

“The power of false oratory--this problem is as old as the Torah.”

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Sometimes I hate the internet. Don't get me wrong – the internet is a tremendous tool – it is a great source of information, communication and resources that I use every day. What I hate about the internet is how easy it is to be influenced by it, how easily false information spreads and how easily it influences what people believe, mostly for the worst. My generation was raised on the premise that news was vetted and checked and while it could have a slant it was based on “truth.” We know now that there are newspapers, television stations and other “news” sources that are more interested in creating their own truth than reporting anything factual. As I watch the January 6th hearings unfold I am constantly amazed at what people are led to believe and what they are willing to go along with. There are too many PT Barnums in this world that are not just looking to entertain us..... How in modern America does this happen? How are people so easily convinced of things that are simply not true?

One only needs to look to our Torah portion this week to see that this has been part of human nature throughout the ages. The Torah portion is Balak and it is a story that is on one level very funny and on another very scary. There are a lot of strange things in this story (even for the Torah) including a non-Jewish prophet, a Moabite King and a female talking donkey. The Jews are completely in the background during this Torah portion. Balak, a Moabite king who both hates and fears the Israelites calls upon a pagan prophet, Balaam to curse the Israelites. Balaam, strangely enough, believes in Adonai, our God, and consults with God about this request. The first time, God tells him “no.” And he listens to God and tells Balak's messengers that he cannot come and curse the Israelites. Balak, not liking this answer, sends messengers to ask again.

This time, God tells Balaam that he can go but he must say only what God tells him to say. Balaam gets on his donkey and heads for Balak. On the way, an angel stands in front of them to stop him from going. Only the donkey can see the angel. When the donkey refuses to move forward Balak starts beating the donkey. Finally, the donkey speaks to Balak and says, “Look, I am the ass that you have been riding all along until this day! Have I been in the habit of doing this to you?” And Balaam answered, “no.” Then he sees the angel in front of him. Balaam goes to Balak and they stand on a hilltop looking down on the Jewish people who are camped below. Balak is expecting Balaam to curse the Jewish people but instead, Balaam blesses them. Balak is not happy. He urges him to try again, and again, Balaam blesses them. A third time we are told, “Now Balaam, seeing that it pleased Adonai to bless Israel, did not, as on previous occasions, go in search of omens, but turned his face toward the wilderness. As Balaam looked up and saw Israel encamped tribe by tribe, the spirit of God came upon him. Taking up his theme, he said (among a few other things) “How fair are your tents, O Jacob, Your dwellings, O Israel!” Another blessing but this one, really from his heart. Needless to say, Balak sends him home without paying him.

As I said, this is a really amusing story on a certain level. The Torah is clearly poking fun at Balaam who is supposed to be a prophet but cannot see an angel right in front of him and is less smart and righteous than his donkey. But on another level, this story is sending us a really important message. As I came across some old notes I had on this Torah portion I found I had written the following question, “Can our words make reality?” Are words so powerful that they shape reality as we understand it? Our tradition certainly thinks so.

To understand this we need to start with a different question. If Balaam was not a real prophet/sorcerer then who cares if he gets up and curses the Jewish people? His curses have no power – at least in a direct, cursing sense. However, even though our rabbis are not concerned that his words can affect the future of the Jewish people, however, they are worried that others will understand reality differently based on those words. Abravanel makes the following point, “Balaam’s sorcery was world famous..... Had Balaam cursed Israel, the surrounding nations would have plucked up courage and gone to do battle with Israel on the strength of his curses. But when they heard how God had turned them into blessings, they would then realize who was Master...and would lose all desire to fight God’s people.”

Another Midrashic commentator adds, “The Almighty’s warning ‘though shalt not curse the people’ was given not because Balaam was capable of doing harm....But this was done to preclude the inhabitants of the land from ascribing any retribution the Israelites might suffer for their sins to the effect of Balaam’s curses. The Almighty wished to bring home to God’s people their disobedience, immediately, as a parent chastises their child.” In other words, if Balaam had cursed the Israelites and God needed to punish them (we know they were punished for bad behavior a lot) God didn’t want the rest of the world to think that Balaam’s curse had worked. God was afraid that Balaam’s words would create a certain reality in the minds of the non-Jews in the surrounding lands and they would attribute the Jew’s punishment to Balaam’s curse rather than to God.

There are so many days that I really scratch my head wondering “how is it possible that people believe some of the things they are being told.” The election was stolen - when there is not one single piece of evidence to indicate that it was. Our former president told lie after lie, one more absurd than the last and yet, people believe him. Why? There are many possible reasons but I think the one that is so clear to me is that sometimes people believe things that seem improbable or even impossible because.....they want to. Someone who is a good orator can paint a picture of a reality that people want to believe in.....the man behind the curtain can convince people that he is the great wizard of Oz, Donald Trump can paint a convincing picture that the election was stolen when it is far from the truth, because there are people who want to believe in them so badly.

There is a Chasidic commentary that always makes me smile. It is on the part of the story where God opens the mouth of the donkey and has it speak to Balaam. The commentary on this verse says “the other nations had heard that Moses’ power was derived from his utterances. They did not realize that this referred to his prayer, and instead believed that his power lay in his tremendous oratorical powers. They therefore went to hire Balaam, who was known as a great orator and who had exceptional powers to curse people, in order to vanquish Moses. As a result, “God opened the mouth of the ass” – He showed them that even an ass can be a good orator.” (Imrei Kohen). We have a lot of good orators out there in our country, many of them in a position of power, many of them trying to create a reality with their words that has no connection to fact.

It is up to us to remember to question any reality that someone is trying to paint with their words. It is up to us to find out what the real facts and evidence show us. It is up to us to hold anyone’s words up to the litmus test of Torah which we can find in this week’s Haftarah, from the Book of Micah: “God has told you, O human, what is good, and what the Eternal requires of you: Only to do justice and to love goodness, and to walk humbly with your God.”