

## **Road to Redemption: Moses Imagines Bilaam as his Alter-Ego**

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Many people have their alter egos. When I was growing up, boys wanted to be Superman, Batman, Spiderman. My superhero was a famous comedian who lived in my imagination. He did stand up. He directed movies. He starred in movies. He was awarded the King of Comedy by the World Society of Comedy in 1979. My alter ego lived out my fantasies playing to audiences all over the world; they would laugh and cheer and chant his name.

Our midrash (BT Baba Batra 33b) teaches us that Moses wrote three books on his own: Job, Deuteronomy, and the Story of Bilaam contained in this week's sedra Parshat Balak. Balak is the first parasha of the Moses saga that does not feature Moses and the Israelites as the main characters of the story. Indeed, the Israelites are in the backdrop of the story down in the mountainous valley in the scope of King Balak of Moab. The main character is King Balak, a foreign leader, and his hired gun the prophet Bilaam. Dr. Avivah Zornberg suggests that the parasha is set up this way to juxtapose Bilaam and Moshe. If we imagine that Moses is writing the story, perhaps he is writing about his alter ego, a doddering prophet, self-confident, yet blundering along the way.

Let's go farther and suggest that the story of Bilaam is inserted into the Torah soon after Moses gets angry and hits the rock jeopardizing his relationship with God and bringing down the divine punishment of being barred from entering the land. I imagine that Moses being the humble man he is thought to be, used the time afterwards for reflection, introspection and may have written the story of Bilaam as a story about himself.

Who is this Bilaam who Moses subconsciously projects himself onto? By now, Israel has had many confrontations with nations that border their path to the Promised Land. Edom refused to feed them, Ammon tried to starve them to death, the Amorites went to war against them, Moab tried to resist them. The new King of Moab, Balak, uses the nuclear option. Why not get a prophet who is equal to Moses in knowing God's powers to destroy the Jewish people using heavenly powers? Pharaoh, as you may remember, tried to best Moses with his own gifted magicians.

Moses imagines what it might be like to be such a prophet – a prophet of Superman’s “bizarro” world – one who is the dark side of everything Moses represents. Early evidence shows us, in fact, that the two are alike in several ways. Both Moses and Bilaam are reluctant to heed the call the leadership. Moses makes God angry by at first refusing to lead the people out of Egypt. Bilaam shows the same reluctance until the amount of bribe money is too much for Bilaam’s ego to turn away. Both are endowed with the mystical ability to tap the force field of God’s wrathful or merciful attributes. Moses is able to turn God’s anger against the people into blessing. Bilaam boasts that he can discern the moment of God’s anger and use it through a spell to blot out the Jewish people.

Perhaps the most interesting similarity, if we want to see Bilaam as Moses’ alter-ego is in the area of circumcision. Much is made of Moses’ reluctance to circumcise his own son on the way back to Egypt from Midian with his wife Zipporah. In this bizarre story, an avenging angel pursues Moses for not circumcising his son. It has been suggested his refusal is an obvious reference to Pharaoh’s refusal to let the people go even at the cost of his own son’s life during the plague against the first born. Moses, as a prince of Egypt, may think that this ultimate plague refers to himself; it is he who will put his own son at risk.

Zipporah saves her husband and her son by circumcising the son herself. Avivah Zornberg points out that following this episode, Moses describes himself as a man of “uncircumcised lips” (Exodus 6:12). Moses struggles in this locked-in state of being able to communicate the word. So too Bilaam, who describes himself as “the fallen man with eyes open” (Num 24:4). Rashi comments that the fallen position indicates that Bilaam’s talents thrive by night, “when God was revealed to him, he had no strength to stand on his legs; he fell forward onto his face because he was uncircumcised and unfit to stand upright in God’s presence.” A similar comment is made about Abraham, before he is circumcised: Rashi reads: “Abraham fell down out of awe of God’s presence ; until he circumcised himself, he had no strength to stand upright before the Holy Spirit...” Is he writing about himself when he describes the alter-ego Bilaam, “a fallen man with eyes open?”

Circumcision is the first mitzvah performed on a boy to remove the covering of the body from its Maker. The purpose of being out in this world is to uncover our souls before God, to be transparent, honest, truthful, open – to remove the curtain of ego that separates ourselves from Being which is the

Reality of God. In circumcision (brit milah), we unveil the organ that will transmit life: is the symbolic gesture for attaining this future spiritual state.

Moses, if we imagine him to be the author of this Bilaam story, reflects his own struggle with his ego after hitting the rock by inventing a “fallen” prophet whose vision is not wide enough to understand himself beyond the separate self. By acting on his own ego and using the “magical” staff to hit the rock, the leader has distracted the community from their unity with God’s power. Moses in his anger has dramatically rebelled against God’s unity— the moment of consciousness where God is one.

Moses struck the rock. He tells a story about a prophet striking his ass. And in his anger, Bilaam is blind to what his ass sees: the angel that standing before him. He no longer has a unified vision of the *really* real. Bilaam is humiliated by his ass just as Moses is undone by the inert rock. God said there that “you did not sanctify me in presence of the people.” Here the donkey leads Bilaam to a narrow space in the path where he cannot turn right or left; he crouches under Bilaam and chastises verbally for striking him three times. Could Moses be referring to himself? The one who let his anger separate himself from God’s presence?

One interpreter says that the words Bilaam uses to describe himself as a “Gever Shtum Ayin” (Numbers 24:4) means that Bilaam was blind in one eye. He lacks the critical eye – the inner eye—the eye of his own humility. Does Moses struggle with his own failure to disengage his own ego? In the episode of the rock, did he adopt what the Yom Kippur liturgy describes as *aynaim ramot*, the one with the haughty eyes who sees what he wants to see and does whatever he wants to do without prior reflection on the consequences of his behavior? Are we swimming in Moses’ remorseful mind as he must take the Israelites three more years until they reach the Promised Land? Does he have more spiritual work to do until his eyes are truly open? We take comfort in the fact that at the end of his life Moses does attain this spiritual maturity for he is described at the end as *lo kata aino*, one whose eyes were not dim (Deut. 34:7), as one who could see clearly from the top of Mount Nebo across the land to the shores of the Mediterranean!

To defeat his alter ego, Moses must struggle as we all do. Bilaam is too proud to admit defeat. All his actions point to a cover up of who he really is. Perhaps Rashi is right about him being an *aral*, uncircumcised, covered

over, hiding who he really is. Moses has some of this trait in him when he describes himself being of uncircumcised lips. He too struggles with the truth. People who sin have something to hide. All corruption, whether it begins with a single individual or a group of powerful people, partake in a cover up so that information will not get out to the masses. Others are kept in a state of ignorance and so their power and reputation grows. The more corruption at stake the more plumbers must be employed to seal the leaks. Removal of the foreskin is the first removal of cover up, the way to be transparent before God. “Walk before Me and become whole!” says God to Abraham (Genesis 17:2). In writing this parable, Moses reflects on what might go wrong with his egotistical self. It should urge us to reflect on our lives and take the opportunity to re-write our own narratives by struggling with the cover ups and deceptions of our own identities, closedness, and arrogance. To purify the soul and awaken it through humility. At the end of our lives, we should pray to be like Moses who can truly see with *lot kata aino*—eyes that are not undimmed, eyes filled with clarity.

Amen.

(Thanks to Avivah Zornberg for her inspiration from her new book “Bewilderments”)