

The Pardes Center for Jewish Educators presents

An Interactive PARSHA EXPERIENCE



Parsha: Balak

Title: There Are at Least Two Sides to Every Story

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The Parsha at First Glance

Spotlight on the Parsha:

This week's *parsha* has a dramatic, complicated and fantastical story that will be fun to explore. Let's break it down...



Who are the key characters in our story?

- *Bnei Yisrael*: They are now wandering through the desert, and rumors about their victorious battles and amazing miracles are beginning to spread!
- *Moav*: A nation dwelling in the desert, not far from where Bnei Yisrael are camped, who fear Bnei Yisrael's power and size.
- *Balak*: The Moabite king.
- *Bilam*: A Moabite prophet who has the power to grant blessings and cast curses.
- *God*: Has the power to decide who gets blessed and who gets cursed.

What happens?

- Balak, fearing Bnei Yisrael's strength, sends messengers to summon Bilam to curse Bnei Yisrael so that Moav might have a chance to defeat them in war.
- Bilam insists that he can only say the words that God puts into his mouth, but despite this Balak still wants him to curse Bnei Yisrael.
- On his way to cursing the nation, Bilam's donkey stops suddenly in the path and refuses to move. Bilam is initially angry and confused until the donkey miraculously begins to talk to Bilam! Then he realizes that the donkey stopped because there is an angel of God in the path. Bilam promises to only say the words that God puts in his mouth and the angel allows him to continue.
- Three times Bilam tries to curse the nation and three times God puts blessings in his mouth instead. Each time Balak gets angrier and angrier that his plan is not working. Each time Bilam explains that he can only say the words of God.
- After the third attempt, Balak furiously gives up and dismisses Bilam in a huff and they each go their own way. Bnei Yisrael is never cursed.

Zooming In:

As in many stories in the Torah, there is a lot of drama and we know what the characters do, but we don't know exactly what they are thinking... let's try to explore this story from multiple perspectives to see if we can understand it more fully.



The Parsha Through Another Lens

Stepping into Someone Else's Shoes:

Instructions: You are going to imagine a few possibilities of what Bilam and Balak were thinking during this entire story. For each character, Balak and Bilam, there are two different possible perspectives with prompts below. Choose one of the perspectives (e.g., cruel and power-hungry king) and ‘step into the shoes’ of that character and perspective. Consider the prompts beneath it (and/or come up with your own prompts) and answer them in first person (“I knew that I needed to summon Bilam because I was...”).

Balak	
<i>Conscientious leader:</i> Balak is just looking out for his people. He is their leader and responsible for their safety.	<i>Cruel and power-hungry king:</i> Balak thinks that he can use Bilam’s powers to his advantage to ensure that he will defeat Bnei Yisrael in battle and become more powerful.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why do you want Bilam to curse Bnei Yisrael? • How do you want the Moabite people to think of you? • How do you feel each time Bilam recites a blessing instead of a curse for Bnei Yisrael? • Why do you refuse to give up and insist repeatedly that Bilam curse Bnei Yisrael? • What are you hoping will happen once Bnei Yisrael are cursed? 	
Bilam	
<i>Shrewdly hoping that Balak will be embarrassed:</i> Bilam knows that God is on the side of Bnei Yisrael (after all, look at all the miracles that God has already performed for them!) and will never	<i>Clueless fool just following orders:</i> Bilam has no idea whose side to be on or what the full consequences of his actions are. He just goes along with what he is told, repeating again and again that he can



<p>agree to curse them. He could have just told Balak that it will never work, but instead he wants Balak to look like a fool, trying again and again to curse the people unsuccessfully.</p>	<p>only do whatever God tells him. He doesn't care really whether Bnei Yisrael are cursed or blessed.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Are you afraid of Bnei Yisrael's power?• What are you thinking when you initially refuse to be summoned by Balak's servants the first time?• How do you feel after the blessings for Bnei Yisrael come out of your mouth instead of curses?• Do you think that Balak is wise for trying three times to curse Bnei Yisrael?• What, if anything, are you hoping will happen to Balak, Moav and Bnei Yisrael?	

Shabbat Shalom!