

Does God have a Sense of Humor?

Bible scholars tell us that a story contained in this week's Torah portion, Parashat Balak, is intentionally funny. And when even a Bible scholar recognizes humor, you *know* it must be funny. In a minute, I'll go over the story and we'll see if you find it funny too. But first, I have to have a brief struggle with the theological implications of a funny passage in our sacred text. Can it be that God has a sense of humor? A Yiddish proverb wisecracks, "man tracht und Gott lacht" Man plans and God laughs, suggesting that God does have a sense of humor, but for the yiddish proverb God seems to prefer irony. We'll find irony in our Torah portion but also crazy surrealistic humor - - think Marx Brothers or Monte Python. Think cartoons.

The Babylonian Talmud has pondered this question. [Pause] Does God laugh? It asks. They quote Psalm 2 verse 4. "He who sits in heaven laughs." (Avodah Zarah 3b) but the whole question makes them a little nervous. We see in numerous Talmudic texts that respectable people like sages ought not to laugh but should maintain a sober demeanor (Avot 3:13, Berakhot 31a) so the notion of God guffawing is rather startling to them. Of course in the story of the Achnai oven (Bava Metzia 59b) when the rabbis outwit God in an argument, they are pleased to hear from Elijah the prophet that God laughed and exclaimed, "my children have defeated me, my children have defeated me!" But they are eager to limit the kinds of occasions on which God might show the divine sense of humor. Some argue that God laughs only at the end of time when the forces of chaos and evil are finally defeated (Shabbat 30b). We are also told that the Holy

One laughs with the righteous in the world to come (Shabbat 30b). Some argue that God laughs at hypocrisy, some that God laughs at the wicked (Avodah Zarah 3b), and this sort of laughter does resound in our parashah. But let's go to the story. You can judge for yourself.

Balak the king of Moab for whom our Torah portion is named is a worried man. Specifically he is worried about the Israelites moving into his neighborhood. He frets, "Now this horde will lick clean all that is about us as an ox licks up the grass of the field." Balak does not want to be licked. So he gets an idea. He will call upon that famous magician Bil'am son of Beor, for, as he writes to the great man, "I know that he whom you bless is blessed indeed and he whom you curse is cursed." If Bil'am will put a curse on Israel, Balak can defeat the weakened people in battle. So a distinguished delegation from Moab and from Midian set out to visit Bil'am. An archeological note: In 1967, a Dutch archeological team found a wall inscription dating from the 8th century BCE about a vision of a seer. The name of the seer? Bil'am ben Beor! He is one of the very few biblical characters for whom there is independent evidence outside the text of the Bible. So you see, he was very famous indeed or had a superbly competent publicist.

In our story, once the delegation has made its request, God visits Bil'am in the night and gives him, not a riddling oracle that can be interpreted this way or that, but a straightforward order: "Do not go with them. You must not curse that people for they are blessed." Bil'am sends the delegation away but a second delegation arrives promising rich reward. Bil'am tells them he can do only what

God will let him do, but he invites this delegation to stay overnight awaiting his prophetic dream: as if God might change his mind when He hears how much money there is in this for Bil'am ben Beor.

Part of the problem is that Bil'am is a diviner and a clairvoyant. That's why he needs hilltops and solitude and also bed, to practice his craft. But though Bil'am says correctly that he can only reveal what God has already willed, he still believes that if he is in the right place, or prepares the right recipe or pushes the right cosmic button, he can get God to do what he wants. And that's not how clairvoyance and divination work. *Balak* thinks that Bil'am is a sorcerer with the power to determine or change Israel's destiny, but *that* is not in Bil'am's skill set.

That night God comes to Bil'am and tells him, "You can go with them but you'll say only the words that I put into your mouth. And Bil'am, still looking for the right cosmic button, arises in the morning, saddles up his donkey and goes to Balak. On his way God gives him series of broad hints that this is a futile errand. He places in Bil'am's way an angel with a drawn sword. The donkey sees the angel and swerves to avoid it, and Bil'am beats her. This happens three times and the third time, when there's no room to swerve, the donkey simply lies down in the road with Bil'am on her back. Bil'am furiously beats the donkey, and then amazingly, God gives the donkey speech, and she calmly begins to reason with the irate and illogical wise man. "Look, I am the donkey you have been riding all along until this day! Have I been in the habit of doing this to you?" Bil'am does not exhibit surprise; he simply goes on complaining until God makes him able to see the angel. But he doesn't yet grasp who really is the ass in this situation. He

has been shown that a donkey, hardly the smartest of beasts, has greater powers of spiritual discernment than he does. He has been warned by an angel with a drawn sword. A wise man would turn around and go home- - but not Bil'am! He does tell the angel he erred in not seeing it and he does half-heartedly offer to go home, but the angel simply reminds him that he will be able to say only what he is told and lets him go.

Bil'am is playing with both God and Balak. He tells Balak he will only be able to utter what God puts in his mouth, but he does not refuse him and return home. Balak feasts Bil'am and prepares seven altars with a lavish sacrifice to buy God's favor. He takes him to a height where Bil'am can see the people Israel. The first attempt goes badly. Bil'am does have a message from God but not one Balak likes. The incensed king says, "I brought you here to curse my enemies and instead you have blessed them!" But Balak suggests that seeing so many of the Israelites has discombobulated Bil'am. He suggests a hilltop with a more restricted view. Again they build seven altars and on each make a lavish sacrifice. This second sacrifice goes no better than the first. Bil'am returns with a stinging rebuke for Balak and a prophecy blessing Israel. Israel's future is assured, he says, for with God as their king they are invincible. Frantic, Balak begs Bil'am, "don't curse them and don't bless them."

But having invested so much already, Balak can't resist one more try to find a propitious spot to curse Israel. Seven altars and seven lavish sacrifices later Bil'am turns his face to the forbidding wilderness and gets ready to curse, but what comes out is not a divination but again a prophecy beginning with "*mah*

tovu ohalekha yaakov, mishkenoteikha Israel.” In the arid wilderness Bil’am sees a vision of trees planted by water, of lush gardens, of boughs dripping with moisture. He prophesies “Blessed are they who bless you [Israel] and accursed they who curse you.” Bil’am has blessed Israel three times and he has cursed his Moabite and Midianite employers. Balak tells him rudely to leave, but Bil’am has one more prophecy. He prophesies, “A star rises from Jacob, A scepter comes forth from Israel. It smashes the brow of Moab” He goes on to predict the destruction also of the Edomites, the Amalekites, the Kenites and some other folk we have trouble identifying. Then freed from the grip of involuntary prophecy, Bil’am the great goes home, humiliated and empty-handed.

So *does* God laugh? Apparently on the day the wicked are discomfited, God laughs. Moreover, in tractate Avodah Zarah [3b] of the Talmud, Rav Judah shows that there is time for play in God’s daily schedule. According to ‘Rav Judah, “During the first 3 hours of the day, The Holy One occupies himself with the Torah. During the second three He sits in judgment on the whole world. . . During the third quarter He is feeding the whole world, from the horned buffalo to the brood of vermin. During the fourth quarter He is playing with Leviathan, the giant sea-monster, as it says in Ps. 104, There is Leviathan whom you formed to play with. And Rabbi Nachman bar Yitzchak added, “Yes He plays *with* His creatures but does not laugh *at* His creatures except on that day [when the wicked are exposed.] That’s reasonable.

We too like to laugh when the villain’s pants fall down.