



Covenant & Conversation

Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

BALAK • בלק

FROM THE TEACHINGS AND WRITINGS OF **RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS** ז"צט

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 Balak and Balaam has an ending that is devastating and unexpected. Recall what happened: The Moabites and Midianites were terrified by the approaching Israelites. Balak the Moabite king approached the Midianites and suggested that they hire Balaam to curse the Israelites. If, as they feared, the Israelites derived their strength from a supernatural force, then it made sense to counter it with another supernatural force. The plan failed spectacularly. Instead of cursing the Israelites, Balaam blessed them. Chapter 24 then ends with the words, "Balaam got up and returned home, and Balak went his own way" (Num. 24:25).

This should have been the end of the story. But it was not. Instead, in the very next verses we read:

While Israel was staying in Shittim, the men began to indulge in sexual immorality with Moabite women, who invited them to the sacrifices to their gods. The people ate the sacrificial meal and bowed down before these gods. So Israel yoked themselves to the Baal of Peor. And the Lord's anger burned against them.

Num. 25:1–3

This could not be more serious. It is the first time the Israelites commit the cardinal sin of idolatry.

Most of the commentators do not regard the Golden Calf as an idol. It was intended as a substitute Moses – a vehicle for receiving divine messages – rather than an object of worship in its own right. But the idolatry at Shittim was real. For the first time we see the Israelites bowing down to Baal, the Canaanite god. It was a betrayal of everything they should have stood for.

What is more, this was the first time the Israelites sinned gratuitously, as it were. Previously they had been driven by fear or hunger or thirst or disappointment. None of these was operative in the case of the Moabite women. This was sheer sexual self-indulgence, yielding to temptation unthinkingly. Even the idolatrous act was undertaken not in any spirit of rebelliousness, but almost as an afterthought: first sex, then food, then pagan worship. If the first, why not the second and the third? The casualness of it almost beggars belief.

Worse: This was the first occasion they had had real contact with the people who would become their neighbours. They were no longer in the desert, far from cities and civilisation. They were approaching the holy land. That they could fall so quickly was a frightening sign of how little they had learned about the nature of their mission as an exemplary people.

Worse still: The sinners were not the usual suspects, the people who came out of Egypt. A generation had passed. Aaron and Miriam had died. So had most of their contemporaries. The Israelites were coming close to their destination. This was the new generation in which all the hopes of the future were invested. Yet they too stumbled at the first fence, fell in the first trial.

Worst of all, it began with sex. To understand the significance of this, recall the book of Genesis. We would have expected it to be either an affirmation of monotheism or a critique of idolatry. But it is neither. It is a critique of the sexual mores of the surrounding culture. Abraham and Isaac feared that they would be murdered for their wives. The people of Sodom surrounded Lot's house, bent on committing an act of homosexual rape. Shechem raped and abducted Jacob's daughter Dina. Potiphar's wife tried to seduce Joseph, and when she failed, had him imprisoned on a false charge of rape.

The implicit argument is profound. What is wrong with idolatry is that it is worship of power – and in human terms the worship of power translates into the untrammelled pursuit of sexual desire. To paraphrase Thucydides, the strong do what they wish and the weak suffer as they must. For Israel to slip into the same sin at the first opportunity is ominous and bodes ill for the future. It also makes a nonsense of Balaam's blessing, "How goodly are your tents, Jacob, your dwelling places, Israel" (Num. 24:5), if, as the rabbis thought, this refers to the modesty of Israel's family life (Rashi to Num. 24:5).

So we brace ourselves for divine anger, and it duly comes.

The Lord said to Moses, "Take all the leaders of these people, and hang them before the Lord, facing the sun, so that the Lord's fierce anger may turn away from Israel." So Moses said to Israel's judges, "Each of you is to put to death those of your people who have yoked themselves to the Baal of Peor."

Num. 25:4–5

It was a sharp and painful punishment designed to restore order to the camp. But it failed to do so. One of the tribal leaders, Zimri from the tribe of Simeon, proceeded to bring a Midianite woman into the centre of the camp and cohabit with her in full view of the people, as brazen an offence as we have seen since Datan and Aviram joined the Korah rebellion. Only the zealotry of Pinhas – killing them both as they were cavorting – saved the day.

Where was Moses? The rabbis were surely right to suggest that it was Moses' own background that rendered him powerless in the given situation, for he had himself married a Midianite woman, the daughter of one of their priests (Sanhedrin 82a). Any attempt on Moses' part to do what Pinhas did would have exposed him to the charge of hypocrisy, and made the situation worse, not better.

That said, however, it is hard to avoid the sense that Moses had reached almost the end of the line as a leader. He was old. He was a member of an earlier generation that had proved incapable of meeting the challenge of entering the land. The previous challenges – the episode of the quails, the spies, the Korah revolt, and finally the moment when he struck the rock – sapped his strength. This was true if not spiritually then emotionally, if not in his relationship with God then at least in his relationship with the people.

But the real issue in the story of Balaam is one in which we the readers stand in a privileged position vis-à-vis the participants. For we know, as the people at the time did not, what had previously transpired between God, Balaam, and Balak. No Israelite was present at any point in the events described in the previous chapters. They could not have known the danger they were in, of being cursed by one of the spiritual virtuosi of the time. They could not have known how God Himself had intervened to turn the curses into blessings.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines tragic irony as "a literary technique, originally used in Greek tragedy, by which the full significance of a character's words or actions is clear to the audience or reader although unknown to the character." Tragic irony is rare in the Hebrew Bible. One might almost say it is foreign to the spirit of Judaism,

whose defining principle is hope. Yet Numbers 25 is precisely this: a study in tragic irony. Not knowing that they had just been saved from serious danger, the Israelites proceeded to fall into a simple and obvious trap. Having been steered away from the abyss, they slipped on a banana skin. We, the readers, understand this even more deeply than the Israelites at the time.

The Torah is a subtle book, and in the story of Balaam it uses one of its most delicate techniques. Only several chapters later (Num. 31:16), in the course of the war the Israelites eventually waged against the Midianites, do we discover that the entire episode of sexual and spiritual betrayal at Shittim was planned and conceived by Balaam himself.

When the Torah withholds a fact essential to understanding a passage and reveals it only later, it is forcing us to realise that events are not always what they first seem. In this case, certain puzzling aspects of the Balaam story now become clear. We now understand why God was angry with Balaam for going along with the Moabites and Midianites despite the fact that He had given him permission to do so. Evidently God detected in Balaam's mind a persisting malevolence towards Israel, which eventually found expression in the plan to have the women seduce the Israelite men.

We also understand the ambiguity of some of the blessings themselves, including the famous line, "It is a people that dwells alone [*levadad*], not reckoned among the nations" (Num. 23:9). Recall how many centuries later the book of Lamentations used the same word to describe not the uniqueness of Israel but its isolation: "How lonely [*vadad*] lies the city once so full of people!" (Lam. 1:1). The sages went so far as to say that, with one exception, all the blessings pronounced by Balaam eventually turned into curses (Sanhedrin 105b).

The real effect of concealing the information about Balaam is, though, to focus attention on the Israelites. It was they who sinned. Had Balaam's

name been mentioned at the outset, we would have focused on him. It would have been his malice, his cunning, his defiance of God's purposes that would have been the story. The Torah is signalling to us that it was not the story. That is not where the Torah wants our attention to be directed. It wants us to focus relentlessly on the Israelites.

The message of the story of Balaam as a whole is this: God saves Israel from its enemies but even God cannot save Israel from itself.

To be defended by the Holy One, Israel must be holy, and that includes – as Leviticus insists in chapters 18 and 20 – a strict sexual ethic. Lose that and the nation will lose everything. If the Israelites act like the Canaanites, they will suffer the fate of the Canaanites. If, on the other hand, it values marriage, honours and sanctifies fidelity between husband and wife and tender care between parents and children, then Israel will eventually be blessed even by its enemies. But if it is unworthy, it can expect no special indulgence from God. To the contrary, as Amos said: "You alone have I singled out of all the families of the earth – that is why I will call you to account for all your iniquities" (Amos 3:2). Loyalty begins in our most intimate relationships, and extends outwards to the nation and upwards to God. Disloyalty, as the Israelites showed in Shittim, can only end in disaster.

The whole book of Numbers has been a counterpoint between order and chaos, law and narrative, God's faith and the people's faithlessness, the blessings God brings forth from the mouth of an enemy and the curses the people bring upon themselves. This is history, but not in a conventional sense. Numbers is less a chronicle of what happened in the course of forty years than a tutorial in what it is to find or lose direction in the wilderness of time.

The enduring lesson remains. God may save us from our enemies, but only we can save us from ourselves.