



Covenant & Conversation

Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

BALAK • בלק

FROM THE TEACHINGS AND WRITINGS OF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS זצ"ל

With thanks to the Schimmel Family for their generous sponsorship of Covenant & Conversation, dedicated in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel. "I have loved the Torah of R' Chaim Schimmel ever since I first encountered it. It strives to be not just about truth on the surface but also its connection to a deeper truth beneath. Together with Anna, his remarkable wife of 60 years, they built a life dedicated to love of family, community, and Torah. An extraordinary couple who have moved me beyond measure by the example of their lives." — Rabbi Sacks

This year's series of essays were originally written and recorded by Rabbi Sacks זת"ל in 5773 (2012–2013). These timeless messages are accompanied by a new [Family Edition](#) created to inspire intergenerational learning on the Parsha.

The Hardest Word to Hear

The story of Bilaam, the pagan prophet, begins with a bewildering set of non-sequiturs. It involves a sequence of events that seems to have no logic.

First, the background. The Israelites are approaching the end of their forty years in the wilderness. Already they have fought and won wars against Sihon, King of the Amorites and Og, King of Bashan. They have arrived at the plains of Moab - today, southern Jordan at the point where it touches the Dead Sea. Balak, King of Moab is concerned, and he shares his distress with the elders of Midian. The language the Torah uses at this point is precisely reminiscent of the reaction of the Egyptians at the beginning of the book of Exodus.

[The Egyptian Pharaoh] said to his people: *"Here, the children of Israel are more numerous and powerful than us..."* and he was disgusted at the Children of Israel. (Exodus 1:9-12)

[Balak, the King of Moab] was very fearful because of the people, because it was numerous, and Moab was disgusted at the Children of Israel.

(Numbers 22:3)

The strategy Balak adopts is to seek the help of the well-known seer and diviner, Bilaam. Again there is a literary evocation, this time of the words of God to Abraham:

God to Abraham: *"I will bless those who bless you, and those who curse you I will curse."*

(Genesis 12:3)

Balak to Bilaam: *"I know that whoever you bless is blessed and whoever you curse is cursed."* (Numbers 22:6)

This time the parallel is ironic (indeed the Bilaam story is full of irony). In the case of

Abraham, it was God who blessed. In the case of Bilaam, the power was thought to reside in Bilaam himself. In fact the earlier statement of God to Abraham already prefigures the fate of Moab - one who tries to curse Israel will himself be cursed.

The historical background to the Bilaam narrative is well-attested. Several Egyptian pottery fragments dating from the 2nd millennium BCE have been found containing execration texts - curses - directed against Canaanite cities. It was the custom among pre-Islamic Arabs to hire poets thought to be under Divine influence to compose curses against their enemies. As for Bilaam himself, a significant discovery was made in 1967. A plaster inscription on the wall of a temple at Deir Alla in Jordan was found to make reference to the night vision of a seer called Bilaam - the earliest reference in archaeological sources to a named individual in the Torah. Thus, though the story itself contains elements of parable, it belongs to a definite context in time and place.

The character of Bilaam remains ambiguous, both in the Torah and subsequent Jewish tradition. Was he a diviner (reading omens and signs) or a sorcerer (practising occult arts)? Was he a genuine prophet, or a fraud? Did he assent to the Divine blessings placed in his mouth, or did he wish to curse Israel? According to some midrashic interpretations he was a great Prophet, equal in stature to Moses. According to others, he was a pseudo-prophet with an "evil eye" who sought Israel's downfall. What I want to examine here is neither Bilaam nor his blessings, but

the preamble to the story, for it is here that one of the deepest problems arises, namely: what did God want Bilaam to do? It is a drama in three scenes.

In the first, emissaries arrive from Moab and Midian. They state their mission. They want Bilaam to curse the Israelites. Bilaam's answer is a model of propriety: Stay the night, he says, while I consult with God. God's answer is unequivocal:

But God said to Bilaam, "*Do not go with them. You must not put a curse on those people, because they are blessed.*"

(Numbers 22:12)

Obediently, Bilaam refuses the emissaries. Balak then redoubles his efforts. Perhaps more distinguished messengers and the promise of significant reward will persuade Bilaam to change his mind? He sends a second set of emissaries and gifts. Bilaam's reply is exemplary:

"Even if Balak gave me his palace filled with silver and gold, I could not do anything great or small to go beyond the command of the Lord, my God."

(Numbers 22:18)

However, he adds a fateful rider:

"Now stay here tonight as the others did, and I will find out what else the Lord will tell me." (Numbers 22:19)

The implication is clear. Bilaam is suggesting that God may change His mind. But this is impossible. That is not what God does. Yet to our surprise, that is what God seems to do:

That night God came to Bilaam and said, *“Since these men have come to summon you, go with them, but do only what I tell you.”*

(Numbers 22:22)

Problem 1: first God had said, “Do not go.” Now He says, “Go.” Problem 2 appears immediately:

Bilaam got up in the morning, saddled his donkey and went with the princes of Moab. But God was very angry when he went, and the angel of the Lord stood in the road to oppose him. Bilaam was riding on his donkey, and his two servants were with him.

(Numbers 22:21-22)

God says, “Go.” Bilaam goes. Then God is very angry. Does God change His mind - not once but twice in the course of a single narrative? The mind reels. What is going on here? What is Bilaam supposed to do? What does God want? There is no explanation. Instead the narrative shifts to the famous scene of Bilaam’s donkey - itself a mystery in need of interpretation:

When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road with a drawn sword in his hand, it turned off the road

into a field. Bilaam beat it to get it back on the road.

Then the angel of the Lord stood in a narrow path between two vineyards, with walls on both sides. When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord, it pressed close to the wall, crushing Bilaam’s foot against it. So he beat it again.

Then the angel of the Lord moved on ahead and stood in a narrow place where there was no room to turn, either to the right or to the left. When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord, it lay down under Bilaam, and he was angry and beat it with his staff. Then the Lord opened the donkey’s mouth, and it said to Bilaam, *“What have I done to you to make you beat me these three times?”*

Bilaam answered the donkey, *“You have made a fool of me! If I had a sword in my hand, I would kill you right now.”*

The donkey said to Bilaam, *“Am I not your own donkey, whom you have always ridden, to this day? Have I been in the habit of doing this to you?”*

“You have not,” he said.

Then the Lord opened Bilaam’s eyes, and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road with his sword drawn.

So he bowed low and fell facedown.
(Numbers 22:23-31)

The commentators offer various ways of resolving the apparent contradictions between God's first and second reply. According to Nahmanides, God's first statement, "*Don't go with them*" meant, "Don't curse the Israelites." His second – "*Go with them*" – meant, "Go but make it clear that you will only say the words I will put in your mouth, even if they are words of blessing." God was angry with Bilaam, not because he went but because he did not tell them of the proviso.

In the nineteenth century, Malbim and R. Zvi Hirsch Mecklenberg suggested a different answer based on close textual analysis. The Hebrew text uses two different words for "*with them*" in the first and second Divine replies. When God says, "Don't go with them" the Hebrew is *imahem*. When He later says "Go with them" the corresponding word is *itam*. The two prepositions have subtly different meanings. *Imahem* means "with them mentally as well as physically," going along with their plans. *Itam* means "with them physically but not mentally," in other words Bilaam could accompany them but not share their purpose or intention. God is angry when Bilaam goes, because the text states that he went *im* – with -them - in other words, he identified with their mission. This is an ingenious solution. The only difficulty is verse 35, in which the angel of God, having opened Bilaam's eyes, finally tells Bilaam, "*Go with the men.*" According to Malbim and Mecklenberg, this is precisely what God did not want Bilaam to do.

The deepest answer is also the simplest. The hardest word to hear in any language is the word "No". Bilaam had asked God once. God had said "No". That should have sufficed. Yet Bilaam asked a second time. In that act lay his fateful weakness of character. He knew that God did not want him to go. Yet he invited the second set of messengers to wait overnight in case God had changed His mind.

God does not change His mind. Therefore Bilaam's delay said something not about God but about himself. He had not accepted the Divine refusal. He wanted to hear the answer "Yes" - and that is indeed what he heard. Not because God wanted him to go, but because God speaks once, and if we refuse to accept what He says, God does not force His will upon us. As the Sages of the Midrash put it: "*Man is led down the path he chooses to tread.*"

The true meaning of God's second reply, "Go with them," is, "If you insist, then I cannot stop you going - but I am angry that you should have asked a second time." God did not change His mind at any point in the proceedings. In scenes 1, 2 and 3, God did not want Bilaam to go. His "Yes" in scene 2 meant "No" - but it was a "No" Bilaam could not hear, and was not prepared to hear. When God speaks and we do not listen, He does not intervene to save us from our choices. "Man is led down the path he chooses to tread." But God was not prepared to let Bilaam proceed as if he had Divine consent. Instead He arranged the most

elegant possible demonstration of the difference between true and false prophecy.

The false prophet speaks. The true prophet listens. The false prophet tells people what they want to hear. The true prophet tells them what they need to hear. The false prophet believes in his own powers. The true prophet knows that he has no power. The false prophet speaks in his own voice. The true prophet speaks in a voice not his (*"I am not a man of words"* says Moses; *"I cannot speak for I am a child"* says Jeremiah).

The episode of Bilaam and talking donkey is pure humour - and, as I have pointed out before, only one thing provokes Divine laughter, namely human pretension. Bilaam had won renown as the greatest prophet of his day. His fame had spread to Moab and Midian. He was known as the man who held the secrets of blessing and curse. God now proceeds to show Bilaam that when He so chooses, even his donkey is a greater prophet than he. The donkey sees what Bilaam cannot see: the angel standing in the path, barring their way. God humbles the self-important, just as He gives importance to the humble. When human beings think they can dictate what God will say, God laughs. And, on this occasion, so do we.

Some years ago, I was making a television programme for the BBC. The problem I faced was this. I wanted to make a documentary about *teshuvah*, repentance, but I had to do so in a way that would be intelligible to non-Jews as well as Jews, indeed to those who had no religious belief at all. What example

could I choose that would illustrate the point?

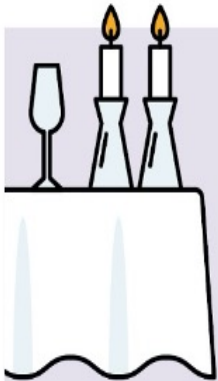
I decided that one way of doing so was to look at drug addiction and recovery. Addicts develop behaviours that they know are self-destructive, but they are part of their lifestyle. To break these habits involves immense reserves of will. An addict looking to address these self-destructive behaviours must acknowledge that the life they have led is harmful to them and to others, and needs to change. That seemed to me a secular equivalent of *teshuvah*, which could illustrate the message to viewers.

I spent a day in a rehabilitation centre, and it was heartbreaking. The young people there - they were aged between 16 and 18 - all came from broken families. Many of them had suffered abuse. Other than the workers at the centre, they had no networks of support. The staff were exceptional people. Their task was astonishingly difficult. They would succeed in getting the addicts to break the habit for days, weeks at a time, until then they would relapse and the whole process would have to begin again. I began to realise that their patience was little less than a human counterpart of God's patience with us. However many times we fail and have to begin again, God does not lose faith in us, and that gives us strength. Here were people doing God's work.

I asked the head of the centre - a social worker - what it was that she gave the young people to make a difference to their lives and give them the chance to change. I will never

forget her answer, because it was one of the most beautiful I ever heard. ‘We are probably the first people they have met who care for them unconditionally. And we are the first people in their lives who cared enough to say “No.”’

“No” is the hardest word to hear, but it is also often the most important - and the sign that someone cares. That is what Bilaam, humbled, eventually learned and what we, too, must discover if we are to be open to the Voice of God.



Around the Shabbat Table

1. Why is it easier to listen to people who tell us what we want to hear, rather than what we need to hear?
2. Thinking back to a time when you received a “no” when you really wanted a “yes”, did the refusal help you in some way?
3. What is the most graceful way to accept a no?

● These questions come from this week's **Family Edition** to Rabbi Sacks' Covenant & Conversation. For an interactive, multi-generational study, check out the full edition at <https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/balak/the-hardest-word-to-hear/>