

## Balak 5778

### What's the Donkey Saying?

Can you think of a time when you learned a big lesson from a little creature? Maybe it was a child or a grandchild: maybe even an animal. The paradigm for such scenarios forms the middle part of the Torah portion for this week, as we once again encounter Bilam and his donkey.

Clearly she's no ordinary creature, this donkey. She can see angels: she can speak: she can even converse. And as you may imagine, our tradition has had a wonderful time interpreting her. I want to share a few of those interpretations and then add a thought or two of my own.

We begin with the word for *donkey* itself - her name. The normal word is *hamor*, from the Hebrew *hmr* – material, or substance. A donkey, this seems to tell us, is, well, dense. A crude lump of stuff. And indeed, Kabbalistic and hassidic commentators take up this language: they understand, for example, that when Abraham leaves his donkey at the foot of Mt Moriah, he's leaving his *gashmiyut* - his gross physicality - behind him and entering a world of pure spirituality.

But that's not the word used here. Bilam's donkey is female – *aton*. Our inelegant 'she-ass' doesn't get the poetry of this rare word, whose root doesn't exist in any other form in Tanakh. Only very wealthy people get to own *atonot* – Abraham, Jacob, Job. They don't get used for ordinary shlepping (Joseph sends *atonot* laden with the best things of Egypt to Jacob, as a special gift). And only special people get to ride them: Bilam is in the exalted company of the widow who shelters the prophet Elijah. Even the Messiah will ride on a *hamor*, not an *aton*. An *aton* is a donkey with a mission, a special creature.

Then there's her capacity to see things that humans can't - even human prophets. The Torah takes particular care to tell us that, not once, not twice, even, but three times over (in contrast, as the footnote in Etz Hayyim states, to Bilam's persistent blindness).

And, of course, she can speak.

We should notice – as Bilam does not – the miraculousness of this. The donkey talks. I'll say that again: THE DONKEY TALKS. A three-times-beaten donkey might attack; it might lie down and stubbornly refuse to move; it might bray; it might bolt. This one talks.

The Midrash teaches us that her mouth was created at twilight before the very first Shabbat of creation, along with other miracles [Avot 5:6] –

*The opening of the earth (that swallowed Korach and his followers), the well (that opened when Moses hit the rock), the mouth of (Bilam's) donkey, Noah's rainbow, the manna, Moses' staff, the shamir (a worm that burrowed through rock that was needed for the building of the Temple), the shapes of letters, the original writing implement used in writing the 10 Commandments and the original stone tablets on which they were written.....*

There are similar Midrashim which mention other miraculous creatures: Abraham's ram, the fish which swallows Jonah. All of these are one-time phenomena. It's as if the donkey has been waiting quietly in the wings for the whole story so far, in order to go on stage and say the lines she was created to say. And then, teaches the Midrash, she dies, having fulfilled her purpose – which was, we must assume, specifically to say what she says when she says it.

This brings us to what she actually says.

Let me put it this way: if you were Bilam's donkey, if you had clearly seen an angel standing in front of you blocking the way, if your master had persisted in slapping and thumping and caning you despite this, what would your first words be? [elicit]

*What's your problem?*

*Can't you see there's an angel there, you idiot?*

*Call yourself a prophet? Can't even see angels, can you? Hanh.*

But she doesn't say any of these things. Instead, she asks:

*What have I done to you, that you have hit me three times?*

By this, of course, she draws our attention to the fact that she has patiently borne Bilam's ill-will - as well as his irate self - twice already. This would be a pretty mild-mannered start to the conversation if it came from, say, a servant; the more so, given that the speaker isn't human.

Bilam, of course, misses the opportunity she is offering him and, entirely ignoring the fact that his donkey is talking to him for the first time in her life, rushes into what looks – superficially – like an answer to her question:

*You've made a fool of me, and if I had a sword, I'd kill you!*

Once again, if it were us, how would we respond? Defensively? With a roll of the eyes? With a good kicking? But again the donkey surprises us:

*Aren't I your donkey you have always ridden, right up until today? Really, have I ever done this to you before?*

Once again, the human is out of control (I am reminded of a classic Basil Fawlty sketch where he beats his Mini Cooper because it's broken down) while the donkey is being the rational one. We can almost hear her tone of voice: quiet, objective. Look at the facts, she seems to be saying. Get out of your angry mindset and be logical. How likely is it that I would be playing games with you since I never have before, not even when you were a little boy riding on my back? There's another perspective that you're missing.

Perhaps this is why, in the gorgeous extended Midrash called *Perek Shirah*, donkeys get something of a star billing. In *Perek Shirah* (I recommend it, it's online) eighty-four elements of the natural world, including the skies, the earth, plants, animals and insects, are each paired up with a suitable Biblical verse they declare. Thus, the whole natural world becomes our teacher. Chickens, for example, teach "He gives bread to all flesh, for God's kindness endures forever." Elephants, predictably, teach, "How great are your works, O God." And so on.

But donkeys say:

*Lecha Adonai...hamitnasei lechol lerosh.*

*Yours, God, is the greatness, the might, the splendor, the victory and the glory, for everything in heaven and earth is yours: yours is sovereignty, being raised as head over all.*

Again, we see that breadth of perspective. Donkeys understand the true measure of the universe; donkeys know who is really in charge of the whole thing; donkeys perceive nothing less than the essence of God.

Think for a moment about the kind of situations where we get mired in a particular negative mindset. Maybe we are trapped by rage. Maybe we are being irrational. Maybe we are acting out physically. Maybe we are so intent on trying to get to where we thought we needed to be going that we are blind to everything in our path.

My strong guess is that in such situations, there is also a spark of something else, something that we were perhaps initially ignoring but which had the power to lift us out of the mire. Maybe there was a third person there who restored us to a sense of objectivity. Maybe a favorite song came on the radio just at that point. Maybe a child made us laugh, or pointed to something for us to look at. Maybe there was a voice, internal or external, that, finally, we opted to listen to. And when we did, we realized that there was another way of reading our situation, another side to the story.

That's the donkey talking.

Maybe it's just a cute coincidence that the word *attune* in English sounds so much like the Hebrew *aton*. But still, I like it. If, when we are trapped and mired, we can attune at least a part of ourselves to the idea that there is a wider perspective, we might stand more of a chance of resolving the situation we are in.

Try it. I'm not saying that it's easy, by the way: it clearly wasn't easy for Bilam either. But still. Next time you are stuck on the interstate; next time the heel falls off your shoe just as you're about to go into a meeting; next time your child or grandchild won't eat its spinach - stop.

And ask yourself: *what's the donkey saying?*

The answers may be surprising.