

Parashat Balak: Transformation and Zealotry

This *parsha* [weekly portion read from the Torah on Shabbat] is particularly difficult for me -- I find it confusing and strange, more so than other *parshyot* [plural of *parsha*].

Part of my confusion is the matter of perspective: why are we getting a suddenly different – an outsider’s – point of view on the lives of the Jewish people in their wandering?

What was harder for me to track than I anticipated was: who is asking what from whom?

From these led to a proliferation of questions: what new information do we get about Jewishness from this story? Especially since we’re looking through outsiders’ eyes? And as we do not really have any interaction with the Jews themselves, or any of the figures we’ve come to know – at least no real interactions until the very end of *parsha*? What does this shift in perspective and protagonist show us?

Despite all of this, one of the reasons I said yes to giving this *d’var* Torah [word of Torah] is the last line of the *haftarah* [weekly reading from the Book of Prophets that accompanies the Torah reading]:

“כִּי אִם-עֲשׂוֹת מִשְׁפָּט וְאַהֲבַת חֶסֶד, וְהִצַּנֵּעַ לְכַת, עִם-אֱלֹהֶיךָ.”

Which is often translated as, “act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God”

Likely because I was already anticipating this verse as I was reading the *parsha*, I was struck by the refrain of paths, both literal and figurative.

We know that somewhere in the distance, the Israelites are moving closer and closer to their Promised Land, and that their path has been fraught.

In the foreground, we have accounts of travel: Balak’s messengers to Bil’am, Bi’lam with his donkey, Bi’lam continuing to Balak, Bi’lam’s view of the Israelite encampment.

Bil’am also goes on a figurative journey as he learns about what it means to follow God’s command and to live by his word. As we travel with Bil’am, we end the *parsha* with Pinḥas.

I want to think about two examples of piety, Bil’am and Pinḥas, and ask about their paths and whether they merit the instruction of Micah, “act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.” In the *haftarah*, Micah seems to admonish the behavior of the Jewish people after the incident with Bil’am... so does that make Bil’am the villain?

What do we know about Bil'am – he is not part of the Jewish people, but somehow he has a connection with Hashem,¹ and Hashem speaks to Bil'am, not only once, but throughout the *parsha*, and we see a development of their relationship. Bil'am is being taught a lesson about discipline and what walking the path of God is, but he is not even aware of that lesson at many points. He doesn't listen to the donkey, assuming that he knows better even though we're told that they have journeyed together before. We should be doubly surprised that the donkey sees the angel – not only is this a story about someone outside the Jewish people relating with Hashem, an animal sees a manifestation of Hashem's power that a person does not and cannot.

What?

When Bil'am realizes his mistake, he follows the path led by the donkey (and God), and refuses to curse the Israelites for Balak. In fact, his ability to follow the path molded by Hashem opens his eyes to the beauty of the Israelites, when he exclaims,

“מה-טבו אהליך, יַעֲקֹב; מִשְׁכְּנֹתֶיךָ, יִשְׂרָאֵל”

(How goodly are your tents, oh Jacob, your dwellings, Israel)

The quest for violence relents for Bil'am, and his actions are able to stay Balak's impulses as well. Even if the Israelites will enter the land, and there is a real risk for Bil'am and Balak and their people, they choose mercy. Or perhaps mercy is chosen for them.

What to make of Pinhas?

The actions of Bil'am lead God to be angry with the Israelites. How so? Many interpretations, such as Philo, suggest that Bil'am orchestrated the seduction of the Israelites to draw them away from their own righteous path. But what we learn from this *parsha* is that there is no impending battle.

In fact, the seeming peace between the nations leads to relationships between them: we're told that Israel interacts with Ba'al, Moav, and Midian, to such an extent that God commands Moses to oust those that have defied the communal boundaries. When someone violates Moses' word and brings a Midian woman into the camp in front of Moses, a crisis ensues.

Pinhas, a *kohain* [priest of Aaron's line], is outraged and murders the man and woman together in sight of the community.

Did Pinhas act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with his God?

I'm not sure. He seems to act justly because he carries out what he understands to be God's justice, separating the Israelites from other nations. But is the sudden act one of mercy? Is taking on this position of judge and executioner humble? Has he acted outside of his role in the community?

¹ Meaning in Hebrew, “The Name,” another way of describing God.

If Pinhas does not meet our model, and Bil'am does, what should we make of a *kohain's* failure against a non-Jew's success in following the word of God?

What path(s) should we follow?

Should we hold on to our position when we are outsiders looking in? Should we pursue those things that render us zealots?

Not only do I think we can learn from both Bil'am and Pinhas, I think we should try to live between their models, but with a slight modification for both.

What I find beautiful about Bil'am's story is his transformation, and his ability to recognize his blindness. While these are traits of openness and contrition that we could all do more to emulate, I want to point us to those moments when we are not willing or able to trust. What if someone sees the Angel, and we do not? What do we do? Do we judge right away, or do we withhold and trust that sometimes, following and not leading is the way to revelation? Revelation may come in the form of someone outside our community, or from an unexpected source.

It is hard for me to find beauty in Pinhas' actions, because everything about it seems wrong to me. Is violence ever righteous? God's "just" violence is not bloody, at least as we saw for Korah (Numbers 16:1-18:32) and his followers ([as Walter Benjamin would tell us](#)); Pinhas' "just" violence is very bloody. Is the literal spilling of blood what makes certain acts of violence unjust? I don't know – because only divine violence seems capable in that regard. I admire Pinhas' faith, but sometimes, as I have tried to show, our commitment to our faith can actually take us outside our other commitments to that same faith. I wish Pinhas had taken or had been given the time to reflect on his plan of action, and whether righteous anger was the frame of mind he wanted to be in when he raised a weapon.

I don't think Pinhas follows the Micah instruction. We do not need to act in place of Hashem, but we can be partners with Hashem, to act out justice and mercy in the world, and be humble in our relationship to the divine.

This is where I think we can bring these two figures together, the transformation and reflection of Bil'am with the zeal and action of Pinhas. But also to find the same between and beyond these two models of faith to turn away from snap judgments to the careful consideration necessary to create, commit, and constantly reconsecrate the values of our community.