

Balak Employs Balaam

When the Moabite king Balak sees how the Israelites are defeating their enemies, he allies himself to his traditional enemy Midian (a reverse takeover bid) and calls on Balaam the magician to come and curse them. After some negotiation in which Balaam protests that he can only say what God tells him to say (and when God says no, he keeps on trying until he seems to say yes or he wants to believe it). Off he goes with the messengers to do his best

On the way, Balaam's ass sees an image in the way and refuses to go any further. Balaam beats it mercilessly. The ass then begins to speak and points out to Balaam that if he, the ass could see there was a problem ahead, why couldn't he? After all, Balaam was supposed to be the wisest of men and now his donkey seems to be on a higher level.

Our rabbis have disagreed as to whether the ass really did speak miraculously or whether it was a dream or indeed Balaam's imagination. The fact is that Balaam was wrestling with himself whether to go or not and was trying himself to work out what exactly God wanted of him. In the end, after several attempts where God put words into his mouth, he did indeed discover the correct response for himself and instead of cursing, he blessed the Israelites.

God of course has His own plans. Magic is limited. So is Balaam who we know from other ancient sources from the Middle East had a fearsome reputation and a book of his own.

The point of the story is that we too often wrestle with issues and religious conflicts. We can indeed work out the right path for ourselves but we often need or want corroboration or some reassurance.

Now if Balaam finally got it right in the end, and the words he spoke are regarded by us today as important characteristics of Judaism and Jewish survival, why wasn't he regarded as a great man?

The answer is that even after he discovered the truth he simply couldn't break a lifetime's habits or escape the corruption of his culture. That was why he gave other advice to Balak on how to seduce the Children of Israel. His problem was also the problem of the Israelites and even today it is the problem of most Jews who know in their hearts what the right thing to do is, but still cannot bring themselves to change their patterns of behavior and thought