Accidental Allyship: How a Curse Became a Blessing

Parashat Balak 2025

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There are stories in Torah that read like satire. The narrative is so absurd, the characters so bumbling, the events so ironic, you almost expect a laugh track. Parashat Balak is one of those stories.

We have a pagan king—Balak of Moab—who sees the Israelites coming and is terrified. Not because they've attacked, but simply because they exist. He hires Balaam, a well-known prophet-for-hire, to curse them. But Balaam warns that he can only speak what God tells him. And then, on his way to deliver this curse, his donkey—yes, his donkey—sees an angel that Balaam cannot, and refuses to move. Balaam beats the donkey, and then the donkey turns and talks. Talks! As if that's not remarkable enough, Balaam then proceeds to have a full theological debate with the animal, as if it were totally normal.

Eventually, Balaam reaches the mountaintop, looks down on the Israelite camp, and opens his mouth to curse—and out comes blessing. Not once, not twice, but three times. Balak is furious. But Balaam shrugs. "What can I do? I can only say what God puts in my mouth."

And among the blessings he utters is one that you already know, perhaps the only line of Torah spoken by a non-Israelite that made it into our liturgy: *"Mah tovu ohalecha Ya'akov, mishkenotecha Yisrael"*—How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel.

The man hired to curse us becomes a mouthpiece of praise.

Balaam is not the hero of this story. He is, at best, a hired gun. But his failure to curse and his success in blessing point us toward a truth that is as urgent now as ever: Sometimes those who seek to harm us end up becoming accidental allies. Sometimes a curse becomes a blessing, not because their hearts changed, but because the outcome did.

We've seen this dynamic play out in terrifying and deeply spiritual ways in the past 650+ days.

On October 7, 2023 the Jewish people endured one of the most horrific attacks since the Holocaust. In its aftermath, many of us expected sympathy, understanding, solidarity. Instead, we were met with a torrent of antisemitism—online, in public spaces, on college campuses, in our workplaces and schools.

Graffiti on synagogue doors. Threats to Jewish students. Teachers pulled from their classrooms for wearing Stars of David. Posters of kidnapped Israelis torn down and trampled. And not just from the fringes, but from mainstream voices. From those who claim to stand for justice. From those who accuse us of being oppressors, colonialists, murderers—for simply being Jewish.

It was a curse. There's no other way to say it. Words intended to isolate us, demoralize us, make us ashamed of our Jewishness.

But something extraordinary happened.

Instead of retreating, we leaned in.

Instead of silence, we sang louder.

Jews who had been unaffiliated, disconnected, disillusioned—suddenly showed up. They came to synagogue. They lit candles. They wore Magen Davids openly. They asked questions. They taught their children. They wrapped themselves in tallitot, kippot and even t'philin that hadn't left their dresser drawers in years.

And not just the observant. Artists, athletes, actors, influencers—all speaking publicly and unapologetically about their Jewish identity. The same Jewish pride that once lived in whispers came roaring back.

October 7—and the antisemitism that followed—was meant to tear us apart. Instead, it stitched us back together.

Just like Balaam.

He came to curse. But he blessed.
They came to erase us. But we remembered who we are.

There's a phrase for this in social movements: accidental allyship. It refers to those who, often unwittingly, advance the cause they're trying to undermine.

The antisemites thought they would shame us. But they sharpened our pride.

They thought they'd isolate us. But they galvanized solidarity.

They thought they'd make us afraid. But they reminded us of what we're willing to stand for.

It's not that they intended good. They didn't. It's that the outcome—the blessing—was bigger than their intent. Just like Balaam. Just like that donkey who refused to walk into danger. Sometimes the moral arc of history swerves around evil—not by changing it, but by using it.

And this phenomenon isn't just ancient or theoretical. It's happening now.

Consider Francesca Albanese, the United Nations Special Rapporteur for the Palestinian territories. Her job, at least in title, is to uphold human rights. But her record tells another story: a pattern of deeply antisemitic rhetoric, blaming Jews for global evils, invoking old tropes, and justifying October 7 as an "inevitable" uprising.

Her words were intended to hurt us—to delegitimize Israel, to vilify the Jewish people, to isolate and erase us from the conversation about justice. But in doing so, she unintentionally revealed the very rot at the heart of global institutions supposedly committed to human dignity.

Her attempts to curse us backfired. Her statements awakened outrage. Her bias clarified things for those still sitting on the fence. Even governments and human rights activists who often critique Israel have called out her moral incoherence. In trying to silence us, she ended up amplifying us.

And within the Jewish community, her rhetoric—like that of others—has further awakened resolve. Not fear. Resolve. Clarity. Identity.

So, just like Balaam, she came to curse, but the outcome blessed us instead.

There's something else curious in this parashah: God lets Balaam go ahead with his mission to curse the Jews. But then God is angry that he went.

Why?

The rabbis say that sometimes, God allows us to follow our own path, even when it's wrong, just to show us that intention and outcome are not the same.

What Balaam intended didn't matter. God used his voice anyway. God overrode his intent.

What does that mean for us?

It means we cannot control what others say about us. We can't stop the curses. But we can live in a way that transforms them.

As I wrote in the Vancouver Sun following the events of October 7:

"This is a moment of clarity for the Jewish people. We have spent decades trying to fit in, trying not to be 'too Jewish.' But the truth is, the world sees us clearly—so we must see ourselves clearly too. And that clarity brings with it courage."

We cannot choose what others say about us. But we can choose what we say about ourselves. We can choose to bless.

It's no accident that the blessing from Balaam is the first thing many Jews say when they enter a synagogue. Mah Tovu. Spoken not by a patriarch or prophet, but by an enemy. A stranger. A reluctant mouthpiece for the divine.

Why do we say it?

Because Judaism believes in reclamation. In transformation. In making sacred what was profane. In turning hate into holiness.

That is what we've done since October 7.

We've taken antisemitism and turned it into Jewish commitment.

We've taken alienation and turned it into spiritual reunion.

We've taken attempted curses and turned them into the most enduring blessings.

So what do we do now?

We do not respond with more hate. That only continues the cycle. We respond by building.

We build community.

We build pride.

We build safe spaces for our children and our elders.

We build bridges—not just with each other but with those outside who are willing to hear us, see us, know us.

We bless.

We say, as Balaam said: *Mah tovu ohalecha Ya'akov.*

We declare our tents—our homes, our synagogues, our communities—good. Not perfect. But good. Sacred. Enduring.

Because when the world tries to curse us, our job is not just to survive.

It is to thrive.

To sing louder.

To bless back.

I don't know what was in Balaam's heart when he opened his mouth. Maybe he hoped for hatred. Maybe he was just tired. Maybe he didn't care.

But I know what came out.

And I know what came out of October 7.

We are still standing.

Still singing.

Still blessing.

And we always will be.