



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Chukat-Balak 5769

By Adina Gerver

July 4, 2009

The strange story of Bilam, his talking donkey and the blessings he bestowed on Israel is recounted in *Parshat Balak*.¹

After the Israelites successfully defended themselves against the attacking Amorites, the Moabite king, Balak, asked Bilam to curse the Israelites in order to weaken them. Following several rounds of negotiations with Balak's representatives and with God, Bilam accepted Balak's charge on the condition that he would only say what God told him to. On the journey, Bilam's donkey suddenly swerved off the road, pressed Bilam's foot against a wall alongside the path, and finally, simply sat down in the middle of the road. After each incident, Bilam beat the donkey, not seeing the angel of God that had blocked the donkey's path. After the third beating, God "opened the donkey's mouth" and she asked Bilam: "What have I done to you that you have beaten me these three times?" God then revealed the angel to Bilam, and the angel reprimanded Bilam, who admitted his mistake. Bilam then continued on towards Moab, where, much to Balak's chagrin, he repeatedly blessed the Israelites instead of cursing them.

Why the talking donkey?² The story would not have been substantially different without it, and, at first read, it is difficult to see what it adds. This anomalous talking donkey did not escape Jewish commentators. Midrash Numbers Rabbah explains that God

closed the mouth of the animal [all animals], for if she spoke, they [people] could not subject her and stand over her. For this [donkey] was the stupidest of creatures and this [Bilam] was the wisest of the wise, and as soon as she spoke he could not stand before her.³

Subjugation, in the rabbinic view, is made possible merely by the inability to speak. The donkey's sudden, surprising voice in this story flips the power dynamic, rendering Bilam powerless in the face of her newfound authority.

Speech is a profound expression of power—and the denial of it a crippling means of oppression—around the world. Many authoritarian governments impose strict censorship of media, preventing exposure of corruption and human rights abuses to the public. In Somalia, journalists are not permitted to interview government officials and are heavily censored. Two journalists there were recently severely beaten by militiamen.⁴ Even a government's written guarantee of protection for free speech is no guarantee of freedom of expression. In Pakistan, whose 1973 constitution guarantees freedom of speech and expression, thirteen journalists were killed and forty more were abducted or arrested in 2008, while media that did not self-censor suffered retributive attacks.⁵ In addition to silencing the media, repressive regimes also silence the voices of dissidents in blatant and sometimes violent ways.

¹ Numbers 21:21-24:25.

² Talking animals are rare in the Torah; the only other one is the talking serpent in the Garden of Eden. See G. Savran, "Beastly Speech: Intertextuality, Bilam's Donkey and the Garden of Eden." *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, 64.1. December 1994. pp. 33-55.

³ Numbers Rabbah, 20:14.

⁴ International Freedom of Expression Exchange. http://www.ifex.org/somalia/2009/06/12/journalists_beaten/.

⁵ See Article 19 of Pakistan's constitution: http://www.pakistanconstitution-law.com/const_results.asp?artid=19&title=Freedom%20of%20speech,%20etc, 2008 Human Rights Report: Pakistan. US Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2008/sca/119139.htm>. Also see website of Pakistani NGO Internews: <http://www.internews.org.pk/>.

Even in democracies, the voices of ethnic minorities, sexual minorities, poor people and numerous other marginalized populations are vastly underrepresented in many societies. This silence translates into a lack of power that often leads to lack of access to basic social services and, at times, even the violation of human rights. Many NGOs work with such populations to help them make their voices heard.

CACTUS (“Center for Working Together for Community Support”), an AJWS grantee, works with rural and indigenous communities in the Mixteca region in Oaxaca, Mexico. In 2006, the community experienced violent police crackdowns against protestors who were rallying for indigenous rights and an end to government corruption. Censorship and monitoring of NGOs’ activities made the community feel powerless. In response, CACTUS began to empower local people to speak out against injustice. In one of its projects, it facilitates a radio station, Radio Rabiosa (“Rabid Radio”), which is run entirely by teenagers. The teens use Radio Rabiosa to share music and culture, as well as information about social protest movements. Bety Cariño, CACTUS’s executive director, expressed the importance of giving voice to these teenagers: “The radio programs are the voices of the community,” she says. “We’ve never been invited to speak, never had the opportunity to articulate who we are. This breaks the silence.”⁶

Proverbs teaches us that speech is a gift given freely by God: “A person may arrange his thoughts, but his ability to express them in language comes from the Lord.”⁷ Let us work to ensure that the voices of the poor and marginalized do not remain silenced, and that the power of speech, a gift from God, becomes fully accessible as a tool for blessing and justice for everyone.



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⁶ Hahn, Sara. “Empowerment on the Air.” *AJWS Reports: Fall 2008*, p. 6.

http://www.ajws.org/who_we_are/publications/ajws_reports/ajws_reports_fall_2008.pdf; “Violations Against Freedoms of Inquiry and Expression in Oaxaca de Juarez: Report by the Fact-Finding Delegation of the Latin American Studies Association.” 1 August 2007.

<http://www.uoregon.edu/~apadilla/rights/LASA.pdf>.

⁷ Proverbs 16:1.

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The writers of the Dvar Tzedek are the recipients of the Lisa Goldberg Memorial Fellowship. As President of the Charles S. Revson Foundation and as a mother, wife, colleague and friend, Lisa Goldberg had a profound commitment to social justice and the Jewish community. She died tragically at the age of 54. Lisa was a good friend and generous supporter of AJWS, and we hope that, through these words of tzedek, we can contribute to her legacy.

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