



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Balak 5770

By Rachel Farbiarz

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This week's *parshah* opens in a panic. Marking with dread the refugee nation swelling along his border, Balak, king of Moab, seeks counsel from the elders of Midian. The Midianites, Rashi reminds us, have privileged information about Israel's unlikely success. Moses had fled to Midian after killing an Egyptian; his wife was a Midianite and he was devoted to her father Yitro, Midian's high priest. "The leader of [the Israelites] was raised in Midian," Balak mused. "Let us ask [the Midianites] what his character is."¹

Midian has its answer at the ready, divulging that Moses's "strength is solely in his mouth." Thus does Balak decide to retain the prophet-for-hire Balaam to curse Israel and arrest its advance, reasoning: "We too will come against them with a man whose strength is in his mouth."²

The idea of these two archetypal prophets—one righteous and humble, one wicked and venal—is satisfying in its oppositional balance. But is it not based on a fallacy? Moses's strength—"in his mouth"? Had not Moses protested his selection as leader, bemoaning his "heavy-mouthed and heavy-tongued" condition? Was this not the man who, ventriloquist-like, spoke through his brother because he was "uncircumcised of lips?"³

Surely, though, the Midianites knew of what they spoke. Midian observed Moses before he grew accustomed to speaking for God, threatening a Pharaoh and commanding thousands. What then is this "strength" of mouth that can also accommodate Moses's debilitating difficulty with speech?

An answer, perhaps, lies in a quality shared by both Balaam and Moses. Both men possess the near compulsion to speak truth—painful, scary, threatening truth—in the face of power. The truths they speak are unruly, irrepressible and wild: belly truths, retched—not birthed—into the world of language.

This quality is plainly on display in our *parshah*. Three times Balaam is sent to curse Israel and three times he speaks his truth, blessing the people instead, before King Balak and his high officers. The danger Balaam thus courts is evident in the king's furious last words to the prophet: "Now, flee to your place!"⁴ Moses's words are likewise marked. He spoke as he saw the truth: to his seething people; to the awesome Pharaoh; and especially to God.

Perhaps, then, this is what it means to be a prophet: To call out a feral truth in the face of power, fear and danger. To refuse to bite one's tongue or swallow the rising bile. To be unconstitutionally incapable of just letting it be.

¹ Numbers 22:2-4; Rashi on Numbers 22:4.

² *Ibid.*

³ Exodus 4:10; 6:12.

⁴ Numbers 24:11.

This was the sort of prophecy that poured forth from Archbishop Óscar Romero of El Salvador, murdered thirty years ago this past March. An initially apolitical and bookish priest, Romero could not abide the brutality he witnessed leveled at the *campesinos*⁵ by the Salvadoran military.⁶

So Romero spoke as he saw it. Flouting El Salvador's draconian restrictions on the media, Romero fashioned his Sunday morning homily into the country's "oral newspaper." Broadcast over the archdiocese radio station—whose antennae were bombed ten times between 1977 and 1980—Romero's sermons detailed the many instances of torture, disappearance, killing and assault that had been perpetrated each week prior.⁷

On Sunday, March 24, 1980, after cataloguing the week's atrocities, Romero pleaded with the military "in the name of God" to end its terror. That evening, as he celebrated Mass, Romero was assassinated. His death "became a milestone. . . presaging the all out war" that would last twelve years and claim more than 75,000 lives.⁸

Journalist Alma Guillermoprieto recently recalled Romero's role in those "dreadful years." She writes of "the distinct recollection that he did not say anything particularly scintillating or inspirational or visionary[.]" Romero's plain, ineloquent words did not bring justice, but they ushered in its companion: The archbishop's listing of names and cataloguing of atrocities insisted on truth, on fact, on the opposite of silence. For this reason, did "hundreds of ragged, persecuted campesinos" gather weekly to hear Romero, "listen[ing] in gratitude, their existence and suffering recognized at last."⁹

Perhaps, then, this is what it means to be, as Moses, "uncircumcised of lips." To persist incorrigibly and callously. To deny cynicism, jadedness, inexperience, fear or power their propensity to muffle the truth. To remain maddeningly untutored in the comfortable, diplomatic silences of an unjust world. Their mouths both uncut and unsutured: These are our prophets.



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⁵ Small-scale farmers.

⁶ Dickson, J. "Oscar Romero of El Salvador." *The Encyclopedia of Informal Education*, 2005. http://www.infed.org/thinkers/oscar_romero.htm.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ U.N. *Report of the Commission on the Truth for El Salvador*, 1993. <http://www.usip.org/resources/truth-commission-el-salvador>.

⁹ Guillermoprieto, Alma. "Death Comes for the Archbishop." *The New York Review of Books*, p. 41-42, 27 May 2010.

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