

When a Donkey Steals the Show
Parashat Balak
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In the movie *Shrek 2*, a talking donkey, voiced by Eddie Murphy, says, “You know, in some cultures donkeys are revered as the smartest of animals, especially us talking ones.”

He could have been talking about Parashat Balak, which includes a pretty smart donkey. The talking donkey in *Shrek* was one of my favorite characters, and in Parashat Balak, the donkey was definitely my favorite character.

Why? Because she was the most honest, straightforward, and really the most relatable character—and the one who could really see things for what they were—in the very strange story about Balak and Bil’am, which has been described as being, like *Shrek*, sort of like a fairy tale.

Just for some context, here’s what some other commentators have said about this parashah. It’s been called curious, “altogether strange,” an enigma wrapped in a conundrum, and, by Lawrence Kushner, “so preposterous it makes splitting the Red Sea look like child’s play.”

Balak is definitely a pretty weird parashah. What happens in the parashah is that the Israelites are camped just outside Canaan, and Balak, who is the king of Moab, is worried about them coming his way. He can look out over their camp and see how numerous they are, and he knows that they have already fought against a number of other peoples—like the Canaanites and Amorites—and the Israelites have come out on top. So it’s not surprising that Balak is worried that the Israelites pose a threat to the Moabites.

Balak decides to seek help from a man named Bil’am, who is a non-Israelite prophet—different commentators have referred to him as a sorcerer or a wizard or even a “rent-a-prophet.” We’re told in this parashah (by Balak)



that Bil'am is known to have power such that when he blesses someone, that person is blessed, and when he curses someone, that person is cursed.

Balak wants Bil'am to curse the Israelites. He figures if that happens, maybe the Israelites won't overpower his people like they did with some of the other peoples in the region. So he sends some of his emissaries to ask Bil'am to come with them to meet with him and to curse the Israelites. They offer to pay him. Bil'am is intrigued. But he says he has to check with God first and tells the group to wait overnight. God tells Bil'am not to go with Balak's men and that he must not curse the Israelites, "for they are blessed." So in the morning Bil'am tells Balak's men to go.

The dignitaries leave, but Balak really doesn't want to take no for an answer. He sends back a bigger, more distinguished group of dignitaries to ask Bil'am *again* to come to curse the Israelites. Again Bil'am says, let me check with God. God says something a bit different this time—he says Bil'am can go with Balak's delegation—but reminds Bil'am that he can only say whatever God commands him to say.

In the morning, Bil'am sets out, riding on the donkey, with the Moabite dignitaries. But God apparently has one of his angry moments—he really wasn't happy with Bil'am going with the Moabite group, even though he had told him the evening before that he could go—so he sends his angel to block the path with a sword. But Bil'am can't see the angel. Who can? The donkey! Naturally, she stops. Bil'am is incensed. Three times he tries to get her to move again, and three times it doesn't work, because the donkey is trying to steer clear of the angel with the sword—and three times Bil'am beats the donkey. The donkey then magically gets the power of speech—a talking donkey, just like in *Shrek*! And she says to Bil'am, "Why do you keep hitting me? Aren't I your faithful donkey that is not in the habit of just stopping in the middle of the road?" And Bil'am has to admit that the answer is no.

Then God, quote, "uncovered Bil'am's eyes" so he could see the angel, who then proceeds to admonish Bil'am for beating the poor donkey. At that point Bil'am admits he has "sinned"—not b/c he hit his donkey, mind you, but because he didn't see the angel in the road. He says he'll turn back if the angel wants, but the angel says, no, go with the men, but reminds him, again, that he can say nothing except what the Lord tells him to say.

And when Bil'am arrives to meet Balak, this is exactly what happens—three times. Balak keeps taking Bil'am to different high vantage points so that he can view the Israelites' camp—which is pretty huge—and asks him to curse them. Each time, before he says anything, Bil'am goes off to hear the word of God, who we're told “puts words into Bil'am's mouth” to say to Balak. And each time those words come out as blessings on the Israelites instead of curses. Balak gets increasingly upset about this. Finally, after the third blessing, in frustration, Balak sends Bil'am home—without his reward—but not before Bil'am warns Balak that Israel will conquer the Moabites.

And then, at the end of the parashah, we're back with the Israelites for a rather violent episode. Apparently the Israelites have begun to consort with the Moabite women and have been worshipping their gods. God is of course not happy about this and tells Moses to have the ringleaders impaled. And then one of the Israelite men shows up with a Midianite woman, and Pinchas, the grandson of Aaron, follows them into a tent and stabs them both. And apparently this is what stops a plague against the Israelites that had killed 24,000 people.

After that last scene, I wished I was back with the talking donkey.

So, some commentators say that one of the lessons of this parashah is simply that it's not good to be someone like Bil'am, who is essentially a mercenary prophet. Bil'am does kind of string Balak along—it may be that he's hoping that God will change his mind and not be so insistent that the Israelites only be blessed (because that's what will get Bil'am his silver and gold from Balak)—but that doesn't happen. Bil'am doesn't get the money he'd wanted from Balak, plus he has this embarrassing scene with the donkey, ostensibly in front of the Moabite dignitaries he's traveling with. And he gets chastised by the angel of the Lord.

Another really interesting reading of this parashah comes from Jan Uhrbach, who directs the Jewish Theological Seminary's Block/Kolker Center for Spiritual Arts. Her theory is that this whole story represents Moses' dream—that it incorporates some of Moses' experiences, anxieties, doubts and fears. That we're supposed to compare Bil'am as a prophet to Moses as a prophet.

Uhrbach points out that Moses has always been a reluctant and unsure prophet, thinking he wasn't good enough. And he's had a sometimes tough time in the desert with the Israelites—who have complained a lot, and gotten

into trouble of different kinds, and don't always listen to him. Maybe Moses worried that he was like Bil'am—not the right kind of prophet.

And the part where Bil'am hits a roadblock—his path is blocked by the angel of the Lord, and his donkey won't budge—Uhrbach says you can compare that, in a way, to the literal roadblocks Moses faced, in the form a bunch of foreign nations that didn't want to let the Israelites pass through their land. Then there's what she calls the ultimate roadblock—God forbidding Moses to enter the Promised Land. Her take on this parashah is that, even if we do the wrong thing (like Bil'am), or make the wrong choices or say the wrong words, like Moses was always worried about doing and sometimes DID, that pushing through our self-doubts or our mistakes, and being open to improving—well, then maybe curses can get turned into blessings, like when the curses Balak wanted Bil'am to make came out as blessings instead. Or like when it becomes clear that the Israelites really will make it to the Promised Land after their years of slavery and wandering and sometimes making bad choices in the desert.

So maybe this parashah is all a dream. Or maybe it's just comic relief. I realized as I was reading it that everything was in threes, like in a folk tale—Balak tries three times to get Bil'am to curse the Israelites; Bil'am comes out with blessings for the Israelites, three times; the donkey gets beaten three times—and it kind of reminded me of those jokes where things come in threes, like, a rabbi, a priest, and a minister walk into a bar. Maybe here in Parashat Balak we're meant to have a dose of this “three-times” sort of thing—something other than what we've had leading up to this. After all, it's been a long 40 years in the desert, all about the Israelis wandering, being unhappy, facing enemies, and getting into trouble. Maybe we're just meant to have a bit of an escape here—a bit of a fairy tale to give us a breather.

I should add that, for me, the timing of focusing on Balak—this strange and fairy tale-like story—has been good. Given all the craziness in the world right now, it has definitely felt like a breather for me.

Back to the talking donkey. Another commentary I read, by George Savran of The Schechter Institutes in Israel, talks about the fact that there are only two places in the Bible where animals are able to talk. One is this talking donkey in Balak, and the other is the serpent in Genesis—the one that convinces Eve that it's OK to eat the apple from the Tree of Knowledge. The difference, though, according to Savran, is that, in Genesis, the serpent is a

bad influence, convincing Eve to eat that apple, which leads her and Adam to gain knowledge they're not supposed to have—to see things they're not supposed to see, like their nakedness—and to eventually get driven out of Eden by God. But in Balak, the donkey is a good influence. She sees what needs to be seen—she sees the angel with the sword—and she essentially saves Bil'am's life by stopping in the middle of the road. After all, that angel might have killed Bil'am if the donkey hadn't stopped moving. Unlike the serpent, who represented some kind of sinister force outside of God, a force attempting to *disobey* God, the donkey was able to speak *because* of the divine spirit—in fact, we're told: “The Lord opened the mouth of the ass.” (I love that sentence, by the way, and I should tell you that last week Joey Baron told me that one of the best things about doing a d'var on this parashah is being able to say the word “ass” in Temple on Shabbat!)

Why is this donkey important? Well, you could argue that the whole stopping in the middle of the road incident, Bil'am's beating of the donkey, that whole scene—you would think it would have given Bil'am pause, maybe made him think twice about what he was about to do. After all—God has made it clear that he does NOT want Bil'am to curse the Israelites, yet Bil'am is heading off to see Balak, who is expecting him to do just that. Also, the angel criticizes Bil'am for beating the donkey, but Bil'am doesn't seem to think what he did was so bad. In short, Bil'am has a moment here to reconsider what he's doing, and how he wants to behave—but he doesn't do it. The donkey here has the moral high ground—not Bil'am.

By the way, the same way the Lord “opened the mouth of the ass,” he also “opened the mouth of Bil'am”—that language is the same in the parashah—so you see how you could make the connection that the real ass is not the donkey, but Bil'am. Think about it: Those times when Bil'am offered blessings on the Israelites instead of curses—the way they're described in the parashah, it seems that Bil'am is just parroting words, not really feeling them. On the other hand, by the time Bil'am offers his third blessing, according to Savran, he seems to achieve more what feels like true insight—behaving less as a mercenary sorcerer just “opening his mouth” to say words provided by God, and more as a true prophet, telling Balak that the Israelite kingdom “shall be exalted” and even providing us with the language that became one of our most common prayers, the Mah Tov: “How fair are your tents, O Jacob, your dwellings, O Israel.” So maybe he kind of comes around—although it's not like we're ever really going to warm up to this guy.

The donkey, on the other hand—just a good egg. She was able to see what was right in front of her—the angel of the Lord—when Bil'am, the prophet, whose whole stock-in-trade was to be a “seer,” after all—*couldn't* see. I like that the donkey was the “the little guy” standing up to “the man.” And I also simply liked the fact that the donkey was a girl donkey—but of course, I'm biased in that regard.

That donkey in Shrek? Kind of annoying. But smart enough, and sometimes pretty insightful. Like our donkey in Balak. To quote the movie donkey again: “You know, in some cultures donkeys are revered as the smartest of animals, especially us talking ones.”