



D'var Torah Parshat Balak - July 20, 2024

By Noah Klein

Shabbat Shalom, my name is Noah Klein, and today I will talk about Parshat Balak. The parsha tells a story between two men with very similar names (who I will inevitably mess up), Balak and Balaam.

First, I want to quickly recap the Parsha for anyone who may have been dozing off during the Torah reading. King Balak of the Moabites becomes jealous of the greatness of the nation of Israel. So he sends for the prophet Balaam to curse the Israelites. But before Balaam can do so, an angel of God comes down in front of Balaam's donkey starting all sorts of donkey shenanigans and stopping Balaam from cursing the Jews. Balaam realizes the greatness of Israel, and gives blessings, rather than curses, on the Jews. Four times, King Balak asks Balaam to curse the Jews, but each time, Balaam gives a blessing masquerading as a curse, cementing Israel's greatness.

This raises the question: How do the *intentions*, the Kavanah, behind the words of a blessing relate to its *outcomes*? In our parsha's case, the words could be seen as either curses or blessings, but Balak understands them as blessings because he understands the prophet Balaam's connection to God. The classic quote from the parsha “מִה־טֹבוֹ יִשְׂרָאֵל אֵלֶיךָ יַעֲקֹב מִשְׁכְּנֹתֶיךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל”, “How fair are your tents, O Jacob, Your dwellings, O Israel!” can have two distinct meanings. The one we recite daily is a complimentary blessing, but one could read it as a sarcastic curse: “Oh Jacob, your tents are SOOOO fair...” Only Balaam's intention differentiates the two.

So, I want to dive into the intentions of words throughout the Torah and try to figure out whether the objective of the speaker is more powerful than the meaning of the words themselves. We have already seen Balaam's intention triumph in this parsha, and now I want to tackle two more examples, starting with Breshit.

As God creates the world, He uses words to solidify some creations. The third verse of the Torah reads, “וַיֹּאמֶר יְיָ אֱלֹהִים יְהִי אֹר וַיְהִי אֹר”. “God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light”. These classic words, in and of themselves, are meaningless. But God's holy intention imbues them with the power of creation. Ibn Ezra explains that God's words--and lack of action--prove that light just appeared by itself, without any motion on God's part. Only God's Kavanah (intention) can overcome the words' literal meaning and create the universe, illuminating (literally) the importance of intention in the Torah.

Now, I want to look at a parsha we'll be reading in a few weeks, Mattot-Massei. The parsha opens by mentioning the importance of vows. Taking a vow to God is the most serious thing a Jew can do with his words, as evidenced by the strict rules of Nazarite life. But the parsha mentions that if a woman living in her father's household makes a vow, her father may later annul it. While this ruling certainly has a sexist undertone, I believe that a broader view of it can yield important information on the intentions behind words and vows. To me, the Torah seems to suggest that a child, still living in their parent's house, does not yet possess the ability to give the true Kavanah that a serious vow requires. Only with the parent's permission may the child's words regain their true intentions and become realized as a vow. So, this text seems to tell us that intentions must be meaningful and adult to construct truly powerful words. Only the Kavanah of an informed and aware person may turn words into something greater.

Looking at some of these cases, I see an overarching theme in the power of words and intentions: As Jews, we can create and define the world with our words. But, this power is not limitless. To allow our words to reach their highest level, we must imbue our strongest Kavanot into them. While praying, when blessing others, when making promises, we may not act half-heartedly. Only if we send our truest intentions into our most important message then our words will be unstoppable.

Shabbat Shalom!