

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, 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.”
4 Balak son of Zippor, who was king of Moab at that time, sent messengers to Balaam son of Beor in Pethor, which is by the Euphrates, in the land of his kinsfolk, to invite him, saying, “There is a people that came out of Egypt; it hides the earth from view, and it is settled next to me. Come then, put a curse upon this people

20-day journey from Pethor to Moab, a distance of about 400 miles (640 km). Because the text records four such journeys, the traveling would have taken about three months.

4. elders of Midian Midian was a confederation of peoples, some of whom may have been ruled by the Moabite king.
5. Pethor Identified with Pitru on the Sajur River, a tributary of the Euphrates, some 12 miles (20 km) south of Carchemish. It was at least a 20-day journey from Pethor to Moab, a distance of about 400 miles (640 km). Because the text records four such journeys, the traveling would have taken about three months.

it hides the earth from view Israel is compared with a locust plague, a common simile for an invading army.

6. Balaam’s curse is expected to weaken the Israelites so that Moab can defeat them in battle and expel them from its land.

This parashah contains what may be the only comic passage in the Torah. It tells how Balaam, reputedly the world’s most powerful wizard, cannot find his way out of his own neighborhood, and how his attempts to curse Israel are turned into blessings in his mouth. The overall message, however, is a serious one: God continues to watch over Israel and extend divine protection to them, despite their recalcitrant behavior and lack of appreciation. Human efforts to harm the people Israel will not prevail.

This story’s most memorable feature is the talking donkey. Here, as in so many tales in folklore when animals behave like humans, it raises questions: “What does it mean to be human? What makes us different from other animals?” Seeing the angel blocking the path, the donkey can recognize, better than Balaam does, that what they are setting out to do is wrong. Human beings should have the capacity to know right from wrong. When temptation and weakness blind us to the wrongness of what we are doing, we are no better than dumb animals.

Some rabbinical sources see Balaam as an authentic prophet, sent to the gentiles as Moses was sent to the Israelites. For that reason, his incantations were to be feared and God had to change his curses into blessings. Others see Balaam as a pathetic, arrogant fraud whose only successful trick was to fool himself into believing that God approved of his intentions.

“When the gift of prophecy was given to the gentile nations, many of them misused it, seeking to destroy rather than to bless” (Tanh. 1).
for me, since they are too numerous for me; per-
haps I can thus defeat them and drive them out
of the land. For I know that he whom you bless
is blessed indeed, and he whom you curse is
cursed.”

7The elders of Moab and the elders of Midian,
versed in divination, set out. They came to Ba-
laam and gave him Balak’s message. 8He said
to them, “Spend the night here, and I shall reply
to you as the LORD may instruct me.” So the
Moabite dignitaries stayed with Balaam.

9God came to Balaam and said, “What do
these people want of you?” 10Balaam said to
God, “Balak son of Zippor, king of Moab, sent
me this message: 11Here is a people that came
out from Egypt and hides the earth from view.
Come now and curse them for me; perhaps I
can engage them in battle and drive them off.”
12But God said to Balaam, “Do not go with
them. You must not curse that people, for they
are blessed.”

13Balaam arose in the morning and said to Ba-
lak’s dignitaries, “Go back to your own country,
from the time of the patriarchs, and the blessing
cannot be reversed by a curse.

13. Balaam arose in the morning Evidently,
God appeared to him in the night.

7. versed in divination The Hebrew idiom
may mean that they took divinatory materials
with them. The text emphasizes that Balaam is a
diviner (one who predicts the future), not a sor-
cerer (one who alters the future through cursing
and blessing), as Balak makes him out to be.

8. Spend the night Thus Balaam might re-
ceive a divine message in a dream.

9. What do these people want God, of
course knows, but uses this rhetorical question to
open a conversation (as in Gen. 3:9, 4:9).

12. they are blessed They are already blessed
the LORD will not let me go Balak omits the
full reason—that cursing Israel is futile—not be-
cause he hoped later to change God’s mind but be-
cause it would have brought the episode to an end
had the emissaries reported this reason to Balak.

13. Balaam arose in the morning It was not unusual for a non-Isra-
elite to invoke the name of Israel’s God. Abi-
melech the Philistine did that in Gen. 26:28.

“...The opposition between God and the sorcerer
is the opposition between the true Deity and
human wisdom. Sorcery is one of the heathen arts,
grounded in people’s believing in their
own power to force God to reveal the divine se-
crets” [Y. Kaufmann].

CHAPTER 22

2–20. The first mention of Balak [v. 2] does
not describe him as a king. One account has
him beginning as a courtier who seized the
throne by manipulating people’s fear of Israel
[H. Soloveichik].

Why didn’t Balak hire Balaam to bless his
own people rather than to curse Israel [since
“whom you bless is blessed indeed,” v. 6]? He
was so consumed by hatred that he forgot about
his people’s needs and could think only about
hurting his enemy [Beit Ramah].

In verse 12, God tells Balaam not to go, so
for the LORD will not let me go with you.” 14 The Moabite dignitaries left, and they came to Balak and said, “Balaam refused to come with us.”

15 Then Balak sent other dignitaries, more numerous and distinguished than the first. 16 They came to Balaam and said to him, “Thus says Balak son of Zippor: Please do not refuse to come to me. 17 I will reward you richly and I will do anything you ask of me. Only come and damn this people for me.” 18 Balaam replied to Balak’s officials, “Though Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not do anything, big or little, contrary to the command of the LORD my God. 19 So you, too, stay here overnight, and let me find out what else the LORD may say to me.” 20 That night God came to Balaam and said to him, “If these men have come to invite you, you may go with them. But whatever I command you, that you shall do.”

21 When he arose in the morning, Balaam saddled his ass and departed with the Moabite dignitaries.

14. The emissaries do not mention that the Lord is the author of Balaam’s refusal. The narrator may be indicating that the Moabites were so convinced of Balaam’s inherent power to curse Israel that they regarded Balaam’s reliance on the Lord as an excuse to back out.

17. I will reward you richly Literally, “I will honor you greatly.” This is a euphemism for monetary rewards, as the next verse makes explicit.

18. The LORD my God This affirmation might explain why Moab sought the help of Balaam even though the seer lived so far away. Perhaps Moab believed that Balaam’s allegiance to and intimacy with Israel’s God would stand him in good stead as he attempted to persuade God to curse His people Israel.

19. what else Perhaps the Lord will change His mind. Such indeed is the unspoken premise behind all forms of divination. The same ritual procedures are repeated until a favorable omen is received. Even in dream interpretation, a single dream is not decisive. Thus Balaam can sincerely hope that in his second dream he will learn that the Lord has changed His mind.

20. That night God came to Balaam That is, in a dream.

21. Balaam saddled his ass The Sages take this as implying his great eagerness to set forth.

departed with the Moabite dignitaries Suggests that he was fully with them in intent [BT Sanh. 105b].
nitaries. 22 But God was incensed at his going; so an angel of the Lord placed himself in his way as an adversary.

He was riding on his she-ass, with his two servants alongside, 23 when the ass caught sight of the angel of the Lord standing in the way, with his drawn sword in his hand. The ass swerved from the road and went into the fields; and Balaam beat the ass to turn her back onto the road.

24 The angel of the Lord then stationed himself in a lane between the vineyards, with a fence on either side. 25 The ass, seeing the angel of the Lord, pressed herself against the wall and squeezed Balaam’s foot against the wall; so he beat her again. 26 Once more the angel of the Lord moved forward and stationed himself on a spot so narrow that there was no room to swerve right or left. 27 When the ass now saw the angel of the Lord, she lay down under Balaam; and Balaam was furious and beat the ass with his stick.

28 Then the Lord opened the ass’s mouth, and she said to Balaam, “What have I done to you that you have beaten me these three times?” 29 Balaam said to the ass, “You have made a mockery of me! If I had a sword with me, I’d

BALAAM AND THE ASS (vv. 22–35)

22. But God was incensed Balaam’s compliance indicates his eagerness to curse Israel, arousing the anger of God.

two servants Balak’s officials have disappeared.

23. into the fields Implies that the fields had no fences along the road.

24. a lane Perhaps a hollowed-out furrow that served as a path.

fence Literally, “a wall of stones.”

25. wall That is, the surface of the stony fence.

beat her again The first time was for a purpose—to get the ass back on the road. Here, the lack of purpose serves to indicate that Balaam struck the ass in sheer anger. The story about the ass lampoons Balaam, making him out to be a fool.

27. When the ass now saw For the third time, in contrast to Balaam’s persistent blindness.

with his stick An index of his mounting anger; perhaps previously he struck with his hand or a strap.

28. The Lord opened the ass’s mouth That is, God gave the ass the power of speech. Note that the use of fables—stories of talking animals or plants—is rare in the Bible (see Gen. 3:1–5; for Jotham’s see Judg. 9:7–15).

29. If I had a sword The irony rests in the
kill you.” 30 The ass said to Balaam, “Look, I am the ass that you have been riding all along until this day! Have I been in the habit of doing thus to you?” And he answered, “No.” 31 Then the LORD uncovered Balaam’s eyes, and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the way, his drawn sword in his hand; thereupon he bowed right down to the ground. 32 The angel of the LORD said to him, “Why have you beaten your ass these three times? It is I who came out as an adversary, for the errand is obnoxious to me. 33 And when the ass saw me, she shied away because of me those three times. If she had not shied away from me, you are the one I should have killed, while sparing her.” 34 Balaam said to the angel of the LORD, “I erred because I did not know that you were standing in my way. If you still disapprove, I will turn back.” 35 But the angel of the LORD said to Balaam, “Go with the men. But you must say nothing except what I tell you.” So Balaam went on with Balak’s dignitaries.

fact that the sword Balaam seeks is close at hand with the angel, whom he, the seer, cannot see.

30. Have I been in the habit Balaam’s impetuous rage is answered by the considered and justifiable argument of the ass. 31. the LORD uncovered Balaam’s eyes The wording is deliberate, a sardonic contradiction of Balaam’s claim that his “eyes are opened” to God’s revelation (24:4,16). 32–33. these three times . . . those three times This expression is repeated by the angel to mock Balaam: The dumb animal shied away from me three times; but you, the all-wise seer, did not shy away from me even once. 34. I did not know In contradiction to Balaam’s claim that he “obtains knowledge from the Most High” (24:16). 35. Balaam’s two servants, who disappeared, have been replaced by Balak’s dignitaries. what I tell you The angel, here identified with the “I” of the Lord, thus speaks or acts as the Lord’s surrogate.
When Balak heard that Balaam was coming, he went out to meet him at Ir-moab, which is on the Arnon border, at its farthest point. Balak said to Balaam, “When I first sent to invite you, why didn’t you come to me? Am I really unable to reward you?” But Balaam said to Balak, “And now that I have come to you, have I the power to speak freely? I can utter only the word that God puts into my mouth.”

Balaam went with Balak and they came to Kiriath-huzoth.

Balak sacrificed oxen and sheep, and had them served to Balaam and the dignitaries with him.

In the morning Balak took Balaam up to Bamoth-baal. From there he could see a portion of the people.

Balaam said to Balak, “Build me seven altars here and have seven bulls and seven rams ready here for me.” Balak did as Balaam directed.

THE MEETING OF BALAK AND BALAAM
(22:36–23:6)

36. Ir-moab Probably identical with Ar of Moab (21:15,28) on the southern shore of the upper Arnon River.

Arnon border That is, the northern border of Moab, which presumes that Balaam came from the north.

at its farthest point Balak paid Balaam the utmost respect due him by meeting him at the point at which Balaam crossed into Moabite territory.

40. sacrificed Balak sacrificed a well-being offering (zevah sh’lamim), the meat of which is eaten by the worshiper and his guests.

41. In the morning Sacriﬁcial ritual implies entering into a state of sanctification, a preliminary requirement for a divine encounter.

be could see a portion of the people The object must be within sight for a curse against it to be effective. Balak, however, fears that the sight of too many Israelites may nullify and even reverse the curse. Hence, he allows Balaam to see only a portion of the Israelites.

CHAPTER 23

Presumably Balaam’s curses would have no effect. Why does God go to the trouble of directing his speech? The Midrash comments on verse 5 (“the LORD put a word in Balaam’s mouth”): “As a rider puts a bit in the mouth of his horse, to control him” (Num. R. 20:20). Astruc suggests that God did this lest others interpret any disaster that might befall Israel as resulting from Balaam’s curse, strengthening their belief in wizardry. Abravanel says that it is to avoid Israel’s enemies’ gaining confidence from Balaam’s words. Kaspi notes, “A true friend will spare his friend anguish and concern, even if he knows there is no basis for it.” The Israelites, having grown up in Egypt, a land of superstition and sorcery, might tend to take Balaam’s curses seriously and thus be demoralized. By the same token, they might be strengthened by his blessings. Praise from a prominent gentile might heighten their devotion to achieving their goals.
rected; and Balak and Balaam offered up a bull and a ram on each altar. 3Then Balaam said to Balak, “Stay here beside your offerings while I am gone. Perhaps the Lord will grant me a manifestation, and whatever He reveals to me I will tell you.” And he went off alone.

4God manifested Himself to Balaam, who said to Him, “I have set up the seven altars and offered up a bull and a ram on each altar.” 5And the Lord put a word in Balaam’s mouth and said, “Return to Balak and speak thus.”

6So he returned to him and found him standing beside his offerings, and all the Moabite dignitaries with him. 7He took up his theme, and said:

From Aram has Balak brought me,
Moab’s king from the hills of the East:
Come, curse me Jacob,
Come, tell Israel’s doom!

8How can I damn whom God has not damned,
How doom when the Lord has not doomed?

9As I see them from the mountain tops,
Gaze on them from the heights,
There is a people that dwells apart,
Not reckoned among the nations,

23:2. a bull and a ram The most expensive—and, therefore, the most desirable—animals in the sacrificial system.

3. Stay They worked in tandem. Balak stood at his sacrifice while the diviner sought omens. your offerings Literally, “your burnt offering,” which the specific sacrifice required. reveals to me Via omens. I will tell you I will interpret for you.

4. offered up The subject is Balak, not Balaam.

5. the Lord put a word in Balaam’s mouth The Lord told him the exact words.

THE FIRST ORACLE (vv. 7–10)

All of the oracles are in verse form, probably attesting to their antiquity.

7. theme Hebrew: mashal, which has no precise rendering and is never used for the discourses of Israel’s prophets. This indicates that Balaam’s oracle is not to be reckoned as prophecy.

bills of the East Hebrew: har’ei kedem; literally, “hills of Kedem [east].” It seems to designate a specific territory in the Syrian desert, east of the Phoenician coast.

9. apart In terms of strength and security. reckoned The people Israel will not share the fate of other nations.

people . . . nations Hebrew: am . . . goyim; here the first term refers to Israelites, and the second to non-Israelites. Usually “am” is a more intimate, ethnic designation than the political designation “goyim.”

9. a people that dwells apart, / Not reckoned among the nations One prominent thinker suggested that the Jewish people survived in the Diaspora, not despite the enmity
10. **dust-cloud** The image here is of the dust raised by Israel’s marching hosts. (The translation is based on emending the text’s *et rova* to *turba-at or turba*, meaning “dust cloud.”)

**my fate** Balaam’s wish illustrates the blessing that every nation and person will desire to receive from God—to share the fate of Israel.

**BALAK’S REACTION AND SECOND ATTEMPT** (vv. 11–17)

13. **another place** Balaam will continue to try the same oracular procedure to effect a favorable omen, this time at another location, perhaps believing that a change of place might lead to a change of luck.

**only a portion** Balak was showing Balaam an even smaller segment of the Israelite camp than before, fearing that the sight of too many Israelites would once again produce a blessing.

14. **Sedehzophim** Literally, “mountain of the watchmen.” A lookout post for astronomical observation or for observing the flight of birds.

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**10. Who can count the dust of Jacob,**
Number the dust-cloud of Israel?
May I die the death of the upright,
May my fate be like theirs!

**11.** Then Balak said to Balaam, “What have you done to me? Here I brought you to damn my enemies, and instead you have blessed them!”

**12.** He replied, “I can only repeat faithfully what the Lord puts in my mouth.”

**13.** Then Balak said to him, “Come with me to another place from which you can see them—you will see only a portion of them; you will not see all of them—and damn them for me from there.”

**14.** With that, he took him to Sedehzophim, on the summit of Pisgah. He built seven altars and offered a bull and a ram on each altar. **And Balaam said to Balak,** “Stay here beside your offerings, while I seek a manifestation yonder.”

**15.** The Lord manifested Himself to Balaam and put a word in his mouth, saying, “Return to Balak and speak thus.”

**16.** He went to him and put a word in his mouth, saying, “Return to Balak and speak thus.”

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of their neighbors but precisely because of it. If we ever became objects of their friendship, it would be harder to avoid assimilating (Baal Shem Tov). Several anti-Zionist Orthodox rabbis of the early 20th century based their opposition to Zionism on this verse’s praise of the Jewish people for not being a nation like other nations. Even the liberal thinker Rosenzweig feared that the Jewish people would lose its distinctive greatness if it “re-entered history” as a political state.

**10. May I die the death of the upright** The Sages, suspicious of Balaam, take him to be saying “May I live as a greedy, degenerate sinner all my days and become righteous just before my death.”

**13. you will see only a portion of them** Individual Israelites may not be that impressive, but it has always been the genius of the Jewish people that the whole added up to more than the sum of its parts. Ordinary people combine to create extraordinary communities, sites of holiness, and charity (Menahem Mendel of Kotzk).
found him standing beside his offerings, and the
Moabite dignitaries with him. Balak asked him,
“What did the Lord say?” 18And he took up his
theme, and said:

Up, Balak, attend,
Give ear unto me, son of Zippor!
19God is not man to be capricious,
Or mortal to change His mind.
Would He speak and not act,
Promise and not fulfill?
20My message was to bless:
When He blesses, I cannot reverse it.
21No harm is in sight for Jacob,
No woe in view for Israel.
The Lord their God is with them,
And their King’s acclaim in their midst.
22God who freed them from Egypt
Is for them like the horns of the wild ox.
23Lo, there is no augury in Jacob,
No divining in Israel:
Jacob is told at once,
Yea Israel, what God has planned.

17. What did the Lord say? For the first
time, Balak recognizes that Israel’s God alone de-
termines Israel’s fate.

THE SECOND ORACLE (vv. 18–24)
21. acclaim Hebrew: t’ru•ah, the military
alarm sounded by trumpet or shofar. It can also
mean a shout of joy.
22. freed them Balaam subtly corrects Ba-
lak’s assertion that Israel was “a people come out
of Egypt” (22:5), as if it had successfully escaped
from slavery without divine help.

wild ox The metaphor refers to God. In the
ancient Near East, gods often were depicted with
horns or wearing horned crowns.
23. augury Hebrew: nahash, which refers
to observing omens such as the flight of birds,
or reading the entrails of a domesticated an-
imal.
divining A tacit admission that magic works
but that Israel has no need for it.
planned Because God has provided Israel
with prophets, it has no need to resort to magical
arts to determine His will.

18. Up, Balak Balaam had referred to Balak
as “king” (22:10), having encountered the true
sovereign, he no longer does so [N. Leibowitz].
21. No harm is in sight Literally, “[God
sees no evil in Israel.” The Tanhuma un-
derstands this to teach that God, out of love, over-
looks Israel’s faults. Ibn Ezra, by contrast, reads
the verse: “Only when God sees no evil in Israel
is the Lord with them.” Israel is not vulnerable
to curses when they do God’s will. Entice them
to sin grievously, as the Moabites do in chapter
25, and God will no longer be a protective pres-
ence in their midst. “A Jew is never alone; God
is always with every Jew” (Baal Shem Tov).
Lo, a people that rises like a lion,
Leaps up like the king of beasts,
Rests not till it has feasted on prey
And drunk the blood of the slain.

Thereupon Balak said to Balaam, “Don’t curse them and don’t bless them!” In reply, Balaam said to Balak, “But I told you: Whatever the Lord says, that I must do.” Then Balak said to Balaam, “Come now, I will take you to another place. Perhaps God will deem it right that you damn them for me there.” Balak took Balaam to the peak of Peor, which overlooks the wasteland. Balaam said to Balak, “Build me here seven altars, and have seven bulls and seven rams ready for me here.” Balak did as Balaam said: he offered up a bull and a ram on each altar.

Now Balaam, seeing that it pleased the Lord to bless Israel, did not, as on previous occasions, go in search of omens, but turned his face toward the wilderness. As Balaam looked up and saw Israel encamped tribe by tribe, the spirit of God came upon him. Instead of seeking God in a dream or having God’s words “put into his mouth,” Balaam is now invested with the divine spirit and falls into an ecstatic state, the mark of a prophet.

THE THIRD ORACLE (23:25–24:9)
This is the climactic oracle. In the first oracle, only God determines blessing and curse (23:8); in the second, God’s blessing cannot be revoked (23:20); in this, the third, those who bless or curse Israel will themselves be blessed or cursed.

27. Perhaps God will deem it right that you damn them  A submissive, almost plaintive utterance, acknowledging the power of God. Balak’s previous order, in verse 13, had been: “Damn them.” The transformation in Balak is now clear. He must reckon with the power of Israel’s God. will deem it right  Literally, “be straight in the eyes of.” That is, be to his liking.

24:1. in search of omens  The reason he separated himself from Balak on the previous two occasions is now clarified. While Balak attended to the sacrifices, Balaam went off by himself to search for portents of the future.
spirit of God came upon him. 3 Taking up his theme, he said:

Word of Balaam son of Beor,
Word of the man whose eye is true,
4 Word of him who hears God’s speech,
Who beholds visions from the Almighty,
Prostrate, but with eyes unveiled:
5 How fair are your tents, O Jacob,
Your dwellings, O Israel!
6 Like palm-groves that stretch out,
Like gardens beside a river,
Like aloes planted by the Lord,
Like cedars beside the water;
7 Their boughs drip with moisture,
Their roots have abundant water.
Their king shall rise above Agag,
Their kingdom shall be exalted.
8 God who freed them from Egypt
Is for them like the horns of the wild ox.
They shall devour enemy nations,
Crush their bones,
And smash their arrows.

3–4. Balaam introduces himself as one who is privy to God’s direct revelation.
4. Almighty Hebrew: Shaddai, an ancient name for Israel’s God (Gen. 17:1, 28:3).

Prostrate An act that acknowledges and pays homage to the Presence of God.
but with eyes unveiled Either his eyes were literally “opened” or, more likely, he was figuratively “enlightened”; i.e., he saw with his inner eye.
5. fair That is, pleasing.
dwellings Parallel to “tents.” The Hebrew word (mishk’notekha) includes the plural of mishkan (tabernacle; temporary structure).
6. aloes A sweet-smelling tree whose sap is used as a perfume.

7. Their boughs drip The image is one of trees (v. 6) so drenched that their boughs drip water. The vegetation will be watered from above and below. Water is a common metaphor for affluence.

Their roots Literally, “and its seed.” This is a reference to posterity.

Their king Thrice promised by God to the patriarchs (Gen. 17:6,16, 35:11).

Agag King of Amalek during the reign of Israel’s King Saul (1 Sam. 15:8). The Amalekites were Israel’s most dreaded enemy in the time of Moses (e.g., Exod. 17:8–16; Deut. 25:17–18).

8. Is for them That is, for Israel.
devour An image of military conquest.

HALAKHAH L’MA-ASEH
24:5. This verse is the source for the prayer Mah Tovu, recited daily upon entering a synagogue. And the Talmud bases its requirements for respecting privacy on this verse, explaining that Balaam was moved to praise the tents of Jacob because the arrangement of their entrances made it impossible for a family to see inside the tents of others, showing respect for privacy (BT BB 60a).
9 They crouch, they lie down like a lion,
Like the king of beasts; who dare rouse them?
Blessed are they who bless you,
Accursed they who curse you!

10 Enraged at Balaam, Balak struck his hands together. “I called you,” Balak said to Balaam, “to damn my enemies, and instead you have blessed them these three times! 11 Back with you at once to your own place! I was going to reward you richly, but the Lord has denied you the reward.” 12 Balaam replied to Balak, “But I even told the messengers you sent to me, 13 ‘Though Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not of my own accord do anything good or bad contrary to the Lord’s command. What the Lord says, that I must say.’ 14 And now, as I go back to my people, let me inform you of what this people will do to your people in days to come.” 15 He took up his theme, and said:

Word of Balaam son of Beor,
Word of the man whose eye is true,
Word of him who hears God’s speech,
Who obtains knowledge from the Most High,
And beholds visions from the Almighty,

9. crouch That is, they rest. In the second oracle, the lion rises and does not rest until it eats its prey. Here, the sated lion lies down to rest. Even when it is in a state of repose, who would dare rouse it?

Blessed . . . Accursed Everyone will bless you in order to be blessed and will desist from cursing you for fear of being cursed (cf. Gen. 12:3).

THE FOURTH ORACLE (vv. 10–19)
Still imbued with prophetic inspiration, Balaam turns his attention to the future of Balak’s country, Moab. Most of the words and references in these verses remain obscure.

10. struck his hands together A derisive gesture.
Prostrate, but with eyes unveiled:
17What I see for them is not yet,
What I behold will not be soon:
A star rises from Jacob,
A scepter comes forth from Israel;
It smashes the brow of Moab,
The foundation of all children of Seth.
18Edom becomes a possession,
Yea, Seir a possession of its enemies;
But Israel is triumphant.
19A victor issues from Jacob
To wipe out what is left of Ir.

20He saw Amalek and, taking up his theme, he said:
A leading nation is Amalek;
But its fate is to perish forever.

21He saw the Kenites and, taking up his theme, he said:
Though your abode be secure,
And your nest be set among cliffs,
22Yet shall Kain be consumed,
When Asshur takes you captive.

17. Balaam’s visionary powers soar from the present to behold the distant future.

star Hebrew: kokhav, which has been interpreted as an image of a king, as the messianic king, and as a “host” in the sense of “multitude of an army.”

smashes . . . Moab A fitting and ironic conclusion to the Balaam story. Balak of Moab wished to curse Israel; instead, his hired seer, Balaam, curses Moab.

children of Seth A general term for all the nomadic groups descended from Abraham (see Gen. 25) and considered to be his kinsmen. The Sethites were a nomadic people located somewhere in Canaan. Israel was promised dominance over them in the patriarchal blessings (as in Gen. 27:29). They have been identified with the Sutu nomads mentioned frequently in Egyptian texts as wandering through the desert regions of the area.

ORACLES AGAINST NATIONS (vv. 20–25)
Balaam is still on the heights as a series of nations come into view. From the Moabite plateau one can see into the Negeb—home of the Amalekites, Ashurim, and Kenites.

21. Kenites A nomadic group that attached itself to Midian, Amalek, and Israel. It ranged from the Sinai Peninsula to the Galilee as far as Kadesh.

CHAPTER 24

17. Some 14 centuries after this event, when Simeon bar Kosiba led a revolt against Roman occupation, Akiva called him Bar Kokhba, “son of a star,” and applied this verse to him as the triumphant ruler predicted by the Torah. His revolt, alas, ended in defeat and destruction.

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23 He took up his theme and said:
   Alas, who can survive except God has willed it!

24 Ships come from the quarter of Kittim;
   They subject Asshur, subject Eber.
   They, too, shall perish forever.

25 Then Balaam set out on his journey back home; and Balak also went his way.

25 While Israel was staying at Shittim, the people profaned themselves by whoring with the Moabite women, who invited the people to the sacrifices for their god. The people partook of them and worshiped that god. Thus Israel attached itself to Baal-peor, and the Lord was incensed with Israel. The Lord said to Moses, “Take all the ringleaders and have them publicly impaled before the Lord, so that the Lord would shun Israel. 

24. Kittim  Cyprus. This verse may refer to the invasions of the sea peoples in the 13th and 12th centuries B.C.E.

IDOLATRY AND EXPIATION AT BAAL-PEOR (25:1–18)

Balaam’s prediction of Israel’s glorious promise is dashed by the events at Baal-peor. The nation that dwells alone with its God abruptly pollutes itself with idolatry.

THE APOSTASY (vv. 1–9)

1. at Shittim  Literally, “in the acacias.” Its full name was Abel-shittim. It was from there that Joshua sent out spies and led Israel across the Jordan.

Moabite women  Apparently, Moabites continued to dwell in the territory after Sihon and the Israelites conquered it.

2. Sexual attraction led to Israelite participation in the sacrificial feasts at the shrine of Baal-peor.

3. attached itself to  Israel transferred its allegiance from YHVH to Baal or engaged in acts of the ritual sexual intercourse required in Baal worship.

4. ringleaders  Hebrew: rashei ha-am, literally, “heads of the people,” simply means “leaders” (see 10:4, 13:3). It suggests that innocent and guilty leaders alike were to be executed.

impaled  The punishment for idolatry was death by stoning, with the body then hanged for public display. Impaling is a rare punishment (see Deut. 21:22–23), carried out also on the sons of Saul by the Gibeonites for breach of covenant (2 Sam. 21).

before the Lord  That impaled corpses would

25. Each went back to his previous way of thinking, unaffected by having encountered God’s protecting love for Israel. God’s word can only affect people who are willing to change.
The Lord’s wrath may turn away from Israel.” 

So Moses said to Israel’s officials, “Each of you slay those of his men who attached themselves to Baal-peor.”

Just then one of the Israelites came and brought a Midianite woman over to his companions, in the sight of Moses and of the whole Israelite community who were weeping at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting. When Phinehas, son of Eleazar son of Aaron the priest, saw this, he left the assembly and, taking a spear in his hand, he followed the Israelite into the chamber and stabbed both of them, the Israelite and the woman, through the belly. Then the plague against the Israelites was checked. Those who died of the plague numbered twenty-four thousand.

have brought ritual defilement to the sanctuary is not a consideration, because an emergency situation prevailed.

the Lord’s wrath Here, this means the plague. In the Bible it is not unusual for the Lord to refer to Himself in the third person (e.g., Exod. 12:11,14).

5. Israel’s officials Hebrew: shof’tei Yisra•el; the root שִׁפַּט (often understood as “to judge”) frequently means “to rule” or “to administer.” The judge (shofet) is also an officer (sar). Moses appointed military officers as commanders and judges, on Jethro’s advice. The two functions overlap, with the commander frequently acting in a judicial capacity. This was the practice throughout Mesopotamia.

his men That is, those under his command. Some assume that the execution was carried out. It is more likely, however, that God’s wrath was assuaged by Phinehas’s act before Moses’ order could be fulfilled.

6. This act, committed before the sanctuary in the sight of Moses and the people while they were bewailing the plague in supplication to God, was a flagrant escalation of Israel’s sin.

who were weeping While Moses and the community were weeping, the couple passed them by.

7. Phinehas An Egyptian name meaning “the Nubian.” Phinehas was at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting in his capacity as chief of the sanctuary guards (1 Chron. 9:20), an office held by his father before him (Num. 3:32). Eleazar the high priest did not act in this instance because he was forbidden to come into contact with the dead under any circumstances (Lev. 21:10–12).

spear A short-shafted pike that could be held in both hands and, like the modern bayonet, thrust downward on a recumbent body. Phinehas would have been armed if he was on duty.

9. twenty-four thousand This count probably included the rest of the older generation who were doomed to die in the wilderness, because it is expressly certified in the census that follows this incident.

CHAPTER 25

9. Hirsch contrasts the 24,000 who die here with the 3,000 who died after worshipping the Golden Calf and concludes that sexual immorality is a greater temptation than idolatry. Israel, at this point an adolescent nation, is vulnerable to the sexually charged orgiastic worship and fertility cult of the Moabites. In all likelihood, this is why the Torah later calls for the destruction of all Canaanite altars and holy places in such stark terms when Israel occupies the Promised Land.
HAFTARAH FOR BALAK

MICAH 5:6–6:8

(When Ḥukkat and Balak are combined, recite this haftarah.)

The exact time of Micah’s prophecy is unspecified. According to the first verse of his book, he lived and labored during the mid-8th century B.C.E., the period of the kings mentioned there. It was a time of expanding Assyrian power; the prophet’s words of doom (1:2–3:12) may either anticipate or reflect the Assyrian invasions that led to the destruction and dispersion of the northern kingdom in 722–721 B.C.E.

The haftarah opens with two prophecies addressed to the remnant of Jacob after the destruction and dispersion. The first prophecy turns on the image of dew, or droplets of water, in a message that gives hope to the people that their renewal will come directly from God (Micah 5:6). As dew comes from heaven without any mortal involvement, so may Israel hope in a resurrection among the nations through divine grace. The second prophecy introduces the simile of a “fierce lion . . . / Which tramples wherever it goes / And rends, with none to deliver” (v. 7). This figure of power and violence gives a sense of empowerment to the nation in exile. Its tone of brute physicality stands in marked contrast to the opening prophecy. The two prophecies presumably were delivered on separate occasions, reflecting two moods or sensibilities.

The prophet climaxes his first two prophecies with a further vision of divine action. “In that day” of regeneration and victory, God will destroy the Israelites’ military arsenal and its idolatrous practices (vv. 9–13). The verb “destroy” (v’ḥikhrati) is repeated four times in these verses, like a persistent hammer beat, and is complemented by four other verbs of wreck and ruin. Divine intervention will be total, eradicating the people’s reliance on physical force and false worship.

Speaking on God’s behalf, Micah then confronts the nation by recalling deeds of divine redemption in the past (6:3–5). The prophet summons the natural world to testify, along with Israel itself, whether God has ever failed them or brought them into danger. The prophet is certain that memory will yield only recollections of the “gracious acts of the Lord” on their behalf.

Hearing all this, the people ponder how best to “approach the Lord” and “Do homage to God on high.” The poignancy and the pathos of their proposals (vv. 6–7) leave no reason to doubt their earnestness. The prophet, rejecting the human desire to offer one’s earthly goods as an act of entreaty, speaks the word of God through tradition (v. 8).

RELATION OF THE HAFTARAH TO THE PARASHAH

Micah recalls to the people “what Balak king of Moab / Plotted against you [i.e., your ancestors], / And how Balaam . . . Responded to him” (6:5). This episode, one of God’s “gracious acts” for His people, provides a direct link to the parashah (Num. 22:2–25:9).

The echo of Balaam’s words in the haftarah provocatively juxtaposes that seer’s contemplative sight with the prophet’s moral demands. Evocation of the wondrous gaze in Numbers (24:5), “How fair are your tents, O Jacob” (mah tovu ohalekha ya•akov), is now balanced by Micah’s statement of “what is good [mah tov]” behavior in God’s sight. Aesthetics and similes of nature (palm groves, gardens, aloes, and cedars beside the water in Num. 24:6) thus stand on one side, and the tasks of covenantal responsibility on the other. It need not be so, however. Visions of the natural world need not result in moral blindness any more than moral clarity must contradict the insights of nature. The mature mind may sustain the teachings of both the parashah and the haftarah. It is the challenge of higher religious consciousness.
5 6The remnant of Jacob shall be,
   In the midst of the many peoples,
   Like dew from the L ORD,
   Like droplets on grass—
   Which do not look to any man
   Nor place their hope in mortals.

7The remnant of Jacob
   Shall be among the nations,
   In the midst of the many peoples,
   Like a lion among beasts of the wild,
   Like a fierce lion among flocks of sheep,
   Which tramples wherever it goes
   And rends, with none to deliver.

8Your hand shall prevail over your foes,
   And all your enemies shall be cut down!

9In that day
   —declares the L ORD—
   I will destroy the horses in your midst
   And wreck your chariots.

10I will destroy the cities of your land
   And demolish all your fortresses.

11I will destroy the sorcery you practice,
   And you shall have no more soothsayers.

12I will destroy your idols
   And the sacred pillars in your midst;
   And no more shall you bow down
   To the work of your hands.

13I will tear down the sacred posts in your
   midst

Micah 5:6. remnant of Jacob In its original context, these references to the remnant refer to the contemporary exile of Israelites in Assyria and elsewhere. Later generations would read them as a messianic hope for their own time.

Like dew from the L ORD Israel’s remnant will be graced with divine sustenance and renewal, which asks nothing in return.

8. Your hand shall prevail over your foes Most commentators regard this as God’s promise to Israel, but it can also be interpreted as Israel’s prayer to God.

13. sacred posts Hebrew: asherim; prohibited by the Torah (Deut. 16:21–22). Destruction of Canaanite asherim is commanded in Exod. 34:13.
And destroy your cities.
14In anger and wrath
Will I wreak retribution
On the nations that have not obeyed.

6 Hear what the Lord is saying:
Come, present [My] case before the moun-
tains,
And let the hills hear you pleading.

2Hear, you mountains, the case of the Lord—
You firm foundations of the earth!
For the Lord has a case against His people,
He has a suit against Israel.
3“My people!
What wrong have I done you?
What hardship have I caused you?
Testify against Me.
4In fact,
I brought you up from the land of Egypt,
I redeemed you from the house of bondage,
And I sent before you
Moses, Aaron, and Miriam.

5“My people,
Remember what Balak king of Moab
Plotted against you,
And how Balaam son of Beor
Responded to him.
[Recall your passage]
From Shittim to Gilgal—

14. nations that have not obeyed  The mention here of other nations—and their dis-
obedience—is puzzling. Some commentators propose emending the word at the heart of this difficulty (goyim, “nations”) to read ge-im, “arro-
gant ones.” Then the prophet would be referring to the “arrogant ones” of Israel.

Micah 6:5. From Shittim to Gilgal A syn-
opsis of places of divine beneficence, from the wil-
derness wanderings to settlement of the Promised
Land. Shittim was the place of Israelite encamp-
ment where God transformed Balaam’s prophecy
for the good of the Israelites (Num. 22:1, 25:1,
33:48–49). Gilgal was the cult site where Saul’s
kingship was renewed after his victory against the
Ammonites (1 Sam. 11:14).
And you will recognize
The gracious acts of the LORD.”

6With what shall I approach the LORD,
Do homage to God on high?
Shall I approach Him with burnt offerings,
With calves a year old?
7Would the LORD be pleased with thousands
of rams,
With myriads of streams of oil?
Shall I give my first-born for my transgression,
The fruit of my body for my sins?

8“He has told you, O man, what is good,
And what the LORD requires of you:
Only to do justice
And to love goodness,
And to walk modestly with your God.”

6–8. A classic expression of the primacy of morality over sacrifice. Other prophets (Amos 5:21–25; Hos. 6:6; Isa. 1:10–20) also articulate divine contempt for the performance of rituals in the absence of moral behavior.

He has told you . . . what the LORD requires
This usually is understood as two parts of one injunction, referring both to what is good and to what the Lord requires as a doubled expression. However, because of the accent marks in the Hebrew text, the second phrase may be interpreted as specifying the injunction (“And what does the LORD require of you: / Only to do justice”).

justice . . . goodness . . . walk modestly
Abravanel astutely interprets this triad as a graded series of obligations: (1) the demands of justice—the formalities and externals of civil and criminal law; (2) the requirement of loving-kindness—actions performed in the spirit of the law, going beyond its formal, minimal demands; and (3) the inwardness of true piety hidden from the world at large.

For Rosenzweig, justice and goodness are goals yet to be accomplished. Humility before God, by contrast, is the unconditional starting point of all true living. It is a standing before the world in a “wholly present trust,” daring to “say ‘Truly!’ to the truth” at every moment.