



Parashat Balak

Balak and Balaam: Language and Knowledge, Speech and Power

by Jeremy Schwartz on Friday July 11, 2008

8 Tammuz 5768

Numbers 22:2 - 25:9

Parshat Balak is a story about speech: who has the power of the tongue, and what impact words can have. Balak, the king of Moab, is afraid of the Israelites' growing power and invites Balaam, a gentile prophet, to travel with his men and curse the Israelites – for Balak knows that Balaam's power is unique: whom he curses is cursed, and whom he blesses is blessed.

Balaam, traveling on a she-donkey to go with the Moabites on this mission, encounters an angel sent to stop him from completing the task which Balak has sent him to do. The angel, at first, is visible only to the she-donkey, which stops. Balaam, frustrated, beats the she-donkey three times before God reveals the angel to him. The she-donkey's role here is peculiar, as is often the case when talking animals appear in the Torah. The animal knows something which Balaam does not, acts accordingly, and is beaten as a result. While Balaam's words are controlled by God, his actions represent free will. The link to gay-bashing is only too clear: every day members of the queer community are beaten as a result of their identity, because they are not understood when they should be fully valued and appreciated members of society.

In the *parsha*, the she-donkey complains to Balaam for beating her, for in all the time that she has served him she has done nothing to provoke this punishment. So, too, do members of the queer community sometimes face rage when they come out to their loved ones, even though they are the exact same people they have always been, and for which they have been loved and valued, before they came out. In this story, the she-donkey's sudden ability to speak is what saves Balaam, for the angel would have killed him otherwise.

Following the angel's directive that he may go with Balak's men as long as he speaks only the words which the angel tells him to speak, Balaam goes on this journey, trying from three different locations to curse the Israelites. Yet, no matter from what viewing point Balaam is asked to see the Israelites and curse them, only blessings emerge from his mouth. Balaam explains to the Moabites that he can speak only the words that God puts into his mouth. Despite the fact that Balak has brought him to perform curses, the blessings that come out are nonetheless beautiful. Among them is a passage that has become an integral part of our liturgy:



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“*Mah tovu ohalehcha Ya’akov mishk’notehcha, Yisrael!*” “How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, Your dwelling places, O Israel!”

Balak, frustrated by Balaam’s inability to curse *am Yisrael*, sends Balaam on his way, and the *parsha* ends with the Israelites at Shittim, where they have sex with the Moabite women and worship *Baal Peor*, the Moabites’ god. The Israelites are punished with a plague which kills 24,000 people before Pinchas, through an act of violence with his spear, puts an end to it.

God has told Balaam that the people of Israel are blessed, yet they then engage in actions which provoke God’s rage. Rabbinic commentaries often cite Balaam as the cause of the Israelite’s behavior in this episode, believing that he must have advised Balak to provide this temptation to the Israelites since Balaam had the prophetic gift of knowing exact moment at which God’s wrath can best be provoked. Balaam is thus given the epithet of *rasha*, “the wicked one.” Even if he cannot speak curses, Balaam is still considered to have plagued the Israelites through words – no sticks and stones, no breaking of bones.

My alternative reading for this Torah Queery brings us back to the issues of language and knowledge, speech and power. Even if Balaam is traditionally considered to be of wicked character, his adherence to speaking only holy words, even with a king trying to lead him astray, is noble. Balak gets the ending to the story which he has sought all along: a curse upon the people of Israel. Yet it does not occur through words but instead through actions – in this case, the actions of the Israelites themselves.

As members of the queer community, we might keep this story in mind as we encounter hate speech and as we lobby for equal rights. Words, no matter how ugly or how beautiful, are limited in power; actions *can* speak louder. At the same time, small differences in language have much to say about the intentions and ideas behind words. Organizations such as the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) work to ensure fair and accurate representation of LGBTQ people in the media precisely because of this link between words, ideas and actions. As a case in point, the legal difference between “marriage” and “civil union” may be minimal, but the effect of this small legal difference on the integration and acceptance of queer families into society may be great.

From a queer perspective, the conclusion to this week’s *parsha* is troubling, for all too often we face accusations of “sexual immorality” and of “provoking God’s wrath.” Yet the context of the “sexual immorality” in this *parsha* is, as usual, tied to idolatry and the worship of other gods. Living in the modern world, in which we often find our sexual and gender diversity embraced, celebrated and even integrated into liberal and secular communities, this appears to be an antiquated connection. As Jews of all sexual orientations and gender identities, we can embrace our diversity while celebrating our togetherness as a community.



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For all types of families which reside within our “dwelling places,” let us remember Balaam’s blessing: *“Mah tovu ohalehcha Ya’akov mishk’notehcha, Yisrael!”*

Shabbat shalom.



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