



Covenant & Conversation



Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

BALAK · בלק

BASED ON THE TEACHINGS OF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS 7" 52

COVENANT & CONVERSATION SUMMARY

The Hardest Word to Hear

• The full essay written by Rabbi Sacks is available [on our website](#)

The story of Bilaam, the pagan prophet, begins with a bewildering narrative. 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. They have fought and won wars against Sihon, King of the Amorites and Og, King of Bashan. They have arrived at the plains of Moav (today it is where Jordan touches the Dead Sea). Balak, King of Moav is concerned, fearing the Israelites, and he shares his distress with the elders of Midian. He turns to Bilaam, a famous seer, asking him to curse Bnei Yisrael. Initially, Bilaam appears respectful. He asks God what to do, and God's first answer is clear: *"Do not go with them. You must not put a curse on those people, because they are blessed."*

Bilaam refuses the king, but Balak sends a second, more impressive delegation, with promises of honour and reward. Bilaam gives a noble reply: *"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."* Yet he adds a dangerous sentence: *"Stay here tonight ... and I will find out what else the Lord will tell me."* That is the turning point.

The hardest word to hear in any language is the word "No." Bilaam has asked once. God has said no. This should have been enough. Yet Bilaam asks a second time. In doing so, he reveals something about himself. He has not accepted the Divine refusal. He wants to hear the answer "Yes."

And that is what he then hears. It is not that God changed His mind. **God does not change His mind.** Rather, God does not force His will upon us. As the Sages said: *"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, I will not stop you - but I am angry that you

asked again. God's "Yes" was really a "No" that Bilaam could not hear, because he was not prepared to hear it.

When God speaks and we do not listen, He does not intervene to save us from our choices.

The episode of Bilaam and the talking donkey is pure humour, causes Bilaam to be cut down to size. He had won renown as the greatest prophet of his day. His fame had spread to Moav 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.

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.

Some years ago, while making a television programme about *teshuvah* - repentance - I visited a rehabilitation centre for young addicts. I asked the head of the centre how they gave these young people the strength to change. I will never forget her answer: "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 you help you in some way?
3. What is the most graceful way to accept a no?

A Takeaway Thought

The word "No," is often unwelcome. Yet accepting a no with humility means understanding we cannot always get what we want, and God knows best.



Exploring the Parsha

WITH SARA LAMM

BASED ON THE TEACHINGS OF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS 7" 57

THIS WEEK'S TORAH PORTION



The Parsha in a Nutshell

Balak, the king of Moav, summons the prophet Bilaam to curse Bnei Yisrael. He refuses, but eventually decides to accept the job. He journeys to the place in the desert where the people are camped, but as he gets closer, strange things begin to happen. Bilaam's donkey sees the angel that God sends to block their path, and halts. Bilaam, unable to see the angel, beats the donkey, and she begins to talk to him! Eventually Bilaam sees the angel too, and he is warned to only say the words God tells him to say.

Three times, Bilaam attempts

to pronounce his curses to Bnei Yisrael. Each time, he issues beautiful blessings instead. Bilaam also prophesies about the future coming of Moshiach.

Later, Bnei Yisrael tragically fall prey to the charms of the daughters of Moav and begin worshipping the idol Peor. When a high-ranking official publicly takes a Midianite princess into a tent, Pinchas takes action and kills them both. His swift response successfully stopped the terrible plague raging among Bnei Yisrael.



Parsha Activity

The Yes/No Game

One person sits at the head of the table, and the other participants take turns asking rapid-fire questions for one minute. The catch is that the "head person" is not allowed to say the words "yes" or "no", or nod or shake their head.

Do you find this game hard? You can't answer with a yes or a no!

A STORY FOR THE AGES



Grounded!

In the early hours of 4 June 1944, the most powerful military commander in the world sat in a room in England, waiting for one man's answer.

It was the height of World War II, and General Dwight Eisenhower was ready to launch the largest seaborne invasion in history. Hundreds of thousands of soldiers were standing by. Ships filled the harbours. The man he was waiting for was Group Captain James Stagg, his chief meteorologist. Stagg had been meticulously studying the weather over the English Channel, and what he saw deeply worried him. A fierce storm was building.

If the invasion launched on 5 June as planned, the rough seas and low clouds would be catastrophic. Planes would be unable to take off. The entire operation could fail, after all their careful planning. But the generals were impatient to

get moving. Their troops were ready. Everyone wanted to hear a yes.

The pressure to proceed was immense. But Stagg looked at his data and said no. He told Eisenhower clearly and calmly that the conditions were too dangerous. He recommended a delay of twenty-four hours.

Eisenhower had wanted a yes just as much as everyone else, if not more. But he also trusted that Stagg knew what he was doing. So Eisenhower listened. He postponed the invasion. On 5 June, the storm hit exactly as Stagg had predicted, with violent winds and churning seas. Had the invasion been launched that day, it would almost certainly have ended in disaster. Instead, on 6 June 1944, in a brief window of calmer weather that Stagg had also forecast, the invasion went ahead. The operation - known as D-Day - was a success, and it



Captain James Stagg (front right) in discussion with General Dwight Eisenhower (front left)

was key to the victory of the Allies.

As we saw in this week's parsha, Bilaam could not accept God's "no" because he craved reward and prestige. He only wanted to hear "yes". But James Stagg understood that true responsibility sometimes means delivering an unwelcome answer, even when everyone around you is demanding a yes. And Eisenhower listened, adjusted, and led the people safely around the storm.



Cards & Conversation

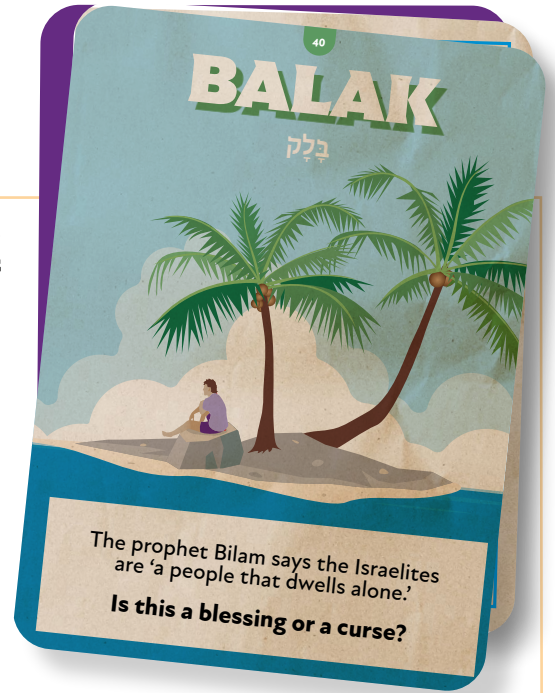
“From the tops of crags I see him; from the hills I gaze down: a people that dwells alone; not reckoning itself among nations.” - Bamidbar 23:9

The prophet Bilaam says the Israelites are ‘a people that dwells alone.’ **QUESTION:** Is this a blessing or a curse?

Rabbi Sacks’ commentary explains: “This is a very ambiguous blessing. Being alone, from a Torah perspective, is not a good thing....

“Nowhere in Tanach are we told that it will be the fate of Israel, or Jews, to be hated. To the contrary, the prophets foresaw that there would come a time when nations would turn to Israel for inspiration. Isolation may at times be the Jewish condition, but it is not the Jewish vocation. We must treat this pronouncement with caution. It is Bilaam’s curse, not God’s blessing?”

Cards & Conversation: Chumash Edition - Each card holds an interesting question to think about and discuss, based on the Torah portion. Flip it over to discover an idea from Rabbi Sacks that shines a new light on the parsha. Find out more by visiting rabbisacks.org/cards-and-conversation



Parsha in Practice

Mitzva of the Week

Rebuking Your Neighbour

The Torah commands us to rebuke someone when they are doing wrong, as it says, “You shall surely rebuke your neighbour.”

This is a very difficult mitzva. It is much easier to stay silent, or to agree out loud with people, in order to keep the peace. But true love means caring enough to speak up when someone is making a mistake. God told Bilaam “no” to stop him from doing wrong; Pinchas acted swiftly and publicly when he saw grave wrongdoings. We must strive to have the courage to say “no” to our friends when they need it, doing so with gentleness and genuine care for their well-being.

“Remonstrating with the people, administering rebuke, was fundamental to the prophetic task. [But] ‘just as it is a mitzva to say something that will be heeded, so it is a mitzva not to say something that will not be heeded.’” - Rabbi Sacks

Practically Speaking

How will you communicate?

Next time someone tells you “no” whether it is a parent, a teacher, or a close friend, pause before getting angry or defensive. Take a deep breath and ask yourself if they might actually be saying it because they deeply care about you and your future.

Bilaam was a powerful, highly-respected prophet, but he surrounded himself with people who only ever told him exactly what he wanted to hear. This led to his downfall. A true leader desperately needs people who are willing to say no.



Try it out

YOUNG STUDENTS:

Have you ever asked for something, such as a new toy, a later bedtime, or an extra dessert, and your parents said absolutely not? It can feel really frustrating. But parents usually say no because they love you deeply and want what is truly best for you. They know that getting everything we want isn’t always good for us. Next time you hear a “no”, try to remember that it is actually a strong sign of how much they genuinely care about you. Try to understand *why* they said no!

ADVANCING STUDENTS:

Think carefully about your own friends. Do you only spend time with people who always agree with you, or do you actively value those who are willing to challenge you?



Learning in Layers

Guiding you through Torah step by step, with insights from the [Koren Sacks Humash with translation and commentary by Rabbi Sacks](#). Each step takes us a little deeper and invites 'Torah as Conversation,' just as Rabbi Sacks taught.

Stronger than I

LAYER 1: FIND THE TORAH TEXT: BAMIDBAR 22:5-6

”הִנֵּה עִם יֵצֵא מִמִּצְרַיִם הִנֵּה כֶסֶה אֶת-עֵינַי הָאָרֶץ, וְהוּא יִשָּׁב, מִמְּלִי.
”וְעַתָּה לְכֵה-נָא אֶרֶץ-לִי אֶת-הָעַם הַזֶּה, כִּי-עֲצוּם הוּא מִמֶּנִּי.”

LAYER 2: READ RABBI SACKS' TRANSLATION

“A people has come out of Egypt, and now they cover the face of the land – and they have settled down alongside me. Please, come now and curse this people for me, for they are **stronger than I**.”

LAYER 3: THINK ABOUT WHAT IT MEANS

Balak, the king of Moav looks at Bnei Yisrael and feels intense fear, believing they are more powerful than his own nation. How is this different from the people's view of themselves, as we have seen in recent weeks (think: the episode of the spies holds some clues.)
Whose perception is accurate, as far as we can tell? What can we learn from this?

LAYER 4: LEARN FROM RABBI SACKS' COMMENTARY

“The language the Torah uses here - and in verse 3 - is reminiscent of the reaction of the Egyptians at the beginning of the book of Shemot: “The Israelite people are many (rav) and more powerful (atzum) than we”... And the Egyptians came to dread (vayakutz) the Israelites' (Ex. 1:9, 1:12). Again we are given an insight into the perspective of other nations on Israel, which may differ from Israel's experience of themselves.”

But does it even matter how numerous Bnei Yisrael are? On parshat Naso, Rabbi Sacks wrote: “The numbering of a people is the most potent symbol... of a society in which the individual is not valued in and for him- or herself but as part of a totality whose power lies in numbers. That is precisely what Israel is not. The God of Israel, who is the God of all humankind, sets His special love on a people whose strength has nothing to do with numbers, a people that never sets itself to become an empire... that was and remains tiny in both absolute terms and relative to the empires with which it was and is surrounded...”

LAYER 5: REFLECT AND RESPOND

It is fascinating how differently we can be perceived by others than we see ourselves. Balak saw a mighty, terrifying nation, while Bnei Yisrael often felt vulnerable and insecure in the wilderness.

1. Why do you think other nations saw the Israelites as so powerful?
2. Have you ever felt small or insecure, only to find out that someone else looked up to you or thought you were strong or powerful in the exact way that you felt weak?
3. How does knowing God is with us change how we should view our own strength?

- Find out more about the [Koren Sacks Humash](#) at rabbisacks.org/books/the-koren-sacks-humash



Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

The Rabbi Sacks Legacy perpetuates the timeless and universal wisdom of Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks as a teacher of Torah, a leader of leaders, and a moral voice.

Explore the digital archive, containing much of Rabbi Sacks' writings, broadcasts, and speeches, or support the Legacy's work, at www.RabbiSacks.org, and follow The Rabbi Sacks Legacy on social media @RabbiSacks.

**With thanks to the Schimmel Family for their generous sponsorship of
Covenant & Conversation, dedicated in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel**