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## Parshat Balak: On Foresight

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In last week's parsha, Moshe suffered from an inability to speak. Rather than talk to the rock, as God had instructed, he hit the rock. In this week's parsha, *daber*, the root for speaking, is repeated throughout the parsha. However, things that shouldn't speak do (the donkey), and the speech that is delivered (Balaam's curses/blessings) is misguided.

At this point in the Torah, the Jewish people are already a nation who understand the power of words. The Midrash Tanchuma Balak 3 explains that when the King of Moav wanted to overcome the Jewish people in battle, they went to the elders to try to discover their secret weapon. The Midianites reported:

His (*B'nei Yisrael*) strength is solely in his mouth  
(quoted in Rashi Bamidbar 22:4).

אין כחו אלא בפיו

*B'nai Yisrael's* success came by talking and praying to God. And so, the Moabites responded: "we too shall come against them with a man who has the power in his mouth (ibid.)" This is how Balaam came to be the spokesperson for the Midianites. But Balaam's power of speech had limitations. At the beginning of the narrative, there seems to be an intrinsic critique of Balaam. In a subversion of the natural order, Balaam's donkey not only spoke, but was also able to see the Angel of God blocking their way. It was not until God opened Balaam's eyes did he truly realize that words are not enough; his mission must be to have sight as well. And when one is truly able to see, he has insight to speak the words of God and not his own. From that moment on, Balaam's speech, and ultimately his blessings, are preceded by the ability to see. Balak takes Balaam to Bamoth-baal where he raises his eyes, and the Torah says:

from there he **saw** part of the people  
(Bamidbar 22:41).

וַיֵּרָא מִשָּׁם קִצְהָ הָעָם (בדמבר כב:מא)

And, moved by what he saw, Balaam utters his first blessing. Then Balak takes Balaam to a second location to **see** the people (23:13), and a third time, he takes him to the peak of Peor, and this time, the Torah says:

Balaam **saw** that it pleased the Lord to bless Israel... Balaam **raised his eyes and saw** Israel dwelling according to its tribes, and the spirit of God rested upon him (Bamidbar 24:1-2).

וַיֵּרָא בְלָעָם כִּי טוֹב בְּעֵינָי יי לְבַרְךְ אֶת  
יִשְׂרָאֵל... וַיִּשָּׂא בְלָעָם אֶת עֵינָיו וַיֵּרָא אֶת  
יִשְׂרָאֵל שֹׁכֵן לְשִׁבְטָיו וְתָהִי עָלָיו רוּחַ  
אֱלֹקִים: (במדבר כד: א-ב)



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From then on the word *vayer* is repeated over and over again. Indeed Balaam becomes the quintessential person who can see. He is called *ha'gever sh'tum ha'ayin*, the man with the open eye (24:15).

You see, one cannot speak without the profound ability of sight and foresight. This is ultimately what differentiated Moshe from Balaam. Moshe, known for his troubles with speaking and stuttering, was nevertheless able to be the mouthpiece of *B'nei Yisrael* because he was able to see God *panim el panim* (face to face) (Shemoth 33:11). Moshe truly saw God. Balaam, however, had to have his eyes opened by God, had to learn to really see the people, and only then was he able to bless *B'nei Yisrael*.

Speaking, when we don't see the value of another person can, indeed, be destructive. Balaam models for us that intended curses can be transformed into *brachot* when we are able to open our eyes, look into another's face, and truly see the light that emanates from within.



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