

A Talking Donkey? Yeah, Right!

A D'var Torah on *Parashat Balak* (Num. 22:2 – 25:9)

By Alan I. Friedman

“Vayar Balak ben-Tzipor eit kol-asher-asah Yisrael la-Emori....”
“When Balak, son of Tzipor, saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites....”

Then Adonai opened the she-donkey’s mouth, and it said to Bilaam, “What have I done to you that you beat me these three times?” Bilaam said to the she-donkey, “You have made a mockery of me! If I had a sword with me, I’d kill you.” The she-donkey said to Bilaam, “Am I not your she-donkey that you have ridden all your life until this day? Have I been in the habit of doing such a thing to you?” And he answered, “No.”¹

We have all grown up with talking animals. Except for two biblical examples, talking animals may have originated with Aesop’s *Fables*, a collection of 656 cautionary tales and morality lessons from the sixth century BCE. And through the centuries, folk tales from almost every culture have contained talking animals.

Fast forward now to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries CE, and we find animals as the main characters in the fairy tales meant for young children: *Three Little Pigs*,² *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*,³ and *Little Red Riding Hood*.⁴ We also find numerous examples of talking animals in the emerging genre of fantasy literature: Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and its sequel, *Through the Looking Glass* (1871); *Pinocchio* by Carlo Collodi (1883); *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* by L. Frank Baum (1900); and Joel Chandler Harris’ “Uncle Remus” stories⁵ of Brer Rabbit, Brer Fox, and other creatures.

Once cartoons and comic strips made their appearance in daily newspapers as social and political commentaries,⁶ talking animals quickly followed — and led to a virtual population explosion. Among the talking-animal characters that found homes on the comics pages of America’s newspapers were Krazy Kat (1910), Felix the Cat (1923), Mickey Mouse (1930), Donald Duck (1937), and Pogo (1948). Success breeds success, and before long

¹ Numbers 22:28-30.

² Various attributed to Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm (1812?), Hans Christian Andersen (no date quoted), and James Orchard Halliwell (1849).

³ The earliest recorded version was written by Eleanor Mure (1831), but the most influential version was published by Robert Southey (1837) in his collection of essays titled, *The Doctor*.

⁴ Ascribed to Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm (1857), with a story line traced to Charles Perrault (1697).

⁵ 1880-1907; other volumes of the tales were published posthumously.

⁶ Although “The Little Bears” was the first American comic strip in 1883, the first successful comic strip character was the “Yellow Kid,” which first appeared in the *New York World* on February 17, 1895.

some of these characters had joined Bugs Bunny (1940) and Bambi (1942) to become movie stars. More recently, “real” animals have appeared in full-length feature films: Francis, a talking mule (1950), Babe, a talking pig (1995), and Stripes, a talking zebra (2005). A talking horse (Mister Ed) even had his own television series from 1961 to 1966.

What does all of this history have to do with our Torah portion? Let’s take a look at the story line. Toward the end of their forty-year journey through the wilderness, the Israelites are encamped on the plains of Moab, east of the Jordan River. They have recently conquered two kings: Sihon, king of the Amorites, and Og, king of Bashan. Alarmed at the Israelite conquests, Balak, king of Moab, sends a party of Midianite and Moabite elders to induce Bilaam — well known as a seer and sorcerer — to “come and curse this people for me, for it is too powerful.”⁷

But God appears to Bilaam in a dream and forbids him to go. When the elders return to Balak and tell him of Bilaam’s refusal, Balak sends a delegation of higher ranking emissaries with promises of rich rewards. This time, God grants permission for Bilaam to go, providing that he speaks only the words that God gives him.

However, when Bilaam saddles his donkey and agrees to accompany the emissaries, God becomes incensed because God knows that Bilaam intends to flout God’s will. To demonstrate to Bilaam and his Moabite escort that he is powerless to act on his own, God dispatches an angel to block his way.⁸ Curiously, Bilaam’s donkey can see the angel, but Bilaam cannot.⁹

What happens next is the essence of television comedy — lacking only a laugh track: “When the she-donkey saw the angel of Adonai standing on the road with his sword drawn in his hand, the she-donkey turned away from the road and went into the field; and Bilaam beat the she-donkey to turn it back onto the road. The angel of Adonai then stationed himself in a lane between the vineyards, a fence on this side and a fence on that side. The she-donkey, seeing the angel of Adonai, pressed herself against the wall and squeezed Bilaam’s foot against the wall; so he beat her again. Once more the angel of Adonai moved forward and stationed himself on a spot so narrow that there was no room to swerve left or right. When the she-donkey now saw the angel of Adonai, she lay down under Bilaam; Bilaam was furious and beat the she-donkey with his stick.”¹⁰ At this point, God enables the

⁷ Numbers 22:6.

⁸ *The Chumash: The Stone Edition*; Edited by Rabbis Nosson Scherman and Meir Zlotowitz; Mesorah Publications, Ltd.; 1993; p. 860.

⁹ According to Rashi, animals are allowed to see spiritual beings that are blocked from the human eye because people would live in constant fear if they could perceive everything around them. (Scherman and Zlotowitz, *op. cit.*, p. 861)

¹⁰ Numbers 22:23-27.

donkey to speak, Bilaam and his donkey have their famous conversation, and Bilaam is finally able to see the angel of Adonai.

Talking animals are a common feature of folklore, but a talking animal in the Torah???¹¹ Even more amazing than a donkey with the power of speech is Bilaam's reaction. There's no surprise, no astonishment, no sense of wonder. Bilaam doesn't jump up and shout, "Hey, what's going on here? My donkey is talking." Apparently he thinks nothing of it, as if it were perfectly natural for donkeys to talk. In fact, he argues with the donkey as if a talking donkey is an everyday occurrence.

Some say that reality and fantasy are the two extremes of cartoons, comic strips, and fairy tales, but aren't reality and fantasy two sides of the same coin? Spin the coin fast enough, and the two worlds blend into one.

Creating anthropomorphic animals, and allowing the animals to talk, enables storytellers to combine the basic character of the animals with human behavior. The animals can also interact with humans better if they talk.¹²

Children are drawn to stories about talking animals because they find the creatures funny and delightful. For adults to participate in the enjoyment at the child's level requires a willful suspension of disbelief. But once authors, artists, and animators start gravitating toward reality with their talking animals, the door is opened for an older, more mature audience. The juxtaposition of fantasy and reality can be a compelling mix if done skillfully.¹³ Is *Parashat Balak* an example of such juxtaposition?

Did the conversation between Bilaam and his donkey really happen, or is the story little more than a Torah-sanctioned fairy tale? Maimonides argues that whenever the term "angel" occurs in the Torah, the entire account is describing a vision, not an actual physical event. Therefore the incident of the talking donkey is allegorical, a record of a vision seen by Bilaam. Nachmanides disagrees. He maintains that the conversation really did take place,¹⁴ and he strongly criticizes Maimonides for not showing proper respect for the traditional explanation.¹⁵

¹¹ Actually Bilaam's donkey was the second example of a talking animal in the Torah. The first was the serpent with whom Eve had a conversation in the Garden of Eden. Perhaps we can rationalize Eve's lack of surprise at encountering a talking snake. After all, she had just been created and hadn't had time to learn that animals can't talk.

¹² "Talking Animal," Wikipedia.org; 2004.

¹³ "Straight Talk About Talking Animals," by Laura Backes; Fiction Factor – Writing for Kids; 2001.

¹⁴ Commentary on *Parashat Hukat-Balak* by Rabbi Avi Weiss, Shabbat Forshpeis, 2000.

¹⁵ "Ramban's Commentary to the Torah," in *Mikra'ot Gedolot; Judaism of the Talmud and Midrash* by Eliezer Segal; Department of Religious Studies, University of Calgary.

It is a powerful irony that a lowly donkey, an animal regarded as stubborn and stupid, could become an instrument of God. How could a “prophet” not understand that this talking-donkey episode was relevant to his mission? How could he not perceive God’s warning not to proceed with his mission?¹⁶ Not only were Bilaam’s ears stopped up, but his eyes were blinded by gold and silver. At the end of the day, the donkey was a truer prophet than Bilaam.

A lesson that we learn from Bilaam’s interaction with his donkey is that at every moment of consciousness, if only we were willing to listen and comprehend, we are given signals that could alter our lives in dramatic fashion.

¹⁶ “Talking Donkeys and Metamorphosis,” a commentary on *Parashat Balak* by Rabbi Michael Lerner; Tikkun.org; undated.