

JULY 2, 2012

Parashat Balak

Mixed Messages

And Balak saw (Numbers 22:2)

וירא בלק (במדבר כב:ב)

Rabbi Benzion Firrer wonders (see *Hegyonah Shel Torah* vol. 4, p130) why this *parashah* is named after Balak when the story is actually about Balaam, a prophet who attempted to use his spiritual abilities to bring harm to the Jewish nation. Rabbi Firrer explained that the Torah gives credit to Balak for his openness and honesty because a person “who reveals his hatred towards us is better than a hypocrite who speaks one way and feels differently. While Balak did not hold back [his hatred], Balaam was two faced; everything he said could be interpreted in opposite ways.” Although the Torah vilifies Balak for his antagonism towards the Jewish people, he was candid and expressed his hatred outright. Balaam harbored animosity inwardly while speaking vaguely to hide his true intentions.

Just as Balaam intentionally masked his animosity for the Jewish people through vague, ambiguous speech, the newly elected President of Egypt has also sent mixed messages about his intentions towards the Jewish state.

Recently, the Muslim Brotherhood’s candidate Mohammed Morsi was declared Egypt’s first freely elected president, [The Wall Street Journal](#) reported. Many secular Egyptians wonder uneasily about the future of their country. Egypt’s government has long been secular, moderate and pro-American. But now, the country is controlled by a party who has viewed the United States with suspicion and lives by the principle, “The Koran is our constitution, the Prophet is our leader, *jihad* is our path and death in the name of Allah is our goal.” Morsi’s first speech to the nation after being declared Egypt’s next president was peaceful, however he has been known as a hard line and often divisive figure within the Muslim Brotherhood. In terms of its neighbor Israel, Morsi wants to “reconsider” the peace deal with Israel and is ready to improve ties with Iran to “create a strategic balance in the region,” [Agence France Presse](#) reported. He told an Iranian news agency, “We will reconsider the Camp David Accord” an agreement that has kept peace between Egypt and Israel for more than three decades. Stanford University’s Fouad Ajami recently [wrote](#) that while “the president-elect promises a presidency for all Egyptians—a role for the Copts, for women, for secularists—the promises of the day could be erased by the night, as an Arabic expression has it.” For more on Egypt, click [here](#).

Rabbinic tradition vilifies Balaam for his two-faced, ambiguous statements about the Jewish people, which he used to hide his true feelings of animosity. As an Islamist assumes the reins of power in Egypt, the world must be wary that behind his ambiguous statements lies a radical Islamic vision. ■

Dangerous Rhetoric

As the ox licks up the grass of the field (Numbers 22:4)

כלתך השור את ירק השדה (במדבר כב:ד)

In a message to Midian, the elders of Moab described the threat of the advancing Jewish army by warning that, “this multitude will lick up all that is round about us, as the ox licks up the grass of the field” (Numbers 22:4). What is the meaning of this strange image? Rabbi Baruch Halevi Epstein (*Tosefet Brachah* on 22:4) explains that in order to coerce Midian to join the fight against the Jews, Moab used inflammatory language that described the Jews in the most negative possible light. While most animals eat the growth of the field and leave the roots to regenerate, the ox,

lacking front teeth to grab its food, uses its powerful tongue to forcefully uproot the plants together with their roots, “and thus fails to leave any source of blessing on the ground.”

Moab’s use of hateful language served as a precursor for its attempt to destroy the Jewish people. Today, Iran uses dangerous rhetoric in its efforts to demonize both Jews and the Jewish state.

While Iranian officials have previously declared that the Jewish state is “doomed to destruction” and called Israel “a cancerous tumor that must be removed,” the Iranian regime has refrained from overtly criticizing Judaism as a faith—until now. [The New York Times](#) reported Iran’s Vice President Mohammad-Reza Rahimi delivered a baldly anti-Semitic speech at an international antidrug conference, saying that the Talmud was responsible for the spread of illegal drugs around the world. Rahimi, second in line to President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, said the Talmud teaches to “destroy everyone who opposes the Jews.” Iran’s vice president also told stories of gynecologists’ killing black babies on the orders of the Zionists and claimed that the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 was started by Jews, adding that mysteriously, no Jews died in that uprising. Rahimi said that the Talmud teaches Jews that they are a superior race, saying, “They think God has created the world so that all other nations can serve them.” In response, Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Liberman [condemned](#) the anti-Semitic tirade saying, “Hitler also said crazy things and succeeded in carrying out his plan,” adding that the world has not yet fully come to understand the danger that Iran poses. “The Iranian regime [is composed of] anti-Semitic fanatics, who have a detailed worldwide plan, part of which, as they admit openly, is the destruction of the state of Israel.” For more on Iran, visit www.aipac.org/Iran.

Moab utilized hateful language to justify its plans to destroy the Jewish people. As Iranian regime rhetoric becomes blatantly anti-Semitism, the world must truly recognize Iran’s dangerous desire to destroy the Jewish state. ■

Righteous Attributes

Let me die the death of the righteous (Numbers 23:10)

תמות נפשי מות ישרים (במדבר כג:י)

According to the Torah, Balaam unwittingly praised the Children of Israel as he called them *yesharim*—righteous—when he expressed, “Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my end be like his” (23:10). What is the nature of the righteousness that Balaam wants? Netziv (see Ha’amek Davar on 23:10) explains that this term refers to, “an upright behavior in one’s dealings with his fellow man.” Moreover, Balaam prayed, “that he would excel like [the descendants of] Jacob in the attribute of the righteous, for they also perform great acts of kindness [not only for the Jewish people but also] for the nations of the world...”

Balaam sought to be like the righteous Children of Israel who performed acts of kindness for both Jews and non-Jews. Today, Israelis continue to model this attribute of righteousness by eagerly helping people all around the world.

After Tom Peled lost his father to a rare form of cancer, he decided to launch a fundraising effort for cancer research, under the name Bike for the Fight, [NoCamels.com](#) reported. Bike for the Fight plans on raising money for the Israel Cancer Research Fund (ICRF), a North American organization founded in 1975 that gives grants to top Israeli cancer researchers in leading scientific institutions across Israel. The recipients of ICRF funds have been engaged in research that resulted in the development of life-saving advancements, such as early diagnostic devices and new drugs for leukemia, bone marrow cancer, breast and ovarian cancer, among others. On the first of August, the Israeli student will start a three month journey across the U.S and parts of Canada. In addition to supporting cancer research, Peled hopes this trip will enable him to strengthen the long-term relationship between American and Israeli Jews. “I see Bike for the Fight turning into the LiveStrong of the Jewish World,” he says.

Balaam recognized the Jews as they readily performed acts of kindness on behalf all people. This summer, an Israeli is translating this trait into action, as he bikes across America raising money to further cancer research and help patients all over the world. ■

Sermon tidbits are intended for your use without attribution. Please feel free to use some or all of the material. Although it is not necessary, it is appreciated if copies of sermons or articles that use the ideas presented here are sent to synagogue@aipac.org.