

## Torah Thoughts Balak

5779:

A fear shared by those whose work includes the creation of new ideas – novelists, musical composers, playwrights, poets – is facing the blank page. Where will the next idea come from? How can they come up with yet another chapter, poem, song or sermon? Often, those same composers will say that they don't know themselves how they come up with ideas, that these things just 'come to them.' The seeming passivity of the artist, waiting for inspiration to come, bears a striking resemblance to the biblical conception of the prophet. Prophecy, like art, is depicted in the Tanakh as a passive act, in which the prophet sees or hears a message from God and then faithfully communicates it to others. The prophet, like the artist, is simply the medium through which the divine message flows.

But if inspiration, or the message, comes to the artist from somewhere beyond their control, the expression of that message certainly comes from the artist's own skill, training and imagination. To what degree is that the case for the prophet? Does the personality of the prophet give shape to God's message? What is the interplay between form and content when it comes to prophecy?

In parshat Balak this week, the non-Israelite prophet Bilaam is called upon to curse the Israelites but, being a true prophet, can only say the words of blessing that God provides. Hired as an artisan of the spoken word, Bilaam claims to have no power over the content of his message. That description of prophecy seems at odds with the example of Moses. We know of many occasions when Moses' words or actions do not precisely convey what God asked of him. Did Moses not hear? Was God vague? It seems more likely that Moses, and similarly Bilaam, hear God's words and then pass them on to the best of their ability. It seems likely that Bilaam's claim to be merely a vessel for God's prophecy is simply a way to avoid being blamed for its content. Just as different painters will create vastly different renderings of the same model, different prophets can receive the same inspiration and yet deliver personalized messages. Prophecy derives from God but, like all art, the message is always colored by the prophet's own temperament.