

# Balak @ the DC Beit Midrash

Tuesday, June 29, 2004; 10 Tamuz 5764

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## Welcome to the DC Beit Midrash!

The Chumash (Five Books of Moses) is divided into 54 portions, which Jews read sequentially each week in services. Each week, a member of our community will lead us in a text-study of this portion, or *parasha*. The voices of both past and contemporary interpreters will inform our discussion. Every week, a sheet summarizing the Torah portion of the week and the other sources the teacher will use will be provided to aid you in your study.

## This Week's *Parasha* (Torah Portion): Balak

Numbers (*Bemidbar*), 22:2–25:9

*Parashat* Balak contains one of the most fully developed stories in the entire Torah. The story is really about Balaam, a prophet who is hired to curse the Israelites by Balak, the Moabite king. Having heard the tales of their other battles, Balak perceives Israel as a threat. God makes it clear to Balaam that he is not to curse Israel, whom God has blessed. But, after a number of approaches, Balak makes Balaam an offer he cannot refuse. God permits Balaam to go, but only with the knowledge that Balaam will have no control over the words that will come out of his own mouth. On his way to curse Israel, Balaam's donkey stops and refuses to move. The donkey can see an angel blocking the way that the man cannot see. A conversation results between man and donkey, one of only two talking animals in the Bible (ten points to anyone who knows the other!)\* Finally, Balaam reaches his destination and opens his mouth to curse Israel. But instead of curses, words of blessing are spoken. This blessing *Ma Tovu* is now part of the daily morning service. At the end of the *parasha*, the Israelites get in trouble for consorting with foreign women and worshipping a foreign deity. Pinchas, Aaron's grandson, known as a great zealot, appeases God's anger over this idolatry by killing an Israelite who was flaunting his salacious activities with a Midianite woman.

(From [http://www.koel.org/pages/parasha/bemidbar\\_summary.html](http://www.koel.org/pages/parasha/bemidbar_summary.html))

## This Week's Sources

### Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo ben Isaac)

1040–1105

This French sage is regarded as medieval Judaism's greatest teacher. Since his death almost nine hundred years ago, Jews who study either the Torah or the Talmud invariably do so with the help of his commentary. As a young man, Rashi studied Talmud in Mayence (Mainz) and Worms. When he was about 25, he returned to Troyes, France and opened his own Jewish school. However, Rashi refused to draw a salary for his work, earning his living instead from several vineyards that he owned. The last years of his life were marred by the anti-Semitic Crusades that swept over France and Germany starting in 1096. In his Torah commentary, Rashi explains terms both on the basis of *peshat* (literal meaning) and *drash* (homiletical or sermonic meaning). He also makes use of words in his vernacular, Old French, for clarification. Rashi's Torah commentary achieved such wide acceptance that it became mandatory for Jews to review the weekly Torah portion with his commentary. In 1475, Rashi's commentary became the first book printed in Hebrew, even before the Torah itself was.

(Excerpted from *Fields*, TCFOT, p 10-12, and *Telushkin*, *Jewish Literacy*, p 180-183.)

### Midrash

300–1200

*Midrash* comes from a Hebrew root which means "to search out, to investigate." Thus, this is a Jewish method of exegesis which sought to discover deeper meanings in the text beyond the literal one. Since the rabbis greatly venerated every letter of the Hebrew Scriptures as of Divine origin, every detail was seen to be significant. Sometimes Midrash is used with the legal portions of the Torah (*halacha*) and sometimes it is used with the non-legal portions (*aggadah*), such as stories about the main protagonists in the Bible. There are many different collections of Midrash. The largest collection is called *Midrash Rabbah* (The Great Midrash). Other collections include *Pesikta* (Divisions), *Mechilta* (Treatise), *Sifra* (Book), and *Sifre* (Books). The material of the Midrash is mostly from the time of the *Amoraim*, the rabbis of the *Gemara* or Talmud (200–500 CE). But some of the Midrash (particularly *Mechilta*, *Sifra*, and *Sifre*) can be traced back to the *Tannaim*, the Rabbis of the Mishna (400 BCE–200 CE). Different Midrashim were written down at different times, over a period of almost a thousand years. The compilers of the different collections of Midrash are generally unknown.

### Talmud

c. 500

The Babylonian Talmud (*Talmud Bavli*) is a compilation of discussions on the Mishna, discussions which had been going on for some three hundred years at the time they were written down. Because the Babylonian edition is far more extensive than its Palestinian counterpart (*Talmud Yerushalmi*), compiled around 400, it has become the most authoritative compilation of Jewish law. When people speak of studying the Talmud, they almost invariably mean the *Bavli*. The Talmud's discussions are recorded in a consistent format. A law from the Mishna is cited, which is followed by rabbinic deliberations on its meaning. The Mishna and the rabbinic discussions

(known as *Gemara*) comprise the Talmud, although in Jewish life the terms *Gemara* and *Talmud* are usually used interchangeably. The rabbis quoted in the *Gemara* are known as *Amoraim*, explainers or interpreters. In addition to extensive legal discussions (*halacha*), the rabbis incorporated into the Talmud guidance on ethical matters, medical advice, historical information, and folklore (*aggadata*).

*(Excerpted from Telushkin, Jewish Literacy, p 150-153.)*

### **Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch**

**1808–1888**

One of the most important nineteenth-century European Jewish leaders. Born in Hamburg, Hirsch was raised in an “Enlightened” environment. He had a full secular education at a German public school, and studied Talmud at home with his grandfather. Hirsch worked for the legal emancipation of Austrian and Moravian Jewry, and in 1851 he began 37 years of service as a rabbi in Frankfurt. In his *Nineteen Letters on Judaism*, Hirsch defends the rationality of traditional Judaism in the form of a fictional dialogue between a rabbi and a young intellectual. Though in some senses a reformer himself, Hirsch ultimately became a harsh critic of developments in the Reform Jewish community of his time. Hirsch’s Torah commentary “seeks to derive the explanation of the text from the words themselves.” He emphasized the divinity of the Torah text, and vehemently opposed the notion that the Torah tradition was subject to historical development or change.

*(Adapted from Harvey J. Fields, A Torah Commentary for Our Times, p 13, and the Jewish Virtual Library: [www.us-israel.org/jsource/biography/Hirsch.html](http://www.us-israel.org/jsource/biography/Hirsch.html))*

### **Jonathan Sacks**

**Contemporary**

Jonathan Sacks is Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of Britain and the Commonwealth. A regular contributor to British radio, television, and the national press, he is the author of 14 books. In addition to his religious office, he also holds visiting professorships at Kings College, London and the Hebrew University, Jerusalem.

*(From The Dignity of Difference, 2002.)*

### **Salis Daiches**

**1890–1945**

Salis Daiches obtained his rabbinic diploma from the Hildesheimer Seminary in Berlin and his PhD from the University of Leipzig. He was rabbi of the Jewish community in Edinburgh, Scotland, from 1919 for many years. He wrote *Aspects of Judaism* and many essays and articles in the Jewish and general press. He also collaborated in the Soncino translations of the Talmud into English.

*(Adapted from Judaism in a Changing World, 1971)*

### **Shadal (Samuel David Luzzatto)**

**1800–1865**

Italian philologist, poet, and Biblical exegete, student of ancient and modern languages and profane science under Mordecai de Cologna, Leon Vita Saraval, and Raphael Baruch Segré, whose son-in-law he later became. He also studied Hebrew at home with his father who, though a turner by trade, was an eminent Talmudist. At Padua Luzzatto had a much larger scope for his literary activity, as he was able to devote all his time to literary work. Besides, while explaining certain parts of the Bible to his pupils he wrote down all his observations. Luzzatto was the first Jewish scholar to turn his attention to Syriac, considering a knowledge of this language necessary for the understanding of the Targum. Luzzatto was a warm defender of Biblical and Talmudic Judaism; and his opposition to philosophical Judaism brought him many opponents among his contemporaries. But his opposition to philosophy was not the result of fanaticism nor of lack of understanding. He claimed to have read during twenty-four years all the ancient philosophers, and that the more he read them the more he found them deviating from the truth.

*(Adapted from <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=638&letter=L&search=S.D.%20Luzzatto#1917>)*

### **This Week’s Teacher**

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Andrew Jakobovics is a graduate of the Solomon Schechter School in Westchester and the Mesivta d'Rav Moshe Zevulun (Margolis) in Manhattan (also known as Ramaz). He spent a year at Yeshivat Sha'alvim in Israel and did his undergraduate work at Columbia. He is currently pursuing a doctorate in urban studies at MIT, where he also received his masters, and is chair of the ritual committee at the Harvard Hillel Orthodox Minyan. He is a gabbai emeritus at Keshet Israel.

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