Balak: Bamidbar (Numbers)

What's it all about?

Balak, the king of Moab, instructs the prophet Balaam to curse the Israelites. On his way to accomplish his task, Balaam's donkey sees an angel of God blocking their way, and berates its owner. Balaam tries to curse the Israelites three times, but each time he ends up blessing them instead. He also prophesies about the coming of the Moshiach. The Israelites are charmed by the Moabite women, and are moved by them to worship the idol Peor, causing a plague. When a high-ranking Israelite brings a Midianite princess into his tent, Pinchas kills them both and stops the plague.



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"The she-donkey saw the angel of God stationed on the road with his sword drawn in his hand."

Take a deeper dive

Don't get us wrong: Everybody loves talking animals. Just ask Walt Disney. But reading this week's parsha, we come across a troubling question: Why did God send an angel to appear before Balaam's donkey? After all, it would've been much simpler for this divine emissary to reveal itself directly to the sinful Balaam and warn him not to carry out his plan and curse the Jewish people. Why did the poor animal have to be dragged into this drama?

The great Ramban, or Nachmanides, asked himself the same question. Sometimes, he explained, righteous men, like the prophet Daniel, could "see" angels, even though angels are spiritual entities that never take corporeal form. And the donkey, sweet as she was, was no righteous prophet, which means she merely sensed great danger when she walked by the angel with his sword drawn.

It's at this point that the great—and poignant—miracle occurs, and the animal is granted the power to speak. "The point of this miracle," the Ramban teaches us, "was to show Balaam who it was who gave human beings the ability to speak, and inform him that He who can open the mouths of those who were previously dumb could also take the ability to speak away from those who previously possessed it. And that He can also make anyone say whatever He wishes for them to say."

God, in other words, delivers the message to Balaam in a subtle and poetic way, reminding him that only the Almighty controls anyone ability to speak and warning him to think carefully before delivering any messages he may not entirely mean or understand. We may have no talking donkeys following us around and giving us advice on a daily basis, but the parsha's admonition, to remember that speech is a God-given wonder and use it only for the good, is an insight we, too, would do well to always remember.

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