

Parashah Balak

The one where King Balak of Moab hires Balaam, a renowned non-Israelite, to curse the Israelites, but he can only bless them.

The parashah begins with King Balak of Moab, who becomes alarmed by the Israelites' camp near his kingdom. He sees the Israelites as a serious threat and decides to seek the help of Balaam, a renowned non-Israelite prophet known for his ability to bless or curse people through his divine talent. Balak hopes that Balaam can curse the Israelites and weaken their strength.

Balak sends messengers to Balaam, offering him great rewards in exchange for cursing the Israelites. Balaam initially declines, but there is divine intervention, and he is persuaded to go with the messengers. However, he was warned that he should only speak the words that God puts in his mouth.

On his way to meet Balak, Balaam encounters a series of incidents, including a talking donkey that sees an angel blocking their path. Balaam is initially unaware of the angel's presence, but eventually, Balaam's eyes are opened to see the angel, who reminds him to speak only as instructed.

When Balaam arrives in Moab, Balak takes him to various locations to curse the Israelites, but each time, Balaam is compelled to bless the Israelites instead. These blessings include poetic insights that highlight the greatness and future success of the Israelite nation.

King Balak is frustrated by Balaam's inability to curse the Israelites and takes him to different vantage points, hoping to change the outcome. However, Balaam consistently delivers blessings instead of curses. Balaam's final prophecy, known as the "Blessings of Balaam," tells of the future victories and blessings of the Israelites and foretells the downfall of their enemies.

After Balaam's prophecies, the Israelites become enticed by the Moabite women and engage in idolatry and immoral behavior. This leads to divine anger and a devastating plague among the Israelites.

Phinehas, the grandson of Aaron, zealously confronts the sinners by killing an Israelite man and a Midianite woman who were publicly engaging in idolatry. This act of zealotry halts the plague and earns Phinehas divine favor.

The story of **Parashah Balak** is a tale of divination, blessings, and curses, showcasing the tension between human will and divine intervention. It **highlights the importance of staying faithful to one's purpose** and the consequences of straying from the path of righteousness.

Teen Takeaways from Parashah Balak

1. **The power of words:** Parashah Balak teaches us that the words we use can have a big impact. Balaam was supposed to curse the Israelites, but he could only say blessings. It shows that words are powerful, so we should use them for good, not harm.
2. **Balaam's blessing was transformed into our morning prayer, Ma Tovu!** "How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel!" The rabbis see this as a prescription for Jewish survival. The tents and dwelling places are our synagogues and homes. As long as there is Jewish activity, learning, and good deeds, none of our enemies will be able to destroy us. How is that a protection for our future?
3. **No limits to goodness:** Balaam wasn't an Israelite but was used to deliver a divine message. This tells us that anyone can do good, no matter where they come from. Don't judge people based on their background; focus on their character. The Talmud teaches that the righteous of all peoples have a share in the world to come (heaven). You do not have to be a Jew to have a relationship with God.
4. **Avoid greed:** Balaam was tempted by riches, but he learned that doing the right thing is more important than money. This warns us not to let greed and the desire for material things lead us down the wrong path. What would it take for you to consider doing something wrong, or even evil?
5. **Balancing identity and values:** It's okay to be proud of your identity and where you come from, but it's also important to recognize the goodness in others. The Israelites were protected as long as they kept the covenant, but they were also meant to be a positive influence on the world. In the book of Isaiah, the Israelites are told "to be a light to the nations." What does that mean?
6. **Stay humble:** Balaam's donkey speaking was a crazy moment! It showed that even when we think we're in control, we're not. It's a reminder to stay humble and open to unexpected lessons. Wisdom can come from many different surprising sources. Whom do you consider wise people? Have you ever learned something from someone you did not think was too smart?
7. **Intentions matter:** Balaam's bad intentions didn't work out as he planned. Sometimes, even when people mean harm, things can turn out for the better. This teaches us that good intentions are crucial and the universe has a way of working things out. Some people call that karma, but Jews have our own word for it: beshert.

Summary

Parashah Balak is not just about ancient events. It's filled with lessons that can **help you navigate life in a positive and ethical way.**