

JUNE 17, 2013

Parashat Balak

Imminent Danger

And Balak saw (Numbers 22:2)

וירא בלק (במדבר כב:ב)

The entire story of the Moabite plot in our *parshah* to curse the Jewish people took place outside the Israelite camp, completely unbeknownst to the nation. Rabbi Eliyahu Kitov (see Sefer Haparshiot Bamidbar Vol. 2 p. 179) notes that the threat from Balak was so severe that the entire story, which spans 95 verses, appears in the Torah in a single paragraph, without any breaks: “[It is] as if the events were written with bated breath due to the great danger which could not be interrupted with a single break or pause...” Thankfully, despite the unknown threat from Balak that lurked outside the Israelite camp, divine protection prevented the Jewish people’s adversaries from doing them harm.

As we read about how Balak sat on the border of the Jewish camp, plotting to curse the Israelites, we are reminded of the dangers that lurk across Israel’s modern border with Syria.

Recently, rebels fighting the Syrian government [seized the only border crossing](#) operated by United Nations peacekeeping forces along the Israeli-Syrian cease-fire line in the Golan Heights, bringing the Syrian conflict closer to Israeli-held territory. The mayhem was enough to threaten the continuation of the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force, the longtime peacekeeping mission in the sensitive and disputed area. Austrian United Nations peacekeepers that patrol the Quneitra crossing were ordered to pull back for their own safety. Twice in recent months a rebel group has taken groups of Filipino peacekeepers in the same mission captive. One senior Israeli government official said that in general there was “skepticism among the senior Israeli leadership as to the utility of international forces or monitors when things get tough.” The Israeli government has long insisted on a doctrine of self-reliance regarding its security. But analysts said that a disintegration of the United Nations peacekeeping force could certainly complicate the situation along the Israeli-Syrian frontier. A recent fierce battle between the Syrian Army and rebels in the Syrian city of Quneitra near the Israeli border on the Syrian Golan Heights “nearly brought Israel and Syria into open confrontation,” [The Times of Israel](#) reported. For more on Syria, click [here](#).

The uninterrupted story of Balak and Balaam highlights the grave danger which threatened the nation. The violence in Syria rages in close proximity to Israel; it too must deal with imminent threats lurking just across its border. ■

Doing their Dirty Work

The king of Moab at that time (Numbers 22:4)

מלך למואב בעת ההוא (במדבר כב:ד)

Why does the text specify that “at that time” Balak was the king of Moab? Rashi (on 22:4) explains that Balak was in fact a Midianite prince unworthy of the Moabite monarchy. Yet, following the Israelite defeat of Sihon, the king of the Amorites, Balak convinced the people of Moab to accept him as their king temporarily to fight against the Israelite aggression. Essentially, the story of Balak is a tale of a Midianite prince (Balak) who hired a foreign prophet (Balaam) to fight on behalf of Moab against Israel. Ironically, while the Midianites were happy to allow the Moabites to confront the Jews, they themselves refused to join the plot to hire Balaam to curse the Jewish people.

Just as the Midianites tried to keep their fingerprints off their efforts to exert influence through the actions of Balak and Balaam, Iran is trying to keep its fingerprints off its efforts to exert influence across the Middle East.

The Syrian Army, with help from the Iranian-backed terrorist network Hezbollah, recently regained an edge in its fight against Syrian rebels. According to the [The Washington Post](#), “Iran is emerging as the biggest victor in the wider regional struggle for influence that the Syrian conflict has become.” As the world’s leading state sponsor of terror, through its proxy armies of Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in the Gaza Strip, the Iranian regime is supporting terrorists that have carried out attacks on American troops and Israeli civilians. Iran strongly supports the Syrian regime as it supplies advice, arms and money to Bashar al Assad, as well as Hezbollah fighters as manpower. Iran plays a role in most of the major crises in the Middle East, and its growing stature in the region will further embolden the Islamic Republic to continue its nuclear weapons program and ignore the international community’s demand that it halt its illegal nuclear research. According to Mustafa Alani, director of security and defense at the Dubai-based Gulf Research Council, “An Iran emboldened by the unchecked exertion of its influence in Syria would also be emboldened in other arenas, including the negotiations over its nuclear program, as well as its ambitions in Iraq, Lebanon and beyond.” For more on Iran, click [here](#).

Just as the Midianites were happy to let others fight the Jews on their behalf, Iran happily supports others as they engaged in terrorism, wage wars, and shoot rockets all in the interest of the Islamic regime. ■

Two Types of Education

Who has counted the dust of Jacob (Numbers 23:10)

מי מנה עפר יעקב (במדבר כג:י)

Each time that Balaam attempted to curse the Jewish nation, he first observed the Jewish camp in the hope of finding inspiration. Yet, each time he viewed the nation, instead of finding reason to curse them, he found himself blessing the Jewish people. The Sages (see Yalkut Shimoni) reinterpret each of Balaam’s blessings to refer to a positive aspect that he saw in the Jewish camp. The Sages explain that the “dust of Jacob” refers to those who “sit in the dust of the feet of sages,” (see Avot 1:4) meaning the students who study at the feet of their teachers. This means that Balaam blessed the children of Israel when he saw them from afar teaching their children in the desert.

Balaam’s blessing demonstrates that even from Israel’s earliest moments as a nation, education has been a foundation of the Jewish people. Today, as Israel stresses the importance of learning, its neighbors provide their children a very different and disturbing education.

While Israel’s Ministry of Education recently [unveiled a program](#) to integrate Israel-Arab teachers into Jewish schools in order to alleviate a shortage of teachers for core subjects, children in Gaza will be getting an entirely different type of education this summer. Palestinian Islamic Jihad invited thousands of children aged between 6 and 16 to pick up an AK-47 and engage in a series of quasi-military drills and lively games including “kidnap an Israeli soldier” in the sand dunes of Rafah. According to [Ynet](#), the summer camp activities include weapon use, jumping over fire and crawling under barbed wire, all performed to the tune of exploding charges. Photographs of these drills were taken and one of the pictures shows young boys dragging a Khaki-clad doll away from an Israeli flag, in what appears to be a re-enactment of IDF soldier Gilad Shalit being kidnapped in 2006. The camp organizers expect up to 10,000 Palestinian children to participate this summer. While world leaders call for Israel and the Palestinian Authority to resume direct negotiations, continued Arab incitement to violence, especially in the education of Palestinian children, dims the prospects of peace. Speaking to the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense committee, Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Ya’alon [said](#) that while peace agreements between Israel and the Palestinians could be signed on paper, as long as the Palestinians still educate their youth to hate Israelis, the peace “will blow up in our faces.”

Even Balaam recognized the Jewish emphasis on education of our children. While Israel educates its youth towards tolerance, Palestinians in Gaza teach their children to shoot, kill, kidnap and hate their Israeli neighbors. ■

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