



## What the Eye Can't See • Parshat Balak

As we open our Torah reading for the week, we are introduced to an unusual agreement. King Balak of Moab paid Bilaam, an accomplished soothsayer, to curse the Israelites who would be passing through on their way to the Promised Land. This, Balak believed, would diminish their military might. Bilaam saddled his donkey, set out on the journey but was then obstructed on the way by an angel he could not see. Eventually, Bilaam was forced into blessing the Israelites in an ironic turn of events.

It's an intriguing story. Bilaam's donkey, it turns out, was far more interesting than its rider. The donkey, in contrast to Bilaam, *could* see the angel blocking the narrow path forward and refused to move. Bilaam, with increasing impatience, jabbed at the donkey's side, prodding him forward: "When the donkey now saw the angel of the Lord, it lay down under Bilaam, and Bilaam was furious and beat the donkey with a stick" (Num. 22:27). This scene of an ill-tempered man beating an animal for non-compliance is painful but not, sadly, unusual, until the story takes another surprising turn. The donkey talked back to its owner: "What have I done to you that you have beaten me these three times?" (Num. 22:28). The donkey did not deserve this treatment and, thus, advocated for himself.

As readers, we might be surprised that Bilaam actually talked back to his magical donkey and explained his actions: "You have made a mockery

of me! If I had a sword with me, I'd kill you" (Num. 22:29). Bilaam was humiliated that he was out on a royal mission, and his insignificant donkey did not obey him. But the donkey, whose wisdom no longer astonishes us, pushed back: "Look, I am the donkey that you have been riding all along until this day! Have I been in the habit of doing thus to you?" And he answered, "No." The angel then posed the same question to Bilaam. Why did you hit your donkey three times?

To understand this week's sedra and its compelling message about leadership, we need to answer three questions:

How is it that this supposed visionary, who is even called a prophet in the Talmud [BT *Bava Batra* 15b], could not see what was right in front of him?

How can it be that a man tasked with controlling the future could not even control his own simple beast?

What is the function of this small, strange conversation when so much else of political and spiritual consequence was happening?

The answers to all three questions may be found in Rashi's comment on what the donkey saw: "*And the donkey saw*: but he [Bilaam] did not since the

Holy One, Blessed be He, gave the animal the gift of sight beyond man. Since he possessed this knowledge, he became easily frightened when he witnessed danger.” In Rashi’s comments and in our story, we find that it is precisely the lack of sophistication of the animal which allowed it to experience reality more acutely and obey the more powerful vision. The donkey served as a foil to Bilaam, both because of its vision and its loyalty. The donkey protested its beatings on the grounds that it had never before behaved like this and should be trusted.

Bilaam was told directly by God not to undertake this journey: “But God said to Bilaam, “Do not go with them. You must not curse that people, for they are blessed”” (Num. 22:12). Despite this clear warning, Bilaam undertook Balak’s mission. Bilaam had the conflicting messages of a king and the King of Kings before him and made a poor choice of what command to prioritize. Not so his donkey. When the words of his master were contradicted by an appearance of the Divine Presence, he yielded to it, even at the cost of the violence to his body.

As a result of selective hearing, Bilaam suffered selective vision. He saw what he wanted to see and did not see what was actually there. The donkey, free of all human machinations, saw reality as it was. The donkey protested its beatings; it had done nothing more than face the truth of a situation that escaped the cognition of its master. Bilaam, when finally confronted by the angel, confessed as much, “I erred because I did not know that you were standing in my way” (Num. 22: 34).

The story line changed again when Bilaam’s eyes were literally unveiled, and, as Rashi intimated earlier, Bilaam, like his donkey, was gifted with clear vision. Bilaam’s failing eye-sight had been repaired, and he gained a wholly different perspective: “How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwellings, O Israel! Like palm-groves that stretch out, like gardens beside a river, like aloes planted by God, like cedars beside the water” (Num. 24:5-6). Bilaam described what he saw with the same set of eyes, but with a different set

of mind. And what he suddenly saw was a nation worthy of blessing.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, writes of the delicate balance between seeing the world as it is and as it should be: “A leader must have vision, but also realism. He or she must think the impossible but know the possible” (“The Pace of Change,” *Covenant & Conversation*). In her article “Why Leaders Must Have Vision,” Debbie Zmorenski defines leadership as “a picture in the leader’s imagination that motivates people to action when communicated compellingly, passionately and clearly.” The problem lies in how that vision is communicated when followers cannot not see it, and it is not clearly communicated, much the way Bilaam could not see what was obvious to his clear-sighted donkey.

Zmorenski recommends four practical steps that a leader can take to translate vision into a reality for others.

- 1) Isolate one challenge within an organization upon which to focus.
- 2) Imagine what success will look like and describe it in detail so it can look real to others.
- 3) Consider the language you will use and the context you need to make the message compelling. How, where, and how often must this vision be shared?
- 4) Practice communicating what you have written and make sure it’s sincere because, “If you don’t believe it, no one else will believe it either.”

Vision is the capacity to describe a reality others cannot see so that you can bring others there.

**So, as a leader are you better at seeing reality as it is or as you think it should be?**