

Parashat Balak begins (*Num.* ch. 22 – see [E], p. 894)

2. Balak son of Zippor saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites.
3. Moab was alarmed because that people was so numerous. Moab dreaded the Israelites,
4. And Moab said to the elders of Midian, “Now this horde will lick clean all that is about us as an ox licks up the grass of the field.”
5. Balak son of Zippor, who was king of Moab at the time
6. Sent messengers to Balaam....

Why did Balak, king of Moab, seek an alliance with Midian? Recall that when a young Moses, defending a Hebrew slave, killed an Egyptian taskmaster, he fled Egypt and took refuge with the Midianites, living with Jethro, the priest of Midian, and marrying Jethro’s daughter, Zipporah. Midrash tells us:

Balak was a great magician.... He constructed a bird with its feet, trunk, and head of gold, its mouth of silver, and its wings of bronze, and for a tongue he supplied it with the tongue of the bird Yadu’a. This bird was now placed by a window where the sun shone by day and the moon by night, and there it remained for seven days, throughout which burnt offerings were offered before it, and ceremonies performed. At the end of this week, the bird’s tongue would begin to move, and if pricked by a golden needle, would divulge great secrets.... One day, however, a flame that suddenly leaped up burned the wings of this bird, which greatly alarmed Balak, for he thought that Israel’s proximity had destroyed his instrument of sorcery.

The Moabites now perceiving that Israel conquered their enemies by supernatural means said, “Their leader had been bred in Midian, let us therefore inquire of the Midianites about his characteristics.” When the elders of Midian were consulted, they replied, “His strength abides in his mouth.”

Think about that. It doesn’t mean that Moses would be a strong contender in a 4th of July hotdog eating contest. It means that the power of a Jew is in words: prayer, study, and the expression of ideas.

The Midrash continues:

“Then,” said the Moabites, “we shall oppose to him a man whose strength lies in his mouth as well,” and they determined to call upon Balaam’s support.¹

The Midrash teaches that Balak was a greater sorcerer than Balaam, but lacked Balaam’s gift of prophecy. Notice the conclusion of the following Midrash, which may have been written in the early years of Christianity in response to “replacement theology,” the notion that the Christians had replaced the Jews as the Chosen People.

In order that the heathens might not say, “Had we had a prophet like Moses, we should have received the Torah,” God gave them Balaam as a prophet, who in no way was inferior to Moses either in wisdom or in the gift of prophecy.... although Moses exceeded the heathen prophet in that God called him without any previous preparation, whereas the other could obtain Divine revelations only through sacrifices, still Balaam

¹ [GB], pp. 463-464

had one advantage over the Israelite prophet. Moses had to pray to God “to shew him His ways,”² whereas Balaam ... could declare ... that he “knew the knowledge of the Most High.”³ But because, in spite of his prophetic dignity, Balaam had never done anything good or kind, but through his evil tongue had almost destroyed all the world, God vowed a vow to His people that He would never exchange them for any other people or nation, and that He would never permit them to dwell in any land other than Palestine.⁴

The following Midrash may be a source for the popular Israeli song, “*Al kal eileh*,” which begins “*al ha-d’vash v’al ha-oketz*” (of the honey and of the bee sting).

AND God said unto Balaam: Thou shalt not go with them⁵. ‘Well, then,’ said Balaam, ‘I will curse them from where I am.’ Said He: ‘Thou shalt not curse the people’ (*ibid.*). ‘In that case,’ said Balaam, ‘let me bless them!’ Said He: ‘They do not need your blessing, for they are blessed’ (*ibid.*). Men say to the hornet: ‘Neither of your honey nor of your sting!’⁶

When Balaam’s ass sees what he, the great seer, cannot see, the opposing angel, Midrash tells us:

And she said unto Balaam: What have I done unto thee, that thou hast smitten me these three times – *SHALOSH REGALIM* (Num. 22:28 – see *Etz Hayim*, p. 897)? She hinted to him: You are seeking to uproot a nation that celebrates the three Pilgrimage Festivals (*shalosh regalim*)!⁷

The Midrash offers multiple conclusions to this incident, including:

1. The princes of Moab began to express astonishment, for they had witnessed a miracle the like of which had never happened in the world. Some authorities say that he told them: ‘She is not mine.’ [*Here, the editor’s footnote interprets: “And I have had no experience of how to control her.”*] So she answered him, ‘Am I not thine ass, upon which thou hast ridden all thy life long until this day?’⁸ You may thus infer that he was not an old man, since the ass was older than he.⁹
2. As soon as she finished speaking she died, so that people should not say: ‘This is the animal that spoke,’ and so make her an object of reverence.¹⁰
3. The Holy One, blessed be He, killed her [*here, the editor interprets “Rather than Balaam”*] out of consideration for the dignity of the villain.... For here was this ass,

² Ex. 33:13. See [E], p. 538

³ Num. 24:16. See [E], p. 905

⁴ [GJ], p. 356

⁵ Num. 22:12. See [E], p. 895

⁶ *Numbers Rabbah* XX:10. See [M], p. 796

⁷ *Numbers Rabbah* XX:14. See [M], p. 801. The footnote here interprets: “the merit of these celebrations alone would protect them against your curse.”

⁸ Num. 22:30. See [E], p. 898

⁹ *Numbers Rabbah*, XX:14. See [M], pp. 801-802

¹⁰ *Numbers Rabbah*, XX:14. See [M], p. 802

the most stupid of beasts, and there was the wisest of all wise men, yet as soon as she opened her mouth he could not stand against her!¹¹

The latter is consistent with the Torah's teaching that the dignity of even an evil person should be respected, e.g., the injunction that one who has been hanged must be given quick burial rather than remaining a spectacle by remaining hanging¹².

Another Midrash seems pointed at one or both of the daughter faiths of Judaism:

The words that Balaam announced were heard by all the inhabitants of the earth, such power did God lend to his voice, for He knew that at some future time there would be a man born of woman who would pass himself for a god and would mislead all the world. Hence God permitted all the world to hear Balaam's words, that said: "God is not a man, and the man that passeth himself for God lieth. But he that will mislead the world by declaring that he will disappear for a time and then reappear will promise what he can never fulfill. Woe then to that nation that will lend ear to the man who will pass himself for God."¹³

References

[E] *Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary*, The Rabbinical Assembly, New York, 2001

[GB] Louis Ginzburg, *Legends of the Bible*, Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia, 1909, 1910, 1911, 1913, 1956

[GJ] Louis Ginzburg, *The Legends of the Jews*, v. III, Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia, 1911, 1939, 1968

[M] *The Midrash Rabbah*, v. III (*Numbers, Deuteronomy*), Soncino Press, London, 1977

¹¹*Numbers Rabbah*, XX:14. See [M], p. 802

¹²*Deut.* 21:22-23. See [E], pp. 1114-1115

¹³ [GJ], p. 380