

**Finding blessing in the wilderness**  
***Parashat Chukat-Balak***  
**July 1, 2023**  
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I was really looking forward to the opportunity to speak today. The last six weeks have been very stressful, and I really needed a break from work.

My plan was to ease into the four-day holiday weekend by putting work aside, spending the day on Friday doing nothing but studying text in preparation for this dvar, spend shabbat at shul, and then spend the rest of the holiday weekend on hiking trails with Tamara.

I love hiking and we take every chance to go hiking in the forests. Massachusetts has beautiful forests. The woods overflow with small wonders; with flowers and frogs, with butterflies and birds, with tiny streams and sculptured stones. There are also grand wonders; cascading waterfalls and canyons as well as soaring cliffs and scenic vistas. For me, walking in the forest is wonderful, awe inspiring, uplifting, and peaceful.

My expectation was that after several days of peaceful reflection and study and several more days in the forest, I would be able to return to work with renewed spirit.

Then I read the weather report.

By mid-week, the forecast was that Friday might be the only day without rain and that the holiday weekend itself was likely to be a wash out.

I had a decision to make. I could spend the day studying text so that I would have something to say this morning. Or we could go hiking in the woods.

At first, I was torn. Then I thought about today's parsha, and we promptly packed our knapsacks and set out on a hike.

Let me explain.



Today's parsha is Chukat-Balak. I am going to focus on the second part of this double parsha – Balak – which relates the familiar story of King Balak of Moab and his effort to recruit Balaam to curse the people of Israel.

Over the past several weeks, the Israelites have been travelling through Sinai, frequently engaging in combat and laying waste to the indigenous nations as they moved towards the promised land. We learn at the outset that “Moab dreaded the Israelites” so Balak and the elders of Moab hatched a plan. They will send emissaries to someone named Balaam who lives on the banks of the Euphrates, asking him to come to Moab and curse the people of Israel so that they can be defeated. This apparently requires Balaam to be present on the peaks overlooking Israel's encampment, where he would presumably utter the words of his curse. Things get complicated when Balaam hesitantly responds to their summons. At this point, God comes into the picture, telling Balaam that he can only say the words that God puts in his mouth and, by the end of the parsha, Balaam does not curse Israel, but pronounces a blessing.

I'm not going to relate the story, but rather explore the ways in which God communicated the words of the blessing to Balaam.

God communicates with Balaam in several different ways in this parsha. In Numbers 22.9 we learn that God comes to Balaam and speaks to him directly, warning him “*not to curse the people, for they are blessed.*”

Three verses later in Numbers 22.12, God comes to Balaam again, telling him “*whatever I command you, that shall you do.*” In Numbers 22.20 God speaks to Balaam directly, telling him that if he is invited again by the elders from Midan, he could go with them, but again warning “*whatever I command you, that you shall do.*”

I have always found it surprising that God speaks directly to Balaam. God doesn't speak to many people in the Torah directly; Adam and Eve, Noah, the patriarchs, Moses. As we learned several weeks ago, God doesn't even speak to directly Aaron or Miriam, but comes to them in a cloud and “*speaks with them in a dream.*” Significantly, however, after three direct communications with Balaam, God hasn't communicated what blessing or curse Balaam will utter later in the parsha, only given him instructions on what to do, what not to do, and only to do what he is commended.

This is also the last time God communicates with Balaam directly. In Number 22.28, God opens the ass's mouth, and the ass talks to Balaam on behalf of God. In Numbers 22.32 a “*messenger of god*” talks to Balaam, but the only thing

Balaam relates to Balak is that he heard that he “*can utter only the word that God puts into my mouth.*” Again, no words of blessing or curse.

At this point Balaam is taken to a peak overlooking the encampments of the Israelites. Here Balaam has the king build him seven altars and they sacrifice seven bulls and rams hoping that this will entice God to “*grant a manifestation,*” presumably communicating the words of the blessing or curse that Balaam can speak. We are told in Numbers 23.5 that God does put a word in Balaam’s mouth. Again, Balaam does not hear words of blessing or curse, but relates only “*how can I damn whom God has not damned.*”

Then they move to another place, on the summit of Pisgah, build seven more altars and offer seven more bulls and rams. In Numbers 23.16 we are told God became manifest to Balaam, and again puts a word in his mouth. But again, Balaam relates only that he hears “*when God blesses, I cannot reverse it.*”

They try again on the peak of Peor; more altars, more sacrifices, still trying to entice God to put the words of prophecy in Balaam’s mouth.

At this point, however, Balaam changes course. In Numbers 24.1 we are told that Balaam “...did not, as on previous occasions, go in search of omens, but turned his face towards the wilderness” – in Hebrew מִדְּבָר - midbar - a word that also refers to desert. We are then told he looks up, sees Israel encamped, and the spirit of God comes upon him. The Hebrew word for spirit being רוּחַ - ruach,” which can be translated as spirit, breath, wind, breath of air, or gift. Used as a verb, the word implies a sensation, perhaps a smell.

It is here that Balaam learns the words that he is allowed to speak, and he begins his famous prophecy. He starts by stating that what he says is the:

*“Word of Balaam son of Beor,  
Word of the man whose eye is true,  
Word of one who hears God’s speech,  
Who obtains knowledge from the Most High,”*

Then we learn what he heard from God – the words of blessing that we know as Ma Tovv.

יִשְׂרָאֵל מִשְׁכְּנֹתֶיךָ; יַעֲקֹב, אֹהֲלֶיךָ טֹבוּ מְאֹד

*“How fair are your tents, O Jacob,  
Your dwellings, O Israel!*

*Like palm-groves that stretch out,  
Like gardens beside a river,  
Like aloes planted by יְהוָה,  
Like cedars beside the water;  
Their boughs drip with moisture,  
Their roots have abundant water.”*

The parsha teaches that God did not communicate these words of blessing directly, nor through an ass or a messenger, not through divination on altars, sacrifices, or omens. Rather the words came to Balaam when he looked towards the wilderness and saw the palm groves, gardens, cedars, and boughs dripping with moisture. It was from wilderness that Balaam heard the words of God.

The notion of that the words of God emanate from the wilderness is encountered again and again in Judaism. Rabbi Jonathan Sachs<sup>1</sup> notes that the Hebrew word for wilderness – מִדְבָּר midbar – derives from the root דָּבַר - dabar - meaning “word” or “speech” or, as a verb, to speak. In the Song of Solomon, the related word מִדְבָּרָה is used to mean mouth. He further points out that the book of Numbers itself is titled in Hebrew בְּמִדְבָּר – bamidbar - or “in the wilderness” and that we begin reading this book on the Shabbat before Shavout when we celebrate the giving of Torah. Rabbi Sachs writes:

*“There is an intrinsic connection between the desert, midbar, and God who reveals himself in speech, medabber.”*

*“It is in the wilderness that the Israelites hear revelation, the word or speaking of God.”*

This theme is also evident in the words of the psalmist:

*“The heavens declare the glory of God;  
the skies proclaim the work of His hands.  
Day after day they pour forth speech;  
night after night they reveal knowledge.”*

Perhaps the best-known expressions of this concept are found in the teachings of Reb Nachman of Braslov who said:

*“...when a person prays in the fields, all the flora enter into the prayer...”*

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/bamidbar/the-wilderness-and-the-word/>

This association is also embodied in Reb Nachman's popular prayer:

*"...may all the foliage of the field -  
all grasses, trees, and plants -  
awake at my coming,  
to send the powers of their life into the words of my prayer"*

*"...so that my prayer and speech are made whole  
through the life and spirit of all growing things."*

There is also a tradition in both Judaism and in western literature equating the sensation of the divine with the notion of the sublime in nature and sensations of awe and wonder.<sup>2</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel<sup>3</sup> derives his understand of God from this sense of the sublime, from the sense of awe and wonder. He wrote:

*"Awareness of the divine begins with wonder. It is the result of what man does with his higher incomprehension. The greatest hindrance to such awareness is our adjustment to conventional notions, to mental cliches. Wonder or radical amazement, .. is an authentic awareness of that which is."*

I experience a sense of awe and wonder when I walk in the woods. I feel the sense of the sublime described by William Wordsworth<sup>4</sup> when he wrote:

*"...I have felt  
A presence that disturbs me with the joy  
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime  
Of something far more deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
And the round ocean and the living air,  
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man;  
A motion and a spirit, that impels  
All thinking things, all objects of all thought..."*

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<sup>2</sup> This was the theme of a book chapter I wrote: Visions of a Source of Wonder. in Proctor, J (ed) "Envisioning Nature, Science, and Religion" Templeton Press, 2009 [www.templetonpress.org/content/envisioning-nature-science-and-religion-0](http://www.templetonpress.org/content/envisioning-nature-science-and-religion-0)

<sup>3</sup> Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *God in search of man: A philosophy of Judaism*. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1976.

<sup>4</sup> <https://poets.org/poem/lines-composed-few-miles-above-tintern-abbey-revisiting-banks-wye-during-tour-july-13-1798>

Significantly, Heschel<sup>5</sup> also described a disconnect between such encounters and the ritual nature of religion. Heschel wrote.

*“There is ... a malady indigenous ... to liturgy. ... it harbors a tendency to follow a direction and rhythm of its own, independent of and divorced from the energies of life which brought prayer into being. At the beginning, liturgy is intimately related to the life which calls it into being. But as liturgy unfolds, it enters a state of stubborn disconnection, even into a state of opposition. Liturgy is bound to become rigid, to stand by itself, and to take on a measure of imperviousness. It tends to become timeless, transpersonal; liturgy for the sake of liturgy. Personal presence is replaced by mere attendance; instead of erecting a sanctuary of time in the realm of the soul, liturgy attracts masses of people to a sanctuary in the realm of space.”*

Wordsworth<sup>6</sup> expressed similar sentiments with respect to science:

*“Having had the image of a mighty River before us ... the main source of all the difficulties and errors ... is that the attention of those who have been engaged in them has been primarily and chiefly fixed upon external objects and their powers, qualities, and properties, and not upon the mind itself, and the laws by which it is acted upon. Hence the endless disputes about the characters of objects, and the absolute denial on the part of many that sublimity or beauty exists.”*

This may be what Balaam experienced on Mount Peor. He did not find the words of God in liturgy, in divinations, altars and sacrifices. It was only when he looked to the wilderness – to the palm-groves that stretch out, gardens beside a river, cedars beside the water, boughs dripping with moisture, and roots with abundant water - that he sensed the divine and found the words of God and blessing.

Which brings me back to the decision I had to make on Friday morning. Should I spend the day studying Torah and rabbinic texts to find the words for this dvar? Or should I go hiking in the wilderness? I was truly undecided. It felt like shirking my

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<sup>55</sup> On Prayer, Abraham Joshua Heschel, <https://opensiddur.org/miscellanea/pedagogy/on-prayer-by-abraham-joshua-heschel-1969/>

<sup>6</sup> The Sublime and the Beautiful, William Wordsworth, <https://www.oxfordscholarlyeditions.com/display/10.1093/actrade/9780198719755.book.1/actrade-9780198719755-book-1>

responsibilities to my community if I did not engage in study looking for words of wisdom to bring to this dvar.

Then I thought about where Balaam heard the words of God and decided to go hiking, expecting to find the words for this dvar in my emotions of awe and wonder in the wilderness – and I did!

On this shabbat, I pray that may we all take the time to look towards the wilderness; may we all experience the sense of awe and wonder; and may each of us find words of blessing in the world around us.

Shabbat Shalom.