

WEEKLY NEWSLETTER

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FROM THE ROSH HAYESHIVA

On Parashat Balak

By Rabbi Dov Linzer

“Whoever has... an *ayin tova*, a good eye... is a student of Avraham; whoever has an *ayin ra’ah*, a bad eye... is a student of Balaam,” the Rabbis tell us in Pirkei Avot (5:22). Avraham sees well, whereas Balaam sees poorly. How so?



On the face of it, the stories of Avraham and Balaam are parallel. Both Avraham and Balaam are called to leave their land and to go westward to or near the land of Canaan. But while Avraham is called by God to go, *lekh likha*, Balaam is told by God to stay, *lo teilekh*. The first lesson, then, is that it is not the going that is important. It is the listening to God. If God says go, you go. And if God says stay, you stay.

So they are both commanded by God. And Balaam, at least in principle, is willing to obey. But whereas Avraham follows God’s command, Balaam resists it. Why? The difference lies not in how they are prepared to act, but how they are prepared to see.

God does not just command Avraham to go to Canaan. God commands him to go to the land *asher ar’ekha*, “that I will show you.” To fulfill that command, it is not enough to obey. One must also learn to see. To find the chosen land, Avraham has to be able to see what God is showing him. He has to learn to see. This is why the climax of Avraham’s trials, the *akeida*, which also begins with a *lekh likha*, is all about seeing properly: seeing the place from a distance, telling Yitzchak that God will see the sheep, seeing the angel, seeing the ram, even naming the place “the mount where God is seen.” Avraham’s career begins with seeing and ends with seeing: seeing what God is showing him, seeing as God would see.

Balaam is a different story. Balaam is prepared to do “as

God speaks to me,” that is, to listen to God (Bamidbar 22:8). There is a huge difference between obeying and agreeing. Balaam continues to see things differently than God. If he obeys, he will do so with reluctance and resistance. “God refuses to let me go with you,” he says (22:13). I still want to go, but God is holding me back.

God tries to teach Balaam otherwise. God tells Balaam not to go with the messengers, not to curse the people, for “they are blessed.” God is letting him know what the true, deeper reality is. But, of course, Balaam continues to see things his way. As Rashi comments: “He saw that it was evil in God’s eyes, and yet he desired to go” (22:22). He did not care how God saw the matter. It was his perspective that mattered.

God, however, isn’t done with the education of Balaam, hence the bizarre story of the speaking donkey. The point of the story is clear: The donkey is able to see what Balaam cannot. Three times we hear, *va’taireh ha’aton*, “and the donkey saw.” It is remarkable that the verse does not signal that there is anything miraculous about the donkey seeing the angel; it is only when the donkey speaks that we read: “And God opened the mouth of the donkey” (22:28). As we know, animals can sometimes smell, hear, and see things in the environment that we humans cannot. This is partly because of the way their senses have adapted to their environments. But it is also partly because they experience the world for what it is. They do not bring the type of subjective lens that we bring to our experiences, filtering, shaping, and seeing things in ways that are consistent with our worldviews. The simple, unfiltered seeing of the donkey is like the simple seeing of children, free from the rationalizations and self-deceptions of adults. It is a seeing that allows them to see what we so often cannot.

Balaam’s arrogance, self-importance, and desire for fame and enrichment blind him to the obvious facts. And now, just as God had opened the mouth of the donkey, God miraculously opens the eyes of Balaam so that he can see the angel, see the truth. But does Balaam learn? Hardly. “Now, if it is evil in Your eyes, I will return

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back,” he responds (22:34). It is still not evil in *my* eyes. I understand that it may be evil in *Your* eyes, and if you tell me not to go, I am prepared to listen. You can get me to obey, but I refuse to see things *Your* way.

At this stage, God allows for a compromise. If Balaam can't be taught to see right, God can at least get him to say the right thing, force-feeding him the lines, putting the very words in his mouth. Perhaps there is a lesson here: Even when we disagree with someone, it can pay to say the words that they want to hear. “Yes, dear” can often be the most important two words in a marriage. Insincerity is never good, but words do have a power of their own. If we choose to say the desired words, even if we do not fully believe them, they can be helpful to the one hearing them, but they can also help shape our own perception, help change the way we see.

This is what happens with Balaam. When he begins working with Balak, he of course continues to see things his way, even as God is working against this. Balak encourages Balaam's tendencies, making sure that he only sees the “edge of the people” (22:41 and 23:13), not to appreciate their totality and their blessedness, to pick on particular aspects that one can see with a jaundiced eye.

This is a key strategy for reinforcing the way we see the world: choosing to see selectively. Consider how rare it is that we try to see the true complexity and scope of a matter, to realize that things aren't so black and white, to see all the nuances. In fact, it was initially thought that with all the information easily available on the Internet, people would develop more informed and nuanced views about matters. What actually happened, and continues to happen, however, is that people choose to see only the “edge of the people,” and seek out the information that reinforces their already established position. It is so much easier to see selectively, to see just what we want to see.

That was the attempt. But the words that Balaam utters begin to have their effect. In his first two poetic prophecies, we hear him declaiming – with words fed to him by God – how the people are truly to be seen: “For I see them from the tops of mountains, and from the hills I behold them” (23:9), “He has not beheld iniquity in Jacob, neither has he seen perverseness in Israel” (23:21). It seems that these words start to seep in to his

own consciousness so that finally, by the third prophecy, he begins to actually believe them. It is now, at this third and final stage, that Balaam truly begins to see:

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

This is the turning point. Before it was “bad in God's eyes” to curse, but he refused to see and resisted. Now it is “good in God's eyes” to bless; he sees this and he embraces it. It is these very words *vayar... ki tov*, “and he saw... that it was good,” that echo the very first act of seeing in the Torah: *va'yar E-lohim ki tov*, “And God saw that it was good.” This is an act of divine seeing. Balaam is now seeing as God sees.

Finally, he can now see. He can now lift up his own eyes and see the people as they truly are (24:2). It is now that he declares that he can see “the vision of God” and see with “eyes open” (24:3) – self-descriptions that have been absent until now. And it is now and only now that he is filled with the “spirit of God.” These are not just words that he is parroting back. He is elevated and inspired by what he sees, and he speaks from his heart.

With this, Balaam's education is complete. Sadly, however, the change is short-lived, as the remainder of the *parasha* bears out. For to learn how to see properly is not something that can be done in an instant. Even when our eyes are open, we often resist and choose to remain blind. It is a life-long struggle to be the students of Avraham, to learn to see the “land that God will show you.” The keys are given to us in this *parasha*: see fully, not partially, and say the right words even if you do not yet believe them. Ultimately, you will be able to see rightly, to see with a “good eye,” to see as God would have you see.

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GUEST D'VAR TORAH

What You See is NOT What You Get

By Abe Schacter-Gampel
(YCT '17)



Parashat Balak opens and closes with sight: in the first verse, “Balak son of Zippor **saw** all that Israel had done to the Amorites” (Bamidbar 24:2), and in the last, “When Pinchas, son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, **saw** this, he left the assembly and, taking a spear in his hand, he followed the Israelite into the chamber and stabbed both of them...” (25:7-8). Both Balak and Pinchas saw something and took action. Balak, king of Midian, saw that *Bnei Yisrael* had defeated the neighboring Amorites and soon might approach the Midianites, so he sent messengers to Balaam in order to curse *Bnei Yisrael*. Pinchas saw that Zimri was transgressing the law by fornicating with Cozbi, a Midianite, so he took a spear in order to kill them. Both Balak and Pinchas saw danger and took preventative measures in order to ensure the safety of their people. Surely, the Torah believes Balak’s actions to be poor and Pinchas’ meritorious. But why? Other than the obvious answer that Balak was planning to harm the Jewish people and that Pinchas was upholding Jewish law – was there a difference in their sight? Did Balak see something wrongly? What was different about Pinchas’ sight that led him to the appropriate response? Does the Torah provide any evidence that can help us understand the nature of each person’s vision?

Bamidbar Rabbah (20:25) provides an answer. The Midrash picks up on the Torah’s ambiguity:

“וירא פנחס בן אלעזר” וכולם לא ראו?! והכתוב: “לעיני משה ולעיני כל עדת בני ישראל” (במדבר כ”ה:ו)?! אלא ראה מעשה ונזכר הלכה...

“When Pinchas son of Eleazar saw’ (25:7) And everyone else did not see?! But it says: ‘in the sight of Moses and of the whole Israelite community’ (25:6)?! Rather, he [Pinchas] saw the act and remembered the law...”

Did Pinchas actually see anything differently? No! In fact, he saw the same scene as everyone else, but he was the only individual who responded. Yes, Moshe and *Bnei Yisrael* witnessed Zimri and Cozbi’s actions, but, Midrash Rabbah argues, the Torah specifically writes that ‘Pinchas saw’ in order to teach us that his observation was different. Pinchas’ sight triggered his memory of *halakha*, leading him to commit justifiable homicide.

This Midrash teaches us a valuable lesson: sight is not neutral. The Torah understands the human capacity for good and evil and reminds us that our sight is only as good as our intentions. Balak saw and Pinchas saw, but they were each unique in their vision. Where are our loyalties? How do our values dictate what we see? It is simply not good enough to open our eyes; we must be morally receptive and willing to consider what might be the correct sight. The difference between Balak and Pinchas reminds us that sight alone will not dictate how we act; rather it is the kind of person you are, the morals that you possess, that determines your sight and will lead to your actions.

FROM THE PRESIDENT

**Eyal, Gil-ad, and
Naftali, z”l:
We will continue your
learning; we will make
you proud!**

By Rabbi Asher Lopatin



We are devastated. We are speechless. We are in the depths of despair. We lost our three dear boys: Eyal, Gil-ad, and Naftali, z”l. Boys that we prayed for, that we said *tehillim* for. Boys for whom we beseeched Hashem, “Allow them to come home in peace.” Alas, they are no longer with us – victims of terrorist murder. Our hearts go out to their families, their friends, and their communities. How can anyone describe the pain and the loss?

Just half a day after this tragic news came the third of
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Tammuz, *yahrzeit* of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rav Menachem Mendel Schneerson, *zt"l*. Now our boys are in heaven with the Rebbe, our loved ones, and the martyrs of millennia past. I hope the Lubavitcher Rebbe and all those holy souls in heaven tell Eyal, Gil-ad, and Naftali that Jews all over the world will be continuing their legacy. Jews will continue to build *Eretz Yisrael*, to live in our Holy Land, and to make it the home for our people. Jews will continue to be strong and filled with hope just as these boys were. And Jews will continue to learn Torah and further the journey from Sinai, the journey our beloved boys were on when they were kidnapped and killed. We will do what we can to continue the journey, and we will strive to do more.

As the families are in *shiva* and Jews all over the world mourn, the need of the Jewish people for a connection to Judaism, for a personal, meaningful Torah, is at its most evident – a clear reminder of the Torah mission of YCT: to fill our *talmidim* with a Torah that they will take to the world as rabbis working in the Jewish community.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe understood the importance of reconnecting Jews to Judaism after so many millions perished in the Holocaust: Their lives and precious souls demanded a response. Lubavitch Chasidism created the model for going out to connect Jews to Judaism. We Modern Orthodox have different philosophical underpinnings, and we frequently engage Jews in different ways than Chabad, but we share their craving to make Judaism meaningful for Jews today. We share their sense of responsibility to respond to the sadness, the loss, and the unanswered prayers by learning more, teaching more, and enabling Jews to rebuild their relationships to our Torah and our tradition.

So let us commit ourselves to continue: Let us turn our tears into a sea of Torah. Let us turn our sadness into a passion to share a Torah of sensitivity. Let us turn our frustrations into insightful Torah understandings that our boys would be proud of.

We are devastated, but as the Lubavitcher Rebbe demonstrated, we can use our lives to continue the unending chain of tradition. Eyal, Gil-ad, and Naftali, of blessed memory, you can count on us. We won't let you down.

ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT

Name:
Aryeh A. Leifert

Home Town:
Teaneck,
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**Graduation
Year:**
2006



Position:
Teacher in a “school on wheels”

About Rabbi Leifert:

Rabbi Aryeh A. Leifert has been involved in transmitting and teaching Jewish stories and values since his youth, and he has been doing so ever since. After receiving his *semikha* from YCT in 2006, Rabbi Aryeh served the Jewish community in San Antonio, Texas, for three years.

Seeking an opportunity to combine his love of teaching, travel, and the Land of Israel, Rabbi Aryeh made *aliyah* with his family in 2009. Now, Rabbi Aryeh runs WalkIsrael (www.WalkIsrael.com), using his knowledge and passion to connect visitors – both real and virtual – to the Jewish homeland.

To read more about Rabbi Aryeh and the difference he is making for Jews around the world, please see our weekly email newsletter. If you do not receive our newsletter but would like to, please email us at slevee@yctorah.org.

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