

Parashat Balak 5778

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In this week's Parsha, Parshat Balak, we come up against the fundamental limits of human control. The King of Moab, Balak, sends emissaries to the regional, well-established prophet Bilaam asking him to come and prophesy against the Israelites. Though he first refuses them, upon the second request when greater emissaries arrive with greater promises of wealth, he succumbs and goes with them. While talking out of one side of the mouth about the impossibility of saying anything other than what God tells him, he gives the impression that he will do whatever is Balak's desire. But in a situation like this, when it's impossible to please everyone, Bilaam fails to make a decision. On the one hand, is his earthly master who will pay him richly in silver and gold; but on the other is his heavenly master, the God from whom he receives the divine word to pronounce over the peoples, and who gives him his power as a seer of the future. As we continue looking at the lessons of leadership in the book of Bamidbar, or Numbers, we're well advised to consider the dynamics of Bilaam and Balak and learn from them about how to avoid such a pitfall of willfulness.

A note of important background, Bilaam is actually known to us from an inscription that was discovered in 1967 in Jordan at Deir Alla. On the walls of the temple we find oracles of the Prophet Bilaam ben Be'or, the same name that we have here in this week's Parsha. This is very unusual to have direct literary evidence of a figure also appearing in the Torah. While we can't say 100 percent, that this is the same figure, it may well be. And while we should not make too much of the handful of facts that we unearth, it is nice to know how plausible such a scenario is. The prophet speaks in an oracular manner very much like the one here pronouncing blessings and curses on different nations and behaving very much like an ancient politician. Why does Bilaam change his answer? If he so clearly tells the emissaries, "God told me no, do not to go with them," Why in verse 8 does he say, "I can only say what God tells me, but why don't you spend the night here and I will give you an answer in the morning." What's going on? Bilaam's big question seems to be: "Can the word of God change?" He doubts, he waffles, his answer becomes unclear, and the rest of the action unfolds from this unsteadiness. While Bilaam apparently changes the word of God, nothing fundamentally changes, he just deepens his involvement and makes more of a fool of himself speaking against what he had apparently promised Balak he would do. Why does he do it? The text gives us clues. He seems to have his eye on the silver and gold that have been promised him, he seems to be over awed by the importance of the dignitaries who are sent to him a second time, and he seems to *want to give in* to Balak's insistence. The dignitaries promise him great honor, referring to a house of silver and gold, weighing him down with treasure and Bilaam is persuaded.

Balak, the king of Moab, provides a different character study, with a complimentary angle. His question seems to be is the power and the authority of the gods for hire? Perhaps in his culture, it generally is. Perhaps he is unaccustomed to working with Adonai, the God of the Hebrews, the

creator of heaven and earth. He seems to think that the power of the Gods can be harnessed, to curse or bless, whomever he wishes. His is a cynical posture, in which wealth determines how religious authorities speak, and those religious authorities in turn can influence the future. Balak is a forceful person, who wants his way. He'll tell the prophet what to prophesy. Balak is a fascinating character study in someone who takes his influence too far, having been blessed with kingship and wealth. He also wants to control the word of God. So he tries to corrupt Bilaam. You can imagine him easily. He is the kind of leader who says, "We'll bring in the very best person from far away. We'll get the best consultant there is to tell us how to do things right." And then he tells the consultant what the right thing is. Why does he bother? So that he has the added authority to move forward with his plan. He believes he can lure the prophet of God with wealth and honor. And for a time he appears to be correct. The desire that moves Balak is to control the future, and in this case geopolitics, and to drive the Hebrews away from his land. What he does not know is that a force far vaster than his is moving the people towards the promised land, ... slowly, but surely.

Two leaders, two sets of questions. I want to ask **us** a question. When we ask questions to our leaders, do we try to influence the answer? Do we try to get a particular outcome? This raises a broader question: How do we make requests? Or are we able to ask a question, or come to a situation, honestly prepared to let it unfold as it needs to, as it will? Are we able to accept the dictum of God to Bilaam, "you shall not go with them, nor shall you curse the people for it is blessed." God answers by appealing not to just his will, but the nature of things. His people are blessed and it cannot be changed. Can we learn the wisdom of the *Ki Barukh Hu*, "for it is blessed" the wisdom to work with the nature of things. The fact is that it is God's choice to curse or bless.

I want to make the following disclaimer before I apply it directly to our community: I'm not preaching this because we have a problem in this area; instead, I'm teaching this in order to preclude problems—before they come up. And I have a sense that when I preach on topics that are in the parasha, that God is giving us a message designed for this week, at this time. Parashat Balak 5778, the second week that I am here with you teaching at Temple Beth-El, I'm teaching it because it's in the Parsha and I believe that we will find a message from God for us and that the timing is just right. May it be "a choice word at the right time," as the proverb says.

Let me ask the question about our culture, as we attempt to apply this: How do we relate to our Rabbis here at Temple Beth-El? Are they supposed to say only what we want to hear? If so, then we are in the position of Balak. No, the Rabbi must remain free, free to teach the Torah, free to instruct according to the word of God and the instructions of our Jewish tradition. To treat the Rabbi otherwise would be to treat him as coming in the heritage of Bilaam, a prophet for hire, but the Rabbis are disciples of Moses. They answer first to God.

The commentator Seforno commenting on verse 9, when God asks, "Who are these people with you, spending the night?" —" 'What are their offer that you have prepared yourself for prophesy on their behalf in order to know what to do for them. Are they here to inquire about the future? Is it merely the future they wish to know or are they here to

obtain some specific desire or purpose through your curse and your intention? Is your intention to gain permission to fulfill their desire? ”

God calls the game from beforehand. “Bilaam, they’re not here to use your unusual ability to peer into the future, they’re here to use your power, and I do not give them permission.”

The **independence of the Rabbi is essential to his job**, as it is to any leader. When we come to an expert, we trust their independent, informed judgement. Whether they’re a judge, doctor or home inspector, and we want to know that they are exercising their full powers rather than being swayed by whomever is paying the bill. So while it’s good to communicate openly and honestly and tell your leaders what you feel and what you would like, let’s have an intention to stop short of telling our leader what the outcome needs to be. Let’s not prejudge how things should turn out.

But how can we get there? Obviously, there are things that we feel we need.

I believe that the wisdom of Pirkei Avot 5:19 to reflecting on the nature of Bilaam’s errors can help out. Pirkei Avot 5:19 contrasts the disciples of Bilaam with disciples of Abraham. Someone who has an evil eye, a haughty spirit and a broad appetite is a student of Bilaam, who did evil. In layman’s terms, this is an envious eye, one that judges others as unworthy of their blessing. Ruakh Gevohah is pride or a haughty spirit and Nefesh Rekhavah is lustiness, a lack of control of our appetites. Someone whose character inclines this way will find himself or herself behaving the way Bilaam did. Torn, doubting, easily swayed by those who can offer wealth or honor. But the disciples of Abraham are the opposite. Those who have a good eye, namely a **generous spirit** toward others, a **humble spirit**, their attitude is “how can I help?” Nefesh Shefelah, a small appetite, has self-control, rather than being led by their own appetite. Pirkei Avot connects this attitude, much like the theme of last weeks sermon, to a posture of trust. Quoting Psalm 55 “And as for me, I will trust in you O God.”

The person who is able to have this generosity of spirit that recognizes the good in others and judges them favorably, is able to do so because they place their basic confidence in God. And as a result, they don’t need circumstances to go one way instead of another in order to be happy. It leaves to the ability to help others and an ability to be in control of one’s own desires rather than subservient to them. So this Shabbat, I want to bless each and every one of us including myself to have a good eye, an outlook that finds the good in others, that judges them favorably, even when they don’t make decisions that we would have preferred.

I bless us each to have a humble spirit, a sense of “How can I help?” rather than “How can I receive?” and I bless us each to have self-control, a sense of independence from our appetites.

And as we do this, I have no doubt that we will be able to bless each other and there will be enough blessings for each and every one of us. Shabbat Shalom.