

What a strange parashah! An enigmatic prophet-for-hire is rendered powerless to carry out the terms of his contract and ends up doing the exact opposite, leading his employer, the Moabite king Balak, on a merry chase in the process. Balak's desired curses turn instead into prophecies of glory and success for Israel and prophecies of doom for her enemies. Stranger still is the fact that this narrative, which includes all but the last nine verses of the parashah, takes place completely in the gentile world, and its effect on those directly as well as indirectly involved is minimal. The Moabites continue to harass the Israelites by tempting them with their women, and the Israelites continue to blithely walk into their traps. What is the episode doing here at all? If nothing in our Torah is superfluous, then we must understand it as a teaching tool with important lessons. So, let's examine its main protagonist, Bilam. According to the Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 105a, one of the many sources containing lengthy discussions about him, his name implies that he is a man without a people (*bilam*), or one who wore down the Jewish people (*bila am*). He gives the impression of being a man of God but nevertheless negotiates with Balak's ambassadors, and he must be a powerful shaman if Balak chooses him for this task. "Balak son of Zippor saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites. Moab became terrified of the people, for they were numerous, and Moab became disgusted because of the children of Israel." (22:1-2). If this sounds familiar, it is because it closely resembles the reaction of the "new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph." (Exodus 1:8) Here too, the people had become numerous enough to be perceived as a threat that needed attention. Balak confides his fears to the elders of Midian and sends them along with other dignitaries, armed with magic charms and flattering words, to hire Bilam to curse the Israelites so he can more easily drive them away. According to the Talmud, the Midianites were no friends of the Moabites, but they joined together against a potential common threat. In another juicy description, "Bilam was a diviner by using his penis. It is written here: 'Fallen, yet with opened eyes' (Numbers 24:4) and it is written there: 'And Haman was fallen upon the divan whereupon Esther was' (Esther 7:8), indicating that the verb fallen has sexual connotations." Other sages go so far as to say that he engaged in bestiality with his donkey, comparing "He crouched, he lay down" (Numbers 24:9) with "Between her legs he sunk, he fell, he lay." (Judges 5:27), referring to Sisera and Jael. Indeed, the Torah repeatedly refers to his *aton* (female donkey), an unusual mount for a man. The common thread running through all of this is fear of the Israelite "encroachers" played out against the backdrop of paganism versus monotheism. The attributes of superstition, duplicity and licentiousness portrayed by our texts as common to paganism are juxtaposed against HaShem's eternal covenant with Israel, which HaShem steadfastly upholds even when the Israelites fail to do. The parallels between Bilam and Pharaoh are especially noteworthy. Pharaoh is ultimately undone by his habitually hardened heart, which makes him increasingly impervious to HaShem's repeated warnings, while Bilam's willingness to sell his prophetic skills to the highest bidder turns him into an unwitting, tragicomic mouthpiece for HaShem. Their fatal flaw is the duplicity stemming from their implacable narcissism. One of the most fancifully anachronistic stories finds Bilam together with Job (or Amalek, depending on the source) and Yitro as one of Pharaoh's counselors pondering what to do about the Hebrews. "Bilam, who advised Pharaoh to kill all sons born to the Jewish people, was punished by being killed in the war with Midian." (Sotah 11a) The common denominator is their desire to bring about the destruction of the Jewish people and their ultimate failure due to HaShem's intervention. Both are either unwilling (Pharaoh), or unable (Bilam) to comprehend how profoundly their pagan world of porous boundaries between human and divine differs from the monotheistic world of strict separation between HaShem and creation. Pharaoh repeatedly mocks HaShem, while Bilam, who claims to be in communication with and in the service of HaShem, squanders his talents trying to do the bidding of his employer and ends up losing his autonomy in the process. His pitiful attempts to go against what he knows in his heart to be right provide a graphic warning against the facile world of paganism that will continue to tempt the Israelites. No wonder Bilam figures so prominently in our texts. Rabbinic sources acknowledge his significance and sometimes equate him to Moses, but conclude that his moral deficits prevented him from reaching his potential. The prophets concerned themselves with chastising the people in order to lead them toward a more ethical and moral future, a far cry from Bilam's utterances, which, however prophetic, were no more autonomous than those of his donkey. Moses began as HaShem's reluctant mouthpiece and grew into our greatest prophet while remaining humbly aware of his humanity. Bilam touted his relationship with HaShem, but sold his skills to those who would pay for them. Unlike blatantly flawed characters such as Haman or the pagan foes of our prophets, Bilam is highly nuanced; and therein lies the danger. His closeness to HaShem is strikingly similar to that of Moses and his prophecies are even more powerful, but whereas Moses remains exclusively monotheistic, Bilam continues to wander between the worlds of monotheism and paganism and never renounces other spiritual powers. His eye may be jolted open, but his mind remains shut. Indeed, we can learn much from his story.

Shabbat shalom!