

God does not have a Dark-Side and Balaam is it.

‘There is no sorcery in Jacob, no divination in Israel. Now Jacob and Israel will be told what things God has done!’ (Num. 23:23)

The Izbicy explains: Sometimes we use force to make a thing happen because we want it so much. No matter whether we are the one who should be deciding and decreeing, even when we are not the person empowered to do it, we fixate and obsess until nothing stands between us and the object of our passion. We are ready to do whatever it takes, spend however much energy or treasure, taking however much risk, to achieve the goal.

Such is the nature of sorcery. Here is where a certain line is crossed from resolve and purposefulness into the practice of magic and the application of force. Magic first applies to the practitioner, changing them into someone stubborn and undeviating, incapable of being moved or deterred – only afterwards is it applied to achieving the goal. Attempting sorcery when you are weak is very dangerous.

Divination is quite the opposite. Sometimes we desire a certain outcome so much, the power of our desire creates a spreading field, a vortex of longing that sucks other people and things into its flux, but the diviner does not achieve his ends by the application of force.

Some people refuse to take an ethical or principled stand; they adopt a neutral pose on every issue. Observing unfolding events as nothing more or less than an invitation to make a profit or gain an advantage, they only join sides when they are sure who the victors and winners will be. They call it ‘going with flow’. When they are in doubt about a move they look for omens, signs and portents, some indication that minimizes risk. They plumb the deepest most powerful currents to make sure they know which direction to take, making sure they are never in opposition to the flow of events, they are very careful not to apply force to shape events or determine outcomes by their own choices.

Even when the choice is clearly between right and wrong they profess neutrality. ‘It’s the wrong time to insist,’ they declare. ‘This is not the place to fight,’ they rationalize. Though they have sufficient power, knowledge or motive to make a difference, they demur until their own success is assured, only then do they move. The diviner always looks at the situation before examining himself, and it is the situation which will dictate the action rather than his desire or principle.

Practicing divination when you should be taking action is contemptible.

Both sorcery and divination have their place depending on the situation and the person. As a rule, in Scripture, when Jacob and Israel are juxtaposed in a single verse, Jacob refers to the weaker and Israel to the more powerful individual. So the verse quoted above makes sense - Jacob the weak doesn’t practice sorcery, while Israel the powerful does not rely on divination.

Balaam was the most powerful diviner and soothsayer the world has ever seen. He could feel the deepest currents of the cosmos. It is said he could even scry that single switching instant in every twenty-four hour period when God is angry, frustrated and disappointed at His People – the Jews. Balaam’s crafty intention was to insert a swift, sharp curse into that singular moment, to destroy the Israelites. Balaam was the ultimate opportunist.

We would know nothing of this whole episode if God had not revealed it to Moses as a chapter written into the Torah. The story tells us what Balak, King of Moab thought, how terrified he was of the Jewish People and how much treasure he was prepared to expend to ensure their perdition, so he sent for Balaam to come and curse the Israelites. On the road Balaam’s long

suffering ass miraculously began speaking and rebuking him for his cruelty. Balak and Balaam sought a vantage point from which they could look out over the Israelite camp to practice their sorcery and divination against us. Ultimately, God swapped the words inside Balaam's mouth, turning every curse into blessing.

The question is this: why does the Torah dedicate an entire Sidra to the story, why is it so important for us to know what nefarious schemes Balak and Balaam tried to pull off?

If we examine the end of the verse above, in which Balaam praised us for not practicing sorcery and divination we read: 'Now Jacob and Israel will be told what things God has done.' This Sidra isn't really about Balaam, it's about God and what He does.

What precisely does God do when He isn't interacting directly with us?

In trying to answer such a question we are faced not only with our lack of knowledge, but with the difficulty in deciding what the words and the question mean. When we ask what does God do, what do the words 'God do' actually mean? Is God an active being, does He do things?

In the Creation story of Genesis, we read how God 'did' everything in six days; that on the seventh day He rested. Did it rain on the seventh day, did the sun shine and the grass grow; in what way was God resting?

As Jews we have been thinking about this question for thousands of years, literally thousands of years. We realized long ago that it's nearly impossible to talk about God without sounding ignorant or silly and that we might spend eternity just arguing about what words and phrases are acceptable to discuss God with. But we want to share our ideas of God with one another, so much, that we have had to agree on certain things, just to get the conversation going.

It all boils down to words. We discuss God using words and our descriptions of God are just words; in fact, the God of our Jewish understanding is nothing but words. Judaism is obsessively careful to think of God as a word, which is an abstract concept, and not an object. As a result we have a word comprising four Hebrew letters (YHV" H) that we think of as God. What it means is that over thousands of years Jews have trained themselves to think of God as a word and not an image of a thing.

Gentiles refer to us as the People of the Book, but they are wrong; their thinking is shaped by their common love of pictures. They think in images, so they sum us up with the representation of a thing – a Book. We are, more precisely, the People of the Word. Consult a dictionary and you will find the noun - WORD has a most complicated definition.

To Jews, God is a word. It stands to reason then that every created thing is also a word. The universe is a word, which explains why it was spoken into being. Even those parts of the world that were not spoken, the first verses in Genesis, 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth,' (before the verses telling us what God said) are also God's speechⁱ, because God's acts are God's speech.

The Sidra of Balak teaches us what God says when not speaking to us; when talking to Himself.

The psalmist says, 'I will listen for what God the LORD says; for when He speaks it is of peace to His people, His godly ones.' (Ps. 85:9)

We know what God says when He speaks to us, and it is only to be expected that a prophet hears God saying good things about His People. In this psalm, though, explains the Izbicy, the psalmist describes how he listened to God talking to Himself. He listened and overheard God talking, and it was all about peace for His People.

Just how does one listen to hear God speaking to Himself?

Seeing has an advantage over listening, as a person may see many things happening at once, while it is impossible to pay attention to two voices at the same time. Listening has an advantage over seeing, in that you can hear what is going on deep inside something, while you can only see what's happening on the surface.

In order to hear God talking you have to be moving and paying attention with your entire body; your arms and legs have to be just as focused on listening as your ears.

Balaam was such an excellent listener he could hear that split second during which God stops speaking good about us (according to the Talmud (Brachoth 7a) the precise value is 1/141.357 of a second, or 1/508888 of an hour).

How did Balaam become such a good listener?

Earlier we explained that Balaam was the great master of divination, and how the diviner works by avoiding direct confrontation or proactive risk taking. In this story it is Balak, the Moabite king hiring Balaam to curse Israel who is the great sorcerer.

'Balaam said to God, "Balak son of Tzipor, King of Moab, has sent for me.'" (Num. 22:10) But Balaam was lying. It was he who moved Balak to send for him, by the sheer potency of his longing. Balaam had been waiting all his life for someone to utilize his services to curse the Jews. But Balaam's waiting was not passive and inactive. Desire as hungry, primal and deep as Balaam's to hurt us, is not simply a negative emotion. It creates ripples which move outward at the speed of Creation, connecting with anything in the universe willing to engage it, to forward its aims. Balaam, rutting in his stable, waiting for someone to engage his divinatory abilities is just as powerful as Balak, the mighty sorcerer attempting to force his will on nature and bend the whole world to his bidding.

Balaam's desire is cosmic, sucking Balak into his ambit like the Earth pulls on the Moon. We can observe the Moon and Earth interacting just by looking at the way the tides rise and fall in seas and oceans. What we don't notice when looking at the tides is the pull of the Sun, because it's too strong to be noticeable. The Sun's gravitational pull goes right through the Earth as though it were not there, while the moon's pull only affects that side of the Earth it shines down on.

Balak and Balaam interact without realizing they are mere pawns in God's game. They resemble the Earth and Moon pulling on one another, unconscious of being in an inescapable orbit around the Sun.

Balaam in his own small way mirrors God's desire for the Jewish People, but Balaam's desire is to see us cursed, shriveling and diminishing, instead of flourishing and expanding. Balaam's desire is to gobble up the Jewish People, to absorb all our power and goodness, to empowered himself by soaking up all our divine energy, by attracting all the goodness and holiness God pours into us, and has been emptying into us since before Creation began.

You see what it is; in order to hear what God says when He's talking to Himself you have to connect to the Original Thought which arose before God desired the Creation of the World. That original thought was of us, of you and me, of Israel. There God speaks only of peace for His People and for his godly ones. The Hebrew word for 'godly ones' is HASIDAV – God's Hasidim, and the individual who comes to mind when we think of God's godly ones, is King David.

There is nothing David can do which will interfere with God's plan that was hatched before Creation, because all God did then was to speak peace to us. And if you learn to listen as carefully as Balaam did in his hatred and David did in his love, you will hear nothing else but God speaking good things unto His people.

This entire Sidra is here to inform us of God's love for us which began with the Original Thought, the very thought that sparked Creation. We are always there. Balaam is an afterthought, an artifact whose purpose and significance is to demonstrate his own purposelessness and insignificance. To give us an inkling of the greater picture, of the cosmic forces being worked by the fingers of God, of the blessings God pours into us all the time, for all time.

ⁱ Talmud, Rosh Hashana 32a