

D'var Torah: Chukat and Balak

This week, we read a double portion in the Torah. Chukat and Balak span Chapters 19 through 25 of Bamidbar, the Book of Numbers, the fourth of the five books of the Torah. Both *parashiot* begin with what might be considered strange animal stories. Both feature themes of rebellion, punishment, and wandering that are typical of Bamidbar. However, they are quite different in tone. Because it is the source of the verses I will be chanting from the Torah, I will concentrate most on the issues raised in the story of Balak and Balaam, which commentators generally treat as a separate Book inserted into Bamidbar, partly for comic relief.

First, some context, so you can understand why comic relief might be necessary in this part of the Torah. The period of wandering chronicled in Bamidbar, the 38 of the 40 years the Israelites spent in the desert, contains no great moments. There is no Exodus, no Sinai, just (as Michael Strassfeld puts it) “the complaints of everyday life.” It is appropriate that the portion from the Torah that I (an “adult *bat mitzvah*”) am chanting for the first time comes from Bamidbar. After all, this is the stretch of life between major life-cycle events, the years between youth and old age, the time when there is little external reminder of the passage of time. Although my first book is about to be published, most of the other “firsts” of my life are long past – first love, first job, first home. Instead, I am wandering through what generally seems like a vast landscape of my career, my relationships, and who I am and hope to be. Bamidbar is about wandering without the milestones that serve as directional markers. I have no idea how far it may be to the Promised Land. I am sometimes weary and nostalgic for the fleshpots of Egypt. What the general message of Bamidbar says to me, on the cusp of middle-age rather than on the cusp of adulthood, is that travel in the desert requires a reliable mode of transportation and a reliable source of water. Living fully in the face of disappointment and uncertainty requires the will to carry on and the refreshments of joy and community. Bamidbar is the tale of the Israelites’ passage through the desert. Studying this text and learning to chant Torah have been part of my efforts to build the will to drive me and the joy and connection to refresh me on my journey.

Just because there is no Exodus or Sinai does not mean that the wanderings of Bamidbar are without drama and spectacle. Indeed, Bamidbar contains many stories of dramatic rebellions, and some quite spectacular punishments. God vaporizes the sons of Aaron because they bring a “strange fire” into the Tent of Meeting. The people complain about their diet of *manna*, the miraculous food God provides in the desert, and God smites them with plague. Miriam and Aaron speak ill of Moses because he marries an Ethiopian woman, for which God strikes Miriam with the physical manifestations of ritual impurity frequently translated as “leprosy”, turning her “white as snow.” Korakh, Dathan, and Aviram convince 250 community leaders to rebel against Moses and Aaron and against the division of ritual labor that is supposed to keep the Jews connected to God. After Moses begs God not to wipe out the entire people in retribution for this

rejection, God makes the earth “open like a mouth” to swallow the rebels and their entire section of the desert encampment – lock, stock, and barrel. The Torah as a whole has many stories featuring the stiff-necked character of the Israelites and our tendency to at least *kvetch* and complain and at worst to rebel against the leaders or the regulations or the resources that God provides for us. Bamidbar strings these stories together like cautionary tales of crime and punishment, cause and effect. The cumulative result is to underscore the perils as well as the importance of the period of wandering in the wilderness as a time of growth, challenge, and change.

Chukat (which means “decree”) opens not with a rebellion but with a real head-scratcher: the paradoxical law of the Red Cow. This is the first strange animal story of this double *parasha*. The first Chapter of Chukat describes the unblemished, coddled Red Cow that the Kohen or high priest ritually slaughters and burns, and the uses to which the ashes must be put. The paradox is that the ashes of the Red Cow purify people who are ritually contaminated, yet the people who engage in preparing the purifying mixture are themselves ritually contaminated by the process. I apparently am not the first reader to find the whole business completely mystifying. It was supposedly regarding the paradox of the Red Cow that King Solomon – no slouch when it came to wisdom – exclaimed, “I said I would be wise, but it is far from me”. Indeed, the rabbis and traditional commentators support the commonsense reader’s intuition that this decree is, as they say, “beyond human understanding,” and they use the incomprehensibility of the law of the Red Cow as proof of the divine origin of the Torah. Reconstructionists do not have the luxury of Biblical literalism. We have to settle for individual and collective God-wrestling. What is interesting to me about the law of the Red Cow is the example it gives of the obscure markers we desperately try to read when our sense of revelation turns to wandering. This seems to me to be one of the hazards of middle age.

As soon as the strange animal story of the paradoxical Red Cow is over, we are back to rebellion. Miriam (cured of her “leprosy” in an earlier Chapter of Bamidbar) dies, and the people are suddenly without the miraculous well that followed the wandering Israelites. Thirst makes the people quarrel and complain to Moses, saying, “Why have you brought us to this wilderness to die? Why did you have us come up from Egypt to bring us to this evil place, with no seeds or figs or grapes or pomegranates and no water to drink!?” God instructs Moses to take his staff and assemble the people and “speak to the rock before their eyes that it shall give its waters.” Moses takes his staff and tells the people that he and Aaron will bring forth water from the rock, but instead of speaking to the rock, the impatient Moses strikes the rock with his staff. When no water appears, Moses strikes the rock a second time. The abundant waters come forth, but because Moses also rebelled (in the way he produced the miraculous water – he struck the rock rather than speaking to it), the waters are called “the waters of strife.” Moses and Aaron are punished for this rebellion by not being allowed to enter the Promised Land.

There are other challenges, battles, and miracles in the rest of Chukat, and at the end, the Children of Israel are encamped in the plains of Moab, on the bank of the Jordan, opposite Jericho. And there begins Parashat Balak, often known as the Book of Balaam after the pagan soothsayer who is the main character.

Parashat Balak, too, begins with an uncanny animal story. Balak, the king of the Moabites, sees the encampments of the Israelites and hears of their military prowess. He becomes very nervous. He sends emissaries to the seer Balaam, son of Beor, “the man with the open eye,” to recruit Balaam to curse the assembled Israelites. Because he knows the Israelites are beloved by God, and because he knows his abilities as a seer are completely dependent on God, Balaam goes reluctantly. The emissaries of Balak think that Balaam is just holding out for more promises of gold and reward from the Moabite king. However, Balaam seems genuinely worried about being able to curse these people he knows are under God’s protection.

Apparently, Balaam was not reluctant enough. On the way from Syria to Moab, a Messenger from God blocks Balaam’s path. The trouble is, Balaam cannot see the Angel, and so is baffled and angry when the she-donkey on which he is riding shies and balks. Balaam beats the donkey, to which God then gives the gift of human speech, so that she says, “What have I done to you, to deserve this beating?” Balaam, not missing a beat even though he has surely never before encountered a talking donkey, says, “Because you have mocked me.” The she-donkey asks Balaam if she has a history of disobedience or mockery, and Balaam admits that no, she has been blameless until now. At this point, God opens Balaam’s eyes so he can see that the donkey balked to avoid an Angel with a drawn sword. Balaam gets it that his journey is a risky one: Balak is asking him to curse the Israelites, whom Balaam knows to be the Chosen People. Over and over, Balaam notes that he can only say the words God gives him.

Once the strange animal tale of the talking donkey is ostensibly over, Balaam meets Balak. The Moabite king reiterates his demand that Balaam, who has a reputation as a sorcerer, should deliver the curse. Although he goes through all the sacrificial rituals, Balaam responds to Balak’s three demands for a curse with three blessings for the Children of Israel.

I will be chanting Chapter 24, the last complete Chapter in Parashat Balak. The Chapter features Balaam’s third and final blessing, which begins with words familiar because we traditionally chant them upon entering the synagogue: “*Mah tovu ohalekha ya’akov mishkenotekha yisra’el.*” The poetry of this third blessing is full of images that are especially striking for a people wandering through a desert, images of abundant water, deep roots, and respectful community.

Hired by Balak to curse, Balaam blesses. Essentially, Balaam winds up making an ass of himself – he appears not only foolish but stubborn. The punishment for Balaam’s rebellion and the comical incident with the ass is that although he tries three times to

curse the Israelites, he blesses them in increasingly beautiful language. Admittedly, the image of this man (who describes himself repeatedly in self-important terms) losing control of his own words and intention after being rebuked by his talking donkey is quite amusing. The rabbinic commentators tend to condemn Balaam for more than being an ass, however. Rabbi Abba ben Kahana ranks Balaam among the three people pronounced “despicable” by God (the others are Cain, who murdered his brother Abel, and Hezekiah, whose boasting results in the Babylonian exile). The rabbis condemn Balaam as the “vilest of sinners” because he intends to curse and injure the people of Israel. One commentator describes Balaam as having “an evil eye, a haughty spirit, and a greedy soul” (*Numbers Rabbah* 20:6-11). Ibn Ezra attributes Balaam’s failings, deception, and scheming to greed for financial gain. Ramban attributes Balaam’s betrayal to more sinister pride: He tempts the Moabites to see God and the prophets as fickle and unscrupulous. In general, the traditional commentators agree that Balaam has no redeeming qualities, despite the beauty of his poetic blessings. Even the modern commentator Pinchas Peli sees Balaam as someone who wastes his God-given gifts.

It is tempting to see Balaam as a stubborn fool whom God uses to make a serious point: Dignity and integrity (perhaps the prime values of middle age) are possible only when we really have our eyes open and are aligned with the greater Truth of our lives. Such a view is consistent with the different and arguably more compassionate view of Balaam taken by more modern commentators. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch sees Balaam in almost Reconstructionist terms, as a man whose faith in God and willingness to do God’s will *evolve* over time. Balaam grows from a sorcerer who seeks to influence God to achieve his own purposes, to a vehicle for God’s will. Contrary to Rabbi Eliezer, who says Balaam’s blessings are not his own but are the words an Angel puts into his mouth, Rabbi Hirsch claims Balaam is informed by the “spirit of unconstrained prophecy”. Similarly, Nehama Leibowitz reads Balaam’s story as one of transformation from sinister intentions to faith in God. Martin Buber claims that although Balaam may have the potential to be a prophet and take initiative, he remains detached and aloof. He announces God’s words and speaks about tomorrow but does not engage with a community or participate in making decisions that shape the future. Therefore he is not a prophet but merely a common magician.

The interlude with the talking ass provides comic relief, but is also another tale of rebellion in line with the themes of Bamidbar. As the diversity of rabbinic opinion indicates, Balaam’s rebellion is ambiguous. On the one hand, Balaam knows better than to set off secure in the certainty that he can obey Balak’s command to curse the Israelites. He hesitates and prevaricates and believes that he has the “go-ahead” from God before he sets out on his journey. On the other hand, Balaam seems headstrong, proud, greedy, and mean to animals. The easy way to reconcile these contradictions is to point out that, as with many accounts in the Torah, the character of Balaam is made up of many different strands of story woven into the canonical text we read today as one continuous narrative. I think the great *homiletic* virtue of these contradictions, though, is that the representation of Balaam is complex and imperfect – in other words,

gratifyingly human. On the surface, Balaam gets his just deserts when he is rebuked by the talking donkey and the Angel. But the story continues, and Balaam finds himself eating crow, as it were, and having a lot of trouble with the spoken word.

Is Balaam true to himself, or just a tool? Is Balaam true to God? To his vision and gift? What are the costs of growing and changing when the outcome is unknown? What are the costs of dragging your feet if you are on the “right” path, or of savagely beating up on yourself if you are not? These unanswered questions echo through the text of this portion and speak directly to the concerns of an adult *bat mitzvah*.

As a wanderer looking for transportation and water as I cross the unmarked desert of mid-life, I sometimes think a little magic is not such a bad thing. Certainly a sense of humor and humility in the face of things not turning out as planned can go a long way when dignity and integrity seem beyond reach. I find a guidepost along these lines in the Haftarah reading associated with Balak, which is from the Book of Micah, and includes this verse:

You have been shown what is good,
 And what God requires of you:
 To do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.

The important point about this set of requirements is that it nowhere says there is only one path or way to walk. It in no way implies that the lost should beat ourselves up. We are here to “do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with ... God.” By doing so, we are simply to be ourselves. A Hasidic story about Rebbe Zusya has him teaching his disciples: In the World to Come, they will not ask me, “Why were you not Moses?” but rather, “Why were you not Zusya?” I read this *parasha* as teaching me to search for ways of being myself, not Moses or anyone else. I read this Haftarah *passuk* as teaching me to look for ways to be my *best* self – fair, compassionate. This set of insights seems like the most reliable source of drive and joy an adult *bat mitzvah* is likely to find.