

Sermon for Parshat Balak
July 26, 2010; Congregation Beth David, Saratoga, CA
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And now a word from our sponsor. On this first Saturday of summer, with the U.S. playing Ghana in a few minutes, it's to your credit to be here this morning. And after being here last week, I know what it feels like to be the starting pitcher for the game after Stephen Strasburg. (*Note to readers: Smaller crowd this week; huge crowd last week for outgoing rabbi's celebration. Strasburg is a new baseball phenom; look him up.*)

Parshat Balak is named for a bad guy. Two weeks ago, parshat Korach was named for a bad guy. Next week's parshah, Pinchas, is named for a guy who's at best a good guy who did a bad thing.

Look through the Torah. There's no parshah named for any of the patriarchs, Moses... The only matriarch who plays a title role is Sarah, the parshah Chayei Sarah, the lives of Sarah... And she dies in the first sentence.

Sure you can play the "it's just named for the first meaningful word in the parshah, so shut up already" card, but whoever came up with that rule must've seen the outcome. They could've made a different rule. Besides, with this rule, about fifteen parshas *should* be named for Moses, so he was obviously great-great-grandfathered out for some reason.

Only a few parshahs are named for people at all. Balak, this week's bad guy. Korach, big rebellion two weeks ago, bad guy. Pinchas, bad deed. Sarah, bad luck. Yitro, Moses' in-law, and if that wasn't bad enough, he suggested the creation of what became our judicial system, so bad guy. Bo, the birth of Bo Diddley, good musician. And Noah, who did create wine and gave us a great Bill Cosby routine, but he forgot to pack the unicorns. Bad guy.

So why, if so few parshahs are named for people at all, did only these guest stars get them? Regardless of the "first meaningful word" rule, there must be a reason why Balak got a parshah named after him and the big names didn't. At least, this is what many Talmudic-age rabbis got paid to discuss, at length. Or would have, if they got paid, but they discussed it anyway. So let's look at Balak, at just a little length.

Your Etz Chayim chumash says that this parshah contains what might be the only comic passage in the Torah. Maybe, though it was pretty funny when Joseph's brothers related Joseph's faked death to Jacob in a country song, as anyone who's seen Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat knows. But Balak as comedy would be well-timed. After all, our last two exciting episodes saw the Korach rebellion and the deaths of Miriam and Aaron. So after all that, maybe someone thought we'd need some comic relief. Some years Balak is combined with last week's parshah giving you immediate comic relief. We know that when you need someone to create *everything*, you call The Big Guy. But can he write comedy?

Balak involves one of the only attempts in history to wipe out the Jews. Can that be funny? Well, we don't exactly dine on ashes on Purim, unless our costume doesn't win the contest. So we'll give it a chance.

Balak was a bad man. A very bad man. Balak was an opportunist, seeking his own advancement and glory at the expense of others. The way he collaborated with the Nazis to beat Indiana Jones to the Ark of the Covenant... Wait. That's Bellok. Raiders of the Lost Ark. Though it's worth mentioning that what Bellok wore near the end of the movie when they open the Ark is quite authentic to what the Torah proscribes for the Leviim. And he throws down some legit Aramaic, including lines from Bei Anah Rachetz. Check it out. After Shabbat, of course.

Balak was a bad man, a very bad man, an opportunist seeking his own advancement and glory at the expense of others, namely us. The parshah starts "vayerah Balak ben Tzippur..." this guy Balak seeing what Israel just did to the Amorites which... let's just say, the Giants offense should do so well. Moab was alarmed, Moab dreaded the Israelites... After a couple sentences of this, it says "uBalak ben Tzipur melech lMoav ba-eyt hahee." "at that time". Balak is referred to as the king of Moab for the first time. The rabbis fed on such oddities, so some believed that this means Balak didn't start out as king. That somewhere between those first few sentences, he incited fear of the Israelites and made the Jews out to be a common enemy to help fuel his sudden rise to power. If true, at least Balak was the only person in history to rise to power by making the Jews out to be a common enemy.

So Balak, now king of Moab, sent messengers to the famous prophet, Bilaam; or Balaam, if you believe King James. They asked Bilaam to come curse the Israelites for Balak. You see, Balak already had a yellow card from the match against Slovenia and couldn't do it himself. With Bilaam's curse, Balak hoped to avoid the Amorites' fate, figuring that it would weaken Israel enough for him to drive them off before they attacked and his losses could become Amoritized over the next several years.

Why did Balak hire someone instead of cursing the Israelites himself? Was he just trying to keep his nose clean? Didn't he tell Bilaam there were too many people about to come calling with too many problems, and that he needed to bring in some outside help to provide support for his people? Was he the first to outsource? Remember, Balak was a bad man.

Bilaam told the messengers to stay over, and he'd tell them what the Big G instructs him to do. They sleep. The Big G tells Bilaam he can't curse the Israelites, so Bilaam tells the messengers... he can't curse the Israelites.

This raises a question of, why does some non-Jewish prophet get the Big G talking to him, and I don't? What exactly is the definition of chosen here? I read Torah at two temples, I teach bnai mitzvah, I stay awake during nearly half the sermons, I'm not a Y*nkees fan. But just because we're the chosen people doesn't mean we're the only people.

Balak didn't like Bilaam's refusal and sent the same message again, but this time with more muscle, *an offer he can't refuse*. What happens next some consider to make a compelling case that the Big G is a woman.

This time the Big G says fine, go out with the boys if you want to, but don't do anything that I don't want you to. We'll call that Exhibit A. So Bilaam agreed to go back to Balak with them, but made no promises about what he'd do for Balak. Bilaam hopped on his donkey and rode off with the boys to see Balak. The Big G was furious that Bilaam went, even though she'd just told him it was okay to go. We'll call that Exhibit B. I'd like to get married some day so there won't be an Exhibit C.

Now G puts an angel in Bilaam's path. Bilaam wasn't watching the road, but at least he wasn't texting. The donkey *was* watching, saw the angel with sword drawn, and ran off into the fields. The angel pops up again, between the vineyards with a fence on either side of them; special effects like you'd find in last year's hit film, Harry Plotzer and the Half-Cooked Blintz. This happens three times until the donkey gives up. All three times, Bilaam didn't see the angel and administered what back home we call a donkey-whoopin'.

Then Bilaam, the many-times great, but not so great, grandfather of Dr. Dolittle, hears the Donkey, played by Eddie Murphy, ask him why he beat her up three times. Bilaam says, "because you keep running off, you're making a donkey out of me!"

G uncovers Bilaam's eyes, ending his game of Pin Travail on the Donkey, and Bilaam sees the angel for the first time. Bilaam, catching on to who was pulling the vocal strings, asks G, "why are you talking out of my donkey?" G says "because you're planning to." So Bilaam's allowed to keep going but got a stern reminder to not curse the Israelites, or else. Or else what, you might ask. But Bilaam didn't ask, so we'll keep going.

Bilaam arrives, Balak takes him within sight of the Israelites to curse them, and builds seven altars at Bilaam's request. Bilaam gets up and instead of cursing the Israelites, blesses them. His excuse? Bilaam could say only the words G puts in his mouth, now being as whipped by G as his donkey was by him. Okay, there is an exhibit C.

Balak is not happy, but he's determined. He takes Bilaam somewhere else, in view of a different part of the Israelite camp, builds seven more altars, and has Bilaam try the Moabite hoedown, "Second curse worse than the first."

Again Bilaam blesses the Israelites instead of cursing them. Balak shouts at Bilaam insistently, "foiled again! Curses!!!" Since bad things are supposed to come in threes, Balak figures he gets one more chance at a curse. Seven more altars, one more curse. But the third time is the charm...ing hit song, Mah Tov, or at least its first line. In all, Bilaam has blessed the Israelites three times.

So they're done. Balak had paid Bilaam in advance so, before going home, Bilaam gives him a prophecy about what exactly Israel will do to Moab and other nations, which... let's just say the Giants offense should do so well.

Interestingly, the end of this curse relates the method that G will use on those nations. A surprisingly modern method that isn't talked about often in this context. It says, "mi yichyeh" "who will live" or "survive",,, "m'sumo El" meaning "from the Sumo of G." Bilaam foresaw that G would send down on those nations armies of Sumo wrestlers.

So, was Bilaam a prophet or a profiteer? Some rabbinical sources say Bilaam was a prophet. But some say he was a fraud. Consider this. What if this narrative of Bilaam's journey isn't a real-time narrative, but is Bilaam's retelling of the journey? A fraudulent Bilaam would know he couldn't really curse the Israelites, or anyone else for that matter, and that they wouldn't be weakened for Balak to defeat. A fraudulent Bilaam would have made up a seemingly ridiculous story like the angel in the road just to cover his donkey before he's exposed. Especially because, if Bilaam was a fraudulent prophet, hearing the Big G's voice this first time, must have scared him into doing whatever was said. So he told his tale and got Balak to build him seven altars three times, making a total donkey of *him* in the process instead.

Or assume for the moment that Bilaam was the real deal; that he could curse like a sailor. His donkey ran off from the angel, and he beat the donkey, three times before he was set straight. Then instead of cursing the Israelites, he blessed them. Three times, each blessing atoning for each of the three donkey-whoopins'. Why the numeric parallel that the Torah loves so much? So generations of bnai mitzvah who have this parshah can make their speech focus on animal rights.

Now these three curses weren't the same each time. The first curse said that only G can determine who is blessed and who is cursed, not Balak, Bilaam, or anyone. The second curse said that nobody can curse something that G has blessed. And the third curse said that those who bless or curse Israel will be similarly blessed or cursed themselves.

The third curse is the origin of Mah Tov, the first thing we say when we enter the synagogue for services bright and early. Well, the first official thing we say, after things like "so, rabbi, did you hear the one about..." Why do we say Mah Tov then? Because we're being like the good Bilaam. Because we woke up early on a Saturday, dressed up, dragged ourselves here on time, saw we were almost the only ones here that early, wanted to curse, but instead *this* blessing somehow comes out of our mouths instead.

So, this is mostly about Bilaam; why isn't the parshah called Bilaam instead of Balak? Balak's the instigator. The Israelites didn't see any of this happen to them. Unlike Dvarim's "zchor et asher asah lcha Amalek", "remember the Alamo, and what Amalek did to you there after you left Egypt," there's no bumper sticker for Balak. So the name placement helps. And it's more of a cautionary tale if we remember the bad guy than the guy who saved our donkeys. Because remembering terrible things and the people who do them stings longer than recalling a hero feels good. Helps ensure the bad's not repeated.

Which makes it time for the timely tie-in. Balak wants the Israelites cursed, set up as evil so they'd be more easily defeated in the land grab that is the Middle East. So he brings in some outside help to sail on in, float-ill-a ssertions, and make the Israelites look bad.

Bilaam makes the Israelites look good, despite what he was hired to do. Was it really just G putting words in his mouth? Did he genuinely believe what he was saying? From the actual text in this parshah, we don't entirely know, any more than we know his true intention or state of mind. But that doesn't stop people from speculating, at length.

It would be nice if more people were like the proposed good Bilaam, who despite being sent with an agenda to slam the Israelites, instead blessed them. Or are at least fair or impartial about them. It would help in the media, in questions of scale like the pages of ink about Middle East political maneuvers next to the occasional dots about deaths by the thousands in Kzyrgystan or the Sudan. But it would also help in daily lives, with everyday people, to not so quickly and easily believe the half-truths and incomplete stories they hear every day. Nobody's noses are totally clean, but too many people see too much dirt on others that they don't see their own in the mirror.

Everyone, all of us, assumes intention on the part of others. We assume bad intent, or at best ignorance, from people with whom we don't agree, and we assume good intent and good knowledge from people with whom we do agree. And assumed intentions usually default to extremes, while reality is typically somewhere in between. People need to find that in between, not merely in reaching a compromise, but before that. In being initially open enough to where the other is coming from such that a conclusion can be reached that doesn't involve anyone vaporizing. At least acknowledge the other person on their terms, a little, and maybe they'll acknowledge you on yours, a little. Not politically, not tactically. Really. "How could they not see where I'm coming from? It's so obvious!" Well, that's what they're thinking about you, too.

Let's face it, everybody thinks they're right. People you disagree with aren't out there thinking, "I know I'm wrong, but I'm doing this anyway." Unless they own the Y*nkees. Really, have you ever tried to actually change someone's deep-seated beliefs about theology, sociology, or politics? You might as well try to separate oil from water, without Kevin Costner's help. Us against them pushes people to those counter-productive extremes, when they probably at least started somewhere in between. Don't assume the absolute worst. As the rabbinic scholar Roy Scheider once said on SeaQuest, "Hope for the best, just be ready for the worst." It's the subtle difference between telling someone "you're wrong" and saying "but this is why *I'm* right." Be more open to someone, and maybe they'll do the same. Maybe they're just waiting to see it in you. Maybe not, but at least you tried.

On a day like today, saying this to you who are here is preaching to the choir, though even our harmony can always use a little work. We get reminders of these principles all the time, like asking forgiveness from each other before from G on Yom Kippur. The question is how to get non-choir members to consider these things. We need answers

better than just getting them in the door, because that will never happen enough. And when it's out of the hands of the institutions, it's left in the hands of us. Individuals. Think about how to carry that ball every day and not fumble it.

So, was Bilaam good? Was he bad? Was he conflicted? Did he change? Was he under someone's influence? Under the influence? Or a combination of these things? It's much easier to think in black and white, and just pick one. Everyone does, by default. But the world is painted in shades of grey. Understanding Bilaam for ourselves, based on our own reading of the text and not on one side of commentary, just might be a reminder of that. Maybe not the intended lesson, but one that's there to be had. *If you're open enough to it. A self-fulfilling lesson, be more open so you can learn to be more open.*

But the parshah ends with the start of a new story, a reminder to not be *too* open, for our own sakes. This rather pointed scene leads into next week's must-hear episode, Pinchas. It seems that various Israelites were hooking up with some Moabite women, proving that interfaith dating has been a concern since the 1980s on the *Jewish* calendar, not the secular calendar. Mingling with the Moabite women was leading to worshipping the Moabite gods. G wanted to lash out, but got talked down to having them round up the ringleaders and impale them for running around with other women. People's Exhibit D, and another six weeks of bachelorhood winter for Punxsatawney Doug.

Some say that the seduction by Moabite women was orchestrated by the bad Bilaam, as a way to get the Israelites after being unable to curse them. This is based mostly on later writings, and has no source in this original parshah, which only adds to the mystery behind the man.

Anyway, one of the Israelites took a Moabite woman into the Ohel Moed, a place that even Clark Kent wouldn't be allowed into to change into his cape and tights. So Pinchas, Aaron's grandson and therefore one of the kohens, followed them into the tent and impaled them both in a way that would make Vlad the Impaler paler than a ghost.

So what's the point? What's the connection to pushing ourselves to being more open to other people and where they're coming from? Pinchas clearly teaches us that sometimes, when something very wrong is being done right in front of you, sometimes you really just have to put a stake in the ground. Shabbat Shalom.

*(If you liked this, you'll probably like my monthly Jewish humor column, *The Beholder's Eye*, available at <http://brookwrite.com>, and on Facebook at <http://facebook.com/the.beholders.eye>. If you didn't like this, tell people you hate about the column, because they'll probably like it. Oh, and be more open by not hating them so much.)*