

A Modern's Take on Balaam

Allen Hirsh - 2024

In Devārīm chapter 13: 2-6 we find the following admonition:

1. If there will arise among you a prophet, or a dreamer of a dream, and he gives you a sign or a wonder
2. and the sign or the wonder of which he spoke to you happens, [and he] says, "Let us go after other gods which you have not known, and let us worship them
3. you shall not heed the words of that prophet, or that dreamer of a dream; for the Lord, your God, is testing you, to know whether you really love the Lord, your God, with all your heart and with all your soul
4. You shall follow the Lord, your God, fear Him, keep His commandments, heed His voice, worship Him, and cleave to Him.
5. And that prophet, or that dreamer of a dream shall be put to death; because he spoke falsehood about the Lord, your God Who brought you out of the land of Egypt, and Who redeemed you from the house of bondage, to lead you astray from the way in which the Lord, your God, commanded you to go; so shall you clear away the evil from your midst.

This provides us a segue into a modern gloss on Balaam. The Torah is telling us that even more important than seeing into the hidden nature of things is the understanding of moral imperative. In response, I am going to assert that in a twist of profound historical irony this strangely comic lampoon of a man practicing an art apparently completely absent from our world is in fact addressing a vital challenge to modern civilization.

A few people in this congregation are aware that I went through grad school twice, walking out on my first PhD in Neurophysiology just before it was done at Columbia University's College of Physicians and Surgeons. The lab next to ours was headed by an old Jewish scientist named David Nachmansohn, a very famous and accomplished biochemist. During WW II his lab pioneered efforts to develop antidotes to the newest nerve gas agents, the organophosphates, being developed and produced by the Nazis. It was the first time that I realized that the insecticides routinely used by my parents in their nursery were first developed to devastate the human nervous system.

The recent movie about the development of the atomic bomb under the leadership of J. Robert Oppenheimer, gave many Americans the first detailed view of the Manhattan project. As he witnessed the first atomic bomb detonation in the Jornada del Muerte, the Journey of Death desert in central New Mexico, he famously quoted the Bahgavad Gita: "I have become the destroyer of worlds". After the war a large majority of atomic

scientists, dismayed by the destructive demon they had loosed on civilization strongly advocated for peaceful nuclear energy.

A number of years ago over 100 Nobel Prize Winners in science issued a strongly worded condemnation of Greenpeace for blanketly opposing genetic modification of crops.

What does this have to do with the Parsha?

Recall God's first admonition to Balaam: " God said to Balaam, 'You shall not go with them! You shall not curse the people because they are blessed.' "

This and the section from Devarim point to a seminal interpretation of the myth: God tells Balaam what is right: His people should in no way be harmed, period. That should have ended the matter because, as the passage in Devarim makes abundantly clear, the power to discern and thereby control what is hidden in the world is always subordinate to what is morally righteous.

So, we now reexamine the modern issues I have raised.

Scientists studying the nervous systems of a wide range of animals from insects to people noted that they all shared a common vulnerability to these deadly nerve toxins. Aha! here was a chance to beat swords into plowshares. Use them as insecticides. What have been the consequences? Worldwide adoption of an unsustainable agricultural model of suppressing pests by wholesale distribution of deadly toxins onto food and fiber. This has led to widespread pollution of water and soil, possible mass injury to people and wildlife, and accelerated industrialization of agriculture

The atomic scientists knew that radioactivity is immensely powerful and dangerous, but they dearly wanted their brainchild to be something other than evil. What has been the result: the proliferation of nuclear weapons into unstable authoritarian societies, three mile island, Chernobyl the still out of control Fukushima, and now Putin's threat to Europe's largest nuclear power plant; significant resistance to the development of renewable energy, and darkest of all, the dotting of the landscape of industrialized countries with nuclear power plants that, if attacked by terrorists with suitcase nukes, would threaten the survival of civilization.

The targeted genetic modification of crops holds promise to prevent collapse of the world's food supply. It can be forcefully argued that carefully applied, the technology will be lifesaving for mankind. But consider what has actually happened. Monsanto, in a fugue of greed, developed suicide seeds, trapping millions of third world farmers into indentured servitude to the company. Several companies touted development of crops resistant to what used to be considered a safe herbicide, roundup, to allow reduced

pesticide application. However, natural processes have produced new superweeds resistant to roundup and so they are now pushing a new model of engineering additional crop resistance to old, very toxic herbicides leading to a net increase in pesticide application.

What is the common thread? People of uncommon talent have often been driven to make their talents serve mankind even when there are clear indications that much of what they wish to do is ethically questionable. In this context the Donkey represents Nature talking back to us, and like Balaam whipping his animal, the industrialized world responding with increasing violence towards nature in the effort to maintain control. Balaam is still with us.