



THE UNITED JEWISH CONGREGATION OF HONG KONG SHABBAT SHALOM

14 – 15 July, 2005

8 TAMMUZ, 5765

Parashat Balak
(Numbers 22:2–25:9)

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D'var Torah by Rabbi Joseph Goldman

Of course, I hope that you will read these lines, but inwardly, I know I risk a bit when I tell you I am going to talk about prophecy. *Parashat Balak*, our weekly teaching, is an explosion of prophecy, and, startlingly, the prophet Balaam is a non-Jew. But, before I get into the part of the story that I hope we will discuss more fully at our Shabbat morning study session, I want to talk a little about prophets.

All prophets are *seers*. Obviously, a seer is a person who sees. And usually, the vision is about the future. There is authority behind that vision. It comes from the belief that the words the prophet speaks have been put into his or her mouth (yes, there are female prophets or prophetesses) by God.

Torah tradition distinguishes two types of prophetic styles or seeing capacity. In some ways their visions are similar to the ways in which we see: all prophets had physiological sight – *eyesight*, in addition to varying levels of *insight*. Insight, or perception, is complex, a combination of brain function and emotional influence, perhaps intuition invisibly shaped by memory and, according to biblical tradition, vision that has been enriched by Divine input.

Among the many values the story of Balaam provides is the place of humor in conflict resolution. For Balaam is an example of a prophet in conflict. He has been employed by Balak the king of the Moabites to curse Israel. God's instructions are clear: No cursing, "...you may go with the Moabite leaders but whatever I command you, only that you shall do."

Astride his donkey, he sallies forth to do "something" to the People of Israel. The instructions are clear but Balaam's conflict state is not resolved. And when overwhelmed by conflict, Balaam, like most of us, doesn't see clearly. Rich humor resolves his blocked vision. What happens next is perhaps best described as an "assinine" experience. Unable to see what his donkey *can* see – an angel with drawn sword standing in the middle of the road – Balaam beats the donkey each time the animal swerves from the path.

Finally, it takes God, who empowers the donkey with speech, to evoke a new level of awareness in Balaam, in effect saying, "Open your eyes, man, and take a look at reality!" The scene evokes a chuckle and a question—If a donkey can see it, why can't we (or do I mean why can't Balaam)? With God's help, Balaam does see, and what he sees helps him to bless Israel.

All of this may well leave you asking, "What good is prophecy if we remain blind to the simple truths that are staring us in the face?"

On a personal note, Sally and I are thrilled to be joining you this summer. We have, of course, heard a great deal about the warmth and the spirit of the UJC and we are looking forward to spending time together and getting to know your special community a little bit better.

Shabbat Shalom
6 Tammuz 5765

13th July, 2005