

The Sound of No Hands Clapping

Rabbi Marcus Mordecai Schwartz, Henry R. And Miriam Ripps Schnitzer Librarian for Special Collections and Assistant Professor of Talmud and Rabbinics JTS



Shabbat, the day of rest, is a cornerstone of Jewish life, filled with customs aimed at creating a sanctified atmosphere. One lesser-known custom is to avoid clapping on Shabbat. This custom finds its roots in rabbinic sources and reveals lessons about self-control, the sanctity of Shabbat, and divine interaction with humanity. It is also surprisingly connected to the Torah's story of Balaam and Balak. To recap, Balak, the king of Moab, feared the Israelites who had recently come out of Egypt. Seeking to curse them, he hired Balaam, a prophet known for his ability to bless or curse with powerful words. The Torah narrates how Balaam, on his way to meet Balak, encountered an angel of God standing in his path. Balaam's donkey, seeing the angel, turned aside, causing Balaam to become angry and strike the donkey. This scene culminates with the donkey speaking to Balaam, questioning why he was beaten. Balaam's behavior highlights the dangers of anger, which led him to strike an innocent animal and miss the divine message before him.

The Yerushalmi (Jerusalem Talmud) will draw the connection between our parashah and clapping. It states that clapping, particularly when done in anger, is discouraged on Shabbat, and bases the prohibition on Numbers 24:10, where Balak, enraged by Balaam's blessings instead of curses, claps his hands together in frustration. Balak's clapping symbolizes a loss of control and submission to anger—actions that go against the peaceful spirit of Shabbat.

Shabbat is intended to be a day of peace and joy, a taste of the World to Come. Anger and frustration disrupt this tranquility. By refraining from clapping, especially in moments of anger, we maintain the sanctity and serenity that Shabbat demands. This prohibition reminds us to cultivate a sense of calm and to avoid actions that might

lead to discord. The story of Balaam and Balak further illustrates the significance of divine intervention in human affairs. Balak hired Balaam, confident in his ability to curse the Israelites. However, God's intervention turned intended curses into blessings, demonstrating His protection over Israel.

Balaam had a unique relationship with anger. The sages considered Balaam one of the seven prophets of the nations and believed his prophetic level was close to that of Moses. However, they also depicted Balaam as morally corrupt, driven by greed, and possessing an evil eye. The Talmud discusses Balaam's ability to discern the precise moment of divine anger, during which he could pronounce effective curses. This ability underscores the potential power of curses but also highlights God's mercy in preventing such moments of anger during Balaam's attempts.

The Talmud notes that God prays for His attribute of mercy to prevail over anger. This divine self-restraint serves as a model for human behavior, especially on Shabbat, a day dedicated to emulating divine rest and mercy. By avoiding actions that might show anger, such as clapping in frustration, we align ourselves with the divine attribute of mercy. The act of clapping, particularly in a moment of anger, symbolizes a loss of control and submission to baser instincts. Shabbat, on the other hand, is a time to rise above everyday impulses and connect with a higher spiritual reality. By consciously avoiding actions that might further anger or frustration, we reinforce the values of self-control and spiritual elevation that Shabbat embodies.

The story of Balak and Balaam teaches us about the limits of human intention, the supremacy of divine protection, and the consequences of moral and spiritual corruption.

Refraining from clapping on Shabbat, rooted in the example of Balak's angry reaction and in Talmudic teachings, reminds us to cultivate an atmosphere of moral uprightness, spiritual elevation, and peace and to embody the divine attribute of mercy. By avoiding actions that disrupt the tranquility of Shabbat, we honor the day's sanctity and strive to elevate our own character, aligning ourselves more closely with divine examples. Through these practices, we transform Shabbat into a sanctuary in time, a day of peace, joy, and spiritual renewal.