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Parshat Balak: At the Violet Hour

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At the violet hour, when the eyes and back
Turn upward from the desk, when the human engine waits
Like a taxi throbbing waiting,

...

At the violet hour, the evening hour that strives
Homeward, and brings the sailor home from sea...
--T.S. Eliot, "The Waste Land"

Parshat Balak tells a fantastical tale of the seer Bilaam who fails to see the angelic vision before him. On a mission to curse the Jewish people—first refused by God, then seemingly begrudgingly permitted—it is only his donkey who perceives the angel standing in his way. Three times over, the animal sees what its prophetic owner cannot:

23 The donkey saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road with a drawn sword in his hand, so it turned off the road into a field. Bilaam beat it to get it back on the road. 24 Then the angel of the Lord stood in a narrow path through the vineyards, with walls on both sides. 25 The donkey saw the angel of the Lord, so it pressed close to the wall, crushing Bilaam's foot against it. So he beat the donkey again. 26 Then the angel of the Lord moved on ahead and stood in a narrow place where there was no room to turn, either to the right or to the left. 27 The donkey saw the angel of the Lord, so it lay down under Bilaam, and he was angry and beat it with his staff. (Numbers 22:23-27)

כג וַתִּרְאֵהוּ אֱתֹנוֹן אֶת־מַלְאֲכֵי ה' נֹצֵב בַּדֶּרֶךְ וַחֲרָבוֹ שְׁלוֹפָה בְּיָדוֹ וַתֵּט אֶת־עֵינֶיהָ וַתִּלְךְ בַּשָּׂדֶה וַיִּךְ בָּלְעָם אֶת־הָאֱתֹנוֹן לְהַטֹּתָהּ הַדֶּרֶךְ: כד וַיַּעֲמֵד מַלְאֲכֵי ה' בְּמִשְׁעוֹל הַכְּרָמִים גְּדֵר מִזְּהָר וְגְדֵר מִזְּהָר: כה וַתִּרְאֵהוּ אֱתֹנוֹן אֶת־מַלְאֲכֵי ה' וַתִּלְחֹץ אֶל־הַקִּיר וַתִּלְחֹץ אֶת־רַגְלָהּ בָּלְעָם אֶל־הַקִּיר וַיִּסֹּף לְהַכְתִּיבָהּ: כו וַיִּסֹּף מַלְאֲכֵי ה' עָבוֹר וַיַּעֲמֵד בְּמִקוֹם צָר אֲשֶׁר אֵין־דֶּרֶךְ לְנִטּוֹת יָמִין וּשְׂמֹאלוֹ: כז וַתִּרְאֵהוּ אֱתֹנוֹן אֶת־מַלְאֲכֵי ה' וַתִּרְבֹּץ תַּחַת בָּלְעָם וַיַּחֲרֹאֲף בָּלְעָם וַיִּךְ אֶת־הָאֱתֹנוֹן בַּמַּקֵּל: (במדבר כב:כג-כז)

Fed up with the maltreatment, the donkey turns on his owner in a most miraculous way:

Then the Lord opened the donkey's mouth, and it said to Bilaam, "What have I done to you to make you beat me these three times?" (Numbers 22:28)

וַיִּפְתַּח ה' אֶת־פִּי הָאֱתֹנוֹן וַתֹּאמֶר לְבָלְעָם "מָה־עָשִׂיתִי לָךְ כִּי הִכִּיתַנִּי זֶה שְׁלֹשׁ רַגְלִים:" (במדבר כב:כח)

A short, clarifying exchange is shared between Bilaam and his talking donkey, and the obstructionist angel is finally revealed.

Then the Lord opened Bilaam's eyes, and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road with his sword drawn. So he bowed low and fell facedown. (Numbers 22:31)

וַיִּגַּל ה' אֶת־עֵינֵי בָלְעָם וַיִּרְאֵהוּ אֶת־מַלְאֲכֵי ה' נֹצֵב בַּדֶּרֶךְ וַחֲרָבוֹ שְׁלֹפָה בְּיָדוֹ וַיִּקַּד וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ לְאַפָּיו: (במדבר כב:לא)

With the help of a talking donkey, and the aid of God, the prophet could now finally see the folly of his ways.

The presence of this odd creature within the canon of the Tanakh has challenged many over time. What are we to make of such a wild, whimsical character? What are we to hear when it speaks? To what does it attest? Is this *aton* (she-donkey) something *sui generis*, weird in a way that other biblical miracles are not?

Pirkei Avot suggests not. It suggests that the opening of the donkey's mouth was actually a miracle like quite a few others, nine others to be exact, that share one thing in common: the unusual timing of their creation.

Ten things were created on the eve of the [first] Shabbat at twilight [*bein ha'shmashot*]. And these are they: The mouth of the earth [that swallowed Korach in Numbers 16:32]; and the mouth of the well [that accompanied the Israelites in the wilderness in Numbers 21:17]; and the mouth of the donkey [that spoke to Bilaam in Numbers 22:28–30]; and the rainbow [that served as a covenant after the flood in Genesis 9:13]; and the manna [that God provided the Israelites in the wilderness in Exodus 16:4–21]; and the staff [of Moshe]; and the *shamir* [the worm that helped build the Temple without metal tools]; and the letters; and the writing; and the tablets [all of the latter three, of the Ten Commandments]. And some say, also the destructive spirits, and the burial place of Moshe, our teacher, and the ram of Abraham, our father. And some say, also the [first human-made] tongs, made with [Divine] tongs. (*Pirkei Avot* 5:6)

עֲשָׂרָה דְּבָרִים נִבְרָאוּ בְעֶרְבַת שַׁבָּת בֵּין הַשְּׁמָשׁוֹת, וְאֵלוֹ הֵם, פִּי הָאֵרֶץ, וּפִי הַבְּאֵר, וּפִי הָאֲתוֹן, וְהַקֶּשֶׁת, וְהַמָּן, וְהַמָּטָה, וְהַשְּׁמִיר, וְהַקֶּתֶב, וְהַמְקַטֵּב, וְהַלְלוּחֹת. וַיֵּשׂ אֹמְרִים, אַף הַמְזִיקִין, וְקִבּוּרְתוֹ שֶׁל מֹשֶׁה, וְאֵילוֹ שֶׁל אַבְרָהָם אָבִינוּ. וַיֵּשׂ אֹמְרִים, אַף צַבַּת בְּצַבַּת עֶשְׂרֵיהֶם: (פְּרָקֵי אָבוֹת הו:)

After six long days of creation, on the brink of nightfall, on the precipice of rest, God's creative energy was stirred in a seeming frenzy, and ten (or more) miracles were born. Embedded into the very fabric of the natural world were (some of) those things that would violate that natural rhythm, miracles that would awe and nurture and confound. And it all happened during the precious time of twilight, *bein ha'shmashot*.

Why this rush? Maimonides (1135-1204), and many others in his wake, saw in this rabbinic statement an effort to maintain the world's essential order and God's essential immovability. Nature must be constant and so must be God's will, say these medievals. The story of creation in Genesis testifies to this. Each day, more light than more life. Every creature, its own habitat:

And there was evening and there was morning, the first day (Genesis 1:5)

וַיְהִי־עֶרֶב וַיְהִי־בֹקֶר יוֹם אֶחָד

How to make sense then of those times that break with this regularity, those times, whether wondrous or horrifying, that seem to sit outside of nature? In his commentary on *Pirkei Avot*, R. Simeon b. Zemah Duran (1361-1444) cites Maimonides in brief:

And our teacher Moses [ben Maimon] of blessed memory explained in his book *The Guide of the Perplexed*, in chapter 29, that the rabbis held that the miracles were decreed during the time of creation, before the completion of creation, when nature was not yet set, so that the things that would [seemingly] defy nature would be on par with nature, to fulfill the words of

ורבינו משה ז"ל פירש בספר המורה פרק כ"ט משני כי דעתן של חז"ל הוא שהנסים נגזר עליהם בעת הבריאה קודם שנשלמה הבריאה ועדיין לא היה שם טבע קיים כדי שיהיו הדברי היוצאי מהטבע שוים עם הדברים הטבעיים וזה כדי לקיים הכתוב

the verse: "There is nothing new under the sun" [Ecclesiastes 1:9]. (Magen Avot 5:6:1) שאמר אין כל חדש תחת השמש. (מגן אבות ה:א)

The MaHaRaL of Prague, Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel (d. 1609), encapsulates a related argument:

Maimonides, of blessed memory, wrote in his book that the sages' reasoning was thus: It was very challenging to them [to imagine] that nature could change after the creation or the will of the One who set it into motion. For this reason they say that the Holy Blessed One put into creation from its very inception miracles that would take place in future times, thus ensuring that there would be no changes in divine will. This is how he explained the words of the sages. (Derech Chaim 5:6:1)

וּכְתַב הַרְמַב"ם ז"ל בְּסִפְרוֹ שְׂדֵעַת חַכְמִים בְּזֶה, כִּי קָשָׁה עֲלֵיהֶם עַד מְאֹד שִׁישְׁתַּנֵּה טִבַּע אַחַר מַעֲשֵׂה בְרֵאשִׁית או שִׁיתְחַדֵּשׁ רִצּוֹן אֶחָד שֶׁהוֹנַח כֶּךָ, וְלִכְךָ הֵם אוֹמְרִים שֶׁהַקִּב"ה שָׂם בְּטִבַּע מִתְחַלֵּת הַבְּרִיאָה שִׁיתְחַדֵּשׁ הַנֶּס בְּאוֹתָהּ שְׁעָה שֶׁהִיָּה וְעֵשָׂה הַנֶּס וְלֹא הִיָּה כֹאן שְׁנֵי רִצּוֹן כָּלל, כֶּךָ הוּא מִפְרֵשׁ דְּבַרֵי חַכְמִים. (דָּרֵךְ חַיִּים ה:א)

The ten twilight creations were thus attempts to render the disorderly orderly; to put into nature those things that appear to be outside of it; to seal the system in a cycle of predictability. The mouth of Bilaam's donkey, like the mouth of the earth that swallowed Korach, and so many other unnatural phenomena, was just nature running according to prescribed rules set in motion so very long ago. Alas "there is nothing new under the sun" (Ecc. 1:9).

This view of a tidy world stripped of all surprise, regulated and regimented, seems to me, though, to be the exact opposite of the mishnaic message.

Ten things were created on the eve of the [first] Shabbat at twilight

עֲשָׂרָה דְּבָרִים נִבְרְאוּ בְּעֶרְבַּ שַׁבָּת בֵּין הַשְּׁמָשׁוֹת

These miracles were not embedded into the six days of creation, as would make sense on the Maimonidean view. It was precisely beyond the bounds of "natural" time that these unnatural entities were born. They were inaugurated instead into a new kind of time, a time in-between times, time that resists precision and categorization, *bein ha'shmashot*.

Trying hard to make sense of this precious time, the Talmud asks:

And what is twilight? From when the sun sets, as long as the eastern face of the sky is reddened by the light of the sun. If the lower segment of the sky has lost its color, and the upper segment has not yet lost its color, that is the twilight period. If the upper segment has lost its color, and its color equals that of the lower one, it is night; this is the statement of Rabbi Yehuda. Rabbi Nechemia says: The duration of the twilight period is the time it takes for a person to walk half a *mil* after the sun sets. Rabbi Yosi says: Twilight is [rather] like the blink of an eye. This [night] enters and that [day] leaves, and it is impossible to calculate it due to its brevity [lit. it is impossible to stand on it]. (BT Shabbat 34b)

וְאִיזָהוּ בֵּין הַשְּׁמָשׁוֹת? מִשְׁתַּשְׁקַע הַחֲמָה כ"ז שְׁפָנֵי מִזְרַח מְאֵדִימִין הַכֹּסִיף הַתַּחְתּוֹן וְלֹא הַכֹּסִיף הָעֶלְיוֹן בֵּין הַשְּׁמָשׁוֹת הַכֹּסִיף הָעֶלְיוֹן וְהַשּׁוּהַ לַתַּחְתּוֹן זֶהוּ לֵילָה דְּבַרֵי רַבִּי יְהוּדָה ר' נַחֲמִיָּה אוֹמֵר כְּדִי שִׁיְהַלֵּךְ אָדָם מִשְׁתַּשְׁקַע הַחֲמָה חֲצִי מִל רַבִּי יוֹסִי אוֹמֵר בֵּין הַשְּׁמָשׁוֹת כְּהַרְפֵּי עֵין זֶה נִכְנָס וְזֶה יוֹצֵא וְאִי אִפְשָׁר לַעֲמוֹד עֲלָיו. (שַׁבָּת ל:ב)



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Should twilight be measured by the colors it casts or by time it takes for it to elapse? Is it when colors bleed into one another or when days blur? Can it be seen? Can it be even momentarily held? As the rabbis struggle to pin down that which is ever moving and ever changing, we can begin to see the gift that is *bein ha'shmashot*, or what T.S. Eliot termed "the violet hour."

It seems that after six days of order and differentiation, God created one more thing: liminality. "And there was evening and there was morning" and then there was something between evening and morning, something grey and messy, unscripted and unbounded, surprising and awe-inspiring. Nature, time, regularity, and predictability all have their place. Indeed our existence depends on all of them. But on *erev Shabbat*, we received a blessed reminder that wondrous things emerge in the in-betweens—whimsy, beauty, oddity, revelation, creativity. All that is unknowable, unpredictable, and untameable lies, alas, *bein ha'shmashot*, on the edges of order. When we can cultivate a modicum of comfort with liminality, when we can learn to live with structure *and* beyond it, in time *and* outside of it, we just might experience miracle. We just might come to see angels.



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