

JUNE 29, 2009

Parashat Chukat-Balak

A Direct Route

Vayima'ein Edom neton et Yisrael avor – “Thus Edom refused to give Israel passage” (Numbers 20:21)

On the final leg of their journey towards the Promised Land, the Jewish people found themselves blocked by the territory of Esau's descendant, Edom. Although Moses sent messengers to request safe passage through the territory, Edom refused Moses' appeal. Why did the Jewish people refrain from attacking Edom and continue their travels? According to the Torah, God had explicitly forbidden the Israelites from doing so. In Deuteronomy (2:4) God warned Moses, “contend not with them [Edom]; for I will not give you of their land, no, not so much as for the sole of the foot to tread on; because I have given Mount Seir unto Esau for a possession.” Forbidden from attacking, the Israelites requested safe passage. When rebuffed, they found themselves forced to take the long route around Edom – a circuitous path that greatly encumbered the nation's progress.

As evidenced by Edom's refusal to allow the Israelites safe passage, obstructed movement places a tremendous strain on travelers. Recognizing this, and in light of Palestinian security advances, Israel has been removing roadblocks across the West Bank in an effort to improve the lives of the Palestinian people.

According to a report in the Israeli newspaper Ha'aretz, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) have lifted several dozen checkpoints and roadblocks in the West Bank in recent weeks, easing movement for Palestinian residents. “On average, a trip between Ramallah to Jenin takes 90 minutes, while several months ago it took hours,” Ha'aretz reports. Further, a Jerusalem Post report quotes the army as stating that, “The removal of the crossing joins the removal of some 140 roadblocks and eight central checkpoints over the past year in an effort to improve freedom of movement for the civilian Palestinian population in Judea, Samaria and the Jordan Valley.” Currently, there are only 10 manned roadblocks in operation within the West Bank, down from 35 a year and a half ago. These improvements, resulting from enhanced security and Palestinian Authority action against terrorist infrastructure in the West Bank, have facilitated free access to all parts of the West Bank for Jericho residents and enabled Palestinians from major cities to travel in the northern West Bank without any security checks. In addition, the Israeli government has allowed several hundred Palestinian businessmen free access to Israel as part of an effort to improve the Palestinian economy.

As the Palestinian Authority continues to take an active security role, Israel will be able to safely take further steps to remove obstacles that impede travel. This will allow Palestinians even greater freedom of movement, and the ability to take the kind of direct route that was denied to the Israelites so many years ago. ■

Tactics of Terror

Vayishb mimenu shevi – “and [he] took some of them captive” (Numbers 21:1)

According to the Midrash (Rosh Hashanah 3a), following Aaron's death the *annan* which had protected the nation disappeared. Thereafter, assuming that the Israelites were now vulnerable, “the Cannanite, the king of Arad,” attacked the Jewish people and took a captive in the process. Rashi explains that these attackers were actually Amalekites who disguised themselves by dressing and speaking in the Canaanite manner. Through their deceptive tactics and taking of a prisoner, the Amalekites hoped to successfully attack the Israelites while avoiding reprisals.

In its tactics and behavior, Hamas mimics the devious conduct modeled by the “Canaanites” in our *parashah*. Like these aggressors, Hamas continues to attack Israel without provocation and attempts to take captives.

Recently, Israeli soldiers defused four explosives placed along the border of the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip, thwarting the latest in a string of attempted terrorist attacks on the Jewish state, the website Ynetnews.com reported. Palestinian terrorists then fired a barrage of mortar shells at the soldiers as they worked to dismantle the bombs. In another instance, Palestinian terrorists attempted to infiltrate the Jewish state from Gaza with a convoy of explosives-laden trucks and horses. Ha’aretz quoted an IDF source who said that the Hamas was planning to launch an attack on an Israeli community bordering the Strip, and the defense establishment stated that the infiltrators planned to abduct IDF soldiers once inside Israel. This attempt to capture soldiers, like Gilad Shalit who is entering his fourth year of captivity and has still not been permitted a visit from the International Red Cross, is aimed at demoralizing the IDF and strengthening Hamas’ bargaining position. Since its violent takeover of Gaza in 2007, Hamas has overseen a massive arms buildup, fired thousands of projectiles into Israel and attempted numerous terrorist attacks. For more on Hamas, click [here](#).

Hamas continues to attempt to ruthlessly attack targets inside of Israel without provocation. Like the Israelites who rebuffed the attacking marauders, modern-day Israel must also utilize its strength to protect and defend its citizens from Hamas’ unprovoked attacks. ■

Unnecessary Force

Vayach et ha’aton b’makel - “And he struck the donkey with the staff” (Numbers 22:27)

Dismayed at Balaam’s eagerness to curse the Jewish nation, God sent an angel to impede his travels. While Balaam’s donkey saw an angel menacing him with an outstretched sword, Balaam himself did not see anything. As the donkey continued to veer away from the path to avoid the angel, Balaam became frustrated with the animal. Balaam eventually struck the donkey with his staff, and even threatened to kill the very animal upon which he sat.

While the impediment to Balaam’s path seemed obvious to his donkey, Balaam was unable to see the imprudence of his course and resorted to violence. Like Balaam, the Iranian government also seems blind to the ineptness of its course, and has also struck out with brutality.

The world continues to watch in horror as Iranian police and military forces, acting on the orders of Iran’s religious leadership, use brutal tactics to break up peaceful protests against the recent Iranian elections. As government militias attacked demonstrators with clubs, tear gas, water cannons and even live fire, President Obama declared that, “The United States and the international community have been appalled and outraged by the threats, beatings, and imprisonments of the last few days. I strongly condemn these unjust actions, and I join with the American people in mourning each and every innocent life that is lost.” The President’s stern comments come as Iran’s most senior panel of election monitors noted that the number of votes cast in 50 cities exceeded the actual number of voters. Despite the apparent election fraud, high ranking cleric Ayatollah Ahmed Khatami stated “Rioters and those who mastermind the unrest must know the Iranian nation will not give in to pressure and accept the nullification of the election results.”

Like the donkey who suffered for trying to lead Balaam away from a dangerous path, ordinary Iranians continue to suffer injury and death for attempting to lead their country away from the perilous course of repression. Hopefully, just as Balaam ultimately realized the error of his actions and sought forgiveness, Iran’s leadership will eventually recognize its error and seek a way to make amends. ■