



## 5 ways

to recognize the Lord's voice

The discussion in today's *Light of Torah* focuses on authentic prophecy. In our daily lives, we are 'told' many things, by the media, by family, friends, mentors, priests, parishioners, politicians, community leaders, spiritual guides... Which messages bring us closer to God? How do we discern? At times it is clear, but not always. Some discussion starters follow.

**1. Love.** Is the message loving? Even if it is a challenging message, is it presented in a way that respects me and calls me to be the person God created me to be?

**2. Timing.** Is it well-timed? A message may be 'right' but the time/place may not be; e.g., the listener may not be in a position to receive it because of age, illness, maturity, life circumstances.

**3. Freedom.** Is it offered freely? Or is there a demanding, conditional tone to it (you **MUST**

believe this or else)? Does the messenger respect my freedom to make choices?

**4. Honest.** Is it honest, even courageously so, pointing out a truth that is difficult for me to confront? Or is it misplaced compassion, telling me only what I want to hear?

**5. More...** Continue this list by offering your own thoughts and experiences. How do you recognize a message that is of the Lord? E.g., what role does prayer play in the discernment process?



Light of Torah  
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# Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.



Numbers 22:2—25:9

*Balak*

## Why reflect on Torah?

During one of his pastoral visits, Pope John Paul II said:

*Where Catholics are concerned, it will continue to be an explicit and very important part of my mission to repeat and emphasize that our attitude to the Jewish religion should be one of the greatest respect, since the Catholic faith is rooted in the eternal truths contained in the Hebrew Scriptures, and in the irrevocable covenant made with Abraham. We too gratefully hold these same truths of our Jewish heritage, and look upon you as our brothers and sisters in the Lord.*

(Address to Jewish Community Leaders,  
Sydney, 26 Nov 1986)

Strong words like these, from a world leader and echoing the renewal unleashed by Vatican II, must find embodiment in the language and practice of grassroots communities. Even more than *saying* we have the 'greatest respect' for Judaism, we Christians need to be able to demonstrate it!

In this spirit, *Light of Torah* invites parishioners to deepen their faith and familiarity with the bible by taking seriously the interpretative traditions of the Jewish people.



## Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar  
of Torah readings:

### Numbers 22:2—25:9

On their way to the promised land the Israelites encounter one obstacle after another: hunger, thirst, rebellion, aggression from foreign tribes. Today's Torah portion tells the story of how the Israelites are threatened by a Moab king (Balak) who employs a seer (Balaam) to curse his enemy, Israel. It is a colorful story, full of intriguing questions and complete with a talking donkey! We will leave aside the donkey for now and focus on Balaam and his futile attempts to curse Israel (see chapters 23 and 24).

## Tasting Torah

Balaam: “*Rise, Balak, and hear; listen to me, O son of Zippor...*” (Numbers 23:18)

Jeremiah: “*Now the word of the Lord came to me saying...*” (Jeremiah 1:1)

Balak, king of Moab, engages Balaam to curse the Israelites. Yet each attempt by Balaam results in a blessing! An issue that has fascinated Jewish sages since antiquity is the authenticity of Balaam, the seer. Was Balaam God's chosen prophet, or just a sorcerer? Why do you think he was suspect in the sages' eyes?

To begin with, let's compare Balaam's oracles to the words of the Hebrew prophets. Jeremiah is quoted above. Read further into Jeremiah chapter 1. Read too, the words of Ezekiel (1:3) and Hosea (1:1). What do you notice?

## Touching Torah

Like the sages, you probably note an important contrast. Whereas the Hebrew prophets consistently acknowledge divine authority (*'Thus says the Lord'*) Balaam announces *himself* and his own powers. Says Ramban,<sup>1</sup> Balaam appears to run after prophecy, building seven sacrificial altars in an attempt to 'force' divine power from heaven, to shape the divine will for mortal purposes. By contrast, the Hebrew prophets don't seek the job of prophet; rather they are sought out by God, and some, out of humility, need to be coaxed into the role. Balaam is not filled with prophecy, but rather is full of himself! Do you agree with this appraisal? Why or why not?

## Depthing Torah

Despite their criticisms, the sages couldn't ignore the fact that Balaam's oracles work for the good of Israel. In fact, one of his phrases has found its way into contemporary Jewish prayer books: *'How goodly are your tents O Jacob, your dwelling places O Israel'* (Numbers 24:5).

And how are we to interpret 24:2 (*'Then the spirit of God came upon him'*) in Balaam's third oracle? Rashbam holds that a development has taken place, taking note of 24:1 which tells us that at this point Balaam stopped seeking omens 'but set his face towards the wilderness,' a scene that suggests a new openness and humility before God. Hirsch is more explicit, saying that Balaam comes to the realization that he cannot control God through sorcery. Thus his third blessing takes on a whole new quality, no longer awkwardly accomplished but freely flowing on the breath of unrestrained spirit-filled prophecy.

Are you convinced? Not all the sages are! Treasure the complex issues that emerge in this fascinating debate. How do they confirm and/or challenge your well-worn beliefs?

## Doing Torah

Reflect on your faith journey and recall:

- a time when you attempted to 'control' God;
- a turning point when you began to trust God more deeply;
- a time when you had to discern between a true and false 'prophecy'/message.

In what way does the story of Balaam speak to you?



## Faith and Life

One evening I was watching a television interview with a famous popstar in which she said, "I am my own work of art."

The very next day I was at Mass when a line from the second reading, St Paul's letter to the Ephesians, jumped out at me. It read: "We are God's work of art" (2:10, JB).

1. The sages/commentators named here: Ramban (13th c), Rashbam (12th c), Hirsch (19th c), cited in Leibowitz, 282-289.

Bibliography: Eskenazi & Weiss, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* (NY, 2008); Leibowitz, *Studies in Bamidbar* (NY: Lambda). Scripture: *NRSV*.