

This week's parashah, Balak, takes place as the Israelites are encamped in the wilderness of Moav, and it is named after an enemy character. The Moabite King, Balak, alarmed at the might and size of the group passing along his territory, seeks to weaken the Israelite nation.

So of course, he decides to hire a specialist: a prophet, named Bilaam, renowned for the potency of his words, to curse the Israelites.

What follows is fodder for a meditation on the question of free-will. Bilaam clearly wants to go. We don't know if it is because he dislikes the Israelites intrinsically, or if he just a mercenary, eager to earn the generous wage that Balak of Moav is offering. In any case, Bilaam also has some sort of stirring of conscience, or at the very least, some sort of wariness. When the messengers of Balak first come to summon him, he tells them: "Spend the night here and I shall reply to you as God instructs me." Then in verse 13 of chapter 22 of Numbers, God tells Bilaam, "Do not go with them. You shall not curse that people, for they are blessed."

Balaam relays the message to Balak's emissaries, but when Balak hears the response, he is undeterred. He sends more emissaries, promising a larger reward, if Bilaam will only curse the people.

Bilaam, perhaps feeling caught between the whims of an earthly king and the Master of the Universe, hedges. Telling the emissaries that no amount of riches could induce him to act contrary to the demands he God, he nonetheless offers to inquire again, and to see if the permission has changed. Surprisingly, it seems that at least in one respect, it has. That night, God tells Bilaam, "If these men have come to invite you, you may go with them. But whatever I command you, that you shall do."

Bilaam doesn't receive permission to curse the Israelites. But whereas before, he had been flatly forbidden from traveling with the emissaries, now he has permission to go with them.

One medieval commentary, Nachmanides, maintains that nothing really changes, that in fact, the line, "If these men have come to invite you, you may go with them" implies that the permission to go is contingent on the idea that there is no expectation that Bilaam will actually do any cursing. If you are just being invited as a guest, so to speak, you can go. But if you are being hired to curse, is the implication according to Nachmanides, then My answer is unchanged.

But Rashi, another famous medieval commentator, believes different, commenting on, You may go with them, he states: "On the road which a person has resolved to go, so they are led." Even God, says Rashi, can't categorically forbid a person from doing something wrong - if a person is set on doing it, they will. God only ever has the power to advise.

Some of us know the story. After a charming interlude involving Bilaam's talking donkey - a dvar torah for another occasion, I am afraid - Bilaam reaches the Israelite encampment. In three different places, at three different times, he opens his mouth, intending to curse, and finds that only blessings come out, including the great line of liturgical poetry with which we open our Shabbat morning services: "Ma Tovv ohalecha Ya'akov, mishkenotecha Yisra'el: How good are your tents, Ya'akvo, your dwelling-places, Yisrael!" Our Shabbat morning liturgy invokes the blessing, every week, of a prophet who opened his mouth to curse us.

So what of Rashi's claim? Did Bilaam in fact have free will? The fact that he could go at all implies yes. The fact that his mouth would not form the words to curse, but could only spill blessing, perhaps implies otherwise.

Or perhaps it is the wrong question, to ask if Bilaam did or did not have free will, as if he were a historic figure. Perhaps the better question is, what does the fable of Bilaam, his going, his attempts to curse, teach us about ourselves?

And in that case, Rashi's comment is helpful. Like Bilaam, we all feel pulled, either externally or internally, occasionally to do things that we know - at least in part of ourselves are wrong. And like Bilaam, if we want to badly enough, we might, in our pursuit of the reward we seek, at least temporarily silence that voice that tells us, "don't go there." But to do so usually has consequences. In Bilaam's case, he we denied the reward that Balak initially offered - for why would Balak pay for blessings when he had ordered curses?

On the other hand, there is a lovely consequence that Bilaam teaches us, too. He went looking for curses, and only found blessings. He knew that the power of his words was dependent on something larger than his own impulses, and when he opened himself to that power, lasting poetic blessing flowed from him.

I used to be the Nature Director at a Jewish summer camp. I would take different bunks on campouts almost every day of the summer. Sometimes the campers were excited about a night of sleeping out in the woods. More often they were anxious: about bugs, about the dark, about the food. One of the first things we would do together was set up the tents in which they would sleep, and I reminded them of Bilaam's blessing: not only that the tents were good, but that curses could be turned into blessings. I would tell the campers that they had the same capacity as Bilaam: to find blessings, even where they expected curses, as long as they remained open to them.

Perhaps the question of curses and blessings is more relative than this text would indicate. Had Bilaam succeeded in cursing the Israelites, it would have been a great boon to him, and to Balak of Moab. Only from an Israelite perspective would it have been a curse. And I wonder if Bilaam himself was able to recognize the blessings that flowed from his own tongue as blessings - or just as a terrible defeat and humiliation. What a shame that would be, no? If he himself could not recognize the beauty of what was coming out of his mouth, simply because it went against the agenda of what he had planned to say?

One thing Bilaam teaches me is that the potential for blessing is always present. If Bilaam himself could say words of blessing where he planned to find only curses, so too for each of us. May we, like he, be surprised at the words that we can create. Shabbat shalom.