

Shabbat Balak

This week's Torah portion begins in the wake of the Israelite victory over an array of enemies. Although known as Balak, it's really the story of the Prophet Balaam whom the Moabite king Balak calls upon to curse the Israelites in an attempt to find some divine protection from this great military threat that he fears.

Interestingly, although not a Hebrew, Balaam is what we might call God-fearing. Not so unusual really for the world that the Bible depicts, in which ancient peoples (including the early Israelites) believed in the existence of gods other than their own.

So try as Balak does to get Balaam to issue a potent curse against the Israelites, Balaam is persuaded by divine intervention in the form of an angel that he can't do it, and instead must proclaim a blessing.

I know a very thoughtful and analytical but atheistic Jew who reminds me of Balaam. His name is Lawrence or Larry Bush, and he's the editor of *Jewish Currents*, an old-line leftwing magazine that is also a web platform today. It literally emerged from the Communist Party as an independent publication 70 years ago, in 1946.

Being leftwing or progressive has always been and remains part of its *raison d'être*. I often find this a little too doctrinaire. But it's broad enough in its tolerance of diverse views that I can usually fit myself in there as a center-left Zionist. The general perspective of the magazine toward Israel is as non-Zionists who endorse its right to exist in security, but are more often than not critical of its policies. From time to time, Larry Bush has allowed me to write pieces that were at odds with the magazine's politics; for example, I've argued for a more militarily aggressive US policy in Syria than they endorse.

During the ten or more years Bush has served as editor, one of his innovations is in honestly exploring Jewish religiosity, from the point of view of a respectful *apicures*, and not with the very negative and scornful perspective of a traditional Marxist. In that vein, he wrote a book some years ago called *Waiting for God: The Spiritual Explorations of a Reluctant Atheist*.

In a review he's written recently of Rabbi Donnie Hartman's *Putting God Second: How to Save Religion from Itself*, he mentioned that he is sometimes invited to synagogues to speak as a secular Jew. Bush's essay is called "[Bridging the Jewish Secular-Religious Divide](#)." As he puts it:

I admire those rabbis who invite me, for their willingness to acknowledge the presence of agnostic and even atheist Jews in their congregations ...

For those of us not raised within a synagogue tradition and not dedicated to the proposition that there's a God in our universe, liturgy is boring, and prayer seems an awful waste of our time together, addressing the You when we want to be addressing the We — while for Jews who love Judaism ... and feel drawn to the liturgy, prayer is spiritually uplifting, comforting and nostalgic. . . .

Bush wants to build a bridge across this divide, but generally doubts that this is possible:

. . . To my left, I see secular Jews having less and less connection with the Jewish tradition, out of ignorance, indifference, anti-religious bias . . . To my right, I see religious Jews engrossed in their individualistic “spirituality” and unwilling to compromise their comfort in order to build a fuller-bodied community.

But he's somewhat encouraged by an Israeli educator, Rabbi Donniel Hartman, whose provocative book is about the need to place humanism ahead of God in modern Judaism. According to Bush, “*Putting God Second* is a bridge-building work that deserves both a secular and religious readership ...”

Putting God Second identifies two “auto-immune diseases” within Judaism that threaten its relevance and its communal health: “God Intoxication” and “God Manipulation.” The first is exemplified in the story of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yokhai's exile in a cave, where he hides ... as a fugitive from the Romans for some dozen years. After being immersed for all that time in prayer and meditation, Shimon emerges and finds [non-spiritual] everyday life so deeply offensive that he literally incinerates farmers with his thoughts — until God sends him back into his cave . . . The story (in the Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 33b) is “a testimony,” writes Hartman, “to the powerful attraction, and the misguided destructiveness, of God Intoxication,” which leaves “those who pursue the most intense and consuming intimacy with God . . . least able to hear God's voice.”

. . . If “God Intoxication” is fundamentally a disease of self-abnegation (God is everything, we must submit to God's service at all times), the second disease associated with Judaism, “God Manipulation,” is one of arrogance, in which God is invoked, Hartman writes, “in the service of our own interests, while [we] simultaneously [are] waving the banner of divine approval.” The symptoms of this disease include a belief in Jewish chosenness, a moral double-standard for the non-Jewish world . . . “For those who claim to own God,” Hartman observes, “there is no sin that

cannot be purified, sanctified, and ultimately transformed into a virtue.” . .

I disagree with this characterization of chosenness, which can be defined as a burden rather than a manifestation of moral superiority, but Hartman is correct in observing this arrogance as an inherent danger in the concept. Bush continues:

THE FAMOUS STORY of Hillel summarizing Judaism “while standing on one foot” is full of significance for Hartman, who notes that Hillel’s summation of “the whole Torah” — “What is hateful to you, don’t do to others” — is not even a quote from the Torah. Rather, Hillel is here testifying to an obligation to be ethically sensitive to other human beings that is not God-dependent, according to Hartman. Humans have “the intrinsic capacity to discern the good,” . . . “Only when religious people can point to a standard of right and good and just, grounded in an independent moral conscience,” he believes, “can we prevent the systemic, pseudo-pious violation of basic morality toward others that has been such a prominent and persistent feature of religious life.”

Personally, I’ve struggled with this religious-secular divide within myself, having been brought up in a non-observant home that identified strongly as Jewish (e.g., parents who escaped the Holocaust, grandparents and numerous other relatives who did not, with half the survivors settling in Israel), while having a conventional Conservative religious education, including some nice Camp Ramah experiences. For a time, Reconstructionism squared the circle for me.

I can find a good prayer service uplifting, because of its aesthetics, or out of a sense of nostalgia for my early religious experiences, or sometimes because a Dvar Torah is especially meaningful.

What may be meaningful in a secular-religious dialogue depends upon which side of the divide you’re coming from, and which side you’re addressing. Hartman tries to open up believers to what is valuable from skeptical or non-faith perspectives, and Larry Bush speaks to non-believers with an openness to what’s valuable in the faith tradition.

But Larry seems to want both in the same institution. This is difficult; Reconstructionism may come closest to doing this with its supposed rejection of the supernatural. We at the West Side Minyan may come very close as well, given our tolerance of diversity.

Question: Would any of you care to speak to this tension between the religious tradition and how you may well believe the cosmos actually works?