

Parsha Balak, our 40th torah reading of the Jewish year and the 7th in the book of Numbers, is a rich story of curses turned into blessings and miraculous circumstances. Balak is the king of Moab, not a friend to the Jews, but a character of importance. That the parsha is named for him is big, because in all the Torah only six parshiot are named for individual people.

Hearing of the previous victories of the Israelites over two of his mighty neighbors, and of their large numbers, King Balak fears the Moabites will suffer a similar fate. He observes how the Israelites depend on *spiritual* power rather than the *power of the sword*. This is evident in Moses' leadership style, who, when he speaks to his people, transmits the word of G-d. Balak wants to mimic this so he retains a powerful, renowned master magician and sorcerer named Bilam to curse the Jewish people into military defeat. Bilam was also known as prophet because G-d did speak to him on occasion. Since the Israelites were led to victory by a man connected to G-d, King Balak reasons if he could also obtain the services of a man connected to G-d, he could defeat them.

So messengers are sent to the Land of Midian, asking Bilam to come and curse the Jews. However, the G-d of Israel appears to Bilam that night and instructs him not to go to Moab, saying "*You shall not curse the people because they are blessed!*" Bilam does decide to obey G-d, but again the king re-entices him with great riches. This time G-d speaks to Bilam and allows him to go, with the provision that whatever G-d commands him, that's what he will do. Bilam departs, but the journey is interrupted when G-d sends an angel, with a drawn sword, to block his path. While Bilam cannot see the angel, his donkey (a clever she-donkey) can. The animal refuses to move as directed, causing Bilam to strike her three separate times. At this point, the donkey miraculously speaks, admonishing Bilam for hurting her. Eventually, G-d "opens Bilam's eyes," and he

sees the angel too. In a conversation between Bilam and the angel, Bilam is chastised for donkey abuse, and reminded he is to say only what G-d dictates. Bilam continues to Moab where he instructs King Balak to build seven altars and offer sacrifices to G-d. At this point G-d dictates to Bilam the words he must repeat to the king. He is to begin by saying, *“How can I curse whom G-d has not cursed, and how can I invoke wrath if the Lord has not been angered?”* He is to end by showering the Israelites with beautiful blessings and praises. When the king responds angrily, Bilam reminds him he can only say that which G-d tells him to say.

Twice the king tries taking Bilam to different locations with pretty much the same results. After the third time, Bilam again opens his mouth to speak, and this time a familiar blessing ensues: *“How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel!”* He adds, *“G-d, who has brought them out of Egypt with his strength shall consume the nations which are his adversaries. Those who bless them shall be blessed and those who curse them shall be cursed.”* Bilam utters this blessing as he looks down at the Jewish camps from the heights of Peor and is struck by their beauty and modesty.

Since Bilam has now failed three times to curse the Jews, the king despairs of accomplishing his goal and sends the sorcerer away. But for his own gain, before he leaves, Bilam offers advice about how to accomplish the downfall of Israel: *Lead the men lead into harlotry with the women of Moab.* Unfortunately, this works. The Moabite and Midianite women seduce some of the Jewish men and entice them to worship a deviant god. G-d commands Moses to execute the guilty parties and a plague erupts among the Jews. When one Jewish leader publicly displays his Midianite princess, both he and his mistress are zealously killed by a grandson of Aaron named Pinchas (who is the subject of next week’s parsha). This

deed halts the plague against the Israelites, but not before 24,000 of them have died. Today's parsha action ends here.

Two interesting side notes: The first, according to Talmud, the Biblical figure Ruth, the Moabite woman who embraced the Judaism of her mother in law Naomi, is a direct descendant of King Balak. Ruth is also the great-grandmother of King David the Moshiach, who will usher in the redemption of the Jews and of the world. This would make King David a direct descendant of the king who tried so hard to curse us into annihilation. Once again our history teaches us that in the blackest darkness there is always a light, and that even when there seems to be no reason, a purpose may emerge. Perhaps this is also why Balak is significant enough to have the parsha named for him.

Secondly, there is independent evidence that Bilam the sorcerer/prophet actually existed. (I love it when this happens, because it gives credibility to our Torah history.) An archeological discovery in 1967, at Deir 'Alla near the River Jordan, uncovered an inscription on the wall of a pagan temple, dated back to the eighth century BCE. The inscription makes reference to a seer named Balam ben Beor, in terms remarkably similar to those of our Parsha. Bilam was a well-known figure in the region. His skills were clearly impressive. He was a religious figure as well as a sought-after shaman, spellbinder and miracle worker.

The facet of this parsha I'd like explore further regards leadership and character. My thoughts are based on the writings of two very different contemporary Jewish men: Jonathon Sachs, Lord Rabbi emeritus in the British Commonwealth, who wrote a wonderful article contrasting the leadership styles of Moses and Bilam, and New York Times op-ed writer, David Brooks, who has authored a new book called *The Road to Character*. Hopefully these thoughts will

be relevant for us too, in our quest to create balance in our lives between self-promotion and improving the world for others.

Rabbi Sachs first points out the obvious. Moses was a leader and a man of great virtue. Bilam was also a leader, but not a man of inspiring character. Rabbi Sachs then asks “What is leadership? Is it simply a set of skills? Is it the ability to summon and command power? Or does leadership also have an essentially moral dimension? *Can a bad man be a good leader, or does his badness compromise his leadership?*” I personally think this is an important question for all of us, since everyone is a leader in certain life situations...at work, with our children or our friends, in our extra-curricular pursuits (the tennis court, Torah study, or the mah jong group). Do we lead with haughtiness or a sense of gratitude? Do we simply share information or try to inspire others to think and grow. In leading, do we act more to promote ourselves or to improve the lives of others? How can we better use our opportunities to make a positive impact?

In today’s parsha, based on either experience or reputation, King Balak clearly believes that whoever Bilam blesses is blessed, and whoever he curses is cursed. Rabbi Sachs notes that even the rabbinic literature doesn’t call this into question. Examining the phrase “*No prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the L-rd knew face to face,*” our own sages went so far as to say *yes, in Israel* there was no other prophet as great as Moses, but among the nations there was. Perhaps they were speaking of Bilam. Another midrashic source says “*there was nothing in the world that the Holy One, blessed be He, did not reveal to Bilam, who surpassed even Moses in the wisdom of sorcery.*” So at a technical level, Bilam has all the skills. Yet the ultimate verdict on Bilaam is negative, mostly due to the ironic sequel to the episode of the curses/blessings. Having been saved by G-d from the would-be curses of Moab and Midian, the Israelites suffer a self-

inflicted tragedy when they allow themselves to be enticed by the women of the land, thus angering G-d. As we've learned, it was Bilam who imparted this strategy. So while Bilam failed to curse the Israelites, he eventually succeeded in doing them great harm. Although Bilam was a man of great gifts, a genuine prophet, a man whom the sages compared with Moses himself, he also was flawed in character, earning a reputation as an evildoer, and mentioned by the Mishnah as being denied a share in the world to come. The name Bilam actually means "a man without a people" (*be lo am*), a man without loyalties. Bilam was simply a prophet for hire. He had the power to effectively bless or curse others, but he was not a prophet in the *moral* sense. Nor was he concerned with the lives he affected. He was a loner, *be lo am*, a man without a people.

Next, Rabbi Sachs points out that Moses was, of course, the opposite of Bilam. G-d Himself says of Moses, "*He is supremely loyal in all My house.*" However disappointed he was with the Israelites, Moses never ceased to argue their cause before G-d. In Egypt he asks G-d, "O L-rd, why do You mistreat Your people? Why did You send me?" When G-d threatens to destroy the Israelites after they make the golden calf, he pleads, "Please forgive their sin. If not, then blot me out from the book that You have written." When they are demoralized by the report of the spies and incite G-d's anger by wanting to return to Egypt, Mose says "With Your great love, forgive the sin of this nation, just as You have forgiven them until now." When his sister, Miriam, speaks badly of him and is punished by leprosy, Moses prays to G-d to heal her. He never ceases to pray for his people, regardless of the severity of their sins, even putting his own relationship with G-d at risk. Knowing their faults, he remains utterly loyal to them. Rabbi Sachs shares that in biblical Hebrew the word "emunah" is translated as "faithfulness, reliability and loyalty"...not walking away from the other party

when times are tough. Emunah is a key covenantal virtue, and while those who lack it may possess great intellectual and spiritual gifts, without the moral qualities of integrity, honesty, humility, and especially loyalty, they will never be truly great leaders. No matter how good you are at something, or how strong your belief about an issue, if you look down on others who believe differently, you will be found lacking.

I think many good people may be facing this dilemma in regard to gay marriage, as a result of recent legislation. Something doesn't have to be *right for you* to allow it to be okay *for others*. Similarly, the Bernie Madoffs of the world may be highly successful in business, for awhile, but pride, arrogance, and a belief they are above the law, causes such would-be great men to fall and hurt others. By enticing the Israelites into sin even after he knew G-d was on their side, Bilam is a classic example of how the greatest may become the lowest. Rabbi Sachs ends by stating that leadership without loyalty is not leadership. We follow those we trust, because they act in ways that earn our trust. This is what made Moses the great leader Bilam might have been but never was. I think most of us see the importance of being loyal to those above us. It is harder to be a Moses, and remain loyal to the people who are taking direction *from* us.

David Brooks, a Jewish, politically conservative, writer for the New York Times and TV news commentator, recently wrote *The Road to Character*. The book received mixed reviews, but it makes useful points regarding today's parsha. In his book, which he says he wrote "*to save his soul*", Brooks contrasts the worlds of moral logic and economic logic by dividing all of us into Adam 1s, who seek worldly success and Adam 2s, who are more deeply committed to character and inner life. Sharing biographies of people throughout history whom he views as heroes, Brooks seeks to uncover useful life virtues including humility, sacrifice and

love, which navigate the road to character. None of his historical figures are Jewish, by the way, although he says that Moses almost made the cut. Brooks actually borrows the idea of Adam I and 2 from Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik who argued in 1965 that we all have two opposing sides of our nature, labeling them this way.

For Brooks, Adam 1 represents ambition, so Adam 1 types must cultivate their strengths. (This to me is Bilam.). Adam 2 types nurture their moral qualities, so they, in contrast, must confront their weaknesses. (Moses, displaying loyalty to his people and the humility that he might not be good enough, seems to fit here.) A good way for all of us to relate to this idea is that Adam 1 is all about your résumé, while Adam 2 is more about your eulogy. David Brook's book is about how to be Adam 2, how to cultivate strong character through humility and the willingness to engage in moral struggle with yourself. He makes a persuasive argument that we are living in a time that rewards the striving, successful Adam 1, but ignores and even demeans those who seek the moral clarity associated with Adam 2, and he sees this as a major failing in the American character. In general, I agree with him. I think more people would choose to be a Bill Gates than a Mother Teresa. But I believe our Jewish ethic to care for others and repair the world also negates this view. One of the things I love best about Judaism is that it provides us with a roadmap of humility when we get too full of ourselves, and purpose when we lose our way. Judaism is a communal religion which emphasizes the good of the whole over the good of the individual. We are told to feed the hungry, attend to the sick, honor our parents, be kind to others and study Torah which reminds us to do all these things. Julie Eisner, editor in chief of Forward magazine, interviewed Brooks recently and concluded that neither his book themes or his conservative politics

were overly Jewish. She also mentioned that he served her a lovely platter of bagel and lox during the interview, not realizing it was the middle of Passover.

In concluding, I leave you with a well known quote, attributed, interestingly, to 5 different sources...the writer Ralph Waldo Emerson, Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu, supermarket magnate Frank Outlaw, Buddha, and Alfred Roberts, the father of British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. One version goes like this:

Watch your thoughts. They become words. Watch your words. They become deeds. Watch your deeds. They become habits. Watch your habits. They become character. Character is everything.

A second version, which I prefer, goes like this : *Watch your thoughts, they become words; watch your words, they become actions; watch your actions, they become habits; watch your habits, they become character; watch your character, for it becomes your destiny.*

In five weeks I will be 65 years old. Next June, I will retire from 45 years of working with public school children. In considering what will be next for me, I realize I am finished with “*trying to make it*” and now committed to “*trying to make it count*”. My own take away from my own d’var torah is to think about my strengths and how I can most usefully contribute them in the time I have left, while remaining respectful and grateful to the people who allow me the privilege of doing so. Maybe, I will sometimes ask myself WWMD, what would Moses do? Hopefully, I will strengthen my Adam 2 side, morality over self aggrandizement. Definitely, I will be working toward a better eulogy. *If not now, when?*

Shabbat Shalom.