



Carnegie Shul Chatter

June 24, 2021



Look Who's Talking

Do you remember Mr. Ed, the talking horse from the CBS-TV show of the same name that aired from 1958-1966? How about Francis, The Talking Mule, featured in seven movies in the 1950's?

Well, a few thousand years before Mr. Ed and Francis, we had Balaam's talking jackass. And unlike Mr. Ed and Francis, Balaam's jackass was real.

I know, some of you will say the jackass didn't really talk, that the Torah used this imagery to make a point. But why couldn't the jackass have talked? Why do we have to doubt God's ability to make things happen, even things like a talking jackass?

If God could create the entire universe, creating a great fish to swallow up Noah or a talking jackass to confront Balaam were surely easy tasks for Hashem.

How many times in recent weeks have we read about our ancestors getting themselves in trouble for doubting God's might? So why should we? If the Torah says a jackass talked, that's good enough for me. How about you?

Balak in a Nutshell

Numbers 22:2–25:9

Balak, the king of Moab, summons the prophet Balaam to curse the people of Israel. On the way, Balaam is berated by his donkey, who sees, before Balaam does, the angel that G-d sends to block their way. Three times, from three different vantage points, Balaam attempts to pronounce his curses; each time, blessings issue forth instead. Balaam also prophesies on the end of the days and the coming of Moshiach.

The people fall prey to the charms of the daughters of Moab, and are enticed to worship the idol Peor. When a high-ranking Israelite official publicly takes a Midianite princess into a tent, Pinchas kills them both, stopping the plague raging among the people.

Pharaoh, Balak and Anti-Semitism Today

There are two major things to ponder in this week's parshah, Balak.

First we have the story of Balak, the King of Moab, the prophet, Balaam, and the talking mule. Then we have yet another instance of our people going astray, this time worshipping an idol and behaving lasciviously with Midianite women, bringing yet another curse down upon them, until Pinchas steps forward and shish-ka-bobs a sinning Jew and his Midianite cohort.



The article I am sharing from the *Sun Sentinel* establishes a parallel between Pharaoh and Balak, and it is especially timely as it relates these events to the anti-Semitism that is raging in the world today. As reported in this week's *Jewish Chronicle*, there were two incidents in June in which Orthodox Jewish men were viciously assaulted in Squirrel Hill. We must be ever vigilant as anti-Semitism, a curse that has been with us since biblical times, does not want to go away.

Balak parsha: Balaam's thwarted plot

By Rabbi Avi Weiss

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Jun 21, 2021 at 1:01 PM

There is a clear parallelism between Balak and events in the Book of Exodus. In both narratives, kings (Pharaoh of Egypt and Balak of Moab), alarmed about the success of the Jewish people, conspire to destroy them.

Robert Alter notes that the language of the narratives intersects. In describing Pharaoh's fears, the Torah says he "came to dread [va'yakutz] the children of Israel" (Exodus 1:12). So too, Moab, the nation Balak led, "dreaded [va'yakatz] the children of Israel" (Numbers 22:3).

The similarities continue, as Pharaoh said to his nation, "Behold, the nation of the children of Israel is much too numerous and mighty for us [rav v'atzum mi'menu]." (Exodus 1:9) Similarly, Balak says, "Behold, the nation that came out of Egypt...are too mighty for me [atzum hu mi'meni]" (Numbers 22:5-6).

In addition, both leaders rely on sorcerers – in the case of Pharaoh, the chartumim (magicians); in the case of Balak, the heathen prophet Balaam – to achieve their horrific goal.

And in Balaam's prophesies, he speaks of "God, Who took them [the Jews] out of Egypt" (23:22, 24:8). Invoking the Exodus points to the connection between the narratives.

Now, of course, the Exodus story is that of the first generation that left Egypt. The Balak story takes place after that generation had died in the desert. It involves the second generation, as they prepare to enter the land of Israel.

Bearing this in mind, Rabbi Nathaniel Helfgot writes that “for the new generation to be able to enter the land they must first go through parallel experiences of the forefathers, picking up the thread and completing the mission, not allowing the plan to go off kilter as had happened 38 years before” (Mikra and Meaning).

Indeed, there is one great difference between these narratives. Pharaoh enslaves the Jewish people; Balak does not succeed in his mission. As the Sefat Emet, quoted by Rabbi Helfgot, writes, “Just as there is a mitzvah to remember/mention the Exodus every day, so, too, one is bidden to remember/mention the kindness that God did for us in thwarting the plot of Bil’am the wicked” (ibid.).

From time immemorial, Jews have been threatened by antisemitism. The convergence and divergence of the Balak and Egypt stories indicate that even as the threats are similar, they are not all identical – and the outcomes sometimes differ.

