

5 ways

to turn a curse into a blessing

Mistakes, troubles, conflicts, misunderstandings... When such things occur in our lives we may at times feel 'cursed' indeed. The story of Balaam reminds us that the Lord is faithful and can transform curses into blessings. How can we recognize and work with God in these transformative moments in our lives? Five thoughts follow:

1. Choose.

Being mistreated by another can heighten my awareness that my values are different (and preferable!) to those of my oppressor. I can renew my choice for important values.

2. Dialogue.

A conflict brewing can be an opportunity to invite opposing parties to the dialogue table. Perhaps this moment will allow for new understandings about the hopes, fears and predicaments of the 'other'.

3. Teach.

A painful moment may be a teachable moment; a chance to talk with my children about core truths and vital principles at stake.

4. Pray.

There is nothing like a crisis to stimulate my prayer life and to call upon the mercy of God.

5. Grow.

During periods of crisis, loss, failure, absence, we often see people step up to new roles and responsibilities. Such growth is a blessing.

Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.

Why reflect on Torah?

How often does scripture leave us feeling a little perplexed? Perhaps a biblical character says or does something that makes no sense to us, or appears contradictory, or leaves us with a dilemma seeking resolution.

We need not be discouraged by such 'irritations' in the text. After all, ancient writings—arising from a time, place and culture far removed from our own—require patient effort and study. Scholars and faith communities are devoted to this ongoing process of reflection. To this task of biblical reflection, traditional Jewish approaches forged over millennia offer an irreplaceable contribution. *Light of Torah* seeks to make known this interpretative tradition to grassroots church audiences.

A strength of traditional Jewish approaches to Torah (bible) is that they encourage us to *welcome* the 'irritations' in the text. For, in the eyes of the sages, each seemingly odd, puzzling or contradictory aspect is not an *obstacle* to comprehension but an *invitation* to deep wisdom precisely because it calls upon our capacity to ponder, probe, engage with God's Word. Join us as we explore Torah with the help of the sages.



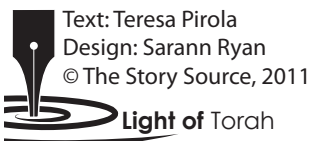
Issue #41

9 July 2011

Numbers 22:2—25:9

Balak

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Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar
of Torah readings:

Numbers 22:2—25:9

In today's Torah portion the Israelites are threatened by a Moab king (Balak) who employs a seer (Balaam) to curse his enemy, Israel. Despite his best efforts, the powers of Balaam cannot bring about a curse on Israel. You can read the whole story over three chapters (Numbers 22-24). The account of Balaam's three futile attempts to curse Israel are found in 23:1-24:13.

Tasting Torah

Balak to Balaam: *"I brought you to curse my enemies, but now you have done nothing but bless them"* (Num. 23:11).

Let's begin with a question posed by Abravanel, a 15th century Spanish-Jewish scholar. Since the Torah places no faith in sorcery or magic, Abravanel wonders why God should care about Balaam's futile attempt to curse Israel. So long as God continues to care for the Israelites, wouldn't it be better to just ignore the harmless actions of this pagan seer operating outside Israel's camp? Why does God bother to intervene in Balaam's attempt to curse Israel?

Discuss this with your *havrutah* partner. How would you respond to Abravanel?

Touching Torah

In reply to his own question, Abravanel notes that Balaam is not just 'any' seer but a famous one, highly esteemed by kings (see 22:6,17).

"Had Balaam cursed Israel, the surrounding nations would have plucked up courage and gone to do battle with Israel on the strength of his curses. But when they heard how God had turned them into blessings, they would then realize who was Master..."

According to Abravanel's view, God can ignore Balaam but God cannot ignore the reactions of *others* to Balaam. So God's intervention is protective of Israel and even produces a kind of 'psychological warfare' to ensure Israel's ongoing safety among the nations.

Depthing Torah

Other sages are of the view that God acts to protect not only Israel but all creatures. God stops Balaam because it is undesirable for *anyone* to be led into error by superstition.

Says *Midrashei Torah* (a 14th century commentary): God intervenes *"to preclude the inhabitants of the land from ascribing any retribution the Israelites might suffer for their sins to the effect of Balaam's curses."* In other words, if Balaam were to curse Israel, and at the same time Israel was being chastized by God, the situation could be misread as being caused by Balaam. By intervening, God prevents desecration of the Divine name.

Does this last point remind you of other Torah passages? Recall how Moses pleads to God after the misconduct of the Spies (Num. 14), and after the Golden Calf (Exod. 32). There Moses urges God to consider carefully how divine actions might be misinterpreted by other nations, especially when God is chastizing his own people for their sins. Now, faced with Balaam, perhaps God is remembering and heeding Moses' advice!

Doing Torah

We began this discussion by taking up an 'irritation' in the text noticed by Abravanel. What other 'irritations' (puzzling words, phrases, apparent contradictions, repetitions) caught your attention? Take up one or more and discuss possible interpretations in *havrutah* (with a friend or small group).



Faith & life

Can the story of Balaam speak to those instances where an outsider tries to 'curse' you or a loved one? For instance, do you tell your child to 'just ignore' the taunts of a schoolyard bully? When should public secular activities be challenged for their insensitivity to a religious community? What wisdom does our Torah portion offer to such present day dilemmas?

Sources: Leibowitz, *Studies in Bamidbar* (Jerusalem, 1994).
Scripture: NRSV.