

# KOL MEVASSER

## The Hardest Word to Hear

By Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

The story of Bilaam, the pagan prophet, begins with a bewildering set of non-sequiturs – a sequence of events that seems to have no logic.

First, the background. The Israelites are approaching the end of their forty years in the wilderness. Already they have fought and won wars against Sihon king of the Amorites and Og king of Bashan. They have arrived at the plains of Moab – today, southern Jordan at the point where it touches the Dead Sea. Balak king of Moab is concerned, and he shares 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: said to his people: "Here, The children of Israel is more numerous and powerful than we . . ." and felt a disgust at the children of Israel.*

*Moab: And Moab was very fearful because of the people because it was numerous, and Moab felt a disgust at the children of Israel.*

The strategy Balak adopts is to seek the help of the well known seer and diviner

Bilaam. Again there is a literary evocation, this time of the words of God to Abraham:

God to Abraham: *I will bless those who bless you, and those who curse you I will curse.*

Balak to Bilaam: *"I know that whoever you bless is blessed and whoever you curse is cursed."*

This time the parallel is ironic (indeed the Bilaam story is full of irony). In the case of Abraham, it was God who blessed. In the case of Bilaam, the power was thought to reside in Bilaam himself. In fact the earlier statement of God to Abraham already prefigures the fate of Moab – one who tries to curse Israel will himself be cursed.

The historical background to the Bilaam narrative is well-attested. Several Egyptian pottery fragments dating from the 2nd millennium BCE have been found containing execration texts – curses – directed against Canaanite cities. 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 Bilaam himself, a significant discovery was made in 1967. A plaster inscription on the wall of a temple at Deir Alla in Jordan was found to make reference to the night vision of a seer called Bilaam – the earliest reference in archaeological

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## KJ Schedule

### Parashat Balak

#### Erev Shabbat / Eve of Shabbat Friday, June 21st

Shaharit .....	6:30 am
Shir Hashirim .....	6:45 pm
Minha & Arvit .....	7:00 pm
Candle Lighting.....	7:49 pm

#### Yom Shabbat / Shabbat Day Saturday, June 22nd

Shaharit .....	8:30 am
Guest Speaker, Rabbi Eliahu Shalom Ezran	
Class with Rabbi Batzri .....	6:20 pm
Ladies Tehillim .....	6:20 pm
Minha/Arvit .....	7:05 pm
Shabbat Havdallah .....	8:34 pm

#### Weekdays

#### Sunday, June 23rd

Shaharit .....	7:30 am
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#### Monday through Friday, June 24 to 28

Shaharit .....	6:30 am
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#### Fast of the 17th of Tammuz Tuesday, June 25th

Fast Begins.....	4:12 am
Shaharit .....	6:30 am
Minha / Arvit.....	7:15 pm
Fast Ends (for Sepharadim) .....	8:20 pm

#### Erev Shabbat / Friday, June 28th

Shaharit .....	6:30 am
Shir Hashirim .....	6:45 pm
Minha & Arvit .....	7:00 pm
Candle Lighting.....	7:50 pm

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sources to a named individual in the Torah. Thus, though the story itself contains elements of parable, it belongs to a definite context in time and place.

The character of Bilaam 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 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. What I want to examine here is neither Bilaam nor his blessings, but the preamble to the story, for it is here that one of the deepest problems arises, namely: what did God want Bilaam to do? It is a drama in three scenes.

In the first, emissaries arrive from Moab and Midian. They state their mission. They want Bilaam to curse the Israelites. Bilaam'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 Bilaam, "Do not go with them. You must not put a curse on those people, because they are blessed."*

Obediently, Bilaam refuses. Balak redoubles his efforts. Perhaps more distinguished messengers and the promise of significant reward

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## Congratulations

Ariel Nissim Young  
on your Bar Mitzvah

Mazal Tov to your parents  
Dafna & Rex Young; your brother,  
Netanel, your grandparents,  
Pat & Rex Young and  
Rabbi Eliahu Shalom & Hana Ora Ezran  
and to both families.

## Shabbat Kiddush

is sponsored in honor of

the Bar Mitzvah of  
Ariel Nissim Young

by  
Dafna and Rex Young

## Seudah Shlisheet

is sponsored in memory of

Morad Mordecai  
ben Rebbe Eliyahu, z"l

by  
The Rafie Family

## Welcome

KJ Shabbat Guest Speaker  
Rabbi Eliahu Shalom Ezran from  
Magain David Sepharadim San Francisco

He will be speaking about the  
*"Balak: The Purpose of Running"*

## In Memoriam

We remember these yahrzeit anniversaries for June 22nd to 29th, 2013. It is customary to light a memorial candle, donate tzedaka, and attend services the preceding Shabbat.

**14 Tammuz / Shabbat, June 22nd**

Rachel Meyer Judah *Rahel bat Aziza*

**15 Tammuz / Sunday, June 23rd**

Mazal Sawdayi *Mazal bat Rima Cohen*

**17 Tammuz / Tuesday, June 25th**

Abdallah Ezra *Abdallah ben Ezra*

**18 Tammuz / Wednesday, June 26th**

Naamat Zelkha *Naamat ben Simha*

**20 Tammuz / Shabbat, June 29th**

Rachel Pourati *Rahel bat Leah Nahid*

## Refuah Shlemah

Yocheved bat Rachel, Mazal bat Malka, Dan Herdoon, Mazal Tov bat Salha Matana, Moshe ben Ezra, Sasson ben Rahel/Sassoon Moses, Penina bat Henia, Dov Ber ben Sonia, Maurice Ovadia / Moshe ben Noosha, Pnina bat Esther, Vera Levi Yossef ben Jamila, Ruth bat Aliza, Dina bat Simha, Shoshana Goury/ Shoshana bat Rahel, Gerry Meyers / Ezra ben Yosef Aharon

## PARASHAT BALAK

Torah Portion in Bamidbar 668 to 682  
Haftara from Micah 682 to 685

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will persuade Bilaam to change his mind. He sends a second set of emissaries. Bilaam's reply is exemplary:

*"Even if Balak gave 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."*

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."*

The implication is clear. Bilaam is suggesting that God may change His mind. But this is impossible. That is not what God does. Yet to our surprise, that is what God seems to do:

*That night God came to Bilaam and said, "Since these men have come to summon you, go with them, but do only what I tell you."*

Problem 1: first God had said, "Do not go." Now He says, "Go." Problem 2 appears immediately:

*Bilaam 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.*

God says, "Go." Bilaam goes. Then God is very angry. Does God change His mind – not once but twice in the course of a single narrative? The mind reels. What is going on here? What is Bilaam supposed to do? What does God want? There is no explanation. Instead the narrative shifts to the famous scene of

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Bilaam's donkey – itself a mystery in need of interpretation:

*Bilaam 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. Bilaam 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 Bilaam'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 Bilaam, and he was angry and beat it with his staff. Then the Lord opened the donkey's mouth, and it said to Bilaam, "What have I done to you to make you beat me these three times?"*

*Bilaam 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 Bilaam, "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 Bilaam'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.*

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

Nachmanides, God's first statement, "Don't go with them" meant, "Don't 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 Bilaam, not because he went but because he did not tell them of the proviso.

In the nineteenth century, Malbim and R. Zvi Hirsch Mecklenberg suggested a different answer based on close textual analysis. The Hebrew text uses two different words for "with them" in the first and second Divine replies. When God says, "Don't 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 Bilaam could accompany them but not share their purpose or intention. God is angry when Bilaam goes, because the text states 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 Bilaam's eyes, finally tells Bilaam, "Go with the men." According to Malbim and Mecklenberg, this is precisely what God did not want Bilaam to do.

The deepest answer is also the simplest. The hardest word to hear in any language is the word No. Bilaam had asked God once. God had said No. That should have sufficed. Yet Bilaam asked a second time. In that act lay his fateful weakness of character. He knew

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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 Bilaam'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 midrash put it: "Man is led down the path he chooses to tread."

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 Bilaam to go. His "Yes" in scene 2 meant "No" – but it was a No Bilaam could not hear, 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 Bilaam 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.

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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," says Moses; "I cannot speak for I am a child" says Jeremiah).

The episode of Bilaam and talking donkey is pure humour – and, as I have pointed out before, only one thing provokes Divine laughter, namely human pretension. Bilaam 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 Bilaam that when He so chooses, even his donkey is a greater prophet than he. The donkey sees what Bilaam cannot see: the angel standing in the path, barring their 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 I was making a television programme for the BBC. The problem I faced was this. I wanted to make a documentary about *teshuvah*, repentance, but I had to do so in a way that would be intelligible to non-Jews as well as Jews, indeed to those who had no religious belief at all. What example could I choose that would illustrate the point?

I decided that one 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

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the life they led was harming them and they had to change. That seemed to me a secular equivalent of *teshuvah*.

I spent a day in a rehabilitation centre, and it was heartbreaking. The young people there – they were aged between 16 and 18 – all came from broken families. Many of them had suffered abuse. Other than the workers at the centre, they had no networks of support. The staff were 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 realize that their patience was little less than a human counterpart 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 chance 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."

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

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