

A quasi-king who sees trouble and panics, a seer who does not see until HaShem opens his eyes, and a people with chronic myopia – sometimes our sacred texts offer teachings in the form of high satire and delicious absurdity. The operating word here is vision, not only the physical act of looking, but also its intellectual-emotional counterpart. Moab's King Balak sees what Israel has done to the Amorites, and his land is overtaken by terror and disgust. Like the new Pharaoh who enslaved the Israelites, Balak frets about the growing number of Israelites, who "have covered the eye of the earth." Midrash Tanchuma Balak 4 explains, "[There are] 2 eyes upon which the land depends, [the Amorite kings] Sichon and Og. They have destroyed them and covered their eyes." In other words, Moab, bereft of its kings and lacking its own vision, feels it can only prevail by supernatural means. The midrash also tells us that Balak, a prince of Sichon, was only appointed king over Moab after the Israelites had killed King Sichon. No wonder he panics and sends elders of Moab and Midian to Bilam, a rather shady prophet-for-hire. He flatters him with a clever paraphrase of HaShem's promise to Abraham ("I will bless those who bless you and whoever curses you I will curse." Genesis 12:3), hoping that a curse from his mouth will sufficiently weaken the Israelites. Bilam plays hard to get, telling them to spend the night while he awaits an answer from HaShem. The answer is an unequivocal no, and Bilam sends the messengers away. But Balak sends higher ranking emissaries, whom Bilam proceeds to rebuff in grandiose style ("Even if Balak gives me a house full of silver and gold, I cannot do anything small or great that would transgress the word of the Lord my God." 22:18) – empty words, because Bilam also tells these men to spend the night while he awaits another answer from HaShem. Suddenly Bilam's "no" is a "maybe," and sure enough, HaShem tells him to go with the men. But when he actually saddles his donkey and sets out, HaShem is angry and sets the stage for one of the Torah's most absurd episodes. Considering human nature, HaShem's anger is not as puzzling as it seems. From the time we can walk and talk we excel at pushing boundaries, continually testing how far we can go before that final, explicit "no" ends our experiment. As we mature, our relationships to boundaries become more sophisticated. We say "no" to disobeying traffic rules, but most of us have driven faster than the speed limit or walked across the street against a red light when there was no traffic. And of course, we say "no" to child labor, but how many of us actually check all the supply chains of the products we buy to make sure there is no child labor involved? There are countless ways to bend the rules in our favor and just like Bilam, most of us are quite adept at finding ones to suit our purposes. Without affiliation, Bilam makes his living by working for those who offer him the most. He is no more loyal to HaShem than he is to Balak or anyone else willing to pay for his services. The midrashim do not look favorably on him, describing his duplicity in a picturesque variety of comparisons and stories. From his effusive reply to the second group of messengers, the midrash derives three negative characteristics: an evil eye ("Then Bilam raised his eyes and saw Israel" 24:2), a haughty spirit (...for the Lord refused to let me go with you" 22:13), and a greedy soul (Balak's grandiose rebuff 22:18). Earlier, the midrash imagines his first conversation with HaShem: "Then God said to Bilam, 'You shall not go with them.' He said to Him, 'If so, I will curse them from where I am.' He said to him, 'You shall not curse the people.' He said to Him, 'Let me bless them.' He said to him, 'They do not need your blessing, for they are blessed.' Similarly, one says to a hornet, 'None of your honey and none of your sting.'" In other words, Bilam's narcissistic shortsightedness lets him think he is more powerful than he actually is. His self-deception makes him an unwitting tool for HaShem and the butt of a delightful cosmic joke. Just like her master, Bilam's donkey begins to bend the rules, incurring his wrath and getting beaten three times (*shalosh regalim*) in the process. Usually the Hebrew word for "times" is פְּעָמִים *p'amim*, but here it is רְגָלִים *regalim* – and the phrase *shalosh regalim* is repeated three times. The midrash continues: "Then the Lord opened the mouth of the she-ass in order to make known to him that the mouth and the tongue are under His control ... 'You are seeking to uproot a people that celebrate three pilgrimage festivals (*shalosh regalim*) in the year!' ... Then the Lord uncovered the eyes of Bilam and he saw (the angel of the Lord)." Bilam's eyes are opened long enough to turn his would-be curse into prophesy and blessing, but his encounter with HaShem has not changed him. Rashi teaches that it was he who encouraged the Moabite women to seduce the chronically myopic Israelites and turn them toward their gods. How easily the Israelites are led astray! How tragic that we humans, who are uniquely gifted with the power of foresight, are so often bedazzled by the Bilams of our day who play upon our fears, our vanity, and our lethargy. We would do well to heed Proverbs 19:21, which admonishes, "There are many thoughts in a man's heart, but HaShem's plan – that shall stand." Or its wonderful Yiddish equivalent, "Der mentsh trakht un got lakht." Our human vision is limited, but we have our Torah to guide us, which it sometimes does through satire and absurdities.

Shabbat shalom!