

# TORAH TABLE TALK – *PIRKE AVOT*

## Abraham and Balak: How We Use Our Gifts

*Parshat Chukat-Balak*, Numbers 19:1 – 25:9

Dedicated by Frances and Buddy Brandt

With love to their grandchildren

Elka, Joshua, Lindsay, Oren z”l, Jenny, David, Lauren, Kayla, Zenna, and Emily

Balaam has a unique gift. A man of deep spiritual intuition, he is respected throughout the world as a prophet who has the ability to bless and curse and converse with God. However, Balaam has no roots or community of his own. Playing on his name, he is *b’li am*, a man without a nation. Balaam is a mercenary; he is available to the highest bidder. When Balak, the king of Moab, sends emissaries to him and asks him to come and curse the people of Israel, Balaam says no, “God refuses to give me leave to go with you!” When the emissaries return to Balaam with even more lucrative offers, Balaam returns to God and asks for permission to go again. This time God tells him, “If the men come to call on you again, get up and go with them!” Without delay, Balaam rises up in the morning, saddles his ass and leaves to do Balak’s bidding.

What are we to make of Balaam? The gentile prophet has unique spiritual gifts and yet he is portrayed as a person who is both blind and deaf to God’s message. He has the ability to converse with God and yet he does not want to hear what God has to say to him. Balaam does not seem terribly surprised when his curses turn into a blessing and he is unable to do Balak’s bidding. He says to the Moabite king: “Isn’t this what I told you, ‘all that Adonai says I must do?’” In the end Balaam is depicted as a fool who squanders the precious gifts he has been given by God.

But we should not dismiss Balaam too quickly. It is no accident that he is compared to our forefather, Abraham. They represent two people who are endowed with great spiritual gifts as well as the ability to speak to God. In the end, each has a choice as to how to use these gifts.

**Pirke Avot 5:22** Whoever possesses these three qualities is numbered among the disciples of our father Abraham but those who possess the three opposite qualities are found among the disciples of wicked Balaam: A generous spirit, a humble soul, and a modest appetite – such a person is a disciple of our father, Abraham. A grudging spirit, an arrogant soul, and an insatiable appetite – such a one is a disciple of wicked Balaam. What difference does it make if one is a disciple of our father Abraham or of wicked Balaam? The disciples of Abraham enjoy this world and inherit the world to come, as it is written (Proverbs 8:21) “That I may give an inheritance of abundance to those who love me, and that I might fill their treasures.” The disciples of Balaam inherit Gehenna and go down to the pit of destruction, as it is written, “You O God will bring them down into the pit of destruction; violent and deceitful men shall not live out half their days while I put my trust in you.”

### Sources

**Numbers 22:7** Balak ben Tzippor saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites...he sent messengers to Balaam...saying...‘Come, then, put a curse on this people for me... For I know he whom you bless is blessed indeed, and he whom you curse, is cursed.’

**Numbers 22:21-22** When he arose in the morning, Balaam saddled his ass and departed with the Moabite dignitaries. But God was incensed at his going; so an angel of the Lord placed himself in his way as an adversary. He was riding on his she-ass with his two servants (*na’arim*) alongside.

**Genesis 12:3** I will bless those who bless you, and curse him who curses you; and all the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you.

**Genesis 22:3** So early the next morning, Abraham saddled his ass and took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac.

### **Rabbi Menachem Becker, Parpara’ot Latorah**

The commentator, Rashi, says, “Hence we derive (from Balaam’s actions) that hatred causes (people to) disregard proper behavior, for he saddled it by himself. The Holy One said, “Wicked one, Abraham has already preceded you, as it is stated ‘for Abraham rose up early in the morning and saddled his ass.’” The question has

been asked, why did God remind Balaam that Abraham also rose up early in the morning in order to take leave and go to the place of the binding of Isaac. What is the connection between these two acts?

Menachem Mendel of Kotzk (1787-1859) answered this question in the following manner: the Holy One wished to emphasize Balaam's hatred by contrasting the behavior of Abraham with that of Balaam. God said to Balaam: "Abraham arose early and saddled his ass in order to fulfill the decree of the Holy One but his actions never came to fruition for God had already promised, 'I will make you a great nation!' You, Balaam, arose early and saddled your ass to disobey God's commandment; your attempts to bring evil on Israel shall certainly not succeed!"

In *Pirke Avot* we learn: anyone who has these three qualities is a disciple of Abraham: *ayin tovah* - a good eye (he is satisfied with his portion and is not jealous of others), *ruach nimukhah* - a humble spirit (self effacing and humble), and *nefesh shefalah* - a lowly soul (who expects very little). But one with a begrudging eye, an arrogant spirit, and insatiable soul is among the disciples of Balaam. Rabbi Isaac Meir of Gur (1798-1866), the author of the *Hidushei HaRim*, finds an illusion in the verses concerning Abraham and Balaam to the qualities of each one. The word servant *na'ar*, (servant) is an abbreviation for *nefesh* (soul), *ayin* (eye), and *ruach*, (spirit). Each one of them carried these qualities with him: Abraham brought a humble spirit, a good eye and a lowly soul while Balaam brought, an arrogant spirit, a begrudging eye and an insatiable soul. Each one brought his spiritual gifts on his journey - one to fulfill God's will and the other to transgress God's will.

### **Commentary**

At first glance it might seem strange to contrast (or compare) Abraham and Balaam. As a contemporary of Moses and a fellow prophet, one would have expected *Pirke Avot* to contrast Balaam with Moses. As we look at the story of Balaam more closely, however, we see some interesting comparisons between Balaam and the founder of the people of Israel. Both Balaam and Abraham have the ability to bless and curse. Both are on intimate terms with God. And their journey begins in the same way; Abraham to offer his son as a sacrifice on the mountain that God will show him and Balaam to curse Israel from the heights overlooking the camp of the Israelites.

It would seem that Balaam had the power to be a great spiritual teacher just like our forefather. Instead, he used his gifts for personal gain and honor. Balaam knows full well that he is dependent on God to act and yet he is so impressed with his position that he fails to show humility in the face of God's command. Wisdom and folly sometimes go hand in hand. Balaam is on the same spiritual caliber of Abraham and yet he cannot see what his ass sees - that God is standing before him blocking their way. Balaam's guilt lies in his failure to use his spiritual gifts properly! Abraham was destined to become the father of a great nation while Balaam would remain a man without a nation whose wisdom and example would die with him.

Finally it is interesting to note that Abraham's greatness is attributed to two elements in his life: his faith and his moral attributes. The two must be connected to one another. Over the years we have witnessed people of great talent and awesome vision who led morally and spiritually bankrupt lives. Faith should never be an excuse for bad behavior but should be a basis for a deeper sense of responsibility!

### **Questions to Ponder**

1. Is Balaam a monotheist? How do you account for his ability to communicate with God?
2. In what ways are Balaam and Abraham similar to and different from one another? In what ways are Balaam and Moses similar to and different from one another?
3. Why do you think *Pirke Avot* singles out these three qualities in Abraham? Is there anything in his story in Genesis that would lead us to believe that he was blessed with a generous spirit, a humble soul and a modest appetite?
4. In what ways can we actualize these qualities in our personal lives? Does faith in God influence moral character? Should it?
5. What are your special gifts and how can you use them for the betterment of others?

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