

**Balak - Selected Shorts (Number 36)**  
*Rabbi Eliot Malomet June 26, 2021 16 Tammuz 5781*

**במדבר כ"ב:ד'**

(ד) וַיֹּאמֶר מוֹאָב אֶל־זִקְנֵי מִדְיָן עֲתִידָהּ יִלְחָקוּ הַקְּהָלִי אֶת־כָּל־סְבִיבֵינֵינוּ כְּלָחָד הַשּׁוֹר אֶת יֶרֶק הַשָּׂדֶה וּבְלֶקֶת בְּרֹצְפוֹר מְלֶדֶת לְמוֹאָב בְּעֵת הַהוּא:

**Numbers 22:4**

(4) *and Moab said to the elders of Midian, "Now this horde will lick clean all that is about us as an ox licks up the grass of the field." Balak son of Zippor, who was king of Moab at that time. Midianites are descendants of Abraham and Keturah. Moabites are descendants of Lot and his eldest daughter. Midian and Lot are first cousins; Moab and Midian are "first-cousins-once-removed". According to Rashi, they were once enemies but, like all future anti-Semites, in their common fear and loathing of the Israelites, they formed an alliance. Note also how they picture Israel as oxen devouring the fields. Here we have a proto-anti-Semitic trope: those Israelites are going to take over; they're going to destroy our land. (Midian is Jacob's uncle; Moab is Jacob's first-cousin-once-removed. They're all related.)*

**במדבר כ"ב:ו'**

(ו) וַעֲתִידָהּ לִכְהַנָּא אֶרְהֶ־לִי אֶת־הַעַם הַזֶּה כִּי־עֲצוּמִים הוּא מִמֶּנִּי אוֹלֵי אוֹכְלֵי נֶפֶשׁ בָּוֹ וַאֲנִי־נִשְׁנוּ מִדֶּ־הָאָרֶץ כִּי יִדְעֵמִי אֶת אֲשֶׁר־תִּבְרַךְ מִבְּרַךְ וַאֲשֶׁר תֵּאָר יֵאָר:

**Numbers 22:6**

(6) *Come then, put a curse upon this people for me, since they are too numerous for me; perhaps I can thus defeat them and drive them out of the land. For I know that he whom you bless is blessed indeed, and he whom you curse is cursed.* Note the echo of Pharaoh (Exod. 1:9) who describes Israel as *רב ועצום ממנו* – *much too numerous for us*. Again, like all future anti-Semites, both Pharaoh and Balak base their strategies on wild distortions of reality. Balak's invitation to Balaam is an ironic echo of God's first charge to Abraham: *I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you*. Israel has total immunity to the curses of others. In the Bible, Israel is the Teflon nation. No curse sticks.

**במדבר כ"ב:י"ב**

(יב) וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹקִים אֶל־בִּלְעָם לֹא תִלְדָּה עִמָּהֶם לֹא תֵאָר אֶת־הָעָם כִּי בְרוּךְ הוּא:

**Numbers 22:12**

(12) *But God said to Balaam, "Do not go with*

*them. You must not curse that people, for they are blessed."* Who is Balaam? The clue is in his name: Bal Am, which is a short form of בלי עם "without a people." The vagrant, itinerant, universal man, who, while originating in Pthor on the Euphrates, evidently has no allegiance to any particular nation, thinks of himself as speaking for all of humanity. In the end, he speaks for no-one, not even himself. Universal messages come from the lived experiences of individuals rooted in their own particularities. See under: Wiesel, Elie; Bashevis Singer, Isaac; Munro, Alice etc.

**במדבר כ"ב:י"ח**

(יח) וַיַּעַן בִּלְעָם וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־עֲבָדֵי בָלָק אֲמִי־תוֹלֵי בָלָק מִלֹּא בִיתוֹ גָּסָף וְזָהָב לֹא אוֹכֵל לַעֲבֹר אֶת־פִּי ה' אֱלֹהֵי לַעֲשׂוֹת קִטְמָה אוֹ גְדוּלָה:

**Numbers 22:18**

*Balaam replied to Balak's officials, "Though Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not do anything, big or little, contrary to the command of the LORD my God. This is his second reply. On the one hand, he is saying that he cannot be bought. On the other hand, because he continues to allow himself to be engaged (after all, it's very flattering!) and asks them to stay over to see what else God will say, he presents an opening for Balak to beg him. Balaam could have simply replied: 100%, unequivocally, no! He could have been Shermanesque: If I am begged, I will not join you; if I am paid, I will not prophesy. But he is wordy and "pious," leaving the cynical reader to think, yeah, he can be bought.*

**במדבר כ"ב:כ'**

(כ) וַיָּבֵא אֱלֹקִים אֶל־בִּלְעָם לַיְלָה וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ אֲמִי־לִקְרָא לְךָ בָּאוּ הָאֲנָשִׁים קוּמִי לְךָ אִתָּם וְאִם אֶת־הַדְּבָר אֲשֶׁר־אָדַבְרָא אֶלְדִּי אֵתוֹ תַעֲשֶׂה:

**Numbers 22:20**

(20) *That night God came to Balaam and said to him, "If these men have come to invite you, you may go with them. But whatever I command you, that you shall do."* After having told Balaam he should not go, why does God reverse Himself? Is God setting Balaam up for a fall? Balaam may have a gift for prophecy but contrary to say Abraham or Moses, he has a weak moral constitution. He will always be known Evil Balaam.

**במדבר כ"ג:ט'**

(ט) כִּי־מֵרָאשׁ צְרִים אֶרְאֶנּוּ וּמִגְבְּעוֹת אֲשׁוּרְנֵנוּ הַדֹּעַם לְבָרָד יִשְׁכֹּן וּבְגוֹזִים לֹא יִתְחַשֵּׁב:

**Numbers 23:9**

(9) *As I see them from the mountain tops, Gaze on them from the heights, There is a people that dwells apart, Not reckoned among the nations, And so, with all the theater, Balaam begins to speak. Rather than curses, his utterances are characterizations of Israel's essence. How do these utterances effect our self-perception? Are we "a people that dwells apart, not reckoned among the nations"? This question is the core of Jewish internal debate.*

**במדבר כ"ד:ה'**

(ה) מֵה־טָבוֹ אֶהְלִיךָ יַעֲקֹב מִשְׁפַּנְתֶּיךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל:

**Numbers 24:5**

(5) *How fair are your tents, O Jacob, Your dwellings, O Israel! It is always important to remember that the first words a Jew recites upon entering the synagogue are from the Gentile prophet. How we see ourselves is related to how others see us. But another reason why we recite the above verse is because it is linked to the below verse, which is not recited:*

**במדבר כ"ד:ח'**

(ח) אֵל מוֹצִיאֵנוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם כְּתוֹעַפֶת רָאֵם לֹו יֵאָכֵל גּוֹנִים צְרִיּוֹ וְעֲצַמְתֵּיהֶם יִגְרֹם וְחֲצִיּוֹ יִמְחָץ:

**Numbers 24:8**

(8) *God who freed them from Egypt Is for them like the horns of the wild ox. They shall devour enemy nations, Crush their bones, And smash their arrows. Is entry to the synagogue then a reminder of our essential nature expressed through the eyes of the other, or is it a means for the Jewish people to derive fortification and reassurance while surrounded by hostile enemies?*

**במדבר כ"ג:ט'**

(ט) כִּרְע שֹׁקֵב כְּאֶרֶץ וּכְלָבִיא מִי יִקְיָמֵנוּ מִבְּרַכְיָה בְרוּדָה וְאֶרְבִּידָה אֶרֶר:

**Numbers 24:9**

(9) *They crouch, they lie down like a lion, Like the king of beasts; who dare rouse them? Blessed are they who bless you, Cursed are they who curse you! This is the central theme of this story, an echo of God's original promise to Abraham. Anti-Semites, anti-Zionists, Judeophobes of the world, take note: Hate Jews to your detriment. Honor Jews to your blessing.*

Shabbat Shalom!

**במדבר כ"ב:כ"ב**

(כב) נִסְתַּר־אֶפְי אֱלֹקִים כִּי־הוֹלִיךָ הוּא וַיִּתְעַבֵּב מִלֶּאֱדָה ה' בְּבָרָד לִשְׁטֹן לֹו וְהוּא רֹכֵב עַל־אֲתוֹנֹו וַיִּשְׁגֵי וַיַּעֲרִיו עִמּוֹ:

**Numbers 22:22**

(22) *But God was incensed at his going; so an angel of the LORD placed himself in his way as an adversary. He was riding on his she-ass, with his two servants alongside, Again, the text puzzles us. God says one thing and then does another. We enjoy the irony on so many levels. It is as if God wanted an argument from Balaam, think Jonah, Jeremiah, even Moses, but Balaam loves the attention, the stage, the honor, the game.*

**במדבר כ"ב:כ"ח**

(כח) וַיִּפְתַּח ה' אֶת־פִּי הָאֲתוֹן וַתֹּאמֶר לְבַלְעָם מַה־עָשִׂיתִי לָךְ כִּי הִפְתִּיתָנִי זֶה שְׁלֵשׁ רְגָלִים:

**Numbers 22:28**

(28) *Then the LORD opened the ass's mouth, and she said to Balaam, "What have I done to you that you have beaten me these three times?" The animal, not known for its intelligence, has more intelligence and divine vision than the prophet!*

**במדבר כ"ב:ל"א**

(לא) וַיִּגַּל ה' אֶת־עֵינָי בַלְעָם וַיֵּרָא אֶת־מַלְאָךְ ה' נֹכַח בְּדָרְדָר וַיִּסְרְבוּ שְׁלֵפָה בְּיָדוֹ וַיִּקַּד וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ לְאַפָּיו:

**Numbers 22:31**

(31) *Then the LORD uncovered Balaam's eyes, and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the way, his drawn sword in his hand; thereupon he bowed right down to the ground. Abraham sees angels and invites them in; Jacob sees an angel and wrestles with him; an angel appears to Moses in the burning bush and Moses wants to come closer to check it out. Balaam is not in the pattern.*

**במדבר כ"ג:א'**

(א) וַיֹּאמֶר בַּלְעָם אֶל־בְּלִקְ בְּנֵה־לִי בָזָה שְׂבָעָה מִזְבְּחֹת וְהִנֵּן לִי בָזָה שְׂבָעָה פָרִים וְשְׂבָעָה אֵילִים:

**Numbers 23:1**

(1) *Balaam said to Balak, "Build me seven altars here and have seven bulls and seven rams ready here for me." What is the significance of the offering? Recall that a bull (sin offering) and a ram (burnt offering) were required for Aaron to enter the sanctuary (Lev. 16:3). Here we have seven of these! If that's not going to pull God's presence towards them, nothing will! But therein lies the fallacy of Balaam's great theatrics. In the biblical system the offering is not "theurgic", it's not intended to move God. It's intended to express a human need.*