

B”H

Parshat Balak

Taming the Donkey and the Snake

from Harav Yitzchak Ginsburgh

Animals that Speak

One of the main images in *parshat Balak* is that of God opening Balaam’s donkey’s mouth so that it could talk to him after Balaam had struck it three times. Balaam was on his way to curse the Jewish people on behalf of king Balak and the Torah recounts,

In the morning Balaam arose, saddled his donkey and went with the Moabite dignitaries. God’s wrath flared because he was going, and an angel of God stationed himself on the road to thwart him, and he was riding on his donkey, and his two servants were with him. The donkey saw the angel of God stationed on the road with his sword drawn in his hand; so the donkey turned aside from the road and went into a field. Balaam beat the donkey to get it back onto the road. The angel of God stood in a path of the vineyards, with a fence on this side and a fence on that side. The donkey saw the angel of God, and she was pressed against the wall. She pressed Balaam’s leg against the wall, and he beat her again. The angel of God continued going ahead, and he stood in a narrow place, where there was no room to turn right or left. The donkey saw the angel of God, and it crouched down under Balaam. Balaam’s anger flared, and he beat the donkey with a stick.

God opened the mouth of the donkey, and it said to Balaam, “What have I done to you that you have struck me these three times?”

Balaam said to the donkey, “For you have humiliated me; if I had a sword in my hand, I would kill you right now.”

The donkey said to Balaam, “Am I not your donkey on which you have ridden since you first started until now? Have I been accustomed to do this to you?” Balaam said, “No!”

In the entire Pentateuch, this is only the second time an animal speaks. The first time occurred in the Garden of Eden where the snake seduced Adam and Eve to eat from the Tree of Knowledge. The Torah describes that affair with these words,

Now the snake was cunning, more than all the beasts of the field that the Lord God had made, and it said to the woman, “Did God indeed say, ‘You shall not eat of any of the trees of the garden?’”



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The woman said to the snake, "Of the fruit of the trees of the garden we may eat. But of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, God said, 'You shall not eat of it, and you shall not touch it, lest you die.'"

The snake said to the woman, "You will surely not die. For God knows that on the day that you eat thereof, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like angels, knowing good and evil."

To succeed the snake targeted Eve, convincing her that God is jealous of anyone who has the power to create. By eating from the Tree of Knowledge, they, Adam and Eve would be able to create worlds, which is the real reason that the Almighty forbade them from eating its fruit. After Eve was convinced she ate from the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge and then convinced her husband, Adam, to do the same. The sages explain that the snake knew that it would not be successful in seducing Adam, only Eve could do that. But, on the other hand, only the snake was able to seduce Eve.

Similarities Between the Snake and the Donkey

There are other similarities between these two instances when an animal spoke. Both are related to curses. The outcome of the conversation between the snake and Eve was a four-fold curse on Adam, Eve, the snake, and the earth. The conversation between Balaam and his donkey in our *parshah* also occurs in context of a curse.

But, the most important similarity is the structure of the dialogue between animal and man in both cases. In both cases, first the animal addresses the human, then the human responds to which the animal responds back.

All this leads us to focus on the Torah's exact wording in the description of both conversations. Specifically, let us look at the number of words in the Hebrew text.

The total words spoken by the snake is 26 (9 words the first time and 17 the second),

אָף בִּי אָמַר אֱלֹהִים לֹא תֹאכְלוּ מִכֹּל עֵץ הַגָּן... לֹא מוֹת תָּמָתוּן בִּי יָדַע אֱלֹהִים בִּי בַיּוֹם אֲכַלְכֶם מִמֶּנּוּ וְנִפְקְחוּ
עֵינֵיכֶם וְהִייתֶם כְּאַלְהִים יִדְעֵי טוֹב וָרָע

The total words spoken by the donkey is 23 (8 the first time and 15 the second),

מָה עָשִׂיתִי לָךְ בִּי הִבִּיתָנִי זֶה שְׁלֹשׁ רְגָלִים.... הֲלוֹא אֲנֹכִי אֲתַנְּךָ אֲשֶׁר רִבַּבְתָּ עָלַי מֵעוֹדָךְ עַד הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה הֲסָבִין
הַסְבַּנְתִּי לַעֲשׂוֹת לָךְ כֹּה

Thus, the total number of words spoken by animals in the Torah is $26 + 23 = 49$ or 7^2 .¹ One of the basic principles in analyzing the structure of the Torah is that two sections of

the text whose contents constitute a whole sum together into a square form. The square is either their combined number of words or the number of their combined letters.

Let us then write out the 49 words spoken by the snake and the donkey in the form of a 7 by 7 square,

מבל	תאכלו	לא	אֱלֹהִים	אמר	כי	אף
ידע	כי	תמתון	מות	לא	הגן	עץ
עיניכם	ונפקחו	ממנו	אכלכם	ביום	כי	אֱלֹהִים
עשיתי	מה	ורע	טוב	ידעי	כאֱלֹהִים	והייתם
הלוא	רגלים	שלוש	זה	הביתני	כי	לך
עד	מעודך	עלי	רכבת	אשר	אתנדך	אנכי
כה	לך	לעשות	הספנת	ההסבן	הזה	היום

We see that in this square the *gematrias* of the first (אף) and last (כה) words are both perfect squares ($81 = 9^2$ and $25 = 5^2$). In addition, if we calculate the sum of the words in red, which form a particular pattern in this square, we find that it is 2166, or $6 \cdot 192$. 19 is the value of "Eve" (חַוָּה), the hero of the story of the speaking snake. In Aramaic, Eve's name stems from the word meaning "to speak," and thus the snake's seeming natural ability to speak came about because of his ability to seduce Eve.²

The *gematria* of all 49 words is 10576, or $16 \cdot 661$, where 661 is the *gematria* of "Esther" (אֶסְתֵּר). In the entire Bible, Esther is considered the most consummate and essential rectification of Eve. Likewise, her uncle (and husband), Mordechai is considered a consummate rectification of Adam. But, note that the value of the words in the four corners plus the middle word is 274, the *gematria* of Mordechai (מֶרְדֵּכַי).³

Borrowed Words

Now that we have seen the essential connection between the speaking snake and the argumentative donkey, let us delve a bit further into what these two episodes represent and what we can glean from them regarding our own challenges in life.

In the Torah's taxonomy (as adopted by the sages), the four parts of creation are

- the inanimate (rock, minerals, etc.),

- the growing (plants, vegetables, etc.)
- the living (animals), and
- the speaking (man)

Speech is the defining human faculty. Should an animal be granted the power of speech it is given this power in order to express a particular human figure. The words uttered by both the snake and the donkey are borrowed words; placed in their mouths for the purpose of highlighting the origin and effect of a particular style of speech. Though words, by definition, can be spoken only by human beings, God allowed these two animals to speak in order to personify in a caricature-like image, those who speak words of this type.

Furthermore, notice that regarding Balaam's donkey, the Torah notes that God (had to) open its mouth for words to come out. By doing so the Torah is stressing that this was a miracle. In reference to the primordial snake in the Garden of Eden, it seems that no such miracle was needed—it seems that the snake's power of speech was natural. What this means is that the origin and effect of the snake's words is more commonplace in our experience than is the origin and effect of the donkey's words.⁴

Opportunism and Self-Justification

Without a doubt, the snake represents a specific archetypal assault on our innate faith in God and our ability to act according to His will. In fact, even though in context we think of Balaam as a wicked individual assaulting his animal and the donkey as the victim, conceptually, the donkey like the snake represents a specific type of assault on our innate faith in God, etc. Balaam thus represents everyman, a point we will explain more shortly.

The strategy used by the snake was opportunism. The snake's argument basically boils down to, "If you eat from this forbidden fruit, you will become like God—knowing good and evil—and thereby be able to create worlds." Seducing a person into doing something that they know is wrong is possible if he or she is offered a one-time opportunity to do something special (in this case be like God). Opportunism causes a person to subconsciously accept the argument that "the end justifies the means."

For example, you could come to a person and tell them that they have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to make a million dollars, and what a shame it would be if they do not take advantage of this special opportunity. Except, that to make good on this offer, you have to do something wrong. The snake placed a dilemma before Eve and later Adam: either eat from the Tree of Good and Evil and become gods, or wait and forever will you be relegated to the work of servants and never attain the status of gods. Who

could pass up the opportunity to become a god? Opportunism works by aggrandizing the ego. This is the type of seduction and assault represented by the snake.

Turning to the donkey's words we find that they were meant to justify its actions. The donkey's short speech is basically an apology (in the sense of a justification of its actions). Although never stated explicitly, the donkey is justifying itself by explaining that everything it did, it did for Balaam's sake—in this case saving him from God's angel.

Self-justification is one of the most detrimental abilities a human being can exercise. Self-justification removes responsibility and accountability for one's actions and therefore prevents real change and concerted progress. Still, the donkey's apologetics remain only implicit. What appears explicitly is the rational argument that its words contain, an argument based on the premise that nature is constant and unchanging. The donkey asks its master: why would you assume anything but good intentions from an animal that has always been true and faithful!? It is this rational argument about nature that lies at the core of the donkey's argument.

Philosophical Rationalism

The rational argument made by Balaam's donkey is representative of Greek culture and the Western tradition in general. It constitutes a logical proof. More specifically, it is a proof based on past experience. The donkey challenges Balaam on whether it has ever been his experience that he has been unfaithful to him. Has Balaam not come to the conclusion that his donkey is ever-faithful and therefore would not have done anything to harm its master?

The Greek mindset regarding nature is inductive and extrapolative. Greek culture teaches a person to rely on nature—that nature does not change. An educated person according to Greek philosophy is one who acts rationally and in accordance with the laws of nature; the philosophically educated person counts on the eternal and everlasting nature of our physical reality. This is the heart of rationalism.

It is also the core issue of the debate between Jewish thought, based on the Divine mindset of the Torah and Greek philosophy. Jewish thought begins with the understanding that nature on its own cannot sustain itself, let alone remain consistent and constant. The only reason that natural laws persist is because the Creator constantly renews them according to His will. Underneath its static facade, nature is constantly being recreated according to the Divine will. Therefore, even though our experience tells us that God does not alter the way in which He creates nature at every moment, and therefore its laws seem to be constant and universal, in reality they have no intrinsic

permanence. God is the ongoing Creator of nature and can will it into its next moment of being any way He wills. Judaism too has learnt something from past experience: that at God's discretion, the laws of physical reality do change. This is the message of the Ten Plagues and the Exodus from Egypt.⁵ When you think about it, you will find that this is the heart of the Chassidic message regarding trust in God. Many of the stories told about the Chassidic masters revolve around modern day examples of God's discretionary suspension, and even complete transformation of nature and its laws.

As if to show us the fallacy of the donkey's statement, the Torah begins its dialogue with the words, "God opened the mouth of the donkey...." Donkeys do not speak, but this one does. It is truly ironic that the essence of the donkey's argument is that you can trust nature, because nature does not change. Yet, here is a speaking donkey claiming that nature, specifically my nature, does not change.⁶

In fact, the donkey's argument was so sound and powerful that Balaam had no response. The sages explain that in order to save Balaam from having the donkey become the object of his shame—people would say "Here is the animal that rebuked and beat Balaam (in retribution for having been beaten by him)"—the donkey died immediately.

2 Souls and 3 Cultures

So we now have 2 caricatures: opportunism is drawn like a snake, cunning and slick; rationality is a donkey. There is a lot of symbolism wrapped up in these two images, but let us follow the following most basic rule. Our psychological being is divided into two forces, an animal soul and a Divine soul, which for most of us, will continue to challenge one another throughout life—the topic of the first chapters of the Tanya. The animal soul corresponds to the Tree of Good and Evil. One of the reasons it is called the animal soul is because its complex nature can be described as resembling various kosher and non-kosher animals. The kosher animals represent the good half of the animal soul, non-kosher animals its evil half.⁷

Here we have found that opportunism is exemplified by the snake and rational, natural-philosophical thought by the donkey. The sages make a wealth of observations about these two animals that would help us characterize the nature of these two facets of our psyche. Perhaps none is more telling than their description of the donkey as an animal that is always cold, even in the heat of the summer its body shivers as if it was in the middle of a snowstorm. The rational mindset too is cold. It can rule us only when the heart—the seat of warmth in our psychological body—is frozen. Without the heart's

warmth, the rational mind runs afoul, eventually being locked into an orderly world of rules and laws that have no autonomous Creator and no meaning.

The snake, on the other hand, symbolizes the evil inclination, that part of the animal soul that thrives on the burning desires of the heart. The sages describe the snake's venom as hot (as opposed, for instance, to the scorpion's venom, which they describe as cold). Its venom overheats the mind, making rational thought impossible. The result is that desires take over; without rational thought altogether the human being becomes nothing more than a powerful force seeking its own self-gratification. That end—self-gratification—can then indeed justify all means, and the ultimate purpose becomes to be a god.

So, the donkey and the snake represent the two extremes of the animal soul: a mind without a heart and a heart without a mind. Note then how their arguments are diametrically opposite. The snake seduces with the possibility of becoming a god and overcoming nature, while the donkey debates the merits of accepting the fact that nature cannot be controlled as it is constant.

What then do Eve and Balaam,⁸ the two humans addressed by the challenge of a speaking animal represent?

To answer this we need to know that human civilization divides into three basic cultures, represented by the descendants of Noah's three sons: Shem, Ham, and Jephthe. Shem's children are the Semites, including the Jewish people. Ham's children include the Egyptian culture and the cultures of the Near East (India, Thailand, etc.). Jephthe's descendants represent what we today consider Western civilization, developed initially by Jephthe's direct descendants, the Greek nations.⁹

Ham's descendants are relatively more emotional and Jephthe's descendants more intellectual. Shem represents the balance between the intellect and the emotions, between the cool rational mindset and the warm passions of the heart. Thanks to this balance, Shem's mind becomes a suitable vessel for studying the Divine and how God is revealed in reality. At the same time, his emotional world is tempered by his intellect, filling his passion with love for all mankind and good values.

Thus, even though Balaam, in context is an evil prophet and Moshe Rabbeinu's antithesis, whose sole purpose is to destroy the Jewish people, as archetypes he and Eve represent Shem and the individual tempered and balanced by the Torah's revelation of Divine consciousness. Even though Balaam utilized his Divine gift of prophecy for evil, his later incarnations¹⁰ represent the ongoing rectification of his essence. In fact, Balaam himself is a descendant of Laban, Rebecca's brother (and Jacob's father-in-law), making

him part of a well respected Semite family. We can summarize our analysis in the following chart,

Soul	figure	Faculty	quality	culture
animal	donkey	rational mind	cold	Jepthe/Greek
	snake	desires of the heart	hot	Ham/Egyptian
human	Eve and Balaam	Divine consciousness	tempered	Shem/Jewish

Messages from God?

To conclude, we would like to address a topic that has received quite a bit of attention over the past few years. There are many people, who claim to experience some kind of telepathic communication with what they believe is a spiritual or extra-terrestrial creature.

Without getting into particular examples, nor even comparing one to the other, there are examples of such communication in the Kabbalistic and Chassidic traditions. Individuals on very high spiritual levels merited a spiritual guide or angel that conversed with them. But, that fact remains that even when the individual is coming from a rectified Jewish background and is a Torah scholar it is still difficult to know whether the guide itself is originating from holiness. Sometimes it might be that it reflects the negative actions or transgressions committed by the person, as holy as the individual might be, and therefore this guide is actually trying to deceive the person.

There are even cases when after having been connected to a seemingly positive spiritual guide for many years, suddenly the guide came to the holy individual and tried to seduce him (using something similar to the snake's opportunism). The guide told him that if you have relations with your wife when she is impure, when intercourse is forbidden, then you will give birth to the Mashiach, for the Mashiach can only be born through forbidden sexual relations.

An encounter with a spiritual guide is no less surprising than a speaking snake or donkey. But, they are no different than the snake or the donkey, in that their ultimate purpose is to test the sincerity and earnestness of the individual. To win the debate with them, whether they speak to the heart or to the mind, one has to be deeply rooted in Torah and tempered properly by its Divine consciousness. By simply and earnestly devoting ourselves to the Torah's teachings and to the performance of *mitzvot* we can meet these challenges and overcome them.

1. Note that in the 3 verses describing the conversation between the donkey and Balaam there are also exactly 49 words. As already noted, 23 words were spoken by the donkey. The remaining 26 words are divided into 11 words spoken by Balaam and another 15 words of narration. But, note that this division of 26 into 15 and 11 is exactly the division of the letters of *Havayah* (יהוה) into the first two letters (יה), whose value is 15 and the final two letters (וה) whose value is 11.

2. The sages reveal Balaam's ability to prophecy depended on his "special" relationship with his donkey. In this sense, the donkey was his Eve, as it were.

3. Minus these 5 words, the remaining 44 words sum to the diamond of 101, i.e., 2 times the $\Delta 101$.

4. Following our earlier observation that speech passed naturally from Eve to the snake, it now passed on in a miraculous manner to the donkey. The value of these three, Eve (חַוָּה), snake (נָחַשׁ), and donkey (אֲתוֹן) [this is one of the two variant spellings in our *parshah*] together is 828, or $3 \cdot 23$, where $\Delta 23$ is the *gematria* of "living one" (חַיָּה), both Eve's original name, as explained elsewhere and the level of the soul from which emanates the human power of speech. 828 is also the value of Joseph's Egyptian name (Genesis 41:45), *Tzafnat Pa'ane'ach* (צִפְנַת פְּעֻנָּח), which alludes to an ability to understand animal communication.

5. This is also one of the reasons that the Ten Commandments begin with "I am God... who has taken you out of Egypt, out of a house of bondage," as opposed to "I am God... the Creator of the heavens and the earth." The Exodus and everything it involved constitute a suspension of the laws of nature created during Creation.

6. Balaam was a sorcerer of sorts, a prophet of the nations who surely realized that all of nature was in God's hands. He himself says he is solely in the hand of God and cannot say anything that God does not put in his mouth. He should have been able to point out this simple argument: a speaking donkey speaks loudly of the inconsistency of natural law. Why did he not? Because in fact, Balaam was a rational thinker applying his rational thought to the mystical realm. As much as he was a magician, Balaam was actually a technologist. He understood and viewed God as Himself limited by the laws He had created.

To illustrate this point we look at the sages question (*Berachot 7a*) regarding his thought process. Why did Balaam go to curse the Jewish people even though God had explicitly told Him he would not be allowed to do so? They answer that Balaam knew that every day, there is a short moment during which God exercises anger. This is what the verse, "God is angry every day" (Psalms 7:12) refers to—this single moment. Balaam planned on seizing that moment, when even God could not stop him from cursing His chosen people. This is exactly the rational mindset: God too is bound by laws. It is just that God's binding law lies in the mystical realm.

What did God do to subvert Balaam? The sages write that of course He simply did not exercise anger at all on those days that Balaam planned on cursing the people.

7. Everything that God has created in the world, He has created for the purpose of serving man and each of us individually. But, to serve mankind means to bring us closer to the Almighty, our truly unique ability and talent. As such, there is an element of added respect for the inherent Divinity found in an animal that has indeed taught us something about our relationship with the Creator. When teaching children (and adults), our greatest challenge is translating our scientific knowledge about the wide variety of life around us into meaningful observations about ourselves and our own behavior.

⁸. The sum of “Eve” (חַוָּה) and “Balaam” (בַּלְעָם) is 161, or $7 \cdot 23$, where 23, again is the value of “living one” (חַיָּה). 161 is the value of the most important phrase, “I don’t know” (אֲנִי יוֹדֵעַ). The sages learn from Moshe Rabbeinu that the essence of rectified speech is to always be able to say, “I don't know.”

⁹. The donkey then is the symbol of Greek culture. Indeed, the Hebrew word for “donkey” that the Torah uses in our *parshah* is אֲתוֹן, the phonetic root of the name Athens (אַתֵּנוֹן), the center of Greek civilization and culture. The Talmud (*Bechorot* 8b) describes a treacherous match of wits between Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananyah and the elders of Athens. Among the many challenges the elders posed Rabbi Yehoshua were questions about paradox, which Rabbi Yehoshua answered with stories about donkeys. The issue that prompted the match in the first place was the duration of a snake’s pregnancy. The Talmud’s description is replete with images and associations that tie into our own discussion and will surely open more avenues of thought for the interested reader.

¹⁰. Balaam is himself an incarnation of Laban and later was reincarnated in Nabal the Carmelite and finally in Plimo, a friend of Rabbi Yehudah the Prince, the editor of the Mishnah.