

So, a dog and a cat are at a bar. They're tossing back a few beers, and talking about what you talk about at a bar. How well the Giants and A's are playing, how the price of cat litter has doubled in the past year, how funny it is that all these humans are wearing muzzles.

And then the door opens, and a horse stomps into the room. The horse walks right up to the bar, and scowls at the bartender. "Whisky!" he says. "Make it a double!" The dog turns to the cat and says "Holy cow, look at that! It's a talking horse!"

Maybe you can see where I'm going with this.

I don't normally start off my drashot with a joke, but it seemed appropriate to our parsha today, Balak. In our chumash, the introductory notes to Balak call it the only comic episode in the whole Torah. This got me thinking about the other famous comic episode in the Bible, one we'll be reading ten weeks from now during the Minchah service on Yom Kippur: the Book of Jonah. There are definite parallels between the two stories. Let's take a look:

- Balaam annoys God by heading out to curse the people Israel. Jonah annoys God by fleeing to Tarshish and getting on the ship.
 - God confronts Balaam with an angel, where he then has an encounter with a magical talking donkey. God confronts Jonah with a huge storm at sea, where he then has an encounter with a magical whale.
 - And let me pause here and say that I *so* wish that it were a talking whale. There's so much standup potential here. Jonah is saying his prayer inside the whale, and the whale interrupts with "Dude! I am trying to sleep. Would you keep it down in there?"
 - Balaam ends up blessing the entire people Israel three times. Jonah utters just four words and ends up saving the entire population of Nineveh, including all the cattle.
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Kids and teenagers like Balak because it allows you to safely say the word "ass" in public, and all the innuendo that goes along with that. I mean really: a talking ass, how can you resist? Everyone wants to know what's up with the talking donkey. I think a more interesting question is: what's up with the whole comic episode? Why is it there at all?

Speaking only for myself, Vayikra and Bemidbar are the most difficult books in the Torah. I'm a story kind of guy: I like narrative and dialog. Vayikra and

Bemidbar, with their chapters of sacrifices, ritual cleanliness and uncleanness, bodily fluids, sprinkling blood... that's chewy stuff, very far removed from today's modern urban life.

Why the comic episode? Let's see what have we been reading recently. In the past three weeks we've seen a man stoned to death for gathering wood on Shabbat, the earth open up and swallow Korach and all his followers and possessions, the death of Miriam without any mourning, the death of Aaron without any burial, and Moses banned from the Promised Land because he hit a rock. In the coming weeks we'll read about the sacrifices for the chagim, including a staggering number of sacrificial animals for the week of Sukkot, and worst of all, Moses commanding a scorched-earth war against the Midianites. These are difficult and troubling topics. Unrelenting weeks of disturbing topics, just like unrelenting weeks of sadness and stress, weighs down your mind and your body.

What's the fix? Laughter. It's the best medicine, so they say. You pry open a week in the middle of all those disturbing topics, and you drop in parsha Balak. Now, it can be difficult to understand what the ancient Hebrews would have found funny, but I think a talking donkey is pretty funny. And if you're my age, you remember Mr. Ed. Sometimes a talking donkey can be just what the doctor ordered. We can think of parsha Balak as a week off from your regularly scheduled theology.

I would argue that Jonah serves the same function on Yom Kippur. What comes before Jonah, earlier on Yom Kippur? Yizkor. The Avodah Service. Eileh Ezkerah. And immediately before Jonah, in the Torah reading, the list of prohibited sexual unions. That's heavy-duty liturgy. And what comes after Jonah? The rest of the Minchah service with amidah #4 of the day, and after that is Neilah with amidah #5, standing up the whole time. It's a long, hungry day, and I have always found the Jonah story, strategically placed in the late afternoon, to be a breath of fresh air.

Viewed from our modern comic sensibilities, the ending of the Balaam story is an anti-climax. There's no punch line. After Balaam's third blessing, he heads home and Balak heads home. That's it. We never hear from them again.

I think there's no punch line because the Torah, as always, wants us to search and find the lesson. I'll end with a teaching from Rabbi Shai Held. Balaam is a flawed person, yet God calls him to serve anyway. Jonah is a total buffoon, yet God calls him to serve anyway. I am a flawed person, yet Cynthia Whitehead called upon me anyway to give this drasha. If God didn't call upon flawed people to serve, there would be no one to call upon. The virtue is to see through the flaws for what each of us can offer.