

Why Read Parshat Balak?

Reflections on Kabbalat Malkhut Shamayim

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Parashat Balak stands out amongst all of the *parshiyot* in the Torah, as this parshah alone is written, almost entirely¹, from an external perspective. The Jewish people, encamped in the Transjordan, on the boundary between the conquered territories of the Emori and the nation of Moab, are precisely where we left them at the end of Parshat Chukat. They have not moved, nor will they, until the beginning of Sefer Yehoshua. Yet, the Torah, surprisingly, turns its attention away from what we might call the Jewish narrative to the machinations of Balak and Bilaam to stymie the Jewish people.

Though the question may seem somewhat audacious, one cannot help but wonder why this parshah was included in the Torah altogether? Surely, the poetry of Bilaam's curses turned blessings is sublime, but does this alone suffice?

After all, as Bilaam himself testifies, it is not as if the blessed status of the Jewish people rests on what he says or does not say, ²*Mah ekov lo kaboh Kel, u'Mah ezom lo za'am Hashem*', 'how could I curse that which God has not, and how could I bring wrath upon those whom God is not angry?'

To make matters even more complex, the Talmud³, quite shockingly, notes that the Sages wished to institute a daily recitation of this parshah, and only this parsha, within Keri'at Shema. Even though, for purely technical reasons⁴, this proposal was not deemed practical, the Talmud does reveal the verse which the Sages apparently found so vital that it nearly became part of the Keri'at Shema, the foundational text of our religion:

כרע שכב כארי וכלביא מי יקימנו מברכיך ברוך וארריך ארור.⁵

He [Israel] crouches and lays down as a lion, and like a cub, who could rouse him; those who bless him will be blessed, whilst those who curse him will be cursed.

¹ The very last section of the parshah, the sin of Ba'al Pe'or, shifts the narrative back to the internal Jewish perspective.

² BeMidbar 23:8

³ Talmud Bavli Masekhet Brakhot 12b.

⁴ Since one may not include merely one verse from an entire passage (a somewhat controversial topic in its own right), our Sages felt such a daily addition would have constituted a burden upon the congregation.

⁵ BeMidbar 24:9.

While the textual connection between this verse, which contains the verbs *shachav* and *kam* just like the Torah's source text for Keri'at Shema, *'b'shachbicha u'vi'kumecha*, is clear enough, what about this verse made it so compelling that the Sages wished to include it in the foundation text of the Jewish faith?

II.

Rashi⁷, in addressing this passage cited in the Talmud, notes that it is a promise that the Almighty will protect the Jewish people, collectively and individually, when they go to sleep, and when they arise in the morning, as the lion and his cub fear no other animals, and dwell with a sense of security.

The consensus view of the commentaries⁸ on the verse itself, as it appears in its original context, to be a prophecy regarding the tranquility and safety which the Jewish people will enjoy in the land of Israel specifically during the Messianic era.

Yet, if either of these approaches were sufficient, one has to wonder where exactly the value added concerning this verse would be found, as these themes are broadly included in the second paragraph of the Shema⁹, which includes God's promise to care for the Jewish people in the land of Israel, should they adhere to the mitzvot.

There is, however, a minority view, which may go a long way in explaining not only the desire to include this verse in Keri'at Shema, but, to return to our original line of inquiry, in illuminating why the Torah includes Parshat Balak altogether.

R. Shmuel Eidels argues¹⁰, partially on the basis of a parallel text in the Midrash Tanchuma, that this verse, as understood by the Talmud, indicates the dedication and fidelity which the Jewish people demonstrate to the mitzvah of *Keri'at Shema*, the acceptance of the Yoke of Heaven.

In other words, the Sages wished to include within the text of Keri'at Shema itself the respect and admiration even a devoted enemy of the Jewish people had for the commitment which the Jewish people had to this foundational mitzvah, *kabbalat malkhut shamayim*:

“They are a nation which arises like a lion. There is no nation in the world as they are,

⁶ Devarim 6:7.

⁷ Rashi Berachot 12b, s.v. *kara shachav*. See the commentary of the Meiri as well, who takes a similar approach.

⁸ See Onkelos, Rashi, as well as Ramban.

⁹ Devarim 11:13-21.

¹⁰ Maharsha, Masekhet Brachot Chidushei Aggadot 12b. See also Rashi to an earlier verse in the sedra, BeMidbar 23:24, s.v. *hen am k'lavi yakum*.

for, as they sleep, they are bereft of Torah and mitzvot, but when they arise, they do so as a lion¹¹, and snatch the Keri'at Shema, coronating the Almighty, and then they become [strong as] lions...when they go to sleep, they place their souls in the hand of God, as the verse in Psalms (31) states, I will place my spirit in your hand, and once again, when he wakes up, he coronates God. Thus, the guardians of the night [which protect them] then hand them to the guardians of the day...thus, Bilaam says, there is no nation like this nation.” [Tanchuma 23¹²]

The practice of bookending our day¹³ with the three paragraphs of Shema, which is, in effect, a loyalty declaration to the Almighty, an acceptance of his mitzvot, and a commitment to remain loyal to these commandments even when confronted with temptation¹⁴, has the impact of establishing the parameters and the character of all that will transpire in between our twice daily recitation of the Shema.

It is perhaps for this reason that Rambam¹⁵, contra Ramban, enumerated the twice daily recitation of Keri'at Shema as a singular mitzvah, as opposed to two discreet mitzvot, despite the fact that omission of one surely does not preclude recitation of the other.

However, due to the daily character of this mitzvah, the impact of our consistent recital of our national mission statement begins to wane. It is one thing for our own Sages to remind us of the importance of Keri'at Shema, *bevu zehirin b'keriat shema*¹⁶, but hearing it from an outsider's voice, perhaps counterintuitively, may be even more conducive towards our ability to internalize the import of this mitzvah.

If so, our Sages desire, even if it went unrealized, to introduce, as part of our twice daily recitation, an outsider's unabashed admiration for our commitment to this mitzvah, comes into much

¹¹ Note the echo of this Midrash in the opening of the Shulchan Arukh, Orach Chaim 1:1, that one should arise with the vigor of a lion in the service of God.

¹² Buber edition.

¹³ The idea that reciting the Keri'at Shema is the very first thing that one should do during the day takes on particular significance according to Rambam, who maintains that R. Yeshoshua's view permitting recitation of the Shema until the end of the third halakhic hour of the day is suboptimal, and that one is, in principle, obligated to recite Shema prior to sunrise. See Rambam Hilkhos Keri'at Shema 1:11. Moreover, the notion that the final act of one's day should involve accepting the yoke of heaven is well established by the institution of Keri'at Shema Al Ha-Mitah, see Berakhot 4b-5a. See Rashi to Brachot 2a for this view that reciting the first paragraph alone in the context of Keri'at Shema Al Ha-Mitah, with its particular emphasis on Kabbalat Malkhut Shamayim, suffices for performance of the mitzvah.

¹⁴ See Mishnah Berakhot 2:2, as well as Rambam Hilkhos Keri'at Shema, 1:2, for a different formulation. See also Berakhot 14b for an exploration of the sequencing of the paragraphs, as well as Berakhot 12b, for a fuller explanation of the third paragraph.

¹⁵ See Hilkhos Keri'at Shema 1:1.

¹⁶ Mishnah Avot 2:12. See Rashi's commentary ad loc. concerning whether the next word in the Mishnah should be Tefillah. In fairness, Rashi, Rabbenu Yonah, and Bartenura all understand that the zehirut called for by the mishnah relates to care regarding reading Shema in the proper time, as opposed to a more general statement concerning the importance of the mitzvah. The two, obviously, are not mutually exclusive.

clearer focus. Surely, we can more deeply appreciate the significance of beginning and ending every day of our lives by pledging unwavering fidelity to our King and His edicts by reminding ourselves of the effusive praise one who had no such obligation expressed for those who did.

III.

In a broader sense, it seems to me that this is precisely the reason we read Parshat Balak altogether. As members of the Jewish people, it is sometimes all too easy for us to see our own flaws and warts, as is the case within every family. Insiders to any group always know where the community's imperfections are to be found¹⁷.

Yet, if we expose ourselves to an outsider's point of view, who expresses his profound admiration for the righteousness¹⁸, proximity to the Almighty¹⁹, and national culture of modesty²⁰ which are characteristic of the Jewish people, our sense of our own shortcomings may be balanced by a newfound appreciation for the exalted mission which belongs to us, exclusively, as the nation which "dwells alone, and is not numbered amongst the other peoples"²¹. Indeed, as Ramban notes, our singularity amongst the nations is a reflection of our unwavering commitment to a single Torah and law, and, by implication, to the One who entrusted us with His word.

It is one thing for us to know on a purely intellectual plane that we are the *mamlekheth kohanim v'goy kadosh*, the chosen nation. Yet, it is something else entirely for us to be reminded, by an avowed enemy, *Hashem Eloka'im imo, u'teruat melekh bo*, 'His God is with him, and he is possessed of the friendship of the King'²².

Often, a complete self understanding, personally or nationally, can only be achieved with the benefit of a broader, external perspective. And, to the extent that *Kabbalat Malkhut Shamayim* is a defining national mitzvah, there could scarcely be a more significant realm in which that perspective might be developed, and more deeply appreciated.

¹⁷ Contra individuals themselves, who tend to overlook their own shortcomings, *kol nega'im adam ro'eh chutz mi'nigei atzmo*.

¹⁸ BeMidbar 23:10.

¹⁹ BeMidbar 23:21.

²⁰ BeMidbar 24:5.

²¹ BeMidbar 23:9.

²² BeMidbar 23:21, following the interpretation of Onkelos and Rashi.