

Notes for Parsha Balak: Numbers 22:2 – 25:9

In this parsha we have the story of Balaam who was paid to place a curse on the Israelites by Balak, king of Moab. It backfires and Balaam ends up blessing the Israelites instead of cursing them. We also see Balak's anger. Finally, we see the Israelites practicing the Cult of the Baal of Peor.

This parsha opens with the king of Moab seeing everything that has occurred between the Israelites and the peoples of the other nations they encountered. Concerned that his kingdom would be next, Balak, the son of King Zippor of Moab, hires a pagan sorcerer, Balaam, to curse the Israelites. Balak chose Balaam because he knows that whoever Balaam blesses gets blessed and whoever Balaam curses gets cursed. Balaam has a proven track record as a sorcerer which Balak believes will work to his advantage.

When the Moabite elders come to Balaam with the request, he asks them to stay overnight and in the morning he will respond to them as the Lord will instruct him. God comes to Balaam to find out what the Moabites want. God instructs Balaam not to go with the Moabites for the people they wish to curse are blessed. In the morning, Balaam instructs the elders to return to their land because God will not allow him to curse the Israelites.

Balak send a second contingent of men to Balaam with the same request. Balaam gives in and goes with the Moabites which incenses God.

God sends an angel to stop Balaam, but only his donkey sees the angel and swerves from the road. Balaam beats the donkey. The angel next manifests in a narrow way before a vineyard between two fences. Again, only the donkey can see the angel and the donkey presses itself against the fence. Balaam beats the donkey for a second time. The angel manifests a third time in a place so narrow on the road that there is no way for the donkey to avoid the angel. For the third time, Balaam beats the donkey. God opens the donkey's mouth and she says, "What have I done for you to beat me like this?" Balaam's answer is that the donkey has made a mockery of him. The donkey points out that she has been carrying items for Balaam for a long time and asks if this is her usual habit. Balaam answers no. God opens Balaam's eyes and he sees the angel who asks why he is beating his donkey and that the donkey turned aside every time she saw the angel. Balaam admits his wrongdoing because he didn't realize the angel was there. Balaam asks if he should continue with the Moabites. The angel responds yes, but tells Balaam he can only say the words that the angel puts in his mouth.

Balaam meets Balak at Kiriath-huzoth and requests Balak to build seven altars and have ready seven bulls and seven rams for an offering to God. Balak follows these instructions and after the sacrifice, Balaam goes off. God appears and speaks to Balaam instructing him to return to Balak and tell him that he can't curse a people that God has blessed. Balak is enraged and demands to know why Balaam is blessing the people he wants cursed. He and Balaam go to Sedehzophim, on the summit of Pisgah, where Balak builds an additional seven altars and sacrifices an additional seven bulls and seven rams. Again, God appears to Balaam with the

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messed that the Israelites are blessed and no harm can come to them. For the third time, Balak and Balaam move on to the peak of Peor to build an additional seven altars and sacrifice an additional seven bulls and rams. This time when Balaam speaks he does so with the following words, "How fair are your tents, O Jacob, Your dwellings, O Israel!" (24:5) These words appear in our liturgy as the song, Ma To-vu.

Thoroughly enraged, Balak rails against Balaam mentioning that he had promised great reward to Balaam but instead of cursing the Israelites, Balaam has blessed them three times. Balaam says he can't accept anything from Balak but before he takes his leave, he gives a description of what Israel will do to the Moabites.

This parsha concludes with the men of Israel having intimate relations with Moabite women at Shittim. The Moabite women invited the men to sacrifice to the Moabite god, Baal of Peor, and the men did so. One of the men brought a Midianite woman to his companions at the Tent of Meeting. Phinehas the priest, Aaron's grandson saw this, left the area, returned with a sword and following the Israelite man into the chamber, slew both the man and the Moabite woman. This ends the plague that God had sent among the people in his anger.