



Balak Burlesque
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Most American Jews are acquainted with the character Tevye, dairyman and progenitor of too many daughters, through the movie or the musical theater versions of *Fiddler on the Roof*. Whether channeled through the immortal voices and visages of Zero Mostel, Chaim Topol, or Theodore Bikel, Tevye comes across as a doting but perennially disappointed patriarch who never sees his daughters marry up in the way that he intends. The titular character of Sholem Aleichem's (1859-1916) original set of linked stories *Tevye the Dairyman* is both funnier and more deeply introspective than his American adaptations. He elaborates on the marital joys and woes—mostly their joys, his woes—of five daughters rather than the three of screen and stage.

From their father's perspective, each girl's choice of a husband reflects a new besetting ill of modernity: romantic love, radical politics, assimilation, and income inequality. But the emotional core and the dramatic climax of both the original and adapted versions is Tevye's conflict with Chava over her decision to marry a Russian Orthodox man. One detail worth highlighting for American audiences is that there was no such thing as civil or secular marriage in the Russian Empire, and under tsarist law, Christians were prohibited from converting to Judaism. Taken together, these laws dictated that in order to marry her sweetheart, Chava must convert to Russian Orthodoxy, placing herself in the formal custody of the local priest in the interim before marrying and entering her husband's legal ambit. With the couple's nuptials, then, Tevye and Golde lose not only the prospect of eventual Jewish grandchildren through Chava, but also any real and immediate access to their daughter.

After mourning her loss, Tevye resumes his daily existence, delivering artisanal, organic dairy products to the wealthy Jews of the fictional Boiberik. His milk cans empty, he drives his horse through the lonesome forest, struggling to avert his thoughts from the tangle of sorrow and rage he lavishes on his third daughter. Suddenly, his horse stops abruptly, and Chava herself appears before him, begging for an audience. In Hillel Halkin's lively translation,

... I jerked the reins to the right and cried, 'Giddyap there, you moron!' Well, no sooner did my horse veer to the right than Chava ran in front of it again, gesturing as if to say that she had something to tell me. I could feel my heart split in two, my arms and legs wouldn't obey me... in a second I knew I would jump right out of the wagon... Just then,



though, I got a grip on myself and jerked the reins back to the left. Back to the left runs Chava, a wild look in her eyes, her face the color of death....

In the savage complexity of his grief, Tevye is determined not to *really* see his daughter, not to take her perspective even briefly, as a conversation would call upon him to do. He vents his fury on his faithful companion: "...And I began to whip my horse for all he was worth. He lunged forward, all right, though he kept looking back and pointing his ears at her." The horse plainly apprehends the figure before them and is ready to grant her the minimum recognition due another person, and a familiar one at that; Tevye, willing his blindness, refuses.

The scene is affecting for any audience, but its resonance trebles for readers familiar with the events of this week's Torah portion. Tevye's arboreal run-in with Chava is a burlesque, of course, of Bilaam's encounter with the fierce, adversarial angel of the Lord sent to block his path toward cursing the Israelites. The two texts, read together, yield interpretations richer than either can offer singly, and so furnish an excellent study of Jewish intertextuality.

The fullest interpretation of Sholem Aleichem's story obviously depends on the biblical vignette. The Tevye whose dignity as a patriarch has already been eroded on multiple fronts, is rendered, like Bilaam, puny and hapless, perceiving less of the true order of things than his mount. "The ass saw"—and as Rashi glosses it, "He (Bilaam) did not see, for the Holy One permitted the animal to see more than the man." More economically than any literary exposition ever could, the telescoped comparison to Bilaam undermines the righteousness of Tevye's mission, and of his unrelenting stance against his daughter. Tevye's horse doesn't speak to him as Bilaam's ass does, but the dairyman nevertheless grasps what Ramban describes as the "reason for the miracle: to show Bilaam who gives voice to human beings (מי שם פה לאדם) or renders them mute (או מי ישום אלם)." The encounter destabilizes Tevye's certainty in his own pious pronouncements. Over the two decades that the reader witnesses of Tevye's parenting, the moment after this encounter with Chava is the only time he expresses deep self-doubt, wondering, "What did being a Jew or not a Jew matter? Why did God have to create both? And if He did, why put such walls between them, so that neither would look at the other even though both were His creatures? It grieved me that I wasn't a more learned man, because surely there were answers to be found in the holy books..." A less naïve character might understand that the holy books offer more questions than answers.



While we certainly can't fully understand Tevye at this textual juncture without Bilaam, I would go so far as to argue that the story of Tevye and Chava affords us a fresh purchase on Bilaam and Balak. The biblical story presents the contemporary readers with several distancing assumptions. First, there is Bilaam's peculiar status as a "prophet for hire" with a strong enough track record to appeal to Balak: a view of prophecy inimical to the deep conviction that typically motivates the Hebrew prophets. Moreover, he enjoys a manifest intimacy with God, despite these mercenary proclivities. We are also challenged by the sheer performativity of his utterances, wherein it is presumed that his speech acts will reshape reality just by virtue of his having voiced them. His blessings or curses upon the people are supposed to *matter*. These factors combine to make the whole episode seem a little absurd, a distraction on the Israelites' way through the wilderness. But the Tevye story restores the high emotional stakes of the encounter between rider, mount and obstacle, substituting a narrative we can more readily relate to. After all, Bilaam's ass leads him to recognize an angel, while Tevye's horse draws his attention to the *person* before him. A "burlesque" (from the Italian *burla*, or joke) is a caricature, designed to provoke laughter. This particular burlesque becomes a zone of textual encounter; be it Bilaam's *mish'ol hakeramim*, or vineyard path, or else Tevye's Russian forest, it's an interpretive meeting place for two Jewish texts where the humorous element of a serious story (Parashat Balak) commingles with the serious element of a comic one—thus enlivening both.