



# COVENANT & CONVERSATION

.....Family Edition.....

FINDING FAITH IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS



*"With thanks to The Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation for their generous sponsorship of Covenant & Conversation. Maurice was a visionary philanthropist. Vivienne was a woman of the deepest humility. Together, they were a unique partnership of dedication and grace, for whom living was giving."*

בס"ד

בלק תש"ף  
Balak 5780

## The Hidden Meaning of the Bilam Story

### \*\* KEY IDEA OF THE WEEK \*\*

**Love is the only force capable of defeating hate. Love heals.**



### PARSHAT BALAK IN A NUTSHELL

Balak is the king of Moab, a country next to the Land of Israel. He becomes scared when he hears that the Israelites are heading his way. Together with the elders of Midian (another country near Israel), he tries to hire the famous non-Jewish prophet Bilam to curse the Israelites. Bilam asks God what he should do, and God tells him not to go with them. But the Moabites and Midianites return to ask him again, this time with a better offer. God tells Bilam that if he goes, he must only say the words God puts in his mouth.

Then a strange thing happens. Bilam's donkey sees an angel blocking their way and stops walking so Bilam strikes her, and the donkey speaks to him. Bilam is then able to see the angel, who reminds Bilam to only use the words God gives him. After that, Bilam and the king climb a mountain above

the Israelite camp to prepare for Bilam's curse. They try three times to prepare altars and sacrifices, but each time, Bilam blesses the Children of Israel instead of cursing them. King Balak eventually gives up and leaves, angry and frustrated. Despite escaping Bilam's curses, the Israelites bring disaster on themselves anyway when Moabite women convince some Israelites to have forbidden relations with them and to worship idols. 24,000 people die in a plague as punishment, until Pinchas, in an act of passion, rises up against one of the wrongdoers and kills him.

### QUESTION TO PONDER:

Why do people hate? Why do the people in the parsha hate Israel?



### THE CORE IDEA

**The Question:** Many questions have been asked about the story of Balak and Bilam and the almost-curses that turned into blessings. Was Bilam a true man of God, or was he a fraud, a magician, a sorcerer, a practitioner of dark arts? Did he have genuine powers? Was he really – as some of the Sages said – the equal of Moses? Was he motivated by money and honour from the Moabites and Midianites, or was he motivated by hatred toward the Israelites and their closeness to God? Why did God first tell him *not* to go, then change His mind and tell him to go? What is the meaning of the story of the talking donkey? Did it really happen, or was it, as Rambam argued, a vision in Bilam's mind?

These are important questions. But to really understand this story, first we must examine the fundamental question: What is the story doing here at all? The entire episode occurred away from the Israelites. No one from their side,

not even Moses, even knew about it. The only witnesses were Balak, Bilam, and some Moabite princes. Had the Israelites known the danger they were in, and how they were saved from it, maybe they would have thought twice before engaging in immoral behaviour with the Moabite women, in the story immediately after the story of Bilam. They would have known that the Moabites were not their friends.

Even Moses only knew that this happened after God told him later on. In short, the Israelites were rescued from a danger they knew nothing about by a deliverance they knew nothing about. How then did it, or could it, affect them?

Besides which, why did God permit Bilam to go at all? He said "No" the first time. He could have said "No" the second time also. The curses would have been avoided, Israel would have been protected, and there would have been no need for the angel, the talking donkey and the various locations,

sacrifices, and attempted curses. The entire drama seems to have been unnecessary.

God only needed Bilam to recite the promise He gave to Abraham: “I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse” (Bereishit 12:3). And Bilam did eventually say this. Why did God also put into Bilam’s mouth the famous and extraordinary poetry - *Ma Tovu Ohalecha Yaakov* – How beautiful are your tents Jacob?

Who was this episode for? What was the intended change it was meant to bring about? Who was its target audience? It did not affect the Moabites. They proceeded to get their women to successfully lead astray the Israelite men. A plague then struck the Israelites, taking 24,000 lives.

It did not affect the Midianites, whose hatred for Israel was so great that God later told Moses: “Treat the Midianites as enemies and kill them” (Bamidbar 25:17-18). Several chapters later God instructed Moses to take military vengeance against them (Bamidbar 31).

It did not affect Bilam himself. The Torah is very subtle about this. Six chapters after the incident of the Moabite women, we read that in the course of the war against the Midianites, Bilam was killed (31:8). Then, several verses

after that, “They were the ones who followed Bilam’s advice and enticed the Israelites to be unfaithful to the Lord in the Peor incident, so that a plague struck the Lord’s people” (31:16). In other words, having gone through the powerful experience of finding curses turned to God’s blessings in his mouth, Bilam remained full of hatred for the people he had blessed, and plotted against them.

It did not change the Israelites, who remained vulnerable to the Moabites and Midianites, and to the temptations they brought. It did not change Moses, who left it to Pinchas to take the decisive act that stopped the plague and was soon after told that Joshua would succeed him as leader.

There are a lot of questions raised here. In essence we are asking, what did this episode achieve and what must we learn from it?

### QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Is the Torah a history book? How do you think the stories which are included were chosen?
2. Before you look at the answer presented in *Thinking More Deeply*, what do you think the message of this story is?



### IT ONCE HAPPENED...

*“Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.”*

- Dr. Martin Luther King Jr

Ken Nwadike has travelled across America, sharing ideas of peace, unity and positivity with anyone who listens. And he also shares hugs. Free hugs, to be exact.

“While viewing the devastation of the 2013 bombing of the Boston Marathon, I was determined to be a participant in the next race. I failed to qualify by just 23 seconds, so I decided to attend the event in a different way. I provided free hugs to runners as encouragement along the route. This simple act made national news headlines and lifted runners’ spirits. Hugs produced smiles and gave runners an extra boost as they ran.” Equipped with a Free Hugs sign, camera, and tripod, his project began; the event was captured on video – which instantly went viral.

The Free Hugs Project soon gained popularity as he made major news headlines for his peacekeeping efforts and de-

escalation of violence during protests, riots, and political rallies. Inspired by the nonviolent movement of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the mission of the Free Hugs Project is to spread love, inspire change and raise awareness of social issues. His courageous work as a peace activist is helping to heal and narrow the social, political and racial divide that currently exists throughout America.

Ken Nwadike often finds himself caught between protestors and police, each with deep distrust of the other. Wearing a Free Hugs t-shirt and holding Free Hugs signs, he bravely de-escalates tension by giving out hugs to both sides, demonstrating humanity and love on all sides of a conflict.

### QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. How does this story connect to the message of the story of Bilam and Balak?
2. How does the quote by MLK connect to the story and to the message from the *parsha*?



### THINKING MORE DEEPLY

**The answer:** Although it did not change the Moabites, Midianites, Israelites, Bilam or Moses, this incident *does* play a significant role in the story of our people. We are reminded of it time and again. In Devarim, Moses reminds the people that the Moabites “did not come to meet you with bread and water on

your way when you came out of Egypt, and they hired Bilam son of Beor from Pethor in Aram Naharaim to curse you. However, the Lord your God would not listen to Bilam but turned the curse into a blessing for you, because the Lord your God loves you” (Devarim 23:4-5).

Joshua, when he came to renew the covenant after the conquest of the land, gave an abridged summary of Jewish history, singling out this event for attention: “When Balak son of Zippor, the king of Moab, prepared to fight against Israel, he sent for Bilam son of Beor to put a curse on you. But I would not listen to Bilam, so he blessed you again and again, and I delivered you out of his hand.” (Joshua 24:9-10).

The prophet Micah, younger contemporary of Isaiah, said in the name of God, “My people, remember what Balak king of Moab plotted and what Bilam son of Beor answered,” just before he delivers his famous summary of the religious life: “He has shown you, O man, what is good and what the Lord requires of you: to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:5, 8).

At the culmination of the reforms instituted by Ezra and Nehemiah after the Babylonian exile, Nehemiah had the Torah read to the people, reminding them that an Ammonite or Moabite may not enter “the assembly of the Lord” because “they did not meet the Israelites with food and water but had hired Bilam to call a curse down on them. Our God, however, turned the curse into a blessing” (Nehemiah 13:2).

So why the significance of an event that seemingly had no impact on any of the parties involved, made no difference to what happened thereafter and yet was deemed to be so important that it occupied a central place in the telling of Israel’s story by Moses, Joshua, Micah and Nehemiah?

The answer is important. We often wonder why God made a covenant with a people who repeatedly proved to be ungrateful, disobedient and faithless. God Himself threatened twice to destroy the people, (after the Golden Calf and the episode of the spies). At the end of our parsha, He sent a plague against them. There were other devoted and religious peoples in the ancient world. The Torah calls Malkizedek, Abraham’s contemporary, “a Priest of God most high.” (Bereishit 14:18). Yitro, Moshe’s father-in-law, was a Midianite Priest who gave his son-in-law sound advice as to how to lead. In the book of Yonah, during the storm, while Yonah was sleeping, the Gentile sailors were praying. When the Prophet arrived at Nineveh and delivered his warning, immediately the people repented,

something that happened rarely in Judah/Israel. Malachi, last of the Prophets, says: “From where the sun rises to where it sets, My name is honoured among the nations ... said the Lord of Hosts - but *you* profane it ...” (Malachi 1:11-12)

Why then choose Israel? **The answer is: love.** Virtually all the Prophets said so. God loves Israel. He loved Abraham. He loves Abraham’s children. He is often exasperated by their conduct, but He cannot relinquish that love. He explains this to the prophet Hosea. Go and marry a woman who is unfaithful, He says. She will break your heart, but you will still love her, and take her back (Hoshea 1-3).

Where in the Torah does God express this love? **In the blessings of Bilam.** That is where He gives voice to His feelings for this people. “I see them from the mountain tops, gaze on them from the heights: This is a people that dwells apart, not reckoned among the nations.” “Lo, a people that rises like a lion, leaps up like the king of beasts.” “How good are your tents, O Jacob, Your dwellings, O Israel!” These famous words are not Bilam’s. They are God’s – the most eloquent expression of His love for this small, otherwise undistinguished people.

Bilam is the most unlikely vehicle for God’s blessings. But that is God’s way. He chose an aged, infertile couple to be the grandparents of the Jewish people. He chose a man who couldn’t speak to be His voice. He chose Bilam, who hated Israel, to be the messenger of His love. Moses explains: “The Lord your God would not listen to Bilam but turned the curse into a blessing for you, *because the Lord your God loves you.*”

That is what the story is about: not Balak, or Bilam, or Moab, or Midian, or what happened next. It is about God’s love for a people, their strength, resilience, their willingness to be different, their family life (tents, dwelling places), and their ability to outlive empires. **I believe all God’s acts have a moral message for us. God is teaching us that love can turn curses into blessings. It is the only force capable of defeating hate. Love heals the wounds of the world.**

#### QUESTION TO PONDER:

How can we apply this message to our lives today?



#### FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

*The Jewish way is to rescue hope from tragedy. However dark the world, love still heals. Goodness still redeems. Terror, by defeating others, ultimately defeats itself, while the memory of those who offer kindness to strangers lives on.*

*Future Tense, p. 20*



#### AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. What is distinct and unique about the story of Bilam and Balak compared to other stories in the Torah?
2. How can a story about God's love for Israel help us (both Jews and non-Jews) to live our lives?
3. With the current unrest in America and around the world, how does the message “only love can defeat hate” help?



## QUESTION TIME

Do you want to win a **Koren Aviv Weekday Siddur**? Email [CCFamilyEdition@rabbisacks.org](mailto:CCFamilyEdition@rabbisacks.org) with your name, age, city and your best question based on the ideas from the *Covenant & Conversation Family Edition*. **Entrants must be 18 or younger**. Thank you to Koren Publishers for kindly donating these wonderful siddurim.



## EDUCATIONAL COMPANION TO THE QUESTIONS

### IN A NUTSHELL

1. Hatred of others is unfortunately very common. Often it comes from a tribal feeling of being threatened by outsiders. Sometimes this feeling comes from a fear of the unknown, when someone is significantly different (whether this be their ethnicity, culture, or beliefs). In the case of the characters and nations found in our parsha, Balak and the other leaders felt threatened by the Israelites as they had heard that they were a powerful people (or at least a people with a powerful God – they knew what had happened in Egypt!) and when they heard that the Israelites were marching towards them, the Moabites and Midianites were afraid their intention was to conquer their lands.

### THE CORE IDEA

1. We cannot guess why God chose to include some historical narratives in the Torah and leave others out (for example much of the forty years of wandering in the desert is not presented in the Torah at all). However, we can say that the Torah is not a history textbook. Its sole aim is not to teach us history. Each narrative included is there to teach a moral truth of some sort. The subject of this week's *Covenant & Conversation* is the moral truth behind the story of Bilam and Balak, and why this story was included in the Torah.
2. There are many messages and moral truths available to be taken away from this story. Rabbi Sacks gives one answer. Others may have other ideas, such as the concept of Divine Providence and the role God takes in the destiny of peoples and the world in general; the blessing God ultimately gave to the Israelites through the mouth of Bilam contains many truths; the character of Bilam is also something we can learn from.

### IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. According to Rabbi Sacks the message of this story is “love can turn curses into blessings. It is the only force capable of defeating hate. Love heals the wounds of the world”. Ken Nwadike travels America showing love to all people, on both sides of many conflicts. He attempts to show that love is stronger than hate, and by showing love he de-escalates tense situations that threaten to become violent. He believes that love will ultimately heal all wounds and close all divides.
2. The quote from MLK echoes Nwadike’s message about love. Hating those that hate will not end hate in the world but only increase hate. Love is the only force that can truly conquer hate. And to do this we must multiply love in the world. This is what Ken Nwadike attempts to do with his Free Hugs Project. This is also the message of the story in our parsha – love can turn a curse into a blessing. Only love can defeat hate!

### THINKING MORE DEEPLY

1. Every day we have choices to make. We meet people and will have to decide how to relate to them. Sometimes we will be within our rights to disagree and argue. The message here is rather than choosing to be right, choose to be kind. Every person is fighting a battle we may never be aware of. Strive to see the people we are with in all their complexities and choose to show compassion and love to both sides.

### AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. What is most unique about this story is it is a sub-plot that does not directly involve any of the main characters and protagonists of the main narrative. In fact, until God informs Moses, he and the rest of the people are completely unaware that this has been happening nearby.
2. God’s message here is that He chose the most unlikely of messengers to deliver His blessing of love to an undistinguished people. God does not value power, wealth, or size. He does only speak to holy prophets. Anyone can be a conduit for His word, and anyone can be the object of His love. The Jewish God is the God of the weak and of the underdog. We can re-evaluate our values to align with God’s, and spread love as wide and as far as we can.

We are living through difficult times, when racism and hatred can be found even in the most open and free of societies. There is much pain and hurt being hurled within society, and we have seen this expressed in recent times. But the only way to truly banish hate is to increase love in the world. In whichever form we can do this. “Hate cannot drive out hate. Only love can do that.”