

SPEAK UP AND SPEAK OUT

A commentary on *Parashat Balak*

By Gideon Leibowitz

The compelling, and somewhat mystifying, tale of Balaam and his donkey in *Parashat Balak*, is one of the more striking portions within the Torah, revealing a powerful insight into how Jewish people tackle issues in the wider world.

The story goes that Balak, the Moabite King, summoned the prophet Balaam to curse the Israelites who had just defeated the Amorites in battle. Although reluctant to carry out this task, Balaam agreed, but while on the journey, his donkey came to a complete standstill. Angry at its refusal to move, Balaam beat his donkey until G-d “*opened the donkey’s mouth*”. Channelling the voice of G-d, the donkey told Balaam not to curse the Israelites but instead to bless them. And so it goes that when Balaam reached the people of Israel he delivered the pivotal and everlasting blessing on the Israelites - “*Mah Tovu Ohalecha Ya’akov (How good are your tents, O Jacob)*”.

This *Parasha* is the only portion of the Torah in which there is a talking animal, something that has occupied Rabbis and scholars for generations. However, of the many potential readings of this Parashat, for me, the most pertinent is not the fantastical nature of the donkey, nor the beauty of the blessing Balaam bestows upon the Israelites, but the fact that in a time of crisis, G-d granted the donkey one of the most powerful gifts possible: the ability to talk.

Without the capacity to speak, the donkey starts off as a subservient and seemingly insignificant presence - particularly in comparison with the authoritative characters of a King and a prophet. However, the donkey’s unexpected voice decisively flips the power dynamic between itself and Balaam and the profound impact of speech, even in the face of the brutality of

Balaam’s beating, enables the donkey to persuade the prophet to bless the Israelites instead of cursing them.

The power of speech has always been a central feature of the Torah. In the morning liturgy of *P’Sukei D’zimrah*, we say “*Blessed is the One who spoke and the world came to be...*”, implying that G-d “spoke” the Universe into existence. Similarly, the oral tradition of songs, sermons and stories in Judaism has always been an essential part of our culture and shared history.

And this emphasis placed on the power of speech is a timely reminder of the Jewish community’s actions within the wider world. Unlike the donkey at the beginning of the *Parasha*, we are fortunate enough to have the ability to speak up and speak out, both as individuals and as a community.

Today, human rights abuses

exist in all corners of the world. In Syria, 11 million people have been displaced by years of civil war, in Chechnya the LGBT community face persecution and violence, and there are more people in slavery today than at any point in human history.

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As a community, we can always do more. Silence and passivity cannot be an option when we have the choice of whether to speak out or not. Silence often shows indifference and as the great Elie Wiesel said, “Indifference elicits no response. Indifference is not a response. Indifference is not a beginning; it is an end.”

There are many people around the world who do not have the power to speak out for themselves. Therefore, just like Balaam’s donkey, who used his voice in such a meaningful way, when we have the privilege of being able to speak, for those of us who do have a voice, it is our duty that we make ourselves heard.