

Balaam's Futile Curses

The Book of Numbers tells how the Israelites are threatened by a Moab king (Balak) who employs a seer (Balaam) to curse his enemy, Israel. Despite his best efforts, the powers of Balaam cannot bring about a curse on Israel. You can read the whole story over three chapters (Numbers 22-24). The account of Balaam's three futile attempts to curse Israel are found in 23:1-24:13.

Balak to Balaam: "I brought you to curse my enemies, but now you have done nothing but bless them" (Numbers 23:11).

Let's begin with a question posed by Abravanel, a 15th century Spanish-Jewish scholar. Since the Torah places no faith in sorcery or magic, Abravanel wonders why God should care about Balaam's futile attempt to curse Israel. So long as God continues to care for the Israelites, wouldn't it be better to just ignore the harmless actions of this pagan seer operating outside Israel's camp? Why does God bother to intervene in Balaam's attempt to curse Israel?

Think about this before reading on. How would you respond to Abravanel?

In reply to his own question, Abravanel notes that Balaam is not just 'any' seer but a famous one, highly esteemed by kings (see 22:6,17):

"Had Balaam cursed Israel, the surrounding nations would have plucked up courage and gone to do battle with Israel on the strength of his curses. But when they heard how God had turned them into blessings, they would then realize who was Master..."

According to Abravanel's view, God can ignore Balaam but God cannot ignore the reactions of others to Balaam. Therefore, God's intervention is protective of Israel and even produces a kind of 'psychological warfare' to ensure Israel's ongoing safety among the nations.

Other sages are of the view that God acts to protect not only Israel but all creatures. God stops Balaam because it is undesirable for anyone to be led into error by superstition.

Says the *Midrashei Torah* (a 14th century commentary): God intervenes "to preclude the inhabitants of the land from ascribing any retribution the Israelites might suffer for their sins to the effect of Balaam's curses." In other words, if Balaam were to curse Israel, and at the same time Israel was being chastised by God, the situation could be misread as being caused by Balaam. By intervening, God prevents desecration of the Divine name.

Does this last point remind you of other Torah passages? Recall how Moses pleads to God after the misconduct of the Spies (Num. 14), and after the Golden Calf (Exod. 32). There Moses urges God to consider carefully how divine actions might be misinterpreted by other nations, especially when God is chastising his own people for their sins. Now, faced with Balaam, perhaps God is remembering and heeding Moses' advice!

Reflection

Can the story of Balaam speak to those instances where an outsider tries to 'curse' you or a loved one? For instance, do you tell your child to 'just ignore' the taunts of a schoolyard bully? When should public secular activities be challenged for their insensitivity to a religious community? What wisdom does our Torah portion offer to such present-day dilemmas?

Bibliography: Leibowitz, *Studies in Bamidbar* (New York: Lambda). Scripture: NRSV.

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