

Parshat Balak

Words Have Power

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Kollel Class of 2022

Thank goodness, we've arrived at the parsha with the talking donkey! After many weeks of disappointing choices on the part of the people and even their leaders Moshe and Aharon, many see this week's parsha as a welcome respite. Not only does it feature the famed talking donkey, it also includes many beautiful words of praise for the Jewish people from an unlikely source - the powerful Bilaam, son of Be'or. We all breathe a sigh of relief when he opens his mouth to curse the Jews and blessings come out instead. It makes us wonder, though, did Bilaam have some supernatural power such that if he had uttered a curse, it would have affected Bnei Yisrael?

This parsha brings questions of this nature to the forefront, where we can see God's divine influence on humanity through the prism of psychology and human behavior. It opens with King Balak of Moav seeing the destruction Bnei Yisrael has wrought on King Sichon of Emor, and fearing his kingdom might be next. He thus attempts to recruit the famed Bilaam to curse the Jewish people. Balak's actions are driven by fear, and he makes choices that end poorly for his people as a result.

In his invitation to Bilaam, Balak says, "Come then, put a curse upon this people for me, since they are too numerous for me; perhaps I can thus defeat them and drive them out of the land. For I know that whomever you bless is blessed indeed, and whomever you curse is cursed." (Bemidbar 22:6)

Does Bilaam have the power to make blessings and curses come true, as Balak believes? The Talmud does not think so; in Brachot, a braita is cited which describes Bilaam's special ability as being able to discern when God is angry and time his curses appropriately. Bilaam's power is not in his words, but in his timing.

The rationalist-oriented commentator Ibn Ezra also believes that Bilaam could not curse Israel. He writes that God is saying, "לא תוכל לקלל אותנו כי אני ברכתיו." "You cannot curse them, for I have blessed them."

Ibn Ezra is challenged by commentators here who believe Bilaam does indeed have some particular powers. Why would God need to forbid Bilaam from going with the Moabites if it was not possible for him to curse the Jews? Sforno, who refers us to the Talmud in Brachot, seems to believe that Bilaam did have some ability to affect God's view of the people, noting also, "לא תלך כדי שלא תתן עיניך בהם לרע" - Bilaam may not go so that he may not set the evil eye upon the Jews.

We don't need to believe in the evil eye to understand that Bilaam's journey had power even absent any supernatural ability. Having the great sorcerer Bilaam on their side would no

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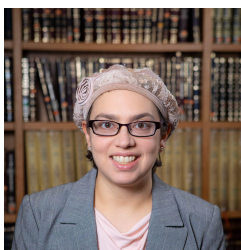
doubt be a source of moral support to the Moabite army preparing to fight the Jews. Our rabbis believed that Bilaam's greatest contribution to the Moabite cause was convincing them to send Moabite women to the Israelite camp to tempt them with sexual immorality and idolatry, our parsha's tragic ending resulting in 24,000 deaths. (So much for a happy respite!)

The Gemara in Sanhedrin 106a describes in detail this advice, an arrangement where the women of Moav tempted the Jews first with garments and forbidden wine before proceeding to the sins of immorality and idolatry mentioned in the text.

From start to finish, the theme is clear: words have power. That power need not be supernatural to cause a cascading series of events. From the start of the parsha, we see that Bilaam's desire to go to the Moabites is problematic even without his attempts to curse the people. The story of the talking donkey drives home this point: Bilaam is a man of words; only when his donkey talks to him does he wake up to the messenger of God before him, despite God having spoken to him twice. Even told he can say nothing without God's approval, Bilaam continues, putting his faith in his greatest asset: his words. He tries to curse the Jews but can only bless them, angering Balak greatly. Why is Balak angry? Because he believes these blessings have power and that Bilaam has the power to utter words that could change the fate of the Jews!

Which do we believe? That the Jews' blessed status existed then in an unchanging way, no matter what Bilaam said? Or rather, that words have power in their ability to tempt, to inspire, to change minds, and to influence others to action?

Any of us who has seen firsthand how an offhand comment can cause hurt we didn't intend, or who has seen how a kind message can bring comfort to one experiencing tangible suffering, knows firsthand that words have power. This is the connection made by the Talmud in Sanhedrin, which seeks to connect Bilaam's words with the actions at the end of the parsha. In our modern lives where communication is easier than ever, the Torah reminds us to be careful with our SMSs, our posts, our tweets, our viral videos: words have power.



Rabba Aliza Libman Baronofsky is a native of Ontario, Canada. She studied Tanach at Midreshet Lindenbaum before participating in York University's Jewish Teacher Education Program. Rabba Aliza also has an ALM in Math for Teaching from Harvard University. Rabba Aliza taught Tanach and math at the Maimonides School in Brookline, MA from 2005-2016, where she particularly enjoyed designing and implementing interdisciplinary lessons. Since 2016, Rabba Aliza has taught at the Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School. She lives in Aspen Hill, MD with her husband and children.