

(Dvar Torah continued from the front page...)

my God' (Numbers : 22:18) Through the prophecy he receives, he becomes the mouthpiece for God's blessing and protection against the destructive ambitions of Balak - whose name means "devastator."

At first glance, Bal'am seems to be a perfect candidate for the title of "gentile ally." Here is a non-Israelite prophet who confirms our sense of the supremacy of our God. Bal'am states repeatedly that he cannot circumvent the wishes of the powerful God of the Israelites—if God refuses to curse Israel, then Balak's wishes will be thwarted. And yet, rabbinic tradition portrays him as a rather dubious character. Perhaps there is some level of ambiguity in the verses regarding Balaam's true heart's desire. The intensity of this criticism reveals discomfort with redemption, even so modest, coming from an outsider.

The Kli Yakar, a 16th century commentator from Prague writes about Bal'am:

Hashem opened the mouth of the donkey: This, too, was a necessity for that specific time. It was intended to show Bal'am that he is comparable to this donkey which does not naturally speak but, only to honor Israel [...] Additionally, it was to prevent the nations of the world from claiming that if they were given prophets, they would have improved their ways.

And yet Bal'am is not the first non-Israelite to have a relationship with the God of Abraham. Before him, Hagar - whose name once again bears witness to her own estrangement—"ha-ger: the alien" - is, like Bal'am, visited by a "malakh haShem," an angel of the Lord. The angel's intervention saves her child, Ishmael, and even goes so far as to promise her his future greatness. The story of Hagar and Ishmael illustrates that God's mercy and redemption extend to the child of a foreign servant. The case of Bal'am shows that God's blessing can spring from a foreigner, that redemption's agents are just as unpredictable as redemption itself.

Like Bal'am with his wounded foot hitting the donkey who can feel what he does not see, it is our denial of the knowledge and wisdom of others that too often leads to violence and ultimately hurts us. Our parasha teaches that we must acknowledge our own shortfalls and experience gratitude for all of the wisdom that God has granted to the nations of the world, the wisdom that we have already received from others, and for what is yet to be learned from foreign lips.



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TORAH SPARKS

Chukat-Balak

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Annual |(Numbers 19:1-25:9)) Etz Hayyim, p. 877
Triennial |(Numbers 19:1-21:20)) Etz Hayyim, p. 877
Haftarah (Micah 5:6-6-8)) Etz Hayyim, p. 915

D'var Torah: Learning From the Nations

Sophie Bigot-Goldblum,

CY Student, 2018-19

Admitting we've learned astronomy from the Chaldeans and philosophy from the Greeks is something that the Jewish tradition has come to terms with. In a sense, less than conceding to the intellectual and scientific superiority of foreign nations, by admitting that there is wisdom among the nations, we are defending our holy turf: The Bible. Each nation has its field of excellence, but only Jews have been chosen as depositary of the Holy Word and the sole partner in God's covenant. True, the other nations may have inherited the mastery of science and art but none can claim knowing God like we do. Not too bad a deal.

However, time and time again, the Bible itself cunningly challenges this claim of exclusivity between God and the Jewish people. In Parshat Balak we hear of a man having direct contact with the God of Israel. This man's name is "Bal'am" which literally translates, "not of the people." Nevertheless, this "Bal'am" worships God, the God of the Israelites no less, as his own—"The Lord

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D'var Haftarah: A World that Will Endure

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, From the Archives

Micah's opening prophecy presents an idyllic time when Israel's needs will be met without the need to rely on others. Israel itself will be considered both blessed and feared by those around it because God will be the source of their strength. (5:6-8) That which follows in Micah's message seems strange: "In that day, declares the Lord, I will destroy the horses in your midst and wreck your chariots. I will destroy the cities of your land and demolish all of your fortresses. I will destroy the sorcery you practice, and you shall have no more soothsayers. I will destroy your idols and the sacred pillars in your midst; and no more shall you bow down to the works of your hands. I will tear down the sacred posts in your midst and destroy your cities." (9-14)

These verses appear, at first glance, to be a punishment, but actually their intention is exactly the opposite. The essence of their message is that in idyllic times, there will be no need to depend on anybody or anything other than God. Weapons will be unnecessary, as will fortified cities. Security will be insured and as a consequence, human beings will shed the insecurity which leads them to dependence on false things.

This interpretation, which appears to be the correct one, is not without its difficulties. In particular, commentators seem to have had trouble seeing how a number of these promises were really blessings and developed creative interpretations to fit the difficult promises into this particular interpretation. Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra (13th century Spain) felt compelled to explain how removing the wall from a walled city (10) was a blessing since it endangered the inhabitants of the city. He explained that God would bring peace in order that the city dwellers would be able to enjoy fresh air instead of the stuffiness caused by the city walls.

Similarly, other commentators found difficulty in the last promise – that "[God would] destroy your cities" since, in part, this seems redundant and it also seems the most difficult to understand as a blessing. Already, Targum Yonathon, the Aramaic translation of the Prophets (7th century), attempted to rectify these difficulties by translating this phrase: "I will destroy your enemies" after finding a reference where the word "eer" means enemy.

Ultimately, God's promises in Micah's prophecy remain a profound reminder that the world should be a better place where insecurity will be replaced by Divine guidance, where human weakness will be replaced by divinely inspired assurance and where belief in God will hopefully lead to building the kind of world that would make God proud.

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Aaron My Brother – Come with Me to Your Death

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, CY Faculty

Background: We are in the 40th year in the desert, Miriam dies, Moshe (and Aaron) strike the rock and are told that they will not enter the land.

Text: Bamidbar 20:23-29

(23) And the LORD said to Moshe and to Aaron... (24) "Let Aaron be gathered to his kin, for he shall not come into the land that I have given to the Israelites... (25) Take Aaron and Elazar his son and bring them up Hor the Mountain. (26) And strip Aaron of his garments and clothe with them Elazar his son, and Aaron will be gathered up and will die there." (27) And Moshe did as the LORD commanded, and they went up Hor the Mountain before the eyes of all the congregation. (28) And Moshe stripped Aaron of his garments and clothed with them Elazar his son, and Aaron died there

- The three main characters in this episode are fulfilling more than one role. What are their private and public roles, and what tension does that create in this setting?
- Great stress is put on Aaron's clothing at the time of his death? Why? Why is there no such issue when Moshe dies?
- The congregation is present in this episode. What is its significance? Why is the ascent to the mountain done in their full view? Do you think that is an intentional move on Moshe's part? Why?
- Moshe's voice is noticeably absent. What would you say to a dear one when they are going to die?

Commentary: Rashi Bamidbar 20:25

Take Aaron - by consoling words. Say to him: Fortunate are you who will see your crown being given to your son, something to which I am not privileged.

- With what word would you replace the word "take" in v.25?
- Rashi highlights the impossibility of this situation. How do you feel about his words of consolation to Aaron?
- Why is Moshe not privileged to the same treatment?
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Commentary: R. Samson Raphael Hirsch Bamidbar 20:26

And strip... and clothe: With that Elazar entered the high priesthood in Aaron's place. So that Aaron was privileged to see, prior to his death, himself living on in the image of his son.

- What great angst is Hirsch addressing in his comment?
- In what settings do we want to see ourselves living on? Who might we feel is a continuation of ourselves and who do we have a hard time accepting?

We welcome your comments: torahsparks@uscj.org