Chukat-Balak Numbers22:

21In the morning Balaam arose, saddled his she-donkey and went with the Moabite dignitaries.

22God's wrath flared because he was going, and an angel of the Lord stationed himself on the road to thwart him, and he was riding on his she-donkey, and his two servants were with him.

23The she-donkey saw the angel of the Lord stationed on the road with his sword drawn in his hand; so the she-donkey turned aside from the road and went into a field. Balaam beat the she-donkey to get it back onto the road.

…three times this happens. Then it concludes:

28The Lord opened the mouth of the she-donkey, and she said to Balaam, "What have I done to you that you have struck me these three times?"

29Balaam said to the she-donkey, "For you have humiliated me; if I had a sword in my hand, I would kill you right now."

30The she-donkey said to Balaam, "Am I not your she-donkey on which you have ridden since you first started until now? Have I been accustomed to do this to you?" He said, "No."

31The Lord opened Balaam's eyes, and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road, with a sword drawn in his hand. He bowed and prostrated himself on his face.

Rashi’s comment on this passage is hilarious:

Our Rabbis, however, expounded this verse in the Talmud: They [the Moabite dignitaries] said to him, “Why aren’t you riding on a horse?” He [Balaam] said to them, “I sent it out to pasture.” [Immediately, the she-donkey retorted, “Am I not your she-donkey?” He said to her, “Just for bearing burdens.” She retorted, “on which you have ridden.” He said to her, “Only on occasion.” She retorted,“since you first started until now, and not only that but I provide you with riding by day, and with intimacy at night, (interpreting Heb. הַהַסְכֵּן הִסְכַּנְתִּי as”I heated you up,") as is stated in Tractate Avodah Zarah [4b].

African tales frequently evoke contests of power, sometimes between gods, or spiritual figures like priests or magicians, involved in a fight to harm or protect those seeking the magicians’ forces. At first there is a struggle whether Balaam will go to join Balak in his impending fight against the Israelites; and then, when he arrives, whether he will curse or bless the Israelites who are encamped close to the Moabites. This is the frame for the story of Balaam and his ass that occurs within that conflict. The outer frame involves Balaam who enters into a conflict with Balak and his representatives who try to convince Balaam to come and curse the israelites, over the opposition of God. When Balaam sets out, that conflict continues, but now inside the frame it is configured as being between god’s angel, allied with the ass, and Balaam who cannot see or understand what is happening. In a minute we will see that there is another deeper underlying conflict, an astonishing one that the totally bizarre Talmudic reading suggests.

Magical fights involve the mobilization of spiritual forces, and take place on a plane outside of reality. They might well involve three instances of battle, three attempts to overthrow an adversary and his or her magic; three figures, each greater than the other. They might involve shifting one’s ground [balak asks balaam to move three times to get him to curse the Israelites]; the transformation of one’s shape [a donkey or a person?]; the invocation of powerful curses, the deployment of magical substances. Words, beings, curses—the ten plagues, the defeat of great forces, kingdoms and pharaohs, all that proves your god’s greater strength. And implicit in the tale is the special status of the one who recounts the tale: the teller endowed with the special sight and the mastery of the word. Magic, power, life, and death. Always death on the horizon.

Perhaps it is on the edge of death that Jewish humor was forged. The donkey will bring us there. She says, am I not your she-donkey on which you have ridden since you first started till now? The Talmud has Balaam reply, “only on occasion.” She then turns into his wife, his concubine, his termagant: “since you first started until now, and not only that but I provide you with riding by day, and with intimacy at night.” We have moved far from the angel with the flaming sword and the world-shaking contest between Moab and Israel, to the female servant, forcing her famous prophet rider to admit that if he wants to be warm at night, he had better start treating her with a little more respect. In Africa of yesterday, when a traveler of importance came to a village, the chief would provide him with a “chauffe-lit,” a young woman to warm his bed—a euphemism for a bed-mate. This chauffe-lit donkey won’t lie down and take the beatings without speaking up; who is this woman who won’t keep quiet? What is her relation to this larger tale? The next line provides the answer.

The line that follows the donkey’s reproach is, “The Lord opened Balaam’s eyes, and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road, with a sword drawn in his hand.” Balaam prostrates himself, a bit belatedly we might say, but that is not the end of the affair. The angel puts Balaam in his place: 33When the she-donkey saw me, it turned aside these three times. Had she not turned aside before me, now also I would also have killed you and spared her [the she-donkey]."

The donkey could see what the prophet could not; she saved his life, despite his angry retort to her, when she spoke. 28The Lord opened the mouth of the she-donkey, and she said to Balaam"What have I done to you that you have struck me these three times?" He responded:

29 "For you have humiliated me; if I had a sword in my hand, I would kill you right now."

The animal becomes the device through which the prophet’s eyes are to be opened. His riding her, directing her force, utilizing her strength to travel down his road, was not enough, and he had to come to the edge of death, and to threaten her with death, for the miracle that enlightened him to occur. [Just like Abraham as he lifted his knife, about to kill Isaac, on the edge of the precipice, when the angel intervened to save his son’s life.]

Jewish humor is dark since it is often in the shadow of death that its uncomfortable laughter has to be evoked. We read it as the humor of the underdog, god’s slaves, god’s donkey, god’s chauffe-lits. The joke here is the donkey making reference to the intimacy at night; and to the listener of the tale laughing at the idea that this powerful man, who rode his women all his life, should be shown up for a liar in front of an angel before whom he will shortly have to throw himself on the ground to save his own life. And where is his gratitude to the donkey whose stubborn refusal to obey him three times was what saved his life.

What sets off all these combats, and the subsequent miracle of Balaam’s ass? Perhaps we could link it to another woman, one who bears my mother’s name, and so to whom I have a very close feeling. Numbers, chapter 20: 1The entire congregation of the children of Israel arrived at the desert of Zin in the first month, and the people settled in Kadesh. Miriam died there and was buried there.

2The congregation had no water; so they assembled against Moses and Aaron.

3The people quarreled with Moses, and they said, "If only we had died with the death of our brothers before the Lord.

4Why have you brought the congregation of the Lord to this desert so that we and our livestock should die there?

The travels and combats that lead to Moab begins there, in the desert of Zin.

In the end, we will wind up with Balaam who has to continue on his journey, despite all the obstacles, and despite being a total ass toward his magical donkey. He has to speak the most beautiful of blessings to the Israelites, despite Balak and his wealth, power, and sacrifices. He was summoned to curse us, but has no real choice except to open his eyes and say:

"The word of Balaam the son of Beor and the word of the man with an open eye.

4The word of the one who hears God's sayings, who sees the vision of the Almighty, fallen yet with open eyes.

5How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel!

6They extend like streams, like gardens by the river, like aloes which the Lord planted, like cedars by the water.

…Those who bless you shall be blessed, and those who curse you shall be cursed.”

Shabbat shalom. Remember Balaam’s ass, who saw before her master could see, whom he beat yet who saved his life, and who paved the way for him to speak these words that have become famous and beloved despite him. How goodly are you tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, of Israel! Shabbat shalom. Remember those words, but also the donkey’s words as she speaks under her master’s body: 27The she-donkey saw the angel of the Lord, and it crouched down under Balaam. Balaam's anger flared, and he beat the she-donkey with a stick. 28The Lord opened the mouth of the she-donkey, and she said to Balaam, "What have I done to you that you have struck me these three times?" Shabbat shalom. Three times is best.