

(Not Preached) with delivery

Balak

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PLEASE RETURN!

I want to discuss with you this morning a problem which is familiar to all of us, yet, despite its familiarity is the most sadly ~~neglected~~ neglected. It is a matter which is of central importance in every phase of human life and existence and on every level. And perhaps it would be best for me to state the problem by pointing it out in the hero, or villain, of this morning's Sidra, where it is drawn in clear and bold lines.

The character of Balaam is an intensely paradoxical one. He is a person who fluctuates from the heights to the depths, from greatness to pettiness, from genius to perverseness. Indeed, Maurice Samuel ("Certain People of the Book") rightly refers to this character as "The Perverted Genius". That is just what he was - a perverted genius. Our Rabbis indicated the same thing when on the one hand they commented on the verse LO KAM BE'YISRAEL K'MOSHEH ODE...AVAL BE'UMOS HA'OLAM KAM, U'MAN NIHU, BILAAM. And on the other hand, they tell us that this man who is comparable to Moses himself was SHOCHEIV IM B'HEMTO, a degraded sexual pervert who regularly committed the most vile form of sodomy!! Nowhere in the Bible do we find a single personality combining such two extreme opposites within the confines of one person: Prophet and Pervert, Genius and Degenerate. Here is man who has intimate contact with the Divine, and then sinks to the lowest debaseness known to us. He speaks with an eloquence unequalled by most of the great prophets of Israel, and takes it upon himself, with an incredible CHUTZPAH, to thwart and frustrate the plans of the Almighty by cursing Israel. A strange and paradoxical person indeed!

Such behavior ~~ja~~ does not "just happen". Minor inconsistencies are common to all human beings, but this sharp and jagged contrast is irrational, it is pathological, and must have deeper roots. What, then, are the roots of this eccentric character?

Our Sages pointed to these roots when they expressed great amazement and astonishment about one statement of Balaam about himself. Recall the famous incident of the Talking Ass? Here is one of the crucial incidents of the whole Bible, when properly understood, which it generally is not, and one which is highly instructive. Balaam had decided to go and curse Israel, complying with the request of the Moabite king Balak, enemy of our people. Riding on his ass he came between two narrow walls, when the animal saw an angel blocking his way. Balaam did not see any angel, and struck the poor animal, when the animal turned to him and complained that he did not deserve such treatment - and then Balaam too saw the angel and apologized. There is here a great element of Biblical humor, of a Divine teasing and ridicule of this heathen prophet. An animal can see more than Balaam! And the great Balaam then apologizes - to the ass!

And yet soon after that in one of his truly eloquent prophecies, Balaam begins by referring to himself with typical modesty as YODEIA DAAS ELION - he who knows the thoughts of the Almighty. Upon which the Rabbis declare, in awe-struck astonishment at this empty brag, HASHTA DAAS BEHEMTO LO HAVAH YADA, DAAS ELION MI HAVA YADA?! How come?! A man who cannot know the thoughts of a mere animal can know the thoughts of the Alm-ty?! A man who has not the vision of a four-legged beast can boast of Divine knowledge? Much more important: a man who can so mistreat and so cruelly abuse an innocent ass that the animal turns to him plaintively and says, "Am I not your loyal beast of burden upon whom you have ridden all your life to this day, did I deserve this of you?", can a man of such meanness and pettiness and cruelty dare boast of knowing the innermost thoughts of Alm-ty G-d?

That is more than a question, friends. It is a devastating condemnation, not only of Balaam but of the type he represents - a type so common, so tragically abundant that it has colored world history and colors the lives of so many of us. This is the Balaam-type, the kind who "talks with G-d" as the Yiddish idiom goes, the kind who is YODEIA DAAS ELION, who professes great faith and great morals and great ethics, who speaks eloquently of his honor and lavishly of his integrity and sincerity, but confines all this to the realm of abstract principles and lets the ethics and morals and faith suffocate in the thin atmosphere of the ~~st~~upper heavens, while

in practice DAAS BEHEMTO LO HAVA YADA, he violates the most elementary principles, he practices every conceivable form of treachery and sin. This is the ~~bridge~~ gulf between theory and practice, between talking and doing, the vast abyss which separates professing and performing. This is the root of perverted genius, and of the perversion of normal human intelligence and pretense. This is the tragedy of great vision and detestable living, of high principles and low deeds, of prophesying like Moses and practicing the morals of an animal.

If we are ever fooled by eloquent phraseology, it is our own fault. We should have learned from Balaam. It was not long ago that most of us American Jews were carried away like a bunch of hysterical bobby-soxers by the noble eloquence of an American President to whom we all but attributed divinity - only to find that treachery against Jews, his greatest supporters, was not beyond him. We have now experience with the pious proetstations of diplomats who talk like monks, whose every political pronouncement is loaded with religious phrases - and yet go ahead to flirt with every petty tyrant in the world, who commit what we might call political sodomy, a la Balaam. Even the most naive fellow-traveler in our country must by now be sufficiently disgusted with the revelations of the Balaam-like behavior of the despots of Russia - YODEIA DAAS ELION and yet SHOCHEIV IM BEHEMTO, people who speak of Democracy and Freedom and People's Governments and can witness without objection so many decades of the world's most brazen one-man tyranny.

That is why we Jews were so careful about too much high talk and too few high deeds. That is why Orthodox Judaism keeps central the Halacha - that which has least to do with propounding great doctrines, and most to do with enforcing them in life. How interesting that the one place the Mishna (in Hagigah) does discuss theology, it takes a negative attitude: restrict it. Don't fool yourself by all this sham eloquence of a Balaam, the Rabbis plead, live the right life, that is far more eloquent in its own way. Jews and Judaism are different from others, a noted gentile thinker once said. While others have a religion, Jews are religious. We begin not from YODIEA DAAS ELION, from elaborating lofty ideas, but from YODEIA DAAS BEHEMTO, from instructing in how to live this mundane life, how not to mistreat a mere beast of burden, how to eat meat, how to make a loan, how and what and what not to cook, when to assist another person, how to pray; from a loyal practice of these minutia we then are able to understand the DAAS ELION, for then we have lived according to the pattern of this same ELION. That is why the man who speaks a good line of religion but in his business practice follows the competitive code of the jungle and treats a friend with treachery - such a man is not religious in the Jewish sense but in the Balaam sense. He knows all about the thoughts of the Almighty, but cannot divine the the simple sentiments of an ass.

Unfortunately, this Balaamite tendency is not restricted to a few individuals. It has become, in our day, a movement of proportions. I refer to what has been called, for some strange reason, Neo-Orthodoxy. Perhaps it is unknown to some of our laity; to those who have been reading about it it is not. What is it? It is a new ideology, espoused by many of those who were once distant from Judaism and have found Conservatism and Reform wanting. They were not satisfied with the current fads in Jewish philosophy. And so they applied to Judaism the philosophy known as Existentialism. Here is a philosophy which does not talk in terms so terribly distant from human beings. It puts man at the center, in the sense of being concerned with him, his father, his destiny. It concerns itself with his anguish, his moments of decision, his feelings as he faces the world. When this Existentialism was transferred to Judaism, it tackled typically Jewish ideas: Revelation, Love and Fear, Man facing G-d in an intimate and personal sense, G-d as a personality, not a mere abstraction. That is all good and well. It comes close to YODEIA DAAS ELION. These neo-Orthodox indeed speak as saints. But what a difference between their talk and their practice! The language of Judaism is all there - even talk of the MIRZVOS. But we look in vain for some affiliation with the Jews who live this kind of life. We look in vain for personal example. Unfortunately it is not there... DAAS BEHEMTO LO HAVA YADA. Good Jewish talk but poor Jewish action. This is not in the tradition of Israel. Israel at Sinai responded to the Divine Summons by saying NAASEH VENISHMA - first we shall live it and from that grow to the abstract definitions.



It is told of the famous MALBIM...came to new position city not overly known for its learning or piety ... disappointed in their attitudes, behaviors, would promise to do things, talk big, never come across... one Shabbos noticed, before sermon, every one kissing Sefer Torah with their hands .... in Drashah said: trouble with this congregation is we kiss with our hands and give with our mouths... better should kiss with mouths but give with hands....

Rabbi <sup>uu</sup>eir, in Mishna Sanhedrin, says that when TZADDIK dies the Shechinah mourns for him and wails KLONI ROSH, KLONI ZRO'A, woe ~~to my head~~ for the head, woe for the arm - for a true Jewish TZADDIK, the true Jewish archetype is one who combines both - an intellectual attitude, and a program of action; talking and thinking, with doing and living; DAAS ELION and sympathizing with DAAS BEHEMTO.

Here is the true Jewish way of living:ROSH and ZROA. Separate them, allow a man to feel he has done his duty by just professing ethics and talking religion and believing in morals, and you have made of him a Balaam, a logical spiritual descendant of this most debased of all NEVI'EI HA'SHEKER, False Prophets. For that is the essence of False Prophecy: Prophecy followed by Perversion, Genius but Degenerate, Poetry to Pettiness,

We who are descended of Moses and not Balaam must live up to the traditions of NEVEI'EI HA'EMESS, the True Prophets. Before pretending to know the thoughts of the Almighty, let us try to commiserate with an animal in pain, with fellow men who seek us out for aid and assistance, with friends whose misery we can lessen and whose joys we can enhance. For the greatest eloquence is in righteous living; the finest poetry is a good deed; the highest philosophy a MITZVAH; the most precious knowledge of G-d - the sympathy we extend to His creatures.