

Parshat Balak – Numbers 22:2-25:9

In Parshat Balak we read that Balak, King of Moab, invites Balaam to curse the Children of Israel. Instead of cursing us Balaam praises us with the flattering words **"How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel."** To reach the vantage points where Balaam views us he rode to them on his she-ass. Why did Balak invite Balaam? Because Balaam's reputation was widely known among all the neighboring nations; in the words of Balak: **"I knew that what you blessed remained blessed and what you cursed remained cursed."** A curse from Balaam would have emboldened all the nations round about to attack the children of Israel, even though Balaam's curse would have been meaningless, considering the covenant God had made with us. A truly gifted man if ever there was one, and as great and lofty as his reputation may have been, Balaam could only see what he wanted to see, while his lowly she-ass saw more and she said so in so many words.

The learned sages had a problem with this Parsha. Animals were not known to them to have the ability to speak. To diminish the miracle, Samuel David Luzzatto in the 19th Century pointed out that the she-ass was not attributed with the power of speech (it isn't written that "the she-ass spoke [**va-dibrah**]", but rather that "the she-ass said [**va-tomar**]"), thus words did not come out of her mouth, but only sounds. Maimonides (the Rambam), in the 12th Century, explained the miracle away by having it occur during Balaam's dream and not in reality, thus avoiding a contradiction with the laws of nature.

However, in our days scientists are discovering that animals are capable of expressing their emotions to us through sign language and even with real words. Two examples are a gorilla named "Koko" at Stanford University in California, who can understand more than 2000 words in English and can express her needs and emotions succinctly and creatively through sign language. Another astounding example is "Alex", an African Grey Parrot at Brandeis University in Massachusetts, who, sadly, passed away a year ago. There is an article in the March 2008 issue of National Geographic about Alex that is very well worth reading. Alex was such a genius that he would lose patience with other talking parrots when they spoke unintelligibly, and would scold them with the words "talk clearly." Elephants, porpoises and whales are also known to have very complex languages, and even tiny honeybees are known to communicate the direction and distance of their resources to their hive-mates through a special dance.

The first sermon I ever gave was given at a Jewish summer camp in California when I was 19 years old. It was this very parsha, Parshat Balak. I was most impressed then, as I am today, with the issue of kindness to animals that we can learn from this parsha. Balaam was a lesser man for his treatment of his she-ass, after she saved him from harm at the hands of a sword-wielding angel that blocked their path. In our times there have been many instances where animals have saved their owners from attack by wild animals or from burning buildings. Dogs and monkeys are trained to aid the blind and the physically disabled. The IDF has unit of dogs and dog handlers who have received medals for valor on the field of battle. Armed forces, police forces and fire fighters have also enlisted the aid of other animals, such as

elephants, horses, mules, camels and even porpoises, in the service of mankind.

We are very aware that we share this world with other wondrous creatures but how are we instructed by Halacha to show kindness to them? Many among us refuse to eat meat, even though we are instructed specifically which animals are fit/clean (kosher) for eating and which are not fit. Noah was instructed by God to save seven males and seven females of all the fit/clean animals, but only one pair of all the other animals.

We are instructed by Halacha to cause the least amount of pain possible to the animals we are permitted to eat by slaughtering them quickly with one stroke of the keenest razor-sharp blade. Furthermore, Halacha forbids us **"to muzzle the ox while it treads the grain."** We are forbidden to **"slaughter a bull or a ram and its offspring on the same day."** One of the reasons for observing the Sabbatical Year every seventh year is to permit **"the cattle and the animals of the land"** to eat from the fallow fields. Halacha also forbids us to collect eggs or chicks while their mother is sitting on the nest. We must send away the mother before we collect them **"so that you will have a good and a long life."** In the Ten Commandments we are instructed to remember the Sabbath Day to keep it Holy, **"You shall do no manner of work, not you, nor your sons, nor your daughters, nor you men-servants, nor your maid-servants, nor your livestock, nor the foreigner who is within your gates."** Kindness to animals in the Ten Commandments! In fact, Halacha requires us to milk our livestock on the Sabbath and to provide food for them on the Sabbath so that they will not suffer distress on the day we enjoy our rest. Halacha also forbids us to partake of food before we have provided our animals with their food. Every Friday evening in our house, before we light the candles, before saying the blessings over the wine and bread, and only on that evening, I open a can of my cat's favorite cat food and put its contents in his bowl. I am convinced that my cat can count to seven because it seems to me that he can always tell when this special day has arrived.

So Balaam struck his she-ass and how did he feel afterwards? He felt humbled and embarrassed, and was even prepared to call off the entire mission, but the angel persuaded him to continue. From his vantage points above the camp, with the words of the she-ass still ringing in his ears and the lesson she had taught him still fresh in his mind, Balaam gazed out over the tents of Jacob, and his eyes beheld how we behaved, according to Halacha, toward our fellowman and toward our animals . . .

And he blessed us.

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