

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Balak
June 26, 2021 * 16 Tamuz, 5781**

Kol Rina – An Independent Minyan, is a traditional egalitarian community. We are haimish (homey/folksy), friendly, participatory, warm and welcoming. We hold weekly services in South Orange as well as holiday services and celebrations which are completely lay led. We welcome all to our services and programs from non-Hebrew readers to Jewish communal and education professionals.

[Balak in a Nutshell](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/2982/jewish/Balak-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

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Balak, the king of Moab, summons the prophet Balaam to curse the people of Israel. On the way, Balaam is berated by his donkey, who sees, before Balaam does, the angel that G-d sends to block their way. Three times, from three different vantage points, Balaam attempts to pronounce his curses; each time, blessings issue forth instead. Balaam also prophesies on the end of the days and the coming of Moshiach.

The people fall prey to the charms of the daughters of Moab, and are enticed to worship the idol Peor. When a high-ranking Israelite official publicly takes a Midianite princess into a tent, Pinchas kills them both, stopping the plague raging among the people.

[Haftarah in a Nutshell: Micha 5:6-6:8](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/696140/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/696140/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm

This week's haftarah makes mention of the incident of Balak the king of Moab hiring the sorcerer Balaam to curse the Jewish people — the main topic of this week's Torah reading.

The prophet Micah prophesies about what will occur after the war of Gog and Magog, the war which precedes the coming of the Messiah and the Final Redemption.

"And the remnant of Jacob shall be in the midst of many peoples — like dew sent by G-d, like torrents of rain upon vegetation that does not hope for any man and does not wait for the sons of men." The prophet describes how G-d will remove the idols and sorcerers and how He will destroy the Jews' enemies.

The prophet Micah then goes on to rebuke the Jewish people for not observing G-d's commandments, calling as witness the "mountains and hills" — a reference to the Patriarchs and Matriarchs — and reminding them of the great things G-d had done for them. He took them out of Egypt and replaced the curses that Balaam son of Beor wanted to utter against them with blessings.

The Jewish people respond by saying that they do not know how to serve G-d and ask for guidance. The prophet reminds them of the Torah, and that all they need to do is contained within it: "He has told you, O man, what is good, and what G-d demands of you: but to do justice, love kindness, and walk discreetly with your G-d."

[FOOD FOR THOUGHT](#)

[Leadership and Loyalty \(Balak 5781\) by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l](https://rabbisacks.org/balak-5781/)

<https://rabbisacks.org/balak-5781/>

Is leadership a set of skills, the ability to summon and command power? Or does it

have an essentially moral dimension also? Can a bad person be a good leader, or will their badness compromise their leadership? That is the question raised by the key figure in this week's parsha, the pagan prophet Bilaam.

First, by way of introduction, we have independent evidence that Bilaam actually existed. An archaeological discovery in 1967, at Deir 'Alla at the junction of the Jordan and Jabbok rivers, uncovered an inscription on the wall of a pagan temple, dated to the eighth century BCE, which makes reference to a seer named Bilaam ben Beor, in terms remarkably similar to those of our parsha. Bilaam was a well-known figure in the region.

His skills were clearly impressive. He was a religious virtuoso, a sought-after shaman, magus, spellbinder and miracle worker. Balak says, on the basis of experience or reputation, "I know that whoever you bless is blessed, and whoever you curse is cursed" (Num. 22:6). The rabbinic literature does not call this into question. On the phrase "no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face" (Deut. 34:10), the Sages went so far as to say: "In Israel there was no other prophet as great as Moses, but among the nations there was. Who was he? Bilaam." [1]

Another midrashic source says that "There was nothing in the world that the Holy One blessed be He did not reveal to Balaam, who surpassed even Moses in the wisdom of sorcery." [2] At a technical level, Bilaam had all the skills.

Yet the ultimate verdict on Bilaam is negative. In chapter 25, we read of the ironic sequel to the episode of the curses/blessings. The Israelites, having been saved by God from the would-be curses of Moab and Midian, suffered a self-inflicted tragedy by allowing themselves to be enticed by the women of the land. God's anger burns against them. Several chapters later (Num. 31:16) it emerges that it was Bilaam who devised this strategy: "They were the ones who followed Bilaam's advice and were the means of turning the Israelites away from the Lord in what happened at Peor, so that a plague struck the Lord's people". Having failed to curse the Israelites, Bilaam eventually succeeded in doing them great harm.

So the picture that emerges from the Jewish sources is of a man with great gifts, a genuine prophet, a man whom the Sages compared with Moses himself – yet at the same time a figure of flawed character that eventually led to his downfall and to his reputation as an evil-doer and one of those mentioned by the Mishnah as having been denied a share in the world to come. [3]

What was his flaw? There are many speculations, but one suggestion given in the Talmud infers the answer from his name. What is the meaning of Bilaam? Answers the Talmud: it means, "a man without a people" (belo am). [4]

This is a fine insight. Bilaam is a man without loyalties. Balak sent for him saying: "Now come and put a curse on these people, because they are too powerful for me . . . For I know that those you bless are blessed, and those you curse are cursed." Bilaam was a prophet for hire. He had supernatural powers. He could bless

someone and that person would succeed. He could curse and that person would be blighted by misfortune. But there is no hint in any of the reports, biblical or otherwise, that Bilaam was a prophet in the moral sense: that he was concerned with justice, desert, the rights and wrongs of those whose lives he affected. Like a contract killer of a later age, Bilaam was a loner. His services could be bought. He had skills, and he used them with devastating effect. But he had no commitments, no loyalties, no rootedness in humanity. He was the man *belo am*, without a people. Moses was the opposite. God Himself says of him, “He is [supremely] loyal in all My house” (Numbers 12:7). However disappointed Moses was with the Israelites, he never ceased to argue their cause before God. When his initial intervention on their behalf with Pharaoh worsened their condition, he said to God, ‘O Lord, why do You mistreat Your people? Why did You send me?’ (Exodus 5:22).

When the Israelites made the Golden Calf and God threatened to destroy the people and begin again with Moses, he said, “Now, if You would, please forgive their sin. If not, then blot me out from the book that You have written” (Exodus 32:32). When the people, demoralised by the report of the spies, wanted to return to Egypt and God’s anger burned against them, he said, “With Your great love, forgive the sin of this nation, just as You have forgiven them from [the time they left] Egypt until now” (Numbers 14:19).

When God threatened punishment during the Korach rebellion, Moses prayed, “Will You be angry with the entire assembly when only one man sins?” (Numbers 16:22). Even when his own sister Miriam spoke badly about him and was punished by leprosy, Moses prayed to God on her behalf, “Please God, heal her now.” (Numbers 12:13) Moses never ceased to pray for his people, however much they had sinned, however audacious the prayer, however much he was putting his own relationship with God at risk. Knowing their faults, he remained utterly loyal to them.

The Hebrew word *emunah* is usually translated as “faith,” and that is what it came to mean in the Middle Ages. But in biblical Hebrew it is better translated as faithfulness, reliability, loyalty. It means not walking away from the other party when times are tough. It is a key covenantal virtue.

There are people with great gifts, intellectual and sometimes even spiritual, who nonetheless fail to achieve what they might have done. They lack the basic moral qualities of integrity, honesty, humility and above all loyalty. What they do, they do brilliantly. But often they do the wrong things. Conscious of their unusual endowments, they tend to look down on others. They give way to pride, arrogance and a belief that they can somehow get away with great crimes. Bilaam is the classic example, and the fact that he planned to entice the Israelites into sin even after he knew that God was on their side is a measure of how the greatest can sometimes fall to become the lowest of the low.

Those who are loyal to other people find that other people are loyal to them. Those who are disloyal are eventually distrusted and lose whatever authority they might

once have had. Leadership without loyalty is not leadership. Skills alone cannot substitute for the moral qualities that make people follow those who demonstrate them. We follow those we trust, because they have acted so as to earn our trust. That was what made Moses the great leader Bilaam might have been but never was. **Always be loyal to the people you lead.**

[1] Sifre Devarim, 357. [2] Tanna devei Elyahu Rabbah 28; see also Bamidbar Rabbah 14:20; Brachot 7a; Avodah Zarah 4a. [3] Mishnah Sanhedrin 10:2. [4] Sanhedrin 105a

Prophetic Pluralism – Balak 5781 by Rabbi Yitz Greenberg

https://mechonhadar.s3.amazonaws.com/mh_torah_source_sheets/GreenbergParashatBalak5781.pdf?utm_campaign=Dvar%20Torah%205781&utm_medium=email&_hsmi=135269306&_hsenc=p2ANqtz-8jfTwlwoskfrzPQGcvGExOe0LzkpsOaMncuuuj2xcEcs4oXIMUsZJ-0l-vZgu-biaui51DM3fwQr2FibPSw5-WksbCZg&utm_content=135269306&utm_source=hs_email

The story of Balaam the prophet in Parashat Balak has many layers. On the surface, the *parashah* offers a scathing critique—really a satire—of the man who is regarded as a great seer by the Moabites. He is portrayed as vainglorious, honor-seeking, looking for money and social recognition above all. Unlike Moses the prophet, he does not try to hear the word of God and give it over to others, rather he tries to wheedle the Deity into letting him get a big payoff from King Balak. Crazy by greed, Balaam makes a fool of himself and, in the end, sees less of the Divine Presence in his mission than does his donkey. Yet if one cuts through this blatant put down, in fact Balaam is revealed as a true prophet—in touch with and receiving profound revelation directly from God. His prophecy communicates some of the most beautiful and touching passages ever said about the Jewish people. In this way, the Torah demonstrates that God cares deeply about and connects to non-Jews; God sends them prophets and gives them true revelation. This is a foreshadowing of a prophetic pluralism which will not become a substantial part of Jewish tradition until millennia later than the Bible—namely in our time.

Let us start at the beginning. Balak, King of Moab, fears the rising Israelite people who have just shockingly defeated two mighty Kings, Sihon the Amorite and Og of Bashan (Numbers 21:25, 33-35; 22:2). He conceives of enlisting the great Midianite prophet, Balaam, to curse and defeat the Israelites with supernatural force (22:5). Balaam is all too ready to do Balak's bidding. Apparently, he senses the high intensity Divine energy flowing through him, but does not understand the prophet's role. Balaam thinks of himself as a gun for hire and expects Balak to be the highest bidder. God tells him not to even think of cursing Israel because the Lord wishes to bless the people (22:12). However, Balaam is not listening. He is plotting how to get Balak to send even more important officers to recruit him and to offer an even

higher reward to do the dirty work.

Balak does send the more imposing officials, with the implied promise of yet greater rewards if he curses Israel (22:15). Balaam responds with an even broader solicitation "...if Balak gives me a handful of gold and silver treasure, (hint, hint!—YG) I can still do only what God permits me to do" (22:18). He knows that God does not want him to harm Israel, but he is hoping that he can barrel his way through anyway. For the right price, he will somehow get around God's objections and deliver the knockout punch to the Israelites. Balaam even succeeds in getting God to let him go with the Moabite officials—albeit he is warned again that he is only to say or do what God permits him to do (22:20).

At this point, Balaam is blinded by visions of dancing treasure; he can see nothing but golden payoffs thanks to his cupidity. God sends an opposing angel to block Balaam's progress—but he is oblivious (22:22). The donkey sees the opposing force, but the great prophet can't see what the dumb animal sees (22:23). Three times the donkey shrinks back or stops short, pushing back against Balaam's angry goading (22:23-27). Finally, Balaam's eyes open enough to see that the Lord does not want him to use his power to harm Israel (22:31). Balaam even offers to turn back—but he does not appear to mean it (22:34). He still hopes for an opening—or a moment of divine relenting—that will enable him to get in his curse and earn his pay day. So much—not much!—for a prophet feeling a higher calling to serve God's purposes. So much—not much!—for a prophet trying to mediate between God's anger and the people by getting the Lord to forgive or carry the people and not harm them.¹

The next day, Balak honors Balaam with elaborate sacrifices (22:40). This is followed by a grandiose ritual sacrifice of seven oxen and seven rams (23:1-4). Alas for Balak's plot and Balaam's treasure hunt, God instructs the prophet to bless the people, Israel, climaxing with the words: "Let me die the death of the righteous and my final end be like his (i.e. Jewry's—YG)." (23:10).

Balak is frustrated that the prophet has blessed his enemies (23:11). But he, too, still thinks that God can be manipulated. Two more times he and Balaam set up elaborate sacrifices on a plateau with a different view of the Israelites, somehow believing that with the right setup they can get God to allow their spiritual assault on Israel (23:13-15; 27-30). But now he and Balaam learn that God is not to be trifled with. God cannot be tricked or maneuvered into doing the evil will of the Moabite King. This shuffling of the deck of sacrifices expresses the false and offensive claim of idolatry and magic: that there is some mystical formula, or ritual behavior, or other mechanism that can force God to do what humans demand. Instead, God has

Balaam bless Israel twice with greater depth and greater force.

Here is the twist in the *parashah's* account: the move from prophecy as arcane evil arts to genuine revelation. The last two times that he speaks prophecy, Balaam stops searching for the magic key to get his malicious intentions fulfilled. Instead he opens up to God—and pure prophecy comes pouring out. In the second exchange, Balaam channels God's instruction "There is no magic [operating] in Jacob and no sorcery in Israel" (23:23). Rather "the Lord His God is with him" (23:21). He proclaims: "I am bidden to bless [Israel]... [Israel] is blessed and it cannot be called back" (23:20).

In the final scene, the spirit of God rests on Balaam and he speaks beyond all calculation (24:1-2). "How goodly are your tents Jacob, your tabernacles, O Israel" (24:5). He compares Israel's blessedness to "winding brooks, gardens by the river's side, like aloes which the Lord has planted, and cedar trees beside the waters." (24:6). Israel is blessed. Blessed are those who bless Israel and cursed are those who curse Israel (24:9).

This is the astonishing and thunderous ending of a project that started as a mockery of the non-Jewish prophet. For the most part, the Bible sees the surrounding religions as idolatrous and spiritually ineffective. But this emergent blessing makes clear that God reveals truth to non-Jewish prophets. This in turn means that God deeply cares about non-Jews; after all, they too are in the image of God and precious to the Lord. Therefore, God does not abandon them in spiritual ignorance and in self-referential concern. God connects to them so they too can play their part in realizing the vision of *tikkun olam*. God seeks their partnership in world repair. God seeks their blessing on Israel even as the Lord wants Israel—Abraham's family—to be a source of blessing for all the families of the earth" (Genesis 12:2-3).

This hidden but deep theme circulates through the tradition for millennia as a minor—often neglected—perspective. But in our time, the encounter between Jew and non-Jew has reached a new level of humanity and opening up to each other.² God has given us the chance to break through, to know the other as a precious image of God, to join a partnership to repair the world for everybody. After all, it will take the efforts of everybody to overcome entrenched interests, cumulative deprivation, and traditional negative stereotypes, in order to create a system of justice and equality for all.

To get there, God enters into covenantal community with more than one religion, more than one nation, more than one tradition.³ This task—made more difficult by the inherited negatives of the past—is the calling of this generation. This

cooperation in common commitment to *tikkun olam* is in our hands to accomplish. In this moment, we can see past the blindness, the cupidity, the egotistic drive of a Balaam, and realize that God has given us a precedent of connection and relationship to a non-Jewish prophet and culture. This discovery of God's concern for all can lead to a joint breakthrough to *shalom*—wholeness—for humanity. This can lead to uncovering and recovering the beautiful poetry of revelation in the other and their way of life. Such discoveries can unleash mutual love and concern which leads to blessing and to being a blessing to each other.

Shabbat Shalom.

¹ This is one of the most important roles of the prophet, as I argued in my essay on Parashat Shelah, "Mediating Between the Divine and the Human: The Prophet's Other Central Role," available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/mediating-between-divine-and-human>.

² This is of course not to deny that there is still anti-Semitism and hatred and degradation of Jews still circulating out there. ³ See also my prior essay on Parashat Lekh Lekha, "Covenantal Pluralism," available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/covenantal-pluralism>.

Balak by Rabbi Shaul Rosenblatt

<https://mailchi.mp/tikun/haazinu5781-2579215?e=e0f2ca6c0d>

Bilaam, a Moabite, is granted a level of prophecy equal to that of Moses. He is an intriguing character - honour driven, arrogant, money chasing and narcissistic. The world doesn't change that much.

Balak, the king of Moab, seeing that conventional weapons have not worked, decides to hire Bilaam to curse the Jewish people. Bilaam accepts the assignment. God allows Bilaam to go with Balak, but Bilaam does warn Balak that he will only be able to say that which God allows him to. Three times Bilaam tries to curse the Jewish People and three times God places prophetic blessings in his mouth instead. His prophecies are some of the most poetic and beautiful parts of the whole Torah. The whole story is well worth a read

Bilaam's great praise for the Jewish people is found in the famous words *ma tovu ohalecha Yakov*. 'How praiseworthy are your tents, oh Jacob.'

The Rabbis explain that he noticed the entrances of the tents of the Jewish nation were carefully aligned so that no one could see into anyone else's home. He wanted to curse the Jewish people, but because of their modesty, he was unable to do so.

There is an underlying message here. The power of the Jewish people lay within their homes. Because of the strength of their homes, Bilaam could not curse them. Homes, not individuals, are the basic building blocks of a nation. Much more so than individuals create homes, homes nurture individuals. Stable homes, with strong values and focused education are the most fundamental element in creating strong communities.

Whilst our society speaks, almost in awe, of single parent families, it surely cannot be the best way to bring up children. I understand that, often nowadays, circumstances force parents to raise children on their own – and many do so heroically – nevertheless, we cannot possibly hold it up as an ideal. Children should see a successful relationship in action if we want to give them the best chance of succeeding in their own relationships. My late wife used to say that the best gift you can give children is the gift of your own healthy marriage. Children crave stability; they crave structure and certainty. A healthy home is the way to provide that. And to take this a step further, I addressed the issue of divorce with my rabbis this week. We talked to a panel of divorcees to understand the struggles and challenges they had experienced. Amongst many issues, we discussed the idea that many people do not get divorced, ‘because of the kids’. I firmly believe the opposite. People SHOULD get divorced because of the kids! Kids are very intuitive as to what goes on in a home. You cannot hide a toxic relationship from them. And consistent bad feeling between mum and dad creates for kids the very instability that the couple are looking to avoid by staying together. Whilst I’m not a fan of divorce, I believe that when the relationship cannot be fixed, the best thing that can be done for the kids is an amicable divorce. If the parents can get the children as their priority – which they should be – and separate in a civil, respectful and even caring way (and I’ve seen it done) the children will not be adversely affected. Divorce is not, itself, instability for a child. Bad feeling between parents is the instability. Divorced parents with good feeling works fine for kids. Married parents with bad feeling does not.

Homes are the building blocks of our societies. An ideal home is married parents who feel good about each other and love their children. A good second best is divorced parents who feel good about each other and love their children. Either way, the stability of our homes is non-negotiable if a society wants to raise a healthy generation to succeed it.

[“The Never-Ending Goal of Unity Without Uniformity” by Rabbi Dr. Kenneth Brander](https://ots.org.il/parsha-and-purpose-balak-5781/)
<https://ots.org.il/parsha-and-purpose-balak-5781/>

It was the summer of 1935.

Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik, the young Lithuanian-born-and-raised heir apparent to a legendary rabbinical dynasty was making his first – and as it turned out, his only – trip to Eretz Yisrael.

Rav Shlomo Aronson, the widely beloved Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv, had passed away in March, and Rav Soloveitchik, who had earned a PhD from the University of Berlin and who was then a community rabbi in the city of Boston, was hoping to succeed him in that position.

During that visit, the 32-year old Rav Soloveitchik was invited to deliver a shiur at Yeshivat Mercaz HaRav, the spiritual home to the vision and teachings of the legendary Rav Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook.

This provided an opportunity for Rav Soloveitchik to meet with Rav Kook, the ailing Chief Rabbi of Eretz Yisrael who would pass away a few months later.

After the visit and the shiur, Rav Kook recalled his own experience as a student attending the shiurim of Rav Chaim Brisker, Rav Soloveitchik's grandfather, at the Volozhin Yeshiva, and commented that "The power of the genius of the grandfather now resides with the grandson."

As a candidate for Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv, that Shabbat Rav Soloveitchik presented a drasha on the parsha, which was the same as this week's portion: Parshat Balak. In retrospect, we know that Rav Soloveitchik – the man who Rav Kook described as a genius and who went on to become a seminal figure in Modern Orthodoxy – did not receive the position of Tel Aviv Chief Rabbi.

As a curious student, I once asked Rav Soloveitchik why he thought they didn't choose him.

He explained that he believed it was due to the drasha that he delivered.

With a bit of further prodding, the Rav shared that the drasha he delivered focused on the verse:

מה טובו אוהלך יעקב משכנותך ישראל

How beautiful are the tents of Jacob, the dwellings of Israel (Numbers 24:5)

And he cited these words to express his hope that the various tents of Israel should soon be able to dwell together: Ashkenazim and Sephardim, the religious and secular.

To try to achieve unity even without uniformity.

In the aftermath of his not receiving the position, Rav Soloveitchik realized that the community was not ready to hear and internalize such a message.

With the 20/20 hindsight of history, perhaps it was fortunate that Rav Soloveitchik never became the Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv and instead remained in the United States in order to help shape world Jewry using both the community of Boston and Yeshiva University as an incubator for his creative thoughts and to become "the Rav", the greatest teacher of his generation.

Yet, as we revisit this parsha, some 86 years later, we see clearly and sadly that Rabbi Soloveitchik's message remains unrealized.

We are responsible to continue to strive toward actualizing the dream of מה טובו אוהלך יעקב משכנותך ישראל

We must all extend ourselves to ensure that there is more achdut, more unity amongst the Jewish people.

We must be respectful in how we talk to each other and about each other.

To accept and respect Jews who observe Judaism differently from us.

Jews who have different customs and traditions, who hail from different descents.

To accept and respect one other – even when we don't agree with the practices or beliefs of the other.

The capacity for us to show God that we are a people that even though we may not be uniform, we are nevertheless committed to unity, so that we can merit the blessing of *מה טובו אוהלך יעקב משכנותך ישראל*

Shabbat Shalom. (*Rabbi Dr. Kenneth Brander is President and Rosh HaYeshiva of the Ohr Torah Stone network of 30 educational institutions, leadership development initiatives, outreach endeavors, women's empowerment programs, and social action projects.*)

Greater than Moses? Balak by Burton L. Visotzky

<https://www.jtsa.edu/greater-than-moses>

Although this week's Torah reading is named for the Moabite king Balak, who sought to curse the Israelites, the real star of the show is the gentile prophet Balaam ben Be'or—with a special comedy cameo by his talking ass. Three whole chapters of the Torah (Num. 22–24) are given over to the efforts of Balak and Balaam to curse the Jews. In the end, of course, God prevails, and on Friday nights in shul we still sing Balaam's blessing, "*Mah tovu ohalekhah Yaakov*—How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwellings, O Israel."

Half a century ago, the Polish philosopher Leszek Kolakowski summed up the situation in his small book, *The Key to Heaven* (Grove Press, 1972), when he imagined Balaam's perspicacious and faithful ass pronouncing, "In the final analysis, I'm the most injured party. My master suffered only a moral unpleasantness, but my rump still hurts" (p. 28).

This biblical farce, however enjoyable, pokes fun at the gentile prophet and in doing so reveals the Bible's anxiety about Israelite exceptionalism. If God speaks with the gentiles, we might ask, how are we Jews special? God spoke with Adam and Eve, to be sure. But they lived a long time before Abraham, father of our faith. God also spoke with Noah. Pirkei Avot (5) reports that Noah lived ten generations after Adam, right in the middle of pre-Abrahamic times. As Midrash Leviticus Rabbah (1:9) wryly comments about Adam and then Noah: "There is no shame when a King consults with his gardener . . . or his ship's captain."

It bears notice that in Islam, Noah (*Nuh* in Arabic) is counted as a prophet. In rabbinic Judaism, the medieval midrash Seder Eliahu (Rabbah 26 and Zuta 10) counts Noah's son Shem as a prophet, too. The passage is worth quoting, as it leads us back to Balaam:

Shem prophesized for 400 years to all the peoples of the world, but they did not listen to him. From that point onward Eliphaz the Temanite, Zophar the Naamathite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Elihu son of Barakhel the Buzite, and [their long-suffering conversation partner] Job of the land of Uz [were prophets]. Balaam ben Be'or was the last of them all. There was no matter whatsoever that the Blessed Holy One did not reveal to Balaam . . . Balaam ben Be'or was even greater in wisdom than

Moses. (Seder Elihu Rabbah 7)

Since that same midrash refers to Moses as “the father of wisdom” and “the father of prophets,” this is an astonishing claim. Balaam was greater than Moses! As the rabbi of that midrash later explains it, the reason God sent these prophets to the gentiles is so they could not complain they were not also given the opportunity to accept the Torah.

Notwithstanding that dubious explanation, we must contemplate what it means that the Torah itself, as well as the rabbis interpreting it, acknowledge the fact that there are prophets who are not Jews. This challenges the persistent myth of Jewish exceptionalism, which conveniently ignores that this same Torah teaches us that the One and Only God of the universe created all of humanity and loves all of God’s creatures equally.

Yes, we recite in Friday night kiddush (and on other occasions), “*asher bahar banu mikol ha’amim*—[We praise you God] Who chose us **from among** all the peoples.” But given the monotheistic imperative that we all worship one and the same God, I prefer to recite (as I learned at the Jerusalem Shabbat table of our late teacher Rabbi Jacob Milgram z”l): “*asher bahar banu im kol ha’amim*—Who chose us, **along with** all the peoples.”

Which brings me back to Balaam. Can one then not reasonably say: There is no God but God, and Balaam, too, is God’s prophet? I acknowledge that some of my scholarly colleagues have interpreted certain rabbinic midrashim about Balaam as referring to Jesus (e.g. Peter Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud*, Princeton 2007). What’s confusing about this equation is that Jesus was Jewish, not a gentile like Balaam. But what if Midrash Seder Elihu, composed in its final form in the ninth/tenth century CE under Islamic rule, is thinking of the preeminent non-Jewish prophet of his time: Mohammed?

Could one then not reasonably say that there is no God but God, and Balaam/Mohammed is God’s prophet? Articulating such a statement does not make me a Muslim. But it does make me a monotheist who recognizes, as have the Bible and centuries of rabbis before me, that there are prophets among all nations. The One God speaks to all of God’s peoples, each in their own chosen status, be they Jews, Christians, Muslims, or for that matter, adherents of other, non-Abrahamic religions. Perhaps that is the lesson Balaam teaches us in our own strife-filled day, when he offered his aspirational prophecy millennia ago: “*Mah tovu ohalekhah Yaakov*—How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwellings, O Israel.” Our dwellings are truly goodly when we live together with respect and blessings for our fellow human beings. (*Burton L. Visotzky is the Nathan and Janet Appleman Professor of Midrash and Interreligious Studies at JTS*) *****

Yahrtzeits

Barry Ostrowsky remembers his father Abe Ostrowsky (Avraham ben Baruch) on Saturday June 26th (Tamuz 16).

Ronni Klein remembers her mother Bette Liebowitz on Saturday June 26th (Tamuz 16).
Linda Chandross remembers her mother Pearl Glick on Monday June 28th (Tamuz 18).
Peter Greene remembers his mother Marian Greene on Tuesday June 29th (Tamuz 19).

