speaking to him, as it says, 'The words of the one who hears the sayings of God' (Bamidbar 24:4). Moshe would not know when S/He would speak to him until S/He was speaking to him, but Balaam would know when S/He would speak to him, as it says, 'And knows the knowledge of the Most High' (Bamidbar 24:16). Moshe would only speak to Her/Him when he was standing, as it says, 'And as for you, stand here with Me' (Devarim 5:28). But Balaam would speak to Her/Him when he was reclining, as it says, 'Who sees the vision of the Almighty, fallen and with open eyes' (Bamidbar 24:16). (Sifrei to Devarim 34:10).

All of these qualities commend Balaam as a person endowed with extraordinary prophetic capability. While Moshe is heralded for his intimacy with God, Balaam's direct and conscious connection with the divine seems to be even more developed than Moshe's. However, many of the sages find reasons to undermine both Balaam and the nations of the world who consider him their prophet. At its core, the *Tanhuma* passage denigrates the nations, justifying a claim about the superiority of the Jewish nation:



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Why [was the gentile world provided with a great prophet]? So the [non-Jewish] nations would not have the opportunity to claim, “if we would have been led by a prophet on the level of Moshe, we would have served God, too.” ([Tanhuma](#), Balak, 1)

A fascinating talmudic passage substantiates Balaam's stature as a prophet among the nations of the world,

When the Torah was given to the Jewish people, [God's] voice went from one end of the world until the other. All the sovereigns of the nations feared and trembled in their halls, and sang songs, as it says, "While in Her/His Temple, all will proclaim, 'Glory!'" (Tehillim 29: 9). They all gathered by Balaam the evil and asked him, "What is this great voice that we hear? Perhaps a flood has come to the world, as it says, 'God sat enthroned at the flood.' (Tehillim 29:10)?"

He answered them, "'God sat as Sovereign forever' [the continuation of the verse] (Tehillim 29:10). The Holy One, Blessed is S/He, has already sworn never to bring a flood to the world again." They told him, "A flood of water S/He will not bring, but a flood of fire S/He will bring, as it says, 'Behold, with fire God will judge' (Yeshayahu 66:15)." He told them, "S/He has already sworn not to destroy all flesh." (Zevachim 116a)

Here, Balaam's insight is helpful and positive. He affirms the validity of the Tanakh, and confidence in the divine covenant and compassion. Some elements of this midrashic scene remind of the scenes in our parasha. In the midrash, Balaam is confronted with a negative expectation – imminent destruction, and he voices a positive interpretation – divine covenant; in the parasha, he is confronted with a negative expectation – the cursing and destruction of the Children of Israel, and he voices a positive interpretation - blessing. Yet, this text and many others assign the epithet *rasha* - evil one - to Balaam. Though there seems to be no doubt that Balaam is endowed with prophecy, many of the traditional commentators consider that he was an evil person. Sages reveal their negative attitude toward Balaam without any qualms. Their disdain for Balaam is uncharacteristic – the mishna advocates to appraise people based on positive assumptions,

Joshua ben Perachyah said. . . . judge every person in the best possible light. (Pirkei Avot 1:6)

Blatantly flouting this instruction, a passage in the talmudic tractate Sanhedrin states,

A certain *min*-heretic said to R. Hanina: Have you heard how old Balaam was? — He replied: It is not actually stated, but since it is written, “Bloody and deceitful men shall not live out half their days” (Tehillim 55:23), [it follows that] he was thirty-three or thirty-four years old. He rejoined: You have said correctly; I personally have seen Balaam's Chronicle, in which it is stated, 'Balaam the lame was thirty years old when Pinehas the **brigand** killed him.’”

Mar, the son of Rabina, said to his sons, “In the case of all [those people mentioned as having no portion in the world-to-come] you should not take [the biblical passages dealing with them] to expound them [to their discredit], excepting in the case of the wicked Balaam: whatever you find [written] about him, interpret it [to his disadvantage]. (Sanhedrin 106b)



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In this same vein, a mishnaic text contrasts Balaam with Avraham, emphasizing Balaam's poor character,

Whoever has the following three traits is a disciple of ‘Avrahan *Avinu* –our parent, and whoever possesses three very different traits is a disciple of the wicked Balaam. Those who possess a generous eye, a humble spirit and a meek soul, are among the disciples of Avraham. Those with a stingy eye, an arrogant spirit and a greedy soul, are among the disciples of the wicked Balaam. (Pirkei Avot, 5:22)

In another passage, sages credit Balaam with the gift of being able to discern the exact fraction of a second when God is angry — a gift no other creature received. According to the talmud, Balaam intended to use this gift to curse the Israelites at that precise moment, and thereby cause God to destroy them. Instead, God restrained His/Her anger to save the nation from destruction (Berakhot 7a).

Later on, the Torah tells of the murder of Balaam during the battle against Midian (Bamidbar 31:8). Referring to the women with whom the Israelites had committed sexual-religious transgressions, the Torah attributes their misbehavior to Balaam,

Yet they are the very ones who, at the bidding of Balaam, induced the Israelites to trespass against the Lord in the matter of Peor, so that the Lord's community was struck by the plague. (Bamidbar 31:16)

Based on this pasuk, another legend (Bamidbar Rabbah 22:4), describes how Balaam succeeds to cause the Israelites to transgress with the women of Moav and Midian during the pagan ceremonies of Ba'al Peor which in turn is punished by the plague with which our parasha concludes. The midrash blames Balaam for the misconduct that causes the death of 24,000 Israelites [by plague].

Reconsidering these midrashim, Torah scholar Nehama Leibowitz comments,

Now let us try to understand why the Torah deferred mentioning Balaam's complicity in the matter of Peor till after his death at the hands of the Israelites... Evidently the Torah wanted to teach us a special lesson. Though it was Balaam who instigated the daughters of Midian to strike a blow at the purity of Jewish family life, though he was the evil genius who thought out the plan, the moral responsibility ultimately rested on the Israelites themselves... Every individual is responsible for his own acts. Provocation does not free the victim of responsibility. (Nehama Leibowitz, Studies in Bamidbar, p. 377)

With these interpretations in mind, return to the Torah text describing Balaam's behavior in our parasha. Among the exquisite poetry of praises in the verses cited above, Balaam's statement, “[How fair are your tents, O Jacob, your dwellings, O Israel!](#)” is one with which we open our daily prayers.



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The sages both respect Balaam's prophetic powers and elaborate how he misuses them. Compare an incident with a different prophet – an Israelite prophet.

Among 55 prophets in the Tanakh, seven of them are women. Hulda is the last; she lives in Jerusalem before the destruction by the Babylonians in 586 BCE. The following story is recorded in the Second Book of Kings.

Josiah was eight years old when he began to reign; and he reigned thirty and one years in Jerusalem; and his mother's name was Yedidah the daughter of Adaiah of Bozkath. . . .

And Shaphan the scribe told the king, saying: 'Hilkiah the priest has delivered me a book.' And Shaphan read it before the king. It came to pass, when the king had heard the words of the book of the Torah, that he rent his clothes. And the king commanded Hilkiah the priest, and Ahikam the son of Shaphan, and Achbor the son of Micaiah, and Shaphan the scribe, and Asaiah the king's servant, saying,

'Go inquire of God for me, and for the people, and for all Judah, concerning the words of this book that is found; for great is the wrath of God that is kindled against us, because our ancestors have not attended to the words of this book to do according to all that which is written concerning us.'

So Hilkiah the priest, and Ahikam, and Achbor, and Shaphan, and Asaiah, went unto Hulda the prophet, the spouse of Shallum the son of Tikvah, the son of Harhas, keeper of the wardrobe--now she dwelt in Jerusalem in the second quarter--and they spoke with her. And she said to them: 'Thus says Adonai, the G-d of Israel: Tell the person that sent you to me - Thus says God: Behold, I will bring evil upon this place, and upon the inhabitants thereof, even all the words of the book which the king of Judah has read; because they have forsaken Me, and have offered to other gods, that they might provoke Me with all the work of their hands; therefore My wrath shall be kindled against this place, and it shall not be quenched. But to the king of Judah, who sent you to inquire of God, thus shall you say to him: Thus says Adonai, the G-d of Israel: As touching the words which you have heard, because your heart was tender, and you did humble yourself before God, when you heard what I spoke against this place, and against the inhabitants thereof, that they should become an astonishment and a curse, and have rent your clothes, and wept before Me, I also have heard you, says God. Therefore, behold, I will gather you to your ancestors, and you shall be gathered to your grave in peace, neither shall your eyes see all the evil which I will bring upon this place.' And they brought back word to the king. (II Kings 22:1-2 & 10-20)

Like the story of Balak and Bilaam in our parasha, in this passage, a sovereign sends messengers to a prophet to ask for help. Like Balaam in the midrash about the flood, the prophet Hulda affirms the validity of the sacred text – here, the one that king Hilkiah has found. She also praises the righteousness of Hilkiah's humility. Her words rebuke Israel for



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straying from the divine teachings, and curse the Israelites with God's wrath – the opposite of Balaam. The outcome is also inverse – after Balaam's prophetic blessings, the people turn away from divine instructions to whoring with the Midianites; after Huldah's prophetic rebuke, king Hilkiyah repents with a fervor for the divine law that is unmatched in the Tanakh, according to the text,

There was no king before him like him [King Hilkiyah] that turned to the LORD with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses; neither after him arose there any like him. (II Kings 23:25)

The texts - in our parasha and in II Kings, and in the rabbinic literature - raise questions about how a prophet approaches his or her role in society, the efficacy of prophecy, and, more generally, about the meaning and purpose of prophesy.

Many commonly hold that prophecy has to do with foresight, prediction. In Devarim 18:18, the Torah describes the prophet as a mouthpiece of the divine, "I will put my words in her/his mouth and s/he will speak to them all that I command him/her." This understanding leaves open the purpose of prophecy, and the possibility that a prophet might attempt to misuse her or his power – as the sages argue concerning Balaam.

A great theologian of the last century, Avraham Joshua Heschel interprets prophecy in a very special way, emphasizing emotional and ethical passion,

The characteristic of the prophets is not foreknowledge of the future, but insight into the present pathos of God. (*The Prophets*, 298)

For Heschel, the miracle of prophecy is that human turns to God, as God turns to human. The prophet speaks in the divine voice with intense sympathy, compassion, and emotional identification, *feeling* both divine and human experience. The prophet is profoundly sensitive to suffering, particularly the plight of the oppressed and weak. Many prophets rail against injustice, transgression, and corruption, against hypocrisy, and apathy. They mediate between human folly and divine wrath, calling for repair. The prophet is driven by moral passion, by a deep commitment to ethical truth. Suffering and ruin follow from turning away from divine love and goodness. The prophet stands between heaven and earth with the unflinching purpose of averting catastrophe and enabling justice.

Prophecy is the voice that God has lent to the silent agony, a voice to the plundered poor, to the profane riches of the world. It is a form of living, a crossing point of God and man. God is raging in the prophet's words. (*The Prophets*, chap 1)

Heschel's extraordinary insight into the experience of prophets inspires his own life and passionate activism in pursuit of justice and peace. He marched with Martin Luther King for civil rights, rallied against the war in Vietnam, and initiated the Pope and Christian leaders into a more respectful inter-faith relations.

Heschel counters the isolationist position derived from the words of Balaam. In a statement about his background in the holocaust, appealing for respect, cooperation, and interdependence rather than ethnocentrism and isolation, Heschel quotes Balaam,



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"There is a people that dwells apart, not reckoned among the nations" (Num. 23:9), says the Gentile prophet Balaam. Is it not safer for us to remain in isolation and to refrain from sharing perplexities and certainties with Christians?

Our era marks the end of complacency, the end of evasion, the end of self-reliance. Jews and Christians share the perils and the fears; we stand on the brink of the abyss together. Interdependence of political and economic conditions all over the world is a basic fact of our situation. (from “*No Religion is an Island*”, 1965 lecture at JTS)

Heschel challenges traditionalist calls for isolationism; he cherishes the uniqueness of our People while encouraging engagement with other traditions. He points to the possibility to study our texts, biblical and rabbinic, with similar boldness - to recognize and address great ethical challenges facing the Jewish people. Chief among these challenges are attitudes and practices concerning “others,” and women.

Questions for Discussion

- With reference to texts in the Torah, discuss how Balaam is and is not comparable to Moshe.
- Based on this current exploration of prophecy, in what sense is Balaam a prophet? Explain.
- Evaluate Heschel's view of prophecy in relation to Balaam – how does Balaam measure up?
- What purpose, if any, do you see in the comparison between the Jewish people and other nations of the world, and among nations generally? Explain whether such comparisons are necessarily ethnocentric – focused on the centrality of one's own nation? Describe how we might value the Jewish people, our unique texts and traditions while respecting the nations of the world. How do these questions relate particularly to Balaam?
- In the text about Huldah, there is no reference to her personal status or role as a woman; she is accepted straightforwardly for her prophetic insight and voice. How do you see the role of prophet in gender terms? - how, if at all, is gender significant to prophecy?
- Explore how Heschel's understanding of prophecy is meaningful or relevant to your life and spirit.
- What are the moral obligations of a prophet – is s/he simply a neutral mouthpiece, or must s/he be committed to some vision of goodness? If so, whose?



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Study Links

Read one of the great works on the Hebrew prophets, Abraham Joshua Heschel's [The Prophets](#). See [A Rabbi of His Time, With a Charisma That Transcends It](#) – an intriguing review of a recent biography of Heschel.

See this blog about Balaam by [The Curious Jew](#): Looking for God in humanity - [Balaam and Moses: Prophets of God](#).

[Here](#) is a critical look at Balaam as the dark/ other aspect of prophesy.

Read a fuller excerpt from A. J. Heschel's [No Religion is an Island](#).

Summary of Issues

The role and moral character of a prophet are not straightforward. The tension between Balaam's behavior explicit in our parasha and the inclination of many sages to undermine and slander him raises difficult questions about how to appraise these rabbinic traditions and our relationship to them. In order to find the evil that they attribute to him, the sages import extraneous assumptions and negative expectations. Rabbinic interpretations of this parasha reveal bias against non-Jews and their leaders not unlike assumptions and bias that we find about women, our capabilities and roles – among the sages and beyond.

Methods & Observations

Commitment to an ancient tradition can embroil us in contradictions and challenges to our values. Rabbinic and some contemporary Jewish attitudes about *others*, and about women run contrary to our sensibilities. Balancing allegiance to sacred traditions and cultivating healthy critical dispositions and willingness to innovate are among our responsibilities as Torah students.

Contact

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