

Balak - And Balaam Saw that it was Good in the Eyes of God to Bless Israel
Rabbi Eliot Malomet **July 12, 2025 16 Tammuz 5785**



Twice already Balaam has failed to curse Israel. Twice he ordered his patron Balak, king of Moab, to do a little sorcery and build him seven altars. Twice he has sacrificed a cow-ram pair on each one to elicit a divine response. However, on both of those attempts, he fails in his mission. Instead of cursing Israel he blesses Israel. Balak, who has promised Balaam a vast sum, is not happy. Now comes the third attempt for Balaam to elicit God's curse upon his beloved people. We are told:

וַיֵּרָא בַלָּעָם כִּי טוֹב בְּעֵינֵי ה' לְבָרֵךְ אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל... (במ' כד:א)

And Balaam saw that it was good in the eyes of God to bless Israel... (Num. 24:1)

This is so interesting! *Nowhere in the story so far does the text explicitly tell us how God responded to Balaam's "curses".* How did Balaam know that **it was good in God's eyes to bless Israel**? What we get instead, is a full fusillade of Balak's angry reactions. After the first "curse" Balak blasts this response:

מָה עָשִׂיתָ לִּי לֵקֹב אֶיבֵי לִקְחָתִיךָ וְהִנֵּה בִּרְכָתְךָ! (במ' כג:יא)

What have you done to me?! Here I brought you to damn my enemies, and instead you have blessed them! (23:11)

And after the second "curse" Balak cranks it up further:

גַּם קֹב לֹא תַקְבְּנוּ גַם בִּרְךָ לֹא תִבְרַכְנוּ! (במ' כג:כה)

Don't curse them! And don't bless them! (23:25)

But does God do anything in response? No! So how does Balaam *see* that these **blessings** were **good in God's eyes**? **He doesn't. This is his interpretation. He interprets Balak's anger as something good in the God's eyes.** As a prophet, he knows that God likes it when evil people get flummoxed. If this were playing out on a stage, the audience would be laughing at the irony! Balaam would be shushing us with a knowing wink in order to prevent us from breaking the secret to Balak! Balak has no clue what is going on. The rest of us, plus God and

Balaam are in on the conspiracy! Perhaps, God is laughing here too! As we know, **God loves a good story!**¹ But as usual, there is a deeper moral truth to the idea that the blessings were **טוב** **ה' -good in the eyes of God**. Where else do we find this expression? These three places in the Torah:

וַיְדַבֵּר אֲהֲרֹן אֶל מֹשֶׁה הֵן הַיּוֹם הִקְרִיבוּ אֶת חַטָּאתָם וְאֵת עֹלָתָם לִפְנֵי ה' וְתִקְרָאנָה אֹתִי כְּאֵלֶּה וְאֶכְלְתִּי חַטָּאת הַיּוֹם הַיֵּטֵב בְּעֵינֵי ה'. (ויקרא י:יט)	See, this day they brought their sin offering and their burnt offering before the Lord, and such things have befallen me! Had I eaten sin offering today, would this have been good in God's eyes? (Lev. 10:19)	Moses was angry that Aaron did not perform the inaugural sacrifices properly following the tragic death of his sons. Aaron responded to him, God would have thought that this wasn't right for me to do right now.
וַעֲשִׂיתָ הַיָּשָׁר וְהַטוֹב בְּעֵינֵי ה' לְמַעַן יֵיטֵב לְךָ וּבֵאתָ וִירִשְׁתָּ אֶת הָאָרֶץ הַטּוֹבָה אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע ה' לְאַבְרָהָם. (דברים ו:יח)	You are to do what is right and what is good in the eyes of God, in order that it may go-well with you, so that you may come and take possession of the good land that God swore to your fathers. (Deut. 6:28)	God wants people to do what is right. This is the basic principle of a moral life. This verse articulates the main principle undergirding Jewish moral philosophy.
שָׁמַר וּשְׁמַעְתָּ אֶת כָּל הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר אֶנְכִּי מְצַוְךָ לַמַּעַן יֵיטֵב לְךָ וּלְבִנְיֶיךָ אַחֲרֶיךָ עַד עוֹלָם כִּי תַעֲשֶׂה הַטּוֹב וְהַיָּשָׁר בְּעֵינֵי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ. (דברים יב:יח)	Take care to hearken to these words that I command you, in order that it may go-well with you and with your children after you, into the ages, that you may do what is good and what is right in the eyes of the Lord your God. (Deut. 12:18)	God wants people to live ritually correct lives. This verse relates to the proper consumption of sacrificial and non-sacrificial animals, and the prohibition against eating blood.

There are also several instances of the opposite: things that are **רע בְּעֵינֵי ה' -bad in the eyes of God**. Er and Onan, Judah's sons are **bad in God's eyes** (Gen. 38:7, 10).² So is the entire

¹There is no biblical or rabbinic source for this beloved quote. It is often attributed to Elie Wiesel who said it all the time in his lectures. But he would no doubt have attributed it to someone else. Despite it having no actual word-for-word classical source, we can easily support it from the Torah with the following reasoning: God delights in creation (the phrase **God saw that it was good** appears seven times) and creation is one long story that is still unfolding, God delights in stories.

Since human beings are storytelling animals (a concept popularized by the recently deceased moral philosopher, Alasdair MacIntyre), and God loves humanity, therefore God loves stories.

² Judah's son Er married Tamar and died without having fathered a child with her. The rabbis derive from this that he engaged sexually with her only for the sake of physical pleasure and not for procreation, taking advantage of her

generation of the Exodus (Num. 32:13) because of its rebelliousness.³ Thus the term **good in God's eyes** can refer either to moral or ritual propriety or simply, things that make God happy. **When the text says that Balaam saw that it was good in God's eyes to bless Israel, it is not only because God got a kick out of it, but because blessing Israel is inherently good. There is a moral dimension to blessing Israel.** This idea goes all the way back to Abraham, and it deserves being repeated often, especially as we experience so much hatred directed against us:

(בראשית יב:ג)
ואברכה מברכיה ומקללה אאר.
I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you. (Gen. 12:3)

When people bless Abraham and his covenantal descendants, they are expressing their admiration for Abraham's values of faith, justice, and righteousness. These values unleash human goodness therefore the people who admire Abraham are inherently blessed. **God will bless those who bless Abraham.** The opposite is also true. Because those who curse Israel are animated by hate, injustice, and evil, they are inherently cursed, and **God will curse them. Throughout history we have seen the truth of these words: societies that have cursed, expelled, or murdered their Jews are cursed societies.**

Let us return to the verse above. When the text says, Balaam saw that it **was good in God's eyes to bless Israel**, we wonder, who is doing the blessing here? **Is God blessing Israel or is Balaam blessing Israel?** Is God dictating the blessings for Balaam to repeat, or is Balaam actually composing the blessings by himself? Of course, both the narrator and Balaam **tell us** that God is putting the words in Balaam's mouth:

וַיִּשֶׂם ה' דָּבָר בְּפִי בָלָעָם (במ') (כג:ה)	And God put word in Balaam's mouth... (Num. 23:5)	Before Balaam's first curse.
הֲלֹא אֵת אֲשֶׁר יִשֶׂים ה' בְּפִי אֶתּוֹ אֲשַׁמֵּר לְדַבֵּר. (כג:יב)	Is it not whatever God puts in my mouth, that [alone] I must take care to speak? (23:12)	Balaam's reply to Balak, giving the excuse for why he blessed Israel the first time.
וַיִּשֶׂם דָּבָר בְּפִיו. (כג:טז)	And (God) put word in his mouth. (23:16)	Before Balaam's second curse.
כָּל אֲשֶׁר יִדְבֹּר ה' אֶתּוֹ אֲעֲשֶׂה. (כג:כו)	All that God speaks— that [alone] I may do?! (23:26)	Balaam's reply to Balak, with the excuse as to why blessed Israel the second time.

But are they telling the truth? Balaam's first two blessings are overwhelmingly idiosyncratic! Look at them closely: **he makes nine(!) references to himself in the first blessing, and ten(!) references to himself in the second blessing!** In other words, while the story says that God is **putting the words in his mouth**, evidently, **most of the words are his own!** Let's recall that Balaam had a reputation as a great prophet not because of a unique relationship with God, **but because he had raw poetic**

talent! His blessings and his curses landed with power! But this was not a man who checked the boxes of a classic prophetic profile - moral probity, righteous indignation in the face of injustice, compassion. No. He was a showboat and a charlatan! And on top of all of that, **HE. HAD. NO. INTEGRITY!** He could be bought! **So when he said that God was putting the words in his mouth, he was lying!** Ok, so maybe the kernel of the idea came from God, **but the words were his!** And when he saw that his blessings were **good in the eyes of God** - because they got Balak so angry, and God delights in the comeuppance of the vile - **he experiences a shift in his consciousness. This is the moment when he truly transitions from a charlatan into a genuine prophet. Look carefully what the text says just before the third blessing:**

...וְלֹא הָלַךְ כַּפְעָם כַּפְעָם לְקִרְיַת נְחֻשִׁים וַיֵּשֶׁת אֶל הַמִּדְבָּר פָּנָיו.
וַיֵּשֶׂא בָלָעָם אֶת עֵינָיו וַיַּרְא אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל שֹׁכֵן לְשִׁבְטָיו וְתַהִי עָלָיו רוּחַ
אֱלֹהִים. (כד:א-ב)
...and so he did not go forth as time and time [before] to encounter divination-meetings, but he set his face toward the wilderness. And Balaam lifted up his eyes and saw Israel, dwelling by their tribes, and there [came] upon him the spirit of God. (24:1-2)

Wow! He doesn't employ any tricks. No gimmicks. He simply looks first into the wilderness and then to Israel and **becomes truly inspired.** And he is no longer a main character in the blessing. He speaks of himself in the third person with humility!

נֹאֵם בָּלָעָם בְּנוֹ בְּעֵר וְנֹאֵם הַנֹּבֵר שְׁתֵּם הָעֵין. נֹאֵם שְׁמַע אֲמָרִי אֶל אֲשֶׁר
מִחֻזָּה שְׂדֵי יִחְזֶה נִפְל וְגִלְיִי עֵינָיו. (כד:ג-ד)
Word of Balaam son of Beor, Word of the man whose eye is true, Word of him who hears God's speech, Who beholds visions from the Almighty. (24:3-4)

And then these famous words:

מָה טוֹב אֱהִיָּךְ יַעֲקֹב מִשְׁכְּנֹתֶיךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל...
How good are your tents, O Jacob, Your dwellings, Israel!

Not a single personal pronoun is to be found in the entire blessing. It is all about Israel and God!

This story is about God, Israel, a canard of a king, and a morally challenged prophet who ends up delivering some of the most memorable words in the Jewish canon. He learned that blessing Israel is good in God's eyes, and so he committed himself to that fully, and in his third and final oration, he truly became God's messenger with God's message.

**What starts out as chicanery ends up as real prophecy.
What starts out as carpetbagging ends up with a real blessing
that continues to animate the Jewish people to this day.
Evidently, not only does God love this story. So do we.**

Shabbat Shalom!

Day 645. We pray for an end to the war and the return of the hostages. May God comfort the bereaved, protect the IDF, and heal the wounded. AMEN!



May God bless and comfort those who lost loved ones in the terrible floods in Texas.

body. When Er died, the levirate rule obligated him to marry the widow Tamar, but he also took advantage of her sexually. In both cases what they did was "bad in the eyes of God." Yevamot 34b.

³ Deut. 4:25, 9:18, 17:2, 31:29, all touch on the same themes of idolatry and violating the covenant.