

A Drashah for Parashat Balak

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I have some thoughts to share about this week's parsha, but first I want to fill you all in on one of my family's recent obsessions – the musical *Wicked*.

Wicked is the “Untold Story of the Witches of Oz”, a look back at the childhoods of the two witches we meet in the *Wizard of Oz* – Glinda the Good Witch of the North and Elphaba the Wicked Witch of the West. In *Wicked*, things are not as they seem. Glinda presents herself as pure good, but she uses her charm to manipulate situations and get what she wants, even at others' expense. She is sweet and kind, but she wields that sweetness like a weapon and without people even realizing it, they go against their own interest to follow Glinda's lead. She attracts a crowd of friends and admirers and their favorite pastime becomes teasing, taunting and otherwise bullying poor Elphaba. Elphaba, the Wicked Witch of the West, seems wicked, but perhaps just misunderstood. People see her green skin and think of her as different, scary, bad. Her father is distant and dismissive and she has trouble making friends. Meanwhile, she is intelligent and talented, and perhaps because she is often on the outside, she sees through her classmates'



phoniness and weak wills. She bravely chooses to remain true to herself even when it costs her social standing and acceptance, and even her misguided dreams.

And then we have the Wonderful Wizard of Oz. Spoiler alert: it's all an act. The Wizard doesn't have any real magical powers. But he appeals to the most basic emotions – wonder and fear – of the Ozians to gather and keep his political power. The wonder part is easy...ooo the Emerald City is so beautiful only a wonderful wizard could have made it! Combine that with the mystery of who he is and how he works, and then you've got the even more powerful feeling of fear. He gets the Ozians to fear him through the smoke and mirrors and secrecy of who he is, and he incites fear of other things to keep the Ozians close, depending on him to save the day.

A turning point in the play is when Elphaba discovers that not only does the Wizard not have the real power that she had always thought he did, but that he is behind a horrible conspiracy to take power away from the animals of Oz by separating them from people and stripping them of privileges. This seclusion results in the animals, who could speak, losing that ability. If you know the parsha, you might see the parallel I'm going to draw, but hold that thought for now.

My two take aways from Wicked are 1) those who seek to have power by taking it from others will not succeed and 2) the voices of the marginalized can teach us and show us the way to truth and justice.

Now back to this week's parsha – Balak. The Israelites had been wandering the desert for a while at this point, and though it hasn't exactly been easy, they're growing in number and strength and getting close to their final destination in the Promised Land. The Moabite king, Balak, sees them coming and gets nervous that this new people will defeat him and take his land and his power, so he sends for Balaam. Who is Balaam? A soothsayer, a diviner, a messenger, a stranger? It's not exactly clear in the text, even the commentators struggle with his character, but it is clear that Balak believes in him. He says “yadati et asher t'varech m'vorach va'asher ta'or yu'ar” – I know that he whom you bless is blessed and he whom you curse is cursed.

In this place and time, people such as Balak really believed in this concept of the blessing and the curse, and also believed that some people had a special power or strength to turn events towards these blessings or curses through their words. However, the text says that Balaam sends a message to Balak that he will only say what Gd puts into his mouth. Balaam seems clear on who he is and his limitations – he can say what Gd instructs, and maybe he has a special power to see visions of Gd and to speak for Gd, but he knows he doesn't have the power to make things happen himself. Balaam and Balak go back and forth a few times about if Balaam will even go with Balak to do this cursing thing, and eventually he goes. But on the way, his donkey gives him some trouble and he realizes that Gd really doesn't

want him to do this. He continues on his way, and when finally the moment comes, instead of a curse, a beautiful blessing for Israel comes out of Balaam's mouth. Balak is furious and he makes Balaam try to curse the Israelites again and again, but again and again, only blessings come.

Thinking back to Oz, my conclusions there are the same as for this parsha and there are several parallels. 1) those who seek power by taking it from others will not succeed and 2) the voices of the marginalized can teach us and show us the way to truth and justice.

First, the power dynamics, as illustrated by Balak, Balaam and the donkey. In chapter 22, Balak sends for Balaam to administer a curse, and in verse 12, Gd says "lo telech im-hem, lo t'or et ha'am ki varuch hu" – Do not go with them, do not curse the people, for they are blessed. And here is the first of several times we see the phenomenon I like to call "I hear you say *no*, but perhaps you mean *maybe*?" I'm sure you've all experienced this phenomenon yourselves. You want the answer to a certain question to be *yes*, and when you hear *no*, you change that to *maybe* in your mind, which is *no* with a little breathing room. *Maybe* is only a small step away from *probably*, which pretty much means *yes*, and there you go! The answer you've been hoping for!

Balak really wants Balaam to agree to this scheme, so he tries to negotiate and offers rich rewards. Balaam really wants to accept these rewards, and although

he knows that Gd's answer will be no, he holds out hope for the *maybe* and says, well, let me just check with Gd one more time. Did Balaam really think Gd would change Gd's mind? The second time Balaam asks, Gd basically says sure, go ahead, but you know that you can only say what I put into your mouth. Balaam hears the "sure", and off he goes! Gd said yes! When these characters convince themselves that something will be so, they'll see and hear what they want that fits in with their narrative, and if that doesn't work, they use other tactics to force the situation, as with Balak offering Balaam a reward, or as I'll show with Balaam with his donkey.

When Balaam mounts his donkey and goes with the Moabites to curse the Israelites, the donkey sees a menacing angel of Gd blocking the way, and the donkey stops and turns off the path. Balaam beats him to get him back on the path. The donkey sees the angel again and swerves into a wall, crushing Balaam's foot, and again, he beats the donkey to keep it moving. The donkey sees the angel a third time in a narrow spot with no way out, so the donkey sits down, and for the third time, Balaam beats him. Suddenly, Gd opens the donkey's mouth to ask why all these beatings, and in Balaam's rage, he tells the donkey that if he had had a sword he would have killed the donkey for not following his directions! Wow, that escalated quickly! The donkey essentially says *no* to Balaam and Balaam skips right over *maybe* and goes straight to *you must, or else*. Balaam is so intent on

going to do this errand, he forgets the fact that his donkey is well-known to him, good and loyal, never acted this way before. He's so intent on seeing things from one perspective that he is blind to all other points of view, like that maybe there's a reason for this behavior. And when Gd uncovers Balaam's eyes, he sees the angel and it all makes sense. Oh yes, I remember something – did Gd not want me to do this? Instead of accepting the initial answer or reading the situation, it takes a *talking donkey* to convince Balaam that Gd is really serious about Gd's intention to bless Israel. No amount of force or turning a blind eye will change that. A talking donkey is an unexpected voice worth listening to.

In parallel with the three mishaps with the donkey, there are three unsuccessful attempts to curse the Israelites. First, a blessing comes out of Balaam's mouth in the beginning of chapter 23, and Balak is angry, but instead of hearing the *no*, he hears *maybe*, and brings Balaam to another vantage point, thinking that might help the curse come. They try again, and again, an even better blessing, saying "No harm is in sight for Jacob, no woe in view for Israel. The Lord their Gd is with them." Balaam reminds Balak yet again that he is only doing as Gd instructs, but Balak tries a third time from yet another place, and wouldn't you know, the best blessing of all is uttered. When Balaam sees Israel camped in the wilderness he is inspired to say "ma tovu ohalecha Yaakov mishkenotecha

Yisrael” – how good are your tents, O Jacob, your dwellings O Israel, the blessing with which we open each synagogue service even today.

Over and over again, we see the party with the supposed upper hand getting very bothered when things don't go their way, and only when the voice of the underdog – the donkey to Balaam, or Balaam to Balak – shines through do things become clear.

What is the lesson, and for whom? What does this curse/blessing foreshadow, and for whom? There is a danger in seeing only what you want to see that furthers your own personal agenda. The people of Oz want to believe in the Wonderful Wizard because it's comforting to have a magical power taking care of everything for you. When things go wrong, they easily accept the Wizard's lies and finger pointing. The animals are bad – let's silence them. Elphaba the Witch is wicked – let's kill her. All in an attempt to distract the Ozians from the fact that the Wizard has no real power.

Balak thinks that with enough money offered as a reward, he can will his wish into existence. He can't stop the Israelites himself, but he can lure someone else to do it for him. Balaam is clear about his limitations, and Gd will not just change Gd's mind. Balak digs his heels in anyway and drags Balaam into his scheme, only to have it fall flat. Similarly, the donkey does not change its mind. A donkey is the archetypal stubborn animal. It doesn't change its mind. And no matter what Balak

does, Israel will not be thwarted. Balaam and Balak both have their eyes covered, so to speak, just like the Ozians. They both have their mind set on something, and the more their version of the narrative is challenged, the more they manipulate the people or things around them to make it as they imagine or wish it to be.

Personally, I believe that we are on the right path when we keep two things in mind. First, power and leadership can never come, in a positive or sustainable way at least, from grabbing it from others and turning people against each other. The best, most productive and sustainable power comes from the power of cooperation, listening to your own true heart AND to others.

And second, we must include the voices of marginalized and vulnerable groups among us. Like the donkey who saw the angel, like the Wicked Witch who chose truth and integrity over popularity, we can learn so much when we make space for those on the fringes to share their experiences. In our world, animals don't speak, but what if they did? What might they see that your eyes are covered to? And who else in our society is silenced, and what might they contribute if given the chance? There are so many stories – in our texts, in literature, in history, and maybe even in our own lives – of uncovering a story that hasn't yet been told to reveal a beautiful or complicated truth. I think there are so very many of these stories because people seek to feel that amazing feeling when, as with Balaam,

your eyes are uncovered, when you gain a new perspective and you realize you're better off and you'll never go back.