

Balaam – Prophet of the World

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The prophet Balaam dominates the narrative of parashat Balak. This is unusual as Balaam is not a member of the Israelites. Thus, Rashi asks the question: Why did Hashem make a prophet amongst the nations of the world?

Rashi answers this question by arguing that Hashem did this only so that the nations of the world will not have any pretext to claim that they were not given an equal opportunity to serve Hashem properly:

And if you ask: Why did the Holy One blessed be He, let his Shechina rest upon so wicked a heathen, I reply that in order that the heathen peoples should have no excuse to say, "If we had prophets, we would have changed for the better", He raised up prophets for them (Bamidbar 22:5).

Rashi's approach raises two difficult questions.

First, if the whole reason why Balaam exists is to undercut any possible claims of unfairness by the nations of the world, then we would expect Balaam to be considered a prophet on equal footing with the other great prophets. However, the rabbis of the Talmud view the matter differently. They see Balaam as a lower lever prophet. True, he had some knowledge of Gd's ways, but it was limited in its depth. He was a one-trick-pony type of prophet.

According to the Talmud, Balaam's prophetic powers come only from the fact that he had a special insight into when Hashem becomes angry:

The Gemara asks: And is there anger before the Holy One, Blessed be He? Can we speak of God using terms like anger? The Gemara answers: Yes, as it was taught in a baraita, God becomes angry, as it is stated: "God vindicates the righteous, God is furious every day" (Psalms 7:12). How much time does His anger last? God's anger lasts a moment. And how long is a moment? One fifty-eight thousand, eight hundred and eighty-eighth of an hour, that is a moment. The Gemara adds: And no creature can precisely determine that moment when God becomes angry, except for Balaam the wicked, about whom it is written: "He who knows the knowledge of the Most High" (Numbers 24:16). This should not be understood to mean that Balaam was a full-fledged prophet. Now, clearly, Balaam did not know the mind of his animal; and he did know the mind of the Most High? If he could not understand the rebuke of his donkey, he was certainly unable to understand the mind of the Most High. Rather, this verse from Numbers teaches that Balaam was able to precisely determine the hour that the Holy One, Blessed be He, is angry. At that moment, Balaam would utter his curse and, through God's anger, it would be fulfilled (Berachot, 7a).

In other words, Balaam did not have special prophetic powers. Instead, what he did know was the time of day when Hashem was angry. At that precise moment he knew that a curse against the Jewish people would be successful.

According to the Talmud, as a result of Baalam's wickedness—his misuse of knowledge—he was severely punished for all of eternity.

Onkelos then went and raised Balaam from the grave through necromancy. He said to him: Who is most important in that world where you are now? Balaam said to him: The Jewish people. Onkelos asked him: Should I then attach myself to them here in this world? Balaam said to him: You shall not seek their peace or their welfare all the days (see Deuteronomy 23:7). Onkelos said to him: What is the punishment of that man, a euphemism for Balaam himself, in the next world? Balaam said to him: He is cooked in boiling semen, as he caused Israel to engage in licentious behavior with the daughters of Moab. (Gittin, 57a).

One difficulty with Rashi's interpretation is that since Balaam's prophecy was inferior, it therefore undercuts the very notion that Hashem sent a prophet to the nations in order to demonstrate that they had a fair shot at achieving spiritual greatness. If the prophet of the nations is obviously inferior then it is not at all fair.

There is a second, more fundamentally difficult, aspect to Rashi's interpretation. Rashi's approach assumes that the only reason Hashem sent a prophet to the nations of the world was in order to undercut them. But isn't it also possible to say that Hashem sent a prophet to the nations not to undercut them but rather, in order to help all the nations of the world achieve their spiritual goals? Aren't all the nations of the world also Hashem's children?

Unlike Rashi, who lived through an era in which Jews were brutally murdered and persecuted, I feel tremendously fortunate to live in an era where I do not see the nations of the world as my adversaries, but as my partners.

For this reason, I much prefer a rabbinic approach that sees Balaam as a great prophet on par with, or perhaps even greater than Moshe Rabbenu.

The end of the Torah states: "Never again did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moses—whom the LORD singled out, face to face" (Devarim, 34:10). About this verse the Midrash states:

in Israel, none did arise, but among the nations of the world, one did arise; so that there not be a claim open to the nations to say, "If we had a prophet like Moshe, we would have worshiped the Holy One, blessed be He. And which prophet did they have [that was] like Moshe? This was Bilaam the son of Beor. However there is a difference between the prophecy of Moshe and the prophecy of Bilaam: Three characteristics were in the hand of Moshe that were not in the hand of Bilaam. Moshe would speak with Him, standing; as it is stated (Deuteronomy 5:28), "And you stand with Me and I will speak to you, etc." And with Bilaam, He would only speak with him prostrate, as it is stated (Numbers 24:4), "fallen and of open eyes." Moshe would speak to Him

'mouth to mouth,' as it is stated (Numbers 13:8), "Mouth to mouth' I speak to him." And with Bilaam [it is written,] "Speaks the one who hears the speeches of God" – as He did not speak to him 'mouth to mouth.' Moshe would speak to him face to face, as it is stated (Exodus 33:11), "And the Lord spoke to Moshe face to face." And with Bilaam, He only spoke in parables, as you say (Numbers 24:15), "And he started his parable, etc." Three characteristics were in the hand of Bilaam that were not in the hand of Moshe: Moshe did not know who was speaking with him. Bilaam knew who was speaking with him, as it is stated, "Speaks the one who hears the speeches of God, who gazes upon the vision of the Almighty." Moshe did not know when the Holy One, blessed be He, would speak to him, and Bilaam did know when the Holy One, blessed be He, would speak to Him; as it is stated, "and who knows the mind of the Most Elevated." They [accordingly] told a parable about the king's butcher who knows what the king brings to his table and knows how much is spent for [what goes] on the king's table. So it was that Bilaam knew what the Holy One, blessed be He, would say to him in the future. Bilaam would speak with Him any time he wanted, as it is stated, "fallen and of open eyes" - he would prostrate himself on his face and immediately, his eye would be revealed about what he was asking; and Moshe did not speak to Him anytime he wanted (Bamidbar Rabbah, 14:20).

According to this interpretation, Balaam was truly a great prophet. In some ways, he was perhaps even greater than Moshe Rabbenu.

In light of the Talmud's critical comments regarding Balaam, it is ironic that we open up our liturgy every single day with Balaam's words:

"Mah Tovu, How lovely are your tents, O Jacob; your encampments, O Israel" (Bamidbar, 24:5).

The irony is not just that Balaam's words are chosen to be our words every day, but also that the ecumenical content of Balaam's words reflect the exact opposite message that Rashi is imparting. Balaam's blessing to the Israelites represents a beautiful vision of a prophet from one nation seeing the spiritual greatness of another nation.

According to Devarim (23:5), Balaam is from Aram Naharayim. This is also the exact same place where Avraham Avinu comes from.

Balaam and Avraham share certain character traits. For example, as Rashi notes, they both arise early in the morning to set out on their Divine service (Rashi, 22:21; cf. Sanhedrin 105b). The fact that both Balaam and Avraham originate from the same place is a statement of universalism; i.e. that even though we are now different nations, we are all from the same source. More than that, it is a statement that no nation is inherently superior to another, and that we all have the same natural abilities.

This week in our daf yomi studies we came across the following story:

There was an incident involving one High Priest who exited the Holy Temple and everyone followed him. When they saw Shemaya and Avtalyon, the heads of the Sanhedrin, walking

along, in deference to them they left the High Priest by himself and walked after Shemaya and Avtalyon. Eventually, Shemaya and Avtalyon came to take leave of the High Priest before returning to their homes. Envious of the attention they received, he angrily said to them: Let the descendants of the gentile nations come in peace. Shemaya and Avtalyon descended from converts, and he scornfully drew attention to that fact. They said to him: Let the descendants of the gentile nations come in peace, who perform the acts of Aaron, who loved and pursued peace; and let not a descendant of Aaron come in peace, who does not perform the acts of Aaron and who speaks condescendingly to descendants of converts (Yoma, 71b).

The message of this story is that the true message of Hashem is not reserved for the genetic children of Moshe and Aaron, but for their spiritual children. It is an inheritance which is open to all who wish to claim it.

So too, regarding the Aron Kodosh, the Talmud teaches:

There were three crowns on the sacred vessels in the Temple: The crown of the altar, and of the Ark, and of the table. The regal appearance they provided symbolized power and authority: The crown of the altar symbolized the crown of priesthood; Aaron was deserving and took it, and the priesthood continues exclusively through his descendants. The crown of the table symbolized the abundance and blessing associated with the crown of kingship; David was deserving and took it for himself and his descendants after him. The crown of the Ark symbolized the crown of Torah; it is still sitting and waiting to be acquired, and anyone who wishes to take it may come and take it and be crowned with the crown of Torah. Perhaps you will say it is inferior to the other two crowns and that is why nobody has taken it; therefore, the verse states about the wisdom of Torah: "Through me kings will reign" (Proverbs 8:15), indicating that the strength of the other crowns is derived from the crown of Torah, which is greater than them all (Yoma, 72b).

The crown of Torah is a universal crown. Anyone who wishes to take the crown of Torah may come and take it. It is open for everyone—Jew and Gentile.

Is this not the true message of the prophet Isaiah? Isaiah reminds us that we must teach Torah to the nations of the world: "And the many Nations shall go and say: "Come all, and let us go up to the mountain of the Hashem, to the house of the God of Jacob; and He will teach us of His ways, and we will walk in His paths" (Isaiah 2:3).

Too often we make the tragic mistake of believing that religion is a zero-sum game and that it is "us vs. them." Balaam teaches us that the opposite is true. The message of parashat Balaam is that there are great prophets amongst the nations and that they bless us with some of the most beautiful and inspiring words ever spoken.

Recently I had the good fortune to spend some time with my rebbe, Rav Avi Weiss. He shared with me a song that he wrote to the words of the last verse of the Haftarah for parashat Balak:

יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ לֵבְתוֹ וְהִצַּנְעוּ חֶסֶד וְאַהֲבַת מִשְׁפָּט אִם-עֲשׂוּת כִּי מִמֶּנּוּ דוֹרְשׁ יְהוָה! מִהֲטוֹב אָדָם לֵנֶהְגִּיד

"He has told you, O man, what is good, And what the LORD requires of you: Only to do justice
And to love goodness, And to walk modestly with your God" (Micah, 6:8).

This passage is possibly selected as the appropriate Haftorah for Balak, because Micah's words *mah tov*, echo Balaam's words *mah tovu*. On a deeper level, however, the words of Micah reflect the theme of Balak and the prophecy of Balaam. The ultimate goal is not the tribalistic triumph of the Jewish people, but a world in which all the nations of the world reflect the universal core values of an elevated world.

You can now watch a Youtube recording of Rabbi Herzfeld's D'var Torah:

<https://youtu.be/4HG0IUrUbbA>