**BALAK (Full – Annual Cycle)**

*B’Midbar* (*Numbers*) 22:2 – 25:9

*Eitz Hayim* 894; Plaut 1173; Hertz 688

This Shabbat I want to talk about one of my favourite stories in the Torah. It tells us about Balak, the wealthy king of Moab and Midian, who asks Balaam, probably the most enigmatic prophet in the Bible, to curse the Israelites. The whole story requires only three chapters, yet they are so different from what comes before and after them that some scholars argued that they were an independent book of Torah—the *Book of Balaam*. As for my d’var, I will talk as if Adath Shalom worked on the annual cycle of Torah reading rather than the triennial cycle. The story must be told in full, not over three years.

Parashat *Balak* is an interlude in Jewish Biblical History. The Israelites have fought their way south to north through much of Moab. They are now resting on the plains of Moab, across the Jordan River from Jericho, and preparing for their move westward into Canaan, their real objective. There is no enmity between Israel and Moab, nor will Israel displace Balak on their route to Canaan. Nevertheless, King Balak seems to fear them and to believe that by inducing God to curse the Israelites, he can stop their advance. Therefore, he contacts Balaam (aka Bilaam), a quasi-prophet from Meso-potamia, whom he believes has the links to God and the power to get the job done.

To digress briefly with a bio of Balaam, Hertz (pg 668) introduces him with words that Balaam’s “personality is an old enigma, which has baffled the skill of commentators.” It does seem that Balaam had learned some elements of true religion in Mesopotamia, “the cradle of the ancestors of Israel.” However, because of some “fundamental contradictions in his character,” most Biblical scholars see him as more a heathen sorcerer than a true prophet, and post-Biblical scholars were even more negative, though there were always a few who saw him in more favorable terms. To close this digression, I do not see how, given his later career in Moab, which I will discuss briefly below, any favorable criticism is possible.

Returning to the thrust of my d’var, Balaam is at first true to his mandate and tells Balak that he can only relate what God tells him to say. Balak then ups the ante with an offer of a rich reward of money. Balaam is sorely tempted and asks God for permission to go to Balak. In my view, God is thinking that it is time to pull Balaam off his pedestal, so He says to Balaam, OK, you can go but remember (22:20): “Whatever I command you, that you shall do.” This resumé brings us to the high point of the story*—*except that I have skipped the famous donkey who could not only talk but also see better than Balaam. That animal could easily be a d’var in itself so please excuse if I ignore him.

The big day starts with the construction of seven new altars with a bull and a ram sacrificed on each. Balak then guides Balaam to a high point of land from which he can look down on the Israelite camp. (The Hertz chumash indicates (669) that heathen curses work only if you can see the target of the curse.) Finally, it is Balaam’s turn at centerstage. He tells Balak to leave him there alone. And Balaam shouts out his curses, but, as we have known all along, God intercedes and what comes out of his mouth are blessings. Balaam’s curses are defeated by God while Israel does not even know that it is under threat.

Jewish sources are very mixed in evaluating Balaam, some call him a prophet (albeit a non-Jewish one), others call him a magician. The mainstream view is that he did have special powers, but that, in contrast to other non-Jewish Biblical characters, such as Job, he was not honourable. Time after time, Balaam allows Balak to induce him to curse the Israelites, and time after time, it is praises that come out.

In its comments on Parashat Balak, the highly moralistic women’s siddur, *Tz'enah Ur'enah,* says that the sin of illicit sexual relations is even worse in God's eyes than idol worship (793). Perhaps this is true. After his initial failure to curse the children of Israel, Balaam conceived the plan of seducing the Jewish men into idol worship. There seemed to be a slippery slope between the beds of Moabite women and the altars of pagan temples. Balaam is said to have reasoned that they would then be cursed by their own God. However, it was Balaam himself who was killed in a battle over both illicit sex and idol worship. To give him some credit, one commentator says that God gave prophetic status to pagans, such as Balaam and Job, so no one could say that God was accessible only to the Jews (Plaut 1184).

Balaam may be the main character, but he is not the main point of the story. To quote Rabbi Plaut (1185):

The three chapters containing the story of Balaam are in fact indifferent to a judgement either of Balaam's character or of his religion. . . . The text, then, is less the tale of a pagan, be he prophet or sorcerer, than a paean of God and His affection for the Children of Israel.”

As if this were not enough, to reinforce this conclusion, the Haftarah associated with the Parashat Balak turns to Micah, my favorite prophet, who writes;

“He has told you, O man, what is good,

“And what the Lord requires of you:

“Only to do justice,

“And to love goodness,

“And to walk modestly with your God.”

However, we are not yet finished with Balaam. He proposes a third attempt to curse Israel. As before, lots of bulls and rams meet their end on altars as part of the effort, but to no avail. If anything, the third curse-turned-to-blessing is the most beautiful of all. In fact, we start every morning service with Balaam's words (24:5):

“Ma tovu ohalchah ya'akov, mishkh'notechah Yisrael”

“How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel.”

Midrash goes wild over that statement, with both literal and figurative interpretations. Some say “tents” means “Torah,” and “dwelling places” means the “synagogues.” In one reference, *Tz'enah Ur'enah* comes back to sex in stating that the passage means that Israelite tents were pitched so that no one could see into another's door.

I will conclude my d’var with a puzzle. Logically, Parashat Balak should have ended with the last verse in Chapter 24, which says simply that Balaam and Balak each went home. Period; end of story. However, Parashat Balak goes on with nine verses from Chapter 25, which is an entirely different story. It also violates traditional practice by which each parashah ends on an upbeat note. This one ends by describing a plague in which some 24 thousand Israelites died.

Why this addition and this change of tradition? I have not found the answer in any text I looked at, so here is my own thought: What if, in the view of the Masoretes when they were dividing up the Torah into weekly portions, the story of Balak and Bslaam carries a good thing too far. It is too upbeat, and they wanted to balance it with something to show that, despite all the evidence, the children of Israel still had doubts, and that they were barely worthy of the God who was doing so much for them. Therefore, they added the story about the plague along with a note that the plague ended.

Shabbat Shalom