

Parshat Balak

Lessons from a Talking Donkey

June 21st, 2013

Last week in Parshat Chukat we read about the ritual of the Red Heifer, one of the strangest laws of the Torah. After being in contact with the body of a dead person, the Israelites should do a special ceremony with the ashes of this animal, which has to be perfect, without any blemish, and which never had a yoke. The Rabbis understood that this ritual was one of the “chukim”, laws that don’t have a rational explanation but in any case we have to fulfill them because they were commanded by God.

From the Red Heifer of last week’s Parsha, we move this week to another particular animal: A talking donkey. And not, I am not talking about Shrek’s “Donkey” but about another talking donkey which is one of the central characters of Parshat Balak.

This is the Story: Balak, king of Moab, frightened by the power of Israel, sends the pagan prophet Balaam to curse the Israelites. And during his way riding his donkey, the animal saw on the way an angel of God with a drawn sword in his hand. Curiously, the donkey sees the angel but not Balaam, who punished the animal when it tried to move out of the road because of its vision. This is repeated three times until the donkey start talking and complaining, and finally Balaam can see the angel and understand the episode.

Why the donkey saw the angel but the prophet could not see it? And why Balaam answers to the donkey’s complains only with anger, without being surprised by the fact he was speaking to an animal?

The truth is that Balaam, full of arrogance and pride after being invited by the king, cannot see what even for a simple donkey was so evident. Balaam was a well-known and important prophet on those times, but his haughtiness and conceit blinded his eyes, and when that happens to great people, even a donkey becomes wiser.

Last week Parsha taught us about the incomprehensive ritual of the Red Heifer. We can live without fully understanding that ritual, but we cannot let pride and arrogance to keep us from understanding the truths that surround us, or allowing them to blind our eyes in front of the obstacles we face through our life, along the different ways we travel.

Shabbat Shalom!
Rabbi Claudio