



## Torah Reflections: Conversations on the Weekly Parsha Parshat Balak 5785: What the Donkey Saw

Integrating Torah into one's life through reflection and conversation can be an incredibly fun and engaging experience. It's a journey of discovery, where ancient wisdom and timeless teachings come to life in our daily experiences. Through reflection, we have the opportunity to dive deep into the rich tapestry of Torah, extracting profound insights and lessons that resonate with our modern lives. The joy lies in the 'aha' moments, those instances when a Torah verse or story suddenly connects with our personal challenges, aspirations, and values. And when we engage in conversations about Torah with others, it becomes an interactive exploration, where diverse perspectives and interpretations enhance our understanding. These dialogues often spark excitement and intellectual curiosity, making the learning process both enjoyable and fulfilling. Torah becomes a vibrant and dynamic part of our lives, offering not just guidance but also a source of endless fascination, connection, and growth.

NOTE: Don't feel obligated to go through every source or answer all the questions—unless you want to. Even one source, or one question will give you plenty of material for discussion and meditation. Enjoy this!

### Some thoughts about Parshat Balak

#### **When the Donkey Speaks: Waking Up to the Moral Voice of Our Time**

Parshat Balak presents one of the Torah's most surreal moments: a prophet for hire is bested in moral clarity by his donkey. But far from comic relief, this story offers enduring lessons about truth, humility, and the strange ways divine reality pierces our illusions.

#### **The Donkey Who Saw What the Prophet Couldn't**

Bilam is a renowned prophet summoned by Balak, king of Moav, to curse Israel. On his journey, his donkey repeatedly swerves, crushes his leg, and finally stops. Frustrated, Bilam strikes her three times—until she speaks:

“What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?” (*Bamidbar* 22:28)

Only then does Bilam see the angel blocking his path:

“And the Lord opened Bilam's eyes, and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road with a drawn sword in his hand.” (22:31)

This moment is not random. *Pirkei Avot* 5:6 teaches that the donkey's speech was one of ten things created at twilight before the first Shabbat. It was embedded in creation—a sign that sometimes, truth emerges from unexpected voices.

In a world obsessed with credentials and platforms, this is Torah's reminder: moral clarity isn't always found in high places. It can speak through the humble, the unseen, and the marginalized.

#### **When Curses Become Blessings**

Bilam, despite his intentions, is compelled to bless:

“How shall I curse whom God has not cursed? ... How goodly are your tents, O Jacob.” (*Bamidbar* 23:8; 24:5)

He becomes an unwilling conduit for truth. The Torah uses him—this outsider—to affirm the covenant:

“Those who bless you shall be blessed, and those who curse you shall be cursed.” (24:9; cf. *Bereishit* 12:3)

Yet Bilam's story is not one of moral innocence. Chazal tell us (*Sanhedrin* 106a) he was one of Pharaoh's three advisors. When Pharaoh debated enslaving the Israelites, Yitro fled, Iyov remained silent, and Bilam supported the plan. Yitro was rewarded, Iyov punished with suffering, and Bilam? Slain by sword in *Parshat Matot* (*Bamidbar* 31:8).

He is the prophet whose gifts were misused, who weaponized insight for power. But Torah still uses his mouth to reveal blessing. A cautionary tale—and a divine paradox.

### **The Weak Who Fear the Strong: Balak and *Ressentiment***

“And Moav became very frightened... and Moav was disgusted because of the children of Israel.” (*Bamidbar* 22:3)

Balak wages no war. He wages a narrative war. Like Nietzsche's idea of *ressentiment*—the weak who resent the strong and invert values to undermine them—Balak cannot defeat Israel, so he hires Bilam to curse them.

It's not about danger. It's about existential discomfort. Israel, a people living in covenant with God, becomes a threat to ideologies built on envy, not ethics.

Modern echoes abound: Israel, small and constantly under threat, is still portrayed as aggressor by ideological forces that cannot accept its resilience. As then, so now: the narrative must be flipped to make strength look evil.

### **When Cultures Collapse: Baal Peor and the Death of Dignity**

When Bilam fails to curse Israel, he shifts strategies. Seduction and idolatry will do what curses could not:

“Entice them into immorality and idolatry.” (*Sanhedrin* 106a; *Rashi on Bamidbar* 24:14)

What is Baal Peor? Worship by defecation. The rejection of dignity itself. A collapse not only of morals, but of meaning.

This is not just ancient history. Cultural critics like Rieff, Scruton, and Paglia have called our own time one of decadence: a civilization so spiritually exhausted it embraces transgression as vitality.

The Noahide laws—which prohibit idolatry and sexual immorality—serve as safeguards against such disintegration. They call us back to a sacred moral center.

### **Pinchas: When One Stands Alone**

In the face of collective collapse, one man stands:

“And Pinchas... arose from the midst of the congregation, and took a spear in his hand.” (*Bamidbar* 25:7)

His act halts the plague. God grants him a *covenant of peace*.

Pinchas is not a vigilante. He is a moral outlier who acts when no one else will. Today's equivalents might be whistleblowers, teachers resisting ideological coercion, or parents choosing dignity over trend.

Rav Hirsch: “In Jewish thought, public office dignifies the server because it entails service of the community. The bearer of the office does not control others; he serves them.” (*on Bamidbar 16:8*)

Real leadership, in Torah, means sacrifice—not dominance.

### **The Donkey’s Legacy: Seeing from the Margins**

The donkey’s role—created at twilight—is to teach us that marginal voices can bear truth.

“Before the sin of Adam, animals could speak. This will return in the Messianic era.” (*Bereishit Rabbah 19:5*)

Those without power—“just a mom,” “just a Noahide,” “just a janitor”—may be closer to uncorrupted truth than public figures.

“Surely the Lord G-d does nothing without revealing His plan to His servants the prophets.” (*Amos 3:7*)

Who is a prophet? One who listens. One who sees.

### **Bilam’s Last Words: The People That Shall Dwell Alone**

In the end, Bilam says:

“Behold, a people that shall dwell alone, and shall not be reckoned among the nations.” (*Bamidbar 23:9*)

Israel’s survival isn’t political. It’s divine. From exile to revival, from persecution to independence—Jewish continuity confounds history.

Nietzsche saw it as scandalous. A people who should have vanished... did not.

“God is not a man, that He should lie.” (*23:19*)

This endurance is a sign to the nations. It is a message not of supremacy, but of covenant.

### **The Choice: Curse or Blessing**

Each generation must choose: envy or integrity, slander or blessing.

“I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse—therefore, choose life.” (*Devarim 30:19*)

For Noahides, this is the heart of moral clarity. Blessing Israel is not political. It’s spiritual alignment.

To see what others miss. To speak truth, not trend. To bless, not curse.

And when the donkey speaks—listen. It may be truth knocking on your path.

Now, reflect on the following questions:

1. Can truth still be recognized when it comes from humble or unexpected sources?
2. What does it mean to ‘stand alone’ for moral clarity, and what inner strength does that require?
3. Why do some cultures glorify transgression when they lose their moral compass?
4. How does the endurance of the Jewish people challenge common narratives about history, power, and identity?
5. What does it mean, in practical terms, to choose blessing over curse in a noisy and cynical world?

Shabbat Shalom!

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