

The Bedside Torah

wisdom, visions, and dreams



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Foreword by Jack Miles, author of *God: A Biography*

But most of all, animals—wild and domestic—would wonder why we so pervert and cheapen our own noblest instincts. Dogs are able to play together and to live up to our expectations. Cats and birds also care for their own kind.

Almost solely in the world, human beings demonstrate a level of aggression and cruelty to their own kind that would be considered truly beastly—except that beasts don't do it.

Balaam's ass embarrassed Balaam because the prophet was less able to live up to his own expectations than was the donkey. Blessed and cursed by our gift of reason, we rely on our brains just enough to get ourselves in trouble, but not enough to resolve to live better, more thoughtful, and more reasonable lives.

Think of all the secrets our pets have seen. And imagine how embarrassing it would be if they could speak.



Parashat Balak/Balak

Take 3

Blessed, and a Source of Blessing

Every year that I read the remarkable story of the Gentile king, Balak, hiring the Gentile prophet to curse the Israelites, I am struck by how remarkable this story really is. After all, how often does the Torah concern itself with the internal affairs of other peoples? Understood as the love letters between God and the Jewish People, it is quite proper that the Torah's focus is on the relationship, the *brit* between God and Israel. Yet this story stars a non-Jew who is seen as a holy and a wise seer.

Balak demands that Balaam curse the Jews so that they will be easier to defeat in battle. Faithful to God, Balaam explains that he cannot curse or bless without first receiving divine authorization. When he asks God what to do, God tells him, "Do not curse the people, *ki varukeh hu*, for it is blessed."

What is God really saying about us? In what way are the Jewish People *barukeh*, blessed?

The medieval commentary *Lekah Tov* understands this phrase to mean that we are blessed because of the *zechut avot*, the righteous deeds

of the patriarchs and the matriarchs. Their goodness was such that God blessed us with an irrevocable blessing. We, their later descendants, benefit from their blessing to this day.

Another related way to understand this verse is to ask ourselves in what way are we blessed. It does sound like God is saying that there is some intrinsic blessing with which we are imbued. How are Jews blessed?

- We are blessed with a rich memory: As a people, we enjoy a continuous identity stretching back to the very earliest layers of human history. From Abraham and Sarah down to the youngest Jewish baby alive today, we know where we come from, and we know who we are. In an age of rootlessness, in a time of confusion about identity, we Jews have the luxury of knowing our beginnings and of identifying with our rich and varied history. As the Passover *Haggadah* urges, each generation understands the history of the Jews not merely as something from the past, but as something informing our own identity today: *We* were freed from Egypt, *we* fashioned the Talmud, *we* explored the depths of Jewish philosophy and Kabbalah, *we* enjoyed the modern fruits of emancipation and of Zionism.
- We are blessed with a wise and profound way of life: Not only do we have a history that is ancient and continuing, but we also have a way of life that is rich and rewarding. The cycle of Sabbaths, holy days, and festivals adds shape and texture to our weeks and years, allowing us to rejoice with our loved ones and to create precious occasions to cherish and to enjoy. The beauty of the holidays becomes part and parcel of our love for each other and our sense of community. Linked as they are to ethical values and religious expression, their beauty is enhanced by moral depth and by great insights to be learned anew.
- We are blessed with being the messengers of God's love and justice: Our religious tradition harnesses beautiful ritual for the sake of ethical rigor. By teaching us to care for the sick, to feed the hungry, to shelter the homeless, to care for the earth, our religion offers a message as vital now as it was when it was first articulated. No less revolutionary today, the notion that all people reflect God's Divine image and are worthy of respect and dignity contin-

ues to transform and elevate the world. Ours is the privilege of carrying that message and reiterating it, even when it seems that others may have forgotten it.

In these and other ways, we are indeed blessed to be Jews. But there is another way that we can understand Balaam's rejoinder. The Hebrew word *barukh* may be passive, meaning blessed. But it might also be an active adjective, like *hanun* or *rachum*. In that case, it means "source of blessing" or "bountiful." When we say a *berakhab*, then, we are saying that God is generous to us, and then specifying how God's bounty is manifest in that particular instance.

Using this understanding, we can say that Balaam is refusing to curse the Jews because we are a source of blessing.

In that reading, Balaam offers us a great challenge: Our mission as Jews is to be a source of blessing, not merely for ourselves, but for all humanity. As Balaam says, "Blessed are those you bless, and cursed are those you curse." Our task as Jews is to serve as God's representatives on earth: Just as God is known as a source of blessing for creation, so we are to be a source of blessing for all.

The way we live our lives, then, must be measured not only by our ritual observances, important as they are, but also by how we embody the ethical *mitzvot*. By shouldering the burdens that weigh others down, by conducting our business lives in an honorable and productive fashion, by embodying patience and compassion in all we do, we live up to Balaam's and God's high expectations.

Are we a blessing? Are you?