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Moshe Rabeinu – Moses, our teacher. When Devarim 34:10 says: “Never again did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moses” the Sifrei (an early Rabbinic midrash) says “In Israel, no, but among the nations, yes. And who was it? Balaam ben Beor!” (Sifrei Devarim 357:10) Essentially, Balaam was (or could have been) the Moshe of all the other nations! But if these two prophets were equally talented – had equal potential – what made Moshe the celebrated hero and Balaam the ridiculed anti-hero?

The answer to this question may be found in a famous teaching of Rabbi Akiva – one that has troubled many people over time. In Pirkei Avot 3:19, Rabbi Akiva says: “All is foreseen (tzafui), yet freedom of choice is given.” This teaching has always been seen as a paradox. How can I be said to have free will if God already knows what I will do? And if I don’t have free will, then why should I be taught right from wrong, and how can I be held accountable for my behavior?

In the Mishneh Torah (Laws of Repentance, chapter 5), the Rambam wrestles with this question, ultimately drawing a distinction between human knowledge and divine knowledge – asserting as a matter of faith that our choices are real choices. Finding this answer unsatisfying, many later commentators have based their explanations on complex typologies of knowledge or mystical concepts. Professor Avigdor Shinan, a modern Israeli commentator, has a simpler answer. He points out that some medieval manuscripts of Pirkei Avot have a final nun instead of a yud – thus turning the problematic word “tzafui” (foreseen) into “tzafun” (seen). In other words, it is not that God knows what we will do before we do it, it is simply that nothing we do goes unnoticed! (Pirkei Avot – Peirush Yisraeli Hadash, p. 113.)

The upshot of Rabbi Akiva’s teaching is that each of us chooses what to do with our God-given abilities. Moshe and Balaam may have had equal prophetic talent – Balaam may even have had an edge over Moshe – but when push came to shove, Moshe chose to bend his will to God’s, while Balaam arrogantly sought to bend God’s will to his. Thus while Balaam became an unwilling conduit for blessing, Moshe became the willing conduit for Torah, which, quite poetically, contains both blessings and curses, offering us a choice between them.

For Discussion: We often speak of people possessing or lacking “potential.” What do the parallel stories of Moshe and Balaam have to say about that? How can our traditions teachings about choice and character lead to our living more meaningful and impactful lives?



TORAH SPARKS

Parashat Balak

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Annual | Numbers 22:2-25:9 (Etz Hayim p. 894-908; Hertz p. 669-682)
 Triennial | Numbers 22:39-23:26 (Etz Hayim p. 899-903; Hertz p. 673-677)
 Haftarah | Micah 5:6-6:8 (Etz Hayim p. 914-917; Hertz p. 682-685)

D'var Torah: Free Will is Given

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

Balaam could really have used a spin doctor, or even an entire PR firm. He had one job to do – to curse Israel – and the exact opposite happened – not once, not twice, but THREE times. It was arguably the first “Kinsley gaffe” - so named by journalist Michael Kinsley who said, “A gaffe is when a politician tells the truth – some obvious truth he isn’t supposed to say.”

But really, Balaam has only himself to blame. All the signs were there that he was headed for a fall. Even before the big moment, God made a mockery of him, embarrassing him in the most shameful way. Balaam, a soothsayer, someone looked up to by the masses and sought out by kings, a person who could communicate with God – was upstaged by a donkey. And the devastating combination of the pathetic and the comedic ensured the story would go viral. Surely he hoped that nobody had seen what transpired. But like someone undone by a “hot mic,” an overhead security camera, or a passing smartphone, his great embarrassment was recorded for all posterity in the Torah.

But unlike many for whom the passage of time helps to repair their damaged reputations, Balaam continued to be the butt of jokes. The Babylonian Talmud calls him all sorts of names, some of which cannot be repeated in polite company. And yet, there is another side to the rabbinic treatment of Balaam – one which poses an interesting question, worthy of our attention.

There is a rabbinic tradition that asserts that Balaam was a prophet of almost unparalleled ability, his only competition for the title of Greatest Prophet was

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D'var Haftarah: Blessed Difference

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

In Micah's prophecy, "Shearit Ya'akov" – "the remnant of Jacob" – are made two seemingly contradictory promises: "The remnant of Israel shall be in the midst of many people, like dew from the Lord, like droplets on the grass which do not look to any man nor place their hope in mortals. The remnant of Jacob, shall be among the nations, in the midst of many people, like a lion among beasts in the wild, like a fierce lion among flocks of sheep, which tramples wherever it goes and rends, with none to deliver." (5:6-7)

Who are the "remnant of Jacob" in this prophecy and how can they be promised at the same time both the pacific imagery of dew and rain along with the fierceness and ferocity of a lion? Regarding the first question, most of the medieval commentators identify the "remnant of Jacob" with those who remained in the land of Israel after most of the community had been exiled. Others, like Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra, identified the "remnant" with the community of Jews who been sent into exile from their homeland.

Pre-modern commentators do not seem to have taken up the second question, but for modern commentators it has become a preoccupation. Among those who deal with it, Professor Yair Hoffman (Israel, 20-21st century) has attempted to answer it within the context of the different ancient Jewish communities' search for a sense of consciousness and distinctive identity in biblical times. He postulates that the exilic community already had developed a sense of self which was different from those who remained in the homeland and that the prophet both recognized and acknowledged this difference. According to Hoffman, the "remnant" in the first verse refers to the exiled community whose blessings from God were majestic and markedly "universal" in nature while the second verse was intended for those who remained in the land of Israel and required the more militant and particularistic blessing in order to maintain their survival. Hoffman sees in these verses an awareness of the development of tension between the universal and the particular, noting that this dialectic may have been born out of the different conditions faced by the two Jewish communities. (Micah, Mikra L'Yisrael, pp. 214-215)

The upshot of his analysis should not be lost on us today: Jewish communities living under different conditions develop different identities and outlooks. But there is quite a gap between recognizing this difference and appreciating it. Hoffman's assertion is that the prophet was aware of these differences and blessed both of them.

As the Jewish people continues to be roiled by conflict, may we learn from the prophet Micah to trust that there are good reasons for Jewish communities in Israel and abroad to think and live differently. That would be a blessing in itself.

Parashat Balak Self-Study

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The People of Israel are camped on the border of Moav, causing the Moabites great concern. Rather than attempt to ward them off by an army, Balak the king invites Balaam, a person who supposedly has the power to get rid of the enemy by placing a curse on it. But not all goes as planned...

- 1) Unlike the nations of Edom and The Emorites (20:14-21, 21:21-31), the Moabites had not been approached by the people of Israel with a request to pass through their land. How do you think that the Moabites understood their own situation?
- 2) Balak, king of Moav, asks Balaam to curse the people of Israel so that he will be able to push them away (22:5-6). What can we learn about the power attributed to curses and blessings in the Tanakhic period? Try to think of another episode where someone went to great lengths to obtain a blessing.
- 3) While Balaam is traveling to Moav with the messengers of Balak, a sword wielding angel blocks his way (22:22-35). Why do you think that only his she-ass is able to see the angel at first? Why do you think that the messengers of Balak do not seem to know anything about the angel episode?
- 4) Balaam stands up to curse the people of Israel 3 times, and finds himself blessing them (23:1-24:9). What do Balak's repeated attempts to find 'the right spot' for a curse tell you about his understanding of the relationship of God and Balaam?
- 5) At the end of the Parasha the people are drawn to the women of Moav and Midian, and begin to worship their gods (25:1-9). When a man approaches Moshe and the leaders with a Midianite woman, Moshe seems unable to find the words to condemn the behavior. Can you think of why Moshe is stumped here?

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