



Blessings, Curses, and Allies: Who's Really on Our Side?

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June 22, 2026

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|----|---|---|
| 1. | Bamidbar (Numbers) 22:2-4 | 1 |
| 2. | Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 105b-106a, Steinsaltz translation | 1 |

With antisemitism and anti-Zionism on the rise, are Jews alone in today's world, or is that belief a powerful myth actively shaping Jewish identity and relationships for the worse? In this episode of TEXTing IRL, Elana Stein Hain and Rabba Rori Picker Neiss, Senior Vice President of Jewish Council for Public Affairs, read Parashat Balak to explore how questions of power, fear, and vulnerability shape Jewish relationships. Drawing on biblical text, Talmudic insight, and contemporary Jewish experience, they probe how narratives about allies and enemies are formed, how they can mislead, and what it takes to stay invested in relationships, even when partners tell us what we don't want to hear and when engagement may carry real risk.

*This source sheet is part of the **June 22, 2026** episode of the podcast **TEXTing IRL - Ideas for Real Life**. Host **Elana Stein Hain** sits down with guests who are accomplished practitioners in their fields to explore how classic and modern Jewish texts can help us wrestle with and act with integrity in the face of the big dilemmas of our time.*

Elana Stein Hain is the Rosh Beit Midrash and a Senior Fellow at the Kogod Research Center of the Shalom Hartman Institute, where she serves as lead faculty and consults on the content of lay and professional programs.

A widely well-regarded thinker and teacher, Elana is passionate about bringing rabbinic thought into conversation with contemporary life. To this end, she hosts [TEXTing IRL](#), a bi-weekly podcast that considers issues relevant to Jewish life through the lens of classical and modern Torah texts; she also teaches [Talmud from the Balcony](#), an occasional learning seminar exposing the big ideas, questions, and issues motivating rabbinic discussions. Elana is the author of [Circumventing the Law: Rabbinic Perspectives on Legal Loopholes and Integrity](#) (Penn Press, 2024) which uses loopholes as a lens for understanding rabbinic views on law and ethics.

She earned her doctorate in Religion at Columbia University and is an alumna of the Yeshiva University Graduate Program in Advanced Talmudic Studies (GPATS) as well as the Consortium in Jewish Studies and Legal Theory Graduate Fellowship at Cardozo School of Law. She also served for eight years as a clergy member on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, at both Lincoln Square Synagogue and the Jewish Center, has taught at the Wagner School at NYU, and sits on the board of Sefaria: A Living Library of Jewish Texts.

Elana is currently living in Jerusalem with her family.

Rori Picker Neiss serves as the Senior Vice President and Rabbi in Residence at the Jewish Council for Public Affairs (JCPA). Prior to that she was Executive Director of the Jewish Community Relations Council of St. Louis, an organization committed to a vibrant and secure Jewish community in a thriving and just St. Louis region, after previously serving as a member of the clergy team at Bais Abraham Congregation, a Modern Orthodox synagogue also located in St Louis. Rori is one of the first graduates of Yeshivat Maharat, a pioneering institution training Orthodox Jewish women to be spiritual leaders and halakhic (Jewish legal) authorities. She is a David Hartman Center fellow at the Shalom Hartman Institute of North America, a CLAL Rabbis Without Borders fellow, and co-editor of “InterActive Faith: The Essential Interreligious Community-Building Handbook”. She is a member of the faculty at the Spertus Institute and serves on the Board of Directors for HIAS and the Parliament of the World’s Religions. Rori is married to Russel Neiss, a software engineer, and they have three children.

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1. Bamidbar (Numbers) 22:2-4

וַיֵּרָא בָלָק בְּרֹצְפוֹר אֶת כָּל־אֲשֶׁר־עָשָׂה יִשְׂרָאֵל לְאֹמְרֵי: וַיִּגַּר מוֹאָב מִפְּנֵי הָעָם מֵאֲדָ כִּי רַב־הוּא וַיִּקָּץ מוֹאָב מִפְּנֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: וַיֹּאמֶר מוֹאָב אֶל־זִקְנֵי מִדְיָן עֵתָה יִלְחָכוּ הַקְּהֵל אֶת־כָּל־סְבִיבֵתֵינוּ כַּלְחָד הַשּׁוֹר אֶת יָרֵק הַשָּׂדֶה וּבָלָק בְּרֹצְפוֹר מָלְךְ לְמוֹאָב בָּעֵת הַהוּא:

Balak saw all that the Israelites had done to the Amorites. Moab was worried because that people was so many. Moab dreaded the Israelites, and Moab said to the elders of Midian, "These Israelites will lap us up as an ox laps up a piece of grass." And Balak was king of Moab at that time.

2. Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 105b-106a, Steinsaltz translation

אָמַר רַבִּי שְׁמוּאֵל בַּר נַחֲמָנִי אָמַר רַבִּי יוֹנָתָן: מַאי דְכַתִּיב "נֶאֱמָנִים פְּעָעֵי אוֹהֵב וְנִעְתָרוֹת נְשִׁיקוֹת שׁוֹנֵא"? טוֹבָה קָלְלָה שְׁקִילָל אַחֲיָה הַשִּׁילוֹנִי אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל יוֹתֵר מִבְּרָכָה שֶׁבֵרַכְם בְּלַעַם הַרְשָׁע.

Rabbi Shmuel bar Nahmani says that Rabbi Yonatan says: What is the meaning of: "Faithful are the wounds of a friend; but the kisses of an enemy are trouble" (Proverbs 27:6)? The curse that Ahiyah the Shilonite gave was better than the blessing that Bilaam the wicked gave.

אַחֲיָה הַשִּׁילוֹנִי קִילָל אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּקִנְיָה, שְׁנֵאָמַר: "וְהִכָּה ה' אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל כַּאֲשֶׁר יָנוּד הַקִּנְיָה בְּמֵים וְגו'". מָה קִנְיָה זֶה עוֹמֵד בְּמִקּוֹם מֵים, וְגִיזְעוּ מַחְלִיף, וְשָׂרְשׁוֹ מְרוּבֵין. וְאַפִּילוּ כָּל רוּחוֹת שֶׁבְּעוֹלָם בָּאוֹת וְנוֹשְׁבוֹת בּוֹ, אֵין מְזִיזוֹת אוֹתוֹ מִמְּקוֹמוֹ, אֶלָּא הוּא הוֹלֵךְ וּבָא עִמָּהּ. כִּינּוּ שְׁדוּמָמוֹ הַרוּחוֹת, עֲמַד קִנְיָה בְּמִקּוֹמוֹ.

Ahiyah the Shilonite cursed Israel with a reed, as it is stated: "For the Lord shall smite Israel as a reed is shaken in water" (I Kings 14:15). There is an aspect of blessing in that curse, as he was saying they will be just like a reed that stands in a place near water, as the water sustains it, and its stalk replenishes itself, as if it is cut another grows, and its roots are numerous. And even if all of the winds that are in the world come and gust against it, they do not move it from its place and uproot it. Rather, it goes and comes with the winds. And once the winds subside the reed remains in its place.

אַבְל בְּלַעַם הַרְשָׁע בְּרַכּוֹ בְּאֶרְזוֹ. מָה אֶרְזוֹ זֶה? אֵינוֹ עוֹמֵד בְּמִקּוֹם מֵים, וְשָׂרְשׁוֹ מוֹעָטִין, וְאֵין גִּזְעוּ מַחְלִיף. אֶפִּילוּ כָּל הַרוּחוֹת שֶׁבְּעוֹלָם בָּאוֹת וְנוֹשְׁבוֹת בּוֹ, אֵין מְזִיזוֹת אוֹתוֹ מִמְּקוֹמוֹ. כִּינּוּ שֶׁנִּשְׁבָּה בּוֹ רוּחַ דְּרוֹמִית, מִיָּד עוֹקְרָתוֹ וְהוֹפְכָתוֹ עַל פָּנָיו. וְלֹא עוֹד, אֶלָּא שֶׁזָּכָה קִנְיָה לִיטוֹל מִמֶּנּוּ קוּלְמוֹס לְכַתּוֹב מִמֶּנּוּ סִפְרֵי תוֹרָה, נְבִיאִים וְכַתּוּבִים.

But Bilaam the wicked blessed them with a cedar. There is an aspect of curse in that blessing, as he was saying they will be just like a cedar that does not stand in a place near water, and its roots are few, and its trunk does not replenish itself, as if it is cut it does not grow back. And even if all the winds that are in the world come and gust against it, they do not move it from its place and uproot it; but once a southern wind gusts it immediately uproots the cedar and overturns it on its face. Moreover, it is the reed that was privileged to have a quill [*kulmos*] taken from it to write scrolls of Torah, Prophets, and Writings. Therefore, the curse of Ahiyah is better than the blessing of Bilaam.