False Prophets and True Religion

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Rabbi Uzi Weingarten teaches a weekly no-charge class, via Zoom, titled "To Walk with God: An exploration of the moral and spiritual teachings of Tanakh." The class is open to all, Jews and non-Jews. It meets Sun evenings at 7:30 PM, EDT, and repeats Tues evenings at the same time. He can be reached at uziteaches@gmail.com

False Prophets and True Religion

By Rabbi Uzi Weingarten

The account of Balak and Bil'am (Numbers 22-24) presents, in the form of a story, the great ethical and spiritual insights at the root of Judaism, as relevant today as they were when Abraham and Sarah first taught “the way of God, which is to do *tzedakah* and *mishpat*” (Genesis 18:19).

Let’s first review the story briefly. Balak, King of Moab, feels threatened by Israel's presence in his vicinity, and hires Bil'am to curse them. Bil'am has a reputation for being able to pronounce blessings and curses that get results (Numbers 22:2-6). Arriving in Moab, Bil'am instructs Balak to build seven altars and offer seven bulls and seven rams (23:1).

Bil'am then receives an oracle from God, one that is quite different from what Balak had hoped for. Since God has not cursed Israel, Bil'am says in his oracle, neither can he. Bil’am then explains to an angry Balak that he can do only as God tells him (23:7-12). This entire sequence--altars, offerings, Bil'am's blessing, Balak's anger and Bil'am's apology--is repeated (23:13-26) and repeated again (23:27-24:13).

What emerges is that Bil’am is a prophet-for-profit. He is willing to use his real or imagined spiritual powers to do whatever will bring him money and fame, with no thought of moral or spiritual considerations. Balak wants a curse placed on an entire nation, so that he can smite them (22:6). This is perfectly acceptable to Bil'am, as long as the price is right. Balak knows this, and therefore tempts Bil'am with money and honor (22:17; 22:37).

One wonders why the Torah devotes so much space and attention to an unscrupulous charlatan. What I suggest is that this account conveys a deeper message: about how, and with what intention, we approach God.

The religion of the ancient idolators involved a combination of magical incantations and rituals. If done in the correct manner, the gods would be pleased and all would be well in the world. The role of the clergy was to know the details of these magical incantations and rituals and to perform them precisely. This was the essence of ancient idolatry.

Some idolators took this one step further. They served the gods with the intent of controlling and manipulating them. This is known as theurgy, which means ‘operations intended to influence the Divine.’

Where is Bil'am in all this? On the one hand, he repeatedly invokes the name of God, and acknowledges him as the source of blessing. At the same time, he has an idolatrous mindset; he thinks that he can control the gods.

That is why, each time that Bil'am seeks to do Balak's bidding, he instructs Balak to build altars and offer up animals (23:1, 14, 29). And when God appears to Bil’am, he says, "I have arranged the seven altars and offered up a bull and a ram on the altar" (23:4). This is *all* he says, because he believes that through numerically-correct offerings he could manipulate God into doing his bidding.

The Bible allows for sincere sacrifices that reflect an authentic desire to draw close to God. The Torah (Deut. 33:19) and Psalms (51:21) speak of *ziv-chei tzedek*, sacrifices of righteousness, whose very name indicates that they are accompanied by a life of personal integrity. (See Isaiah 1:10-17, regarding sacrifices, and rituals in general, that are not accompanied by a life of integrity.) These are quite different from Bil'am's sacrifices, offered by a prophet-for-profit, in order to place a Divine curse on his employer's imagined enemies.

Let us look at two verses from the first oracle that God puts into Bil'am's mouth. One of the first verses is:

> How shall I curse
>
> > whom God has not cursed? (23:8)

The purpose of this statement is to inform Balak that God will not curse Israel. It also informs Bil'am that God cannot be manipulated, not by sacrifices and not by anything else.

That is the simple part of the story. What is of greater interest to us is the conclusion to Bil'am's first oracle. He prays for himself: "May I die the death of *yesharim*" (23:10). *Yesharim* (sing., *yashar*) means 'straight,' and refers here to 'morally straight,' the opposite of crooked. Bil'am prays that he die the death of 'upright people.'

This prayer is perplexing, because it seems to come out of nowhere. It has nothing to do with the subject at hand, which is Balak's desire to have Bil'am cursed Israel. What is it doing here?

It seems to me that by having Bil'am say this prayer, God is teaching him what the true path is. Unlike what Bil'am thought earlier, the way to God is not through magical incantations or precisely-performed rituals. Rather, the first step in walking with God is the way of *yesharim*, a life of spiritual awareness that begins with honesty and compassion. By putting in Bil'am's mouth a prayer that he die the death of *yesharim*, God is teaching him, and us, to what we should aspire.

Let us look now at the haftarah (reading from the Prophets) for this week's Torah portion, which is a section from Micah (5:6?6:8). There would seem to be a self-evident connection, since Micah is the only prophet who mentions the incident of Balak and Bil'am. Micah (6:5) calls on Israel to

> … remember what Balak, King of Moab, connived regarding you
>
> > and what Bil'am son of Be'or answered him.

There is, however, a subtler, more profound connection between the two sections. As we saw, one of themes of the story of Bil'am is how to serve God. And this is also what Micah teaches us. Immediately following the mention of Bil'am in the above verse, Micah poses the question that every spiritual seeker asks:

> With what shall I approach God, bow before God on high? (6:6)

How one comes near to God is a shared theme of our Torah portion and the haftarah. The 'common religion' of Micah's day was animal sacrifices, so Micah refers to that and asks:

> Shall I approach him with burnt offerings, with year-old calves?

The prophet reminds us that the *essence* of walking with God is a life of honesty and kindness and humility and spiritual awareness. It is only in that context that rituals have true spiritual value. Micah concludes this section with the verse (6:8) that guides us on how to walk with God:

> He has told you what is good
>
> > And what does God ask of you?
>
> ONLY
>
> To do what is just and to love kindness
>
> > And to walk humbly with your God

“To do what is just and to love kindness” are the two parts of the moral life. Between them, they encompass all human interactions.

“Walking with your God” refers to the spiritual life. Micah adds “humbly” because ‘humility’ is the single most important spiritual quality (though not the only one). In other words, what God asks of us is to live of moral and spiritual lives.

CLOSING THOUGHT

The story of Bil'am, in the way we explained it, is a statement about true religion. And religion is "true," from the Torah's standpoint, when it does three things:

First, when it teaches that the core of the Divine path is kindness, truth and walking with God humbly.

Second, when religion gives concrete expression to these values, offering real-life guidance on how to live a life of honesty, compassion, gratitude and holiness. It gives practical

And third, when religion provides rituals, to serve as reminders and to build community, while making clear that they are in a supporting role. (In this understanding, the rituals do not carry the same level of obligation as Micah’s three principles. Hence, Micah saying ONLY.)

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