



WEEKLY PARASHA

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Oh, Say Can You See?

Speech is central in the story of Balak and Balaam, from Balaam's blessings to the talking donkey. But as much as this *parasha* is about talking, it is also about seeing.

"And Balak the son of Beor saw, *va'yar*, all that Israel had done to the Amorites." (Bamidbar 22:2). Balak not only saw what Israel had done to the Amorites, he saw it in a particular way. He saw a threat, and he responded accordingly. Had he been watching more carefully, he would have seen how the Israelites skirted the edge of his territory to avoid engaging his people in battle (see Devarim 2:8–13, already implicit in Bamidbar 21:11–13). This whole story, then, is the result of his failure to see correctly.

Balaam also fails to see clearly. What he sees is informed not by fear, however, but by ego and ambition. Balaam is certainly prepared to obey God. Although he wants to go with Balak's messengers, he chooses not to, saying, "God will not let me go with you" (22:13). And on their second visit, he tells them, "I cannot do anything, big or little, contrary to the command of the Lord my God" (22:18). But it is clear what he really wants to be doing. As any parent of a teenager knows, there is big difference between reluctant compliance and enthusiastic participation. How does a person move from submitting and obeying to embracing his charge? By internalizing the values and priorities of the other, by seeing as the other sees.

It is instructive in this regard to compare Balaam's response to God's command with that of Avraham. When God commands Avraham to leave his faraway land, God does not simply tell him to go to Canaan. God says: "go to the land *asher ar'ekha*, that I will show you." God was teaching Avraham that a person cannot simply obey God. Rather, it is our duty to see what God is showing us; we must learn to see the world as God sees it, particularly when the task is arduous and the challenge is great.

In contrast, Balaam is told by God not to go, *lo teileikh* rather

than *lekh lekha*. Here, mere passive compliance would have sufficed, and yet Balaam resists and continues seeing things his own way. Balaam need not embrace God's way of seeing to drive him to change the world as Avraham had before him, but he must at least embrace it sufficiently so as to not contribute to the evil in the world. God not only tells Balaam not to go, but why he should not go: "do not curse the people for they are blessed" (22:12). Balaam has been shown the true, deeper reality, but is determined to not see, to not internalize this vision as his own. As Rashi comments, "He saw that it was evil in God's eyes, and yet he desired to go" (22:22).

But God isn't done with Balaam's education, for as Balaam goes on his way, his donkey rebels against him. The point of this bizarre story is clear: the donkey can see, but Balaam cannot. Three times the verse states, "*va'teireh ha'aton*," "and the donkey saw." A simple animal could see the deeper reality that Balaam could not. Remarkably, the verse only mentions God giving the donkey the ability to speak, indicating nothing miraculous about its ability to see the angel. Animals, as we know, can sometimes sense things we humans cannot, like an impending earthquake or even the impending death of an ill patient. Their interaction with the world is guided less by thoughts and emotions and more by acute senses able to perceive a more subtle, hidden reality. Animals are free of the subjective lens through which we view our experiences, filtering and shaping things for consistency with our worldview. The simple, unfiltered seeing of the donkey is like the seeing of a child, free from the rationalizations and self-deceptions of adults. This allows them to see what we so often cannot.

God now miraculously opens the eyes of Balaam so that he can see the angel, and the truth. God shows him how his arrogance, self-importance, and greed blind him to the truth. But does Balaam learn? Hardly. "Now, if it is evil in Your eyes, I will turn back," he responds (22:34). It is still

not evil in my eyes, he is saying to God. I understand that You think that it is evil, and if You tell me not to go, I am prepared to listen. You can make me obey, but You can't make me agree. I will see it my way, not Your way.

At this stage, God allows for compromise. If Balaam can't be taught to see rightly, God can at least make him say the right thing. God will force-feed him his lines, putting the very words in his mouth. There is a lesson to be learned here: even when we disagree with someone, we can still say the right thing. Sometimes the most important thing is simply to stop insisting that we are right. "Yes, dear" can be the two most important words in a marriage, for words have a peculiar power. The desired words can be helpful to the one hearing them, and they can also shape our own perception and change the way in which we see.

This is what eventually happens with Balaam. Knowing what it means to see through one's own lens, Balak tries to make Balaam see in a way that is not accurate, but that serves his own ends. He takes Balaam to places where he will see only the "edge of the people," not their totality or their blessedness, hoping that this partial, biased vision will allow Balaam to curse them (22:41, 23:13).

Choosing to see selectively is a key strategy in reinforcing the way we see the world. Consider how rarely we try to see the true complexity and scope of a matter, to move beyond the black and white and to appreciate all the nuances. It was initially thought that all the easily available information on the Internet would lead people to develop more informed and sophisticated views. The actual result was the opposite; what happened was a phenomenon known as "confirmation bias." People chose to see only their own truth, seizing on information that reinforced their established position and filtering out the rest. It is so much easier to see selectively, to see only the "edge of the people."

This was Balak's plan. But the words Balaam utters, that God puts in his mouth, begin to have their effect. In his first two poetic prophecies, we hear him declaiming in words fed to him by God how the people are truly to be seen: "For I see them from the tops of mountains, and from the hills I behold them....He has not beheld iniquity in Jacob, neither has he seen perverseness in Israel" (23:9,21). These words start to seep in to his consciousness, so that by the third prophecy, he actually begins to believe them.

This is the turning point of the story. Balaam starts to see through the eyes of God: "And Balaam saw that it was good in the eyes of God to bless Israel" (24:1). Before, Balaam

could only acknowledge that it was "bad in God's eyes" to curse the people, but he refused to adopt that perspective. Now he sees that it is "good in God's eyes" to bless the people, and rather than resist, he follows this vision and lets himself be led accordingly.

The words describing this pivotal moment are, "*vayar ... ki tov*," "and he saw ... that it was good". These words echo the very first act of seeing in the Torah: "*Va'yar E-lohim ki tov*," "And God saw that it was good." From the beginning of creation this is our mandate – to see as God does, to know what is truly good and what is not.

Balaam can finally see. He can lift up his eyes and see the people as they truly are (24:2). He declares that he can see "the vision of God" with "eyes open," self descriptions thus far absent (24:3). And it is only now that he is filled with "the spirit of God." He is not simply parroting words that have been forced into his mouth. He is elevated and inspired by what he sees, and when he speaks, he speaks from his heart. With this Balaam's education is complete.

Sadly, the change proves to be short lived, as the remainder of the *parasha* bears out, for learning to see properly cannot be accomplished in an instant. Even when our eyes are open, we often resist and choose to remain blind. It is a life-long struggle to be the students of Avraham, to learn to see "the land that God will show you." The keys are given to us in Parashat Balak: to see fully, not partially; to move beyond our biases and fears; to say what we know is right even if we do not yet believe it, knowing that this can help shape our vision and make us see as we know we should. In this way, we will not only resist the forces of evil, but we will be driven by the right vision to do good and to bring blessings into the world.

Shabbat Shalom!

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