Global Day of Jewish Learning
Curriculum: Heroes and Villains, Saints and Fools

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A Project of the Aleph Society
Introduction (10 minutes)

» Begin by asking participants their assumptions about biblical prophets.

1. Which characters in the Bible are prophets? Who stands out as a memorable prophet?
2. What are the abilities and functions of prophets?
3. What are some character traits of prophets?
4. Do prophets always act for the good?

A prophet is someone with great power. He or she is different from the average person: God speaks to prophets, showing them the future or giving them a special message to bring to the people. Some well-known Israelite prophets at times appear to have flawed character traits, yet they always seem to act out of a motivation to benefit the Israelites. In this unit we’ll meet a prophet named Balaam, who is not an Israelite—which in and of itself may challenge your notion of prophecy—and who seems motivated to use his prophetic abilities to harm the Israelites. Our study of this complex character will challenge us to consider an important question: how do we use our talents?

Share this summary of the story of Balaam (Numbers 22–24).

Let me summarize the story of Balaam, which appears in Numbers Chapters 22–24.

Balak, King of Moab, is frightened by the approaching Israelite nation and he asks Balaam to curse them. Balaam informs Balak that he will only be able to do what God allows. Though God grudgingly permits Balaam to pursue this mission, He is angry with Balaam for going. On the way, an angel blocks Balaam’s path. His donkey perceives the presence of the angel while Balaam does not; an unusual dialogue with the donkey ensues. Balaam attempts to build altars and use different vantage points to curse the Israelites but he ultimately blesses them three times. After Balak, in effect, fires him, Balaam offers one final prophetic speech about the future of Israel.

Part One: Meeting Balaam (5 minutes)

» Ask a participant to read Text #1 aloud.

Text #1: Numbers 22:1–14

פיפסמר בֶּן ア-ד
טְיֶשֶׁנ בֶּן יָשְׁרָאֵל וְיִתְנְבֹּרָה מַלְאֹךְ מַעְשֵׂרָה לָרוּחַ:
(ב) וַיְבָא כַּלָּחַ בֶּן אָפִּלָּחַ אֶת כָּל אֶשְׁרָאֵל יָשָׁרָאֵל לֵאָבְדָי
(ג) וְלָא מָאֵב מַלְאֹךְ מַעְשֵׂר כָּל הָאֱלֹהִים כֹּל הָאֱלֹהִים מַלְאֹךְ מַעְשֵׂר
(ד) לִבְּשָׂר מֶלֶךְ אֶת אֶשְׁרָאֵל שֵׁם יִבְּשָׂר מֶלֶךְ מֶלֶךְ כֹּל אֶשְׁרָאֵל יָשָׁרָאֵל
כֹּהֵן הָהוֹא: [Translation of Text #1]

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The Israelites then marched on and encamped in the steppes of Moab, across the Jordan from Jericho. Balak son of Zippor saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites. Moab was alarmed because that people was so numerous. Moab dreaded the Israelites, and Moab said to the elders of Midian, “Now this horde will lick clean all that is about us as an ox licks up the grass of the field.” Balak son of Zippor, who was king of Moab at that time, sent messengers to Balaam son of Beor in Pethor, which is by the Euphrates, in the land of his kinsfolk, to invite him, saying, “There is a people that came out from Egypt; it hides the earth from view, and it is settled next to me. Come then, put a curse upon this people for me, since they are too numerous for me; perhaps I can thus defeat them and drive them off. For I know that he whom you bless is blessed indeed, and he whom you curse is cursed.”

The elders of Moab and the elders of Midian, versed in divination, set out. They came to Balaam and gave him Balak’s message. Balaam arose in the morning and said to Balak’s dignitaries, “Go back to your own country, for the LORD will not let me go with you.”

**Ask:**
1. Describe Balaam and what Balak wants him to do.
2. What is your first impression of Balaam’s talent as a prophet?
Part Two: An Unlikely Comparison—Moses and Balaam (5 minutes)

Let us look briefly at a famous text about Moses, and a related commentary on Deuteronomy in the "Sifre Devarim" (a 4th century rabbinic work).

Ask a participant to read aloud Texts #2 and #3.

Text #2: Deuteronomy 34:10

Never again did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moses—whom the LORD singled out, face to face.

Text #3: Sifre Devarim 357:10

In Israel none arose but one did among the nations and this is Balaam ben Beor.

Ask:

1. What about these texts surprises you?
2. What do these texts suggest about the talent level of Balaam?

Both Moses and Balaam are considered to be prophets of the same caliber. The impression given here is that Balaam is a prophet of impeccable standing.

Part Three: Talent for Sale? (20 minutes)

Ask participants to form groups of two or three for the "chevruta" style of learning. Chevruta, or partnered learning, has the added benefit of two people sharing ideas and insights as they learn together.

Ask chevruta pairs to read Text #4 together and discuss the question which follows.
Then Balak sent other dignitaries, more numerous and distinguished than the first. They came to Balaam and said to him, “Thus says Balak son of Zippor: Please do not refuse to come with me. I will reward you richly and I will do anything you ask of me. Only come and damn this people for me.” Balaam replied to Balak’s officials, “Though Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not do anything, big or little, contrary to the command of the LORD my God. So you, too, stay here overnight, and let me find out what else the LORD may say to me.”

Ask:

1. Given Balaam’s response to the dignitaries, how would you describe his relationship with God?

Balaam seems to be so committed to God that there would be nothing, not even a house full of silver and gold, that could entice him to go against the word of God.

In contrast to reading these verses as showing Balaam’s subservience to God, the next two texts propose alternative readings. Text #5, by R. Joseph Bekhor Shor (a 12th century French commentator and poet), sees Balaam as opening a negotiation with the dignitaries. Text #6, from Deuteronomy, also implies Balaam’s greed.

Ask your chevruta pairs to read Texts #5 and #6.


This is the way of those who desire bribes. In a crafty fashion they state a bribery amount, as Efron said, “A land worth four hundred silver shekels” [Genesis 23:14], and thus gave a monetary amount. Abraham heard, understood, and gave it to him. So too here [in Numbers 22:18], he [Balaam] intended to fix an amount for the bribe so that he would increase his profit.

Note: Bekhor Shor’s comment refers to Genesis 23, in which Efron negotiates a price for the sale of his land to Abraham, who wishes to bury Sarah there.
Text #6: Deuteronomy 23:4-6

4 No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted into the congregation of the LORD; none of their descendants, even in the tenth generation, shall ever be admitted into the congregation of the LORD, 5 because they did not meet you with food and water on your journey after you left Egypt, and because they hired Balaam son of Beor, from Pethor of Aram-naharaim, to curse you.—6 But the LORD your God refused to heed Balaam; instead, the LORD your God turned the curse into a blessing for you, for the LORD your God loves you.

Bring the full group together and ask:

1. Do these texts change your opinion of Balaam? How and why?
2. What are examples of people selling their talents in our modern society? When is this behavior praiseworthy and when might this be worthy of condemnation?

Part Four: Same Action, Different Intentions (10 minutes)

Let’s continue with Balaam on his journey and see how one aspect of the story is interpreted in the Talmud.

Read Text #7.


20 That night God came to Balaam and said to him, “If these men have come to invite you, you may go with them. But whatever I command you, that you shall do.” 21 And Balaam rose up in the morning, and saddled his ass, and went with the princes of Moab. 22 But God was incensed at his going; so an angel of the LORD placed himself in his way as an adversary...
Balaam: To Bless or To Curse

Ask:

1. What do the first two verses of this text convey about Balaam?
2. How might the concluding verse challenge your previous interpretation?
3. Why was God angry with Balaam for going? Hadn't he just told him to go?

Read Text #8.


The verse says about Balaam “And Balaam rose in the morning and saddled his donkey,” (Numbers 22:21). A Sage taught in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar: Love nullifies the fence of distinction, and this is learned from Avraham, as the verse says: “And Avraham rose early in the morning and saddled his donkey,” (Genesis 22:3). He himself did this and he did not wait for his servants. Similarly hate nullifies the fence of distinction, as the verse says: “And Balaam rose early in the morning and saddled his donkey,” (Numbers 22:21).

Ask:

1. How would you summarize the message of this text?
2. According to this text, how are love and hate similar?

Part Five: Using Your Talents (5 minutes)

Balaam can be viewed as an individual with great prophetic ability, as well as someone who acts based on greed and hatred. How can we understand Balaam's use—or misuse—of his talents? A comment by Rabbi Steinsaltz will serve as a springboard for our discussion of this question.

Ask a participant to read Text #9.

Text #9: Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz. My Rebbe.

In Judaism, ruach hakodesh is the ability to know things in the present or the future, through a personal bond with the world of the spiritual. Sometimes Jews and non-Jews, even nonbelievers, are given a form of ruach hakodesh as a gift; in secular terms we might call it ESP. The biblical Balaam was surely not a nice person. His arrogance is quite apparent, his bias against the Israelites and for the Moabites is evident—but he nevertheless possessed a connection to the holy spirit. Jews consider his prophecies to be at a very high level, and they are even included in the daily prayer.
Ask:

1. What message is Rabbi Steinsaltz trying to impart?
2. Why would God grant prophecy to an evil person?
3. Or why would God incline a great prophet toward evil? Of Balaam, Balak says, “He whom you bless is blessed indeed” (Numbers 22:6). If that were true, would it mean Balaam does good, in addition to evil? If so, how would that affect your opinion of Balaam?

Conclusion (5 minutes)

In the end, Balaam heads out to curse the Children of Israel. God does not allow the curses to leave Balaam’s mouth and instead changes Balaam’s words into blessings; thus Balaam blesses the Children of Israel three times. One of the blessings is now part of morning prayers (Mah Tovu begins with Numbers 24:5—“How fair are your tents, O Jacob, Your dwellings, O Israel”).

Ask:

1. Does this end result alter your opinion? How important are Balaam's intentions?
2. Are you surprised to learn that a prayer that is said daily comes from someone intent on cursing the Children of Israel? Why do you think it was chosen as part of the daily prayer service?
3. What messages can we take away from this story?
The Israelites then marched on and encamped in the steppes of Moab, across the Jordan from Jericho.

Balak son of Zippor saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites.

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and Moab said to the elders of Midian, “Now this horde will lick clean all that is about us as an ox licks up the grass of the field.” Balak son of Zippor, who was king of Moab at that time, sent messengers to Balaam son of Beor in Pethor, which is by the Euphrates, in the land of his kinsfolk, to invite him, saying, “There is a people that came out of Egypt; it hides the earth from view, and it is settled next to me. Come then, put a curse upon this people for me, since they are too numerous for me; perhaps I can thus defeat them and drive them out of the land. For I know that he whom you bless is blessed indeed, and he whom you curse is cursed.”

The elders of Moab and the elders of Midian, versed in divination, set out. They came to Balaam and gave him Balak’s message. He said to them, “Spend the night here, and I shall reply to you as the LORD may instruct me.” So the Moabite dignitaries stayed with Balaam.

God came to Balaam and said, “What do these people want of you?”
10 Balaam said to God, “Balak son of Zippor, king of Moab, sent me this message: 11 Here is a people that came out from Egypt and hides the earth from view. Come now and curse them for me; perhaps I can engage them in battle and drive them off.” 12 But God said to Balaam, “Do not go with them. You must not curse that people, for they are blessed.” 13 Balaam arose in the morning and said to Balak’s dignitaries, “Go back to your own country, for the LORD will not let me go with you.” 14 The Moabite dignitaries left, and they came to Balak and said, “Balaam refused to come with us.”

Part Two: An Unlikely Comparison—Moses and Balaam

Text #2: Deuteronomy 34:10

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Text #3: Sifre Devarim 357:10

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Part Three: Talent for Sale?

Text #4: Numbers 22:15–19

"In the morning, Balaam arose, and the leaders of Moab called to him. He said to them, 'I must return in the morning to my own people, but you have not called me to come to you today if you will offer me an ox and a young bull, I will come to you. But if it is not good for me to come to you, I will not come at all.' So they prepared the oxen and the young bulls and sent word to Balaam, saying, 'Come, and we will consult with our leaders.' Then Balaam got into his donkey and set out toward Moab.

Balaam: To Bless or To Curse
Then Balak sent other dignitaries, more numerous and distinguished than the first. They came to Balaam and said to him, “Thus says Balak son of Zippor: Please do not refuse to come with me. I will reward you richly and I will do anything you ask of me. Only come and damn this people for me.” Balaam replied to Balak’s officials, “Though Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not do anything, big or little, contrary to the command of the LORD my God. So you, too, stay here overnight, and let me find out what else the LORD may say to me.”

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