



Turning to See

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Parashat Balak 5785

The moment when Bilaam can't see the angel is familiar to us—too familiar for comfort.

We've seen this scene before: a hidden angel, an unusual occurrence, the word of God. We've seen it all at the burning bush (*sneh*), the moment when Moshe, our greatest prophet, receives his first mission: speech.

שמות ג:ב-ג

²וַיֵּרָא מַלְאֲכֵי ה' אֵלָיו בְּלַבַּת אֵשׁ מִתּוֹךְ הַסֵּנֶה וַיֵּרָא וְהָיָה הַסֵּנֶה בֹּעֵר בָּאֵשׁ וְהַסֵּנֶה אֵינּוּ אֵכָל: ³וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה
אֲסֶרֶה נָא וְאֶרְאֶה אֶת הַמַּרְאֶה הַגָּדֹל הַזֶּה מִדּוֹעַ לֹא יִבְעַר הַסֵּנֶה:

Shemot 3:2-3

²And an **angel of God** appeared to him in a flame from within the bush. He **saw**, and behold, the bush was aflame but was not consumed. ³Moshe said, “**Let me turn aside** to see this great sight, why the bush is not being consumed.”

Like Moshe at the *sneh*, Bilaam encounters an angel in an unexpected place. As with Moshe, the encounter leads to departure from his planned route:



במדבר כב:כב-כג

²²וַיַּחַר אֶף אֱלֹקִים כִּי הוֹלֵךְ הוּא וַיִּתְּצֵב מַלְאָךְ ה' בְּדֶרֶךְ לִשְׁטָן לוֹ וְהוּא רֹכֵב עַל אֲתוֹנוֹ וּשְׁנֵי נִעְרָיו עִמּוֹ:
²³וַתֵּרָא הָאֲתוֹן אֶת מַלְאָךְ ה' נֹצֵב בְּדֶרֶךְ וְחִרְבוֹ שְׁלוּפָה בְּיָדוֹ וַתֵּט הָאֲתוֹן מִן הַדֶּרֶךְ וַתֵּלֶךְ בַּשָּׂדֶה וַיֵּר בָּלָעַם
אֶת הָאֲתוֹן לְהַטְתָּהּ הַדֶּרֶךְ:

Bemidbar 22:22-23

²²But God was incensed at his going; so an **angel of God** took a position in his way as an adversary. He was riding on his donkey, with his two servants alongside. ²³The donkey **saw** the angel of God standing in the way, with his drawn sword in his hand. The donkey **swerved from the road** and went into the fields; and Balaam beat the donkey to turn her back onto the road.

This is not coincidental: aside from Moshe and Aharon, Bilaam is the first individual we have encountered since Shemot God speaks to directly. Hazal assert that Bilaam and Moshe are, in fact, divinely appointed counterparts:

מדרש תנחומא בלק א

כָּשֶׁם שֶׁהָעַמִּיד מְלָכִים חֲכָמִים וְנְבִיאִים לְיִשְׂרָאֵל, כֵּן הָעַמִּיד לְאַמּוֹת הָעוֹלָם... הָעַמִּיד מֹשֶׁה לְיִשְׂרָאֵל שֶׁהָיָה
מְדַבֵּר עִמּוֹ כָּל זְמַן שִׁירָצָה. הָעַמִּיד לָהֶם בָּלָעַם, מְדַבֵּר עִמּוֹ כָּל זְמַן שִׁירָצָה.

Midrash Tanhuma Balak 1

Just as God raised up kings, prophets, and sages for Israel, so did God raise them up from the nations of the world. ... God raised up Moshe for Israel, who spoke with God any time that he wanted, [and] God raised up Balaam for the nations of the world, in order that he might speak with God any time that he wanted.

According to the Midrash Tanhuma, Bilaam, like Moshe, can communicate with God at will.

It is a disconcerting comparison. How can it be that Bilaam, the prophet for hire who will be remembered as an enemy of the Jewish people, has the same prophetic powers as Moshe, chosen by God to redeem the Jewish people and receive the Torah? What does that say about Moshe—and, perhaps more disturbingly, what does it tell us about prophecy itself?

Perhaps it tells us that prophecy alone is not what makes for a great prophet. Moshe and Bilaam may have similar powers, but they differ in what is most important: how they respond to the world.

Like Moshe who sees the curious sight of a bush which burns but is not consumed, Bilaam encounters an unusual occurrence (his donkey's diversion) which indicates the presence of a divine messenger. However, unlike Moshe, Bilaam does not change his course in response to the unusual. Instead, Bilaam's donkey acts while he, the prophet, remains oblivious:

במדבר כב:כו-כז

וַיִּסֹּף מֵלֶאֱהָ ה' עֲבוּר וַיַּעֲמֵד בְּמָקוֹם צָר אֲשֶׁר אֵין דֶּרֶךְ לַנְּטוֹת יָמִין וּשְׂמֹאל: ²⁷וַתֵּרָא הָאֵתוֹן אֶת מֵלֶאֱהָ ה' וַתִּרְבֹּץ תַּחַת בִּלְעָם וַיַּחַר אָף בִּלְעָם וַיִּךְ אֶת הָאֵתוֹן בַּמֶּקֶל:

Bemidbar 22:26-27

²⁶Once more the angel of God moved forward and stationed himself on a spot so narrow that there was no room to swerve right or left. ²⁷When the donkey now **saw** the angel of God, she lay down under Bilaam; and Bilaam was furious and beat the donkey with his stick.

Bilaam, who cannot see the angel, is given another chance to detect the supernatural through his donkey's behavior. This is Bilaam's chance: Moshe at the *sneh* only saw the angel after he noticed something strange and decided to turn and examine it more carefully.

Bilaam, however, does not respond to the unusual with curiosity. Instead, he responds with anger, attempting to use violence to force the world to behave as it usually does.

Until this point in the narrative, Bilaam's character has been ambiguous. While he tells the messengers who try to hire him to curse the Jewish people that he cannot say anything other than what God tells him to say, when they approach him a second time, after God has already refused him once, he invites them to stay the night to see if God will change his mind. As readers, we are left uncertain: is Bilaam a faithful prophet who simply wants to check again with God, or a manipulative one, hoping that if approached again, God will change His mind?

Bilaam's reaction to the unexpected and the way it differs from Moshe's is the key to understanding his character. He is a man on a predetermined mission and will tolerate no diversions. He has no use for curiosity, nor, it seems, for compassion. As he relentlessly beats his donkey, trying to force her to obey his will, she begins to speak:

וַיִּפְתַּח ה' אֶת פִּי הָאֶתוֹן וַתֹּאמֶר לְבִלְעָם מָה עָשִׂיתִי לָךְ כִּי הִכִּיתָנִי זֶה שְׁלֹשׁ רָגְלִים: ... וַתֹּאמֶר הָאֶתוֹן אֶל בִּלְעָם הֲלוֹא אֲנִכִּי אֶתְנֶךָ אֲשֶׁר רִכַּבְתָּ עָלַי מֵעוֹדָךְ עַד הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה הֲהִסְכֵּן הִסְכַּנְתִּי לַעֲשׂוֹת לָךְ כֹּה וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא:

²⁸Then God opened the donkey's mouth, and she said to Balaam, "What have I done to you that you have beaten me these three times?"... ²⁹The donkey said to Bilaam, "Look, I am the donkey that you have been riding all along until this day! Have I been in the habit of doing this to you?"

This, more than missing the angel, is Bilaam's flaw: he does not wonder why the creature he has worked with for so long is suddenly behaving in a new way. Instead, he uses violence to assert his will, trying to get her to behave as he requires. Neither relationship nor surprise have a role within Bilaam's world. Bilaam, a prophet for hire, who uses sight as a tool to

impose what he wants on the world, to bless or to curse as he has already decided—if he can—has no room for the unexpected, for new data the world might give him. And because of that, he can only see what he already assumes is there.

This is why, although they are both prophets, it is Moshe who is chosen to give the Torah. When we approach Torah as Bilaam does, using tools to try to force it to obey our will, to yield the readings we have predetermined, we fail both Torah and ourselves. Torah demands, first, that we come to it with curiosity. It demands that we be willing to see the unexpected, to have our preconceived ideas upended. It is an overture from God that offers new possibilities to those who have the curiosity—and the courage—to notice the unexpected.

True Torah study begins when we say, “Let me turn aside and see.”

