

5780 - Numbers 19-25 - Chukat (Statutes) – Balak (Balak)

Chukat begins with the law of the red heifer, judged by the sages to be the most incomprehensible in the Torah. It became a classic example of a *chok*, a “statute,” often understood as a law that has no reason, or at least none we can understand.

The text then shifts from law to narrative. After the death of Miriam the people find themselves without water. They complain to Moses and Aaron, who turn to God. They then respond to the people in a way that seems to suggest anger. They are judged to have acted wrongly, and both are told they will not enter the land. Aaron dies.

The people complain again and are attacked by venomous snakes. Moses, at God’s command, places a brass serpent on a pole, so that all who look up to it will be healed. The people sing a song about a miraculous well that gave them water. Moses then leads the people into successful battles against Sihon and Og.

In the essays in this section, the first looks at one of the recurring themes in Numbers, the close connection between law and ritual, in this case between the law of the red heifer and the story that follows, about Miriam, Aaron, and Moses. The second examines the approach of one of the early masters of rabbinic Judaism, Yochanan b. Zakkai, to the red heifer. The third offers a new approach to “statutes” in terms of contemporary neuroscience. The fourth looks at the famous episode in which Moses struck the rock, for which he was sentenced not to enter the land. Was this a punishment, or something else? The fifth looks at an alternative way of understanding the episode. The sixth examines a strange rabbinic interpretation of a fragment of a song that appears towards the end of the *parasha*, about “the book of the Wars of the Lord.”

Balak, king of Moab, fears the approach of the Israelites. Together with the elders of Midian, he attempts to hire the well-known Mesopotamian prophet Balaam to curse them. Balaam consults with God, who tells him not to go, but the Moabites and Midianites return with another offer. This time God instructs Balaam to accompany them but only to say the words He puts in his mouth. After a strange episode in which Balaam’s donkey sees an angel blocking the way, Balaam and Balak ascend a mountain overlooking the Israelites’ camp.

Three times at different places they prepare altars and sacrifices, but each time, Balaam utters blessings instead of curses. Balak leaves in anger and frustration. Having been spared Balaam’s curses, however, the Israelites bring disaster on themselves through adultery and idolatry, seduced by the local women. Twenty-four thousand people die in a

plague that strikes the camp until Pinhas, in an act of zealotry, rises up against one of the wrongdoers.

In the essays that follow, I examine first **God’s apparent changes of mind in relation to Balaam’s mission**. The second essay examines one of the most famous of Balaam’s blessings, of Israel as “a people that dwells alone.” The third explores the flaw in Balaam’s character. The fourth asks about the place of the episode in the worldview of Tanakh as a whole. The fifth is about the aftermath, the sins of the Israelites with the Moabite and Midianite women.

*The Hardest Word to Hear*¹

The story of Balaam, the pagan prophet, begins with a bewildering set of non-sequiturs—a sequence of events that seems to have no logic. The context is that the Israelites were approaching the end of their forty years in the wilderness. Already they had fought and won wars against Sihon king of the Amorites and Og king of Bashan. They had arrived at the plains of Moab—today, southern Jordan at the point where it touches the Dead Sea.

Balak king of Moab was concerned, and shared his distress with the elders of Midian. The language the Torah uses at this point is precisely reminiscent of the reaction of the Egyptians at the beginning of the book of Exodus.

EGYPT: [Pharaoh] said to his people: “Here, the Children of Israel is more **numerous** [*rav*] and powerful than we ...” And [the Egyptians] felt a **disgust** [*vayakutz*] at the Children of Israel. (Ex. 1:9,12)

MOAB: And Moab was very fearful because of the people because it was **numerous** [*rav*], and Moab felt a **disgust** [*vayakatz*] at the Children of Israel. (Num. 22: 3)

The strategy Balak adopted was to seek the help of the well-known seer and diviner Balaam. In fact, the historical background to the Balaam narrative is well attested. Several Egyptian pottery fragments dating from the second millennium BCE have been found containing execration texts—curses—directed against Canaanite cities.⁽¹⁾ It was the custom among pre-Islamic Arabs to hire poets thought to be under divine influence to compose curses against their enemies.

As for Balaam himself a significant discovery was made in 1967. A plaster inscription on the wall of a temple at Deir Alla in Jordan, dated to the eighth century BCE, was found to make reference to the night vision of a seer called Balaam ben Beor—the earliest reference in archaeological sources to a named individual in the Torah.⁽²⁾ Thus, though the story itself

1 Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant & Conversation: Numbers*, (Maggid Books & The Orthodox Union), pp. 285-291.

contains elements of parable, it belongs to a definite context in time and place. (Another curious fact: the first-ever telegraph message—from Washington, May 24, 1844—quoted the words of Balaam [Num. 23:23]: “What hath God wrought.”)

The character of Balaam remains ambiguous, both in the Torah and subsequent Jewish tradition. Was he a diviner reading omens and signs, or a sorcerer practising occult arts? Was he a genuine prophet or a fraud? Did he assent to the divine blessings placed in his mouth, or did he secretly wish to curse Israel? According to some midrashic interpretations he was a great prophet, equal in stature to Moses. According to others, he was a pseudo-prophet with an “evil eye” who sought Israel’s downfall.⁽³⁾

1. Deuteronomy 23:3-6

³No Ammonite or Moabite or any of their descendants may enter the assembly of the LORD ... **they hired Balaam son of Beor ... to pronounce a curse on you.**

a. 2Peter 2:15-16

¹⁵They (i.e., those who follow the corrupt desire of the flesh and despise authority [v. 10]) have ... follow(ed) the way of **Balaam son of Bezer, who loved the wages of wickedness.**

b. Revelation 2:14

¹⁴There are some ... who hold to the teaching of **Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin so that they ate food sacrificed to idols and committed sexual immorality.**

In this essay I want to examine neither Balaam nor his blessings, but rather the preamble to the story, for it is here that one of the deepest problems arises, namely: **What did God want Balaam to do?** It is a drama in three scenes.

In the first, emissaries arrive from Moab and Midian. They state their mission. They want Balaam to curse the Israelites. Balaam’s answer is a model of propriety: Stay the night, he says, while I consult with God. God’s answer is unequivocal: “But God said to Balaam, **‘Do not go with them.** You must not put a curse on those people, because they are blessed” (Num. 22:12).

Obediently, Balaam refuses. Balak redoubles his efforts. Perhaps more distinguished messengers and the promise of significant reward will persuade Balaam to change his mind. The second scene unfolds. This time a new and more impressive set of emissaries arrives, offering “very great honour” (Num. 22:17) should Balaam agree. Again his reply is exemplary: “Even if Balak were to give me his palace filled with silver and gold, I could not do anything great or small to go beyond the command of the Lord my God” (22:18). However, he adds a fateful rider: “Now stay here tonight as the others did, and **I will find out what else the Lord will tell me**” (22:19).

The implication is clear. Balaam is suggesting that God may change His mind. But this seems impossible. That is not what God does. Yet to our surprise, that is precisely what God appears to do: “That night God came to Balaam and said, ‘Since these men have come to summon you, go with them, but do only what I tell you’” (Num. 22:20).

Initially God had said, “Do not go.” Now He says, “Go.” A second difficulty appears immediately in the next scene: “Balaam got up in the morning, saddled his donkey, and went with the princes of Moab. But God was very angry when he went, and the angel of the Lord stood in the road to oppose him” (Num. 22:21–22).

The previous night God had said, “Go.” Balaam went. Then God became “very angry.” Had God changed His mind not once but twice in the course of a single narrative? The mind reels. What is going on here? What was Balaam supposed to do? What did God want? The text offers no explanation. Instead the narrative shifts to the famous scene of Balaam’s donkey—itself a mystery in need of interpretation:

Balaam was riding on his donkey, and his two servants were with him. When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road with a drawn sword in his hand, it turned off the road into a field. Balaam beat it to get it back on the road.

Then the angel of the Lord stood in a narrow path between two vineyards, with walls on both sides. When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord, it pressed close to the wall, crushing Balaam’s foot against it. So he beat it again.

Then the angel of the Lord moved on ahead and stood in a narrow place where there was no room to turn, either to the right or to the left. When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord, it lay down under Balaam, and he was angry and beat it with his staff. Then the Lord opened the donkey’s mouth, and it said to Balaam, “What have I done to you to make you beat me these three times?”

Balaam answered the donkey, “You have made a fool of me! If I had a sword in my hand, I would kill you right now.” The donkey said to Balaam, “Am I not your own donkey, which you have always ridden, to this day? Have I been in the habit of doing this to you?” “No,” he said. Then **the Lord opened Balaam’s eyes, and he saw the angel of the Lord** standing in the road with his sword drawn. So he bowed low and fell facedown. (Num. 22:22-31)

The commentators offer various ways of resolving the apparent contradictions between God’s first and second reply. According to Nahmanides,²

² Moses ben Nachman (1194–1270), commonly known as Nachmanides and also referred to by the acronym RaMBaN was a leading medieval Jewish scholar, Sephardic rabbi, philosopher, physician, kabbalist, and biblical commentator.

God's first statement, "Do not go with them," meant, "Do not curse the Israelites." His second—"Go with them"—meant, "Go, but make it clear that you will only say the words I will put in your mouth, even if they are words of blessing." God was angry with Balaam not because he went, but because he did not tell them of the proviso.⁽⁴⁾

In the nineteenth century, Malbim³ and Rabbi Zvi Hirsch Mecklenburg⁴ suggested a different answer based on close textual analysis.⁽⁵⁾ **The Hebrew text uses two different words for "with them" in the first and second divine replies.** When God says, "Do not go with them" the Hebrew is *imahem*. When He later says, "Go with them," the corresponding word is *itam*. The two prepositions have subtly different meanings. *Imahem* means "with them mentally as well as physically," going along with their plans. *Itam* means "with them physically but not mentally"—in other words Balaam could accompany them but not share their purpose or intention. **God was angry when Balaam went, because the text states (Num. 22:21) that he went *im* them—in other words, he identified with their mission.**

This is an ingenious solution. The only difficulty is verse 35, in which the angel of God, having opened Balaam's eyes, finally tells Balaam, "Go with [*im*] the men." According to Malbim and Mecklenburg, this is precisely what God did *not* want Balaam to do.

There is, however, an alternative answer: **The hardest word to hear in any language is the word no. Balaam had asked God once. God had said "No."** That should have sufficed. Yet Balaam asked a second time. In that act he betrayed his essential character. He knew that God did not want him to go. Yet he invited the second set of messengers to wait overnight *in case God had changed His mind*.

God does not change His mind. **Therefore Balaam's delay said something not about God but about himself. He had not accepted the divine refusal. He wanted to hear the answer yes—and that is indeed what he heard.** Not because God wanted him to go, but because God speaks once, and if we refuse to accept what He says, God does not force His will upon us. As the sages of the Talmud put it: "Man is led down the path he chooses to tread" (Makkot [Lashes]10b).

2. 2Samuel 12:15-23

¹⁸**On the seventh day the child died ...** ²⁰**Then David got up from the ground ... 'Who knows? The LORD may be gracious to me and let the child live.'**

3. 2Corinthians 12:7-9

⁸Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. ⁹But he said to me, **"My grace is sufficient for you ...**

4. James 4:1-3

³**When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives,** that you may spend what you get on your pleasures ...

The true meaning of God's second reply, "Go with them," is, **"If you insist, then I cannot stop you going—but I am angry that you should have asked a second time." God did not change His mind at any point in the proceedings.** In scenes 1, 2, and 3, God did not want Balaam to go. His "yes" in scene 2 meant "no"—but it was a "no" Balaam was not prepared to hear. *When God speaks and we do not listen, He does not intervene to save us from our choices.* "Man is led down the path he chooses to tread."

But God was not prepared to let Balaam proceed as if he had divine consent. Instead He arranged the most elegant possible demonstration of the difference between true and false prophecy. **The false prophet speaks. The true prophet listens. The false prophet tells people what they want to hear. The true prophet tells them what they need to hear. The false prophet believes in his own powers. The true prophet knows that he has no power. The false prophet speaks in his own voice. The true prophet speaks in a voice not his.** "I am not a man of words," said Moses (Ex. 4:10). "I cannot speak for I am a child," said Jeremiah (Jer. 1:6).

5. John 14:23-24

²⁴Anyone who does not love me will not obey my teaching. **These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me.**

The episode of Balaam and the talking donkey is pure humour. One thing provokes divine laughter in Tanakh, namely human pretension.⁽⁶⁾ Balaam had won renown as the greatest prophet of his day. His fame had spread to Moab and Midian. He was known as the man who held the secrets of blessing and curse. God now proceeds to show Balaam that when He so chooses, even Balaam's donkey is a greater prophet than he. The donkey sees what Balaam cannot see: the angel standing in the path, barring the way. God humbles the self-important, just as He gives importance to the humble. When human beings think they can dictate what God will say, God laughs. And, on this occasion, so do we.

Some years ago, in the course of making a television programme for the BBC, I faced the following problem: I wanted to make a documentary about *teshuva*, repentance, but I had to do so in a way that would be intelligible to non-Jews as well as Jews, including those who had no religious belief at all. What secular counterpart could I choose that would illustrate the point?

3 The Malbim, an acronym for Meir Lob Ben Yehiel Michal, was a Russian-born rabbi and scholar of Hebrew who lived from 1809-1879.

4 R. Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenburg (1785-1865), Chief Rabbi of Koenigsberg in Germany.

I decided that the best way of doing so was to look at drug addicts. They had developed behaviour that they knew was self-destructive, but it was also addictive. To break the habit would involve immense reserves of will. They had to acknowledge that the life they led was harming them and they had to change. They had, in other words, to go through a secular equivalent of *teshuva*.

I spent a day in a rehabilitation centre, and it was heartbreaking. The young people there—they were aged between sixteen and eighteen—all came from broken families. Many had suffered abuse. Other than the workers at the centre, they had no networks of support. The staff was made up of exceptional people. **Their task was mind-numbingly difficult.** They would succeed in getting the addicts to break the habit for days, weeks at a time, and then they would relapse and the whole process would have to begin again. I began to realise that their patience was little less than a human reflection of God's patience with us. **However many times we fail and have to begin again, God does not lose faith in us, and that gives us strength.** Here were people doing God's work.

I asked the head of the centre, a social worker, what it was that she gave the young people that made a difference to their lives and gave them the strength to change. I will never forget her answer, because it was one of the most beautiful I ever heard. "We are probably the first people they have met who care for them unconditionally. And **we are the first people in their lives who cared enough to say no.**"

6. 1Kings 1:5-8

⁶(His father had never rebuked him by asking, "Why do you behave as you do?"

"No" is the hardest word to hear, but it is also often the most important—and the sign that someone cares. That is what Balaam, humbled, eventually learned, and what we too must discover if we are to be open to the voice of God.

(1) See John Gray, *The Legacy of Canaan: The Ras Shamra Texts and Their Relevance to the Old Testament* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1965).

(2) Bill Arnold and Bryan Beyer, *Readings from the Ancient Near East: Primary Sources for Old Testament Study* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002).

(3) See below, "The Man Without Loyalties."

(4) Nachmanides, Commentary to Num. 22:20.

(5) Malbim, Commentary to Num. 22:21; Mecklenburg, *HaKetav VeHaKabbala* (The Written [Torah] and the [Oral] Tradition) to Num. 22:12.

(6) See *Covenant and Conversation: Exodus—The Book of Redemption* (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2009), 53-58.

7. Then **the Lord opened Balaam's eyes, and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road with his sword drawn ...**

a. Genesis 3:5-7

⁵"For God knows that when you eat from it **your eyes will be opened**, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" ... ⁷Then **the eyes of both of them were opened ...**

b. Genesis 21:17-20

¹⁹Then **God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water.**

c. 2Kings 6:15-17

¹⁷And Elisha prayed, "**Open his eyes, LORD, so that he may see.**"

d. Luke 24:28-31

³¹Then **their eyes were opened and they recognized him**, and he disappeared from their sight.