

Parshat Balak
The Snake and the Donkey
Talia Weisberg - Class of 2024

Parshat Balak begins with Balak, the king of Moav, hiring the well-known prophet Bilaam to curse the Jewish people. Bilaam reluctantly accepts the job and travels to where the Israelites are camped. The donkey that he saddles for the trip sees an angel on the road and veers off the path, making Bilaam so angry that he hits her. After this happens three times, the donkey famously speaks aloud and protests this unfair punishment:

Then the LORD opened the donkey's mouth, and she said to Bilaam, "What have I done to you that you have beaten me these three times?" Bilaam said to the donkey, "You have made a mockery of me! If I had a sword with me, I'd kill you." The donkey said to Bilaam, "Look, I am the donkey that you have been riding all along until this day! Have I been in the habit of doing thus to you?" And he answered, "No." Then the LORD uncovered Bilaam's eyes, and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the way, his drawn sword in his hand; thereupon he bowed right down to the ground. (Num. 22:28-31)

This is the second of two times in Tanach where speech is attributed to an animal, the first of which is the snake that compels Chava to eat from the Eitz Hada'at:

Now the serpent was the shrewdest of all the wild beasts that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say: You shall not eat of any tree of the garden?" The woman replied to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the other trees of the garden. It is only about fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden that God said: 'You shall not eat of it or touch it, lest you die.'" And the serpent said to the woman, "You are not going to die, but God knows that as soon as you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like divine beings who know good and bad." When the woman saw that the tree was good for eating and a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable as a source of wisdom, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave some to her husband, and he ate. (Gen. 3:1-6)

The nature of this speech is widely contested among the meforshim. The Ohr Hachaim believes that the snake only hissed, but Adam and Chava could understand all the plants and animals in Gan Eden. Although Ibn Ezra ultimately concludes that the snake and donkey both spoke themselves, he quotes Saadiah Gaon's opinion that an angel spoke on their behalf. Other commentaries, including Chizkuni and Radak, state that the animals literally began to engage in human speech. However, the meforshim are unanimous that the donkey's speech, in a post-Edenic world, was indubitably a miracle. This tracks with a famous Mishnah in Avot 5:6 that states that the mouth of this donkey was created at twilight during the erev Shabbat of Creation, when God created ten things that were particularly miraculous before the Creation stage ended.

To whatever extent the snake and donkey did indeed speak, there are several interesting points of comparison between these narratives.

Where the snake uses his shrewdness to undercut his Master, the donkey is faithful and seeks to serve her master loyally. The snake speaks to incite Chava to sin and mortality, whereas the donkey speaks to protect Bilaam from being killed. Rabbenu Bachya brings a kabbalistic idea that the snake was animated by the satan, whereas the donkey was

animated by Hashem. In addition, the genders are swapped in these two stories, with a male animal speaking to a female human in Bereishit and a female animal speaking to a male human in Balak. Although the punishment for the snake is explicit, the reader never learns of a reward for the donkey's actions.

Both stories begin with the animal asking a question, the human responding, the animal speaking again, and then the human seeing something. In Chava's case, "the woman saw that the tree was good for eating and a delight to the eyes" (Gen. 3:6), and in Bilaam's case, "the LORD uncovered Balaam's eyes, and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the way" (Num. 22:31). These parshiot are also connected by curses. Because the snake convinced Chava to eat from the Eitz Hada'at, God cursed both the snake for his role in humanity's downfall and Adam and Chava for the sin they committed. The donkey successfully saved Bilaam from being killed by the angel in the road, and the curses that he was supposed to deliver against the Jewish people failed.

Given that the snake and donkey are the only two talking animals in Tanach, there is something to be learned from the various differences and similarities in their stories. The episode of Bilaam and the donkey can be understood as a replay of the incident of Chava and the snake, but with the ending it should have had. A sneaky, irreverent animal is replaced by a dependable, steadfast one; a sin against God that brings a curse upon humanity is replaced by an adherence to God's word that brings blessing into the world. Although Bilaam is not the most obvious analog to Chava, the two biblical figures are more easily connected by their interactions with talking animals, for better or for worse. The Talmud (Sotah 47a) notes that Balak is Ruth's ancestor, which also makes him the ancestor of Mashiach, who will arrive riding on none other than a donkey (Sanhedrin 98a). While it remains to be seen whether Mashiach's donkey will also be able to talk, it is clear that the Jewish people's history and future is unexpectedly yet inextricably linked with this humble beast of burden.



Talia Weisberg is originally from New York, NY. She previously served as the Director of Academic Affairs at the Consulate General of Israel to New England, where she designed and executed strategic initiatives to promote understanding and knowledge of Israel among university students, faculty, and administrations. She earned her Bachelor of Arts at Harvard University in the Comparative Study of Religion with a secondary field in Women, Gender, and Sexuality. Her senior honors thesis explored the Bais Yaakov girls' school movement, of which she is an alumna, and its role in the evolution of Orthodox women's formal religious education. As an undergraduate, Talia held several leadership roles within Harvard Hillel and campus feminist groups. She

currently serves as the Ritual Chair on the board of the Orthodox Minyan at Harvard Hillel, a minyan that caters to students, young professionals, and young families in Cambridge, MA. In 2013, she was named as one of the Jewish Week's "36 Under 36" young visionaries reshaping and broadening the Jewish community.