

Balak 5777

If you google the words 'joke introduction presentation' you pull up thousands of websites which basically all say the same thing - that starting with a joke is a good way to soften up your audience for the more serious message that you will hit them with further down the line. I'm sure that somewhere in that list, you'd find this week's Torah portion, since it begins with just such a joke – Bilam, the omniscient prophet who can't seem to see what's right in front of his face.

Poor old Bilam. The prophet who gets hired to curse but ends up giving blessings. The visionary who can't see that an angel is standing in his path. The man with the talking donkey. Who'd want to be him? He's God's stooge, the straight man for God's rather warped sense of humor. It's no wonder, is it, that he behaves like what in England we would call a bit of an old git.

But - as we just observed - a joke is often merely an opener for a more serious message, and I want to suggest that there is just such a message in this Torah portion.

To discover it, we need to take a closer look at our anti-hero.

Bilam leaps into the Torah, previously unheard of. He doesn't seem to be the most popular of people - well, perhaps that's the way of the prophet - certainly no friends are ever mentioned. He will be referred to only once more, in a terse headline towards the end of the book of Numbers, during the war against the Midianites:

They also put Bilam son of Beor to the sword.

So he will exit just as quickly as he entered.

Our tradition is fond of pillorying him, and the rabbis of the Midrash enjoy themselves greatly at his expense. He is compared - adversely - to Abraham and to Moses, even to his own donkey. Once again, Bilam comes out the loser.

I would also add, though, that much like other great clowns of literature, Bilam has his tragic side. There's something about his situation that is really poignant. And we shouldn't forget that he IS a prophet - he does seem to be in some kind of relationship with God, at least in terms of setting limits as to what he can or can't say.

Bilam gives four prophecies. This seems excessive. In order to convey the message that he can't curse a people whom God has blessed, you would think that once would be enough. Twice, if- as here - your paymaster is insistent that you try again. But four?

Yet it's the difference between the prophecies that carries the true message of this week's Torah portion - for Bilam, for the Israelites and for us. (If you want to follow, the prophecies begin on page 900, verse 7.)

The first two prophecies (page 900 and page 902) are fairly standard. Roughly summarized, they say, No Can Do. 'Oi there King Balak: sorry, mate, can't do what you want me to. What can I do about it? Those Israelites, there really are a lot of 'em, they're clearly a bit special, and they seem to have God's phone number. Better give up.'

But then there's a change. King Balak does, in fact, give up - he says, 'Don't curse them and don't bless them' - in other words, shut up before you say anything worse. But Bilam has the bit between his teeth now - 'Whatever the Lord says, that I must do.' And so he is taken to another location, and rather than go running off looking for omens, as he did the previous two times, the Torah tells us that he 'turned his face towards the wilderness.'

And something different happens. Rather than God randomly encountering him, as for the previous two prophecies (*vayikar elav*), the Torah tells us that God's spirit - the speaking spirit, the *ruah* that hovered over the waters at Creation - settles on him. And this puppet, this stooge, this clown - begins to prophesy for real.

He introduces himself by name - he is the one who hears God's speech, who beholds God's visions, prostrate but with wide-open eyes. And what he sees, first, is the whole encampment of the Israelites - all 600,000 - odd of them, all arranged in their battalions. He bursts out into a line so famous that our liturgists gave it pride of place in the Siddur:

*Ma tovu ohalekha Ya'akov
mishkenotekha Yisrael*

The fourth prophecy is just as spontaneous. Balak has completely had it by now, and we can imagine him yanking at Bilam's robe to make him leave, even as he refuses to pay because he didn't get what he ordered. But there is no stopping Bilam. Using the same introduction as before, he predicts that the 'star' that is to rise out of Jacob will endure, long after the Moabites, the Edomites, the Amalekites, the Kenites, the Cypriots, have all perished. He's completely carried away.

But afterwards: exit Bilam. No further words are exchanged. As Shakespeare wrote, in another context: The rest is silence. Next time we meet him it will be to hear the report of his death.

So, what IS the message beyond the joke? Perhaps it is that we need to appreciate what Bilam didn't have, and what we take for granted.

First, the *ma tovu* prophecy - the spread of the tents, the fertile, buzzing, beautiful community. The whole is more than the sum of its parts - Menahem Mendel of Kotzk - ordinary people combine to create extraordinary communities (etz hayyim 901).

I wonder if Bilam felt this at a very personal level. The Maharal points out that his name breaks down into 'belo am' - without people. He's incapable of human connection, but intelligent enough to know how important it is, and to realize what might be missing in his life.

As for the second prophecy - I think it speaks to an identity of purpose. Bilam is taking note of how a community can come together around a shared ideal, and then exercise its power in pursuit of that ideal. And perhaps he is mindful, as he does so, of how he is not part of that shared destiny, as he wistfully observes,

Alas, who can survive except God has willed it?

As he turns away from what he has seen, does this tell us that he has also seen his own, lonely death? Perhaps. He may be a buffoon - but it turns out that he isn't a fool.

So the message behind the joke is a powerful one. It tells of the beauty of community and the power of a shared tradition and convictions. Do we really need our enemies to tell us what we have? Or can we, ourselves, commit to noticing it and celebrating it?

Look around. The people sitting in their rows, just as we do this morning. The 'star that rose from Jacob' that still shines – here this morning and in every place where Jews still come together.

If Bilam were here, I think he would remind us to be grateful.

Shabbat shalom.