

# PARASHAT BALAK

## *Numbers 22:2–25:9*

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*Parashat Balak* takes its title from Balak son of Zippor, king of Moab. Afraid that the Israelites will attack his nation, Balak sends messengers to invite Bala'am ben Beor, a well-known pagan prophet, to come and curse the people of Israel. At first, God forbids Bala'am to grant Balak's request. Then the seer is sent but told that he must say only what God commands. On the way, Bala'am's donkey sees an angel standing before her and refuses to go forward. Bala'am beats her. After the donkey protests that she is being mistreated, Bala'am himself sees the angel. Fearful, he asks if he should return home, but the angel tells him to continue, warning once again that he is to say only what God commands. On three occasions King Balak asks Bala'am to curse the Israelites, but each time the seer blesses them. Furious, Balak tells Bala'am to return home. In parting, the seer predicts that Israel will soon "smash the brow of Moab." Later, when the Israelites camp in Shittim, they have sexual relations with Moabite women and offer sacrifices to the Moabites' god. As a result they are punished with a plague. When Pinchas, son of Eleazar the priest, witnesses an Israelite entering a tent with a Moabite woman, he takes a spear and kills both of them. His action ends the plague after 24,000 Israelites have died.

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