

The story of Bil'am, the sorcerer-prophet for hire who became HaShem's unwitting mouthpiece and his employer Balak takes up all but the last nine verses of our parashah, and the rest of the Book of Numbers deals with its aftermath. Let's look at its origins. At the end of last week's parashah, the Israelites had just defeated Sichon, the powerful Emorite king who had previously conquered Moab (21:26), and then gone on to vanquish Og, the king of Bashan (21:34). In addition, the Israelites were at peace with the Ammonites, who were hostile toward Moab. No wonder Balak is terrified of them. Notwithstanding their connection with the Israelites, Moab joins forces with the Midianites, a nomadic people who were descendants of Abraham and his second wife Keturah (Genesis 25:1-2), and they appoint Balak, a Midianite, as their king. Moses fled to Midian after it had become known that he had killed an Egyptian taskmaster, and he married Zipporah, the daughter of the enigmatic priest of Midian. (Zipporah is the feminine form of Zippor, which means bird. It was likely a common Midianite name.) Known by seven different names and the subject of some fanciful midrashim, this man became Moses' wise and trusted advisor. Midrash Tanchuma Balak 3 discusses the unlikely alliance of Midian and Moab: "What is the relevance of [mentioning] the elders of Midian [22:4] here? It is simply that they saw Israel conquering in a way that was not customary for conquerors. They said, 'Their leader, i.e., Moses, was raised in Midian. Let us learn through them about his character.' The elders of Midian told them, 'His power is only in his mouth.' They replied, 'We also will bring someone against them who has power in his mouth.' Do you not find that the Midianites were at war with the Moabites? [Genesis 36:35]" It goes on to reference Tractate Sanhedrin 105a: "A parable of two dogs that were with the flock and they were hostile to one another. A wolf came and attacked one. The other said, 'If I do not help him, today he kills him and tomorrow he comes to attack me.' They both went and killed the wolf. Rav Pappa says that this agrees with the adage: A weasel and a cat made a wedding from the fat of the luckless. Despite their hatred of one another, they join forces for their mutual benefit at the expense of a third party." Believing that a supernatural power was behind Israel's success, Balak sends for Bil'am, hoping to respond in kind. We know what happens. After delivering his blessing and prophesy, Bil'am parts company with Balak, but according to Sanhedrin 106a, he advises Balak to set a trap for the Israelites: "The God of these people despises lewdness, and they desire linen garments. Come, I will give you advice. Make for them enclosures with wall hangings and seat prostitutes in them, with an old woman outside and a young woman inside, and have the women sell them linen garments. ... And a jug of Ammonite wine was placed near her, and neither Ammonite wine nor gentile wine had been prohibited yet. ... Once he drank the wine, his evil inclination burned within him. He said to her, 'Submit to me.' She removed the idol that she worshipped from her lap and said to him, 'Worship this.'" He said to her, 'Am I not Jewish?' She said to him, 'What is your concern? We are asking you to do nothing more than to defecate in its presence.' But he does not know that its worship is conducted in that manner." And thus "Israel became attached to Baal Peor, and the anger of the Lord flared against Israel." (25:3) Ba'al Peor was a Canaanite deity, whose name derived from *Peor*, a mountain in Moab, and *Ba'al*, meaning lord/master/owner. Its worship is said to have involved sensual depravity. From the outset, the relationship between Moab and Israel was dichotomous. After the angels rescue them from Sodom, Lot's daughters, believing that they are the only ones left in the world, each has a child by their father. The elder names her child *moav* (from my father), and the younger names her child *ben-ami* (son of my people). They are the ancestors of the Moabites and Ammonites. (Genesis 19:31-38) Midrash Genesis Rabbah 50 explains that the angels rescued Lot and his daughters because they foresaw that Ruth the Moabite (ancestor of King David) and Na'ama the Ammonite (Salomon's main wife) would descend from them. Because of their hostility to the Israelites during their desert sojourn, Moabite men were strictly barred from marrying Israelite women, but Israelite men were permitted to marry Moabite women – provided they converted, a profound departure from the form of worship into which they had been socialized. The Talmud says that like all animals, we humans eat, procreate, and eliminate waste. But we are commanded to imbue these basic functions with spiritual significance by sanctifying them with special blessings and creating respectful boundaries around them – the polar opposite of the hedonistic approach of many idolatrous practices. The word *peor* means gaping/wide open, in this case, the opening of an orifice, i.e., the anus, as well as the sexual organs. In other words, Baal Peor worship entails uninhibited gratification of the vilest animalistic desires. Indeed, Moab has reverted to the depravity of Sodom that had seduced Lot and now seeks to ensnare the Israelites. Sadly, forms of depravity continue to beset our world. Eating competitions, sexual exploitation, unbridled commercialism, and countless potentially addictive pursuits play to our basest instincts. Then we unfortunately overreact with stringent restrictions, creating a vicious circle of extremes. The antidote is found in our sacred writings, which constantly stress balance. "The path of the upright is one of moderation in every trait, so that each trait is equidistant from either extreme and not close to either." (Maimonides, Hilchot De'ot)

Shabbat shalom!