



BALAK

THE STRENGTH TO SURRENDER

Why Letting Go Is the Ultimate Power

PARSHAH OVERVIEW

Balak

Balak, the king of Moab, summons the prophet Balaam to curse the people of Israel. On the way, Balaam is berated by his donkey, who sees, before Balaam does, the angel that G-d sends to block their way. Three times, from three different vantage points, Balaam

attempts to pronounce his curses; each time, blessings issue forth instead. Balaam also prophesies on the end of days and the coming of Mashiach.

The people fall prey to the charms of the daughters of Moab and are enticed to worship the idol Pe'or. When a high-ranking Israelite

official publicly takes a Midianite princess into a tent, Phineas kills them both, stopping the plague raging among the people.

QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

Is the ability to make sacrifices genetic, or can it be learned?

Can all Jews do it, or are some Jews just not cut out for it?



RASHI RULE

Rashi sticks to the plain interpretation of the text, resorting to Midrash when it's the only way to explain the plain meaning.

TEXT 1A

Numbers 22:1-6

- א. וַיִּסְעוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, וַיַּחֲנוּ
בְּעֶרְבוֹת מוֹאָב מֵעֵבֶר לְיַרְדֵּן יְרֵחוֹ.
- ב. וַיֵּרָא בָלָק בֶּן צִפּוֹר אֶת כָּל אֲשֶׁר
עָשָׂה יִשְׂרָאֵל לְאֹמֹרִי.
- ג. וַיָּגֶר מוֹאָב מִפְּנֵי הָעָם מְאֹד כִּי
רַב הוּא, וַיִּקֶּץ מוֹאָב מִפְּנֵי בְנֵי
יִשְׂרָאֵל.
- ד. וַיֹּאמֶר מוֹאָב אֶל זִקְנֵי מִדְיָן:
עֲתָה יִלְחָכוּ הַקָּהָל אֶת כָּל
סְבִיבְתֵינוּ כְּלַחֵךְ הַשּׁוֹר אֶת יֶרֶק
הַשָּׂדֶה, וּבָלָק בֶּן צִפּוֹר מֶלֶךְ לְמוֹאָב
בָּעֵת הַהִיא.

1. The Children of Israel journeyed and encamped in the plains of Moab across the Jordan from Jericho.
2. Balak, the son of Zippor, saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites.
3. Moab was terrified of the [Jews], for they were numerous, and Moab dreaded [the arrival of] the Children of Israel.
4. Moab said to the elders of Midian, "Now this group will devour everything around us as the ox consumes the greens of the field." Balak, the son of Zippor, was king of Moab then.

TEXT 1A

Numbers 22:1-6

ה. וַיִּשְׁלַח מַלְאָכִים אֶל בְּלָעַם בֶּן
בְּעוֹר פְּתוֹרָה אֲשֶׁר עַל הַנָּהָר
אֶרֶץ בְּנֵי עַמּוֹ לְקַרְא לּוֹ, לֵאמֹר:
הִנֵּה עַם יֵצֵא מִמִּצְרַיִם, הִנֵּה כֶסֶה
אֶת עֵינֵי הָאָרֶץ וְהוּא יֵשֵׁב מִמְּלִי.

ו. וַעֲתָה לְכָה נָא אָרָה לִי אֶת
הָעָם הַזֶּה כִּי עֲצוּם הוּא מִמֶּנִּי,
אוֹלֵי אוֹכַל נֶכֶה בּוֹ וְאֶגְרֹשׁנוּ מִן
הָאָרֶץ, כִּי יִדְעֹתִי אֵת אֲשֶׁר תְּבָרֵךְ
מִבְּרֶךְ וְאֲשֶׁר תָּאֵר יוֹאֵר.

5. He sent messengers to Balaam, the son of Be'or, to Pethor, which is by the river of the land of his people, to call for him, saying, "A people has come out of Egypt, and behold, they have covered the eye of the land, and they are stationed opposite me.

6. "So now, please come and curse these people for me, for they are too mighty for me. Perhaps I will be able to wage war against them and drive them out of the land, for I know that whom you bless is blessed and whom you curse is cursed."



G-d prevented
Balaam from cursing
the Jews and instead
filled his mouth with
powerful blessings.

TEXT 1B

Numbers 23:7-10

ז. וַיִּשָּׂא מִשְׁלוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר: מִן אֲרָם
יִנְחֶנִי בָלָק מֶלֶךְ מוֹאָב מֵהָרִי
קֶדֶם, לָכֵּה אֶרֶה לִי יַעֲקֹב וּלְכֵה
זַעֲמָה יִשְׂרָאֵל.

ח. מָה אֶקַּב לֹא קִבֵּה אֵל, וּמָה
אֶזְעַם לֹא זַעַם ה'.

ט. כִּי מֵרֹאשׁ צִירִים אֶרְאֶנּוּ
וּמִגְבְּעוֹת אֲשׁוּרֵנוּ, הֵן עַם לְבָדָד
יִשְׁכֹּן וּבְגוֹיִם לֹא יִתְחַשֵּׁב.

י. מִי מִנָּה עֶפְר יַעֲקֹב וּמִסְפָּר אֶת
רִבֵּעַ יִשְׂרָאֵל, תְּמַת נַפְשִׁי מוֹת
יִשְׂרָאֵל וְתִהְיֶה אַחֲרִיתִי כָמֵהוּ.

7. And he took up his parable and said, "Balak the king of Moab has brought me from Aram, from the mountains of the east, saying, 'Come, curse Jacob for me and come invoke wrath against Israel.'

8. "How can I curse whom G-d has not cursed, and how can I invoke wrath if G-d is not wrathful?

9. "For from their beginning, I see them as mountain peaks and behold them as hills; it is a nation that will dwell alone and not be reckoned among the nations.

10. "Who counted the dust of Jacob or the number of Israel's seeds? May my soul die the death of the upright and let my end be theirs."

"I see them as
mountain peaks and
behold them as hills."

—*Balaam*



TEXT 2A

Rashi, Numbers 23:9

THE RASHI

"כִּי מֵרֹאשׁ צָרִים אֶרְאֶנּוּ". אֲנִי מִסְתַּכֵּל בְּרֹאשֵׁיהֶם
וּבִתְחִלַּת שְׂרָשֵׁיהֶם וְאֲנִי רוֹאֶה אוֹתָם מִיְסָדֵיהֶם וְחִזְקֵיהֶם
כְּצוּרִים וּגְבָעוֹת הַלָּלוּ, עַל יְדֵי אֲבוֹת וְאִמָּהוֹת.

"For from their beginning, I see them as mountain peaks." I look at their origins and the beginning of their roots, and I see them established and powerful, like these mountains and hills, because of their patriarchs and matriarchs.



Rashi explains that Balaam compared the Jewish people to mountains and hills, symbolizing the strength derived from their patriarchs and matriarchs.

TEXT 2B

*Rabbi Shmuel ben
Meir, Numbers 23:9*

"כי מראש צרים אראנו". שאני עומד
עכשיו אני רואה אותם.

"From the top of the mountain peaks, I see them." I see them from the mountains atop which I stand at this moment.

“ראש” — “Head”
rosh

RASHI

“From their **beginning**, I
see them as mountain peaks.”

RASHBAM

“From the **top** of the
mountain peaks, I see them.”

QUESTION

Why did Rashi reject the literal translation and instead choose a poetic, Midrashic approach when he usually favors the straightforward meaning?

TEXT 3

*Maimonides, Mishneh
Torah, Laws of Torah
Fundamentals 7:3*

הדברים שמודיעים לנביא במראה
הנבואה - דרך משל מודיעין לו, ומיד
יחקק בלבו פתרון המשל במראה
הנבואה וידע מה הוא.

כמו הסולם שראה יעקב אבינו
ומלאכים עולים ויורדים בו, והוא היה
משל למלכיות ושעבודן. וכמו החיות
שראה יחזקאל, והסיר נפוח ומקל שקד
שראה ירמיה, והמגלה שראה יחזקאל,
והאיפה שראה זכריה, וכן שאר
הנביאים.

מהם אומרים המשל ופתרונו כמו אלו,
ויש שהן אומרים הפתרון בלבד,
ופעמים אומרים המשל בלבד בלא
פתרון, כמקצת דברי יחזקאל וזכריה.
וכולן במשל ודרך חידה הם מתנבאים.

When a prophet is informed of a message in a vision, it is granted to him in metaphoric imagery. Immediately, the interpretation of the imagery is imprinted upon his heart, and he or she knows its meaning.

For example, the ladder with the angels ascending and descending envisioned by the Patriarch Jacob was an allegory for the empires and how they would subjugate his descendants. Similarly, the creatures Ezekiel saw, the boiling pot and the rod from an almond tree envisioned by Jeremiah, the scroll Ezekiel saw, and the measure Zechariah saw [were all metaphoric images]. This is also true about the other prophets.

Some prophets related the allegory and its explanation as these did. Others told only the explanation. At times, they would describe only the imagery without explaining it, as seen in some of the prophecies of Ezekiel and Zechariah.

All prophecies come in the form of metaphoric imagery and allegories.

G-d spoke in parables
because parables convey
ideas that are difficult to
communicate directly.



TEXT 4

*Rabbi Ovadiah
Seforno, Numbers
23:7*

"וַיִּשָּׂא מִשְׁלוֹ". אָמַר אוֹתוֹ הַמֶּשֶׁל
שָׂרָאָה בְּנִבְאוֹתָיו.

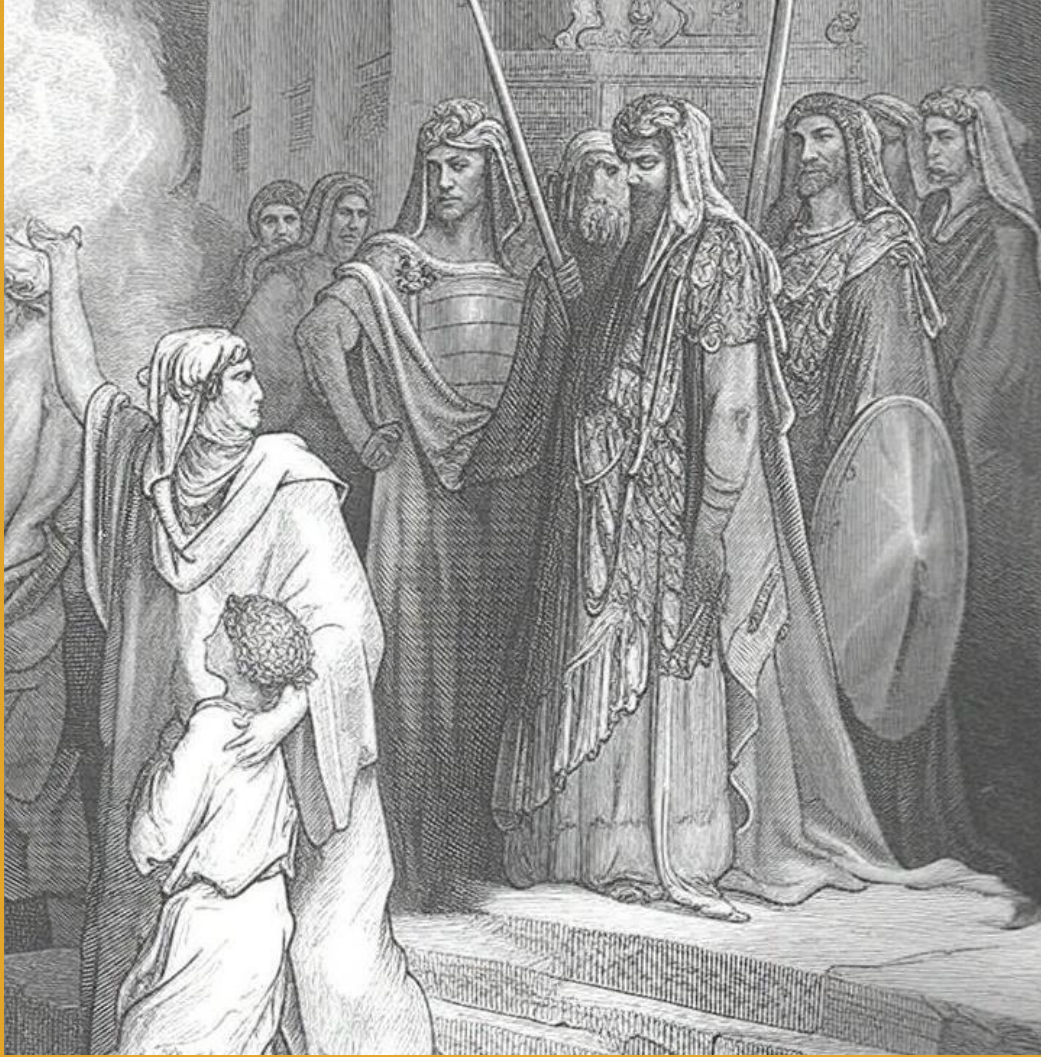
"And he took up his parable." He shared
the parable that he saw in his prophecy.

ANSWER

Rashi chose an allegorical explanation because the Torah says that Balaam shared the prophecy through parables, yet his words lack a literal parable, leading Rashi to reject a straightforward translation.

Rashi's parable of
mountains and hills
conveys Jewish strength.
Mountains stand firm,
unmoving—just like us.





Every Jew possesses the unbreakable, unwavering strength that Chanah and her seven sons displayed. Only a metaphor can convey their heroic courage.

TEXT 5

*Rabbi Menachem
Mendel of Lubavitch,
Or HaTorah,
Bamidbar, p. 507*

יכול כל אחד מישראל למסור נפשו על קידוש השם בלי שום
טעם ודעת. רק מחמת שבבחינת חכמה שבנפשו אין לסטרא
אחרא מקום אחיזה כלל כנזכר לעיל. ולכן נקרא מראש צורים,
שהוא בחינה חזקה מאד.

There is no logical explanation for why all Jews can [and would] die for G-d. It is because they feel deep in their souls that life without G-d is not possible. This is why Balaam called it [the Jews' ability to self-sacrifice] a mountain peak. It is a point of fierce strength.

The source of this
unwavering strength is our
matriarchs and patriarchs
who taught us that nothing
exists outside of G-d.

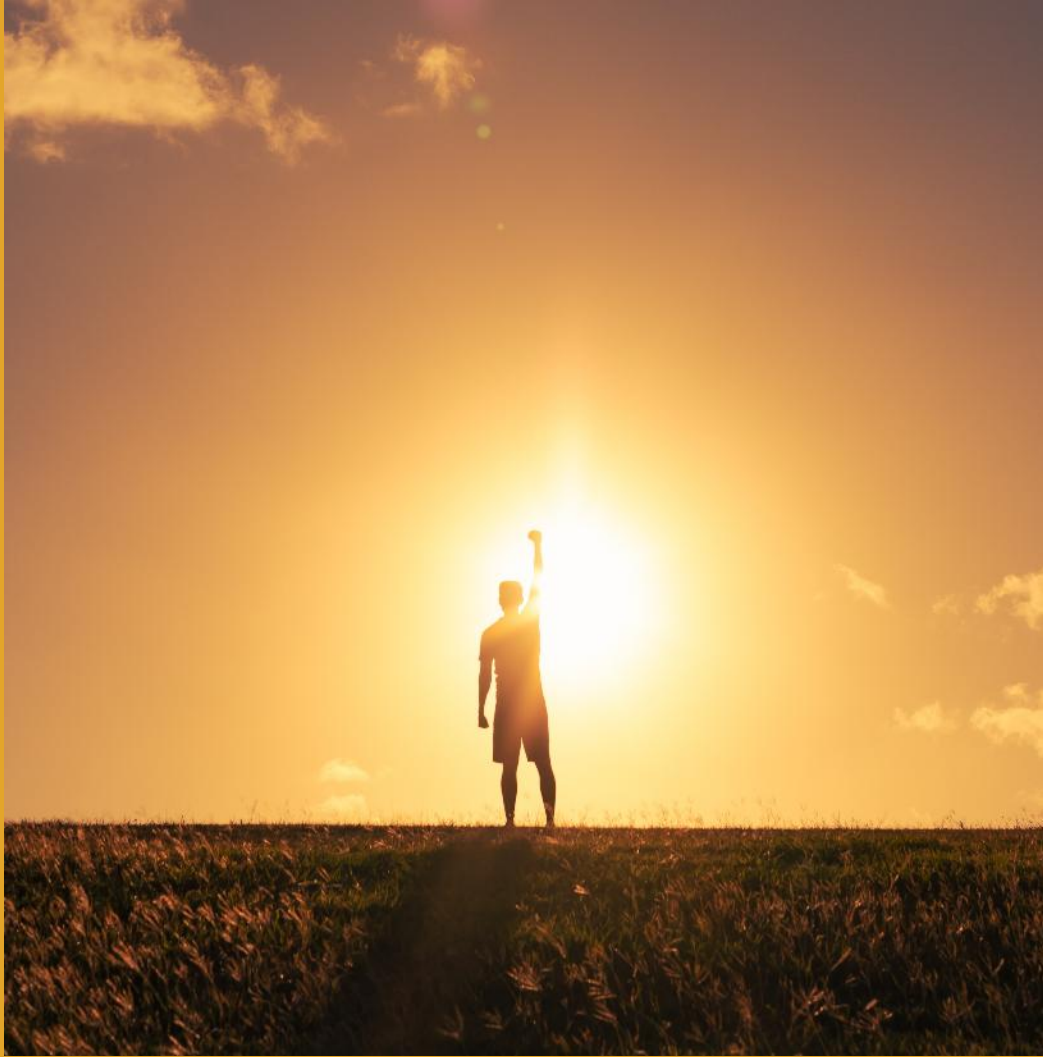


TEXT 6

*The Rebbe, Rabbi
Menachem Mendel
Schneerson, Hayom
Yom, 23 Elul*

אבינו הראשון, אברהם, בגלל עבודתו במסירת נפש לפרסם
אלקותו יתברך, קל אחד, לכל בני העולם, זכה להנחיל לזרעו
עד סוף כל הדורות את האמונה הטהורה בה' ובתורתו. וכל
איש ואשה בישראל, יש להם הכח והעוז למסור נפשם על
התורה הקדושה.

Abraham, our first patriarch, risked his life to spread awareness
of the One G-d to every person on Earth. He, therefore, merited
to bequeath this pure faith in G-d and His Torah to his children
for all time. Consequently, every Jewish man and woman has
the strength to sacrifice their life for the sacred Torah.



Every Jew possesses the inherent strength to resist in moments of challenge, even at the ultimate cost of dying for G-d.

If we are able to give up
our lives for G-d, then we
can undoubtedly sacrifice
forbidden pleasures.



TEXT 7

*Rabbi Shneur
Zalman of Liadi,
Tanya, Likutei
Amarim 25*

שְׁלֹא לִיפָּרֵד בְּשׁוּם אֹפֶן מִיְחֻדּוֹ וְאַחֲדוּתוֹ יִתְבָּרֵךְ, אֲפִילוּ בְּמִסִּירַת נֶפֶשׁ מִמֶּשׁ, בְּלִי שׁוּם טַעַם וְשִׁכָּל מוֹשָׁג, אֲלֵא בְּטַבֵּעַ אֱלֹקִי.

וְכָל שָׁכֵן בְּשִׁבְיַת הַתְּאֻוֹת הַקֵּלָה מִיִּסּוּרֵי מִיתָה, שֶׁקְרוֹב אֵלָיו הַדָּבָר יוֹתֵר לְכַבּוֹשׁ הַיֵּצֵר . . . אֲפִילוּ מִעֲבִירָה קֵלָה שֶׁל דְּבָרֵי סוֹפְרִים, שֶׁלֹּא לַעֲבוֹר עַל רְצוֹנוֹ יִתְבָּרֵךְ, מֵאַחֵר שֶׁנִּפְרָד בָּהּ מִיְחֻדּוֹ וְאַחֲדוּתוֹ כְּמוֹ בְּעִבּוּדָה זָרָה מִמֶּשׁ בְּשַׁעַת מַעֲשָׂה.

If it came to it, we would lay down our lives to avoid being separated from G-d's unity and Oneness. [We would do so] without reason or logic but purely out of our Divine nature.

Indeed, then, it is far easier to subdue our [sinful] appetites since this entails much lighter suffering than death [which we would willingly endure to avoid being torn from G-d]. Even when it concerns a minor rabbinic prohibition, we can control ourselves to avoid transgressing G d's will because while performing the forbidden act, we become separated from G d's unity and Oneness just as much as through actual idolatry.



Our unbreakable bond with
G-d empowers us to resist
any transgressions, major
or minor, affirming our
Jewish identity.

TEXT 8

*The Rebbe, Rabbi
Menachem Mendel
Schneerson, Likutei
Sichot 1, p. 12*

שמסירת נפש מיינט מסירת הרצון, איבערגעבן דעם אייגענעם ווילן . . . איז מיט יעדער בויג וואס א איד בויגט זיך צוליב דעם אויבערשטן, אפילו מיט א תנועה קלה, איז דאס א קטלא פלגא. איז דאס אויך מסירת נפש.

פון דער אנדער זייט, אפילו דער וועלכער איז א גדול שבגדולים, איז פאר אים אויך ניט גענוג די עבודה וואס על פי טעם ודעת. נאר אויך ביי אים מוז זיין דער בויג מיט נסירת נפש. וואס דוקא דעמאלט וועט ער נעמען געטלעכקייט.

Self-sacrifice means giving up our desires and sacrificing our personal will to G-d. . . . Every minor act of bowing to G-d, even an insignificant gesture, is a partial slaying of your desire and pleasure. This, too, is self-sacrifice.

Even the most pious Jew can't be satisfied with serving G-d purely out of reason. Even this Jew must bow to G-d with self-sacrifice. Only then do we grasp G-dliness.

Every sacrifice we make, no matter how big or small, brings us closer to G-d.



IS THIS SELF-SACRIFICE

STRENGTH,



OR

HUMILITY?



TEXT 9A

*Midrash, Shemot
Rabah 45:5*

הִלֵּל אָמַר: הַשְׁפָּלָתִי זֶה הַגְּבָהָתִי,
וְהַגְּבָהָתִי הִיא הַשְׁפָּלָתִי.

Hillel said, "When I am humble, I am exalted. When I am exalted, I am lowly."

TEXT 9B

Zohar, vol. 1 p. 122:2

והכי פתח רב מתיבתא: "מאן דאיהו זעיר
איהו רב, מאן דאיהו רב איהו זעיר".

Rav would begin his lectures with the following statement: "One who is small is large. One who is large is small."

True greatness in Judaism
comes from transcendental
humility, not ego-driven
prominence.



TEXT 10

*The Rebbe, Rabbi
Menachem Mendel
Schneerson, Likutei
Sichot 28, p. 172*

וואס אט דער תוקף פון מסירת נפש איז פונקט דער היפך פון דעם מושג פון
"תוקף" בשייכות צו עניני העולם: דער גדר פון וועלט איז - פאראנענקייט
ומציאות, און א שטארקע זאך אין וועלט מיינט, אז די מציאות פון דער זאך איז
בתוקף. אבער מסירת נפש איז ענינה, פארקערט, מען איז זיך לגמרי מבטל, מען
גיט זיך אינגאנצן אוועק צום אויבערשטן.

The strength of self-sacrifice is the exact opposite of conventional worldly strength. The physical world is defined by its existence—by the fact that it is. Thus, to be strong in this world, we must have a more substantial existence; a stronger hold on "being." The opposite is true of self-sacrifice. It is to be wholly subsumed, to give oneself entirely to G-d.



Balaam conveyed the Jews' strength in parable form to highlight that unlike conventional strength, true strength is shown through selfless devotion to G-d's will.

Every Jew has an innate ability to make sacrifices for G-d. We must hone this skill to overcome the everyday challenges that we face.



KEY POINTS

1. Balaam referred to the Jews as mountains that derive their strength from the beginning, signifying our ability to die for G-d—a trait inherited from our patriarchs and matriarchs.
2. This has been key to Jewish survival throughout exile, enabling us to resist assimilation and to hold on to beliefs and traditions.
3. Our strength is not only in the willingness to die for G-d but also in living for G-d, which involves sacrificing forbidden pleasures. Giving up our pleasures is like sacrificing a piece of ourselves.
4. Conventional wisdom views the ability to retain and control as a strength. Judaism sees the willingness to surrender as a form of merging with a higher and greater reality.
5. Every Jew has an innate ability to make sacrifices to G-d. No Jew has this more than others. We might need to hone this skill for day-to-day matters, but it is intrinsic to us all.

