

Dvar Torah - Parashat Balak – Adam Scheer

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Today we are privileged to read Parshat Balak. To refresh our memories, Balak, the King of Moab, hears about the recent victories of the Israelites against Sichon, king of the Amorites and Og, king of Bashan. King Balak fears he will be faced with a disastrous confrontation with the Israelites and panics. Echoing anxieties articulated by more modern monarchs, he worries that these “strangers” will sojourn in his land and take land, local jobs and otherwise challenge the locals’ sovereignty. Balak’s bright idea? Send messengers along with elders from Midian to Bilaam ben Peor, a non-Israelite freelance prophet-for-hire to put a curse on the Israelites. At first Bilaam refuses to go against God’s wishes to curse the Israelites, then he agrees to curse the Israelites, then God gets angry and sends an angel to talk some sense to Bilaam, Bilaam then ignores the Angel, the donkey Bilaam is riding sees the angel...it is a long story but, in the end, rather than curse the Israelites, Bilaam blesses them. Among the blessings the Torah attributes to Bilaam is Ma Tov: "How good are your tents, O Jacob, your tabernacles, O Israel!" Early risers everywhere have Bilaam to thank for that one.

This is where the story usually ends. I can remember learning this story for the first time in fourth grade and thinking, don’t mess with God, don’t mess with Israelites, and Israelites are so awesome that even their enemies end up loving them.

But the story does not end there. Ultimately Bilaam convinces King Balak to entice the Israelites to sin. This is a family show so I will not go into details, but suffice it to say that the male Israelites were tempted to indulge in inappropriate activities with Moabite women. The male Israelites succumb to the temptation and then God punishes them.

So, the story **does not** end well. Fourth grade me – and many of you - only got part of the narrative. Bilaam is proven to find a way around God’s will and Balak’s initiative is followed by divine retribution against the Israelites. I find this all tough to swallow. Somewhere in Rabbinic literature, there must be proof that Bilaam was a fraud or that the story is misunderstood. Unfortunately, no such mental gymnastics can be found! In fact, there is a midrash that says that Bilaam was a prophet on Moses’ level – or even higher. So the rabbis think Bilaam has the goods. OK, well the archaeological record for this period is limited. Maybe the story just didn’t happen and Bilaam was the result of someone’s imagination. Sadly, for those who would like to completely discount this story, while there is still no archaeological evidence of the Exodus or the existence of Moses, in 1967 archeologists found evidence that Bilaam son of Peor was likely a real person as was Balak.

So, what are we to conclude out of this? This story – told interestingly from the perspective of Balak and not that of Moses or the Israelites – seems to be some form of Torah sanctioned heresy. Are we to believe that God’s will can be “worked around” and undermined? Fourth grade me would have been shattered. Fifty year old me is depressed and confused.

OK, this is where I would normally take a break from the sad facts of the world and start scrolling through Jewish Twitter. For those unfamiliar with the delights and distractions of Jewish Twitter, let me share what is trending in that world right now. Gefilte Fish hot dogs. Apparently, they are a thing. The struggles of women fighting for ordination and recognition by the Orthodox community. The incredible work to sustain – and in some case build anew – Jewish observance and institutions in Muslim lands. If there is a topic that touches our people, there are multitudes willing to discuss and debate the details.

I promise, this will all eventually connect us back with the parasha.

In late November 2021, Jewish Twitter erupted. Yitzchak Melamed, an Israeli-born professor of philosophy at Johns Hopkins University, had asked for access to the archives in the historic Portuguese synagogue in Amsterdam. Professor Melamed is an expert on the philosophy of Benedict “Baruch” Spinoza, and he was interested in learning about Spinoza’s childhood as part of a documentary that he was developing. For those of you who have had the privilege of visiting the Amsterdam synagogue complex, you know that one cannot just walk in without an appointment these days due to security concerns. While Professor Melamed’s need to formally request access to the synagogue and its archives

was quite standard, the response he got denying him entry to the synagogue was hardly typical. Evoking a 350-year ban on Spinoza and his teachings, Professor Melamed was told to get lost.

I will read the letter in full:



Portugees – Israëlietische Gemeente te Amsterdam

ק"ק ספרדים תלמוד תורה באמשטרדם

Joseph B. Serfaty, rabbijn
הרב יוסף בנימין צרפתי

Amsterdam, 28 november 2021 | כ"ד כסלו תשפ"ב

בס"ד

To the attention of Professor Yitzhak Melamed,

The chachamim and parnassim of Kahal Kados Talmud Torah excommunicated Spinoza and his writings with the severest possible ban, a ban that remains in force for all time and cannot be rescinded.

You have devoted your life to the study of Spinoza's banned works and the development of his ideas.

Your request to visit our complex and create a film about this Epicouros in our Esnoga and Yeshiva (Ets Haïm) is incompatible with our centuries-old halachic, historic and ethical tradition and an unacceptable assault on our identity and heritage.

I therefore deny your request and declare you persona non grata in the Portuguese Synagogue complex.

I wish you a meaningful Chanuka,

יגאל זמאין צרפתי
ר"ק ספרדים תורה

Rabbi Joseph Serfaty



Jewish Twitter could not stop commenting on this letter. Some cheered Rabbi Serfaty on for standing on principle. Others scratched their heads struggling to understand why, after 350 years, the Amsterdam kehillah couldn't let the old grudges go. In any case, the letter and the brouhaha reinforced how enduring Spinoza's ideas are to this day. Even on Twitter.

By way of background, Spinoza is among the greatest philosophers ever. He is also one of the best-known Jewish heretics. Spinoza's life started out innocently enough. He studied bible and Maimonides under Rabbi Saul Levi Morteira (1596-1660), one of the prominent rabbis in Amsterdam. But not long after ending his Jewish studies at age 14, Spinoza started challenging apparent contradictory facts and timelines in the TaNaCH and the nature of divinity itself. The Jewish community in Amsterdam, made up largely of Spanish and Portuguese Jews whose families escaped the Inquisition, valued cohesion, and control above all else. Spinoza was a threat to the internal order they created and could also cause the good people of Amsterdam to turn on the Jewish community. So, the synagogue's elders decided to send this young punk a message. The notice of excommunication delivered to Spinoza was unambiguous and harsh. In part, it read:

...cursed be he by day and cursed be he by night; cursed be he when he lies down and cursed be he when he rises up...

It goes on but Jerry and Jane told me to keep my remarks to 10 minutes or less.

Following his excommunication, Spinoza lived a lonely life. Friends and family could not be seen with him and 17th Century Amsterdam, as liberal and cosmopolitan as it was, was still not the easiest place for a Jew shunned by his co-religionists. Apparently one of Spinoza's few sources of personal joy came from setting up spiders to fight each other. Even in death, Spinoza was unable to escape the curses his community directed toward him as we learned from Jewish Twitter, 350 years later. At the same time, it is almost impossible to capture the full scope of Spinoza's influence on the world we live in. Modern philosophy and democracy, biblical criticism, even Hasidism all can find Spinoza's ideas at their root. Did the curse work as intended, or did it set in motion a series of events that made Spinoza more impactful than he could have ever imagined?

So where does our tangent on Spinoza come back to meet our parashah? I would like to offer that both Bilaam and Spinoza have something to teach us about nature of prophesy and the personality pitfalls – and potential - of the prophet.

As Rabbi Ira Rohde, Hazzan of Congregation Shearith Israel in New York wrote:

Bilaam fills the classical role of the prophetic seer who sees or foresees with a vision which is beyond ordinary. He is blind to ordinary sight and sees through dreams. In this way he lives apart from society and its usual conventions.

Mel Brooks said it is tough to be the king. It is also tough to be the prophet. The prophet may have profound insight about the future but she can be blind to mankind's mundane realities. This detachment from the world can lead the prophet to seem aloof and even weird, making it tempting to then dismiss the prophet and her admonitions. She is not one of us, she is crazy, she is aloof, she does not understand our reality. God's engagement with Bilaam – treating his prophesy as truth and going to great lengths to capture Bilaam's attention - teaches us two things. First, we are to take the prophet's visions and warnings seriously – even if the prophet is not "one of us." Second, we need to engage the prophet to take her out of her loneliness and engage her. Our efforts may not always work – God tried with Bilaam and was only partially successful – but we are to make every effort lest the prophet be left to use her powers to the detriment of the community.

Replace Bilaam with Spinoza and Rabbi Rohde's insights still apply.

Amsterdam's Portuguese Jewish community of Spinoza's day suffered from profound existential fears. The synagogue's elders believed that Spinoza would threaten the comfortable community they had only recently established. Like Balak, they resorted to cursing their perceived enemy in what they thought was an act of religious piety. Had they followed the lessons of this week's parasha perhaps they would have acted differently.

Imagine if the Portuguese community had engaged young Spinoza's questions with dialog over excommunication? Perhaps Spinoza could have been a "Gadol HaDor" - a Giant of his Generation -for the Jewish community writ large. With the right engagement and support from his community, Spinoza might have leveraged his natural gifts to lead Judaism toward modernity and altered the course of Jewish history in Europe and the broader world. His legacy might have resulted in greater Jewish unity, rather than Jewish rivalries and disunion.

Putting these thoughts in a broader context, we live in scary times. Many of us are genuinely fearful of what lies ahead. Our parasha teaches us to choose openness over fear and urges us to see opportunity in the unknown. Through dialog and engagement with those who think and act differently we can grow together and create a better world.

By the way, Rabbi Serfaty was fired by his synagogue's board for his aggressive public position on Spinoza and Professor Melamed was ultimately invited to the synagogue in Amsterdam.

Shabbat Shalom