

Give Bilaam his Costanza Points

(Old Testament, Book of Numbers, Chapter: Balak)

Summary: Story of prophet called upon to curse the Israelites camped outside a king's province. The story includes a talking donkey and a series of mishaps. The prophet has no free-will in that he is only able to speak the words God puts in his mouth. Allegorical references to Aesop's Fables, the movie "Shrek", and "All I needed to learn I learned in Kindergarten".

Moral: 1- Follow your heart; 2- Don't give in to peer pressure; 3- People can change and should be allowed to.

Statistics: 1108 words (approximately 10 minutes speaking time); includes definition of terms used; includes 4 direct quotes in transliterated Hebrew and English translation.

The rabbi asked me to speak in his absence this week. When I am through we can decide if he is honoring me or punishing you.

We'll begin with a summary of the parsha and then I would like to share some thoughts on the specific area we are reading today.

First, a show of hands, please.

How many people here watched the television show 'Seinfeld' when it was airing or watch it in reruns?

If you haven't seen the show you may want to talk to your neighbor.

For those who have seen the TV show-- another show of hands, please.

How many people remember the series in the show where George fought against his very nature to do and say the opposite of what he wanted to do or say...

Ultimately standing up to George Steinbrenner and getting the dream job of his life?

This week's parsha is about the struggles of a George Constanza-like character.

Balaak the Moav king sees the tribes of Israel camping just outside his territory and calls upon Bilaam, a non-Israelite-- who is known for prophecy and being intimate to a degree with the Israelite God -- to curse the Israelites.

Bilaam suffers a series of poor choices, mis-steps and mishaps, including--

- being rebuked by his donkey,
- accosted by an invisible sword-wielding angel,
- and speaking the opposite of his benefactor's wishes not once but three times.

The parsha ends with Israel triumphing--

- through it's continued existence,
- Bilaam blessing Israel and cursing Moav,
- and declaring he will now return to his people, Israel.

And finally with a plague wiping out 24,000 people attributed to Hashem for Israel's lascivious behavior with the locals (We are not reading this last piece today).

As for the beginning of the Parsha, I will only say this-
That as a child I read Aesop's fables and thought "Thief. Hack.

MY TORAH had it first."

As a father, my wife reminded me that as we walked out of Shrek-- the story of the ogre and the donkey-- I remarked to my family: "someone owes us royalties- That's in MY TORAH."

It is the middle portion of the parsha we read today Chapter 22 verse 39 through chapter 24 verse 4.

In reviewing the Hertz and Etz Haim Humashing and reading through various sources on the Internet I came across some interesting things I would like to share and then take you down a different path altogether.

Ready?

This Parsha bothers the rabbis. It seriously upsets their world.

Is this a dream? Is this not a dream?
Bilaam speaks to and is spoken to by the one G-d.

The story is fraught with incongruence that cause the rabbis to struggle with explanations and justifications such as

- What happened to the royal contingent sent by Balaak?
--Bilaam was riding on a talking donkey when attacked by an angel he couldn't see and he didn't have anyone with him.
- Hang on a minute- why is that donkey talking?
--Was Bilaam dreaming again?
- And why is the angel annoyed?
--Didn't G-d say it's okay to go? And why would G-d first say no and then say yes with a stipulation?
- Hold on a minute. The end of the Old Testament is the story of Moses.
--The only guy allowed to talk with G-d at this point in our history and our journey.

So the rabbis work overtime to make Bilaam out to be the ultimate bad guy. He is compared to Amalek and Haman.

But we don't blot out Bilaam, we don't blot out his name as we do Haman's every Purim.

Here's the different path I mentioned earlier.

Here he is, Bilaam, in our torah parsha. And In fact, Bilaam is immortalized by our use of his very words every morning upon entering the synagogue- "Mah Tovv Ohalecha Yaacov, Mishkenotecha Yisrael: How goodly are your tents oh Jacob, your dwellings oh Israel."

You'll read the story yourself and reach your own conclusions, but here's what I think.

This is one of the stories in the Torah that is meant to be a children's story, a metaphor, an analogy, a lesson to be sought and learned, taught and applied.

"All I needed to learn I learned in Kindergarten?"

All I needed to learn I learned in the Torah. I just have to look.

I have taken to reading the Torah in this fashion and have found timeless parallels and new experiences weekly.

This story is not about the battle between Balaak or Bilaam and Israel; or Bilaam and G-d; or between good and evil... but about the struggle between the head and the heart and the dangers of peer pressure.

Bilaam is pressured by what seems to be a good career move. Hard to pass up- Gold. Silver. Royal escort. And makes an uncomfortable choice. But he can't deliver on the goods.

As an excuse, twice, Bilaam explains to Balaak that it is G-d that is putting the words into his mouth--

Chapter 22 verse 38: "I can utter only the word that God puts into my mouth."

Chapter 23 verse 12: "I can only repeat faithfully what the Lord puts in my mouth."

But the third time Bilaam is overcome with the spirit of G-d which in this case is simply doing the right thing and does not so much provide an excuse as explains to Balaak in Chapter 23 verse 26: "Whatever the Lord says I must do."

And finally in Chapter 24 verse 13 Bilaam does not need G-d to put words in his mouth because he starts thinking with his heart and tells Balaak: "I cannot speak

beyond the word of G-d for good or bad, I can only speak from my heart that which G-d will have me speak to you.

So what do I think Sefer Bilaam is about?

The story of the evolution of a person from childhood to adulthood.

From needing to have the right words put in your mouth, to recognizing that you need to do the right thing; and through deeds finally, evolving to feeling what's right and just doing the right thing.

It's a guideline for making choices.

A story for children and adults about decisions, their ramifications and our ability to change our minds and make decisions that **feel** right.

For me, the sedra's lessons are three:

- 1- Follow your heart
- 2- Don't give in to peer pressure, and...
- 3- People can change and should be allowed to.

I'm okay giving Bilaam his Costanza points.

Shabbat Shalom.

The reading begins in Numbers, Chapter 22 verse 39.

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Definition of Terms Used:

- Amalek**- Figure in Old Testament who took advantage of weakened Israelites leaving Egypt attacking with intent to annihilate
- Balaak**- (also Balak) Character name- ruler of Moav
- Bilaam**- Character name- prophet
- God**- God with a capital 'G' denotes Israelite God
- Haman**- Persian leader who convinced King to let him exterminate all Jews out of spite in all 120+ provinces
- Hashem**- Hebrew name for God, literally meaning "the name"
- Moav**- Kingdom over which Balaak rules
- Parsha**- Section of Torah
- Sedra**- Story within the section of Torah
- Shabbat**- Jewish Sabbath
- Shalom**- Hebrew greeting: hello; good-bye; peace
- Sefer**- Book
- Torah**- Old Testament, Pentateuch, Five Books of Moses