

Parshat Balak: a talking donkey, the fate of man and beast, and what we say when we enter the sanctuary.

Parshat Balak is an interesting portion. As the Etz Hayim says, it contains what may be the only comic passage in the Torah. It tells the tale of how Balaam, who was supposed to be the world's most powerful wizard, struggled to find his way in his own neighborhood. He was hired by Balak to curse the Israelites (as part of Balak's military efforts), but every time he opened his mouth to curse the Israelites, a blessing came out instead. Just picture that.

But the story's most unforgettable feature is a talking she-ass/donkey. Perhaps this is what gave the creators of Shrek the idea. It is a funny scene: Balaam, who was on his way to curse the Israelites, cannot see the angel which God placed in his way as an adversary. But the donkey can and she swerved from the road into the field, squeezed Balaam's foot against the wall, and lay under him. Balaam, who was now quite frustrated, beat her repeatedly to turn her back into the road. Then the Lord opened her mouth. Phrases 28-30, pages 897-898.

She said to Balaam "What have I done to you that you have beaten me these three times?"

Balaam actually responded and struck a conversation with his ass. "You have made a mockery of me!"

The ass said to Balaam: "Look, I am the ass that you have been riding all along until this day! Have I been in the habit of doing thus to you?!?"

And he answered (shamefully, I imagine) "No".

Comic relief aside, again from the Etz Hayim commentary, there are many folk tales in which animals behave like humans, and it raises questions: "what does it mean to be human? What makes us different from other animals?" Seeing the angel blocking the path, the donkey can recognize, better than Balaam does, that what they are setting out to do is wrong. Human beings should have the capacity to know right from wrong. But we do not always, do we? So is there really any difference?

--Or in the words of Kohelet, Ecclesiastes: "For in respect of the fate of man and the fate of beast, they have one and the same fate: as the one dies so dies the other, and both have the same lifebreath; man has no superiority over beast, since both amount to nothing. Both go to the same place; both came from dust and both return to dust" (Ecclesiastes, 3:19-20)

"ומותר האדם מן הבהמה אין כי הכל הבל."

A bit depressing.

Is there really no difference? Some suggest that what stands between man and beast is the ability to speak. Is this why God opened the she-ass's mouth? And is that it? Or is it that we, as humans, have a moral obligation towards animals, mankind, and the world?

--Harav Avraham Itzhak Kook, who was the first Ashkenazi chief rabbi in the British mandatory Palestine, a great Jewish thinker and scholar and one of the most influential rabbis of the 20th century, is also known for his writings about

“the Vision of Vegetarianism and Peace”. Contrary to what many believe, he was not a vegetarian, because he believed that in this world, man is not morally ready not to use animals for his own good. He argued that man should focus on fair and just treatment of other men. It will just be too much to ask of man. But he also stressed the importance of many Jewish laws which exist to protect animals and remind us of where we stand, morally speaking, when we eat them and use their wool. In his writings Harav Kook drew a picture of the ideal world which will exist in the End of Days: man and beast will live together in harmony (Zootopia), and eating meat will be considered unthinkable.

So maybe the talking donkey is not a comic relief after all. Perhaps there is actually deep meaning to their dialogue, reminding Balaam she has always served him faithfully and therefore should not be mistreated by him. This scene serves to remind us that we are in fact different from beasts but that this difference comes with profound moral obligations towards animals. The fact that humans speak, makes it possible to discuss morals and obligations, and also to pray. Why do we pray?

--Back to our parsha. 24:5, page 904, here are the words of Balaam:

"מה טובו אוהליך יעקב משכנותיך ישראל"

“How fair are your tents, O Jacob, Your dwellings, O Israel!”

And in our new siddur Lev Shalem, page 101: “How lovely are your dwellings, Jacob; your sanctuaries, people of Israel!”

The commentary on the right hand side says: “Many rabbinic readings of this verse understand the “dwellings of Jacob” (literally, “tents of Jacob”) and the “sanctuaries of Israel” to refer to houses of study and prayer houses (Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 105b, for instance). Interestingly, we enter the synagogue with the words of a non-Jew, here used to praise the synagogue. This verse was added to the service in the late Middle Ages, when European royal courts became more formal, which warranted a similarly formal introduction to our worship of the Sovereign of All.” If you read the rest of this prayer, you will notice that three of the verses begin with the word “אני”, I. We enter worship as individuals and *then* join the community in prayer.

The sixth line from the top of this prayer reads:

"ואני תפלתי לך אדוני עת רצון, אלוהים ברב חסדך, ענני באמת ישעך"

“My prayers are to You, Adonai, in the hope that this is a favorable time; God in your abundant love, respond to me with faithful deliverance”.

So we stand and pray and hope that it is a good time for God, and that God will answer our prayers with loving kindness and true deliverance. I am personally ambivalent about this. Is this why I pray?

The Maggid of Dubno said that prayer is not connected with our needs or even our existence; God is always aware of those. Prayer’s real purpose is to awaken us, so that we are aware of our obligations towards our community, our people, God – even ourselves. And from our parsha – animals too.

ואני תפילתי is also the name of the Masorti movement's beautiful new Siddur, and so I will end with my own translation to English of a very Israeli prayer from that siddur, which immediately follows מַה טוֹבוּ:

“May it be your will that the entrance to this synagogue be wide enough to accept all those who yearn for love and are thirsty for human companionship. May it be your will that through this gate will come all those who wish to remove anger from their heart, express their gratitude, and strengthen their hopes. May it be your will that the entrance to this synagogue be narrow enough to prevent the entering of pettiness, vanity, jealousy and שנאת חִינּוּם, hatred. May the threshold of this synagogue not be an obstacle to young feet and stray feet, but proud and crushing feet will not pass it. May it be your will that this synagogue will enrich the lives of those who come into it with content and challenge, the joy of mitzvah, and the love of God *and* man. כֵּן יִהְיֶה רְצוֹן.”

Shabbat Shalom.