



## Reading Balaam: Is There Truth among Gentile Prophets?

Parashat Balak, Numbers 22:2 – 25:9 | by Mark Greenspan

“**Interfaith Relations,**” by Rabbi Jeremy Kalmanofsky, (pp. 727-750) in *The Observant Life*

### Introduction

The gentile prophet Balaam described the Jewish people as: “A people that dwells alone, not reckoned among the nations,” (Numbers 23:9). This is the way Jews traditionally saw themselves through the ages. As a result of this self-perception the *Halakhab* of interfaith relations is complex and controversial even today. Jeremy Kalmanofsky offers a comprehensive and nuanced analysis of the issues that might affect the relations between Jews and people of other faiths. On the one hand Judaism has created clear boundaries between itself and other faiths. On the other hand as Jews we have lived in almost every part of the world and in every culture; we have been deeply aware of the importance of maintaining relations with our neighbors.

Jewish attitudes toward other faiths grew out of a pagan world. There could be no compromise between the polytheism of antiquity and the monotheism of Judaism. But what does this mean for us today? To what extent are today's religions true monotheism? Do we even have a right to pass judgment on the faith beliefs of others? Jeremy Kalmanofsky asks: “Is social contact with non-Jews nothing but the first step toward assimilation? Does religious interchange promote syncretism?” Maintaining boundaries while promoting good relations with others can be complex indeed.

In our *parshah* this Shabbat we read about one of the most famous and enigmatic gentiles: Balaam. While Balaam is often demonized by the sages there are some surprising things we can learn from him about the nature of religion. Apparently Jews do not have a monopoly on revelation. The questions that Balaam inspires are as relevant today in interfaith relations as they were in the Bible: Are there truths that we can learn from a gentile prophet, or is Balaam simply the front of a more sinister agenda?

### The Torah Connection

*Come then, put a curse upon this people for me, since they are too numerous for me; perhaps I can defeat them and drive them out of the land. For I know that he whom you blessed is blessed indeed and he who you curse is cursed... Go back to your own country for the Lord will not let me go with you... I could not do anything, big or little, contrary to the command of the Lord my God.*

- Numbers: 22:6

*My people remember what Balak king of Moab plotted against you and how Balaam son of Beor responded to him.*

- Micah 6:4

**God came to Balaam (22:9):** *It is surely significant that the Torah, a work that comes from Israel, pictures the creator as communicating with a non-Israelite prophet as well. It is a reminder that the Torah begins with the story of the connection between God and all the earth. The narrowing of focus to Abraham and to his descendants is said to be so that they will be a blessing to all the families of the earth. Indeed the connection between Balaam and that promise given in God's first words to Abraham is explicit. The full wording to Abraham is: "And I will bless those who bless you and those who affront you I'll curse." And soon Balaam will bless Israel with the parallel words: "Those who blessed you: he's blessed. And those who curse you: he's cursed.*

- Richard Elliot Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah* (2001; reprint, San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2003)

- a. In what way is Balaam similar to Abraham? In what ways is he different from him?
- b. What does it mean to be a prophet? In what sense is Balaam a prophet?

**Balaam: Saint or Sinner?** *If one were to remove the ass-episode from the text, what would remain is a picture of Balaam as a saint. Over and over again, whether in response to Balak's emissaries or to Balak himself, Balaam harps on a single theme: his unconditional submission to the will of the Lord. He will not allow himself to be hired without the Lord's consent (Numbers 22:8, 13, 18). All of Balak's gold and silver will not sway him from pronouncing only that which the Lord had commanded him. Moreover, it is clear from the beginning that Balaam has no intention of cursing Israel... Convincingly and unflinchingly, Balaam proclaims himself the Lord's obedient servant, who, like Moses, denies that he has ever done anything "of his own accord" (Numbers 24:13, 16:28)*

- Jacob Milgrom, *The Jewish Publication Society Torah Commentary, Numbers*

- a. Why does Dr. Milgrom suggest that the story of the talking ass might not be part of the original version of the story of Balaam?
- b. What is it about the Biblical tale that might lead you to reject or accept Dr. Milgrom's argument that Balaam was a saint?
- c. Robert Alter writes, "an inscription on plaster, probably composed in the eighth century BCE discovered in 1967 at Deir Alla in the same region (Gilead in northern Trans-Jordan)... speaks of a powerful soothsayer and seer named Balaam son of Beor... The well-known figure, then, of the pagan seer Balaam, whether legendary or historical, has been coopted by the author of the Balaam story." Why would our ancestors have borrowed Balaam and included him in their narrative?

**Never again did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moses:** *(Deuteronomy 34:10). There had not arisen one like him in Israel; but among the nations of the world, one like him did arise. This was done in order that the nations of the world might have no excuse to say, "If we had had a prophet like Moses, we would have worshiped the Holy One." Who was the prophet like Moses they had? Balaam son of Beor. However, there was a difference between the prophecy of Moses and the prophecy of Balaam, in that Moses had three qualities Balaam did not have: when God spoke with Moses, Moses was able to stand on his feet, whereas when God spoke with Balaam, he fell to the ground; God spoke with Moses mouth to mouth, whereas He did not speak mouth to mouth with Balaam; He spoke with Moses in plain terms, whereas He spoke with Balaam in parables. On the other hand, there were three qualities Balaam had that Moses did not have: Moses did not know who was speaking to him, whereas Balaam knew who was speaking to him; Moses did not know when the Holy One would speak to him, whereas Balaam knew when the Holy One would speak to him... Moses could not speak with God whenever he wished, whereas Balaam spoke with Him whenever he pleased, as Scripture says, "Fallen down--his eyes are opened" (Numbers 24:4), which implies that whenever he prostrated himself on his face, at once his eyes were opened to anything that he inquired about.*

- B'midbar. Rabbah 14:20

- a. There are many passages in rabbinic literature and Midrash which depict Balaam in less than favorable ways. What does this passage say about Balaam? What insight might it give us into other spiritual figures?

**And the Lord put a thing in the mouth of Balaam** *(Numbers 23:5): Rabbi Eleazar said: An angel; Rabbi Jonathan said: a book. Rabbi Johanan said: From the blessings of that wicked man you may learn his intentions: Thus he wished to curse them that the Israelites should possess no synagogues or school-houses. This is deduced from "How goodly are thy tents, O Jacob;" - that the Shechinah should not rest upon them. "And thy tabernacles, O Israel;" - that their kingdom should not endure. "As the valleys are they spread forth;" - that they might have no olive trees and vineyards. "As gardens by the river's side;" - that their odor might not be fragrant... Rabbi*

*Abba ben Kahana said: All of the blessings reverted to a curse, excepting the synagogues and schoolhouses, for it is written, "But the Lord thy God turned the curse into a blessing for thee, because the Lord thy God loved thee;" (Deuteronomy. 23:6) - the curse, but not the curses.*

- (BT Sanhedrin 105b)

- a. **The Bible tells us that Balaam set out to curse Israel but landed up blessing them. What does this passage do with Balaam's blessings?**
- b. **Do you think this a fair or an unfair depiction of Balaam? In the end how would you judge Balaam?**

## Reflections

While Balaam is often compared to Moses (they are both described as prophets) a more apt comparison is between Balaam and Abraham. In fact the sages made the following statement: "Whoever possesses these three qualities is numbered the disciples of Abraham and those who possess the three opposite qualities are found among the disciples of wicked Balaam." (Avot 5:21) Value judgment aside Balaam is depicted as a man of great spiritual power on a par with the founder of our faith. This is reflected in our *parashah*. Balaam's dialogue with God is a conversational and intimate like that of Abraham and he is a man who has the power to confer blessings and curses on the larger world around him like our forefather.

Balaam has been the subject of much discussion throughout the ages. Is he a sinner or a saint? According to Jacob Milgrom if one leaves the story of the talking ass out of the narrative one gains a different depiction of this gentile seer/prophet. Balaam appears to be a faithful servant of God. But one might also argue that the story of the talking ass is the very point of the story. Friedman suggests that Jews do not have a monopoly on spiritual truths or religious faith. The problem with Balaam, Robert Alter points out, is that Balak assumes that he can hire Balaam as "a technician of the spirits to put a hex on the people of Israel" and Balaam for his part does little to argue with him. Balaam piously says he can't do anything God won't allow but he goes along with Balak's representatives anyway.

We see the two aspects of religion which Jeremy Kalmanofsky discusses in his chapter on "Interfaith Relations: faith and practice." Rabbeinu Tam, a medieval scholar, distinguished Christian faith from gentile practices that were contrary to accepted Jewish values. Kalmanofsky writes: "...medieval rabbis knew enough about Christianity to recognize that Christians combined a basic faith in the God of Israel with practices that depart from aniconic monotheism." Similarly Balaam could be a monotheist by faith but basically a pagan in the way he practiced his faith. The use of magic and the ability to circumvent the will of God by offering a curse were far more serious affronts than the actual beliefs of the faith system. Similarly Rabbi Menahem Meiri in the thirteenth century "shifted the definition of idolatry from a ritual to an ethical one... Meiri evaluated non-Jewish cultures less by how they worship in their shrines and more by how they act in society (Kalmanofsky)." I believe the approach of Rabbeinu Tam and the Meiri open the door for a more pluralistic approach to interfaith relations.

So how do we approach interfaith relations in the contemporary world where Jews deal not only with Christians and Moslems but Hindus, Buddhists, and people of many different faiths? It seems to me that the crux of the issue today lies not in faith beliefs but in faith practices as Jeremy Kalmanofsky suggests. I would also advocate that we consider the distinction that I heard an evangelical minister offer on the radio some years ago. We need to strive for insulation not isolation. By knowing what we believe and who we are we encounter people of many faiths include polytheistic faiths without the danger of being converted by them. And in an age of the open market place if we fail to engage others in these discussions we stand to lose ground. The real issue however is not convincing or converting others or saving some of our own from apostasy. There is much to be learned by encountering the faith of others.

I am definitely a proponent of the often quoted adage that one who knows only one faith does not know any faiths at all. We can better understand where we stand in the world when we can see ourselves in relation to the world around us with all its diversity. Is there a danger of syncretism in this encounter? I guess there is. But we can no longer live in a ghetto. The richness of God's presence in the world does not end with the Jewish religion. Even Balaam, a hostile prophet, had something to teach us. That is why his words appear on the very first page of the Siddur: "How goodly are your tents O Jacob."

*Adapted from Torah Table Talk by Mark Greenspan*