"Balak: The millennial struggle for peace and the undoing of Bilaam"

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This coming week we observe the fast of the 17th Tammuz, inaugurating the three weeks of semi-mourning for the siege of Jerusalem and the destruction of our *Bet ha-Mikdash* and the symbol of our religious and national pride and independence.

The second Temple was destroyed by the Romans in the year 70 CE. Inevitably, our sages asked themselves what terrible sin could possibly have justified such a crushing and interminable punishment at the hands of the Romans. Their response was *sin'at chinam*, 'causeless hatred' of fellow Jews.

The great Rav Kuk used to say that if we wanted the Temple to be rebuilt, and our sovereignty and peace to be restored, we first had to create internal peace and a sense of unity based on mutual respect, concern and love for one another. In short: we must replace *sin'at chinam* with *ahavat chinam*, causeless love, and only then would the sin of the generation whose hard-heartedness lost us our Temple be purged.

This is exemplified by a true story concerning the late Lubavitcher Rebbe, of blessed memory, and associated with the sidrah Balak and the heathen prophet Bilaam's desire to curse our people. It is related that a rabbi once publicly and bitterly attacked the Rebbe for something he is alleged to have said and done. When it was pointed out to the critic that he had been misinformed, and that the

Rebbe had never said or done what was alleged, the rabbi immediately penned a letter of apology to the Rebbe, imploring him not to bear a grudge against him for his rash and false outburst.

The Rebbe responded: "Believe me when I tell you that I do not have the time to bear grudges against people, and he attempted to persuade his followers always to adopt this attitude. “Where do you find the time to bear grudges against people?” he pleaded. “Where do you obtain the time and the energy to hate? That valuable time needs to be used constructively: to love, to help, to cement friendships, to bring people closer to God. In short, to change the world!”

It is truly amazing how we find the time to do the things that interest or entertain us. Busy professionals, for whom people must wait weeks for an appointment, nevertheless find the time to go on regular holidays, to frequent pubs and restaurants after work, to attend theatres and cinemas, to watch the Euros, Wimbledon, football matches, cricket test matches, to read the papers, and to watch TV and Netflix for several hours each day. They also find the time to get into arguments and to write offensive e-mails, messages, WhatsApps, and blogs! We should all consider the Rebbe’s question before we start each day: “With all our daily preoccupations, can we really spare the time for grudges and the energy to hate?”

The very first biblical quote in our daily prayers is the formula of the priestly blessing, concluding, ‘*May the Lord turn His face towards you and grant you peace”*

(Nu.6:26). The implication is that if our relationships are not undergirded by peace, God will not turn His face towards us!

Balak was prepared to spend as much time as it took and as much money as it required in the pursuit of hatred and destruction. He engaged the most prominent sorcerer and soothsayer of his day to use his gifts of oratory, instruments of divination, and powers of prognostication, to determine the most appropriate place and the most efficacious formulae for invoking a curse upon the Israelites, with a view to weakening them into submission and driving them out of the country (Nu. 22: 2ff).

So, the story of Balak illustrates the lengths to which some people are prepared to go, the fortunes they are prepared to invest, and the means they are prepared to employ – both natural and supernatural - to destroy those they perceive as different and, therefore, as a threat. Those lengths are exemplified by the fact that, as Bilaam hesitated to accede to his request – fearing divine retribution – the king sent a further delegation promising even greater honours and whatever amount of material inducement Bilaam would demand (22: 17).

The message to Israel was clear. It was a warning of the lengths to which the surrounding peoples would be prepared to go in order to harm them, frustrate their ambitions, and avoid associating and cooperating with them, even to their mutual advantage. If ever Israel hoped to pioneer and promote international relations, they were being advised to think again.

In addition to the moral degeneracy of the seven Canaanite tribes (which will be discussed in next week's Torah thought) – which alone justified their subjugation by Israel – there was also the consideration that they were focused upon pursuing policies that were implacably opposed to the development of a prosperous and peaceful future for their region. Their political philosophy was isolationism, violent competitiveness, and an implacable opposition to the notion of 'a family of nations.' They were not interested in discovering what Israel's objectives were. They just knew that they were different, and therefore a threat.

So, when Bilaam prophesied - *Hein am levadad yishkon, uva-goyyim lo yitchashav – 'They are a people that dwells alone and are not reckoned among the nations'* (23:9), he was not describing - as he imagined – a nation with an isolationist outlook, but, to the contrary, one that was prepared to enter into an alliance with all who wished to associate and cooperate with it. This was demonstrated at the very outset of the exodus from Egypt when the Hebrews welcomed the 'mixed multitude' of non-Israelites into their fraternity, to share the protection and destiny promised by God (Ex .12:38). Ironically, that particular element of Bilaam's prophecy was an accurate description of the outlook of the surrounding nations rather than that of Israel!

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Balak, king of Moab, shared with the Midian tribes in their midst (See Gen. 36:35) their terror at the vast number of Israelites approaching their land (22:3-4), an echo

of the way in which Pharaoh had shared with his nation his great fear of the rapid growth and threat of the Hebrews at the very outset of their enslavement (Ex. 1:7). Both kings employ the same adjective, *atzum mi… ('more powerful than me/us'*: Gen. 1:9; Nu. 22:6), to describe Israel's perceived warrior-like strength which, if true, was undoubtedly the effects of the grinding physical toil imposed on them.

Why the Moabite Balak chose to share his anxiety with the Midianites – who were not direct neighbours - is not spelt out, though a regional anti-Israel alliance at this time would not have been unexpected. As a joint delegation of Moabites and Midianites subsequently went to persuade Bilaam to curse Israel (See Nu. 22:7), it might simply have been the case that a close relationship had sprung up at that time between the Midianites and Bilaam, whose services the former may have regularly employed as part of their idolatrous *Pe'or* worship rituals (See Nu. 24:2-3). It would have made sense, therefore, for the king of Moab to have approached the Midianites to aid him in enlisting Bilaam's services.

A second semantic link is created by King Balak's disclosure to Bilaam of the nature of the fear of Israel that grips him - *hinnei kissah et ein ha-aretz – 'Behold it* [Israel] *has covered the surface of the earth'* (Nu 22:5 , 11). The identical phrase will be recalled by those familiar with the earlier description of the plague of locusts. Moses warns Pharaoh that, if he refuses to let the people go, he will send a plague - *v'chissah et ein ha-aretz – 'which shall cover the surface of the earth* (Ex. 10:5). The Hebrews appeared to Balak as a plague of locusts covering the entire earth, the identical infestation that had helped to bring Pharaoh to his heels. Balak would

have got word of every detail of the plagues inflicted on the Egyptians to secure the Hebrews' release. And now his country was at their mercy!

A third semantic link is created through the phraseology of Balak's summons to Bilaam to curse Israel: *'For I know that he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed'* (22:6). This is the almost identical blessing that God gave to Abraham on His first call to him: *'I will bless those who bless you; and curse him that curses you'* (Gen.12:3). The mission of Bilaam was thus doomed at the very outset, because the blessedness of Israel - as conveyed to her founding father, Abraham - had long become a divinely-ordained reality. Thus, any who sought to frustrate that blessing were setting themselves against the will of God, with all its attendant consequences. Hence, that particular attribute, with which Balak complimented Bilaam, was, demonstrably, ironical and laughable.

Shabbat shalom

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