



Righteous Anger • Parshat Balak

Bilam initially presented as a pious Gentile prophet. When Balak, King of Moab tried to contract him to curse the Israelites, Bilam reported back to the king's messengers to "Go back to your own country, for God will not let me go with you" (Num. 22:13). Bilam continued the saintly reframe when he was asked again, stating that he could not be swayed by riches because "I could not do anything, big or little, contrary to the command of my God" (Num. 22:18).

Despite these external verbal pieties, the sages accuse Bilam of virtue signaling. Beneath the veneer of divine devotion lay internal turmoil. Rashi names three vices that boil beneath the surface of Bilam's character that leak out in his interactions: pride, greed, and an evil eye. This analysis, writes Dr. Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, makes Bilam "a case study in unconscious motivation."

Bilam's character flaws are particularly exposed in his interactions with his donkey. Bilam's anger is on full display, when after his donkey refused to proceed for the third time, "Bilam was furious and beat the donkey with his stick" (Num. 22:27). It is precisely in frustrating situations when character is tested. Bilam failed.

Not fooled by outward appearances, the sages of the Talmud note Bilam's preoccupation with anger, and recount one of his unsavory strategies to curse the Israelites (*Berakhot* 7a). Based on the verse in Psalms, "God has indignation every day" (Ps. 7:12), the Talmud relates that God experiences anger

every day for a fraction of a second ("One fifty-eight thousand, eight hundred and eighty-eighth of an hour"). As a successful sorcerer, Bilam was privy to that precise moment. Bilam's plan was to capitalize on this moment and curse the Israelites at that specific instant. To protect the Israelites, God temporarily contained even that moment of frustration, so Bilam was unable to exploit God for his vile purposes. What are we to make of this cryptic Talmudic passage?

In her book, *Anger: The Conflicted History of an Emotion*, Barbara Rosenwein tracks two philosophic strands concerning anger throughout ancient, medieval, and modern history. Some, like the Stoics, argued that anger should be extirpated and exterminated from our personalities; it should never be experienced or expressed. Others, like Aristotle, found a place for anger and even promoted this strong sentiment when harnessed against injustices. A life devoid of anger at best reflects a Pollyannish worldview, and at worst exposes an apathy towards an unredeemed society.

While Jewish ethical teachings tend to promote the avoidance of anger, this Talmudic narrative subtly describes the power of a controlled and calculated anger. The aforementioned verse in Psalms that highlights God's daily anger frames this fiery idea with the phrase, "God vindicates the righteous; God has indignation every day." God's anthropomorphic frustrations are precisely a reaction to injustice. His anger motivates pursuit of righteousness.

Yet emulating God's righteous indignation can be problematic. It can consume emotions, distort perceptions, and cause untold damage. This Talmudic reading models a healthier way of expressing productive anger. God's anger is not spontaneous or unreflective. It is controlled, calculated, and contained. Moreover, in particularly volatile times, when, for example, Bilam was trying to fan the flames, God avoided even that measured anger.

God models for us the subtlety and nuance of virtuous anger. God utilizes anger to assist the righteous, to correct injustices, and to protect the vulnerable. Bilam due to his character flaws misunderstands and attempts to misuse God's anger. His internal vices leak out in his reaction to his donkey. Instead of striking his trusted, defenseless, and helpless animal, Bilam should have reacted with compassion and empathy.

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Character Challenge: Reflect on a time you experienced righteous indignation. Does the sentiment reflect the refinement of Divine anger or the crudeness of Bilam's coarse character?

Quote from Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks zt"l: "[A]t the very moment He is declaring his compassion, grace and forgiveness, God insists that He does not leave the guilty unpunished. *A world without Divine justice would be one where there is more resentment, punishment, and crime, and less public-spiritedness and forgiveness, even among religious believers.* The more we believe that God punishes the guilty, the more forgiving we become. The less we believe that God punishes the guilty, the more resentful and punitive we become. This is a totally counterintuitive truth, yet one that finally allows us to see the profound wisdom of the Torah in helping us create a humane and compassionate society" ("Can there be Compassion Without Justice?," *Covenant & Conversation*).