

Balak - . Parashat Balak (Numbers 22:2 - 25:9) - Lucy Steinitz, July 8, 2017

The *parashah* for this Shabbat is a nightmare for religious fundamentalists. A talking donkey? Really? It's so preposterous it makes splitting the Red Sea look like child's play.

This week Balaam, the Torah's only non-Jewish prophet, is riding on his donkey at the behest of Balak, the king of Moab, to deliver a paid-for-in advance message to damn the Jews. God, who is not too keen on cursing Israel, stations an angel to block Balaam's journey. But there's a catch: only the donkey can see the angel. (The donkey that becomes Balaam's link to the divine.)

The angel appears three times on the path. The first time the angel appears with a drawn sword. The donkey, intelligently, swerves off the path; Balaam whacks her. The second time, the angel appears in a narrow space between two vineyard walls, mashing Balaam's foot; Balaam whacks the donkey again. The third time, the angel chooses such a narrow place on the path that the poor donkey's only option is to lie down; and Balaam whacks her again. Whereupon—here it comes—the donkey turns to Balaam and *speaks*, not so much to ask for the abuse to stop but to question Balaam, "saying, What have I done to you that you should whack me like this three times?"

But Balaam is thick-headed and self-centered and only says to the donkey, "How dare you mock me! If I had a sword, I'd kill you right here and now"(Numbers 22:28–29). Balaam is concerned only that he looks foolish in front of his assistants, who have accompanied him. There is no indication whatsoever here that talking to his donkey is abnormal, but Balaam protests the questioning of his authority, as man over beast. Among other oddities in this story, I think this is the world's first recorded incident of road rage.

Then—and only then—does "the Lord open Balaam's eyes ..."(Numbers 22:31). Balaam has a short conversation with the angel and realizes that his donkey has been way ahead of him all along. Balaam sees that what he thought was making him look foolish was actually saving his life. So now Balaam realizes the error of his ways, the danger of his path, and he repents. Suddenly the story changes: Balaam now reveres God and therefore can only bless the Israelites and not curse them. In fact, the revamped curse of Balaam was deemed such a blessing that it became enshrined as the opening words of our liturgy, to be uttered when we enter a synagogue for prayer—"How goodly are your tents O Jacob, *Ma Tovu Ohalekha Ya'akov.*"

But I want to talk more about donkeys. First, let's imagine how the donkey sounded to Balaam.

OPEN: YouTube Video for sound http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ac2yP_DbHxc

I happen to love donkeys, who were ubiquitous in Namibia and Ethiopia where we lived; they are all-terrain assistants on whom the local people still rely today for transportation, carrying loads, grinding grain, and plowing fields. They are highly dependable, gentle and generally friendly to people – but sometimes stubborn. If they sense danger they simply tend to freeze. Hence, the initial reaction of Balaam’s donkey to the angel of God was natural to the species.

I did some internet research and found that donkeys play a significant part in many Bible stories. Here are some examples:

1. Abraham saddled his donkey to take Isaac to be sacrificed (Gen 22)
2. Joseph’s brothers took donkeys with them to get food from Egypt (Gen 42)
3. Moses saddled his donkey to go on his trip to Egypt to free Israel (Ex. 4:20)
4. And, of course, Jesus rode a donkey into Jerusalem a week before He was crucified in order to fulfill the prophecy that He would do so (Matthew 21:5; Zechariah 9:9)
5. Donkeys were very important animals in Torah in their own right. In fact, they were so important:
 - that their 1st born male offspring were the only “unclean” animals that God’s law required to be redeemed by sacrifice of a lamb. Ex. 13:13
 - The law required that a man’s Donkey had to rest on Sabbath Day. (Exodus 23:12)
 - If it was stolen, the thief was required to pay back twice the donkey’s value (Exodus. 22:4)
 - Exodus 23:5 specifically commanded that “If you see the donkey of someone who hates you fallen down under its load, do not leave it there; be sure you help him with it.”
 - Exodus 20:17 also said “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house. You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.”
 - This makes the donkey just one of only two animals mentioned in the 10 commandments. Incidentally, the only other talking animal in the Bible is... (can you guess?) the serpent in the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve.

So Donkeys were highly valuable to God’s People... and to God Himself.

When you think about it, Balaam’s story could have easily been told without the donkey, but it wasn’t. Whoever you believe wrote the Bible decided that the donkey-as-intermediary was a critical part of the story, and had to be retained. To me, this means that the lowly donkey has something to teach us. But what?

First, the donkey is emblematic of the instruction that we have, as Jews, to be kind to animals. On the Sabbath, we are obliged to let the donkey rest, same as human beings. We are taught to rescue fallen donkeys, and to feed the animals under our care before we sit down to have

a full meal ourselves. These injunctions let my cousin –with whom I discussed this parasha last weekend – to suggest that maybe the donkey knew that the Israelites were kinder to his species than the Moabites, so he had a self- interested motivation in getting Balaam to change his curse to a blessing. Not such a stupid or lowly animal after all.

The talking donkey did not escape Jewish commentators through the ages. Midrash Numbers Rabbah (20:14) explains that God “closed the mouth of the animal [all animals], for if she spoke, they [people] could not subject her and stand over her. For this [donkey] was the stupidest of creatures and this [Balaam] was the wisest of the wise, and as soon as she spoke he could not stand before her.”

Subjugation, in the rabbinic view, is made possible merely by the inability to speak. The donkey’s sudden, surprising voice in this story flips the power dynamic, rendering Balaam powerless in the face of the donkey’s newfound authority.

Hmmn.

Speech is a profound expression of power—and the denial of it a crippling means of oppression—around the world. Many authoritarian governments impose strict censorship of media, preventing exposure of corruption and human rights abuses to the public. In some ways, our own government is trying to do the same. The importance of preserving free speech is a lesson drawn from Balaam and his donkey.

To me, there is yet another lesson here. By listening to his lowly donkey, Balaam saves many lives including his own. Shouldn’t we do the same kind of listening? Everywhere in the world today, decisions are made by people who can speak well and can speak loudly, especially by those who have access to the media. But shouldn’t all voices, even those we don’t initially understand, also be considered?

All human beings deserve a voice in their own destiny. Yet, we live in a world where decisions are often made by adults on behalf of children, without listening to their experiences or point of view. But we should listen to children more, for example when courts consider custody or foster care or cases of abuse. Governments also need to listen more to the voices of women, ethnic minorities, sexual minorities, poor people, and numerous other marginalized populations who are vastly underrepresented in many societies.

In conflict-ridden situations, peacebuilding requires listening first. Listening with our ears, our eyes and our hearts. Then, and only then, can co-existence begin, where blessings replace the curse of war – once again repurposing disaster into a beautiful prayer. This lesson, the lesson of listening to those without a voice or to those whose speech we may not understand -- listening to those who are most often ignored or taken for granted – this is one of the lessons from today’s parasha – and don’t forget: it all comes from a donkey.