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Parashat HaShavuah Series

Parashat Balak 5770

Balaam and Darryl Strawberry: It's Not About Potential

When Darryl Strawberry began his Major League baseball career as a member of the New York Mets, he was touted as the next Willie Mays. The scouts raved about Strawberry's potential, his immense power and speed. While Strawberry had a decent career, he was never seriously considered for the Hall of Fame and is certainly not considered to be another Willie Mays. Because of various off-the-field problems, including alcoholism, Strawberry never lived up to his potential.

What can we learn from the career of Darryl Strawberry? We learn that someone's potential is of no help to anybody unless one puts it to good use. This is demonstrated by the Mishna's treatment of Balaam (*Sanhedrin*, 10:2). The Mishna tells us that Balaam is one of the seven people who has no portion in *Olam Habah* – the world to come, which is considered a severe form of punishment.

Balaam was an ancient version of Darryl Strawberry. He had all the potential in the world but failed to live up to it. Balaam was gifted with prophetic ability (see Rashi Num. 22:5 and *Brakhot 7a*), but used that ability in an attempt to curse¹ *Bnei Yisrael*, the Children of Israel, who God had already declared would be blessed.

Balaam is then mocked by God. The "prophet" fails to see God's sword drawn by an angel blocking his advance, and is saved by his own donkey, which swerves off the road in order to avoid a deadly encounter with the angel. Balaam, the "great prophet," blinded by greed (Balak bribes him to curse Israel), fails to see what even his donkey can see. The donkey on which Balaam rides is more insightful than its master, who has chosen to transgress the word of the Lord! It is as if God is telling us that Balaam's donkey was able to understand the

¹ 1. Balaam tells Balak's officers that he cannot transgress the word of God (Bamidbar 22:18) but then enters into a partnership with Balak in an attempt to curse Israel.

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dangerous and foolish nature of his master's mission while Balaam "the prophet" was not.

Balaam, like Darryl Strawberry, failed to live up to his potential. Strawberry should have had a Hall of Fame career; Balaam should have been a Moses to the nations (see Rashi, 22:5). Instead, Balaam sold his prophetic abilities to Balak, though he failed to curse Israel. Balaam had the potential to draw people closer to God; instead he drove them away (see Rashi, 22:5).

What can we learn from Darryl Strawberry and Balaam? We are not judged according to our potential, we are judged on what we make of our God-given potential.

Shabbat Shalom!

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