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Abraham, Balaam, and Living a Life of Agency

Rabbi Yehuda Sarna | BronfmanTorah | Balak 2018

This summer, we will be bringing you divrei torah written by the 2018 Bronfman Fellowship educational team.

The first contribution in this series is written by Rabbi Yehuda Sarna, who is teaching a five-session shiur on Free Agency. Fellows will study great Biblical narratives and the stories of individuals who have succeeded in transcending or subduing obstacles to free agency. As they identify shared themes across millennia, Fellows will accept, reject or modify the positions taken by these figures in seeking to direct their own lives with agency.

Rabbi Yehuda Sarna serves as the Executive Director of the Edgar M. Bronfman Center for Jewish Student Life at NYU and as the University Chaplain at New York University. Originally from Montreal, Canada, he studied at Yeshiva University and received his ordination from RIETS. Yehuda co-founded the Of Many Institute for

Multifaith Leadership at NYU, where he is a Senior Fellow, and teaches Jewish Law and Multifaith Leadership in the Wagner School for Public Service.

Two biblical characters, two approaches to choosing a life path. Abraham and Balaam are drawn into relief with each other through literary and thematic parallels, inviting deeper exploration into the organizing principles which guide their most consequential decisions.

Both Abraham and Balaam rise early in the morning, saddle their donkeys and set out on journeys, each accompanied by a retinue of two servants. They share the ability of issuing blessings and curses with accuracy. They are both stopped at a critical point in the journey by an angel of God. According to some biblical scholars, these stories constitute "mirror narratives" of each other. Comparing these two figures is not new, but has not been exhausted.

From a strictly textual reading, Abraham is presented, at the outset, as the more self-concerned of the two. God tells Abraham to go to the promised land "lecha" – for you, for your financial benefit. In fact, as Abraham descends into Egypt, he asks Sarai, his wife, to conceal her identity not only to save his life, but also "lema'an yitav li baavureich" – so that I may benefit materially from association with you. And in fact, Sarai is taken and Abraham is enriched.

Balaam, on the other hand, resists the temptation of riches if it were to involve compromising the will of God. When asked by Balak, King of Moab, to use his powers to curse the Jews, he states, "Even if Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not do anything, big or little, contrary to the command of God." On a surface level, Balaam refuses to allow his self-concern to drive his decision-making process.

The discomfort in this ironic contrast leads some commentators in our tradition to re-read the stories, casting Abraham instead as a selfless, humble servant and Balaam as a greedy, power hungry operator. However, "humble-washing" Abraham performs him a disservice. Abraham ultimately sheds his attachment to material things, and even to his own son. What he does not discard is his sense of self, challenging God when he feels that God has not delivered on His promise or when His actions would be unjust.

Moses continues Abraham's legacy in this way. The Torah describes his manner of conversation with God as confrontational, "face to face". Balaam, on the other hand, is incapacitated, blinded, or sleeping when God speaks to him. He is more obedient than his donkey. He is a mismatch with the Biblical line of prophets not because he doesn't listen to God, but because he does not call God to listen.

This summer on Bronfman, we will explore themes of agency and determining one's life course, using biblical narratives as gateways to the adventure. To bring the fullness of oneself into dialogue with what we perceive as our higher calling is what it means to truly be a student of Abraham.

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P.S.: We're always looking for more dvar torah writers. Interested? Contact

stefanie@byfi.org. We look forward to hearing from you.