

# Prophecy is Worthless Without Love

*Parashat Balak*



## Parashat Balak

This Shabbat we read and study Parashat Balak. Balak saw the progress of the people of Israel. He witnessed that the people of Israel enjoyed the blessing of God and therefore he feared them greatly. Balak understood that the blessing over the children of Israel was from above, a spiritual blessing of strength that cannot be measured physically.

Due to this, Balak, employed Balaam's services in order to curse the people of Israel, to harm their spiritual power as well as their military victories and progress.

## Balak's Infamous Blessing for the People of Israel

In the course of this parasha, we encounter a donkey that spoke to Balaam. Did it really happen or was it simply a dream? The truth is that the story of the donkey can be read in two ways: both as a true story as well as God's response to Balaam in a dream (or vision).

In any case, Balaam went with Balak to curse Israel, but God did not allow him to do so. Instead, he ended up blessing Israel several times, one of which is one of the most famous blessings that we pray to this day in every synagogue around the world, including in our congregation:

*“How beautiful are your tents, Jacob, your dwelling places, Israel!” - Numbers 24:5 [NIV]*

## **Only God Himself has the Right to Criticize His People**

God expects us to be good children. Our behavior sometimes causes us to distance ourselves from Him, but even this is only between us and the Lord. When there is an external threat, such as Balaam, who sought the weak link among the people of Israel, God's love is revealed, and this love shows us that He has never abandoned us and never will.

Inwardly, God can be angry with us, at the people of Israel. However, no one else should criticize Israel - that is His exclusive right.

It's like this with us at home, we can quarrel and get angry at our family, but it's only inward. Once an outsider dares to say a bad word about a family member, we'll protect him.

A foreigner does not have the right to open his mouth because he does not understand nor does he belong. In the face of foreigners, the family, community, and nation unite, and those tensions disappear.

## **Who Exactly was Balaam the Prophet?**

Towards the end of the parasha, as in all the recent weekly Torah portions, the people of Israel left their first love, God. They rebelled against Him and this led to a plague. At the very end of the parasha, in the last verses, we encounter a young, energetic priest who was zealous for God. One point that is fundamental about this young priest was that he not only spoke, but acted. As a matter of fact, next week's Torah portion was named after him.

Balaam is a very interesting figure. If we read between the lines, we understand that he was one of the greatest prophets in the Torah. He was

filled with the spirit of God. This parasha shows us that Balaam spoke with God on a regular basis. Here we stop and think to ourselves, who exactly was this great prophet?

The people of Israel saw him as the enemy or villain. Who was this wicked man who sought God and immediately received an answer? Who was this prophet who is written as being "...one who hears the words of God, who has knowledge from the Most High..." (Numbers 24:16)

## How You Utilize Knowledge is Important

The New Testament describes Balaam as a false prophet. That is to say that he was a true prophet, however, he was one who chose the path of evil, of greed, full of self-importance, and pride. One who sought to fulfill his own lustful desires. We find this description in 2 Peter 2:15.

In the epistle of Jude, it is written that he was a man without fruit.

This means, you can be a great and wise man and you can even know the secrets of heaven. At the same time, however, you can still be evil and greedy, seeking wisdom for your own personal benefit.

We can learn an important lesson from Balaam. It does not matter how much knowledge you possess - it's how you utilize that knowledge.

That's exactly what Paul was talking about in 1 Corinthians 13:

*"If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing." - 1 Corinthians 13:2 [NIV]*

## Knowledge is Worthless Without Love

All knowledge, secrets, and prophecy - all these are worthless without love. Love means caring for others; goodwill towards those around you and protecting individuals who can't fend for themselves.

We are all believers who are familiar with the Bible, and we are all wise in one form or another. We tend to delve into our faith, into the correct theology, the proper understanding of the Bible, as well as the study and interpretation of the principles of our faith.

The question that arises from the story of Balaam is: what do we do with this knowledge? Is it only for personal benefit or personal salvation? Do we live out our knowledge for those around us including for our families? The Bible dwells mainly on the relationship between man and his fellow man, on helping others and on caring.

## **Can you Win God's Favor with Money?**

Let's return to the parasha, the Moabites saw the progress of Israel and her many victories, and they are afraid. In a moment of desperation, Balak, king of Moab, turned to Balaam. It was clear to all the nations surrounding Israel that her success was supernatural, therefore, the Moabites thought that the intervention of a prophet like Balaam could tip the scales.

Why did Balak offer Balaam large sums of money? After the first officials returned without Balaam, Balak thought that Balaam would want more money and honor, so he sent additional distinguished officials, and promised more money (Numbers 22:14).

This was because Balak thought that if a prophet performed certain actions he could cause God to comply with his request.

We can only chuckle at Balak's way of thinking, what did he expect? As if you could buy God with a little money or that somehow Balaam had the power to influence God and cause Him to curse Israel for a certain amount.

Many people are similar to Balak, Jews and Christians alike. These individuals see God as a rich and good grandfather filled with treats.

This approach is not so distant from us. Sometimes we too think that we can "buy" a blessing from God, we think we can make "give and take" deals with the Almighty. For instance, you say a prayer in order to gain health, or you do a mitzvah just to receive blessing. Another example is seen with visiting the house of God, just so that your life can now be blessed.

This approach hits home, because it is based on truth. It is possible to speak with God, and even influence Him. It is possible, through a true and sincere prayer, one that comes from the heart, to touch God. We can all lift our eyes to heaven, open our hearts, and see and feel that there is someone who listens and hears us.

Shabbat Shalom.

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