

JUNE 25, 2007

Parashat Balak

Simple Misperception

Vayagor Mo'av "And Mo'av was frightened" (Numbers 22:3)

What were the Moabites so scared of? Was *B'nei Yisrael* a barbaric nation known for her cruelty? Hardly. On their journey from Egypt, our ancestors tried hard to avoid conflict while crossing the territories of others. Ramban explains that *B'nei Yisrael* outnumbered the Moabites and, fearing an attack from this larger nation, Mo'av decided on a preemptive attack. Ramban teaches us that this war was about perception (or, rather, misperception), not about actual fear. Had the Moabites bothered to pay attention, *B'nei Yisrael* had very public orders from HaShem not to attack Mo'av. In fact, they were prepared to pay high tribute for the favor of passing through Moabite land.

In a world of complex communication, it is easy to have misunderstandings. It is important that we take available evidence into consideration and listen to other people to avoid tragic misperceptions.

Last week, the U.N. Human Rights Council – a body whose preoccupation with Israel has prevented it from dealing with real atrocities in Darfur and elsewhere – once again singled out the Jewish state by voting to make her the lone permanent item on its agenda. The Council was formed only a year ago to address the obvious anti-Israelism of its predecessor, the Human Rights Commission, whose composition included some of the world's worst human rights abusers. Since last year, it has repeatedly criticized only one country for human rights abuses: Israel.

It is obvious that Israel is unfairly picked on by much of the world and that many countries use international organizations to beat up on the Jewish state either out of hatred or simply to deflect attention from their own records. While we should be proud that our Canadian neighbors were the single opposing vote in last week's action by the Council (the U.S. refused a seat on the panel and, thus, did not cast a vote), the United States is often the only country to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with Israel

Our activism, as well as the common values shared by Americans and Israelis, keeps the U.S.-Israel relationship strong. Last week's action by the U.N. Human Rights Council should remind us of that which we are up against and, hopefully, cause us to redouble our efforts. ■

Secure the Blessings

Ki yadati eit asher t'vareich m'vorach "For I know that he whom you bless is blessed" (Numbers 22:6)

Because Balak fears *B'nei Yisrael*, he sends a message to Bilaam asking him to come and curse the people that have appeared on his border. Although, in our *pasuk*, Balak acknowledges Bilaam's ability to bless as well as to curse, Talmud (Sanhedrin 105a) teaches us that Bilaam really only had the power to curse. Sforno comments that Balak was

aware of this limitation to Bilaam's power, but that he utters the above praise to "butter up" Bilaam. The Chafetz Chayim, however, teaches us that Balak actually believed that Bilaam had the power to bless – and that this belief acts as an even greater indictment of Balak. Why curse *B'nei Yisrael* if he could have simply blessed his own people?

Golda Meir famously said that Israel would "have peace with the Arabs when they love their children more than they hate us." Today, in Gaza, one might conclude that Golda's blunt assessment still fits.

When Israel pulled all troops and settlements out of Gaza in the summer of 2005, the residents of the territory had a choice: build up their own society or continue to try to destroy Israel. After thousands of Qassam rockets, the kidnapping of Gilad Shalit, continued attempts to infiltrate into Israel to commit acts of terrorism, and the recent Hamas-Fatah bloodshed, it is obvious that the leaders of the thugs in Gaza are not interested in governing. Only, as New York Times columnist Tom Friedman recently wrote, "in making life ungovernable."

We pray that the new warlords of Gaza – the victorious terrorists of Hamas – learn the lesson of Balak and quickly go about securing blessings for their own people rather than seeking curses for *B'nei Yisrael*. ■

Hear Ye

Lo teileich imahem "You shall not go with them" (Numbers 22:12)

Appearing to Bilaam in a dream, God orders him not to go do the bidding of Balak. Rather than deducing the evil nature of the mission, Bilaam reports to Balak's emissaries that HaShem simply refuses to allow him to go – as if God is just being a bit unreasonable and they should check back with Bilaam later. As we know, Balak does send higher-ranking messengers with promises of wealth and fame and, in spite of God's clear direction, Bilaam takes the bait. Rabbi Chayim Shmuelevitz commented that any unbiased person who heard God's directions would understand what he or she was to do.

Not Bilaam. He only hears what he wants to hear. We all know people whose egos or personal desires get in the way of what they know to be right.

In addition to Iran's reckless pursuit of nuclear weapons technology, Tehran continues to top the State Department's list of state sponsors of international terrorism. In an announcement that surprised absolutely no one, the head of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, Ali Larijani, admitted late last week that Iran finances Hizballah and Hamas. Larijani told Newsweek magazine, "We do support Hizballah and Hamas, that is right. But these two are not terrorist groups. These are the two groups that are defending their own land."

Also last week, in an interview with Germany's leading weekly newsmagazine, *Der Spiegel*, Hamas' Mahmoud Zahar claimed that American aid money had been used to purchase weapons that were now in the hands of Hamas. Zahar said, "There are naturally very many weapons around now. Two years ago, one bullet in Gaza cost around \$3.50 — now it would cost 35 cents. The American aid money has been translated into weapons. Thank you, America!"

The United States must continue to work to isolate and Iran and use all political and economic tools at our disposal to persuade Tehran to change course. While much of the world chooses not to hear the words of Iran, Hamas, and Hizballah, we must make every effort to constantly remind our leaders to listen to them carefully. ■