

Parashat Balak

This week our portion recounts the tale of how Balak, king of the Moavites, sought to destroy our ancestors by means of considerable spiritual cunning. He had seen just how easily Israel had swept aside other Canaanite kings, like King Og of Bashan and Sichon king of the Amori, and he thus looked for another more effective strategy in combatting the Israelite threat. Rightly concluding that Israel's strength lay not so much in her numbers but in her spiritual help, Balak determined that he would not meet the Israelites in battle until she had been drained of her spiritual strength. It was thus that he summoned Bilam, a great gentile sorcerer, who dwelt some distance away beyond the Euphrates, with the purpose that he come to Moav and curse Israel. Indeed, it was this same Bilam that shaliach Kefa compared people of his own generation to: "These people," he said, "have left the straight way and wandered off to follow the way of Bil'am Ben-B'or, who loved the wages of doing harm but was rebuked for his sin — a dumb beast of burden spoke out with a human voice and restrained the prophet's insanity!" What a fascinating statement this is! In this passage Kefa makes it clear that Bilam's insanity, by which he means that he pursued money before morality, was exposed by a "dumb beast of burden speaking out with a human voice". Isn't that somewhat paradoxical? I mean, if I were to tell you that I had heard a donkey talk with a human voice, wouldn't you think that *I* was insane, or at least been imbibing some illegal substance? After all, donkeys don't *usually* talk do they? And yet, according to Kefa, and according to the account of this week's parashah, a speaking donkey confronted the gentile sorcerer and exposed *his* insanity! As we read, "So Bil'am got up in the morning, saddled his donkey and went with the princes of Mo'av. But God's anger flared up because he went, and the angel of Adonai stationed himself on the path to bar his way. He was riding on his donkey, and his two servants were with him. The donkey saw the angel of Adonai standing on the road, drawn sword in hand; so the donkey turned off the road into the field; and Bil'am had to beat the donkey to get it back on the road. Then the angel of Adonai stood on the road where it became narrow as it passed among the vineyards and had stone walls on both sides. The donkey saw the angel of Adonai and pushed up against the wall, crushing Bil'am's foot against the wall. So he beat it again. The angel of Adonai moved ahead and stood in a place so tight that there was no room to turn either right or left. Again the donkey saw the angel of Adonai and lay down under Bil'am, which made him so angry that he hit the donkey with his stick. But Adonai enabled the donkey to speak, and it said to Bil'am, "What have I done to you to make you beat me these three times?" Bil'am said to the donkey, "It's because you've been making a fool of me! I wish I had a sword in my hand; I would kill you on the spot!" The donkey said to Bil'am, "I'm your donkey, right? You've ridden me all your life, right? Have I ever treated you like this before?" "No," he admitted. Then Adonai opened Bil'am's eyes, so that he could see the angel of Adonai standing in the way with his drawn sword in his hand, and he bowed his head and fell on his face. The angel of Adonai said to him, "Why did you hit your donkey three times like that? I have come out here to bar your way, because you are rushing to oppose me. The donkey saw me and turned aside these three times; and indeed, if she hadn't turned away from me, I would have killed you by now and saved it alive!" Bil'am said to the angel of Adonai, "I have sinned. I didn't know that you

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were standing on the road to block me. Now, therefore, if what I am doing displeases you, I will go back." But the angel of Adonai said to Bil'am, "No, go on with the men; but you are to say only what I tell you to say." So Bil'am went along with the princes of Balak."

Now I don't know about you, but this passage reminds me of a certain popular movie in which a donkey also is made to speak.

VIDEO

So let me ask you, do you believe that donkeys can speak? Is the Torah's account of Bilam being reprimanded by a talking donkey literal truth or a flight of literary fancy, a la Shrek? Indeed, does it really matter? The issue at the heart of this question is what is called Biblical literalism - which, defined, means that you believe that everything in the Bible is literally true. In fact if you aren't familiar with Judaism you may not know that Biblical literalism did not originate from ancient Judaism and isn't found in modern Judaism, but emerged in later Christianity - in particular as a result of the Protestant Reformation. As Stephen Tomkins asks in The Guardian newspaper, "Where does biblical literalism come from? What is the genesis, if you will, of the habit of mind that makes many Christians read the Bible with a different brain to the one they'd use with any other writing? It is by no means an essential Christian tenet. No creed says anything about how to read the scriptures. The highest claim the Bible makes for itself is when the writer of Paul's letter to Timothy says the Hebrew scriptures were "God-breathed", which is wonderfully suggestive but hardly precise or dogmatic. I mean, Adam was God-breathed, and look what happened to him. The Bible is the word of God, Christians believe, but why should the fact it's God's mean it has to be read with naive absolutism? Many Christians call the church "the body of Christ" without considering it anything like infallible, or refusing to see its rites as symbolic. Part of the problem is historical. The deification of the Bible is a result of the Protestant reformation. Before then, the final authority, the ultimate arbiter and source of information in religious matters was the church, with its ancient traditions and living experts. When Luther and friends opposed the teaching of the Catholic hierarchy, they needed a superior authority to appeal to, which was provided by the Bible. Fair enough. But in defending or reclaiming the Bible from papists and then liberals, evangelical Protestants made it the very heart of the faith. Hence the ludicrous situation where many evangelical organisations, such as the Southern Baptist Convention, have statements of faith where the first point is the Bible, before any mention of, for example, God. Hence the celebrated idolatrous aphorism of William Chillingworth: "The BIBLE, I say, the BIBLE only, is the religion of Protestants!"

If you've been raised within a literalist tradition you might see nothing wrong with Chillingworth's aphorism, but to Jews, both ancient and modern, it is somewhat bewildering, for as Rabbi Elli Tikvah Sarah states, "Literalism and fundamentalism are anathema to Jewish teaching. As the saying goes, two Jews, three opinions. This has always been the way of Jewish life." This is evidenced she says by the multiplicity of opinions that are expressed within

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the pages of the Talmud. "Jewish teaching," she says, "is multi-vocal. Look at a page of the *Mikra'ot G'dolot*, the 'great commentaries' on the Hebrew Bible, or a page of the Babylonian Talmud, and you will find a host of interpretations and perspectives." Indeed, Jewish tradition has it that there are many possible interpretations of any given Scriptural verse, of which the P'shat (or literal meaning of the verse in its context) is but one. More important perhaps, certainly in the rabbinical period, which includes the time in which Yeshua himself lived, was the method of interpretation called *derash*. As the JPS Guide to Jewish Traditions explains, "During the rabbinic period, *derash*, was the major form of biblical interpretation. By a detailed and often ingenious analysis of unusual spelling, vocabulary, and other elements in the sparse biblical text, as well as through extensive cross-references among various part of the Tanakh, the Rabbis 'filled in the details' and developed a detailed scheme of how the various mitzvot were to be fulfilled (*halakhah*). Using parables and anecdotes to elucidate the text, they also were able to reveal its moral and ethical teachings (*aggadah*)." According to this criteria Yeshua could hardly be described as a literalist because, as the *besorot* reveal to us, the primary mode of his teaching was *derash*. As we read in Mark 4: "Yeshua also said, "With what can we compare the Kingdom of God? What illustration should we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when planted, is the smallest of all the seeds in the field; but after it has been planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all the plants, with such big branches that the birds flying about can build nests in its shade." With many parables like these he spoke the message to them, to the extent that they were capable of hearing it. He did not say a thing to them without using a parable; when he was alone with his own talmidim he explained everything to them." In other words Yeshua explained to his talmidim the deep meaning of the parable because this teaching could not be understood literally. Perhaps there never was a good samaritan or a widow searching for a mite, or a farmer sowing seed. But does it really matter? Biblical literalism would have us believe that it really, really does. And yet, when we get fixated on the need for every story, account or sentence in the Bible to be *literally* true then we can get trapped in a dangerous mental *cul-de-sac* of our own making. The sad reality is that for Biblical literalists the whole Bible must either be *literally* true or it is not true at all; and because for literalists truth is a zero sum game they find themselves having to defend a literal interpretation of every single passage or verse or else their whole spiritual world will come crashing down! Thus their absolute need to believe that a donkey literally argued with Bilam. But is this account literally true? Does it have to be literally true in order to be truth? Indeed, let us consider for just a moment the implications of what an answer in the positive actually means. Many would say that God, being God and thus imbued with all power, can easily cause a donkey to talk. But would such an action, were it literally true, not also constitute a violation of the created order previously established in *Bresheet*? It's not just that the donkey would have been able to make noises that sound like human language - which according to hundreds of hilarious YouTube videos they can already do - but that in order to speak the donkey would necessarily have been imbued with a self-awareness and self-consciousness, not to mention spiritual sensitivity, that according to the Creation account are uniquely human qualities. For according to *Bresheet* human beings were made distinct from the animals; human beings alone were made

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“b'tezelem elohim” in the image of God. In other words human beings alone have been created with the ability to think, be self aware, empathise with others, to have a conscience which leads them to fundamental moral values such as mercy, love and justice. All of these attributes are evident in the speech of Bilam’s donkey. For a Biblical literalist, schooled in the Protestant tradition, this is a difficult passage because to assert the literal meaning of one text undermines that of another. And yet to ancient Jews there were no such exegetical problems since the account would have been understood as midrash. That does not make the story any less truthful or impactful, or do Yeshua’s parables lack truth and impact too because they were not meant literally either? In fact I would go so far as to say that this exegetical divide is one of the boundary markers that defines the border between Judaism and Christianity - or at least the Protestant form of Christianity. Indeed, such is the divide that former Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has called literalism “heresy”. For his part Bishop John Shelby Spong recently published a book called “Biblical Literalism: A Gentile Heresy”. Just how different and peculiar the worldview of Protestant literalism appears to Jews is apparent from an account Rabbi William Gershon of Congregation Shearith Israel, Dallas, Texas has written of his overhearing a group of Christian scholars discussing Scripture:

“This morning I was having a quiet breakfast, working, reading my email and thinking about this week’s message. Fortuitously I sat across from a small group of Christian scholars who were debating the literal nature of the Bible. I couldn't help myself from eavesdropping on their discussion. What caught my attention was their discussion of speaking in tongues. But that is a topic for another day. What they really focused on is the question of how to read and understand the Bible. They were convinced that while there was symbolism in the Bible, the Bible could only be understood literally. But if you read the Bible literally, you are going to read it into absurdity. The Sages of the Talmud were not fundamentalists in reading the Bible. The Rambam [Rabbi Moses ben Maimon, commonly known as Maimonides] in *Perek haHelek* offers a clear perspective: “Literalism robs our religion of its beauties, darkens its brilliance, and makes the laws of God convey meanings quite contrary to their intended meanings.” Literalism reduces religion to absurdity. To be literal is ludicrous. If you want to ridicule the Torah, just read it literally. One example. God said: “Let there be light.” To whom was God speaking, since there was no one there in the unformed void and chaos of the universe? Is God speaking to Himself? What does it mean that God speaks? Does God have a voice or vocal cords? As I always tell my students, “If God can speak, then He can blow His nose.” But the sages of the Talmud and the Midrash realized that when the Torah says *vayomer elohim*, “and God said,” it means to teach something other than a literal account of God’s method of communication. In all the other stories of creation - Greek, Mesopotamian, Babylonian - the world is created by bloody warfare between warring gods. But the God of Israel created the world with words alone, with speech alone. *Vayomer Elohim* means to instruct us that there is no Satan, no primordial battle between rival gods, no dualism between a good god and bad god. In the biblical view, the world did not come into being by wars and violence between contending deities. The world was created by one God with the word, and we should learn to sustain with the word, not the sword. What rescued Judaism

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from a rigid, narrow fundamentalist literalism is expressed brilliantly by the 19th century Talmudist, Rabbi Naphtali Zvi Yehuda Berlin, the Rosh Yeshiva of Volozyn: "The whole Torah is written in poetic form and possesses the nature and character of poetry. Consequently, one must be aware of the illusions and figurative expressions of poetry to appreciate the meaning of the Bible." In other words, to understand Torah you have to understand symbols and parables and metaphors and allegories. The Torah was written, to quote the rabbis, *b'leshon adam*, in the language of human beings. Language by definition is limited and needs interpretation. God communicates with human beings, so we speak of God having a mouth. God shows us love, so we speak of God having a heart. Faith in God ultimately can only be spoken of in poetry. What we learn is that there is not only scientific truth; there is also religious truth. You need both science and faith. To use Heschel's formulation: Faith without reason is mute; reason without faith is deaf."

What then is the truth that is hidden in the account of Bilam's talking donkey? Actually perhaps, in the light of what we have discovered, it's not quite right to speak of *the* truth because Scripture, being Scripture, is capable of many multi-layered truths at the same time. But the truth that speaks to me as I read the passage is that which is hinted at by Kefa. It's the comic absurdity of the narrative that strikes me. The fact that the gentile sorcerer is chastised by a talking donkey is absurd in the extreme. Just as with the dreamlike acts in Shakespeare's 'Midsummer Night's Dream,' I can well imagine our forefathers chuckling to themselves as they read this account. How they would have laughed at the bumbling gentile sorcerer - the one who claimed to see all things spiritual but who actually saw nothing. What an idiot! What a fool! The story is implicitly sending up the gentile priests and religion, whether pagan, Christian or other, who throughout history have risen up in the name of their gods against the Jewish people. Though the threats which the Jewish people have had to contend with throughout this terrible history have been mortal in the extreme, this story would nevertheless have given much comic relief and reassurance to Jews in times of difficulty. Because in the end not only were Balak and Moav destroyed but Bilam met his own sticky end. The message of the story is that both the secular and religious authorities are idiots if they think that they can destroy the Jewish people - why, even a talking donkey understand more than they do!