

That Magic Moment—Balak 5782

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Being out here tonight in the Rudin Garden is the perfect setting in which to tell the story of a talking donkey. It's a little like the Torah's version of *Shrek*.

Here's the story in a nutshell: A wicked king named Balak is irritated that the Israelites are planning to traipse through his country on the way to the Promised Land.

So, he hires this guy named Bil'am—a freelance prophet you could hire in those days—to put a curse on the Israelites so maybe they would turn back or change their route and not come through his territory.

Bil'am takes the job. But, try as he might, he is simply unable to curse them; the Torah says God just wouldn't let it happen. He keeps trying, but every time his plot is foiled.

One time, his donkey—who, it seems, was in on God's plan to keep Bil'am from doing this—tries to run Bil'am off the road into a ditch. He gets furious at the donkey and starts hitting her with his stick.

The donkey responds, not with a bray or a whimper, but by starting to talk:

"What's the deal, bro?" she says, "Why are you hitting me like that? Stop it!"

And the conversation goes on from there.

Now, if you're wondering why in the world the Torah has a story about a talking donkey, you're not the only one. The sages wondered the same thing. And here's how they explain it:

We know that, when God created the world, God made animals on the sixth day, right before creating human beings.

And we know that the key thing distinguishing human beings from the rest of the animals is that human beings can speak—and animals can't. That's the way of nature.

But, here, the donkey talks—so it is obviously some *supernatural* anomaly: "supernatural" meaning something that defies the natural way of the world.

Oh, and speaking of things like that: Didn't we see the earth open up and swallow Korach and his buddies whole a couple weeks ago? And what about that mysterious water-well that followed the Israelites through the desert for all those years until Miriam died?

Hmm, the sages thought. During the six days of Creation, God made all of nature—and nature follows certain rules. And one of those rules is that donkeys don't talk.

But obviously, God must have made this donkey, too. So, when did that happen?

And here, the rabbis give us one of their coolest teachings.

They say: God created the talking donkey, and the mouth of the earth that swallowed Korach, and the traveling well; these and seven other supernatural things in the Torah, *after* the sixth and final day of Creation but *before* the seventh day—the first Shabbat—began.

And that liminal moment—that slice of time *after* the end of the day, but *before* the onset of evening (we're actually almost there right now)—they call "*bein hash'mashot*," meaning literally "between the lights," or "twilight," for short.

And *bein hash'mashot* (twilight), they say, is as quick as the blink of an eye; so quick it is barely perceptible at all.

This is a profound and deeply spiritual teaching.

It means that in that tiny slice of time as quick as the blink of an eye, God fashioned a whole other layer of Reality (with a capital R):

A layer that holds elements of life that defy the normal rules, and patterns, and expectations based on logic and intellect and empirical data.

Aspects of life we simply cannot understand.

In a word, it's this layer of Reality where *mystery* dwells.

We're not accustomed to thinking this way.

We live in an age and a culture that is intensely scientific and rational.

To us, Reality is the sum-total of what we can see and touch and demonstrate—no more and no less.

If we can't *prove* it, we decide it doesn't exist. It's not "*real*."

But Judaism doesn't think that way.

From the sages of the Talmud to the kabbalists of Spain and Tzfat, to the Chasidim and modern mystical philosophers like Heschel, our tradition teaches that Reality is *much* bigger than what we can perceive with our eyes or demonstrate with our rational proofs.

- Some say that angels are all around us, all the time.
- Some say we are just a tiny part of a grand cosmic drama unfolding across time, space, and dimensions we cannot even begin to fathom.
- Some say the world and everything in it are mirrored in a heavenly realm that exists in parallel to our own, and that everything we do here has ramifications in that realm, too.

But we miss it; we miss all of it. Not because it isn't *real*, but because we are oblivious to all but the little piece of Reality we can see and prove.

We mistakenly think we can know everything about Reality—and if we don't yet know it, we will one day.

But, in truth, no matter how much our finite minds discover about the cosmos, all we will *ever* see is a very narrow piece of the puzzle, as though we are looking at it through a keyhole in the door.

In our hyperrational world, we have lost our sense of the mystery.

To live a spiritual life, I think, is to reclaim our sense of awe and to marvel at the inexplicability of existence.

To be spiritual is to embrace the *possibility*—the possibility that even though we cannot see or prove certain things, they may still be real.

It's to *choose* to believe, against all evidence to the contrary, that the seemingly impossible is somehow possible.

To live spiritually is to accept that there are, and always will be, things about life and the world that we *cannot* understand—and, in the words of my former colleague Rabbi Karyn Kedar, *surrender* to that mystery.

And once we do that, well...paradoxically, I believe the world will open up to us in entirely new ways, and we will experience majesty and divinity all around us like we never have before.

And where we once ached with pain over our inability to understand, we will be filled with reverence and wonder, and our spirit will be comforted by the knowledge that, as finite human beings, some things are beyond our ability to know and control. And there's freedom and peace in that.

It's to believe that in the face of the mystery, God has our back.

The mystery was created at twilight, a slice of time that passes as quickly as the blink of an eye.

If we don't consciously search for it, we'll miss it.

That's why the rabbis gave us a *halakhah* to follow in that liminal moment after Friday ends but before Shabbat begins.

They said it's precisely at that moment that we are supposed to say the evening Sh'ma.

Think about that: In that magic moment when mystery was created, we say the Sh'ma.

Why? Because in the face of mystery—whether it inspires us to new heights or knocks us down so hard we can barely move—all we can do is surrender to it and proclaim the reality of the One God.

Shabbat Shalom!