

PARSHAT BALAK

8-14 Tammuz 5784
14-20 July 2024

Torah: Numbers 22:2-25:9
Haftorah: Micah 5:6-6:8

The Showdown

They stood arrayed against each other, the best either nation had to offer. On one side stood Moses, who would be remembered as the greatest prophet of all time. On the other side was Balaam, the far-famed soothsayer, whose curses were regarded as all-powerful. Both had access to the highest levels of divine truth. Both could transcend their human limitations and engage in divine discourse. Moses utilized his gift for prophecy and blessing; Balaam utilized his for destruction and damnation, seeking to manipulate divine will against the victims of his wrath. Moses led his people along a path destined by G-d, a path of sanctity and inspiration. Opposing him was Balaam, hoping to use his divine gift to obstruct this path. Balaam intended to apply his usual tactics, sorcery, and soothsaying. But, in an ironic twist of faith, Balaam's words were used against his intentions by the very G-d he had hoped to manipulate. As the Torah tells it in in this week's Parshah (Numbers 22:2-24:14), the people of Israel were encamped on the borders of Moab when Moses applied for permission to the Moabite king for his people to pass through. Rather than grant such license, Balak, king of Moab, commissioned Balaam to place a curse upon the Jews. Balaam embarked for Moab, hoping to use his venomous oratory. But G-d pulled the curses from Balaam's mouth and implanted instead a beautiful ode to the Jews - an ode that ranks as the highest praise of the Jewish people in all of the Torah. The question is: what was Balaam thinking? How could he have hoped to manipulate G-d against

His own children? How could he hope to harness divine powers to counter-purpose with the divine?

The Divine Transcendence

We believe that G-d is intrinsically good, and thus concerned with the good behavior and moral conduct of humanity; that He rewards good behavior and punishes bad. This is certainly true on one level, but it cannot be true on all levels. G-d, we believe, transcends all limitations and is free of all constraints - even the constraints of moral principles. He is indefinable and cannot be confined to any set of rules. If He enunciates principles of morality, He does so by choice, absolutely free choice. These principles cannot constrain G-d, even after He chose to establish them. He was free to choose them when He did, and He continues to be free to reject them. Principles that constrain their subject must, by definition, precede their subject - an inconceivable notion when applied to G-d. To us, the principles of morality are incontrovertible. Our conception of human life is governed by these principles. Murder, to our minds, will always be wrong, and charity will always be right. This is because we were created in a world governed by these principles. To G-d, who precedes the principles of morality, they are not ironclad. So long as G-d chooses to bind Himself to them, the principles remain in place. Should He ever choose to disassociate from them, the principles would cease to exist. In other words, the principles that form the bedrock of society are not absolute; they are contingent upon divine choice.

(We have never known G-d to change His mind. We believe that G-d is, in fact, unchanging. But this is not because His principles are absolute, but because He is absolute. In other words, G-d is

not bound by His principles; His principles are bound by him.)

Balaam's Attempt

There must exist, on some level, a dimension of divinity that is immune to the principles of right and wrong; a level on which morality is not necessarily more appealing than immorality. A level on which the human experience simply doesn't matter. We can live or die, be honest or deceptive, kind or cruel: G-d wouldn't care. On that level, G-d completely transcends the petty workings of our universe. Fortunately, this dimension of divinity doesn't actively associate with the workings of creation. The divine dimension that does reach and govern our world is completely engaged. It is caring and imminent.

Nevertheless, should it be possible for us to "access" that rarefied dimension, we would be able to secure divine consent for things that defy morality, and thus sow chaos and destruction. On the other hand, should this dimension be accessed for constructive purposes, it might also be possible to draw down immense, completely undeserved, blessing for humanity. At this level G-d doesn't discriminate between the deserving and undeserving. Both can be cursed, and both can be blessed; it simply doesn't matter.

Choosing Jacob

Our sages taught that Moses was the only prophet able to relay G-d's words unequivocally. All other prophets introduced their prophecy with the phrase, "So said G-d." Moses would say, "This is the word of G-d." This is because all other prophets were privy to the level of divine "speech," while Moses was able to access the realm of divine "thought." Hence, other

Psalms Daily

Psalms for our brethren in the Holy Land

Psalm 117

1. Praise the Lord, all nations, laud Him, all peoples.
2. For His kindness has overwhelmed us, and the truth of the Lord is eternal. Hallelujah!

(Please say Chapter 20 daily)

Pirkei Avot (6:3)

One who learns from his fellow a single chapter, or a single law, or a single verse, or a single word, or even a single letter, he must treat him with respect. For so we find with David, King of Israel, who did not learn anything from Achitofel except for two things alone, yet he called him his "master," his "guide" and his "friend".

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prophets could, at best, listen to their prophecy and approximate its true meaning, while Moses could visualize his prophecy to discern its precise meaning. Moses was the only Jewish prophet to use the term “this,” but non-Jews also had a prophet who could use that term - Balaam. This demonstrates that Moses’ ability to access the transcendent levels of divine thought was matched by that of Balaam. Balaam hoped to utilize his gift of prophecy to access the rarefied dimension of the divine that remains unmoved and unbound by his own rules, and thus manipulate the G-d of Israel against his own children. Here he was countered by Moses, who also had access to this rarefied

level. What was Moses’ weapon at this cosmic showdown? A truth which runs even deeper than the “transcendent” divine reality which Balaam was reaching for. The prophet Malachi proclaims: “Behold, Esau is a brother to Jacob, yet I love Jacob and detest Esau.” The prophet does not speak here of biological brotherhood, for biological brotherhood itself is not sufficient reason to suppose that G-d might love Esau over Jacob. Rather, prophet refers to a dimension of the divine reality in which Jacob and Esau are “brothers,” because it is impervious to moral conduct and can possibly accept the immoral Esau over the moral Jacob. A dimension that views “Esau” and “Jacob,” despite their differences, as

equals. But even at this rarefied level, the prophet attests, “yet I love Jacob” - in this place, too, G-d chooses Jacob. This choice was revealed at Mount Sinai, when G-d expressed a choice of Israel that permeates the highest levels of his essence, even the rarefied dimension that hitherto remained impervious to Jacob in relation to Esau. Balaam challenged Moses on the pre-Sinai system, hoping to turn G-d against his own children. Moses opposed him on the post-Sinai system, which actualized the truth that even on the most transcendent level, Jacob would always be the favorite son. Not necessarily because his conduct is better, but because he is the chosen one.

By Lazer Gurkow

IN JEWISH HISTORY

Sunday, July 14, 2024-8 Tammuz, 5784

Spanish Inquisition Abolished (1834)

On July 15, 1834, the Office of the Spanish Inquisition was abolished by the Queen Mother Maria Christina, after nearly three and a half centuries, thousands of Jews tortured and burned alive, and hundreds of thousands forced to convert.

Jews expelled from Genoa (1567)

Having become a virtual vassal of Spain, the Republic of Genoa expelled the Jews.

Monday, July 15, 2024-9 Tammuz, 5784

Jerusalem Walls Breached (423 BCE)

The Babylonian armies of King Nebuchadnezzar breached the walls of Jerusalem on the 9th of Tammuz in the year 3338. The 9th of Tammuz was observed as a fast day until the second breaching of Jerusalem's walls.

Talmud Burned in France (1244)

Twenty-four wagonloads of Talmudic volumes were publicly burned by Christian church officials in Paris.

Passing of the Sanz-Klausenburger Rebbe (1994)

Born in Poland in 1905, he became the rabbi of the congregation in Klausenburg, Romania, in 1930. During the Holocaust, he and his family were separated, and he was subjected to forced labor in various camps, tragically losing his wife and nine of his children. He relocated to the United States and reestablished his court in Brooklyn in 1946. He remarried and fathered seven more children. His notable contributions include founding the Kiryat Sanz community in Israel and its Laniado Hospital.

Tuesday, July 16, 2024-10 Tammuz, 5784

King Zedekiah captured (423 BCE)

When the Babylonians breached the walls of Jerusalem on the 9th of Tammuz, King

Zedekiah fled the city. He was captured by Babylonian troops in the plains of Jericho on the 10th of Tammuz and was taken to King Nebuchadnezzar, who forced him to witness the slaughter of his sons, and then ordered his eyes gouged out.

Wednesday, July 17, 2024-11 Tammuz, 5784

Purim Tammuz (Algiers) (1775)

In 1775, the Spanish General O'Reilly attacked the city of Algiers and was successfully repulsed by the Dey of Algiers, Mohammed ibn Uman. Tradition has it that flames came out of the graves of the great Rabbis Isaac ben Sheshet and Solomon ben Simon Duran and contributed to the Spanish defeat.

Passing of Rabbi Elchanan Wasserman (1941)

Rabbi Elchanan Bunem Wasserman headed a famous yeshivah in Baranovitch (in what is now Belarus), attracting many bright students. At the outbreak of World War II, he fled with the yeshivah to Lithuania. In 1941. When the Nazis broke their pact with the Soviets and overran Lithuania, he was one of the thousands of Jews who met their deaths, sanctifying G-d's name. Rabbi Elchanan authored Kovetz Shiurim, a collection of Talmudic classes he delivered at the Yeshivah (Talmudical seminary).

Thursday, July 18, 2024-12 Tammuz, 5784

R. Yosef Yitzchak Born (1880)

Tammuz 12 is the birthday the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn of Lubavitch (1880-1950).

Passing of R. Jacob ben Asher (the Tur) (1348)

R. Jacob ben Asher, son of R. Asher ben Yechiel (the Rosh), was one of the most prominent Torah scholars in medieval Europe. His classic work on Jewish law,

Arba'ah Turim (known also as Tur), covers every area of Jewish life (in the post-Temple era), presenting the various opinions of previous authorities along with the author's own decisions.

Friday, July 19, 2024-13 Tammuz, 5784

R. Yosef Yitzchak Freed (1927)

On the 13th of Tammuz of 1927, the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn, received the documents authorizing his release from a prison sentence of exile to Kastroma in the interior of Russia. He had previously been sentenced to death, though that sentence had been commuted, on account of teaching Judaism.

Shabbat, July 20, 2024-14 Tammuz, 5784

Jews of Schaffhausen, Switzerland Burned at the Stake (1401)

After the postilion (coach driver) of the governor killed the four-year-old son of a councilor, charges were lodged against a Jew named Michael Vinelmann, a former resident of Basel, alleging that he had promised the murderer three gulden for the blood of the child. The murderer was broken on the wheel, and the Jew burned alive without trial. Shortly before, a similar accusation had been brought against the Jews of Schaffhausen and been successfully refuted. When news of Michael Vinelmann's fate was brought to Schaffhausen, several of the Jews of the city fled and were soon captured. They were taken back to Schaffhausen, where they were thrown into a dungeon and terribly tortured. Unable to endure the pain, they "confessed" to the crime of which they had been accused, whereupon all the Jews living in Schaffhausen were condemned to death. Thirty Jews were burned alive. Four weeks later, eighteen men and women died at the stake in Winterthur under similar circumstances.