

Balak: Standing for Humanity **Rabba Daniella Pressner, Class of 2020**

Rabbi Dr. Ariel Burger recounts a story in a conversation with Krista Tippett on *On Being*. He tells the story of a rabbit farm on the outskirts of Auschwitz where the Nazis treated their rabbits better than their Jewish slave laborers. On this farm, one of the workers was a Polish man who repeatedly snuck food in for the slave laborers and inmates. One day, a woman receiving bread cut her arm on a piece of barbed wire; the wound became infected and she required antibiotics. The Polish man recognized that without antibiotics, the woman could die so he cut open *his* arm and placed his wound on her wound so that *he* would become infected. He then went to the rabbit farm owner to procure the antibiotics to save this woman's life.

Parshat Balak is one of the most unusual stories in the *Tanakh*; it is a story of prophets, sorcery, and even a talking donkey. Its moral message is also elusive. There are three moments where God appears in front of Bilam to guide him in making a better choice: two times in the form of a prophecy and the third time in the form of an angel. In this way, God encourages Bilam to make better choices and models the idea that sometimes individuals need outside support to be able to actualize their potential. Striving to actualize potential often requires courage and moral clarity and, in Bilam's case, repeated opportunities to try again. Bilam's inability to see beyond himself impacted his ability to bring blessing, *of his own volition*, to Israel. Perhaps the choice to do what is right only becomes simpler when we are *willing* to put *humanity* at the center of our choices, independent of personal motives that often cloud this clarity. *Bilam's donkey* symbolizes an individual who is able to act without personal motives clouding moral clarity. This is an individual who can actualize potential by being *open* to seeing truth with honesty and humility, regardless of preconceptions. We learn that Moshe modeled the highest form of prophecy as he was "*mechuvan umezuman*," always "directed and ready" to accept prophecy (Mishna Torah, Hilkhot Yesidei HaTorah 7:6). What would our world look like if each of us spent more time dedicating ourselves to this vision?

Balak repeatedly commands Bilam to curse the Nation of Israel and Bilam reminds him that all he can do is serve as God's mouthpiece. "*Hadavar asher yasim Elohim b'pi, oto adaber.*" "Only the word which *God* puts into my mouth, I will utter"(Numbers 22:38). While Bilam's words ultimately reflect God's intentions, it is not clear that his actions follow this pattern. God warns him not to go to curse the nation and yet, Bilam decides to move forward nonetheless. But God does not give up on Bilam. "*VaYavo Elohim el Bilam.*" "And God came toward Bilam"(22:20), as if to say, "you may have made a poor choice but I will hold you to your potential." God gives Bilam multiple opportunities to change course, even sending a *malakh Hashem*, an angel, to stand in his way so that he does not curse the nation (22:22). Three times the angel stands before Bilam and his donkey, and three times Bilam strikes his donkey to

proceed forward. While the donkey responds, instinctively recognizing that something needs to be different, Bilam does not budge. Instead he berates his donkey for his poor behavior. One message is clear: One does not need to be a savant or a prophet to look out for humanity; even donkeys have instincts. And still, God does not give up on Bilam and has the donkey speak to help articulate this message. Yet despite God's efforts to help Bilam rise to his potential, he refuses and becomes simply a conduit for blessing against his will.

On the one hand, Bilam could be praised for his commitment to expressing God's words. On the other hand, the story teaches that simply following commands rarely responds to the call to stand for humanity. Bilam had the opportunity to bless Israel or to work to prevent Balak from cursing Israel. But he chose to idly stand by, instead of performing God's work in this world. He failed at the basic value of honoring humanity, the work of *living* Torah. This parsha teaches that God's words do not have relevance unless they are *lived and applied*. Bilam stubbornly refused to see past his ability to be a conduit; he saw his purpose as transactional as opposed to transformational. And yet, this story fascinatingly presents a God who, time and again, does not give up. Why?

In speaking of Bilam, Rav Yochanan teaches, "*m'birchato...atah lomad mah b'libo,*" "from his blessing...you learn what was in his heart" (Sanhedrin, 105b). While Bilam meant to curse Israel, only blessings came out, suggesting that Bilam was not simply a conduit for God's words but that, in his heart of hearts, Bilam *wanted* to bless Israel. Perhaps this is why God models repeated opportunities for Bilam to act with moral clarity, to stand bravely against the grain of the cultures around him, and to stand up for the sake of humanity. In continuing to expect more from Bilam, God reveals the value of "cracking" evil, of helping others rise to their potential, and pushing them to act on instinct and principle and not to be swayed by influence. All humans—alas, even donkeys—have the potential to bring greater *chesed* (charity) to the world. God models a commitment to humanity that stands at the center of not just our words (Bilam's commitment to saying whatever God put into his mouth) but our actions (Bilam's continued *decision* to be open to cursing Israel if those were the words God put into his mouth). God teaches us that when we notice others not reaching their potential, we must work alongside them to help make this happen and we should hope that others do the same for us. This commitment to each other and to humanity's potential brings light to this world and often, has the capacity to save lives and ultimately, generations.

The most beautiful part of the rabbit farm story is that it doesn't end there. The grandchild of the Jewish woman who survived finds the man in Poland who saved his grandmother's life, visits him and says, "Thank you. Thank you for my life." Just as God sees the "crack" in Bilam



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as an opportunity for his growth and his potential, our superhuman strength is our desire to help everyone reach theirs by calling on each person to bring greater light to this world.

*Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in. (Anthem, Leonard Cohen)*

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