

BALAK

40th of 54 sedras;
7th of 10 in Bamidbar



Written on 177.8 lines (ranks 35th)

2 Parshiyot; 1 closed, 1 open

There are 2 one-parsha sedras (Vayeitzei, Mikeitz), and then this one, on the fewest parshiyot in a sedra list

104 p'sukim - rank 34 (8th Bamidbar)

1455 words - ranks 33 (8th Bamidbar)

5357 letters - rank 35 (8th Bamidbar)

Balak is close to average for the Torah's sedras but is on the small side for Bamidbar

MITZVOT

Balak is one of 17 sedras in the Torah without mitzvot. FYI - 9 of them are in B'reishit, 3 in Sh'mot, none in Vayikra, 2 in Bamidbar, and 3 in D'varim.

Aliya-by-Aliya Sedra Summary

[P>] and [S>] indicate start of a parsha p'tucha or s'tuma. X:Y is Perek:Pasuk of the beginning of the parsha; (Z) is the number of p'sukim in the parsha.

Numbers in [square brackets] are the Mitzva-count of Sefer HaChinuch AND Rambam's Sefer HaMitzvot. A=ASEI; L=LAV (prohibition). X:Y is the perek & pasuk from which the mitzva comes.

Kohen - First Aliya - 11 p'sukim - 22:2-12

[S> 22:2 (95!)] *There are 674 parshiyot in the Torah - 295 open (p'tucha) and 379 closed (s'tuma). There are 5846 p'sukim in the Torah. That's an average of 8.7 p'sukim per parsha. 95 p'sukim is a huge number for a single parsha. FYI, Vayeitzei and Mikeitz are each a single parsha, with 148 and 146 p'sukim respectively. This first of two parshiyot in Balak might (probably, but needs verification) be the third largest parsha in the Torah.*

Balak was a weaker king than his neighbors in the region. The defeat of two others (OG and SICHON) instilled fear in Balak's heart, and he realized that waging a "conventional" war against the Israelites would be futile. His plan (following research of the matter - without access to Google or ChatGPT!) was to enlist Bil'am to curse the People of Israel. This, Balak hoped, would allow him to beat the Israelites and chase them away from his region. To this end, Balak sends a delegation to Bil'am in Midyan. Bil'am invites the envoys to spend the night so that he (Bil'am) can be spoken to by G-d. G-d does "appear" to Bil'am and asks him who these people are. Bil'am tells G-d and G-d warns Bil'am not to go with the delegation, nor to curse the people, because "they are blessed".

SDT: How come Balak, a sworn enemy of Israel, rates having a sedra named after him? We can suggest

that Balak was an "honest enemy" of Israel. His antagonism was based on his fear of Israel; his intentions and actions were clear-cut. We have been plagued by many enemies throughout history who have hidden behind a smile, a mask of friendship, or a hand-shake and photo-op, only to try to stab us in the back (or worse). It's "nice" when an enemy is "up front" about it.

SDT: Commentaries point out that Moav and Midyan were bitter enemies. Nonetheless, they put their differences aside and united to fight against Israel. This shows the power of anti-Semitism in this world. See what our enemies are ready to do because they hate us so much.

BUT IT ALSO must teach us another lesson. We too must be prepared to set aside that which divides the Jewish People into fragments, so that we can fight our common enemy with greater strength. This is not to suggest that we must ignore, overlook, or forgive these differences. But we have to know when we should put our religious-secular battles "on hold", in order to be united against the enemies of the Jewish People. We must all work together - Ashkenazim & S'faradim, National Religious and Charedi, one chasidic sect and another, one faction within a chasidic sect and the other faction, left and right, religious and secular, to strengthen our position against

those who would harm us, take parts of Eretz Yisrael from us, divide our capital... et al.

SDT: Rashi quotes a Midrash that explains why G-d asked Bil'am "who are these men with you?", when He first appeared to him at night. This, says Rashi, was to give Bil'am the false impression that there are times when G-d doesn't know something and needs to ask. Bil'am would then be hopeful that during one of those Divine "lapses", he would be able to "bless" the Jews, even though G-d told him that he shouldn't. The Guardian of Israel has no lapses!

Levi - Second Aliya - 8 p'sukim - 22:13-20

In the morning, Bil'am (reluctantly) dispatches Balak's emissaries with his message of refusal. Balak sends a larger and more prestigious delegation to Bil'am, with offers of great honor and wealth if Bil'am would only agree to Balak's request. Bil'am again refuses, but does invite the new delegation to spend the night. This time G-d 'permits' Bil'am to accompany the Moavites, but warns him not to do anything other than what G-d tells him. (Commentaries draw from this the notion: "In the direction a person is inclined, there he is lead." Also like, "giving him enough rope to hang himself with".)

SDT: Why was Bil'am to be

punished for going with Balak's delegation, when G-d permitted him to go? Sort of told him to go. Certainly, a person is held accountable for violations of G-d's commands, but are we also responsible for things which are not specifically prohibited, although it is reasonable to assume that G-d does not want us to do them?

The answer is YES. This is one of the concepts we actually derive from the episode of Bil'am. The Torah gives us a very good idea of what HaShem wants of us. Many sins are spelled out very clearly - in fact, there is a notion of "one will not be punished unless expressly warned"; yet we are warned that G-d will be angry, so to speak, if we do things that we (should) know are contrary to His wishes.

This is something that exists in human relationships too. Parents, for example, expect children to behave a certain way, even without being specifically told. We are not programmed robots; we are human beings with the ability to reason. And G-d (and our parents - remember the Gemara in Kidushin that teaches us that there are three partners in the human being - G-d, one's father and one's mother) wants us to make the right decision in areas He left "open", so to speak.

In the straight reading of the Chumash, it seems that Bil'am is truly

a man of G-d who only wants to do what G-d wants him to do. Tradition describes him differently, as one who knows that he is totally in G-d's control but tries to fight it at every step of the way. He is identified as Bil'am HaRasha. What a blow to Bil'am's ego to be thought of so highly among people, yet to know that G-d is in charge and he (Bil'am) cannot act independently.

Shlishi - Third Aliya - 18 p'sukim - 22:21-38

Bil'am arises early in the morning, saddles his donkey (by himself), and goes with the Moav officers. **(The implication in the pasuk is that Bil'am went with a great deal of enthusiasm to "hopefully" curse the People of Israel. Contrast this with Avraham's enthusiasm on his way to fulfill G-d's command of the Akeida.)** G-d is "angry" with Bil'am for going (even though He permitted it) and sends an angel in an attempt to dissuade him from continuing. The Torah recounts that on three separate occasions - symbolically, it happened in increasingly narrower passages - the donkey sees the angel blocking the way, but Bil'am does not see him. Bil'am strikes the donkey each time, until G-d gives the power of speech to the donkey, who admonishes Bil'am for his actions. Then G-d permits Bil'am to see the angel and Bil'am acknowledges his sin.

He offers to return, but the angel allows him to proceed, with the warning not to say anything "unauthorized".

In Pirkei Avot we are taught that the "mouth of the donkey" was one of ten special items that G-d created in the instant before He rested from creation on the very first Shabbat. One of the lessons from this concept is **SOF MA'ASEH B'MACHSHAVA T'CHILA**, what happens in the end was in G-d's thought at the beginning. We should not think that the "mouth of the Earth" that swallowed Korach & Co. or the talking donkey, or No'ach's rainbow, et al, were "after-thoughts" of G-d. **No such thing.**

Balak goes out to greet Bil'am, who "warns" Balak that he is powerless to act on his own and must say only what G-d "puts in his mouth". (This is the significance of the "mouth of the donkey" - viz. that it is G-d Who grants the gift of speech; one should not be arrogant about his ability to speak well. In the words of the beautiful prayer of the Shali'ach Tzibur on Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur, **OCHILA LAKEIL**, the human being thinks thoughts in his heart, but from G-d comes the ability to express them with his mouth and lips... or the lack of the ability.)

SDT: SWORD-WORDS - it is a matter of which side of **WORD** you put the **S**. The favored weapon of the

nations of the world is the sword. The "weapon" of Israel is "the power of speech" (prayer, divrei Torah, kind words, etc.). Bil'am arrogantly lays "his weapon" aside and attempts to harm the People of Israel with their (our) weapon. G-d, so to speak, went against Bil'am with his abandoned weapon - the angel's drawn sword. And ultimately, the Torah tells us, Bil'am fell by the sword. - Rashi

R'vi'i - Fourth Aliya - 15 p'sukim - 22:39-23:12

Balak makes sacrifices on the occasion, and Bil'am orders seven altars to be built for the special offerings. (All that is done is highly significant - e.g. the Torah records that our three Patriarchs offered a total of seven korbanot at various times. Bil'am hoped to "neutralize" the effect of those sacrifices in G-d's eyes by repeatedly offering seven sacrifices of his own - it didn't work.)

After meditation, Bil'am "speaks" about the People of Israel. He does not curse them, but rather beautifully describes the uniqueness of Israel. Balak is upset, but Bil'am reminds him that he (Bil'am) can only transmit that which G-d wants him to.

If we are unique among the nations of the world, it is because of the Torah and our commitment to it, and our 'living' it - not something genetic, nor a mere accident of birth. We must preserve that

uniqueness by remaining true to Torah, faithful to HaShem, and distinct from the other nations. And, as Bil'am pointed out, our uniqueness depends upon being different from the other nations (- not wanting to be just like everyone else). We are different when we are different. And that is what we are supposed to be.

Chamishi - 5th Aliya - 14 p'sukim - 23:13-26

Balak takes Bil'am to a different vantage point, in the hopes that he will be able to curse the People this time. Once again, seven altars are built and sacrifices offered. Once again, Bil'am meditates and then utters magnificent descriptions of the Nation of Israel. Balak says his piece and Bil'am again explains his restrictions. (Difficult for someone who is considered the quintessence of arrogance.)

Rashi says that Balak chose Rosh HaPisga as a place from where Bil'am might succeed in cursing the people, because he foresaw that Moshe would die there. Rashi says that Balak knew this about the place but Bil'am didn't - that Balak was the more gifted prophet of the two (sometimes).

Twice we find, And Bil'am said to Balak, build for me "with this" seven altars and prepare for me "with this" seven bulls and seven rams (23:1 and 29). With this, BA'ZEH. We are taught that all the prophets of Israel proph-

esy with KOH (as in KO AMAR HASHEM), except Moshe, who prophesies with ZEH. Bil'am felt that he was on Moshe's level and kept throwing around the ZEH. G-d says to Bil'am, go back to Balak, and thus - KOH - you shall speak. Enough with the pretension to ZEH; you say KOH. Bil'am gets the message and switches to KOH when he speaks to Balak.

Shishi - Sixth Aliya - 17 p'sukim - 23:27-24:13

Balak suggests yet a different vantage point from which to observe Israel; maybe G-d will permit them to be cursed. Bil'am again asks for seven altars to be built, and a bull and a ram to be offered on each. This time, Bil'am does not meditate in his usual manner, expecting similar results, namely that blessings will emerge from him - and he really wants to curse Israel.

SDT: Balak takes Bil'am to Rosh HaP'or. Having seen in a vision that Israel will soon fall at P'or, Balak assumes that the cursing from there would be successful (Rashi).

Targum Onkeles indicates that Bil'am was "reminding" G-d of the Golden Calf, so that He would allow the People to be cursed. However, when he saw the multitude encamped in such a special manner, he was endowed with "Ru'ach HaKodesh" and he blessed the People of Israel a third time. Balak had

"had enough", spoke harshly to Bil'am, and "sent him packing".

We say the words that came from Bil'am's mouth - MA TOVU... Sometimes it takes a non-Jew's observation for us to appreciate something we might not see. Or, we can say that we are not quoting Bil'am, rather we are quoting G-d, since He gave Bil'am those words.

Sh'VII - Seventh Aliya - 21 p'sukim - 24:14-25:9

Before Bil'am takes leave of Balak, Bil'am prophesies about the other nations in the region... which was, in different words, a prophecy that each nation shall eventually perish, as will those who will bring about the earlier nations' destruction.

[P> 25:1 (9)] Bil'am's final advice, his attempts to curse the People having failed, is to entice the People to idolatry and immoral behavior which will turn G-d Himself against them. This plan works, as 24,000 perish in a plague following the immoral and idolatrous worship of Baal Pe'or. Only the bold action of Pinchas b. Elazar b. Aharon HaKohen in defending G-d's honor, stops the devastating plague.

SDT: This final lesson of the sedra must be learned well by us today. What Balak and Bil'am discovered is that when Israel is in G-d's favor, it will be invincible from

outside attack. No nation can succeed against Israel, when we are "on good terms" with G-d. That includes attacks by the sword or by words... If we, however, incur G-d's anger (so to speak), by being unfaithful to Him, by disregarding Torah and mitzvot, then we are extremely vulnerable to our enemies. And they might not even have to actually fight against us (as in terror attacks) - we can, G-d forbid, destroy ourselves (as with road accidents, and other acts of self-destruction). This was true more than 3000 years ago; it is no less true today.

On a certain level, Parshat Balak is extremely simple and straightforward, with an extremely powerful message - because of that simplicity. For 95 p'sukim, we feel the protection of G-d as Balak and Bil'am fail time and again in what almost looks like a comical farce. The Gemara says that Bil'am was in some ways superior to Moshe Rabeinu, that when he was around, G-d Himself was extra vigilant - so to speak - in protecting us. For those 95 p'sukim, we beam with pride at the grudging admiration of a unique nation as expressed by Bil'am.

And then come the last 9 p'sukim of the sedra. Bil'am went back home. So did Balak. No danger anymore. WHAM! We did it to ourselves. G-d protected us from Bil'am by giving

him his words. By not letting him speak on his own. And then we turned around and betrayed G-d. 24,000 fatalities. And the toll would have been greater, except for the bold action of Pinchas. The sedra is shouting its message to us. All we have to do is listen to it.

Last 3 p'sukim are reread for Maftir.

Note that the Pinchas episode is interrupted by the break between sedras. Zimri and Kozbi are not identified yet, G-d's reaction comes next week. Just for now - the plague stopped! The swiftness with which the plague struck is matched by the swift action of Pinchas. For now, that's the point. More next week.

Haftara 17 p'sukim Micha 5:6-6:8

Micha's prophecies include the state-of-affairs that finds Israel dispersed among the nations of the world, the promise of the end of war and restoration of Israel to its Land, and the "settling of accounts" between G-d and the other nations, and G-d and Israel. This portion contains a reference to the advice of Balak and Bil'am's response to it - thus the appropriate choice of this portion as the haftara for Parshat Balak.

Note the "credit" to Balak for the advice that caused the failing of Israel as opposed to the implication from the

Torah that it was Bil'am's idea.

Note the reference to the leaders of the People as Moshe, Aharon, and MIRIAM.

The haftara ends with the famous encapsulation of our responsibilities to G-d: "What does G-d demand of us, ONLY to behave justly, love chesed, and walk modestly (humbly) before G-d."

This is the formula for the greatest protection we can have from the Balaks and Bil'ams of the world. And its disregard makes us terribly vulnerable to them. What a contrast between the end of the sedra and the end of the haftara! Again, we have the simple but powerful point. This is how we are supposed to behave (from the haftara). This is how we behaved... and what happened to us (from the sedra).

Lessons from the Torah and from the haftara - as there also should be. We just have to see them and learn them.