

# *Parashah* and Politics: How Torah Changed the World

*Parashat Balak*, Numbers, Chapters 22-25 | July 20, 2024

By Rabbi Meir Soloveichik

## Menachem Begin Teaches Torah for Our Time

On a Saturday night in 1977, a Torah study session assembled in the residence of the newly elected prime minister of Israel. Yehuda Avner, who was in attendance in Menachem Begin's home, described what unfolded at the very first session of what would become a weekly Bible study circle, which took place on the Sabbath whose Torah portion was the very same one as our own:

Approximately twenty people, among them Bible scholars of repute, would seat themselves around the couch on which the prime minister sat, and for an hour or more they would delve into some particularly attention-grabbing passage of the Book of Books. I would participate as a matter of course; being in attendance on the prime minister was part of my job.

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On the first such Saturday night, held on the very eve of Begin's departure for Washington, the chosen passage was from the Book of Numbers, chapters twenty-two to twenty-four, in which the Bible records how, in the fortieth year after the children of Israel embarked on their Exodus from Egypt, and just

a few months before entering the Promised Land, the heathen prophet Balaam was coaxed—bribed actually—by the Moabite King Balak, to curse the advancing Israelites and thereby devastate them before they could devastate him. However, Balaam, impelled by God's command, and much to Balak's displeasure, found himself involuntarily blessing them instead.

A post-Shabbat gathering to study Torah: this can be seen as a sign of the uniqueness of the premiership of Begin, which, of course, it was. But it was much more than that, because the discussion of our *parashah* that unfolded in Begin's home would, in the end, reflect the uniqueness of his own Zionism, and his political worldview, one which is as relevant to us today as it was then.



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The reading named for the Moabite king Balak is utterly unlike any other in the Torah. By and large, the usual characters in the Pentateuch—Moses, Aaron, the Israelites—do not appear. A pagan king, terrified by the defeats wreaked by Israel on the Amorites who had waged war against God’s people, sought out a sort of prophetic sorcerer named Balaam, hoping that the latter’s talent for cursing could undo the threat posed by the Chosen Nation. Originally, Balaam is forbidden by the Almighty from joining the Moabites in this evil quest, but then he is abruptly allowed to take Balak up on his offer, as long as he only pronounces the words that God instructs him to. The Almighty perhaps allows Balaam to accompany the Moabites because He is aware of Balaam’s eagerness to engage in “cursing for hire”: an eagerness implied by the fact that Balaam is utterly oblivious to the angel that he meets along the way, an angel that his donkey has no trouble discerning. God, in other words, assents to Balaam’s desire in order to teach him, and thereby us, a lesson.

There is a distinctly comic element to much of the story: the donkey miraculously speaks, reprimanding Balaam, and then Balaam himself, again and again, is unable to utter a single curse. Instead, he lyrically articulates the uniqueness of God’s people. We would, however, be wrong to allow the humorous elements of the story to distract us from the profundity of his prophecy, which speaks to the mysterious nature of Jewish history. One of the most famous of these prophecies is the very first one he utters, one that inspired the study session in Begin’s home:

And God met Balaam; and he said to him, I have prepared the seven altars, and I have offered upon each altar a bull and a ram. And the Lord put a word in Balaam’s mouth, and said, Return to Balak, and thus you shall speak. And he returned to him, and lo, he, and all the princes of Moab, were standing beside his burnt offering. And Balaam took up his discourse, and said,

From Aram Balak has brought me,  
the king of Moab from the eastern mountains:  
Come, curse Jacob for me,  
and come, denounce Israel!

How can I curse whom God has not cursed?  
How can I denounce whom the Lord has not denounced?

For from the top of the mountains I see him,  
from the hills I behold him . . . (Numbers 23:4–9)

And then Balaam gives us the following fascinating description of biblical Israel—one that I will do my best to translate, drawing on the work of others—an apparent explanation of why his quest to curse this people did not succeed.

Behold, it is a people that dwells alone, and is not reckoned among the nations. (Numbers 23:9)

What exactly does this mean? How are the Israelites “not reckoned among the nations,” and in what way is this connected to his failure to curse his intended target?



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It was the meaning of this verse that was the central focus of the circle's discussion at Begin's home. Avner reports:

Professor Ephraim Auerbach . . . picked up the theme, citing classic commentators who suggested that the meaning of “dwelling alone,” as cited by the heathen prophet Balaam, really meant voluntarily setting oneself apart. In other words, the Jewish nation distinguished itself from other peoples by virtue of its distinctive religious and moral laws, and by the fact that it had been chosen by God as the instrument of a divine purpose within the family of nations.

According to this understanding, not being “reckoned among the nations” describes how God's people sees itself. According to Avner, this approach was seconded and supported by the great scholar and teacher Nechama Leibowitz, also in attendance. At this point, according to Avner, another scholar, Harel Fish, entered the discussion, and offered a slightly different exegetical twist on the verse. According to his approach, God's people is set apart, “not reckoned” among the nations, in the sense that its peoplehood is unique; its identity is formed by a fusion of family, faith, and peoplehood—something whose parallel cannot be found elsewhere.

Stroking his goatee, he mused that in modern society the Jewish people were unique in personifying a seamless blend of peoplehood and religion, born out of the two seminal events that forged the Jewish national personality: the Exodus from Egypt, when Jews entered history as a people, and the giving of the Torah at Sinai, when Jews entered history as a nation-faith. A Jew, therefore, was a synergy of both—Exodus and Sinai. He could not be the one without the other, though many throughout the centuries had tried to keep them apart. Whether one was a believer or a skeptic, this subtle nation-faith individuality was indivisible. And since this was what distinguished the Jewish people from all other peoples, they would always, uniquely, “dwell alone.”

What this means, then, according to Fish, is that Jews can never be normal, akin to other peoples, and that this is reflected in Israelite origins from the very beginning. Balaam's words embody a warning against a Jewish quest for normalization. Of course, normalization was just what some early secular Zionists sought, reflecting an approach from which Begin's own covenantal Zionism sharply dissented. A related point, according to Avner, was made by another attendee in Begin's home:

Dr. Chaim Gevaryahu, chairman of the Israel Bible Society, added that he wondered what led those brilliant secular Zionist founding fathers of yesteryear to predict so confidently that Jewish self-determination would, of itself, lead to national normalization and put an end to anti-Semitism. . . . that could never happen, because nothing could ever put an end to anti-Semitism. In fact, one thing to be learned from the biblical portion under review was that the so-called prophet Balaam was the archetypical anti-Semite. His whole intent was to curse the Jews, not to bless them. The blessing was God's doing, not his.

Anti-Semitism, in other words, is a response to, and a hatred of, the mysterious, miraculous nature of the Jewish people, and a reminder to Jews of their own uniqueness. Begin himself then joined the conversation by reflecting on the political and theological meaning of Balaam's words. As cited by Avner, Begin said:



“As Professor Harel Fisch has pointed out, other peoples are multi-religious; other religions are multi-national. But we Jews are one and the same—religion and nationhood both. And as Professor Auerbach and Professor Leibowitz have indicated, we have forever maintained this distinctiveness by refusing to assimilate into other nations. It all began with the father of our nation, Abraham of Ur of the Chaldees, who, at the age of seventy-five, deduced the eternal truth of the One God, and bolted the idolatry of his parental home in order to worship Him. Hundreds of years later we see his descendants, by now an enslaved people, again embarking on a God-commanded journey—the Exodus from the idolatrous land of Egypt—again in order to worship the One God. In both instances their destination was Eretz Yisrael, there to fulfill their religious-national destiny. Never in Jewish history was this identity severed.”

At this point, Avner reports, Begin asserted how vital it therefore was that Judaism play a significant role in the civic fabric of the Jewish state. He then brought forward a book containing the writings of Ambassador Yaakov Herzog, and proceeded to quote from it to all assembled:

If one asks how the ingathering of the exiles, which no one could have imagined in his wildest dreams, came about, or how the State of Israel could endure such severe security challenges, or how it has built up such a flourishing economy, or how the unity of the Jewish people throughout the Diaspora has been preserved, one must come back to the primary idea that this is ‘a people that dwells alone.’ More than that, one must invoke this phrase not only to understand how the Jews have existed for so long; one must invoke it as a testimony to the Jewish right to exist at all in the land of their rebirth.

It is only with this in mind that we can attempt to understand why this story of Balaam appears in the Torah. Nowhere else does the narrative of the Hebrew Bible pull away so extensively from its focus on Israelite leaders, in order to take us up close to pagan kings, and the sorcerers who serve them. Yet it would seem that the curtain is pulled aside to reveal this strange and striking scene because it is more than one single story: it is an embodiment of Jewish history itself. Throughout the centuries, there would be those who would attempt to define the Jewish people as cursed, and, in the name of these purported curses, would attempt to deride and destroy Jewish peoplehood. But their very failure to make good on their curses, much like the failure of Balaam of old, highlighted the miraculous nature of Jewish history.

As the first Bible study came to a close, Begin, according to Avner, reflected on Balaam’s story, and the message of the man whose curses had been turned into blessing. Building on Yaakov Herzog’s words, Begin said:

“So there you have it, . . . Cease dwelling alone and we cease to exist. What a conundrum!”



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Begin's point, of course, is not that Jews should resist engaging other peoples. On the contrary, it was Begin who made peace with Egypt, and Begin was the first Israeli prime minister genuinely to engage Christian Zionists in America. Rather, by "dwell alone" Begin was emphasizing that Jews must never forget their uniqueness. Indeed, he himself understood that there were those who were not Jewish who understood this, that there were those who, unlike Balaam, would choose to respond to the miraculous nature of Jewish identity by offering not curses, but rather blessings of their own.

Thus, in the midst of a very fraught and tense week in America, it was inspiring to see a prayer, at the opening of the convention in Milwaukee, recited on behalf of the hostages in Gaza, with the largely non-Jewish audience enthusiastically and reverently responding. It is a reminder of the fact that today there are many who seek to bless the Jewish people, and that unlike Balaam, they do so instinctively, and with love, with an understanding of the unique and inspiring nature of Jewish history.

The story of Balaam is as relevant as ever; and the conversation in the prime minister's residence highlighted the uniqueness of the man who hosted it—and succeeded in capturing the uniqueness of the Jewish people itself.

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## **Additional Resources**

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