

# Walk through the Parsha

with **Rabbi David Walk**



## I'll Take That Blessing

### Balak

This week's Torah reading continues the details of our ancestors' interactions with the nations surrounding Eretz Yisrael. In last week's episode, the dynamic was very simple. The nations with whom we interacted were either distant relatives, whom we avoided, or strangers, whom we defeated in battle. This week, on the other hand, the people of Moav, our distant cousins, are alarmed by the presence of this vast nation on their border.

The reading begins: Balak son of Tzipor saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites.

Moav was alarmed because that people was so numerous. Moav dreaded the Israelites, and Moav said to the elders of Midyan, "Now this horde will lick clean all that is about us as an ox licks up the grass of the field" (Bamidbar 22:2-4).

What's the plan to deal with this projected danger? Hire a prophet to direct God's ire against these people. Bilaam is cajoled, bribed and flattered into presenting Moav's case to God against B'nei Yisrael.

We all know that the entire enterprise fails in the most marvelous manner. All the curses become blessings. We love

these blessings so very much that some have entered our liturgy. But this whole scenario raises the most poignant issue:

Who is Bilaam?!? This famous personality who declares these blessings.

The most famous answer comes from the Midrash: "There has not arisen another prophet in Israel like Moshe" (D'varim 34:10) - in Israel one has not arisen, but among the nations of the world he has arisen, so that there will not be recourse for the nations of the world to say: Had we had a prophet like Moshe, we would have worshiped the Holy One blessed be He. What prophet did they have like Moshe? This was Bilaam... (Bamidbar Rabba 14:20).

Wow! Bilaam is the only other prophet who can be mentioned in the same breath as Moshe Rabeinu. This seems to contradict the seventh of our famous Thirteen Articles of Faith: I believe with perfect faith that Moshe was the greatest prophet who ever lived. No prophet who lived or will live could comprehend God more than Moshe.

That glowing review was not the norm. In most of Rabbinic literature, Bilaam is denigrated. In one famous Talmudic passage, Bilaam's power is described as recognizing or sensing God's wrath, and, therefore, being able to 'predict' the downfall of nations or individuals (B'rachot 7a). Over time the custom developed to refer to Bilaam as the RASHA, the wicked one (Ta'anit 20a; Bamidbar Raba 20:14).

The Zohar (and in its wake many mystics and Chasidim) sees his powers as deriving from his unnatural relationship with his donkey, who had the real power or talent. This is fascinating, because the more rational of our commentaries (led by the Rambam), don't believe the donkey episode ever happened. They see it as a vision from a dream.

Throughout the history of Jewish thought this question of Bilaam's power has been viewed as much more complicated and nuanced. The great Jewish philosopher, Reb Shmuel David Luzzatto (1800-1865) saw and detailed the complexity:

Was Bilaam a monotheist or idolater? Clearly, an idolater, because he believed in KOSEM (magic or soothsaying, and, therefore, could not be a prophet [Radak], Yehoshua 13:22). Plus, if he were a monotheist, he would have felt the need to join Yisrael... He, also, would have told Balak that this nation was chosen by God... So, what was his skill? He was a soothsayer and practitioner in signs and magic. He was conversant with all the spiritual and idolatrous practices of his age. He used this knowledge to attempt to foretell the future, and to influence these 'powers' to join or abandon his clients or their enemies. When he approached B'nei Yisrael, he knew Jewish practices and, therefore, requested the offering of bulls, as Jews offer. Was he a charlatan or was his behavior sincere? Sincere (B'TAM LEV)!

He blessed or cursed based upon what he saw in his visions... That is why he had to bless Yisrael, and knew that if he cursed he would be found false (SHEKER)... Otherwise, why would God include these blessings in the Torah?... Was he a prophet? No! He had a sense of things, and this one time these wonderful words were placed in his mouth.

Shadal's comments are much longer, and he delves into many side issues. However, to me, the gist is critically important: Bilaam is basically a phony, but sincere. Therefore, God takes this innocent and makes him the vessel for such beautiful, inspirational, soaring paeans to the greatness of Yisrael:

How amazing are your tents, O Ya'akov!  
Your havens, O Yisrael!

That's why it feels so right quoting him daily, when we prepare to enter into conversation with God. This simple, innocent sensed the greatness of our relationship with God, both at home and in sanctuary, and we continue to be inspired so many centuries later. He saw our spirituality, was moved, and, then, was inspired by God to express how deeply affected he was by the apparition of the encampment of our saintly ancestors.

Do we inspire such reactions? Do we have no Bilaams in our age? Or does our behavior not inspire such powerful reactions? I don't know if we lack

**Bilaams, but there's not much I can do about that. But we can all work on our behavior patterns to be more spiritual and kind. Then we, too, could inspire all who witness our virtue. A worthy goal for us all!** 🙏