

Balaam and Balak: The Full Story

By Shlomo Chaim Kesselman

The fascinating story of Balak and Balaam's failed attempts to curse the Jewish people is found in Numbers 22-24. The Torah records how, after being thoroughly humiliated by his talking donkey, Balaam, the non-Jewish sorcerer and prophet commissioned by Balak King of Moab to curse the Jews, found himself incapable of cursing them. Instead, he bestowed on the Jews four tremendous blessings, some of which we even recite in our prayers today, and the last which foretells the Messianic redemption.

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Background

It was the year 2488 from creation, and the Jewish people had spent the last 40 years in the desert. They were finally prepared to enter the Promised Land, and they camped at the border of Moab. The Moabites were terrified of the Jews, especially after they defeated the Emori, the Moabites' guardians.¹

Politics makes strange bedfellows

Politics makes strange bedfellows, so although natural enemies, Moab and Midian banded together and appointed a Midianite, Balak son of Zippor, as king over them.² Balak recognized that the power of the Jews was supernatural, so he too sought a way of undermining them supernaturally. Together with the elders of Midian, he hatched a plan to hire Balaam—a well known and powerful sorcerer and prophet—to curse the Jews. Since the Jews' strength lay in their mouths, i.e., in prayer, he planned to defeat them with a stronger "mouth"—Balaam's curse.

Balak knew Balaam from his hometown of Pesor, and could vouch for his powers firsthand, as Balaam himself had prophesied that Balak would become king.³ Additionally, the Zohar records that when Sichon, the Emorite King, was fighting Moab, he hired Balaam and his father to curse the Moabites, and as a result won the war.⁴

The Midrash tells us that Balaam was so great a prophet, his prophecy equaled that of Moses. Since G-d created His world with symmetry, everything that exists on the positive side has a negative counterpart. The equivalent of Moses was Balaam.⁵

The Offer

Balak sent messengers to Balaam offering him great riches and honor for his services. Balaam received the messengers and told them that, since the G-dly spirit rested on him only at night, they should stay overnight.⁶ That night, G-d appeared to Balaam. After Balaam told of Balak's messengers and their offer, G-d forbade him from going with them. In the morning, Balaam told the messengers that G-d forbade him from going. Too vain to admit that he was in G-d's control, he intimated that he was not going because the ministers were too low-ranking for him. He implied that if Balak was really serious he would send his highest ranking officials and offer him a lot more money.⁷

The messengers returned to Balak and delivered Balaam's answer. Desperate, Balak dispatched his most distinguished officers with promises of grandeur and greatness for Balaam. Balaam reminded these ministers that G-d forbade him from going, but added that they should spend the night and he would ask G-d again. Sure enough, that night G-d appeared to Balaam and this time told him that he may go, but must do whatever G-d wants.

Balaam woke early in the morning and excitedly saddled his donkey, instead of having his servants do it. The Midrash tells us that at that moment G-d said, "Wicked one, my servant Abraham already preempted you when he saddled his donkey personally, so dedicated was he to fulfill God's command to sacrifice his son."⁸ Balaam then set off with Balak's emissaries.

Donkeys and Demons

G-d was angry at Balaam for going (we'll get into why later), so He sent a sword-wielding angel to block his path.

The donkey saw the angel on the road with his sword drawn; so she turned aside into a field.

Balaam beat the donkey to get it back onto the road. Then, the angel stood in a path of the vineyards, with a wall on both sides. The donkey saw the angel, and she pressed against the wall (to squeeze past the angel), crushing Balaam's leg, and he beat her again. Then the angel stood in a narrow place, where there was no room to turn right or left. The donkey saw the angel, and it crouched down under Balaam.

The commentators discuss why Balaam was unable to see the angel. Some explain that G-d does not normally allow people to perceive angels, for if they did they would become deranged. Animals, though, do see them.⁹ Others explain that G-d purposely hid the angel from Balaam's sight so that he would hit his donkey, and the ensuing humiliation would occur when the donkey spoke and bested him.¹⁰ Still others explain that even the

donkey did not actually see the angel, rather she just perceived a frightening form, similar to a butcher holding a knife.¹¹ Whatever the reason, Balaam felt humiliated by the donkey's disobedience, so he angrily beat her.

The Zohar explains that Balaam's powers came from his donkey. Through his immoral acts with it, he would tap into powerful, impure energies, which he would use to harm people. Therefore, the first step in the process of crushing Balaam was to disable his tools. G-d not only made his donkey ineffective in producing magic, He made it counterproductive. This represented the ultimate destruction of Balaam, when his evil turned against itself. The donkey turning against its master was the catalyst for what happened later, when G-d forced Balaam to bless the Jews.¹²

G-d made it ineffective and counterproductive

The Midrash teaches that G-d made the donkey speak to show Balaam that "the tongue and mouth (speech) are entirely in G-d's hands," to the extent that He could even make an animal speak. G-d wanted Balaam to realize that when it would come time for Balaam to curse the Jews, he would be entirely at G-d's mercy.¹³

Humiliation

Then G-d opened the mouth of the donkey, and she said to Balaam, "What have I done to you that you have struck me these three times?" Balaam said to the donkey, "For you have humiliated me; if I had a sword in my hand, I would kill you right now." The donkey said to Balaam, "Am I not your donkey on which you have ridden since you first started until now? Have I been accustomed to do this to you?" He said, "No."

The Talmud explains the dialogue as follows: The Moabite dignitaries asked Balaam, "Why do you not ride a horse?" Balaam responded that he sent his horse to graze. Immediately, the donkey retorted, "Am I not your donkey?" To which he responded, "Just for carrying burdens." "On which you have ridden," argued the donkey. "Only on occasion," admitted Balaam. To which she responded, "Since you first started until now you have always ridden on me. Moreover by day I provide you with riding, and by night with intimacy."¹⁴

Thus Balaam stood before the highest-ranking Moabite officials, utterly humiliated. They commented to each other that a man who was bested by his donkey would never be capable of defeating an entire nation.¹⁵

Then G-d opened Balaam's eyes and behold, an angel with a sword stood before him! Balaam immediately dismounted and prostrated himself. The angel reprimanded Balaam for setting out on this journey against G-d and for striking his animal. Balaam admitted to having sinned and asked the angel if he should return home. The angel told Balaam to go with the men but informed him that he would only be capable of saying exactly what G-d told him to.

A Vessel for G-d's Blessings

The commentators discuss what exactly G-d wanted from Balaam. The first time the messengers came, G-d forbade him from going, then the second time, He instructed him to go. Then He sent an angel to block him, but

when Balaam asked the angel if he should abandon the mission, the angel told him to continue going! G-d told him no, then yes, then no, then yes! What did G-d actually want from Balaam?¹⁶

One of many explanations is provided by the chassidic rebbe, Rabbi Avrohom Dov Avrutch (1765-1840). He explains that G-d wanted Balaam to go so that he would bless the Jews. The problem was, however, that Balaam was too vain and self-centered to be a conduit for G-d's blessing. In order for G-d's energy to flow through him, he needed to become transparent. He needed to realize that he was powerless, a mere pawn in G-d's hand.

Therefore, when the first group of regular ministers came, G-d told him not to go. The humiliation Balaam needed to experience would not be sufficient if he was humiliated in front of such men. G-d made him send for important ministers, in front of whom he would be totally broken. And therefore, when the second group came, G-d told him to go.

Then, G-d sent the angel and made the donkey speak to bring about this humiliation, shattering Balaam's ego and making him a fitting conduit for G-d's blessings. Therefore, when he asked the angel if he should return, the angel told him to go, because now that he was a broken man, with no self to get in the way, he was finally fitting to be the deliverer of G-d's infinite blessings.¹⁷

A Miraculous Oracle

Having been humiliated by his donkey and pushed around by G-d, Balaam arrived in Moab's capital city and was greeted by Balak. Balak brought Balaam to Bamot Ba'al, a place of idol worship that overlooked the entire Jewish camp.¹⁸ Balaam commanded Balak to prepare seven altars for him and to offer a bull and a ram on each one. Balaam had specifically seven prepared, in an attempt to counteract the seven altars the Jewish forefathers had built.¹⁹ Balaam took leave of Balak, and G-d appeared to him, "placing words in his mouth." Balaam returned to Balak, raised his voice and began to speak. The Midrash describes how G-d blasted Balaam's words all over the world, so everyone would hear.²⁰

The angel told him to go

Balak the king of Moab has brought me from Aram, from the mountains of the east saying, "Come, curse Jacob for me and come invoke wrath against Israel." How can I curse whom G-d has not cursed, and how can I invoke wrath if the L-rd has not been angered?²¹

Instead of curses, the most wonderful blessings and praise issued forth. Balak took Balaam to two other places in the hope that Balaam would have more luck cursing. All the places were specific in that Balak divined that the Jews would sin in those places, so he hoped to be successful in cursing them from there. But each time Balaam opened his mouth, nothing but the greatest praise for the Jews flowed forth. Noticing the way the Jews' tents were positioned, indicating their overall modesty, Balaam declared, "How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel!"²²

After Balaam blessed the Jews for the third time, Balak grew angry and told Balaam to leave. As he was leaving, Balaam turned to Balak and prophesied what would happen to his people in the end of days and

about the Messianic redemption.²³

I see it, but not now; I behold it, but not soon. A star has gone forth from Jacob, and a staff will arise from Israel which will crush the princes of Moab and uproot all the sons of Seth. Edom shall be possessed, and Seir shall become the possession of his enemies, and Israel shall triumph.

Chassidic teachings explain why these great blessing came through such a wicked man. Balaam blessing the Jews was a preparation for Moshiach, when every single creation will acknowledge its Maker and the greatness of the Jewish people. This process began when Balaam, the greatest Jew-hater, recognized this truth and blessed G-d and the Jews.²⁴

FOOTNOTES

1. Rashi, [Numbers 22:2](#).
2. Rashi, [Numbers 22:4](#).
3. Rashi, Numbers 22: 5.
4. Bamidbar Rabbah 20:8.
5. Bamidbar Rabbah 14:20.
6. Rashi, [Numbers 22:8](#).
7. Bamidbar Rabbah 20:10.
8. Rashi, [Numbers 22:21](#); Bamidbar Rabbah 20:12.
9. Rashi, [Numbers 22:23](#).
10. Abarbanel, Ohr Hachayim.
11. Ramban, Bachaye.
12. Likkutei Sichot, vol. 28, pp. 341-342; Zohar Balak 206b.
13. Bamidbar Rabbah 20:14.
14. Rashi, [Numbers 22:30](#); Avodah Zarah 4b.
15. Bamidbar Rabbah 20:14.
16. Abarbanel, Ramban, Midrash Rabbah and others.
17. Bat Ayin, Parshat Balak, pp. 363-364.
18. Rashi, [Numbers 22:41](#).
19. Rashi, [Numbers 23:4](#); Chizkuni and others.
20. Bamidbar Rabbah 20:21.
21. The first set of blessings is in [Numbers 23:7](#); the second, [Numbers 23:18](#); the third, [Numbers 24:2](#); and the fourth, [Numbers 24:15](#).
22. [Numbers 24:5](#).
23. [Numbers 24:17](#) and onward.
24. Likkutei Sichot, vol. 23, pp. 166-171.

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